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From Esthetic to Ethical Hedonism: A Paradigm Shift in Oscar Wilde's Moral Philosophy

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Abstract:

Oscar Wilde's emphasis on estheticism gives him a negative image as a man of pleasure. Yes, he could be a lover of pleasure but his moral philosophy was not esthetic hedonism as many believe. This work, through a hermeneutic interpretation and philosophical analysis of the contents of his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his confessions and repentance argue that his true moral philosophy is ethical hedonism. It insists that even if he was formerly an esthetic hedonist; there was a paradigm shift from the former to the later. The implications of such a shift were also identified in this research.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, estheticism, hedonism, ethics, Dorian Gray.

从审美享乐主义到道德享乐主义：奥斯卡·王尔德道德哲学的范式转变

摘要：

奥斯卡·王尔德对审美主义的强调给他带来了享乐者的负面形象。是的，他可能是一个享乐爱好者，但他的道德哲学并不像许多人认为的那样是审美享乐主义。这部作品通过对其小说《道林·格雷的画像》的内容进行阐释和哲学分析，表明他的忏悔和悔悟，表明他真正的道德哲学是伦理享乐主义。它坚持认为，即使他以前是一个审美享乐主义者；从前者到后者发生了范式转变。这项研究还确定了这种转变的影响。

关键词：奥斯卡·王尔德、唯美主义、享乐主义、伦理学、道林·格雷。

1. Introduction

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (October 16,

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1854 –November 30, 1900) was a famous Irish poet and playwright, the son of Jane (née Elgee) and Sir William Wilde, an Anglo-Irish couple. He learned both German and French he was still very tender. Oscar was very brilliant in school, winning many awards. At Trinity College Dublin and Oxford, he studied classics and was enticed by the estheticism of the time (Holland, 2003; Sturgis, 2018; Mason, 1972 [1914]). His emphasis on estheticism led him to be considered a hedonist. This paper argued that even if he was a hedonist, he later left it for ethical hedonism, yet people still regard him as an esthetic hedonist. The purpose of this study is to prove that there was a paradigm shift in Oscar Wilde's moral philosophy: from esthetic to ethical hedonism. This research is very important as it fills this gap that other scholars did not identify. To achieve this aim, this work sources its primary data through a review of the life and literary works of Oscar Wilde, while other commentaries and literature serve as secondary sources of data. Hermeneutics, analysis, and logical reasoning are applied to examine these data.

2. Research Background

2.1. Oscar Wilde's Esthetic Hedonism

In late 19th century, esthetic movement came up. They emphasized “art for art's sake”. According to them, the primary and sole goal of art is to create beauty and pleasure. For them, art does not serve any moral or social goal except beauty and pleasure (Fargis, 1998; Denney, 2000). It was with some radical group of artists and designers that the movement originated in England around 1960. They came up challenging the Victorian mainstream culture which insisted that every work of art should promote morality. If morality is taken away from the work of art, it could lead to unhealthy promotion of social chaos and vice versa (Stern, 2017). Work of art like music can be great ingredients of morality engineering and social change (Suharto, 2018; Julia et al., 2022).

The Victorians, according to Carolyn (2014), “passionately believed that literature and art fulfilled important ethical roles. Literature provided models of correct behavior: it allowed people to identify with situations in which good actions were rewarded, or it provoked tender emotions”, adding that “at best, the sympathies stirred by art and literature would spur people to action in the real world”.

On the contrary, the esthetic group argued that the primary concern of art was to elevate beauty and pleasure. A work of art is purely for happiness and should not be judged from ethical consequentialism. This is similar to the position of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) when he says:

“My judgment of beauty, my taste, is simply contemplative, which means that I do not need to know anything more about the object other than how its character affects my feelings of pleasure or displeasure. An esthetic judgment is not a cognitive judgment; that

is, it rests upon neither theoretical nor practical knowledge” (Stumpf, 1994).

Kant further states “that for an esthetic judgment to be ‘pure’, it must be independent of any special interest; it must be ‘disinterested’”. Similarly, the esthetics of the 19th century believed that the work of art must be “disinterested” from any moral or social prejudice and must be judged on how far it promotes beauty and pleasure, which make people happy. This kind of philosophy seduced the minds of many literary writers of the time, including William Morris and Oscar Wilde, who later became their spokesman. Wilde, therefore, emphasized that the concern of artists should be to promote esthetic ideals of pleasure and beauty rather than utilitarian ethics (Beckson, 2003; Belford, 2000). He wrote many literary works promoting estheticism. He even extended estheticism beyond literary work to practical living as he “transposed the beauty he saw in art into daily life”, making it a practical project. To explain this further, Duggan (2008) states:

The explosion of esthetic philosophy in *fin-de-siècle* English society, as exemplified by Oscar Wilde, was not confined to merely art, however. Rather, the proponents of this philosophy extended it to life itself. Here, estheticism advocated whatever behavior was likely to maximize the beauty and happiness in one's life, in the tradition of hedonism. To the aesthete, the ideal life mimics art; it is beautiful but quite useless beyond its beauty, concerned only with the individual living it. Influences on others, if existent, are trivial at best (Duggan, 2008: 61).

Pearce (2004), quoting Wilde on the praxis of estheticism, also writes:

It is indeed to become a part of people's lives. I mean a man who works with his hands, and not merely with his hands, but with his head and his heart. The evil that machinery is doing is not merely in the consequence of its work but also in the fact that it makes men themselves machines, whereas we wish them to be artists, that is to say, men (Pearce, 2004: 144).

For Oscar Wilde, estheticism is a philosophy that must be lived out, not a mere exercise of thought. Commenting on Wilde's emphasis on the positive influence of estheticism as a philosophy beyond paper work, Duggan (2008: 63) writes, “Just as the machines that mass-produce materials with the intervention of human thought are labeled ‘evil’”, Oscar Wilde likewise “condemns men who act as metaphorical machines, programmed to behave in accordance with society's ideas of propriety rather than allowing themselves to act freely and achieve the greatest amount of happiness” According to Carolyn Burdett (2014), “Wilde teased his readers with the claim that life imitates art rather than the other way round. His point was a serious one: we notice London fogs, he argued, because art and literature has taught us to do so”.

Among other members of esthetic movement, Oscar “practicalized” this philosophy as he was always seen dressed in outlandish manner that captured people's

attention. Even the way he dressed his hair, his room with peacock feathers, his manner of speech and virtually everything about him was always very captivating that he became very famous in his time (Mendelssohn, 2018, Holland, 2003; Sturgis, 2018; Breen, 2000; Mason, 1972 [1914]). He conforms his lifestyle to the esthetic belief, giving himself fully to pleasure: partying, drinking, and sexual indulgence (Adut, 2005; Sturgis, 2018). It was this lifestyle that led to his imprisonment and early death as he was accused, arrested, prosecuted, and imprisoned for homosexual misconduct. Marquess of Queensbury, who was the father of Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde's lover had cautioned them severally against their homosexual practice. On February 18, 1895, a card was left at Wilde's club by the Marquess of Queensberry with the inscription "For Oscar Wilde, posing sodomites" (Holland, 2004: 300). Wilde, motivated by Douglas, moved against the advice of friends to sue the Marquess of Queensbury for criminal libel, as sodomy was then a serious crime. Queensberry who was arrested, through his lawyers, hired private detectives who garnered many evidences in support of Wilde's homosexual liaisons. The course turned against Oscar Wilde, and the complainant became the accused. He refused to flee to France as advised by his friends. Queensberry had been released, and Oscar Wilde was arrested and tried. Mainly Twelve (2022) citing Allman (1988) reveals that "Wilde's association with blackmailers and male prostitutes, cross-dressers and homosexual brothels was recorded, and various persons involved were interviewed, some being coerced to appear as witnesses since they too were accomplices to the crimes of which Wilde was accused". Oscar Wilde was convicted and imprisoned for two years, first at Newgate Prison in London and later at Pentonville Prison, where he was subjected to hard labor. After two years (1895-1897), he was released, suffered meningitis as a result of harsh treatment and ear injuries sustained while in the prison and died on November 30, 1900 (Adut, 2005; Holland, 2003).

Oscar Wilde's emphasis on pleasure and beauty as well as his lifestyle made people to hold that his moral philosophy is esthetic hedonism. Though, estheticism and hedonism are never the same. Estheticism as we have seen emphasizes on beauty and pleasure as the primary goals of the work of art, while hedonism states that good life is a life of pleasure and happiness. In other words, estheticism is concerned with works of art, whereas hedonism is concerned with human moral actions. Esthetic hedonism is taken to be a philosophy which emphasizes that good life for man is a life of uncontrolled pleasure and happiness, while ethical hedonism states that as we pursue pleasure and happiness, we must be prudent in balancing our lifestyles as pleasure uncontrolled can lead to destruction (Craft, 2005; Megan, 2000).

Aristotle proposes moderation in his theory of mean as the best ethical approach to life (Aristotle, 1976, pp. 91-99). This can also be referred to as ethical hedonism

(Stumpf 1994).

3. Results

3.1. A Shift to Ethical Hedonism

Oscar Wilde might have aligned himself with esthetic hedonism (if that can be successfully defended), but his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his confessions even before and after his imprisonment, and his repentance reveal that his moral philosophy is ethical hedonism. In other words, even though he initially advocated esthetic hedonism, he later discovered the dangers therein and shifted to ethical hedonism, and died as an ethical hedonist.

3.2. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

People often consider this novel to be Wilde's highest promotion of esthetic hedonism, but this is not true. A hermeneutic study of the novel shows that it is rather a promotion of ethical hedonism, showing the dangers of an unrestrained life of pleasure as dictated by estheticism (Duggan, 2009). The novel is a story about a man, Dorian Gray, who, under the influence of estheticism, gave himself to the pursuit of pleasure with abandonment, which led to his death and that of others.

Basil Hallward, an artist, who was infatuated by Dorian Gray 'beauty', made a Dorian Gray's portrait for him. Through Basil, Dorian Gray came into contact with Lord Henry Wotton, a famous preacher of estheticism. His teaching on the importance of beauty and pleasure as the only good things one gains on earth seduced Dorian Gray. Dorian Gray wished that he would be ever young while the portrayal decayed, and also worked toward it. He surrendered his life to drinking, partying, sensualities, and whatever would make him happy, without constraint. In the process of pursuing pleasure, he came in contact with Sibyl Vane, an actor who always performed Shakespeare's plays. He told the lady how much he loved her and finally proposed to marry her. The lady fancied him, believing that she was loved, and accepted the proposal. Dorian invited her to entertain his friend, but she performed below expectation, as she had been enamored by Dorian's presence. Dorian therefore humiliated her saying "Without your art, you are nothing" and that he was no longer interested in marrying her (Wilde, 2007: 101). When Dorian got home, he discovered that his wish had been granted as his portrait grew older while he became younger. He later felt remorseful for how he treated Sibyl and decided to reconcile with her but it was too late as the disappointment had led her to commit suicide. Dorian still locked up the portrait, while continued his esthetic life.

On the night before he left for Paris, Dorian's friend, Basil, visited him, querying him about the rumors of his sensualities. Dorian did not deny the allegation but took Basil where he kept the portrait. Basil, who made the portrait, could only recognize the portrait as a work of his artistry by appending his signature. The portrait was then older than Dorian's appearance. Being horrified by

the sight, Basil begged Dorian to repent. His insistence angered Dorian who perceived him as one of those that contributed to his moral degeneration. Out of infuriation, Dorian killed him with a knife. To get rid of his dead body, Dorian then blackmailed his old friend, Allan Campbell, into using his chemistry knowledge to destroy Basil's body. Alan who succumbed could not bear the guilt but committed suicide.

He moved to opium den, to free his mind from the guilt of the action, but unknown to him, James, the Sibyl's brother was there. James who had been seeking an opportunity to avenge the death of her beloved sister, was not certain about Dorian Gray's identity as the only thing he knew about him was "the Charming Prince" which the late sister always mentioned in her discussions. When he approached Dorian to ascertain his identity, Dorian denied as he was too young to have known the lady who died eighteen years ago. His youthful appearance convinced James who later discovered that he was the "charming Prince" only when he had left. Dorian became afraid as he had been aware that James was after his life. Very fortunate for him, James was accidentally hit by bullet during a shooting party.

Dorian Gray returned to London, telling Lord Henry of his resolution to repent and live righteously. He decided not to break the heart of his newly found lover Hetty Merton. He still found the portrait older than his appearance. Resolving that only true repentance will absolve him of all his evils, he decided to destroy the portrait which was a reminder of his evils. He locked himself in a room, took up the knife with which he killed Basil, and stabbed the portrait. The noise from the locked room made the servants to alert police who came and broke the door. Behold, a disfigured body of an old man was lying lifeless on the floor. They could only recognize it as the body of Dorian Gray by the rings on his fingers. In other words, Dorian Gray had committed suicide as the guilt of her actions was too unbearable for him.

Dorian Gray is therefore an allegorical figure that shows that the pursuit of esthetic life with abandonment can be very destructive. Had it been that Dorian controlled his appetites and sensuous life, he would not have died the way he did. Sibyl, Basil, James, and Campbell would not have died the way they did. His immoral life therefore cost him his life and that of the other four persons. In other words, uncontrolled pleasure can be self-destructive and a menace to society.

3.3. Confessions of Oscar Wilde

The confessions of Oscar Wilde indicate that even though he was an advocate of estheticism, he remained an ethical hedonist. One can be an advocate of estheticism, yet an ethical hedonist. This is because estheticism is concerned with pleasure and beauty in the work of art, whereas hedonism deals with morality. One can hold that the primary purpose of a work of art is to promote beauty and happiness but turns out to be living

a good ethical life, for human life is not a mere work of art but the actions of a free human agent. Although Wilde promotes estheticism, he makes it clear in his confessions and comments that his moral philosophy is ethical hedonism. Wilde explains this when he states that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* "is a story with a moral lesson. And the moral is this: All excess, and all renunciation, brings its own punishment" (Wilde, 2007: 248). Estheticism is effective in condemning renunciation, but excessive obedience to its desires is severely dangerous. In practicing estheticism, one must apply forethought and constraint. You must meditate on the consequences of your actions both to yourself and to the members of society.

The ability to control one's sensuous life is demonstrated in the last stage of Dorian Gray's life. Mitsuharu Matuoka, in his essay, "Estheticism and Social Anxiety in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*", points out that when the death of Dorian approaches, "Dorian ultimately reacts against his lifestyle, choking on his new hedonism," when "a great sense of doom hangs over Dorian" (Matsuoka, 2003: 78). On one occasion, he revealed his epiphany to Lord Henry: "The soul is a terrible reality. It can be bought, sold, and bartered away. It can be poisoned or made perfect. There is a soul in each one of us. I know it" (Wilde, 2007: 211). Wilde, writing on Dorian's later philosophy, states, "Never to accept any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience. Its aim, indeed was to be experience itself, and not the fruits of experience, sweet or bitter as they may be" (Wilde, 2007: 125). However, this realization came too late to Dorian as his corrupt soul had been nurtured for too long in the lifestyle, and the guilt of his actions being too much for him to bear, he committed suicide. Therefore, he was destroyed by his unrestraint pursuit of pleasure.

In addition, Wilde's confessions on *De Profundis* written while in prison reveal a regret of the absolute life of estheticism. At the prison, Wilde underwent some spiritual transformation that formed part of *De Profundis*. In the first part of the book, "Wilde blamed himself for the ethical degradation of character that he allowed Douglass to bring about in him and took responsibility for his own downfall" (Twelve, 2022), saying "I am here for having tried to put your father in prison" (Wheatcroft, 2003). He concludes the first part with forgiveness for Douglass and his father as well as all other persons involved in his predicament. The second part of the latter is about his spiritual journey of redemption while in prison and fulfillment through his prison readings. He realized that his predicament had filled his life with experience, though very bitter but impactful: "...I wanted to eat the fruit of all the trees in the garden of the world... And so, indeed, I went out and so I lived. My only mistake was that I confined myself so exclusively to the trees of what seemed to me the sun-lit side of the garden, and shunned the other side for its shadow and its gloom" (Wilde, 2021, Holland & Hart-Davis, 2000: 739). An articulate part of

his confession of his regret for absolute esthetic hedonism can be seen on pages 2 and 3 of *De Profundis*:

I must say to myself that I ruined myself, and that nobody great or small can be ruined except by his own hand. I am quite ready to say so. Am trying to say so, though they may think it at the present moment. This pitiless indictment I bring without pity against myself. Terrible as was what the world did to me, what I did to myself was far more terrible still.

Describing what actually happened, he continues:

I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age. I realized this for myself at the very dawn of my manhood, and forced my age to realize it afterwards...The gods had given me almost everything. But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease.

Regretting his life of senseless and sensual pleasure, Wilde likened such a lifestyle to madness and uselessness:

Desire, at the end, was a malady, or madness, or both. I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and therefore, what one has done in the secret chamber one has some day to cry aloud on the housetop. I ceased to be lord over myself. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace. There is only one thing left for me now, absolute humility (Wilde, 2007-2022: 2-3).

All these passages are words of regret for living a sensual life of pleasure. In other words, he should have lived a balanced life. Very fortunate for him, he identified humility as the solution. Humility led to his repentance.

3.4. His Repentance

Oscar Wilde, through his prison experience, spiritual journey, and readings of the works of St. Augustine, Dante, and Newman, repented from his former ways of life. On his release, he wrote to the Jesuits of Farm begging them to arrange a six-month retreat for him, which they refused for an unexplained reason. Their response to his request pained him: "Wilde wept at the news. No doubt the Jesuit Fathers had reservations about accepting a man of Wilde's notoriety, but we can't help but wonder what effect six months of traditional Ignatian spirituality would have had on this sensitive man (Mccracken, 2003). However, whatever reason might be given, the church failed in its duty of fetching the lost soul. In *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, written after his prison experience, Wilde revealed his latent catholic sentiments and the encounter he had with Christ: "Happy they whose hearts can break And peace of pardon win! How else may man make straight his plan And cleanse his soul from Sin? How else but through a broken heart May Lord Christ enter in?" (Mccracken, 2003). Wilde traveled in Europe for exile in 1899. He was briefly in Rome with his companion

Robbie Ross, where they attended masses and were papal audiences, and Wilde received a blessing from Leo XIII, which he thought had an effect not only on his spiritual life but also on his physical health. His health was said to deteriorate, and he left Rome for Paris, where the final scene of his long conversion took place. There, he received his conditional baptism, was anointed, and died a catholic on November 30, 1900 at age of 46.

The last three years of Wilde's life were a marked departure from the decadent, glamorous lifestyle that he had lived prior to his imprisonment, not only materially but also spiritually. It was a time of spiritual renewal. He re-embraced his childhood Catholicism... (Hunter, 2021).

His repentance from his former esthetic hedonism to the Christian faith indicates a paradigm shift in his moral philosophy. Though some insisted that his repentance wasn't true, according to them, he united with Douglass and went back to drinking. This argument is not strong enough. Reconciliation with such an old friend is not sinful. It depends on what is involved in the relationship. Alcoholism itself is not morally wrong so far it is done with caution and moderation. Their arguments according to Hunter (2021) is not convincing enough as the contents of *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, his last two works, are manifestations of true repentant soul for "in them, the man I knew best for series of eye roll-inducing puns meditated on life and death, sin and guilt, and the depths of human cruelty, and he seemed to do a better job of it than many philosophers and theologians" (Hunter 2021). Quoting one of the inspiring passages of *De Profundis*, Hunter writes:

The world had always loved the saint as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of God. Christ, through some divine instinct in him, seems to have always loved the sinner as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of man. His primary desire was not to reform people, any more than his primary desire was to relieve suffering... Of course, the sinner must repent. But why? Simply because otherwise, he would be unable to realize what he had done. The moment of repentance is the moment of initiation (Wilde, 2021; Wilde, 2007-2022).

Here, Wilde shows his deeper understanding of the theology of God's love for sinners and our faith in him as the basic foundation of salvation. We are saved by faith in Christ not necessary by the works of our righteousness. God knowing fully how frail and weak we are as human beings, out of his love for us, sent his son Jesus Christ to die for our sins, so that by our faith in him, we are saved. It is not that sinner should not repent from his sin "otherwise he would be unable to realize what he had done" but the most important thing is not our act but our faith in Jesus Christ.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we find out that Oscar Wilde's emphasis on estheticism made him a hedonist. But from

the findings of this study, it is obvious that even if esthetic hedonism was the moral philosophy of Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his confessions and repentance confirm a paradigm shift to ethical hedonism. The identification of this paradigm shift in his moral philosophy is the novelty and significance of this paper. This paradigm shift has some implications for us which are necessary to be highlighted as our concluding remarks:

1. We must accept ethical hedonism as the moral philosophy of Oscar Wilde. Attributing pure esthetic hedonism to Oscar Wilde is an injustice and a smear of his personality. In fact, it is a character assassination.

2. We must not live a pure esthetic morality, as uncontrolled pleasure can be very destructive both to oneself and to society. The experiences of Dorian Gray and Oscar Wilde are illustrations of this. Therefore, we call on those especially youths who have given themselves to drunkenness, prostitution, stealing, drugging, lasciviousness, and prodigality to refrain while it is still day.

3. Though the major function of the work of art is beauty and pleasure, work of art should be relevant in promoting social ethics and good life in the society. Therefore, we recommend censorship of the work of art (films, music, novels, etc.) by relevant government agencies.

4. We must change our perception of Oscar Wilde as a "bad person". The final days of a man's life matter so much. A critical appraisal of the later end of his life reveals his repentance and commitment to God. His literary impact within the 46 years he lived is amazing. Therefore, we should celebrate him as a hero and saint.

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