

A NEW HEDONISM IN OSCAR WILDE'S NOVEL *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*

Minodora Otilia SIMION

Lecturer PhD

“Constantin Brâncuși” University of Târgu-Jiu

ABSTRACT:

OSCAR WILDE IS ONE OF WRITERS WHO EXPRESSED HIS OPINIONS ON HEDONISM AND AESTHETICISM IN HIS NOVEL *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*. AT THE TIME OF THE NOVEL'S PUBLICATION, IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND THE AESTHETIC MOVEMENT WAS FLOURISHING. THE AESTHETIC MOVEMENT COINCIDED WITH THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION AT THE END OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AND EMPHASIZED THE ARTISTIC ASPECT OF A MAN'S WORK.. WILDE'S THOUGHTS ON AESTHETICISM, MORALS, ART AND LIFE ARE EMBODIED BY LORD HENRY WOTTEN WHO BELIEVES THAT LIFE IS WORTH LIVING TO ITS FULLEST OTHERWISE IT WOULD BE A WASTE. IN OSCAR WILDE'S VIEW, THE AESTHETIC MOVEMENT IN FIN-DE-SIECLE ENGLAND EMPHASIZED THE IDEA OF CREATING THE MAXIMAL AMOUNT OF BEAUTY AND PLEASURE IN ONE'S LIFE AND DORIAN GRAY SEEMS TO PROMOTE THIS PHILOSOPHY.

KEY-WORD: HEDONISM, AESTHETIC MOVEMENT, MORALS, ART, LIFE

1. Introduction: The Aesthetic Movement

At the time of the novel's publication, in Victorian England the Aesthetic Movement was flourishing. The Aesthetic Movement coincided with the Industrial Revolution at the end of the nineteenth century and emphasized the artistic aspect of a man's work.

The Aesthetic Movement, represented in Britain by Walter Pater, was introduced in France by such writers as Theophile Gautier, Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Flaubert and Stephane Malarme. The fin-de-siecle in England is characterized by the triumph of evolutionism in science, growth of industrialization, economic and political rivalry among countries, the emancipation of women and urbanization, all these being reflected upon the general spirit of the age. The spirit of decadence is a feature of many literary works of the turn of the century and as a movement Decadence is associated with Symbolism and Aestheticism and it has appeared as a reaction to realism and naturalism. Aesthetics seek beauty everywhere: in art, literature, in life, beauty is their new deity, art embodying the absolute autonomy, a superiority over other aspects of life and an independence from morals and society. Their views are a reaction to the Victorian beliefs according to which art could be used as a tool for social education and moral enlightenment.

The Aesthetic Movement in Great Britain, initially comprising authors, painters, critics and collectors of art was “ a mixture of straightforward rebellion against

Victorianism, never theorizing, and extravagant posing-all meeting in unstable fusion in the symbolic rise and fall of Oscar Wilde”[Gilmour :237].Its leading figures were John Ruskin and William Morris who fervently supported the Pre-Raphaelites in their reaction against what Wilde himself called “the crude primaries of a doubtless more respectable but certainly less cultivated age “ and “the crude brutality of plain realism”[Holland and Hart-Davis: 436]

The Aesthetic Movement advocated the concept of “ art for art’s sake” in a form of modern Epicurianism which originated in Bentham’s hedonism. For the aesthetes, a thing or event is valuable from an aesthetic point of view if it evokes pleasure and the pursuit of beauty is the most important aim in life.

In Oscar Wilde’s view, the Aesthetic Movement in fin-de-siecle England emphasized the idea of creating the maximal amount of beauty and pleasure in one’s life and Dorian Gray seems to promote this philosophy. But Wilde also warns that unrestrained aestheticism may lead to self-absorption, lack of remorse and intellectual regression and consequently suggests a more restrained aestheticism.

The first principle of aestheticism, that art serves no other purpose than to offer beauty is a means of escaping the realities of the world since, says Wilde,” If one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality ,to every dream-I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of mediævalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal”[Wilde:19]. Or, as he further argues:”The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it: Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful[Wilde:19].

Walter Pater, a major influence on Wilde’s work, emphasized this idea, considering that art should not be educational, it should just stimulate the desire for beauty and the love of art for art’s sake.The supporters of this movement completely rejected the idea of the existence of moral significance in art, opposing the views of their middle-class readers.

2. Hedonism and aestheticism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

When it was first published in 1890 in Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was considered to be immoral, so Wilde revised his novel and had it published a year later with a preface that explained his aesthetic approach. In the preface he stated that “There is no such a thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all”.

Oscar Wilde makes a deep analysis of aestheticism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, insisting upon the idea of the hypocrisy of the English upper classes:”[...]. The middle classes air their moral prejudices over their gross dinner-tables, and whisper about what they call the profligacies of the betters in order to try and pretend that they are in smart society and on intimate terms with the people they slander. In this country it is enough for a man to have distinction and brains for every common tongue to wag against him. And what sort of life do these people, who pose as being moral, lead themselves? My dear fellow, you forget that we are in the native land of the hypocrite.[Wilde :118].

The novel analysis changes the emphasis on the “static”, on the “inside”, the characters “losing” their most often physical contour clearly and impressed by pshychology”[Curelar: 73]

Dorian Gray is sitting for a portrait painted by his friend Basil Hallward and converses with Lord Henry who considers that the purpose of life is uninhibited self-development and beauty and youth are the highest values. Dorian is strongly attracted to these ideas and wishes his portrait might age while he might keep his youthful appearance.

In Wilde's view Basil is the character who best represented him as he puts it in his letter of 12 February 1894: "Basil Hallward is what I think I am : Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would to be –in other ages, perhaps" [Holland and Hart-Davis: 585]

In his clever aphorisms Lord Henry supports free thinking, selfishness and a rejection of the norms. Art is the central theme of the Aesthetic movement and hedonists, in search of pleasure, enjoy art.

Dorian Gray is fascinated by Lord Henry's philosophy of life and is irresistibly influenced by him. One day he sees an actress, Sibyl Vane and he is so impressed by her talent that he confuses this passion for her art with true love and eventually they become engaged. He proudly invites his friends Basil and Lord Henry to a performance but as her acting on that particular day is terrible, he decides to leave her for ever. Sibyl is so much affected by his parting that she commits suicide. The first change in the portrait is noticed by Dorian before hearing the news about Sibyl's death: a touch of cruelty in the mouth.

Lord Henry settles his "pupils" doubts and gives him a greater sense of detachment and in the next eighteen years Dorian enjoys the life of a prosperous man. His portrait mirrors the corruption of his soul and, in order to hide it from the others, it is locked up in a room at the top of the house.

Finally vice and evil become means of experiencing intense sensual and aesthetic pleasure for Dorian and Basil's calls for repentance make him so enraged that he finally kills his friend.

Christopher S. Nassar distinguishes between the morally committed aesthete and the decadent by the fact that "the latter, looking within and discovering not only purity but evil and corruption, yields to the corrupt impulse and tries to find joy and beauty in evil" [Nassar:37].

After the murder, the portrait has a bloodstained hand and Dorian becomes obsessed with it. He stabs the picture and a cry is heard. When the servants come into the room they can see a beautiful portrait of Dorian and the corpse of a man with a knife in his heart, his face wrinkled. The new hedonism is based on the Epicurian and Cyrenaic Schools of philosophy in which pleasure is the only thing worth living.

Dorian's love for Sibyl Vane is superficial, as illustrated by his own description (p 101): "I loved you because you were marvelous, because you had genius and intellect, because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art". He seems to be attracted to her aesthetically as he doesn't admire her personality but her acting talent and when she no longer appeals to him from this point of view, he abandons her unscrupulously. ("Without your art, you are nothing") - p 101

Dorian indulges in hedonistic pleasures and devotes himself to the study of perfumes, embroideries and other aspects of fine art, the pursuit of pleasure being a dominating motive behind the actions of the characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The originator of this aesthetic ideal was Epicurus who declared that pleasure was man's greatest good and rejected pain as being evil. Dorian's collections of jewellery and art are

nothing but “means of forgetfulness, modes by which he could escape, for a reason, from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne”[Wilde: 111].

“There was to be, as Lord Henry had prophesied, a new hedonism that was to recreate life and...to teach man to concentrate himself upon the moments of a life that is itself but a moment”[Wilde: 109].

Indulging in life’s momentary pleasures and not caring about their fatal consequences, the *carpe diem* sentiment holds true for both Wilde and his main character. Lord Henry Wotten encourages his choice at the beginning of the novel: “[..] Ah! Realise your youth while you have it. Don’t squander the gold of your days, listening to the tedious, trying to improve the hopeless facture, or giving away your life to the ignorant, the common, and the vulgar. These are the sickly aims, the false ideals, of your age. Live1 live the wonderful life that is in you. Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing...A new Hedonism—that is what our century wants[...]”[Wilde: 32].

Wilde proclaims sensualism, the worship of the senses as a “new spirituality, of which a fine instinct for beauty was to be the dominant characteristic.[Wilde:104].

Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is “ the tragedy of aestheticism” and “the aesthetic novel by excellence, not in espousing the doctrine, but in exhibiting its dangers”.[Ellmann:297]

3. Conclusions:

Oscar Wilde is among the writers of the end of the 19th century who asserted the superiority of beauty and pleasure over everything else and his novel embodies the principles of aestheticism and hedonism.

Dorian Gray’s story is a Faustian one: he trades the purity of his soul for eternal youth. The message of the book is clear: hedonism for the sake of hedonism is empty since it leads to the decay of the soul.

REFERENCES

- [1]. The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde , introd. Vyvyan Holland, London :Collins, 1966
- [2]. Curelar, Mirabela Rely Odette, The Woman’s Portrait in the Novels of Anton Holban, Annals of Constantin Brancusi University of Targu-Jiu, Letters and Social Sciences Series, Issue 3/2013
- [3]. Ellmann Richard, Oscar Wilde, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987.
- [4]. Gilmour, Robin, the Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1830-1890, London: Longman, 1993, p 237).
- [5]. Holland, Merlin and Rupert Hart-Davis, eds. The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde, New York: Henry Holt, 2000, p. 436)
- [6]. Nassar, Christopher S ,Into the Demon Universe: A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde, New Haven:Yale UP, 1974).