Wilde’s Aesthetics in Consumer Culture and Orientalism

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Abstract:

This thesis is an examination of nineteenth-century writer Oscar Wilde and his philosophy of aesthetics surrounding consumer culture and Orientalism in late Victorian England. In order to share the theories of aesthetics that he learned from the movement's predecessors with a wider audience, he immersed himself in writing, editing, and theatre production, and promoted his ideals through his lecture tour, social activity and published works. My research focuses on the social history of Wilde's background with aesthetics, and the important roles that consumer culture and Orientalism play in Wilde's writings. Consumer culture was booming due to the shrinking gap between the wealthy and the impoverished and because of opening trade in Japan and China. As a result, Orientalism became popular with consumers and artists; its ideas even influenced Wilde's aesthetics and written works.
Introduction

Oscar Wilde left a cultural legacy of decadent style and sparkling witticisms. Today, his works are widely read in high school and university educational settings. His passionate rhetoric surrounding aesthetics and modern society encompassed and influenced a variety of artistic fields, including high art, fashion, decorative arts, theatre, and literature. Wilde was an international “spokesman for aesthetics” (Ellmann 157) and firmly believed in the importance of sharing ideals of high culture with mass society, which he was able to do due to the social upheaval that characterized Victorian England. Wilde promoted the ideals that he learned from the Aesthetic movement’s predecessors, namely the Pre-Raphaelites and Walter Pater, through his vigorous participation in social circles and publication of largely well-received written works. Wilde was extremely socially savvy in his ability to promote himself, his friends, and his colleagues. Besides describing his aesthetics within a novel, essays, and several plays, Wilde also endorsed his aesthetics in an American lecture tour and publications such as *Pall Mall Gazette* and *The Woman’s World*.

One particular aspect that stands out as an integral part of Wilde’s intellectual philosophy of aesthetics is Orientalism, a tendency to look to the Far East rather than Western civilization as a perfect example of artistic freedom and aesthetic ideals, as “Nineteenth-century orientalism’s Orient functions as an alternative aesthetic space” (Haddad 2). Orientalism applies to the booming consumer culture in Victorian England as trade opened in Japan with the Meiji Restoration in 1867, and both elites and lower classes received Oriental consumer goods as symbols of the new line of communication between two worlds. Indeed, “… the vogue for Chinese goods spread widely amongst the aristocracy, and a taste for objects in Chinese style
became almost synonymous with nobility” (Chen 40), though a blend of cultures occurred when “Japanese subjects were not only used in “high” literature and art but also associated with popular culture, entertainment, and even the consumerist way of life (Zhou 59). Wilde’s aesthetics contributed to the Victorian consumer culture through his influence in art, fashion, decorative arts, and home furnishings. With that consumer culture arise issues of accessibility, advertising, and class structure. Besides affecting English society’s consumerist trends, Wilde’s aesthetics carried over into his own writing, both fiction and non-fiction. My research, along with other scholars’ investigations, finds examples of his aesthetics and Oriental ideals within speeches and interviews during his North American lecture tour, his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and his philosophical essay, “The Decay of Lying”; these examples reveal the significance of consumer culture’s influence within Victorian society and literature at the time.

**Student and Professor of Aesthetics: American Lecture Tour and Interviews**

Wilde became interested in aesthetics while he was studying at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland. He took a course on the subject and studied well-known, esteemed predecessors of aesthetics from Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato to Pre-Raphaelites like Rossetti (Ellmann 30). In 1874, Wilde decided to leave Ireland to fulfill his ambitions of further study in aesthetics in the one city that would allow him to do so to the fullest extent—London, England. He sat for scholarship-awarding examinations at Oxford in the spring of 1874 and enrolled in courses that fall (Ellmann 35). In between studying literature and philosophy, Wilde began his writing career with poetry and conversed with fellow students and colleagues; these discussions would later inspire the dialogical style of “The Decay of Lying.” Understandably, the two
individuals whom Wilde was most interested in meeting and studying under were John Ruskin and Walter Pater because "For an undergraduate with artistic tastes, they were the inevitable poles of attraction" (Ellmann 47) who later on would greatly influence his own aesthetic philosophy, spirituality, and writings.

After graduating from Oxford, Wilde continued in London and immersed himself in society, charming his way through social and literary circles with little money and a large aesthetic presence. Wilde’s reputation as a flamboyant advocate of aesthetics went so far as to land him the role of an inspiration for satire in Gilbert and Sullivan’s 1881 comic opera Patience, as “[Gilbert] could scarcely ignore Wilde as the most conspicuous representative… and the most articulate standardbearer of aestheticism at the time” (Ellmann 135). The opera was successful enough that Richard D’Oyly Carte wanted it to open in the United States that same year; more importantly, he courted Wilde to promote the opera’s American debut with a lecture tour composed of topics involving “a consideration of ‘The Beautiful’ as seen in everyday life” (Ellmann 152). Wilde could not resist this opportunity to make some money and promote himself and his aesthetic beliefs, especially after the lack of success of his first play, Vera; or, The Nihilists from the previous year (1880).

America was a new frontier to explore and provided a fresh audience to share his thoughts on art and society regarding consumer culture and Orientalism. The vagueness in the direction of these lectures provided Wilde with an open ability to be able to judge this new American audience’s tastes and incorporate them within his own personal beliefs and style. Perhaps naively so, Wilde “was not prepared for the reporters: there were so many, and they would ask anything. Nor were the reporters prepared for him” (Ellmann, 158) when he first
arrived after his ship docked on American shores. From January to November, 1882, Wilde embarked on the lengthy lecture tour that took place in both major cities and rural towns across North America, including the United States and Canada. The tour’s appropriately long name was “The Practical Application of the Principles of Aesthetic Theory to Exterior and Interior House Decoration, with Observations upon Dress and Personal Ornaments,” otherwise known as “The House Beautiful,” (Gere and Hoskins 12). In these lectures, Wilde used his position as a “self-designated ‘professor of aesthetics’ as he identified himself on his visiting cards” (Waldrep xi) as he discussed ways in which the American audience could appropriate aesthetic ideals into selections of furniture and home decorations. He decried Gothic styles and “the gilt and gaudy” qualities of French furniture (Gere and Hoskins 92) in favor of a more modern and harmonious visual look for one’s home. In fact, “during the 1870s and 1880s the model aesthetic house was a created pastiche of linear embellishment and unrelated, exotic formats (Blanchard 87) such as richly colored tapestries, delicately painted wooden furniture and privacy screens, and porcelain bowls and vases. This sense of eclecticism transformed a dull, mundane domicile into one that represented the merging of East and West, though in the privacy of one’s home rather than on a diplomatic scale.

However, as far as interest in Wilde went, locals from the western side of the Atlantic were familiar with the Aesthetic movement’s predecessors, the artists known as the Pre-Raphaelites, and were curious to learn about Wilde as a new representative of current English artistic circles (Blanchard xii). Alas, Wilde’s gender-bending, effeminate physical appearance and mannerisms at times startled and put off certain audiences who did not appreciate the fact that “He dressed to be noticed and entertained with a touch of eccentricity that got him talked
about (Gere and Hoskins 12). Though some North Americans did not receive him very kindly, as
“He was mocked as a degenerate in satirical cartoons... and mimicked by Harvard students...”
(Hofer and Scharnhorst 6), more enlightened individuals afforded Wilde with interviews. By
conducting a staggering 98 of them with various publications, newspapers, and magazines (Hofer
and Scharnhorst xi), Wilde shows how influential he really was in terms of sheer breadth of
exposure.

Throughout these interviews, Wilde espoused his own Orientalist aesthetics and often
commented on the wonderful artistic sense of the Japanese and Chinese to a wide range of
readers. He would describe the selections of the furnishings of English aristocratic households in
order to influence the buying power of both American and English masses. In a January 1882
Boston Herald article titled “Oscar Wilde,” Wilde remarked, “I am also a great admirer of the
Japanese, of eastern art especially, in which there is a most delicate sense of the beautiful”
(Hofer and Scharnhorst 43). Delicate beauty aptly describes the Eastern ideals which contrasted
with heavier, extravagant Gothic ideas of aesthetic interiors that previously dominated the
decorative arts arena. Moreover, in an interview with New York World on May 6, 1882, Wilde
described the artistic value of Orientalism in the developing San Francisco Chinatown as he said:

I found the Chinese quarter in San Francisco most interesting, and, in my opinion, the
Chinese have a decided artistic value... Their quarter is full of artistic motives, and they
have a constant eye to the value of color. We do not value color sufficiently—we do not
recognize the elements of joyousness that color brings into life. (Hofer and Scharnhorst
146)
The idea of color in Orientalist furnishings and decorations appears to be important due to “blue-and-white china, [and] because of its beautiful colour, noble shape and proportioned form, [it] was one of the best objects to bring an aesthetic sense to a room” (Chen 43). The famous blue-and-white pattern in porcelain became significant and recognizable example of the commodification of Oriental goods.

Application of Orientalist Aesthetics in England Society

In England, Orientalism was affecting not only the domestic sphere, but also the public sphere of theatre. Two plays, *Patience* (1881) and *The Mikado* (1885), involved aesthetics and Orientalism frankly in their productions. A critic favorably commented that “Such plays as ‘Patience’ and ‘the Mikado’ have developed our instinct for colour and form,” showing that the plays were as much educational vehicles as caricatures for aestheticism (Fortunato 39). Thus, the presentation on the desirable quality of color in Japanese-themed and aesthetic plays reveals the extent to which Orientalism influenced ideas of aesthetics and beauty.

Aristocrats back home in England such as the Whistler and Wyndham families also typified the ideal audience for beginning Orientalist consumerism: people who desired a large collection of objects and artifacts to portray a sense of deep transcendence into another artistic realm never before seen. For these elite homes, “The emphasis is on the creation of a harmonious yet eclectic whole, not on the specific value of individual pieces. The morning, drawing and dining rooms at Clouds [the Wyndham’s home] were decorated with Oriental blue and white dishes and jars (Mendelssohn 228). The Clouds home thus exemplified the goal of Victorian consumers, which became a total immersion in Orientalist objects, which became commodities in general society. The trend of decorating one’s home in such objects from China and Japan
thus appeared in society in a top-down fashion, trickling down to diluted, cheapened, and milder variations created for a mass audience.

When Wilde returned to England after his tour, he continued to write and participate in social circles to promote himself and aesthetics. He married Constance Lloyd on May 29, 1884 in “a wedding in the high aesthetic mode” (Ellmann 249), complete with a wedding dress designed by the expert of beauty and aesthetics, Wilde himself. In his private life with Constance, Wilde was also an authority of Oriental ideals and consumerism within his own home. He was proud of his stylistic tendencies and “Much of what we might see as Wilde’s extravagance—his elaborate decorations for his home and clothing for himself and his wife—was an attempt to popularize himself as an arbiter of taste” (Waldrep 63). He enjoyed having visitors and company over to examine his physical manifestations of his aesthetic beliefs. After all, as he had learned on his lecture tour, “the public buys the image, not the speech [which had] transformed in the fertile arena of English consumer society” (Waldrep 63). As part of his image as an Aesthete, much of the furniture, decorations, and fabrics used in his home encapsulated the splendor of Oriental style that Wilde helped cultivate on his own time. These images of his home were further popularized by magazines and pictorial editorials; being a man of his word from his American lecture tour, “Wilde’s home was a famous showplace for the more avant-garde ideas then in vogue about home furnishings” (Waldrep 35).

Orientalist Consumer Culture in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

After his lecture tour, interviews, and magazine and newspaper work, Wilde began writing his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published in 1890, which further espoused his aesthetic beliefs right from the beginning preface and into the characterization of the infamous
Dorian Gray. For Wilde, “Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated” (Wilde, *Picture 3*), and beautiful things definitely included objects of Orientalism. For Wilde, surfaces were an important part of what can and be considered beautiful in aesthetic theory. Indeed, “Wilde was interested in elevating the status of the decorative, the superficial (Fortunato 20) by attributing Orientalism to aesthetics. Thus, the visual aspect of aesthetics is held as the most crucial sense involved, as beauty can be designated merely by sight. Several instances of Orientalism within the novel reveal that beauty or aesthetic value can also be divulged by means of other senses, namely touch and scent.

In the novel, a multiple number of Orientalist goods appear in various forms of home furnishings in order to present Dorian Gray as an Aesthete and cultivator of beauty beyond that of his own. He is a man of taste and a student of aesthetics, specifically taught by his friends and mentors, Lord Henry and Basil Hallward. As Lord Henry arrives at Dorian’s house, “the butler entered with a laden tea-tray and set it down upon a small Japanese table... Two globe-shaped china dishes were brought in by a page” (Wilde, *Picture 27*). Taking notice of the origin of the table and dishes, the reader will automatically assume that Dorian is of some standing in society, as his Orientalist objects are neither gaudy nor cheap, which may have been characteristics of Orientalist items created for the masses. However, Dorian’s table is small and the dishes have a delicate shape that requires specific handling that the help of the upper classes could provide. In other words, Dorian is uplifted as a member of high society because “The consumption of Chinese tea identifies the character as educated, graceful, and superior” (Chen 48). In addition to the furniture and practical use for dishes, Dorian also has a passion for consuming decorative items in that “he sought to accumulate the most exquisite specimens that he could find of textile
and embroidered work... elaborate yellow Chinese hangings... Japanese Foukousas with their green-toned golds and their marvelously-plumaged birds” (Wilde, Picture 116). Here, Dorian demonstrates his passion for Orientalist aesthetic consumption by declaring an intention to collect such items. He envies the naturalistic, beautiful qualities of textiles and what they can contain: a periscope to an outside, seemingly intangible world other than that which his artifacts can provide him.

Besides home furnishings, jewels and gems are evoked in The Picture of Dorian Gray to promote the visual aesthetic value of Orientalist objects. In terms of sparkling gemstones and jewels, the outer has more importance than any inner quality when it comes to visuality in consumer culture. Orientalism visually concerns color, delicateness, and purity, especially. Mills reveals how the consumer culture of jewel and gem collection relates to identity of the Dorian Gray as a dandy figure obsessed with physical appearance and consumption, and his house-museum as accommodating his assortment of Orientalist items. Just the way that Basil describes Dorian in that “The world is changed because you are made of ivory and gold,” (Wilde, Picture 181), with two distinctly Oriental jewels, refers to a “transformation of the dandy-collector into a jewel-object” (Mills 158) himself. Thus, Life imitates Art in that Dorian Gray becomes his own artistic commodity, a jewel, trapped within the boundaries of his own home, where his portrait binds him forever in a secret pact of hidden identity and fear of disintegrating beauty.

Wilde also inserts Aestheticism into Dorian’s dialogue when Dorian asks Basil, “Was it not Gautier who used to write about la consolation des arts?... I love beautiful things that one can touch and handle. Old brocades, green bronzes, lacquerwork, carved ivories, exquisite surroundings...” (Wilde, Picture 92). Here, Dorian is referring to Gautier’s famous quote, “art
for art’s sake,” which became the unofficial yet widely familiar slogan for Aestheticism.

Arguably, “Wilde tried to sell the Aesthetic living style to his readers” (Chen 47) as Dorian remarks upon Gautier by relating the French man’s writings to his own appreciation for aestheticism to go beyond the visual and into tactile enjoyment for such Orientalist objects like brocades and ivories. The sensuous appeal of Orientalism is thus expanded upon with the extended realm for pleasure, transcending mere outer surface beauty. Besides touch, the sense of smell is also evoked when considering the scope of the opulent attraction of Orientalist objects. Dorian insists, “And so now he would study perfumes, and the secrets of their manufacture, distilling heavily-scented oils, and burning odorous gums from the East” (Wilde, *Picture* 111), which further deviates from the strictly visual sensibility of Orientalism, moving it into a more developed artistic forum. Another example of the olfactory possibilities in conjunction with visual appeal occurs when Dorian Gray reaches for his opium box before heading out to the opium dens to smoke it. He describes the box and its contents in vivid detail, specifically mentioning how:

> It was a small Chinese box of black and gold-dust lacquer, elaborately wrought, the sides patterned with curved waves, and the silken cords hung with round crystals and tasseled in plaited metal thread. He opened it. Inside was a green paste waxy in luster, the odour curiously heavy and persistent. (Wilde, *Picture* 152-153)

As part of Dorian’s eventual downfall, his use of Asian narcotics reveals the dangers in giving in too much to hedonism and pleasure-seeking, even within an Orientalist realm. Though we have previously seen instances of Orientalism in consumer goods that have highlighted the benefits of such a connection from the East to the West, there are obvious parts of it that have the potential
for destruction, rather than the creation of beauty, if abused. The murky future of Orientalist goods is revealed "In Wilde’s own tendencies to privilege the Oriental in his writing... he consistently linked the Asian with... a region of knowledge that was not known to the common man (Waldrep 41). Chen goes on to say that “commodities... decide who the consumers are” (Chen 49), which speaks to the obsession and addiction that Dorian Gray has with collecting Orientalist items, including opium. In this last case of consumption, Dorian is revealed as an opium-eater, decided upon by his choice of commodity. In other words, Life imitates Art; life is exemplified through Dorian’s choice to consume opium, and art is exemplified through the appearance of opium as a commodity.

Life Imitating Art in “The Decay of Lying”

Just before the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde published the first version of “The Decay of Lying” in 1889 and then an expanded version in *Intentions* in 1891. The essay is composed of a dialogue between two individuals, Vivian and Cyril; mostly, Cyril asks philosophical questions on art and beauty, while Vivian answers them with lengthy responses. Vivian postulates that lying is an art form due to its ability to prevent “Art [becoming] sterile, and beauty [passing] away from the land” (Wilde, “Decay” 167). However, society’s quest for absolute truth in facts has led to a decay of the ability for artists to lie in order to achieve the greatest aesthetic extent. Vivian further explains how the history of decorative arts, which is the topic that Wilde lectured on during his North American tour, “is the record of the struggle between Orientalism, with its frank rejection of imitation, its love of artistic convention, its dislike to the actual representation of any object in Nature, and our own imitative spirit” (Wilde, “Decay” 175). With regards to home furnishings, the pressure to retain a sense of
rote reproduction remained until Orientalism came into the scene. Ultimately, its “frank rejection of imitation” is a cultural response to the ability of the unknown to provide a new perspective on aesthetics and artistic representations.

However, the elevation of Orientalist ideals in favor of “our own imitative spirit” calls into question the idea of the fetish. Gagnier claims that Wilde “turned his audience into consumers” (Gagnier 109) because his works mainly lent themselves to an educated, literate class who identified with characters like Dorian Gray or Lord Henry, or others from Wilde’s comic society plays. Furthermore, “In “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde could see the West’s fetishism of Eastern ways and peoples in British Orientalism and japonisme” (Gagnier 109). Gagnier’s interpretation is another example of the dark side of Orientalism, in addition to Dorian’s opium-eating. This fetishism has the potential to corrupt the true ideals and meanings behind pure Oriental objects, and not those coming out of a Western filter to create fake copies for the masses. Wilde was against such a cultural sieve and focused instead on being able to distinguish between true aesthetic commodities and false, reactionary copies.

In “The Decay of Lying,” Vivian further proposes that there is a separation of real-life Japanese people and their representation in art that is created for Westerners like himself and Cyril, who enjoys Orientalist commodities like much of society. Vivian declares that “The Japanese people are the deliberate self-conscious creation of certain individual artists” (Wilde, “Decay” 187) such as Hokusai or Hokkei—Japanese-born painters. Artists create archetypes that people in real life base their personas upon. Moreover, people base their ideals upon what they see in various mediums of art, such as paintings, fashion, and decorative arts. Furthermore,
Vivian claims that "The whole of Japan is a pure invention," so that when traveling to Japan in an attempt to retain a first-hand look at the country's aesthetic potential, "All [Western painters] saw, all he had the chance of painting, were a few lanterns and some fans" (Wilde, "Decay" 187). The aesthetic possibilities of Japan thus lie primarily in the country's art by its own artists. There is no need to spend effort, time, and money to go and physically see a country with one's own eyes when one has the chance to see what that country's people's lives are based upon, art. Here, the idea that a human's Life imitates Art comes to the forefront, and Art is the reality that Life bases itself upon. Vivian is the spokesperson for this anti-mimetic ideal that Wilde espouses as part of his aesthetics. In the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Vivian's ideas also repeats as "The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium" (Wilde, *Picture* 3). The imperfect medium refers to any man-made creation—furniture that one creates art with, fabric that one creates art with, or jewels that one creates art with; all of these items are utilized in Wilde's novel as revealing the morality of Dorian's art. Thus, the advantages of consumerism in art are shown throughout the essay and the novel.

Wilde further reveals the benefits of consumer culture in the essay by highlighting how "[Pre-Raphaelite painter] Rossetti's paintings were not just popular visual arts but could be taken as the guide for women's dress fashion. In other words, the beauty of Rossetti's art could be realized in a woman's practical life" (Chen 49). Wilde is thus communicating the consumerist value of art and how art can take on special models to teach society about beauty within a practical realm. The consumerist value is then applied to written art forms such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in that "Orientalism also supplies poets with a variety of models, drawn from
oriental textiles and architecture as well as literature, upon which to base a modified poetics” (Haddad 155). Wilde presumably drew from Orientalist tastes when choosing Dorian’s home furnishings and furniture, from which he created a platform to espouse his aesthetic beliefs in conjunction with Orientalism. In sum, “Wilde formulates the new aesthetic as one of art for its own sake, unrestricted by either nature or the classical artistic tradition” (Haddad 200). Wilde’s new aesthetic is open, free, and boundless with limited Western influence.

Conclusion

“As an aesthete Wilde found it essential to cultivate more than one art” (Ellmann 33), and he did so by enthusiastically throwing himself into various artistic and social circles to pursue his quest for aesthetic achievement throughout the world. His pursuit led him into a world that escaped the ordinary that English society had to offer; instead, he discovered the realm of Orientalism and appropriated its aesthetic ideals into his own beliefs. Wilde sought artistic freedom and “celebrates orientalism as a route to art’s freedom from the representation of nature,” (Haddad 155) in that Orientalism can be seen as a new venue for aestheticism. Nature is now represented in unnatural and artificial ways through its depiction in art and consumer commodities such as tapestries, furniture, jewels, and porcelain. Perhaps Wilde sees consumerism as a way of getting away from nature or classical Western artistic tradition since new boundaries are being formed, forcing people to creatively step away from nature and invent their own ideas of aesthetics. The fact that Orientalism has stemmed from a Victorian societal fascination with the newly opened Far East and has also lasted throughout our own contemporary period speaks to the testament of human curiosity with regards to the unknown or unexplored.
Moreover, the fact that Wilde’s works are still being thoroughly consumed by readers of academic source materials all the way to cheap paperbacks goes to show the extent of his influence on English literature. Wilde’s egalitarian ideas surrounding his aesthetics also helped spread of his influence to a wide audience. Though some disintegration of ideal aesthetics was inevitable, for the most part, the basic tenets of Wilde’s aesthetics were upheld in terms of a vibrant, bustling consumer culture, evidenced by the 1910 Great Britain-Japan Exhibition.

Fortunato describes the proof of de-exclusivity of aesthetics due to

The fact that aestheticism was tied very palpably to consuming is evinced by [Wilde’s] references to identifiable brand names, those of interior designer E.W. Godwin, the department store run by Messrs. Liberty, and the “other leading houses of business.” Incidentally, these brands are cited as a sign that consumers are being educated in aesthetics and taste, a sign of a democratization of a formerly exclusive world.

(Fortunato 37)

Wilde would be proud to know that his art was available to everyone, from the educated elite to mass audiences, as art is the lens through which people view beauty and develop their own aesthetic ideals.
Works Cited


