



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the realm of literature, one of the interesting phenomena is the transfer and the derivation of influence. The literary influence is universal, for example, the influence of Greek and Latin literature on the literature of many European countries, the influence of Indian literature on eastern literature. The topic which interests me is the influence of the French literature on English literature, specifically, the influence of the French Art for Art's Sake School on the works of Oscar Wilde, one of the most notorious Victorian writers whose works are widely criticized positively and negatively. As a rule, he was praised by the poets and critics who pursued the same doctrines and were imbued with the same influence. On the contrary, he was reproached by moral and puritanic critics and readers. Through his life, he showed much interest in the French literature, especially, the literary movement in France in the nineteenth century which tended to aestheticism and consequently was called 'the Art for Art's Sake School.' This new literary school had the strongest influence on the works of Wilde. Traces of it appeared so evidently that contemporary critics criticized Wilde for his imitation, more pejoratively, his plagiarism. Whistler, a great painter of that age, his own friend, attacked him:

Among your ruthless exposures of the shams of to-day, nothing, I confess, have I enjoyed with keener relish than your late tilt at that arch-imposter and pest of the period - the all-pervading plagiarist!¹

The French critic remarked on the similar point of view:

L'ouvrage n'est certes pas sans faiblesse. Une certaine mièvrerie de style, un langage trop recherché parfois efféminé, gâte quelques-uns des pièces, et cette affectation rapprochée des bizarreries de l'auteur, justifie sans doute les parodistes: mais le critique indépendant découvre vite des qualités estimables. Ces vers sont souples, coulants, harmonieux; le style est soigné, la facture surveillée.

Mais ils (ses oeuvres) ont un défaut, un défaut grave: il manque d'originalité. L'apprenti suit de trop près des maîtres qu'il a élus.

Wilde, accused of plagiarism, did not reject the fact. Privately, he once said to Max Beerbohm: "of course I plagiarize. It is the privilege of the appreciative man."³

Wilde had his reputation in English literature as a critic, a poet, a dramatist. The French influence is infused in all his literary works. In his criticism, he declared his opinion of Arts which were partly the ideas inherited from the French school. In poems, plays and stories, he applied and reinforced the derived theories. This thesis will provide the study of the influence of the French Art

¹Karl Beckson, ed. Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 63.

²Albert J. Farmer, Le Mouvement Esthétique et 'Décadent' en Angleterre (1873-1900) (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1931), p. 133.

³Karl Beckson, ed. Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage, p. 2.

for Art's Sake theories in his poems and his novel. The study will accentuate, specifically, the use of imagery.

In his poems, the French Art for Art's Sake theories are reflected in the manifestation of many aesthetic kinds of imagery. Light, colour and tactile imagery are mostly recaptured from the example of Baudelaire and Gautier whose works interested Wilde a great deal.

Wilde wrote many kinds of stories; fairy tale, short story and novel. The first two categories are excluded in the study. The analysis will stress his novel solely. The Picture of Dorian Gray is the only novel he wrote and is the most interesting story that shows the very strong influence of French literature. The influence of A Rebours of Huysmans is especially obvious. Besides, many literary theories of the French writers, such as, Flaubert, Gautier are revealed.