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Wilde's Decorative Arts: A study of painting, clothing, and home décor in the writings of Oscar Wilde

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In the preface to his novel, Wilde writes: "it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors." My approach to Wilde's work on aesthetics has been shaped by my own aesthetic experiences and by the influence of my teachers, from my parents to my university professors in both the English and Art History departments.

Finally, I'd like to thank everyone for 'wilde' puns and the staff at Interlibrary Loans for locating *The Woman's World.*

ABSTRACT

This project explores Oscar Wilde's work on painting, the art of dress, and home décor, referred to collectively in his lectures as the 'decorative arts.' While it has become commonplace to assert that Wilde's plays and essays subvert the status quo, few scholars have studied Wilde's work on the decorative arts to substantiate his status as a writer arguing for social and political change. Through an analysis of Wilde's North American lecture tour and his editorship of *The Woman's World*, as well as his approach to painting, clothing, and home décor in his more well-known work, I argue that Wilde conceives of the decorative arts as a means of expressing and inciting dissatisfaction with the social and political realities of Victorian England.

As I show, Wilde subtly presents avant-garde art, sartorial details, and home décor items as functional ornaments. The formal elements of a painting foster receptivity and, by extension, sensitivity and compassion. Unconventional attire functions as a visual symbol of discontent with social and physical conformity. In light of Wilde's published support of women's emancipation, his writings on home décor imply that the well-decorated house, rather than the Victorian wife, should be responsible for creating domestic harmony.

Wilde's penchant for the decorative arts has long remained the domain of anecdote; the following study instead positions Wilde's interest in the decorative arts as a defining, and insightful, aspect of his *oeuvre*.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette thèse examine en profondeur les idées d'Oscar Wilde sur la peinture, l'art de s'habiller, et la décoration familiale, qu'il qualifie collectivement comme les 'arts décoratifs.' Même si c'est bien connu que les pièces et les essais de Wilde bouleversent le status quo, il y a eu très peu d'études sur la manière dont Wilde utilise ses idées sur les art décoratifs dans le but de promouvoir des changements sociaux et politiques. Par une analyse approfondie de la série de conférences nord-américaine de Wilde et de sa rédaction du journal *The Woman's World*, je soutiens que Wilde emploie les arts décoratifs comme un moyen d'exprimer and d'inciter dissatisfaction avec les réalités sociales et politiques de l'Angleterre Victorienne.

Je démontre que, pour Wilde, les éléments formels de la peinture stimulent la receptivité et, eventuellement, la sensibilité et la compassion. L'habit non conventionnel sert de symbole visuel de mécontentement envers la conformité sociale and physique de l'époque. En vue de l'appui de Wilde pour la cause féminine, ses écrits sur la décoration familiale suggèrent que la maison, et non pas la femme, est responsable pour maintenir l'harmonie domestique.

L'intérêt de Wilde pour les arts décoratifs a depuis longtemps fait l'objet de simples anecdotes. Ce projet, au contraire, considère cet intérêt comme un aspect plus important de son oeuvre.

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Introduction

From Blue China to Wallpaper

While a student at Oxford in the mid 1870s, Oscar Wilde decorated his room with pieces found at various antique stores and famously declared he was finding it difficult to live up to his blue china. The statement, which mocked the upper-class craze for Japanese blue-and-white china, was quickly taken up by lampoonists, such as George du Maurier and Gilbert and Sullivan. After graduating from Oxford with a First in Classics in 1878, Wilde was the subject of a series of caricatures by du Maurier, published in the popular magazine *Punch*. The images, which mocked Wilde's persona as an exquisitely-dressed, aesthetically-minded dandy, assured the formerly unknown young graduate a place in the public consciousness. Although he had not yet published anything other than a poem, "Ravenna," which won Oxford's Newdigate prize, and a review of the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877, Wilde became synonymous with the Aesthetic movement of the late nineteenth-century; his caricatured persona intrigued and amused the public.

Making good use of the fame afforded by the *Punch* caricatures, Wilde lectured in North America in 1882 at the request of Gilbert and Sullivan whose operetta, Patience, spoofed the Aesthetic Movement, and Wilde in particular. Wilde's task was to be as flamboyant as possible and thus introduce North American audiences

to the cult of beauty and pleasure Gilbert and Sullivan were parodying. Wilde also used the opportunity to further cultivate his persona and express his aesthetic philosophy. He traveled extensively, lecturing on the importance of beautifying one's home and the ability of art to foster a non-violent atmosphere. The lectures were later followed by a three-year run as editor of *The Woman's World* magazine, during which Wilde expressed views which we would now describe as feminist. He championed, among other progressive issues, the suffrage movement and the higher education of women. The publication of his novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, in 1890, ushered in a highly productive time for Wilde: critical essays on aesthetics and socialism were followed by social comedies, such as The Importance of Being Earnest, which mocked the tenets of Victorian society, such as duty, genealogy, sincerity, and utilitarianism, through ironic witticisms.

Following his 1895 court trials, during which he eloquently defended himself and his works from accusations of immorality by questioning Victorian morality itself, Wilde was imprisoned, with two years hard labour, for what were referred to as "acts of gross indecency with other male persons" (cited in Varty 8).[1] His plays were performed infrequently, he was refused access to his children, and critics looked to his writing, and its theme of pursuing pleasure, as a portent of what was described as his "downfall." Upon his release from prison, in 1898, Wilde wrote "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," a long poem calling for a more humane prison system.

While living in France, Wilde fell ill with meningitis and died in 1900, at the age of forty-six. As he rested in his room at the Hotel d'Alsace, ever intent on the aesthetics of his surroundings, he is said to have quipped, "My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or other of us has to go" (Gere 107). From blue

china to wallpaper, the visual was always for Wilde the vehicle for expressing a mood, a viewpoint, a moment, a desire. Indeed, as he wrote in "De Profundis," "like Gautier, I have always been one of those *pour qui le monde visible existe*" (954).[2] However, unlike Gautier's desire to purge art of any socio-political agenda, Wilde's aesthetic sensibilities were a means to express social, cultural, and political concerns. Contrary to both popular belief and his own assertion of 'art for art's sake,' Wilde's aesthetic writings are motivated not only by the experience of beauty, but also by the necessity for practical, social change.

"The Soul of Man Under Socialism" has traditionally been the touchstone for scholars exploring Wilde's politics. While "Soul of Man" is certainly crucial, I propose Wilde's work on the decorative arts is equally valuable in understanding his dissatisfaction with the social conventions and politics of late Victorian England. As I will show, Wilde's socio-cultural and political views, namely his emphasis on compassion, individuality, and women's emancipation, can be understood more fully by studying his work on painting, clothing, and home décor, which he referred to, collectively, as the decorative arts.

"All art is quite useless"

Wilde's preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray concludes with the oft-quoted line "All art is quite useless." As an Aesthetic claim, this comment captures Wilde's well-known conviction about the autonomy of art and his quarrel with the Victorian interest in didactic art. Like many of his paradoxes, Wilde's aphorism on the uselessness of art is ironic, hyperbolic, and elusive. Mischievously misleading his champions and his detractors, Wilde presents an aphorism which argues against art as

an instrument for societal change all the while creating aesthetically-minded lectures, essays, and plays which indeed engage in socio-cultural and political projects.

As a result of his deliberately flippant persona, Wilde has often been, in the words of one scholar, "dismissed as an idle aesthete, an uncommitted poseur" (Eltis 6). As a result of Wilde's similarly flippant writing style, Wildean scholars making a case for Wilde's social and political views have found it necessary to resort to a surface-depth analysis of his work. The approach is one Wilde himself suggested, mystified, and mocked. In the preface to his novel, Wilde asserts that "All art is at once surface and symbol...Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril." Wilde teasingly urges us to remain at a literal level even as he asserts the presence of the symbolic and mocks the tendency toward literalism, that is to say the inability to perceive subtleties and ironies. Moreover, as Jonathan Dollimore has noted, "inversion becomes central to Wilde's expression of [his] aesthetic [...]. Attributes [such as] surface, lying, insincerity [...] are substituted for [...] depth, truth, sincerity" (56-57). Indeed, the surface-depth binary is one of the many Wilde dismantles in his critical essays and plays.[3] Nevertheless, most Wildean scholars articulate their understanding of Wilde's work by employing the traditional notions of surface and depth which Wilde mocked. For example, Christopher Craft discusses the homosexual allusions underlying the puns in The Importance of Being Earnest, arguing that they "operate within the heterosexual order as its hidden but irreducible supplement" (120). Arguing for Wilde's anarchic political philosophy, Sos Eltis studies Wilde's A Woman of No Importance for what the play reveals "below the surface" (128). Anne Varty, in line with Wilde's own stage directions for An Ideal Husband, notes that Lord Goring's speech on compassion "drops the dandy's mask in

order to reveal a Christ figure beneath" (187). In most interpretative approaches to Wilde's work, meaning, insight, or seriousness of purpose are shown to be oscillating beneath the surface of Wilde's melodramatic theatrical conventions and his characters' ostensibly flippant witticisms.

In his recent work on Wildean aesthetics, Neil Sammells acknowledges and counters this interpretative tradition by focusing on Wilde's interest in style and stressing that his plays "are all surface" (82). Sammells considers the gestures, tastes, and accouterments of Wilde's stage dandies as being worthy of analysis in their own right rather than as teasing clues to an underlying meaning. Considering Wilde's 'style' as his interest in art, fashion, and self-fashioning, as well as his creation of similarly style-obsessed stage dandies, Sammells states that Wilde recognizes "style is defined not by essence [...], but by its function" (127). Wilde's style, as Sammells sees it, serves to maintain "that shifting complexity which successively and successfully eludes all attempts to fix and authenticate" (22). Anchored in postmodern theory, Sammells's analysis prizes Wilde's work as, above all, a sustained obfuscation of meaning. While I value Sammells's assertion that style, in Wilde's writing, has a function, I consider that function not to be Wilde's pursuit of elusiveness but rather his expression of dissatisfaction with social and political realities.

In the following study, I focus on how Wilde's work on the decorative arts seeks to inspire his audiences and readers to re-evaluate late nineteenth-century mores. Such re-evaluations are what Elizabeth Hollander would describe as "shift[s] in consciousness that, according to Wilde, it is art's business to effect" (449). In his lectures, novel, plays, and essays, Wilde continually references painting, the art of dress, and home decoration. Through these works on aesthetics, Wilde makes

recommendations toward social and political change. By focusing on Wilde's well-known critical essays and plays as well as his lesser-known 1880s lectures and editorial essays, I argue that Wilde's claims about painting stress the importance of compassion as a tonic for unyielding social mores; those on the art of dress emphasize the need for individuality; and those on home décor provide insight into his progressive views on women's emancipation. With this interdisciplinary study drawing upon both art history and literature, I use Wilde's often overlooked 1880s lectures and editorial writings to found my argument that, through his writing on the decorative arts, Wilde offers ideas toward both socio-cultural change, specifically a valorization of compassion and individuality, and political reform, namely women's emancipation.

In a lecture entitled "Art and the Handicraftsman," Wilde states: "we should remember that [...] all the arts are decorative arts" (186). Influenced by the Aesthetic Movement's valorization of artisan work, Wilde rejects the traditional hierarchy of visual art in which painting and sculpture, the so-called 'fine' arts, were deemed more technically difficult, aesthetically pleasing, and edifying than the so-called 'decorative' arts, such as dressmaking, needlework, and household furnishings. By suggesting that all art is both fine and decorative, Wilde refuses the established distinctions associated with these categories, thus implying that all the arts can be beautiful, evocative, and accessible; each is equally capable of inspiring the viewer.

In line with William Morris's writings on design reform, Wilde championed both the practical and utopian social effects of beautifying the homes of all classes of society. However, Walter Pater's conclusion to The History of the Renaissance, which Wilde interpreted as a rejection of the moral value of art, urged Wilde to

distance himself, at least in part, from Morris's assertion that art could edify one's moral character. For Wilde, the decorative arts serve a different purpose than they do for Morris, who enlisted art in the promotion of conventional morality, and for Pater, who argued art's sole purpose was to provoke a personal, evocative response in the viewer. Wilde's work on the decorative arts fuses his own distaste of Victorian England's unyielding moral codes together with both Morris's belief in art's social function and Pater's contrasting belief in the autonomy of art. Through this fusion, Wilde enlists the 'art for art's sake' dictum as a key factor in his project of social and political reform. As we will see, Wilde suggests, in his "English Renaissance" lecture, that art which avoids didacticism and remains "aloof" (128) achieves greater clarity regarding societal problems.

Curiously, given Wilde's appropriation and gradual re-working of the Aesthetic Movement's sensibilities, one area of study which has been somewhat overlooked by Wildean scholars is Wilde's interest and role in the visual culture of the later nineteenth century. Although certain wide-ranging studies, such as Karl Beckson's London in the 1890s, have described the interdisciplinary atmosphere motivating many *fin-de-siècle* writers, scholarship that has dealt specifically with Wilde and the visual arts has largely focused on Salomé and the relationship between Aubrey Beardsley's drawings for the play and Wilde's text.[4] My study of Wilde's writings focuses not on the relationship between text and image in Wilde's work, but rather on Wilde's own writings on the decorative arts. Wilde's lectures on painting, dress, and home décor, delivered in North America in 1882, and his work as editor of *The Woman's World* from 1887 to 1889, are crucial to this study since it is through these two media, lectures and journalism, that Wilde expresses the philosophy of art

he later articulates more obliquely in his novel and essays. Apart from the work of Kevin O'Brien, Wilde's North American lectures have not been studied closely and only Sos Eltis, Catharine Ksinan, and Laurel Brake have studied Wilde's editorship of *The Woman's World* in depth.

After a brief overview of the Aesthetic Movement, I devote considerable attention to Wilde's lecture tour and the ways in which the aesthetic philosophy he expresses reflects contrasting influences. I then highlight the differences between conventional didactic art, which reinforces the status quo, and the purpose and style of Wilde's work on art which, as he states of individualism in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," "seeks to disturb monotony of type, slavery of custom, [and] tyranny of habit" (909).

I then begin my study of how Wilde's writings on painting, dress, and home décor participate in socio-cultural and political projects. I have divided my study of Wilde's work on the decorative arts into three sections, or case studies, which are linked by the fact that each provides in-depth analysis of the social and political objectives, both practical and utopian, of Wilde's aestheticism. First, I explore Wilde's work on art, specifically his affinity for the formal elements of a painting, such as line and colour. In his lectures, Wilde suggests that by sensitizing viewers to beauty through line, shape, and colour, a work of art can, by extension, foster viewers' sensitivity and compassion toward other individuals. While not always expressed as a direct function of formal artistic elements, but more broadly as a function of an aesthetic disposition, the issue of compassion recurs throughout Wilde's writing, most notably, as we will see, in the characters of his stage dandies.

Following the format of Wilde's lectures, in which he discusses painting first, then clothing, and finally home décor, the second section of my thesis is devoted to Wilde's writings on the art of dress and his corresponding references to sartorial details in his plays. Throughout his oeuvre, Wilde suggests clothing can function as an individual or collective act of dissent. Reacting against the uniformity of dress, Wilde asserts that alternatives or unique additions to conventional attire are successful expressions of individuality and resistance. He envisions clothing, specifically the clothing of his male and female dandies, as calculated reactions against Victorian conformity. Wilde's work on dress also enters the realm of dress reform. Acknowledging that restrictive gowns and corsets perpetuate notions of women's physical and political inferiority, Wilde urges popular dissatisfaction with physically-restrictive dress and suggests alternatives which foreshadow twentieth-century comfort.

In the third section of my study, I argue, in the spirit of Wildean paradox, that Wilde's interest in home décor shifts focus away from the Victorian woman's role in the home. In his lectures, Wilde stresses that beautiful objects create a sense of pleasure and harmony. By focusing on beautiful objects rather than wifely duties, Wilde, whether intentionally or not, contributes to late nineteenth-century critiques of the Victorian 'angel in the house' ideal. For Wilde, the angel *is* the house; he makes the house, and not the wife, responsible for maintaining harmony. Wilde's editorial essays for *The Woman's World* are essential to my argument here. Indeed, his work for the magazine suggests he is an example of that rarity, the male aesthete feminist.

This study situates Wilde's writings within the *fin-de-siècle* context in which they were created, acknowledging that they are both a product and active critique of

that environment. I provide a detailed analysis of how, in his somewhat neglected 1880s work as well as his much studied 1890s writings, Wilde's approach to painting, clothing, and home décor shows that, despite the tendency to interpret Wilde's 'art for art sake' dictum as a complete rejection of art's social role, Wildean aesthetics are not divorced from social, cultural, and political concerns. In keeping with his characteristic attack on conventional notions of the 'serious' and the 'trivial,' Wilde uses the ostensibly 'trivial' decorative arts to critique social conformity and gender inequality, thus playfully creating a new genre of political writing.

Chapter One

The Aesthetic Movement and Wilde's Lecture Tour

Sunflowers and lilies: The 'Aesthetic Craze' of the 1870s and 1880s

While at Oxford, as a student of John Ruskin's and Walter Pater's, Wilde was acutely aware of the heightened attention given to the decorative arts in the latter half of the nineteenth century. His professors embraced and further expressed the philosophy behind what was described, in the popular press, as "the decorative art rage" (cited in Mikhail 70) or the "aesthetic craze" (27).[5] Pater, who stressed that beauty and pleasure were ends in themselves, decorated his Oxford drawing-room with the hallmarks of the Aesthetic style: Morris wallpaper, blue plates and pots, and carefully chosen flowers (Gere 14). The fact that visitors noted his décor in their journals and letters speaks to the wide-spread influence of, among others, Ruskin's and William Morris's work on design reform. Ruskin wrote and lectured on the importance of ornament, specifically Gothic art and architecture; Morris stressed the civilizing effects of beautiful household items made by the noble hands of the craftsman; both emphasized that tasteful art and design countered the spiritually and socially destructive effects of industrialization.

Wilde the undergraduate quickly entered the cultural conversation of the time, a conversation focused on the importance of the decorative arts in creating both aesthetic and social harmony, that is to say both beauty and peace. With the opening of London's Grosvenor Gallery in 1877, created as a bohemian alternative to the Royal Academy, Wilde found others who shared his aesthetic sensibilities. In the

company of James McNeill Whistler, whom he later eclipsed as the premiere London dandy, Wilde embraced the style and ideas of the influential, and popularly satirized, Aesthetic Movement.

In London, during the latter half of the nineteenth-century, two conflicting design movements were both described by contemporary writers and journalists as "Aestheticism." William Morris's Arts and Crafts movement stressed the morally edifying aspects of beautiful objects while the work of James Whistler and Aubrey Beardsley reacted against Morris's "social moralizing" (Escritt 49) by asserting that beautiful objects and artworks were simply meant to be beautiful, not edifying. Art historians now seek to carefully define and separate the two movements as 'Arts and Crafts' and 'Aestheticism,' but they clearly overlapped not only in the shared term used by the British and North American press to describe them, but also in their shared taste in design, their celebration of beauty, and their distaste for machine-made decorative art. As we will see, in line with Baudelaire's assertion "*il faut être de son temps*" (xvi), Wilde's writings on the decorative arts reflect both the belief that beauty can incite social change and the belief that art should not be created in the service of conventional morality.

Introduced to a wider audience during the 1851 Great Exhibition in London, the Aesthetic Movement has a lineage that spans its century as well as the British Channel. While the designs and morally edifying philosophy associated with Morris's Arts and Crafts branch of the Aesthetic Movement originated in England, the notion that art is autonomous can be traced to France; to Théophile Gautier, who coined the phrase *l'art pour l'art*. Charles Swinburne and Walter Pater introduced Gautier's assertion to England. French Aestheticism, as reflected in the writings of Gautier,

Baudelaire, and Joris-Karl Huysmans, was a literary movement which stressed the supremacy of form over subject matter, the importance of courting new and extreme sensations, and the necessity for art to reject its traditional didactic role. British Aestheticism, on the other hand, referred to both Morris's design movement, which promoted social reform and spiritual awakening through art, as well as the conflicting 'art for art's sake' philosophy borrowed from the French by Swinburne and further articulated by Pater. Despite their differences, both Morrisian and Paterian Aestheticism represent what Jonathan Freedman notes as "the turn within Victorian culture toward valorizing art in general and visual art in particular as a means of provoking intense experience in a society that seems able to deaden the senses and the spirit alike" (2).

Freedman describes Ruskin, Morris, Swinburne, and Pater as "avatars of the "*fin de siècle*" (2). However, these avatars were themselves preceded by artists and popular home décor writers who made significant contributions to design reform. Indeed, the originators of the Aesthetic Movement in England, namely Thomas Carlyle, Ruskin, and Henry Cole were influenced by the early nineteenth-century writings of Thomas Hope, who coined the term "interior decoration" (Gere 35), and the mid-nineteenth century designs of Augustus Pugin and Owen Jones. Pugin pioneered the Gothic Revival in England; his idealization of medieval art, architecture, and society influenced Morris and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Stephen Escritt notes that for Pugin "the Gothic style was a visual manifestation of the Middle Ages, whose benevolent religious and social order contrasted- as he saw it- with the artistic, social, and moral chaos of the nineteenth century" (29).

Fascinated by the florid style of medieval architecture, Pugin created stylized natural designs, as did Owen Jones who wrote the influential Grammar of Ornament (1856). Inspired by intricate Middle Eastern and Oriental designs, as well as the complex designs of medieval illuminated manuscripts, Jones proposed that "in surface decoration all lines should flow out of a parent stem. Every ornament, however distant, should be traced to its branch root" (cited in Escritt 30). Describing their design ventures in botanical metaphors, Jones and Pugin created highly stylized images based on the natural forms of plants and flowers.

Moving into the realm of home decoration, Carlyle, Ruskin, and Cole sought to improve popular taste and thus edify and ennoble a public considered to be disenchanted by industrialization. They rejected bulky furniture and machine-made designs, advocating instead the beauty of handcrafted goods, well-chosen paintings, paler colours, and stylized, abstract patterns influenced by Moorish and, beginning in 1854, Japanese designs (Gere 43). Japanese woodblock prints and ceramics, including the blue-and-white china that inspired Wilde's first publicly recorded quip, greatly influenced the design patterns of William Morris, among others. Morris's company, The Firm, made and sold beautifully decorated household objects, such as furniture, wallpaper, carpets, and ceramics (see appendix, fig. 1). The "Morrisian look" (Gere 43), as the decorative style was known, became synonymous with the Aesthetic Movement.

In "The Lesser Arts," a lecture delivered to the Trades Guild of Learning in 1877 and later published in 1882, Morris declares: "nothing can be a work of art which is not useful; that is to say, which does not minister to the body when well under command of the mind, or which does not amuse, soothe, or elevate the mind in a

healthy state" (207). Morris and his followers intended to cultivate the taste of all classes of society so that each individual, surrounded by beautiful objects, would be morally edified. However, the designs and objects the Aesthetic Movement inspired were often too delicate for everyday use and became the *objets d'art* of the upper classes (von Eckardt 31). Nevertheless, the Aesthetic Movement in its more commercialized form did succeed in transcending, to a certain degree, the strata of British society. Beginning with Charles L. Eastlake's Hints on Household Taste (1868), highly popular manuals on home decoration flooded the market. While Linda Dowling considers British Aestheticism to have "dwindled" (35) into decorating tips, the proliferation of popular home décor manuals suggests the design reforms introduced by Ruskin and Morris had sustained appeal.[6]

Although Pierre Bourdieu has suggested that Aestheticism mystifies the notion of taste so as to reinforce class distinctions and social control (31), British Aestheticism in fact sought to de-mystify the notion that taste was the exclusive domain of upper-class aesthetes. The fact that the movement was often described in contemporary newspaper reports as the decorative "rage" or "craze" (cited in Mikhail 70) speaks to its popularity and relative accessibility. Stressing that taste could be taught, books by Charles Eastlake, Clarence Cook, and William Morris detailed the acquired art of home décor. In contrast, Mary Eliza Haweis's extremely popular manual, The Art of Decoration (1881), rejected "such dogmatism" (361) and argued that taste was subjective, but nevertheless provided "broad principles" (362) for creating a tasteful, aesthetically-minded home.

In 1875, following Morris's lead, Arthur Lasenby Liberty opened his textile store in London; the most popular designs, featuring lily and sunflower motifs,

ushered in a craze for the stylized botanical images first developed by Pugin and Jones and which would later be associated with Art Nouveau (von Eckardt 30). The affordable textiles sold at Liberty's of London attracted a variety of customers, including key figures of the Aesthetic Movement such as Morris, Whistler, the architect E.M. Godwin, and the Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones (30). Both Liberty's and Morris's attenuated flower and plant designs were bought enthusiastically and often copied and sold at a lower cost by other manufacturers, thus making them widely available and prompting Gilbert and Sullivan to spoof London's "sentimental passion for a vegetable fashion" (Patience, 200).

As art historians have noted, Morris's and Liberty's highly stylized botanical designs simultaneously promoted the beauty of nature and artifice (von Eckardt 31). Wilde, who would make paradox his calling card, enjoyed the contradictions inherent in his favourite designs. In his first North American lecture, entitled "The English Renaissance of Art," he told his audience "You have heard [...] of two flowers connected with the aesthetic movement in England, and said, I assure you, erroneously, to be the food of some aesthetic young men. Well, let me tell you the reason we love the lily and the sunflower, in spite of what Mr. Gilbert may tell you, it is not for any vegetable fashion at all. It is because these two lovely flowers are in England the two most perfect models of design, the most naturally adapted for decorative art" (154). For Wilde, the lily and the sunflower were the aesthete's flower of choice because they paradoxically symbolized the ability of art to better nature.

The Aesthetic Movement reached its peak in the early 1880s with the popularity of Morris's and Liberty's designs, Gilbert and Sullivan's operatic parody Patience, and Wilde's lecture tour. The year before Wilde left to lecture in North

America, William Powell Frith painted "The Private View of the Royal Academy, 1881" which unmistakably depicts Wilde, striking an affected pose with a lily in his buttonhole, commenting on art while surrounded by an attentive group of fashionable young women (see appendix, fig. 2). Frith did not cite Wilde by name, but referred to him as "a well-known apostle of the beautiful" and noted that "beyond the desire of recording for posterity the aesthetic craze as regards dress, I wished to hit the folly of listening to self-elected critics in matters of taste whether in dress or art" (cited in Gere 23). In the following year, audiences across the Atlantic eagerly, if skeptically, participated in the folly.

"The wise contradict themselves": Wilde's North American lectures

Written and delivered when he was twenty-eight, Wilde's lectures on the decorative arts have often been considered by scholars as his juvenilia; as a result, they have not been studied in detail. Tellingly, the most comprehensive collection of his lectures is still Essays and Lectures, compiled by Robert Ross eight years after Wilde's death.[7] As Kevin O'Brien notes, many of the lectures have been re-titled by Ross, and sections of some have been added on to others, thus making it difficult to establish a master copy of each.[8] Wilde's lectures on the decorative arts, while witty, express his views on art without the paradoxes and epigrams he would save for his later works. However, few scholars have gone to them for insight into his aesthetic philosophy. For example, Lawrence Danson and Neil Sammells, who have both written extensively on Wilde's aesthetics, have wrestled with Wilde's 1891 collection of essays, which he teasingly titled Intentions, without devoting attention to his North American lectures.

While most scholars fail to mention Wilde's lectures in their studies of his aesthetic philosophy, in 1882, Wilde's lecture tour was the talk of each town he visited. Wilde arrived in New York on January 2nd 1882 and, in another famous quip, told the customs officer "I have nothing to declare but my genius" (cited in Hart-Davis 123).[9] The following day *The New York World* ran an article which first described Wilde's appearance, from his clothing to his teeth to the "rhythmic chant in which every fourth syllable is accentuated" (cited in Mikhail 37), and then presented a lengthy interview in which Wilde discusses his aesthetic philosophy and lecture tour.

Wilde's letters to friends in England capture, albeit hyperbolically, the attention his lecture tour garnered. He informs friends of his three secretaries and adds that "the third whose hair resembles mine is obliged to send off locks of his own hair to the myriad maidens of the city, and so is rapidly becoming bald" (Letters, 126). He notes that "roses are hung with white lilies for me everywhere" (127) and, mocking his passion for fame, writes: "Loving virtuous obscurity as much as I do, you can imagine how much I dislike this lionizing, which is worse than that given to Sarah Bernhardt I hear" (126). In a letter to Whistler, dated a month later, Wilde writes, "My dear Jimmy, they are 'considering me *seriously*.' Isn't it dreadful? What would you do if it happened to you?" (139). Despite deciding to counter the earnest tone of his lectures by dressing in knee-breeches and cloaks, Wilde was indeed taken seriously in that his mannerisms, choice of clothing, and lectures were carefully noted by countless reporters.

Having traveled to North America to introduce the public to Aestheticism and thus set the stage, as it were, for Gilbert and Sullivan's operatic parody, Wilde enthusiastically played up his persona by dressing in what he described as "Francis I

dress" (Letters, 141). On cue, reporters devoted detailed attention to Wilde's mannerisms and costume. While they did so mostly in a facetious tone, they nevertheless dutifully recorded his first lecture, "The English Renaissance," virtually verbatim so that Wilde was forced to write new material for subsequent lectures in the same city. The tendency to transcribe and publish Wilde's lectures continued throughout his lecture tour. Indeed, thanks to three Montreal newspaper reports, Kevin O'Brien has been able to reconstruct Wilde's lost "House Beautiful" lecture. The *Montreal Daily Witness*, the *Montreal Star*, and the *Montreal Gazette* each published detailed accounts of Wilde's lecture on 22 May 1882 (O'Brien 398). Judging from the Montreal newspaper reports, as well as those published in New York, Toronto, Charleston, Sacramento, and elsewhere, audiences found the aesthetic philosophy Wilde expressed worthy of note. Wilde's lectures effectively popularized the Aesthetic Movement in North America.

As many scholars have emphasized, Wilde's aesthetic philosophy derived from numerous sources. Indeed, Wilde's practical "House Beautiful" lecture, which "received the best reviews from newspaper critics" (O'Brien 401), was based on various popular books on home décor, such as Charles Eastlake's Hints on Household Taste (1868), Clarence Cook's The House Beautiful (1878), and Mary Eliza Haweis's The Art of Dress (1879). Wilde's three other lectures, written before "The House Beautiful," were more philosophical; they were based on Pater's Studies in the History of the Renaissance (1873), as well as Morris's lecture, "The Lesser Arts" (1877), which was later collected in Hopes and Fears for Art (1882).

For Wilde, borrowing and inventing were considered equally valid creative techniques. In keeping with medieval and early modern writerly traditions, he states

in his Oxford notebooks that "it is only the unimaginative who ever invents. The true artist is known by the use of what he annexes, and he annexes everything" (cited in Eltis 55). Similarly, in his later editorial column for *Woman's World* he writes that "true originality is to be found rather in the use made of a model than in the rejection of all models and masters" (259).[10] Conversely, he has asserted that "to invent anything at all is an act of sheer genius" (cited in Sammells 110). Along the same lines, Wilde has the figure of Gilbert, in "The Critic as Artist" (1891), decry writing which "suggests no fresh departure of thought" (834). In "Phrases and Philosophies," Wilde states: "the well-bred contradict other people. The wise contradict themselves" (238). The quip captures Wilde's approach to his aesthetic philosophy: it addresses his valorization of both borrowing and inventing and asserts that insight can only be gleaned by thoroughly considering, and often synthesizing, conflicting views.

Wilde's lectures selectively appropriate different avant-garde ideas on style, taste, and politics. They contain elements of both Morris's socially-conscious Arts and Crafts Aestheticism and Pater's Aestheticism which, influenced by Gautier, Baudelaire, and their British exponent, Swinburne, stressed the autonomy of art and the primacy of pleasure and beauty. Wilde's "The English Renaissance," first delivered in New York on January 9th 1882, expresses these two conflicting Aesthetic philosophies and celebrates the atmosphere of aesthetic discourse in which they exist.

Echoing Morris, Wilde tells his audience that "industry without art is barbarism" (152) and states that "it would be impossible to overrate the gain that might follow if we had about us only what gave pleasure to the maker of it and gives pleasure to its user, that being the simplest of all rules about decoration" (149). Expressing a Morrisian interest in the nobility of art, Wilde asserts: "in art as in

politics there is but one origin for all revolutions, a desire on the part of man for a nobler form of life, for a freer method and opportunity of expression" (113). Acknowledging his debt to Morris, Wilde notes that "he has given to our individualized romantic movement the social idea and the social factor also" (123).

In keeping with his own aphorism that "the wise contradict themselves," Wilde expresses both Morris's belief that the purpose of art is to inspire practical, social change as well as Pater's philosophy that, as Wilde notes, we should appreciate life and art for "its pulsations and not for its purpose" (151). Wilde asserts that "art never harms itself by keeping aloof from the social problems of the day: rather, by so doing, it more completely realizes for us that which we desire" (128). While the statement is in keeping with the *l'art pour l'art* philosophy of Baudelaire and Gautier, it also suggests that by remaining aloof the artist can observe his or her society with detachment and thus comment on it more subtly and astutely. Developing the point, Wilde notes that "he who seems to stand most remote from his age is he who mirrors it best, because he has stripped life of what is accidental and transitory, stripped it of that 'mist of familiarity' which makes life obscure to us" (131). Indeed, Wilde asserts that he wished, "in this lecture at least, to dwell on the effect that decorative art has on human life- on its social not its purely artistic effect" (151). He follows this assertion with key ideas not from Ruskin or Morris, but from Pater's eloquent conclusion to his Studies in the History of the Renaissance.

In his 1873 work on Renaissance art and aesthetic appreciation, Pater asserts that "not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end" (222). He reminds his readers that "we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. [...] Our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible

into the given time" (224). These pulsations can be achieved through viewing art which, Pater writes, "comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake" (224). Similarly, in "The English Renaissance," Wilde notes that "the demand of the intellect is merely to feel itself alive" (141) and tells his audience that those interested in aesthetics "seek experience for itself and not for the fruits of experience, [they...] burn always with one of the passions of this fiery-coloured world, [and] find life interesting not for its secrets but for its situations" (151). Contradicting his celebration of Morris's social aestheticism, Wilde declares: "the passion for beauty engendered by the decorative arts will be [...] more satisfying than any political or religious enthusiasm, any enthusiasm for humanity, any ecstasy or sorrow for love" (151). Borrowing directly from Pater's idealistic view of aesthetic experience, Wilde states "art comes to one professing primarily to give nothing but the highest quality to one's moments, and for those moments' sake" (152).

By fusing Morrisian and Paterian Aestheticism, Wilde's first lecture re-defines the Aesthetic Movement. His new, broader understanding of the movement stresses that art is both socially-conscious and autonomous. He suggests that while art's aim should not be to reform society, by making a viewer appreciative of beauty art can, however, foster passion, idealism, and, by extension, dissatisfaction with the social and political status quo.

The lectures which follow "The English Renaissance," namely "House Decoration," "Art and the Handicraftsman," and "The House Beautiful," continue Wilde's strategy of fusion. They express the importance of form and sensation; they celebrate individualism as opposed to conventionality; and assert that art, by giving

delight, fosters an appreciation of beauty which can lead to peace and social harmony. Each of these points foreshadow Wilde's polemical essay, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," in which, after discussing the role of the artist as individualist, Wilde declares: "what man has sought for is, indeed, neither pain or pleasure, but simply life. Man has sought to live intensely, fully, perfectly. When he can do so without exercising restraint on others, or suffering it ever, and his activities are pleasurable to him, he will be saner, healthier, more civilized, more himself. [...] The new individualism [...] will be perfect harmony" (921-922).

With the exception of "Art and the Handicraftsman," each of Wilde's lectures includes the following assertion, repeated verbatim: "I think that art, by creating a common intellectual atmosphere between all countries might, if it could not overshadow the world with silvery wings of peace, at least make men such brothers that they would not go out to slay one another for the whim or folly of some king or minister."[11] Wilde's decision to include the line in three of his four lectures speaks to its key role in his aesthetic philosophy. While each of his lectures suggests art can inspire the viewer to effect social change, in each Wilde also disapproves of didacticism in art. In "The English Renaissance" he asserts that "appeals to art to 'have a mission' are appeals which should be made to the public" (137). In a lecture given a year later to art students of the Royal Academy in London, Wilde asserts that "a picture has no meaning but its beauty, no message but its joy" (212). By stating that art is both autonomous and socially-conscious, Wilde places the problematic issue of didacticism at the crux of his lecture series.

In the years before Wilde's North American lecture tour, didacticism in art was a topic of considerable discussion. In 1878, the year Wilde arrived in London, a court

trial dealing specifically with the function of art brought the issue of didacticism to the forefront of the public consciousness. Featuring two of the key figures of British Aestheticism, Ruskin and Whistler, the trial came about as a result of Ruskin's critique of Whistler's painting "Nocturne in Black and Gold" (see appendix, fig. 3). Ruskin wrote, in the journal *Fors Clavigera*, that Whistler asks "two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face" (cited in Merrill 44). As Wilde would later do when slandered by the Marquess of Queensbury, Whistler sued for libel.

The debate which developed during the trial reflected the two sides of Aestheticism: Ruskin asserted that art was meant to "edify and educate" (von Eckardt 32); Whistler, on the other hand, claimed that art was simply meant to be beautiful. As the cultural historian Wolf von Eckardt has suggested, "only in Oscar Wilde's London would the question of aesthetic and commercial value of a work of art become the reason for a legal confrontation" (32). Since Ruskin's social aestheticism confronted Whistler's 'art for art's sake' philosophy, we can add that the educational value of art was also on trial. Whistler won the trial, but he was only awarded a farthing and was forced to declare bankruptcy. Wilde's lectures, in navigating the issue of didacticism, were very much a product of their historical moment.

Wilde's lectures aim to teach North American audiences the basic elements of home decoration, such as colour harmony, the proper way to furnish a room, and the most pleasing vantage point at which to hang pictures and paintings. Indeed, "The House Beautiful," Wilde's least theoretical and most well-received lecture, educates audiences on the dos and don'ts of home décor. However, in a *New York Tribune* interview given while on tour, Wilde asserts that "the groundwork of aestheticism...is that you cannot teach a knowledge of the beautiful; it must be revealed" (cited in

Mikhail 39). Similarly, in "The English Renaissance," he notes that "the truths of art cannot be taught: they are revealed only" (146). Although Wilde rejects the notion that an aesthetic sense can be taught, clearly his lectures are didactic in that they seek to promote practical changes in the realm of home décor. Wilde's lectures can also be thought to support didacticism in art: as we have seen, Wilde asserts that beautiful art can inspire a humanitarian spirit in the viewer. He suggests that the peaceful effects of viewing art can result in social change, specifically an atmosphere of compassion rather than judgment. However, Wilde creates a distinction between didactic art, as in art which seeks to promote conventional morality, and art which, in creating pleasure, creates harmony.

Sos Eltis has emphasized that Wilde attacked "the Victorian ideal of art as a moral vehicle [...] throughout his career, from the preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray to his testimonies at the trials" (194). We can trace Wilde's rejection of conventional didacticism further back to his North American lectures. In "The English Renaissance" Wilde specifically addresses didacticism in art. Foreshadowing his preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray, he tells his audience: "it is not an increased moral sense, an increased moral supervision that your literature needs. Indeed, one should never talk of a moral or an immoral poem- poems are either well written or badly written, that is all. And, indeed, any element of morals or implied reference to a standard of good or evil in art is often a sign of a certain incompleteness of vision, often a note of discord in the harmony of an imaginative creation; for all good work aims at a purely artistic effect" (142). Wilde's concluding statement, a variation of the 'art for art's sake' philosophy, is a reaction against the assumption that art should

promote Victorian morality; it does not, however, assert that art should exist in a vacuum devoid of social or political concerns.

In his lectures, and throughout his *oeuvre*, Wilde expresses the 'art for art's sake' dictum. As Karl Beckson has suggested of Swinburne's controversial defense of Baudelaire's Les Fleurs du mal, the art for art's sake philosophy was perhaps used as a defensive strategy to avoid legal prosecution (xxvii). Similarly, Linda Dowling maintains that the notion of *l'art pour l'art* "served as the ideological camouflage through which an otherwise 'dangerous' rationalism and agnosticism were able to enter the mainstream of Victorian thought" (32). Purporting to reject any relationship between art and social criticism enabled subversive writers and artists to critique society without appearing as threatening figures of dissent, thus allowing them to get away with more, as it were. Ironically downplaying the social and political power of art, the 'art for art's sake' dictum is in fact political: Wilde's favoured maxim attacks the dominant Victorian belief that art should be a didactic instrument promoting conventional morality.

During his editorship of *The Woman's World*, Wilde further expressed his distaste for art and literature which served as mouthpieces for conventional Victorian values such as duty and repentance. In the second edition of the magazine, Wilde writes that "many of our novelists are really pamphleteers, reformers masquerading as story-tellers, earnest sociologists seeking to mend as well as mirror life" (441).[12] He also asserts that most contemporary novelists "wish to reform the morals, rather than to portray the manners of their age. They have made the novel a mode of propaganda." (278). A few years later, in the preface to his novel, Wilde writes that "an ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style." The

statement implies that Wilde's own florid writing style, often criticized as being too affected, is in fact less mannered than popular didactic literature, in which the writing may not be flowery, but the story and style are subservient to the goal of promoting what Wilde described in *Woman's World* as "the cheap severity of abstract ethics" (224). In The Importance of Being Earnest, Wilde mocks the effect on readers of the simplistic moralizing espoused by many Victorian novels. Miss Prism, who inadvertently places her three-volume novel in a bassinette and baby Ernest/Jack in a handbag, asserts that in her novel "the good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means" (565).

Wilde's novel, essays, and plays mock the Victorian values of authority, sincerity, and utility; the belief that punishment chastens the sinner (Eltis 194); the Victorian institutions of marriage and social hierarchy; and Victorian upper-class traditions such as elaborately codified mourning rituals and dinner parties governed by commonplace assertions. Written for a North American audience, Wilde's lectures do not specifically address these issues. They focus instead on the inhumane effects of industrialization and seek to disturb the custom or habit of dressing without flair and living without decoration. However, in "The English Renaissance," Wilde alludes to what he considers to be Victorian England's long tradition of rigid and restrictive social mores when he tells his North American audience that their country's "very absence of tradition, which Mr. Ruskin thought would rob your rivers of their laughter and your flowers of their light, may be rather the source of your freedom and your strength" (140).

While conventional didacticism aims to uphold the status quo, Wilde's writing critiques conformity. In the April 1889 edition of *Woman's World*, Wilde decries the

fact that "most people prefer to think with the majority" (463). Similarly, in "The Chinese Sage," an article published in the *Speaker* in 1890, Wilde states that "morality [...] went out of fashion [...] when people began to moralize" (533). Wilde's didacticism, specifically his argument that art can foster an appreciation of beauty and, by extension, the desire for a non-conformist, harmonious, and non-judgmental society, exists in direct opposition to the didactic quality of popular Victorian novels, in which characters who reject or stray from accepted codes of conduct are ultimately punished. The didactic art Wilde supports, like his understanding of individualism in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," functions as "a disturbing and disintegrating force. Therein lies its immense value. For what it seeks to disturb is monotony of type, slavery of custom, [and] tyranny of habit" (909).

As Lord Henry states, "modern morality consists in accepting the standard of one's age. I consider that for any man of culture to accept the standard of his age is a form of the grossest immorality" (56). In late nineteenth-century England, abiding by conventional morality was the standard message of didactic art. Wilde reacts against both the fact that art perpetuates conventional social mores and the heavy-handed manner in which it does so. Addressing the issue of heavy-handedness in his December 1887 column for *Woman's World*, he notes: "it is very difficult to give good advice without being irritating, and almost impossible to be at once didactic and delightful" (224).

Aware of the importance of tone in curbing a potentially preachy argument, Wilde's writing gradually evolves into a characteristically flippant approach to his aesthetic philosophy. Although Wilde's first lecture has a distinctly earnest, intense tone, both in its emphasis on Morris's and Ruskin's notion of "noble" craftsmanship

and Pater's celebration of experience for its own sake, his subsequent lectures show signs of the playfulness that would become his trademark. In "House Decoration," for instance, Wilde humourously introduces his argument that art positively or negatively affects one's state of mind by noting "I do not see the wisdom of decorating dinner-plates with sunsets and soup-plates with moonlight scenes. [...] We do not want a soup-plate whose bottom seems to vanish in the distance. One feels neither safe nor comfortable under such conditions" (167).

Since didacticism does not exclusively refer to works which reinforce conventional morals and values, Wilde's lectures, in their discussion of art as a catalyst for social change, can be considered didactic. However, didacticism connotes heavy-handedness, literalism, lack of subtlety; everything Wilde's writing is not. Indeed, even in its uncharacteristically earnest forms, as in his first lecture and his post-prison letter "De Profundis," Wilde's writing assumes a pose, an attitude, thus making the term 'didactic' hopelessly inadequate to describe Wilde's tone and somewhat ill-suited as a defining adjective for Wilde's project. More in keeping with the spirit of Wilde's oeuvre, we can assert that his work, in its continued commentary on social and political issues, is not only insightful, but incite-ful. Wilde rejects Victorian didacticism because of its tone and, more importantly, because of its perpetuation of conventional morality; however he does not reject the notion that art can foster social and political change. As Wilde sees it, art, in creating a heightened experience in viewers, readers, and audiences, can incite dissatisfaction with social mores and political inequality.

Chapter Two

"The sensuous element of art": Artistic production and aesthetic experience

"Those high hours when thought is not"

Wilde clearly rejects art which imposes moral messages on individuals. As Elizabeth Hollander has noted, Wilde instead appreciates "art's capacity to inform general perceptions through individual experience" (457). In his work on painting, Wilde often celebrates what we would now refer to as nonrepresentational art. As he sees it, avant-garde art, in rejecting standard artistic conventions, urges viewers to be receptive; this receptiveness, he argues, can in turn foster a desire for alternatives to the rigid social mores of Victorian society.

Not surprisingly, it is in his North American lectures on the decorative arts that Wilde first invokes painting to express his aesthetic philosophy, a philosophy centered on the primacy of the senses. As we will see, in discussing the primacy of form, or style, Wilde develops links between art and the abstraction of music. In so doing, he critiques his society's valorization of the intellect rather than the senses and its favouring of narrative-oriented art rather than formal artistic elements such as line and colour. While on tour, and to a greater extent in his essays on aesthetics, Wilde states, tongue-in-cheek, that life imitates art. His oft-quoted statement playfully subverts conventional notions of mimesis. More importantly, the inversion implies that art influences an individual as much as social conventions or religion. Indeed, Wilde argues that the Victorian valorization of the intellect and of narrative-oriented art

preserves conservative behaviour. He also argues that, on the other hand, a sensory engagement with the formal design elements of an artwork fosters compassion, which Wilde considers a welcome alternative to his society's emphasis on punishing those who reject its strict moral codes.

In each of his lectures, Wilde devotes substantial attention to the formal aspects of art. In fact, in keeping with Walter Pater's writings on the sensory pleasure of viewing art, Wilde's work on painting and design stresses that formal elements such as line and colour elicit a sensory and emotional appreciation in the viewer. To a certain degree, Wilde's approach to viewing art reflects Ruskin's emphasis on the importance of seeing, of simply looking at a work of art. As Ruskin writes in A Joy For Ever (1857), "one of the worst diseases to which the human creature is liable is the disease of thinking. If it would only just look at a thing instead of thinking what it most be like [...] we would all get on far better" (16.126). However, in his art criticism, Ruskin "claims religious exaltation as the proper frame of mind for an understanding of [...] art" (Birch 26). In praising Joseph Turner's paintings, Ruskin writes that his works, such as "The Slave Ship" (1840), urge viewers to "hear the still, small voice, wherein rests the power communicated from the Holiest" (3. 653). In keeping with Ruskin's writings on aesthetic experience, but in sharp contrast to Ruskin's actual art criticism, Wilde stresses that the formal elements of art, in engaging our visual sense, allow us to temporarily transcend the world of moral, spiritual, and intellectual concerns. In "The English Renaissance," Wilde expresses the key point of his aesthetic philosophy. He tells his audience, "this restless modern intellectual spirit of ours is not receptive enough of the sensuous element of art; and so the real influence of the arts is hidden from many of us: only a few, escaping from the

tyranny of the soul, have learned the secret of those high hours when thought is not" (133-134).

Wilde, however, also asserts, in "The English Renaissance," that artists must react against "the claims of mere feeling and sentiment" (127) otherwise their work will be sentimental rather than powerful. While this advice about creating art is somewhat vague, Wilde's advice to contemplate art by focusing on "the sensuous element" is extremely accessible. For him, viewers who state they like the colours of a painting have shown a sensory engagement with the work which, being visceral and subjective, supersedes any intellectual discussions of the artwork's merit. Indeed, for Wilde, the ultimate aesthetic experience is an intense sensory experience.

Wilde's argument that aesthetic experience stems from formal design elements such as line and colour foreshadows aspects of the early twentieth-century art theories of Roger Fry and Clive Bell. Fry and Bell, who organized the 1912 Post-Impressionist exhibition, stress that a sensory, emotional engagement with formal design elements is all that is needed to appreciate a work of art. In "An Essay on Aesthetics" (1909), Fry writes that an artist "arouses the aesthetic feeling" (86) in a viewer through "the emotional elements of design": line, space, light and shade, and colour (84). In "The Aesthetic Hypothesis" (1914), Clive Bell echoes Wilde's emphasis on the viewer's visceral response to an artwork. He asserts that "the starting-point of all systems of aesthetics must be the personal experience of a peculiar emotion" (113) and goes on to state that "to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing but a sense of form and colour" (115). Bell writes that in every painting line, colour, and form can "stir our aesthetic emotion" (113) and notes that "people who cannot feel pure aesthetic emotion remember pictures by their subjects; whereas people who can, as

often as not, have no idea what the subject of the picture is" (116). Defining the aesthetic philosophy of the Post-Impressionists, he refers to the "relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, [as] 'Significant Form' [...]" (113). In emphasizing that the style of a work of art, specifically its use of line and colour, evokes a heightened, personal, sensory experience in the viewer, Wilde's lectures and essays anticipate Modernist aesthetic principles.

Given Wilde's celebration of an individual's instinctive engagement with art, subjectivity figures prominently in his writing. As he writes in an 1886 letter, "it is only the auctioneer who should admire all schools of art" (277). In his lectures on painting, in his novel, and in his later dialogues on aesthetics, Wilde values the subjective nature of aesthetic experience instead of an intellectual, objective appreciation of art based on the standards and values expressed by art critics. In The Picture of Dorian Gray, Lord Henry reminds Dorian that the subjective nature of our sensory engagement with the world is what makes that engagement most powerful. He tells him, "a chance tone of colour in a room or a morning sky, a particular perfume that you had once loved and that brings subtle memories with it, [...] a cadence from a piece of music you had ceased to play, I tell you, Dorian, that it is on things like these that our lives depend" (150). Along the same lines, in "The Critic as Artist," Gilbert scoffs at Ernest's belief in absolute truth and states "For what is truth? In matters of religion, it is simply the opinion that has survived. In matters of science, it is the ultimate sensation. In matters of art, it is one's last mood" (860). As Anne Varty has noted, "fundamental to Wilde's critical enterprise is the notion that vision, truth, and insight are [...] relative to the individual's experience" (60). Wilde suggests

that instead of searching for an absolute truth removed from our personal experience, we should favour the effect of personal experiences and sensations.

In his focus on subjectivity and in his lectures' privileging of the senses as the only necessary tools for engaging with art, Wilde counters Matthew Arnold's belief in the objective nature of aesthetic experience. In his preface to Poems (1853), Arnold states that all good art appeals "to the great primary human affections: to those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time" (1381). By promoting the notion that aesthetic experience is objective, Arnold implies that all viewers innately feel the same when viewing good art or reading good poetry. In contrast to Arnold, Wilde advocates a personal, instinctive response to art. In so doing, he echoes the approach taken by Mary Eliza Haweis. As we have seen, in her books on home décor, Haweis stresses personal taste, writing that "there is no *ought* in beauty, save your own feeling of delight" (361).

The art historian Charlotte Gere has noted that Wilde was not well-versed in artistic terms and vocabulary (92). As a result, his articulation of the nature and effect of aesthetic experience is accessible: his work on painting de-mystifies aesthetic contemplation and in so doing critiques art criticism which alienates the casual art viewer. In his work on painting, Wilde states that, ideally, aesthetic experience is a heightened sensory experience. As we will see, he further states that visual art should achieve the abstraction of music by affecting viewers through form rather than through the depiction of ideas or narratives. In his lectures and dialogues on aesthetics, Wilde asserts that art affects viewers' perceptions. By extension, he maintains, in his lectures, that viewers who are receptive to an artwork's formal design elements, rather than to art which imposes a thematic or moral message, will develop an increased

aesthetic sensitivity which, in turn, can lead to an increased sense of compassion. Since Wilde presents formal elements such as line and colour as the catalyst for such aesthetic experiences, he often celebrates nonrepresentational art in his lectures and essays on aesthetics. While all art can certainly incite the senses, Wilde considers art which leans toward abstraction to be the most effective in prompting a heightened sensory experience.

"Form is everything. It is the secret of life": Abstraction in art

In his "English Renaissance" lecture, Wilde states: "it is not enough that a work of art should conform to the aesthetic demands of its age: there should be about it, if it is to affect us with any permanent delight, the impress of a distinct individuality, an individuality [...] coming near to us only by virtue of a certain newness and wonder in the work and through channels whose very strangeness makes us more ready to give them welcome" (121). For Wilde, Whistler was the painter who achieved this "distinct individuality." Indeed, Wilde's appreciation of Whistler's work clearly informs his lecture's definition of new, engaging art. Whistler rejected aesthetic conventions by creating art which operates through what Wilde refers to as strange channels; specifically, by privileging line and colour, Whistler created art which courts abstraction. As we have seen, Ruskin condemned Whistler's "Nocturne in Black and Gold" (1877) for its unconventional approach to colour and its lack of distinct shapes. Wilde, however, praises Whistler's work for precisely the qualities Ruskin criticized.

In "The Decay of Lying" (1891), Vivian tells Cyril "one does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and only then, does it come into existence. At present,

people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects" (793).[13] Tongue-in-cheek, but yet in keeping with the phenomenological approach to art put forth by late-nineteenth century artists such as Cézanne, Vivian asserts that "things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the arts that have influenced us" (793). Proving the point that we are influenced by aesthetics, his theory that "life imitates art" is itself influenced by Impressionist art. The painterly fogs which Vivian refers to are most likely the fogs of Whistler's "Nocturne in Blue and Gold" (1877).

In line with the Impressionist interest in evoking sensations rather than depicting subject matter, the title of Whistler's painting announces his interest in exploring color harmonies as a means of capturing an impression of reality (see appendix, fig. 4). Rejecting Realist art, in which the colours of life are dutifully reproduced on canvas, Whistler depicts a night sky, river, and shore bathed in otherworldly blue light. Whistler uses colour and the suggestion of light to depict ephemeral optical, rather than actual, realities. In his lectures, Wilde, influenced by Whistler's work, stresses the importance of colour in art. In "The House Beautiful," he asserts that North Americans "should have such men as Whistler among you to teach you the beauty and joy of colour. When he paints a picture, he paints by reference not to the subject, which is merely intellectual, but to colour" (406). Similarly, in his 1885 review of Whistler's "Ten O'Clock" lecture, published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, Wilde praises Whistler's decision to depict optical perceptions rather than visual realities. He writes that, in his lecture, Whistler justly criticized Nature for "a general overcrowding of detail, both in omnibuses and in landscapes; and then [...] spoke of the artistic value of dim dawns and dusks, when the mean facts

of life are lost in exquisite and evanescent effects; [...] when the warehouses become as palaces, the tall chimneys of the factory seem like campaniles" (43).

Whistler's rejection of strictly representational art greatly influenced Wilde's "The Decay of Lying." Indeed, Vivian's assertions can be understood as a written analogue for Whistler's visual manifesto. As Vivian tells Cyril, "all bad art comes from returning to life and nature, and elevating them into ideals. Life and nature may sometimes be used as part of art's rough material, but before they are of any real service to art they must be translated into artistic conventions. The moment art surrenders its imaginative medium it surrenders everything" (799). Both Whistler's paintings and Wilde's aesthetic philosophy react against what Wilde describes in "Soul of Man" as "the attempt to interfere with the individualism of imaginative art" (909). Throughout "The Decay of Lying," Vivian notes that resistance to imaginative art often manifests itself as an insistence on "faithful and laborious realism" (786) and the depiction of traditional values such as prudence and duty (784). By opposing the primacy of representational art and its accompanying conventional moral messages, Wilde and Whistler counter the views upheld by Ruskin, Victorian England's foremost art critic.

Ruskin began his life-long praise of Joseph Turner's work because he was prompted to refute a critic who suggested Turner did not paint the natural world. In his 1844 Preface to Modern Painters, Ruskin writes that "Turner paints more of nature than any man who ever lived" (xv). While Ruskin did reject strict imitation, he stressed art's debt to nature and abided by the notion, well-established in Western art, that art takes from life and is thus subordinate to the natural world. Wilde asserts the opposite. Arguing for art's superiority to nature, he has Vivian state that "what art

really reveals to us is Nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition [...] It is fortunate for us, however, that Nature is so imperfect, as otherwise we should have no art at all. Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place" (777). By stating that "life imitates art far more than art imitates life" (799), Vivian, and by extension Wilde, positions himself in opposition to the most fundamental principles upheld by Victorian art criticism.

Through Vivian, Wilde rejects mimetic realism in art and instead asserts that the viewer's imagination is mimetic. Painterly fogs shape a viewer's perception and awareness of real fogs. In one of the dialogue's most memorable lines, Vivian astutely states that "the world has become sad because a puppet was once melancholy" (790). Wilde acknowledges that our state of mind and emotions are mimetic; they are a palimpsest of what we have read and seen. Moving from the effect of literature on the reader and Impressionist fogs on the viewer to the effect of Japanese art on Western culture, Vivian asks Cyril, "do you really imagine that the Japanese people, as they are presented to us in art, have any existence? [...] The Japanese people are the deliberate construction of certain individual artists. [...] The actual people who live in Japan are not unlike the general run of English people; that is to say, they are extremely commonplace, and have nothing curious or extraordinary about them. In fact, the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people" (795). Here, Wilde foreshadows Edward Said's Orientalism (1979), in which the 'exotic' Middle East is shown up to be a construction of Western art.[14]

Vivian's comments on the effect of melancholy literature, Japanese art, and painterly fogs call attention to the fact that art influences our thoughts and emotions,

our conception of reality, and the degree of attention we give aspects of the visual world. Although Wilde's rejection of strictly mimetic art has been the focus of most scholarly work on "The Decay of Lying," the suggestive power he attributes to art is an equally intriguing aspect of Vivian's "life imitates art" theory. In concluding his argument, Vivian asserts that his theory "has never been put forward before" (799). Indeed, Wilde articulates the influence of aesthetics in a new, possibly disruptive, way. By asserting that life imitates art, Wilde not only rejects the notion that art should mirror nature, thus rejecting the Victorian understanding of art as subservient to nature, but he also ascribes to art a power which places it on par with the major factors influencing individuals, namely religion and social mores.

Along with Whistler's Impressionist paintings, Japanese woodblock prints were, for Wilde, harbingers of a new perspective. As Linda Zatlin asserts, Victorian England's "predilection for clear moral truths" (29), as exemplified in Arnold's and Ruskin's art criticism, was at odds with Japanese prints "in which scenes of actors and idealized scenes of brothel life expressed no moral while revealing more than necessary" (29). Aware of his audience, both in England and in North America, Wilde did not discuss *shunga*, the Japanese woodblock prints depicting sexual subject matter which Aubrey Beardsley would later subvert with his drawings of confident, rather than submissive, sexual women. As part of his project of privileging line and colour rather than subject matter, Wilde alludes instead to the highly stylized polychrome woodblock prints of Hokusai, Hokkei, and Hiroshige.[15]

In Hokusai's "View [of Mount Fuji] on a Fine Breezy Day" (1822-32), the mountain, depicted in unusual shades of orange and red, dominates the frame (see appendix, fig. 5). In "Snow at Kambara" (1833), Hiroshige depicts the mountains

looming over small figures, bent against the snow (fig. 6). Unlike the French Realist painter Gustave Courbet's roughly contemporaneous "The Stone Cutters," Hiroshige does not evoke the pathos or toil of the poor nor does he paint in dark, somber colours. His peasant scene does not present a narrative or suggest a moral message; it evokes a mood which the Japanese art historian Joan Stanley-Baker has described as "the feeling of loneliness and quietude" (193).[16] In 1867, Ruskin expressed his distaste for Japanese art, asserting that "the Japanese 'inability' to draw arose from an inherent moral depravity" (Zatlin 26). Precisely what Ruskin disliked, namely Japanese art's lack of a clear moral message, intrigued Wilde.

In the opening paragraphs of The Picture of Dorian Gray, Japanese art figures prominently. As Lord Henry languidly observes Basil's studio, we are told that "now and then the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect" (5). Lord Henry, in keeping with what Wilde would describe in "The Decay of Lying" as life imitating art, sees the world through the visual language of a Japanese print. He notices the shadows of birds on the curtain because they recall the images created by "the painters of Tokio who, through the medium of an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion" (5). As Jonathan Freedman states, "Aestheticist art habitually seeks simultaneously to valorize temporality and timelessness, to compact both into the same aesthetic form or shape" (18). In its opening description of Lord Henry's aesthetic sensibility, Wilde's novel presents Japanese art as the impetus for what Freedman observes as a characteristic Aesthetic paradox. By placing stress on the desire to capture "swiftness and motion" through a medium that is "necessarily immobile," Wilde celebrates an aesthetic

sensibility, in both artist and viewer, that can be defined as a love of transience and of the desire to artificially capture transience through relatively permanent artistic means. Those artistic means, and their sensuous effect, are the focus of Wilde's work on Japanese art.

Foreshadowing Lord Henry's aesthetic appreciation, Wilde's lectures celebrate Japanese art's "classical restraint of form" (143) as an "escape from the tyranny of the soul" and an immersion into "the sensuous elements of art" (133). As he states in "The English Renaissance," "while the Western world has been laying on art the intolerable burden of its own intellectual doubts and the spiritual tragedy of its own sorrows, the East has always kept true to art's primary and pictorial conditions" (134). As we have seen, Wilde favours line and colour rather than content; he presents formal design elements as the most effective means of promoting a visceral, rather than an intellectualized, aesthetic experience. For Wilde, Japanese art, in its emphasis on line and colour, avoids anchoring the viewer in a moralistic narrative; instead, it asserts its surface or "pictorial" elements, specifically its design and colour harmonies. Similarly, Whistler, by downplaying subject matter in favour of colour harmonies, creates art which has, as Wilde states in "House Decoration," "no extensive intellectual scheme to trouble you, and no metaphysics of which we have had quite enough in art" (166). Indeed, Whistler's paintings, especially "Nocturne in Blue and Gold," were influenced by Hiroshige's emphasis on colour (Zatlin 37). As Linda Merrill has noted, Japanese prints intrigued Whistler because they were "free from [the] literary and historical associations" which dominated Victorian painting and they "exhibited an abstract elegance agreeably foreign to the prevailing [narrative-oriented] pictorial style" (25). Japanese art, for Whistler and Wilde, aimed at a purely aesthetic

effect and thus the prints achieved what other art, hampered by narratives and moral messages, could not. For the British aesthetes, Japanese prints freed up the mind and let the viewer focus on the sensory, thus providing a heightened aesthetic experience.

Both Whistler's work and that of Japanese woodblock artists influenced the subversive illustrations of Aubrey Beardsley who, more than any other Western artist, appropriated aspects of the Japanese style to shock the Victorian public and challenge conventional morality, specifically the "cultural repression of lust" (Zatlin 175). Beardsley's highly stylized drawings, which are the culmination of Aestheticism, the premature apogee of Art Nouveau, and a visual manifestation of the uncertainties of the British *fin de siècle*, deliberately obfuscate meaning. Indeed, his provocative 1894 illustrations for Wilde's Salomé not only upstage Wilde's text of the play, but reject the traditional purpose of illustrative work by rendering the scenes they depict ambiguous. In "The Black Cape," for example, Beardsley depicts Salome cloaked in a highly stylized cape in a series of shapes which suggest so many possible associations, such as a phallus, a whale, and a fan, that the drawing mocks the notion of representation and courts abstraction (see appendix, fig. 7). Like Whistler, Beardsley focuses not on telling, or elucidating, a story, but rather on creating aesthetic, or as Wilde would have it, "sensuous," effects through formal design elements.

Working in pen and ink, Beardsley explored the possibilities of, as he wrote in an 1891 letter, "the harmony in *line*" (32). His evocative use of line suggests not only the languid decadence of the *fin de siècle*, but also an awareness and critique of the effects of Victorian conformity on the individual. In "The Eyes of Herod," an illustration for Wilde's play, Beardsley depicts Salome's body and Herod's head, which is reputed to be a caricature of Wilde, by borrowing the Japanese technique of

using long, thin lines to depict ghosts (see appendix, fig. 8). He then echoes these long, sinuous lines in the candles, flames, and peacock's neck (Zatlin 155), thus suggesting that Salome and Herod are shaped, literally and metaphorically, by their environment. At the same time, the stylistic similarities between the figures, the candle, and the peacock assert the importance of a purely visual engagement with the drawing. Like Whistler's, Beardsley's art stresses the sensory, or sensuous, in a society in which the aesthetic experience provoked by art was only trusted if the artwork presented a moral message. Indeed, in Modern Painters, Ruskin asserts that beauty in art is more than merely an evocation of the sensory; it is the expression of higher truths. As he writes, "ideas of beauty [...] are the subjects of moral [...] perception" (6. 70). Clearly, Whistler's and Beardsley's work was at odds with a historical moment dominated by narrative-oriented art and didactic art criticism.

In "House Decoration," Wilde asserts that an "appreciation of art is not secured by any elaborate scheme of learning" (167). Similarly, in "The English Renaissance," he states that artworks, in their material and pictorial aspects, are "entirely satisfying to the poetic sense and not needing for their aesthetic effect any lofty intellectual vision" (125). By privileging art which, above all, incites a sensuous response, Wilde acknowledges and critiques the prevailing tendency of art critics to downplay the sensory. Indeed, in "The English Renaissance," he critiques the fact that "art has been defined as an escape from the tyranny of the senses" (18). As the narrator of The Picture of Dorian Gray observes, "the worship of the senses has often, and with much justice, been decried, men feeling a natural instinct of terror about passions and sensations that seem stronger than themselves" (91). Reversing the Victorian valorization of the intellect over the sensory, Lord Henry states that "the senses could

refine, and the intellect could degrade" (43). So as to elevate the status, and thus foster acceptance, of an intense sensory experience, Wilde sets up parallels between art and what was considered the ultimate expressive medium, music. Furthermore, by associating art with music, a medium which achieves its effects through form alone, Wilde not only stresses the sensory, but also rejects narrative-oriented art and favourably alludes to nonrepresentational, abstract art.[17]

Art has often been described as an attempt to achieve music's perfect fusion of form and content. More than any other late-nineteenth century painter, Whistler conceived of art in musical terms. He entitled his paintings "Symphony," "Arrangement," or, alluding to Chopin's piano pieces, "Nocturne." In comparing his works to musical compositions, Whistler does not simply align art, through words, to music; the titles are appropriate since they call attention to his own interest in fusing form and content. For Whistler, form is content in that his paintings take formal elements, specifically colour harmonies, as their subject. In an article in the *World* dated 22 May 1878, Whistler writes that "as music is the poetry of sound, so is painting the poetry of sight [...]. Art should be independent of all claptrap- should stand alone, and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear" (cited in Beckson 259). Associating the process of creating art with the composition of music, Whistler states that "nature contains the elements, in colour and form, of all pictures, as the keyboard contains the notes of all music. But the artist is born to pick, and choose, and group with science, these elements, that the result may be beautiful- as the musician gathers his notes, and forms his chords, until he brings forth from chaos glorious harmony" (cited in Kleiner 993).

Influenced by Whistler, Wilde aligns art with music in each of his North American lectures. In "Art and the Handicraftsman," Wilde compares a completed work of art to a musical composition. He states that "from a good piece of design you can take away nothing, nor can you add anything to it, each little bit of design being as absolutely necessary and as vitally important to the whole effect as a note or chord of music is for a sonata of Beethoven" (180). In "The House Beautiful," he asserts that "colours resemble musical notes; a single false colour or false note destroys the whole" (405). Discussing Whistler's "Symphony in White," Wilde says, in "House Decoration," that the "colour strike[s] the right keynote" (166). In "The English Renaissance," he notes that certain artists produce art which creates delight "like that given to us by music- for music is the art in which form and matter are always one, the art whose subject cannot be separated from the method of its expression, the art which most completely realizes the artistic ideal" (136). Here, Wilde echoes, among others, Walter Pater who writes in The Renaissance that "all art constantly aspires toward the condition of music" (140). Pater further stresses the point in Appreciations (1889), in which he states that music is the "ideal of all art" because "in music it is impossible to distinguish the form from the substance or matter, the subject from the expression" (37-38).

Although writers and artists have long bridged the perceived hierarchical gap between art and music by discussing the parallels between the two mediums, as the art historian Linda Merrill notes in her study of the 1878 Whistler v. Ruskin trial, "because of a general preference for the written word [in Victorian England], much visual art of the period aspired to the condition of literature" (231). The tendency to create art which aspired to literature manifested itself in two ways: in Realist art and in

the fanciful art of the Pre-Raphaelites. Realist artists, like Realist novelists, sought to faithfully render scenes from everyday life and often presented a moral or socially-conscious narrative, such as Hubert von Herkomer's "On Strike" (1891) which aims to depict the dignity and hardship of the working-class (see appendix, fig. 9).[18] The members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, on the other hand, such as D.G. Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones, reacted against the style and content of Realism by creating fanciful, but nevertheless narrative-oriented, paintings illustrating scenes from literature and myth. For example, Burne-Jones's "King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid" (1884) was inspired by Tennyson's 1842 poem by the same name (Kleiner 977, see appendix, fig. 10).

Whistler and Wilde, in comparing art to the abstraction of music, reject narrative-oriented, representational art. Merrill suggests that Whistler, in giving his paintings titles taken from music, "foil[s] the English habit of taking paintings literally" (25). As she notes, in the nineteenth century there was no term for describing nonrepresentational art; by focusing on the form, or style, of a work of art, particularly its colour, and by comparing art to music, Whistler "defines abstraction without naming it" (6).

The undefined, ambiguous quality of Whistler's "Nocturne in Black and Gold" was precisely what Ruskin criticized by describing Whistler's technique as "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face" (cited in Merrill 9). In Modern Painters, Ruskin writes that "all great drawing is distinct drawing; for truths which are rendered indistinctly might [...] as well not be rendered at all" (3. 60).[19] Moreover, he asserts that "the first thing to be looked for as a sign of noble art is a clear consciousness of what is drawn and what is not; [...] all haste, slurring, obscurity, indecision, are signs

of low art, and all calmness, distinctness, luminousness, and positiveness, of high art" (3. 61). Reviews of Whistler's "Nocturne," in keeping with Ruskin's artistic principles and his dislike of Whistler's work, critiqued the painting's vague quality.[20] A reviewer in *Punch* described the work as "above, all fog; below, all inky flood; For subject- it had none" (cited in Merrill 36). Similarly, an unsigned article in *The Daily News* noted, with either real or feigned indignation, that "the spectator feels inclined to cry anxiously, 'Where is the baby?' for babies and cradles are but inadequately represented at the Grosvenor Galley. This is not as it should be; this is not in accordance with the practice of the Royal Academy and with the tradition of British art" (36).

In their writings on art, both Ruskin and Wilde stress the importance of form, or style. However, while Wilde asserts, through Gilbert in "The Critic as Artist," that "Form is everything. It *is* the secret of life" (865, italics mine), Ruskin asserts, as we have seen in his work on Turner, that, through form, a painting instructs the viewer toward noble, universal truths. Moreover, Ruskin's distaste for Whistler's impressionistic painting emphasizes that, for Victorian England's most revered art critic and consequently for art viewers intent on expressing the 'correct' aesthetic opinion, style meant "distinctness" (3. 61), that is to say representational art. As a reaction against Ruskinian artistic principles, Wilde's lectures, in their alignment of art with music, celebrate the sensually evocative quality of Whistler's avant-garde technique and incite viewers to redefine their notion of style, or form, to include nonrepresentational art. As the *fin de siècle* made way for the increasingly experimental art of the early twentieth century, British aesthetic theorists, such as Roger Fry and Clive Bell, taking a cue from Wilde and Whistler, also articulated art's

evocative effects by referencing music. For example, Roger Fry aligns nonrepresentational art and its visceral effects with music which "of all the arts supplies the strongest stimulus to the imaginative life and at the same time has the least power in controlling its direction" (80).

Echoing the musical analogies developed in his lectures, Wilde asserts, in "The Soul of Man," that "form and substance cannot be separated in a work of art; they are always one" (911). As a reaction against the late nineteenth-century emphasis on Ruskinian art criticism, Wilde proposes that style is substance. Creating an impressionistic, non strictly representational painterly style, as Whistler did, is a critical gesture in a historical moment focused on representational, narrative-oriented, didactic art. Wilde recognized the rebellious nature of Whistler's style as his painting's substance. Moreover, as Wilde sees it, form and substance are one because the formal elements of art, such as colour harmonies and line, evoke in the viewer a visceral appreciation of the beauty of colour and design. This aesthetic, or sensuous, appreciation of beauty is art's substance. In "The English Renaissance," Wilde states that "the good we get from art is not what we learn from it; it is what we become through it. Its real influence will be in giving the mind enthusiasm, [...] accustoming it to demand from art all that art can do in rearranging the facts of common life for us, [and] accustoming it to love the things of the imagination for their own sake" (150). Wilde suggests that art does not simply offer individuals an escape from current realities but also inspires them to bring about an alternative reality.

As chief exponents of the Aesthetic Movement, Ruskin, Morris, and Wilde all assert that art can positively influence an individual. However, Ruskin and Morris assert the influence of art by working within the constructs of Victorian society. They

stress that art positively influences one's moral character by conveying moral messages. As Linda Merrill notes, Ruskin, especially, "taught the public that pictures were to be valued according to 'the clearness and justice of the ideas conveyed'" (229). In contrast, Wilde criticizes art which imposes moral messages, or truths, on viewers, as well as art criticism which scripts art into this didactic role. Instead, Wilde acknowledges art's ability to influence our visual and psychological perception of reality. For Wilde, unconventional art, such as Whistler's paintings, rejects the status quo and fosters new modes of seeing and being which are not imposed on the viewer but which instead develop in viewers who have allowed themselves to be receptive, or aesthetically sensitive, to an artwork's formal design elements.

Wilde's aesthetic philosophy privileges an instinctive, sensory-oriented aesthetic experience ideally brought about by a nonrepresentational artistic style. Wilde thus presents an alternative to his society's Ruskinian approach to creating and viewing art. In urging his audiences and readers to question their aesthetic sensibilities, Wilde lays the groundwork for an acceptance of Modern art and, as we will see, he promotes an atmosphere focused less on preserving conventional morality and more on suggesting an alternative moral vision based on compassion rather than the Victorian notion of punishment.

"Art might make men such brothers": Art and compassion

Wilde's first two lectures, "The English Renaissance" and "House Decoration," both delivered early in 1882, echo Ruskin and Morris in earnestly addressing the morally beneficial aspects of art. However, unlike Ruskin, Wilde does not suggest that art should present a moral message. Instead, he expresses the

Morrisian idea that art, in making viewers sensitive to beauty, will make them more peaceful and compassionate. As we have seen, in "The English Renaissance," Wilde states that art can "make men such brothers that they would not go out to slay one another for the whim or folly of some king or minister" (144). However, he also states in the same lecture that "in its primary aspects a painting has no more spiritual message or meaning than an exquisite fragment of Venetian glass or a blue tile from the wall of Damascus: it is a beautifully coloured surface, nothing more" (134). The two statements are not at odds because, for Wilde, art is not created in order to foster compassion; compassion is instead the positive result of being receptive to the beauty of line and colour.

Compassion, as Wilde sees it, is not a moral quality which art should teach the viewer, but rather the natural result of being sensitive to beauty in art. In "The English Renaissance," Wilde states that "the flawless beauty and perfect form" of an artwork is itself "the social idea, being the meaning of joy in art" (133). By bringing joy to viewers, art makes them less likely to be hostile, cruel, or unsympathetic. In concluding "House Decoration," Wilde states, "the boy who sees the thing of beauty which a bird on the wing becomes when transferred to wood or canvas will probably not throw the customary stone" (171).

By asserting that individuals who are sensitive to art, who have an aesthetic sense, will be gentle and compassionate, Wilde's lectures foreshadow "The Soul of Man" and "De Profundis," both of which, in different ways, align aesthetic sensitivity and the figure of Christ. In "The Soul of Man," Wilde compares medieval and Renaissance paintings of Christ and asserts that medieval artists, in their stark yet beautiful depictions, present us with Christ as a "beggar with a marvelous soul" (921).

Implicit in Wilde's commentary is the notion that medieval religious art, by depicting Christ so as to evoke a visceral response in the viewer, emphasizes Christ's compassion and incites the viewer's compassion toward him. In "De Profundis," Wilde argues that the artist is a society's truly compassionate figure. He considers Christ as an artist-figure, who, in suggesting that "people should live flower-like lives" (944), displays an aesthetic sensibility. Wilde asserts that Christ's "morality is all sympathy, just what morality should be" (945). His emphasis on sympathy echoes his assertion, in "Soul of Man" that "as one reads history [...] one is absolutely sickened, not by the crime the wicked have committed, but by the punishments that the good have inflicted. [...] When there is no punishment at all, crime will either cease to exist, or, if it occurs, will be treated [...] with care and kindness" (906). In "De Profundis" and "Soul of Man," as in his social comedies, Wilde implies that his own society does not practice what it preaches: despite lip service paid to Christian virtues such as kindness, tolerance, and forgiveness, the Church, state, and society place emphasis on punishment rather than compassion.

As Mrs. Cheveley states in An Ideal Husband, "nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, everyone has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues- and what is the result? You all go over like ninepins- one after the other. Not a year passes in England without someone disappearing. Scandals used to lend charm, or at least interest, to a man- now they crush him" (486).[21] Her statement not only suggests that morality is a trend, and therefore relative rather than absolute, but that Victorian values, such as fidelity and sincerity, are so idealized and unyielding that they produce an array of fallen men and women.[22] Wilde's emphasis on compassion and Mrs. Cheveley's observation that

rigid Victorian values cause England's many public scandals are quite topical. The 1890 O'Shea divorce case featuring Charles Stewart Parnell, a well-respected politician and advocate of Irish nationalism (Boyce 288), foregrounded the issue of compassion, and specifically forgiveness, in the consciousness of the British public. While on trial for adultery, Parnell "challenged conventional morality, demanding that one aspect of a man's character guarantee forgiveness for another" (Hollander 449). In so doing, he asked the public to reconsider not the severity of his crime, but the severity of social and state punishment. Indeed, Parnell's statements at trial foreshadow not only Wilde's speeches during his own trial, but his emphasis on Christ-like compassion in "De Profundis."

Although Wilde critiques Victorian morality by focusing, in his essays, on Christ's compassion, in his novel and plays his witticisms are often at the expense of religion. For example, in The Picture of Dorian Gray, Lord Henry observes that "the terror of society, which is the basis of morals, and the terror of God, which is the secret of religion- these are the things that govern us" (16). However, Wilde's critique of religious mores is not at odds with his conception of Christ in his aesthetic writings. Wilde presents Christ as the supreme artist figure, existing apart from any religious doctrines. In "De Profundis," he writes that Christ "would not hear of life being sacrificed to any system of thought or morals [...], he preached the enormous importance of living completely for the moment [and...] that every moment should be beautiful" (956). Wilde appropriates Christ as the ultimate aesthete, one whose love of the subjective, unrestrained nature of aesthetic experience prompts his rejection of social and religious doctrines such as restrictive codes of conduct and uncompromising notions of morality.

As a result of Wilde's exaltation of beauty, contemporary newspaper reporters often facetiously described the Aesthetic Movement as a "Religion of Beauty" in which Wilde, "the apostle," spread the "gospel" of the "prophets" Ruskin and Morris (cited in Mikhail 67, 86). The popular references to Aestheticism as a religion perhaps betray anxieties that the movement was replacing religion in certain circles. As Linda Dowling has noted, the Grosvenor Gallery opened on Sunday afternoons, thus inviting the public to view art rather than attend church (34). Although Wilde does not refer to Aestheticism in religious terms, his criticism of organized religion and his belief that aesthetic sensitivity fosters compassion suggest that art, for him, acts as the catalyst for an alternative moral vision. As we have seen, Wilde stresses the sensory aspect of aesthetic experience and rejects not only intellectualized approaches to viewing art, but metaphysical ones as well. Art, for Wilde, does not become a religion or a vague source of spirituality; instead, it specifically promotes aesthetic sensitivity which in turn fosters increased sensitivity, or compassion, in the social realm.

Nevertheless, in his writing, Wilde displays an affinity for religious symbolism, an affinity shared by *fin-de-siècle* Decadent writers such as Ernest Dowson, John Gray, and Lionel Johnson who, like Wilde, converted to Roman Catholicism. In keeping with his interest in painterly colour, Wilde's writing is pervaded by references to the colour purple. Wilde's purple imagery captures his dandies, and his own, receptiveness to beauty. Moreover, he often includes purple in phrases which reflect his belief that aesthetic sensitivity can lead to a greater capacity of feeling. In The Picture of Dorian Gray, rooms are decorated with "purple-lipped irises" (56), Dorian covers his portrait with a "purple hanging" (153), chimney smoke curls in a "violent riband" (64), and Lord Henry tells Dorian he "once wore nothing

but violets all season, as a form of artistic mourning for a romance that would not die" (72). In concluding "The Critic as Artist," Wilde has the character of Gilbert note that "a faint purple mist hangs over the park, and the shadows of the white houses are purple" (872). In "De Profundis," Wilde considers sorrow or suffering to be the "purple thread [that] runs through the texture of Dorian Gray" (936) and ends his letter by celebrating purple in the visual world: "I tremble with pleasure when I think that on the very day of my leaving prison both the laburnum and the lilac will be blooming in the gardens" (954).

Purple often connotes religion, luxury, death, and love (de Vries 375). As Wilde would certainly have known, for the ancient Greeks, purple denoted luxury in clothing as well as love; Hera and Dionysius are described wearing purple robes, as are Eros, Circe, and Aphrodite. In the Hebrew tradition, purple is associated with cult objects, such as the veil of the tabernacle (de Vries 375). In Roman Catholicism, purple is the colour of martyrs as well as the colour worn during funerals and Lent. Derived from the murex shell, purple was one of the first colours produced (375). As one of the oldest colours, it is suggestive of something past its prime; thus while yellow was the colour associated with the 1890s, purple is an equally appropriate colour choice for the *fin de siècle*, and specifically for its Decadent Movement, of which Wilde's novel, in its fascination with artifice and decay, is an integral part.[23]

As Lord Henry, Gilbert, and Wilde's persona in "De Profundis" suggest in their references to purple, in Wilde's *oeuvre*, the colour connotes, above all, a strong aesthetic disposition and a propensity of feeling, two of the key qualities of Wilde's dandies. In his essays and dialogues on aesthetics, as well as in his novel, Wilde distances himself from the emphasis on compassion he expressed in his lectures. For

example, Lord Henry quips that "one can always be kind to people about whom one cares nothing" (70). However, his statement is made in the context of discussing a love affair, or lack thereof, rather than issues of inequality, punishment, and judgment. While Lord Henry's sensitivity or compassion towards others often remains difficult to pinpoint, the dandies in Wilde's social comedies are prime examples of Wilde's assertion, in his lectures, that an appreciation of beauty fosters an increased sense of compassion. As even a cursory reading of the plays suggest, it is precisely the dandies' responsiveness to beauty, and by extension, their sensitivity toward sorrow and suffering that gives rise to the necessity for adopting their notoriously flippant personas.

Wilde's stage dandies counter the assumption that wit implies a lack of sympathy. Through their wit, Lords Darlington, Illingworth, and Goring express their depth of feeling, and of fellow feeling. Their quips often highlight the fact that their aesthetic disposition makes them more compassionate and sensitive. In Lady Windermere's Fan, Lord Darlington states: "we are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars" (399). Dumby writes off Darlington's comment as being "very romantic" (399), thus failing to acknowledge that, through his whimsical quip, Darlington suggests that an aesthetic disposition helps mitigate melancholy. Furthermore, Darlington's witticisms often advocate a society based on compassion rather than judgment and punishment. He challenges Lady Windermere's adherence to a code of moral absolutes by discarding the categories she initially seeks to maintain. He tells her, "It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious" (370), and adds, "I think life too complex a thing to be settled by hard and fast rules" (370). Similarly, in A Woman of No Importance, Lord

Illingworth, who mocks conventional notions of sincerity and seriousness, asserts that "intellectual generalities are always interesting, but generalities in morals mean absolutely nothing" (442). Clearly, unwavering moral categories are being criticized by characters known, above all, for their appreciation of beauty. The implication is that individuals who have a well-developed aesthetic sensibility and a heightened awareness of their visual surroundings will also be more perceptive of the social, cultural, and political climate they inhabit.

Lord Goring, in An Ideal Husband, proves himself to be the foremost compassionate dandy. Urging Lady Chiltern to soften her strict moral views, he tells her "All I do know is that life cannot be understood without much charity, cannot be lived without much charity. It is love, and not German philosophy, that is the true explanation of this world" (502). As Anne Varty states, "Wilde refashions New Testament philosophy to make it an appropriate instrument for the dandy. In 'The Soul of Man' he had represented Christ as a dandy [...]. In An Ideal Husband, he represents the dandy as Christ, at the heart of whose preaching is forgiveness and moral generosity [...]. With it will come freedom from hypocrisy [and...] freedom from double moral standards" (188).[24] Lord Goring convinces Lady Chiltern to forgive her husband by stating that "a woman who can keep a man's love, and love him in return, has done all the world wants of women" (539). In voicing this traditional view, Lord Goring expresses what he knows is the role Lady Chiltern envisions for herself. His sensitivity to the specifics of a situation presents an alternative to Baudelaire's notion of the dandy as a figure who keeps his depth to himself as a reaction against a vulgar and mediocre society. The compassionate morality and sensitivity of Lords Darlington, Illingworth, and Goring are not

aberrations, but rather active aspects of their dandiacal character. Through his lectures, and through the characters of his dandies, Wilde asserts that sensitivity to beauty, and especially to the formal elements of design, fosters compassion; aesthetic awareness can engender social awareness, specifically dissatisfaction with the Victorian emphasis on punishment and judgment.

Chapter Three

"The heroic cannot be the common": Expressing dissent through dress

"Fashion is what one wears oneself"

In two of his 1882 lectures, "House Decoration" and "The House Beautiful," Wilde follows his comments on art with a detailed discussion of clothing, or "dress."[25] Indeed, he often devotes the same degree of interest and attention to clothes that he directs toward painting. As we have seen, in his comments on painting, Wilde rejects strictly narrative-oriented art and primes his late Victorian audience for abstraction in art. Moreover, he embraces the notion that art can change the way we perceive and engage in life, arguing that an artwork's formal elements, namely line and colour, can foster compassion simply by making a viewer sensitive to beauty. Wilde's work on dress also promotes social change: his writing presents clothing, like painting, as having the potential to highlight and challenge the status quo.

However, while painting can affect viewers by developing within them an aesthetic sensitivity which, in turn, can lead them to favour an alternative moral vision based on compassion, clothing in Wilde's writing attempts to influence viewers by urging them to question, more broadly, their tendency to conform to societal conventions. As we will see, the unique sartorial details with which Wilde's male dandies adorn themselves and the sartorial choices made by his female dandies, notably Mrs. Erlynne, express their individuality and critique the conservative values signaled by conventional clothing. Similarly, Wilde's proposed dress reforms for women reject the conventions of fashion in favour of clothing which functions as a

visual sign of dissent. In his lectures and open letters, Wilde urges women to dress more comfortably so as to express their dissatisfaction with physically restrictive fashion and the anti-suffrage arguments perpetuated by restrictive corsets.

Long before it became a cliché, Wilde realized that the clothing we choose to wear functions as a visual sign of the personas we choose to put forth. In this, Wilde's work does not imply that identity is created through clothing. Instead, he maintains that clothing, by helping us accentuate the identities we display at a given time, allows us to express ourselves more fully. Wilde considers displaying different personas not an act of dissimulation, but rather the expression of one's individuality. Indeed, throughout his writing, Wilde rejects the notion that to "be thyself," (903), as he defines individuality in "Soul of Man," requires being consistent in character and views. In "The Decay of Lying," for example, Vivian states: "Who wants to be consistent? The dullard and the doctrinaire" (778). Wilde acknowledges that the self is not stagnant but often mercurial; to remain consistent is to deny aspects of one's character. Through his work on clothing, Wilde suggests that one of the hallmarks of individualism is the decision to publicly express the shifting aspects of one's character and thus trouble stereotypes.[26]

In Wilde's work on dress, agency resides in the wearer: carefully chosen clothing signals the power we have to express and transform ourselves. The clothing we wear thus functions as costume. As the editor of *The Woman's World*, Wilde often blurred the boundaries between clothing and costume: in the magazine's January 1888 edition, illustrations of the actress Sarah Bernhardt dressed as Tosca comprised the fashion pages, thus "emphasizing the theatricality of dress" (Varty 50). In his treatise on stage costumes, "The Truth of Masks" (1885, 1891), Wilde discusses "how

important costume is as a means of producing certain dramatic effects" (876).[27] In his society comedies, Wilde's male and female dandies also celebrate the theatrical or performative possibilities afforded by clothing. Mrs. Erlynne, the well-dressed adventuress with "at least a dozen" (372) pasts flippantly asserts, in Wilde's Lady Windermere's Fan: "if a woman really repents, she has to go to a bad dressmaker, otherwise no one believes in her" (407). Her statement succinctly acknowledges that our sartorial choices are powerful visual signs of our conformity or our dissent.

Along with the expressive possibilities afforded by clothing, whether on stage or in life, the importance of details recurs as a central issue in both Wilde's essay on costume and his work on clothing. In "The Truth of Masks," Wilde praises what he considers to be Shakespeare's historically accurate use of sartorial details, arguing that "perfect accuracy of detail, for the sake of perfect illusion, is necessary" (888). As Anne Varty notes, Wilde knew that only through the meticulous use of details in costume and stage sets could a playwright "have an opportunity to be [...] 'a critic of the age'" (70). Indeed, Wilde often oversaw the creation of accurate contemporary costumes (Gere 25) and sets (Kaplan and Stowell 27) for his own satirical society comedies.

However, details, for Wilde, do not simply serve purposes of accuracy. He notes in "The Truth of Masks" that "even small details of dress [...] become in Shakespeare's hands points of actual dramatic importance, [...] a method of expressing [...] the character of a person on his entrance" (876-877). In a letter to the editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, published 2 February 1891, Wilde further develops links between sartorial details and personality. He praises the details of the costume worn by Charles Wyndham in Dion Boucicault's play London Assurance. Writing

appreciatively of the coat's buttons and unique, though not cited, colour, Wilde considers the costume a welcome alternative to "the uniform black that is worn now" (465). Aligning unique sartorial details with individualism, Wilde states that "its charm resides in the fact that the choice of the colour of the coat is left to the taste and fancy and inclination of the wearer. Freedom in such selection of colour is a necessary condition of variety and individualism of costume" (465).

Wilde's plays, written a few years later, also encourage the expression of individuality through the use of unique accessories. Sartorial details such as waistcoats and buttonholes, that is to say flowers in coat lapels, creatively distinguish Wildean dandies from other well-dressed gentlemen. Lord Goring, noting he is "the only person [...] in London at present who wears a buttonhole" (513), states: "fashion is what one wears oneself. What is unfashionable is what other people wear" (513). His statement wittily inverts the standard definition of fashion. As Neil Sammells notes, "for the dandy, 'fashion' embodies the opposite of the conformism it entails for others" (101). Through tongue-in-cheek irony, Goring rejects the notion of fashion as a popular trend and instead defines fashion as the visual expression of one's audacity and individuality.

Individualism, as Wilde asserts in "The Soul of Man," is a "disturbing and disintegrating force" (909) which, in countering "monotony of type, slavery of custom, and tyranny of habit" (909), can lead to social change. Jonathan Dollimore, quoting in part from "Soul of Man," has noted that in Wilde's writing, individualism has "a dynamic social potential, one which implies a radical possibility of freedom 'latent and potential in mankind in general'" (51). Through their clothing, Wilde's characters assert their individuality and thus implicitly question the types, customs,

and habits of their Victorian society. Lord Goring adds unusual buttonholes to his otherwise conventional attire. Mrs. Erlynne wears beautiful, stylish clothes in defiance of her social status as a 'fallen woman' who is expected to wear either somberly repentant or inappropriately outlandish clothes. Both Lord Goring and Mrs. Erlynne's styles of dress assert their individualism and function as acts of disobedience. Indeed, in "Soul of Man" Wilde aligns individualism and dissent. He describes individualists as "agitators" (900) and asserts that "disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man's original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and rebellion" (899).

Foreshadowing his work on individualism in "Soul of Man," Wilde concludes his "Art and the Handicraftsman" lecture by urging his audience to "congratulate yourself if you have done something strange and extravagant and broken the monotony of a decorous age" (195). In his writing, Wilde argues that the rejection of conventional dress can break precisely such monotony. As such, his work on clothing implies that the decorative can be political: unconventional clothes act as a tool for dissent and reform. Similarly, in his lectures, Wilde's suggestions for dress reform, for men and women, place primacy on both beauty and functionality. His editorial essays for *Woman's World*, as well as his letters of the period, argue for practical yet beautiful alternatives to the restrictive clothing worn by late-nineteenth-century women. For example, in a letter to the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, published on 14 October 1884, Wilde comments on the "ungainly and uncomfortable articles of dress" worn by women, such as corsets and high heels, and suggests alternatives so that "the body is free and unconfined for respiration and motion, there is more health, and consequently more beauty" (233).

By suggesting physically liberating alternatives to conventional clothing, Wilde puts into practice his notion that the decorative arts, which for him include dress, can foster social change. In a historical moment in which clothes were markers of gender restrictions and class divisions, Wilde's theoretical and practical writings on dress assert that freedom can be achieved through the development of personal style and physically liberating reforms in dress. As we will see, in his lectures, letters, and plays, Wilde presents the creative use of clothing as a vehicle for expressing dissatisfaction with societal assumptions. Secondly, in his letters and editorial writings, Wilde expresses his suggestions for dress reform as an act of collective dissent much like he champions personal style as an individual act of dissent. Taken together, Wilde's work on the implications of unique sartorial details and his practical work on dress reform suggest clothing can alleviate late nineteenth-century social and physical conformity.

"It is the exquisites who are going to rule": Sartorial details and individualism

Wilde's own use of theatrical clothing to shape his public persona, and thus establish his fame, has been well documented. Fashioning himself as a dandy, Wilde sported long hair and eccentric clothes while at Oxford. Once in London, he attended an exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery in a coat cut to resemble a cello (Merrill 9). In alluding to music, Wilde's coat was perhaps a sign of his developing belief that avant-garde art should court the abstraction of music. Most certainly, in making him the talk of London society, the cello-shaped coat was a sign of Wilde's already well-developed awareness of the relationship between clothing and power. Through dress, Wilde presented himself as a spectacle. As Michel Foucault has argued, and as Judith Mayne

succinctly states, the term 'spectacle' is "fairly straightforward in its designation of subject/object relationships, defining the object of the look as possessed and controlled by the subject of the look" (cited in Barlowe 51). However, by choosing to dress unconventionally, Wilde is not possessed and controlled by the subject of the look, the public, but rather he possesses and controls the public by directing their visual attention.[28]

Recognizing the continued importance of dressing flamboyantly in order to attract and maintain public interest, Wilde carefully selected his lecturing attire for his 1882 North American tour. Dressed in knee-breeches and velvet coats, Wilde fascinated his audience and attracted the attention of the press (see appendix, fig. 11). In a letter to his manager, Colonel Morse, dated 26 February 1882 from St. Louis, Missouri, Wilde provides detailed instructions on desired additions to his lecturing costume. He writes "will you kindly go to a good costumier (theatrical) for me and get [...] two coats [...]. They should be beautiful; tight velvet doublet, with large flowered sleeves and little ruffs of cambric [he provides a sketch]. Any good costumier would know what I want- sort of Francis I dress: only knee-breeches instead of long hose. [...] They will excite a great sensation. [...] They were dreadfully disappointed at Cincinnati at my not wearing knee-breeches" (141). Clearly, Wilde knew that clothing which shaped one's public image was a form of costume; his choice of clothing was integral to the success of his lecture tour since the clothes he wore influenced public reception. However, rather than the fanciful clothing he wore while lecturing, Wilde's lectures advocate beautiful, often theatrical, but also practical, reforms in dress, such as the widespread adoption of the cloaks worn by American miners. Wilde's own costume was therefore not worn to be taken up as popular

fashion; it was instead an individual statement of his own taste as well as a strategy to attract audiences.

In Degeneration (1892), Max Nordau attacked the *fin-de-siècle* aesthetes, asserting that when "Oscar Wilde goes about in 'aesthetic costume' among gazing Philistines, exciting either their ridicule or their wrath, it is no indication of independence of character, but rather [...] a purely anti-social, ego-maniacal recklessness and hysterical longing to make a sensation" (319). Unlike his detractors, Wilde understood the importance of making a sensation. Wilde knew reporters would publish, and often ridicule, the details of his eccentric outfits, word of mouth would spread, and his lectures would attract larger crowds, thus bringing to a greater audience his views on the ability of the decorative arts to foster social change.

Wilde's costume helped create an audience for his lectures and undoubtedly served to promote both his public persona as the ultimate aesthete as well as Gilbert and Sullivan's Patience. However, beyond its strategic importance, Wilde's costume also reflected his genuine interest in expressing dissatisfaction with sartorial conformity by dressing in unconventional colours, styles, and fabrics. His flamboyant attire was an assertion of individualism and an invitation for his audience, wearing nondescript styles and shades of grey and brown, to choose their own variation of what he described in "House Decoration" as "notable and joyous dress" (162).

In 1846, Baudelaire's essay "On the Heroism of Modern Life" famously celebrated black as the urban colour of choice. Influencing decades of aspiring aesthetes, Baudelaire asserted that the black suit of the "modern hero" was the "necessary garb of our suffering age" (195), an age of disillusionment and *ennui*. Rejecting Baudelaire's seminal essay by alluding to its title, Wilde states in "Art and

the Handicraftsman" that "the heroic cannot be the common nor the common the heroic" (195). In his essay, Baudelaire emphasizes that "the dress-coat and the frock-coat not only possess their political beauty, which is an expression of universal equality, but also their poetic beauty, which is an expression of the public soul. [...] We are each of us celebrating some funeral" (195). In contrast, Wilde notes, in "The House Beautiful," that "people should not mar beautiful surroundings by gloomy dress; dress nowadays is altogether too somber" (40).[29] He also critiques the frock-coat and waistcoat Baudelaire considered beautiful, humourously observing that modern sculptors have to unfortunately memorialize famous men wearing such items: "to see the frock-coat of the drawing-room done in bronze, or the double waistcoat perpetuated in marble, adds a new horror to death" (163).

Arguing for individuality, Wilde's lectures celebrate colour, reject the cut of conventional clothing, and assert that colourful, draped clothes bring the wearer a sense of pleasure and pride. In "House Decoration," Wilde states that "there would be more joy in life if we were to accustom ourselves to use all the beautiful colours we can in fashioning our own clothes" (162). In his lectures, and throughout his work on clothing, Wilde does not distinguish between classes when suggesting clothes should be more colourful and comfortable.[30] Given his interest in colour and drapery, men's wear receives the brunt of his criticism. Although Wilde's work on clothing elides class, in light of the fact that the men's wear of each socio-economic class was equally limited in its use of colour, his lecture implies that the clothing of upper, middle, and lower class men all suffers from monotony and a lack of individuality.

Stressing economy both in cost and in style, Wilde favours the cloak as "by far the most beautiful piece of drapery ever invented" (164). He argues for simple lines in

the clothing of men and women, stating in "The House Beautiful" that "when dress was most simple, it was most beautiful" (43). He praises "ancient Greek drapery" as well as "the dress of the time of Charles II," and, specifically for women, "the costumes of [early Renaissance] Venetian ladies" and the "graceful [...] style of dress painted by Reynolds and by Gainsborough" (43). Given his eccentric list of favourite drapery styles, it seems surprising that Wilde warns "there should be nothing outré in dress" (43). He also suggests that "a man or woman of taste can so conform their dress that it will not merit disapproval but receive the praise of those who have an artistic eye" (43). While these statements may initially seem conservative, they foreshadow his own, and his stage dandies,' preference for conventional suits paired with unconventional details. Original details and accessories which could be deemed "artistic" showcase the wearer's ability to be creative and original even when wearing conventional clothing.

Upon returning to London after his lecture tour, Wilde cut his hair short so as to imitate a Roman sculpture he admired in the Louvre, adopted more conventional suits, and limited his flamboyant taste in dress to exotic buttonholes such as dahlias and green carnations (Gere 97, see appendix, fig. 12). Wilde's deliberately sudden shift in style attracted immediate attention: *Punch* printed a spoof advertisement on 31 March 1883 announcing the sale of "the whole of the Stock-in-Trade, Appliances, and Inventions of a Successful Aesthete who is retiring from business" (155). As an act of self-promotion, Wilde's new, post-1882 look made headlines, thus successfully announcing his return to the London scene. More importantly, his decision to pair conventional suits with striking buttonholes would be the inspiration for his subtle critique of conventional dress in the society comedies he would write a decade later.

In his 1891 letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, in which he praises the unusual colour and details of the costume worn by Charles Wyndham, Wilde criticizes the monotonous black suit worn by men, but ultimately acknowledges its omnipresence and asserts the need to counter its conformist effect through unique details. Echoing the rejection of Baudelairean black he expressed his North American lectures, Wilde asserts the black suit is "dull and tedious and depressing" (465). He suggests that "the colour of the coat should be entirely for the good taste of the wearer to decide. This would give pleasure, and produce charming variety of colour effects in modern life" (465). However, characteristically seeing the world in painterly terms, and recalling his 1885 essay on costume, he acknowledges the value of the black suit at dinner-parties "where it serves to isolate and separate women's dresses, to frame them as it were" (465). Reflecting his post-1882 approach to countering conventional dress, Wilde states that "the little note of individualism that makes dress delightful can only be attained nowadays by the colour and treatment of the flower one wears" (465). Clearly, details, and specifically buttonholes, were now Wilde's favoured means of challenging conventions and asserting individuality.

For Wilde and his stage dandies, dissent resides in details. If Wilde had continued to wear his thoroughly unusual "Francis I" lecturing outfits and had chosen to style his dandies in a similar way, his critique of social conformity through sartorial attire would have been written off as the idiosyncratic view of an eccentric. Unique details paired with conventional suits, on the other hand, have a potentially unsettling effect. Unusual sartorial details signal that the wearers position themselves at a remove from social norms and conventions while a well-cut, conventional suit simultaneously signals their status within society. As Gary Schmidgall points out, the

Wildean dandy is a rebellious figure who works not from outside, but rather from within a society to invert its social norms (xvi). Indeed, Wilde's post-1882 attire and that of his dandies allows them to occupy the privileged position of being both within and apart from society. By visually expressing their distaste for conformity in the conformist atmosphere of an upper-class drawing room, Wilde and his dandies operate within a target audience.

Of all the male dandies in Wilde's plays, Lord Goring most aligns sartorial details with individuality. In the opening of the third act of An Ideal Husband (1895), he is in the process of changing his buttonhole for the second time that day. After noting that he is the only person in London currently wearing a buttonhole, and is therefore at the height of fashion, since "fashion is what one wears oneself" (512), he ponders his new buttonhole, ultimately telling his butler that the unnamed flower "makes me look a little too old [...] for the future a more trivial buttonhole, Phipps, on Thursday evenings" (514). Lord Goring recognizes that sartorial choices can be used to capture the mercurial quality of the self. As Elizabeth Hollander has noted, for Wilde's dandies, "the point is not that the self is grounded in artifice, but that it [...] changes [...] in the consciousness of other people as well as one's own self" (449). Buttonholes, for Lord Goring, function not as agents of deception, but rather as visual, public reflections of his current or desired state of mind.

Lord Goring's sartorial philosophy has its antecedent in Wilde's 1891 *Daily Telegraph* letter, in which Wilde declares "one will be able to discern a man's views of life by the colour he selects" and that "waistcoats will show whether a man can admire poetry or not" (466). Lord Goring's buttonhole dialogue, framed by a series of statements about relativism, such as "falsehoods [are] the truths of other people"

(519), also highlights and spoofs the key role sartorial details play in helping him adopt his various personas. Both Lord Goring and Wilde's letter humourously exaggerate Wilde's belief in, as he phrases it in his letter, the "psychological value" (466) of clothing. However, they also assert, without exaggeration, that an outfit functions as a series of signs through which viewers reach varying conclusions about the wearer's character, political leanings, and taste. Lord Goring's buttonhole comment and Wilde's letter imply that while the triviality of a buttonhole or the poetic nature of a waistcoat may not be immediately apparent or agreed upon, the public will immediately acknowledge unique sartorial details as statements of dissatisfaction with the ubiquitous black suit worn without decoration and, by extension, with the conventional politics and values signaled by such thoroughly conventional attire.

Lord Goring's musings on his need for a more trivial Thursday evening buttonhole enact Wilde's philosophy that we should "treat the serious things of life very trivially, and the trivial things of life very seriously" (Oxford notebooks, cited in Small 143). His buttonhole deliberations treat the seemingly trivial seriously; in so doing, they highlight the subversive intent informing ostensibly minor sartorial choices. Specifically, Lord Goring's buttonholes undermine the Victorian notion that men should be serious and practical both in dress and pursuits. As Joel Kaplan and Sheila Stowell have noted, "operating almost entirely through ties, waistcoats, and those all important buttonholes, Wilde's dandies [...] taunt his sober gentlemen with 'frivolous' options to late Victorian earnestness" (12). Soon after Lord Goring inserts the uninspiring buttonhole in his lapel, his father, Lord Caversham, arrives unexpectedly to have "a serious conversation" (515). Stating "I hate paradoxes" (514), Lord Goring's father epitomizes the "sober gentlemen" Kaplan and Stowell

refer to in passing. Upholding the Victorian notion of duty and the institution of marriage, he tells his son "it is your duty to get married. You can't always be living for pleasure. Every man of position is married nowadays" (515). Lord Goring's desire for a more trivial, youthful buttonhole seems especially propitious once the sensible and literal Lord Caversham enters the scene. A more trivial buttonhole would have served as a visual symbol of opposition to Lord Caversham's valorization of conformity: it would have reinforced Lord Goring's individualism, specifically his rejection of societal expectations and notions of success.

In A Woman of No Importance (1893), Lord Illingworth also addresses the importance of sartorial details, aligning a sense of style with independence. He quips that "people nowadays are so absolutely superficial that they don't understand the philosophy of the superficial. [...] Sentiment is all very well for the buttonhole. But the essential thing for a necktie is style. A well-tied tie is the first serious step in life" (446). Like Lord Goring, he considers ostensibly frivolous sartorial details markers of personality and dissent. Lord Illingworth deliberately rejects the conventional and clichéd milestones of independence and individuality, such as choosing a career and a spouse, and replaces them with the trivial, thus participating in Wilde's project of troubling Victorian notions of propriety and duty by blurring the boundaries between the conventionally 'trivial' and 'serious.' These boundaries are further blurred for readers who have both Illingworth's and Goring's dialogue at hand since Illingworth invokes the category of the serious rather than the trivial even though his reference to serious neckties and Goring's to trivial buttonholes make similar points.

Moments earlier in the scene, Lord Illingworth succinctly expresses what Lord Goring implies in his buttonhole scene. Illingworth tells Gerald, his son and foil, that

"the future belongs to the dandy. It is the exquisites who are going to rule" (446). Gerald has been raised by his mother, the penitent Mrs. Arbuthnot, who is obsessively proper so as to atone for the illegitimacy of her child. Along with the puritan Hester, Mrs. Arbuthnot argues for strict Victorian values such as punishment and an unwavering sense of duty.[31] As a product of his conventional upbringing, Gerald responds to Lord Illingworth by stating: "I have always been told that a man should not think so much about his clothes" (446), thus serving as a mouthpiece for the gender stereotype that clothing is a woman's domain and the related notion that clothes are inconsequential. These two views are precisely what Wilde and his dandies reject by adopting creative neckties and buttonholes as markers of individuality. To counter Gerald's commonly-held notions, Lord Illingworth opts to hyperbolically assert the importance of a stylishly-tied necktie. In the previous act, Lord Illingworth had stated: "discontent is the first step in the progress of a man or a nation" (443). Now, through his seemingly innocuous necktie quip, Lord Illingworth enacts his earlier statement: he expresses his discontent with monotonous men's wear and gender stereotypes. Putting into practice his "philosophy of the superficial" (446), he uses comments on dress to urge Gerald to question his staunch upbringing, thus highlighting the ability of clothing, and conversations on clothing, to foster a more open-minded, less judgmental society.

Like Lord Illingworth, Mrs. Erlynne in Lady Windermere's Fan (1892) uses clothing, and comments on clothing, to criticize her society's moral codes and insatiable appetite for scandal. We discover Mrs. Erlynne abandoned her daughter, Lady Windermere, for a life of adventure. Acknowledging the Victorian public's fascination with fallen women, Dumby refers to Mrs. Erlynne as an "*édition de luxe* of

a wicked French novel, meant specially for the English market" (384). Although the play's society ladies are unaware Mrs. Erlynne is Lady Windermere's mother, they do know "she is absolutely inadmissible into society" (372). When discussing Mrs. Erlynne's reputation as an adventuress, the Duchess of Berwick is especially incensed that "she dresses so well, too, which makes it much worse, sets such a dreadful example" (372). Indeed, characters presented as 'fallen women' were commonly described as wearing either inappropriately revealing or ostentatious clothing if they were still living a life of adventure, or, if they had reformed, somber dresses in unattractive styles (Kaplan and Stowell 17). By dressing Mrs. Erlynne elegantly, Wilde presents her as an individual rather than a type, thus rejecting prevalent literary and social stereotypes.

In the play's third act, Lady Windermere, convinced her husband is having an affair with Mrs. Erlynne, agrees, despite her earlier unwavering reproach for any breach of conventional morality, to run away with Lord Darlington who, in a case of opposites attracting, has professed his love to her. As the act's first scene begins, Lady Windermere waits for Lord Darlington in his rooms. Mrs. Erlynne, aware of the gossip and confusion, arrives to save her daughter's reputation as an irreproachable wife, a reputation she knows her daughter holds dear. Wilde's stage directions call attention to Lady Windermere's cloak, noting that she begins the scene without her cloak, then places it on her shoulders, and a few moments later removes it again. Although Wilde does not describe the cloak, the costumes worn by actresses on the opening night of his plays were meticulously discussed in anonymous reviews written for contemporary fashion magazines.[32] In the scene in Lord Darlington's rooms, both Marion Terry as Mrs. Erlynne and Lily Hanbury as Lady Windermere wear over their

ball gowns "a richly brocaded satin cloak lined with identical pink bengaline" (Kaplan and Stowell 17). Unlike the clothes expected of a 'fallen woman,' Mrs. Erlynne's cloak resembles, in every detail, the cloak worn by her virtuous daughter. Mrs. Erlynne keeps her cloak on throughout the scene; Lady Windermere, displaying anxiety, removes hers, as noted in the stage directions. As Joel Kaplan and Sheila Stowell point out, "Wilde's bare-armed and décolleté heroine confronts a villainess firmly wrapped in a garment of sound English manufacture" (17). After convincing Lady Windermere to return to her husband, Mrs. Erlynne asks "Where is your cloak? [...] Put it on." (396). Wilde's decision to include the reference suggests that the identical cloaks are indeed highly significant.

Since Lady Windermere's cloak is aligned with her return to her husband, the cloak suggests propriety and duty, qualities which have temporarily left her, as emphasized by her lack of a cloak, and which Mrs. Erlynne, wearing an identical cloak, reminds her she values. Countering expectations, Wilde presents Lady Windermere, the virtuous Victorian wife, in revealing attire and Mrs. Erlynne, the fallen women, in an elegant cloak which, in its proper, conservative style, troubles preconceptions about her status as a fallen woman. Once again, through clothes which signal sets of values, Wilde questions prevailing stereotypes of the 'virtuous' and 'fallen' woman, and thus the related moral categories of 'good' and 'evil,' suggesting each extreme reductive and uninteresting.

Mrs. Erlynne decides not to disclose her identity to her daughter so as not to shatter Lady Windermere's idealized image of her long-lost mother. So as to avoid having her good deed reduce her to another type, namely a villain with a heart, Mrs. Erlynne criticizes her society's superficial notion of atonement. She tells Lord

Windermere "I suppose you would like me to retire into a convent, or become a hospital nurse, [...] as people do in silly modern novels" (407). Verbally expressing what her elegant and fashionable outfits visually assert, she adds: "what consoles one nowadays is not repentance, but pleasure. Repentance is quite out of date. And besides, if a woman really repents, she has to go to a bad dressmaker, otherwise no one believes in her" (407). Refusing to dress the part of the reformed sinner, and thus refusing the role as well, Mrs. Erlynne leaves the scene with the play's eponymous fan. Inscribed with the name 'Margaret,' the fan refers to her as well as her daughter. Breathlessly described by costume reviewers as having "sixteen white ostrich feathers" (Kaplan and Stowell 19), and reproduced in contemporary fashion magazines, the fan, in Mrs. Erlynne's possession, comes to stand not for 'good' or bad' women, categories she rejects equally, but for mischief, compassion, resilience, and flair; in short, characteristics specific to her.

"How thoroughly practical all dreamers are": Wilde's dress reforms for women

Through dandies who ornament black suits and 'fallen women' who dress elegantly, Wilde presents individual expressions of dissatisfaction with the sartorial conventions which serve as visual codes for the conservative values of late nineteenth-century England. Wilde and his male and female dandies assert their anti-conformist nature through clothing; in so doing, they attempt to unsettle Victorian sensibilities. Indeed, as Wilde writes in his *Daily Telegraph* letter, "the English dislike individualism. Nothing but a resolution on the subject passed solemnly by the House of Commons will do with us" (466). As we have seen, asserting one's individualism as a reaction against conformity becomes, in much of Wilde's work, the central

purpose of dress. However, Wilde's interest in rejecting conformity also extends to the physical conformity of women's dress. In this, his views echo those of Mary Eliza Haweis, writing in the late 1870s, and those of E.M. Godwin, his friend and architect, both of whom educated the public on the health hazards of restrictive clothing.

Both Wilde's work on men's wear and his dress reforms for women attempt to counter societal assumptions regarding the defining characteristics of each gender. While sartorial details in men's wear reject the societal expectation that men be practical, Wilde's dress reforms for women attempt to counter the assumption that women are governed by the frivolous dictates of fashion. In his editorial column for *Woman's World* and his open letters to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, Wilde suggests women adopt looser, more comfortable clothing as a collective expression of dissatisfaction with the physical conformity of conventional fashions. Through well-developed writings on women's dress reform, Wilde displays his perceptive understanding of the cultural factors contributing to women's inequality and establishes himself as a vocal supporter of women's emancipation.

In The Art of Dress (1879), a popular manual for Victorian women, Mary Eliza Haweis devotes a chapter to "The Abuse of Dress." Considering the first rule of dress "that it shall not contradict the natural lines of the body" (32), she asserts that "comfort and health [...] are indispensable to beauty" (32). An accomplished artist, Haweis provides sketches comparing "the natural position of the organs" and the "fashionable position of the organs" (36, see appendix, fig. 13). In the 1850s, physicians incited controversy when they observed that corsets restricted the ribs, diaphragm, and lungs (Summers 59). Haweis revives the debate, urging her readers not to accept "fashions which displace bones and internal organs" (34). She notes that

restrictive clothes "are snapping the comfort of the present generation and the mental and physical wellbeing of the next one" (34), specifically arguing that "a pinched waist" and a "tortured head or foot" can cause "drink-madness, weak intellect, [and] bone disease" (35).

During his lecture tour, Wilde wrote his manager, in a letter dated March 1882, requesting Haweis's manual. Reinforcing Haweis's belief in the interrelationship of beauty and functionality, Wilde expresses his appreciation, in "House Decoration," for clothes which are "comfortable and therefore beautiful" (164). However, while Haweis decries excessively restrictive clothing, giving her chapter subtitles such as "Tight Lacing is Mischievous" and "Tight Lacing is Ugly," she nevertheless writes that "people who refuse to wear any corset at all look very slovenly" (35). Wilde, in contrast, argues for the widespread adoption of more drapery in women's dress since drapery affords comfort and its folds create beautiful lines. Moreover, in his "House Beautiful" lecture he states, unequivocally, that "nothing is beautiful, such as tight corsets, which is destructive of health; all dress [...] should be free to move about in, showing the figure. Anything that disfigures the form or blots out the beauty of the natural lines is ugly" (42).

After returning to London, Wilde further develops his anti-corset views into a specific suggestion for reform. In a letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, written and published in October 1884, he observes that "as long as the lower garments are suspended from the hips, a corset is an absolute necessity; the mistake lies in not suspending all apparel from the shoulders" (233). Wilde's suggested alternative to the corset anticipates by a decade the first patent for a design resembling the modern-day bra. However, since the design, patented by Marie Tucek in 1893, did not gain

widespread popularity until the 1920s (Vare and Ptacek 58), Wilde's assertion that garments should be hung "from the shoulders, and from the shoulders only" (233) was over forty years ahead of popular fashion.[33]

Wilde's suggestions for dress reform extend beyond alternatives to the corset. In the same letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, he also addresses the problem of high heels. His comments assert that lack of comfort necessarily causes a lack of beauty, specifically a disruption of the natural line created when walking. He writes that the "modern high-heeled boot's [...] inevitable effect is to throw the body forward, to shorten the steps, and consequently to produce that want of grace which always follows want of freedom" (233). Acknowledging that long gowns require a shoe with height, Wilde states: "what I object to is that the height should be given to the heel only, and not to the sole of the foot also" (233). As with his proposed alternative to the corset, Wilde's practical suggestion anticipates the comfort of twentieth-century fashion and fosters dissatisfaction with popular, restrictive, nineteenth-century style.

As editor of *The Woman's World* from 1887 to 1889, Wilde often devoted sections of his editorial column, entitled "Literary and Other Notes," to the issue of dress reform. Echoing his earlier lectures and letters, Wilde's December 1887 column expresses his disdain for corsets, pointedly noting "it is really sad to think that in our own day a civilised woman can hang on to a cross-bar while her maid laces her waist into a fifteen-inch circle" (237). In the same article, he describes corsets as that "form of torture [...] endured by women in obedience to the dictates of an unreasonable and monstrous Fashion" (236). Wilde presents his comments on dress reform alongside his championing of the higher education, professional development, and political and social activism of women. Aligning dress reform especially with women's

professional development, he writes that "women's dress can easily be adapted and modified to any exigencies" (205) and that women's "present style of dress is quite inappropriate to any kind of mechanical labour and must be radically changed before they can compete with men upon their own ground" (205).

As his editorial writings suggest, Wilde recognizes women's restrictive clothing not only as a health concern, but also as a visual symbol of the political and social restrictions imposed on them and, furthermore, as a factor contributing to the perpetuation of such restrictions.[34] Indeed, the headaches, fainting spells, and other ailments caused by corsets were often cited by anti-suffragists as natural, rather than corset-induced, hallmarks of a weak constitution making women unfit for serious thought (Summers 146-147). Queen Victoria, for example, cited women's physical weaknesses as prime reasons for rejecting the "mad, wicked folly" of women's suffrage (cited in Beckson 132). In his November 1888 editorial installment, Wilde implies that the twentieth century will see gender equality; he posits that "it is probable that the dress of the two sexes will be assimilated, as similarity of costume always follows similarity of pursuits" (205). Wilde's astute and generally prophetic comment reflects his awareness that, in his current society, the physically-restrictive dress worn by women perpetuates arguments restricting their pursuits.

In his January 1888 column, Wilde adds a new, and crucial, element to his proposed dress reforms: having argued against restrictive clothing and suggested alternatives, he now focuses on the dressmakers through whose skill and vision such alternatives might become a reality. Ostensibly a monthly review of books, his column begins by critiquing a book by a Mrs. Fawcett, presumably Millicent Fawcett, founder of the next decade's National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. Wilde

writes: "I am sorry to see that Mrs. Fawcett deprecates the engagement of ladies of education as dressmakers and milliners, and speaks of it as being detrimental to those who have fewer educational advantages. I myself would like to see dressmaking regarded not merely as a learned profession, but as a fine art" (266). Wilde's provocative statement not only questions the boundaries between so-called high and low art, but, more importantly, positions the dressmaker as a pivotal figure in the campaign for dress reform. Wilde writes that "to construct a costume that is at once rational and beautiful" (266) a dress-maker must be aware of proportion, the laws of health, colour, materials, pattern, and design. He declares that "the ordinary milliner, with her lack of taste [and] foolish fashions will have to make way for the scientific and artistic dress-designer" (267). Wilde's statement suggests dress-designers willing to create comfortable, practical, and beautiful items for women occupy a subversive position in a culture in which restrictive corsets and gowns reinforce the political and social repression of women.[35]

During the following two decades, dress reform was no longer considered crucial in the pursuit of female emancipation. Edwardian suffragettes such as Emmeline Pankhurst and Evelyn Sharp dressed elegantly and conventionally so as to counter prevailing stereotypes of 'masculine' suffragettes, stereotypes which implied women need look like men in order to vote. When Lady Haberton, a Victorian supporter of dress reforms, died in 1911, an obituary in *Common Cause* read: "Lady Haberton really tried to inaugurate the fashion for comfortable clothes [...]. But the chance slipped by and modern women are too busy with a great reform to make themselves conspicuous in a minor matter" (cited in Kaplan and Stowell 155). Delivered as lectures, published as open letters in popular magazines, and featured in

his editorial column for *The Woman's World*, Wilde's suggestions for dress reform, while published widely, certainly did not result directly in women's emancipation nor the popular adoption of more comfortable clothes. However, Wilde's work fostered an atmosphere of dissatisfaction with the physical effects and socio-political implications of contemporary sartorial conventions and encouraged further expressions of dissent in support of women's emancipation.

In his January 1888 column for *Woman's World*, Wilde praises Daniel Defoe's 1697 "Essay upon Projects" for anticipating "the most advanced modern ideas on the subject of the education of women" (265). He pointedly states Defoe's work "shows how thoroughly practical all dreamers are" (265), thus asserting that individuals whose ideas are considered idealistic are in fact suggesting achievable goals. Clearly, the same can be said of Wilde's own work. The utopian individualism Wilde's theorizes on in "Soul of Man" becomes more precise and accessible in his lectures, plays, and open letters in which he suggests that dissatisfaction with social conformity can be expressed through individualistic sartorial details. Indeed, Wilde's treatment of dress and sartorial ornaments in his plays and letters solidifies his theoretical work on individualism. In his work on women's dress reform, Wilde presents audiences and readers with simple, insightful suggestions which, in encouraging collective dissatisfaction with the status of women, secure him a prominent place alongside John Stuart Mill and George Bernard Shaw as one of a handful of male writers advocating gender equality.[36]

Chapter Four

"The House Beautiful": Women's emancipation and home décor

"A harmonious whole"

Wilde's support of women's emancipation can be located not only in his suggestions for dress reform, but also in his work on home décor. While more implicit than in his writings and lectures on dress, Wilde's rejection of gender inequality in his lectures on home décor resides in both his choice of adjectives when describing the effect of a well-decorated house, adjectives traditionally associated with the wife, and in the conspicuous absence of any references to the wife's presence and domestic duties.

Wilde's suggestions for creating aesthetic interiors were addressed to audiences comprised of both men and women. At no point in his lectures does Wilde imply that the "refining influence" (417) of home décor is solely a wife's concern; in fact, unlike most contemporary home décor manuals, he does not mention wives, or husbands, at all, but rather refers to "you," the collective audience, thus implying that individuals work together in choosing decorative items which foster harmony. Most contemporary home décor manuals, on the other hand, address suggestions on collecting to men and advice on creating a well-decorated interior to women. In A Plea for Art in the House (1876), for example, W.J. Loftie writes that a father should encourage his children to collect artistic objects (97) and that "mothers often wonder oftentimes that their sons care so little for staying home. But does it occur to them to

ask themselves what have they done to make their home happy and pleasant?" (97). Loftie then suggests women model the family rooms after the "comfort and good taste of the club drawing-room" (97) which attracts men away from home. In The Art of Decoration (1881), Mary Eliza Haweis includes a discussion of women's dress and a frontispiece depicting a woman, thus welcoming her intended readership. Other contemporary home décor books present illustrations of women in rooms showcasing the purchases of their collector-husbands, thus implying that the wife was equally a possession. Daniel Cottier's cover illustration for Clarence Cook's The House Beautiful (1878) includes an inset of a woman sitting in a well-appointed living room. Moreover, the book's frontispiece features Walter Crane's wood-engraving, "My Lady's Chamber," which presents a woman with a Pre-Raphaelite profile pouring tea in a room filled with blue and white china and Japanese fans (see appendix, fig. 14). Unlike these manuals, which script women and men into traditional roles, Wilde's lectures focus exclusively on the details of home décor. Moreover, his own house on Tite Street in London's Chelsea district was a collaborative effort among himself, his wife Constance, and their friend, the architect and innovative set designer, E.M. Godwin (Varty 65).

The house, bought in 1884, was the subject of a detailed correspondence between Wilde, Constance, and Godwin. In December, Wilde wrote to Godwin from Leeds mocking the urgency of their decorative decisions: "the red for the drawing room [...] is it to be vermillion? Is it not? The universe pauses for an answer!" (241). A few days later, writing from Edinburgh, Wilde asks Godwin to discuss the placement of an "oriental blue and red hanging" (242) with his wife. Through their collective efforts, the house exemplified the concept of total harmony Wilde

advocated in his 1882 lectures.[37] The collaboration on the Tite Street house put into practice Wilde's non-gender specific approach to home décor, emphasized by the collective "you" to whom he addressed his lectures. However, his work on home décor does not simply imply that men and women should decorate together.

Discussing the sphere of the house, a space clearly aligned with women in the Victorian doctrine of the separate spheres[38], Wilde asserts in his lectures that a beautifully decorated interior creates harmony. Indeed, he devotes most of his "House Beautiful" lecture to describing elements which create a "harmonious whole" (405). Harmony was precisely the desired effect which a Victorian wife, as 'angel in the house,' was expected to create (Christ 147). By focusing on the importance of items such as wallpaper and furniture in creating an atmosphere of harmony and refinement, Wilde effectively rejects the Victorian notion, famously expressed in Coventry Patmore's poem "The Angel in the House" (1854), that a wife's role was to create a peaceful atmosphere for her husband. Instead of the wife, decorative items, in Wilde's lectures, become responsible for establishing and maintaining a peaceful domestic atmosphere, thus relieving the wife of her expected task. Once again, Wilde's work on surfaces, on the decorative arts, expresses dissatisfaction with social and political realities; his work on home décor can be seen to reject both the societal idealization of women as sources of domestic bliss and the related resistance toward accepting women as active members of the public sphere.

Wilde's displacement of women as central sources of domestic harmony may or may not have been intentional. Nevertheless, his non gender specific approach to home décor, together with his editorial column in *The Woman's World* periodical, troubles accusations, put forth by some feminist scholars, that his writing is

misogynistic; instead, these often overlooked works situate Wilde as one of Victorian England's foremost, yet least heavy-handed, feminist writers.

The Woman's World: Wilde's support of women's emancipation

Beginning with Kate Millett's Sexual Politics (1970), which presents Wilde's Salomé as a misogynistic play, Wilde's works have, at times, been interpreted as expressing a hatred and fear of women. Millett writes: "the feminists merely wanted equality and the vote- need one respond with a heroine who goes about cutting off heads? [...] Wilde refused to deal with the actual woman responding to her circumstances" (155). Salome, however, is far from being an "actual woman," as Millett herself acknowledges. In discussing Dorian Gray, Sally Ledger asserts more emphatically that Wilde's writing is misogynistic. She states that "the aestheticisation of homoerotic desire is accompanied in the novel by an overt misogyny. Women represent for Wilde's dandies a gross physicality" (113). Ledger specifically argues that Dorian's rejection of Sybil Vane reflects "a repulsion toward women- and [...] towards women's sexualized bodies in particular" (113). Similarly, Elaine Showalter considers Wilde's novel to express "an escalating contempt for women whose bodies seem to stand in the way of philosophical beauty" (176). Quoting from the text, she writes that "the aristocratic dandy Lord Henry Wotton speaks the most misogynistic lines in the novel, a series of generalizations about the practicality, materiality, grossness, and immanence of women who 'represent the triumph of matter over mind'" (176).

Wilde's male dandies certainly engage in quips at the expense of women. However, to brand their statements as misogynistic would be to take them out of

context and, moreover, to minimize the concept of misogyny. More often than not, insults expressed by Wilde's male dandies resound as ironic rather than misogynistic; they highlight societal stereotypes about women and, in the society comedies, they are accompanied by Wilde's female dandies' equally cutting quips about men. For example, in A Woman of No Importance, Lord Illingworth laments that "All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy" (440); Mrs. Allonby replies: "No man does. That is his" (440). Often cited without its partner (Varty 176), Illingworth's quip in fact functions as part of an exchange which suggests that women and men should cultivate aspects of their characters that do not necessarily conform to societal assumptions regarding gender behaviour.

Lord Illingworth's other generalizations concerning women are, however, more scathing and hostile; indeed, of all Wilde's male dandies, he can substantiate what scholars often perceive as the misogynistic element in Wilde's writing. However, Illingworth exists in a play which, as its title announces, explores commonly held views on gender and dramatizes the animosity, either feigned or real, between men and women. Indeed, Mrs. Allonby's comments on men act as foils to Lord Illingworth's on women. She begins her entertaining description of an ideal husband by noting that men "are horribly tedious when they are good husbands, and abominably conceited when they are not" (431). Clearly, Wilde did not pen critiques directed solely at one gender. Yet, while scholars cite Wilde's male dandies to substantiate claims that Wilde's work is misogynistic, the quips expressed by Wilde's female dandies are not used to develop arguments that the texts in which they exist endorse a hatred of men.

Often overlooked as well is the context in which Wilde's dandies express what can be read, if devoid of irony, as their attacks on women. Lord Illingworth's hostile comments are in reference to the source of his anger, Mrs. Arbuthnot, who seeks to maintain her own reputation by raising their son Gerald in accordance with the strict moral codes Illingworth rejects. As a result, Illingworth tells her: "What a typical woman you are! You talk sentimentally, and you are thoroughly selfish the whole time" (443). In his long discussion with Gerald on the topic of women, he declares, clearly contemplating Mrs. Arbuthnot's "inflexible righteousness" (Varty 177) and her fear of scandal, that "the history of women is the history of the worst form of tyranny the world has ever known. The tyranny of the weak over the strong" (447). Adamant that "no son of mine should take the side of the puritans" (465), he criticizes Mrs. Arbuthnot's influence through generalizations that serve to emphasize his frustration rather than his hatred of her. Moreover, since inversion necessarily invokes the pre-inverted sentence, Wilde urges his audience, through Lord Illingworth's inversion of expectations, to replace 'women' for 'men,' thus acknowledging the reality of gender inequality.

Neil Sammells has noted that Wilde's female dandies counter claims that his plays are misogynistic. He argues that they "display the wit and 'cool' which displaces male authority and control" (120). Indeed, scholars making a case for Wilde's hatred of women necessarily avoid Mrs. Allonby's dialogue, as well as that of Wilde's other witty female characters, such as Mabel Chiltern in An Ideal Husband, Mrs. Erlynne in Lady Windermere's Fan, and Cicely and Gwendolen in The Importance of Being Earnest . As Sammells points out, these characters display the dandy's "self-possession, verbal facility, and insistence on the importance of

appearances and style" (120). Moreover, they, like their male counterparts, appropriate the concept of irrationality traditionally associated with women and re-define it through their quips so that the 'irrational' refers in fact to the studied rejection of the myriad conventions accepted, out of habit, as 'rational.' For example, Mrs. Allonby quips that women "have always been picturesque protests against the mere existence of common sense. We saw its dangers from the first" (433). Like Wilde's male dandies, she refuses to align her quick-witted social critiques with common sense since being commonsensical is a quality praised by the society she criticizes.

Although Wilde certainly creates a series of astute female dandies, asserting that these characters counter claims that his writing is misogynistic operates under the same assumptions governing arguments which assert that the dialogue of Wilde's male dandies indicates the inherent misogyny at work in his texts. Both these arguments assume that the text in question endorses the views of certain characters over those of others. Moreover, both approaches imply that Wilde himself subscribes to the views which the text is seen to support. Indeed, scholars who refuse to consider the possibility that Wilde may be ridiculing or ironically presenting misogynistic beliefs often imply that he supports the misogynistic views his dandies can be thought to express. Kate Millett, Sally Ledger, and Elaine Showalter, in accusing not simply Wilde's characters, but his text's themselves of misogyny, imply that, through these texts, Wilde expresses his misogynistic views. Wilde's work in his capacity as editor of *The Woman's World*, however, challenges these implied accusations of misogyny.

During his three-year editorship of *The Woman's World*, from 1887 to 1889, Wilde often used his editorial column, "Literary and Other Notes," as a forum for expressing his views on what was known in late Victorian England as the "Woman

Question." Along with the issue of suffrage, the "Woman Question" referred to related debates regarding the higher education and professional development of women. During the late 1880s, the concept of the New Woman emerged to describe the growing number of women seeking independence, pursuing higher education, and working outside the domestic sphere (Dowling 438). Often associated by the popular press with "a potential for anarchic violence" (439) because of her desire for gender equality, the New Woman, both in life and in literature, was educated, often in traditionally 'masculine' fields such as mathematics and economics; she rode bicycles and smoked; and she expressed her views on current social debates.

Contemporaneously, *The Woman's World* under Wilde's editorship became, as Catharine Ksinan has pointed out, "a serious and intelligent woman's journal at a time when few if any existed" (409). In a series of letters sent in the spring of 1887, Wilde solicited articles from well-known women writers and socialites, many of whom were avid supporters of the suffrage movement. Writing to Helena Sickert, an author, lecturer, and "prominent suffragist" (Hart-Davis 83), Wilde states: "The magazine will try to be representative of the thought and culture of the women of this century- and I am very anxious that those who have had university training, like yourself, should have an organ through which they can express their views on life and things" (83). Wilde shaped *Woman's World* into a periodical which, in its choice of title, cover image, and content, defined itself in opposition to contemporary women's magazines.

Woman's World was the result of major changes to an existing periodical, *Lady's World*, in which fashion plates and gossip were the main features. In a letter dated April 1887 to Wemyss Reid, his publisher at Cassell's, Wilde, having recently agreed to take over the editorship, notes that "at present [*Lady's World*] is too

feminine, and not sufficiently womanly" (297). In a later letter, dated September 1887, he stresses the need to change the title from 'Lady' to 'Woman' in order to announce the periodical's new, progressive approach. He states that "its name should definitely separate itself from such papers as the *Lady* and the *Lady Pictorial*" (318). Wilde's new title aligns his magazine with the image of the New Woman, thus expressing support for women's emancipation. As Laurel Brake asserts, "the change of name [...] implied a significant move from the world of the 'lady' to that of the 'woman,' a word associated at the time with 'commonness,' suffrage, and higher education" (128). Similarly, Ksinan states that for Wilde "*Woman's World* was to be a radical departure from *Lady's World*, the switch from 'lady' to 'woman' signifying [...] the fresh erasure of borders suggesting solidarity between all women" (413). Indeed, rather than court a select readership of upper class ladies, the magazine, through its new title, addressed itself more broadly to women writers, students, and professionals who sought a magazine that reflected their varied interests and opinions.

During the following three years, Wilde's stated mandate became a reality. More often than not, the women to whom Wilde wrote agreed to submit articles on subjects of personal or general interest. Unlike *Lady's World* and other women's periodicals, which mostly featured unsigned articles or articles by men, *Woman's World* consisted almost entirely of articles by women, most of which were signed (Brake 136). Moreover, the cover of the magazine displays the names of the most well-known contributors rather than the topics of featured articles. While this certainly serves as a marketing strategy, the list of women's names also suggests an atmosphere of discussion among women: the names assert that although the editor is male, the magazine expresses women's views.

Intent on securing high quality, engaging, and informative writing by women, Wilde's editions of *The Woman's World* featured prose by Olive Schreiner, who was a noted anti-imperialist, novelist, and advocate of women's suffrage. The magazine also included poetry describing historical women by the well-known writer and supporter of women's rights, Wilde's mother Speranza. Articles discussing the status of women in other historical moments and countries became a regular feature, providing information on women's lives in ancient Egypt and Rome, as well as ancient and contemporary China, including an article in the November 1888 edition on "Women in Oriental Poetry and Literature." Contributors also wrote profiles on nineteenth-century women artists in England and continental Europe such as Angelica Kauffman, a founding member of the Royal Academy of Arts, and Marie Bashkirtseff, whose journals express her frustration with her gender's lack of freedom in choice of dress, leisure, and profession.

Under Wilde's eclectic editorship, *Woman's World* featured articles on art, literature, home décor, as well as social issues relevant to late nineteenth-century London. Extensive articles by women on urban poverty, the conditions faced by factory workers, the necessity of higher education for women, and professions for women were published alongside articles on the history of dress and aesthetic interiors. While, as Laurel Brake notes, "'masculine' subjects" such as science, economics, and religion were not included (139), their exclusion does not suggest Wilde "avoids" (Brake 139) publishing articles on traditionally masculine topics in a women's magazine, but rather that his contributors, most of whom were women, did not receive an education in theology, economics, and theoretical science. What Wilde writes of the history of women's poetry in his January 1888 column also holds true for

his contributors' choice of subject matter, "we must not judge of women's poetic power by her achievements in days when education was denied her" (257).

Nevertheless, economic issues such as poverty were discussed at length in the magazine, as was medicine as a career option for women. In the December 1887 edition, Dr. Mary Marshall contributed an article on the medical profession, noting that "the question of whether women shall study and practice medicine as a profession in England has been answered in the affirmative" (103).[39] Moreover, Wilde notes in his March 1888 installment of "Literary and Other Notes," that "The Englishwoman's Year-book contains a really extraordinary amount of useful information on every subject connected with woman's work [...]. The Year-book makes mention of stock-broking and conveyancing as professions that women are beginning to adopt" (231-232).

While women may not have been contributing articles on 'masculine' topics and were only beginning to enter fields dominated by men, Wilde observes in his January 1888 column that contemporary women's poetry, in reaction to social stereotypes, grapples with the "intellectual problems of modern life: science, philosophy and metaphysics [...]; they leave the triviality of triolets to men" (257-258). Laurel Brake has argued that in Wilde's "value structure, men are free to be trivial; women are not; men may be useless, and women must be useful" (142). However, as we have seen, the ostensibly trivial details of both women's and men's dress in Wilde's writing serves the purpose of challenging societal conventions. Moreover, here, in noting that women's poetry concerns itself with useful issues, Wilde does not transfer the task of being useful onto women, thus creating another expectation for women to contend with, but rather appreciates their desire to reject the

stereotype that women are solely interested in domestic affairs, needlework, music, and abstract notions of "love, beauty, intuition, and virtue" (Christ 149).

Women's emancipation was, of course, a central issue for a periodical intent on, as Wilde writes in a letter, being "the recognized organ for the expression of women's opinions" (297). As Sos Eltis has noted, since Wilde conceived of the magazine as a forum for debating the "Woman Question," "more conservative voices were occasionally heard in the magazine" (11). Indeed, Wilde published articles expressing both sides of the debate on the New Woman and the suffrage movement. For example, in the first edition, issued in November 1887, Mrs. Charles McLaren contributed an article entitled "The Fallacy of the Superiority of Man" which was disputed the following month by the anti-suffrage supporter Lucy Garnett's "The Fallacy of the Equality of Women."

A few months later, in a February 1888 article, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, a well-known suffragette, expressed a logical argument for giving women the vote, noting that in the 1884 Reform Bill "felons [...] and lunatics were joyfully admitted" (10). Lucy Garnett's "Reasons for Opposing Woman Suffrage" (March 1888) countered Fawcett's argument with the claim that women "are very apt to take superficial views and to be unduly biased in matters on which their readily-awakened sympathies are excited. [...] To extend the suffrage to women would therefore add immensely to the danger of questions being decided by sudden accesses of emotional enthusiasm rather than by deliberate consideration of facts" (306). Laurel Brake has noted that in publishing differing positions on women's suffrage Wilde sought to appeal to "a broad spectrum of women authors and readers" (146). However, Wilde's

decision to include essays on both sides of the debate can be considered as more than simply a marketing strategy.

Millicent Fawcett's argument, being unemotional, well-developed, and based on political facts, served as proof against the assumption, expressed not only by Lucy Garnett but by other anti-suffrage advocates, that women's inherent inferiority hampered their judgment. Fawcett's article attests to the fact that women were indeed capable of rational thought while Garnett's argument engages in the emotional declarations and disregard for factual support which she claims to decry. In publishing Lucy Garnett's article, Wilde perhaps saw an opportunity, after establishing Fawcett as a clear-thinking supporter of suffrage, to highlight the illogical arguments put forth by anti-suffragists. Indeed, as Catharine Ksinan suggests, since British Parliament opposed any proposal regarding female suffrage, "Wilde's use of Garnett may have been a strategy to display the actual content of this opposition" (418).

Although Wilde published articles expressing opposing views regarding the issue of women's emancipation, his decision to reject *Woman's World*'s earlier incarnation as a conservative ladies' journal, combined with his witty and political editorial column, set the magazine's tone of polite dissent. Wilde replaced the gossip section of *Lady's World* with "Literary and Other Notes," in which he reviewed books by women and men. In each of his reviews, he includes quips which rival some of his dandies' more famous declarations. In his February 1889 column, he writes that "most modern mysticism seems to me to be simply a method of imparting useless knowledge in a form no one can understand" (460). In his March 1889 column, he praises non-nationalistic writers, exclaiming "the Muses care so little for geography!"

(472). As well, his editorial column, as we have seen, provides valuable insight concerning his distaste of didacticism in art and his attention to women's dress reforms.

Wilde's column serves as often overlooked proof of his socially-conscious politics and troubles scholarly claims of misogyny. As "one of few Victorian males to advance publicly women's social cause" (Ksinan 424), Wilde was a valuable, vocal ally in the feminist campaign for gender equality.[40] In his May 1889 installment, Wilde devotes a large section of his column to expressing support for women's emancipation. He favourably reviews David Ritchie's Darwinism and Politics, in which Ritchie argues against James Stephen's Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, which questioned the possible success of women in the labour force, and Herbert Spencer's Sociology, which maintained that women, if admitted into politics, would "do mischief by introducing the ethics of the family into the state" (cited in Wilde 487). Wilde's enthusiasm for Ritchie's defense of women's roles in the workforce and in politics prompts him to quote and paraphrase Ritchie at length. Wilde notes, in language borrowed from Ritchie (Powell 179), that "the cultivation of separate sorts of virtues and separate ideals of duty in men and women has led to the whole social fabric being weaker and unhealthier than it need be" (488). Using Ritchie's ideas and the excuse of reviewing his book as a springboard, Wilde criticizes the Victorian doctrine of separate spheres for men and women.

Wilde's review of Ritchie's book echoes the support of women's emancipation he expresses in virtually each of his editorial installments. In the first edition of *Woman's World*, Wilde notes that "the further we advance [...] the more apparent does it become that women are to take their share as bread-winners in the world"

(205). In the December 1887 edition, Wilde aims to counter the preconception that "stupidity is the proper basis for the domestic virtues, and that intellectual women must of necessity be helpless with their hands" (228). He urges readers to familiarize themselves with Phyllis Browne's biography of a Mrs. Somerville who was a "skilful cook" (228) as well as a "mathematician and scientist" (227). While we might consider celebrating the domestic virtues of an intelligent career-woman as a step back in the process of achieving gender equality, the women's movement of the 1880s sought to emphasize precisely this balance of virtues so as to counter assumptions, and popular caricatures, that suffragettes and New Women were "masculine" (Kaplan and Stowell 155). As Sheila Stowell notes, by presenting themselves as feminine, Victorian women "fought for their rights as women to occupy space previously occupied by men alone" (7). Furthermore, by not rejecting entirely women's roles as wives and mothers, suffragettes proposed an image of female emancipation which was not thoroughly unsettling to the Victorian social order. Wilde, in supporting their approach, aligned himself with the most persuasive arguments for women's emancipation put forth by late 1880s feminists.

Wilde's vision for *Woman's World* was a few years too early to be successful. Although the periodical courted a varied readership, including emerging New Women, socialites, intellectuals, middle-class working women, and young girls entering the work force (Brake 138), its readership dwindled in numbers. Catharine Ksinan has suggested that "a convincing reason for the magazine's failure is that late Victorian society was still unready to abandon its belief in women's mental inferiority" (411). During the following decade, as more women began to enter the workforce, attend university, and express their political views, a greater market developed for

progressive women's magazines which published articles on social and political issues (Varty 51-52). However, in the 1880s, magazines such as the *Lady* and the *Lady's Pictorial*, which favoured fashion plates and articles celebrating women's domestic virtues, attracted the largest readership (Eltis 12). Aware of the popularity of these periodicals, Wilde's publishing company, Cassell's, requested that *Woman's World* focus less on politics and more on gossip and beauty features. Frustrated with the request for "retrograde steps" (12), Wilde resigned as editor; upon his departure the periodical reverted back to its earlier conservative standpoint and what Wilde had described in a letter as a "stupid production, with its silly gossip about silly people, and its social inanities" (322).

Despite its short run, during the three years of Wilde's editorship *Woman's World* was one of various cultural elements which, in retrospect, helped the notion of the New Woman become an integral part of the public consciousness of the following decade. Unlike other popular references to the New Woman, such as the spoofs in *Punch* (Ledger 109) and Hugh Stutfield's 1887 anti-New Woman novel The New Antigone (Dowling 438), *Woman's World* was a forum favourably presenting intelligent, vocal women who were becoming known as 'New.' In his first column for *Woman's World*, Wilde writes: "Nothing in the United States struck me more than the fact that the remarkable intellectual progress of that country is very largely due to the efforts of American women, who edit many of the most powerful magazines and newspapers, [and] take part in the discussion of every question of public interest" (204). While he deliberately exaggerates the status of American women, Wilde does so in order to motivate and incite women in England to play active roles in public affairs and in deciding the content of women's magazines.

While not immediately influential, Wilde's avant-garde editorship, and his editorial column, set the stage for later, like-minded publications. As Anne Varty notes, "the conjunction of feminism and journalism begun by Wilde was taken forward by other papers emerging during the next decade such as *Woman's Life* or *The Woman's Signal*" (51). Each of these New Woman periodicals, however, and the campaign for women's emancipation in general, still had to wrestle with the traditional Victorian ideal of a wife as 'angel in the house.' As Carol Christ notes, Coventry Patmore's phrase suggests that the angel/wife "brings a more than mortal purity to the home that she at once creates and sanctifies, for which her mate consequently regards her with sentimental, essentially religious reverence" (146). While the feminists of the late 1880s embraced a balance between domestic virtues and professional development, and the New Women of the 1890s "aggressively rejected" (Beckson 129) the societal assumption that they be angelic wives, Wilde's approach, as early as 1882, was to subtly displace the angel.

"With the proper background women can do anything": Challenging the 'angel in the house' ideal

During his revamping of *Lady's World,* one of the major stylistic changes Wilde insisted upon, along with the new title, was a change in cover (Brake 138). *Lady's World* displayed on its cover a drapery-swathed woman, barefoot and with one shoulder bared, positioned in a classical *contraposto* on a cloud and illuminated by a halo-shaped light (see appendix, fig. 15). A standard image of idealized womanhood, the figure vaguely suggests abstract ideals such as the Virtues, personified in literature as female figures and represented in Western art since the Renaissance as beautiful,

stoic women. Although she raises a feather in one hand, it is not a quill, and she looks out toward the horizon instead of reading the book balanced on a cloud under her right hand. Her position on the cloud and the rays of light surrounding her suggest she possesses a transcendent, divine quality.

While certainly created and viewed as a classical type, the *Lady's World* figure also embodies the essential characteristics of the Victorian 'angel in the house' ideal: harmony, refinement, and transcendence. While the Virtues, or the Muses, were idealized types understood as imaginative creations, the similarly idealized notion of the 'angel in the house,' which the *Lady's World* cover evokes and supports, was the domestic role expected of Victorian women. In Canto V, Book I of Patmore's "The Angel in the House," the Victorian wife is celebrated as "infantine, auroral, mild" (18); her "blindest love is sweet and warm/ And full of truth not shaped by thoughts" (35-36); and like the *Lady's World* figure, "she stands/Adorn'd with undeficient grace" (37-38).

Instead of an idealized, glowing female figure on a cloud, the *Woman's World* cover consists of a William Morris-style pattern of ornate leaves (see appendix, fig. 16). Characteristically, Wilde opts for abstraction rather than narrative-oriented, or in the case of the *Lady's World*, conventionally symbolic, representational art. The new cover clearly reflects Wilde's affinity for the Aesthetic Movement's arabesques and curvilinear shapes and, by extension, his interest in the formal elements of design. Indeed, in keeping with his belief that formal design elements spark imaginative thought, the fanciful figures which twine around the cover's inset border are highly stylized, rather than idealized, female figures. They are hybrid figures: winged mermaids whose serpentine tails blend with the equally stylized botanical patterns.

Designed as deliberately ambiguous images, they evoke the style of the Aesthetic Movement as well as the stereotype of the femme fatale. However, since they form part of the larger design, and are not immediately discerned, they mischievously allude to contemporary stereotypes of sexualized women, stereotypes based on fears of women's growing power, rather than emphatically assert their presence as femme fatale figures.

While the woman featured on *Lady's World* is idealized, but physically realistic, the hybrid creatures on the *Woman's World* cover are thoroughly imaginative creations forming part of the larger stylized design. Readers of *Lady's World* were presented with an imposing vision of womanhood. In sharp contrast, readers of *Woman's World* are greeted with the title of the periodical, and its editor's and contributors' names, presented against a fanciful background pattern. This shift, from an idealized woman to an Aesthetic background design, can be understood as a visual symbol of Wilde's rejection of the 'angel in the house' ideal.

Coventry Patmore's poem, in keeping with popular ideals, considers a wife to be naturally serene, refined, and in harmony with herself, thus bringing her over-worked and disillusioned husband serenity, refinement, and harmony by association. As the concluding line of Patmore's fifth canto states: "So dancing round the Tree of Life/ They make an Eden in her breast/ While his [virtues], disjointed and at strife/ Proud-thoughted, do not bring him rest" (45-48). The ideals imposed on wives, while certainly not indigenous to the late nineteenth-century, became even more highly valued during this period. Carol Christ has noted that as a result of various socio-cultural forces such as "the breakdown of faith and the dehumanizing pressure of the marketplace, many Victorian writers relocated [traditional religious and moral] values

in the home and in the woman who was its center" (146). The popularity of the genteel 'angel in the house' ideal was further solidified by fears that factors such as the rise of the working class, the increase in prostitution, the decadent influence of popular French literature, and the campaign for women's emancipation would taint British upper-class society (146).[41]

By replacing an idealized central figure with an Aesthetic background, Wilde critiques the domestic pressures placed on women as well as the fears which popularized these ideals. As newly appointed editor of a women's magazine, he opts to supplant a serene, auroral feminine figure with a botanical pattern, thus choosing not to reinforce the societal idealization of women. Unlike Wilde's deliberate editorial rejection of the Victorian ideal of womanhood, his implied rejection of this ideal in his earlier North American lectures on home décor may or may not have been intentional. However, the fact that, five years after returning from his North American lecture tour, Wilde rejects the idealized woman on the *Lady's World* cover in favour of a Morris-style decorative background not only lends support for, but indeed enacts, the displacement suggested in his lectures.

In his North American lectures, Wilde repeatedly states that the beneficent effects of an aesthetic interior are joy, harmony, and refinement. As he asserts in "House Decoration," "if you go into a house where [...] everything is dainty and delicate, gentleness and refinement of manner are unconsciously acquired" (170). What Victorian society considered to be the role of the wife, Wilde considers the role of the well-decorated house. In Lady Windermere's Fan, Mrs. Erlynne declares: "With the proper background women can do anything" (389). While she refers to discussing business on a terrace and mocks the Victorian concern with propriety, her

statement also captures what Wilde implies in his lectures on home décor: if the aesthetic harmony of a "proper background" can foster emotional harmony and a sense of refinement, as Wilde maintains it can, then the wife need no longer be the source of harmony and refinement; she can release herself from her 'angel in the house' role and follow other pursuits. With the "proper background" creating the atmosphere once expected of her, she can, as it were, "do anything."

In "The House Beautiful," Wilde addresses each aspect of a house's interior decoration, providing suggestions for creating a harmonious, refined environment. Through his choice of adjectives, he clearly attributes the Aesthetic décor of a house with the qualities traditionally expected of a wife, thus suggesting that the 'angel' need not be the wife, but the well-decorated house. For instance, he stresses the importance of colour scheme in creating a "harmonious whole" (405), discusses "joyous paper on the wall, full of flowers and pleasing designs" (407), praises "delicate blown glass" (412), and notes that green and gray stained glass creates "a sense of quiet and repose" (409). He urges his audience to avoid "heavy and coarse" (411) cast iron gates for fireplaces as well as "heavy and massive" (409) Gothic furniture. He argues instead that a "lighter and more graceful style of furniture is more suitable for our peaceful homes" (409) and praises Queen Anne furniture for being "beautiful without being gaudy, so delicate in appearance and yet so strong" (410).

Wilde also devotes part of his lecture to describing Whistler's famous blue and yellow Peacock Room. Cited by art historians as "the most lavish example of an Aesthetic interior" (Escritt 50), the room was designed by Whistler in 1876-77 for Frederick Leyland, an entrepreneur, patron, and collector. Wilde praises the room's blue walls, light yellow ceiling, cane-yellow woodwork, blue and white china, and its

white serge curtains (see appendix, fig. 17). He states it is "a charming room, catching all the warm light and taking on of all surrounding beauty, and giving to the guest a sense of joyousness, comfort, and rest" (406). Once again, the role of the 'angel in the house' is now given to the aesthetic interior.

Wilde concludes his lecture on home décor by stating that there is "nothing in life that art cannot raise and sanctify" (418). As Coventry Patmore's poem emphasized, elevating and sanctifying was the job of the wife, the 'angel in the house': her refinement, grace, and gentleness give "title to the worthier throne" (32), that throne being reserved for her husband and his search for truth (31). She not only sanctifies her husband's pursuit of truth, but, as we have seen, Patmore describes her as providing a peaceful, harmonious atmosphere of "happy virtuous" (36-39). By using adjectives associated with the wife's idealized role to describe instead the effect of interior decoration, Wilde can be understood as attempting to release her of her expected role. In "The House Beautiful," Wilde presents the role of bringing peace, beauty, refinement, and harmony not as the purpose of an idealized wife, but of an aesthetic background. Like his cover for *Woman's World*, Wilde's "House Beautiful" lecture replaces the idealized woman with an aesthetic background, thus foreshadowing the support of women's emancipation he expresses in his *Woman's World* editorials and, once again, using the decorative arts as a means to express social critique.

Conclusion

Functional Ornaments

In the years following the 'decorative arts craze' in England, the continental Art Nouveau movement of the *fin de siècle* and early twentieth century aimed to create useful items which were at once functional and beautiful. Victor Horta in Brussels, Otto Wagner in Vienna, and Antoni Gaudi in Barcelona, among others, created interior and exterior spaces in which functional items such as window handles, doorknobs, stairwells, and air vents were fancifully designed using the new decorative vocabulary of wide-ranging colour, and stylized, curvilinear forms. Preceding these designers by a decade, Wilde's work on the decorative arts can be considered as a similar attempt to combine beauty and functionality. However, rather than make the useful beautiful, Wilde renders the decorative useful. Indeed, his work on the decorative arts highlights the irony of his assertion that "all art is useless." Nevertheless, Wilde's well-established distaste for the Victorian value of utility does not waver; his version of utility, namely the function he gives the decorative arts, can be considered as an alternative form of usefulness since it serves to criticize rather than reinforce the dominant social order.

By enlisting the ostensibly frivolous decorative arts as a means of inspiring a desire for social and political change, Wilde puts into practice, and in fact defines, Lord Illingworth's "philosophy of the superficial" (446). As we have seen, in his lectures, letters, plays, and journalism, Wilde suggests that painting, dress, and home

décor, respectively, can prompt individuals to express discontent with the Victorian emphasis on punishment, with social conformity, and with gender inequality.

Wilde argues that painting, specifically avant-garde art's unusual use of line and colour, renders viewers more receptive. By making viewers sensitive to beauty, and specifically to beauty evoked through unconventional techniques, avant-garde art fosters open-mindedness and compassion, qualities that can incite viewers to critique the Victorian readiness to punish transgressions of social mores. As Wilde sees it, paintings should only inspire viewers through the appeal of their formal design elements. Wilde favoured Whistler's paintings precisely because, unlike the representational art of the period, they refuse to present a narrative or impose a moral or spiritual message on the viewer. Whistler's "Nocturnes" do not relay a message of compassion or sensitivity; instead, through the experience of contemplating Whistler's work, viewers become more sensitive and appreciative of colour harmonies and nuances. As Wilde suggests in his North American lectures, this heightened aesthetic awareness and sensitivity can develop, in the social realm, into a desire for harmony through the respect of differences, thus making individuals "such brothers that they would not go out to slay each other for the whim of some king" (144) nor "throw the customary stone" (171).

Also through the individual's active role, clothing can function as an assertion of individualism and, by extension, as a critique of social conformity. In his North American lectures, Wilde deplores the omnipresence of Baudelairean black in men's wear as well as the lack of loose-fitting drapery in the dress of both genders. As we have seen, he argues that colour and drapery create joy. During his tour, Wilde's eccentric lecturing costume added to the discussion, functioning as a visual symbol of

his belief in the importance of defying conventions through dress. Following his post-1882 decision to replace his eccentric attire with conventional suits adorned with unique details, Wilde created stage dandies who also favour ornaments as subtle signs of dissent.

Wildean dandies who wear unusual buttonholes reject the uniformity of current fashion and, by extension, the traditional values associated with the thoroughly conventional suit, values such as duty, prudence, seriousness, consistency of character, and acceptance of the social and political status quo. Similarly, fallen women who dress stylishly reject and critique social conventions. Expected to wear dark, unflattering attire or inappropriately loud clothing, Mrs. Erlynne instead wears beautiful, elegant gowns. In so doing, she refuses the visual and social codes suggestive of repentance as well as the social and literary categories of 'good' and 'bad' women. Through his work on dress reform, Wilde urges women to reject another social convention: the expectation that to be elegant requires dressing in physically restrictive attire. As Wilde suggests, dress-designers who create comfortable women's wear and women who adopt these dress reforms express their dissatisfaction with the restrictive corsets and gowns which both mold women into objects of display and perpetuate the anti-suffrage argument that their weak-constitution justifies their social and political inequality.

Through his approach to home décor, Wilde further decries the reality of gender inequality. Together with his editorial column for *Woman's World*, his writing on home décor argues for women's emancipation. As we have seen, Wilde describes decorative elements as refined and beautiful sources of tranquility, precisely the description traditionally imposed on the wife. His work on home décor thus suggests

that it is the well-decorated house, and not the wife, that is responsible for maintaining a sense of harmony. Morris-style wallpaper, pale colours, lightweight furniture, and hand-made ornaments, chosen by occupants for their colour harmonies, create a serene, restful environment which can be understood as operating to relieve the wife from her idealized and restricted role as 'angel in the house.'

Although Wilde may not have written "House Beautiful" with such an express purpose in mind, in light of his editorial changes to *Lady's World*, his progressively-minded editorial column for *Woman's World*, and his choice of adjectives when describing decorative items, Wilde's lecture implicitly rejects the 'angel in the house' ideal. Both Wilde's North American lectures and his editorship of *Woman's World* remain rich and relatively unexplored aspects of Wilde's *oeuvre*; more work in these two areas will undoubtedly further illuminate the ways in which Wilde's writing on dress reforms and home décor position him as a late nineteenth-century feminist writer, one who uniquely enlists the decorative arts in support of women's emancipation.

In the second act of An Ideal Husband, Mabel Chiltern and Lord Goring's banter values ornament rather than the Victorian value of usefulness. After Mabel states that "Tommy [her secretary] is the most useful person in London," Lord Goring provides her with the question "And who is the most ornamental?" She "triumphantly" asserts: "I am" (503). Mabel's response invokes both the notion that women are the possessions of their husbands as well as the anti-suffrage argument that women were too refined and delicate to be given the vote. She critiques this objectification of women by re-defining the notion of an ornament. For her, as for all Wilde's dandies, being ornamental, or decorative, means presenting oneself as

superfluous, trivial, and aloof so as to better critique society from a more distanced vantage point.

As we have seen, Wilde states in the "English Renaissance" that "art never harms itself by keeping aloof of the social problems of the day: rather, by doing so, it more completely realizes that which we desire" (128). Through their quips, Mabel, Lord Goring, and Wilde's other dandies enact the role Wilde ascribes, in his lecture, to non-didactic art: they subtly critique society not from a platform of reform, but from the disengaged position of 'art for art's sake.' However, Wilde not only critiques society through quips uttered by dandies proclaiming themselves to be ornamental. As this study has shown, he makes ornaments, namely paintings, sartorial details, and home décor items, useful. The decorative arts, in Wilde's writing, become functional ornaments; they suggest and cultivate dissatisfaction with social and political realities.

Endnotes

[1] After returning from a vacation in Morocco with Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde was accused of sodomy by Douglas' father, the Marquess of Queensberry. Wilde charged him with criminal libel. After Queensberry's acquittal, Wilde was arrested and imprisoned for homosexuality, then considered a crime in England. For more on Wilde's trials see Michael S. Foldy's The Trials of Oscar Wilde: Deviance, Morality, and Late Victorian Society.

[2] All quotations of Wilde's works are taken from The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde (Wordsworth, 1997).

[3] As with conventional notions of sincerity, authority, and morality, Wilde uses paradox to mock clichés regarding notions of 'surface' and 'depth.' In Lady Windermere's Fan, for example, Mrs. Erlynne, the play's female dandy, notes that "there is a great deal of good in Lord Augustus. Fortunately, it is all on the surface. Just where good qualities should be" (389). She also mocks her appearance-oriented but nevertheless moralistic society by chiding "manners before morals!" (405).

[4] Some of the many articles written on the relationship between Beardsley's drawings and Wilde's text include Eliot Gilbert's "Tumult of Images: Wilde, Beardsley, and Salomé" (Victorian Studies, Winter 1983), and Robert Schweik's "Congruous Incongruities: The Wilde-Beardsley Collaboration" (ELT, 1994).

[5] *The Daily Record-Union* (Sacramento), in an article published 27 March 1882, refers to the Aesthetic Movement as the "decorative art rage" (3). Sir Frank Benson, in My Memoirs (Ernest Benn, 1939), describes the movement as the "aesthetic craze" (cited in Mikhail 26).

[6] Linda Dowling argues that Wilde was prompted to turn away from the Arts and Crafts movement and toward an 'art for art's sake' aestheticism because of the "vulgarization" (35), by home décor manuals, of Morris's Arts and Crafts philosophy. However, Eastlake's popular manual was published in 1868, followed by others in the early 1870s, thus the "vulgarization" occurred before Morris's influential 1877 lecture and long before Wilde included aspects of both Paterian and Morrisian Aestheticism in his 1882 lectures.

[7] At the time of this writing, Oxford University Press had still not issued its annotated Complete Works of Oscar Wilde.

[8] Beginning with Richard Butler Glaenzer's Decorative Art in America: A lecture by Oscar Wilde (1906), Wilde's 1882 lectures have, at times, been referred to as one lecture, cited as "The Decorative Arts."

[9] Rupert Hart-Davis and Wilde's grandson, Merlin Holland, quote this line in their introduction to Wilde's letters from North America. As they note, "sadly there is no evidence for the anecdote" (123).

[10] Since the pagination of the available microfiche version of *Woman's World* is often confusing, page citations for Wilde's editorial column are taken from Robert Ross's compilation of Wilde's journalism, entitled Reviews.

[11] In Essays and Lectures, the statement appears on page 144 of "The English Renaissance" and page 171 of "House Decoration." In Kevin O'Brien's reconstruction of "The House Beautiful," the line appears on page 417.

[12] In the March 1889 edition of *The Woman's World*, Wilde, reviewing the novel Dorinda by Lady Munster, appreciates the unconventionality of the narrative. He writes: "I was afraid that Dorinda, after undergoing endless humiliations, would be proved innocent in the last chapter. It was quite a relief to find that Dorinda [...] is a kleptomaniac; that is to say, she is a member of the upper classes who spends her time in collecting works of art that do not belong to her. This, however, is only one of her accomplishments" (441).

[13] Anne Varty notes that "the 'brown fogs' are facetiously chosen since fog would normally be held to obscure vision rather than to enhance it, and it is normally taken as something to look through rather than look at" (60).

[14] In asserting that "it is style that makes us believe a thing- nothing but style" (796), Wilde also foreshadows Linda Nochlin's work on the persuasiveness of the Realist style, specifically its ability to suggest, through fine brushwork and a precision of detail, that what it depicts is a 'snapshot' of reality.

[15] In "The Decay of Lying," Wilde cites Hokusai and Hokkei during Vivian's discussion of Japanese art (795).

[16] The earlier work of Japanese screen painters such as Tawaraya Sotatsu's impressionistic "Pine Island" (early 17th c.) and Ogata Korin's "Irises" (early 18th c.) may also have influenced Wilde's understanding of Japanese art. Both artists emphasize colour, and present imaginative depictions of trees or, in Korin's folded screen, flowers floating in air.

[17] Art historians and art theorists do not differentiate between the terms 'abstraction' and 'nonrepresentational art.' Indeed, as the index of Charles Harrison and Paul Wood's Art in Theory 1900-1990 indicates, nonrepresentational art is a synonym for abstract art (1183).

[18] Herbert von Herkomer, W.H. Deverell, and Ford Madox Brown were among the most well-known British Realists. As Linda Nochlin notes, they, along with French Realists such as Millet and Courbet, created "a visual compendium of social injustices" while also "declaring the heroism, dignity, and probity of manual labour" (127).

[19] Given Ruskin's praise for Turner's impressionistic work, Ruskin's critique of Whistler's painting has always been seen as rather contradictory. As Linda Merrill has emphasized, contemporary commentators noted, in articles published anonymously, that "Mr. Ruskin exhausted reams of paper and floods of ink in praise of Turner's 'arrangements' many of them less definite than Whistler's" (cited in Merrill 52).

[20] Ruskin's criticism of Whistler's painting greatly influenced popular opinion. As Karl Beckson notes, for years, no one would purchase Whistler's "Nocturne in Black and Gold" (261).

[21] Victorian notions of punishment are also ridiculed in The Importance of Being Earnest. As Sos Eltis notes, "the puritan ethic of punishment, the idea that suffering chastens the sinner, so vigorously attacked in "The Soul of Man," is shown up as a lunatic fallacy when Miss Prism exclaims at the news of Ernest's death: 'What a lesson for him! I trust he will profit by it'" (194).

[22] Wilde made a similar point a few years earlier in his editorial column for *The Woman's World*: he noted that "there is always a certain amount of danger in any attempt to cultivate impossible virtues" (225).

[23] The Decadent poet and essayist Arthur Symons refers to the colour purple or to purple flowers in his poetry. He associates purple with artificiality, age, and decay. See especially "Maquillage" (1892) and "Violet" (1895).

[24] In her analysis, Varty states that Lord Goring "drops the dandy's mask to reveal a Christ figure beneath" (187). Her statement is most likely prompted by Wilde's stage directions at a later point in the play: he describes Lord Goring as "showing the philosopher that underlies the dandy" (539). However,

as I have suggested, and as the stage directions imply, Lord Goring's compassion is an aspect of his dandyism. As Neil Sammells states, Wilde's characters fashion themselves into "multiple selves, all of which are on the surface" (38).

[25] In her illustrated manual The Art of Dress (1879), Mary Eliza Haweis writes that 'dress' is "clothing [...] elevated into a fine art" (32).

[26] Wilde's work on dress can be aligned with Stephen Greenblatt's notion of self-fashioning. In his study of Renaissance literature and society, Greenblatt argues that individuals fashioned themselves in order to either reinforce or resist the dominant social order. However, while Greenblatt asserts that one's identity is primarily shaped by social forces, Wilde, as I have suggested, maintains that the individual is the dominant shaper of his or her own identity.

[27] As Karl Beckson notes in The Oscar Wilde Encyclopedia, Wilde's essay on costume was first published in May 1885 under the title "Shakespeare and Stage Costumes." It was then revised as "The Truth of Masks" in Wilde's 1891 collection of essays, Intentions (385).

[28] In acknowledging that Wilde wields power as a spectacle, I am not aligning the effects of his sartorial project with the spectacles, such as processions and pageants, which Renaissance rulers would create in order to emphasize their power. As Peter Stallybrass, Allon White, and Edward Muir have shown, Renaissance rulers conceived of spectacles as methods of surveillance. Wilde's project is not concerned with issues of surveillance and, in opposition to the Renaissance 'spectacles of power,' his sartorial spectacles reject, rather than reinforce, the dominant order.

[29] In "The Truth of Masks" (1885), written a few years after his lectures, Wilde notes that "the value of black is hardly appreciated" (891). However, while citing Baudelaire's assertion that "*nous célébrons tous quelque enterrement*," Wilde praises black as a "tone-giving neutral" which can "separate and harmonise colours" and thus proves useful in "stage-mounting and home decoration" (891).

[30] In his 1882 lectures, Wilde does make two implicit references to the upper middle classes. In "The House Beautiful," he notes that "the money spent on modern dress is an extravagant waste" (39). Along the same lines, in "House Decoration," he notes with displeasure that "we hear ladies boast that they do not wear a dress more than once" (163). He argues instead for the wearing and handing down of beautiful dresses, noting the process would "be quite appreciated by a modern husband when called upon to settle his wife's bills" (164).

[31] During the play's first performance, in April 1893, Mrs. Arbuthnot wore "two severe looking gowns, both black" (cited in Kaplan and Stowell 25). Although the black gowns are in keeping with her character as a moralistic penitent, their "plunging neckline[s] and form-fitting bodice[s]" (26) suggest Wilde and the design team of Mesdames Savage and Purdue chose to complicate Mrs. Arbuthnot's character through clothing which would have been seen as seductive and inappropriate.

[32] For detailed descriptions of the costumes worn by actresses on the opening night of Wilde's first three society plays, see Kaplan and Stowell's useful Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes (Cambridge, 1994).

[33] Much disparity exists in accounts of the history and manufacture of the bra. In 1914, Caresse Crosby patented a "backless brassiere" and in the late 1920s Ida Rosenthal, founder of the Maidenform company, patented and popularized the modern-day bra (Vare and Ptacek 50-55).

[34] In his awareness of the link between women's restrictive dress and gender inequality, and in his advice on rejecting corsets, Wilde echoes the dress reformer Elizabeth Stuart Phelps who, in What To Wear? (1874), urged women to "burn the corsets!" (cited in Summers 147). As Leigh Summers notes, Phelps rejected the corset because in making women physically weak it "undermined [their] potential for political power" (147). It is worthwhile to note that in her study of the corset Summers cites Wilde once, stating that as editor of *Woman's World* he wrote that, due to corseting, the female body has "lost

its elasticity" and has "ceased developing according to the laws of nature" (cited in Summers 59). As Summers notes, this faulty view that the female body was irrevocably weakened through corsets comes from "February Fashions" (*Woman's World*, 1888). Wilde, however, did not write this article and only contributed to the magazine in the form of his editorial column.

[35] Laurel Brake has argued in her study of Wilde's editorship of *Woman's World* that Wilde associates women's dress with "vulgar commodification" (132) and seeks to replace it "with more spiritual elements of women, their intellect and emotion" (132). Brake considers Wilde's decision to place fashion plates at the end of *Woman's World*, rather than at the beginning as they were presented in the periodical's predecessor, *Lady's World*, as proof of what she describes as Wilde's tendency to "value fashion for women less than that of men" (132). Reversing the placement of the fashion plates may simply have been a gesture, on Wilde's part, to assert the periodical's break from its exclusively fashion-oriented predecessor. Furthermore, as we have seen, in his editorial column Wilde decries women's adherence to the dictates of restrictive fashion; he does not, however, minimize the importance of dress. Brake's argument fails to consider Wilde's editorial writings on the art of dress design, his suggestions for women's dress reform, as well as his decision, as editor, to include an article on the history of women's dress in each edition of *Woman's World.*

[36] In The Subjection of Women (1869), Mill writes: "the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes- the legal subordination of one sex to the other- is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement [...] it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on one side, nor disability on the other" (427). Two years earlier, Mill, as a Member of Parliament, proposed giving women the vote, but "the proposal was rejected by a vote of 194 to 74" (Perry 426). In a series of interviews and essays, George Bernard Shaw, a vocal supporter of gender equality, expresses "the rather original view about woman that she is very much the same sort of person as myself" (cited in Weintraub 230) and notes that "the domestic career is no more natural to women than a military career is to men" (239). Percy Bysshe Shelley and Jeremy Bentham also supported women's emancipation.

[37] For a detailed description of Wilde's house, see Charlotte Gere's The House Beautiful. After visiting it, W.B. Yeats wrote that the "perfect harmony" of the house and of Wilde's family life suggested a "deliberate artistic composition" (cited in Gere 104). While Yeats presents this as a criticism, the Wildes most likely saw it as a success. Indeed, choosing to work with Godwin, a set designer, speaks to their interest in creating a theatrical environment.

[38] In the essay "Of Queens' Gardens" (1865), Ruskin celebrates the doctrine of the separate spheres, writing that "the man, in his rough work in [the] open world, must encounter all peril and trial. [...] But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, ruled by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence. This is the true nature of home- it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from injury, but from all terror, doubt and division" (cited in Beckson 131).

[39] Page numbers for articles published in *Woman's World* are cited as they appear on microfiche available from the University of Alberta and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. However, these page numbers do not always follow or correspond to those listed in the magazine's contents page.

[40] The campaign for women's emancipation was indeed closely associated with Wilde, both because of his editorial column and, in the following decade, because, as Linda Dowling has shown, the New Woman and the dandy both came to be associated with anarchism (438). As a result, Wilde's downfall caused support for the New Woman to suffer (Ledger 109).

[41] Carol Christ notes that "feminists starting with Virginia Woolf [in A Room of One's Own (1929) and Three Guineas (1938)] have shown the ways in which the ideal of the angel in the house in fact limits woman's political power and psychological freedom even while it apotheosizes her" (147).

Appendix

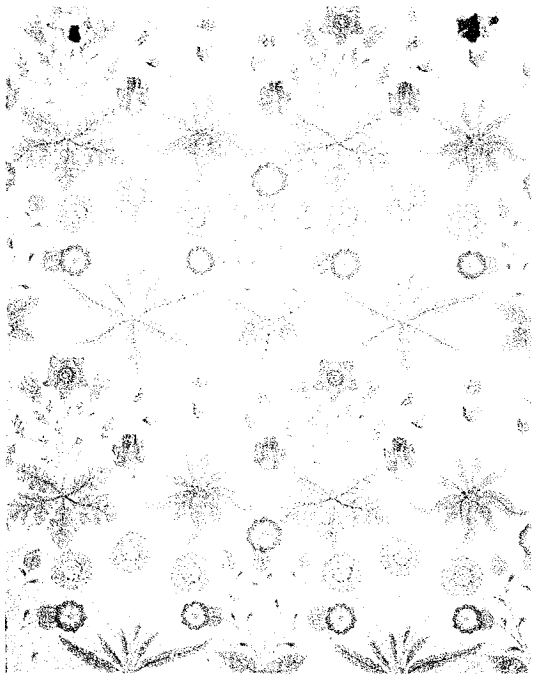

Fig.1a "Daisy" wallpaper: the first and most popular wallpaper pattern designed by William Morris (1864) (Gere 41)

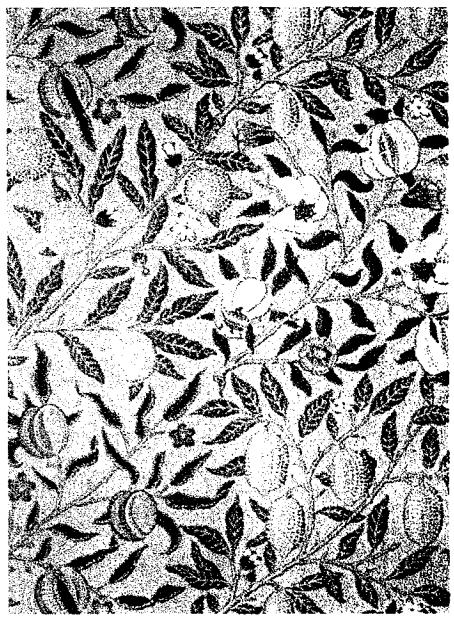

Fig. 1b "Pomegranate" wallpaper by Morris (1886) (Gere 118)

Fig. 2 William Powell Frith's "The Private View at the Royal Academy, 1881" (Gere 21)

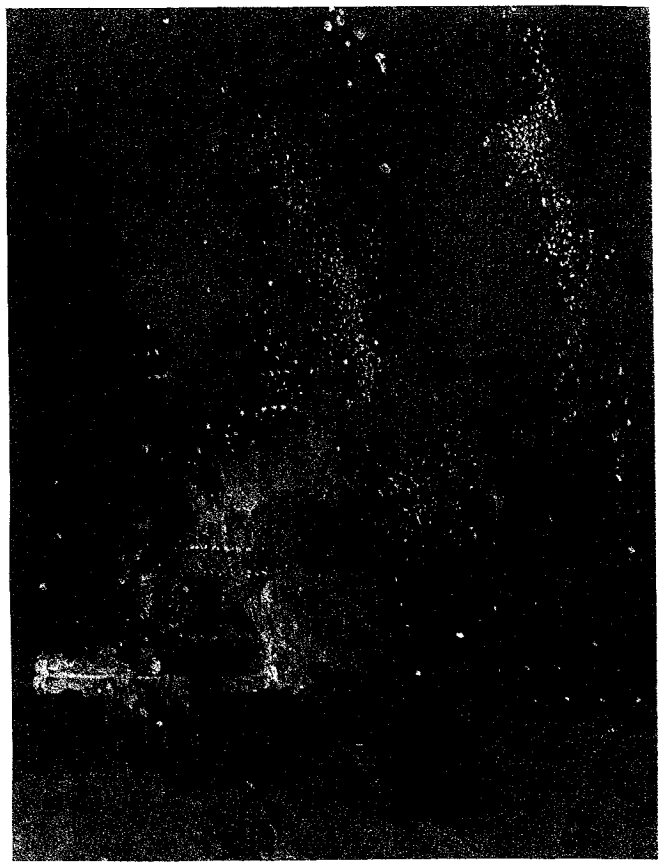

Fig. 3 Whistler's "Nocturne in Black and Gold" (1875, exhibited 1877) (Merrill 209)

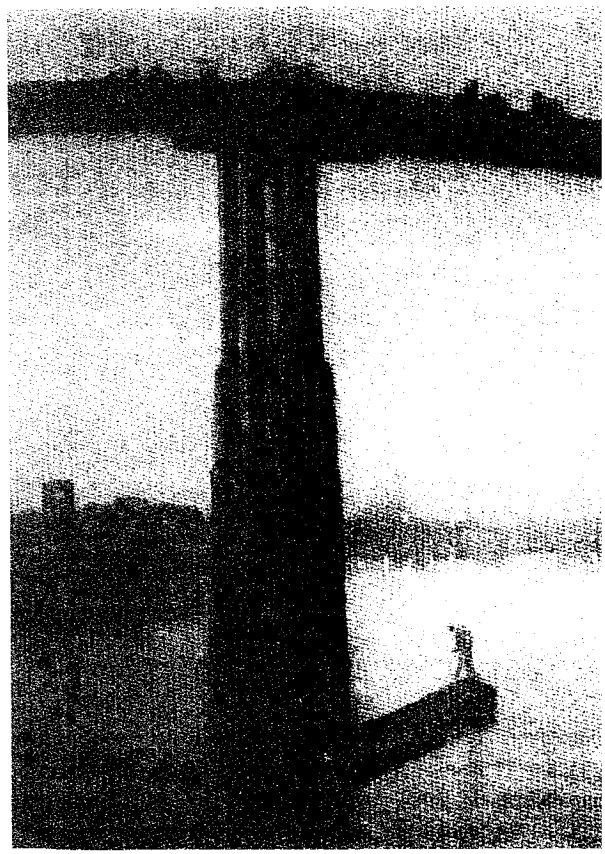

Fig. 4 Whistler's "Nocturne in Blue and Gold" (1872) (Gere 23)

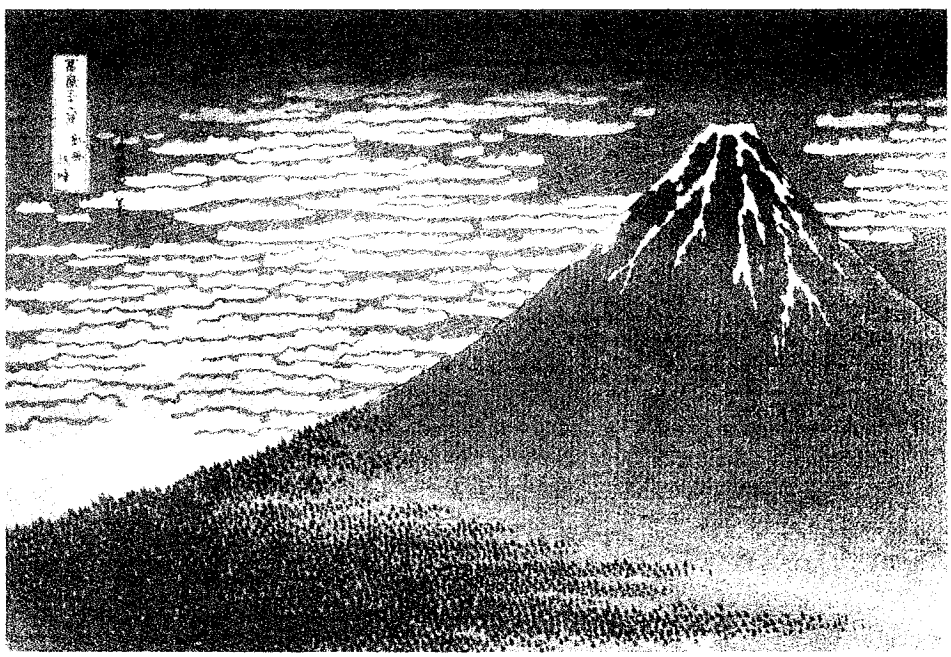

Fig. 5 Hokusai's "View on a Fine Breezy Day" (1822-32) (Stanley-Baker 193)

Fig. 6 Hiroshige's "Snow at Kambara" (1833) (Stanley-Baker 193)

Fig. 7 Beardsley's "The Black Cape" (1894) (Zatlin 108)

Fig. 8 Beardsley's "The Eyes of Herod" (1894) (Zatlin 155)

Fig. 9 Herkomer's "On Strike" (1891) (Nochlin 123)

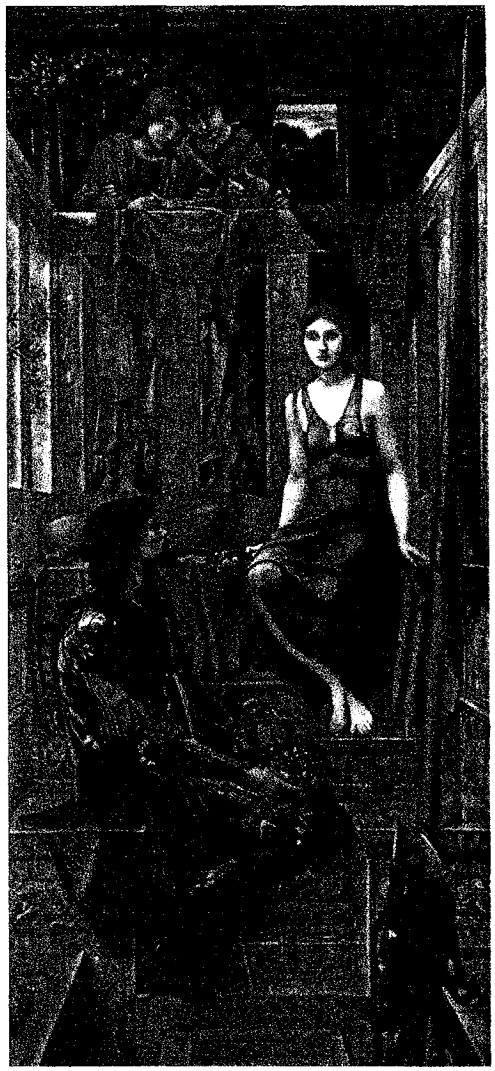

Fig. 10 Burne-Jones's "King Cophetua And the Beggar Maid" (1884) (Kleiner 977)

Fig. 11 Wilde in his lecturing costume, New York, 1882. Photographed by Napoleon Sarony. (Gere 89)

Fig. 12 Wilde in his post-1882 attire. Photographed in London in 1889. (Gere 96)

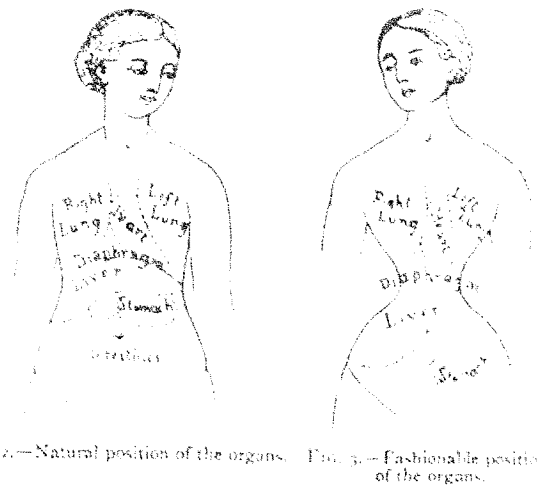

Fig. 13 Haweis's sketches of the organs before and during corseting (1879). (Haweis 36)

Fig. 14 Crane's "My Lady's Chamber" (1878). Frontispiece for Cook's The House Beautiful. (Gere 91)

Fig. 15 Cover of *Lady's World* (1886) (Brake 140)

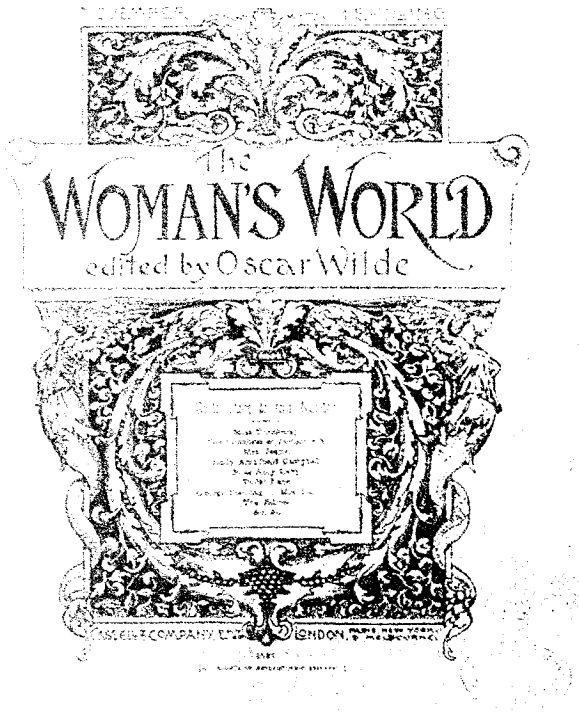

Fig. 16 Cover of *The Woman's World* (1887) (Brake 141)

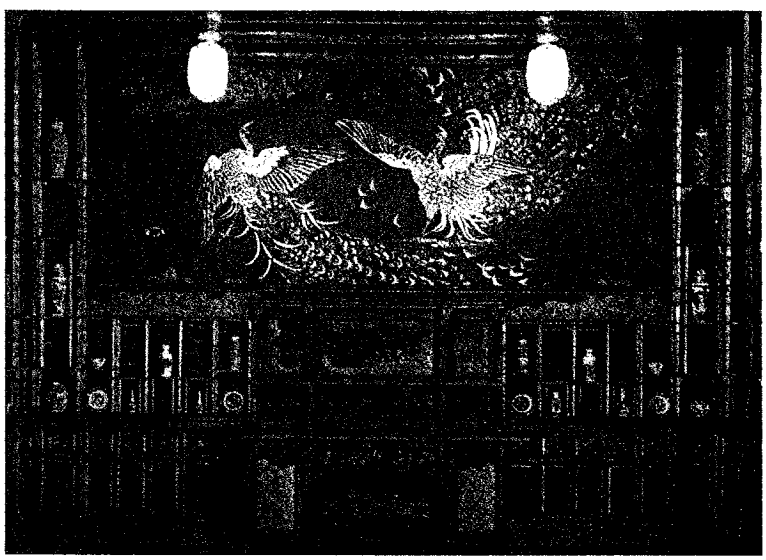

Fig. 17 The Peacock Room, designed by Whistler (1876-77) (Escritt 51)

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