A Study of Art and Aestheticism
in
Oscar Wilde’s
The Picture of Dorian Gray

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Abstract

My twofold aim with this essay is, firstly, to examine the ideas about art expressed in the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by the Victorian author Oscar Wilde. Secondly, I analyse how Oscar Wilde has implemented the philosophy of aestheticism throughout his novel. I achieve this by discussing the novel from the perspectives of the arts of painting, acting and literature. I examine the ideas expressed through the three main characters Dorian Gray, Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton. I give occurrences of alliteration, epigrams and theatrical traits of the novel as examples of how the novel in itself is a beautiful work of art. With this essay I wish to highlight the need for all types of art mentioned in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to be included in any discussion about art in the novel. My thesis statement is that the philosophy of aestheticism is promoted throughout the novel. This philosophy states that art should only be seen as something beautiful. Art should not be expected to teach its audience any moral lessons. The over-all conclusion is that it is indeed the philosophy of aestheticism that is promoted in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the ideal of male beauty in particular.
Introduction

The artist is the creator of beautiful things.
To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim. […]
All art is quite useless.

(Wilde xxiii–xxiv)

So begins and ends the Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde, published for the first time in 1890 in Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine. In her introduction to The Picture of Dorian Gray, editor Isobel Murray writes that the novel was “condemned […] on all accounts, and chiefly as ‘a poisonous book, the atmosphere of which is heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction’” (Wilde vii). Ross Douthat and David Hopson say in their notes on The Picture of Dorian Gray that Wilde was very disappointed with the way the novel was received and therefore revised it and added a Preface and six new chapters in 1891. The Preface was designed to counter some of the criticism that was aimed at the novel, among other things concerning the novel’s immorality. The Preface also contains the principles of Wilde’s art philosophy. Wilde belonged to a school of thought known as aestheticism, which was of the opinion that art’s essential value is its beauty and that it should have no other value or purpose than that. In Victorian Britain this was a radical statement, since art was considered to be not only a function of morality, but also a way of strengthening and perpetuating it.

At the time of the novel’s first publication, most critics were concerned with the moral aspects of the story. The protagonist Dorian Gray is first introduced to the reader as a young, amazingly beautiful and innocent man who sits as a model for an artist named Basil Hallward. One day another friend of Basil’s, Lord Henry Wotton, is there when Dorian arrives for his daily visit. The two have a chat while Dorian sits for his portrait, and Lord Henry’s words about beauty and youth make a profound impression on Dorian. He utters a fatal wish: “If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the
picture that was to grow old! For that – for that – I would give everything” (Wilde 25). Over
the next few weeks, Lord Henry’s influence over Dorian increases and the young boy begins
to live a life dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure. After cruelly breaking off an engagement
with the actress Sybil Vane, Dorian returns home and notices that his portrait has changed.
There is “a touch of cruelty in the mouth” (Wilde 90), and it appears as if his thoughtless wish
has come true. Dorian hides the portrait in the attic where no one can see the consequences of
his moral decay. At the end of the novel, Dorian stabs his portrait and in doing so kills
himself. The portrait returns to its original state and Dorian’s dead body takes on the true
appearance of the old, cruel man he has become.

Almost all sources I have come across in my search for material about art and
aestheticism in The Picture of Dorian Gray appear to have a focus on either Dorian and the
portrait, the famous Victorian aesthetic critic Walter Pater’s influence on Wilde or Lord
Henry’s decadent, Hedonistic views about youth and beauty. Very little or no attention is paid
to the significance of Sybil Vane and her art, namely acting. Basil Hallward is brought up in
discussions about morality, but the significance of his character and what ideas about art that
he might represent could be further analysed. It was the depiction of moral decay and Lord
Henry’s new Hedonism that enraged the critics of that time. Today, those themes are not such
sensational matters. Instead, what I find to be interesting in The Picture of Dorian Gray, and
what I will be focusing on, are the aspects related to art in the novel.

My aim with this essay is to examine the ideas about art expressed in The
Picture of Dorian Gray, and how these ideas are presented. What ideas do the characters
Dorian Gray, Lord Henry, Basil Hallward and Sybil Vane represent? The concept of art seems
to include only painting and writing to most critics. I am not disputing their importance, but
with this essay I will show the importance of the inclusion of all types of art in the novel in
any discussion about art and aestheticism in The Picture of Dorian Gray. I will focus the
analysis on three key areas: the art of painting, the art of acting and the art of literature. The
art of music is also appearing in the novel but it is only briefly mentioned in relation to opera
visits and descriptions of, for example, Lord Henry’s voice as melodious. It is almost non-
existent throughout the book. Therefore, I will analyse musical art briefly in the section about
the art of literature. I will also examine the novel as an aesthetic object. In itself, the novel is
in fact a brick in the foundation of the position it argues in favour of, and this aspect should be
included in a discussion about art in The Picture of Dorian Gray. I will combine these two
approaches in my analysis. In doing so, I hope to be able to present conclusions based on a
fuller and broader analysis of the ideas about art the novel is presenting and how it discusses
the issue of what the essence of art is.

In order to analyse *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the way I intend to, it is important to have a clear conception of what the terms aestheticism and Hedonism mean. In his book *Aestheticism and Oscar Wilde*, Aatos Ojala says that the philosophy of aestheticism represents a value consciousness where aesthetic values prevail over all others, from moral to material ones. [...] Aesthetic values are intrinsic values [...] and ends in themselves. This kind of value consciousness forms the philosophical basis of the movement, known in history under the slogan which well indicates its pursuits: *l’art pour l’art*, “art for art’s sake”

(Ojala 13)

Finn Skjoldbjaerg’s book *Tekstens nytelser: en lesning i og omkring Oscar Wildes roman The Picture of Dorian Gray* notes that many literary historians are of the opinion that aestheticism has clear similarities to Romanticism, in the sense that both aestheticism and Romanticism can be interpreted as a relation to, or polemic against, something that previously existed (Romanticism versus Realism, aestheticism versus Victorian values). Skjoldbjaerg suggests that aestheticism could be seen as an attempt to make art the central value of a new religion; free from all demands to be a teacher of a true moral, a realistic mirror of qualities and reality or useful in any other way than through its beauty. He further writes that British aestheticism is seen as a part of that era’s spirit of decadence, that is, as a part of the said uproar against Victorian values such as Moral, Truth, Nature (this is where aestheticism differs from Romanticism which embraces Nature) and even God. Skjoldbjaerg explores different topics that are relevant to a fuller reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and he stresses the difference between aestheticism and aesthetics. Aesthetics is the science of beauty, particularly in art, while aestheticism is a point of view that solely emphasises the aesthetic. Ojala says that aesthetic and moral Hedonism, as well as “the valuing of experience for its own sake” (Ojala 15) often co-exist in the same text. According to Ojala, the valuing of experience for its own sake means that experience should not be seen as something that can teach us a moral lesson or guide us, but only be appreciated for what it is and the pleasure it has brought us.

This leads us onto Hedonism. According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, Hedonism is a “doctrine that [states that] pleasure or happiness is the sole or chief good in life” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). There is an obvious parallel between art for art’s sake and experience for its own sake. One could say that Hedonism is the application of the philosophy of aestheticism to the way one lives one’s life and that aestheticism is the
application of Hedonism to the way one views art, since Hedonism pursues pleasure and experiencing something beautiful brings pleasure.

Some other critics who have written articles or books about the subject of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and art are Elana Gomel, Sheldon W. Liebman and Jean Paul Riquelme. The articles I have managed to obtain deal mostly with moral and morality. Those that bring up aestheticism, such as “Oscar Wilde’s Aesthetic Gothic: Walter Pater, Dark Enlightenment, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*” by Jean Paul Riquelme, to a large extent focus on Walter Pater and his influence on Wilde’s work as well as on the painting and the character Dorian Gray. Still, they will be useful to me for some parts of the analysis. Elana Gomel’s article “Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the (Un)Death of the Author” examines the main characters from the point of view that they each represent different aspects of the author Wilde’s personality. Sheldon W. Liebman’s article “Character Design in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*” also discusses the use of character, and argues that the novel urges Dorian to meld the adverse positions of Basil Hallward and Lord Henry instead of choosing between them.

The only article I have found that focuses somewhat on acting and Sybil Vane in relation to art and aestheticism is “Art’s Concealment and Revelation in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*” by Sarah Burch. She focuses on one aspect of aestheticism; that of the concealment of the artist and revelation of its subject. By analysing Sybil Vane and Dorian Gray she comes to the conclusion that Sybil Vane represents the concealment of the artist and that Dorian Gray represents the revelation of the subject. I will develop this idea later on in the analysis.

The focus on Dorian and the painting is evident also in Aatos Ojala’s book. Ojala examines the philosophy of aestheticism, aestheticism in relation to Wilde himself and also aestheticism in Wilde’s different works. He analyses the presence of aestheticism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but he concentrates on Dorian and the painting albeit with some mentioning of Lord Henry. Ojala argues that Walter Pater had a major influence on Wilde’s thoughts and works. This opinion is generally accepted in the academic world of literary criticism. Pater’s book *The Renaissance* is a collection of impressionistic, critical essays on artists who, to Walter Pater, together made up the spirit of the Renaissance. In her introduction to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Isobel Murray writes that

> [t]he Conclusion to *The Renaissance* celebrates experience as an end in itself [i.e. Hedonism], and rejects theories, ideas or systems which demand the sacrifice of areas of experience, and
advocates whatever will give ‘nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake’.

(Wilde x)

She further states that it is helpful to a reading of the novel to understand that Walter Pater’s work was a model for Wilde, and therefore I will include this aspect in my analysis of the art of literature in the novel.

Britta Kalscheuer has written about art and Walter Pater in her article “The Influence of John Ruskin’s and Walter Pater’s Art Theories on Oscar Wilde’s Novel The Picture of Dorian Gray”. She studies Walter Pater and specifically The Renaissance to see what ideas he promotes, and then she compares what she finds to what is said in Wilde’s book. She discovers multiple parallels, and therefore her article is very useful to my analysis of art and aestheticism.

To help me in my analysis of intermediality and ekphrasis in The Picture of Dorian Gray I will use selected parts of two collections of essays; Pictures into Words – Theoretical and Descriptive Approaches to Ekphrasis edited by Valerie Robillard and Els Jongeneel and Intermedialitet – Ord, bild och ton i samspel, edited by Hans Lund. Skjoldbjaerg’s book is also of particular interest because it touches on intermediality in The Picture of Dorian Gray. As Skjoldbjaerg rightly notes, what is most interesting in a discussion about aestheticism is that the novel in itself is an aesthetic object. He examines the text and finds many poetic concepts in the prose, such as alliteration, rhythm and epigrams. This seems to me to be a logical way to read the novel, since the Preface actually warns readers to looks for a deeper meaning in the text. The novel argues in favour of art for art’s sake, and Skjoldbjaerg answers the question of whether we ought to read the novel accordingly, with a yes. This idea of The Picture of Dorian Gray as an aesthetic object in itself will be developed throughout this essay as I cover the different forms of art. I will approach this topic from the perspective of intermediality and therefore a more in-depth exploration of that area is needed before I begin the analysis.

In Werner Wolf’s chapter “Musikaliserings av litterär berättelse” in Intermedialitet – Ord, bild och ton i samspel, Wolf defines the term intermediality as a concept that can be applied to all crossings of boundaries between conventionally separate means of expression. These crossings can occur in two ways; either within one single work of art or semiotic complex, or as a direct result of relations between different works of art or semiotic complexes. By this he is suggesting that intermediality is a sort of blend of different art forms. An example could for instance be literary characters in a novel discussing music, a
musical performed on stage (a musical is then a mixture of acting, literature and music), a movie based on a novel or a poem about a painting. This makes intermediality a very broad and interesting topic, and therefore I am obliged to limit myself to certain aspects of it. Since the common denominator in this essay will be art and aestheticism (which promotes the value of beauty) I shall focus on the beauty of the work of art that is *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Not only has Oscar Wilde written a book that promotes the importance of the sheer beauty of art, he has also made the book itself beautiful. For example, there are descriptions of the portrait, as well as descriptions of the characters’ reactions to it. This kind of description falls under the area of intermediality called ekphrasis, a term whose history and meaning I will summarise below.

In the chapter “Quotation, Enargeia, and the Functions of Ekphrasis” in *Pictures into Words*, Claus Clüver writes that the word ekphrasis comes from the Greek ekphrazein, which in turn is an intensive version of the verb phrazein. Phrazein refers to a certain use of speech, and it means “to show, to make known or explicit” (Robillard and Jongeneel 36), and ekphrazein means “to show very clearly, to make completely clear” (Robillard and Jongeneel 36). In “Litterär ekfras” in *Intermedialitet – Ord, bild och ton i samspel*, Hans Lund says that in ancient Greece the term ekphrazein was used within the field of rhetoric. By explicitly describing something, the intent of the speaker or author was to make the audience or readers able to really see that which was described. This particular technique was named enargeia.

Today, ekphrasis is most commonly known as a fiction genre. Literary ekphrasis can be found in poetry, but also as sections of text within novels and short stories. There are multiple possible definitions of the term ekphrasis. One definition that has been widely used for a long time is Leo Spitzer’s. In 1955 he defined ekphrasis as “the description of a work of art by medium of the word” (Lund 183). In 1996, Amy Golahny presented an alternative definition which stated that ekphrasis is a text which “expresses the poet-reader-viewer’s reaction to actual or imagined works of art” (Lund 183). This extended definition is the one I will be referring to when I use the term ekphrasis, since Dorian Gray’s portrait is a fictional, imagined work of art. This kind of ekphrasis is generally referred to as notional ekphrasis.

Hans Lund further brings up the on-going discussion among critics regarding how extensive and detailed a verbal description of a picture or painting has to be to be an ekphrasis. The line between ekphrasis and non-ekphrasis is unclear. The answer is dependant on how one applies enargeia, or perspicuity. As I just explained, enargeia is the technique of describing an object so that the listener or reader has an impression of having the described
object right in front of their eyes. A common opinion is that one cannot have ekphrasis without enargeia, and enargeia should always imply a detailed description.

However, during the past decade a differing opinion has entered the discussion. Its foremost advocate is the critic Tamar Yacobi. Her main argument is that just like a novel does not have to contain a detailed description of a city in order for the text to convey an urban atmosphere to the reader, a painting does not have to be described in explicit detail in order to enable a reader to imagine it for his or her inner eye. What American researchers refer to as the ekphrastic moment (the moment when the reader suddenly ‘sees’ the picture or painting hidden within the text) can be achieved by an author who carefully has picked out certain markers which refer to the work of art in question. These markers could suffice to make the work of art come alive in the mind of the reader.

I will now begin my analysis by discussing the function of the Preface in the light of a discussion about aestheticism and art in the novel. The second section will deal with the form of painted art and the significance of the characters Dorian Gray, Lord Henry and Basil Hallward in relation to that. The third section will examine the significance of the character Sybil Vane and acting. My fourth section will explore the art of literature. In the final fifth section I will present and discuss the results of my analysis.
The Function of the Preface

The Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* contains some epigrams in favour of aestheticism. According to Douthat and Hopson, the people who lived in the Victorian era were of the opinion “that art could be used as a tool for social education and moral enlightenment” (Douthat and Hopson). This was particularly evident in relation to literature by writers such as Charles Dickens. As already mentioned, the aestheticist movement wanted to free art from all these responsibilities. Wilde writes:

- The artist is the creator of beautiful things. / To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim. […]
- There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. / Books are well written, or badly written.
- That is all. […] / Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art. / Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art. […] / All art is quite useless.

(Wilde xiii)

In these lines it is evident that Wilde is of the opinion that art’s purpose is beauty. A work of art is merely a beautiful thing, nothing else. Dorian, his vices and his moral decay is the subject that Wilde has painted with his words. We should admire the beauty of Wilde’s literary painting instead of trying to extract a moral lesson from his piece of art. Wilde’s Preface further warns readers of the dangers of looking for hidden meanings or symbols in art: “All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril” (Wilde xxiv).

What is so paradoxical about the Preface is that it argues in favour of aestheticism while the story itself seems to warn us about the dangers of living one’s life according to this philosophy. Dorian was a beautiful innocent young man before he was influenced by Lord Henry Wotton and began to only care about pleasure and beauty, ignoring the consequences and the moral and ethical conflicts that arose because of his new lifestyle. One could wonder why Wilde would write a book about a boy who seems to be living his life according to the philosophy of aestheticism to the point of ruin, only to later add a Preface that argues in favour of that very philosophy. The answer to that question is multi-faceted. A part of the answer is of course what I mentioned in the introduction: to counter some of the criticism concerning the novel’s immorality. Richard Ellman, one of the most famous biographers who have written about Oscar Wilde, suggests in his book *Oscar Wilde* that Wilde felt that his book contained too much moral and therefore overthrew the foundation of
the story by adding the Preface. I do not completely agree with this opinion because I do not think that Wilde himself thought of his book this way. The Preface does not only counter the criticism concerning the story’s moral, it directs the focus of the reader towards what I perceive to be an issue that Wilde wanted to highlight with his book – art and aestheticism. Dorian’s moral decay does not necessarily have to be seen as the main subject of the novel, nor does teaching a moral lesson about the dangers of living one’s life according to the philosophy of aestheticism have to be the main purpose of the text. It could simply be seen as a method to bring forth the points about art and aestheticism that Wilde wanted to make. What these points could be is what I will be analysing in the following sections of this essay by, among other things, taking the application of the essence of these epigrams one step further and applying it to the story and its characters.
The Art of Painting

Painting is what most critics have focused on in relation to art and aestheticism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Already before reading the first page, the title puts the focus on this particular form of art. The title makes the reader anticipate that there is something extraordinary with Dorian Gray’s portrait, and that it will be important to the story. The portrait is the catalyst of the narrative, and when the portrait is destroyed the story ends. Therefore, it is understandable that this form of art has received the most analytical attention.

In this section I will examine the art of painting in relation to the characters Dorian Gray, Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton. Additionally, I will discuss the function of Dorian Gray’s portrait and what is said about beauty from the perspective of painting.

The three main characters Dorian Gray, Lord Henry Wotton and Basil Hallward have different feelings about the portrait. For Dorian, the influence of Lord Henry and seeing his portrait for the first time reveals to him how beautiful he really is. After this realisation, Dorian remembers what Lord Henry had said to him about youth and beauty, and that it would not last forever:

Yes, there would be a day when his face would be wrinkled and wizen, his eyes dim and colourless, the grace of his figure broken and deformed. The scarlet would pass away from his lips, and the gold steal from his hair. The life that was to make his soul would mar his body. He would become dreadful, hideous, and uncouth.

(Wilde 25)

These words are almost a verbatim account of the description of the old corrupted Dorian at the end of the novel, after he has stabbed the painting and reversed the spell: “Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage” (Wilde 224). As Christopher Lane writes in his article “Framing Fears, Reading Designs: The Homosexual Art of Painting in James, Wilde, and Beerbohm”, the portrait becomes an ideal to its subject. It is a “counterpart” (Lane 935) to Dorian, but a threatening one, because of its static state of perfected beauty. While Dorian will change and grow old, the portrait will remain the same, a painful, lifeless reminder of what he is destined to lose later on in life. Elana Gomel writes that “Dorian’s initial aspiration is to “write” himself into the portrait, and thus to achieve the immortality and immutability of the objet d’art. His tragedy is that he succeeds” (Gomel 76). After Dorian expresses his wish that the
portrait would grow old while he would remain as young and beautiful as the boy in the painting, it ceases to be just a dead object. Instead, it starts to be the mirror of Dorian’s moral and his soul. It teaches him about how he lives his life; about which of his actions that are benevolent and which that have malicious or selfish intent. The portrait is no longer a dead object - it is alive. This is something negative from the point of view of aestheticism, because the portrait ceases to be only a beautiful object for the sake of pleasure.

Gomel draws a parallel between Lacanian theory and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. She suggests that the Lacanian idea of the mirror stage where a child identifies with the image it sees in the mirror and by doing so “acquires a unified self […] based on the visual matrix of an image” (Gomel 79) is similar to Dorian’s identification with his own ideal self that he sees in his portrait. This self is unified and immaterial, not restrained by bodily materiality and the unstable human mind. Gomel further writes that if you read the novel “as an allegory of artistic creativity” (Gomel 79), it makes the difference between a painted work of art and a written text smaller “by focusing on the dynamics of subjectivity and the clash between the corporeal and the ideal selves of the artist, the character, and the audience” (Gomel 79). According to Gomel, this clash is best represented by the closing scene of the novel where Dorian stabs his portrait and assumes his true appearance which is unique even if it is not beautiful. However, the picture is not destroyed. Once more it is beautiful and perfect. This trait of incorruptibility is usually a trade-mark of literary works of art, rather than paintings. A literary work of art is “reincarnated” (Gomel 79) every time it is printed, but a painting remains unique and as such it can be destroyed. Therefore, “Dorian’s invulnerable picture is the immortality of discourse, freed from the taint of materiality that returns to the discarded, loathsome corpse” (Gomel 79). When the painted work of art ceases to be only a beautiful object, a catastrophic state of chaos is created. This reminds us once again of the aestheticist principle that art should be beautiful, nothing else.

The portrait has a different meaning for its creator, Basil Hallward. The painter feels his work of art not only shows the subject of the portrait, but that it also reflects Basil himself:

‘Then why won’t you exhibit his [Dorian’s] portrait?’ asked Lord Henry.

‘Because, without intending it, I have put into it some expression of all this curious artistic idolatry, of which, of course, I have never cared to speak to him. […] But the world might guess it; and I will not bare my soul to their shallow, prying eyes. My heart shall never be put under their microscope. There is too much of myself in the thing, Harry – too much of myself!’

‘Poets are not so scrupulous as you are. They know how useful passion is for publication. Nowadays a broken heart will run many editions.’

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‘I hate them for it,’ cried Hallward. ‘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.

(Wilde 11)

In this quote it is quite obvious that Basil is representing a positive view of aestheticism. Basil feels that he is revealing himself in Dorian’s portrait and according to aestheticism this is not what a painter should strive to achieve with art. There are different opinions about what exactly it is that Basil has revealed in his painting, but the most prominent conclusion drawn by most literary critics is that Basil is infatuated with Dorian. I agree with this opinion, because of the many examples in the book that strengthen this theory. For example, in the above quote Basil himself describes his feelings about Dorian as being a “curious artistic idolatry” (Wilde 11). If Basil is indeed infatuated with Dorian, he has all the more reason to want to hide the portrait from public exposure. Homosexuality was a crime in Victorian England. Also, a lot of artists feel that their works reveal themselves and this is most likely why there are so many artists who for example write poetry ‘to their drawers’, i.e. write down a poem on a note and then put it in a drawer. From the above quote we can deduct that Hallward includes these poets into the category of artists, and that they too should strive to create beauty, not to express their souls or inner selves through their words. These opinions that Hallward expresses are concurrent with the meaning of the first two epigrams of the Preface: “The artist is the creator of beautiful things. / To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim” (Wilde xxiii).

Christopher Lane writes that “Lord Henry sees in Dorian an aesthetic object that the painting mediates and only stubbornly conveys” (Lane 935). Dorian is an object to Lord Henry, albeit an interesting one. He seems to think of Dorian as a canvas that is untouched when they first meet. Basil paints Dorian into a portrait of the painter’s inner self just as Lord Henry paints the real Dorian into a portrait of his own life philosophy by talking to him and letting him read the yellow book (this will be discussed more in a later section). Gomel suggests that the reason Lord Henry wants the portrait is that he sees it as a “fetish or token of sexual possession” (Gomel 81). She is of the opinion that since all three characters are homosexual, that in itself is enough reason for them to mutually identify with each other. Dorian begins by trying to take after Lord Henry, but in the end he has far surpassed his former teacher and even gets away with murder, a murder that is a consequence of living his life according to Lord Henry’s hedonist principles. Sheldon Liebman writes that it is Lord Henry’s proposal that Dorian should experience everything that causes Dorian’s hedonism to
develop. Lord Henry says: “Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations” (Wilde 22). Dorian sanctions his search for knowledge and pleasure by practising Lord Henry’s self-development theories:

But it appeared to Dorian that the true nature of the senses had never been understood, and that they had remained savage and animal merely because the world had sought to starve them into submission or to kill them by pain, instead of aiming at making them elements of a new spirituality, of which a fine instinct for beauty was to be the dominant characteristic.

(Wilde 130)

While Lord Henry is content to merely theorise, Dorian puts the theory into practice. This is the New Hedonism that Lord Henry is advocating. Lord Henry’s role as a teacher is related to homosexuality, a theme I will explore further.

The homosexual tendencies and Wilde’s own homosexuality are detectable in the ideal of male beauty that is promoted throughout the novel. The only beautiful female character is Sybil Vane. Dorian’s mother Margaret Devereaux was also beautiful, but she does not appear in the novel since she is dead. Douthat and Hopson write that the homoerotic relations play an important role in the structure of the novel. They point out that Basil’s painting the portrait is a consequence of his appreciation of Dorian’s beauty, just as Lord Henry’s desire to shape Dorian after his own wishes is a result of his desire to seduce Dorian. Skoldbjaerg points to several examples from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to show the presence of male desire. For instance, Dorian is attracted by Lord Henry’s voice: “And he had such a beautiful voice” (Wilde 18) shortly followed by “‘And yet,’ continued Lord Henry, in his low, musical voice” (Wilde 18), and “The few words Basil’s friend had said to him […] had touched some secret chord that had never been touched before, but that he [Dorian] felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses. Music had stirred him like that” (Wilde 18-19). In some places one can almost sense Lord Henry’s attempts to seduce Dorian: “Talking to him [Dorian] was like playing upon an exquisite violin. He answered to every touch and thrill of the bow…” (Wilde 35). Skjoldbjaerg writes that since homosexuality was a crime in Victorian Britain, it is not odd that Lord Henry would express his desire through the melody of his voice rather than being more explicit. Lord Henry gives Dorian his voice and in return enjoys Dorian’s physical beauty. Skjoldbjaerg further points out that Basil and Lord Henry see Dorian as an erotic object in multiple places in the text: “And I [Basil] have caught the effect I wanted - the half-parted lips and the bright look in the eyes. I don't know what Harry has been saying to you, but he has certainly made you have the most wonderful expression” (Wilde 19). Lord Henry also mentions parted lips: “And how charming he had
been at dinner the night before, as with startled eyes and lips parted in frightened pleasure he had sat opposite to him at the club, the red candelshades staining to a richer rose the wakening wonder of his face” (Wilde 35). As Skjoldbjaerg rightly states, half-parted lips commonly connote a sense of eroticism. This ideal of male beauty goes back to ancient Greece. Douthat and Hopson write that this male relationship is connected to Wilde’s aesthetic values because it is related to antiquity where an expression of appreciation of youth and beauty was essential to culture. This appreciation was expressed physically in the relationships between men. It is therefore not odd that Dorian is admired by both Lord Henry and Basil Hallward, whose portrait expresses these ideals and desires.

The beautiful painting itself is not described in detail, but there are elaborate descriptions of the three male characters’ reactions to the portrait. This is a form of ekphrasis. As I wrote in the introduction, ekphrasis can be defined as a text “that expresses the poet-reader-viewer’s reaction to actual or imagined works of art” (Lund 183). The first reaction we encounter takes place on the very first page, and it is the reaction of Basil Hallward:

In the centre of the room, clamped to an upright easel, stood the full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty, and in front of it, some little distance away, was sitting the artist himself, Basil Hallward […].

As the painter looked at the gracious and comely form he had so skilfully mirrored in his art, a smile of pleasure passed across his face, and seemed about to linger there. But he suddenly started up, and, closing his eyes, placed his fingers upon the lids, as though he sought to imprison within his brain some curious dream from which he feared he might awake.

(Wilde 1-2)

Wilde’s book begins with an ekphrastic section. First, we receive a description of the painting itself. It is not very detailed, but it contains three of the critic Tamar Yacobi’s markers that were mentioned in Hans Lund’s article “Litterär ekfras”. We know that it is a large painting – the full-length of a young man. The painting is a portrait, and the motif is a young man. This young man is extraordinarily beautiful, and he has been “skilfully mirrored” (Wilde 1), so the portrait must then also be beautiful. With these few markers, the readers are able to form an image in their minds of the painting. Lord Henry’s description of the painted Dorian helps in adding more detail to this image: “[T]his young Adonis […] looks as if he was made out of ivory and rose-leafs” (Wilde 3). Upon Lord Henry’s first meeting with the real-life Dorian the reader receives more information about the boy’s appearance:
Yes, he was certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair. There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candour of the youth was there, as well as all youth’s passionate purity. One felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world.

(Wilde 15)

Since the portrait is described as mirroring Dorian, these descriptions add to the image of the painting even though they do not describe the painting. Dorian himself is somewhat enthralled upon viewing his portrait for the very first time:

Dorian […] passed listlessly in front of his picture and turned towards it. When he saw it he drew back and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time. He stood there motionless and in wonder, dimly conscious that Hallward was speaking to him, but not catching the meaning of his words. The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before. Basil Hallward’s compliments had seemed to him to be merely the charming exaggerations of friendship.

(Wilde 24-25)

From these lines one does not get a description of the painting itself, but from Dorian’s reaction to it, the reader can draw multiple conclusions. The first one is that the portrait is something extraordinary. It has Dorian mesmerised and speechless. The second conclusion is that the portrait is very beautiful. Dorian discovers his own beauty, and a beautiful person painted just the way he is onto a portrait makes for a beautiful painting. The third conclusion is that beauty brings pleasure. Wilde writes that Dorian’s “cheeks flushed with pleasure” (Wilde 24), and Basil Hallward had a “smile of pleasure” (Wilde 1) on his face. According to aestheticism, pleasure is the most important emotion one should draw from an encounter with the beauty of any form of art, and Dorian and Basil’s reactions are consistent with this idea.

There is another question I have not yet dealt with. Hallward may have created the portrait, but to whom does a work of art belong? Is it automatically property of its creator, or are there more people who may have a claim? According to Gomel, the issue of subjectivity that I examined above is equated by the complicated positions of the subjects that are represented in the story. Instead of placing the focus on the dichotomy of the author and his reader, Wilde is suggesting that there are “at least three distinct subject positions involved in artistic creation: the artist (or the writer), the model (or the character), and the audience (or the reader)” (Gomel 80). These three subject positions are represented by the three main characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: Basil Hallward, Dorian Gray and Lord Henry Wotton respectively. By this she is saying that the creator of an art object does not have to be only the artist. Creation can be fragmented, that is, be split up on several people. The painting
is painted by Basil Hallward, Dorian Gray is the model, and Lord Henry observes it. It is Lord
Henry’s words that cause Dorian to get a special expression on his face, and it is this
expression that helps Basil to complete the picture. Therefore, all three characters are
contributing to the creation of the portrait. The rivalry between the characters over who
should get the keep the painting is highlighted in the following quote, taken from the passage
where Basil has just completed the portrait and Dorian looks at it for the first time:

‘Don’t you like it?’ cried Hallward at last, stung a little by the lad’s silence, not understanding
what it meant.
‘Of course he likes it,’ said Lord Henry. ‘Who wouldn’t like it? It is one of the greatest things in
modern art. I will give you anything you like to ask for it. I must have it.’
‘It is not my property, Harry.’
‘Whose property is it?’
‘Dorian’s, of course,’ answered the painter.
‘He is a very lucky fellow.’
[…]
‘I am glad you appreciate my work at last, Dorian.’ said the painter […].
‘Appreciate it? I am in love with it, Basil. It is a part of myself. I feel that.’
[…]
[Lord Henry:] ‘You had better let me have it, Basil. This silly boy doesn’t really want it, and I
really do.’
‘If you let anyone have it but me, Basil, I shall never forgive you!’ cried Dorian Gray […].
‘You know the picture is yours, Dorian. I gave it to you before it existed.’

(Wilde 25-28)

Gomel asks herself whether the painting belongs to the person who put the colours on the
canvas, or to the model that let his beauty be used for the painting, or if it belongs to the
person who completes the art object by interpreting it. She finds that Wilde’s answer to her
question is paradoxical in the sense that he denies “the legitimacy of the question by
representing the ideal self of the work of art as an illusion created by the dynamic interaction
of its multiple creators” (Gomel 80). If the work of art could be seen as an illusion created by
Basil Hallward, Lord Henry and Dorian Gray together, it is no longer a question of to whom
the painting belongs, but rather a question of whether this painting is a unity or an object at
all.

The ekphrastic passages contribute to the beauty of the novel itself. As I said in
the introduction, Wilde created a beautiful work of art that in itself is a brick in the foundation
of the aestheticist philosophy it argues in favour of. Even though Dorian lives his life
according to this very philosophy to the point of ruin, it is still possible to conclude that this is
the case. It is important to realise that only when the portrait ceases to be merely a beautiful object does chaos begin. Order is restored once the painting again takes on its true appearance and ceases to be ‘alive’. Therefore, according to Wilde’s novel, aestheticism is the glasses with which one should view art. Also the subtle homosexual tendencies are a function of the ideal of male beauty, and the importance of appreciation of beauty as a value in general. This aestheticist atmosphere permeates the art of painting in the novel.
The Art of Acting

The art of acting is the art form that has been given the least attention in all the research material that I have come across. When Sybil Vane, the actress, is brought up in discussions about *The Picture of Dorian Gray* it is mostly in relation to Dorian’s sins and his moral decline. This lack of analysis could have several reasons. First of all, Sybil’s appearance in the novel is quite brief. Secondly, at first glance her function in the story seems to be to illuminate just how cold and cruel Dorian’s new life philosophy has made him. However, in the light of a discussion about art and aestheticism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, her character takes on a new meaning. Acting is a form of art just like painting or literature. Therefore, as I mentioned in the introduction, it is my opinion that acting also ought to be included in any and all discussions about that topic. It is true that the arts of painting and literature are important, but so is acting.

Not only does acting play a part in the story, but the novel itself has some traits of a theatre play. This is not surprising, considering the fact that Wilde wrote a number of plays such as *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Salomé*. The following excerpt is from the first page of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

> The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden, there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn.

> From the corner of the divan of Persian saddle-bags on which he was lying, smoking, as was his custom, innumerable cigarettes, Lord Henry Wotton could just catch the gleam of the honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms of a laburnum, […] making him think of those pallid, jade-faced painters of Tokyo who, through the medium of an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion. […]

> In the centre of the room, clamped to an upright easel, stood the full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty, and in front of it, some little distance away, was sitting the artist himself, Basil Hallward, whose sudden disappearance some years ago caused, at the time, such public excitement and gave rise to so many strange conjectures.

(Wilde 1)

This text is constructed in such a way that it appears to be the settings of a theatre stage. We are informed of the positions of the two characters Lord Henry and Basil Hallward and what they are doing. After this elaborate description of the settings, a dialogue follows. We do not receive much information about what the characters are thinking or feeling except one brief
line that also refers to the settings. The characters are introduced to us mainly through the use of dialogue. There are some longer passages where we are allowed to share some of the characters’ thoughts but these parts could easily be turned into, for instance, a monologue, if the book was to be transformed into a theatre play.

One of the characters, Lord Henry Wotton, is already performing longer monologues. Often, he also has witty, satiric retorts and comments that invite the reader to smile. His lines are much like some of the lines of characters in Wilde’s witty plays. This kind of witty lines falls under the category of epigrams. There are numerous examples throughout the novel, such as “[t]he only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it” (Wilde 18), and “[w]hen one is in love, one always begins by deceiving one's self, and one always ends by deceiving others. That is what the world calls a romance” (Wilde 52). Skjoldbjaerg writes that an epigram belongs to the genre of conversationalists, and that it was not a coincidence that Wilde moved on to writing drama after the publication of The Picture of Dorian Gray. These theatrical traits could be seen as a part of Wilde’s attempt to create a beautiful work of art. However, acting is also actively present in the story, especially through the character of Sybil Vane.

In her essay “Art’s Concealment and Revelation in The Picture of Dorian Gray”, Sarah Burch writes that Dorian represents the revelation of the subject in a work of art because his portrait reveals his true character. He is the subject of the painting. Sybil Vane is representing the concealment of the artist. Both these positions go back to the Preface: “To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim” (Wilde xxiii). The idea of art that she represents is conveyed through the story. Sybil Vane is a brilliant actress when Dorian first meets her and he describes her artistry as follows: “As for her acting – well, you shall see her tonight. She is simply a born artist. I sat in the dingy box absolutely enthralled. I forgot that I was in London and in the nineteenth century” (Wilde 75). However, after Dorian proposes and the two are engaged, the quality of her acting radically diminishes. When Dorian brings Lord Henry and Basil Hallward to the theatre to see Sybil act as Juliet in Shakespeare’s play, they are not impressed with her performance:

[S]he was curiously listless. She showed no sign of joy when her eyes rested on Romeo. The few words she had to speak […] were spoken in a thoroughly artificial manner. The voice was exquisite, but from the point of view of tone it was absolutely false. It was wrong in colour. It took away all the life from the verse. It made the passion unreal. […] She seemed to them to be absolutely incompetent. […] It was simply bad art. She was a complete failure.

(Wilde 82-83)
Why does Sybil’s acting become so bad? Burch suggests that the reason is that Sybil goes against art’s aim after falling in love with Dorian. Before she had felt and experienced love, she had not experienced the feelings she was portraying in her acting. There was nothing of herself in her characters on stage. Many actors have to practice hard to acquire the skill of concealing themselves while acting as someone else on stage. Sybil had no such obstacles. The reason for Sybil’s former brilliance on stage was that she completely hid her real identity while performing. After falling in love with Dorian, this is no longer possible for her: “I might mimic a passion that I do not feel, but I cannot mimic one that burns in me like fire” (Wilde 86). This goes against art’s aim according to aestheticism. Sybil ceases to reveal art while concealing herself as a person. Burch writes that “[n]ot only is Wilde showing that if art's aims are ignored bad art will result, he illustrates that it will cause the ruin of the subject of the art and the artist as well” (Burch). Sybil’s misery and suicide was a direct function of her failure to fulfil art’s aim and thereby producing good art. Dorian fell in love with Sybil’s characters, not with Sybil herself. When she becomes Sybil Vane again he leaves her, and this is why she kills herself.

Douthat and Hopson are of the opinion that Sybil’s fate should be interpreted as an invitation to criticism of aestheticism. According to them she is the victim of Dorian’s philosophy that puts beauty and pleasure above all other values, a philosophy that causes him to fall in love with her acted characters and not the real woman. However, they have failed to take into consideration what actually happens with Sybil and her art once she goes against the aim of art stated in the Preface. It is a neglect of art’s aim that causes her to produce bad art (i.e. bad, unconvincing acting) and Dorian to fall out of love. This might make Dorian seem cold, but, as I concluded in the previous section, his coldness and cruelty is a result of yet another breach of art’s aim; that of a painting that has become more than merely a beautiful object. Whenever there is a breach of the aim of art in The Picture of Dorian Gray, chaos and misery ensue. Therefore, both Sybil Vane and Dorian Gray actually contribute to the novel’s argument in favour of aestheticism.
Literature is the third form that plays a role in the discussion of art and aestheticism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It is not frequently occurring in the novel, but nonetheless it ought to be included in this essay. Literature is important also because of its influence on Wilde’s thought and writing. As I mentioned in the introduction, Walter Pater had a significant impact on Wilde, particularly his book *The Renaissance*. Isobel Murray even goes as far as to say that “Pater’s two novels are models for Wilde” (Wilde x). She also says that Wilde frequently echoes *The Renaissance*. Wilde once said to Yeats about *The Renaissance* that “[i]t is my golden book; I never travel anywhere without it; but it is the very flower of decadence” (Wilde x). The reason that the extent of Walter Pater’s influence on Wilde is important to my analysis is that Pater also wrote about art. As I also said in the introduction, *The Renaissance* is a collection of impressionistic, critical essays about artists. If Wilde more or less is echoing Pater’s work, then Pater’s ideas about art also play a part in my analysis of the ideas that are presented in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

In her essay “The Influence of John Ruskin’s and Walter Pater’s Art Theories on Oscar Wilde’s Novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*”, Britta Kalscheuer writes that “[t]he absence of social or moral aspects in art and the pure art-for-art's-sake-concept are Pater's ideal” (Kalscheuer 5). She continues with a quote by Pater: "Art, then, is thus always striving to be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception, to get rid of its responsibilities to its subject or material" (Kalscheuer 5). The character that most frequently echoes Pater’s ideals is Lord Henry Wotton. Lord Henry seems to share Pater’s desire to advocate the idea that art should be free from any other demands than that of beauty. Lord Henry says: “But beauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins. Intellect is in itself a mode of exaggeration, and destroys the harmony of any face” (Wilde 3). The ‘art for art’s sake’-movement is promoted through the character of Lord Henry. For Lord Henry, “beauty can only exist as long as it is not marred by any didactic purpose” (Kalscheuer 9). This view is similar to Pater’s argument that art should be free from intelligence.

What Lord Henry says is also constructed in a way that supports Pater’s view that art is unable to bear a message. However, Wilde takes this idea even further when he lets Lord Henry say:
As for being poisoned by a book, there is no such thing as that. Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile. The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame. That is all.

(Wilde 218).

This idea can also be found in the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. / Books are well written, or badly written. That is all” (Wilde xxiii). According to Kalscheuer, the idea that is promoted through the character of Lord Henry is that art can give people joy, but it should never inspire a person to act or reflect. The sterility that Lord Henry talks about is what keeps art at a distance while also preventing it from being able to make a deeper impression on its audience. Kalscheuer further writes that another of Pater’s ideas is brought up in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: the idea stating that the yearning for new experiences and sensations is the basis of not only all art, but also all of life. To Lord Henry, art is “a method of procuring extraordinary sensations” (Wilde 213). He uses art to make his life richer, not in order to learn from it.

There are many parallels between the philosophical ideas of Walter Pater and the ideas that Wilde present in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, both in the Preface and through the characters themselves. These ideas are concurrent with the philosophy of aestheticism, and all of them are founded in the notion that art should not be expected to provide anything but beauty. Jean Paul Riquelme also writes that Wilde is echoing Pater. However, Riquelme suggests that Wilde is echoing Pater in order to “evoke, refuse, and transform” (Riquelme 617). By echoing Pater, Wilde “projects the story of a contemporary Narcissus as one truth about Paterian aestheticism. According to Riquelme, Wilde’s purpose with doing this is not to agree with Pater, but to “present them darkly, in shades of gray, as at a base contradictory in destructive and self-destructive ways” (Riquelme 617). I agree that Wilde is indeed echoing Pater, but I find Riquelme’s conclusions about the purpose to be erroneous. It is true that at first glance, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* appears to be a book about what happens when one lives one’s life according to aestheticism. However, one has to take into consideration that Wilde was a man of paradox. As I said in the section about the function of the Preface, it would not be impossible or odd for a man of paradox to write a book about a young man who lives his life to the point of ruin and at the same time create a Preface that explicitly argues in favour of aestheticism. Furthermore, the story can be interpreted as arguing in favour of aestheticism implicitly, as I have shown in the previous sections by, among other things, highlighting how Dorian’s life turns into chaos because he has gone against the aim of art by allowing and wishing for a picture to be more than just beautiful.
I will now take a closer look at what is said about art in relation to literature. In The Picture of Dorian Gray, the art of literature is represented by the mysterious yellow book that Lord Henry gives to Dorian. The content of this yellow book is described as follows:

It was a novel without a plot, and with only one character, being, indeed, simply a psychological study of a certain young Parisian, who spent his life trying to realize in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own […]. There were in it metaphors as monstrous as orchids, and as subtle in colour. The life of the senses was described in the terms of mystical philosophy. […] It was a poisonous book.

(Wilde 125)

Most critics seem to agree that this book is a representation of a real novel. Douthat and Hopson write that it is partly based on a novel by the Frenchman Joris-Karl Huysmans called À Rebours, which in English means ‘against the grain’ or ‘against nature’. They describe the plot of À Rebours as being about “a decadent and wealthy Frenchman indulges himself in a host of bizarre sensory experiences” (Douthat and Hopson). This yellow book takes on the role of a life-guide to Dorian. He becomes obsessed by it and purchases several copies of the book “bound in different colours, so that they might suit his various moods” (Wilde 127). He was given his first copy of the book by Lord Henry, who also enjoys reading it.

However, there is an important difference between the kind of influence the book has on Dorian and Lord Henry respectively. Lord Henry merely views the yellow book as a source of amusement, entertainment and pleasure. He admires the beauty of the work of art, but allows it no other function. Dorian, on the other hand, becomes completely obsessed by it. To him, the yellow book is not just a beautiful work of art – it is his life guide. Douthat and Hopson write that it is possible to say that it is the yellow book that causes Dorian’s downfall. This happens not because the book is immoral, but because he allows it to totally govern his life. This conclusion is supported by the Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray which states: “They are elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty. / There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. / Books are well written, or badly written. That is all” (Wilde xxiii). According to Douthat and Hopson, the Hedonistic way of life presented in the yellow book becomes just as confining as Victorian society. Ironically, it was precisely this kind of confinement that Dorian sought to break free from. To Lord Henry, the yellow book is neither better nor greater than any other book ever written. This is why he keeps his respectability throughout the story and avoids the destruction and chaos that rules Dorian’s life.
There is a third aspect left to analyse in relation to the art of literature. Wilde has used specific writing techniques that enhance the beauty of the novel itself. Skjoldbjaerg quotes from one of Oscar Wilde’s own letters, defending his harshly criticized novel:

The real moral of the story is that all 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 realises 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.

(Skjoldbjaerg 38)

Skjoldbjaerg goes on to say that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is an aestheticist object. According to him, there are multiple artistic aspects in the novel that turns it into aestheticism and not a book about aestheticism. The content of the book such as the plot, vices and virtues, morality and immorality could in this context be seen as the material that these artistic aspects use to transform the novel into the (from the point of style) beautiful work of art Wilde thought literature ought to be. Consequently, Skjoldbjaerg draws the conclusion that the lyrics or words in works of music are there to create a mood or atmosphere rather than to convey a story. He supports this conclusion further by quoting the Preface from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art. / From the point of view of form, the type of all the arts is the art of the musician” (Wilde xxiii). He takes this idea to another level by arguing that the novel in one sense is like a work of music because it is what he refers to as a “symphony of words” (Skjoldbjaerg 39, my translation). Therefore, one should not single out elements such as the epigrams of Lord Henry, Dorian’s pleasures, the portrait or the characters themselves and analyse these one by one. When performing an analysis of a musical piece one does not single out one instrument or one bar of music to find out what the composer might have wanted to say with it. Instead, Skjoldbjaerg says that one must see the individual parts as making up the material which becomes a beautiful whole through the aesthetic mind of the artist. One of the literary techniques Wilde has used to create a beautiful whole is alliteration: “thoughts that have filled you with terror, day-dreams and sleeping dreams whose mere memory might stain your cheek with shame” (Wilde 18, Skjoldbjaerg’s emphasis). The phrase “mere memory” is used in more places in the novel: “Its mere memory had marred many moments of joy” (Wilde 223, my emphasis).

Jean-Paul Riquelme has also noted the aesthetically pleasing features in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He quotes from the first page of the novel:

Lord Henry Wotton could just catch the gleam of the honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms of a lauburnum, whose tremulous branches seemed hardly able to bear the burden of a
beauty so flame-like as theirs; and now and then the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains [...].

(Wilde 1, Riquelme’s emphasis)

Riquelme says that not only is Wilde echoing Pater, there are two more kinds of echoing in the novel. This quote contains a literal type of echoing, with the ‘b’ and ‘f’ sound, much like the alliteration I exemplified above. The third kind of echoing Riquelme mentions is repetition of language and words (like the “mere memory” above). He says that the words ‘burden’, ‘flame’ and ‘shadow’ are frequent throughout the novel, and that they often occur where something significant is happening or being described. As an example he highlights the passage where Dorian Gray and Basil Hallward are going up the stairs to Dorian’s schoolroom where he will murder Basil. In the stairs, “the lamp cast fantastic shadows” (Wilde 154). Later on, Dorian visits some opium dens to try to forget what he has done and become. He sees mainly dark windows, “but now and then fantastic shadows were silhouetted against some lamp-lit blind” (Wilde 185). Riquelme writes that “[t]he phrase ‘fantastic shadows’ [...] returns in a way that punctuates at times the stages in Dorian’s destructive attempt to hide and to experience who he is” (Riquelme 619). With this technique, Wilde makes these important passages stick easily in the reader’s mind, as well as beautifying his literary work of art.

The philosophy of aestheticism shines through also from the perspective of literature. It is evident both in the influence of Walter Pater as well as in the ideas that are presented through the characters. Art should only be seen as beauty, not as a guide to life. As soon as art in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* fills any other purpose than that of being beautiful, catastrophe seems to ensue. In relation to the art of literature, this was very evident in the way Dorian made use of the yellow book and the consequences of this choice. The effort that has gone into the beautification of the novel itself was made clear in this part of the analysis, and it is evident that Wilde has not left his choice of words to chance. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a beautiful book as well as a book about beauty.
Conclusions

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a two-fold novel. At first glance, it appears to be the story about a young man who one day realises his own beauty and makes a fatal wish to always remain young while his portrait was to grow old instead. However, if one takes the time to go below the surface of the story, one will find that in fact the novel is an exploration of Wilde’s position regarding art. My thesis statement was that Wilde was arguing in favour of aestheticism through his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Throughout the analysis I have attempted to reveal and clarify the ideas about art that are expressed in the novel. The main key areas I focused on were the function of the Preface, the art of painting, the art of acting and the art of literature. My second aim with the analysis was to apply Oscar Wilde’s art philosophy on his own work of art; i.e. his novel. By doing that I wanted to show that the novel itself in fact is a brick in the foundation it argues in favour of. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a work of art, and according to aestheticism art’s only purpose is to convey beauty. This would mean that Wilde would have made an effort to create a beautiful work of art with his novel.

Before I began my analysis of the art forms themselves, I took a closer look at the function of the Preface. This was necessary for two reasons. The Preface contains a series of epigrams that together summarise the foundation of aestheticism, which is the position I intended to argue that Wilde was advocating with his novel. Further, the Preface could puzzle a reader since the novel appears to be about a young man who lives his life according to aestheticism to the point of ruin, while the Preface seems to be advocating this very philosophy. I came to the conclusion that the function of the Preface was to counter some of the criticism concerning the novel’s immorality. I found that I did not agree with the Oscar Wilde critic Richard Ellmann’s suggestion that Wilde felt the book had too much moral in it and that he therefore would have added the Preface. Instead, I proposed the alternative explanation that Wilde would have added the Preface to direct the reader towards the aspect of art and aestheticism in the novel.

The second section dealt with the art of painting. The most important conclusion I reached in that section was that as soon as the purpose of art according to aestheticism is breached in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, catastrophe and chaos ensue. This was made clear
primarily through two examples, the first one being that Dorian makes a wish that goes against art’s purpose to only provide beauty, since he wishes for the painting to grow old and himself to stay young and beautiful. The second example was that Basil feels he has revealed too much of himself and his infatuation with Dorian in the painting, and this is also against art’s aim as stated in the Preface. I also concluded that it is the idea of male beauty in particular that is promoted in the novel. The desires of Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton are subtle but detectable. Since homosexuality was a crime in Victorian Britain, Wilde could not write explicitly about homosexuality which was referred to as ‘the love that dare not speak its name’.

Regarding the question of to whom a work of art belongs, I found that there are multiple people who contribute to the creation of a work of art. Basil Hallward paints the portrait, Dorian is the subject and Lord Henry is the audience or interpreter. The painting is presented as an illusion that is created by these three characters together.

The second form of art I analysed was the art of acting. I presented Burch’s idea that Dorian and Sybil represent the revelation of the subject and the concealment of the artist respectively, in the following line of the Preface: “To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim” (Wilde xxiii). Sybil produces excellent art as an actress since she is concealing herself (the artist). There is nothing of her in the characters she portrays because she has never felt the feelings they experience. Dorian represents the revelation of the subject since he is the subject of the portrait that reveals his true character.

Sybil’s character is important also because there is a significant deterioration of the quality of her acting after she meets and falls in love with Dorian. A reason for this could be that she is going against the aim of art according to aestheticism after she falls in love with him. Once she has felt real love, she can no longer conceal herself or separate herself from her acted characters while on stage. Because of her bad acting, Dorian breaks off the engagement. This causes Sybil to commit suicide. I argued against Douthat’s and Hopson’s suggestion that Sybil’s fate should be interpreted as an invitation to criticism of aestheticism. They are of the opinion that Sybil is a victim of Dorian’s art philosophy that puts beauty above all else. I pointed out that it was in fact a neglect of art’s aim according to aestheticism that caused her to produce bad art. Dorian’s coldness is a result of another breach of art’s aim according to aestheticism. He has allowed a painting to be more to him than just beautiful. Just like in the section about the art of painting, this shows that when art’s aim is breached in The Picture of Dorian Gray, chaos and misery ensue.
My final third section about the art of literature clarified the large extent to which Walter Pater and *The Renaissance* influenced Wilde. Since Wilde could even be said to have echoed Pater, I argued that it was useful to examine also Pater’s ideas about art. The importance of beauty and that art should convey only beauty was one of the foremost points both authors advocated. As for the representation of the art of literature in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I found that it was represented primarily by the yellow book that greatly influenced Dorian. It was this yellow book that had a major impact on Dorian’s transformation from innocent young man to experienced, cruel adult. I suggested that letting a book have such a great influence on one’s life goes against the purpose of art according to aestheticism, since Dorian lets the book be more than just beautiful.

The final aspect of art and aestheticism I wanted to analyse was *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as an aesthetic object. I carried out this part of the analysis throughout the paper. I found many examples of Wilde’s deliberate attempts to beautify his literary work of art and mould it into a beautiful creation. Examples of this were ekphrasis, the theatrical traits of the novel, epigrams and alliteration.

As I have attempted to show throughout this essay, the most important idea about art that is promoted in the novel is aestheticism which states that art’s only aim and purpose is beauty, in this case male beauty in particular. This makes *The Picture of Dorian Gray* different from books by many heterosexual authors. The man is objectified and worshiped instead of the woman, which is more common.

I began this essay with a quote: “All art is quite useless” (Wilde xxiii–xxiv). I do not think that Wilde was suggesting that art has no value or purpose. However, one should not put art to use. According to aestheticism, art should never be expected to teach one about moral and life. In that sense, art is useless, or ought to have no use. This line is in itself a paradox (something that is not uncommon in relation to Oscar Wilde) and sums up my conclusions quite nicely.
Sources

Articles


Books


**Internet Material**

Burch, Sarah. “Art’s Concealment and Revelation in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.”

