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Wilde has been described by Regenia Gagnier (in her 1986 study *Idylls of the Marketplace*) as one of the first theorists of what she terms a 'market' (or consumer) society; write an essay showing how Wilde's literary works engage with contemporary material culture.

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The influential growth of material and consumer culture during the period in which Oscar Wilde was writing marked a shift in society's outlook on the role and availability of commodities, as the rise of manufacturing and technology during the mid-late Victorian era, alongside the ease of accessibility to displays such as The Great Exhibition in London, captured the public's imagination about the exciting possibilities such changes had to offer. Wilde's engagement with such issues can be seen in a number of in his literary works, as the use of elaborately ornate sets and props in plays such as *An Ideal Husband* and *Lady Windemere's Fan* reflected the public's interest in such chic and fashionable items. His engagement with the advertisement and publicity of his plays also connected with the increasingly consumer orientated culture, as his associations with a variety of highly regarded designers added a sense of contemporary flair to his productions. However, works such as 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* offer a much more critical portrayal of consumer and material culture, as they explore the damaging effects such principles can have on the prosperity of both individuals and of society as a whole.

Wilde's engagement with consumer culture was in part influenced by the increased accessibility to a wide variety of commodities during the time in which he was writing, as advances in industry and technology during the nineteenth century directly affected the interests and spending habits of the general population. The birth of the manufacturing industry as a result of the Industrial Revolution led to an explosion in the choice and availability of material products, which in turn gave rise to a more consumerist and commercially engaged society. A particularly dominant example which fuelled the development of this culture could be seen in The Great Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations, in which 'thirty-two nations from Europe, America, Africa and the Far East' were represented by 'an assembly of manufactured articles, the largest display of commodities that had ever been brought together under one roof'.[1] The ease with which the public were able to view such a wide variety of items all in one place sparked the collective imagination of the country, and provoked an increased interest in the acquisition of different items from across the globe.

This fascination with objects from around the world is reflected in Wilde's writing, as the wave of public interest in the diverse range of items on display at The Great Exhibition is

[1] Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England — Advertising and Spectacle 1851-1914* (CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 17

echoed in in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* through Dorian's 'search for sensations that would be at once new and delightful, and possess that element of strangeness that is so essential to romance'[2] in an attempt to 'accumulate the most exquisite specimens he could find'.[3] His use of richly vivid descriptions such as 'the dainty Delhi muslins, finely wrought with gold-thread palmates, and…the Dacca gauzes, that from their transparency are known in the East as "woven air," and "running water," and "evening dew"'[4] emphasise the allure of such distinctive and exquisite items, as the bold and intense imagery emulates the 'abundance and variety of things of the world…[that] awed visitors' and 'advanced a prescient vision of the evolutionary developments of commodities'[5] from which the country would never turn back.

The amalgamation of Wilde's own interests in such extravagant items with the increasingly commercial interests of Victorian consumer culture helped him keep abreast of public popularity, particularly in terms of the promotional publicity for several of his stage plays. The stage directions throughout his scripts indicate this widespread fascination with unusual and exotic objects, as the descriptions of the set signify the elaborately decorative visual appearance of the stage itself. For example, the ornate details of the mise-en-scène and props in the stage directions to *An Ideal Husband* create a sense of extravagance, as the inclusion of features such as '*a great chandelier…which illumine[s] a large eighteenth-century French tapestry — representing the Triumph of Love, from a design by Boucher*'[6] indicates the great decadence of the house in which the scene takes place. The specificity of the '*large eighteenth century French tapestry…from a design by Boucher*' and a '*Louis Seize sofa*' not only indicate the wealth and class of the characters, but also alludes to the scope of the upper-classes' artistic temperaments. The use of such specific late-eighteenth century pieces creates a sense of diversity, as the juxtaposition of the ornate rococo-style tapestry with the more angular neo-classical Louis Seize style furniture also emphasises Wilde's interest in the aesthetic movement, as the varied styles reflect the movement's tendency to pick and choose according to their fancy rather than consistently adhering to a particular style.

As well as using period pieces such as these, however, Wilde also commissioned a wide variety of contemporary artists, designers and tailors to create more up-to-date and modern pieces to ensure the stage was adorned with popular and fashionable furniture and clothing. This gave his plays a fresh sense of style, as the use of such modishly up-to-date items meant that the visual character of his productions reflected the fashionable trends of the modern day. The playbills for the productions at the time drew attention to the wide array of people and companies involved in these areas, as they 'advertised the names of the interior designers (for the sets), for example, Walter Hann' and detailed that 'the "furniture and draperies" were provided by Frank Giles, & Co., Kensington,… the dresses by Mesdames Savage and Purdue [and] the floral decorations… from Harrod's stores'.[7] This engagement with marketing and advertising further exemplifies his relationship with the consumerist culture of the day, as his affiliation with such high-class partnerships and organisations helped bolster the popularity of his plays through their joint promotion with such well-regarded brands.

Whilst Wilde's use of such prestigious contemporary artists and designers meant his plays reflected the most up-to-date tastes of contemporary Victorian culture, his plays not

[2] Oscar Wilde, 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' in *The Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Spring Books, 1965), p. 451
[3] Ibid., p. 454
[4] Ibid., pp. 454-55
[5] Richards, p. 27
[6] Oscar Wilde, 'An Ideal Husband' in *The Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Spring Books, 1965), p. 84
[7] Paul Fortunato, *Modernist Aesthetics and Consumer Culture in the Writings of Oscar Wilde* (New York; London: Routledge, 2007), p. 96

only mirrored the aesthetic and material values of mid-late nineteenth century England but also actively influenced them. The use of such extravagant costumes and sets meant that his plays acted almost as a living showcase for the latest designs, as the fashionable attire and decoration with which his productions were adorned directly inspired the wardrobes and furnishings of the wealthier members of the population. *Lady Windemere's Fan* was particularly influential in this regard, as Paul Fortunato highlights how the fan central to the play's plot was 'a very fashionable consumer item at the time' and explains that 'in the fashion magazines, there were full illustrations of the dresses of the leading female characters in the play, and there were fine illustrations also of the enormous ostrich feather fan'.[8] His plays were so widely renowned for their impact on the spending habits of the public that certain writers even parodied his consumerist inclinations, as 'in Brookfield's satire of the play, *The Poet and the Puppets: A Travestie Suggested by "Lady Windemere's Fan,"* the title figure's name is Lady Winterstock — a reference to the fashions she displays'.[9] The use of Lady Winterstock not only overtly mimicked Lady Windemere's name, but also made brazenly tongue-in-cheek reference to the tendency for Wilde's characters to publicise the fashionable 'stock' for the upcoming season.

Despite this, Wilde was often deeply critical of materialistic culture in his works, and in fact seemed openly opposed to excessive consumption despite its apparent prevalence in both the content and publicity of his society comedies. In 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' Wilde pinpointed the cause of many of society's problems as being a direct result of people's obsession with personal ownership and private property. His suggestion that 'private property has really harmed Individualism…by confusing a man with what he possesses'[10] highlights society's tendency to conflate the quality of a person's character with the possessions they own, a mistake which could be seen to have been exacerbated by the increase in commodity culture during the period in which he was writing. His suggestion that consumerist society 'made gain, not growth, its aim. So that man thought that the important thing was to have, and did not know that the important thing is to be'[11] builds upon this criticism, and appears to imply Wilde's scepticism about the benefits of the increased availability of consumer goods to the moral wellbeing of society as a whole.

Neil Sammells' suggestion that Wilde 'treads a thin line…between salesmanship and subversion'[12] highlights the discontinuity between his claims in 'The Soul of Man' and his actions in the real world. Despite his commercial ventures with the sales and advertisements related to *Lady Windemere's Fan*, as well as the grossly commoditised nature of his own exuberant lifestyle, his fascination with Christ often led him to write about the advantages of a non-materialistic existence and the abandonment of material wealth in the pursuit of the ideal socialist society. In his paraphrased account of Matthew 6:19-24, the idea that an individual should not 'imagine that your perfection lies in accumulating or possessing external things [because] your affection is inside of you'[13] appears quite counter-cultural, not only to society as a whole but also to Wilde's own personality. In the context of the ever accelerating consumer market of the day the concept of surrendering one's material belongings to become happier would have seemed absurd. This conflict in interests suggests a tension between Wilde's idealistic attitude towards the abolition of materialism and the overpowering urge of his real-world desires, as although he wrote that 'If only you could

[8] Fortunato, p. 95
[9] Ibid., p. 96
[10] Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' in *The Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Spring Books, 1965), p. 918
[11] Wilde, 'The Soul of Man', p. 918
[12] Neil Sammells, 'Oscar Wilde', *In Our Time*, BBC Radio 4, 6 December 2001
[13] Wilde, 'The Soul of Man', p. 920

realise that [your affection lies inside of you], you would not want to be rich',[14] his continued dandyism perhaps suggests this was something that he never fully realised himself.

Whilst 'The Soul of Man' explores how people would flourish in a world free from the shackles of materialistic consumerism, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* demonstrates the way in which the soul of man under capitalism is prone to corruption and fundamental deterioration. The contrast between Basil and Lord Henry's views of Dorian himself highlight the discrepancy between a sincere and truthful love of something beautiful and the more superficial adoration of a more reckless materialistic obsession. Basil's appreciation of coming 'face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself'[15] presents a much purer and more meaningful evaluation than Henry's view that 'he is some brainless, beautiful creature, who should always be here in winter when we have no flowers to look at, and always here in summer when we want something to chill our intelligence'.[16] Whilst Basil appreciates him for the charm of his overall character, Henry's disregard for his intelligence in favour of his looks alone reflects the vapid and shallow propensities of his character, as he almost seems to represent a personification of materialistic culture itself. Basil's reluctance for Henry to meet Dorian could therefore be seen to reflect Wilde's criticism of materialism's corrupting influence, as his assertion that 'your influence would be bad' because it would contaminate Dorian's 'simple and beautiful nature'[17] highlights the potentially damaging effects materialism can have on the purity of the human spirit.

Regenia Gagnier states that 'Wilde captured the essence of modern economic man [through Lord Henry] when he named the cigarette the perfect type of pleasure because it left one unsatisfied. For this reason, the cigarette is the perfect commodity',[18] as Wilde highlights the shallow and transitory nature of the pleasure gained by the consumption of material objects alone. Henry's suggestion that 'What more can one want?' than an 'exquisite' experience which 'leaves one unsatisfied'[19] is explored in Dorian's attempts to lose himself in consumerism, as despite the 'exquisite' nature of the wondrous treasures he collects from around the world, he still finds himself feeling ultimately discontented and unfulfilled in himself. Jerusha McCormack suggests that 'From the moment he speaks his desire [to be immortalised], Dorian himself becomes an artefact, neither alive nor dead… [and] anaesthesises himself with things, inventing himself by means of his own collections'.[20] Whilst 'these treasures…were to be his means of forgetfulness, modes by which he could escape',[21] his inability to fully realise his potential shows the pitfalls of relying on material gain for true prosperity and happiness.

McCormack's suggestion that Dorian 'becomes an artefact, neither alive nor dead'[22] when he immerses himself in a shroud of materialistic consumption reflects Wilde's assertion that 'to live is the rarest thing in the world', as 'most people exist, that is all'.[23] As Dorian is consumed by the corruption of the materialistic influences around him, the 'painting [burdens] him with [a] new consciousness of life at the same time that *it* bears the burden of

[14] Wilde, 'The Soul of Man', p. 920
[15] Wilde, 'Dorian Gray', p. 380
[16] Ibid., p. 378
[17] Ibid., p. 384
[18] Regenia Gagnier, 'On the Insatiability of Human Wants: Economic and Aesthetic Man' in *Victorian Studies 36.2* (Winter, 1993), p. 126
[19] Wilde, 'Dorian Gray', p. 421
[20] Jerusha McCormack, 'Wilde's Fiction(s)' in Peter Raby, *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wild*e (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 113
[21] Wilde, 'Dorian Gray', p. 455
[22] McCormack, p. 113
[23] Wilde, 'The Soul of Man', p. 919

this consciousness'.[24] This prevents him from truly living, as he instead lapses into a state of mere existence. Although *The Picture of Dorian Gray* offers an extreme example, the moral message which underpins the allegorical story alludes to the real world implications of materialism's capacity to prevent people from truly living. Wilde therefore uses the novel as a warning that the 'sordid preoccupation, endless industry [and] continual wrong' of the consumerism which gripped the country at the time he was writing binds us and 'hinders Individualism at every step'[25] from becoming the best that we can be.

Wilde's complicated relationship with the materialistic culture by which he was surrounded at the time he was writing is reflected in his literary works, as the struggle between his fascination with the acquisition of material items and his awareness that society would be better off without them is evident when his works are examined collectively. The boom in industry and manufacturing excited his interest in appealing to the growing commodity culture of the late nineteenth century, as his use of advertising and commercial ventures in plays such as *Lady Windemere's Fan* allowed him to directly engage with the consumerist society of the late-Victorian era. His partnership with well-renowned designers and retailers of the day not only grounded his plays in contemporary fashion, but also allowed him to directly influence the aesthetic tastes of his audiences himself. However, in critical essays such as 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' he offers a much more negative critique of materialism, as he suggests that such pursuits of material gain are in fact damaging and restrictive to human flourishing. This condemnation is expanded upon in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as Dorian's ultimate demise as a result of the corrupting influence of materialistic recklessness acts as a damning warning about the perilous consequences in which such over-consumption can potentially conclude. Whilst several of his plays actively engage in the growth of the materialistic culture of the late nineteenth century, Wilde also directly condemns the superficial and shallow tendencies such a lifestyle can entail, as he highlights the fundamentally corrosive effects such an overtly consumerist culture can have not only on our own personal wellbeing and happiness as individuals, but also on that of society as a whole.

[24] Julia Prewitt Brown, *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde's Philosophy of Art* (University Press of Virginia, 1999), p. 79
[25] Wilde, 'The Soul of Man', p. 920

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