Response Paper One: An Exquisite Portrait of an Exquisite Man

“Words have no power to impress the mind without the exquisite horror of their reality.”

– Edgar Allen Poe

There are twenty-nine appearances of the word “exquisite” within the approximately 300 pages of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word has only moderate current usage patterns; this is perhaps the first reason why its prevalence in *Dorian Gray* is notable. The word comes from the Latin *exquisitus,* “to seek out.” The *OED* gives many definitions, but one of the most appropriate to the context of this novel is: “Of such consummate excellence, beauty, or perfection, as to excite intense delight or admiration.” Another appropriate definition, for the noun form of the word, reads “A person (usually a man) who is over-nice in dress, etc.; a coxcomb, dandy, fop.” Both of these definitions of the word “exquisite” are used both by and to describe protagonist-turned-anti-hero Dorian, encapsulating a sense of the character’s vices.

Use of “exquisite” is particularly present at the beginning of the novel: a fitting phenomenon, as the beginning segments of the novel depict Dorian’s youth, when “exquisite” most aptly describes him. However, not every use of the word is positive; some segments foreshadow the downturn that is to come. When learning the story of Dorian’s parentage, Lord Henry states: “Behind every exquisite thing that existed, there was something tragic” (67). Not only does this quote associate Dorian – the “exquisite thing” described here – with tragedy, but by equating these ideas, the quotation also subverts an expectation early on of “exquisite” as a positive descriptor. For the rest of the novel, this quote lingers each time the word “exquisite” is employed, bringing into question the word’s connotations.

As the novel progresses and Dorian’s moral character and reputation deteriorate, “exquisite” takes on a certain kind of irony. This irony is apparent in this quote from Basil Hallward: “You became to me the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream. I worshipped you” (202). Dorian represented the ideal of youth, both to Basil as an artist representing a vision, and more generally as a gentleman progressing upward within London society. However, as the child that he was grows and matures, Dorian’s “exquisite” nature moves from a fundamental character trait to a façade, an image he performs like the masterpiece Basil once painted. Though Dorian to some extent manages to retain the worship that accompanies exquisiteness, he maintains this out of fear rather than adoration, as before. Though on the outside Dorian looks the same as he always has, the exquisite quality he once possessed is indeed haunting, like the memory of a nightmare, as his character corrodes within.

Though as previously mentioned, the word “exquisite” mostly inhabits the earlier half of the novel, the closing paragraph contains a final use of the word: “When they entered, they found hanging upon the wall a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty. Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognized who it was” (392). The final use of “exquisite” calls back to the beginning of the novel, when Dorian himself fully embodied this characteristic. The use draws attention to his contrasting current state, his final state, and the impression of his former self preserved in the painting. Finally, it circles back to Lord Henry’s statement towards the novel’s beginning, relating the word “exquisite” to tragedy. This final quotation conjures exquisite’s Latin origins, placing? Dorian as the seeker of his own downfall and demise.