

## Author



Ana Rojas found kindred spirits in the “decadent” authors she studied; she likes to collect mantilla combs and antique etiquette books, a “strange passion” she describes as similarly decadent. Although many existing texts deal with the Decadent style, there are very few that focus on the narratological structure of Decadent novels and how that structure separates Decadence from other literary styles. It was in this niche that Rojas saw an opportunity to begin her research. Rojas hopes to continue to study comparative literature and pursue a career in academia.

### Key Terms

- Decadence
- Description
- Narrative speed
- Narratology

# Generating Degeneration: The Paradoxical Movement of Decadent Narratives

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## Abstract

Decadence is synonymous with decline, which is why the term was applied to the late nineteenth-century literary movement. Decadent novels such as Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *A Rebours* and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* share themes of decline and deterioration. The word “decadent,” however, refers not only to the content of these works, but to their structure as well. The goal of decadent authors was to create narratives without plots, rich instead with details and description. A novel without a plot would seemingly disintegrate, but paradoxically these texts move forward even as they digress. This paper explores *A Rebours* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* from a narratological perspective: how the narratives are structured and what techniques the authors use in order to sustain them. Ultimately, what characterizes Decadence is more than just the theme of dissolution, but the ability to generate a narrative within a framework of degeneration.

## Faculty Mentor



Ana and I first met in a seminar that I was teaching on performance theory. The seminar room was cozily furnished, and I perhaps should have surmised by Ana’s habit of reclining on the couch, injecting witty, acute and cosmopolitan comments into the discussion, that she might have a penchant for texts in the decadent tradition. But in fact, as I learned in that class and subsequently, Ana’s diligence, dedication, and intellectual energy are traits that contrast with the characters that she has chosen to write about—the languishing Deseintes of Huysmans’ novel *A Rebours* or the effete Dorian Gray from Wilde’s novel. What she does share with these characters is an eye for detail and nuance, and this talent, which is also the result of labor and perseverance, comes through at every turn of her thesis. It was a pleasure to work with Ana on this project.

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## Introduction

As any good storyteller knows, there are certain dos and don'ts upon which a good story depends. However, Decadent authors such as Joris-Karl Huysmans and Oscar Wilde chose to ignore traditional narrative guidelines in their novels, *A Rebours* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, respectively. How, then, are these novels arranged, and how do they carry the reader from beginning to end? Narratology, the study of how narratives are structured, is based upon the idea that all narratives have a basic format that allows the story to unfold. Although narratology is a relatively new field, its basic tenets have been around as long as storytelling itself. The guidelines Aristotle put forth in his *Poetics* remain a crucial point of reference in analyzing narratives. He argues that the most important element of tragedy is plot, which is "the representation of action" and "the ordered arrangement of the incidents" (chapter 6). This arrangement "is of the first importance," for the plot must be "complete and whole" (Aristotle, chapter 7). He defines a whole as "that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end," and further qualifies that "well constructed plots must neither begin nor end in a haphazard way, but must conform to the pattern I have been describing" (chapter 7). Many authors have attempted to depart from the Aristotelian plot, but a story cannot exist without some structure. Therefore, those who challenge Aristotle's notions of plot in their narratives replace it with some other order.

Narratology is concerned with understanding the order of narratives by exploring the basic structure of plots, namely how they are similar and where they differ. Two major figures in this field are Gerald Prince and Gérard Genette. Prince's book, *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative*, explores the building blocks of narrative, which he defines as "the representation of at least two real or fictive events or situations in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other" (Prince, 1982). If time sequence is a necessary element, then a storyteller must consider the order in which events are presented. Whereas Prince examines the organization and techniques of narratives in general, Genette's book, *Narrative Discourse*, explores narrative theory in relation to one text, Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*). This novel subverts narrative linearity because the protagonist, Marcel, recounts his life as a series of memories. These memories are sparked by various experiences, such as insomnia or eating a madeleine, so that the order in which they are recounted is the order in which they are recalled to mind. Genette describes the plot as one of "a vast movement of coming-and-going." The novel does not begin at the beginning and go straight through

to the end, but loops backward via memory. Recognizing, however, that even the most non-linear narratives have some general structure, Genette uses Proust's novel to explain the basic rules of narrative; his analysis of the *Recherche* can be applied to other texts, Decadent novels in particular.

## The Emergence of Decadence

When Huysmans wrote *A Rebours* in 1884, his aim was to transgress the confines of Aristotelian narrative, "to break the boundaries of the novel...to get rid of the traditional plot." In so doing, he wrote what was to be considered "the Bible of Decadence" (Thornton, 1983). Although Decadence is the name for the late nineteenth-century literary movement, the word comes from the Latin verb *decadere*, meaning "to fall away," and hence is synonymous with decline. However, there is no record of the word's use in Roman times, and it appears to be of medieval Latin origin (Gilman, 1979). With the publication of Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in the late eighteenth century, Roman civilization became firmly tied to the idea of political decline and moral decay. This association with Roman corruption led the French critic Désiré Nisard to apply the word "decadence" to literature in *Etudes de moeurs et de critique sur les poètes latins de la décadence* (1834). He used the word pejoratively, noting a similarity between the poetry of his contemporaries and that produced during the final years of the Roman empire. Nisard pointed in particular to a shared "penchant for individual eccentricity, recondite subject matter, [and] description for its own sake" (Reed, 1985). Nevertheless, the very poets he criticized appropriated the word in order to characterize their own writing. For example, in his biography of Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier defined decadent style as "a style that is ingenious, complicated, learned, full of shades of meaning and research, always pushing further the limits of language...it is no easy matter, this style despised of pedants, for it expresses new ideas with new forms and words that have not yet been heard" (Thornton, 1983). Shifting the negative moral implications of the word, decadence came to be associated with a refined sense of aesthetics and a great appreciation for beauty; it suggested the ability to create something new. To criticize decadence implied the barbaric and uncouth. Thus, decadence became "a synonym of both degeneration and regeneration," its duality of meaning defining a literary movement through paradox (Pireddu, 1996).

This duality is present not only in the word, but in Decadent texts themselves. Indeed, it forms an integral part of their style. Yet, what is "Decadent" style and what separates it from others? Decadent texts all deal with some sort of de-

cay or decline. The characters are afflicted by disease or aging, but their malaise is always ambiguous: “not sick-unto-death yet not quite healthy either” (Spackman, 1989). Languid and effete, they reject the natural for the artificial, and attempt to use sensation to escape their boredom (Showalter, 1990; Pierrot, 1981). Decadent protagonists seek the exotic and the unnatural. As John Reed notes, the description of these rarities is “a sequence of highly wrought, ornamentally detailed, almost detachable segments united by mood, motif and image rather than by a generative story line.” This brings us directly to the paradox of Decadent narrative, for the word necessarily implies movement: that of falling away. Yet, how is a narrative to move if it has no plot? As Nisard pointed out, what characterizes Decadence are the long descriptive passages, which he claimed were there for their own sake. Despite his criticism, this intricate description is precisely what constitutes Decadent narratives. As the story focuses upon detail, the whole composition comes together as an assembly of carefully developed descriptive passages (Reed, 1985). In replacing the plot with details, the author substitutes one narrative structure for another, so the question becomes how description propels the narrative forward.

Huysmans uses this narrative structure in *A Rebours*. The protagonist, Des Esseintes, leaves society in order to shut himself up in his museum-like home, Fontenay. Each chapter is an individual discussion of objects and the memories they spark. Reed comments on the composition of this novel, which consists “not of a traditional unified narrative but of a sequence of set pieces, elaborations upon such related topics as gems, perfumes, flowers, art works, Anglophilia, and so forth.” The title—in English, *Against Nature* or *Against the Grain*—is notoriously difficult to translate, but means a contrary-wise movement. It appropriately describes the life of Des Esseintes, as well as the narrative structure of the novel, which is certainly *à rebours*. Much like *A la recherche du temps perdu*, objects serve as a point of departure and their description pulls Des Esseintes—and the narrative—into memories of the past before curving back to the present, repeating the process in each chapter. The result is a novel where the “linear development of narrative sequence is held at bay by a discourse that is not essentially narrative but rather encyclopedic and descriptive” (Halpern, 1978). Des Esseintes’s house at Fontenay, as the sphere which contains all the objects catalogued in the story, is the thread that connects the chapters and holds the novel together. In the absence of a concrete plot, details substitute for action.

*A Rebours* had enormous influence on Wilde, which is apparent in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, first published in 1890, six

years after *A Rebours*. Wilde wrote that his text was “a fantastic variation on Huysmans’s over-realistic study of the artistic temper in our inartistic age” (*Letters*, 1962). Similarly fascinated with the ornamental and the unnatural, the novel chronicles the life of Dorian Gray who finds that, through some mysterious process, a portrait of him ages while he remains young. That Wilde admired *A Rebours* is clearly evident in chapter 11 of *Dorian Gray*. Here, Dorian’s life is changed by a mysterious “yellow book...a novel without a plot, and with only one character, being, indeed, simply a psychological study of a certain young Parisian...The style in which it was written was a curious jewelled style, vivid and obscure at once.” The yellow book is meant to evoke *A Rebours*, and chapter 11 of *Dorian Gray* imitates Huysmans’s style. Rather than describing Dorian’s life, the narrative is suspended and the reader is given detailed passages describing various objects in Dorian’s possession. As in *A Rebours*, the description which appears to exist solely “for its own sake” ends up constituting the narrative, taking the place of the plot.

Many themes found in Decadent novels can be explored in great detail: *ennui*, illness, and fascination with the unnatural, to name only a few. However all these are contained within a specific narrative structure. In order to understand how Decadent themes function within a novel, it is necessary to understand how the novel functions at the level of the narrative. *A Rebours* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are both excellent examples of novels that attempt to break free from the Aristotelian plot by creating narratives that are built upon description. In what has become one of the most famous definitions of Decadent style, Paul Bourget wrote, in his *Essais de psychologie contemporaine (Essays of Contemporary Psychology)*, “A decadent style is one where the unity of the book decomposes in order to give place to the independence of the page, where the page decomposes in order to give place to the independence of the phrase, and the phrase in order to give place to the independence of the word” (Reed, 1985). Bourget’s comment brings us back to the paradox of Decadent narratives: they are built around a framework of decomposition. While these novels may break down the traditional linear plot, the independent sections, made up of ornate description, come together to form a new type of narrative.

## Description and Narration

Descriptive passages are a means of slowing down and pausing the story to give details. Paradoxically, these pauses are precisely what give Decadent narratives their movement.



Description in a novel is an important element of narrative speed which, according to Prince, is “the relationship between the duration of the narrated—the (approximate) time the events recounted go on or are thought to go on—and the length of the narrative (in words, lines, or pages, for instance)” (1982). The speed of any given text may vary, and to explain these variations, Genette defines four “narrative movements”: scene, summary, pause, and ellipsis (1980). In a scene, the narrative time equals the story time, and is thus most often used in dialogue, while in a summary, the narrative time is less than the story time. At the extremes are pause and ellipsis. Prince writes: “If some part of the narrative corresponds to no elapsing of narrated time, we speak of pause and we say that the narrative comes to a complete stop...Similarly, I may describe at length a character or a setting and my description may correspond to the passage of no narrated time” (1982). Thus, in a pause the narrative time is infinitely greater than the story time and in an ellipsis the story time is infinitely greater than the narrative time.

How is it possible to sustain a narrative that slows down as each aesthetic object comes into view and is carefully examined if descriptive pause brings the story to a “complete stop”? Referring to the long descriptive passages in Proust, Genette concludes that lengthy description does not necessarily constitute a pause. Genette holds that Proustian pauses are not really pauses at all because the description of objects becomes the narrative itself:

Proustian “description” is less a description of the object contemplated than it is a narrative and analysis of the perceptual activity of the character contemplating...A contemplation highly active in truth, and containing “a whole story.” This story is what Proustian description recounts...So we see that in Proustian contemplation...is an activity—intense, intellectual, and often physical—and the telling of it is, after all is said and done, a narrative just like any other. (1980)

Likewise, contemplation is the primary action in which Decadent protagonists are engaged—an action that is carefully detailed. While the descriptive passages in *A Rebours* and *Dorian Gray* seem to impede the narrative by thwarting the development of the plot, they reveal themselves to be the plot itself. However, the degree to which such a narrative is “just like any other” is questionable. The very goal of Decadent authors was to write stories that were not like any previous model. In attempting to subvert traditional narrative structure, they substituted description for plot. While the act of

describing may be an act like any other, the result in Decadent novels is unique. The way in which these descriptions pull the novels together is precisely what separates Decadent narratives from other styles.

This can be seen clearly in chapter 11 of *A Rebours* which is not only an example of description taking the place of plot but, more importantly, is a metaphor for the narrative itself. In it, Des Esseintes decides to leave his home near Paris and go to London. The subject of the whole chapter is this voyage, but he gets no further than Paris before returning to Fontenay that evening. The entire chapter is concerned with a trip that never takes place but is nonetheless recounted through finely-wrought detail. This is precisely how the novel functions as a whole. Although there is no London trip to describe, an entire chapter is nevertheless devoted to recounting it. There is no plot, no “story” to be told, yet this story is described for 16 chapters. *A Rebours* is one long narrative pause which exists independently of a structured plot. Chapter 11 is an excellent example of narrative pause, where the description of “the perceptual activity of the character contemplating” supersedes elements such as the story of Des Esseintes’s trip to London:

Des Esseintes pondered over his trip; this dreadful weather was already an installment of England that he was being paid in Paris; a rain-swept, measureless London, stinking of heated metal and soot, smoking everlastingly in the fog, was unfolding now before his gaze...All this activity was taking place on the dark, scummy waters of an imaginary Thames.

His desire for travel is satisfied simply by its illusion, and an actual trip becomes superfluous. This device functions at the level of the narrative as well. In his introduction to an English translation of the text, Nicholas White calls the narrative pattern “ironically abortive” because the “description threatens to overwhelm the imperative of plotting and story-telling” (Huysmans, 1998). However, the minutiae and details are the plot. Both Des Esseintes and the reader experience movement through details such as the smell of metal and soot and the darkness of the “scummy waters.” As with Proust, *A Rebours* is held together by its descriptive passages, as in chapter 11, which is itself a narrative that corresponds to no elapsing of narrated time because it pauses to recount an event that never really takes place.

Chapter 11 is one of the few times where Des Esseintes leaves his home, Fontenay, and in fact, that home is almost more important to the novel than Des Esseintes himself.

White notices that, by removing Des Esseintes from the sphere of human interaction, the novel “resists the developmental plot structure of traditional fiction” (Huysmans, 1998). The novel is confined almost entirely to Fontenay. What is found within its walls provides the narrative with all the material for description; the detailed passages that make up the narrative stem from the house. The novel consists of individual chapters, each one describing a particular set of objects. However, the story is more than just a series of randomly-linked vignettes that catalogue the items in the home: “The House serves as the impetus for the continuation of the story and the extension of the text...The inventory of the house (painting, jewels, books, etc.) is the stuff of the book...The House is a trope of embellishment and embroidery, a device which allows for critical expansion.” (Halpern, 1978). Without Fontenay there would be no story. At the end of chapter 11, Des Esseintes returns home; neither he nor the narrative can survive very long away from Fontenay. The house, in containing all the objects of description, perpetuates the narrative. Not only are the objects within the home detailed, but they spark memories of the past for Des Esseintes. In these memories, the reader is allowed a glimpse of his life before moving into Fontenay. Each chapter thus begins in the “present” of the narrative, then describes in detail objects which recall a memory. The narrative sweeps back into the past in order to describe the memory, and then brings the story back to the narrative present before ending the chapter. Genette notes that in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Marcel’s insomnia and the madeleine serve as “indispensable transfer point[s],” through which the narrative continually passes (1980). As events that spark Marcel’s memories, they are what give the novel its shape. Similarly, the house is the “indispensable transfer point” of *A Rebours* and in each chapter the narrative must pass through the walls of Fontenay in order to get from beginning to end. The house does more than simply provide fodder for descriptive pauses—it defines the framework of the novel as the spring-board for memories that dictate the content of each chapter. Like the madeleine for Marcel, Fontenay and the objects within it evoke memories for Des Esseintes so that the action of *A Rebours* depends upon the description of these memories as well as the description of his possessions.

This looping backward of the narrative is what Genette calls *analepsis*: “any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment” (1980). Throughout *A Rebours*, the narrative is pulled into the past, a movement triggered by an object in the present. Chapter 1 begins, “More than two months elapsed before Des Esseintes was able to immerse himself in

the silent tranquillity of his house at Fontenay.” Since the chapter does not go on to describe these two months, it would suggest “the infinite speed of ellipsis, where a non-existent section of narrative corresponds to some duration of story” (Genette, 1980). Yet, what happens here is not really an example of ellipsis; the novel does not skip over a portion of the story only to resume the narrative thread when Des Esseintes is finally settled. The chapter instead recounts his memories of how he used to decorate his home in Paris: “In the past, in the days when he received women in his apartments, he had designed a bedroom where, amid the small pieces of furniture carved in pale Japanese camphor wood, beneath a sort of canopy of pink Indian satin, women’s bodies took on a soft blush under the artfully prepared lighting that filtered through the fabric.” The chapter begins with Fontenay, which then leads to a description of Des Esseintes’s life prior to the action of the text. The novel itself takes place from the time Des Esseintes moves into the home to the time he moves out of it, but this passage is a memory of the past, from his life before the purchase of the house. Fontenay is the spark that ignites the memories with which the chapter is concerned and this pattern of analepsis characterizes the whole text. Instead of a plot which takes the story from past to present, or present to past, the narrative zigzags, weaving back and forth in time. The house is the impetus for the narrative, since Fontenay and its contents trigger the analepses. The house is indeed the “transfer point” through which the novel keeps passing. Just as *A la recherche du temps perdu* “is launched with a vast movement of coming-and-going” where Marcel’s “recollections control the whole of the narrative,” so too moves *A Rebours* (Genette, 1980). Des Esseintes’s recollections, brought on by Fontenay, control the narrative. Through the analepses that result from the house, the movement of the novel is also one of “coming-and-going” through Fontenay.

These analepses, upon which the structure of *A Rebours* depends, are descriptive pauses as well. For example, in the passage quoted above, the memory that stems from the house is not one of action, but rather one of description of aesthetic details. When the narrative moves back in time, what it describes are the objects in the apartment: the shape of the furniture, the drape of the fabric, the color of the lighting. Instead of using plot complication, Huysmans uses ornament and decoration, and descriptions of present objects and past memories are what make up the narrative (Reed, 1985). Huysmans accomplishes his goal of getting rid of the traditional plot by writing a novel where the protagonist is virtually the only character, so the narrative depends on his contemplation rather than his interaction with others, and the

narrative moves backwards and forwards in time depending upon the objects and memories described. What is detailed is dictated by the house; Fontenay is essential to the structure of the novel for it allows both the description of objects to substitute for action and the subversion of linear narrative order through analepsis.

The movement of “coming-and-going” that occurs at the level of the narrative through analepsis is also found within the content of the novel. Des Esseintes’s health is declining, but he is not afflicted with any specific disease. In each chapter, he uses objects to stimulate his senses. This evokes some memory, which the narrative goes on to describe, but ultimately, he becomes physically exhausted and the chapter ends with some sort of “collapse,” either physical or psychological (Halpern, 1978). The movement in each chapter is a mini version of the novel as a whole. A prime example is chapter 10, which begins with Des Esseintes feeling well: “one fine morning Des Esseintes woke up in excellent health.” As the chapter goes on, he opens different bottles of perfumes and as he does, memories spring to mind: “he recalled an afternoon spent...in the company of this woman...this recollection stirred up within him a forgotten world of old ideas and ancient perfumes.” These reflections on his past are ultimately interrupted “by an overwhelming sensation of bodily weakness,” but when he throws open the window to get some fresh air, he encounters the scent of the outdoors “assaulting his over-taxed nostrils, discomposing afresh his ruined nerves, and throwing him into such a state of prostration that he collapsed in a faint, close to death.” The story is stitched together by a series of chapters that contain the same back and forth movement in each one. Each chapter imitates the general structure of *A Rebours* (Reed, 1985); individually, they are small scale processes of decline, self-contained descriptive pauses within the framework of a larger descriptive pause: the novel. Throughout the text, Des Esseintes’s physical decline echoes that of the novel as a whole. Halpern argues that this stagnating decay—this repetition of the same movement without any seeming progress—impedes the narrative:

“Decadence” expresses itself here [in *A Rebours*] as the imminence of an ending which thrusts itself into the narrative from the very beginning, as the *process* of falling...life as constant dying...for fourteen chapters we have a sense of entropic degeneration; Des Esseintes’ health spirals up and down without any real change. Such a digression, because it is analytical, additive, and categorizing, substantially thwarts the narrative sequence...*A Rebours* narrates the devel-

opment of an illness...its narrative sequence *is* an illness, an inevitable decline. (1978)

Although Halpern argues that digression hinders the narrative, descriptive passages propel it forward by taking the place of the plot. Just as Des Esseintes’s health slowly degenerates, so does the narrative, which is digressive because it moves back and forth in time, constantly pausing to give detailed descriptions. However, rather than thwarting it, this digression moves the narrative along. Decline is the narrative sequence. Each chapter is a process of falling and combined, the chapters comprise an entire narrative of decay. Decadent narrative is concerned with recounting the process of falling away, of using carefully described objects and memories to tell the story of that process. The use of descriptive pause in *A Rebours* functions at both the level of narrative and content, resulting in a novel where the act of describing is the plot itself.

### Use of Time

Influenced by *A Rebours*, Wilde used description in place of action in chapter 11 of *Dorian Gray*, which deals with the effects of the “yellow book” upon the life of the protagonist. Although Wilde may have been influenced by Huysmans’s use of ornate description, overall the structure of Wilde’s novel does not imitate that of *A Rebours*. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* proceeds in a linear fashion. The novel is roughly 150 pages long and can be divided into three general parts: part 1 covers four weeks in approximately 83 pages; part 2 describes 18 years in 13 pages; and part 3 recounts six weeks in about 52 pages. Out of those years, only 10 weeks are detailed. This uneven distribution of time results in great variations in speed. Parts 1 and 3 are predominantly dialogue with the occasional descriptive pause, so they fall under the category of scene. Part 2, however, is more problematic: in 13 pages 18 years pass. As such, part 2 can be considered an ellipsis. At the same time, it interrupts the action of the story in order to give a description of Dorian’s possessions with only the occasional reference to the passage of time. Squarely in the middle of the novel, the narrative action is suspended for a detailed discussion of jewels, fabrics, perfumes, etc., giving the impression of slowing down rather than speeding up. Therefore, part 2 also appears to be a pause, and this raises the question of how it is possible for a narrative at once to reach “infinite speed” and come to a “complete stop.”

Genette writes that “the analysis of ellipses comes down to considering the story time elided” (1980). In the case of chapter 11, that time is 18 years. Chapter 10 closes with

Dorian starting to read the book and when chapter 12 begins, the reader is given a quick summary of the years that have passed. Genette calls these kinds of ellipses “explicit ellipses”:

They arise either from an indication...of the lapse of time they elide, which assimilates them to very quick summaries of the “some years passed” type (in this case the indication *constitutes* the ellipsis as textual section, which is then not totally equal to zero); or else from elision pure and simple (zero degree of the elliptical text) plus, when the narrative starts up again, an indication of the time elapsed...Both of these forms, in addition, can supplement the purely temporal indication with a piece of information having diegetic content. (1980)

Chapter 11 is not an example of “elision pure and simple,” for the narrator takes pains to indicate the time elided. The first line contains a temporal marker: “For years, Dorian Gray could not free himself from the influence of this book.” The reader knows that there is some lapse of time and that therefore the ellipsis is “not totally equal to zero,” but rather the limit as the narrative approaches infinite speed. However, it is not until the first lines of chapter 12 that the reader discovers how much time has elapsed. Since chapter 11 explicitly indicates that a certain amount of time has passed, but does not recount what happens during that time, the chapter may be considered an ellipsis.

In addition to the opening lines of chapter 11, there are several other temporal markers scattered throughout—such as “always,” “often,” and “after he had passed his twenty-fifth year”—which form an important part of the structure of the chapter. They serve the dual purpose of indicating stasis and the passage of time. The first line of chapter 11 functions in much the same manner as the first line of *A la recherche du temps perdu*: “For a long time, I used to go to bed early” (Proust, 1981). Both suggest elision by obliquely referring to the passing years, implying that there is nothing to tell. “For a long time...” gives the reader the impression that Marcel went to bed early year after year, with no variation in this pattern. Similarly, “For years...” suggests that the book exerts the same influence over Dorian, with no change over time. This conclusion is reinforced throughout the chapter by the other markers, which imply that the same thing has happened every day over an extended period of time and therefore may be skipped in the narrative. While suggesting stasis, the phrase “For years...” also implies a moment of change. There is no sense in pointing out a particular pattern if it is not ultimately

to be broken. *A la recherche du temps perdu* begins with going to bed early, but could not go on if Marcel were indeed to sleep. Without this change, the narrative could not continue; the whole story could be elided because there would be nothing new to tell. Change is suggested in the first line of chapter 11 of *Dorian Gray*, which is concerned with the process of change brought about in Dorian because of the yellow book. Wilde deals with this process indirectly, illustrating it through descriptive pause.

Like *A Rebours* as a whole, chapter 11 of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is one long descriptive pause. The chapter is not about Dorian’s actions during those years, but is rather a series of descriptions of his possessions, tastes, and interests, and these details correspond to no particular narrated time. As Donald Lawler has remarked: “The reader should not be surprised to note that whenever an aesthetic object comes into view...the tempo of the prose slows down to display more fully each new interest and to dramatize each new effect” (1980). The narrative seems to pause because Dorian ceases to be the subject of the novel; in chapter 11, the objects become the subjects:

And so, for a whole year, he sought to accumulate the most exquisite specimens that he could find of textile and embroidered work, getting the dainty Delhi muslins, finely wrought with gold-thread palmates, and stitched over with iridescent beetles’ wings; the Dacca gauzes, that from their transparency are known in the East as “woven air,” and “running water,” and “evening dew;” strange figured cloths from Java; elaborate yellow Chinese hangings; books bound in tawny satins or fair blue silks, and wrought with *fleurs de lys*, birds, and images; veils of *lacis* worked in Hungary point; Sicilian brocades, and stiff Spanish velvets; Georgian work with its gilt coins, and Japanese *Foukousas* with their green-toned golds and their marvellously-plumaged birds.

By slowing down the narrative for the sake of description, this passage, along with many others in chapter 11, suggests the passage of time. Like the opening of the chapter, this paragraph begins with a temporal marker, but then goes on to focus on the textiles themselves. Narrative time disappears into the background, and the foreground becomes “the sensuous details of rare, unusual artifacts” (Lawler, 1988). After the first line, Dorian’s presence matters little in the passage, instead concentrating on describing the objects. It is in this sense that the narrative pauses, slowing down to display the object, and thereby suspending “the dramatic movement



of the story” (Mason, 1907). Despite the “absolute slowness of descriptive pause” (Genette, 1980), this passage, as with Proustian description, does not halt the movement of the story but instead pushes it forward. Details are a substitute for action and become the plot itself. Dorian’s act of contemplation, and the narrator’s painstaking detailing of this act, contains in itself the story of Dorian’s moral decay. This process is recounted to the reader, not through action, but through description so that the movement of the narrative depends upon its suspension.

Wilde makes careful use of pause in recounting this process of decay and the aureate descriptions in *Dorian Gray* serve the purpose of implying the process of Dorian’s degeneration via aesthetic details. According to Wilde: “It was necessary...for the dramatic development of this story, to surround Dorian Gray with an atmosphere of moral corruption. Otherwise the story would have no meaning and the plot no issue. To keep this atmosphere vague and indeterminate and wonderful was the aim of the artist who wrote the story” (Mason, 1907). This atmosphere replaces the particulars of Dorian’s path of moral degeneracy. As with Proust, Wildean contemplation serves the active narrative purpose of recounting a story in between the lines of description. However, there is no story if there is no decay; in order for the portrait to change, Dorian must undergo some sort of psychological transformation. Since Wilde wanted to keep the nature of the corruption vague, he instead used aesthetic details to establish the likelihood of Dorian’s fall from grace (Lawler, 1988). While initially giving the impression of narrative pause, the luxurious atmosphere carefully described in chapter 11 instead pushes the narrative forward. Dorian’s indulgence of the senses implies the corruption of his soul.

## Conclusion

Decay is the most important theme that characterizes “Decadent style,” and while this process of decline is certainly part of the content of Huysmans’s *A Rebours* and Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it is also the very essence of their structure. Both novels reject the rigid organization of Aristotelian narrative in favor of a style that, paradoxically, degenerates at the same time it generates the story. In avoiding plots, these narratives escape linear order, and instead substitute an alternate structure. The Decadent structure depends on both pause and ellipsis to carry the narrative. The novels gain movement either by moving backwards and forwards temporally, as in *A Rebours*, or by eliding events entirely, as in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. At the same time, these narratives are based upon details and digression. Rather than depending upon

action, or the protagonist’s interaction with others, Decadent narratives rely on contemplation and the description of that contemplation to constitute the narrative. Descriptive pauses propel the narratives forward, even as they appear to suspend them. Ultimately, Decadent texts are made up of the very details that seem to bog down these novels and exist for their own sake. Thus, what makes a novel “Decadent” is more than just its themes of decay and degeneration: novels are Decadent precisely because their narratives are.

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