

**Charles University in Prague, Faculty of Education**

**Department of English Language and Literature**



**Bachelor's Thesis**

***Between Irony and Decadence: Oscar Wilde's Portrayal of  
the Upper Class***

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## **Prohlášení**

Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci na téma *Between Irony and Decadence: Oscar Wilde's Portrayal of the Upper Class* vypracovala samostatně a uvedla jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

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## **Poděkování**

Za cenné rady, odborné vedení a trpělivost při zpracování bakalářské práce děkuji  
vedoucímu bakalářské práce PhDr. P. Chalupskému, Ph.D.

## **Annotation**

The Bachelor's Thesis on the theme of *Between Irony and Decadence: Oscar Wilde's Portrayal of the Upper Class* deals with Wilde's perception of the English aristocracy of the end of the nineteenth century and with the ways which he uses to criticise this social milieu. A brief glossary is introduced to supplement the theme. The thesis further discusses the topic of the writer's philosophy of *Æstheticism* and of *Æstheticism* generally. The analysis of Wilde's conception of morality and immorality is the last part of the thesis. General comments are demonstrated on the following works: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) and *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892).

## **Anotace**

Bakalářská práce na téma „Na pomezí ironie a dekadence: Portrét horní třídy z pohledu Oscara Wilda“ se zabývá Wildovým pojetím anglické aristokracie na konci devatenáctého století a prostředky, které využívá ke kritice této společenské vrstvy. K doplnění tématu zde uvádíme krátký Slovník pojmů. Práce dále pojednává o esteticismu obecně a o esteticismu z pohledu Oscara Wilda. Poslední částí je analýza Wildova konceptu morálnosti a nemorálnosti. Obecné poznatky jsou demonstrovány na následujících dílech: Obraz Doriana Graye (1890), Ideální manžel (1895), Jak je důležité míti Filipa (1895) a Vějíř lady Windermérové (1892).

# Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	2
THE ÆSTHETIC MOVEMENT .....	3
Æstheticism and Oscar Wilde .....	5
WILDE'S CONCEPTION OF MORALITY AND IMMORALITY .....	11
OSCAR WILDE'S PORTRAYAL OF THE UPPER CLASS IN HIS SELECTED WORKS.....	17
Language, means of humour and characters .....	22
Glossary.....	26
CONCLUSION .....	31
ABBREVIATIONS.....	33
WORKS CITED .....	34

## INTRODUCTION

This Bachelor's Thesis deals with the most expressive features of Oscar Wilde's literary themes in his selected works. It is focused on his criticism of the upper class which dominates in his writing. It also discusses the writer's philosophy of Æstheticism and his concept of morality and immorality. All ideas are supported by examples from the following works: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) and *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892).

The thesis consists of three parts – “The Æsthetic Movement”, “Wilde's conception of morality and immorality with a special focus on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*” and “Oscar Wilde's portrayal of the upper class in his selected works”. The first chapter contains a subchapter which deals with Oscar Wilde's conception of Æstheticism. The first and the second part of the Bachelor's Thesis are closely connected and they result from each other – mainly Wilde's conception of morality and immorality results from Æstheticism. The third part is subdivided into two subchapters “Language, means of humour and characters” and “Glossary”, which is supposed to provide additional comments on the theme of the upper class. The ordering of these three chapters is based on their rising importance – Wilde's criticism of the aristocracy is the most prominent one.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the characteristic features of Wilde's writing and illustrate why he is focused on the themes mentioned above. As regards expected results, it should provide an image of Wilde's attitude to the upper class, Æstheticism and morality. It should also depict the interconnectedness of these themes: how Wilde's philosophy of Æstheticism determines his concept of morality and immorality and how Æstheticism and morality form his attitude to the upper class.

## THE ÆSTHETIC MOVEMENT

The term *Æsthetic* has its origin in a Greek word *aisthesis*, which means *perception* or the science of the beautiful. The definition was used by German writers for a branch of philosophy which deals with the theory of the beautiful, or rather, with the philosophy of poetry and fine arts. For the first time, the term was applied by a German philosopher named Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in the title of his work – *Æsthetica* (published in 1750). For a century and a half, German writers and philosophers were discussing a literary question “...whether an object is actually beautiful in itself, or merely appears so to certain persons having faculties capable of appreciating that which is *positively* beautiful“ (Hamilton vi). This discussion gave rise to the school of Æstheticism. The Æsthetic Movement in England showed the same tendencies as those characteristic of French Decadence.

Æstheticism had its forerunners in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (known also as the Pre-Raphaelites) who were inspired mainly by the Middle Ages – or more specifically – by the medieval Pre-Raphaelite painters. Furthermore, they deeply admired the early Renaissance (early Italian art). Æstheticism had a very important source of inspiration in Walter Pater as well. The publication of his work *Renaissance* in 1873 is considered to be the beginning of English decadence. He presented there his philosophy of living intensely and set the doctrine of his Cyrenaicism. He believed that we should enjoy every moment of our lives as it would be the last, but it was not meant as bohemianism. The poetic passion, the desire for beauty, the love for art for its own sake – these should be the most significant aspects of our existence. This vivid conception of art and living is quite surprising to find in a person who led very ascetic life in silent solitude. Nevertheless, Walter Pater strongly influenced Oscar Wilde, who met him when he was studying at Oxford. Mainly Wilde's early lectures bear distinctive features of Pater's philosophy.

One of the basic theses of the Æsthetic School is that all fine arts are very closely connected to one another. “It may be urged that the Æsthetic idea of the correlation of the arts is carried to an absurd extent, when Mr. Whistler borrows musical terms for titles for his paintings“ (Hamilton 28). Thus, it influenced not only art and poetry, but also other branches of human creative endeavour, such as design of clothes and furniture. Æstheticism and its principles could be found especially in painting (a condition most probably given by the impact of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood – some of the Æsthetic painters were also the Pre-Raphaelites). As examples of the painters of Æstheticism we can name Dante G. Rossetti, James A. MacNeill Whistler, Cecil G. Lawson or Walter Crane (an illustrator). In music, some composers drew inspiration from the Æsthetic Movement, for instance Franz Liszt, Anton Rubinstein or Richard Wagner. Concerning architecture, the Æsthetes preferred the Queen Anne style, which can be distinguished by chippendale furniture, dados, old-fashioned brass and wrought iron work or medieval lamps. In addition, furniture and costumes of people with Æsthetic inclination bore resemblance with Japanese style of art.

This movement was represented by three symbols: the sunflower, the lily and the peacock's feather (or just the peacock), which were supposed to mean Purity (the lily), Beauty (the peacock) and Constancy (the sunflower). Hamilton writes that it is not so easy to explain why these symbols were so closely identified with Æstheticism. It was probably due to Dante G. Rossetti's poems, in which he celebrated especially the lily and the peacock. Oscar Wilde uses the symbols too: in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for instance, the word “peacock“ appears four times – it works as a metaphor for something very beautiful and majestic: “she is a peacock in everything but beauty“ (15), “the sky was like a monstrous peacock's tail“ (221).

Æstheticism in literature (chiefly in poetry) was often dealing with descriptions of passions. It was fond of using intense language: “...somewhat exaggerated metaphor, and their

adjectives are usually superlative – as supreme, consummate, utter, quite too preciously sublime &c.“ (Hamilton 36). Consequently, Æstheticism was not based only on the credo ‘art for art's sake’ but also ‘words for their own sake’ – they were not mere linguistic units for Æsthetes who were particular in choosing proper words. Words themselves had their sense of existence. Aatos Ojala uses the ideas of Théophile Gautier to describe the importance of words for Æsthetes: “For them words had ‘in themselves and apart from their meaning, a beauty and value of their own as gems which have not yet been cut and mounted in necklaces, bracelets’; and it was ‘no light task selecting the right jewel of a word’“ (18). The most prominent poets were as follow: Dante G. Rossetti (we can notice the diffusion of different kinds of art), William M. Rossetti, Algernon Charles Swinburne, William Morris and Oscar Wilde. It is also possible to find some features of Æstheticism in Robert Browning's or Walt Whitman's poems.

The Æsthetic Movement was often attacked by a big number of critics who wrote epigrams and drew cartoons to mock the Æsthetes. Epecially *Punch*, a British satirical magazine, was focused on assaulting the poets of Æstheticism. For instance, there was a scandal with some caricatures made by Mr. Du Maurier (published in *Punch*). Æstheticism was ridiculed also through satirical works, such as F. C. Burnand's *The Colonel* or Gilbert and Sullivan's opera *Patience*. The Æsthetes were criticised mainly for their iclination to homosexuality and were accused of being immoral and effeminate; Æstheticism was labelled as self-serving and purposeless.

### Æstheticism and Oscar Wilde

“Oscar Wilde described himself on leaving Oxford as a ‘Professor of Æsthetics and a Critic of Art’....“ (Harris 39). Æstheticism was not considered by its followers to be a mere

literary movement. It was rather a philosophic concept for them. This view was embraced also by Oscar Wilde himself, as we can see, for example, in an interview which he gave on a visit in America: “‘It will depend entirely upon what encouragement I find in the acceptance of my school of philosophy.’ ‘Do you than call æstheticism a philosophy?’ asked the reporter. ‘Most certainly it is a philosophy. It is the study of what may be found in art. It is the pursuit of the secret of life. Whatever there is in all art that represents the eternal truth, is an expression of the great underlying truth. So far æstheticism may be held to be the study of truth in art’” (Hamilton 111). For Wilde, Æstheticism was not an ordinary philosophy, it was the philosophy of life; it was his life attitude to which he made everything, the way of life and the way of writing, subordinate.

“The English Aesthetic Movement was ‘the revolt against the ugliness of the Victorian era and the revolt against its moral tutorship’” (Ojala 100). This fact is the reason why Oscar Wilde deals with the concept of morality and immorality but he does not see the difference between them as they are parts of one concept for him. For Wilde, Æstheticism is above morality or immorality, which is clearly demonstrated by Wilde's answer at a court: “‘Had he written there a story called ‘The Priest and the Acolyte?’’ ‘No.’ ‘Was that story immoral?’ Oscar amused everyone by replying: ‘Much worse than immoral, it was badly written.’” (Harris 144). Wilde repeats this idea in The Preface in which he writes: “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all” (PDG 5).

The Æsthetes are the chosen ones who can recognize the truth and appreciate the real beauty of nature and art; on the other hand, there are people called Philistines who do not see or are not able to distinguish the beautiful. The term “a Philistine“ is enforced by Matthew Arnold in his essay *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). He divides the society into three classes: Barbarians (the aristocratic class), Philistines (the middle class) and Populace (the working

class). “Barbarians“ and “Populace“ are classical allusions and “Philistines“ is a biblical reference to “an alien and aggressive tribe who inhabited the southern coast of Palestine. From there they continually raided the Israelites“ (Cuddon 665). In *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms* there is used Arnold's definition to describe Philistines as “the prosperous middle class that had come to power in industrialized Europe. Arnold regarded this new middle class as interested solely in material possession and therefore as a threat to genuine culture“ (Quinn 245). Simply speaking, a Philistine is a person who primarily concerns themselves about material objects and money and who is interested very little in art, beauty and culture. Arnold himself writes in *Culture and Anarchy*: “...the Philistine being, as is well known, the enemy of the children of light or servants of the idea“ (104). This designation is also used by Oscar Wilde: “Oh, Basil is the best of fellows, but he seems to me to be just a bit of a Philistine“ (PDG 80). Paradoxically, Dorian was speaking about Basil, a painter, who was actually the first one who discovered Dorian's beauty.

Oscar Wilde was accused of being a homosexual not only in his real life but was also accused of writing about homosexuality in his works. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was considered to be the most obvious piece of evidence: Basil Hallward's adoration of Dorian was taken as a proof of Wilde's homosexuality. However, Basil's worshipping of Dorian is rather platonic love of an artist to something, or rather someone, extraordinarily beautiful – thus it is a telling example of Æstheticism in practise. It is not a sexual relationship. Dorian is a Muse, an abstract symbol for his art. Basil says: “He is all my art to me now. ...his personality has suggested to me an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style” (PDG 18, 19). He also says “Dorian Gray is to me simply a motive in art“ and “...my life as an artist depends on him” (PDG 20, 24). Oscar Wilde puts emphasis on an æsthetic point of view in the relationship between Basil and Dorian. Art is Basil's whole life and when Dorian appears he just finds a new focus in his beloved act of creation.

Wilde was a very keen admirer of the Antiquity, especially of ancient Greece. Frank Harris writes that Wilde is said to have quoted ancient writers and philosophers even on his deathbed. “He preferred Niobe to the Mater Dolorosa and Helen to both; the worship of sorrow must give place, he declared, to the worship of the beautiful“ (Harris 36). Accordingly, he found ancient Greece a source for his Æstheticism. He adored the Greek concept of beauty together with the beauty of a male body. ““A man's figure is much finer,’ [Oscar Wilde said]. Still it seemed to me that his admiration was rather artistic and aesthetic than merely physical“ (Harris xli). This was most probably the inspiration for the theme of Dorian as a Muse. A Muse is usually a woman but in Æstheticism the gender does not play a role; beauty is on much higher level of importance. Dorian is purely an inspiration for Basil as an artist.

Wilde's underlying ideas about art and Æstheticism can be found in The Preface (added to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* afterwards when the edition published in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* was criticised). Wilde writes: “All art is quite useless.“ It is not meant as denigration but as something positive – beauty is not a matter-of-fact, it is something divine. He also said: “Art never expresses anything but itself“ (Ellmann xx). Art should evoke beauty in people, it should please them, but at the same time it is art for art – it is created for the beauty itself. We can see Wilde's faith in the power of beauty when Basil speaks about Sibyl Vane: “To spiritualize one’s age – that is something worth doing. If this girl can give a soul to those who have lived without one, if she can create the sense of beauty in people whose lives have been sordid and ugly, if she can strip them of their selfishness and lend them tears for sorrows that are not their own, she is worthy of all your adoration, worthy of the adoration of the world“ (PDG 114). Sibyl Vane represents an entity which could be called a soul of art – she appeals to her audience in the same manner in which the art should appeal to its readers.

In the introduction to the Æsthetic Movement we have discussed the concept of words held by its followers. Wilde himself was conscious of the power of language and he used it

fully. He went even further and called himself “a Lord of Language“ (Ojala 42). He often plays with words to create a certain atmosphere – most frequently a comic situation. According to the spirit of Æstheticism, Wilde is fond of using words which describe marginal qualities: the terms such as “charming“, “fascinating“ or “exquisite“ on the one side, and “tedious“, “serious“ (which he uses rather in meaning of “dull“) or “horrid“/“horror“ on the other side. The reason why Wilde wrote so many comedies is in that he was very efficient in writing dialogues. In his times, he was known chiefly as an extraordinary conversationalist. He professed “the principle of doing nothing and of discussing everything“ (Ojala 39).

The æsthetic principle of the interconnection of arts is very evident in Oscar Wilde's fiction and plays. He often uses metaphors and symbols from other kinds of art. His plays especially are full of references to paintings and statues. In the first act of *An Ideal Husband* two ladies are described in a scenic comment as “Watteau would have loved to paint them.” This note is to a great extent unnecessary and redundant because the audience in a theatre would not know about it and a scenarist would scarcely have been looking for an actress who really looks like Watteau's model. It was purely Oscar Wilde's compulsive feeling which was caused by his inclination towards Æstheticism. Nearly every person in *An Ideal Husband* is characterized by a parallel from painting or statuary, for instance Lord Caversham as “rather like a portrait by Lawrence”, Mabel Chiltern as “To sane people she is not reminiscent of any work of art. But she is really like a Tanagra statuette”, Mrs. Cheveley is “A work of art, on the whole, but showing the influence of too many schools”.

Wilde used a method which could be called mixing of genres and modes of writing: his comedies often have some features of his fiction and his fiction sometimes has some features of his comedies. The following extract reminds of a scenic comment which tells a decorator in a theatre how an imaginary room on a stage should be decorated: “On a tiny satinwood table stood a statuette by Clodion, and beside it lay a copy of *Les Cent Nouvelles*,

bound for Margaret of Valois by Clovis Eve and powdered with the gilt daisies that Queen had selected for her device“ (PDG 64). It seems that drama has a stronger position than fiction in Wilde's work. Consequently, his fiction is more influenced by his comedies than it is the other way. It is probably caused by his inclination to the theatre. “He had not only all the vanity of the actor, but what might be called the born dramatist's love for the varied life of the stage - its paintings, costumings, rhetoric - and above all the touch of emphasis natural to it which gives such opportunity for humorous exaggeration“ (Harris 36).

By his contemporaries Wilde as a representative of Æstheticism was received in different ways. Harris describes how Wilde was hated by many people but usually until they met him in person. He was a charming debator, as has been mentioned above, and was able to captivate his listeners very easily. “By talent and conviction he was the natural pet of the aristocracy whose selfish prejudices he defended and whose leisure he amused. The middle class, as has been noted, disliked and despised him; but its social influence is small and its papers, and especially *Punch*, made him notorious by attacking him in and out of season“ (Harris 71). *Punch's* assaults were paradoxically beneficial for Wilde and his reputation and everyone wanted to see his plays.

## **WILDE'S CONCEPTION OF MORALITY AND IMMORALITY WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY***

“I am afraid that you and I disagree in our opinion on art for I hold that there is no perfect art without perfect morality, whilst you say they are distinct and separable things“ (Moffet 27). These sentences of Oscar Wilde's wife Constance, which she wrote him in a letter, prove that Wilde believed that the artist's view of life is the only possible one and it should be applied to all aspects of human life, including morality. Although Constance pointed out the fact that her husband thought art and morality two separable things, it is probable that it was not supposed to mean “two different things at the same level“. Wilde as a representative of Aestheticism valued beauty above morality – thus morality itself is not so important for Wilde, the writer, but he often deals with the concept of morality and immorality, because he wants to protest against Victorian values and to show the superiority of beauty. “His [Oscar Wilde's] attitude towards life can best be seen if he is held up against Goethe. He took the artist's view of life which Goethe was the first to state [...]: ‘The beautiful is more than the good,’ said Goethe; ‘for it includes the good’ (Harris 66). Wilde himself considered evil only as a means through which he could implement his conception of the beautiful, as he implies in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* when he describes Dorian's contemplation of various kinds of poisoning.

The superiority of beauty is also depicted in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. There is a repeatedly mentioned idea of equivalence of a good-looking appearance and morality. For instance, Lady Narborough says to Dorian Gray: “You are made to be good – you look so good“ (PDG 249). If someone is good-looking he or she is automatically supposed to be moral – superficial beauty is considered to determine inner principles. When people look at Dorian and they can see how handsome he is, no one could believe that he has committed all the crimes he is told to have done. Particularly Basil Hallward refuses to believe the gossips.

This focus on appearance culminates at the end of the book when Dorian partly confesses to Lord Henry that he has murdered Basil and Lord Henry answers: “I would say, my dear fellow, that you were posing for a character that doesn't suit you. [...] It is not in you, Dorian, to commit a murder” (PDG 297). Even Lord Henry is convinced by Dorian's beautiful face although he thinks he knows Dorian's character. Lord Henry is once said to “value beauty far too much“. He responds: “I admit that I think that it is better to be beautiful than to be good. But on the other hand, no one is more ready than I am to acknowledge that it is better to be good than to be ugly” (PDG 271). This again supports the idea of the dominance of beauty over morality.

It seems that Wilde did not believe that the world can be divided into moral and immoral part; at least, he was sure that literature cannot be moral or immoral. This idea is presented in The Preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which becomes a climax of Wilde's dealing with the concept of morality and immorality. “There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all” (PDG 5). Wilde decided to add The Preface because *The Picture of Dorian Gray* had been heavily criticized and called an immoral book. When it was first published in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* on 20 June 1890, “it was attacked immediately in *The Daily Chronicle* [...] as a ‘tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French *decadents* - a poisonous book, the atmosphere of which is heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction’“ (Harris 82). Oscar Wilde replied that “It is poisonous, if you like; but you cannot deny that it is also perfect, and perfection is what we artists aim at“ (Harris 82). Actually, Wilde believed that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a negation of an immoral book – he reportedly claimed that his novel was in fact “too moral“.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* was labelled as an immoral book because its readers felt offended by the sins depicted in it, but in a matter of fact Oscar Wilde was right – the book is

very moral. There are many books which describe sins and evil and in which the begetter of maleficence is punished; these books are often considered to be morality books. Dorian Gray is punished for his sins – in spite of this fact the book was despised. The most probable reason of this assailing is that the society of Wilde's times could not bear the truth that they were hypocritical and shallow. As Lord Henry declares: “The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame” (PDG 304). The novel shows the real face of the upper class at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Wilde's concern for the upper class will be disputed in the third part of the Bachelor's Thesis.

In addition, the theme of selling one's soul is not original at all. The legend of Doctor Faustus is likely to be the most famous. There is a difference between Dorian Gray and Doctor Faustus because Dorian only utters a desire not to grow older but Doctor Faustus yearns for knowledge so much that he is able to sell his soul. Dorian's wish is uttered unintentionally; it is just a regret over the certainty of losing his youth. Faustus makes a decision of his own will and he intends to commit a sin from the very beginning. Although they are based on the same idea, the legend of Doctor Faustus is considered to be a warning story in contrast to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The motif of the fatal picture is not authentic as well. As Timothy Moffet writes: “The story of a man who remains eternally young while his portrait decays was inspired by the painter Basil Ward (‘Basil Hallward’ in the novel), whom Oscar had once watched painting a handsome young man. Ward had remarked of his sitter, ‘How delightful it would be if he could remain exactly as he is, while the portrait aged and withered in his stead.’ *Dorian Gray* was not completely original – there are too many traces of Poe, Balzac, Robert Louis Stevenson and French Symbolism for that” (34). Wilde only worked up these themes into a masterpiece which, as he said, was written for his own pleasure.

Oscar Wilde is exceptional with his concept of sin. He considered it as a kind of experience. He did not find the sin something immoral. He said: “I showed them that sin with

its curiosities widened the horizons of life. Prejudices and prohibitions are mere walls to imprison the soul“ (Harris 32). He also said: “What is termed Sin is an essential element of progress“ (Ellmann xxii). Were it not for a sin, the world would stand still or fade away or become colorless, as Wilde says through the character of Lord Henry Wotton: “Sin is the only real colour-element left in modern life” (PDG 44). These are one of many Wilde's opinions which made people of his times condemn him and call him an immoral creature. They minded that he defended the sin. Wilde goes further and sometimes doubts that something as the sin even exists: “his sins, if there are such things as sins“ (PDG 28); “the passion for sin, or for what the world calls sin“ (PDG 264). These statements prove that in Wilde's opinion, the difference between moral and immoral simply disappears – denying the existence of the sin means denying its immorality. Wilde easily confuses good and evil and transposes virtues for sins, because for him, morality and immorality, as has been repeatedly highlighted, melt into one unit.

Wilde often writes about “passion“ which is closely connected with the sin for him (although it has not always been like that – in his earlier works, passion was associated rather with love-passion). The word “passion“ and words derived from it are used nearly eighty times in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Dorian does everything from passion and eagerness for youth, knowledge and experience. It is also passion which makes him kill Basil Hallward. For Oscar Wilde, passion, sin or temptation are not entities which we should resist. As Lord Henry expresses in one of his paradoxes: “The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself“ (PDG 30).

Apart from sin and passion, soul is also one of the key words. “The soul is a terrible reality. It can be bought, and sold, and bartered away. It can be poisoned, or made perfect. There is a soul in each one of us. I know it“ (PDG 300). The theme of selling one's soul has

been already discussed but furthermore there is an issue concerning the corruption of a soul. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the most telling example in which the corruption of a soul takes a really realistic form. It becomes practically tangible in the shape of the picture. The corruption of a soul results from the fascination with a sin – the person who sins enjoys the sinning and is intoxicated with it; at least this is the way in which Oscar Wilde sees it. Generally speaking, Wilde frequently writes about the fascination with evil: Dorian Gray yields precedence to the friendship with Lord Henry from the friendship with Basil Hallward although he is aware of the danger of the friendship with Lord Henry. He realizes that it could destroy him: “But I know that you are better than he is. You are not stronger – you are too much afraid of life – but you are better“ (PDG 154). Wilde's inclination to fascination with evil is also manifested when he describes how Dorian is poisoned by a book in spite of the fact that Lord Henry declares that it is not possible to be poisoned by a book.

Wilde believed that there is no moral influence – in principle, any kind of influence is immoral. An influenced person is like an emptied vessel which is filled again with thoughts, passions, virtues or sins which are not their own and thus not natural to them. The influenced person is not real because he or she is only an echo, a copy, a clone. Someone else's influence restrains the aim of life: self-development. It seems that Wilde was convinced that it is simply people, not the source of influence, who are responsible for being influenced because they let themselves be influenced. He denied the accusation of being immoral in his books – the readers simply wanted to see the immorality in his books. “It is a mistake to think that the passion one feels in creation is ever really shown in the work one creates. Art is always more abstract than we fancy“ (PDG 161). People tend to see in art more than is actually present there.

Wilde's concept of morality and immorality is very deep-rooted in him as well as his concept of beauty. He certainly believes in what he writes but on the other hand it can be

possible that he presents these ideas in so straightforward manner because he wants to shock the society as he repeatedly declared. A proof could be Lord Henry Wotton, Wilde's alter ego, and his tireless propagation of the importance of assuming a pose. Basil says to Lord Henry: "You never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing. Your cynicism is simply a pose" (PDG 12). Lord Henry often speaks about sinning and evil but, unlike Dorian, he has never done anything wrong. Nevertheless, the only sentence, or rather a question which Dorian asks himself, is supposed to contain all basic ideas of Oscar Wilde's concept of morality and immorality: "Was the soul a shadow seated in the house of sin?" (PDG 82). The soul and the sin are so deeply interconnected that they are inseparable. Wilde does not try to moralize – his effort is to depict the morality and immorality of his times as he thought it was.

# OSCAR WILDE'S PORTRAYAL OF THE UPPER CLASS IN HIS

## SELECTED WORKS

There is a noticeable focus on the upper class in Oscar Wilde's works. It is most probably caused by two reasons: Wilde's family background and his social sentiment. Wilde came from an aristocratic family – he was born to Sir William R. Wilde and Jane Francesca Elgee, a grand daughter of Archdeacon Elgee, of Wexford. He was brought up in aristocratic surroundings and often joined his mother's dinner parties even as a child, although it was unusual at that time to allow a child to join a party. Then he attended best schools, for instance Oxford. Simply, as Walter Hamilton writes, Oscar Wilde was “a gentleman by birth, education, manners, and appearance” (95). The second reason why Oscar Wilde deals almost strictly only with the social milieu of the upper class is that he felt aversion against the poor and poverty itself. “His [John Ruskin's, Oscar Wilde's teacher] sympathy with the poor bored me; the road he wanted us to build was tiresome. I could see nothing in poverty that appealed to me, nothing; I shrank away from it as from a degradation of the spirit” (Harris 33). Wilde was afraid of poverty and hated it at the same time. He did not want to speak about it, or even write about it.

Wilde satirizes many life attitudes and opinions of aristocrats. He also disputes big number of aspects of their lives, such as the way of living and the aim of living (living for pleasure etc.). Generally speaking, he attacks their hypocrisy which has many forms. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he mocks mainly the focus on outward appearance. This focus on outward qualities is showed in the adoration of beautiful appearance of Dorian Gray and neglecting the horrible reality of his sinning. Wilde is aware of the fact that the upper class judged people by their appearance and reverses it in a parody when Lord Henry says: “It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances” (PDG 34). This appearance-orientation is closely connected with the cult of youth. Youth is adored to excess; it is even

called an art: “Youth is an art“ (IH 225). Lord Henry himself says that he would do anything for keeping his youth and Dorian Gray really does it – he sells his own soul for it. Dorian's desire for youth is awoken by Henry's famous statement: “Youth is the one thing worth having” (PDG 34). At the end of the book, Dorian becomes, apart from a sinner and a murderer, also a hypocrite which is the worst possible quality from Oscar Wilde's point of view. Dorian's awareness of being a hypocrite becomes a turning point of all his sinning and causes his decision to destroy the picture. This climax demonstrates Wilde's conviction that it is better to be a sinner than to be a hypocrite.

“What this century worships is wealth. The God of this century is wealth“ (IH 96). The aristocrats judged and valued people not only by appearance but also by wealth and money. The one who had money and position could afford to do anything. When Dorian Gray is told to be involved in various scandals, the narrator of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, to a great extent identifiable with Wilde himself, remarks: “His great wealth was a certain element of security. Society, civilized society, at least, is never very ready to believe anything to the detriment of those who are both rich and fascinating. It feels instinctively that manners are of more importance than morals, and, in its opinion, the highest respectability is of much less value than the possession of a good chef“ (197). A beautiful face and great wealth were enough for the society to forgive you any kind of behaviour. Moreover, scandals made a person interesting for the society. The concept of wealth as the criterion of significance of a person can be slightly modified into the concept of power (slightly because money means power anyhow). “That power, power over other men, power over the world, was the one thing worth having, the one supreme pleasure worth knowing, the one joy one never tired of, and that in our century only the rich possessed it“ (IH 100). In conclusion, if someone had youth, money and power they were valued by the society very highly – the more of these qualities, the more they were valued.

In his works, Oscar Wilde reflects the fact that the upper class did not behave naturally but they were wearing a mask in front of others. Assuming a pose was the most important act for an aristocrat who wanted to succeed in the society of the end of the nineteenth century. Timothy Moffet writes: “‘The first duty in life is to assume a pose,’ said Oscar. ‘What the second duty is, no one yet has found out’” (34). This is one of many forms of hypocrisy which Wilde attacks. A well assumed pose was considered to be an excellent achievement. When Lord Henry learns the facts about the unfortunate background from which Dorian Gray comes, he says: “Yes; it was an interesting background. It posed the lad, made him more perfect, as it were” (PDG 53). Lord Henry Wotton is the most telling example of a posed aristocrat – he is wearing the mask of a wicked philosopher and dandy to make himself more interesting for the society. He makes rebellious talking all the time but at the end of his speech he does not remember what he has been speaking about. This is the worst thing which he has done – by his rebellious talking he provokes Dorian Gray's evil side and makes it wake up. There is Basil Hallward in the contrast to Lord Henry. The painter is the only character from the group of the main characters who does not assume a pose. He realizes that Lord Henry, Dorian Gray and others are wearing masks. Basil says: “I shall stay with the real Dorian” (PDG 44). However, when he says “the real Dorian”, he means the painted Dorian – the Dorian from the picture is more real than the flesh and blood one.

The concept of double life is also closely connected with the previous subject. Before we start discussing this topic it is noteworthy that Wilde uses two different approaches in criticising the upper class: he either mocks them or he attacks them. Wilde's comedies are indeed based on the first conception – their aim is to amuse the audience. The second approach appears in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which is not meant to be amusing, it is humourless (we should not say serious – this word has a meaning of dull for Wilde). These two methods manifest themselves in the concept of double life as well. The double life

becomes a very important and dangerous matter for Dorian who pays for it with his own life at the end of the book. A counterpart is created by a rather harmless Bunburying (or Jack's playing Ernest in town) in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Sir Robert Chiltern's secret from young days makes a borderline case between the instances mentioned above – it seems to be a serious problem but it is soon solved. The double life is combined with wearing a mask. The unmasking comes usually at the end of a story. For example, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* it is represented by destroying the picture and revealing Dorian's real face.

Although marriage is often a theme of Wilde's comedies and many characters actually get married during the play, marriage is very much depreciated and ridiculed as it is considered to be business and bore. In general terms, love as an abstract concept is perceived as a very romantic emotion; but practically, being in love is again simply a pose which is dictated by the society because it is modern and fashionable to be in love. Love is not thought to be anything real, it is a mask created by the fashion of this era. “I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressly to propose to her.’ ‘I thought you had come up for pleasure?... I call that business.’ ‘How utterly unromantic you are!’ ‘I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact’“ (IBE 17). Furthermore, in Wilde's comedies, there is a repeatedly mentioned idea that men usually propose only for practise. Marriage can not be taken seriously if the proposing is made only for practise. Wilde goes further and he not only mocks marriage but he even praises and puts forward divorces. Thus instead of writing “Marriage is made in Heaven“ he writes “ Divorces are made in Heaven“ (IBE 17). The end of marriage is celebrated also in becoming a widow. “I hadn't been there since her poor husband's death. I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger“ (IBE

29). As can be seen, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is full of depreciation of marriage. On the other hand, *An Ideal Husband* and *Lady Windermere's Fan* are rather on the side of marriage although not all the time. This theme is further explored in the Glossary.

Wilde was also interested in intellectual and cultural issues. He criticised mainly literature and the educational system. He regarded the aristocrats as not very educated people because they took interest only in unnecessary things which, as Wilde remarked, became their necessities. The single knowledge about which the upper class cared concerned fashion, entertainment and pleasure. Their life delight was in knowing what was happening in the society so as they could spread gossip. Wilde vilifies the educational system in England when Lady Bracknell, a very satirical character of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, says: “The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes“ (39). However, neither education is a guarantee of intelligence and ability of creative thinking from Wilde's point of view: “Dr. Chasuble is a most learned man. He has never written a single book, so you can imagine how much he knows“ (IBE 109). Thus scholarship is not the most important aspect of an efficient writer. Wilde attacks the English society for not being interested enough in books and literature. Such society is not susceptible to any kind of high-quality literature. ““You talk books away,’ he said; ‘why don’t you write one?’ ‘I am too fond of reading books to care to write them, Mr. Erskine. I should like to write a novel certainly, a novel that would be as lovely as a Persian carpet and as unreal. But there is no literary public in England for anything except newspapers, primers, and encyclopaedias. Of all people in the world the English have the least sense of the beauty of literature”“ (PDG 62). Wilde shows his contempt for the aristocracy regarding the way in which they treated literature and he is convinced that they were not educated at all.

In conclusion, the upper class is depicted in a very unflattering manner. They are showed as shallow because they cared only for material values and superficial beauty. They did not concern themselves in literature and education. In spite of the fact that they estimated material wealth they did not value even it; they belittled it. The sense of their lives lay in experiencing as much pleasure as possible. The aim of their deeds was entertainment and they yearned for it regardless the consequences. Lord Henry Wotton is ready to destroy Dorian's life if it brings him the feeling of pleasure and fascination. "It was no matter how it all ended, or was destined to end" (PDG 82). They were hypocritical and if it happened that they admitted their mistake they did not let anybody to blame them: "When we blame ourselves, we feel that no one else has a right to blame us" (PDG 134). They adored everything artificial. They talked behind others' back and then they did the same acts which they disapproved. This is the way in which Wilde saw the aristocracy. Wilde summarizes this criticism of his in a sentence that speaks for itself: "My dear fellow, you forget that we are in the native land of the hypocrite" (PDG 210). Although it is partly subjective Wilde gives us a significant image of the upper class through criticizing the whole spectrum of aspects from their lives.

### Language, means of humour and characters

The following subchapter is supposed to deal with Wilde's approach to language, literary humour and characters. Wilde uses these devices to portray the upper class appropriately according the way in which he perceived this social milieu. As has been already mentioned, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* does not contain humorous perspective but the comedies do because they are expected to be entertaining – humour is herein a means of criticism. Language of Wilde's works is linked to false moralizing of the aristocracy which

Wilde actually parodies. The analysis of Wilde's language, humour and characters should show what literary methods he employs to criticise the upper class.

Wilde's language is quite specific – however, not in the register but rather in lexical collocations. Wilde, we can say, invented a system of phrases which are typical for him. For instance, nearly every moral (moral from his point of view) lesson which he gives in his works or a statement which he finds universally true are ended up by a phrase “That is/was all”. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* “That is all” appears sixteen times and “That was all” is used five times in a meaning mentioned above. It is not the phenomenon of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; in *An Ideal Husband* there is “That is all” nine times: “I did not sell myself for money. I bought success at a great price. That is all“ (98). Also in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* these phrases occur many times. “Something is the only thing worth...” and “There is no such thing as...” are the second most frequent structures in Wilde's works. They are again connected with moralizing. Especially Lord Henry Wotton pronounces them often. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* almost abounds with these sentences: “Youth is the only thing worth having“ (34), “It is only the sacred things that are worth touching“ (74), “Pleasure is the only thing worth having a theory about” (109) etc. Wilde could be called the Lord of Paradoxes. He frequently uses paradoxes whether it is in paradoxical situations or in the oxymoronic connection of words (for example: youth's passionate purity, serious Buryist). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Mr. Erskine says: “Well, the way of paradoxes is the way of truth“ (58). It is again Lord Henry Wotton who speaks in paradoxes most often: “Dorian is far too wise not to do foolish things now and then, my dear Basil” (PDG 102).

All possible kinds of humour are present in Wilde's work – verbal, situational and dramatic. Verbal humour is achieved mainly by paradoxes and connecting together two ideas which are not pertinent to each other. “To-day I broke off my engagement with Ernest. I feel

it is better to do so. The weather still continues charming.’ ‘But why on earth did you break it of? What had I done? I had done nothing at all. Cecily, I am very much hurt indeed to hear you broke it off. Particularly when the weather was so charming’“ (IBE 107). In this extract, the engagement is compared to weather which sounds amusing. Situational humour is most evident in *The Importance of Being Earnest* – Wilde uses parallels to create a humorous situation. For instance, Gwendolen's first speech to Cecily when she likes her and then when she hates her is expressed in the same scheme which produces a parallel. Wilde's comedies were very popular in his times and they still are because he is able to achieve very humorous effects in his plays. For example, the scene with cucumber sandwiches in *The Importance of Being Earnest* or the conversation at the ball in *Lady Windermere's Fan* are the top of Wilde's entertaining artistry: “Dumby: ‘Good evening, Lady Stutfield. I suppose this will be the last ball of the season?’ Lady Stutfield: ‘I suppose so, Mr. Dumby. It's been a delightful season, hasn't it?’ Dumby: ‘Quite delightful! Good evening, Duchess. I suppose this will be the last ball of the season?’ Duchess of Berwick: ‘I suppose so, Mr. Dumby. It has been a very dull season, hasn't it?’ Dumby: ‘Dreadfully dull! Dreadfully dull!’ Mr. Cowper-Cowper: ‘Good evening, Mr. Dumby. I suppose this will be the last ball of the season?’ Dumby: ‘Oh, I think not. There'll probably be two more’“ (44). Furthermore, it perfectly shows the hypocrisy of the aristocracy which Wilde mocks and parodies in his works.

Concerning characters in Wilde's work, they are functions rather than realistic characters and they play particular roles depending on what their purpose is. The reason lies in Wilde's perception of the upper class – he saw them as they were impersonal figures which play a role within their social class. Wilde often puts some qualities from himself into his male characters. For instance, in Basil Hallward there is Wilde-the Aesthet; in Lord Henry there is Wilde-the cynic. In each of our selected works there is a character who is Oscar Wilde's alter ego or mouthpiece who mocks the aristocracy by talking satirically against them.

Lord Henry Wotton (PDG) is, as usual, the most prominent one; he behaves and talks in the same manner as Wilde behaved and talked. Simply, Lord Henry embodies Wilde's life attitude. In *An Ideal Husband* there is Lord Goring who noticeably reminds of Lord Henry not only by his talking but also by the description in a scenic comment given on page 257: "...showing the philosopher that underlies the dandy". Algernon Moncrieff in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan* are Wilde's alter egos as well. The following statement of Lord Darlington is taken over from Lord Henry: "I couldn't help it. I can resist everything except temptation" (LWF 13). There is often a brother or a guardian who does not want to give a consent to marriage between his friend and a girl who he is supposed to look after (IH and IBE). Wilde frequently amuses his audience with a character of a rich elderly lady from the upper class who is very vain and dull: for example, Lady Bracknell from *The Importance of Being Earnest* or the Duchess of Berwick from *Lady Windermere's Fan*.

The Duchess of Berwick is a very satirical character. She is accompanied by her daughter, Lady Agatha Carlisle. The actress who performs Lady Agatha does not have a complicated text to learn: the only sentence which Lady Agatha says during the whole play is "Yes, mamma". The effect of this humorous fact is intensified in the moment when her mother addresses her "my little chatterbox". The Duchess of Berwick is an embodiment of a hypocritical aristocrat who is not ashamed repeatedly utter completely opposite statements: "My dear one! You always say the right thing" (LWF 70); "Agatha, you say the most silly things possible" (LWF 71). Furthermore, she is very glad to be the messenger of bad news – with great pleasure, she informs Lady Windermere that her husband, upon whom they "looked as being such a model husband" (LWF 21), is unfaithful to her. The Duchess of Berwick pretends to be Lady Windermere's friend although she even does not know the gender of their child.

Wilde's language, means of humour and characters make his works so typical that it is easy to recognize them among the rest of the English written literature. His works intertwine in many features and Wilde expresses it by using the same phrases, wits, and sometimes even the same names – Mrs. Erlynne occurs in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and in *Lady Windermere's Fan* as well. It is usual that critics of any social class are indeed not accepted well by the social class which they criticise but Oscar Wilde is efficient in not criticising directly in exact formulations. He does it through particular language, style of humour and characters who speak for themselves, thereby he achieved a success that his comedies were acknowledged very positively and everyone wanted to see them although they mock the upper class to a great extent. He was able to put forward the animadversion in such way that the aristocracy was laughing at their own hypocrisy.

## Glossary

There can be found particular key terms in Wilde's writing. They are leitmotifs which repeat through his works. Wilde often uses them but they are not always exactly the same in a form. The meaning and the context are rather identical but the form slightly differs (although not always – examples in an entry “Her hair has turned quite gold from grief“ are absolutely identical). For instance, some epigrams which appear in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* later reappear in one of his plays. According to Wilde's contemporaries, many of these phrases were actually uttered by Oscar Wilde himself before they were processed into his works. Frank Harris writes: “The conversation of Lord Henry Wotton with his uncle, and again at lunch when he wishes to fascinate Dorian Gray, is an excellent reproduction of Oscar's ordinary talk“ (83). This brief glossary is supposed to demonstrate the most frequent catchwords of Oscar Wilde's selected works.

➤ Being a pessimist or an optimist

The philosophy of Pessimism and Optimism seems to have been popular in Oscar Wilde's times. At least, Wilde mentions it repeatedly (mainly in *An Ideal Husband*). An optimist is someone who looks upon the world as a good place to live; he or she has tendency to take a favourable or hopeful view about life. On the other hand, a pessimist is a person who perceives life very negatively. Nevertheless, he satirizes it in his comedies because he would like to show that the aristocracy actually did not believe in Pessimism or Optimism; they simply assumed a pose. Wilde even calls Pessimism and Optimism “fashionable religions”.

Examples: “‘Are you an optimist or a pessimist? Those seem to be the only two fashionable religions left to us nowadays.’ ‘Oh, I’m neither. Optimism begins in a broad grin, and Pessimism ends with blue spectacles. Besides, they are both of them merely poses’” (IH 30). “‘Are you a Pessimist?’ ‘No, Lady Chiltern, I am not a Pessimist. Indeed I am not sure that I quite know what Pessimism really means’” (IH 121). “‘Lane, you’re a perfect pessimist.’ ‘I do my best to give satisfaction, sir’” (IBE 55).

➤ Dividing into good and bad

Wilde did not believe that the world can be divided into good or bad (this attitude of his is closely connected with his concept of morality and immorality). However, Wilde was not an author of the idea that the terms good and bad in fact do not have any real significance. He took it over from his friend James Abbott Whistler. “‘My dear fellow,’ cried Whistler, ‘you must never say that this painting’s good or that bad, never! Good and bad are not terms to be used by you; but say, I like this, and I dislike that, and you’ll be within your right.’ Carried away by the witty fling, Oscar cried: ‘I wish I had said that.’ ‘You will, Oscar, you will,’ came Whistler’s lightning thrust” (Harris 44).

Example: “It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious” (LWF 10).

➤ Giving good advice

For Wilde, giving good advice is connected with moralizing which he strictly rejected. Thus he tends to mock and criticise the act of giving good advice. He satirizes mainly a person who advises because this person gives a present which is useless.

Examples: “He says things that annoy me. He gives me good advice” (PDG 79). “My father told me to go to bed an hour ago. I don’t see why I shouldn’t give you the same advice. I always pass on good advice. It is the only thing to do with it. It is never of any use to oneself“ (IH 73).

➤ Her hair has turned quite gold from grief

This remark is caused by Wilde's tendency to depreciate marriage. Becoming a widow is regarded as a pleasant state which brings along rejuvenescence. It was used for the first time in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and it was used again, in practically unchanged form, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Examples: “When her third husband died, her hair turned quite gold from grief” (PDG 247). “I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief“ (IBE 29).

➤ Knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing

Especially in his plays, Wilde often mocks the upper class which he found shallow and hypocritical. He criticises their longing for money and that they did not value any real quality.

Examples: “Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing“ (PDG 67). ““What is a cynic?’ ‘A man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing’“ (LWF 113).

➤ People who pretend to be worse

“Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others“ (Ellman xix) is one of Wilde's epigrams. This idea is not original as well. It came to Wilde's mind when an elderly lady said to him one day at lunch that she knew people who pretend to be a great deal worse than they really are. Oscar Wilde replied: “Naturally we pretend to be bad, dear lady, it is the only way to make ourselves interesting to you. Everyone believes a man who pretends to be good, he is such a bore; but no one believes a man who says he is evil. That makes him interesting“ (Harris 292). Wilde was fond of scandals and he felt pleased when the society talked about him.

Example: “‘I sometimes think you pretend to be worse.’ [...] ‘Oh, nowadays so many conceited people go about Society pretending to be good, that I think it shows rather a sweet and modest disposition to pretend to be bad. If you pretend to be good, the world takes you very seriously. If you pretend to be bad, it doesn't’“ (LWF 5, 6).

➤ Worshipping of a wife or a husband

Wilde often deals in his comedies with the relationship between a wife and a husband. He uses the following scheme: women look up to their husbands and men are not good enough to deserve their wonderful wives; then it is showed that a husband has made some mistake and a wife makes a mistake too; in the end, they forgive each other and continue in living in love and harmony. For instance, in *An Ideal Husband*, Sir Robert Chiltern's fraud from young days is revealed, then Lady Chiltern is discredited by her intimate letter but the story ends happily. Wilde also writes that women love their husbands too much, they place them on monstrous pedestals and make ideals of them; but in fact, it makes only false idols of men. This concept is typical especially for *An Ideal Husband*, whereas *The Importance of Being Earnest* rather depreciates the relationship between a wife and a husband;

Examples: “We make gods of men“ (LWF 87). “We women worship when we love“ (IH 83). “If we men married the women we deserved, we should have a very bad time of it“ (IH 227).

This brief glossary provides additional comments to the theme of Wilde's criticism of the upper class, which is illustrated on examples from his selected works. It is based on particular key terms which repeatedly appear in Wilde's writing. These catchwords reflect Oscar Wilde's opinions and they also remind the manner in which he conversed normally.

## CONCLUSION

Almost all Wilde's ideas concerning life and art come from Æstheticism and therefore from his deep belief that beauty is superior to all entities in the world, especially to morality and immorality. Æstheticism became Wilde's life philosophy, life attitude and main literary inspiration, which was the reason why Wilde was ridiculed and despised by many people, above all by the middle class. He also indirectly denies the accusations of the society of him being homosexual because he shows in his works that the gender does not play a role and that it is beauty which is important - it is caused by a strong influence of ancient Greek culture and æsthetics upon Wilde who admired it to a great extent. The theme of beauty is developed mainly in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This novel is a point of intersection between Wilde's philosophy of Æstheticism and his concept of morality and immorality.

Wilde's concept of morality and immorality is very unusual. He thought art and morality two distinct and therefore separable entities. He did not see the difference between morality and immorality because he took them as parts of one idea. He considered the terms good and bad as empty phrases which do not have any reason for existence. Wilde created his own conception of sin, passion and soul – he believed that they are, in essence, mere inventions of the society; they did not exist for him as sensible notions. Wilde refused the labelling of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as an immoral book because it actually ends with the punishment of a sinner and thus, on the contrary, it is a very moral story. He combines his belief in beauty with his concept of morality and immorality in an idea which says that someone who is beautiful can not be immoral. This theme is also connected with Wilde's focus on criticism of the upper class.

Oscar Wilde criticises the aristocracy for two main reasons – because they were assuming poses all their lives and because they were hypocritical. The aristocrats pretended to be strictly moral although they were extremely corrupt and it is exactly this hypocrisy which

Wilde mostly criticises. The hypocrisy can assume various spectrum of forms: in the focus on outward appearances and wealth, in wearing a mask in front of others, in leading a double life, in the depreciation of marriage or in the lack of interest in literature. Wilde uses two different approaches in criticising the upper class: he either mocks them or he attacks them. Wilde's comedies mock the aristocracy and their aim is to amuse the audience. The second approach appears in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which is not supposed to be humorous. There is a collision of serious criticism and humorous satire – Wilde really attacks the upper class only in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; his comedies are rather in a spirit of witty self-reflection. The aristocracy received Wilde's comedies very positively but later they rejected him because of his accusation of homosexuality. As Timothy Moffet writes: “As in all the great tragedies, the crux of his life seems to lie at the point where his path takes a sudden downward turn. How is that such a brilliant, generous and noble man should have become a wretched outcast, pilloried by the same world that once ‘licked my conqueror's boots’, as he put it in the bitterness of his last days? Does the fault lie with Oscar's own vanity and carelessness, or with a society so immured in hypocrisy that it would happily sacrifice its first-born son merely in order to save face?” (1). The upper class was so hypocritical that they were able to outcast a person who had amused them for years.

Even though Oscar Wilde strongly criticises the aristocracy in his works, in reality he did not detest them so much because he was still a part of them. Wilde himself is trying not to be hypocritical and not to moralize because morality as such does not exist from his point of view. He believed that if *The Picture of Dorian Gray* appeared to be immoral to the society, then it was only an image of the immorality of his times and a reflection of an unflattering reality which showed the hypocrisy of the upper class.

## ABBREVIATIONS

- PDG: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*
- IBE: *The Importance of Being Earnest*
- IH: *An Ideal Husband*
- LWF: *Lady Windermere's Fan*

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