

# The Aesthetics of Oscar Wilde

---

**Svjetličić, Altea**

**Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad**

**2020**

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište u Rijeci, Filozofski fakultet**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:186:196633>

*Rights / Prava:* [In copyright](#)/[Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2025-01-10**



*Repository / Repozitorij:*

[Repository of the University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences - FHSSRI Repository](#)



UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA  
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

*Altea Svjetličić*

**THE AESTHETICS OF OSCAR WILDE**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B.A. in English Language and Literature and Croatian Language and Literature at the University of Rijeka

Supervisor:

Mr. sc. Irena Grubica, viši predavač

September 2020

## **Abstract**

This thesis discusses Oscar Wilde's aestheticism, exemplified in his only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his essays, lectures and fairy tales *A House of Pomegranates*. It starts off with an introduction in which a historic context of the aesthetic movement and Wilde's life is provided. Further on, there is an analysis of the aesthetic movement and its significance in Oscar Wilde's work, as well as a detailed description of the characteristics of the movement such as the new ideal of beauty, the movement's circles, the Art for Art's Sake movement and the movement's comparison to Victorian norms. Then the thesis exemplifies the idea of beauty, art and the artist in Wilde's essays and lectures. The following chapter explores the aesthetic principles in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, focusing on the philosophy of beauty, decadence and the figure of the dandy, the conflict between Aestheticism and morality, ethical and aesthetic ideas embodied in the figure of the doppelgänger as well as in Wilde's language style and imagery. After that analysis, the thesis focuses on the analysis of aesthetic experiments in Wilde's fairy tales *A House of Pomegranates*, with a special highlight on the beautiful and the material in the *Star-Child*. The last chapter explores the role of art as a formative force in the fields of Aestheticism, culture and society, which is followed by a conclusion on the matter.

**Keywords:** aesthetic movement, beauty, Art for Art's Sake, morality

## Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>2. Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Movement</b> .....	2
<b>2.1. The New Ideal of Beauty</b> .....	3
<b>2.2. The Aesthetic Movement Circles</b> .....	4
<b>2.3. Art for Art’s Sake</b> .....	5
<b>2.4. The Aesthetic Movement and Victorian Norms</b> .....	7
<b>3. The Idea of Beauty, Art and the Artist in Oscar Wilde’s Essays and Lectures</b> .....	9
<b>4. Aesthetic Principles in Oscar Wilde’s <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i></b> .....	12
<b>4.1. The Philosophy of Beauty</b> .....	15
<b>4.2. Decadence and the Figure of the Dandy</b> .....	16
<b>4.3. The Conflict between Aestheticism and Morality</b> .....	18
<b>4.4. Ethical and Aesthetic Ideas Embodied in the Figure of the Doppelgänger</b> .....	19
<b>4.5. Language, Style, Symbols and Imagery</b> .....	21
<b>5. Aesthetic Experiments in Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales <i>A House of Pomegranates</i></b> .....	23
<b>5.1. The Beautiful and the Material in the “Star-Child”</b> .....	27
<b>6. Aestheticism, Culture and the Society: Art as a Formative Force</b> .....	29
<b>7. Conclusion</b> .....	31
<b>8. Bibliography</b> .....	32

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to explore and describe the aesthetics of Oscar Wilde. With that being the goal, it is right to start with some basic historical information about the movement and the time in which it surfaced as well as some basic information about the author.

Aestheticism covers a period between 1889 and 1895 in the late Victorian era, also known as the Nineties. The movement originated from the works of German writers such as Kant, Schelling, Goethe and Schiller, who were all active in the Romantic period. They believed art must be autonomous and the artist is a superior being compared to an ordinary man. Aestheticism's main point of view on art is that it is not referred to life or connected to morality at any level. Therefore, the movement disapproves art as a moral and useful concept. Oscar Wilde, alongside other poets, was influenced by Walter Pater and his collection of essays *The Renaissance* because of his views that life should be treated in the spirit of art. Decadent movement in 19<sup>th</sup>-century French symbolist poetry was another influence on the aesthetic movement thanks to its emphasis on the autonomy of art and Art for Art's Sake as its guiding principles. Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1854 and throughout his life wrote many literary works out of which the most popular are: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Lady Windermere's Fan*. He is most known for his involvement in the aesthetic movement which was an advocate for the *l'art pour l'art*.

Oscar Wilde lived during the Victorian era which was characterised by conservatism and an intense class and gender division. Wilde enjoyed a hedonistic life and was considered to be an aesthete. Speaking of his sexual orientation, he was a homosexual and since the society at that time was unforgiving and very conservative, he was sentenced and imprisoned. This led to a miserable end of his life in France.

## 2. Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Movement

Oscar Wilde, who lived during the Victorian era between 1854 and 1900, gained his glory both for his literary works and personal life. During the Victorian time, homosexuality was considered to be a serious offence which is why the author was sentenced to prison. His life ended in poverty in Paris where he moved after serving a two-year prison sentence. Oscar Wilde had aesthetic views on art, life and morality, all of which can be seen in his essays, lectures and his only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

According to Rodney Shewan, the author's use of art is to explore his internal conflicts and to create an adequate reflection of himself. However, the goal of individualism is not selfishness because "selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live".<sup>1</sup> Phillip Cohen describes Wilde as a split personality, one being an unscrupulous dandy and the other being an accountable Christian individual.<sup>2</sup> The two previously mentioned authors have opposing opinions about which personality is the real Oscar Wilde.<sup>3</sup> Cohen is in favour of a moralist versus a scandalous dandy. If Wilde shocked the Victorian public as a scandalous dandy, then they would be equally uncomfortable in the presence of a deep-set moralist.<sup>4</sup> Christian sentiments in Wilde's works corroborate Cohen's claim that they are expressions of his true feelings, even though many critics characterized them as irony. His perspective on Wilde is as if he is a man in search of an understanding between his true self and a moral system he is forced to obey.<sup>5</sup>

Wilde established himself as an aesthete in the early 1880s the act of which was characterised by self-trivialisation.<sup>6</sup> According to authors of *The Importance of Reinventing Oscar: Versions of Wilde During the Last 100 Years*, Oscar Wilde plagiarised the aesthetic and dandy persona he was and wrote about. He brought to life the fears of an un-English and ungentlemanly literary style the anti-aestheticist Victorian public had.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the 'Art for

---

<sup>1</sup> Shewan (1977), p. 108

<sup>2</sup> Cohen (1978)

<sup>3</sup> cf. Shewan (1977), Cohen (1978)

<sup>4</sup> Cohen (1978), p. 49

<sup>5</sup> Cohen (1978)

<sup>6</sup> Böker, Corballis, Richard. and Hibbard (2002), p. 91

<sup>7</sup> Böker, Corballis, Richard. and Hibbard (2002), p. 91

Art' sake doctrine, he imported from France and created an effeminate pseudo-aristocratic character.<sup>8</sup> At the time Wilde adopts the phenomenon 'Aestheticism', it is defined "as an artistic movement as well as a form of high fashion offering a new, 'arty' standard of taste with regard to room decoration, clothing, and acts of 'aesthetic' self-presentation..."<sup>9</sup> Wilde intentionally measured up to the public's beliefs of how an aesthete should act or look. The aesthetic poet represents a lyric persona who is at the same time an exaggerated caricature who lacks personal and psychological qualities. The initial uses of the term 'Aestheticism' are not precise, an aesthetic individual is described as an amateur who uses poeticised speech. The term has satiric and parodic implications from the start; as a caricature and an object of mildly conventional laughter.<sup>10</sup>

To conclude, an aesthete is "somebody who utilises his persona in order to objectify his fantasies of grandiosity, or in order to advertise his artistic product, or in order to advance socially. That seems to be why English aestheticism has been associated with the emergence of the 'culture industry' and the era of the superstar; and that seems to be why Oscar Wilde – who in the popular mind is still regarded as 'the' aesthete – has been identified as a precursor of the twentieth-century pop idol."<sup>11</sup>

## 2.1. The New Ideal of Beauty

At the very end of the nineteenth century when the period of Realism is over, new literary tendencies are emerging to the literary scene. The forthcoming period is hard to describe and is commonly referred to as *fin de siècle* (the end of the century) or Decadence. The main changes happen in the function of literature as the highlight is put on the request for the entire aesthetic function of literature. This means beauty gains a new value, it is the most important message to transfer through a literary work.

---

<sup>8</sup> Böker, Corballis, Richard. and Hibbard (2002), p. 92

<sup>9</sup> Böker, Corballis, and Hibbard (2002), p. 91

<sup>10</sup> Böker, Corballis, and Hibbard (2002), p. 93

<sup>11</sup> Böker, Corballis, and Hibbard (2002), p. 98

In Realism, the function of literature is to serve as a mirror of social reality. In this new era, the highlight is put on the cult of beauty and the request for the exclusiveness of aesthetic values. Aestheticism is the first period in which there is a final cease with the tradition of Realism. Two terms which are used to describe this era are autonomy of literature and crisis of the culture. However, in this period, a special emphasis is put on the autonomy of literature thanks to the Art for Art's Sake principle and the cult of beauty. This leads to literature finally being fully accepted as something that has its criteria and purpose, which is an innovation in comparison to the past.

The attacks on the autonomy of literature in the era of Modernism only strengthened the belief that literature is autonomous and irreplaceable. In Aestheticism, the highest value of analysis is put on the literary expression itself. Along with the cult of beauty, there is the cult of style and expression in which there is such virtuosity in performance and complex literary organization that it becomes the priority. Consequently, the main interests of literature – the theme and issues, will never overpower the value of remake. Aestheticism is characterised by distrust in firm frames of genres and that is why literature continues to produce new genres and genre combinations to this day. The cultural crisis is a frequent theme used in the period of Modernism as well.

## **2.2. The Aesthetic Movement Circles**

Oscar Wilde's first attempts to get into the Aesthetic Movement are during his Oxford days, according to Walter Hamilton<sup>12</sup>. To be more specific, it is when he reviewed the Grosvenor Gallery's opening exhibition. Creating a certain image of an aesthetic dandy certainly helps him get noticed as a potential member of the movement. His close connections with some Pre-Raphaelites<sup>13</sup> could not hurt that coming into existence. The aesthetic movement's members are self-proclaimed judges of taste who are publicly expressing their opinions. In the words of Walter Hamilton, the aesthetes cross the line by even deciding what should be considered as

---

<sup>12</sup> Hamilton (1882) p. 35

<sup>13</sup> Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was a group of English painters, poets and art critics who believed the Classical poses and Raphael's elegant compositions were a bad influence on the academic teaching of art.



beautiful. Those who did not agree with their decisions are given the name Philistines which meant they are deemed hopeless.<sup>14</sup> Along with being considered an elite group, the members of the aesthetic movement make peculiar fashion trends, use affected language and glorify beauty.

Wilde was recognized by a producer Richard D'Oyly Carte as the ideal educator on jokes in *Patience*<sup>15</sup> for the American theatre audience. He happily accepted the task, but the audience did not expect to hear anything intelligent from his lectures but rather something to laugh at. Newspaper articles criticized him from the start but after his discussion on the English renaissance of beauty and craftsmanship, some of them stopped doing so and made some positive remarks about Wilde's conclusions. However, Oscar Wilde was more associated with being the inspiration for Victorian satirists rather than being an aesthetic movement leader.

His knowledge of the founders of the Arts and Crafts Movement John Ruskin and William Morris's ideas was demonstrated on his lectures held across America. In 1882, Wilde stated his advocacy for Art for Art's Sake theory and continued to lecture on it. Upon his return to England, he settled to the norms of the Victorian era but still proved his loyalty to the aesthetic Movement by giving much detail to decorating the interior of his house. The roots of the Aesthetic Movement are design reform and the Art for Art's Sake concept since both are the responses against the dominant artistic and domestic interior preferences.

### **2.3. Art for Art's Sake**

Art for Art's Sake is a translation of the French phrase *l'art pour l'art* which dates back to the early 1900s. The phrase was used by many artists and writers throughout the years to describe art that is free from all forms of moral, political or utilitarian functions. Followers of the Art for Art's Sake movement believe the only purpose of art is the art itself. Therefore, it has to be a phenomenon which is neutral and unbiased while discussing matters, as well as an independent source of imagination.

---

<sup>14</sup> Hamilton (1882) p. 7

<sup>15</sup> *Patience* is a comic opera in two acts with music by Arthur Sullivan and libretto by W.S.Gillbert.

Even though the phrase “Art for Art’s Sake” is most connected to Oscar Wilde’s *Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it originates from French Romantic and Symbolist poets. They simplified Immanuel Kant’s theory on aesthetic autonomy. Oscar Wilde’s writing and social skills make him a brilliant publicist for Art for Art’s Sake but not a practitioner.

The core of the Art for Art’s Sake movement is an elaborate technique, but the motivation is the intolerance towards Philistinism. Philistines are the people with an anti-intellectual social attitude which undermines beauty and art. The movement's biggest enemy is the middle class who is a representation of wealth and power seizers. The year 1848 is a breaking point in terms of change, the Philistines turned reactionary, and the Romanticists arose against sentiment. Therefore, in Romanticism, an alliance is made between science and Art for Art's Sake. In Realism, their relationship comes into balance whereas in Naturalism art gives in to science. Consequently, the members of Philistinism are dividing science from *l’art pour l’art* movement. However, in the end, science failed and its ideals were cancelled.

These are the perfect conditions and time for Aestheticism to arise to the cultural scene. The main representatives of this period are Tolstoy, Nietzsche and Ibsen who were all considered as anarchists as all three authors fought battles against conventional law. As a form of those fights emerged Nihilism and Anarchism but they did not last long as they were prevented by political terrorism. Artists began to feel the need to express elusiveness and entered a so-called ‘queer state of mind’. This period in history is called *The Yellow or Mauve Nineties*. Symbolism arises as a reaction against Realism which is characterised by the representation of cold hard facts and truth. In contrast, symbolists intend to crush this cult of reality and make a place for beyond sense beauty. They aspire to make art the means of evocation of mystery which eventually causes chaos in the literary world.<sup>16</sup>

The notion of Decadence first appears in France which is in a state of political decay. However, it can be best explained in the context of England. Even though a vast majority perceived it as a joke, there was another understanding of the phenomenon. This involves it being a form of objection to progress – a Philistine ideal. Decadence served as an act of rebellion against the idea of progress. Auguste-Maurice Barrès is one of the first supporters of Nationalism and Imperialism. On the other side of the ideological platter, there is the socialist sentiment

---

<sup>16</sup> Guérard (1936), p. 61-73

which found its way through authors such as Ruskin, Tolstoy, Bernard Shaw and William Morris.<sup>17</sup> Since Naturalism also made a return, Art for Art's Sake followers find themselves in a dangerous environment to believe what they believe in. One example of a decadent Hellenist representative who remained silent during this period is Pierre Louÿs, a close friend of Oscar Wilde. The first World War is a representation of what happens when Idealism crumbles from within. The two opposing sides consist of Ultra-Pacifists vs. Wilsonians, or in other words, democrats vs. communists. Their ideological views are completely different from one another.

As a result of this conflict, Art for Art's Sake also changes the forms in which it appears. It becomes a movement which gives great detail to technique, values cynicism, immortality and nihilistic pessimism. Writers even changed their style and technique in 1920 to adapt to this new trend. The twenties are often described as a hectic time in history thanks to the craze for pleasure everyone was feeling in this post-war period. However, this atmosphere provoked different reactions among citizens. Some writers want to escape their thoughts by getting busy with technique. Some cannot bear their surroundings while some use cynicism or rebellion as defence mechanisms. José Ortega y Gasset gives a definition of the new form of art which appears in the roaring twenties in his work *La Deshumanización del Arte*.<sup>18</sup> This art is the art which does not take itself seriously, an art which has useless and difficult rules. One of the fiercest critics of the Art for Art's Sake movement, Friedrich Nietzsche, stated that the movement is hypocritical since it pleads art should be independent of all functions, but it still is an expression of the artist's self.

#### **2.4. The Aesthetic Movement and Victorian Norms**

The Victorian era was a contradictory period, it was an era of industry, progress in science and strict moral codes, but also an era of corruption, poverty, prostitution and materialism. All these negative sides are a product of the capitalist system in Great Britain. Utilitarian Victorians seek after material gains and utility while giving little recognition to emotions and the spiritual. Aestheticism appears as a response to the materialism and capitalism in the late Victorian period, as a means of saving art from utilitarianism. Despite being a reaction against the materialistic and

---

<sup>17</sup> Guérard (1936), p. 79-80

<sup>18</sup> Guérard (1936), p. 83

capitalistic world, Aestheticism also serves as a reaction against Realism and Naturalism. The two mentioned literary movements dismissed the Art for Art's Sake doctrine and highlighted life without idealisation. The aesthetic movement arose against, in Matthew Arnold's terms, the uncultured middle-class who gives more significance to money and the material than to art and beauty.<sup>19</sup> At that time, most artists think art should be the means to provide pleasure instead of moral or sentimental messages as it has no other purpose than to be beautiful.

A historian named Harold Perkin describes the situation in Great Britain during the Victorian era in *The Origins of Modern English Society*. He states that society's morality changed drastically during this period, going from an aggressive and cruel nation to a polite and orderly one.<sup>20</sup> At that time there are many historical influences which could cause the sudden change of character of the British nation, one of which being the French Revolution. The empowerment of religious movements resulted in the overall improvement of morality. Society rarely indulges in activities such as gambling or prostitution. However, those who committed crimes are exposed to severe physical punishment such as whipping, branding or hanging.

During the Victorian era, the social climate is quite conservative, the division between men and women is big and gender roles determine all aspects of life. Men belong to the public sphere which means they can participate in politics and earn money. In contrast, women belong to the private sphere which implies a dependency on their spouse and taking care of the housework and raising children. The sexual behaviour is also destined in accordance with gender, meaning only men are allowed to indulge sexual activity for pleasure. Victorian norms are conservative but much more to women than to men. There are certain rules which must not be disobeyed, or the consequences are rough. In this period, the law is especially harsh to criminals and, surprisingly, homosexuals who are often sentenced and imprisoned.

The Victorian society expects art which conveys a deeper moral or political meaning which is why Aestheticism is not understood. The concept of art existing to be beautiful is not what they anticipate or can fully understand. However, since the aesthetes did not want to be understood by everybody, this relationship between the two is successful.

---

<sup>19</sup> Arnold (1908), p. 279

<sup>20</sup> Perkin (1969) p. 280

### 3. The Idea of Beauty, Art and the Artist in Oscar Wilde's Essays and Lectures

Oscar Wilde stated in his lecture *Art and the Handicraftsman* that the only opposition to beauty is ugliness, contrary to people's belief the opposition to beauty is usefulness.<sup>21</sup> His main point on beauty is that what is beautiful will always be useful because no craftsman will decorate a bad work. Beauty is mandatory in all aspects of life, especially in art. Beautiful art is what nature intends humans to have if they want to live a human life. The idea of the artist is what makes beauty come to life. Without an artist, there would be no artworks and without artworks, there would be no beauty in life. According to Wilde, the connection between these three ideas is impossible to separate.<sup>22</sup>

Wilde believes art is in all aspects of life, such as the architecture of cities or clothes people wear. The artist is concerned with life, and how to make a beautiful world which would cause only joy and loveliness to its spectators. Wilde's opinion is that beauty should always surround men and then the world would become a more productive and joyful place. He does not advocate imitation in the process of creation. Originality and passion are the two main characteristics all artists should possess in order to be artists. A true artist should live through what he creates, he should think in colour if he uses colour for his creation. Design is one of the most important values in work because nothing can ruin a beautifully designed thing. Art should be in all aspects of life but not in all forms. Wilde criticises simplification of art such as painting the dishes because that way art is suffering and being reduced to something simple. Art is everything but simple, it should be put on a pedestal and used to admire at. The environment in which the artist creates is also of great importance since an unhealthy artist cannot produce valuable art.

The ideas of beauty, art and artist permeate all classifications of society and life. Things which are not beautiful are neither useful, people who cannot create are poor, and the world without art is a miserable place. Wilde states that the aesthetic movement was the first one to

---

<sup>21</sup> Oscar Wilde online 2007

<sup>22</sup> Oscar Wilde online 2007

connect the handicraftsman to the artist because they saw beauty in utility.<sup>23</sup> The influence of Greek or Italian artists should never be imitated because nothing is as beautiful as the original. Wilde appraises all modern handicraftsman which produces beautiful forms of art. However, he condemns the ones who are not completely immersed in the art to try and create it because it will only cause harm to their audience. Art is immortal and it cannot be harmed by any force, not even death itself.

In his *Lecture to Art Students* Oscar Wilde highlights that beauty cannot be described as a theory because it exists only as beauty itself (Oscar Wilde online 2007). It does not need any definition but only the act of creation so it comes to life to spread joy among its spectators. Beauty should not be idealised but rather found in life and then recreated in art. The philosophy of art is quite simple, an artist must only know to recognise a good or a bad picture when he sees it. All art is modern if it is good, and all artists are good artists if they convey the beautiful. Time or century do not define an artist, he is the master of eternity and an exception which is not affected by time passage. Wilde disapproves the inability of artists to acknowledge ugly things because they are a part of art too. Artworks have no meaning rather than their beauty, and no moral significance.<sup>24</sup>

In his essay *The Decay of Lying*, Wilde makes statements about art being the discoverer of nature's lack of design and monotony. The more time one spends on studying art, the less one will care about nature. Nature is imperfect and art's task is to teach nature her place. Without the imperfection of nature, there would be no art. He compares the natural and the artificial and gives advantages to the artificial because it is the perfected version of the natural. When an artist creates a type, life always tries to copy and reproduce it which is evidence of life imitating art rather than the other way around. For him, art should be based on imagination and illusion which are a sign of true talent in an artist. If the artist is a true visionary and possesses the talent, he is capable of doing great things. The new form of art is beautiful because it becomes what it never was, so to appreciate it, the beholders must be open and imaginative. This means that an artist should never try to adapt to the public but the public should be more sensible for art. The artist should create only to fulfil his creative power, and not to satisfy the needs of the public. Artists

---

<sup>23</sup> Oscar Wilde online 2007

<sup>24</sup> Oscar Wilde online 2007

should not regard any rules that any force tries to impose on him. The most important statement about art is that it should not serve the purpose of morality or virtue.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, Wilde emphasises originality as one of the most important characteristics the art and the artist should possess. If they seek for roles in other artists or artwork, art will no longer have its purpose. Its purpose is to convey beauty which was never seen before so it can provoke the feelings of utmost admiration and pleasure. We can conclude that Oscar Wilde's views on beauty, art and artist are revolutionary because he views all these ideas individually. He gives beauty the recognition it deserves and describes art and artists as valuable and exquisite. For him, art is almost something sacred that cannot be touched or seen by everybody because not everybody has the ability to see beauty. The three ideas are connected and influence each other in many ways. Art should be beautiful and provoke only pleasure, and the artist is the one who creates all that.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Wilde (1905) p. 1-56

<sup>26</sup> Wilde (1905) p. 93-219

#### 4. Aesthetic Principles in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is Oscar Wilde's only novel and therefore, the only novel which reflects his aesthetic views and opinions. The theme of the novel revolves around the idea of art and morality in the Victorian era. Wilde elaborated his aesthetic views in the *Preface* where he states "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all."<sup>27</sup> This statement means he does not give much thought to what is considered to be moral or immoral, he is only focused on the quality of his work. Wilde also states that the artist is the creator of beautiful things which is a clear example of his life principles which revolve around the importance of an artist and beauty in life.

Many pages of the novel are devoted to descriptions of beauty, whether it is the beauty of a person, place or something else. The first chapter starts with the description of Basil's studio in which the author makes sure the readers can perceive it through all of their five senses to perceive the maximal amount of its beauty. To exemplify a description involving one of the senses, here is a quote referring to the sense of smell: "The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn."<sup>28</sup> Here, Wilde tries to exemplify to the reader about the beautiful odours in Basil's studio which make the entire atmosphere even more pleasurable.

As already mentioned, many forms of beauty are described in the novel. Another form the author gives great thought to is the beauty of a person. Besides the obvious first choice of a beautiful individual – Dorian Gray, the author also describes his love interest Sibyl Vane as a beautiful object of art. "...she was certainly lovely to look at - one of the loveliest creatures, Lord Henry thought, that he had ever seen. There was something of the fawn in her shy grace and startled eyes."<sup>29</sup> Dorian falls in love with Sibyl instantaneously while watching one of her amazing acting performances. However, to Dorian, her beauty eventually proves to be insufficient since he loses his interest in her the moment she loses her acting talent. It seems that

---

<sup>27</sup> Wilde (1890), p. 1

<sup>28</sup> Wilde (1890), p. 2

<sup>29</sup> Wilde (1890), p. 71



even though Sibyl was beautiful, to Dorian, her artistic talent was more important than her beauty. When she ceases to be an artist, she stops being beautiful in his eyes. Right before Dorian finds out the news of Sibyl's suicide, he realises there is still time for redemption. His portrait could serve as a guide to him becoming a better person, as a form of conscience or fear of God. Even though throughout the novel it seems Dorian cares only about his outer beauty, in a conversation with Lord Henry "Harry" Wotton he explains his reasons to become good. He does not want his soul to become hideous, and to prevent it from happening, he decided to marry Sibyl Vane. The moment Harry informs Dorian about Sibyl's death is crucial because it is when the last ounce of modesty and goodness leaves his being. The news of her death makes him understand life goes on and nothing changes even though somebody is no longer here. "'So I have murdered Sibyl Vane', said Dorian Gray, half to himself, - 'murdered her as certainly as if I had cut her little throat with a knife. And the roses are not less lovely for all that. The birds sing just as happily in my garden.'"<sup>30</sup> He goes so far as acknowledging he was the culprit and yet he feels no remorse like he did before. This is interesting because it seems Dorian sees death as a form of art as well. Until he realised Sibyl is no longer alive, he felt guilty, but after finding the news his attitude completely changed. Throughout their relationship, Lord Henry serves as a medium which constantly justifies Dorian's flaws and misdoings. Wilde uses the character of Henry to be the voice of aesthetic ideas about life and beauty. From Dorian's perspective, even death is seen as a form of beauty which intensifies his vanity. "It has all the terrible beauty of a great tragedy, a tragedy in which I took part, but by which I have not been wounded."<sup>31</sup> The decision he makes at that moment is a decision which will prove to be fatal. Dorian decides to use the portrait as a magical mirror which will take over all punishment life intended him to receive. His vanity does not allow him to worry about the sins he is to commit as long as his loveliness will not fade in any way. With the portrait, the author enables Dorian to fulfil all aesthetic purposes of life.

Dorian Gray as a character is a representation of Aestheticism in its physical form. As the movement emphasises aesthetic values of art, Oscar Wilde highlights the beauty in this character. Dorian, just like art in Aestheticism, is more focused on being beautiful rather than having any other purpose. Aesthetes believe life should imitate art, which is proved in the novel

---

<sup>30</sup> Wilde (1890) p. 91

<sup>31</sup> Wilde (1890) p. 93

by some of Dorian's opinions of life. "It is only shallow people who require years to rid of an emotion. A man who is master of himself can end a sorrow as easily as he can invent a pleasure. I don't want to be at the mercy of my emotions. I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them."<sup>32</sup> This quote is taken from a conversation Dorian had with the painter Basil Hallward. It is obvious his remarks about emotion and life reflect the aesthetic views. To him, the pleasure of living a life with no sorrow is of higher value than living life through emotions. The corruption of his moral values progresses, and he becomes more ugly even though he is still physically beautiful, as perceived by Basil: "Something has changed you completely. You look exactly the same wonderful boy who used to come down to my studio, natural, and affectionate then. You were the most unspoiled creature in the whole world. Now, I don't know what has come over you. You talk as if you had no heart, no pity in you."<sup>33</sup> Basil's role is to serve as a moral counterweight to Dorian's immorality.

However, Oscar Wilde also wisely uses a real artist, painter Basil Hallward, to express the main aesthetic belief that art should not be used for any other purpose than itself. In a conversation with Dorian, Basil says: "Well, after a few days the portrait left my studio, and as soon as I had got rid of the intolerable fascination of its presence it seemed to me that I had been foolish in imagining that I had said anything in it, more than that you were extremely good-looking and that I could paint."<sup>34</sup> This quote represents the entire purpose of Aestheticism and what aesthetes aspired to achieve – beauty. He was so busy worrying about the meaning of the portrait and the message it should send that he did not realise real art should have no meaning but to be beautiful. Basil further on continues to elaborate on the purpose of art and how it seems to him it conceals the artist more than it reveals him. Besides through Basil's character, Wilde also expresses aesthetic viewpoints through Dorian himself. The attitude that life should imitate art is directly stated in one of the descriptions of Dorian's opinions on life. We learn about his fascination with fashion and dandyism which is, in his opinion, an attempt to assert the absolute modernity of beauty. Wilde describes that Dorian's way of dressing and style influences other young men at balls and other events he attends which is how he confirms that Dorian is an aesthetic experiment in his novel.

---

<sup>32</sup> Wilde (1890) p. 103

<sup>33</sup> Wilde (1890) p. 103

<sup>34</sup> Wilde (1890), p. 111

The conflict between art and life is exemplified in the relationship Dorian has with Sibyl. He only loves her while her artistic expression is at admirable levels. Once when she fully gives herself to him, she loses her talent and Dorian subsequently loses his interest in her. When Sibyl dies, she becomes a Juliet in her tragedy which is, to Dorian, heroic in a way. Her death also indicates that if we reduce art to life, it has to die. Also, when he murdered Basil, he showed how great his appreciation for art is. He is willing to end a life to enable the art to live.

#### **4.1. The Philosophy of Beauty**

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature's function is no longer to reflect the social reality but to serve an entirely aesthetic purpose. Aestheticism as a movement glorifies the cult of beauty which paves the way for the cult of style. Artists demanded autonomy for art so it would be completely independent of all other spheres of life of viewpoint.

Oscar Wilde wrote his novel as an expression of life having its meaning in art, that is life existing because of art. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reflects life as a device of art and hedonism. Dorian is subordinated to live his life to indulge his hedonistic desires and persevere his beauty. Beauty is the material value of this novel. Dorian is always judged by the way he looks, and it is what everybody notices. Beauty is his biggest virtue and his biggest flaw at the same time. It is most commonly associated with goodness which, in this novel, proves to be wrong. Although he maintains his beauty, his inner beauty declines which results in him becoming hideous. The novel ends with Dorian achieving his biggest fear – of becoming ugly. He does not only become morally ugly but also he dies as a hideous creature nobody can recognize. This can be interpreted as a moral of the entire story, but the author declines that in the very Preface to the novel by saying art is not moral nor immoral. I can conclude that Wilde does not want the readers to seek a moral of the story, but only to enjoy the beauty of his novel and that is the whole philosophy of beauty. This means that, in the end, beauty is always the most important.

## 4.2. Decadence and the Figure of the Dandy

The foundations of Decadence lead to Baudelaire and Gautier, French writers who are first to advocate art's own rules. All of them are against art serving utilitarian purposes or having a moral motivation. Decadence stands for broadening the lines of expression by opening new opportunities in colour, sound and language. The term itself stands for a disappointment in the present times, as well as low expectations of the future. Traditional ideas are subdued by appraising the unnatural and artificial over the natural and reality. The movement spread across Europe, whereas in Britain it gained a local variant – Aestheticism.

Decadence values exaggeration or distortion, alongside with morbid and unsettling atmospheres which are often dream-like. The movement displayed itself in literature, poetry and visual art in terms of various styles, techniques, subjects, meaning and materials. McEvansoneya claims decadent painters had a huge impact on writers such as Moreau on J. K. Huysmans.<sup>35</sup> More precisely, Wilde's only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was influenced by Huysmans' *À Rebours*. Him, alongside with Eugene Lee-Hamilton, Pater, Burne-Jones and George Moore were called *Les Décadents* which translates to 'Decadent' and describes them as a group. Burne-Jones' works were praised by Oscar Wilde and they continued to deepen their relationship and even became friends.<sup>36</sup> This relationship will prove to be important artistically, as well as personally. The character of Dorian Gray is an example of a decadent character. His moral values are perceived as morbid, as well as his behaviour in general since he behaves immorally and shows no remorse for his actions. Dorian's only preoccupation in life is his beauty which he protects by all means. His persona's moral values decline simultaneously with the appearance of his portrait. When Dorian kills Basil his morality shatters, and moments after reaching that lowest moral point he even destroys himself physically and reveals his true appearance to the world. Therefore, throughout the novel, we can see the gradual decay of Dorian's ethical values which lead to the complete decay of his beautiful appearance. The conviction and imprisonment of Oscar Wilde put an end to an era. Subsequently, the criticism against Decadence and Aestheticism in general gains plausibility. The audience is convinced the civilization is heading to a downfall in terms of morality and rationalism. However, the ideas born in the period of

---

<sup>35</sup> McEvansoneya (1995) p. 14

<sup>36</sup> McEvansoneya (1995) p. 14

Decadence do not completely disappear but survive in different shapes. It is safe to say Decadence is a time of gaining freedom to discover new forms and techniques of art and gives a lot to its autonomy.

The figure of the dandy portrays an individual who is his centre of the cult of oneself. Oscar Wilde used dandyism in his works but never fully immersed in it. What is characteristic of a dandy figure is that he will not stage his sentiment, but rather be marked with a seeming lack of emotions.<sup>37</sup> Staging a lack of emotions will increase speculations among the audience. The great English dandy of the nineteenth century was George 'Beau' Brummell who, renowned for his style, did not meet the usual criteria for social recognition such as wealth or achievements in the political, artistic or military sphere. In England, there is the model of a dandy as a gentleman, but in France, it evolves into the dandy as a writer. Here the dandy's features become slightly different; he is portrayed as an individual with a lack of essence, meaning he can only be described through his appearance and behaviour. The nineteenth century is a period of simplicity style-wise, so a dandy is described as wearing dark or black colours. The dandy figure attracts attention to himself through the way he presents himself rather than with the clothes he wears. Oscar Wilde is a dandy figure himself, but he attracted attention with unusual clothes since the black and simple ones were considered to be the norm in his time. In a way, Wilde uses his way of clothing to protest the bourgeois utilitarian thinking. An expression which is often connected with a dandy is 'airs' which means he resorts to verbal witticisms rather than deeds. His verbal communication consists of simple and frivolous values which point out his lack of morality. Another element which is mandatory for a dandy to have is the audience. Without an audience, he does not exist because the essence of his being is to be talked about. The English ideal of the dandy includes being a successful writer, staying aloof and having a relationship with the audience.<sup>38</sup> Even though Oscar Wilde corresponds to most of these features, he has one more strategy which could intrigue the audience even more. This strategy includes creating characters in his literary works who resemble him, which invites the audience to a more detailed look of life quite similar to the author's.

A perfect example of a dandy figure is certainly the character of Dorian Gray since it seems his only purpose in life is to be beautiful and noticed. Dorian is a hedonist who, by all means,

---

<sup>37</sup> Böker, Corballis, and Hibbard (2002), p. 82

<sup>38</sup> Böker, Corballis, and Hibbard (2002), p. 83

wants to enjoy life and maintain his beauty forever. Beautiful things are what attracts him, and when they are no longer beautiful, he loses interest in them. To him, beauty is closely related to art which is obvious even in his relationships. His relationship with Basil, a painter, and Sibyl Vane, an actress, confirm that statement. When Sibyl loses her talent as an artist, Dorian's emotions towards her disappear. After her death, he feels unbothered, even slightly amazed because she became a modern Juliet. His relationship with Basil is what in a way made him the man he is. Basil is the one who painted the portrait that ends up being Dorian's ruin. Both Basil and Sibyl serve as an audience to him, he is the centre of their lives. When Sibyl loses his affection, she kills herself, and that is what makes Dorian even vainer. When Basil makes that portrait of Dorian, he makes him more immoral because it gives him a pass to do horrible things and be left untouched. However, in the end, his desire to enjoy only aesthetic things in life is what leads him to his downfall – the loss of his beauty.

Oscar Wilde went on lecture tours where he presented his work of art which was himself making witticisms while being completely emotionally detached from the audience. After his death, the public finally got a full insight into his intimate sphere of life which is what they were trying to get the entire time. This is in a way similar to Dorian's story because only after his death the public gains access to the part of his life which was hidden.

#### **4.3. The Conflict between Aestheticism and Morality**

In the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde evaluates all art as useful. This statement reflects the general belief of the Aestheticism. This movement strongly opposes to art being used as a form of utilitarian device. Art's sole purpose is to meet the criteria of beauty and pleasure among its receiver. In England, the aesthetic philosophy spreads its influence on other aspects of life as well. Beauty is the highest value for an adherent of Aestheticism, he believes life should imitate art to reach the ideal state.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be observed as an allegory of a world in which morality judges an individual as quickly as Aestheticism manufactures its principles. An aesthete sees no difference between morality and immorality, his only criteria revolves around the values which

jollify or deject a person. In the novel, the author gives us an opposing situation. He portrays a picture of an aesthete's life with all its immoral and tainted features. Dorian lives a self-centred life in turn of his own happiness, which in the end, leads to his downfall, and he dies as the most miserable he could ever be. This ending is evidence of Wilde's intention to make the novel as a monition to the risks of mindlessly pursuing the aesthetic philosophy. In contrast to many others, Wilde was aware that aesthetic does not necessarily have to be equalised with immoral. Aestheticism emerges in the Victorian Era precisely at the same time as the Industrial Revolution, meaning that the overall atmosphere is marked with man's labour to produce various goods.

According to Wilde's exposition of Aestheticism, a comparison can be linked from the negative sides of mass production to artists who produce work accordant to the society's norms. He advocates Aestheticism as a lifestyle because that is the only way for man to behave naturally and be content. In the novel, Lord Henry serves as a means Wilde used to express his own opinions about contemporary society and its distorted moral values. Lord Henry understands that life becomes torture for a person if they do not follow their desires. In other words, if Aestheticism is not embraced, a person will never achieve to be his true self just to obey to what society imposed. Lord Henry can be seen as the device for transferring aesthetic views, and Basil can be the device of morality. Between the two, Dorian chooses Lord Henry and his views on life. Subsequently, this means that in a conflict between the two, Aestheticism will always beat morality because the two should never even be brought into connection.

#### **4.4. Ethical and Aesthetic Ideas Embodied in the Figure of the Doppelgänger**

Time passage is one of Dorian's biggest concerns since it means the decay of his beauty. When he wishes to switch the roles between himself and the portrait, he actually creates a doppelgänger. This doppelgänger belongs to the fourth dimension of time and duration<sup>39</sup> and represents an entity frail to the effects of time. Dorian and the portrait both exist at the same

---

<sup>39</sup> Fricano (2015), p.1

time, but only one of them can be affected by time. Therefore, only one of the two can exist within the fourth dimension.

Until the end of the novel, the portrait continues to deteriorate while Dorian keeps his beauty despite his wrongdoings. When he tries to destroy the portrait, the deterioration time has provoked transfers to himself. In other words, Dorian and the portrait are the symbolic opposites of one another. In the novel, there is a strong connection between beauty and youth which never breaks. The reason Dorian is allowed to stay young and beautiful is due to the fact he exists only outside of the fourth dimension. His beauty is the most important thing in life to him, and he will do anything to prevent losing it. The first time Dorian finds out about the importance of youth is from Lord Henry when he speaks the following words: “We degenerate into hideous puppets, haunted by the memory of the passions of which we were too much afraid, and the exquisite temptations that we had not the courage to yield to. Youth! Youth! There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth!”<sup>40</sup> When Dorian wished he could switch roles with the portrait his wish came true: “If it were I who was always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that – for that – I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!”<sup>41</sup>

In a certain way, he does lose his soul because he becomes an unscrupulous person who cares only about his well-being. There is another argument to the theory that Dorian ceases to exist in the fourth dimension. A person's soul is considered to be an unphysical entity, and throughout the novel, it is mentioned that Basil Hallward caught Dorian's in the portrait. However, the moment the portrait becomes Dorian's true doppelgänger is when he acknowledges the portrait as a part of his being. When he sees the changes in the painting, he decides to protect it at all costs like a part of himself which has to remain hidden from the world. Aesthetically, the doppelgänger is a representation of the protagonist's moral decay. All the ugliness of his soul is represented on the portrait. When Dorian does something immoral or hurts another person, he is seemingly unaffected by it. Ethically, the doppelgänger takes over the guilt for Dorian's sins considering the fact people still find themselves attracted to him, which is not moral at all. In a way, Dorian does not go unaffected by his deeds since his soul becomes monstrous. The main issue of the relationship between Dorian and his doppelgänger is the passage of time, which is

---

<sup>40</sup> Wilde (1890) p. 63

<sup>41</sup> Wilde (1890) p. 65 – 6



greatly disregarded by Dorian, making him fully outside of the fourth dimension. In the end, Dorian blames Basil for making him become the vain person he is. Basil glorified his beauty and associated it with youth, and that is what remained in Dorian's memory to this day. For him, beauty equals youth and without having one of the two, a person cannot be happy or live a content life. He does not want anybody to relate ugliness with his being, that is why he tries so hard to keep his doppelgänger hidden. The portrait takes all the consequences of Dorian's actions, so he does not have a feeling of responsibility. Morally, this represents a big ethical problem because it seems as if he has no conscience since he never receives any punishment. Even at the end of the novel, after murdering Basil, Dorian feels no remorse. The only thing he wishes to do is to dispose of his body and destroy the hideous part of himself represented in the portrait. The term he uses to refer to the portrait is "monstrous soul-life" which shows the hatred he feels for it. When he stabs the knife in the portrait, he enters the fourth dimension and they switch their roles. The portrait reclaims its original beauty and Dorian finally experiences the consequences of his lifestyle.

I can conclude that the evolution of Dorian's personality causes him to split into two entities. It almost seems that his doppelgänger is his soul, the part of him which has a conscience and gets the punishment for his actions. Dorian, however, is the part which remains untouched despite doing all the immoral things. In the end, this morally questionable situation seems to get corrected because Dorian finally gets what he deserves even though the author dismisses this claim in the Preface.

#### **4.5. Language, Style, Symbols and Imagery**

Speaking of symbols in the novel, there are many different ones. One of the most important symbols is Dorian's portrait. The portrait represents a symbol of Dorian's personality, one part of him which is hidden from others and available only to his eyes. Although it seems Dorian is unbothered by his moral decay, he is actually losing his mind trying to protect his secret. He is not concerned with being an immoral person but rather with the existence of a part of himself which is not considered as beautiful. The portrait loses beauty as time passes and reflects the true

look of Dorian's soul and he cannot withstand that. That is why he destroys it in the end because he cannot bear the fact a part of his being became ugly and unattractive.

Another symbol in the novel is Harry's present to Dorian. The book Lord Henry gives to Dorian can be interpreted as the influence he has over him. Dorian cannot stop reading the book as it is filled with metaphors and written in a style which characterises the work of some of the finest artists of the French school of *Décadents*. "It was a poisonous book. The heavy odor of incense seemed to cling about its pages and to trouble the brain."<sup>42</sup> Wilde describes the book just like he could describe the influence Harry has over Dorian. He is the one who gives him the ideas which make him lead a morally corrupted life. Lord Henry constantly fills his mind with his philosophical theories which result in Dorian's pursuit for a purely hedonistic lifestyle. Dorian cannot stop reading just like he cannot stop listening to Harry's ideas and opinions. Because of the ideas Henry imprinted in Dorian, he became the person with corrupt values.

Wilde uses language and style which correspond to the aesthetic ideals of writing. He often produces very long descriptions of objects to further emphasise their beauty, as seen at the beginning of the novel when he describes Basil's studio. Also, there are instances when he uses Lord Henry as a device of philosophical thought. Henry is often ironic and uses artistic references when referring to Dorian, as seen in the following quote. "...I really can't see any resemblance between you, with your rugged strong face and your coal-black hair, and this young Adonis, who looks as if he was made of ivory and rose-leaves. Why, my dear Basil, he is a Narcissus, and you – well, of course you have an intellectual expression, and all that."<sup>43</sup> In this example, Harry compares Dorian to mythological creatures. Furthermore, Wilde uses Lord Henry to make remarks on beauty and art, which again reflect an aesthetic point of view on life.

---

<sup>42</sup> Wilde (1890) p. 126

<sup>43</sup> Wilde (1890) p. 4

## 5. Aesthetic Experiments in Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales *A House of Pomegranates*

Oscar Wilde was a fierce supporter of Aestheticism which is visible from his literary work. His literature mostly revolves around detecting the "ugly" in society. *A House of Pomegranates* represents Wilde's second fairy tale collection, with the first one being *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*. This collection consists of four tales: *The Young King*, *The Birthday of the Infanta*, *The Fisherman and His Soul* and *The Star-Child*. All stories have quite convoluted plots which explain the author's perspective on life and society of that time.

There are certain characteristics of the philosophy in which Wilde believes. The first one involves innovation in the form which is crucial for an artist to be original.<sup>44</sup> One's art cannot be perceived as independent if one does not use innovative and original procedures while conveying art. Only the artist himself is allowed to have the last word on his work. Another valid point is art having its independence from life itself. Nature is not the origin of art because it is the most radical representation of life, and life and art should always stay separated. It is no secret Oscar Wilde had his own philosophy about art and the act of creating a piece of art. His main theory about art being superior in comparison to life is what governs all his works. For him, art has no other purpose than being art. It does not have a moral system which it could follow and, therefore, be evaluated as wicked or good. Art is pointless, meaning it does not express a deeper meaning than the literal. Wilde believes art's purpose is to only be art, while the artist is the one who is allowed to have an opinion or a moral responsibility. Morality exists in a completely different sphere of the one in which art exists.

In *The House of Pomegranates* aesthetic ideas are reflected in thorough illustrations of beauty. In the tale *The Young King* the author contributes to the aesthetic manner by giving the young lad an extraordinary passion for beautiful things. As stated in the following quote: "...he had shown signs of that strange passion for beauty that was destined to have so great an influence over his life."<sup>45</sup> Later on, he compares beauty to an anodyne from pain or a cure for illness. Aestheticism is characterised by a certain alienation from society, and this statement is

---

<sup>44</sup> Hou (2014), p. 2168

<sup>45</sup> Wilde (1891), p. 4

substantiated in the tale through the young lad's attitude towards art. "...which was almost a divination, that the secrets of art are best learned in secret, and that Beauty, like Wisdom, loves the lonely worshipper."<sup>46</sup> Oscar Wilde uses the character of the young lad to illustrate a true aesthetic worshipper who enjoys spending his time admiring art and is because of it often misunderstood by the environment. Wilde also associates beauty with objects which are in some relation to sin or sorrow. For example, the pearls and the jewels used for the young king's crown are described in all their beauty but in the context of their origin as well. This only intensifies the separation of beauty from morality.

The first example of this experiment is seen in *The Birthday of the Infanta* in which there are detailed descriptions of various forms of beauty.

"There was a stately grace about these slim Spanish children as they glided about, the boys with their large-plumed hats and short fluttering cloaks, the girls holding up the trains of their long brocaded gowns, and shielding the sun from their eyes with huge fans of black and silver. But the Infanta was the most graceful of all, and the most tastefully attired, after the somewhat cumbrous fashion of the day. Her robe was of grey satin, the skirt and the wide puffed sleeves heavily embroidered with silver, and the stiff corset studded with rows of fine pearls. Two tiny slippers with big pink rosettes peeped out beneath her dress as she walked. Pink and pearl was her great gauze fan, and in her hair, which like an aureole of faded gold stood out stiffly round her pale little face, she had a beautiful white rose."<sup>47</sup>

This passage from Wilde's *The Birthday of the Infanta* exemplifies his use of thorough descriptions of beauty as one of the aesthetic experiments used. The Spanish children are described in all their glory, with special regard to their poise. In the descriptions of the children, it seems Wilde gives the lead to elegance rather than mere descriptions of their concrete beauty. Further on, he continues to emphasize the beauty cast upon the Infanta's attire with great detail. Descriptions, as detailed as these, are not a common characteristic of fairy tales, so it is evidence of Wilde's unique technique. As the story continues, we find out about the King's dead wife whom he loved so much that he had her body embalmed and placed on a tapestried bier in the chapel of the Palace. This act can also be characterised as a part of Wilde's philosophy on art. A comparison can be made between art and his wife. The Queen, just like art, should not have to waste underground hidden from the world. It should be displayed in the world and always be

---

<sup>46</sup> Wilde (1891) p. 5

<sup>47</sup> Wilde (1891) p. 29

preserved. The King loved the Queen so madly he never permitted her to be out of his sight which can be linked to art never being allowed or wanted to serve any other purpose by the aesthetes. The importance of beauty in Wilde's aesthetic principles can be seen from the following quote: "...and that though she was but a barren bride he loved her better than Beauty..."<sup>48</sup> The author used a comparison to the highest value in life – beauty, to express the King's love towards his dead wife. His daughter reminds him of his beloved wife, both in her physical appearance and her demeanour. Wilde is consistent with descriptions of beauty in various people, such as the young Count of Tierra-Nueva, through the entire tale. Even the horrible act of bull-slaughter is perceived as an admirable and commendable action. The author gives significance to art once again, this time in the form of performers of a semi-classical tragedy of Sophonisba. Their acting was so good and natural that "the eyes of the Infanta were quite dim with tears"<sup>49</sup>. Whenever there is a need to express Infanta's virtue, it is always done with mentioning her beautiful appearance or even ascribing her goodness to her beauty, as seen in the following quote: "...but the pretty Infanta charmed them as she leaned back peeping over her fan with her great blue eyes, and they felt sure that one so lovely as she was could never be cruel to anybody"<sup>50</sup>.

To describe the Dwarf in the story, Wilde used adjectives such as "ugly" and "useless" which corroborates the aesthetic viewpoint on ugly things as being useless as well. The Dwarf is described as being unconscious of his grotesque appearance and, despite it, being happy and high-spirited. He moves on to say that nature fashioned the Dwarf that way so others could mock him which again draws a parallel to the relationship between art and nature. Art is completely independent of nature, meaning it could never be ugly since its only purpose is to convey beauty. All other characters from the tale perceive the Dwarf as extremely ugly and do not understand how he could act in a joyous matter. This implies that ugliness should not be linked with anything positive. The Dwarf's search for the Princess is slowed down with his amazement with the beauty of the interior. Wilde manages to delay his task by describing the luxurious beauty of the rooms he entered. In the end, the Dwarf dies from a broken heart since he saw his monster-

---

<sup>48</sup> Wilde (1891) p. 32

<sup>49</sup> Wilde (1891), p. 36

<sup>50</sup> Wilde (1891) p. 39

like appearance. Beauty is what attracts people to love things, and since he did not have it, he could never be loved and therefore had no reason to live.

In *The Fisherman and His Soul*, Wilde makes a lot of effort to describe the mermaid's beauty without directly stating she is beautiful, as seen in the following quote.

“Her hair was as a wet fleece of gold, and each separate hair as a thread of fine gold in a cup of glass. Her body was as white ivory, and her tail was of silver and pearl. Silver and pearl was her tail, and the green weeds of the sea coiled round it; and like sea-shells were her ears, and her lips were like sea-coral. The cold waves dashed over her cold breasts, and the salt glistened upon her eyelids.”<sup>51</sup>

The fisherman instantaneously falls in love with her and is willing to give his soul in return of her being his wife. In a conversation with a priest, he even compares the mermaid to the morning star and the moon. "For her body I would give my soul, and for her love I would surrender heaven."<sup>52</sup> This is similar to Dorian Gray who, having seen his portrait, thought to himself he would give anything in the world to remain to be as beautiful. The fisherman gives up his soul so he can be with the one he loves. However, his story also ends in despair since in the end he, just like Dorian, loses what is most important to him.

In the entire collection *A House of Pomegranates*, Oscar Wilde exemplifies his aesthetic theory that art is immoral. In all these tales, beauty loses its utilitarian purposes, meaning it no longer serves as the carrier of virtues. He split the beautiful from good, as seen in the examples of the Infanta or the Star Child. The author's descriptions of beauty are not there to serve as a moral device but rather to prove art is useless. Beauty should be the only navigation to making artwork, the artist should aspire to make all details perfect. Another characteristic which qualifies as an aesthetic experiment is the unexpectedness of the tale's end. In this collection, three out of four tales end surprisingly with the deaths of the protagonists. In tales which seemingly convey a moral lesson, Wilde takes away the concept of a happy end which leaves the reader surprised in the end. This is how the author demonstrates the absurdity of art serving as a device for morality or any other purpose. His work of art does not exist to teach the readers the difference between the good and the bad. He accepts both moral and immoral as appropriate materials for his art because he observes them from the objective artistic side which knows no good or bad. The

---

<sup>51</sup> Wilde (1891) p. 64

<sup>52</sup> Wilde (1891) p. 72

irony is another one of Wilde's experiments used in this collection of tales which can be seen best in *The Fisherman and His Soul* when flowers which bloomed on the grave of the lovers, never bloom again after people pray for the world in the sea. Oscar Wilde is an adversary of tradition, and therefore, does the most to make his literary works different from what the public is used to.

Pain and suffering of the protagonists happen rather often and is not very frequent in children's fairy tales, but these are not the common children fairy tales. Wilde uses the two emotions to involve aspects of life which can happen in the tales because art should consist of everything that exists in life. However, the terrible events which occur to the protagonists do not provoke compassion in other characters because that would be idealistic, and the society is far from it. Wilde uses these experiments to address the hypocrisy of the society which moralizes over many aspects of life but do little to follow their own rules. Considering the fact this is a collection of fairy tales, I can only conclude Wilde wishes to inform children of the ways life works. The use of digressions appears multiple times throughout the tales. It is used as another aesthetic experiment which serves to split the plot and to distract the reader from the main theme. By doing so, Wilde manages to illustrate that each detail of the tale matters equally and deserves to be beautiful. To conclude, Oscar Wilde uses aesthetic experiments such as the emphasis on beauty, the surprisingly unhappy endings and digressions to make a different concept of art.

### **5.1. The Beautiful and the Material in the “Star-Child”**

In the *Star Child*, the author again focuses on the external beauty of the child and other beautiful things he wishes to describe. However, just like in the rest of the tales, beauty ceases to be the indicator of morality. In other fairy tales, beauty is always an indicator of a virtuous person whether this is not true in Wilde's tales. The Star Child is undeniably beautiful from the very beginning.

“And every year he became more beautiful to look at, so that all those who dwelt in the village were filled with wonder, for, while they were swarthy and black-haired, he was white and delicate as sawn ivory, and his curls were like the rings of the daffodil. His lips, also, were like the petals

of a red flower, and his eyes were like violets by a river of pure water, and his body like the narcissus of a field where the mower comes not.”<sup>53</sup>

Unlike with other fairy tale characters, the Star Child's beauty does not equal with goodness. He is a cruel and vicious person who mocks others and tortures animals. His moral virtues arrive only when his beauty is taken away from him, and he experiences the world through the eyes of an ugly creature.

In this tale, beautiful does not always stand for the material. When the Star Child lives life as a beggar, he sees the goodness in the world. He becomes compassionate to other creatures and helps them without expecting something in return. Once when he is kept as a slave, he puts the misery of others before himself. All that because he realises the importance of material things in life is minimal in comparison to the importance of love. His transformation occurred because he hurt his mother and drove her away and almost immediately felt sorry for it. However, this also implies that the Star Child perceived beauty as the most sacred value in life since only when he loses it he realises the severity of his mistake. Even though the tale has a strong moral message, it also implies the importance of beauty in one's life. If Star Child did not lose his beauty he probably would not decide to find his mother, and eventually become a good person. Material things are portrayed as non-essential. The Woodcutter and his wife did not make use of the gold cloak or the chain of amber when they found the child. By simply storing it away they express their modesty and fairness. Later on, when the Magician orders the Star Child to bring him gold, he always gives the gold to the beggar. This shows how little he cares for material things and his own suffering when he understands what he did to his mother. If the Star Child did not lose his beauty but rather something material, he would probably not think twice about his mother. But when he loses the most important thing that exists, he completely changes his character and becomes a different person. When he gives the gold to the beggar for the third time, he is rewarded for his change of character and therefore gets his beauty back. In the end, with the return of his beauty, he also gains material wealth and it seems the moral balance is retrieved. However, Wilde mentions his reign lasts for only three years and he is succeeded by a very cruel ruler. This way the author manages to disturb the restored balance and induce an unrest end of the tale.

---

<sup>53</sup> Wilde (1891) p. 136



## 6. Aestheticism, Culture and the Society: Art as a Formative Force

The idea of artistic autonomy changed drastically since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Immanuel Kant makes ground-breaking conclusions about the aesthetic theory. This causes a huge impact on the overall cultural and literary scene in the 1900s. Kant values aesthetic theory as one of the constituents of the philosophical system and makes remarkable statements about beauty. The philosophy of beauty soon spreads across the literary scene and affects the entire culture and society. Only those who appreciate art's autonomy can fully realise their intellect and morality.

In the first years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Kant's philosophy arrives to France in a reduced form through the Art for Art's Sake slogans. The movement makes even more success in England and Germany as opposed to France, where censorship is put on literature. The progress of the printing press results in the establishment of a market system, which has no room for poets. Many of them decide to join the aesthetic movement as a counterweight to being rejected by the market and left with no other option. The society runs the market and therefore the aesthetes decide to turn their back to it and start glorifying individualism. One of the most famous representatives of Aestheticism, Oscar Wilde is often mocked during this time due to his aesthetic aspirations. There are many satirical pieces regarding him and other members of the movement since the public found them peculiar. However, the visual arts are a field of success for the Art for Art's Sake movement and prove to be quite influential among society. Artists cause a lot of attention during this period and provoke the entire public because of their lack of understanding. The Victorian society has troubles with comprehending that art is no longer tangled with any deeper meaning. Aestheticism brings radical and revolutionary ideas to life since it demands society to appreciate only the beauty of artistic work. In the Victorian era, society is class-based, more people gain their voting rights and the economy is growing.<sup>54</sup> The country is rich and gaining even more wealth thanks to the industrial improvements. Overall, this period is quite prudish since it has double standards when it comes to people's rights. Gender and class are the most important criteria for the hierarchical organization of society. The society's moral leaders are the members of the middle class which is growing rapidly at that time. The political sphere is controlled by the male members of the upper class. Nevertheless, the monarch

---

<sup>54</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica (2019)

is Queen Victoria. Society experiences quite a few changes during this period. The British Empire abolishes slavery and liberalism arises as to the presiding ideology. The country's economy prospers for almost half of the century and then collapses intensely, resulting in an 18-year-long economic depression. The improvement of the traffic of goods and people follows a huge interest in British culture. Great Britain is culturally the most interesting anglophone place in the world.

The most popular places to visit are the theatres and music halls. The printing press continues to rise in popularity since people enjoy reading about scandals and crimes. Novels, once unavailable to all classes, are now affordable to everybody who wishes to read, so in accordance with that authors make various genres. The characteristic Victorian novel consists of many pages and characters who are involved in a complex plot. Art serves as a form of entertainment for society, they want certain norms to be fulfilled. Aestheticism immerses as a new phenomenon which is not understood easily by the entire society just like Wilde's work was not always understood by the public.

## 7. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to explain the characteristics of Oscar Wilde's aestheticism by analysing his life and work. While doing so, it provided a detailed analysis of the aesthetic experiments in Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Grey* and fairy tale collection *A House of Pomegranates*, as well as the idea of beauty, art and artist in his lectures and essays.

The main conclusion on Wilde's technique is that his biggest concern is the importance of art serving no other purpose than being beautiful. This is exemplified in his essays and lectures through extensive passages on his ideas of art, beauty and artist. For Wilde, the importance of an artist is huge, and he believes an artist is a true virtuoso who possess a special talent which is not accessible to anybody. The idea of art is represented in many of his works and it always has the same meaning. Art is a form of expressing the beautiful and its purpose is to please its spectators. Through the character of Dorian Gray, Wilde manages to offer an insight into the life of an aesthete whose lifestyle lead him to a fatal end. Even though the novel seems to have a moral of the story Wilde dismisses those claims in the *Preface*. "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all."<sup>55</sup> This is an ironical attempt to point out to the reader that art should not be used as a device of an ideology. Similar happens in his fairy tales with their unexpected endings which are one form of aesthetic experiments used alongside detailed descriptions of beauty and irony. Wilde manages to shatter the reader's expectations to receive the moral of the story because all protagonists in the story die even after their redemptions.

To conclude, Oscar Wilde was a perfect example of an aesthete who managed to convey his ideas to his literary work. He appreciated beauty as the most important value in life and cleverly made valid points to why art should be observed as art. His literary style became the representative of the entire Aestheticism as a period in literature.

---

<sup>55</sup> Wilde (1890)

## 8. Bibliography

1. Arnold, Matthew. 1908. *Culture and Anarchy; The Picture of Dorian Gray*. New York: Macmillan.
2. Becker-Leckrone, Megan. 2002. *Oscar Wilde (1854–1900): Aesthetic and Criticism*. The Continuum Encyclopedia of Modern Criticism and Theory. New York; Continuum P.
3. Belford, Barbara. 2000. *Oscar Wilde: A Certain Genius*. London: Bloomsbury.
4. Bell-Villada, Gene H. 1986. *The Idea of Art for Art's Sake: Intellectual Origins, Social Conditions, and Poetic Doctrine*. *Science & Society*, vol. 50, no. 4, 1986, pp. 415–439. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/40402974](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40402974). Accessed 20 August, 2020.
5. Bell-Villada, Gene H. 1996. *Art for Art's Sake and Literary Life: How Politics and Markets Helped Shape the Ideology and Culture of Aestheticism, 1790-1990 (Stages)*. University of Nebraska Press.
6. Böker, Uwe. Corballis, Richard. and Hibbard, Julie A., 2002. *Importance of Reinventing Oscar: Versions of Wilde During the Last 100 Years*. Amsterdam, NY: Brill, Rodopi.
7. Bork, Alfred M. 1964. *The Fourth Dimension In Nineteenth-Century Physics*. *Isis*, 55(3), 326-338. Retrieved August 27, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/228574>
8. Cohen, Ed. 1993. *Talk on the Wilde side*. New York: Routledge.
9. Cohen, Philip K., 1978. *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde*. Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, London: Associated University Presses.
10. Contributor: Susie Steinbach Article Title: Victorian era Website Name: Encyclopædia Britannica Publisher: Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. Date Published: October 08, 2019 URL:<https://www.britannica.com/event/Victorian-era> Access Date: August 25, 2020.
11. Ellmann, Richard. 1987. *Oscar Wilde*. New York, USA: Knopf.
12. Guérard, Albert. 1936. *Art for Art's Sake*. Boston, New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Company.
13. Gültekin, Lerzan. 2016. *Art versus morality*. <http://www.ide.hacettepe.edu.tr/ekitap3/7.pdf>
14. Hamilton, Walter, 1882. *The Aesthetic movement in England*. London: Norwood Editions.

15. Hark, Ina Rae. 1980. *Reviewed Works: The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde*. by Philip K. Cohen; *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism*. by Rodney Shewan. University of California Press.
16. Hog Creek Review: A Literary Journal of The Ohio State University at Lima (2015) Fricano, Giuseppe. *The Picture Of Dorian Gray - A Dimensional Doppelgänger* <http://hdl.handle.net/1811/78998>
17. Jervis, John. 1998. *Exploring the modern*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers.
18. Joel Kaplan and Sheila Stowell (1999). The Dandy and the Dowager: Oscar Wilde and Audience Resistance. *New Theatre Quarterly*, 15, pp 318-331 doi:10.1017/S0266464X00013257
19. Knox, Melissa. 2001. *Oscar Wilde in the 1990s The Critic as Creator*. Camden House.
20. Oscar Wilde online, 2007-2020 web page; <https://www.wilde-online.info/> Access Date: August 20, 2020.
21. Perkin, Harold. 1969. *The Origins of Modern English Society*. London and New York: Routledge Paperback.
22. Philip McEvansoneya (1995) *Oscar Wilde and decadence in art*, *Irish Studies Review*, 3:11, 14-19, DOI: 10.1080/09670889508455486
23. Ross, Robert, editor. Release Date: March 12, 2013 [eBook #774] [This file was first posted on January 5, 1997] ISO-646-US (US-ASCII) Transcribed from the 1913 Methuen and Co edition by David Price, *Essays and lectures by Oscar Wilde*, Date Published: March 12, 2013 web page; <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/774/774-h/774-h.htm#page197> Access Date: August 25, 2020.
24. Shewan, Rodney, 1977. *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism*. London: Macmillan Press, New York: Barnes and Noble.
25. Solar, Milivoj, 2003. *Povijest svjetske književnosti*. Zagreb: Golden marketing.
26. Theory and Practice in Language Studies ISSN 1799-2591 Volume 4, Number 10, pp. 2168-2172, October 2014 Jing Hou: *The Aesthetic Experiment of Oscar Wilde in A House of Pomegranates*. Academy Publisher: Manufactured in Finland. doi:10.4304/tpls.4.10.2168-2172
27. Wilde, Oscar. 1890. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. London, New York: Ward, Lock.

28. Wilde, Oscar. 1891. *A House of Pomegranates*. London: James R. Osgood McIlvaine & Co.
29. Wilde, Oscar. 1905. *Intentions: The decay of lying, Pen pencil and poison, The critic as artist, The truth of masks*. New York: Brentano's.