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## Gay Subculture, AIDS, and Neo-Decadence: 1980s in Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002)

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### Abstract

Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002) provides a glimpse to the gay subculture of 1980s' London and New York, and contextualizes the issues like AIDS epidemic and gay liberation movement. The shown attributes of the gay subculture including the queer fashion trends, drug consumptions, and unprotected gay sex even at the risk of HIV transmission parallel the hedonistic and counter-normative 'decadent' aspects of Oscar Wilde's source-text, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). *Cathode Narcissus*, the video installation capturing the naked male beauty, makes Dorian the 'dis-embodied' model/emblem for gay pride in a digital era and marks the posthumanist shift in the new form of decadence or neo-decadence. This paper, with respect to Self's *Dorian: An Imitation*, would engage to explore how the attributes of 1980s' urban gay subculture and rapid transmission of HIV among gays come under the paradigm of neo-decadence in the *fin de siècle* (meaning, "end of the century") of the twentieth century.

**Keywords:** gay subculture, homosexuality, AIDS, drugs, neo-decadence, decadence.

### Introduction

"[...] what if the whole giddy rondo had the air of the *fin de siècle* about it? Because it was the end of the twentieth century, [...] a hundred years of willed decline." (Self, 2002, p. 267)

In an interview with Robert McCrum for *The Guardian* (September 29, 2002), Will Self commented that his *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002), an "appropriation"<sup>[1]</sup> of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), will pursue the readers to trace the correlation between "the decadence of the 1880s and the decadence of 1980s" (McCrum, 2002). Decadence, reflecting the obsessive indulgence in pleasure and relative moral decline, ennui and counter-normative tendencies (MacLeod, 2006, p. 1, Charlesworth, 1965, p. xv), appeared as one of the counter cultural movements of the nineteenth century's *fin de siècle* (meaning, in French, "end of the century"<sup>[2]</sup>). The gay subculture<sup>[3]</sup> of the 1980s' London and New York in Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* mirrors the decadent aspects like narcissism, cynicism, sexual perversity, hedonistic inclinations and artificiality perceived in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. *Dorian: An Imitation* gives the glimpses of the private lives of urban gay characters, their intoxicating drug consumptions, scenes of gay bars, gay village, and contextualizes the prevalent issues of eighties like rapid outbreak of HIV among gays, and gay liberation movement. Self's narrative, set in the digital era, bestows a posthumanist scope as well for, here, a video installation capturing the appealing 'gay' beauty replaces the mysterious painting that seemingly consumed Dorian's degeneration in Wilde's source-text. This paper would attempt to explore how the constituents of West's urban 'gay subculture', rapid transmission of

HIV amongst gays, and the posthumanist purview, as presented in Self's *Dorian: An Imitation*, come under the paradigm of the renovated form of decadence, or neo-decadence, in the twentieth century's *fin de siècle*.

### **"Air of the *fin de siècle*": Decadence to Neo-Decadence**

The term "decadence" was first used to connote the denial of the banal moral values, hedonistic perversity, and exploration of sensual passion as a subversive force by Theophile Gautier in his introduction to the 1868 version of Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleur du Mal* (Gilman, 1979, p. 89). In Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* decadence is betrayed through the fascinating narcissism of Dorian Gray, Basil Hall's homoerotic sensation for Dorian, influence of Henry's toxic philosophy, Dorian's opium addiction, his obsession with aesthetic perfection leading to abandon Sybil Vane, the stage actress, and his "spiritual and moral perversity" (Symons, 1893/1974, p. 72). Although, homosexuality as a decadent yearn for "rare sensations" (MacLeod, 2006, p. 1) appeared in several French texts like Jean Lorrain's *Monsieur de Bougrelon* (1897) and *Monsieur de Phocus* (1901) (Hawthorne, 2019, p. 203), Catulle Mendès's *Mephistophelia* (1890), the memoir of the French lesbian woman Liane de Pougy (Anne Marie Chassaingne) *Idylle saphique (Sapphic Idyll)* (1901) (Hawthorne, 2019, p. 204), in English literature it was a rare aspect, perhaps, because of the Christian's sacrilegious tag and England's legal ban on homosexuality/sodomy. Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) presents male-male homosexual hints with sly implicitness. To cite one instance, Basil Hall's "curious sensation of terror" (Wilde, 1891/2001, p.9) and sudden "crisis" (p.9) after meeting Dorian is analogous to Gustav Von Aschenbach's nightmare where he yields himself to a phallic idol (Mann, 1912/2004, 45) and reckons his homosexual attraction for the boy Tadzio in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*.

The term "neo-decadent" was first used in aesthetic criticism by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975), an Italian film director, in a review of Federico Fellini's (1920-1993) films titled "The Catholic Irrationalism of Fellini" (1960/1984) to refer the "purposeful exaggeration of feeling and imagery" (Demers, 1984, p. 64), use of "the unusual and the morbid to shock our feelings and even to violate our sensibilities" (1984, p. 64), distortion of the "realism" (1984, p. 64), and the expression of cynicism (Pasolini, 1960/1984, p. 72). Brian M. Reed, in exploring queerness and fashion consciousness in the poems of Djuna Barnes (*The Book of Repulsive Women*, 1915) and Hart Crane in his book *Hart Crane: After His Lights* (2006), mentions of "US neo-Decadence" (Reed, 2006, p. 52) of 1920s that sought extremity in queer representations (Reed, 2006, p. 52). Brendan Connell, in "The First Manifesto of Neo-Decadence" (2010/2018), puts that the neo-decadent writers resort artificiality and synthetic sensation in writing and seek to implore the "fragmented, the contorted, the unfinished" (Connell, 2010/2018) and often lousiness. Colby Smith in his lecture titled "Neo-Decadence: A Very Brief Introduction" at Alden Library, Ohio University, Athens Campus on 29th January, 2018, points out the following tenets and demands of the post-2000 version of neo-decadence:

It is anti-Capitalist, anti-Consumerist [...] against sincerity [...] that seeks to tell a story from the heart. [...] It promotes deeply experimental scenarios and prose including

explicit endorsement of lack of character development and story arc. [...] [I]t rejects the overtly fantastic. (Smith, 2018, January 29, 00.02.39-00.03.56)

However, Daniel Corrick, in "Introduction" to *Drowning in Beauty: The Neo-Decadent Anthology* (2018), comments that neo-decadence is the "updated" version of the "content of the original Decadence" in "a contemporary setting and tackling or at least incorporating modern preoccupations" and both the decadences are "not merely styles but a mode of consciousness, dying, decaying, growing and mutating as its objects do" (Corrick, 2018). In Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* "[s]treet fashion synergised with pop music, pop music energised politics" (Self, 2002/2003, p. 267), conceptual artists' "distorted cartoons" (p. 267), televisions, internet, perplexing digitalized bodies, increasing number of drug addicts, homosexuals and homophobes, gay liberation movement created the neo-decadent "dying, decaying" (Corrick, 2018, p. 267), "fragmented" (Connell, 2010/2018, p. 15), "contorted" (p. 15) and "queer" (Reed, 2006, p. 52) "air of the *fin de siècle*" (Self, 2002/2003, p. 267) in the 1980s' London and New York.

### **Gay Liberation, *Cathode Narcissus* and Neo-Decadence**

The homophile protests during late 1950s and early 1960s in the United States had paved the way for the constructive gay liberation movement (D Emilio, 1983, p. 224). 'Stonewall riot' in June 27, 1969 marked the initiation of modern gay liberation movement in America and Europe (Cruikshank, 1992, p. 3). During 1980s, in America, the gay community manifested themselves as "powerful minority" (Cruikshank, 1992, p.72) and emphatically expressed their "pride" (p. 75) of being gay. Dorian is among—what Baz calls—the "first gay generation to come out of the shadows" (Self, 2002/2003, p. 12); "unashamed" (p. 12) to disclose their true sexual orientation in public. *Cathode Narcissus* is launched on internet for free by Dorian's "The Gray Organization" to endorse "[m]ale beauty" (Self, 2002/2003, pp. 270-71) and contribute in instilling the sense of "a new mature pride in homosexual identity" (p. 271) among the members of gays. *Cathode Narcissus* functions in supporting the 'gay liberation' movement and strengthens the resistance against the social polarization of gay community's as "an underclass, or a persecuted ethnic minority" (2002/2003, p. 271).

Dennis Denisoff, in his article "'A Disembodied Voice': The Posthuman Formlessness of Decadence" (2013), argues that the decadent poetics is not merely set of doctrines in the background of a particular era but this is about "formulation of a broader spiritualism exploring the boundaries of the self, the human, and the otherworldly" (p. 182), and the posthuman "shift" (p. 184) of decadence makes one recognize "human" as "fundamentally prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically 'non-human'" (p. 184) and "this ever-changing, multi-perspectival world is not an ideal toward which to strive, but a reality that already exists but still needs to be recognized" (184). Posthuman decadence is not about "capturing, but of playing most seriously with a transmutational, disembodied model of being" (Denisoff, 2013, p. 198). In *Dorian: An Imitation*, the wide circulation of *Cathode Narcissus*, the video installation created by Baz portraying the "gorgeous" (Self, 2002/2003, p. 42) nude body of Dorian through internet, functions to make Dorian a 'disembodied' model for gay pride. Hence, in *Dorian: An Imitation*, the role of *Cathode Narcissus* in gay liberation movement of 1980s, captures the posthumanist shift in the neo-decadence. The

owner of The Gray Organization's (Dorian) wishes to showcase his naked "perfection" to the public by affording the cost of *Cathode Narcissus* and its availability on internet with the self-indulgent inscription on its homepage, "Download Some Perfection Today" (Self, 2002/2003, p. 270), reflects neo-decadent narcissism as well.

At a "charity event" (Self, 2002, p. 34), "a classless John" (p. 34) describes Wotton as "fucking dodgy ... like a junky as well as a toff" (p. 34). In response, as Dorian perceives that the comment is also meant for him, "'And a queer...you forgot to say queer'" (p. 34). Queer's primary meaning without any socio-traditional context is "strange; odd" (Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 1777). Etymologically, the word "queer" came from German "*quer*" meaning, "oblique, perverse" (Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 1777). As per *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, word "queer", from the early twentieth century, usually mean "homosexual", basically, in a "deliberately derogatory" sense "when used by heterosexual people" (Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 1777). While the gay liberation movement was taking its peak in the 1990s (specifically in United States), the gay protestors resorted to consider the word "queer" with positive vibes. A leaflet titled *Queers Read This: The Queer Nation Manifesto* was distributed amongst people attending the New York Pride March in June, 1990. This leaflet declared that being "queer" is being "revolutionary" (1990, p. 1) and they deserve "same freedom of movement and sexuality, as straits" (1990, p. 1).

### **Gay Subculture, Drugs and Neo-Decadence**

West's urban gay communities are often popularly associated with the following — drug (often illicit and arousing) addiction, excessive alcohol consumptions, effeminacy (of gay men), gay sex, queer make ups and attires, tattooed body, piercings, gay bars. In Self's *Dorian: An Imitation*, too, Dorian, Baz, Henry Wotton and other gay characters are irrecoverably addicted to drugs, and, at times, their desire of sodomy seems to be drug-induced effect. Baz perceived New York to be full of "gay scene" (Self, 2002/2003, p. 89) and "saturated with drugs" (p. 89). Wotton's monograph gives a glimpse to the sombre gay bar on 12th Street, Mineshaft, New York:

[W]onkily partitioned room succeeded warped vestibules, each filthier and ranker than the last with odour of faces and semen and poppers. All around was the thawalk of flesh on flesh, with its ragged accompaniment— the gaunts and groans of effortful coition. (p. 95)

Beatty, Geckle, Kapner, Lewis and Sandstorm, in "Gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals" (1999), has shown how "substance use and abuse" (Beatty et al., 1999, p. 545) are a common factor in gay communities. According to Meyer (2003), homosexuals, being driven by the "minority stress" (p. 676) and several subjective "proximal" (p. 676) stresses of which fear of "rejection" (p. 677), "concealment" (p. 677) of homosexual identity, "internalized homophobia" (p. 677), imbibe "distil" (p. 677) approach towards mainstream society. And, the homosexuals' sense of being members of a "stigmatized" (Meyer, 2003, p. 677) community "with others who are like them rather than with members of the dominant [heteronormative] culture" (p. 677) and the urge of belongingness operate largely behind the subjective existence of 'gay subculture'. Soho, in London, is a quite well-known for the gay bars and its streets are favourite meeting spots for LGBTQ people (Haslop

et al., 1998, p. 319). Dorian visits Soho “three afternoons a week” (Self, 2002/2003, p. 18) and he is seen attending clubs like Sealink Club (p. 200), *Quo Vadis* (p. 267) in Soho. Herman, in Self’s *Dorian: An Imitation*, a rent-boy who also supplies drugs to Dorian is also from Soho (p. 214). In Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the youths’ opium addiction mirrors the decadent “seeking after rare sensations” (MacLeod, 2006, p. 1). “Blue-Gate Fields” (Wilde, 1891/2003, p. 112), referred to as one of the infamous places that Dorian frequently visited, was “notorious for opium houses and sailors’ brothels” (Drew, 2001, p. 192). Lord Henry is described to smoke “opium-tainted cigarette” (Wilde, 1891/2003, p. 6). The “opium dens” (Wilde, 1891/2003, p. 146) were visited by the opium addicts like Dorian seeking to experience opium induced momentary delusion and unique sensory numbness. As Barbara Charlesworth (1965) relates, ‘decadence’ sought to attain “as many moments as possible of heightened sensory experience, enjoyed within the mind outside the society” (p. xv). Significantly, in Foucault’s conception, drug inducement functions as a mode of counter-traditionalism that works through “sado-masochism” (Eribor, 1989/1991, p. 315). In Self’s text, the member of London and New York’s gay communities’ obsession for drug induced delusion and synesthesia conform to the neo-decadent urge to attain extremity as a mode of obsession.

Tattoos, piercings, and other unique ways of representing ‘body’, flamboyancy often are related to “queer” identity. In Self’s *Dorian*, there is also a brief glimpse of the gay village in Fitzrovia where the gays are seen wearing the fetish dresses willing to be spotted as queer:

Here, in Fitzrovia, close to both the hospital complex and the burgeoning gay village, there was a preponderance of homosexual men. They sported greased hair, pencil-like facial hair, earrings and white vests, the better to show off their easy-to-wipe skin tones. Some were gaunt-jawed and slope-shouldered, others were pumping up and overly active. (Self, 2002/2003, p. 74)

Justin Isis, in his blog, in introducing his book *Neo-Decadent Manifesto of Women’s Fashion* (2019) emphasizes on the necessity of depicting the absurdity and distinctiveness in the neo-decadence to afflict “our current age of sartorial stagnation and accelerated resource depletion” (Isis, 2019, March 11). Hence, the queer attires and make-ups that are often identified to the gay community’s common behavioural pattern do intersect with the neo-decadent decorum. In fact, neo-decadence seeks “ecstasy in extremes” (Corrick, 2018) and, in an “obscure” era of technological advancement, anything—clothes, trends in fashion, tattoos, recreational drugs, musical sub-cultures, cosmetics, photography or whatever— that becomes the “subject of obsessions, damnations and salvations” (Corrick, 2018) comes under the neo-decadent paradigm.

### **Homosexuality, AIDS epidemic in the Eighties and Heteronormative Politics**

In Self’s text, Dorian becomes the “Aids Mary, the malevolent and intentional transmitter of the virus” (Self, 2002/2003, p. 112) among gays. However, the “Epilogue” section of the novel reveals that all the earlier pages, in fact, form the semi-delusional monograph of Wotton who recently died in AIDS. The outbreak of AIDS epidemic in the eighties, as shown in Self’s *Dorian: An Imitation*, does not deter the gays to engage in the unprotected anal intercourses. As Wotton comments, “to die for the love of boys would be a beautiful death” (Self, 2002/2003, p. 59).

However, Wotton's fascination for imbibing "beautiful death" (Self, 2002, p. 59) in pursuing sensual pleasure gets disillusioned by the sufferings that AIDS caused,

I am saying we all need a heavily forested interior to maintain life on Planet Arse, but unfortunately antibiotics have completely logged my interior, and for months now, I've been subject to the most appalling flatulence. [...] I can tell you my diarrhoea is the thing that keeps me fit. [...] As I say, wrestling with Mr. Arse has been exhausting, but my sight has settled into a beneficent state of impairment. (Self, 2002, p. 182)

In fact, in the 1980s, gay sex was presumed to be the reason behind the spread of HIV virus. Numerous inauthentic articles published in various newspapers popularized this hype<sup>[4]</sup>. On May 11, 1982, *The New York Times* alternatively named AIDS as "Gay-Related Immune Deficiency" (GRID)<sup>[5]</sup>. Unprotected sex and commonly seen drug addiction among the gay people were held responsible for the rapid spread of HIV virus among gay people in the nineties. The reason was not only the proven immunity disruptive functions of addictive substance and drugs in human body, but also because of the first suspected appearance of AIDS (in the name of *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia or PCP) in December, 1981 in five men who used to engage in homosexual acts and took drug-injections (History of HIV and AIDS Overview, n.d). John L. Martin, in "Drug Use and Unprotected Anal Intercourse Among Gay Men" (1990) (published in *Health Psychology* journal (9(4))), based on a research survey carried out on gay men in 605, New York City, from 1984 to 1987, shows the gay men who engaged in "unprotected anal intercourse" (p. 451) and consumed the "substance" (p. 462) including "amphetamines" (p. 461), "cocaine", (p. 461) "marijuana" (p. 461) in regular basis (which, most of them did) were more vulnerable to HIV infection during the nineties' AIDS epidemic in America (p. 462). This AIDS outbreak in the 1980s and the rapid transmission of HIV amongst the gays became a reason for the governments and heterosexists to oppose gay empowerment and suppress 'gay liberation' movement. The leaflet (*Queers Read This: The Queer Nation Manifesto*) distributed in the New York Pride March in June, 1990 also claimed that the false accusation of spreading AIDS was being imposed on queers to "wipe [them] off" (1990, p. 2).

## Conclusion

According to Alan Sinfield (1998), the hypothetically "alleged universal culture" (p. 81) of the gays that goes beyond "locality, gender, sexual orientation, race" seeking "to subordinate other cultures" (p. 81) is non-existent. Mark Simpson (1995) derogatorily tagged the gay subculture as delusional "Underwear Cult" (p. 2). Beatty, Geckle, Kapner, Lewis and Sandstorm, in "Gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals" (1999), argue that the term "gay", itself, in "social, cultural, and affective dimensions" (p. 542), denotes "subculture" (p. 542). But spatially separate gay communities cannot be homogenized as part of a universal gay subculture or based on any shared behavioural commonalities (Beatty et al., 1999, p. 542). The term Post-gay emphasizes the necessity of dissociating the gay community's behavioral patterns from the mass-media's stereotypical portrayal of gays. Gay subculture can neither be considered as an umbrella concept that singularly covers every gay community, nor can be related to "sharply definable communities" (Beatty et al., 1999, p. 542) of gays and lesbians with common character, attitude and values. Even each gay

subculture has non-intermixable “small subdivisions” (Beatty et al., 1999, p. 542). Yet, as Self’s *Dorian: An Imitation* suggests, in the 1980s, a heteronormative political discourse sought to tag AIDS as a gay-epidemic and identify the gay men with some reckless urban gay subculture that indulges in gaining extremity of sensual and sensuous pleasure. Undoubtedly, in Self’s novel, the semblance of 1980s urban gay subculture complies with the popular conjectures about the same, and somewhat, homogenizes the urban gay characters as alcoholics, drug addicts, and extreme sensual pleasure seekers who engage in unprotected sex even at the utmost risk of HIV contamination. Hence, within the narrative of *Dorian: An Imitation*, AIDS infected bodies of the gays signify the neo-decadent extremity and hedonism inherent in the gay subculture of eighties’ London and New York.

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### Notes:

<sup>[1]</sup> Self’s rewriting can be better explained as, in the terminology of Julie Sanders (2006), “appropriation” (p. 26) as even though Self’s storyline parallels that of Wilde’s, the recontextualization of the story in a different time setting and relative alteration make it an altogether ‘new’ one (Sanders, 2006, pp. 26-27).

<sup>[2]</sup> Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 512.

<sup>[3]</sup> West’s urban gay “culture” is referred here as gay “subculture” as this is a segment of broader cultural domain yet goes against the heterosexist and homophobic society’s traditional decorum of normativity (often undocumented).

<sup>[4]</sup> See Timothy E. Cook and David C. Colby, p. 95.

<sup>[5]</sup> See “A Timeline of HIV and AIDS”.

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