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“Decadence and Repression in Henry James
and Oscar Wilde”

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This dissertation endeavors to contrast the popular view that Victorian literary figures, Oscar Wilde and Henry James have opposing personalities and different approaches to aestheticism. Besides contextualizing James's treatment of homosexual repression and sublimation, Jamesian texts are presented from a different angle, an angle which sheds light on how some of James's works share common characteristics with the decadent works of the late-Victorian era, specifically Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray* and *Salomé*. I assert that even though Wilde and James are often construed as antithetical figures, and in spite of James' vindication of (homo)sexual repression and morality and his conviction that Wilde was an "unclean beast" (Ellmann 178), works like *Roderick Hudson* (1878), "The Author of Beltraffio" (1884), "The Aspern Papers" (1888), and "The Lesson of the Master" (1892) exhibit surprising similarities with Wilde's so-called "degenerate" decadent novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), "The Portrait of Mr. W.H" (1889) and his novella: *Salomé* (1894).

Chapters two and three of the dissertation accentuate that despite James's "supposed" prudery: his novels "provid[ing] a training manual in conservative ideology" (Reitz 3) and Wilde's decadence, the above mentioned Jamesian works display decadent and (homo)erotic explicit subtexts that are very much comparable with Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, "The Portrait of Mr. W.H.," and *Salomé*. These chapters show that in these works, the narrators paint an ambiguous picture of heterosexual love and courtship. Furthermore, these works both embrace decadence and avow same-sex passion, aestheticism, and fetishistic indulgences. Moreover, these writings depict homophobic and repressed homosexual male fictional characters, and contain gendered metaphors conflated with phallic imagery. On the one hand, Wilde and James both address themes like homosocial affiliations (that are potentially homoerotic), homo-aesthetics, homoerotic gazes, and also the abomination of heterosexual courtships. On the other hand, both authors make concessions to New England/ late-Victorian morals and include the portrayal of moral exemplars. These themes are not only prevalent in Wilde's and James's novels, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Roderick Hudson*, chosen for comparison, but even imbue the smaller works by Wilde and James, namely *Salomé*, "The Aspern Papers," "The Lesson of the Master," and "The Author of Beltraffio."

However, the subchapter entitled: *Repression and Homoeroticism in Roderick Hudson* demonstrates how Wilde's *Dorian Gray* and James's *Roderick Hudson* also expose differences, both in textual artifice and ideology. One distinguishing factor between Wilde's and James's novels is that *Dorian Gray* preaches sexual indulgence and embraces sensori-

emotional values, which is communicated with alacrity via Dorian and Lord Henry, who are the focal points of Wilde's novel. Antithetically, *Roderick Hudson* clearly rejects and preaches against the decadent dogmas of the late-Victorian counter-culture, an attitude which is communicated via Rowland Mallet, a bourgeois and self-controlled moralist, who is the archetype of virtue and late-Victorian conservative ethics in James's novel. Rowland emphasizes a need for control and self-negation, unlike Dorian Gray. Rowland represses and sublimates his homoerotic passion, thereby conserving his sexual purity and morality. In contrast, the subchapter: Wilde's Effete and Decadent Characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* discusses how Wilde's novel endeavors to subvert conventional moral precepts and to unveil the dogmas of decadence and aestheticism.

Importantly, the first two chapters of the dissertation were written with the intention of contextualizing the realm of Wildean and Jamesian characters and in order to demonstrate the gravity of the conflict between late-Victorian Puritanism and its decadent subculture. The conservative conventions of late-Victorian times and the movements that came into existence for the sake of critiquing these orthodox traditionalist ideals are examined in detail. Chapter one further analyses how the radicalism of the campaign for the conservation of sexual purity and morality was the primary cause of rigidity in the authoritative and average late-Victorian middle class, whose members strove to adhere to the moral codes proclaimed by conservative establishments (Stevens 64). The *Juvenile Literature and Muscular Christianity* and *Surveillance of the Subculture* subchapters denote that pursuing a life of aesthetic vision was quite a struggle under Victorian doctrines of godliness and good learning (pertaining to the upbringing of boys with the intention to breed intelligent, eminent Victorians). The ideal Victorian male strove for religious and moral living and gentlemanly conduct (Newsome 110), thus celibacy (before marriage) was also a requisite as it reflected sexual purity. By and large it is shown that the late-Victorian mind was rigid.

The methods implemented by the conservative Victorians which helped them in initiating a moral crusade against immorality, with the intention of maintaining and enforcing religious orthodoxy are further unraveled. Homophobic and heterosexist attitudes found expression in public courts, the press, and scholarly discourses. The conservative late-Victorians extolled marriage and family life, due to fear caused by the thriving homosexuality in public schools and other subcultural venues. To demonstrate this fear and paranoia, Victorian medical science is addressed in the *Moral Hygiene and Clitoridectomy* subchapter, with the purpose of

highlighting the radicalism and brutality behind the urge of preserving the sexual innocence of men and women.

Antithetically, the subchapters: *On Dandyism* and *On Decadence* highlight the Decadent movement, which critiqued and resisted late-Victorian values, advocated the importance of leading a life of aesthetic vision, sensori-emotional values and indulgence.

The subchapter: Homoeroticism and Fetishism in *Poems* and *Salomé* addresses how decadence and dandiacal performance are reflected in some of Wilde's works. Thanks to the background information on decadence and dandyism the reader is able to see Wilde's success at merging the dandy with the female performer. Wilde's *Salomé* allies herself with the dandies, so much so that even her orientalism reinforces gay performance. *Salomé* is suffused with aestheticized and homoerotic phallic fetishism, frequent in both Wilde's and James's works. Furthermore, the establishment of homosocial environments in late-Victorian culture is also considered.

Carlyle and Victorian Asceticism highlights the similarity between Thomas Carlyle's, Wilde's and James's male characters, who participate in male social spheres, where men are endowed with masculine wisdom and moral stamina. The eminent Victorian writer Thomas Carlyle hence has also been briefly included in the analysis. Thomas Carlyle's thoughts on morals, homosocial communities, and ethics run parallel to James's and at times even Wilde's. Similarly to James's and Wilde's works, *Past and Present* (1843) and *Sartor Resartus* (1831) exhibit homosocial/erotic undertones and also a blatant hatred towards women. Carlyle's ideal environment was woman free and chaste, where men could sublimate their (homo)sexual drives into productive work, thereby leading a harmonious life of contemplation and industriousness. Since Carlyle's preference for men and animosity towards women is so acute he may, in this respect, be regarded as a predecessor of late-Victorian homoerotic writing. When closely reading Carlyle's texts, it can be observed that there may be an "indistinguishability" between homosociality and homosexuality – a phenomenon this dissertation frequently addresses in the interpretation of the literary texts analyzed. Carlyle's bachelors, who remain unmarried and prefer homosocial bonds, are in fact exemplary homosexual figures. Marriage is also denied by Carlylean protagonists for they reject and oppose compulsory heterosexuality. Carlylean, Wildean, and Jamesian texts embody a correlation between women hatred and latent homosexuality. In order to point out

these parallels, the themes of homosocial affiliations, asceticism, dislike of women, celibacy, and the regulation of innate male energy are also analyzed.

Overall, the dissertation unveils in chapter two and three that in these works, either the narrators or the characters display a strong antagonism towards heterosexual marriage and courtship. There lies a misogynist tension in Jamesian, Wildean, and Carlylean works, for the realm of the homosocial purposely eradicates the female sex. Furthermore, it is further demonstrated throughout the dissertation that these texts also embrace decadence, homo-aesthetics and same-sex affiliations, homoeroticism, fetishistic indulgences, and depict characters suffering from homophobia. They also portray repressed male fictional characters whose homosexual panic indirectly drives them into a homosocial environment due to their self ignorance. The modern stereotypes of male homosexuality are also evident in the chosen literary works. Both Wilde's and James's characters at times transgress, for their performance and exterior discontinue traditional gender expressions.

Finally, a paradoxical feature of both Wildean and Jamesian texts are pointed out, namely the concessions to contemporary moral standards, the execution of 'poetic justice,' and the lip service paid to conventional norms, which suppress the strong appeal to homosexual desire these works have established. Thus, in pointing out these parallels and in accentuating the similarities of the Wildean and Jamesian texts analyzed, a new perspective may be developed, not only concerning these writings, but also the late-Victorian period, thereby showing how conservatism and decadence paradoxically overlap, concepts which are usually construed as having been diametrically opposed.

Theory and Methodology

The arguments and the hypotheses formulated in this dissertation are partly based on Queer Studies, specifically Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's scholarly work on homophobia and homosexual panic, Judith Butler's concept of gender performance, and on Leland S. Person's and Ed Cohen's thoughts on homoerotic gazes and homo-aesthetics. Moreover, some aspects of cultural studies are also drawn on, in order to contextualize Wildean and Jamesian texts. An essential task of this dissertation consists in substantiating the cultural and social

conditions under which homosexual panic and effeminate performance emanated during the late-Victorian period. It is indispensable to review some of the late-Victorian era's power structures since these establishments played a significant role in enforcing late-Victorian moral dogmas. Cultural studies highlights a culture's material trappings, in addition it draws attention to the processes employed by contemporary power structures that disseminate ideology. Thus, some concepts and considerations taken from cultural studies serve the purpose of identifying the cultural and social conditions under which homosexual panic and effeminate performance thrived during the late-Victorian period.

Also, in order to address and discuss the ways in which (repressed) homoerotic desires and fetishistic indulgences are articulated, or the ways in which the era's values are reflected in literary texts, a close reading of James's, Wilde's, and Carlyle's selected works from the perspective of queer studies is fundamental. By means of close reading it is shown that the texts not only enunciate their culture's constraints and mores but also the era's underground movements.

It is argued and shown, in the Wildean, Jamesian and Carlylean works analyzed, that there is a continuum between the homosocial and the homosexual, for the homosocial may be "potentially" erotic (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 1-3). It is also characteristic of the texts analyzed that they straddle the paradoxical tension between the homosocial as homosexual and the homosocial as homophobic, since they contain a subtext of homoerotic desire, yet at the same time portray several characters subjected to homosexual panic, at times, preaching sexual purity.

Also, Sedgwick clearly states that religion and high culture overlap with "homosexual" culture (94), which is indeed depicted and addressed in the works of both Wilde and James. These phenomena are clearly present in Dorian Gray's life and Rowland's, as well. Sedgwick holds that a shift has taken place when the imperative characteristics of the aristocratic demeanor and behaviour had become accessible for homosexual men in the upper and middle classes (*Between Men* 94). This effete aristocratic demeanor was also emulated by the nineteenth century dandies in general, and importantly by James (in the case of his fictional character Roderick), and Wilde, and also some of his fictional characters, like Dorian, Lord Henry, Cyril Graham, and Mr. W.H.

It is further argued in these two chapters that the deployment of male desire is in Wilde's and James's characters' effeminate and aristocratic performance and behaviour, specifically in their gazes, and in their art. Thus, the homoerotic gaze of a Wildean or Jamesian fictional character and the process of his art making may be correlated. At one point Person proposes that writing is a metaphor for homosexual penetration, for it is its use of the male gaze that produces its homoerotic "outcome" (194). This premise is applied to art making, specifically painting and sculpting. Similarly, it is a painter's or a sculptor's homoerotic gaze that creates an aesthetic outcome, like a beautiful youthful image of a young man. Thus, it is deduced that homosexuality may be mediated on multiple levels, homo-aesthetically, through works of art, and also in acts of writing and reading between men, and in performance as well. Thus, homoeroticism may be circulated via painting, as in Basil's example in Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, and also writing, like in "The Author of Beltraffio," "The Aspern Papers," and "The Lesson of the Master." Importantly, the writers or artists in the Jamesian and Wildean texts mentioned not only transcribe homosexuality into their written works or art objects, but also engage in a closeted relationship with their admirer or muse. This "interdependency" (Person 188) most definitely has an erotic appeal, not only an aesthetic one, for James and Wilde configure these homo-aesthetic bonds in both "phallogocentric and dominant-subordinate terms, while making the Master more often the object than the subject of male desire" (Person 189). Importantly, however, James and Wilde, consciously destabilize this ideal and potentially homoerotic homosociality by the introduction of the woman, whose sole purpose is to interrupt the established close knit male to male bonds, thereby reinstating compulsory heterosexuality. Thus, when analyzing Wildean and Jamesian texts and the concept of repressed and unavowed homosexuality, it is necessary to make gender identities and gender practice the sites of close reading and relate them to a wider social and cultural context to unveil the endlessly manifold dynamics of sexuality and gender.

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