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Each Man Kills the Thing He Loves: Hypocrisy in Oscar Wilde

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1. INTRODUCTION

People have to deal with hypocrisy most of the days of their lives. Societies are still judging according to their old beliefs and conventions, refusing to accept that the times had changed, and all human beings deserve to be who they want to be and love who they want to. Nineteenth or twenty-first century, there is no difference, hypocrisy still exists. Homosexuality is relevant topic in some works of Oscar Wilde and even today these people are being oppressed and rejected by the society in certain countries.

Oscar Wilde, who was an Irish writer in the late Victorian Era, was everything but a conventional person. He made the Victorian society indignant by his behaviour and scandals. He became a spokesman for ‘Art for art’s sake’ of the late nineteenth century Aesthetic Movement. Apart from being an Aesthete he was an excellent conversationalist.

The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate Victorian values, Wilde as an advocate for ‘Art for art’s sake’ exposed various kinds of hypocrisy in his work. He through his work pointed out the general principles valuable for Victorians such as the old-fashioned purpose of marriage and selecting partners according to their status and affluence. There were obvious differences not only between classes but in the position of women and men in the society. Moreover, the double standards were present which played a great role along with the sexuality and taboo topic such as same-sex relationships. The last topic that will be discussed within this thesis is crime and punishment, the unfairness and conditions of prison system. As Wilde’s own life became more tragic, his message became more obvious.

The opening chapter of the thesis covers the Victorian Era, from the beginning of the reign of Queen Victoria in 1837 towards the end in 1901. This period was prosperous and troubled at the same time, a number of developments were achieved along with several new inventions. However, several new Acts and Bills were passed, which for example extended voting right for men, restricted child labour along with the working hours. Although Victorians were seen as a ‘prudish’ people, many of them led a double life unacceptable according to the society.

The next chapter is devoted to the life of Oscar Wilde. He was born into a respectable Irish family, both of his parents were literary active. Wilde attended two colleges, one in Dublin and the other in Oxford. He joined the Aesthetic movement

and became a spokesman for the 'Art for art's sake' when he met Walter Pater and John Ruskin. Towards the end of the century, he got married to Constance Lloyd and had two children with her. The last decade was a turning point in his life, he published most of his major works, in which he exposed the secret sins and behaviour of the society that once adored him. His success ended with a trial where he was accused of 'gross indecency' and was imprisoned.

The last chapter explores different kinds of hypocrisy in Wilde's work, namely in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. The importance of same class marriage and good family background, the double life of characters and the activity called 'Bunburying' is present in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. It examines the relationships between Dorian, Basil Hallward and Lord Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, what was valuable for each of them, the appearances of others around them or the actual temperament of the person. In *De Profundis*, Wilde reflects on his own story, his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas and how it impacted his own life. The feeling of blame, guilt and injustice made by society is present. His last work, the poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, shows through the story of C. T. Wooldridge, how prisoners were badly treated with a little respect. Wilde remarks on the justice system that is inadequate and unfair as prisoners are not judged by the same standard.

2. VICTORIAN ERA

The Victorian Era was the period dating between the years 1830 and 1901, these years were only indicative and roughly corresponded to the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901). It was a remarkable period of British history at the same time prosperous and full of troubles. The city of London underwent the biggest development of the age, its rapid growth was followed by a change in the way of living. People were moving to more urban life leaving behind the ownership of a land. The economic and social problems were brought by the industrialization which caused rapid and unregulated development. On the other hand, Britain was exporting goods around the world which had positive impact on their wealth. The invention of steam power, which speeded their railways and iron ships, along with other inventions such as a printing press, a telegraph, a photography or an international cable made an astonishing development.¹

The long Victorian period can be divided into three phases according to Robson in her introduction to the Victorian volume of the Norton Anthology: early Victorian, mid-Victorian, and late Victorian. “The early period (1830–48): a time of troubles”² was significant with the first steam-powered railway line in the world which connected Liverpool with Manchester. In 1832 a Reform Bill was set that changed the existing class structure and also extended a voting right to all men who owned a piece of property of 10£ worth. However, after the crash in 1837 the prosperous years were followed by troubles in harvesting and unemployment that resulted in poverty and riots. Not only the working class was living in horrible conditions, the working places were horrific too with a high number of child labour.³

“The mid-Victorian period (1848–70): economic prosperity, the growth of empire, and religious controversy”⁴ brought several Factory Acts which made a limitations of child labour, working hours and slightly improved the working

¹ Catherine Robson, “Introduction,” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. Ninth edition. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 3–4.

² Robson, “Introduction,” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7.

³ Robson, “Introduction,” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7.

⁴ Robson, “Introduction,” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 10.

conditions. This period was referred to by a historian Asa Briggs as “The Age of Improvement”.⁵ Another Reform Bill was passed in 1867 that gave a voting right to working class people.⁶

“The late period (1870–1901): decay of Victorian values”⁷ was an expansion of the previous period but at the same time it was hard to categorize it. Many of the wealthy Victorians were spending their weekends in the country filled with big house parties with the feeling of being serene and safe. London became a centre of delight, which was recollected in the work of Frank Harris. Severe economic depressions appeared causing a rising rate of emigration and along with the growth of labour became a political and economic force that included all kinds of socialism. Some of the leaders believed in the system of the Tory-socialism of John Ruskin while others were supporters of the revolutionary theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Between the first British authors who espoused Marxism was a poet and painter William Morris. Overall, the literature of the last phase underwent a change in attitudes. Many of the late-Victorian writers were satirizing the major Victorian idols, for example Samuel Butler had written a satire on the family life where he portrayed the typical oppressive father, where his own father served as a model. On the other hand, Walter Pater with his followers took different approach, thinking the answers to the problems will not be found so they shifted their focus on beautiful moments while they last.⁸ And the authors of “The Nineties”⁹ realized they were living at the end of great century, of which the Aesthetic movement and melancholy became its characteristics. The aestheticism of the nineties was presented in the periodical *The Yellow Book*. It can be said that the nineties represented a bridge between two centuries during which the Victorian standards were breaking and the modernist movement in literature was at its beginning. Many authors of the twentieth century were already publishing such as Shaw, Hardy and Conrad. Oscar Wilde’s comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest* satirized the mid-Victorian value and the word *earnest* became a pun. Oscar Wilde

⁵ Robson, “Introduction,” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 10.

⁶ Robson, “Introduction,” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 15.

⁷ Robson, “Introduction,” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 14.

⁸ Robson, “Introduction,” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 14–16.

⁹ Robson, “Introduction,” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 16.

was a remarkable author of the late nineties who in his work satirized the values of society and a novelist Richard Le Gallienne said about him that he made the century died with a laughter:¹⁰ “Wilde made dying Victorianism laugh at itself, and it may be said to have died of the laughter.”¹¹

2.1. Victorian Society and its Double Standards

The Victorian society was known as ‘prudish’ refusing to accept the existence of sex and hypocritically discussing it all the time. Even though there were some writings with this theme such as medical treatises, psychological studies or even pornography, most of the people never used in real conversations and women were particularly proud how little did they know about their own body. This attitude led them to living a double sexual life. Nevertheless, these standards did not meet the expectations of a society, people were practicing prostitution, spreading diseases, desiring sex by both men and women and even a desire for the same-sex relationship by men and woman was present.¹²

The main organisation of Victorian society relied on gender and class, it was a hierarchically structured. As mentioned above the double sexual standards meant different things for men and women. While men were seen as strong independent creatures belonging to the public sphere, women were expected to dependent on them, staying at home and taking care of the households and their children. On the other hand, working class people were unable to separate these spheres otherwise they would not be able to survive. The percentage of working class in Victorian population was high as much as eighty percent. While the middle-class was growing rapidly during the nineteenth century from fifteen to over twenty-five percent of the population and became the moral leaders of society, the upper class was still very

¹⁰ Robson, “Introduction,” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 16–17.

¹¹ Quoted in Robson, “Introduction,” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 17.

¹² Susie Steinbach, “The Victorian Stereotype and Double Standard,” *Victorian Era* (Encyclopædia Britannica, October 8, 2019), accessed June 12, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Victorian-era>

wealthy with their income from properties, interests and rents. They owned most the land and controlled local, national and imperial politics.¹³

Religion with faith was important to society and most of them were Christians, they had several state Anglican churches which dominated the religious landscape – the Anglican churches of England, Wales and Ireland. The Church of Scotland was Presbyterian, therefore there was some religious diversity as other non-Anglican Protestants such as Roman Catholics or Jews had lived in Britain as well. Alongside with their religion, the development of science was more than welcomed and appreciated by Victorians. The theory of evolution belongs to the best-known and it was credited to Charles Darwin. Evolution was not the only topic that draw attention, psychology and physics of energy were fascinating as well.¹⁴

2.2. Victorian Literature

The Victorian literature and the British Empire were connected, the works of the Romantic period were included in the writings about imperialism of the nineteenth century which had an influence no Victorian literature. Many of these writer's works were still reprinted as they are today, for example Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* but the major influence on Victorian literature had the Romantic poets.¹⁵ Unfortunately, when the reign of Queen Victoria started most of the great and successful poets such as John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, Walter Scott and Samuel Taylor Coleridge who were inspired by the French Revolution were all dead. Although Robert Southey was at that time Poet Laureate, William Wordsworth was recognized as the greatest poet of the day.¹⁶ Nevertheless, several authors began their literary careers before 1837, Wordsworth had lived until 1850

¹³ Steinbach, "Gender and Class in Victorian Society," *Victorian Era* (Encyclopædia Britannica, October 8, 2019), accessed June 12, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Victorian-era>

¹⁴ Steinbach, "Religion and Science in the Victorian Era," *Victorian Era* (Encyclopædia Britannica, October 8, 2019), accessed June 12, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Victorian-era>

¹⁵ Patrick Brantlinger, "Exploring the Terrain," *Victorian Literature and Postcolonial Studies*. Postcolonial Literary Studies (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 1.

¹⁶ Clement King Shorter, *Victorian Literature: Sixty Years of Books and Bookmen* (London: James Bowden, 1897), 5.

and became a Victorian. Other writers whose career started before the reign of Queen Victoria were Carlyle, Dickens or Tennyson.¹⁷

The topics of their work included India, Africa, Australia, or even slavery, especially those who had travelled through Europe had much to say. Some of the writers such as Thackeray and Kipling had colonial origin, both were born in India and other writers had families in these colonies too. Bad social conditions such as poverty, unemployment, and famine were criticized by authors who immigrated to the United States.¹⁸

Another influence that can be found was scientific development, Tennyson reflected on the evolution and the extinction of some species that he came across in Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*. *Middlemarch* written by George Elliot observed the development of human character and the Provincial life, the writing was similar to biological experiment. Another sub-genre that emerged was imperial Gothic fiction where belonged H. G. Wells's *Time Machine*, but many writers including Wells used Gothic for expressing their worries about the future.¹⁹

2.3. Victorian Culture and Art

With the gained access, the British culture became more important. They portrayed their own society from which they have emerged but more importantly Britain became the cultural centre of the English-speaking world. Performance were a varied combination of melodrama, morals and spectacle. The theatre during this period flourished, starting with melodrama which was the most popular at the early time, later followed by sensation drama. Not only theatres gained its popularity, but music halls gained its audiences as well. Its programmes were varied, they included singing, dancing, some sketches and more. Music halls emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century around 1850s and attracted thousands of people of all social classes. The printing was getting bigger with many newspapers and magazines that

¹⁷ Brantlinger, "Exploring the Terrain," *Victorian Literature and Postcolonial Studies*, 1.

¹⁸ Brantlinger, "Exploring the Terrain," *Victorian Literature and Postcolonial Studies*, 1–3.

¹⁹ Brantlinger, "Exploring the Terrain," *Victorian Literature and Postcolonial Studies*, 3–4.

were affordable. Another big role in printing played novels that were widely read by educated and literate mid-Victorians, many of them are still read today.²⁰

²⁰ Steinbach, “Victorian Culture and Art”, *Victorian Era* (Encyclopædia Britannica, October 8, 2019), accessed June 12, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Victorian-era>

3. THE LIFE OF OSCAR WILDE

“I’ll be a poet, a writer, a dramatist. Somehow or other, I’ll be famous, and if not famous, notorious.”²¹

Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde had lived in the second part of the Victorian Era. His father was a known surgeon in Dublin, where Oscar Wilde was raised. Wilde attended two colleges, first he was studying classics in Dublin at Magdalen College then he got a scholarship to Oxford where he set an excellent academic record for himself. At Oxford he got under the influence of John Ruskin’s aesthetic theories and more importantly under the influence of Walter Pater. After graduation, he moved to London, where additional Irishmen George Bernard Shaw and William Butler Yeats lived as well. Soon after moving, he established himself as a writer and a spokesman of the school of ‘Art for art’s sake’. Wilde was a gifted man for the role of a spokesperson for aestheticism. His wordplay and opinions which could easily cause an outrage pleased his listeners, as he was a brilliant conversationalist.²² “I never before heard a man talking with perfect sentences, as if he had written them all overnight with labour and yet so spontaneous,”²³ were the words of Yeats after he once listened to Oscar Wilde’s speech.

Wilde’s colourful clothing drew an attention to him, as it was contrasting to the boring Victorian suits. He was a writer who could excel in many different genres as a critic of literature and of course of the society, as a novelist, a poet and a playwright. In *The Critic as Artist* and in many of his other prose, he elaborated on Pater’s aestheticism on the superiority of art to life and its lack of obligation to standards. However, his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* had a different perspective. The young man is pursuing selfishly his pleasures and remains young and beautiful until the end of the novel while his portrait took all the sins of his soul. Wilde as a poet was little overshadowed by the previous generation of poets in the era. The most success he received for his social comedies, the first success

²¹ Quoted in Hesketh Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*. 3. ed. (London: Methuen, 1947), 35.

²² Robson, *The Norton Anthology of English literature*, 810.

²³ Quoted in Robson, *The Norton Anthology of English literature*, 810.

came with *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.²⁴

His successful life crumbled with the trials about the Libel Suit after which he was sentenced to two years of hard labour in prison. Even though Wilde was a married man with two children, he was not hiding his relationships with men which gave him 'the homosexual' image. The affair that took his freedom away, started in 1891 with a young poet Lord Alfred Douglas. The father of Lord Douglas accused Wilde of homosexuality, who Wilde took to court for a libel but lost and was sentenced to two years of hard labour in prison for sodomy. His last pieces of work were produced in prison, the long poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and his confession in prose *De Profundis*. After his release he left London and moved to Paris, where he also died alone in a hotel room, similarly to the death of imaginary Ernest in the play *The Importance of Being Earnest*.²⁵

3.1. Family Background

Oscar Wilde came from a respectable family in Dublin. His father was William Wilde, a known oculist and aurist with intellectual activities. His mother Lady Wilde was writing for revolutionary papers and was very clever and educated woman who read in Latin and Greek. Together with his father, they collected folklore. Oscar was a second son, his older brother, William, became a journalist in London and his younger sister, Isola, died in childhood unfortunately. During his childhood he travelled a lot with his father to visit different ruins, but his mother thought he was less smart than his brother.²⁶

He married Constance Mary Lloyd on May 29, 1884, she was a daughter of prominent barrister. They had two sons, Cyril and Vyvyan.²⁷ After the return from their honeymoon, they wanted to Tite Street, but it was not redecorated until January 1885, so they were switching between Wilde's familiar lodgings. Due to lecturing again, Wilde was often away from home, but he managed to keep a correspondence with his wife Constance. His letters delighted her, and she was

²⁴ Robson, *The Norton Anthology of English literature*, 810–11.

²⁵ Robson, *The Norton Anthology of English literature*, 810–11.

²⁶ Arthur Ransome, *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study* (London: Methuen, 1913), 26–27.

²⁷ Ransome, *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study*, 85.

occupied with her first pregnancy. They had their sons less than a year apart, after their birth Wilde slowly became distant from his wife. He was still fond of her but had no interest in playing the role of husband, on the other hand his sons were a delight to him. The distancing from his wife caused him a desire to return to the company of young men.²⁸

3.2. The Double Life of Oscar Wilde

It was towards the end of the eighties when Wilde started practicing his homosexuality, he remained bi-sexual for a long time before he gave to his true nature. He allowed himself to be lured into a world of full of limitless passions and appetite. Nowadays his behaviour would not be considered egregious or perverted.²⁹

It was the unfortunate moment of meeting Lord Alfred Douglas that led to his fall. It was in 1891 when Lionel Johnson took Douglas to meet Oscar Wilde on Tite Street. They were attracted to each other, Wilde liked his appearance and historical name while Douglas was fascinated by Wilde's conversations.³⁰ But it was in the spring of 1892, when their acquaintance changed after Douglas wrote to him asking for help with a blackmail letter, he had received. They spent much of the following summer together and their lives became somewhat inseparable. Thus, Wilde realized that Douglas was also reckless and unmanageable, always asking for money and diners.³¹

It was Douglas who introduced Wilde to his world where young men would prostitute themselves in exchange for a few pounds and dinner. The competition between them, made Wilde step up his affairs. Here Wilde met Alfred Taylor whose rooms he started regularly visiting and spending a lot of money on the gifts for the boys. The Society had tolerated the homosexuality as long as it was practiced in secret and no one was caught. But Wilde's chances of getting caught were enormous as he was meeting with Robert Ross, who was a homosexual as well, Alfred

²⁸ Richard Ellmann, "Mr and Mrs Wilde," *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1988), 240–51.

²⁹ Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 263–65.

³⁰ Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 267.

³¹ Ellmann, "A Late Victorian Love Affair," *Oscar Wilde*, 362–64.

Douglas and John Gray. While he believed that nothing can happen to him, he was slowly dragging himself down.³²

3.3. The Trials

‘All trials are trials for one’s life,’ Wilde would declare after his trials were over and his destruction by them was complete.³³

The first trial should not have been his own, as it was Wilde who prosecuted, the ninth Marquess, John Sholto Douglas for a libel. He was accused by him for ‘posing’ as a sodomite, but the Marquess’ purpose was to show that Wilde had presumptions for committing sodomy.³⁴ Nevertheless, the trial ended two years of provocation and Queensberry did not consider himself as the aggressor but seen himself as a victim of the case. Despite his continuous threats, Wilde had still been seen with Alfred Douglas in public.³⁵

Wilde was used to being verbally attacked, he was accused of plagiarism and had to face constant rumours about his homosexuality. The rumours about his sexuality had faded with his marriage but again appeared after the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and ‘The Portrait of Mr W. H.’ Even though there had been several literary attacks and accusations, Wilde though highly about the dedication of his friends and did not thought about the vulnerability in his behaviour. Wilde’s attitude towards sexual transactions was an example of common behaviour of the class. The boys were treated well but he still did not think that his behaviour with the boys would have any serious consequences.³⁶

Unfortunately for Wilde the prosecutions for criminal libel was the end for him not the beginning of legal manoeuvres. He consulted his prosecution with Humphreys in May 1894 and again in July, but Queensberry took advice as well

³² Ellmann, “A Late Victorian Love Affair,” *Oscar Wilde*, 366–68.

³³ Quoted in Richard Ellmann, “I Am the Prosecutor in This Case,” *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1988), 409.

³⁴ Oliver S. Buckton, “Defacing Oscar Wilde,” In *Secret Selves: Confessions and Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Autobiography* (University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 120, accessed June 3, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9780807860625_buckton.7.

³⁵ Ellmann, “I Am the Prosecutor in This Case,” *Oscar Wilde*, 409.

³⁶ Ellmann, “I Am the Prosecutor in This Case,” *Oscar Wilde*, 409–10.

and in 1894 in the summer he discovered some letters addressed to his son which were written by Wilde. Even though Queensberry knew that the letters itself would not be enough for the charge of sodomy, he decided to bring Wilde's reputation down thus to remake his own. Wilde received a note from Queensberry that should serve as an interview but for him it seemed as an invasion of his club after the failure at his theatre. Wilde asked George Lewis for advice who was already engaged by Queensberry, but he told him to rip up the card and forget about its existence which he did not do and met with Humphreys the next day. In the meantime, Wilde became a prey of Queensberry father and son.³⁷

After the proceeding were launched, Humphreys appeared for Wilde while Sir George Lewis was saying that Queensberry would plead for justification. Wilde was asked some questions and they adjourned the case for eight days. Two days before the hearing, Wilde attended *The Importance of Being Earnest* together with his wife and Douglas, on the 9 March the day of hearing Lewis withdrawn from the case due to his friendship with Wilde. He was advised to leave for Paris together with his wife, but Douglas said it was absurd, so Wilde started to prepare for defending his letters, including the ones he wrote to Douglas. The problem was he would have to enter his plea before the trial started and to his and Humphreys surprise Wilde was accused of soliciting more than twelve boys. Even though he was encouraged by several friends to drop the case, he did not and so the trial opened on 3 April 1895.³⁸

As the cross-examination continued, it made Wilde look like an amoral artist with a good evidence and the questions he was asked. Passages from his work had been read, specially from *Dorian Gray* and suggestions about perverted *Dorian* had been made. Carson, the barrister, was persistent in questioning Wilde about his work, Douglas and other boys. They hoped that Carson would accept the verdict of not being guilty but instead he was persistent. Queensberry was then justified to call Wilde a sodomite in the public. In the end Carson received a gratulation and Wilde was guilty: "What made Carson unmade Wilde".³⁹

³⁷ Ellmann, "I Am the Prosecutor in This Case," *Oscar Wilde*, 410–13.

³⁸ Ellmann, "I Am the Prosecutor in This Case," *Oscar Wilde*, 414–17.

³⁹ Ellmann, "I Am the Prosecutor in This Case," *Oscar Wilde*, 421–25.

A trial of 26 April 1895 was about the same topic as his previous trial with Queensberry. His case was probably the only one in the late nineteenth century that was given so much publicity due to its evidence. The prosecutor of the case wanted a speedy trial and it was obvious that the case had been run with certain hypocrisy. Not only the homosexuality was quite common in the schools but there was also an agreement that the name of Queensberry's son wouldn't be mentioned in return for the evidence Queensberry collected. Because of the Jury's verdict of Wilde not being guilty, the new trial had been ordered. Although many people insisted that another trial would cause more harm, it continued to the third last act.⁴⁰

Even though Wilde had twenty-five days until his next and last trial, he spent some of them in Holloway Prison as his bail was denied without any particular reason. Few days later Charles Matthew spoke on Wilde's behalf to Mr Baron Pollock for a bail until the trial begins and the bail was set. Wilde had troubles staying at hotels because some of Queensberry's people threatened the managers of the hotels. He stayed with his brother in the end, but it was not easy, and he was not happy there. After a dinner with Leversons, they offered him to stay with them as they saw how unhappy he was.⁴¹ The last Wilde's trial was after Taylor's who was charged for indecency not for sodomy. By the time the trial had started Wilde was a broken man. At the court they went over the letters to Douglas once again, looked at the payment of blackmailed to Wood and his relations with Taylor, Wood, Parker and Conway. On 25th May, both Oscar Wilde and Alfred Taylor were sentenced to two years of imprisonment and hard labour.⁴²

3.4. The Aesthetic Movement

This chapter will focus on the Aestheticism of the late 1870s and 1880s that was the outcome of the Pre-Raphaelitism. Rossetti whose poetry and paintings inspired the Aesthetes created a link between Pre-Raphaelitism and Aestheticism. It offered a different experience further removed from anything that was available in the industrial world. The artist part was to provide and project his own understanding of beauty in whatever form he had chosen while the purpose of art

⁴⁰ Ellmann, "Doom Deferred," *Oscar Wilde*, 434–37.

⁴¹ Ellmann, "Doom Deferred," *Oscar Wilde*, 438–40.

⁴² Ellmann, "Doom Deferred," *Oscar Wilde*, 446–49.

was to afford the pleasure which quality only the artist could judge. At the same time, the artist's judgement meant more than criticism and the public opinions about him. The outcoming experience was a unique personal event without any reference to any other human being. A life itself was seen as an art, they replaced the pleasure-pain hedonism with the ethereal hedonism of beauty and human experience.⁴³

Thus, the Aestheticism had a resistance towards the received standards of value. The middle-class vulgarity and what counted as a taste were disowned, the Aesthetes focused on exploring human mind and consciousness with emotions. Even though the Aesthetes supported their work with the 'poetic' and 'scientific' truths, the movement still included romantic individualism with epistemology. The artists claimed to be superior to men and to belong to a separate class. Aestheticism was viewed as something elite by the society. Although it was derived from Pre-Raphaelite movement, it received its inspiration from France because the avant-gardism of English and French was at the same time. A phrase 'Art for art's sake' proposed by Gautier, became a short description of Aestheticism. The poetic principles and techniques of Parnassiens, Gautier and Baudelaire, were accepted by the Aesthetes thanks to Swinburne's enthusiasm. Later around the eighties they got under the influence of Symbolistes and Paris became a home to a new English poets and painters. But under a Walter Pater's influence it went back to ancient Greece and Rome, to Middle Ages, to a Renaissance and to Japan to fulfil the moments of aesthetics. But the best symbolization of the revolt against the contemporary spirit were the glamorous costumes set by Wilde.⁴⁴

Although the period of 'Aestheticism' is being stretched over the last phase as a response to arts and moral's orthodoxy, the Decadence is rather being regarded as separate. However, the Decadents extended the Aestheticism to abnormal and perverse such as sexual aberrations, drug-taking, absinthe-drinking according to previous moral standards. The Aestheticism created in Decadence represented a revival and mostly exaggeration in their desperate search for new exciting experiences in life or to numb their feelings in alcohol, sex and drugs. These things were sought out from different motives but mainly to cross over the boundaries of

⁴³ Richard Daniel Altick, "The Primacy of Art," *Victorian People and Ideas* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), 291–93.

⁴⁴ Altick, "The Primacy of Art," *Victorian People and Ideas*, 293–96.

experience.⁴⁵ This pseudo-romanticism was described by Graham Hough in his book *The Last Romantics* as: “an immense number of explorations, many false starts and blind alleys, and not a few personal tragedies, all directed to finding some sort of accommodation between art and a bourgeois industrial society”.⁴⁶

However, since useful messages to the society were not required from the artists, they could dedicate their time to the form – new graphic designs, images, experimenting with language order or even with the sounds in poetry.⁴⁷ As Jerome H. Buckley expressed in *The Victorian Temper*: “The ‘aesthetic’ regard for craftsmanship remained the controlling force behind many a serious and powerful work of art, from the subtle moral geometries of James to the enormous intellectual labyrinths of Joyce”.⁴⁸ Therefore the results from their occupations with technique became significant for the Aestheticism what had a good base for its thriving growth.

⁴⁵ Altick, “The Primacy of Art,” *Victorian People and Ideas*, 296–98.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Altick, “The Primacy of Art,” *Victorian People and Ideas*, 298.

⁴⁷ Altick, “The Primacy of Art,” *Victorian People and Ideas*, 298.

⁴⁸ Altick, “The Primacy of Art,” *Victorian People and Ideas*, 298.

4. ANALYSIS OF WILDE'S WORKS

This chapter will focus on the analysis of Oscar Wilde's works. Although Wilde was a proponent of 'Art for art's sake', his works carried an ongoing moral message, employing satire to expose various kinds of hypocrisy. Moreover, as his own life became more tragic, his message became more apparent and obvious. He used the characters along with their view to show the elements of sexuality and morals along with the double standards, social classes and crime and its punishment are going to be discussed within all these works. The works differ in the point of views on what crime and punishment means to each character as well as the attitude of people in the society. All of them were written towards the end of nineteenth century but the long letter *De Profundis* and a poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* relate to his time in prison.

The comedy of manners *The Importance of Being Earnest* is one of the five most popular comedies, in which he discussed the Victorian society, perhaps the most successful one. Satirizing a Victorian society that was artificial and hypocritical yet still presented itself as an intelligent on the surface.⁴⁹ Moreover, we can find connections between the character of Jack and Wilde, although Jack paid his bill for dinning at Savoy to avoid the Holloway prison, the scene still resembles Wilde's own disaster.⁵⁰

The novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* not only made suspicions about his own sexuality because of the close friendship between three male characters but portrait the morality of people as well. Dorian's behaviour led him down a path which had an inevitable end, the same as Wilde's own abrupt end that he could not prevent from happening.⁵¹ Wilde himself expressed the relation to each character: "Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry is what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages".⁵²

⁴⁹ Oscar Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde* (United Kingdom: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), vii.

⁵⁰ Buckton, "Defacing Oscar Wilde," 128.

⁵¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (United Kingdom: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), vii.

⁵² Buckton, "Defacing Oscar Wilde," 112.

Wilde wrote *De Profundis* during his last months of imprisonment in Reading Gaol, the letter was addressed to Lord Alfred Douglas, or 'Bosie' as Wilde called him. It was written on blue prison paper and since Wilde was not allowed to send it from the prison himself, he gave it to Robert Ross who should have sent a copy to Douglas and kept another one along with the original. However, Douglas denied receiving the letter and pretended that he did not know about it when it was published in 1905. In 1909 the original manuscript was given to the British Museum.⁵³ Indeed, this letter was Wilde's try to 'destroy' the image that had been given to him, by retelling the story of his affair with Douglas.⁵⁴

The last work, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, is based on Wilde's prison experience, it tells a story of a hanging that took place in Reading Gaol during his imprisonment. He started the composition before his release date in May in 1897 and its first publication was anonymous in 1898. The first section of the poem deals with the act of hanging and prisoners' reactions while the second discusses the nature of justice and the cruelties of the prisons system.⁵⁵

4.1. Victorian Society

Strict rules were applied in Victorian Society which were expected to be abide by people, especially from the upper-class. Certain expectations on marriage were held and therefore it was not acceptable to do otherwise which can be found in the play, where the suitable partner should have some qualities and most importantly had to be approved by the parents. They were hypocrites in nature, being more focused on the outside beauty and youth, which was connected with aesthetics rather than seeing what really was in people's souls and behaviour. The behaviour towards someone who was accused or committed some crime, was mostly humiliating.

⁵³ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writing* (United Kingdom: Wordsworth Edition Limited, 1999), VIII–IX.

⁵⁴ Buckton, "Defacing Oscar Wilde," 120.

⁵⁵ Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writing*, XII.

4.1.1. The Importance of Being Earnest

Victorian Society was divided into classes, that were abide by rules respectable to the class. Therefore, the family background and status were important for marriages. For the elderly generation marriage was a way of securing the status and position that is the reason why Lady Bracknell did not approve of the engagement between Jack and Gwendolen because he did not come from a respectable family and was not chosen by the parents. When Gwendolen told her about her engagement with Jack, Lady Bracknell reminded her that the engagement is not her decision: "...When you do become engaged to some one, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact".⁵⁶ Thus her statement contradicts her morality, because she did not have any fortune herself when she got married.⁵⁷

At the same time Jack could be seen as a hypocrite and betrayer of his own class for trying to get married to Gwendolen who was from higher class than him. The announcement of their marriage was followed by Lady Bracknell's questioning which revealed that Jack had never met his parents as he was found in a hand-bag at Victoria Station and on that account, he was not a suitable candidate for Lady Bracknell's daughter.⁵⁸

The characters that Wilde created had different point of view on marriage. Algernon's thought on it was that it was demoralizing to the man because marriage came with responsibility. While he was dining with his friends drinking, they drank several bottles of champagne, which brought him to a thought why bachelor's drink champagne to which his servant replied that in married households the champagne is rarely first-rate brand. Although his servant thought that marriage was quite pleasant, he did not give it much thought, which seemed very lax to Algernon who then expressed an opinion on the lower class: "They seem to have absolutely no sense of responsibility".⁵⁹ This is an absurd comment on the lower class when

⁵⁶ Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, 263.

⁵⁷ Otto Reinert, "Satiric Strategy in The Importance of Being Earnest," In *College English* 18, no. 1 (1956), 16, accessed July 13, 2020, doi:10.2307/372763.

⁵⁸ Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, 266.

⁵⁹ Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, 249.

Algernon himself was the one with no responsibilities whatsoever, who did not have to go to work and who spent all his time dining and drinking with his friends. On the other hand, he himself said that marriage is a business which does not have anything in common with pleasure after Jack told him about his plan to propose to Gwendolen. Another paradox is that his mindset had shifted after he met Cecily, suddenly he wanted to get married and his decision was not influenced by any business. Marriage being compared to business is creating a hypocritical view, truly unfair to women who are seen as a commodity in the act.

4.1.2. The Picture of Dorian Gray

This, only novel by Wilde, portrays the nature of superficial Victorian society, that emphasized more the external beauty than the internal one. Lord Henry praised the beauty over other personal qualities, when he pointed out Dorian's beautiful face and told him: "Beauty is a form of Genius—is higher, indeed, than Genius, as it needs no explanation".⁶⁰ This approach to beauty gave the feeling that when someone was handsome one could do anything and get away without being punished. Therefore, Henry's remark on beauty had big influence over Dorian when Basil finished his portrait, he made an evil wish of being forever young while the portrait should take upon the burden of aging: "If the picture could change, and I could be always what I am now!".⁶¹ Being young and beautiful meant everything to Dorian. Not only the painting was aging instead of him, but all the sins and injustice committed by him showed up on the picture.

Since Dorian's view of beauty had changed, his love became rather superficial. He fell in love with a young actress from a lower class, however he loved her beautiful appearance and the characters she was playing that lacked her own personality. When one night her acting was horrible because she realized what the real love is and found her true self, he broke their engagement with the most awful words "...you have killed my love".⁶² and drove her to suicide. Dorian's only crime was that he hypocritically loved all the roles she was portraying, overlooking her personality. Even though he did not feel any guilt over her death, because he

⁶⁰ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 20.

⁶¹ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 25.

⁶² Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 84.

was not the one who killed her. He was responsible for the suicide, for not loving her true personality.⁶³

The conflict between appearance and morality, caused many young gentlemen a downfall as they were deceived by Dorian's external beauty. The emphasis on external beauty were quite strong that they could not believe that someone whose appearance was so pure, and innocent would be capable of some horrible sins. Basil pointed out Dorian's influence over other people's lives was rather tragic, that his friendship was fatal for too many young men. But Dorian turned it around and said I was not his fault that they of course lived "...in the native land of the hypocrite".⁶⁴ He himself was selfish and felt no guilt over anything he had done in the past which showed his true nature that caused a fall to many people who once spent time in his presence.

Wilde provided us with two completely opposite characters in nature, Lord Henry and his friend Basil, yet their interest was in the same person. While Basil seemed to be quite a boring and moral person, Lord Henry was more of amoral one, he acted perfectly according in the society however when being out of public eyes his personal morality was quite profoundly different. He had an evil soul and wicked ways for amusement, telling shocking theories. One day Basil told him: "You never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing.",⁶⁵ suggesting that his cynicism is just a pose which he had adopted, albeit he encouraged Dorian on his theories he himself never practised a single one. Between these two men stood Dorian, who liked Lord Henry's views but at the same time he was afraid because the man had a fascinating voice as Dorian mentioned: "There was something in his low, languid voice that was absolutely fascinating".⁶⁶ and he was able to listen to him for hours. When his portrait started to alter, he realized it was too late for him to be rescued by Basil from Lord Henry's influence and to resist the poison coming from his own nature. The picture had to be hidden from world's eyes because it

⁶³ Rolf Breuer, "Paradox in Oscar Wilde," In *Irish University Review* 23, no. 2 (1993), 230, accessed July 13, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/25484563.

⁶⁴ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 147.

⁶⁵ R. Thurston Hopkins, *Oscar Wilde: A Study of The Man and His Work* (London: Lynwood and Co., 1913), 49.

⁶⁶ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 20.

became a mirror to Dorian's corrupted soul, which was aging unlike his appearance.⁶⁷

Another aspect of society was the treatment of women in relationships. Lord Henry shared with Dorian his thoughts about women that they did not have genius but when they spoke it was charming however according to him: "Women are a decorative sex".⁶⁸ In terms of marriage Lord Henry held a strange opinion on who should propose differentiating between upper and middle-class people, "...it is always the women, who propose to us, and not we who propose to the women. Except, of course, in middle-class life,"⁶⁹ mocking the lower class for being unfashionable is easy when one did not need to work, and his only responsibilities were dinners and theatre. Women were not considered as worthy companions for conversation with men. "They have wonderfully primitive instincts,"⁷⁰ suggesting that in fact they appreciated being treated badly, only looking for their masters to be dominated, making them less valuable than men.

Homosexual behaviour was an unacceptable taboo topic in Victorian society and one could end in a court for it. Wilde was sent to prison for it, and the scandalous topic is apparent in the novel as well. It is not hard to notice the homoerotic elements within the relationship of the main characters. Both Basil and Henry have a desire over Dorian, Henry is purely fascinated by his behaviour and how it could be altered by his views on life itself. While Basil admired his beauty from the first day they had met and was "aesthetically in love with him".⁷¹ That made Dorian to have an influence over him as well as over his art. When Basil told him: "I worshipped you,"⁷² Dorian understood the absurd painter's jealousy and felt sorry for him because Dorian only saw "something tragic in a friendship so coloured by romance".⁷³ There is a parallel with his own life, Wilde liked to be in the company of young men similarly to Basil who idealized Dorian from the first time

⁶⁷ Breuer, "Paradox in Oscar Wilde," 230.

⁶⁸ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 46.

⁶⁹ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 74.

⁷⁰ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 99.

⁷¹ Hopkins, *Oscar Wilde: A Study of The Man and His Work*, 47.

⁷² Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 110.

⁷³ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 113.

they had met. Basil's character was used at court to prove that Wilde shared the affection for love in the same way as the fictional character.⁷⁴

4.1.3. De Profundis

The letter is recollecting on Wilde's life when he was in the company of Lord Douglas, most importantly on how society contributed on his downfall. It was the society's principles who sent men into a prison and it has such a big impact on them which they carry even after the release for the rest of their lives. When Wilde said: "Society takes upon itself the right to inflict appalling punishments on the individual, but it also has the supreme vice of shallowness, and fails to realise what it has done,"⁷⁵ he realized what he had suffered within the years but that the society should be aware of its actions as well. They still managed to humiliate people who were sentenced to prison in the most grotesque way possible. Wilde had been taken out the hospital ward for the amusement of others, who laughed at him and when they learned who was standing in front of them, they laughed even more. Without feeling slightest pity for the person on the pedestal.⁷⁶

Even though the apparent relationship between two men would cause a big scandal, Bosie's father pretended to be saving his own son from the corrupted artist, but the reality of the case was different. He saw an opportunity how to be in the papers again and to be in the eyes of society again as a new character of loving father. The friendship between Wilde and Douglas was used by his father for his own success, no matter what ruin he would bring upon Wilde, he cared about his position in public, this was an opportunity how to regain it back.⁷⁷

The mother of Lord Douglas played a part as well, she was the example of a hypocrite, too afraid to talk to her own son about his life and choices he made that she would transfer her responsibility as a parent on Wilde. Writing him countless letters to talk to Alfred but always stressing "...do not let Alfred know that I have written to you,"⁷⁸ and in the end she blamed Wilde for having an influence over her

⁷⁴ Buckton, "Defacing Oscar Wilde," 113.

⁷⁵ Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writing*, 61.

⁷⁶ Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writing*, 88.

⁷⁷ Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writing*, 96.

⁷⁸ Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writing*, 99.

son. However, it was her incapability to discuss things with her own son or to even talk to him in person, yet the same way she had shifted her parental responsibilities on Wilde, she blamed him for influencing her son as well making the situation entirely grotesque.

According to Wilde, Douglas was an epitome of negative social and aesthetic principles. His personal needs were mostly ruled by instincts and appetite, his soul was filled with endless hate with a vice for writing dreadful letters. This behaviour carried a burden of the nature of paradoxes that ruled in society where human beings were free to make decisions about their own lives while being entirely ruled by law.⁷⁹

4.1.4. The Ballad of Reading Gaol

If a crime is committed, the punishment should follow. “The man had killed the thing he loved, And so he had to die,”⁸⁰ he killed his wife, so he should be punished but the whole society revealed much deeper problems such as cruelty and hypocrisy. There was a double measure in society, each man could ruin his life and drove his loved one away as ‘killing’ his love could have many forms: “For each man kills the thing he loves, Yet each man does not die”.⁸¹ Thus, every person one day would commit some type of crime that would not need to be punished by the law but could become physical burden to the person for the rest of their lives.

As scandalous as it was, some stanzas refer to same-sex love or even the prostitution which was very common at the time even though they acted like none of this was happening. “Some love too little, some too long, Some sell, and others buy; Some do the deed with many tears, And some without a sign...,”⁸² this part not only referring to Douglas and himself but ‘sell’ and ‘buy’ meaning the common practise of prostitution.

⁷⁹ Michael R., Doylen, “Oscar Wilde's ‘De Profundis’: Homosexual Self-Fashioning on the Other Side of Scandal,” In *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27, no. 2 (1999), 555, accessed May 8, 2019, www.jstor.org/stable/25058478.

⁸⁰ Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writing*, 118.

⁸¹ Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writing*, 118.

⁸² Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writing*, 118.

4.2. Double Standards

Leading a so-called double life was normal for Victorians as the social rules were quite strict. The society was not exactly accepting and open minded so many topics were a pure taboo. As long as they were pursued privately, they pretended it is not happening and could present themselves as prudes. While leading a double life connoted the need for secrecy and hiding, it did not mean being invisible or lonely. It gave men the possibility of development and self-invention.⁸³

4.2.1. The Importance of Being Earnest

Even the title itself suggests an intended pun on the society, ‘earnest’ is someone who is sincere and serious while the name ‘Ernest’ used sounds the same. Both main male characters had led a double life in a way, Jack invented a brother called ‘Ernest’ but was using the name in town for himself, but in the country, he told them he is going to visit his troubled brother in the city, so he could escape from the country. While Algernon created an invalid friend called ‘Bunbury’ who is severely ill, so he could use the excuse of visiting him as an escape from the city and his obligations, he even named the activity as he said, “I have Bunburied all over Shropshire on two separate occasions”.⁸⁴ Neither of them felt any guilt or remorse towards their actions, either for escaping to avoid their social responsibilities or to be with the woman they liked. This behaviour that Wilde was proposing was normal in conventional society as was Victorian one, indeed it had nothing to do with being ‘earnest’.⁸⁵

While both of them, Jack and Algernon, were ‘Bunburying’ to escape the society and its hypocritical conventions, they became hypocrites themselves by pretending to be somebody of the name of Ernest.⁸⁶ Before the time they have got caught, Cecily expresses her wish hoping that Algernon who pretends to be Ernest at the moment is not actually leading a double because that would be pure

⁸³ Michael R. Doylen, “Oscar Wilde's ‘De Profundis,’” 554.

⁸⁴ Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, 255.

⁸⁵ Reinert, “Satiric Strategy in The Importance of Being Earnest,” 17.

⁸⁶ Reinert, “Satiric Strategy in The Importance of Being Earnest,” 16.

hypocrisy.⁸⁷ Ironically, that was exactly what he was doing at the moment. When they got caught with their lies as imposters, Jack had to admit he has never had a brother, he just pretended to have one. While Algernon had to ‘kill’ his imaginary friend. When his aunt asked about the poor friend Bunbury, he said to her: “Oh! I killed Bunbury this afternoon. I mean poor Bunbury died this afternoon”.⁸⁸ There were no emotions or pity over his death, he even made a little bit of fun from the situation, which shows the shallow character and values in society – they did not value honesty nor responsibility, but cared for social positions, style and beauty. Paradoxically, Jack was not lying about who he was as it turned out that his real name was Ernest after his father, so both of his lives became a truth.⁸⁹

4.2.2. The Picture of Dorian Gray

Dorian’s double life was completely of a different type than the ones presented by Jack and Algernon. The beauty and innocence in his face allowed him to commit the most terrible sin of all, a murder. No one would ever believe him that he had killed Basil with his own hands and the fact gave him indescribable pleasure from his double life. Even when he jokingly said to Lord Henry what would he say if he actually killed Basil, he gave him an answer that only boost his ego: “It is not in you, Dorian, to commit a murder”.⁹⁰

On the outside Dorian was a respectable young Englishmen, adored by others. Thus, his soul was corrupted, starting with the suicide of Sibyl followed by the murder of Basil in his own home and another suicide as outcome of Basil death. He sought a peace in drugs, namely in opium. Nevertheless, to Dorian his beauty and youth has been a mask for his sins and served as a cover for his double life.

4.3. Crime and Punishment

The view on crime and its punishment differs throughout different works. While in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the punishment for the sins affects his mind,

⁸⁷ Richard Foster, “Wilde as Parodist: A Second Look at The Importance of Being Earnest,” In *College English* 18, no. 1 (1956), 21, accessed July 13, 2020, doi:10.2307/372764.

⁸⁸ Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, 323.

⁸⁹ Breuer, “Paradox in Oscar Wilde,” 233.

⁹⁰ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 212.

making him feel nervous and suspicious towards others. For Dorian the punishment is the prejudices of the society and the fact his beauty had saved him from any real punishment more likely being hanged. On the other hand, the poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* discusses the real punishment of being imprisoned and waiting for a death sentence. Along the prison life, what rules are being applied and the mistreatment of prisoners. However, in *De Profundis* the punishment serves a role slightly different, it has the positive outcome of changed point of view on life itself.

4.3.1. The Picture of Dorian Gray

Punishment for a crime does not always have to be prison, for Dorian the punishment was the ugliness of the formerly beautiful portrait and his destroyed peace of mind. It was a mirror to his corrupted soul that became uglier whenever a crime was committed, or someone was badly treated. After the murder of Basil, Dorian forced his former friend to cover up his sin by dissolving the dead body, being completely angry Dorian told Alan: “Don’t you understand? They will hang me for what I have done,”⁹¹ he was right that would be perfect punishment for murdering someone. After being blackmailed, Alan agreed to do it, but in the end, he could not bear to live with the fact he had helped a murderer and committed a suicide. Yet another suicide to which Dorian was the cause.

The more sins Dorian had committed, the more restless he became, always having the feeling of being watched. He was extremely nervous when leaving London for longer time as someone could discover his terrible secret even though he was the only person having the key to the room. The picture was causing him more uneasiness each day, although he was indifferent to his own life he was still afraid of dying or being killed by Sibyl’s brother James what a paradox.

He was always burdened by the murder; his own past was haunting him and yet the only evidence that could be found was the picture itself. It carried all his sins and secrets, it did not let him peacefully sleep and kept him awake at night. He decided to destroy the piece of art with the same knife that he killed its artist with, he sliced the picture in order to be free. He did not only destroy the picture, he killed himself, suddenly the picture gained back its original beauty and on the floor was a

⁹¹ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 167.

dead body with a knife in its heart and all wickedness in the face.⁹² He was only recognized because of his rings, since he was “withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage”.⁹³

4.3.2. De Profundis

As was mentioned several times, the relationship between two men was not acceptable during Victorian Era. Wilde talks about reminiscence of their “ill-fated and most lamentable friendship”,⁹⁴ that brought a ruin upon his successful life. Not only he ended up in prison for two years, but their friendship brought a bankruptcy to him.

Without the punishment there would be no realization of the things one had done. Wilde was saying it allows the sinner to change the past, that it can be altered. Christ had shown that a sinner is capable of such a thing. He himself said: “I dare to say one has to go to prison to understand it”. In the end the imprisonment allowed him to change his view on life and what is meaningful and important in one’s life.⁹⁵ “What a beginning! What a wonderful beginning!”⁹⁶ showed the punishment that was at the beginning unbearable had turned into positive outcome during the first year. Even though that Wilde turned it into something more acceptable and let his soul develop to a new perspective on life, the prison system was entirely wrong. They had come across mistreatment, bad conditions and hard labour.

From the point of view of the father, Wilde’s imprisonment was not enough for him, he also brought bankruptcy on him too. For his own success and being the hero for saving his son from the evil ‘influence’ of older man. Wilde’s punishment for the friendship he had tried ending on several occasions was not only the hard imprisonment, but the bankruptcy when he lost his collection of books, rights to his own work and his oldest son was taken away by the law. That is more than enough punishments for one friendship.

⁹² Breuer, “Paradox in Oscar Wilde,” 230.

⁹³ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 224.

⁹⁴ Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writing*, 3.

⁹⁵ Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writing*, 83.

⁹⁶ Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writing*, 85.

4.3.3. The Ballad of Reading Gaol

Through the story of hanging a prisoner for murdering his wife, Wilde described the life and rules in the prison. “I know not whether the laws be right, Or whether laws be wrong,”⁹⁷ Wilde tried to make some conclusion about the justice system, however he had no idea if the law was right or wrong. Surely the men knew the walls in Gaol were strong and the time went extremely slow. No such a thing as privacy existed in prisons, prisoners were constantly watched so the prison would not be robbed of its prey by the suicide.⁹⁸

The punishment had been inadequate, being sentences to hard labour, they had to clean their prison floor until their fingers bled but at the same time the hard work served as a distraction for a brief moment from a feeling same to all of them “... in the heart of every man, Terror was lying still”.⁹⁹ Not only the hard work but also the lack of humanity was present, no one ever came to talk to them, they had been only watched through a door “With soul and body marred”.¹⁰⁰

Throughout the whole poem we read about the treatment of prisoners, who were treated as a filth not based on their qualities as people but because of the transgressions they have committed. Their manners showed after the hanging of the prisoner,¹⁰¹ “They hanged him as a beast is hanged:...But hurriedly they took him out, And hid him in a hole”.¹⁰² None of them talked about him as a dead, they only cared about getting rid of the body as quickly as possible.

When Wooldridge was hanged, he did not receive even a proper burial afterwards “For where a grave had opened wide, There was no grave at all”.¹⁰³ He

⁹⁷ Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writing*, 135.

⁹⁸ Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writing*, 119.

⁹⁹ Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writing*, 124.

¹⁰⁰ Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writing*, 137.

¹⁰¹ Brett Beasley, ‘Oscar Wilde’s Humility: A Reassessment of The Ballad of Reading Gaol,’ In *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* 69, no. 4 (September 22, 2017): 256, accessed June 8, 2020, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,url,uid&db=edsclr&AN=edsgcl.527261179&lang=cs&site=eds-live>.

¹⁰² Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writing*, 134.

¹⁰³ Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writing*, 132.

was put simply on a mud and sand, covered in quicklime to speed up the process of dissolving the dead body. It was all rushed in order to hide him and even made fun of his dead body without any respect “They mocked the swollen purple throat, And the stark and staring eyes: And with laughter loud they heaped the shroud...”.¹⁰⁴ He was a murderer therefore he deserved to be punished but did not need to be treated with such an inhuman way. Wilde never suggested that there should be no punishment for the murder or that he should not be hanged because there is a certain link between punishment and crime as it is between murder and execution.¹⁰⁵ Wooldridge murdered her, so the execution was waiting for him, “The man had killed the thing he loved, And so he had to die”.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writing*, 134.

¹⁰⁵ Beasley, “Oscar Wilde’s Humility,” 260.

¹⁰⁶ Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writing*, 138.

5. CONCLUSION

The aim of the bachelor thesis was to remark upon different kinds of hypocrisy of the Victorian Era, whose society was ruled by strict rules and double standards. The thesis was concerned with the elements of hypocrisy depicted in four works of Oscar Wilde, namely in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. During the reign of Queen Victoria, a lot of progress was made with a number of new inventions. People were changing the way of living and moving to the city of London, Britain's population grew a great deal during this time. Victorian literature was certainly affected by the society's views and morals. Without a doubt, writers of the late Victorian period discussed and satirized the stereotypes running in the society, between these writers belonged Oscar Wilde.

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, an Irishman, was considered to be one of the most remarkable authors of the late period of Victorian Era. After moving to London, he established himself as a spokesman of the Aesthetic movement and a proponent of 'Art for art's sake'. His plays with witty humour made the Victorians laugh at their own morals and behaviour.

The author's works had carried an ongoing moral message, employing satire to expose the social practices of Victorian society, more precisely various kinds of hypocrisy. Moreover, as his own life became more tragic with the trial that was followed by the imprisonment, his message became more apparent and obvious. In one of his work *De Profundis*, Wilde remarked on the important events in his own life: "...two great turning-points of my life were when my father sent me to Oxford, and society sent me to prison".¹⁰⁷ The first one was important in terms of his education and establishing his career as a writer, the other one had him to re-evaluate his views on life after spending two years in prison with hard labour.

Furthermore, the work is analysing several topics related to the hypocrisy of society were discussed within them. The elements and values of Victorian society could be found in all discussed works. The class system and expectations on marriage appeared in *The Importance of Being Earnest* as marriage was a way of securing the social status. An act of trying to get married into a higher class was

¹⁰⁷ Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol & Other Writing*, 60.

unacceptable and considered as an act of hypocrisy as well. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the important values were shown, their appreciation for beauty over everything else. However, the novel contained a taboo topic of the Victorian period that was same-sex relationships. The homosexual elements came from Basil who had adored young Dorian, similarly to Wilde who himself liked to be in the company of young men himself. Nevertheless, the two later works showed more serious wrongdoing of the society, discussing the role of society in punishments of other people in both works *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

The topic of double standards in society was shared by two of his works, but with different outcomes. While Jack and Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest* pretended to be someone else in order to get to city or countryside away from their social responsibilities, Dorian's life was poisoned by several sins. Whereas the consequences the Jack's and Algernon's attitudes ended happily, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wilde picked different outcome, more tragic as the result of Dorian's double life was his own death as he could no longer bear the ugliness created his actions in the portrait. The picture became a distress to him, he became paranoid of someone discovering his awful secret, it slowly became a burden and punishment for his previous actions. In his work could be found two different points of view on punishment. While in *De Profundis* Wilde proposed a thought that without the punishment one would not become conscious of the bad decisions one had made in life or crimes that one had committed. On the other hand, in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* Wilde told a story of another prisoner who had been rightfully hanged for murdering his wife and simultaneously depicted the prison life and the injustice towards prisoners.

In conclusion, Wilde shared similarities with his characters which could be considered biographical themes in his work and his own personal experience with prison changed his point of view on life itself. Oscar Wilde as a writer, managed to capture the Victorian values with incredible wit that made the Victorianism of the late period die with laughter. Although he was more known for his scandal and trial of "gross indecency," his work carried a hidden message about homosexuality which could not be discussed openly at the time.

6. RESUMÉ

Bakalářská práce *Každý člověk zabíjí to, co má rád: Pokrytectví v dílech Oscara Wilda* se zabývá různými druhy pokrytectví v jeho čtyřech dílech, a to ve hře *Jak je důležité míti Filipa*, v románu *Obraz Doriana Graye*, v dopise *De Profundis* a v *Baladě o žaláři v Readingu*. Soustředí se na vztahy mezi hlavními mužskými postavami románu, jak představy a nároky společnosti ovlivnily jejich chování, ale také autorovými vlastními zkušenostmi popsány ve zbývajících dvou dílech, které napsal až v době, kdy byl vězněn. V dopise jeho milenci Lordu Douglasovi Wilde převyprávěl celý jejich vztah, ale také se věnoval vině a společnosti, která se na jeho pádu podílela. Kromě rozboru děl a prvků, které se v nich nachází, je věnována pozornost i samotnému životu autora a viktoriánské době.

Ve druhé kapitole podává práce základní fakta a změny podle období, na které byla viktoriánská doba rozdělena. Pozornost je upřena na změny, kterými společnost prošla po schválení několika reforem. Rozebírá také hodnoty společnosti a dvojí standardy, které v ní panovaly. Nakonec se věnuje také autorům, kteří byli ve viktoriánské době aktivní, a vzrůstu zájmu o divadla a kulturu všeobecně.

Třetí kapitola se soustředí na samotný život Oscara Wilda, jeho rodinu, studia a okruh přátel, který měl vliv na jeho pozdější psaní. Podkapitoly jsou věnovány jeho rodinnému životu s manželkou a dvěma dětmi, ale také popisují jeho dvojí život v očích společnosti a aféru s Lordem Alfredem Douglasem, která započala celý jeho pád a skončila až Wildovým odsouzením ke dvěma letům tvrdé práce ve vězení. Část třetí kapitoly je také věnovaná soudům, kterými si Oscar Wilde prošel a jaký vliv měly na jeho dosavadně úspěšný život. V neposlední řadě je zde rozebráno estetické hnutí viktoriánské doby.

Samotným dílům se tato práce věnuje ve čtvrté kapitole, která je rozdělena do tří podkapitol–Viktoriánská společnost, Dvojí standardy společnosti, Zločin a trest. Každé dílo je rozebíráno podle toho, jaké motivy pokrytectví v něm můžeme najít. Ve hře *Jak je důležité míti Filipa* se objevují nejen hodnoty dané společností, ale také její dvojí standardy. Pro společnost bylo nepřijatelné, aby uzavřeli manželství dva lidé z odlišných vrstev, a proto se této svatbě snažili zabránit. Dalším tématem byly smyšlené osoby dvou hlavních hrdinů, kteří je využívali k útěku od svých povinností, v případě Jacka to bylo z venkova zpátky do města,

zatímco Algernon se na druhou stranu snažil dostat z města pryč za pomoci svého nemocného kamaráda. V románu *Obraz Doriana Graye* se ve vztahu mezi hlavními postavami objevuje element homosexuality. Román též poukazuje na pokrytecké vnímání světa kolem nás, soustředěním se pouze na vizuální krásu, která nakonec přivedla hlavní postavu k sebevraždě. V neposlední řadě, trest pro Doriana za všechny jeho hříchy byla přehnaná paranoia, že by někdo mohl zjistit jeho skutečné tajemství ukryté v obraze. Další dílo, kterému se tato práce věnuje, je rozsáhlý dopis *De Profundis* adresovaný Lordu Douglasovi, který Oscar Wilde napsal během svého vězení v Readingu na vězeňský papír. V něm popisuje jeho skutečný vztah s Douglasem, jeho pocity ale i částečnou vinu za jeho odsouzení. Pokrytectví je zde ukázáno skrze jeho rodiče na jejich chování vůči Wildovi. Posledním dílem v této kapitole je *Balada o žaláři v Readingu*, která znázorňuje soudobou společnost a její odsuzování. Skrze příběh vojáka odsouzeného k trestu smrti za zabití své manželky dostáváme představu o krutosti a nespravedlivosti viktoriánského vězení, ale také můžeme v určitých verších najít známky vztahu mezi dvěma muži.

Cílem této bakalářské práce bylo dokázat přítomnost pokrytectví typického pro danou společnost, které se odráželo v jejich názorech na manželství a s tím také související výběr správného partnera podle určitých kritérií. Společnost, která navenek působila upjatě, žila dvojí život a dokud o něm nikdo nevěděl, bylo to v pořádku, ale jakmile se to dostalo na povrch, ostatní toto chování odsuzovali. Také vnímání a postavení žen ve společnosti bylo vůči mužům odlišné, ženy měly být na mužích závislé. Posledním tématem této práce je zločin a jeho následný trest, ale také špatné podmínky ve vězení. Oscar Wilde byl bezpochyby odlišný na dobu, ve které žil. Jeho chování i některá díla způsobila pobouření ve společnosti. Ať už to byly divadelní hry, ve kterých satirizoval současnou společnost, či jeho román, kde nejenom *Dorian* zaprodal svoji duši ďáblu výměnou za věčnou krásu, ale také zde byl určitý vztah mezi hlavními mužskými postavami. Dokud jeho díla byla ovšem vtipná a lehce satirická, společnost je milovala. Stejně tak, jak se změnil jeho život s odsouzením na dva roky vězení, změnil se i tón jeho děl, která byla najednou více realistická a upřímná. I přes skandály, které provázely jeho život, patří jeho díla k významným dané doby, které vykreslují satiricky danou společnost a její hodnoty.

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8. ANNOTATIONS

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8.1. Abstract

This Bachelor Thesis is concerned with kinds of hypocrisy in the Victorian Era whose society was ruled by double standards and strict rules. These elements are depicted in four-well-known works of Oscar Wilde. The analysed works are *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. The aim of the thesis is to explore different types of hypocrisy within these works, in which Oscar Wilde satirized contemporary society that played an important role in his downfall.

Key words: Aesthetic movement, Homosexuality, Oscar Wilde, Victorian Society, Hypocrisy, Double Standards, Morality, Prison

9. ANOTACE

Jméno: Karolína Crháková

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Název práce: Každý člověk zabíjí to, co má rád: Pokrytectví v dílech Oscara Wilda

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9.1. Abstrakt

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá zpracováním tématu pokrytectví ve viktoriánské době, kde ve společnosti vládly dvojí standardy a přísná pravidla. Tyto prvky jsou popsány ve čtyřech známých dílech Oscara Wilda, mezi která patří *Jak je důležité míti Filipa*, *Obraz Doriana Graye*, *De Profundis* a *Balada o žaláři v Readingu*. Záměrem této práce je prozkoumat různé druhy pokrytectví v daných dílech, ve kterých Oscar Wilde satirizoval soudobou společnost, která se přímo podílela na jeho osudu.

Klíčová slova: Estetické hnutí, Homosexualita, Oscar Wilde, Viktoriánská společnost, Pokrytectví, Dvojité standardy, Morálka, Vězení