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Summary of the Dissertation

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Decadence as a Literary Convention

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Decadence as a Literary Convention

I. Decadence was a special response to the concept of progress. Julien Freund, who, in his book *La Décadence*, attempts to provide a complete picture of the concept of decline throughout the history of philosophy, asserts that the enthusiasm for decline felt by the decadents of the end of the 19th century was unprecedented in history. Already, in the middle of the century, the view appeared that progress had led to a world of artlessness, in which chosenness was of no value. This elitist criticism of progress was continued by the decadents, who, re-evaluating the common values of the modern world, identified themselves not as progressive but, just on the contrary, as believers in decline. It was not in the field of politics where they exerted their opposition to progress but in arts and literature. They did not aim to change the modern world, which they considered petty, but to separate art from it. They regarded art as an autonomous system.

In my opinion, decadence had extraordinary importance in the theory of literature. I do not share decadents' negative views on the progress of sciences, technology and civilization. They undervalued classical human rights, while those were the sine qua non of publishing their dissident views. Decadents' greatest merit was to separate art from historical progress, whether or not they denied the latter justifiably. This meant to strongly reject classicist aesthetics as well as the naturalist theory of literature. Classicist and naturalist theorists thought that the history of literature was progress, i.e. development towards the literary trends which they were adherents of, namely classicism and naturalism, and they condemned any alteration of this trend as violation of the norm. Decadents, however, who denied that historical progress had brought about increase in values, believed that deviation from the trend or norm could be a way to create literary or artistic value.

II. It is important to examine and weigh all the views expressed by the decadents' contemporaries and in the reference literature which concern the relationship between reality and literature. This is a precondition to provide a proper definition of decadence, since different views can result in different notions of decadence.

Although society has influence on literature, authors' social circumstances are not totally determinative in their works. In addition, fiction, which means diversion from reality, is an important element of literature. The idea that literature expresses an internal reality is not

without any reason. Yet, while dealing with decadence, I do not study the authors' psyche. Literature is the soul's product, but the soul also includes many things that are nothing to do with art or literature. As Oscar Wilde said, all that the soul produces is not literature. So, I do not examine the soul in my study. Neither do I follow the opposite logic, which says life is influenced by the works of art and literature.

I regard decadence as a literary convention. I also examine as conventions the thematic, stylistic and linguistic elements that featured decadence. Since decadence is such a convention that was typical of a certain period's literature, it can be considered as a literary trend, as well. Since the adherents of the trend called themselves decadents and founded a decadent periodical, decadence could be reckoned as a literary movement, too. I think, however, that in movements, human relations are more determinative than in literary works. So, I find it more important to examine decadence in the literary works themselves.

III. In order to show how unprecedented decadence was, I feel it important to clearly show what separates it from other literary trends. In the third chapter, on the basis of three definitions, i.e. those made by Arthur Symons and Charles Bernheimer and the one in the Random House Dictionary cited by Richard Gilman, I identify decadence with late 19th century French and English authors' endeavours to break norms, which transformed the literary language. The consistent use of the idea of deviance makes decadence different from former trends. Decadence opposed classicism for its rigid rules, the respect of which was, even in the second half of the 19th century, recommended to authors by France's official institutions. Since the rejection of norms led decadents to despise nature, they wanted to supersede romanticism and naturalism, which trends, for different reasons, regarded nature as a basis of reference.

The concept of norm violation resulted in the typical conventions of literary decadence: the cult of decay, elitism, pitilessness, the beautification of ugliness by art, aesthetic religion, the appreciation of artificiality, and unusual linguistic forms. I try to characterize these conventions in their narrowest sense to reveal how decadence differs from other trends. It is important to emphasise that there were certain conventions (e.g. the cult of sickness) that were originally not inventions of decadence, but those of a former trend, and taken up by decadence, because they fitted into the concept that breaking norms can be a way to create artistic values. These adopted conventions also feature decadence. However, it is important to show the special way decadence integrated them.

IV. I think literary decadence is worth examining in a broader sense than just within the narrow frames of its definition. If we extend the meaning according to Wittgenstein's family resemblance principle, then we can see decadence ramifying greatly and prevailing over a longer period. Seeking family resemblances, we can notice decadent features in such works, too, that also belong to trends other than decadence, at least on the basis of its narrower definition. This is a way to see that decadence had had its antecedents and that, after the end of the era of the narrowly defined decadence, the trend continued in a number of works. For instance, the cult of decline already appears in Flaubert's early works in the 1840s, while *Utas és holdvilág*, a novel by Antal Szerb published in 1937, is an example of return to decadent conventions in a later age.

According to the definition cited by Gilman, decadents were French and English. Their works, however, influenced the literature of other nations, too, where the decadent conventions may have changed to a certain extent. Hungarian decadent works often show not to have been influenced by the narrowly defined decadence but by forerunners of the trend or by less typical pieces of it. In Hungarian decadent works, disdain for modernity is less prevailing than in French ones. In Ady's decadent cycle, *A daloló Párizs*, besides Paul Verlaine, Baudelaire and the cabaret-poet Jehan Rictus are mentioned as inspirers. Babits, in his essay on Swinburne, regarded Baudelaire as the most decadent poet.

The concept of decadence based on family resemblance helps discover intriguing relationships and coincidences. Nietzsche's philosophy and certain novels by Gabriele D'Annunzio have parallels with the decadent cult of pitilessness. Observing such similarities leads to the realization that symbolism is a decadent trend.

The excessive use of the family resemblance principle can result in an infinite extension of the notion. To avoid this, I regard as a condition of parallelization, that the violation of the norm must have artistic or cultural value in the literary work. And, since without romanticism there is no decadence, I consider the middle of the 19th century to be a *terminus ante quem*.