

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter consists of five sub-chapters; the first is Background of the Study, the rationale and context of the research is presented. Research Question, enumerates the question that the study intends to answer. Objectives of the Study, the expected outcomes of the research are described. Significance of the Study, outlines the prospective impacts of the research. The last is Scope and Limitation of the study defines the areas of restriction and the gaps within the research.

1.1. Background of the Study

Analysing human existence is essential because it unravels the layers of meaning behind our daily experiences and the choices we make. This study is not only about the external world but also about the self. By delving into the core of what it means to be human, we uncover insights into freedom, responsibility, and the ever-present tension between our aspirations and the realities of life. Sartre (2007) encapsulated this idea when he stated, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself," highlighting that our identities are defined through our choices and actions. Similarly, Kierkegaard (1941) warned of the profound impact of losing touch with one's true self by asserting, "Despair is the sickness unto death, this despair is the sickness of the self." These insights not only emphasize the necessity of understanding the core of our existence but also reveal how examining the human condition can illuminate the challenges and potentials inherent in our personal and collective journeys. This study not only enriches our self-understanding but also challenges us to confront the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in the human condition. The study of human existence invites us to reflect on our individual and collective identities, encouraging a deeper dialogue about purpose, authenticity, and the nature of reality. In doing so, it provides a framework for making sense of our personal journeys and the broader societal narratives that shape our lives.

The approach of this study is using existentialism theory by Jean-Paul Sartre to analyse the philosophical underpinnings of Lord Henry's influence on Dorian Gray. Existentialism as a philosophy emphasizes human freedom, responsibility, and the lack of a particular essence or meaning to life (Sartre, 2007). Sartre's

existentialism might explore how Lord Henry's advocacy of hedonism and aestheticism leads Dorian down a path of existential crisis and moral decay. There are many reasons why Sartre's existentialism serves as a better lens through which to analyse *The Picture of Dorian Gray* than Kierkegaard's. One important element is Dorian's self-deception, in keeping with Sartre's idea of *Bad Faith*. Dorian tells himself that his actions do not matter, because his beauty is still intact, and it is the portrait, not himself, which shows what he has become. By refusing to accept responsibility for his choices, he lives in bad faith, denying his own freedom. Sartre (1956) states that bad faith consists in fleeing from a mode of being in order to assume another — which is exactly what Dorian does, he avoids to acknowledge his moral decay by cloaking himself in his physical beauty. From Kierkegaard's perspective, he would argue that Dorian needs faith in order to escape from despair as he stated "Despair is the sickness unto death, this despair is the sickness of the self" (Kierkegaard, 1941). Dorian's crisis, however, is not religious; his downfall is not because he has abandoned God, but because he cannot admit that he has any power at all, and so Sartre's existentialism serves as a more appropriate model for explaining Dorian's psychological and moral decline.

Alternatively, Lord Henry represents the embodiment of Sartrean freedom, preaching a hedonist philosophy that frees Dorian to pursue pleasure with no cost to morality. This mirrors Sartre's theory that man creates his own values instead of following societal norms, for as Sartre claims, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (Sartre, 2007). This notion is cemented in Lord Henry's speech to Dorian: "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it" (Wilde, 1890). However, Sartre would also argue that Lord Henry is on *Bad Faith* — while he pretends to preach radical freedom, he essentially influences Dorian into following his view of the world instead of letting Dorian make his own choices. Sartre states "If man is free, he is responsible for his existence, and if he is responsible for his existence, then he is responsible for all men" (Sartre, 2007). This statement supports Sartre's notion that true authenticity requires individuals to define themselves independently, rather than passively adopting another's philosophy. Kierkegaard's focus on faith and divine meaning, by contrast, does

not suit Dorian's struggle. His crisis is one of existential degradation, not theological, which makes Sartre's conception of bad faith and radical freedom a more fitting framework for a tragic downfall.

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde or known as Oscar Wilde was a famous Irish writer, poet, and dramatist who was born in Dublin on 16 October 1854 and died on 30 November 1900 in Paris at the age of 46 (Beckson & Ostberg, 2024). The reputation of Oscar Wilde as a writer is largely based on his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and his accomplished comedies of manners, including *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) as quoted in Beckson & Ostberg (2024). The latter turned out to be a remarkable master of memorable and sharp epigrams. He was one of the leaders of the aesthetic movement in England that emerged in the late nineteenth century, claiming that art has values in its own right. He also lived a rather flamboyant life which cost him, between 1895 and 1897, imprisonment for homosexuality — which played a key role in his downfall. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* exists in the intersection of Victorian moral anxiety and the flourishing Aesthetic Movement. In the late 19th century, Wilde's work not only incited debates around art's independence, but also showcased anxieties about the rapid industrialization and change in social and sexual paradigms. Scholars such as Ellmann (1988) and Joseph Bristow document how Wilde's flamboyant persona became a reflection of the novel's obsession with outward appearance and inward essence (Giudicelli, 2013). Considering *Dorian Gray* within this larger socio-cultural framework reveals how concerns about class, sexuality, and the artist's place in modernizing England are reciprocated through the themes of beauty, duplicity, and decay. The writer chose Wilde in this study as being in disgrace, he was still considered to be arguably the most sophisticated and intelligent person within his domain. Specifically, his sexuality, though a taboo in Victorian times, was hardly concealed by him. His productions were distinct with regard to style and controversial for their content.

Considered by many to be one of the greatest works in its genre, it is accepted to be one of Wilde's most important works (Poetry Foundation, 2024). For this study, the writer chose this novel since it is called by many prominent scholars as

a true classic of English literature, such as literary critic Harold Bloom in the *Modern Critical Interpretations' Series*, *The Modern Library's* list of the 100 best English language novels, and other literary critics and scholars whose claim the same (Goodreads, 2020). Though this novel did not earn any prizes according to official stylistic divisions, it is so far, very controversially, one of the most widely acclaimed literary novels and is argued to have left an important mark in the history of literature. Because of its popularity, there have been many adaptations and critiques such as movies, stages, and other literary adaptations as well. Wilde's exploration of moral decadence and self-deception resonates with existential themes, which makes it a valuable source for study on Sartre's philosophy and existentialism.

This study analyses Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and focuses on how Lord Henry's philosophies and ideas about life, pleasure, and hedonism that shaped Dorian Gray's worldview and decisions from Sartre's existentialist perspective. This study is important since it uncovers the existential predicament at the core of this novel, whereby freedom, self-deception and external influence determine the path of Dorian's downfall. Despite previous studies' emphasis on morality, this study reveals Lord Henry as an existential manipulator, showcasing how his philosophy guides Dorian into Sartrean bad faith — refusing responsibility and an attempt to avoid consequences. This study is relevant to modern struggles around self-deception and social influence, whereby people evade responsibility for their decisions. Through this lens of Sartre's existentialism, this study connects it to philosophy and literature, minimizing our awareness of free will, manipulation and the consequences of living in bad faith.

This study helps us to understand how existential philosophy works through literature and how fiction serves as a true mirror of our life's trials. This analysis is necessary to deepen the understanding of existentialism in literary criticism, proving that Sartre's ideas are not just theoretical but applicable to character development, psychological manipulation, and the consequences of unrestrained influence. The study's novelty lies in its application of the Sartre's existentialism framework to Lord Henry's influence on Dorian Gray. This has not previously been a major focus in the analysis of the character in general. The previous studies

mostly discussed about aestheticism, morality, or modernist criticism, this study explores how Lord Henry's philosophy encourages Dorian's self-deception and descent into *Bad Faith*, making Sartre's existentialist concepts a key interpretative framework for the novel. This approach offers a different perspective on his role in the novel and may provide new insights into the themes of existentialism and its interaction with Wilde's narrative.

The research gap further underpins the novelty of this study. Tirsahar (2017) discussed about bad faith in Sartre's philosophy but does not relate to literature. Rather, Kennedy (2020) and Coimbra (2023) emphasize aestheticism and modernist transgression over existential theory. Pozzo di Borgo (2023) uses Sartre's existentialism, though in the context of a different literature. Meanwhile, Akudolu et al. (2024) discussed about morality in Wilde's work but do not use existentialist theory. None of these studies examine how Lord Henry's existential influence inspires a psychological and moral crisis for Dorian Gray through a Sartrean lens of *freedom, responsibility, and bad faith*.

1.2. Research Question

1. How do key moments in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* illustrate Lord Henry's philosophical influence on Dorian Gray's moral and existential decision-making?

1.3. Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze how Lord Henry's philosophy influences Dorian Gray's moral and existential decision-making in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, by identifying key narrative moments that reflect this influence, and interpreting these moments through Jean-Paul Sartre's existential concepts of *Freedom, Responsibility, and Bad Faith*.

1.4. Significance of the Study

Theoretically, this study expected to contribute to the existing literary and philosophical scholarship through the application of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist framework in examining Lord Henry's influence over Dorian Gray in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with the concepts of *freedom, responsibility, and bad faith*. This study addresses a significant gap in the existing literature as most previous studies have concentrated on aestheticism, morality and modernist

criticism, not on the existential dimensions of Wilde's work. Interpreting key moments in the novel with a Sartrean concepts, this study extends knowledge of existentialism as a narrative expression. This perspective is innovative as it integrates philosophical theory with literary analysis through the lens between philosophical theory and literary analysis, it broadens the discussion around the influence of external philosophies on the development of character and the decision-making processes within literary works.

Practically, this study can be a reference in the academic field, especially for literature students who want to discuss topics related to existentialism in fiction. This study attempts to offer a small contribution to peers and future researchers who would like to apply existentialist concepts in their literary analysis. It is expected to help to understand how Lord Henry's philosophy positions him in relation to Dorian Gray when he was faced with various actions, decisions and indeed, his eventual demise.

1.5. Scope and Limitation of the Study

The scope of this study focuses on the use of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, specifically by applying his concepts of *freedom, responsibility, and bad faith* in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This study examines key moments in the text to demonstrate how Lord Henry's philosophy affects Dorian's actions and inner struggles.

This study is limited on Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it should be noted that the findings of this study may not be applicable to other literary works. This study will also be limited to answering the research question regarding Lord Henry's influence on Dorian Gray. The study does not incorporate a broad range of secondary data or alternative philosophical frameworks, which may limit the depth and generalizability of the findings. It is expected that the remaining issues or concerns will be explored by other writers in the future.