



**Consider the Ways in Which ‘High’ Art and ‘Low’ Art Commingles in Works by
BOTH Wilde AND James. What do You Make of the Crossover Between
‘Criminality’ and Aesthetics – or ‘Ghostliness’ and Aesthetics – in These Two
Authors?**

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According to Dennis Denisoff, British culture from 1840-1940 was ‘predominantly antagonistic towards non-sanctioned sexual practices’.¹ Indeed, Richard Dellamora asserts that ‘Britain ... had the most regressive anti-sodomy legislation in Western Europe’.² Victorian America was also characterised by a similar homophobia. In an era so intolerant of non-normative sexualities, same-sex desire was something that could not be openly expressed. Instead, many had to suppress their sexuality, or at least ensure that it remained a closely guarded secret. Nevertheless, as Jeff Nunokawa notes, despite the atmosphere of puritanical oppression that is often seen to define the Victorian era, it is evident that ‘sexual desires are everywhere in the Victorian novel, either as an explicit topic or as a subterranean force close ... to the surface’.³ This idea of ‘subterranean’ sexuality is central to both *The Aspern Papers*, by Henry James, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, by Oscar Wilde. In both texts, males are associated with aestheticism, and ‘high’ art, whilst females are associated with ‘low’ art, in the form of the gothic, the ghostly, and the sensational. Consequently, females are seen to be marginalised and diminished by male characters. The aestheticism associated with males is emblematic of male homosexuality and homoeroticism: it is, in other words, a signifier of ‘subterranean’ sexuality that is considered a taboo in Victorian society. Thus, the periphery position of females can be seen as the consequence of male reactions to the forced suppression of homosexual desires. Essentially, the diminishment of females at the hands of males (resulting primarily from their alignment with low art) is, in the texts, a male response to the weight of social expectations of heterosexuality. Thus, by exploring the interplay between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art forms in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Aspern Papers*, Wilde and James highlight the marginalisation and dismissal of female characters as a product of repressed homosexuality and homoerotic desire in males. In doing so, they provide a criticism of a Victorian society intolerant of forms of sexuality that exist outside the heteronormative standard.

Michèle Mendelssohn argues that ‘aestheticism was an argument about art and culture’, which centred on the appreciation of beautiful works of art.⁴ Denisoff makes the further distinction that aestheticism ‘came to be associated with ... high-art’.⁵ It is clear that the narrator of *The Aspern Papers* is associated with aestheticism, in that he is obsessed with what he sees as the noble pursuit of art – in the form of him trying to procure Aspern’s papers. He elevates his undertaking to an almost spiritual level, claiming ‘I felt even a mystic companionship, a moral fraternity with all those ... in the service of art. They had worked for beauty, for a devotion; and what else was I doing?’.⁶ He also makes it clear that there is almost nothing he would not do in the pursuit of Aspern’s documents: ‘hypocrisy, duplicity are my only chance ... for Jeffrey Aspern’s sake I would do worse still’.⁷ He displays an aesthetic enthusiasm for beautiful art, made evident by his fanatical obsession with the documents. However, the term ‘devotion’ and his admission that he would do anything ‘for Jeffrey Aspern’s sake’, as opposed to doing it for the sake of Aspern’s *art*, suggests there is something more personal than mere artistic appreciation in his motives (emphasis mine). Indeed, his assertion that Aspern ‘had been not only one of the most brilliant minds of his day ... but ... one of the handsomest’, has distinct homoerotic overtones.⁸

Moreover, the narrator’s scheme to ‘win over’ Juliana and Tita (so as to procure the papers) by sending them flowers, can be read as an indicator of suppressed homosexuality. By claiming ‘it’s absurd

¹ Dennis Denisoff, *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody 1840-1940*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 2.

² Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism*, (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 12.

³ Jeff Nunokawa, ‘Sexuality in the Victorian Novel’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Deirdre David, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 125-148, (p. 126).

⁴ Michèle Mendelssohn, *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 5.

⁵ Denisoff, *Aestheticism*, p. 6.

⁶ Henry James, ‘The Aspern Papers’, in *The Aspern Papers and Other Tales*, ed. by Michael Gorra, (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), pp. 50-145, (p. 77).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

... for a man, but I can't live without flowers', the narrator openly rejects stereotypical masculinity, and by extension, the heterosexuality that accompanies this stereotype.⁹ Moreover, 'the late 1890s saw homosexuality increasingly associated with a public iconography of flowers'.¹⁰ He determines to 'bombard their citadel with roses', until 'their door would ... yield to the pressure ... [of] a mountain of carnations'.¹¹ James, then, uses the motif of flowers as a signifier of homosexuality: the narrator rejects traditional stereotypes of masculinity (and the heterosexuality associated with this), in order to succeed in his aim of obtaining the papers – an endeavour which itself symbolises homoerotic desire. Jacob Korg boldly argues that the documents sought so desperately by the narrator do not actually exist, and that Juliana and Tita are letting him believe they do, in order to obtain rent money. He claims the narrator is 'rendered so credulous by his obsession' that he is incapable of realising the truth.¹² Although his obsession is certainly all-consuming, it seems more plausible to see his fascination with the papers as an indicator of his suppressed homosexuality, and alignment with aestheticism, rather than as an indicator of his gullibility.

In contrast to the association of males with high art and aesthetic values, females in the novella are associated with ghostly elements of gothic fiction – that is, low art. Lynn Pykett states that 'above all gothic is concerned with feeling ... (perhaps mainly) to create feeling ... in the reader'.¹³ She specifies that 'gothic fictions seek to arouse ... fear and terror'.¹⁴ Whilst not necessarily producing reactions of terror, James certainly characterises his two main female characters according to gothic conventions. Invoking the traditional image of the 'old haunted house', James describes their home as 'a dilapidated old palace on an out-of-the-way canal'.¹⁵ This image of a 'gloomy and stately' house in a state of 'extreme dilapidation' immediately creates an atmosphere of mystery, with the implied sense of isolation lending the house an eerie quality.¹⁶ The narrator questions Tita: 'should you mind telling me how you exist without air, without exercise, without any sort of human contact?'.¹⁷ Thus, the sense of remoteness associated with the house is also attributed to Tita and Juliana, with the implication that they live 'without air' extending the idea of mere social segregation into a more sinister sense of other-isation, in which the two women are presented as being almost inhuman.

This sense of female otherness is emphasised by Mrs Prest's claim that 'they have the reputation of witches', which aligns them with the low art of ghost stories.¹⁸ Significantly, it is Juliana – Aspern's former lover – who is portrayed as the more ghostly of the two women. She is referred to as 'a terrible relic', an 'old witch', a 'grim' creature, and – bizarrely – 'most dead of all'.¹⁹ The emphasis on her age, and description of her as 'dead' liken her to a ghost who haunts the gloomy house where she once lived. She also has a 'mystifying bandage over her eyes', which 'increased the presumption that there was a ghastly death's-head lurking behind it'.²⁰ Thus, James implies the narrator's desire to marginalise her significance as the past lover of Aspern. If his devotion to Aspern can be seen as representative of homoerotic feeling, it seems that his attempts to diminish Juliana as a bizarre, decrepit old woman is a result of his jealousy of the hold she once had over Aspern. It also symbolises his general resentment of a society that attempts to limit sexual freedom, by enforcing a heteronormative standard. Certainly, his bizarre reasoning that the shade can only conceal 'a ghastly death's-head' indicates a passion that goes beyond the duties of mere textual description – his deduction is imbued with an almost morbid creativity that maliciously depicts 'the divine Juliana as a grinning skull'.²¹ His deliberate contrasting of the young and 'divine' Juliana with the frail old woman he sees before him serves not only to cruelly emphasise the deterioration of her beauty, but also pre-empts her death! In this sense, the female association with elements of low art serves to marginalise them. This diminished portrayal of females is borne from a jealousy of the heterosexual love of Juliana and Aspern, as well as a negative reaction to the Victorian model of heterosexuality, which was propagated as the norm.

Through the narrator's association with high art, then, James conveys a sense of 'subterranean' sexuality, whereby his aesthetic devotion to procuring the papers becomes emblematic of homoerotic

⁹ Ibid., p. 60.

¹⁰ Hugh Stevens, 'Queer Henry *In the Cage*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry James*, ed. by Jonathon Freedman, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 120-138, (p. 130).

¹¹ Ibid., p. 78.

¹² Jacob Korg, 'What Aspern Papers? A Hypothesis', *College English*, 5:23, (1962), 378-381, (p. 378).

¹³ Lynn Pykett, 'Sensation and the fantastic in the Victorian novel', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Deirdre David (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 192-211, (p. 196).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ James, 'Aspern', p. 50.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 54-9.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 64, 110, 94, 53.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 94, 64.

²¹ Ibid., p. 64.

desire. His diminished view of females can be read as a reaction to the fact he does not wish to engage in the heterosexual relationships expected of him (something hinted at by his rejection of Tita). He likens Aspern and his past lovers to the Greek myth of Orpheus and the Maenads, suggesting that 'all the Maenads were unreasonable'.²² William Stein suggests that this constitutes his 'implicit rejection of women', and 'fear of their sexuality'.²³ Certainly, he makes derogatory comments about females, making it clear he 'could not, for a bundle of tattered papers, marry a ridiculous, pathetic, provincial old woman'.²⁴ The prospect of entering into a heterosexual relationship is so abhorrent to him, that it leads him to temporarily disregard his beloved documents as a 'bundle of tattered papers'. Thus, through engagement with notions of high and low art, James provides a criticism of Victorian attitudes that lead the narrator to marginalise female characters, as a reaction to social strictures that attempt to enforce a heteronormative standard, which he cannot abide by.

The Picture of Dorian Gray, also aligns males with high art. Rita Felski notes that 'aesthetic pleasure ... [was] located in ... the collection and enjoyment of beautiful objects'.²⁵ Accordingly, the simply act of getting out of bed displays Dorian's alignment with aestheticism: 'he got up, and, throwing on an elaborate dressing-gown of silk-embroidered cashmere wool, passed into the onyx-paved bathroom'.²⁶ Wilde's indication of Dorian's penchant for exquisite possessions, therefore, associates him with high art and the aesthetic movement. Furthermore, Denisoff defines aesthetes as 'people who viewed, or claimed to view, life as art', adding that they were 'interested in fashioning themselves as art'.²⁷ Descriptions of Dorian by Lord Henry as a 'young Adonis, made out of ivory', and 'a wonderful creation' with 'finely-chiselled nostrils', liken him to an exquisite work (by suggesting he was fashioned by an artist) whilst betraying Henry's aesthetic appreciation of beautiful art.²⁸ This sense of 'Dorian as art' is heightened following the creation of Basil Hallward's 'portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty' – a portrait that displays Dorian's sins on its surface, thus epitomising the idea of his life being art.²⁹ Upon hearing of Dorian's plans to reform his sinful behaviour Lord Henry discourages him, saying 'you are really beginning to moralize ... you are much too delightful to do that'.³⁰ Thus, he again betrays his adherence to the aesthetic manifesto of 'art for art's sake' – which suggests that art should be amoral – whilst solidifying the depiction of Dorian as a 'delightful' piece of art.

Moreover, like in *The Aspern Papers*, Lord Henry's description of Dorian as an 'Adonis' with 'finely-chiselled nostrils' confuses a detached appreciation of art with an erotic appreciation of the male body. In both texts, male affiliation with high art appears to be accompanied by an implication of homosexuality – certainly, the description of Basil's admiration of Dorian as 'a romance of art' explicitly links aestheticism and homoeroticism.³¹ Dominic Manganiello suggests that Wilde portrays sin in the novel as a process that allows individuals to explore 'passions that are normally considered vile or ignoble', resulting in the aesthetic objective of a 'richer and more variegated experience'.³² Manganiello's connection of aestheticism with sin is significant when considered in light of the novel's association of homoeroticism with aestheticism. Dorian deteriorates into a life of depravity as a result of 'Lord Henry's influence, and the still more poisonous influences that came from his own temperament'.³³ His sins, which result in his friendship being deemed 'fatal to young men', are clearly symbolic of homosexuality.³⁴ Lord Henry declares to Dorian: 'you yourself, with your red-rose youth and your rose-white boyhood, have had passions [and] ... dreams ... [which] stain your cheek with shame'.³⁵ The implication of shame, as well as the image of flowers (which suggests homosexuality, as in *The Aspern Papers*) solidifies the notion that the aesthetic influence of Lord Henry results in Dorian's realisation of a homosexual self, previously kept hidden in reaction to Victorian homophobia. Thus, Wilde associates males with aestheticism, and aestheticism with the realisation – and implied fulfilment – of homosexual desires.

²² Ibid., p. 53.

²³ William, B. Stein, 'The Aspern Papers: A Comedy of Masks', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 2:14, (1959), 172-178, (p. 175).

²⁴ Ibid., p. 141.

²⁵ Rita Felski, 'The Counterdiscourse of the Feminine in Three Texts by Wilde, Huysmans, and Sacher-Masoch', *PMLA*, 5:106, (1991), 1094-1105, (p. 1095).

²⁶ Wilde, *Dorian*, p. 81.

²⁷ Denisoff, *Aestheticism*, pp. 6-7.

²⁸ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Joseph Bristow, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 6, 21.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 183.

³¹ Ibid., p. 14.

³² Dominic Manganiello, 'Ethics and Aesthetics in The Picture of Dorian Gray', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 2:9, (1983), 25-33, (p. 26).

³³ Wilde, *Dorian*, pp. 102-2.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 127.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

By contrast, females in the novel are - like in *The Aspern Papers* – associated with low art. Sybil Vane is first encountered by Dorian acting in an ‘absurd little theatre’, described as ‘vulgar’ and ‘tawdry’ – thus she is immediately associated with a sense of tackiness which is directly opposed to the cultivated refinement of aestheticism.³⁶ Furthermore his claim that he ‘was rather annoyed at the idea of seeing Shakespeare done in such a wretched hole of a place’ reinforces the notion of her alignment with low art, by suggesting that the production in which she is acting cannot be of a quality deemed acceptable for a performance of Shakespeare (who was, of course, associated with high art).³⁷ Similarly, her mother, who is prone to ‘false theatrical gestures’, is depicted as an uncultivated woman, associated with the low art of melodrama.³⁸ Pykett defines sensation fiction as concerning ‘murder’, ‘adultery’ and ‘bigamy’.³⁹ Sensational works also ‘addressed contemporary anxieties and fantasies about marriage and the family’.⁴⁰ Many of the more sensational aspects of the plot, then, revolve around Sybil: her mother not being married to her father throws the shadow of scandal over her and James’ conception, whilst his determination to hunt down and kill Dorian results in the melodramatic sub-plot that aligns Sybil with sensation, if only by association. Moreover, Victorian anxieties regarding inter-class marriage are also explored in relation to Sybil’s engagement to Dorian. Thus, the main female character in Wilde’s novel is firmly aligned with notions of low art. When contrasted with the male association with high art, the negative connotations of this female alignment become apparent – females in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are presented as inferior to the refined male aesthetes, just as they are in James’ novella.

This female inferiority is exemplified by Dorian’s brutal rejection of Sybil, following the performance of Shakespeare he attended with Basil and Lord Henry. Despite his initial appreciation of her acting, that night he deemed it ‘absurdly artificial’ – ‘it was simply bad art’.⁴¹ After the show he cruelly negates their love, with the words ‘you are nothing to me now’.⁴² His rejection of her appears to be based solely on her lack of artistic prowess; he calls off his engagement seemingly because Sybil does not fit the mould of aesthetic brilliance that he deems acceptable for a wife. If aestheticism in the novel is emblematic of suppressed homosexuality, his rejection of her on the grounds of ‘aesthetic failure’ can be read as a rejection on the grounds of his stifled sexuality. Their engagement seems to be his way of obscuring, or even denying, the homoerotic passions awakened in him through Lord Henry’s influence. Indeed, despite her beauty (which would seemingly be attractive to a heterosexual man), Sybil apparently holds no fascination for Dorian besides her status as ‘art’, available for aesthetic appreciation. This is made apparent by his admission that ‘without ... [her] art ... [she] is nothing’.⁴³ Essentially, he turns their brief courtship into an aesthetic conquest, which is rendered pointless when she loses her aesthetic appeal. The notion that Dorian’s inability to marry Sybil results from his homosexuality is further evidenced by that fact that, when she ‘pressed his hands to her lips, he drew them away and a shudder ran through him’.⁴⁴ This adverse physical reaction (the precise opposite of the shudder of excitement experienced by the narrator of *The Aspern Papers* when he touches the portrait of Aspern) suggests in Dorian an intense revulsion at the thought of engaging in any form of physical intimacy with her. Evidently his rejection, and therefore marginalisation, of Sybil is a result of his homosexuality, which itself is suppressed in reaction to an intolerant society.

Nancy Armstrong argues that Victorian novels engage with contemporary fears over food production in the face of the growing population, by refocusing the economic problem into the domestic domain. She argues that problems with production are given solutions in literature via a Malthusian control over sexual reproduction – manifest in a regulation of the female body, ‘whether through that woman’s reform, her incarceration, or her banishment from the text’.⁴⁵ This idea of textual banishment occurs in *The Aspern Papers* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, with Juliana’s death and Sybil’s suicide – the latter being the result of Dorian’s rejection. However, it seems that this textual expulsion serves not to fictionally ‘rectify’ economic problems, but to demonstrate the undeniable marginalisation (to the point of non-existence!) of females at the hands of males. Through their exploration of high and low art along gendered lines, it is clear that Wilde and James portray females as diminished and disregarded by ‘superior’ male aesthetes. By suggesting that the male motive for doing this lies in their reaction to

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 43-4.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 45.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 54.

³⁹ Pykett, ‘Sensation’, p. 203.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Wilde, *Dorian*, p. 72.

⁴² Ibid., p. 75.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Nancy Armstrong ‘Gender and the Victorian Novel’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Deirdre David, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 97-124, (p. 100).

the enforced heteronormative standard of the Victorian age, they highlight and provide criticism of the intolerance of a society in which a narrow view of sexuality was the only accepted one.

To conclude, males in the two texts are clearly aligned with the high art of aestheticism. The persona of the dandy-aesthete is, in the novels, associated with homosexuality and homoerotic desire. The narrator's devotion to Aspern's art, and Lord Henry's aesthetic influence over Dorian are both emblematic of suppressed homosexuality – to refer back to Nunokawa's phrase, aestheticism comes to symbolise a form of 'subterranean' sexuality. In the two texts, this sexuality is subterranean because it cannot be openly articulated or displayed in a Victorian society that criminalises homosexuality. Females, by contrast, are associated with low art, in the form of sensational, ghostly and gothic fiction. They are therefore presented as marginalised and diminished in comparison to males, who are superior in their aesthetic refinement. This female inferiority is expressed not only through their alignment with low art, but also through both Dorian and the narrator's rejection of Sybil and Tita, respectively, as well as the ultimate textual expulsion of Juliana and Sybil. Female marginalisation at the hands of male characters can thus be viewed as a reaction to the heteronormative standard imposed by a homophobic Victorian society. The stifled homosexuality of both Dorian and the narrator prevents them from conforming to this standard – their rejection, and marginalisation, of females can thus be seen as a reaction to an enforced sexuality with which they cannot, and indeed have no desire to, comply. Wilde and James, then, explore the interplay between high and low art forms in order to provide a criticism of Victorian homophobia, manifest as female marginalisation at the hands of sexually suppressed males.

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