



Q33382 – Wilde and James

Wilde and James caused public scandals due to their frank handling of themes of transgressive sexuality. Discuss this topic in relation to texts by BOTH Wilde AND James. You may treat sexual transgression AND/OR other kinds of transgression.

Jaya Prabhakar

In Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry Wotton, provides his protégé, Dorian, with an unnamed "yellow book"¹ that enraptures and fascinates the young man to the extent that he "could not free himself from the influence of this book".² The 'influence' exerted by this book is never named or explained throughout the novel, despite also being associated with Lord Henry and Basil's relationships with Dorian and the aesthetic object that the characters surround themselves with. However, the collocation of these images implies a connection between male relationships, particularly those between older and younger men or boys, aestheticism and literary and sexual knowledge. Through the description of the "poisonous book"³, that appears to enchant and ensnare the reader, just as the "odour of incense seemed to cling about its pages"⁴, alongside the aforementioned images, 'influence' is portrayed as a nefarious, seductive power that targets the young, beautiful boy, threatening, and in the case of Dorian Gray succeeding, to corrupt his innocence. In other words, the threat of 'influence' is an innuendo for the Victorian fear of transgressive sexuality – the 'threat' of homosexuality – for which Wilde himself would be imprisoned in 1895. This essay will use the titular character of Oscar Wilde's 'The Young King' and the character of Dolcino from Henry James' 'The Author of *Beltraffio*' to explore the transgressive 'influence', epitomised by Dorian's book, through the presentation of the child as a prelapsarian figure, the depiction of books and knowledge, and the 'influence' of aesthetic objects. However, ultimately the authors undermine Victorian fears of 'influence' and its connotations within their respective texts, as the fates of the children illustrate alternative conceptions of 'influence'.

As Thompson notes, "[t]he nostalgia for the past [...] is echoed in the period's interest in childhood"⁵; childhood was envisioned as a prelapsarian state of innocence in the Victorian psyche. As an extension of this state, the child in Victorian literature was constructed around the figure of the 'Romantic child' an embodiment of innate innocence and purity, evident in the characters of Dolcino and the young king at the beginning of their respective texts. Wilde

¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, (London: Penguin, 2012), p.127.

² Ibid. p.129.

³ Ibid. p.128.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Mary Shine Thompson, 'The importance of not being earnest: Children and Oscar Wilde's fairy tales', *New Review of Children's Literature & Lib*, (2001) 7.1, p.193, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13614540109510653>> [Accessed 05-04-19].

associates the childhood home of the king with the prelapsarian Eden or an Arcadian paradise, as it is described as a “remote part of the forest, more than a day’s ride from the town”.⁶ The boy’s residence within an apparent *hortus conclusus* maintains the conditions for his innocence since, being surrounded by nature, he remains protected from the ‘influence’ of the fallen world of adulthood and transgressive sexuality. Wilde emphasises the prelapsarian state of the forest through his description of the king’s appearance. He is first discovered, “bare-limbed and pipe in hand” (p.3), harkening back to the desexualised and unashamed nakedness of Adam and Eve before the Fall, while the imagery of the pipe evokes the figure of Spenser’s Colin Clout, representing the idyllic pastoral landscape. Furthermore, Wilde describes how the thought of the boy’s coronation gown “lit up with a bright lustre his dark woodland eyes” (p.8). In using the noun “woodland” as an adjective to describe the king’s eyes, Wilde implies that his innate innocence and role as the ‘Romantic child’, represented through this imagery of nature, has not been fully blinded by the “bright lustre” of the seductive influence of his aesthetic possessions, foreshadowing his redemption from ‘influence’ at the end of the tale.

In contrast, James’ depiction of Dolcino as the ‘Romantic child’, presents his prelapsarian innocence as doomed to fall. The narrator’s initial description of the child recalls that “[h]e had the face of an angel – the eyes, the hair, the more than mortal bloom, the smile of innocence”⁷ and that his beauty “seemed to be composed of elements too fine and pure for the breath of this world”.⁸ The narrator deifies Dolcino by elevating him to an angelic status, and applies the lexis of fertility and vitality to him through the description of his “bloom”, thus aligning the boy with the heavenly paradise of Eden. James highlights this imagery of elevation and vitality through the use of comparative language: “more than mortal” and “too fine and pure”. However, it is through this technique that James also alerts the reader to the inevitable potential for Dolcino’s innocence to be corrupted. The imagery of elevation can also be interpreted as imagery of excess, suggesting that Dolcino, as a symbol of prelapsarian innocence, is inherently too angelic – “composed of elements too fine and pure” – and is therefore on the cusp of corruption, meaning he simply cannot exist in the fallen world. Moreover, James uses the narrator to emphasise the encroaching threat of potentially pederastic ‘influence’, as the older man effectively creates a blazon, anatomising and glorifying the child’s body, whilst expressing concern for the child’s life. Ohi describes the narrator’s description of Dolcino as “the aroused contemplation of innocence’s vulnerability in the form of a self-righteous, moralizing protection”⁹, also applying to it Kinciad’s concept of “erotic innocence”.¹⁰ While Beatrice fears that her husband’s writing will corrupt their son, it is in fact the transgressive undertones of the narrator’s narrative that becomes the corruptive influence affecting the presentation of Dolcino to the reader. Ultimately, the figure of the child can be considered as a site of potential in Victorian literature, as both James and Wilde partake in a tradition that “produced a newly sensual Romantic child through books directed toward children and about them, resulting in the “Golden Age of Children’s Literature.”¹¹ In doing so, the child becomes either a symbol of corrupted innocence that needs to be redeemed, as in the case of the young king, and a symbol of purity that has the potential to be corrupted or influenced and therefore needs to be protected, as in the case of Dolcino.

⁶ Oscar Wilde, ‘The Young King’, in *The Young King: The Star Child*, (L.C. Page & Company), p.3, <<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015092867582;view=1up;seq=13>>, hereafter cited parenthetically.

⁷ Henry James, ‘The Author of *Beltraffio*’ in *The Aspern Papers and Other Tales*, (London: Penguin, 2014), p.9, hereafter cited parenthetically.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Kevin Ohi. “‘The Author of ‘Beltraffio’’: The Exquisite Boy and Henry James’s Equivocal Aestheticism”, *ELH* 72.3, (2005), p.750, <<https://muse.jhu.edu/>> [Accessed 08-04-19].

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Naomi Wood, ‘Creating the Sensual Child: Paterian Aesthetics, Pederasty, and Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales’ *Marvels & Tales*, 16.2, (2002), p.159, <<https://muse.jhu.edu/>> [Accessed 05-04-19].

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The necessity to protect and maintain the innocence of children was prevalent during this period, as parents were encouraged to withhold knowledge from their children, particularly concerning sex, childbirth and death, since, as Pearson states, “precocity tended to be associated with moral degeneration”.¹² The concept of knowledge as a corruptive influence can be traced back to the Fall, as Adam and Eve consume the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, therefore alerting them to experience and evil. Moreover, the threat of ‘influence’ to the child is deepened when additionally considering the acquisition of knowledge as an acquisition of carnal knowledge. Beatrice’s treatment of Dolcino is representative of this view, as she figuratively and literally attempts to shield the boy from acquiring the knowledge within his father’s book, and by extension from being influenced by his father, since Miss Ambient notes, Dolcino is “very precocious and very sensitive, and his mother thinks she can’t begin to guard him too early” (p.23). Dolcino’s precocity renders him vulnerable to knowledge both as a corruption of innocence and relating to sexual transgression. The central image of the ‘influence’ that Beatrice despises is associated with the book *Beltraffio* itself, symbolic of this knowledge. Just as the meaning of ‘influence’ is never truly denoted, the contents of the book are never disclosed, other than the narrator describing it as “the most complete presentation that has been made of the gospel of art; it was a kind of aesthetic war-cry” (p.3). The presentation of the book as unapologetically aesthetic may reveal the reason behind Beatrice’s fears for her son and hatred of her husband’s books, since, as Duffy notes, “[m]ainstream Victorians themselves drew a connection between aestheticism and homosexuality”.¹³ This association may be implied in the text through the narrator’s reverent comparison of *Beltraffio* to a “gospel”; the application of religious language to the book deifies it and illustrates its influence over the young man who effectively becomes a disciple of Mark Ambient. Resultantly, Beatrice’s fear of her husband’s writing may in fact be representative of the Victorian fear of homosexuality – a reaction that Ohi believes to articulate “a link between aestheticism and the power of language to corrupt or influence”.¹⁴

This concept may be corroborated by the conflation of the supposed ‘influence’ of Ambient’s writing and Ambient himself; as the creator of *Beltraffio* and its aestheticism he also represents a threat to his son’s innocence. James demonstrates the relationship between Mark Ambient and his book though presenting him as an extension of his writing (and vice versa). Throughout the text the narrator incessantly refers to Ambient as “the author of *Beltraffio*” (p.3). By continuously applying this title to Ambient, the narrator reduces Ambient’s character simply to the author of aestheticism, therefore identifying him as the source of the transgressive ‘influence’ that Beatrice associates with the book. Beatrice’s disdain for her husband’s ‘influence’ is related to the narrator by Ambient’s sister, who notes, “[i]t is as if it were a subtle poison, or a contagion, or something that would rub off on Dolcino when his father kisses him or holds him on his knee” (p.26). Beatrice’s association of her husband’s influence with “a subtle poison” mirrors a more general conceptualisation of aesthetic literature as poisonous. As previously discussed, this motif is evident in the “poisonous book”¹⁵ that influences Dorian Gray, and is also reflected in Wilde’s opinion of the aesthete Walter Pater’s *The Renaissance: Studies in the History in Art and Poetry*, which he described as a poisonous work. Furthermore, the imagery of a contagion that is

¹² Maeve Pearson, ‘Re-exposing the Jamesian Child: The Paradox of Children’s Privacy’, *The Henry James Review*, 28 (2007), p.113, <<https://search.proquest.com/docview/220295129/BC787895105F4948PQ/15?accountid=8018>> [Accessed 06-04-19].

¹³ John-Charles Duffy, ‘Gay-Related Themes in the Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* (2001), p.336, <[https://www-cambridge-org.ezproxy.nottingham.ac.uk/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/6DDAC950C8B6CB2DE6AD65A02681386C/\\$1060150301002054a.pdf/gayrelated_themes_in_the_fairy_tales_of_oscar_wilde.pdf](https://www-cambridge-org.ezproxy.nottingham.ac.uk/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/6DDAC950C8B6CB2DE6AD65A02681386C/$1060150301002054a.pdf/gayrelated_themes_in_the_fairy_tales_of_oscar_wilde.pdf)> [Accessed 05-04-19].

¹⁴ Ohi, “The Author of ‘Beltraffio’”: The Exquisite Boy and Henry James’s Equivocal Aestheticism’, p.756.

¹⁵ *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p.128.

transferable through physical contact presents Ambient's 'influence' as biological and innate, an illness that can be transferred to Dolcino in order to corrupt his innate innocence. Beatrice's critiques suggest that by directly engaging with Ambient, as the narrator engages with *Beltraffio*, Dolcino may succumb to the corruptive disease of sexually transgressive knowledge, thus conflating Ambient with his book. Ultimately, James situates the figure of the innocent, corruptible child at the centre of the conflict of influence between the aestheticism and knowledge of Ambient and his book, and the religious morality and overbearing protection of Beatrice. However, it is important to note that the conceptualisation of Ambient's 'influence' and its threat to Dolcino is presented through a palimpsest of narrative frames; the narrator relates Miss Ambient's interpretation of Beatrice's opinion concerning her husband. Through this structural distancing created by the testimonies of a series of unreliable narrators, each with their own agenda, James maintains an ambiguity, not only surrounding the exact realisation of 'influence' in the text, but also surrounding the question of who the 'influence' belongs to. This question is explored at the conclusion of the text through Beatrice's potential role in Dolcino's death by turning away the doctor, which remains similarly ambiguous and structurally distant as the concept of 'influence'. Ironically, in her desperation to protect Dolcino from the "contagion" of his father's influence, Beatrice appears to commit a transgressive act by allowing her son to succumb to a sickness. Once again, *Beltraffio* remains central to this transgressive behaviour, as Miss Ambient claims that, "[t]he book gave her a horror, she determined to rescue him – to prevent him from ever being touched" (p. 48). Rather than the 'transgressive' material of Ambient's book threatening Dolcino, Beatrice's horror influences her to "rescue" her son so that he may remain as a prelapsarian, desexualised child in death, as opposed to becoming corrupted in life. Ultimately, Beatrice's fears of 'influence' become more harmful to Dolcino than the 'influence' itself.

In 'The Young King', 'influence' is more overtly associated with objects of aestheticism, as opposed to the personal politics of James' text. While *Beltraffio*, the object of aestheticism in James' text, does not ultimately corrupt or seduce Dolcino, the beautiful objects surrounding the king immediately succeed in influencing him. Upon walking into the palace, the boy shows "signs of that strange passion for beauty that was destined to have so great an influence over his life" (p.4). Wilde uses the semantic field of excess ("passion" and "so great") to emphasise the characteristics of aestheticism and to indicate the power of its 'influence' over the king. The description of the king's infatuation with his possessions as "signs of that strange passion" stands in contrast with the reserved reason associated with prelapsarian Eden. Therefore, the signs of passion represent the young king's Fall from innocence, having come into contact with the influence of aestheticism that he was protected from in the Edenic forest. Furthermore, the description of the king's love of aesthetic objects as a "passion" may also reiterate the association of transgressive sexuality with 'influence', similarly to the implications of the 'influence' of Ambient's book. Following the period of prelapsarian innocence and reason within the forest, the young king experiences what Markey describes as "a fall into awareness"¹⁶ once he enters the environment of aesthetic materialism - more specifically his fall results in his acquisition of sexual awareness or knowledge. Wilde further develops the association between aestheticism and sexual knowledge through the boy's reaction to his extravagant clothing and jewels, described as a "cry of pleasure" (p.4). This orgasmic reaction to beauty may be representative of the king's sexual awakening, as he is influenced to occupy a transgressive space between boy and man, and innocence and knowledge, thus disturbing the Victorian conception of the 'Romantic child'. The presentation of the king as a sensual, 'Romantic child' is perpetuated in his body language, as he is depicted on his couch, "lying there, wild-eyed and open mouthed, like a brown woodland Faun" (p.2). The king is anatomised and portrayed

¹⁶ Anne Markey, *Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales: Origins and Contexts*, (Irish Academic Press, 2014), <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nottingham/detail.action?docID=1925640>> [Accessed 06-04-19], p.148.

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provocatively, with his “open mouth” mirroring the “cry of pleasure” evoked by his aesthetic possessions. Through using the simile to compare the boy to a “woodland Faun”, Wilde superimposes the imagery of prelapsarian innocence over the imagery of sexual knowledge, further emphasising the young king’s transgressive state as a result of aesthetic ‘influence’.

Developing on Victorian preconceptions of aestheticism, Wilde directly relates aesthetic ‘influence’ with homoeroticism and homosexuality through the young king’s reaction to a series of classical male figures associated with beauty and homosexuality. The king is described as “gazing, as one in a trance, at a Greek gem carved with the figure of Adonis”, “pressing his warm lips to the marble brow” of a statue of Antinous, and spending an entire night “noting the effect of the moonlight on a silver image of Endymion” (p.6). The “trance” induced by these figures may be associated with their seduction of the young king, not only due to their aesthetic beauty, but also due to the homosexual desire that the ‘influence’ of these objects reflects onto him, emphasised by the young king’s physical intimacy with the statue of Antinous. Through compiling this triplet of classical, homoerotic figures, Wilde heightens the intensity of the ‘influence’ that these objects of both aestheticism and homoeroticism exert on the king. Similarly, Wilde includes another classical male figure within the intimate space of the king’s bedchamber: “[a] laughing Narcissus in green bronze held a polished mirror above its head” (p.8). The figure of Narcissus may be considered as a manifestation of homosexual desire, as he glorifies his male body, falling in love with himself. By including the mirror held by the statue within the piece of art, the figure of Narcissus seems to tempt the king into succumbing to aesthetic, or homosexual, ‘influence’, encouraging him to become a part of the artwork himself as he is entranced by his own male figure within Narcissus’ mirror. These associations of the Narcissus figure may illustrate that the young king’s self-absorption is the result of his assimilation with his aesthetic possessions, just as Beatrice conflates her husband’s character with his aesthetic book, reflecting the increasing corruption of his innocence.

The extent of the corruption of the young king’s innocence through the ‘influence’ of his possessions is revealed in his three dreams, detailing the suffering that his self-absorption indirectly inflicts on others. The third dream most effectively illustrates his fall from innocence, through the depiction of a fallen Garden of Eden, described as “a dim wood, hung with strange fruits and with beautiful poisonous flowers” (pp.15-16). The woods in the dream are presented as the antithesis of the prelapsarian forests in which the young king was raised. Instead, similarly to the palace full of beautiful objects, the fallen woods are laden with imagery of temptation, from the “strange fruits” that are reminiscent of the fruit from the tree of knowledge, to the “adders [that] hissed at him as he went by” (p.16), reflective of Satan’s possession of the serpent in order to tempt Adam and Eve. The imagery of poison may be indicative of the corruptive power that aesthetic ‘influence’ has enforced over the king, as observed in Dorian Gray’s book and Mark Ambient’s character, infecting his innocence and character with a ‘transgressive’ sexuality. Furthermore, Wilde illustrates the extension of this poisonous ‘influence’ to the young king’s subjects as they dig for jewels, uprooting the pastoral landscape as a result of the king’s desires: “[t]hey tore up the cactus by its roots, and trampled on the scarlet blossoms” (p.16). The king’s subjects ultimately become the victims of Death and Avarice, the new inhabitants of the fallen landscape, in order to satisfy his excessive “strange passion” (p.4), created by aesthetic ‘influence’.

However, at the end of his dream, the king is forced to regard his reflection in a mirror, finally seeing a figure of moral corruption and the cause for his people’s suffering as opposed to a figure of aesthetic beauty. Despite its previous association with aestheticism and sexually transgressive influence, the imagery of the mirror becomes the vehicle through which the young king is absolved of his narcissistic self-absorption and obsession with his possessions. He is restored to a state of innocence and purity as he dons the clothes of his childhood for his coronation, rejecting his kingly raiment, and is prepared to die for the salvation of his people. Through divine intervention, the young king becomes a Christ-like

figure, elevated to angelic status. Notably, however, his clothing combines imagery of a prelapsarian landscape, indicative of the king's innocent childhood, with imagery of aestheticism: "sunbeams wove round him a tissue robe that was fairer than the robe that had been fashioned for his pleasure. The dead staff blossomed, and bare lillies that were whiter than pearls" (p.28), therefore elevating a realisation of 'influence' to a heavenly status. The 'influence' of aestheticism therefore becomes central to the moral education of the king, similarly to Wilde's fairy-tales that Wood claims to "not only teach and embody Paterian aestheticism, but also the homosexual counter-discourse it inspired".¹⁷ Through complicating the depiction of images typically associated with transgressive 'influence', Wilde undermines the connotations of corruption that were associated with them, presenting 'influence' in 'The Young King' as 'art for art's sake' rather than a threat.

In conclusion, Wilde and James depict the effects of 'influence' on the figure of the innocent child differently; James highlights the threat to Dolcino's innocence through elevating him and surrounding him with vehicles of 'influence', whereas Wilde depicts the fall of the innocent child as he is seduced by 'influence'. Despite these differences, both authors use the fates of the children at the conclusion of their texts to challenge the conception of 'influence' as a product of aestheticism and transgressive sexuality. Instead, they position the boys at the centre of transgressive acts that ultimately immortalise their innocence; the young king is redeemed and elevated to an angelic status through divine intervention, and it is suggested that, having read her husband's writing, Beatrice allows Dolcino to die so that he might avoid corruption and remain innocent in death. Wilde and James both use their texts to emphasise that the Victorian conception of 'influence', and by extension ideas of knowledge, aestheticism and homosexuality, as evil and corruptive powers was misguided, revealing greater threats to the innocence of the child.

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¹⁷ Wood, 'Creating the Sensual Child: Paterian Aesthetics, Pederasty, and Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales', p.167.

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