



According to Regenia Gagnier, despite its slogan ('Art for Art's Sake'), Aestheticism was a vehicle for social reform (Idylls of the Marketplace, 1986). Do you agree? Discuss this topic with reference to works by BOTH Wilde AND James. In your response you should think about issues of gender AND/OR class in relation to the aesthetic prose (critical dialogues and/or fiction) of the two writers.

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In the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde maintains 'there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written'.¹ This encapsulates the core of Aestheticism: an appreciation of beauty removed from the concept of morality. Johnson indicates that, in the nineteenth century, it was this 'conviction of the importance of beauty as compared with – and even in opposition to – other values' that defined Aestheticism.² In *Dorian Gray* and *The Spoils of Poynton*, Wilde and James explore Aestheticism and its interaction with life, art and opposing normative Victorian values of 'utilitarian moralism'³ and realism. Both writers engage with social issues relating to class and gender in these texts, nevertheless Gagnier's notion of Aestheticism as a vehicle for social reform gives too much weight to the role of social matters in their aesthetic prose. Whereas Wilde's social commentary in *Dorian Gray* is constructed in a purposefully paradoxical and ironic manner which avoids clarity, James pushes social aspects of *Spoils* to the fringes of the narrative in favour of a commentary

¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), p.3. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

² Robert Vincent Johnson, *Aestheticism* (London: Methuen, 1969), p.1.

³ *Ibid.*, p.79.

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on sensibility and morality. In this essay I will argue, through examination of the ways in which the writers engage with issues of class and gender in *Dorian Gray* and *Spoils*, that their treatment of these topics ultimately could not be described as assisting social reform.

In 'The Art of Fiction', James writes that 'the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does not attempt to represent life'⁴ and for it 'to be constituted of [beauty and truth] is, to my vision, to have purpose enough'.⁵ This demonstrates that, with regard to fiction, James held the aesthetic belief that beauty in form is the primary goal above subject matter and a realistic presentation of contemporary society. This can be seen in *Spoils* which primarily focuses on aesthetic topics. At the same time, the novel is informed by the social, namely the legal tradition of primogeniture which left women in Britain financially vulnerable upon the death of their husbands. In his notebooks, James writes about a woman who was forced to give up the 'rich old house, in which she took pride and delight' and in which she 'had always lived', to her son and his wife following her husband's death.⁶ He shows sympathy for the 'situation of the mother *deposed*, by the ugly English custom, turned out of the big house on the son's marriage and relegated'⁷ which forms the basis of his tale. In *Spoils*, James highlights the unjust nature of this 'cruel English custom' and encourages sympathy for Mrs. Gereth as a widow who stands to lose Poynton and all of its contents with 'no account whatever...taken of her relation to the treasures, of the passion with which she had waited for them, worked for them, picked them over, made them worthy of each other and the house, watched them, loved them, lived with them'.⁸ Mrs. Gereth's dedication to Poynton is not only described as that of an artist to their work, but also that of a mother to a child. She tells Owen that the spoils are 'living things to me; they know me, they return the touch of my hand' (*Spoils*, p.53). This

⁴ Henry James, *The Art of Fiction and other essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), p.5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.21.

⁶ Henry James, *The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. by F. O Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p.136.

⁷ James, *Notebooks*, p.137.

⁸ Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton* (London: Penguin Classics, 1987), p.43. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

maternal imagery demonstrates the importance of Poynton and the spoils to Mrs. Gereth and thus emphasises the injustice of them being taken from her as if they were her own child.

Nevertheless, the unfair nature of Mrs. Gereth's position is focused less on the patriarchal legal system than the fact that the 'robust and artless' (p.39) Owen and 'exceptionally tainted' (p.43) Mona Brigstock are those set to inherit Poynton. The injustice is grounded in Owen and Mona's lack of ability to properly 'understand[] and appreciate[]' (p.44) the spoils like Mrs. Gereth and Fleda can. Lyons notes that 'what was originally projected as an incident rooted in a specific social custom, its conflicts having implications for the values and structures of the society it reflects, has become instead a study in "passions"'.⁹ Hence, primogeniture is not portrayed as the problem – Mrs. Gereth 'could give up everything without a pang' (p.53) to Fleda as Owen's wife – rather it establishes a social framework within which James explores aesthetic sensibility, passion and individual pleasure in conflict with morality.

Fleda, the central figure and a representative of 'exquisite tastes'¹⁰, is juxtaposed by, as James describes her in the Preface, 'the awful Mona Brigstock' who, 'without the smallest leak of force into taste or tenderness of vision' (p.33), sees only material value in the spoils. She does not appreciate them as art objects, but she wants them 'because they belong to the house and the house belongs to Owen' (p.44). James demonstrates this contrast in sensibility through the settings of Waterbath and Poynton, two houses characterised by 'intimate ugliness' (p.37) and 'rare perfection' (p.41) respectively. Poynton is described as a 'complete work of art', cultivated by Mrs Gereth and her husband over 'twenty-six years of planning and seeking, a long, sunny harvest of taste and curiosity' (p.41). Roper notes that the 'exquisite furnishing...has been an activity in which taste is raised to the level of artistic creation'¹¹ and Mrs. Gereth's artistry reveals itself in the 'great syllables of colour and form,

⁹ Richard S. Lyons, 'The Social Vision of The Spoils of Poynton', *American Literature*, 61:1 (1989), 59–77 (p.61).

¹⁰ James, *Notebooks*, p.137.

¹¹ Alan H. Roper, 'The Moral and Metaphorical Meaning of The Spoils of Poynton', *American Literature*, 32:2 (1960), 182–96 (p.185).

the tongues of other countries and the hands of rare artists' and a 'sense of style which, however amused and amusing, never compromised nor stooped' (pp.47-8). Poynton thus represents the pinnacle of aesthetic taste with its exotic curiosities, opulence and style. In direct contrast with Poynton's aesthetic perfection which brings Fleda to tears as a 'sign of her submission to perfect beauty' (p.47), the 'imbecilities of decoration, the esthetic misery of the big commodious house' (p.35) at Waterbath cause[s Mrs. Gereth's] face to burn' (p.37). These 'imbecilities' include the 'smother[ing]' of the house 'with trumpery ornament and scrapbook art', creating 'an ugliness fundamental and systematic, the result of the abnormal nature of the Brigstocks, from whose composition the principle of taste has been extravagantly omitted' (p.37). The verb 'smother' indicates that the 'ugliness' of the house is overwhelming and oppressive to individuals of 'taste'. Munnelly suggests that 'Mona's taste is woefully middle class',¹² yet taste arguably transcends class in the novel. Fleda, 'who hadn't a penny in the world' and 'with her mother dead, hadn't so much even as a home' (p.42), is the only figure other than Mrs. Gereth who has a pure appreciation of the objects at Poynton. In spite of his wealth and upbringing, Owen fails to understand the spoils and the bourgeois Brigstocks choose to spend their money on 'the maddening relics of Waterbath' (p.45). Hence, aesthetic sensibility in James's tale bears little relation to class, instead focusing on the individual.

Although, as Lyons argues, 'it is possible...to see in *The Spoils of Poynton* remaining traces of James's social concerns'¹³, they do not drive the narrative. James focuses instead on the conflict between Aestheticism and moral principles through Fleda and Mrs. Gereth. The portrayal of Mrs. Gereth is ambivalent: James encourages sympathy for her due to the work she put into Poynton – like Basil Hallward in *Dorian Gray*, she puts much of herself into her art - but, as Baym suggests, she is also presented as a 'character whose extreme

¹² Lindsay Munnelly, 'Obstinate Objects: Agency as Immobility in Henry James's *The Spoils of Poynton*', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 61:1 (2019), 72-93 (p.84).

¹³ Lyons, p.59.

esthetic sensibilities are united with moral obtuseness'.¹⁴ She is portrayed as an aesthete whose commitment to the collection of art objects is all-consuming and limitless; she tells Owen that she and her husband 'almost starved' for objects in the house and that 'they were our religion, they were our life, they were *us!*' (p.53). James also refers to Fleda's relationship with the spoils in religious terms as she decides to return 'to Poynton as a pilgrim might go to a shrine' (p.209). This suggests that to Mrs. Gereth, and to a lesser degree to Fleda, the appreciation of art informs her way of life. For Mrs. Gereth, like Dorian Gray, the application of this aesthetic mindset to life leads to a disregard for morality. For example, she 'horribly shame[s]' (p.54) Fleda by offering her as a wife to Owen, and she shows no remorse in stealing most of Poynton's contents. Whereas Mrs. Gereth abandons morality, Fleda struggles when her individual passions come into conflict with her morals. This can be seen in her reaction to Mrs. Gereth's theft as she is struck with 'the vision of great gaps in the other house...a scandal of nakedness between high bleak walls' (pp.80-1). Morality and the beauty of the objects create a conflict in Fleda's conscience: it 'defied her not to pronounce it a triumph of taste' (p.81) yet 'she saw again nothing but gaps and scars' at Poynton (p.85). Mrs. Gereth, on the other hand, continues to enjoy the objects, claiming that they 'really look better' (p.83) at Ricks. On account of her principles, Fleda refuses passion (and her desire for Poynton), telling Owen that he 'mustn't break faith' (p.166) to his engagement with Mona. In doing so, she denies both herself and Owen of love and Mrs Gereth of Poynton. This conflict between morality and the aesthetic concepts of individual desire and taste thus forms the central theme of James's novel while gender relations maintain a background role.

Aestheticism in life also forms the core of Wilde's *Dorian Gray*. He writes to the *St James's Gazette* that the novel 'is an essay on decorative art'¹⁵ and 'a story with a moral...all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment.'¹⁶ This 'moral' could

¹⁴ Nina Baym, 'Fleda Vetch and the Plot of "The Spoils of Poynton"', *PMLA*, 84:1 (1969), 102-111 (p.105).

¹⁵ Oscar Wilde, *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Hart-Davis, 1962), p.264.

¹⁶ Wilde, *Letters*, p.259.

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also be applied to *Spoils*, in which both Mrs Gereth, in her ruthless attempts to maintain Poynton, and Fleda, in her extreme moral principles, ultimately face 'punishment'. Wilde explains that Basil is punished for 'worshipping beauty far too much', Dorian for 'having led a life of mere sensation and pleasure' and 'tr[ying] to kill conscience', and Lord Henry for 'seek[ing] to be merely the spectator of life'.¹⁷ The novel is, by Wilde's description, chiefly concerned with Aestheticism and morality.

Nevertheless, class relations play a more significant role in *Dorian Gray* than in James's tale. Wilde presents a dichotomy between life for, as Gagnier describes it, the 'idle aristocrats and romantic artists'¹⁸ in the West End, and the poverty of the working class in the East End. Various settings demonstrate this opposition, for example Basil's studio, an aesthetic haven which appeals to all the senses, 'filled with the rich odour of roses', the 'sullen murmur of bees' and 'the fantastic shadows of birds in flight [which] flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains' (*Dorian Gray*, p.5). Henry's residence is described similarly with a focus on the colours of the 'olive-stained oak', 'cream-coloured frieze' and 'apricot-coloured light of a summer day in London' (p.45). This ornate, synaesthetic and colourful description is similar to James's portrayal of Poynton and creates an opulence and excess characteristic of Aestheticism. Contrastingly, the working-class Vane household expresses emptiness and oppression. Whereas the 'apricot-coloured light' which 'streamed' (p.45) into Henry's library evokes softness, the light in the Vane household is 'shrill' and 'intrusive' (p.59). Mrs Vane is 'sitting in the one arm-chair that their dingy sitting-room contained' (p.59) which juxtaposes the images of Henry 'lying...in the 'corner of the divan of Persian saddlebags...smoking' (p.5) and Dorian 'reclining in a luxurious arm-chair' (p.45). The Vane household is presented as a dull, oppressive setting which lacks the luxury and opulence of the aesthetes' households.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1987), p.65.

Moreover, Wilde further emphasises this contrast in his portrayal of the East End as a 'labyrinth of grimy streets' (p.49) with 'gaunt black-shadowed archways', 'evil-looking houses', 'women with hoarse voices', 'drunkards' and 'grotesque children huddled upon doorsteps' (p.86). Waldrep notes that although Wilde 'oppose[d] certain extreme forms of realism', he 'introduced a sense of fact into the literature of decadence'¹⁹ which is realised in the East End. However, the exaggerated nature of his illustration of the East End as a dark, criminal underworld indicates Kohl's argument that 'the reality of poverty [is] somehow reduced to the level of alien fantasy'.²⁰ The adjective 'grotesque', which highlights an unpleasant appearance while omitting sympathy for human suffering, particularly demonstrates that Wilde is uninterested in what he calls 'the crude brutality of plain realism'.²¹ Instead of presenting suffering and poverty with the intention to further social reform, the East End carries a symbolic function, representing the corruption and immorality of Dorian's soul in juxtaposition with his outward appearance of beauty and innocence.

The 'problem' of the East End (p.45) is also addressed through the voice of Lord Henry, who provides social commentary throughout the novel. An embodiment of the all-consuming philosophy and hedonistic lifestyle associated with Aestheticism, Henry represents the dandy who has 'set himself to the serious study of the great aristocratic art of doing absolutely nothing' (p.33). He is consistently paradoxical which Basil highlights, claiming that Henry 'never say[s] a moral thing, and...never do[es] a wrong thing' (p.8), and he delivers commentary on art, life, and issues of class and gender in the form of Wildean witticisms and aphorisms. Henry comments on women, claiming for example that 'no woman is a genius' and that they are 'a decorative sex' who 'never have anything to say, but they say it charmingly' (p.47). However, there is a strong sense of irony in that both he and Dorian choose the society

¹⁹ Shelton Waldrep, 'The Aesthetic Realism of Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 29:1 (1996), 103-112, pp.105-107.

²⁰ Norbert Kohl, *Oscar Wilde: the works of a conformist rebel*, trans. by David Henry Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp.147-8.

²¹ Wilde, *Letters*, p.264.

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of women like Lady Narborough and the Duchess, both of whom are depicted by Wilde as well-connected and entertaining. The Duchess is witty and, by Henry's own admission, 'very clever, too clever for a woman' (p.173), thus demonstrating the contradictory and unserious nature of his statements. Waldrep argues that Henry's statements 'comment[] on the ways in which society functions', therefore 'achieving some of the same ends as the Naturalist writers'.²² For example, Henry discusses the East End, asserting it is a 'problem of slavery, and we try to solve it by amusing the slaves'; however, when asked 'what change [he] propose[s]', he answers that he 'do[esn't] desire to change anything in England except the weather' (p.41). In this sense, Wilde shows an astute awareness of class issues and mocks the disinterestedness of Henry as a representative of both the aristocracy and Aestheticism. Nevertheless, Wilde's exploration of social issues in *Dorian Gray* is limited to this paradoxical and occasionally critical voice, rendering it impossible to identify his standpoint with certainty. Moreover, Henry's callousness is arguably more on account of his aesthetic worldview than his upper-class status, for example when he asserts that the suffering of the working class is 'too ugly, too horrible, too distressing' and 'the less said about life's sores the better' (p.41). This reflects the dangers of adopting aesthetic philosophy rather than a call for social reform. As Kohl sums up, the conclusion of *Dorian Gray* is that ideas of 'individual and society, art and life, aesthetic conduct and moral awareness are irreconcilable'²³ which is apparent through Henry's paradoxical and ironic voice. Wilde mocks the aristocratic aesthetes through Lord Henry, however the extent to which this encourages social reform is limited.

Pyle argues that 'Aestheticism always assumes the superior or "elect" position' over social matters in Wilde's writing.²⁴ This is true for *Dorian Gray* and James's *Spoils*. Despite the patriarchal tradition which frames the novel, and the scale of social class

²² Waldrep, p.109.

²³ Kohl, p.175.

²⁴ Forest Pyle, *Art's Undoing: In the Wake of a Radical Aestheticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), p.211.

represented through the Gereths, Brigstocks and Fleda, the extent to which these issues are explored as systematic injustices is very limited. Instead, James was more interested in exploring the 'appreciation' which 'lives in Fleda' and Mrs. Gereth in opposition to the 'comparatively stupid' Owen and Mona (p.31), and how individual desires interact with moral principles. *Dorian Gray* also chiefly deals with this conflict. Whereas, for James, debates on Aestheticism transcend the social foundations of *Spoils*, Wilde's depiction of social issues through Lord Henry's commentary is so ambiguous and closely intertwined with a critique of Aestheticism itself that it is impossible to identify his position on social reform. The depiction of the Vane household in juxtaposition with the opulence of the West End acknowledges wealth disparities in contemporary Victorian London, however the grotesque illustration of the East End reduces this contrast to a symbol of Dorian's duality rather than a comment on class injustice. In both *Dorian Gray* and *Spoils* there is an element of social criticism, yet this ultimately forms a small part of the primary subject matter, namely the tension between individualistic, pleasure-seeking and amoral Aestheticism, and life.

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