Title: Surface and Symbol: Manifestations of Aristotelian and Platonic Philosophy in the Works of Oscar Wilde

In the works of Oscar Wilde, a significant classical influence surfaces in his exploration of the nature of morality and the link between ethics and aesthetics. By examining Wilde’s incorporation of classical philosophy throughout his works, my proposal seeks to further an understanding of the ethical dilemma presented by The Picture of Dorian Gray, specifically regarding the ambiguous relationship between ethics and aesthetics.

In The Picture of Dorian Gray and Plato’s Republic, for example, the actual or idealized roles of art function as elements essential to the development or maintenance of morality. Each author questions the inherent goodness of morality, formulating scenarios in which moral behavior is scrutinized and its value assessed.

To demonstrate the iterant thematic influence of Greek philosophical ethics throughout Wilde’s literary career, I intend to examine The Picture of Dorian Gray in addition to his poetry and criticism. Wilde’s poems, written either in college or shortly afterwards, demonstrate early assimilations of Greek philosophy into his creative endeavors, and the theme resounds across texts up to the composition of The Picture of Dorian Gray in 1889. By identifying numerous manifestations of Attic philosophy throughout Wilde’s body of work, I will illustrate the integral and pervading importance of his classical background.

The notebooks Wilde kept during his education at Oxford contain the aspects of his studies which he deemed suitable for recording and recollecting. Whereas notebooks created in the American educational system tend to reflect information distilled through professors, notebooks fostered by the more independent methodology encouraged in the British system contain a record of the student’s observations. An analysis of the classical portions of the notebooks and their connections to Wilde’s artistic compositions may demonstrate a thematic reverberation rooted in Wilde’s Oxford days and extending across texts.

I will have an opportunity to work on the notebooks and other documents from Wilde’s Oxford years which Professors Philip Smith and Joseph Bristow (UCLA) are editing for publication. I will have access to the notebooks as an undergraduate research assistant in the Spring of 2006 term and be permitted to study them for my project.

Although two of Wilde’s notebooks have been subject to extensive scholarly scrutiny, a new document has surfaced from a private collection as of 2004. The document, the “Philosophy Notebook,” contains Wilde’s handwritten notes focusing primarily on classical philosophy. The notebook includes extensive Greek quotations from Aristotle’s Nichomachean Ethics as well as comparisons between the ethical positions proffered by Aristotle and Plato.

My knowledge of ancient Greek will allow me to work closely with the classical portions of Wilde’s notes and create a suitable milieu for performing a cross-textual linguistic analysis. I will perform a close analysis of the classical passages Wilde
chose to excerpt in his notebook. Rough translations from Greek to English concepts such as "beauty," "goodness" and "happiness" lose key connotative subtleties that would have been noted by Wilde as a classicist and incorporated into his works. A fundamental understanding of the Greek texts in their original form may clarify Wilde’s usage of classical concepts throughout his career.

In addition to the "Philosophy Notebook," I will be granted access to five other documents including "Of Plato and Psychology" a review of John Addington Symonds’ Studies of the Greek Poets, and an essay on Hellenism written by Wilde as an undergraduate. Both pieces may contribute significantly to my analysis of Wilde’s studies and strengthen the link between classical philosophy and his works.

To examine Wilde’s classical studies in the broader context of the 19th century, I will study the critical and contextual backgrounds of the influence of classical Greek through in England and Oxford in the late 19th century. In so doing, I will be better prepared to assess the importance of Oxford figures such as Walter Pater, John Ruskin, John Addington Symonds, Benjamin Jowett and others in relation to Wilde.

The late-Victorian debate concerning the relationship between ethics and aesthetics included the highly disparate views of Pater and Ruskin. Wilde attended the lectures of both men during his years at Oxford, and his works reflect their influential dichotomy as he explores the nature of goodness and art’s role in influencing and representing morality.

While the connection between the works of Wilde and classical texts, primarily Platonic, has received considerable attention, I hope to add to the discourse by focusing on the Aristotelian and comparative Attic philosophy contained within the newly uncovered document. I can contribute to the conversation by emphasizing the importance and formative significance of Wilde’s study of classical philosophy regarding the critical interpretation of The Picture of Dorian Gray.