

**PICTURES OF THE DECADENCE IN WORDS – REMEMBER AND  
THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY – A CORPUS LINGUISTIC APPROACH**

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**Abstract:** *The current research paper aims to establish the frequencies of terms belonging to the semantic fields of senses, arts, physical appearance and beauty, colours and illness in two works representative of the Decadent movement in the English and Romanian literature, i.e. Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray and Mateiu Caragiale's Remember. A comparative approach of the authors' intentions to picture their worlds is performed to reveal similarities and differences between the literary works under scrutiny and how they are relevant for the literary movement, studying them solely from a linguistic perspective. The methods chosen to perform the study belong to corpus linguistics, i.e. an online available software programme named Word Counter is used to detect the number of occurrences, followed by the interpretation stage using charts. Results prove that the words from the semantic field of physical appearance have the highest frequency in both works, senses and colours are significant aspects in the works under scrutiny, illness is not stressed in both stories, and art is more important in The Picture of Dorian Gray than in Remember. The occurrences of the terms reveals similarities and differences which validate the statement that the texts belonging to a certain literary period, i.e. the Decadence, focus on the physical appearance, beauty and art, values promoted by the literary movement.*

**Keywords:** *Decadence, arts, senses, physical appearance and beauty, illness, corpus linguistics;*

### **Introduction**

Literature has been studied from various perspectives, and the literary text can also be approached from the corpus linguistics perspective. Thus, a comparative study of two literary pieces of writing regarding the number of occurrences of words from specific common semantic fields may offer a new view on the respective works.

However, the choice of texts must be made respecting at least one criterion of similarity concerning their literary context so that the research could be valid as the literary theoretical approach is not to be ignored. Furthermore, the selection of the words must be performed carefully, as they must be relevant for the aim of the paper, to answer the requirement of the research, and to consider the literary aspect and context. Thus, comparing and contrasting figures of occurrences is a task that must respect some rigorous rules concerning choices.

Moreover, the quantitative comparison is eased if a software programme is used to collect the data, but the manual procession is sometimes required to detect the lemma in the texts. The interpretation stage regards some specific terms linked to the literary movement features, and in the case of Decadence, words from the semantic fields of *art, senses, illness, physical appearance and beauty* and the

symbols used within the text. There is common terminology, and the number of occurrences of specific terms is relevant for unveiling hidden meanings or the author's intention to convey their message. Last but not least, the size of the texts is another characteristic that needs special attention when the numbers of words are the focus in the approach, and this is also the case of *Remember* by Mateiu Caragiale and *The picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde.

All in all, a comparative approach of two texts, using corpus linguistics tools, unveils the message beneath the words. Additionally, the richness of symbols specific to the Decadence permits a selection of terms, which are then analysed using corpus linguistics methods.

### **Literature review**

Humankind has experienced peaks and troughs throughout history considering its path, and consequently, periods of outstanding achievements were followed by a decline, and a recurrent opposition has been noticed during history, each cultural movement being followed by an opposed one considering the set of values they promoted. When the term *decadence* in literature is considered, the situation is not different, and firstly, the theoretical approach is to be established as a research framework.

Thus, according to the *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (2013), the term *decadence* refers to a specific decline in art or literature, being used for the first time for in antiquity for the Alexandrian period (300–30 BC), and then to the period after the death of Augustus (14 AD). However, the term recurred in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it targets the French symbolist movement, especially poetry. The movement promotes both the autonomy of art and “the need for sensationalism and melodrama, egocentricity, the bizarre, the artificial, art for art’s sake” (Cuddon 2013: 188). Furthermore, the position of the artist regarding society is perceived as a superior person towards the rest of the people, but an outsider, referring especially to bourgeois society. Moreover, the decadent poetry though was preoccupied “with personal experience, self-analysis, perversity, and elaborate and exotic sensations” (Cuddon 2013: 188) to a large extent. The definition underlines the importance of sensations, arts and the artistic self in the Decadent movement, which are reflected in the choices of words.

Subsequently, according to the *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (2013), the French poet who drew the direction of the movement was Charles Baudelaire with his *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), “a sort of manifesto of the movement or cult” (Cuddon 2013: 188). However, according to the same source (2013), the English literature did not adhere to the movement, and only influences can be noticed in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for example. Thus, this literary work is perceived to be a milestone in the English Decadence and it may be considered a significant reference point when comparison is performed. Furthermore, according to *The New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, the previously mentioned work was inspired by Huysmans’s *À Rebours*“ which

dramatised but also ironised the languid life of decadence, the vocation of the senses [...] and carried Decadence into the public world” (Horowitz 2005: 1466).

Additionally, Arthur Schopenhauer has previously presented the topic of art and senses in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of his masterpiece *The World as Will and Idea* (1909) entitled *On the Inner Nature of Art, volume 3*. Thus, according to Schopenhauer, art is supposed to supply an answer to the philosophical question on the nature of life, but the author underlined the idea that all arts “speak only the naive and childish language of perception, not the abstract and serious language of reflection” (Schopenhauer 1909: 174). Consequently, the respond appears as “a fleeting image: not permanent and general knowledge” (Schopenhauer 1909: 174). Accordingly, “for perception every work of art answers that question” (Schopenhauer 1909: 174) regardless of its typology, i.e. painting, sculptures, poetry, drama, or music. However, the last form of art is stated to be more profound than the others “for in its language, which is understood with absolute directness, but which is yet untranslatable into that of the reason, the inner nature of all life and existence expresses itself” (Schopenhauer 1909: 174). Consequently, the indissoluble link between art and senses is emphasised whilst the language used to convey the message plays a vital role.

On debating on the nature of art, wisdom, truth, and the hidden secret of appealing more to senses are ingredients of the works of art which is brought to life when each person perceives it. Consequently, their secret language must be explored, and when literature is considered, words must be explored, and corpus linguistic tools may confirm or reveal additional features of a literary work.

Thus, Tony McEnery and Costas Gabrielatos underline the usefulness of computers software in approaching literary works in their chapter entitled *English Corpus Linguistics*. The authors explain how corpus linguistics contribute to language research presenting the nature of corpus linguistics, such as definition, features, and in which situation is appropriate. Furthermore, McEnery and Costas Gabrielatos emphasise that there is a common point regarding the scholar’s attempt to define linguistics, i.e. “corpus linguistics is empirical, in that it examines, and draws conclusions from, attested language use, rather than intuitions” (McEnery & Gabrielatos 2006: 2). Furthermore, Tony McEnery and Costas Gabrielatos underline the necessity for a well-stated hypothesis and the analysis of the entire text, but they opt for the lack of lemmatisation. However, lemmatisation may be relevant when word frequency is considered to the detriment of collocations. Subsequently, the study of texts using corpus linguistics tools and methods may confirm the traits of the literary movement to which they belong and they may also facilitate comparison between literary works.

Last but not least, the studies presented above are relevant considering the terminology studied within the current paper as the choice of language is representative from the corpus linguistics perspective. Thus, from the multitude of the semantic fields of words used in a literary work, the representatives are those related to the literary context and tendency in the historical period.

## Research methodology

### Research hypothesis and research questions

The following hypothesis can be formulated regarding the word frequencies analysis: If a corpus consisting of two literary works belonging to the Decadence movement, i.e. *Remember* by Mateiu Caragiale and *The picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, are analysed in order to detect the number of occurrences of words from the semantic fields of *senses, arts, physical appearance and beauty, colours and illness*, then a clear picture of how the authors imagined the world of Decadence at that time will be revealed. Furthermore, comparing the obtained data will unveil similarities and differences between the two worlds imagined by Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Mateiu Caragiale in *Remember*. Thus, the paper aims to answer three research questions:

- 1) What are the frequencies of the words from semantic fields of *senses, arts, physical appearance and beauty, colours and illness* in the two literary works under scrutiny?
- 2) What are the similarities and differences between the two worlds as they emerge from the imaginary expressed by Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Mateiu Caragiale in *Remember*?
- 3) What is the relevancy of the detected frequencies for the authors' intention to picture the Decadence?

### Aim and objectives

The aim of the research paper is to establish the frequencies of words belonging to the semantic fields of *senses, arts, physical appearance and beauty, colours and illness* in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Mateiu Caragiale's *Remember*, as well as their similarities and differences for the authors' intention to picture their worlds. Subsequently, the frequencies of terms from the semantic fields of *senses, arts, physical appearance and beauty, colours and illness* detected in the two literary works will be compared and contrasted in order to reveal how they are similar and different in the context of the literary movement.

The following objectives will be achieved:

- a) To detect the frequency of the words from the semantic fields of *senses, arts, physical appearance and beauty, colours and illness*;
- b) To interpret the relevancy and importance of the frequency of the terms from the semantic fields of *senses, arts, physical appearance and beauty, colours and illness*;
- c) To compare and contrast the two literary works using the criterion of terms frequency;
- d) To create a chart to express in percentages the frequency of the words under scrutiny;
- e) To interpret the relevancy of their frequency from the perspective of the conveyed message;

### **Corpus description**

The corpus consists of two literary works belonging to the Decadence movement from the Romanian and English literature, i.e. *Remember* by Mateiu Caragiale and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. The reason that led to the choice was the fact that both authors used powerful pictures to describe an unusual character, the dandy, characteristic of the Decadence movement, both proving mental issues concerning their physical aspect.

On the one hand, *Remember* by Mateiu Caragiale focuses on Aubrey du Vere, a strange young man from Berlin, a dandy of the Decadence, whose physical aspect is of utmost importance. He loves blue and wears seven rings with sapphires. His physical appearance changes during the night, being seen by the narrator either wearing inappropriate make-up or women's clothes. Aubrey du Vere ends tragically, found dead in the river, with his face burnt by acid and with a stagger in his chest, his rings representing the only proof for identification.

On the other hand, Dorian Gray, the main character and the dandy from *The picture of Dorian Gray*, also proves an unhealthy preoccupation with his physical aspect, but his beauty does not change as he sold his soul for eternal beauty. His life is also a chain of unusual appearances, a dissolute lifestyle, and mystery. Moreover, his death resembles Aubrey de Vere's as he is found dead with a stagger in his heart, being identified by his servants after they have recognised the rings on his hand.

All in all, Aubrey de Vere and Dorian Gray are both similar and different, and thus, common aspects are detected, such as their preoccupation for beauty, art, unhealthy lifestyle, and their similar death. They are expressions of dandyism and mystery, representative characters for the Decadence movement.

### **Research approach and tools**

The approach used in the research is a simple corpus linguistics approach, and the paper aims to interpret the text only from the linguistics perspective. Thus, there are four stages in the process as it follows: 1) identification of the frequency of the words from the semantic fields of *senses, arts, physical appearance and beauty, colours* and *illness*; 2) interpretation; 3) identification of the similarities and differences between the two texts in the corpus; 4) interpretation.

Thus, the first stage is to identify the frequency of the total number of words and those from the semantic fields of *senses, arts, physical appearance and beauty, colours* and *illness* using the Software Word Counter available online, but to a certain extent. The aim is to identify the total number of words and the number of occurrences for terms related to the Decadence movement and the two main characters. Major parts of speech are targeted, mainly nouns, adjectives, adverbs and verbs, as they bear semantic content relevant for the study. Secondly, the identified data are interpreted, compared and contrasted, the length of the literary works is also considered. Interpretation stages follow these steps of the research, and the data are organised in groups for clear insight and the ease of interpretation of their frequency. Therefore, the data can reveal how the dandy is perceived and in

which words the Decadence movement is expressed as it is revealed by the frequencies of the words from the semantic fields of *senses*, *arts*, *physical appearance and beauty*, *colours* and *illness*. The frequencies are relevant as the word choice is connected to both the movement and the characters, and a low or high frequency is a reliable indicator for the interpretation. However, manual processing of the text is required for detecting lemmas and possible errors in the spelling of the electronic version of the literary works. Furthermore, *Remember* is the first in the analysis as it is shorter than *The Picture of the Dorian Gray*, and there are fewer possibilities to detect the terms. Then, following the identified pattern, the next literary work is analysed, and the results are compared in the end.

In conclusion, this framework of analysis suits well to the aim of the research and, this confers it challenge, interest, and clarity both for performing and understanding. Accordingly, the results are obtained accurately, and they are reliable in configuring the picture of the Decadence movement.

### Results and interpretation

Five semantic fields were considered and analysed as they were related to the *Decadent* movement linguistic trends and consequently their frequency was also notable within the texts. Furthermore, proper names related to arts and works of art are counted as they are relevant for the field of arts. The term *mirror* is also considered as being connected to how a person perceives themselves and adjectives related to the concept of beauty appears as important in the category of *physical appearance and beauty*. Furthermore, the cafe as a venue for artists' meeting is counted, as well, in the category of *arts* and the lack of colour is also important for the group of *colours*. The parts of speech which are prevalent are the noun and verb, but adjectives and adverbs are also detected in the corpus. Additionally, the total number of words of the text and a proportion of the five semantic fields in the texts were considered and interpreted as the two literary works subjected to analysis differ considering their length and an accurate comparison is possible only if percentage is considered. Thus, the detected numbers are as it follows:

#### ❖ *Remember*

Total number of words: 6478

- *Physical appearance and beauty*: 83: ochi – 14, oglinda/i – 8, inel - 4, safir – 5, frumos – 14, chip - 7, păr – 6, fața – 6, tână – 13, arată – 6
- *Senses*: 36: vedea – 12, auzi – 3, mireasma – 9, parfum - 2, mirosi – 1, frig – 3, a simți – 6
- *Colours*: 22: albastru – 15, negru - 5, violet – 1, alb – 1
- *Arts*: 20: muzica- 1, muzeu - 2 cafe – 3, Ruysdael – 3, cadre - 2, Mignar - 1, Mancini - 1, Van Dyck - 1, Van-der- Faes – 1, Van-Brouwer – 1, Van-der-Hoogh - 1, ulcioare de Delft - 1, Stendhal – 1, Hasdeu - 1
- *Illness*: 3: boala - 1 bolnav -1, paloare - 1

The highest frequency is noticed in the category *physical appearance and beauty*, followed by the category of *senses* and *colours*, while the group representing *arts* and *illness* are the last in line. However, the terms *ring* and

*sapphires* may be placed in the category of *arts* and thus, the frequency increases but remain below the category of *colours*.

❖ ***The Picture of Dorian Gray***

Total number of words: 55732

- *Physical appearance and beauty*: 533: eye – 84, mirror – 11, ring- 7 , sapphire – 3, beautiful – 29, beauty – 44, face - 86, hair – 21, young - 57, look – 191
- *Arts*: 491: picture - 167, music – 31, Shakespeare - 9, book - 28, Romeo – 7, Juliet - 10, literature - 3, art(s) - 59, artist – 16, Portrait - 49, exhibit - 11, exhibition -10, to paint - 39, canvas - 21, painting - 13, painter - 10, Japanese artefacts - 6, Georgian work - 1 Georgian urn – 1
- *Senses*: 253: see– 93, hear – 44, smell – 4, cold – 21, feel – 28, feeling – 16, sensation- 8, perfume - 5, odor - 5 senses - 29
- *Colours*: 152: colour - 49, blue – 19, black – 17, purple – 11, white – 36, yellow - 13, brown - 5, colorless - 2
- *Illness*: 20: ill – 7, pale – 13

The highest frequency is noticed in the category *physical appearance and beauty*, followed by the category of *arts* and *senses*, while the group representing *colours* and *illness* are the last in line. Nevertheless, if the terms *ring* and *sapphires* are placed in the category of *arts*, the frequency increases, over passing the category of *senses*.

**Similarities and differences**

The focus in both literary works is on *physical appearance and beauty*, followed by the category of *senses*, while *illness* is in the last position for both stories. This may be explained if we consider that the dandy in the Decadence movement was highly preoccupied with his look, and they experienced the world focusing on their physical perception, especially the sense of seeing. Furthermore, *illness* is not the current motif in the analysed works, which explains why the words from the semantic field of *illness* are placed in the last position, even if both characters seem to have some mental issues. The main difference lies in the fact that the category of *arts* has a different position in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, i.e. it is situated in the third place, before the one of *colours*, which is opposed in the case of *Remember*. The explanation may be the fact that *art* is a central theme in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, the focus on arts is perceived from the title, and the score is given by the number of occurrences of the term *picture*.

However, the results considering the total number of words differ considerably, the English work being 8.6 times larger than the Romanian story. Thus, when the results are compared and contrasted, this ratio may also be taken into account in order to obtain valid results and accurate interpretation.

If the graphics are compared, *Remember* proves to have a higher frequency in the categories of *physical appearance and beauty*, and *senses*, a reverse situation for *colours*, while *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* is superior only regarding the category of *arts* and *illness*. This proves that Mateiu Caragiale's work is more vital

than Oscar Wilde's in transmitting the message, considering how it is expressed in words. Another interpretation refers to *art* which plays a vital role in Wilde's work as *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* is superior regarding the category of *arts* and *illness*. Contrary, the physical appearance is emphasised in the Romanian work, whilst the other three categories do not differ substantially regarding the detected percentage in the text.

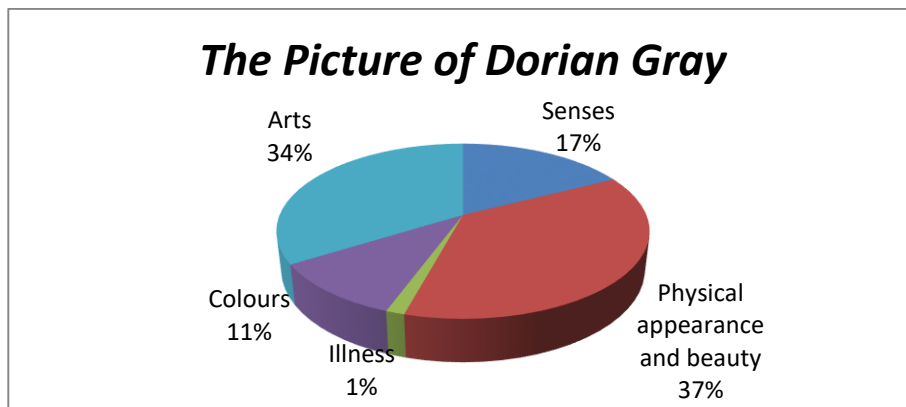


Figure 1. Frequencies of terminology - *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*

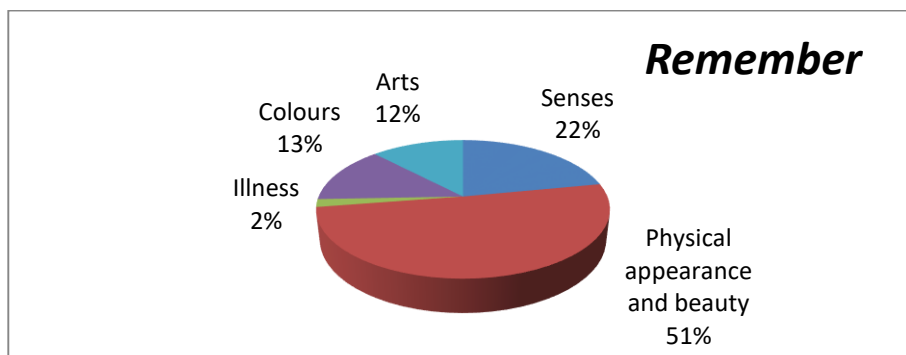


Figure 2. Frequencies of terminology- *Remember*

All things considered, the study of the number of occurrences in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde and *Remember* by Mateiu Caragiale proves similarities as the focus is on the main characters' physical appearance, the perception of the world around using senses, and mental illness is stressed in both works. However, the semantic field of *art* is revealed to play an essential role in the English novel under surveillance as stated in the title, as well.



## Conclusions

A comparative study in the frequency of words in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Remember* has proved a rewarding one, as the similarity of the semantic fields generated by incremental images confirms several assumptions about their authors and the generative mechanism of texts belonging to a certain literary period. The aesthetic decadence is mainly characterized by reliance upon the interpretive function of perception, experience of the world being a matter of sensuous response rather than ratiocination. The other prevailing area of reference is that of artifacts: masks rather than organic faces, jewels, the making of art objects (aesthetic considerations about painting, portraits, exhibits, etc.).

The terms under scrutiny are similar to both stories, and the results have both common points or differ in frequencies: the category of *physical appearance and beauty* is the widest in opposition to the one of *illness* which is the least represented in the corpus. Considering the semantic fields of *colours*, the colour *blue* is the most frequently used, whilst the sense of *seeing* occurs most frequently in both literary works. This idea is noticed from the title, art is of utmost importance in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the dandies are portrayed using the vocabulary specific to the Decadence movement.

In conclusion, the construction of identity is not objective, as in realist art, but subjective: it depends on the way one is perceived by others or represented through art. Characteristic is also morbidity, the frequent allusions to death, as the decay of flesh, of organic life was seen as the prelude to the revelation of the spirit in art. Furthermore, the corpus linguistic analysis proves to be appropriate for approaching two dissimilar works belonging to the same literary movement.

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