

Oscar Wilde: A Study in Art, Mortality, and Pleasure Pursuit

Hussein Jasim Mohammed Al-Husseini

English Department University of Misan Amarah, Maysan, Iraq

Email:- hussainalhussainy14@gmail.com

Abstract

Oscar Wilde's attitude to hedonism would not be of an ordinary variety. Thus, it becomes all the more necessary to focus this study on Hedonism - Its Philosophical Bases in intertwining connection with the extraordinary strange personality of Oscar Wilde. His mind during its vigorous growth of creativity for one decade and more oscillated from the Keatsian sensuousness to the upper reaches of saint-like illuminations, as one finds in his works such as De Profundis, The Soul of Man under Socialism as well as in some of his short poems. His attitude to hedonism or pleasure-pursuit has to be viewed at different dimensions of human experience other than those of the ordinary variety. Accordingly, the study sheds light on hedonism has been linked to the dramatic personality of Oscar Wilde in his legal and social battle with the Marquis of Queensbury, arising out of the cleverly manipulated and engineered propaganda that Oscar Wilde had homosexual relationship with Alfred Douglas, son to the Marquis of Queensbury. Also, the study deals with certain dramatic elements from Wilde's life. The study ends with concluding remarks and a Reference.

Keywords: Socialism, pleasure,

Introduction

Since the present study is on Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) a born genius - having distinguished himself as a fiction writer, playwright, poet and essayist as well as conversationalist per excellence. It would be appropriate to reflect on the philosophy and history of hedonism, keeping in mind his predilection for the cult of beauty and the fact that he was known to his contemporary world as the 'apostle of aestheticism'. His interest in aestheticism and beauty grew out

of his precociously absorbing study of Greek language, literature and philosophy. Philosophically Oscar Wilde was influenced not only by the ideal of Platonic beauty, but also by the divergent strands of ancient Greek philosophy including 'hedonism' of whose earliest known propounder was Aristippus (435C-356 BC).

There is a philosophical viewpoint on Hedonism and its historical development, right from its Hellenic beginning until the nineteenth century thinkers who in one form or another touched upon pleasure-pursuit as an end in itself. To put it succinctly, hedonism or pleasure-pursuit dominates the life of all living creatures including human beings. There are various sources and dimensions of pleasure experience as there are different types of human beings. There is a vast difference in the pleasure experience of human beings without education and those with education. To reiterate, the pleasure experience of a genuinely trained and educated person invokes the role of taste and heightened sensibility; whereas the pleasure instincts of those who are just raw and have had no opportunity of social refinement, either through education or training would be crude and coarse in their approach to pleasure experience.

While bearing in mind this major difference in pleasure experience among human beings, it is very much clear that the attitude of Oscar Wilde towards pleasure would certainly be of a very high order, as compared with the pleasure pursuit of ordinary people. Those who have read Wilde's prose writings, his critical work as well as his poems and plays are unanimous

in their opinion that Oscar Wilde was essentially a man of scintillating intellect and refined emotions. His novel, *The picture of Dorian Gray* is trenchantly illustrative of the validity of this observation.

Thus, his pursuit of pleasure as an intrinsic part of his creative activity. With ordinary folk, the pleasure pursuit is of specific nature, but with a man of creativity, pleasure interwoven in the creative process itself.

Necessarily, Wilde's approach to pleasure meant a high degree of sensibility. By no means, he could stoop down to any kind of sensational pleasure. Only fit for the race of Calibans generally found in the hinterland of urban regions where the malformed proletarians teem and abound. What T.S. Eliot has stated his well-known essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent* about the creative mind's potency to relive the past in the crucible of the contemporary present was reflected upon by Oscar Wilde much earlier, and it does go to show that Oscar Wilde was really a man of extraordinary talent and understanding.

In terms of Ethics, Hedonism can be connected with any sort of pleasure (Greek hedone from hedy, 'sweet' 'pleasant'). Theories of Hedonism are not new or modern. However, their critics have misunderstood them which in turn have led to their misrepresentation. The major reason behind this misconception is the idea that the hedonist defines pleasure as purely physical in its origin. This notion has been a sort of the truth. Virtually, almost all the hedonists believe that pleasure comes from several elements in which fame and reputation, friendship and sympathy, and knowledge and art are at the head. Most if not all of them have argued that physical (or lower) pleasures can contain certain prior factors or consequences.

To make this discussion on hedonism historically relevant, it would be appropriate to have coverage of the different types of hedonistic theories and the eminent thinkers who have contributed towards the theoretical development of hedonism from time to time. There are various types of hedonistic theories.

Types of Hedonistic Theories

Among the different theories of hedonism are psychological and ethical. The former claims that all people are motivated by the pursuit of pleasure. For example, we may say that we love virtue for its own sake, but the psychological hedonist will assert that it gives us pleasure to be virtuous. Even the ascetic who fasts and mortifies his body is really dominated by the pleasure ideal, according to this theory, for he probably finds a degree of enjoyment in such activities or he may find a masochistic pleasure in his own suffering.

The ethical hedonist asserts that pleasure is not always pursued in life, but that it ought to be man's exclusive goal. The ethical hedonist looks with scorn at self-imposed suffering and useless self-sacrifice. He counsels man to enjoy himself, and in this way attain complete happiness. Hedonism also has been divided according to its social outlook. Individualistic hedonism is interested only in our personal welfare. Represented by Aristippus and Epicurus, it neglects the welfare and advancement of society. On the other hand, universalistic hedonism believes that happiness has a social connotation and that we must expand the pleasure principle so that a maximum number of people can enjoy the goods of life. In modern times this doctrine has been championed by such thinkers as Locke, Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and Sidgwick.

Eminent Aristippus Thinkers

The most unqualified proponent of hedonism in ancient Athens was Aristippus (435 C-356 B.C.), a student of Socrates who was born in Cyrene; his followers consequently were called Cyrenaics.

Aristippus was very wealthy, and evidently he enjoyed all the pleasures of the world, including luxurious living and beautiful women. In his theory of knowledge, he attacked the concept of universals; only individual things are real. Applied to ethics, this means that we can never understand our fellow-man, and that we can only trust our own sensations. Aristippus made it clear that the good is pleasant, while evil is associated with pain. What pleasure should be preferred, that of the body or that of the mind? Aristippus answers that all pleasures are derived from the body, hence we should trust our sensations and be guided by our physical instincts. What matters most in the estimation of pleasure are intensity and immediacy. Let us not wait for the pleasures of the future, rather let us cultivate the present. Often when we wait for a utopia, we neglect the enjoyments which are near at hand, and which lead to full happiness.

According to contemporary accounts, Aristippus was urbane and cosmopolitan. He never lost his poise and good manners, and he lived up to his teaching by practicing a hedonistic way of life. His followers, however, modified the pleasure theory. Hegesias thought that pleasure is experienced so rarely that life is scarcely worthwhile; while Theodorus negated all social restraints, and thought that we could engage in his kind of an act provided that we were not taught by society.

Epicurus

Epicurus (342.-270 B.C), unlike Aristippus had a more intellectual view of pleasure, and he was mainly concerned with the pleasures of the mind.

Epicurus felt that man's insecurity could be partly traced to his false opinions regarding God: "First of all, believe that God is a being incorruptible and happy, as the common opinion of the world about God dictates; and attach to your idea of him nothing which is inconsistent with incorruptibility or with happiness; and think that he is invested with everything which is able to preserve to him this happiness, in conjunction with incorruptibility .For there are Gods; though our knowledge of them is indistinct .But they are not of the character which people in general attribute to them; for they do not pay a respect to them which accords with the ideas that they entertain of them. And that man is not impious who discards the Gods believed in by the many, but he who applies to the Gods the opinions entertained of them by the many. For the assertions of the many about the Gods are not anticipations, but false opinions":

"We are not to fear death. 'Accustom yourself also to think death a matter with which we are not at all concerned, since all goods and all evil is in sensation, and since death is only the Privation of sensation. On which account, the correct knowledge of the fact that death is no concern of ours, makes the mortality of life pleasant to us, in as much as it sets forth no illimitable time, but relieves us from the longing for immortality. For there is nothing terrible in living to a man who rightly comprehends that there is nothing terrible in ceasing to live; so that he was a silly man who said that he feared death, not because it would grieve him when it was present, but because it did grieve him while it was future. For it is very absurd that that which does not distress a man when it is present, should afflict him when only expected. Therefore, the most formidable of all evils, death, is nothing to us, since, when we exist, death is not present to us, and when death is present, then we have no existence".³



Prudence is the greatest virtue, according to Epicurus. "Now, the beginning and the greatest good of all these things is prudence, on which account prudence is something more valuable than even philosophy, inasmuch as all the other virtues spring from it, teaching us that it is not possible to live pleasantly unless one also lives prudently, and honorably, and justly; and that one cannot live prudently, and honestly, and justly, without living pleasantly; for the virtues are connate with living agreeably, and living agreeably is inseparable from the virtues. Since, who can you think better than that man who has holy opinions respecting the Gods, and who is utterly fearless with respect to death, and who has properly contemplated the end of nature, and who comprehends that the chief good is easily perfected and easily provided; and the greatest evil lasts but a short period, and causes but brief pain. And who has no belief in necessity, which is set up by some as the mistress of all things, but he refers some things to fortune, some to ourselves, because necessity is an irresponsible power, and because he sees that fortune is unstable, while our own will is free and this freedom constitutes, in our case, a responsibility which makes us encounter blame and praise. Since it would be better to follow the fables about the Gods than to be a slave to the fate of the natural philosopher; for the fables are sketched as if it were possible to avert the wrath of God by paying him honor; but the other presents us with a necessity which is inexorable".

And, he is not thinking fortune a goddess, as the generally esteem her (for nothing is done at random by a god), nor a cause which no man can rely on, for he thinks that good or evil is not by her to men so as to make them live happily, but that the principles of great goods or great evils are supplied by her, thinking it better to be unfortunate in accordance with reason, than to be fortunate irrationally; for that those

actions which are judged to be the best, are rightly done in consequence of reason."⁴

How can we best enjoy life? How can we attain the maximum amount of pleasure according to Epicurus? We must cultivate an inward attitude of tranquility; above all we should avoid greed and envy. Riches are not necessary for a philosophic life, which prospers most amidst "cheerful poverty." For a pleasant life, friendship is indispensable; we are by nature gregarious and our outlook expands in the company of friends. Even when he was dying, Epicurus thought of his friends and was concerned about their welfare.

He sounds almost like Machiavelli when he discusses justice. "Justice is a covenant of what is suitable, leading men to avoid injuring one another, and being injured."

Justice does not exist dependently. It is the result of mutual contracts, so whenever there is a mutual engagement, there is justice to avoid doing or sustaining mutual injury:

"Injustice is not intrinsically bad, it has this character only because there is joined with it a fear of not escaping those who are appointed to punish actions marked with that character.

It is not possible for a man who secretly does anything in contravention of the agreement which men have made with one another to guard against doing or sustaining mutual injury, to believe that he shall always escape notice, even if he has escaped notice already ten thousand times; for, till his death, it is uncertain whether he will not be detected.

In a general point of view, justice is the same thing to everyone; for there is something advantageous in mutual society. Nevertheless, the difference of place, and divers other circumstances, make justice vary."⁵

Epicurus, like Buddha believed in peace of mind. We may have physical

power, but without peace of mind it has no value. We must learn to be modest in our demands and to expect little from life. By reducing our wishes to a minimum, we become masters of our fate, and are not distressed when reverses overtake us. This does not mean that we should neglect our body; on the contrary, we should strive to maintain our health, see to it that we adopt a proper diet, and obtain enough physical exercise. We should avoid all forms of dissipation and debauchery. The great pleasure is not that of the moment, but one which is lasting and which satisfies our mind.

Epicurus did not promise future rewards. This life is our only existence; death means total extinction. There is no teleology; the gods do not intervene. The world can be explained mechanistically, according to the atomic hypothesis.

LUCRETIUS

The attack against organized religion was even stronger in Lucretius than in Epicurus. Lucretius in *De Rerum Natura* asserted that most of the ills of man could be traced to religion, to man's belief in Providence. "But some in opposition to this, ignorant of matter, believe that nature cannot without the providence of the gods in such nice conformity to the ways of men vary the seasons of the year and bring forth crops, and all the other things, which divine pleasure the guide of life prompts men to approach, escorting them in person and enticing them by her fondling to continue their races through the arts of Venus, that mankind may not come to an end. Now when they suppose that the gods designed all things for the sake of men, they seem to me in all respects to have strayed most widely from true reason"⁶.

We should not fear death: "And even supposing the nature of the mind and power of the soul do feel, after they have been severed from our body, yet that is nothing to us who by the binding tie of marriage

between body and soul are formed each into one single being. And if time should gather up our matter after our death and put it once more into the position in which it now is, and the light of life be given to us again, this result even would concern us not at all, when the chain of our self-consciousness has once been snapped asunder. You may be sure that we have nothing to fear after death, and that he who exists not, cannot become miserable, and that it matters not a whit whether he has been born into life at any other time, when immortal death has taken away his mortal life."

The philosopher looks with tranquility at the condition of mankind. "It is sweet, when on the great sea the winds trouble its waters, to behold from land another's deep distress; not that it is a pleasure and delight that any should be afflicted, but because it is sweet to see from what evils you are yourself exempt. It is sweet also to look upon the mighty struggles of war arrayed along the plains without sharing yourself in the danger"⁸.

The philosophy of Lucretius rests upon the automatic theory. The world is composed of atoms which are not governed by design. There is no intelligence in the universe. Just look at history; usually the virtuous men perish, while the wicked remain alive. Man cannot better his condition by appealing to God and by praying. Rather he should use the resources of science and study life in a naturalistic manner.

Like Voltaire, Lucretius felt that superstition was the great enemy of progress. Man constantly appeals to occult causes and turns to theology; but Lucretius advises man to cultivate his own intelligence and to survey the universe in an impartial and objective manner. If he does this, he will abandon his anxieties regarding the gods and the beyond, and he will be able to live a tranquil existence

It is interesting to note that the moral spirit of Lucretius is paralleled in modern philosophical literature by Bertrand Russell in *A Free Man's Worship*. Like Lucretius, Russell contends that the universe is not concerned with man, and that we must not appeal to supernaturalism, rather we must rely upon our own power and upon our own intelligence.

LOCKE

The modern version of Epicureanism can be found in John Locke (1632-1704). As a thinker he had a significant influence, not only in ethics but also in politics, religion, education, epistemology and various other fields. Suspicious of abstraction and *a priori* theories, Locke favored the solid ground of experience, and he thought that moderation was the best guide to human happiness.

Famous is his denial of innate ideas. Man's mind at birth is a blank tablet. The same applies to his moral ideals. We are not born with ethical certainty. Locke pointed to the variety of moral codes, and to the fact that what is approved by one society is attacked by another. Faith and justice are not acknowledged by all men. We only have to look at the thieves and murderers whom we find everywhere.

Moral rules, according to Locke, depend on proofs. This indicates that they are neither innate nor recognized by all men. Those who feel that moral ideals are violated in practice, but acknowledged in theory reduce them to Platonic abstractions. Of what value are concepts which have only theoretical validity?

Locke identified pleasure with good, and pain with evil: "Amongst the simple ideas which we receive both from sensation and reflection, pain and pleasure are two very considerable ones. For as in the body there is sensation barely in itself, or accompanied with pain or pleasure; so the thought or perception of the mind is simply so, or else accompanied also with pleasure

or pain, delight or trouble, call it how you please. These, like other simple ideas, cannot be described, nor their names defined" He further maintains:

"Things then are good or evil only in reference to pleasure or pain. That we call 'good,' which is apt to cause or increase pleasure, or diminish pain, in us; or else to procure or preserve us the possession of any other good, or absence of any evil. And, on the contrary, we name that 'evil,' which is apt to produce or increase any pain, or diminish any pleasure, in us; or else to procure us any evil, or deprive us of any good."⁹

Locke felt that all mean desire happiness. "If it be farther asked, what it is moves desire? I answer, Happiness, and that alone. 'Happiness' and 'misery' are the names of two extremes, the utmost bounds whereof we know not: it is that 'eye hath not seen, ear hath not heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive.' But of some degrees of both we have very lively impressions, made by several instances of delight and joy on the one side, and torment and sorrow on the other."

Moreover, he underscores: "How can we judge our moral actions? There are three standards in Lock's system. The first is divine law: Whereby I mean the law which God has set to the actions of men, whether promulgated to them by the light of nature, or the voice of revelation. That God has given a rule whereby men should govern themselves."¹¹

Secondly, civil law is important: "The civil law, the rule set by the commonwealth to the actions of those who belong to it, is another rule to which men refer their actions, to judge whether they be criminal or no."¹²

Thirdly, the law of reputation and opinion governs morality: " 'virtue' and 'vice' are names pretended and supposed everywhere to stand for actions in their own nature right or wrong. The measure of what

is everywhere called and esteemed 'virtue' and 'vice', is this approbation or dislike, praise or blame, which, by a secret and tacit consent establishes itself in the several societies, tribes, and clubs of men in the world, whereby several actions come to find credit or disgrace amongst them, according to the judgment, maxims, or fashions of that place."¹³

Locke used the method of common sense in his moral system. He felt that our virtues are rewarded by society. Thus when we have the reputation of charity, we gain in the eyes of our neighbors; whereas when we are stingy, we become social outcasts. Hence there is no essential conflict between altruism and egoism. The egoist only hurts himself, according to Locke; he is bound to live an unhappy life. The altruist, on the other hand, derives pleasure from his unselfish actions, and contributes to the advancement of society.

BENTHAM

Like Locke, Bentham (1743-1832) stressed the pleasure principle. "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. The principle of utility recognizes the subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which he is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law. Systems which attempt to question it, deal in sounds instead of sense, in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light."¹⁴

He held that happiness means *the greatest good for the greatest number*. Hedonism, accordingly, is not a selfish philosophy, but develops the welfare of the community. All his life Bentham was interested in progressive social legislation and in applying philosophical principles to

political problems. He was opposed to the ideal of asceticism. "By the principle of asceticism I mean that principle, which, like the principle of utility, approves or disapproves of any action, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question; but in an inverse manner: approving of actions in as far as they tend to diminish his happiness; disapproving of them in as far as they tend to augment it". He goes on as follows"

"The principle of asceticism seems originally to have been the reverie of certain hasty speculators, who having perceived, or fancied, that certain pleasures, when reaped in certain circumstances, have, at the long run, been attended with pains more than equivalent to them, took occasion to quarrel with everything that offered itself under the name of pleasure.

The principle of utility is capable of being consistently pursued; and it is but tautology to say, that the more it consistently is pursued, the better it must ever be ever for humankind. The principle of asceticism never was, nor ever can be, consistently pursued any living creature. Let but one tenth part of the inhabitants of the earth pursue it consistently, and in a day's time they turned it into a hell."¹⁵

Also, he points out to critical inquires about the role God concerning ethics: "We cannot decide ethical questions by appealing to God. It may be wondered, perhaps, that in all this while no mention has been made of the theological principle; meaning that principle which professes to recur for the standard of right and wrong to the will of God. But the case is, this is not in fact a distinct principle. The Will of God here meant cannot be his revealed will, as contained in the sacred writings; for that is a system which nobody ever thinks of recurring to at this time of day, for the details of political administration; and even before it can be applied to the details of private conduct, it is universally allowed, by

the most eminent divines of all persuasions, to stand in need of pretty ample interpretations; else to what use are the works of those divine? And for the guidance of these interpretations, it is also allowed, that some other standard must be assumed. The will then which is meant on this occasion, is that which may be called the presumptive will: that is to say, that which is presumed to be his presumptive of the conformity of its dictates to those of some other principle. It is plain, therefore, that, setting revelation out of the question, no light can ever be thrown upon the standard of right and wrong, by anything that can be said upon the question, what is God's will?"¹⁶

There are *four* sanctions for our moral rules. First, we find physical sanctions - standards determined by nature; second, political sanctions - standards determined by assemblies, laws and judges; third, popular sanctions, which relate to public opinion, and fourth, religious sanctions which are determined by an appeal to a supreme being.

Bentham had a quantitative ideal of pleasure. He thought pleasure could be assessed in terms of seven standards: intensity, duration, certainty, nearness, fecundity, purity and extent .He tried to outline the exact procedure to be followed when a person seeks to estimate the meaning and significance of having pleasure: "Of the value of each distinguishable pleasure which appears to be produced by it in the *first* instance; of the value of each pain which appears to be produced by it in the first instance; of the value Of each pleasure which appears to be produced by it after the first. This constitutes the fecundity of the first pain and the impurity or the first pleasure." Bentham then suggested that one should "sum up all the values of all the pleasures on the one side, and those of all the pains on the other. The balance, if it be on the side of pleasure, will give the good tendency of the act upon

the whole, with respect to the interests of that individual person, if on the side of pain, they had tendency of it upon the whole. ."¹⁷

MILL

It became the task of John Stuart Mill to clarify the concept of utilitarianism. Mill, unlike Bentham, gave a *qualitative* account of pleasure "Few human creatures would consent to be chanted into any of the lower animals, for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasure, no intelligent human being would cement to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce ,or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs. They would not resign what they possess more than he, for the most complete satisfaction of all the desires which they have in common with him. If they ever fancy they would, it is only in cases of unhappiness so extreme, that to escape from it they would exchange their lot for almost any other, however undesirable in their own eyes."¹⁸

Mill realized that the core of utilitarianism was like that of Jesus. Self - devotion was not a monopoly of idealistic ethical systems: " Meanwhile, let utilitarian never cease to claim the morality of self - devotion was a possession which belongs by as good a right to them as either to the Stoic or to the Transcendentalist. The utilitarian morality does recognize in human beings the power of sacrificing their own greatest good for the good of others. It only refuses to admit that the sacrifice is itself a good. A sacrifice which does not increase, or tend to increase, the sum total of happiness, it considers as wasted.

I must again repeat, what the assailants of utilitarianism seldom have the justice to acknowledge, that the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent's own

happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator".¹⁹

Like Locke, Mill thought that morality was not innate, yet it could be developed in a natural manner. "On the other hand, if, as is my own belief, the moral feelings are not innate, but acquired, they are not for that reason the less natural. It is natural to man to speak, to reason, to build cities, to cultivate the ground, though these are acquired faculties."²⁰

For Mill, Utilitarianism promotes virtue. "Whatever may be the opinion of utilitarian moralists as to the original conditions by which virtue is made virtue; however they may believe (as they do) that actions and dispositions are only virtuous because they promote another end than virtue; This opinion is not, in the smallest degree, a departure from the happiness principle. The ingredients of happiness are very various, and each of them is desirable in itself, and not merely when considered as swelling an aggregate. The principle of utility does not mean that any given pleasure, as music, for instance, or any given exemption from pain, as, for example, health, are to be looked upon as means to a collective something termed happiness, and to be desired on that account. They are desired and desirable in and for themselves; besides being means, they are a part of the end. Virtue, according to the utilitarian doctrine, is not naturally and originally part of the end, but it is capable of becoming so; and in those who love it disinterestedly it has become so, and is desired and cherished, not as a means to happiness, but as part of their happiness".²¹

There are two main sanctions of human conduct. One is internal, namely, our sense of sympathy, whereby we identify ourselves with others and whereby we feel for those who are oppressed and are deprived of the goods of life. The other

sanction is external, and represents the mores and ideals of society. Both sanctions must be recognized by the individual; they are not opposed to each other for, according to Mill, private virtue adds to the public good. Thus Mill, like Epicurus, appealed to an intellectual version of hedonism. He made it clear that there is a hierarchy of pleasures, and that man cannot live on the animalistic level. Hence it is much greater to be a dissatisfied thinker than a complacent fool.

One of the weaknesses of hedonism is that it generalizes too much. It glorifies the pleasure principle whereas many activities involve pain, and very often pleasure is only a minor by-product of our strivings. As Hegesias realized, pleasure is achieved by so few that it practically condemns the worth of life itself. Most people, it appears, live a miserable existence as partially evidence by the mental hospitals, the battle -fields, the hospitals, the churches and the offices of the psychiatrists. How much pleasure does the average man achieve in twentieth century civilization?

To some extent, we must cultivate a Taoistic concept of pleasure.²² Human happiness cannot be found in a direct manner; often it is a by-product of other goals and activities. We must strive primarily not for pleasure, but for values which transcend pleasures, and which lead to true universality.

Still, we cannot neglect the influence of hedonism on civilization, especially in the field of literature. From De Return Natura to Omar Khayam's Rubaiyt to Fitzgerald's This Side of Paradise and to Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray, hedonistic ideals have inspired many eminent authors. The philosophy of pleasure lacks sublimity and heroism, but it emphasizes the importance of man and gives free voice to his life impulse.

Freud taught that it is dangerous to suppress the pleasure impulse, and that such a process may involve immense neuroses.

The pleasure impulse of man is in constant conflict with the super-ego which represents the restraining voice of society and of our own conscience. Those who are guided too much by the super-ego tend to be rigoristic, fanatical, and puritanical, while those who are dominated by the pleasure impulse tend to be self-indulgent and often lack a sense of discipline and self-control. Somewhere between lies the line balance indispensable to the fullest life. The more we study more problems, the more we shall realize that it takes intelligence and discrimination to live a meaningful and happy life.

Being given to sound scholarship and vigorous thinking, Oscar Wilde was much ahead of his age; and necessarily, his opponents treated him as a rebel who wore the mask of a dandy. He was also greatly susceptible to his personal honor. He had a large number of friends in the English society of the day. He felt intellectually gratified at this; and drew pleasure out of it. At the same time, it is equally true to say that if anybody tried to humiliate or insult him, he took up the challenge and tried to teach the bully a lesson. This was the marked characteristic of Oscar Wilde whereby he came into a conflict with the Marquess of Queensbury. If Wilde cared much for happiness and pleasure, he was equally conscious of defending his honor. He catered to a life of pleasure and honor at an elevated level. Wilde was hedonist in a way all his own. And discussion on hedonism would be incomplete if it is not related to Wilde's life. For this reason, the undernoted text is all the more relevant to the study of Wilde's literary achievement.

Prime facie, hedonism is concerned with man's conduct: and then it touches the core of ethics. The stolid social convention steps in once it is found that one's conduct is widely in variance to the generally accepted ethical practice - as it was with Oscar Wilde. He was a rebel; and so, he adopted a dandyish pose as if to shake up the stolidly dull Victorian sensibility. The Wildean

dandy, all-knowing and impeccably conscientious, performs the function of nineteenth-century England, which in G.M. Young's words, is "to disengage the disinterested, to release it from the entanglements of party and sect - one might almost add, of sex - and to set it operating over the whole range of human life and circumstances".²³

In fact, Wilde's approach to life was highly intellectualized and refined, the traces of which are also to be found in the writings eminent Victorians as Arnold, Ruskin, Newman, Carlyle - to mention the most important ones. On the basis of these references is not difficult to understand that Wilde's pursuit of pleasure was exceedingly refined, taken aesthetically. From his biographical records it is also found that he was not a morbid aesthete. He was essentially a man of vigour and vitality. His letters to his friends during the Oxford days reveal that he was by no means 'a wilting and rather effeminate aesthete at that period.'²⁴ . He had a wholesome attitude to life at this stage, for as he grew mentally sharp, he also built up his physique. He prized the value of body-mind growth at the same time. He was certainly intensely interested in the arts and wrote a great deal of poetry, but he seems to have divided his time between literature, art and healthy exercise. He writes enthusiastically about the salmon he caught, about his shooting prowess and even of how good he is becoming at lawn tennis, a game then in its infancy; and he says that he is 'too occupied with rod and gun for the handling of the quill.' A thread of tremendous zest for living runs through the letters, an eagerness to enjoy every moment of life to the full. He finds beauty in everything around him even a thunderstorm arouses his enthusiasm; writing to Ward from his uncle's vicarage at West Ashby he says: I arrived here in an awful; it came down as if the angles thought the earth was fire and were pumping fire-engines on us.²⁵

It all shows that Oscar Wilde was very intelligently receptive nature's uneven moods. This saved him from boredom and frustration of life. The more one is consciously adjustable to the varying moods of nature, the greater are his chances of developing finer nuances of thought and feeling. Notwithstanding his love for the ideal of beauty, he was physically as much vigorous as he was mentally sharp. He could turn the table even against those possessing rowdy elements. This was during the period when he was at Oxford. At this stage, there was nothing abnormal about him. He was only trying himself from the ragers. Sir Frank Benson, a contemporary of his at Oxford, in My Memoirs recorded an incident in which there was an unsuccessful attempt to 'rag' Oscar Wilde; and it ended in ignominy for the would-be ragers: "At the time Wilde challenged attention by winning the Newdigate he was described by a Balliol don as a brilliantly clever scholar, who had strangely good taste in art and in humanity; a great appreciation of quality in pictures, in horses, in athletics and in ethics: emphatically at that moment a good judge of what is best. He was also possessed of the extraordinary muscular strength that you often find in big, loosely built Irishmen"²⁶

Now, in terms of the remaining part of this interesting extract, being quoted below, it is made very much clear that Wilde was not given to vindictiveness. He took a tolerant attitude towards his jealousy-motivated opponents:

"When the debris of tables, sofas, chairs and pictures had been raised to the height of a respectable mausoleum Wilde invited the new admiring crowd – crowds are so changeable – to sample the victim's cellar. No second invitation was necessary, and the corpse pinned down beneath the ruin of his rooms was soothed in his dying agonies by the gurgle of expensive liquors and choice

vintages pouring down the throats of his uninvited guest".²⁷

Being dramatic by aptitude as well as being a successful playwright, Wilde had a sense of generosity in his approach to life, he did not at all care even if the wine of choice vintage is offered to the 'spectator' students who wanted to enjoy fun at the expense of Wilde when some of their friends went on a ragging plan. From these extracts, it is proved that Oscar Wilde had the requisite courage to defend his honour. Later in his life when he was involved in a homosexual case, to become a cause célèbre in the west in the last years of the nineteenth century, he defended himself against the accusations of his opponents led by the Marquess of Queensbury. It is entirely a different matter that Oscar Wilde got an imprisonment after the trial. In more than one way, it is possible to say that his court punishment followed by solitary imprisonment was the result of a combination of socio-cultural factors, linked to the hypocritical pretensions of upper class in the Victorian age.

Apparently, he was pilloried by the leaders of the English vested interest because he was a celebrated writer and also a cultural rebel; he exposed the rankling hypocrisy of his time. More than adequate grounding in Greek language and literature enabled him to sharpen his concept of beauty whereby it could be made possible for him to apperceive in different spheres of life the beautiful forms in protoplasmic intensity. His art -sense verged towards concretized forms; and so he was not speculative in his art-expression — the relevant extracts of which would be cited as and when they are needed in sustaining the thetical argument. The influence of John Ruskin and Walter Pater had a positive influence on him. The earlier influence of Mahaffy on Wilde was no less significant than that of Ruskin and Pater. He met the Reverend John Pentland Mahaffy at Trinity College, Dublin as a student in classics,

remaining there for three years. Then, the Reverend Mahaffy was Professor of Ancient History at the Trinity College, known for his eminence in Greek scholarship:

"My father's knowledge of Greek was profound; but it was due more to a prodigious memory than to hard work. Such was his love of the language that he remembered every word he ever read in it, and acquired, in consequence, a vast Greek vocabulary"²⁸

The learning of Greek language is really a onerous task; that is why, when it is said, it is Greek to me, one has to plead ignorance about it. It is a safe way to avoid discomfiture in the presence of a knowledgeable fraternity; for it is not every body's cup to understand and speak Greek language, specially the ancient one, which is all the more difficult for a non-Greek, Oscar Wilde happened to be. From the undernoted extract, it is known that Oscar Wilde with supple dexterity showed his grasp of the New Testament in Greek language at a viva voce examination:

'My father, being confident that he could pass any viva voce examination in Greek without any preparation, had not even troubled to look at it; and the examiner, suspecting this and being anxious to teach my father a lesson, told him to turn to Chapter 27 of the Acts of the Apostles and to start translating. This chapter is probably the most difficult in the whole of the New Testament, being the description of St. Paul's shipwreck on his way to Italy; it contains a number of obscure nautical terms which no one could be expected to know unless they had studied them. My father translated it perfectly, and when the foiled examiner told him that he had done enough, he replied: 'Please may I go on? I want to see what happened to St. Paul.'²⁹

By his learning, insight and understanding the New testament, in original Greek, he could put the viva voce

examiner on the defensive. It all shows that he was seized of the subject matter thoroughly - an indication of his vigorous intellect and self-confidence. For any examinee of considerable merit, like Oscar Wilde it naturally had to be an hour of glory; and if he drew pleasure out of it, one need not have any kind of caviling towards one's glorious moment. Bearing in mind, the truth of the theoretical assessment: - "Practically all hedonists recognize the existence of pleasures derived from fame and reputation, from friendship and sympathy, from knowledge and art," - one finds that finds Wilde's pursuit of beautiful life and happiness was desirable to him by virtue of his personal qualities and attainments. From the standpoint of hedonism, there was nothing wrong in his pleasure pursuits. He was a consummate practitioner of aestheticism, as it has been testified by several of his eminent contemporaries, like W.B. Yeats, Andre Gide, Walter Pater, James Joyce and George Bernard Shaw among several others as well as by later writers and critics of great merit. He was a force to be recognized, despite some comments being censorious.

His stay at Oxford also helped him to chisel his intellectual thinking about this life -outlook and aestheticism. His association with John Ruskin, Walter Pater and Mahaffy proved fruitful for him in many ways the undernoted extracts vouch for this assessment:

The man under whose spell was Walter Pater... His stolid appearance and austere method of life seemed to emphasise the paganism of his writings. He was, in theory at any rate, an out-and-out hedonist.'

The doctrine he preached was an exaltation of personal experience above all restrictions, 'as the ultimate object of life,' and he summed it up by declaring that "the theory or idea, or system, which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of this experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or

some abstract morality we have not identified with ourselves, or what is only conventional, has no real claim on us." In other words, he preached that physical sensation is an end in itself to which it is noble to aspire '.

This teaching, coming on top of that of Mahaffy and Ruskin, was exactly what my father required to send him headlong into the paths of aestheticism. Many of his biographers have pointed to his admiration of human beauty, and particularly of male human beauty as an indication of incipient decadence. This is manifestly unfair. Youth in all its forms has always been an inspiration to the poet and the artist, and my father was only following the lead of Ruskin and Pater, neither of whom could be accused of - decadence in admiring beauty for its own Sake.³⁰

From these biographical extracts on Oscar Wilde's pursuits and intellectual aims, by his son Vyvyan Holland, it is made very clear that Wilde was a man of vigorous intellect and sound physique; and that under the influence of John Ruskin and Walter Pater; he became an ardent apologist of aestheticism and beauty, which gave him pleasure and happiness. To term his love for male human beauty as a form of decadence in him is difficult indeed to endorse, simply because his vigorous mind got expressed in highly refined feeling and thoughts. His novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, under the title: *A House of Pomegranates*; his stories under the title *The Happy Prince*, *Plays*, *Poems* together with *Essays* and *Articles* sustain the validity of the argument being hammered home here. All the same, Wilde was accused of homosexuality and also imprisoned on account of it. There is a difference of opinion on this score. According to some, Wilde was perverse in his mind, while the others say, it is not true. Any way, he was too versatile a man to be classified exclusively around the sensational colouring of homosexuality. All the same he

could not escape the opprobrium of being a homosexual.

There were compelling factors for it. One was his pride in the hey-days of glory and fame. The second factor responsible for Wilde's downfall was the stubborn and egotistic attitude of Marquess of Queensbury, father to his third son, Lord Alfred Douglas with whom Wilde had close relationship for quite some time. While the personal factor of homosexual relationship between Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas tilted the court proceedings against Wilde, nonetheless the incompatibility of life outlook between Oscar Wilde and the Marquess of Queensbury was no less responsible for the disastrous drama beginning with the tiling of a libel case by Oscar Wilde against the Marquess of Queensbury in March 1895. In this case, Wilde was the loser. Then, as a reprisal, following the proceedings started by the Marquess of Queensbury Wilde was arrested and was put on trial on charges of homosexuality in two phases. At the first trial, April 26 to May 1, no decision came out because of a hung jury, and the second trial, May 20-25, 1895. Wilde was convicted and sent to prison for two years with hard labour.

One need not go into the scrutiny of the trial papers; the palpable fact is that apart from his father's intransigently hostile attitude towards Oscar Wilde, the son. Lord Alfred Douglas may have been pressured to play a Judas to his bond of friendship with Wilde. The most surprising thing is that in spite of the harrowing suffering in the prison Oscar Wilde's creativity remained undimmed.

It all shows that Wilde's pleasure and delight has to be linked more to his creative pursuits. Homosexuality more than its actual facticity was deviously conjured up to damage and destroy Oscar at the height of his glory. The Marquess of Queensbury when he strangely abnormal man with vindictiveness as his forte. Had it

not been so, Wilde would not have to face opprobrium, suffering and imprisonment. The tussel between Oscar Wilde and the Marquess of Queensbury meant the fight between the anti-establishment and the diehard custodian of the English establishment. From the following extract, it is very much clear that more than Wilde's being degenerated from his association with Lord Alfred Douglas — which is not very conspicuous, for Wilde maintained the tenor of his creativity despite the social estrangement and legal punishment until the closing phase of his life; it is the peculiar personality of the Marquess which paved the way to the catastrophic turn in Wilde's life:

The Marquess of Queensbury was, we may charitably, assume, a madman: that is to say, he wanted the world to be run according to the Queensbury rules and when its inhabitants showed no inclination to suit his convenience, he lost his temper. At West End play he got up and denounced the opinions of a certain character, declaring that all right-minded people, including himself, were atheists. He was extremely combative and self-assertive, prejudiced and conceited, and would go to any lengths to revenge what he construed as an insult. Indifference to his views drove him frantic; and as he bored people with his atheistical opinions on every possible occasion, he was frequently driven frantic.

Once the entire family were turned out of their home, near Ascot at twenty-four hours' notice because Queensbury wished to bring a party of friends which included his mistress. His wife bore with his behaviour for twenty years; but when he proposed that his mistress should come along and that the three of them should live together, the breaking point was reached, and in 1887 she divorced him.³¹

From this extract, it is known how much cantankerous the Marquess of Queensbury was towards other characters and specially towards his wife. He was a sadist and a

persecutor who drew pleasure in persecuting others, weaker than himself. This is how he continued to harm his wife even after she had divorced him. In the same way, he went against Oscar Wilde with vindictive ferocity when he was convinced that Wilde had homosexual relationship with his son, Alfred Douglas. For a considerable length of time Douglas remained a devoted friend to Wilde; and it appears that the Marquess through cajolery and threats weaned Douglas away from Oscar Wilde. After all, the Wildean friendship for Douglas meant some sort of a quest of a father-figure and guide in Wilde since Douglas was greatly disenchanted with the paternal family life.

It is because of the malefactor attitude of the Marquess; Oscar Wilde was condemned more than the act of condemning in the hands of law and prosecution. Even taking for granted that Wilde-Douglas relationship was abnormal, it cannot be gainsaid that it was essentially a personal affair. There was hardly any justification for the vested interest to blow up the ordinarily abnormal relationship out of proportion. It appears that the champions of the social convention saw to it that the whole affair becomes a hysterical bugaboo to dog him at every step in 1895 with the apparent intention to clip Wilde's leoline talents. Still, Oscar Wilde continued to maintain his creativity despite physical pain, sorrow and horror.

From the extract, being cited below, it is made clear, that the Marquess of Queensbury did everything possible to compel his son, Alfred Douglas to conform to the line of action he thought best:

At the end of two months, he (the Marquess of Queensbury) was normal again and his son (Alfred Douglas) received a letter in which he repeated everything he had said against Wilde prior to their meeting (already alluded to in the underlined portion, above) and declared that unless Douglas swore never to see airman (Wilde) again, his allowance would

be stopped. That put the son's back up, and in reply he questioned his father's right to interfere, refused positively to obey him, and said that if he was mean enough to stop the allowance he could go ahead and do it. Queensbury went ahead and did it. But the stoppage of the allowance did not skip their correspondence, which became extremely acrimonious, and at last Queensbury wrote a letter beginning 'Alfred', containing a flood of false accusations and a cataract abuse, ending 'Your disguised so-called father'; which inspired his son to send him a telegram: 'What a funny little man you are!'. This did not help to smooth things over, and Queensbury foamed at the pen, commencing another letter 'You miserable Creature', going on to lament that he had committed a crime in bringing 'such a creature into the world and concluding with the solacing reflection that his son had probably not been begotten by himself, in which case the crime was not his.'³²

The acrimonious verbal war between the Queensbury and his son, Alfred Douglas continued to be more and more vituperative as the time rolled on; in the same way, the Queensbury's attitude towards Oscar Wilde also got threatening and aggressive, so much so that Queensbury was seen "stamping round the West End of London, vowing vengeance against Wilde, defaming his character and threatening to shoot, thrash, assault, fight, ruin, disgrace or otherwise incommode him,' Since Queensbury's mind. Already over-exercised with Wilde's image, he vowed to finish him at any cost, for he considered him as his main arch-enemy":

"Accompanied by a prize-fighter, the 'screaming scarlet Marquis', as Wilde used to speak of him, called at No. 16 Tine Street. The two boxing 'stars' were shown into the library by the seventeen-year-old footman who was small in stature and tremblingly nervous at the sight of the ex-champion and his fellow-bruiser. Wilde got up and stood by the fireplace to receive

his visitors, quite capable of taking on half a dozen of such between the puffs of a cigarette, and having no more physical fear of Queensbury than if he had been a tame rabbit.

'Sit down" barked the Marquis.'I do not allow anyone to talk like that to me in my house or anywhere else, said Wilde calmly. 'This is the Marquis of Queensbury, the most inhuman brute in London. You are never to allow him to enter my house again. Now', he went on, opening the door for his uninvited guests: 'get out' And the screaming soarier Marquis left hurriedly, the professional pugilist on his heels".³³

From this long extract, it is possible to say that the issue of homosexuality on which Oscar Wilde was implicated and punished was a wonderful feat of sheer concoction in which the police, the prosecution, the press, a section of the vested interest opposed to the unconventional style of Wilde's living participated in a determined manner to oust Oscar Wilde anyhow from London's literary glory. (One can cite the opinions of eminent authorities known to Wilde.) All the same, a passing reference may also be made to John Galsworthy's play, *The Show* in which he has shown his concern about the increasing threat to man's personal freedom from the so-called 'do-gooders' from the ranks of police, press and the unscrupulous elements of the social vested interests. The dramatic turning in Oscar Wilde's successful and glorious life was essentially the handiwork of these elements whose rallying-cry is how to destroy the extraordinary individual.

It is the most disheartening feature of modern life. The democratic ideology of vox populi does not allow any note of dissent from any outstanding individual like Oscar Wilde. That he continued to voice his thoughts and feelings in short, clipped and tangential expressions against the forces of orthodoxy of the English Society in the closing phase of the Victorian era were undoing.

"From 1888 to 1895 literary England put out of countenance by an Irish who avowed he was a socialist, a hinted he was a homosexual, and patently was an antagonist of organized morals and religion. He declined, in the most public and ceremonious manner, to live within his income, behave modestly, work hard, respect his elders, or in general recognize reality, nature, art, politics or history in their traditional attire. Except that his gold-tipped cigarettes contained only tobacco, he was bent on a subversion of propriety and sobriety just as disestablishmentarian as anything out of San Francisco, and much more lavishly got up. Then at the very moment when he was writing his best, when *The Importance of Being Ernest* was playing packed houses, he was convicted of what the law picturesquely calls sodomy, and sentenced to two years at hard labour".

Therefore, his place as a symbolic figure is as better as his works and he is one of those writers of his age who do not transcend it altogether like Henry James. Wilde is the most transparent survivor. This position is assured on the continent as well. The pungency of his English can be founded out immediately by the students of the language. It questions the type of his writing: discursively or dramatically, and whether it is being alive with concession:

"Rhythms of an older generation's reassuring platitudes and proverbial certainties are undercut by those of intransigent youth. Yet the utmost joviality is marshaled to represent the generations of loggerheads. Wilde abjured the ponderousness which ordinarily accompanies social protest. It did not suit him, and innuendo could strike deeper."

In this extract, one comes to know in its first half the salient aspects of Wilde's dandified style of life and his indwelling propensity to be free of the compulsions of living according to the traditional values whereby he became a unique rebel to voice his protest through the word of mouth, and

in writing against the outworn social values. In the second half of this extract, the distinguished critic and man of literature is justified in holding to the opinion that the writings of Oscar Wilde would survive other writers, of his age, by virtue of the easy, felicitous and lively style of expression in different literary genres he undertook to dwell upon. That a man of such literary attainments should be stigmatized with homosexuality passes one's imagination. Anyway, as his reputation has been sullied by the smearing campaign started by the vindictive Marquess of Queensbury, followed by his hard imprisonment, one just cannot wishfully undo it, one can only understand him by piecing together different aspects of his creativity.

He had a lively sense of life which got expressed through his pen in a scintillating and incisive manner. By virtue of his powerful intellect, he could give expression to the freshening world of magic and wonder passing before one's eyes every moment.

Concluding Remarks

Oscar Wilde has been called an apostle of aestheticism and beauty, which he deserves it amply well, for he possessed a unique gift of the gab to express himself beautifully even the pedestrian and unbeautiful aspects of the surroundings and human reality. Precisely, in this context, a study of the salient aspects of Hedonism is very much relevant to understand Oscar Wilde in terms of art, morality and pleasure pursuit. Already, a succinctly worded philosophical definition of Hedonism has already been made at the beginning of this chapter; and now, to know its historical continuity right from the ancient Greek period to the beginning of the modern era, the following few pages are devoted. It is hoped that this discussion would help us in understanding the charismatic personality of Oscar Wilde in proper perspective.

Nowadays, man's mind is riven with weird contradictions arising out of contending ideologies linked to class and caste dissensions, racial discrimination, national interests and all that. Moreover, as the incidence of alienation and various types of pollution has coloured man's mind in general away from the true graces of culture, the factors of personal sympathy and social ideals are being looked at increasingly with suspicion. Further, in the besetting conditions of today when there is a universal craving for more freedom and comforts by all, even by the most undeserved ones, the factors of personal animosity and social jealousy come to play a determining role. As a consequence, a talented man of courage and knowledge is pilloried unjustifiably as it happened in case of Oscar Wilde. The assumptions underlying hedonism hold true in a limited way; for in man's bosom if there are impulses for doing good, there are, contentious war, the chances of hedonism to prevail in human society would largely remain shaky. All the same, the spirit of hedonism is necessary for man to remain civilized; hence, this debate and discussion.

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