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Aesthetic Principles in Oscar Wilde's
The Picture of Dorian Gray

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1. Introduction

Aestheticism has its roots in the Romantic period and the Pre-Raphaelites and spread in Western Europe and America during the late 19th century. It involves a devotion to art and it denotes the importance of beauty compared with other values, as morality and material utility. As Robert Vincent Johnson notes, “aestheticism is not one single phenomenon, but a group of related phenomena, all reflecting a conviction that the enjoyment of beauty can by itself give value and meaning to life” (10). Aestheticism attempts to separate art from life in order to reduce moral implications. Instead of letting attitudes towards life influence the work of art, art is valued for the immediate aesthetic pleasure it entails (Johnson 13-14). However, Aestheticism threatened the Victorian respectability and morality by emphasizing sensuous pleasure and a life ideal of beauty.

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) is one of the most famous figures linked to literary Aestheticism. He was generally viewed as a controversial symbol for Aestheticism, mainly because of his appearance. Wilde got introduced to the aesthetic principles by his college teachers, Walter Pater and John Ruskin. He kept Pater’s words of philosophy with him everywhere and named them his “Golden book,” because to him they were life changing. Ruskin inspired Wilde to teach others about his aesthetic interests (Pearson 35).

Wilde is famous for writing poems, plays, short stories, criticism and one novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, written during his late career (first published in 1890 and revised in 1891), which concerns the issue of devotion to art. The story’s main characters are three men seeking beauty in life; Lord Henry, a wise teacher of aesthetic principles, Basil Hallward, an artist, and Dorian Gray, a model learning about aesthetic values. The novel mainly concerns a discussion among these three men, who are fascinated by each other’s beauty and opinions. The story was highly debated regarding whether it is morally repulsive, due to the focus it places on fascination between men, or a work of Aestheticism.

The ambiguity in the interpretation of the novel prompted my interest in exploring the role Aestheticism might have played in it. There are several critical works about Wilde, mainly biographies about his life, focusing on the fame he received for his personality and the way his life ended tragically in prison and misery. He is moreover often mentioned in texts about Aestheticism, since he is one of the most famous symbols of The Movement, but most of these works concord his other literary contributions.

In this essay I plan to examine the principles of Aestheticism in order to investigate whether the novel is written in accordance with Aestheticism. I hope to show how the two main characters in the novel resemble Wilde himself, especially when it comes to getting introduced to the Aesthetic philosophy and living a life according to those principles. I will also discuss how the story was received, how Wilde changed the text, and why he refuted the mainstream ideology of the Victorian era. My claim is that Wilde uses *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to spread his own interpretations of Aestheticism.

The theoretical approach I will use is based on the perspectives of New Historicism. In New Historicism it is important to research the author's life, the author's social surrounding and how people reasoned during the author's lifetime and relate that information to the literary work (Lynn 175).

I will start by tracing biographical elements in the novel; how two literary works influenced it and how the two main characters actually resemble Wilde himself. I will then pay attention to aesthetic objectives and the aesthetic style, Victorian influences on Aestheticism, as well as explore how the story was received and why Wilde revised the novel.

2. Biographical Aspects of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

2.1 Literary Influences

When Wilde was on his honeymoon he walked into a Parisian bookstore and bought a novel called *A Rebours* by J.K. Huysman. The novel caught his interest tremendously. He went back

and bought all editions available and read the story over and over again. It was a sinful story about a young Parisian who seeks immoral and moral experiences. According to Joseph Pearce, the text is poisonous; it is difficult to discern if the novel is about a spiritual saint or a sinner (176). The story concerns “souls tortured by the present, disgusted with the past, terrified and despairing of the future” (Pearce 178). *A Rebours* reminded Wilde about his dark side, and it “[would] hang over Wilde like an ominously dark cloud or lurk within him like a shadow of his darker self” (Pearce 177).

Later, when Wilde wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he made a book have great impact on Dorian Gray’s life, in the same way *A Rebours* had on his (Pearce 177). In the novel Lord Henry and Dorian Gray often meet to discuss life matters and the beauty in life. After some time Lord Henry recommends Dorian Gray to read a book that has a yellow book cover, thereby named the “yellow book,” because he knows that it will influence the young man’s life: “It seemed to him that in exquisite raiment, and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. Things that he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him. Things of which he had never dreamed were gradually revealed” (Wilde rev ed 91). Similarly to *A Rebours*, the “yellow book” is about a young Parisian who tries to figure out what it is like to live during other centuries; what kind of passions and ideas that are circulating. Moreover, the Parisian youth wants to sum up the various moods in himself “through which the world-spirit has ever passed, loving for their mere artificiality those renunciations that men have unwisely called virtue, as those natural rebellions that wise men call sin” (Wilde rev ed 91). Dorian Gray finds himself addicted to the poisonous novel:

The mere cadence of the sentences, the subtle monotony of their music, so full as it was of complex refrains and movements elaborately repeated, produced in the mind of the lad, as he passed from chapter to chapter... a

malady of dreaming, that made him unconscious of the falling day and creeping shadows. (Wilde rev ed 92)

Like Wilde himself, Dorian Gray “cannot free himself” (Wilde rev ed 92) from the book; he is also fascinated by the novel and buys all editions available. He gets the impression that the story is about his own life, a part that he has not lived yet, which is how Wilde viewed *A Rebours* as well. In fact, the description of how Dorian Gray experiences the “yellow book” (Wilde rev ed 93) seems almost identical to the description of how Wilde interpreted *A Rebours* according to Pearce (176-177).

Another work that influenced *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* by Walter Pater. Wilde found the text life changing (Pearce 66). He called it the “Golden book” and never travelled anywhere without it (Pearson 38). In this study, Pater analyzes the work of a few Renaissance artists and the European culture of the time by using aesthetic criticism. He interprets how art, poetry, philosophy and religious life are linked (Pater 6), by for example making a comparison between the beauty of the religion of Greece with the Christian religion. Pater writes that “the fifteenth century is an impassioned age, so ardent and serious in its pursuit of art that it consecrates everything with which art has to do as a religious object” (18). In fact, the study contains many philosophical ideas, which Wilde used as a guide in life.

One chapter from the *Studies of the History of the Renaissance* which seems to have influenced Wilde and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in particular is where Pater focuses on Winckelmann and his specialization in Greek classics (86). To Winckelmann no other people value beauty as much as the Greeks: monuments of beauty are created, people are prized for their beauty and it gives them right to fame (Pater 103). Those who are beautiful try to seek fame through the artists, since they acknowledge their beauty. Thus artists are given the “opportunity to have supreme beauty ever before their eyes” (Pater 103), a view of beauty

revisited in the novel, as the story concerns the importance of being and remaining beautiful. Dorian Gray represents the supreme beauty the artist Basil Hallward can enjoy having before his eyes. Wilde even makes an explicit comparison between Greek sculptures and Dorian Gray through Basil Hallward's claim: "What the invention of oil-painting was to the Venetians, the face of Antinoüs was to late Greek sculpture, and the face of Dorian Gray will some day be to me" (Wilde rev ed 7). Winckelmann characterizes the Greek sculptures as great, free, and individualistic; to him they are "the ideal artists of themselves, cast each in one flawless mould - works of art which stand before us as an immortal presentment of the gods" (quoted in Pater 110). Similarly, in Wilde's novel, Basil Hallward defines Dorian Gray in terms of "the lines of a fresh school, a school that . . . has all the passion of a romantic spirit, all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek. [He] is the harmony of soul and body" (Wilde rev ed 8). Winckelmann is of the opinion that the sculptures show perfection, a representation of the gods, and Basil Hallward thinks that Dorian Gray shows the same perfection of the Greek spirit.

Due to his inspiration from the Greek classics, Wilde was often criticized for writing in a manner that shows same sex affection. The general opinion was that a man cannot be admired by another man artistically; therefore the novel was interpreted to be about men fascinated by each other sexually. Notably however, Winckelmann claims that "the beauty of the Greek statues was a sexless beauty; the statues of the gods had the least traces of sex. Here, there is a moral sexlessness, a kind of impotence, an ineffectual wholeness of nature, yet with a divine beauty and significance of its own" (quoted in Pater 111). Similarly, Wilde arguably focused on the beauty of the person, regardless whether it was a woman or a man.

The novel contains then an array of biographical aspects. Like Wilde himself, Dorian Gray gets addicted to a moral, sinful text that is life changing: *A Rebours* inspires Wilde in the creation of the "yellow book" with its dangerous story and sinful character (Pearce 176).

Then, the aesthetic criticism in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, and especially the Greek art discussion there, seems to have stimulated Wilde in his interpretation of the aesthetic principles throughout the novel.

2.2 Character Resemblance

The theme of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* comes from a real episode in Wilde's life, as he used to visit a painter named Basil Ward, who at one point had an incredibly beautiful model in the studio. Wilde was of the opinion that it was a shame that such a beautiful face would grow old. The artist suggested that it would be wonderful if the painting could grow old instead and the model would remain young. Wilde thought this to be a fascinating idea and started to write a story about it. He showed Basil Ward his appreciation by naming one of his main characters Basil *Hallward* (Pearson 156-157). The other two main characters, who show similarities to Wilde himself, are Lord Henry and Dorian Gray.

2.2.1 Lord Henry

The character of Lord Henry in the novel bears traits of Wilde himself and of Pater, Wilde's college professor. It is Pater who persuasively taught Wilde the philosophy of Aestheticism in a similar way Lord Henry teaches Dorian Gray about life values, but in the novel Lord Henry strongly resembles also Wilde himself. Wilde's lifestyle is broadly mirrored in the novel, where tea parties, social gatherings and meetings with important people play a significant part in Lord Henry's life. Wilde enjoyed great social gatherings and was often invited to upper class festivities. Furthermore he was famous for his own tea-parties, his friendliness, hospitality, lively temperament, and enthusiastic conversations. Everybody who appreciated conversation, laughter, musical entertainment and arrack punch were welcome (Pearson 40). Wilde held lengthy speeches during these parties, making original remarks about people, statements that did not make sense and paradoxes which he laughed at himself, but he could also cite verses, by him and by others, incredibly well. The speeches were a perfect medium

to spread his aesthetic views. Similarly, Lord Henry makes remarkable statements to cause reactions, as for example “there are only two kinds of people who are really fascinating – people who know absolutely everything, and people who know absolutely nothing. The secret of remaining young is never to have an emotion that is unbecoming” (Wilde rev ed 62). Lord Henry seems to have a clear idea of what life is like and how it should be lived and he tries to convince Dorian Grey of his sentiments. Many of his striking statements, like “the aim of life is self-development. To realize one’s nature perfectly – that is what each of us is here for” (Wilde rev ed 13) are indeed Wilde’s own opinions; thereby, through Lord Henry Wilde could share his perspectives on Aestheticism with the readers.

2.2.2 Dorian Gray

Dorian Gray is young, beautiful and, at first, an innocent model. His appearance is described as similar to Wilde’s: “his mode of dressing, and the particular styles that from time to time he affected had their marked influence on the young exquisites of the Mayfair balls and Pall Mall club windows, who copied him in everything that he did, and tried to reproduce [his] charm” (Wilde rev ed 94). However, the real person behind Dorian Gray is Wilde’s lover, John Gray. He is the beautiful and adorable person who inspired Wilde to create Dorian Gray, but Dorian Gray and John Gray do not share other qualities (Pearce 223). Instead, Dorian Gray shows more resemblance with Wilde himself, especially in how he as a young man encountered the aesthetic principles. Through the novel, Wilde could reach a broad audience and define his Aesthetic ideas, covering them in conversation between his main characters.

Many people affected Wilde in his search for life purpose; Pater in particular influenced Wilde’s way of relating to religion and Aestheticism (Pearson 35). In a similar way, Dorian Gray is affected by Lord Henry. Lord Henry has clear judgments about everything, something which troubles Dorian Gray at the same time as it fascinates him. In fact, he cannot stop thinking about Lord Henry’s words. He wants to live by the aesthetic principles, but his wish

to remain young and beautiful forever makes him lie and even murder. Wilde did not become a murderer as Dorian Gray, but his interpretation of Aestheticism gradually changed into involving a fascination for sinners (Pearce 244).

3. Aesthetic Objectives and Victorian Era Ideology Influences

3.1 Aesthetic Style

There is not only one definition of Aestheticism; nor is there one single name for the concept; it is termed ‘Aestheticism,’ ‘Aesthetic Movement,’ ‘Decadence,’ ‘Fin-de-Siècle,’ ‘Beauty without realism,’ ‘Art for art’s sake,’ and ‘Art for its own sake’ (Prettejohn 2). There is no consensus about when Aestheticism emerged, whether it was around 1860, earlier or later. The term ‘Aestheticism’ is still used because it describes the developments in art after Pre-Raphaelitism: instead of focusing on nature and reality, as the Pre-Raphaelites, Aestheticism embraces art’s difference from real life (Prettejohn 2-4). Then, ‘Art for art’s sake’ concerns experimentalism in the fields of painting and poetry, while ‘Aesthetic Movement’ is associated with decorative arts, interior design and fashion. As Elizabeth Prettejohn notes, during his lectures in America, Wilde promotes the ‘Aesthetic Movement’ but he terms it ‘aestheticism’ and ‘aesthetic movement,’ less formally (4).

The terminological confusion in Victorian writing helps to explain the disparate interpretations of what is considered to be art. As Malcolm Budd notes, Aestheticism can mean, more widely, artistic appreciation, where artistic appreciation is the aesthetic appreciation of works of art (13). Viewed more narrowly, aesthetic and artistic values are separated. Then the aesthetic experience of art involves its beauty, liveliness, and expressiveness while the artistic value means its originality. In other words, an object can be beautiful aesthetically, but artistically it is judged by its originality. Other interpretations include whether aesthetic pleasure should be distinguished from “purely sensory pleasure,

such as delight in a color or taste . . . [or whether] purely sensory pleasure [should be] a species of aesthetic pleasure” (Budd 13).

Besides defining whether Aestheticism entails artistic appreciation and sensory pleasure, Aestheticism is often “portrayed as feminine or effeminate in contrast to modernism’s masculine rigor” (Schaffer and Psomiades 6). Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades state that Aestheticism can be read as “the celebration of ‘perverse’ sexuality in ways that take into account desire between women as well as between men” (11) and according to Alan Sinfield, Aesthetes are regarded as effeminate, but not distinctively homosexual, even though some are (90). Moreover, as Rita Felski points out, “The feminized male deconstructs conventional oppositions between . . . [men and women]; he is male, yet disassociated from masculine rationality, utility and progress” (1099). To Felski, Dorian Gray is a feminized male with his “scarlet lips, golden hair, and eternal youth” (1096).

Aestheticism then can be defined in several ways and the boundaries of the concept are blurred. Different Victorian era viewpoints as the view of women, workforce, religion, and morality seem to have affected the definition of the concept. As Pearce notes, “the movement was never an homogenous whole and never shared anything other than the broadest and vaguest of aims and aspirations” (131). While there is no consensus around the definition of Aestheticism, Wilde is preoccupied with the Aesthetic Movement, artistic appreciation, sensory pleasures, and a feminized male. He thereby, in my view, follows the aesthetic style.

3.2 View of Women

As Felski notes, in opposition to qualities of an Aesthete, who values uniqueness and self-fulfillment, women were often considered “standardized” and “uniform” due to their consumerist behavior and “natural sentimentality” (1100). In addition they were regarded “mechanical, depersonalized and ultimately soulless” at the same time as they were too

emotional compared to the “controlled conscious of an Aesthete” (Felski 1101). In the novel, Wilde compares the lives of an ordinary woman to that of an actress:

Ordinary women never appeal to one’s imagination. They are limited to their century. No glamour ever transfigures them. One knows their minds as easily as one knows their bonnets. One can always find them. There is no mystery in any of them. They ride in the Park in the morning, and chatter at tea-parties in the afternoon. They have their stereotyped smile, and their fashionable manner. They are quite obvious. But an actress! How different an actress is! (Wilde rev ed 37)

Here it seems like Wilde tries to promote art, by devaluing ordinary women while giving artistic women a higher status.

Wilde made furthermore a number of negative statements about women: “No woman is a genius. Women are a decorative sex. They never have anything to say, but they say it charmingly” (rev ed 34). The reason for these less favorable statements concerning women is ambiguous; whether they are part of seeking attention, or being ironic, it is difficult to determine. According to Felski, “both art and women [could] be seen as decorative [and] functionless” (1098). It may then not be exclusively Wilde’s viewpoint that women were a decorative sex; it may have been a general idea. At the same time, Wilde himself was adored by women. Hesketh Pearson points out that he realized early in life, that in order to become successful, approval from women was needed since, in his view, they ruled the society (52-53).

Wilde described his own wife favorably, in contrast to the statements made about the women in the novel, yet, as Pearson notes, he was of the opinion that being married involved adultery (129) and when he discovered that he also had an interest in men, he was constantly adulterous. A similar idea is mentioned in the novel: “faithfulness is to the emotional life

what consistency is to the life of the intellect – simply a confession of failure” (Wilde 36).

Lord Henry motivates why he does not appreciate marriages with the claim that they do not nurture individuality: “Men marry because they are tired, women because they are curious: both are disappointed. The real drawback to marriage is that it makes one unselfish. And unselfish people are colorless. They lack individuality” (Wilde rev ed 54).

As Johnson notes, to an Aesthete individuality and “personal fulfillment” play an important role, “to give meaning to his life” (10). The individualistic view of a male Aesthete does not promote female self-consciousness; women can “only function as the other of a male subject, a stimulus to his pursuit of the ideal” (Felski 1104). Women are thereby to step back in order not to suffocate men in their search of a free spiritual aesthetic lifestyle; otherwise men cannot follow their senses completely, as Wilde writes in the novel: “Women inspire us with the desire to do masterpieces, and always prevent us from carrying them out” (Wilde rev ed 58).

3.3 Views on Work and Power

In order to nurture individuality, according to Wilde, people should not own items, be in power over each other, nor perform manual work (Pearson 172). A person is not defined by what he/she owns, but according to what he/she is. Therefore people should not own items, since in Wilde’s view ownership constrains individuality. Whenever there is a person in power over others, there will always be people objecting to it. All power is degrading; both to those who have it and those who are exposed to it (Pearson 172). Degradation is also mentioned in the novel when Lord Henry and Basil Hallward discuss individualism:

“If one lives merely for one’s self, Harry, one pays a terrible price for doing so?” suggested the painter.

“Yes . . . the real tragedy of the poor is that they can afford nothing but self-denial. Beautiful sins, like beautiful things, are the privilege of the rich.”

“One has to pay in other ways but money . . . I should fancy in remorse, in suffering, in the consciousness of degradation.” (Wilde rev ed 57)

Moreover, Wilde did not believe that there was any dignity in manual work and therefore machines should perform all dull and filthy work while the role of the government would be to manufacture and distribute necessities (Pearson 173). Humans in his view were created for a higher mission, than to move around dirt. The machines should become people’s slaves, not their competitors, and the government should be people’s servant and not their master. The goal was not to work at all (Pearson 173). Ruskin, on the other hand, lectured about the honor of working, the necessity of beauty, as well as the bad influence of all machines. In his opinion, the beautiful nature in England had been destroyed by all the disgusting factories.

Still, while Wilde promoted a country where machines performed all filthy work, he was against the factories built during the industrialization era. To him, they made the country look ugly and destroyed the beauty of nature: “all the factory chimneys and vulgar workshops should be transported to some far-off island” (Pearce 63). These viewpoints are of course contradictory; Wilde wanted machines to perform dull work, but found the factories not aesthetically beautiful in his close surroundings. He does not seem to have considered that it is difficult to keep the beautiful nature and at the same time have machines in service of humans.

3.4 View of Religion

Some of the disagreements about the aesthetic principles, between the aesthetic founders, concerned the involvement of Christendom. Ruskin believed that “Aestheticism in art was inseparable from morality, which . . . had its roots in the moral foundations of medieval Christendom” (Pearce 62). Therefore he did not welcome the Renaissance, since according to him, “the aesthetic inevitably suffered when the humanism of the Renaissance weakened the links with these Christian roots” (Pearce 62). Pater, on the other hand, suggested that the

Renaissance involved liberation from Christendom and he welcomed a change (Pearce 65). In his view, the Renaissance took place during the Middle Age to revolt against moral and religious ideas: “in their search after the pleasures of the senses and imagination, in their care for beauty, in their worship of the body, people were impelled beyond the bounds of the primitive Christian ideal; and their love became a strange idolatry, a strange rival religion” (Pater 16). Unlike Ruskin, Wilde did not share the Christian philosophy; he wanted to be religious, but he did not find any religion he could identify himself with. In the novel he states that the secret of religion is “the terror of God” (Wilde rev ed 13), which would mean that people were fearful of God or felt guilty of not behaving well enough with God watching over them.

Unlike Ruskin, while Wilde was attracted to the beautiful buildings in Rome and the religion that created them, he found religion too logical. As Pearce notes, he was “troubled by a pessimistic rationalism that led him towards skepticism” (80). This is reflected in the novel when Lord Henry says “I wonder who it was [that] defined man as a rational animal. It was the most premature definition given. Man is many things, but he is not rational” (Wilde rev ed 20-21). Instead Wilde only interpreted religion from an aesthetic perspective, which meant that he put less focus on intellect and more on the senses. This is manifested via Dorian Gray, who “sought to elaborate some new scheme of life that would have its reasoned philosophy and its ordered principles, and find in the spiritualizing of the senses its highest realization” (Wilde rev ed 95). Dorian Gray seeks spirituality via the senses, from an aesthetic perspective; he “knew that the senses, no less than the soul, have their spiritual mysteries to reveal” (Wilde rev ed 97).

Wilde was under the impression that it is possible to be spiritual and religious, but he found himself incapable of achieving it (Pearce 214). In contrast to the commands of Christian faith, where people should avoid sins, Wilde recommended an open lifestyle, where

all actions are welcomed, as otherwise there would be too much focus on sinful temptations. Lord Henry has a similar idea: “if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, [and] reality to every dream – I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy” (Wilde rev ed 13). Further Lord Henry suggests that people who would not follow their feelings, impulses or dreams lived in self-denial and felt trapped, and thereby he proposes that the only way not to have unbecoming body temptations is to yield to them (Wilde rev ed 13).

3.5 Views on Oscar Wilde

Wilde was considered the leader of the Aesthetic Movement; he was even dressed for the role, which infuriated some other artists who did not receive the same fame as Wilde. Wilde tried to conform to Victorian lifestyle by dressing formally, but he put too much effort into his clothing choices, which led to the creation of a new fashion style (Pearce 58). He often wore velvet jacket, knee pants, black silk stockings, white shirt with a big collar, green scarf and a buttonhole in the shape of a sunflower or a lily. The lily, mentioned several times in the novel, became a symbol of his aesthetic fashion style. The excitement about Wilde’s clothes made him decide to reform the dressing code and to master all parts of Aestheticism. He even called himself professor of Aestheticism. (Pearson 51-52).

A viewpoint that differentiated the aesthetic founders concerning the Victorian ideology concerned the focus on lust in life. In time Wilde’s fame mainly concerned his fashion style instead of aesthetic philosophy, which Wilde himself found increasingly boring compared to the beautiful sins described in *A Reboours* (Pearce 188). He thought that sin was needed in order to improve life and that conscience only showed imperfect life development. He was of the opinion that religion was a past chapter: “we cannot go back to the saint. There is far more to be learnt from the sinner” (quoted in Pearce 244). Instead of aiming to act like a saint, in his view, one’s role model should be the sinner.

The aesthetic founders then all but agreed upon what to incorporate into the aesthetic principles. Ruskin believed that art and religion should be combined, while Wilde and Pater did not. Wilde and Ruskin agreed upon that the factories destroyed the beautiful nature, while at the same time Wilde promoted factories to perform all human work. Pater believed in living in the moment, trying new viewpoints and creating new impressions and Wilde promote this kind of lifestyle too, but focused also on lust. There was then no real consensus on what the aesthetic philosophy should entail.

3.6 Reception and Interpretation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

The Picture of Dorian Gray was a highly debated novel, which definitely created interest, but readers did not agree upon how to interpret it. Wilde received hundreds of critic opinions that mostly were negative. Many critics used an angry tone and harsh words. The novel was described as “dull,” “vulgar,” “lame,” “clumsy,” “tedious,” “disgusting,” “nasty,” “corrupt,” “offensive” and “false” (in Mason). It was even suggested that the book should be “chucked into the fire” (Mason 8) and that the author was “the only person likely to find pleasure in it” (Mason 10). But Wilde also received more favorable reviews: “two thirds of all Mr. Wilde has ever written is purely ironical . . . [*The Picture of Dorian Gray*] is a work of the highest morality, since its whole purpose is to point out the effect of selfish indulgence and sensuality in destroying the character of a beautiful human soul” (Buchanan quoted in Mason 47-48).

Many reviewers interpreted the story to be about male affection, instead of art. The morality and decency of the novel were even discussed at the trial of Lord Queensberry at the Old Bailey on April 3rd, 1895. In the following dialogue the prosecutor indirectly asks Wilde for his opinion about morality:

- I take it that no matter how immoral a book may be, if it is well written it is, in your opinion, a good book?

- Yes; if it were well written so as to produce a sense of beauty which is the highest sense of which a human being can be capable. If it were badly written it would produce a sense of disgust. (Mason 44)

Wilde ignores morality and only focuses on the beauty of the work. In his view the story itself is not as important as the way it is written; which means that he separates the aesthetic value, the beauty of the novel, from its artistic value, its originality. To him “there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all” (Wilde revised vii). Asked by the prosecutor whether “a well-written book putting forward perverted moral views may be a good book” Wilde answered that “no work of art ever puts forward views. Views belong to people who are not artists” (quoted in Mason 44). Later in the dialogue Wilde suggests moreover that people are not cultivated enough to appreciate the artistic value of the novel.

The Picture of Dorian Gray hurt Wilde’s reputation tremendously. Not only did people disapprove of the novel, they also despised the author (Pearson 162). Several journalists reviewed the novel. One is from *The Scots Observer’s* who noted that “Mr. Wilde has brains, and art, and style; but if he can write for none but outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph-boys, the sooner he takes to tailoring the better for his own reputation and the public morals” (quoted in Mason 21). In defense Wilde wrote several articles explaining his viewpoint:

If a work of art is rich and vital and complete, those who have artistic instincts will see its beauty, and those to whom ethics appeal more strongly than aesthetics will see its moral lesson. It will fill the cowardly with terror, and the unclean will see in it their own shame...it is the spectator and not life, that art really mirrors. (Mason 23)

The journalists and Wilde debated on whether the novel was written according to the aesthetic principles or whether it is an unethical work. In a review for *The Bookmaker*, Pater stated that Wilde “is true, certainly, on the whole, to the aesthetic philosophy” (quoted in Mason 41). Wilde held that he had written a beautiful story, while some journalists claimed that he had written a repulsive unethical love story between men. They never came to an agreement.

3.7 Text Revision

The Picture of Dorian Gray was first published in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, in 1890 (Mason 49). The first edition contains many parts that easily can be mistaken to be on male devotion, as for example “I knew that if I spoke to Dorian I would become absolutely devoted to him” (Wilde 7) and “don't take away from me the one person that makes life absolutely lovely to me” (Wilde 11). In the original version then it seems as if Basil Hallward falls in love with Dorian Gray:

It is quite true that I have worshipped you with far more romance of feeling than a man usually gives to a friend. Somehow, I had never loved a woman. I suppose I never had time... from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I quite admit that I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly. I was jealous of every one to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you. When I was away from you, you were still present in my art. It was all wrong and foolish...it was to have been my masterpiece. (Wilde 56-57)

Another interpretation however, may be that Basil Hallward falls in love with the artistic quality of Dorian Gray; he shows an intense devotion, sympathy and admiration for a beautiful personality (Pearson 166). The beautiful features of Dorian Gray's face, his positive character, and his aura make after all the creation of an extraordinary painting possible.

Yet, in order to put more emphasis on aesthetic beauty, Wilde removed some ambiguous parts from the novel in later editions, to make it easier to perceive the artistic value of the story. He also added a preface where he defines art, the work of an artist, and beauty. It consists of only two pages that contain several ambiguous statements, but there are deeper meanings to those well-chosen sentences, as for example: “no artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style” (Wilde rev ed vii). These sentences remind of riddles or puns; they are oblique, which can lead to several interpretations and perhaps further misunderstandings.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to show, how the author’s life, social surrounding and the way people reasoned during the time have had an impact on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as well as how Aestheticism influenced the novel.

In terms of evidence of biographical aspects in the novel, firstly, the dangerous story and sinful protagonist in *A Rebours* are almost identical to those in the novel’s “yellow book” and like Wilde, Dorian Gray becomes addicted to this life changing text. Then there are traces of the aesthetic criticism in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, especially the Greek art discussion, which stimulated Wilde in his interpretation of the aesthetic principles, and lastly Dorian Gray as a student of the aesthetic principles, mirrors Wilde as he was first introduced to Aestheticism.

Moreover, many of Lord Henry’s striking statements seem to be Wilde’s own opinions; thereby Wilde could share his perspective of Aestheticism and criticism of the ideology of the Victorian era. His views on marriages, that they “make one unselfish” and prevent men from “carrying out masterpieces,” are put forth by the Lord, contrasting the qualities of an Aesthete, who valued uniqueness and self-fulfillment (Wilde rev ed 54, 58).

Since Aestheticism was quite broadly defined though, Wilde seems to have promoted a version of it according to his interpretations. Widely considered the leader of The Movement, Wilde was not totally in agreement with other aesthetic founders upon what to incorporate into the aesthetic principles. They all valued the beauty in art and nature, but disagreed on societal factors as work, religion and morality. Unlike Ruskin who incorporates religion and morality into the concept, Wilde and Pater seem to define the principles more similarly suggesting an open sensuous lifestyle with the difference that Wilde focused more on lust rather than on love.

Lastly, his contemporaries viewed Wilde's novel as immoral, describing love affection between men. To Wilde though, morality was not part of Aestheticism and he found people not cultivated enough to appreciate the artistic value of his work. Still, he hoped that with revisions the aesthetic objectives would become more obvious. As it stands, in his text Wilde embraces aesthetic elements as artistic appreciation and sensory pleasures, which together with the inclusion of a feminized male exemplify the author's own aesthetic principles.

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