

Wilde's Aestheticism, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salome*

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Abstract

This thesis explores Oscar Wilde's aesthetic ideas and how they are expressed in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salome*. An analysis will be provided of the critical works of *Intentions*, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* and *De Profundis*. In order to be able to understand the conflict that is present in Wilde's critical works between ethics and aestheticism, this thesis will also examine the influence of Walter Pater and John Ruskin on Wilde. The aesthetic principles Wilde outlined will be used to provide an analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salome*. The expectation is that the same conflict between aesthetics and ethics that arises in his critical works will be found in his fictional work as well.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, aestheticism, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Salome*, ethics, *Intentions*, *De Profundis*, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*.

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Introduction

When Wilde was asked about his life, he said: 'Some said my life was a lie but I always knew it to be the truth; for like the truth it was rarely pure and never simple' (qtd. in Holland 3). Wilde's life seems to be surrounded by paradoxes and statements like the one above demonstrate this perfectly (Holland 3). He was married, but was homosexual. He was Irish, but was very much part of English society and although 'a figure of the social establishment' he attacked Victorian morals (Warwick 35). It all started when Wilde was born in 1854 in Dublin. His mother was a writer as well and his father was a surgeon. He did well in school and won a scholarship to Trinity College where he was first introduced to and became interested in aestheticism (Warwick 8). He went on to study at Oxford where he developed further as a writer and a critic. It was there that he encountered his first mentor, John Ruskin (Warwick 8). Ruskin was a teacher at Oxford and through his teachings Wilde became more interested in ethics and art (Warwick 14). Later Wilde encountered Walter Pater at Oxford. It was because of Pater's influence that Wilde became more interested in aesthetics in a more pure form, that is to say without the moral concerns (Warwick 15). When Wilde left Oxford in 1878 he called himself 'the professor of aesthetic' (Ellmann *Oscar* 11). After Oxford he first earned a living by writing reviews, but also by writing poetry and prose. Gradually Wilde became more successful at writing during the 1880s (Warwick 35). Towards the end of the century accusations were made against Wilde regarding homosexuality and consequently he was sentenced to prison. Prison was very hard on Wilde and he never went back to the place he held in English society (Warwick 63). He died in France in 1900.

One of his best known works is the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, about a man who is afraid of his beauty fading, so he makes a deal so only a painting of him will show his decay and not his body. Another work by him is the play *Salome*, first published in 1893. The play was originally written in French and a year after publication translated into English. The play could not be performed in England, because it was not allowed to portray a Biblical character on stage (Barnet ix). Oscar Wilde was not only known for his fictional work, but also for the critical essays he wrote. Some of the essays he wrote about aestheticism are published together under the name *Intentions*. *Intentions* was first published in 1891 and contains several essays published earlier in magazines. The volume comprises of the essays 'The Critic as Artist', 'The Decay of Lying', 'Pen, Pencil and Poison' and 'The Truth of Masks'. Another essay he wrote that will be discussed later on is 'The Soul of Man Under

Socialism'. The last text that will be discussed in the first chapter is a long letter he wrote while in prison which also contains several of his critical ideas.

After having discussed the essays about aestheticism, I intend to analyse *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salome* and connect them to Wilde's ideas about the movement. By looking at these different fictional works I will try to answer the question: 'In what way are the essays about aestheticisms reflected by Wilde's fictional work, in particular in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salome*'.

Previous research in this field has focussed primarily on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a work of fiction in which aesthetic characters are portrayed (Dierkes-Thrun 30). Research on *Salome* has focussed more on the different sources for the play instead of how Wilde's critical ideas are expressed (Donohue 123). I will build on this research, but will add an analysis of Wilde's own critical works about aestheticism and connect this to the fictional works I mentioned earlier.

A definition of aestheticism is given by Gene H. Bell-Vellida: '[...] it is the idea that verse and fiction are without any moral, social, cognitive, or other extraliterary purposes' (3). According to the aesthetic movement art should be art and should not have any other goals. Their slogan is art for art's sake (Bell-Vellida 1). The term aestheticism can be traced back to the mid-18th century where German philosophers debated about objective and subjective notions of beauty (Stankiewicz 168). The movement did not flourish until the late 19th century in England (Freedman xviii). Walter Pater is considered to have had a significant influence on the movement. The Oxford Companion of English Literature states that 'Pater's work has long been associated with the 'art for art's sake' movement, and the cultivation of decadence in the 1880s and 1890s' (770). The specific time in which aestheticism flourished is connected to the changing Victorian society. According to Stankiewicz, style became a way to make sure that the wealthy would buy new goods before they were worn out, so that the factories could continue to grow and make more profits (167). Yet the conclusion that aestheticism is merely a form of consumerism is too hastily drawn (Freedman 3). He argues that there is also a call against consumerism within the movement (3). Supporters of the aesthetic movement stated that art should be appreciated above all things, also above wealth and virtues. Owning certain objects was seen as 'morally and spiritually superior' (167). The aesthetes represent an important turn in English literature (Freedman 2). He states that 'all represent a moment in which the enterprise we have since come to see as central to the tradition of Anglo-American poetry and prose – the Romantic tradition – reaches its moment

of climax, or its moment of exhaustion, or both. All represent the turn within Victorian culture towards valorizing art in general and visual art in particular as a means of provoking intense experience in a society that seems able to deaden the senses and spirits alike' (2). So aestheticism is more about provoking the senses and experiencing than consumerism.

A conflict seems to arise not only in Wilde's critical writing but also in his fictional work. The two men who influenced him most, Ruskin and Pater, represent two different ways of looking at art. Ruskin insists on an ethical approach to art and Pater argues that art should have no other purpose than being art. Wilde struggles with reconciling these two views in his works. The conflict between ethics and aestheticism is interesting to examine further. So first I will look at the influence of Ruskin and Pater on Wilde's critical works. Then I will provide an analysis of *Intentions*, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* and *De Profundis*. This analysis will serve as the theoretical framework for the analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salome*. I expect to find a conflict between ethics and aestheticism in both Wilde's critical works and his fictional works.

Chapter One: Wilde's Aestheticism

Wilde collected four essays in his volume *Intentions*. Along with a related essay published separately, 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', these make up Wilde's thoughts on life and art. The long letter *De Profundis* will also be discussed since Julia Brown argues that the peak of Wilde's critical thoughts are collected in *De Profundis*. Wilde's thoughts changed over time and this work is considered by her as the culmination of Wilde's critical thoughts (xiii). Yet before the critical works themselves are going to be looked at, it is important to understand some of the major influences some thinkers had on Wilde's ideas. Although Wilde himself would argue that there is no such thing as good influence, there certainly were contemporaries who did influence Wilde's work (*Picture* 24). The two figures who influenced his aesthetic thinking the most were John Ruskin and Walter Pater.

At first Wilde began as a disciple of Ruskin, enthusiastic for Christian, Medieval and Pre-Raphaelite themes and believing firmly in truth to nature (Calloway 35). John Ruskin was an English critic who lived from 1819 to 1900. He is mostly linked to his influence on the Pre-Raphaelites and his support for Gothic architecture (Warwick 13). According to Warwick, he believed in 'social reform through aesthetic response; that through attention to the moral meaning in nature, true art would be created and through appreciation of art, humanity could refine its spirit, learn to act unselfishly and break down the boundaries between nature, art and life' (14). Yet he did not agree with the aesthetic movement, because he was strongly opposed to materialism (14). Wilde was very familiar with Ruskin's works since he encountered them when he was attending Oxford (8). The influence that Ruskin had on Wilde is most noticeable in *Intentions*, 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', and 'De Profundis'. According to Erickson, Wilde's romanticism transforms because of Ruskin into socialism, a form of 'artistic individualism' (74). This of course presents a clash between the idea of art as serving a moral ideal and the idea that art should only exist for itself and have no other purposes.

Later, Wilde became more influenced by Pater's ideas of aestheticism (Calloway 35). Walter Pater was an English critic who lived from 1839 to 1894. In 1873 Pater published *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* which was a challenge to Ruskin's work (36). In contrast to Ruskin, Pater was an advocate for the aesthetic movement. Pater concludes in *The Renaissance* that young men should 'seek primarily for sensation and great passions in both art and life, and to get as many pulsations as possible into the given time' (Calloway 36). He called out to his followers to follow the credo 'Art for Art's sake' which meant that the

pursuit of an aesthetic experience or the pursuit of beauty alone would not be hindered by any other factors, like social norms and notions of good and evil (37). The single goal of life became 'to respond to what is beautiful, curious or profound (Erickson 75). And therefore the role of the artist is also changed according to Pater. The critic no longer functions as someone to tell the reader what is good or evil but 'to reveal the most striking impressions of which his nature is capable (75). Pater's influence is clearly present in Wilde's critical works, but also in his fictional ones. In one of Wilde's last works *De Profundis*, Wilde refers to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* as 'that book which had such a strange influence over my life' (41).

Wilde states in 'The Decay of Lying' that self-contradiction is a virtue and it is precisely because of this that makes it more difficult to establish what Wilde's philosophy of art really entails. Yet one theme reoccurs throughout Wilde's critical essays and the letter *De Profundis*. The relationship between life and art is central to most of his essays. In the essays collected in *Intentions* Wilde summarizes some main points of his aestheticism. The first point he makes is that art should be independent from everything else. It should never express anything but itself and that turning to life and nature for art never results in anything but bad art. It is allowed to take inspiration from life and nature, but it should be molded into something completely original. Wilde also tries to make the point that the life of an artist is his greatest work of art and therefore feels that the mask someone wears is more important than what is underneath. Although Wilde continues to stress individualism and autonomy throughout all of his critical works, he is seemingly contradicting himself by adding a socialist layer to his critical thinking. The contradiction between the call for individualism and social responsibility is never completely resolved. Wilde however reconciles this partly by claiming that through individualism and developing the self, one comes to care more for others. Also, through the instilling some socialist ideas into society, for example the abolition of private property, there is more room for developing the self. The individual essays will be looked at in detail below.

Intentions is a collection of essays published in 1891. Although Wilde did write other essays containing his critical thoughts on literature and art in general, *Intentions* is presented most attractive compared to his other essays due to the use of his witty style of writing which is more present in *Intentions* (Erickson 75). Therefore it is most appealing to read compared to some other essays Wilde wrote. *Intentions* centers around the relationship between art and life and is in particular concerned with the connection between Nature and Art. Some themes

that occur throughout the different essays are the idea that masks are more important than what is underneath it, the multiplicity of personality and of self-contradiction as a virtue (Danson 90).

‘The Decay of Lying’ is the first essay in *Intentions*. Before it was collected in *Intentions*, it was published in *Nineteenth Century* in 1889. Wilde’s ideas are presented to us in the form of a dialogue between Vivian and Cyril. The dialogue is mainly about the relationship between art and nature and therefore it is not surprising that the dialogue begins with the question whether to sit outside or stay inside. Vivian represents more Wilde’s ideas and Cyril seems to represent a more conservative critical view (Erickson 76). Therefore Cyril is the one who suggests to go outside and enjoy Nature and Vivian replies that ‘my own experience is that the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature’ (3). The reason why he thinks this way is that he found that Nature was lacking in design, it is monotonous and cruel and although its intention is good, it cannot carry it out (4). Nature is also uncomfortable and he says he prefers houses to the open air (4). In fact, he seems to suggest that Nature should be shaped according to mankind: ‘If Nature had been comfortable, mankind would never have invented architecture’ (4). According to Erickson, Vivian goes against the traditional idea that Nature is a ‘beneficent universe with which man seeks to exist harmoniously’ (76). So Wilde presents Nature more as an environment that can be shaped by mankind. Vivian decides to stay inside and work on an article he is writing.

The article ‘the Decay of Lying’ centers around, as the title suggest, the deterioration of lying in modern society. Cyril tries to suggest that politicians still lie, but Vivian suggests the opposite and says that they never go beyond misrepresentation. Soon the dialogue reverts back to art and Vivian argues that the decay of lying is most evident in modern fiction, because ‘the modern novelist presents us with dull facts under the guise of fiction’ (8). He presents an argument that modern novelist borrow straight from life and that this is fatal to the imagination. Wilde seems to want to bring across that art is the shaping of raw materials, provided to us by Nature and make it into something completely new and original (Erickson 76). Therefore Art cannot borrow directly from Nature without failing to be good art. Wilde takes this idea ever further by suggesting that not only should we keep ourselves from borrowing from Life, it is Life that borrows from Art (32). Cyril is stunned by Vivian’s statement and asks: ‘But you don’t mean to say that you seriously believe that Life imitates Art, that life in fact is the mirror, and Art the reality?’ (32). Vivian then explains how sometimes people imitate Art by living out the lives they have read about. Danson, in his

essay 'Wilde as Critic and Theorist', wants to take this even further, despite the paradox, by suggesting that not only borrowing from Life and Nature make bad art, but even bad social conditions (86). 'Vivian's paradox depends less on the reversal of 'art' and 'nature' than on the fulcrum, 'imitates'. It suggests that whatever *is* is wrong (even, perhaps, a 'natural' fact as normative heterosexuality), because it mindlessly repeats a prior act of imitation' (Danson 85). Vivian ends the dialogue by summarizing some of the points he made. He gives the reader a few characteristics of what the new aesthetics is. First 'Art never expresses anything but itself' (53). It has no connection to his time or age and is therefore separate from everything and completely autonomous. The second is that 'all bad art comes from Life and Nature' (54). Thirdly, 'Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life' (55). Lastly, 'Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art' (55).

The second essay in Wilde's *Intentions* is 'Pencil, Pen and Poison: a study in green'. This essay first appeared in *The Fortnightly Review* and was published just like 'The Decay of Lying' in 1889. Unlike the 'The Decay of Lying', this essay is not written in dialogue form. The essay is presented to us as a biography of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, who lived from 1794 to 1852. Wilde describes him as: 'though of an extremely artistic temperament, followed many masters other than art, being not merely a poet and a painter, and an art-critic, an antiquarian, and a writer of prose, an amateur of beautiful things, and a dilettante of things delightful, but also a forger of no mean or ordinary capabilities, and as a subtle and secret poisoner almost without rival in any day or age' (60). Wilde opens his essay with the statement that artists are often reproached for lacking 'wholeness and completeness of nature' (59). Wilde seems to make Wainewright the advocate for the aesthetic movement. Wainewright poisoned his niece because her ankles were fat and Wilde claims that his crimes have given 'a strong personality to his style' (89). According to Erickson, the tone of the essay is three layered (80). The first layer appears to be serious, but the tone can also be seen as amusing and entertaining. Yet when one reads more carefully 'it becomes apparent that Wilde means everything he says' (80). Yet not everyone agrees with what Wilde was intending to say with this essay. According to Danson, 'it is impossible to say when he is being sincere or insincere' (92). Some critics feel that Wainewright seems to be like Wilde himself, an advocate for aestheticism and a dandy and others feel that the essay satirizes aestheticism (92). Danson concludes that especially the seeming contradictions in Wilde's works are all part of the performance he is giving: 'in all Wilde's performances the sublime and the ridiculous, like sincerity and insincerity, or like illusion and reality, are not necessarily

opposites (92). They are not opposites necessarily, because it was Wilde's aim to 'realise his personality in multiplicity' (93). Although the essay itself in all its contradictions seems to be a manifestation of Wilde's personality theory, in the text itself there is also evidence of this. Wilde writes that 'this young dandy sought to be somebody, rather than to do something. He recognized that Life itself was an art' (Erickson 81).

The third essay published in *Intentions* is 'the Critic as Artist'. The essay was published in two parts. The first part 'The Critic as Artist: With Some Remarks Upon the Importance of Doing Nothing' was first published in *Nineteenth Century* in 1890. The second part 'The Critic as Artist: With Some Remarks Upon the Importance of Discussing Everything' was published a little later the same year and also appeared first in *Nineteenth Century*. The essays are similar in form to 'The Decay of Lying' since these are also written in dialogue form. The themes of the essay are also similar with the essays revolving around the relationship between Life and Art. The dialogue takes place between Gilbert and Ernest. Ernest presents the more conservative view and Gilbert represents Wilde's own ideas. 'The Critic as Artist: With Some Remarks Upon the Importance of Doing Nothing' begins with Ernest remarking that most modern memoirs are boring because they 'are generally written by people who have entirely lost their memories, or have never done anything worth remembering' (Wilde 95). Gilbert answers that people are much more interesting when they talk about themselves than when they talk about others, so he does enjoy memoirs. This interchange leads to a discussion about art and art criticism. Ernest does not believe in art criticism and remarks: 'In the best days of art there were no art-critics' (105). He then explains his standpoint by recounting the art of ancient Greece and claims that there were no art critics then. Gilbert does not agree and points out that 'It would be more just to say that the Greeks were a nation of art-critics' (110). According to Gilbert the so-called critical spirit was inherited from ancient Greece and the spirit was mainly concerned with aesthetic criticism and not with morals. Gilbert goes on to say that art should be 'self-conscious and deliberate' (121). At the end of the second part of 'the Critic as an Artist' Gilbert argues that 'the critics impressions of an art work are shaped by the nature of personality, the critic must make the cultivation of his own art work his lifelong work' (126). He becomes, as it were, a work of art (Erickson 84).

Wilde presents a view in 'The Critic as Artist' that is different from the view presented otherwise in *Intentions*. He stresses the importance of individuality and autonomy, but in this essay he presents us with the idea that an artist must explore and intensify his own autonomy,

but when he does so he ‘gains access to a spiritual entity that is racial or collective, not individual’ (Erickson 85). The critic also has a function in society, namely to convey to the culture the racial experiences he has gained through the process of the gaining of that spiritual entity (85). This makes the culture to which this is transmitted cosmopolitan (85). Gilbert sees this as a way to eliminate for example war, since this communication and sharing of these racial experiences can be a means to overcome biases towards others.

The fourth and last essay of *Intentions* is called ‘The Truth of Masks’. It was originally published under the name ‘Shakespeare and Stage Costumes’ in 1885. So although it appears last in *Intentions*, it was actually written first. ‘The Truth of Masks’ is considered as the weakest of Wilde’s essays, not because the ideas presented in this essay are weak, but because it is not presented in Wilde’s usual witty style (Erickson 87; Danson 91). This essay also seems to contradict the rest of the essays in *Intentions* although Wilde tries to put this one more in line with the others by adding a conclusion in which he claims that ‘There is much with which I entirely disagree’ and ‘A Truth in Art is that whose contradictory is also true’ (263). According to Danson, *Intentions* starts as a book with a defense for art’s autonomy and ‘a rejection of historicity’ and ends as a book about historical accuracy in stage design (91). The essay centers in particular around Shakespeare his concern with costumes and stage design. According to Wilde, the only reason why he did not employ more stage effects was because the technology was not yet available to him. Wilde does present us with some critical ideas about art, although they do not adhere nicely to the other principles discussed in the previous three essays. The autonomy of art is again stressed: ‘Art has no other aim but her own perfection’ (252). Yet the emphasis that has been put on beauty in the other essays, cannot be found in ‘The Truth of Masks’ (Erickson 88). Wilde writes that ‘it must be remembered that neither in costume nor in dialogue is beauty the dramatist’s primary aim at all (255). So although this essay is somewhat different in ideas compared to the previous three essays, this is not remarkable if one keeps in mind that this was written years before the other three essays were published. Wilde’s thought process evolved from what has been written here in ‘The Truth of Masks’ to the ideas presented to us in ‘The Decay of Lying’, ‘Pen, Pencil and Poison’ and ‘The Critic as Artist’.

The last essay that will be discussed is ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism’. It was written a few months before *Intentions* was published and appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1891. The title is misleading, because the essay is more about art and individualism than about the soul and socialism (Erickson 91). The essay was inspired by George Bernard Shaw

who wrote *the Fabian Essays* the year prior, but very little of what Shaw wrote about can be found in Wilde's essay. One might also expect to find similar ideas to the ideas of Karl Marx in this essay, but this is also not true. Pearson suggests that the title of the essay should have been 'The Soul of Man Above Socialism', because of its concern with individualism and art (qtd. in Erickson 91). Wilde's ideas about individualism are inspired by Romantic poets like Blake and Shelley. Also Ruskin's influence can be detected in this essay with Wilde's concern with social utility which can be found in the idea that creation should be meaningful. Yet according to Erickson, the inevitable conflict with Pater's idea that art should not have moral concerns is never resolved (91). Wilde develops the idea in this essay that Christ's teachings did not include a cry for social change, but for the development of the self (Warwick 39). Wilde's idea of individualism is not competitive, but is 'a perfection of the self that leads to the highest sympathy with others' (39). The most important method of achieving this is through art. He distinguishes between two types of individualism, namely the individualism of capitalism and the individualism of art. Capitalism is less desirable than art, because capitalism holds one back to truly perfect oneself, since it is easy to confuse who you are with what you own (41). This is the reason why Wilde pleads for the abolition of private property.

The last work that will be discussed is one of the last works Wilde wrote before he died. *De Profundis* is a long letter he wrote to Lord Alfred Douglas when he was imprisoned for homosexual offenses in 1897. The first part of the letter mainly concerns Wilde's relationship with Douglas and memories about how he lived when he was not imprisoned yet. The second half of the letter is focused more on Wilde's critical ideas and once again he takes Christ as an example of an individualist artist, but this time he compares himself to Christ. *De Profundis* is more often used for its biographical importance than for its critical insights, but Brown argues that it is 'the culmination of the Wildean aesthetic speculations' (xiii). She argues this because it is Wilde's last work and because his ideas have changed throughout the years she takes this letter to represent the most complete work on his critical thoughts (xiii). *De Profundis* is, according to Warwick, a work that identifies sin and repentance in the same way that this was established in 'Pen, Pencil, and Poison' (74). The crimes that Wilde repents in *De Profundis* are the crimes that go against truth, beauty and the realization of art, just as in 'Pen, Pencil, and Poison'. The greatest shame that Wilde undergoes results from knowing that he could not live up to the standards of his own art (Warwick 75). *De Profundis* can be seen as the 'recognitions of the difficulty of living in the dialectical mode that is his ideals, and

recognizing the actions that can be seen as contributing to the ‘becoming’ of the individual’ (75). So it seems that Wilde’s ideas presented to us as abstract ideas in his critical essays are illustrated by Wilde’s own life in *De Profundis*.

Some of Wilde’s most important ideas about aestheticism have been explained here in detail. The points Wilde tried to make in his critical essays will be linked to two of his fictional works. First *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* will be held against some of the major themes in Wilde’s critical works.

Chapter Two: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

The Picture of Dorian Gray is the only novel written by Oscar Wilde. Three versions of the novel exist. It first appeared in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in 1890. This is the shortest version of the novel and has only thirteen chapters. The novel received a lot of criticism for being immoral when it was first published, even after editing the most offensive parts out (Erickson 99). A year later it was published again and this version has twenty chapters. The main difference between the two versions, despite the number of chapters, is that the later version contains a preface in which Wilde defends the novel and gives the reader information about how the novel should be read. This preface could be considered as a philosophical framework to guide the reader, but was also added to fight the allegations that the book was immoral. The third version that exists was published in 2011 and is an uncensored version. Especially the lines that refer to homosexuality were edited out in the original version and restored in the 2011 version. Since the editing mainly concerned references to homosexuality and this thesis is mostly concerned with aestheticism, it is not relevant to look at the uncensored version. Therefore, the twenty-chapter edition of the novel will be used.

The protagonist of the novel is Dorian Gray, a young man praised for his beauty. He has befriended a painter named Basil Hallward who is very much impressed by Dorian's beauty. He paints Dorian frequently and there are often hints that Basil's affection runs deeper than merely an appreciation for Dorian's beauty. When Dorian meets Lord Henry, Basil's friend, Lord Henry starts to explain his ideas about life and youth to Dorian. This makes Dorian scared of losing his youth and he makes the wish that he himself will never grow old or show sign of sins, but that the painting that Basil just made of him will show his decay instead. This echoes Goethe's Faust legend in which a man sells his soul for pleasure, knowledge and youth (Erickson 97). Faust seems to be the most direct source for the story of Dorian Gray. After this Lord Henry's influence over Dorian becomes greater and greater and he embarks on a sinful life, although the precise nature of his sins is only hinted at. In the end he kills Basil and then destroys his own portrait, causing his own death.

Walter Pater's and John Ruskin's influence are both present in the text. Basil Hallward and Lord Henry seem to represent both men's ideas about aestheticism and morals (Erickson 105). Wilde presented the moral of the story in such a way that both his mentors could find reason to be discontent with it (Ellmann 'Overture' 30). Pater's influence is represented in the text by Lord Henry (Ellmann, 'Overtures' 25). Lord Henry quotes directly

from Pater's work *The Renaissance*. Just as in the conclusion of *The Renaissance* Lord Henry tells Dorian: 'You have drunk deeply of everything . . . and it has all been to you no more than the sound of music' (qtd. in Ellmann 'Overtures' 25). Lord Henry borrows his words and ideas so closely from Pater that Wilde seems to not want to distinguish them from each other. Yet Lord Henry's advice and ideas are the downfall of Dorian Gray and therefore *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is often regarded not as a praise for Pater's ideas, but as a criticism directed towards him (Ellmann 'Overture' 26). This interpretation is supported by the book that Dorian Gray is given by Lord Henry. Wilde describes the effect the novel has on Dorian: 'Dorian Gray had been poisoned by a book. There were moments when he looked on evil simply as a mode through which he could realise his conception of the beautiful' (116). The book that was given by Lord Henry can be compared to *The Renaissance* by Pater that Wilde read and was 'that book which has had such a strange influence over my life' ('Profundis' 41). According to Carroll, 'Dorian's life turns out to be something like an experimental test case for the validity of Pater's aesthetic philosophy, and the experiment falsifies the philosophy. Dorian lives badly and dies badly, but the retributational structure does not simply eliminate the Paterian component from Wilde's sensibility' (96). So Carroll believes that although Dorian's downfall seems to refute Pater's philosophy this is not completely the case.

Ruskin's influence on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not evident in the beginning of the novel. The character most associated with Ruskin is Basil Hallward. At first he does not adhere as much to Ruskin's ideas, but according to Ellmann he moves closer to Ruskin later on in the story ('Overture' 28). Ruskin's influence becomes clearer when Basil expresses more worry about Dorian's moral situation. This is, as seen in the previous chapter, characteristic of Ruskin's writings. Basil tells Dorian of his worries: 'I think it right that you should know that the most dreadful things are being said against you in London' (118). He continues saying that 'One has a right to judge of a man by the effect he has over his friends. Yours seem to lose all sense of honour, of goodness, of purity. You have filled them with madness for pleasure. They have gone down into the depths. You led them there' (120). Basil really struggles with the fact that Dorian, someone so beautiful in his eyes, is capable of sin. He wants to believe desperately that the rumours about Dorian are not true: 'Deny them, Dorian, deny them! Can't you see what I am going through? My God! don't tell me that you are bad, and corrupt, and shameful!' (122). Yet when Basil is shown the ugly portrait of Dorian, he has to believe the rumours about Dorian and he begs him to repent his sins so that he can be saved. Basil believes the portrait to represent Dorian's soul and believes that it

could be saved when he listens more carefully to his conscience. So as the story evolves, Basil echoes more of Ruskin's ideas about morality. After Basil is murdered, Dorian recalls a trip they made to Venice together. During this trip Basil discovers and admires Tintoretto's art which Ruskin admired very much as well ('Overture' 28). Details like this establish the link between Ruskin and Basil even more.

The struggle between ethics and aestheticism, which is rooted in the influence of both Pater and Ruskin on Wilde, is not only present in his critical works as discussed earlier in the first chapter, but is also present in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The conflict is never really resolved in his critical works, but Wilde attempts to resolve it in his novel. In the introduction of the book he writes that 'there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all' (3). This echoes Pater's ideas that art should have no other objective apart from being art. He also wrote about *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in a letter to the Editor of the *Daily Chronicle* that it was his aim to keep the moral out of the novel for aesthetic purposes, but that he feared that he did not succeed completely (Raby 67). This again resonates with Pater's ideas about art, yet Wilde feared that he could not adhere completely to Pater's art philosophy. He continues his letter by stating what that moral element is in the novel: 'The real moral of the story is that excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its punishment, and this moral is so far artistically and deliberately suppressed that it does not enunciate its law as a general principle, but realizes itself purely in the lives of individuals, and so becomes simply a dramatic element in a work of art, and not the object of the work of art itself' ('Letters' 259). So Wilde admits that some morality has found its way into the novel, but that his work is still adhering to the aesthetic principles because the moral is by far not the most important part of the story and is mostly suppressed.

This punishment that Wilde talks about in his letter is demonstrated by the downfall of some of the main characters. The reason why some characters are punished and others are not seems to be rooted in one of the aesthetic principles Wilde describes in *Intentions*: 'All bad art comes from Life and Nature' ('Decay' 54) and also that the artist's aim is 'to reveal art and conceal the artist' (*Picture* 3). Another aesthetic ideal seems important as well for the downfall of some characters, namely that an artist's greatest piece of art is his own life ('Pencil' 93). All the main characters, Basil, Dorian, Sibyl and Lord Henry represent different kinds of artists and the reason why Basil, Dorian and Sibyl are punished lies exactly in the fact that they either return to life and nature for their art or that they fail to follow Wilde's aesthetic ideal of making one's life into a piece of art (Erickson 115). Lord Henry is not

punished because he does adhere to Wilde's aesthetic principles outlined in his critical works.

Basil Hallward is the most obvious kind of artist, namely a painter. At first sight Basil is not punished, but rather a victim of Dorian's sins. Yet his death is more a punishment than a tragedy. He fails as an artist and is punished for it (Erickson 116). The flaw he has as an artist is two-fold. First of all he returns to life and nature for his paintings. He confesses that he wants to paint Dorian just as he is, 'not in the costume of dead ages, but in your own dress and in your own time' (92). Since Wilde believes that returning to life and nature makes for bad art, Basil here is on the pathway to creating bad art. The second flaw Basil has, is that he puts too much of himself into his painting. Earlier in the novel he himself says about art that 'An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty. Someday I will show the world what it is; and for that reason the world shall never see my portrait of Dorian Gray' (13). He believes in the aesthetic principles, but feels he failed those in the portrait he made of Dorian. He himself admits that he has put too much of himself into the portrait: 'I felt, Dorian, that I had told too much, that I had put too much of myself into it' (92). He sees his own flaws as an artist and in the end he is punished for it by his own death.

Dorian Gray is a different kind of artist. He attempts to live his life dominated by beauty and pleasure and through that he attempts to live his life as though it is his art. So at first sight Dorian does follow Wilde's aesthetic ideal, namely that he elevates his life to be his greatest work of art. Yet he also makes a fatal mistake which proves to be his downfall. He seems to be being punished for his sins, but he is not punished for this, but for the wrong execution of Wilde's aesthetic ideal. Dorian's fatal mistake is that he fails to be good art. As Wilde wrote in the 'The Decay of Lying': 'When life gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into the wilderness. This is the true decadence and it is from this that we are now suffering' (22). According to Erickson, Dorian 'comes dangerously close to such decadence' (114). Dorian does not dedicate his life to art and beauty, but to self-indulgence (114). So although Dorian seems to live his life in the spirit of aestheticism, he merely lives for selfish pleasure. Dorian admits to this in one of his final conversations with Lord Henry: 'I wish I could love [...] But I seem to have lost the passion, and forgotten the desire. I am too much concentrated on myself. My own personality has become a burden to me' (162). Dorian fails to be good art and therefore he is punished as well by Wilde.

Sibyl Vane is also an artist who is punished by Wilde. Sibyl is in the beginning of the

novel a good actress, someone who does represent good art, because she follows the artistic credo of aestheticism completely. She conceals herself as an artist and only reveals her art. Dorian describes her acting to Lord Henry: 'One evening she is Rosalind, and the next evening she is Imogen. [...] I have seen her in every age and in every costume. Ordinary women never appeal to one's imagination. They are limited to their century. [...] They are quite obvious. But an actress! How different an actress is!' (43). She is very much admired by Dorian and he falls in love with her. He even proposes to her, but this is the moment that life takes over and when she stops representing good art. Dorian, Basil and Lord Henry go to the theatre to see her perform, but suddenly she is a dreadful actress. Dorian hopes she is ill and was a bad actress because of that. He goes to talk to her and Sibyl explains why she will never act well again: 'before I knew you, acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived. I thought that is was all true [...] You came – oh, my beautiful love!- and you freed my soul from prison. You taught me what reality really is' (70). So reality takes over and is mixed in with her art and therefore she creates bad art. Raby argues that 'The inter-penetration of personal feeling and the artistic process is presented as fatal' (72). Sibyl's downfall is that she does not only let reality take over her art, but also lets her own feelings and therefore herself mix in with her art. Hence she does not follow the aesthetic principles either and is first punished by Dorian leaving her and after that by death when she takes her own life.

Lord Henry is the only one who escapes punishment in the novel. Lord Henry is the only artist who fulfills Wilde's artistic credo and therefore there is no need to punish him. Although Lord Henry is not an artist in the traditional sense of creating art by painting or acting, he elevates his personality into his own art. Because of this Erickson describes him as 'the true critic and artist' (116). He executes Wilde's idea of making his own life his greatest work of art perfectly. He avoids the pitfalls that proved to be Dorian's downfall. His personality never becomes a burden to him (Erickson 116) and he is capable of being 'merely a spectator of life' (*Pictures* 45). Therefore Lord Henry succeeds in striking a balance between making his own life his work of art, without putting too much of himself into it.

This chapter attempted to connect Wilde's philosophy presented in his critical works to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In the next chapter the play 'Salome' will be discussed in relation to Wilde's aestheticism.

Chapter Three: *Salome*

Salomé is a one-act play written in 1891 in French. It was translated into English, although the authorship of this translation is unknown. It is speculated that Lord Alfred Douglas translated it, but Wilde was not satisfied with this. So it could be that Wilde revised Douglas's translation or that he made his own (Barnet ix). Because the translation will be used for this thesis, the English spelling will be used from now on. The play went into production in 1892, but it was refused a licence due to an old law that stated it was forbidden to portray biblical characters (ix). The play is based upon the Biblical story of the tetrarch Herod and his wife Herodias. Herod wants to see the dance of the seven veils performed by his stepdaughter Salomé, but she wants something in return. She wants the head of the prophet Jokanaan (John the Baptist). In the original story Herod's wife desires Jokanaan's head and Salomé is not even mentioned by name, but Wilde made Salomé a main character and made her desire Jokanaan's head. She wants his head, because she desires him, but he refuses her. Herod is hesitant in killing Jokanaan, but gives the order to have him killed eventually. When he sees Salomé kissing Jokanaan's head, he gives the order to kill his stepdaughter.

Criticism on *Salome* has not usually focused on Wilde's critical ideas and how they are expressed in the play. The different sources for the play have been the main concern for most critics so far. This chapter however will look at Wilde's own critical thinking and how this is presented in the play. First it will consider the influence of Pater and Ruskin on the play. Then it will analyse Wilde's continual conflict between aestheticism and ethics and how this is represented in the play.

One of the themes present in Wilde's work is the relationship between reality and fiction. Wilde was influenced by Pater who wrote in his conclusion to *The Renaissance* that reality, although perceived as something fixed, is in fact not. It is elusive and it can be perceived differently by different people and even differently by ourselves at different moments (Barnet xii). This is a view that is repeated many times in Wilde's critical works, but most profoundly in 'The Decay of Lying' and in 'The Critic as Artist'. In 'The Decay of Lying' he writes: 'Try as we may, we cannot get behind the appearances of things to reality. And the terrible reality may be that there is no reality in things apart from their experiences' (66). The mask, or appearance, is what is interesting about people, about art, not the reality. In 'The Critic as Artist' he explains that it is indeed the visible not the invisible which is appealing (146).

This idea of the significance of individual experiences of perception reoccurs throughout the play. It is first symbolized by the perception of the moon (Barnet xiii). The page remarks about the moon that 'She is like a dead woman rising from a tomb' (3). The captain of the guard however sees something completely different: 'She is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil, and whose feet are of silver. She is like a princess who has little white doves for feet. One might fancy she was dancing' (3). Salomé describes the moon as follows: 'She is like a little piece of money, a little silver flower. She is cold and chaste' (8). Herod sees the moon as a 'mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers' (16). And lastly Herodias says about the moon 'the moon is like the moon, that is all' (16). This shows that although all characters look at the same moon, their perception of it is different. This demonstrates Wilde's idea that it is the experience and the perception that matters, not the reality. And maybe the reality does not exist, since all the characters describe the moon differently. The perception of Jokanaan is also different to each person. The first soldier sees Jokanaan as a holy man, a gentle soul (5). Yet Herod is afraid of him. Salomé thinks he is 'terrible. It is his eyes that are above all terrible. They are like black holes burned by torches in a tapestry of Tyre' (11). Yet only a few moments later she describes him completely differently: 'Thy body is white like the snows that lie on the mountains of Judea, and come down into the valleys' (13). And again, a few lines on, she says: 'Thy body is hideous. It is like the body of a leper' (13). This also seems to echo Wilde's essay 'The Decay of Lying' in which he writes that 'Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things is the proper aim of Art (55). To contradict oneself could be seen as a form of lying and therefore Salomé adheres to one of the main principles aestheticism.

The struggle that is present in Wilde's critical works between aestheticism and ethics is also present here. The same construction through which this is manifested can be found in both *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and also in *Salome*. According to Ellmann, 'Behind the figure of Jokanaan lurks the image of that perversely untouching, untouchable prophet John whom Wilde knew at Oxford' (26). Yet Ellmann argues that Jokanaan is 'not Ruskin, but he is Ruskinism as Wilde understood that pole of his character' (26). Jokanaan represents the moral and the call for an ethical life (Erickson 129). He calls for moral judgement in one of his monologues: 'Go bid her rise up from the bed of her abominations, from the bed of her incestuousness, that she may hear the words of him who prepareth the way of the Lord, that she may repent her of her iniquities' (11). Although it is not explicitly mentioned, this passage probably refers to Herodias, since she married her brother-in-law after the death of her

husband. According to Quigley, 'His unwillingness to look at a woman as beautiful as Salomé can suggest diminished ability somewhere, weakness as well as strength [...]' (107). The weakness refers to his inability to appreciate beauty and the strength refers to the fact that he does not abandon his religious principles (Quigley 107). Jokanaan, therefore, represents the moral voice in the play.

Pater is also represented in the play, namely by Salomé. She symbolizes the 'Paterian insistence upon cultivation of beauty and sensation and the desire for even further ranges of experience' (Erickson 129). She is captivated by Jokanaan's beauty and desires nothing but to kiss him. She sees him and says: 'I am amorous of thy body, Jokanaan!' (12). Ellmann explains further by stating that 'It is Salome, and not Pater, who dances the dance of the seven veils, but her virginal yet perverse sensuality is related to Paterism' (27). The struggle between ethics on the one hand, represented by Ruskin and in the play by Jonakaan, and aestheticism, on the other, represented by Pater and in the play by Salomé, becomes very explicit in the scene when Salomé asks Jonakaan for a kiss. She only sees his beauty and is blinded by all else. She asks him continuously to kiss him: 'suffer me to kiss thy mouth' (15). Jokanaan responds with moral objections to why he does not want to kiss her: 'Cursed be thou! Daughter of an incestuous mother, be thou accursed!' (15). Eventually Salomé gets her way and kisses Jokanaan, as she desires, but this does not mean that Salomé wins and Jokanaan loses, so that aesthetics win and ethics lose. Jokanaan is killed and is punished for too blindly following ethics. Salomé however is also punished by being killed for pursuing beauty too exclusively. Salomé is not the only one who is punished for her pursuit of beauty, also another character is punished because of the same thing. The captain of the guard admired Salomé's beauty greatly. In fact the play opens with him saying: 'How beautiful is the Princess Salomé tonight!' (3). Throughout the play he constantly comments on her beauty and cannot stop looking at her. The page of Herodias remarks to him that he should stop looking at her so much: 'You are always looking at her. You look at her too much. It is dangerous to look at people in such fashion. Something terrible may happen' (4). And indeed he is punished for his admiration of Salomé by death. He sees that Salomé desires Jokanaan and then he kills himself.

Immediately before Salomé is killed the play suddenly focusses on Herod. Ellmann argues that Herod represents Wilde himself in the play, striking a balance between ethics and aesthetics (27). Herod is an admirer of beauty. He constantly looks at Salomé. Salomé herself remarks about his: 'It is strange that the husband of my mother look at me like that' (7). Even

Herodias notices this: 'You must not look at her. You are always looking at her!' (16). In his pursuit of Salomé's beauty, he asks her to dance for him. She complies, but asks for the head of Jonakaan. Herod has sworn to give it to her, so he gives the order to kill Jonakaan, but he has objections. He begs Salomé to ask him something else: 'Therefore ask not this thing of me. This is a terrible thing, an awful thing to ask of me' (30). Although he has made a mistake in pursuing beauty too much, he still has a conscience and moral objections. According to Powell, 'Wilde dramatized himself as Herod suspended indecisively between the influence of Ruskin and Pater' (45). It is Herod therefore that represents the conflict between ethics and aestheticism.

Wilde is very clear in 'The Decay of Lying' that 'all bad art comes from life and nature' (54). He demonstrates this principle in *Salome* as well. The character of Herodias represents realism and a realistic approach to life (Barnet xviii). She seems to be the most 'real' person in the play and is therefore also the most bland (xviii). The way she sees the moon in the beginning of the play demonstrates this. Where everyone else in the play sees something different in the moon and is very imaginative about this, she says: 'the moon is like the moon, that is all' (16). She is the most realistic character of all the characters and because of that she is the least interesting. She is punished by Wilde at the end by killing off her daughter at the end of the play.

Conclusion

Aestheticism was an art movement in the 19th century with Oscar Wilde one of its leading figures. Although the slogan ‘art for art’s sake’ represents the aesthetic movement accurately, for Oscar Wilde this was not so straight forward. It was his ideal to have art express nothing else besides it being art, but as this thesis demonstrated Wilde struggled throughout his critical works and also throughout his fictional works with the influence of ethics on aestheticism. This struggle is rooted in the influence of two art critics whom Wilde encountered when he was attending Oxford.

This thesis first looked at the influence of these two art critics, because to understand Wilde’s critical works one has to understand the influence of these two men. The first man who influenced Wilde was John Ruskin. He believed that by paying attention to the moral message in nature, good art would be created and when people appreciated this art then they would have the chance to improve themselves. So Ruskin was a firm believer of ethics in art. The second great influence on Wilde was Walter Pater. His beliefs were rooted firmly in aestheticism and therefore he believed, contrary to Ruskin, that ethics had no place in art. The aesthetic credo of ‘art for art’s sake’ applied to Pater completely.

Wilde presented to the reader his ideas about aestheticism in the critical works he wrote. This thesis looked at several essays he wrote and also at one of his last works, namely the long letter *De Profundis*. First the collection of essays *Intentions* was discussed. Here Wilde proposed that art should be independent and should never express anything but itself. An artist also should never fall back on nature and life for art, because this results in bad art. He also presented the idea that the greatest work of art an artist could make is elevating his own life into art. This results in the fact that he stresses the importance of masks and not what is underneath. He states that the masks differ with every person, but that what is underneath is the same with everyone and therefore not as exciting to examine. The influence of Pater is clearly visible in the principles outlined above. These points all adhere to the aesthetic credo, but Wilde’s work is not as straightforward as it first seems. The influence of Ruskin is also clearly present in his critical works, causing a conflict between the aesthetic principles and a more socialist view of art. In ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism’ Wilde seemingly contradicts himself by bringing some socialist ideas to his thinking. He tries to resolve this problem by claiming that through individualism it becomes possible to care more for others and thereby to create a greater sense of social responsibility. So Wilde tries to say that

because of individualism social responsibility becomes more easy to accomplish.

Especially this conflict between ethics and aestheticism is a theme that seems to reoccur throughout Wilde's fictional work. The conflict, represented by Ruskin and Pater, is represented by two characters in the novel. Basil Hallward represents Ruskin as he provides the moral voice throughout the story. Pater is represented by Lord Henry who often quotes directly from Pater's own work. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a good example of how Wilde tries to resolve this conflict between ethics and aestheticism, but even when he deliberately tries to not engage with ethics in his novel it is difficult to keep the influence of Ruskin out of the text. Wilde himself wrote about the novel that he had tried to keep ethics in the background, but that he feared he had failed. The moral he feared that found its way into the novel was that all excess was wrong and was punished throughout the novel. Yet the punishment Wilde inflicts on some of the characters seems to be rooted in the aesthetic principles. All the artists in the novel who fail at producing good art are punished by death. Basil fails at producing good art because he puts too much of himself into his art and because he returns to nature and life to create art. This results in bad art and he is therefore punished by death. Dorian equally fails at being good art. His art is produced through his own life, although this is one of the aesthetic principles, elevating one's own life into art, Dorian fails because he does not dedicate his life to art and beauty, but to self-indulgence. So Dorian is not punished for his sins, but for the wrong interpretation of Wilde's aesthetic ideas. Sibyl, the actress, is punished for reasons similar to Basil's. At first she is able to conceal herself, the artist, and only express her art, which makes her an excellent actress. Yet when she falls in love with Dorian, she is unable to keep herself and her feelings separate from her performance. And not only that, but she also lets reality interfere with her acting, which cannot result in anything but bad art. The only character in the novel who is not punished is Lord Henry. He is the only one who executes Wilde's aesthetic ideas completely. His greatest work of art is his own life and he never lets himself interfere with that. He is able to maintain a proper distance and therefore he is the only one who produces good art. So *The Picture of Dorian Gray* uses Wilde's aesthetic ideas as the foundation of the story and therefore there is no discrepancy between his aesthetic ideas and the ideas presented in the novel.

Wilde presented his critical ideas in a similar construction in *Salome* compared to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Again the influence of Ruskin and Pater is clearly visible in the play. In *Salome* there are also two characters who represent Ruskin and Pater. Jokanaan represents Ruskin since he calls for morality throughout the play. Pater is represented by the character of

Salomé. She blindly pursues beauty and is willing to sacrifice anything for it. Also the same construction of punishment exists in the play. Characters are punished for creating bad art, yet unlike in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* there is no character present in the text who executes Wilde's ideas perfectly. Jokanaan is punished by death because he is only focused on ethics and cannot respond to beauty accurately. Salome is punished for the opposite. She only pursues beauty and is punished because of this. Herod represents the struggle between ethics and aestheticism. He admires beauty and can respond to it accurately, but he does have a conscience and values ethics as well. It is argued that Herod represents Wilde himself, forever trying to reconcile ethics and aestheticism. Herodias represents what happens when reality takes the upper hand in art. It creates boring art and boring characters and therefore demonstrates what happens when one does not adhere to the aesthetic principle that reality has no place in art.

Wilde attempted to outline his principles of aestheticism and tried to create art according to these. He succeeded in outlining the aesthetic credo in *Intentions* following most of what his mentor Pater taught him, but the influence of his other mentor Ruskin, proved to be too strong at times. This resulted in a conflict between his aesthetic principles on the one hand and the call for morality in art on the other. Although Wilde believes that morality has no place in art it was hard to leave it out completely. The struggle is present in not only his critical works, but more explicitly in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salome*. For further research it would be interesting to compare more of Wilde's fictional work to his critical works and see whether the same conflict arises in more of his works. It would also be interesting to see whether Wilde's struggle to reconcile ethics and aestheticism was a conflict other writers of the aesthetic movement also struggled with.

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