

AESTHETICISM IN “THE PORTRAIT OF DORIAN GRAY”

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*Abstract: The paper focuses on the origins of aestheticism which are to be traced back during the Romantic age and the Pre-Raphaelites. It is an attitude to life which hints at a devotion to art and beauty, placing these values on top of everything else. The purpose of aestheticism seems to be an urge to set a strict boundary between art and life itself with a view to reducing at all costs the liabilities and moral implications on the part of the individual. Oscar Wilde’s only novel, “The Portrait of Dorian Gray” is centered on the idea of beauty as ideal of life. In the novel Wilde attempted to highlight the fact that “aestheticism advocated whatever behavior was likely to maximize the beauty and happiness in one’s life, in the tradition of hedonism.”*

*Keywords: beauty, objectify, mirror, self-love, narcissism, aestheticism*

The origins of aestheticism are to be traced back during the Romantic age and the Pre-Raphaelites. It is an attitude to life which hints at a devotion to art and beauty, placing these values on top of everything else. According to Immanuel Kant an aesthetic judgment is solely based on feeling, more precisely a feeling of pleasure or displeasure. Kant was the philosopher who greatly influenced the current called aestheticism and sparked curiosity upon judgments of the beautiful and beauty itself.

The purpose of aestheticism seems to be an urge to set a strict boundary between art and life itself with a view to reducing at all costs the liabilities and moral implications on the part of the individual. The utmost concern of literary critics of the time was the far-fetched focus on pleasure which was a direct attack and threat to Victorian morality.

Oscar Wilde’s only novel, “The Portrait of Dorian Gray” is centered on the idea of beauty as ideal of life. In the novel Wilde attempted to highlight the fact that “aestheticism advocated whatever behavior was likely to maximize the beauty and happiness in one’s life, in the tradition of hedonism.” (Duggan, 61)

The plot of the novel is woven around three characters, three men, and their personal quest for beauty as the ultimate purpose of life: Lord Henry, who is a professor of aesthetics, Basil Hollward, a talented artist, and, last but not least, Dorian Gray, who is a model trying to get the ropes of aesthetic values and who looks up at the above mentioned gentlemen.

The Portrait of Dorian Gray was written in compliance with the principles of aestheticism. First, we have the object of beauty, who is Dorian himself. Then, we have the creator, the artist who is capable of grasping this beauty and capture it on canvas for eternity. Basil is the recipient meant to acknowledge Dorian’s beauty as undeniable. In the novel, Basil is the artist who feasts his eyes on Dorian’s beauty. The author even provides a very clear comparison between Dorian and Greek sculptures for the reader to better grasp the image of his perfection: “What the invention of oil-painting was to the Venetians, the face of Adonis was to the late Greek sculpture and the face of Dorian Gray will someday be to me.” Basil even goes so far as to define Dorian as “the harmony of souls and body”, a representation of perfection.

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The fascination of beauty shared among Dorian, Basil, and Lord Henry is a work of aestheticism. "Fashion, by which what is really fantastic becomes for a moment universal, and Dandyism, which, in its own way, is an attempt to assert the absolute modernity of beauty." (The Portrait of Dorian Gray, 162)

Sadly enough, out of fear and wrong tagging, aestheticism was often called Decadence or Art for art's sake, meaning that one loves beauty without intellectual or moral skills, just like loving the idea of love in a person not the person oneself. ".....beauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins. Intellect is in itself an exaggeration, and destroys the harmony of any face." (The Portrait of Dorian Gray, 5)

Another biased tag was placed on Oscar Wilde himself for dimming too much the line between male and female in terms of beauty as the author was infamous for the outrageous much too effeminate outfits he used to wear. He did it all for the sake of his innermost belief, aestheticism. He used his novel as a linguistic means, a semiotic approach meant to highlight his creed. His ultimate goal was to shatter Christian doctrine which professed the shame of the flesh. There is a plenary liberation from the "terror of God" when Dorian confesses that his quest for spirituality is by means of the senses, therefore an aesthetic approach per se. Lord Henry even enflames Dorian to live in the temptations of the flesh, giving vent to his desires being the only solution to get rid of them.

Therefore, the hedonistic approach to life preached by the author himself seems to be the sanest attitude to life of any individual.

Nonetheless, according to many critics, Dorian is a much too effeminate male. And the fact that aestheticism encourages sexuality in the sense that it takes into consideration the desire existing in every male and female alike leads us to the normal conclusion that it can be defined as the celebration of sensory beauty.

The embodiment of this epitome is Dorian himself who is so bewitched by Basil's personal views of beauty as being eternal and the only ideal worth pursuing in life that he makes the wish for his painting to grow old not him.

He does this devilish pact only to find out when he awakens from his vain illusion of eternity that he was wrong. Trying desperately to redeem his moral values he commits suicide and the painting miraculously regains its original beauty while he turns very old suddenly proving thereby the aesthetic creed of the author: beauty never dies.

Wilde portrayed beauty as sin. To him, a thing of beauty is a vehicle used to obtain immortality and the only thing that time cannot harm. In his own thinking, philosophies fall away like sand, and creeds follow one another like the withered leaves of autumn; but what is beautiful is a joy for all seasons and the possession for all eternity.

Whereas Wilde is a strong believer in the power of the aesthetic element, another British poet called Gerard Manley Hopkins sees beauty as an innate quality of all things created by God.

To him, beauty is only the outer shell containing a beautiful inner core.

Strange as it may seem the analogy between Wilde's only novel and a poem written by a romantic poet does bring about clarification on the matter of beauty as godly or devilish attribute. On the one hand we have a novel where the author is straightforward in admitting that a beautiful appearance is what all humans dream to achieve willing to make sacrifices or ungodly pacts for and on the other hand we have a poem where the poet asserts from the very title that beauty is from God, visible in all things mortal and worth praising as divine.

From a psycho-analytical perspective, Hopkins' poem is a poem which reveals a concealed transcendental spirituality.

In „Pied Beauty” we catch a glimpse of a poet who behaves as an architect of sensations, striving to achieve perfection for all eternity as long as there is somebody to act as a vehicle of legacy.

The poem is an exploration of the human psyche, of a mind troubled by recurring, obstinate questions. To the poet, the only place able to provide answers to these questions is Nature.

The poet values the beauty of Nature, feeling at the same time that beauty makes the magic of it.

In Freudian terms, the soul is the only recipient or tool for that matter, which had a previous existence of its own and recollections of immortality remain forever clutching to it even after birth. Consequently, childhood is the golden age, a time of splendid vision which is normally accompanying throughout our lifetime shading a celestial light upon everything reminding us thereby of our immortal source.

The ability to perceive the visionary gleam fades away, becomes inaccessible gradually, as time goes by, until it disappears completely, the adult being completely unable to access it.

The growing child loses the capacity of celestial vision until he becomes completely oblivious of his divine origin.

The two phrases that are recurrent in the poem, i.e. the speckless spots and beauty as divine grace refer precisely to a psycho-analytical component, made transparent by Freud's theory of the brain.

The visionary gleam is mostly encountered in the poem and it makes specific reference to the transient, fleeting nature of life. Its magic seems to be implacably confined to the golden age of youth.

The poem “Pied Beauty” is a religious hymn in verse. When reading the poem one gets two sensations: one is a visual sensation of watching paintings in an art gallery and the other one is a pious feeling of attending service in church.

Words flow like music and their inner rhythm is reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Hopkins' style is unique due to his mastery of syntax which he condensed to the point of encryption. The form of a poem is of a shortened sonnet which is another invention of the author. Basically, from the point of view of the theme tackled upon, the poem is a hymn of praise to God whom we should thank for all the “dappled things” in creation. The form of “Pied Beauty” is Hopkins' way of praising God through imitation: Hopkins created something pied and beautiful – a ten-and-a-half line sonnet – while maintaining order. (Heller 192)

In the author's perspective God is unchangeable and immutable in a world of ever-changing things. Hopkins' heart desire at some point in his life was to become a priest. He even became a member of the Society of Jesus, better known as the Jesuits. As a matter of fact, there is one striking feature of the poem which testifies of the author's religious upbringing and education namely the first and last line. They are directly hinting at the two mottoes written on the pulpit in abbreviated form, in every Jesuit school. The two mottoes belong to Saint Ignatius of Loyola. It is very well known that pupils of Jesuit schools were in the habit of writing the abbreviated form of the two mottoes at the beginning and the end of each exercise they were doing. From this perspective, we might say that Hopkins is, in writing his poem, redoing an exercise in the purest Jesuit spirit.

Right from the opening line the poet tells us that what we need to do piously is raise a hymn of praise to God who blessed us with all the “dappled” beautiful things around us. In

line two he starts giving examples of such things, especially by pairs of opposites like light and darkness, or the “skies of couple-colour” and a “brinded” (striped) cow.

All this variety of God’s creation should be celebrated and glorified and the unity to be found in God should be praised above all things. The world is charged with the grandeur of God, Hopkins believed. (Mariani 3)

Even the alliteration he makes extensive use of throughout the poem is yet another means of highlighting the uniqueness of God’s grace and glory. Even His act of creation goes from the infinite to the finite, from unity to diversity.

The opening line makes clear from the very beginning that glory be to God, the choice of mood and tense pointing at the magnificence of God who deserves glory in the past, present and future.

“Glory be to God for dappled things –  
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;[.....]  
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:  
Praise him.”

Pied Beauty is a vivid depiction of God’s creation with a focus on Him being present in all things. The poet’s attempt is to improve the reader’s knowledge of the mystery of the universe and the very existence of man. The poem abounds in stylistic complexity which is an indirect way of hinting at the same intrinsic complexity of God’s creation.

Hopkins takes a close look to the river where trout swim and his visionary eye catches a glimpse of their skin which reveals red coloured markings which appear to be made in the elaborated painting technique called stippling.

“For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim”

Then his gaze shifts at the windfalls from the chestnut trees. The chestnuts hitting the ground split into half and show the inner reddish brown nuts inside which the poet considers to look exactly like coal breaking open in fire and glowing red.

“Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls”

Then a virgin landscape catches his sight, a land plotted and pieced. He speaks of ploughing the land, cultivating it, raising sheep (the word fold refers to a sheep enclosure) showing thereby human intervention in nature.

“Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough”

The trades that human occupy themselves with are referred to in very precise terms, like the reference to fishermen and sailors:

“And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.”

Later on, the lines draw our attention to qualities and features of people which testify as well of the uniqueness in diversity of all things in creation. Fickle is an adjective usually applied to the inconstant nature of women, so whimsical and changing. Freckles are the spots that many people, especially women, get on the skin because of exposure to sun. Back in the Victorian era there was a mania of making your complexion as uniform and pale as possible, women using to this aim potions meant to remove freckles or any other spots.

The final line sublimates the theme introduced in the first line. The almighty creator of all the mutable things in the world, so varied and changeable is God who, by contrast, is of a beauty past change. Therefore, one cannot but Praise Him.

“He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:  
Praise him.”

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