



What do you make of the crossover between ‘criminality’ and aesthetics – or ‘ghostliness’ and aesthetics – in Wilde and James?

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Wilde’s ‘Pen, Pencil and Poison’ (‘PPP’ - 1889) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and James’ *The Aspern Papers* (1888) are highly charged with the notion of aestheticism.¹ Prioritising the notion of art for art, Wildean aestheticism is wholly preoccupied with the value and appreciation of art, which is considered in a vacuum. While James’ aesthetic orientation is less obvious, Eguchi claims that it is largely informed by Ruskin’s moral and religious principles.² Nonetheless, both authors concern themselves with the tensions between life and art, echoing Kant’s separation of the aesthetic from science and morality. The relationship between art and morality is, then, long-established, as art has historically been manifested as a means to assess morality.³ This essay proceeds to discuss how criminality functions in relation to art for James and Wilde, with a concluding observation concerning the ramifications of consumerism on their aesthetic stances.

The significance of aestheticism in relation to criminality thus emerges naturally for Wilde and James, albeit in different modes. Sheehan attributes Wilde’s connection between art and criminality to their inevitable ‘anti-normativ[ity]’.⁴ The suggestion is that the artist, like the criminal, challenges hegemonic social mores which seek to restrict both artistic and criminal practice. Criminality allows Wilde to comment on society, which is done so primarily through the figure of the Dandy. For Godfrey, dandyism relies on the exploitation and provocation of social codes without explicitly breaking them, as the dandy exists in opposition to normative conventions.⁵ It is interesting then, that the dandy figures of Dorian and Wainwright are culpable of murder. The Dandy, enlightened by his artistic sensibilities, answers not to the moral order of society, but to the supreme realm of art. While crime is ultimately presented by Wilde as an interrogation of society, crime for James in *Aspern* is explored through a discussion of morality, evidenced not least by the fact that the narrator’s plans to commit theft are eventually foiled. By means of his compounded style, stratifying question after question, James’ narrative provokes a moral evaluation of the narrator’s

¹ Oscar Wilde, ‘Pen, Pencil and Poison – A Study in Green’, *Oscar Wilde Online* <https://www.wilde-online.info/pen,-pencil,-and-poison.html> [accessed 4 May 2023]; Oscar Wilde, ‘The Picture of Dorian Gray’ in *Oscar Wilde – The Major Works: including The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Oscar Wilde and Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Henry James, ‘The Aspern Papers’, in *The Aspern Papers and Other Tales*, ed. by Henry James and Michael Gorra (London: Penguin Books, 2014).

² Tomoko Eguchi, *Ethical Aestheticism in the Early Works of Henry James: The Shadow of John Ruskin* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), p.1.

³ Noël Carroll, ‘Art and the Moral Realm’, in *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, ed. by Peter Kivy (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2004), p. 126.

⁴ Paul Sheehan, ‘A Malady of Dreaming - Aesthetics and Criminality in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*’, *Irish Studies Review*, 13:3 (2005), 333-40 (p.336).

⁵ Sima Godfrey, ‘The Dandy as Ironic Figure’, *SubStance*, 11:36 (1982), 21-33 (p.28).

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actions, rather than a critique of society. The reader is consequently tasked with determining whether or not criminality is justified in the name of art in the three texts.

The rationalisation of crime inspired by aesthetic desire is, unsurprisingly, not clear cut in any text. A superficial reading of *Dorian Gray* may suggest that crime is not necessarily discouraged by Wilde, whose narrative, unlike James', successfully allows his dandies to succumb to their aesthetic and immoral temptations. The distinction between vice and virtue is, as suggested by Guan, blurred, since Wilde's dandies are so heavily embellished with aesthetic sympathies, that their moral wrong doings are often obfuscated.⁶ After rejecting Sibil Vane merely on account of her poor artistry, whereby he chides that 'without [her] art [she is] nothing', Dorian shows no remorse.⁷ His attention is directed elsewhere, with his appreciation of the perfume of flowers instantly 'bring[ing] him an anodyne for his pain'.⁸ His aesthetic sensibilities preside over his emotions, dictating his actions and, dialectically, bridging the emotional gap as a result of his behaviour. He does not experience any sadness in her absence, but rather at her artistic ineptitude, whereby he declares 'can't you see that my heart is breaking' at the realisation that Sibil is in fact not a theatrical prodigy, but merely an example of 'simply bad art'.⁹ Lord Henry chimes in, 'it is not good for one's morals to see bad acting', and yet Dorian's baseless desertion of Sibil is not considered to be morally injurious.¹⁰ Similarly, moments after Dorian murders Basil, the narrative momentarily fixates on the lamp, which is of rather curious 'Moorish workmanship, made of dull silver inlaid with arabesques of burnished steel, and studded with coarse turquoises'.¹¹ Even at the scene of this harrowing murder, Wilde foregrounds this minor artistic detail, briefly giving the reader a glimpse of Dorian's aesthetic rumination. This unusually timed attention to detail acts almost as a brief interlude, affording the reader a degree of immediacy, and an insight into the aesthetic persuasion. Again, Dorian shows no signs of regret, refusing even to 'glance at the murdered man', and proceeds to contemplate how he will cover his tracks.¹²

Guan adds that these tendencies of Dorian's are indicative of Wilde's intention to toy with the 'mutual conversion of beauty and ugliness, good and evil', with which I would agree.¹³ Wilde's narrative explores what constitutes vice and virtue in the eyes of the aesthete, which, according to his Preface, are simply 'materials for an art'.¹⁴ Although Guan suggests that evil represents something novel for Wilde, I argue, instead, that it represents something normal.¹⁵ In removing the distinction between good and evil, which are markedly set apart in Stevenson's characters Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, for example, Wilde reveals, more realistically, the evil capabilities of man, which are heightened under the influence of hedonism.¹⁶ Wilde, I maintain, is therefore doing two things here. Firstly, he acknowledges

⁶ Beibei Guan, 'Oscar Wilde's Aestheticism', *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 7:2 (2018), 24-32 (P.27).

⁷ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 113.

⁸ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 114.

⁹ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, pp. 110-11.

¹⁰ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, pp. 110-11.

¹¹ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 166.

¹² Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 166.

¹³ Guan, 'Wilde's Aestheticism', p.27.

¹⁴ Oscar Wilde, 'The Preface', in *Oscar Wilde – The Major Works: including The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Oscar Wilde and Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.48.

¹⁵ Guan, 'Wilde's Aestheticism', p.27.

¹⁶ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Merry Men and Other Tales and Fables: Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (New York: Scribner, 1905).

the brutality of human nature, and to the dismay of critics, essentially normalises criminality. Before stabbing Basil Hallward, Dorian cries, 'Each of us has Heaven and Hell in him', indicating that no man is free of vice.¹⁷ I would then suggest that, for Wilde, this is all the more reason for art to explore immorality in its worst form, since the omnipresent vice of humanity is merely a tool for the creation of aesthetic material. And, since 'there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book', criminality is seemingly neither justified nor condemned.¹⁸

The situation is similar in 'PPP'. Wainwright is adorned with praise by Wilde, by reason of his 'artistic perception' which rendered him a 'pioneer' with a 'gorgeous' style.¹⁹ Wilde acknowledges that 'His crimes seem to have had an important effect upon his art', reiterating once again the idea that vice can be employed as an aesthetic tool.²⁰ Although Wilde is not explicitly condoning criminality, he acknowledges that such experiences can enhance the quality of an aesthetic work. Wilde arguably sees aspects of himself in Wainwright, as the vision of him 'lying there in the midst of his books and casts and engravings, a true virtuoso, a subtle connoisseur, turning over his fine collection of Mare Antonios, and his Turner's 'Liber Studiorum,'" almost inevitably conjures up the iconic image of Wilde himself, reclined on a sofa, book in hand.²¹ At the very least, Wilde acknowledges the likeness of their aesthetic stances, stating that the 'young dandy... recognised that Life itself is in art'.²² These parallels within Wilde's complimentary memoir, coupled with the declaration that the 'man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose', seem to gloss over Wainwright's crime in order to emphasise his aesthetic achievement.²³ In asserting that 'We cannot re-write the whole of history for the purpose of gratifying our moral sense of what should be', the memoir simply materialises as a tribute to another aesthete, and morality is, on this occasion, pushed aside in the discussion of art.²⁴

Aspern is seemingly concerned less with the value of art than *Dorian Gray*, and prioritises morality instead. Miller makes an interesting case about the first-person mode of narration, the anonymous narrator of which responds to an external demand of accountability.²⁵ The implication for the reader is thus that they are given the opportunity by James to decide for themselves the narrator's culpability. Although reaching a verdict, is, as suggested by Miller, a somewhat arduous process, I suggest that the narrator's iniquity can be inferred relatively early on in the text.²⁶ Upon his arrival at the Bordereau residence, the narrator instantly attempts to coax Tita with the prospect of 'the sweetest flowers in Venice' if she were to permit him to stay.²⁷ His manipulative nature is swiftly revealed, as he states, 'I ended by making my interlocutress believe that I was an honourable person', unavoidably suggesting that he is, in fact, not so.²⁸ As the narrative progresses, and the narrator gets closer to obtaining the papers, his charming demeanour begins to crumble. As his

¹⁷ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p.164.

¹⁸ Wilde, 'The Preface', p.48.

¹⁹ Wilde, 'PPP', pp.3-8.

²⁰ Wilde, 'PPP', p.12.

²¹ Wilde, 'PPP', p.4.

²² Wilde, 'PPP', p.3.

²³ Wilde, 'PPP', p.13.

²⁴ Wilde, 'PPP', p.13.

²⁵ J. Hillis Miller, "History, Narrative, and Responsibility: Speech Acts in 'The Aspern Papers,'" in *Enacting History in Henry James: Narrative, Power, and Ethics*, ed. by Gert Buelens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 194.

²⁶ Miller, 'History', p.196.

²⁷ James, *Aspern*, p.61.

²⁸ James, *Aspern*, p.62.

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impatience grows, his persistence becomes more and more apparent: ‘I could not wait longer – that I must really take a sounding’.²⁹ In his frustration, his true, unpleasant disposition is revealed, primarily through his newly emerging attitude towards Juliana, whom he describes as a ‘subtle old witch’.³⁰ While the narrator is keen to frame Juliana as ‘cunning’, given that she ‘humour[s] to test [him] and practise on [him]’, the narrator has already established for himself an unfavourable impression amongst the readers, and so rather than the encouraging the reader to evaluate the women as well, his comments are simply viewed as ironic.³¹ When the narrator claims towards the end that his remark about ‘mak[ing] love to the niece’ was a joke, this merely consolidates his untrustworthiness as it is judged to be another lie, particularly since there was no indication within the original comment that he was teasing (58).³²

The Bordereau women, then, naturally emerge as the victors on account of several factors. The unreliable narrator, however, subtly the reader may perceive, unknowingly establishes himself as the antagonist by reason of his own distasteful behaviour, which is undoubtedly immoral. His dishonourable conduct is exacerbated by the integrity of Tita, who states that she ‘can’t deceive [Juliana] that way’, and is even described to have ‘moralised’.³³ Acknowledging that these victors consider the narrator to be a ‘publishing scoundrel’ by reason of his attempts to violate what they consider to be the integrity of Aspern’s art and its history, the reader is perhaps inclined to adopt this view as well.³⁴ Miller refers to ‘gaps and lapses’ in the narrator’s account which may thus constitute James’ own views, which in this instance may instantiate his own criticisms of consumerism, to which I will return further on. I would argue though, like Miller, that the reader feels on trial alongside the narrator, and thus may feel the need to agree with James.³⁵ While Miller posits that James affords the reader a considerable amount of flexibility in their evaluation, I argue, on the contrary, that James’ presentation of the narrator, albeit complex, provides a firm and critical stance on immorality. The reader’s impression that they are forming their own judgement on account of the first-person narrative is then, perhaps, potentially inaccurate. In spite of the fact that *Aspern* may widely be considered to observe a more ambiguous stance on criminality, given that as suggested by Gorra, James offers a series of unanswered ‘parables’, the construction of the narrator at the finest, lexical level ultimately serves to present a much more unsympathetic response towards immorality than the earlier discussion of Wilde’s texts.³⁶

Before moving on to consider consumerism, it is worth drawing attention to the idea that although the discussion of art dominates Wilde’s texts, it could be argued that Wilde admonishes readers against the dangers of excessively immoral behaviour. Duggan postulates that *Dorian Gray* functions as a ‘cautionary tale’ which warns of the consequences of overindulgence and abusing aesthetic liberty.³⁷ The fact that Dorian

²⁹ James, *Aspern*, p.90.

³⁰ James, *Aspern*, p.110.

³¹ James, *Aspern*, p.106; James, *Aspern*, p.111.

³² James, *Aspern*, p.58.

³³ James, *Aspern*, pp.123-4.

³⁴ James, *Aspern*, p.127.

³⁵ Miller, ‘History’, p.195.

³⁶ Michael Gorra, ‘Introduction’, in *The Aspern Papers and Other Tales*, ed. by Henry James and Michael Gorra (London: Penguin Books, 2014), p. xv.

³⁷ Patrick Duggan, ‘The Conflict between Aestheticism and Morality in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*’, *WR: Journal of the Arts & Sciences Writing Program*, 1:1 (2009), (p.62).

eventually meets his demise as a result of his excessive hedonism gives weight to this idea, with Wilde's apparent rejection of the conflation of aestheticism with immorality. Basil, who does not identify with the sybaritic values of Dorian and Lord Henry, represents one of the few examples of sound morality. He rebukes Dorian's dismissal of Sibil, saying 'Don't talk like that about any one you love, Dorian. Love is a more wonderful thing than Art'.³⁸ While love is not necessarily identified as moral, the suggestion here is that aesthetic appreciation should fall second to human emotion, not lead it. Similarly, before his death, Basil starts to pray, reciting the lines 'Lead us not into temptation. Forgive us our sins. Wash away our iniquities', providing an explicit contrast to Lord Henry who asserts that 'the only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it'.³⁹ If Wilde were to advocate the aesthetic extremes perpetuated by Dorian, one might suggest that any such notions of moral integrity would be altogether omitted. This idea also manifests itself in 'PPP', through the separation of the aesthete from the 'personality'. Notably, Wilde writes, 'One can fancy an intense personality being created out of sin', rather than an intense aesthete.⁴⁰ In this respect, personality may simply refer to artistic freedom, or license even, which is magnified by exposure to crime. More importantly, to associate the aesthete, and thus himself, with crime and sin, may have been all too revealing of Wilde's own sexual proclivities.

The crossover of high and low art owes primarily to the commercial environment in which the texts were published. Despite the fact that both writers historically exhibited a contempt for this new literary market, Wilde's literature leant into it much more than James'. There appear to be, nonetheless, significant tensions within Wilde's work, ostensibly on account of his financial instability. For example, the sensationalised nature of *Dorian Gray*, with its dramatic succession of deaths and constant anticipation surrounding the changes to the portrait, easily renders the novel melodramatic. On the other hand, the novel is wholly imbued with aesthetic assumptions, evinced largely by the extensive passages of purple prose, which would not typically have appealed to, or even been understood, by the new consumer. Lord Henry preaches elaborately about hedonism: 'Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing.... A new Hedonism... Youth! Youth! There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth!'.⁴¹ Likewise in 'PPP', Wilde lists examples of Wainewright's appreciation of aesthetic items: 'He loves Greek gems, and Persian carpets, and Elizabethan translations of Cupid and Psyche, and the Hypnerotomachia, and book-binding and early editions, and wide-margined proofs'.⁴² In contrast, James does not adapt his pensive, complex style to the fast-paced, thrilling demands of melodrama. The final line, 'When I look at [the picture] my chagrin at the loss of the letters becomes almost intolerable', delivers a subdued ending, of which only those of an intellectual disposition would render climactic, since James provides no definitive resolution.⁴³ James adheres completely to the tenets of high art, writing almost exclusively for his ideal reader, whom he aims to both educate and challenge. Although James engages with the theme of criminality, there is far less stylistic tension in *Aspern* than Wilde's texts, arguably rendering the former more representative of 'high' art.

³⁸ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p.110.

³⁹ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p.165; Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, pp.61-2.

⁴⁰ Wilde, 'PPP', p.13.

⁴¹ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p.65.

⁴² Wilde, 'PPP', p.3.

⁴³ James, *Aspern*, p.145.

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Despite the fact that Wilde’s prose demonstrates caution in its treatment of immoral behaviour, morality occupies, nonetheless, a secondary role in any discussion related to art. The inevitable blurring of good (or of aesthetic sensibility) and evil perpetuates a profound sense of moral confusion within *Dorian Gray*, which is magnified by Wilde’s defence of art borne of criminality in ‘PPP’, on the grounds that this does not affect the quality of the art itself, and can even enhance it. The subtle undertones of admonition in regards to excess are, however, overshadowed by Wilde’s dedication to art, which is situated on a pedestal. James, conversely, prioritises a discussion of morality, which is implicitly applied to the subject of art. James, I conclude, promotes a negative, albeit subtle, evaluation of the narrator, whose actions against the integrity of art and aestheticism are ultimately condemned by the reader. Although Wilde presumably advocates amorality in relation to aesthetic design, James seems to promote moral rectitude, at least in regard to authorial self-preservation.

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