

Aestheticism and Sensation

Talia Schaffer

At first glance, it may appear odd to have an article about aestheticism in a *Companion to Sensation Fiction*. After all, the two movements seem to have little in common. Aestheticism occurred decades later, spoke to another audience, and aimed for a different effect on the reader. Yet when we examine these movements more closely, we find that aestheticism actually shared certain features with sensation fiction. Both were controversial movements that eschewed the culturally accepted Victorian rules for good literature. Both aimed to generate vivid, intense visual effects. Both worked to produce strong feeling in the reader. And in their own time, both were perceived as pandering to inept readers' in order to achieve a spurious, temporary popularity. Indeed, studying aestheticism helps us see that sensation fiction had a more complex influence than critics recognize. Most scholars know that sensation fiction helped pave the way for the popular adventure and detective fiction to follow, but what is less well known – if equally important – is that sensation novels also prepared readers to appreciate fiction that challenged dominant beliefs about literature's moral effect, sentimental appeal, and realistic style. By opening up this alternative way of writing, sensation fiction made aestheticism possible. In turn, because aestheticism praised art that directly affected the reader's feelings, aestheticism could prompt a reconsideration of the achievements of sensation fiction. Many texts published between the 1860s and the 1890s showed the influence of these two movements, and their confluence helped define an emerging type of popular literature.

In this essay I offer a brief introduction to aestheticism, considered especially in its relation to sensation fiction. Instead of trying to cover all of the aesthetic movement, I have aimed to highlight those aspects of aestheticism most interestingly connected to its sensational predecessor. My hope is that reading aestheticism against sensation will help us see just how these apparently different movements interrelated

and why that connection was crucial for popular writing in the second half of the nineteenth century.

"Aestheticism" names a cultural movement, emerging in the 1870s and ebbing in the 1910s, that tried to make every aspect of life a form of art. For aesthetes, "Art" became comparable to religion, an ideal to which one should aspire, a higher code expressed in the design of every possession, from teacups to bookbindings. Walter Pater wrote in the manifesto of the aesthetic movement, the "Conclusion" to his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), that "art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake" (Pater 1977: 239). To immerse oneself in art would be to burn with what Pater famously called "a hard gem-like flame," in other words to live one's life fully, intensely, with maximum pleasure (1977: 237). To live one's life according to the laws of art, the aesthete thought, would teach fine lessons: respect for the maker's individual creative skill and appreciation of the artifact's beautifully balanced form, honest materials, and simple lines. For some aesthetes, art became a way of teaching morality. Steeped in artistic virtues, the aesthete would be capable of recognizing and rejecting the pretentious falsities that the aesthetes diagnosed in Victorian design. Once one learned to value honesty in art, one could appreciate it in life.

What made for good art? Pater explained that "all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music" (1977: 135). He meant that good art would have formal play, structural beauty, and minutely skilled craftsmanship.¹ These qualities defined art – not its subject or message. Indeed, "a great picture has no more definite message for us than an accidental play of sunlight and shadow for a few moments on the wall or floor" (1977: 133). Just as music is a non-representational, abstract play of sounds, so too, the aesthete thought, the quality of writing and painting ought to be measured by how successfully they used their chosen medium. Such form "should become an end in itself, should penetrate every part of the matter" (1977: 135). Aesthetic texts are radical in their insistence on their own craft, and their refusal to hew to normative Victorian values of realism and moralism.

Those Victorian values were wholly opposed to Pater's. Ten years before Pater's *The Renaissance*, the critic and thinker G. H. Lewes wrote:

Art is a Representation of Reality – a Representation which, inasmuch as it is not the thing itself, but only represents it, must necessarily be limited by the nature of its medium; the canvas of the painter, the marble of the sculptor, the chords of the musician, and the language of the writer, each bring with them peculiar laws; but while thus limited, while thus regulated by the necessities imposed upon it by each medium of expression, Art always aims at the representation of Reality, *i.e.* of Truth; and no departure from truth is permissible, except such as inevitably lies in the nature of the medium itself. Realism is thus the basis of all Art. (Lewes 2001: 37)

Lewes insists on fidelity to reality as the absolute basis of art. He also, interestingly, treats the medium in which the artist works as an impediment to pure truth. For

Lewes, canvas, marble, chords, and words "limit" and "regulate" access to truth. Artistic techniques and materials are merely inconvenient obstacles.

Lewes specifies that accurate depiction of realism is not enough; while any artist can copy a village group, the true artist will throw "a sentiment into his group which every spectator will recognize as poetry" (Lewes 2001: 38). In other words, what is necessary in art is both the technical skill to replicate reality and the sentimental skill to infuse it with emotional meaning. While Lewes presumably would have repudiated this association with sentimental fiction (he was focusing on what he thought of as the highest forms of art), the fact is that his ideas were very much in line with the kind of feeling that popular readers wanted from their novels. In the saintly deaths of children, in the sufferings of animals, in the tragedies of families torn apart, the reader's feeling of outraged misery could be purged cathartically and could also be redirected (as Dickens's fiction encouraged) into social activism.

A generation later, aestheticism abjured both realism and sentiment. Lewes had seen words, chords, and canvas as impediments to realism, but the aesthetes saw realism as interfering with the free play of color, form, and sound. It was quite inconvenient to have to interrupt one's exploration of the medium for some futile attempt to replicate reality. "As a method, realism is a complete failure," asserted Wilde (1969b: 303). He accused literature that incorporated governmental statistics and verifiable facts of being dreadfully dreary, and insisted that in fact "art never expresses anything but itself," for "the more abstract, the more ideal an art is, the more it reveals to us the temper of its age" (1969b: 313–14).

We see this attitude in James McNeil Whistler's art, which Whistler saw as pure studies of color and form, not representations. Whistler gave his paintings musical names, such as "nocturnes," to emphasize his fidelity to the Paterian view of art. Whistler's title deliberately deterred a potentially sentimental reading of his most famous picture. Calling it an *Arrangement in Grey and Black: The Artist's Mother* forced readers to consider it primarily as a formal arrangement, only secondarily as a picture of Whistler's mother. (The subject's uncompromising grimness also militated against a sentimental reading of motherhood.) Similarly, Whistler's paintings of the Thames at night used quasi-abstract arrangements of color and light to baffle and block representational identifications. His daring led to art critic John Ruskin denouncing his *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* as "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face" (Ruskin 1907: XXIX, 160). Whistler sued Ruskin for libel, which produced a famous trial in which Britain's leading art critics testified as to whether this new form of painting counted as art or not. The judge ruled in Whistler's favor, but awarded him only a shilling, which meant that his attempt to have his work legally declared art bankrupted his art career.

Victorian readers (and critics) not only wanted realism and sentiment, but also demanded that art teach moral lessons. In Wilde's caustic summation, "the good ended happily and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means" (Wilde 1975: 343). Braddon and Wood sometimes interrupted the narrative to warn the reader directly against the kind of sexual adventurism of their main characters, recasting the

story as a tract of moral education. And sensation novelists were usually careful to ensure that crime was punished in the end. Here again, aestheticism took another tactic. Art existed simply for its own sake, to offer the world a beautiful artifact. It did not exist for the sake of some exterior moral lesson. Aesthetes felt that if it was artistically pleasing to have the good end happily, by all means write it that way, but do not write such an ending if it violated the structure of the drama or fiction. As Wilde commented, "no artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an author is an unpardonable mannerism of style." Indeed, even more drastically, "vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art" (Wilde 2007: 3, 4). In other words, the artist needs to view morality simply as a way to produce an effect. The needs of the art determine the artist's use of moral ideas, not the other way around.

When aestheticism rebelled against mainstream Victorian literary values, we have to wonder whether the movement learned a lesson from sensation fiction. In one sense, sensation fiction strongly embraced mainstream Victorian literary goals. Indeed, sensation fiction created an intensified version of what mid-Victorian readers wanted. Sensation fiction wasn't content with seeming realistic; rather, it aimed to achieve a kind of documentary accuracy, with Wilkie Collins, for instance, famously utilizing real train timetables to organize characters' journeys and researching the effects of various poisons. Sentiment? Nothing in Victorian fiction is a better tear-jerker than the ending of Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*, with its devastating portrayal of an estranged mother/wife who cannot reveal her identity or restore her relationships.

Yet sensation fiction often paid lip service to these cultural desiderata, creating a deeply subversive undercurrent that violated the interests that these criteria served. In other words, if a novel was supposed to teach a moral lesson, it was in order to train readers to make good moral choices. But in sensation fiction, if a novel taught a moral lesson, it was often to provide a culturally acceptable gloss over its more profoundly anti-moral ideas. After a reader had spent several hundred pages thrillingly identifying with an adulterer, a murderer, or a bigamist, the character's last-minute punishment hardly reversed this subversive sympathizing. Contemporary critics despised sensation fiction's failure to meet moral standards. W. Fraser Rae wrote in 1865:

Tested, then, by a purely literary standard, these [sensation] works must be designated as the least valuable among works of fiction . . . Hence it is that the impartial critic is compelled, as it were, to unite with the moralist in regarding them as mischievous in their tendency, and as one of the abominations of the age. Into uncontaminated minds they will instil false views of human conduct. (Rae 1998: 591)

Certainly, sensation novels generally ended with the good characters rewarded and the bad characters punished, but they boasted hundreds of pages in the middle in which the reader's ardent sympathies were with the villain(ness), and it was this sympathetic, passionate identification with a criminal figure that so appalled critics like Rae. Similarly, if a reader sobbed sympathetically, it might only prove that she or he wanted

the wrong person to do the wrong thing. Sentiment might be a dangerous weapon, unleashed on behalf of the villainous rather than the virtuous.

More profoundly, sensation fiction and aestheticism shared a different aim than Lewes's "Real Art." Unlike respectable mainstream fiction of the nineteenth century, popular genres often aimed to generate excitement. Gothic novels in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Newgate novels in the Regency and early-Victorian period, shilling shockers, penny dreadfuls, and, of course, sensation fiction at mid-century, all aimed to arouse the reader to a sense of breathless suspense, anxiety, fear, and horror. H. L. Mansel wrote: "excitement, and excitement alone, seems to be the great end at which [writers of sensation fiction] aim – an end which must be accomplished at any cost" (Mansel 1998: 573). But where sensation fiction aimed for thrilling, adrenaline-packed emotion, aestheticism wanted to evoke a fleeting mood, a languorous rapture or melancholy fatigue, in which the reader is caught gazing at pure beauty.

In this respect aestheticism merged lessons from Romanticism with the sensation novel genre. Aestheticism ushered the reader into a rich imaginative realm without many events, just as Keats's nightingale transports one into an eternal poetic space where one must "in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet / Wherewith the seasonable month endows" (Keats 1999: 43–4). The suspension of conscious thought, the entrance into a kind of delicious trance where one feels it "rich to die," is entirely typical of aesthetic writing. So, too, is the entry into an enchanted imaginary realm like Coleridge's "shadow of the dome of pleasure" which "floated midway on the waves; / Where was heard the mingled measure / From the fountain and the caves" (Coleridge 1999: 31–4). If sensation fiction taught aesthetes to aim for readerly emotion, it was Romanticism, not sensationalism, that provided the model for that emotion.

Coming thirty or forty years after sensation fiction, aestheticism rejected the values that had governed a century's worth of writing. While sensation fiction adapts, intensifies, and redirects the dominant values of realism, moralism, and sentiment, aestheticism flouts them, creating an entirely different kind of writing, a formal play with images and language. Its real goal is to induce pleasure in the reader.

An early practitioner of this style was the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, whose verses generated a kind of swooningly musical pleasure in spite of their disturbing meaning. Swinburne, who wrote during the heyday of sensation fiction, shared the sensation novelists' interest in intense feeling. It is hard not to think of the infamous flogging scene in *Aurora Floyd* (1862), with its arousal and violence, when we read Swinburne's celebration of pain in "Dolores" (1866): "By the ravenous teeth that have smitten / Through the kisses that blossom and bud, / By the lips intertwined and bitten / Till the foam has a savour of blood, / By the pulse as it rises and falters, / By the hands as they slacken and strain, / I adjure thee, respond from thine altars, / Our Lady of Pain" (Swinburne 2003a: 105–12). Just as Whistler flirted with pure abstraction, Swinburne explored the limits of meaning, as we can see in his self-parody, "Nephelidia" (1880):

From the depth of the dreamy decline of the dawn through a
 notable nimbus of nebulous noonshine,
 Pallid and pink as the palm of the flag-flower that flickers with
 fear of the flies as they float,
 Are they looks of our lovers that lustrously lean from a marvel
 of mystic miraculous moonshine,
 These that we feel in the blood of our blushes that thicken and
 threaten with throbs through the throat?

(Swinburne 2003b: 1–4)

This is art aspiring to the condition of music, as Pater advised. Pure, pleasurable sound with little or no relation to sense, aesthetic writing like Swinburne's could celebrate immersion in art, eschewing larger lessons.

The 1860s also saw the emergence of a kind of male figure that would later be associated with aestheticism. In *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–5), Eugene Wrayburn and Mortimer Lightfoot demonstrate an insouciant, satirical lassitude, preferring their comfortable male partnership to real work. Similarly, Robert Audley's sensuality, self-indulgence, appreciation of fine dining, immersion in leisure activities, and refusal to earn a living mark him as a proto-aesthete. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Robert has to be reformed. As many critics have noted, perhaps most famously Richard Nemesvari (1995), he has to become a properly heterosexual, bourgeois subject by the end of the novel. Similarly, Dickens's Eugene Wrayburn becomes a conventionally appropriate middle-class male, hard-working and happily married. Aesthetic tendencies – present if not yet named – are one of the worrisome trends of the 1860s.

Finally, the 1860s saw the heyday of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti's swooning, sensuous women, John Everett Millais's intensely detailed, richly colored realism, and Edward Burne-Jones's pensive fables. The Pre-Raphaelite movement is often identified as the beginning of aestheticism. Yet the Pre-Raphaelites were also associated with sensation fiction, as Chapter 43 in this volume demonstrates. Here was a moment when aestheticism and sensationalism converged: Pre-Raphaelitism's disturbingly sexualized females and richly detailed visual settings appealed to both movements.

As Pre-Raphaelitism gradually melted into *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism, the aesthetic movement moved further away from many of its sensational connections. Where sensation fiction prized immediacy, suspense, modernity, and quasi-journalistic crimes, aesthetic texts often liked to transport the reader into a misty nostalgic fable, decorate the story with deliberately archaic language or epigrams, and focus on the achievement of a mood rather than the resolution of an exciting mystery. While Wilde's epigrams are well known, Max Beerbohm, in "A Defense of Cosmetics," provides an example of another style of aesthetic language:

Loveliness shall sit at the toilet, watching her oval face in the oval mirror. Her smooth fingers shall flit among the paints and powder, to tip and mingle them, catch up a

pencil, clasp a phial, and what not and what *not*, until the mask of vermeil tinct has been laid aptly, the enamel quite hardened. And, heavens, how she will charm us and ensorcel our eyes! (Beerbohm 2007: 68)

Beerbohm's language draws attention to itself, with its repetitions ("oval"), its archaisms ("phial"), its unusual terms ("vermeil") and its odd formations ("ensorcel"). Aesthetic writing calls attention to itself *as* language. Unlike the apparent immediacy and transparency of sensation fiction's style, aesthetic writing aims for thickness.

Aestheticism's insistence on high art, too, meant that it aimed for a different class association than its sensational forebear. Sensation fiction, in the infamous words of W. Fraser Rae, "temporarily succeeded in making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing room" (Rae 1998: 592). A literature previously associated with servants and working-class subjects had made its way into middle-class homes. But aestheticism, by contrast, demanded that one affiliate oneself to an aristocratic pose. Because aesthetes gained cultural status from demonstrating their leisured, indolent connoisseurship, they had to perform the kind of lifestyle that would allow for the accumulation of such esoteric knowledge. If the prototypical aesthete was the languid, velveteen-clad artiste gazing at a lily (made famous by parodies by George du Maurier and Gilbert and Sullivan), one imagines the prototypical sensation-fiction character to be the grimly determined, dogged, energetic subject hell-bent on exposing (or concealing) the crime. If the imagined reader of aesthetic texts was the classically educated, Continentally traveled, leisured man of letters, the imagined reader of the sensation novel was the hard-working middle-class man or woman.

If sensation fiction infamously focused on crime, aestheticism focused on danger. Sensation fiction gained its thrills from showing that alcoholism, abuse, abandonment, colonial violence, bigamy, arson, theft, violence, and extramarital affairs existed in apparently happy, wealthy families. Aestheticism aimed for a different pleasure when it depicted the underworld, demonstrating that the aesthete was not hemmed in by retrograde Victorian morality, that all subjects were alike to art. Dorian Gray's jaunt to the filthy opium den, or Mrs. Vane's residence in the flyspecked gas-flaring flat, or the locale of "The Harlot's House" demonstrate how Wilde tried to use art to depict the underside of Victorian night life. The poems of Ernest Dowson and Arthur Symonds are overwhelmingly concerned with the seamy side of London life: brothels, dance halls, night scenes, drug scenes. If both sensation fiction and aestheticism liked to show the horrors, their class orientation was quite different. Sensation fiction showed the unseen miseries lurking in the greatest families, while aestheticism showed the common revulsions of impoverished city life.

Although these aesthetic texts highlight contemporary urban decay, another aspect of aestheticism favored a very different kind of setting – a vague, romantic, misty past. This differentiates it from sensation fiction's obsession with absolute contemporaneity; sensation novels often referred to events recently in the news. By contrast, Dorian may go to the opium den, but he also immerses himself in a richly quasi-medieval atmosphere through his famous collections of vestments, gems, and per-

fumes. Aestheticism incorporated elements of the medieval revival (including William Morris's designs), as aesthetes gloated over tapestries, antique silver, and Jacobean wood carving.

One of the major differences between sensation fiction and its successor is that they became associated with different genres. Sensation was primarily associated with novels, although, as this volume demonstrates, it also appeared in poetry and drama. Meanwhile, until recently, the only British text widely accepted as an important aesthetic novel was *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Like Romanticism a century earlier, this turn-of-the-century movement used intense, fragmentary, interior forms rather than the extended realistic scene-setting of fiction. Although more recent critics have developed a more extensive list of aesthetic novels, those who study aestheticism still tend to think of poetry, prose, dialogs, or drama as the movement's primary fields, rather than fiction.

Studies of aestheticism are complicated by its relation to decadence, another *fin-de-siècle* movement which had significant overlaps with aestheticism, so much so that the two are often paired. If *Dorian Gray* is the key novel of British aestheticism, the major text of (French) decadence is J. K. Huysman's *A Rebours*, and scholars often couple the two. One of the earliest anthologies of the movement, edited by Karl Beckson, was called *Aesthetes and Decadence*, and in some contexts the terms are used interchangeably. Decadence may be seen as a mood of fatigue within aestheticism, but some critics treat it as a counter-movement, or an unrelated cultural event. Thus Shafquat Towheed, in a recent article, describes decadent reading as a desultory, impressionistic activity that aims for sensory effect rather than deep immersion. In Towheed's telling, the very reading of decadent texts makes one a participant in decadence's alienation (Towheed 2006: 3). For decadence shared aestheticism's signature move, the desire to evoke a mood or describe a scene rather than to teach a moral lesson. But decadence exaggerated the amorality of aestheticism and made it an end in itself. Decadence is usually seen as a celebration of decay, as the name would imply. In the words of Arthur Symons, it has "an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity . . . this representative literature of to-day, interesting, beautiful, novel as it is, is really a new and beautiful and interesting disease" (Symons 2007: 71). The style Symons refers to is, in his words "spotted with corruption" (2007: 72). The most famously decadent lyric is Ernest Dowson's "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae," generally just called "Cynara," which begins:

Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine
There fell thy shadow, Cynara! thy breath was shed
Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;
And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, I was desolate and bowed my head:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

Dowson 2007: 73–4)

Dowson's speaker captures a mood of pensive regret, of revulsion at satiety, of intimate discontent that is quintessentially decadent. Similarly, Swinburne's necrophiliac, perverse, masochistic lyrics can be seen as decadent although they pre-dated the decadent movement by decades. Aubrey Beardsley's drawings, with their devastatingly skillful sinuous lines limning ambiguously sexual grotesques, provided a visual analog. "Cynara" demonstrates how decadence aimed to provoke feeling in the reader, but whereas sensation fiction aimed for excitement, terror, and shock, decadence went for a world-weariness, a cynical arousal, and a fascinated revulsion.

If decadence provided a space for expressing illicit desires, it was also very much associated with male writers; its tone of weary sexual knowledge was extremely risky for British women writers, although some French women writers like Rachilde (Marguerite Eymery) managed it. The aunt-niece couple who wrote as Michael Field, Edith Cooper and Katherine Bradley, would seem like an ideal example of decadence, with their steamy, sensuous lyrics like those in "Unbosoming," which compares love to an iris "brimful of seeds," "packed in a thousand vermilion-beads / That push, and riot, and squeeze, and clip, / Till they burst the sides of the silver scrip" (Field 1898: ll. 3, 5-7). Like the iris, the lover's "harvest-secret is burning red, / And I would give thee, after my kind, / The final issues of heart and mind" (Field 1898: ll. 14-16). However, the two women, as Michael Field, wrote "the one prayer / From decadence, Good Lord deliver us!" and were so appalled by the *Yellow Book* they demanded their submission be returned unpublished (Leighton 1992: 217). Michael Field's horror of decadence serves to alert us to another side of the movement. Innovative as it was stylistically, decadence could be quite reactionary politically. Decadence could be used to deplore the decay of high culture, classical knowledge, traditional Christianity, in the face of a modernity that felt blatant, garish, and commercial. Decadence, in other words, was opposed to precisely the kind of best-selling cheap fiction that sensation novels represented.

Thus where sensation fiction featured women writers who were as successful, or more so, than their male counterparts, aestheticism had a more complicated gender balance. Oscar Wilde edited a women's magazine, *The Woman's World*, befriended many women writers and worked to help them in their careers, and paid considerable (and serious, respectful) attention to aspects of women's culture that had rarely received notice from male writers: lace, jewels, tea sets. Part of the aesthetic movement's rationale was that, in Wilde's words, "one should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art" (Wilde 1969a: 434). Everything from one's clothing to one's armchair ought to partake of the qualities of good art.

Aestheticism therefore embraced aspects of women's culture. Whereas female sensation writers were seen as dashing recklessly into tales of crime that ought not to concern them, female aesthetes could retain approval for their continued femininity (so long as they did not verge on decadence). Aestheticism also conferred cultural status upon its participants in a way that sensation fiction distinctly did not. To be an aesthete was to be a cutting-edge-artistic innovator, aware of recent art theories and conversant with international cultural movements. To be a sensation-novel writer

— at least according to the critics — meant to abandon higher literary goals to grossly pander to a popular audience. Prominent aesthetic writers included Alice Meynell, the renowned poet and essayist nominated for poet laureate, and Lucas Malet (Mary St. Leger Kingsley Harrison), the author of some of the most widely admired and controversial fiction of the turn of the century.

Perhaps the most famous work of aesthetic fiction is Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). The plot is too well known to need retelling here, but what is significant for our purposes is that when Dorian switches identities with his portrait, he literally lives out the rest of his life as a work of art. In this novel, Wilde asks what it would really mean to become a work of art. Perhaps to his own surprise, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* ends up endorsing moral guidelines, condemning a life lived in pure pursuit of pleasure. Dorian's chief adviser, Lord Henry Wotton, teaches Dorian a debased Paterian philosophy. Lord Henry is indeed the "critic as artist" (to quote the title of one of Wilde's most famous dialogs), a critic who creates the work of art, Dorian. Meanwhile, Basil Hallward, the painter, is tragically helpless to alter his own beloved icon, Dorian. *Dorian Gray* tests the main tenets of aestheticism and, fascinatingly, finds them dangerous.

However, *Dorian Gray* can also be read as a successor to sensation fiction. After all, it boasts an exciting plot which includes opium addiction, suicide, secret crimes, concealed identity, forbidden love, and magnificent material objects. As Regenia Gagnier points out, "just as Wilde had dedicated his stories and tales to women of Society who would thereby ensure his reputation, he constructed the narrative of *Dorian Gray* from the standard elements of a certain genre of upper-class women's literature: art, psychology, sin, and luxury" (Gagnier 1986: 66). The centerpiece of the aesthetic movement was built, at least in part, on the armature of the sensation novel.

Why would Wilde want to connect his novel with this critically disdained movement of a few decades earlier? First, he enjoyed the writing of Mary Elizabeth Braddon and remained friendly with her throughout her life (Wolff 1979; Carnell 2000). Second, resurrecting the sensation novel made political as well as commercial sense. As a popular genre with enormous sales and a loyal long-term audience, it would have attracted Wilde, and as a genre with prominent female practitioners it fit into Wilde's interest in heretofore despised feminized culture. And third, the sensation novel offered a useful precedent for combining beautiful characters with magnificent possessions, and secret, dastardly deeds.

But it is the phenomenally popular novelist Ouida (Marie Louise Ramé) who forms the strongest link between Wilde and the sensation novel. In the 1860s Ouida's early novels used sensation tropes, with dashing adventure stories, seductions, and aristocrats with sexual secrets. In *Disease, Desire and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels*, Pamela Gilbert explains that Ouida's sales of *Under Two Flags* (1867) rivaled those of Braddon and Wood, with sixty-three editions in England alone (Gilbert 2005: 142). But Ouida kept writing, and by the 1880s she was pioneering the aesthetic novel. Her career connects these two points, and demonstrates just how these apparently different genres could find common ground.

During the 1880s Wilde and Ouida became friendly, attending each other's parties, reading each other's work, and helping each other professionally. Ouida wrote articles for Wilde's magazine, *The Women's World*, and in the same magazine Wilde reviewed her novel *Guildenry*. Wilde's review lists the best epigrams from *Guildenry*, making it clear that he was studying Ouida's style. Indeed, Wilde's epigrams are extremely similar to Ouida's in both their subversive content and their condensed, inverted structure. *Dorian Gray* shows how much he learned from her. Ouida writes that "when we were young our mere life was a poem," and Lord Henry tells the eternally young Dorian that "your days are your sonnets" (Ouida 1866: 495; Wilde 1981: 217). Princess Napraxine "would sacrifice [her] own life for an epigram," someone observes dourly – just as Dorian claims "you would sacrifice anybody, Harry, for the sake of an epigram" (Ouida 1885: I, 56; Wilde 1981: 205).

By the 1890s aesthetic writers were pointing out that Ouida had pioneered aesthetic style. It was in the manifesto of the aesthetic movement, *The Yellow Book* (1895) that G. S. Street published his influential appreciation of Ouida. In 1895 Alice Meynell commented:

Things improbable at the first glance in connection with her are to be traced to Ouida: amongst others the "epigram." . . . Many and many a little author to-day would perhaps become less frivolously cheerful on finding the most modern of his inversions in the decorated pages of his half-forgotten Ouida. The *pose* itself need no longer be copied by author from contemporary author, for it can be had, at no more than second-hand . . . from her. (Meynell 1965: 8)

Meynell's point is apt. It was Ouida who popularized epigrams and inversions, who influenced the younger generation of aesthetes and helped produce that signature aesthetic style. Max Beerbohm dedicated his book *More* (1899) to Ouida, and his chapter about Ouida pays homage to her enormous vitality, her endless interest in beauty, and her vividly absorbing plots.

Ouida's descriptions of artistic culture may also have interested Wilde. In her play *Afternoon* (1883), Ouida wrote about a supercilious dandy, "this Ruskin of the drawing-room; this æsthetic of æsthetics" (Ouida 1883: 153). His friend and acolyte is a man named Aldred Dorian, whose home is described in the following stage directions: "Studio of Aldred Dorian. Tapestryed Walls, Paintings, Marbles, Bronzes, Carved Chairs, Artistic Litter" (Ouida 1883: 164). This Dorian achieves fame for his collections of antique tapestries, china, and silver, and he gives exquisite parties to the artistic elite. He is also a painter of portraits. Although Dorian determines to sell all his collections and flee abroad, his mentor ensures that he can never manage to escape his all too spectacularly artistic home. *Afternoon* is likely to have helped shape the more famous Dorian a few years later.

And it is Ouida who gives us our conclusion here. Her sensational tales often feature abandonment, long-lost family members, exile, child abuse, and marital rape. Yet she describes them with the intense visual richness of aestheticism, and with a sharp

epigrammatic wit that Wilde copied. Beerbohm speculated about her development from her sensational early novels to her aesthetic later fiction, commenting that, although Ouida lost her "naughtiness," she kept her poetry, wit, and romance (Beerbohm 1899: 114–15).

From Lady Audley's sables and Sèvres vases to Dorian Gray's beryls and pearl-powdered copes, one of the strongest connections between sensation fiction and aestheticism was the passion for beauty. In the rare antiques they praised, and the exciting writing they practiced, sensational and aesthetic writers shared something crucial. They brought style to popular writing, and they popularized style.

NOTES

- 1 Pater himself felt that great art combined form and content, but for Wilde, true art was simply a matter of form. It is Wilde's slightly more radical position I am describing as typical of aestheticism here, although I am retaining Pater's famous formulation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beerbohm, Max. "Ouida." In *More* (pp. 101–15). London: John Lane, 1899.
- Beerbohm, Max. "A Defense of Cosmetics." In *The Yellow Book* (1894). Repr. in Talia Schaffer, *Literature and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (pp. 57–68). New York: Longman, 2007.
- Bigland, Eileen. *Ouida: The Passionate Victorian*. London: Jarrölds, 1950.
- Braddon, Mary Elizabeth. *Lady Audley's Secret*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Carnell, Jennifer. *Literary Lives of Mary Elizabeth Braddon: A Study of her Life and Work*. Hastings: Sensation Press, 2000.
- Coleridge, Samuel T. "Kubla Khan." In David Damrosch (ed.), *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, vol. 2 (pp. 501–3). New York: Longman, 1999.
- Dowson, Ernest. "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae." In Talia Schaffer (ed.), *Literature and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (pp. 73–4). New York: Longman, 2007.
- Ffrench, Yvonne. *Ouida: A Study in Ostentation*. London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1938.
- Field, Michael [Edith Cooper and Katherine Bradley]. "Unbosoming." In *Under the Bough* (p. 84). Maine: Thomas B. Mosher, 1898.
- Gagnier, Regenia. *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986.
- Gilbert, Pamela K. *Disease, Desire and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Keats, John. "Ode to a Nightingale." In David Damrosch (ed.), *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, vol. 2 (pp. 773–5). New York: Longman, 1999.
- Leighton, Angela. *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992.
- Lewes, G. H. "Realism in Art: Recent German Fiction." *Westminster Review* (1858). Repr. in *The Nineteenth Century Novel: A Critical Reader* (pp. 36–9). Ed. Stephen Regan. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Mansel, H. L. "Sensation Novels." *Quarterly Review* (1863): 481–514. Repr. In M. E. Braddon, *Aurora Floyd* (pp. 573–80). Ed. Richard Nemesvari and Lisa Surridge. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 1998.
- Meynell, Alice. "The Praises of Ouida." *Pall Mall Gazette* (16 Aug. 1895). Repr. in *The Wares of Autolycus: Selected Literary Essays of Alice Meynell*

- (p. 8). Ed. P. M. Fraser. London: Oxford University Press, 1965.
- Nemesvari, Richard. "Robert Audley's Secret: Male Homosocial Desire in *Lady Audley's Secret*." *Studies in the Novel* 27 (1995): 515–28.
- Ouida. *Chandos*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1866.
- Ouida. *Afternoon*. In *Frescoes and Other Stories* (pp. 139–234). Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1883.
- Ouida. *Othmar*. Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1885.
- Pater, Walter. *The Renaissance* (1873). Chicago: Academy Press, 1977.
- Rae, W. Fraser. "Sensation Novelists: Miss Braddon." *North British Review* (1865): 180–204. Repr. in M. E. Braddon, *Aurora Floyd* (pp. 583–92). Ed. Richard Nemesvari and Lisa Surridge. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 1998.
- Ruskin, John. "Fors Clavigera" (1907). In *Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 29. Ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. London: George Allen, 1903–12.
- Street, G. S. "An Appreciation of Ouida." *The Yellow Book* 6 (July 1895): 167–76.
- Swinburne, Algernon. "Dolores." Representative Poetry Online. 2003a. University of Toronto, <<https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/html/1807/4350/poem2079.html>>, accessed 7 Jan. 2009.
- Swinburne, Algernon. "Nephelidia." Representative Poetry Online. 2003b. University of Toronto, <<https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/html/1807/4350/poem2096.html>>, accessed 7 Jan. 2009.
- Symons, Arthur. "The Decadent Movement in Literature." In Talia Schaffer (ed.), *Literature and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (pp. 71–2). New York: Longman, 2007.
- Towheed, Shafquat. "Containing the Poisonous Text: Decadent Readers, Reading Decadence." In Paul Fox (ed.), *Decadences: Morality and Aesthetics in British Literature* (pp. 1–30). Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2006.
- Wilde, Oscar. "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young" (1894). In Richard Ellmann (ed.), *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde* (pp. 433–4). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969a.
- Wilde, Oscar. "The Decay of Lying" (1891). In *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde* (pp. 290–320). Ed. Richard Ellmann. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969b.
- Wilde, Oscar. "The Importance of Being Earnest" (1895). In *Oscar Wilde; Plays, Prose Writings and Poems* (pp. 321–76). London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1975.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.
- Wilde, Oscar. "The Preface" (1891). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (pp. 3–4). Ed. Andrew Elfenbein. New York: Pearson, 2007.
- Wolff, Robert Lee. *Sensational Victorian: The Life and Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon*. New York: Garland, 1979.