

SUGGESTIVE SILENCES: SEXUALITY AND THE AESTHETIC NOVEL

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation addresses how the philosophy, subculture, and sexuality of aestheticism interact with the form of the nineteenth-century novel. One primary result of this exploration is a nuanced delineation of the aesthetic novel in its formal characteristics, its content, and most notably, in the sexually charged silences that both this form and content reveal—silences made audible to invested aesthetic readers through coded doubleness. Through thus defining the aesthetic novel and seeking to articulate the unspoken sexual transgressions that are, as is argued, requisite therein, this project sheds new light both on the partially submerged sexuality of aestheticism as a movement, and on why novels account for so small a portion of the aesthetic movement's output—topics first raised in part by Linda Dowling, Dennis Denisoff, and Talia Schaffer.

By engaging Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Vernon Lee's *Miss Brown* (1884), Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), Robert Hichens' *The Green Carnation* (1894), John Meade Falkner's *The Lost Stradivarius* (1895), and Aubrey Beardsley's *Venus and Tannhäuser* (1895), this dissertation demonstrates that, whether politically engaged as affirmation or using sexuality as a way to communicate rejection of middle-class morality and its own fascination with the unusual, aestheticism defines itself by its inclusion of unusual sexual situations. This argument is in part guided by and grapples with theoretical writings by Victorian sources including Walter Pater, Matthew Arnold, and Walter Hamilton and contemporary sources including Alistair Fowler, Nancy Armstrong, and D. A. Miller.

Central to the dissertation are the suggestive silences in aesthetic novels that function not merely as the unsaid, but appear at points that beg explanation or exploration, indicating the presence of the forbidden with the frisson between interest and absence. Such moments form a pattern of mysterious sexual omissions in the novels of aestheticism, titillating audiences with their implied perversity, but never explicitly exploring it on account of legal, economic, and social censorship. Finally, this project shows that the unspeakable gaps in legal above-ground literature can easily be articulated within the already illegal world of pornography, which this dissertation accesses through the aesthetic and pornographic *Teleny* (1893).

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## INTRODUCTION

## I. Aestheticism

It was the strangest book he had ever read. It seemed to him that in exquisite raiment, and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. Things that he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him. Things of which he had never dreamed were gradually revealed. (Wilde *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 240)

Yet you poisoned me with a book once. I should not forgive that. Harry, promise me that you will never lend that book to any one. It does harm. (278)

I fell in love with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* at seventeen, and immediately I wanted more. Over the next several years, I read all that I could find by Oscar Wilde, along with Walter Pater's *The Renaissance*, and volumes of poems and short stories relating to aestheticism and decadence. As much as these texts and their contexts intrigued me, I faced an extended frustration because they denied me the reading experience so many of us are trained to prioritize: the novel. The aesthetic movement is known for *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, several plays, a large number of short stories and poems, multiple distinctive magazines, and a wealth of material objects, but it is certainly not known for its novels.

Only after beginning graduate study did I become aware of more novels connected to the aesthetic movement. After I asked a professor specifically about aesthetic novels, I was pointed towards *Marius the Epicurean*. This reading experience was a major turning point because initially, *Marius the Epicurean* was practically unreadable by the standards that I had developed over time as a student of literature and a

constant reader of nineteenth-century novels. My curiosity about why aestheticism and the novel seem so at odds with one another is what spawned this dissertation.

Broadly speaking, this project addresses how the philosophy and subculture of aestheticism interact with the forms associated with nineteenth-century novels. This exploration requires a nuanced delineation of the aesthetic novel as a genre, first through its formal characteristics, second through its depicted characters, settings, behaviors, and plots, and third through the sexually charged silences that pervade these works on every level. I refer to this last phenomenon as “suggestive silences” throughout this dissertation, and I will articulate them more fully later. Through this groundwork of describing the aesthetic novel and articulating the requisite unspoken sexual transgressions therein, this project seeks to shed new light both on the partially submerged sexuality of the aesthetic movement and the lesser-explored issues of why it produced so few novels among its otherwise plentiful artistic output.<sup>1</sup> Dennis Porter has suggested that aestheticism is incompatible with the novel as a form, but this study does not take this as an intellectual endpoint.<sup>2</sup> Aesthetic novels exhibit many shared qualities, and by investigating their patterns of similarity under the rubric or descriptor of the aesthetic novel, this project seeks to increase the scholarly understanding of each text individually and also to enhance the general understanding of aesthetic literary texts.

Part of this project involves working from previous discussions of aesthetic and decadent novels in order to create an updated and broader description of the aesthetic

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<sup>1</sup> A few important examples of scholarship concerning sexuality and aestheticism include Dellamora (1990 and 1999), Denisoff (2006), Dollimore (1991), Dowling (1978 and 1996), Hanson (1998), Losey (2000), Schaffer (1999), Sedgwick (1985 and 2008), and Showalter (1993).

<sup>2</sup> See Porter “Aestheticism versus the Novel: The Example of ‘Salammbô’.”

<sup>2</sup> See Porter “Aestheticism versus the Novel: The Example of ‘Salammbô’.”

novel. Throughout it, I aim to address the gaps in scholarly conversation by looking at the aesthetic novel in a larger historical, philosophical, and literary context than previous scholarship, much of which was written before the insights of feminist and queer theory were integrated into academic discourse. This project takes what is useful in that work and connects it with more recent insights in Victorian scholarship, as well as offering new analyses of texts that are significantly informed by historicist, queer, and feminist viewpoints.

Aestheticism is an artistic and philosophic movement that prioritizes the creation and appreciation of beauty. The creative, philosophic, and social incarnation that arose in England in the latter half of the nineteenth century had strong connections to French art and continental philosophy. Its emphasis on beauty expressly takes precedence over any concerns over morality or societal standards regarding either art or life. This instance of aestheticism had many proponents and participants; especially famous and influential were Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. Both participated in artistic and critical endeavors alike, and this union of creative and critical thought is characteristic of and key to the movement. People affiliated with the movement produced work in most literary forms of the English *fin de siècle*, including poetry, essays, parodies, plays, cartoons, and short stories abound, but as mentioned, there are curiously few novels associated with aestheticism.<sup>3</sup>

Five novels in particular anchor this project as examples of works best understood as aesthetic novels. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891 and 1893), Vernon Lee's *Miss Brown* (1884), Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), John Meade

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<sup>3</sup> See Talia Schaffer and Kathy Psomiades (1999).

Falkner's *The Lost Stradivarius* (1895) and Robert Hichens' *The Green Carnation* (1894) collectively illuminate the aesthetic movement in ways that would not otherwise be possible. Scholars of literature, history, art, gender and queerness, and their intersections—including Richard Dellamora, Regenia Gagnier, Kathy Psomiades, Dennis Denisoff, Talia Schaffer, and Ruth Vanita—have offered readings of these texts that explicitly connect them to aestheticism, but that said, of these novels, only *The Picture of Dorian Gray* appears regularly as a subject in academic journals and new print editions. Many of the others are far less often read within or outside current studies of Victorian literature. Taken together, however, these five novels reveal how the aesthetic movement encountered and utilized the form and expectations of the novel, offering a previously unspoken unique sensibility of the aesthetic novel, and also a provisional central oeuvre of the genre. Through sustained engagement with these novels, this project raises previously unasked questions concerning formal and historical aspects of the aesthetic novel. These questions are given context by primary sources of aesthetic thought (including historical non-aesthetic responses to the movement) as well as secondary sources concerning different facets of aestheticism, Victorian sexualities, and approaches to the novel.

## II. Aestheticism in Context

In some ways, the late-Victorian aesthetic movement was a reaction to decades of criticism of art and literature that valued moral judgment—particularly in choice of subject matter—over issues of technique or style. Aestheticism complicated this, and at times outright opposed it. The aesthetic audience's role was not to judge the social or

ethical message of art, but to remain open and sensitively attuned to its style, method, execution, or technique. These were the agents of beauty and were expressly considered—and indeed judged—without any critique of subject matter or morality, and with distaste for social conventions. This led to or happened concurrently with the movement gaining a reputation for active immorality (as opposed to a mere disinterest in morals). This public panic stemmed from two aspects of the movement. First, it did not prioritize gender normativity. Second, marriage was simultaneously treated as flawed and unnecessary for a full emotional life. As a result, aestheticism could be generalized as advocating individuality and desire instead of productivity and familial or social units.

The beauty that aestheticism privileged thus above morality combined particular features. Implicit in aesthetic art and literature was the special importance of historical examples and the distant past; the art, décor, and linguistic allusion of the movement blended classical influences with medieval ones. They relished their impressions of the Renaissance's advances. When aesthetes sought novelty in addition to historical quotation or borrowing, they turned to cutting edge fashion and art. Between this desire for the ultra new and a love of the classical, aestheticism held the contemporary status quo in disdain.

While the movement's creative and social precursors include the Pre-Raphaelite artists and dandyism's long history, aestheticism's critical and philosophical output points to some equally important, if less opulent forerunner. The prioritization of active receptivity over moral judgment on the part of the audiences can be traced back to the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century artistic movement of sensibility, or sentiment, which values the ability and propensity for an individual to be emotionally moved by his

or her surroundings. A precursor to aesthetic thought in some ways, this notion gave rise to a cultural criticism of sensibility that likewise prefigured aestheticism's harsh reception. Sensibility was eventually accused of artificiality and immorality; as Janet Todd writes, "sensibility was felt to have done its work and to have moved manners from coarseness toward gentility; in the process it was judged to have softened or undermined morals as well. The attack on sensibility as immoral or amoral came from all quarters" (137). These quarters to which Todd refers include religious, middle-class, and philosophic thinkers who all found sensibility, when not held in check, to be prone to excess, falsity, moral vulnerability and eventually danger and disease. Awareness of these traits shaped the critical discourse in the decades after sensibility's decline, shaping the history and environment that spawned aestheticism.

A few examples from sentimental literature can help us to articulate the kinds of receptivity that sensibility valued, and by extension to understand through similarity and difference the openness that aestheticism prioritized. One of the most lastingly popular and representative novels of sentiment, Lawrence Sterne's novel *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), displays the pleasures, trials, and humor available to the traveler of sensibility. It also reveals some connections to aestheticism. Mr. Yorick, the protagonist who exemplifies the sensitive male, contemplates the fate of the first individual he encounters on his trip, a begging monk. He gently relishes his own experience of mourning.

I feel a damp upon my spirits, as I am going to add, that in my last return through Calais, upon enquiring after Father Lorenzo, I heard he had been dead near three months, and was buried, not in his convent, but, according to his desire, in a little cemetery belonging to it, about two leagues off: I had a strong desire to see where they had laid him,—when, upon pulling out his little horn box, as I sat by his grave, and plucking up a nettle or two at the head of it, which had no business to grow there, they all struck together so forcibly upon my affections, that I burst into a flood of tears:—

but I am as weak as a woman; and I beg the world not to smile, but to pity me.  
(Sterne 18)

The extent of his curiosity and affection after the monk's death could come as a surprise to readers unfamiliar with the conventions of sentimental literature until his moment of explanation. The emphasis sensibility places on receiving, relishing, and enjoying a wide variety of stimulation resembles aestheticism's values in some ways. Importantly, however, sensibility values passivity where aestheticism, despite refraining from moral judgment, maintains the value of artistic discernment, praising passivity in neither artist nor viewer. The aesthete is active in a curatorial sense even amidst his or her receptivity, whereas the sentimental individual makes him or herself receptive, even vulnerable, to all forms of stimulation equally.

Whereas aestheticism is known for surprising comparisons, classical allusions, and a highly wrought style, sensibility marks itself in style with imitations of candor, spontaneity, and naturalness, all of which aim to express the sincerity of response and description rather than skill in either interpretation or expression. This example from the parodic treatment of sensibility Tobias Smollet's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771) shows the young Miss Lydia Melford writing to her friend, Miss Willis, about her experiences in Gloucester before their departure to Bath:

We set out for Bath to-morrow, and I am almost sorry for it; as I begin to be in love with solitude, and this is a charming romantic place. The air is so pure; the Downs are so agreeable; the furz in full blossom; the ground enamelled with daisies, and primroses, and cowslips; all the trees bursting into leaves, and the hedges already clothed with their vernal livery; the mountains covered with flocks of sheep and tender bleating wanton lambkins playing, frisking, and skipping from side to side; the groves resound with the notes of blackbird, thrush, and linnet; and all night long sweet Philomel pours forth her ravishingly delightful song. Then, for variety, we go down to *The Nymph of Bristol* spring, where the company is assembled before dinner; so good natured, so free, so easy; and there we

drink the water so clear, so pure, so mild, so charmingly maukish. There the fun is so chearful and reviving; the weather so soft; the walk so agreeable; the prospect so amusing; and the ships and boats going up and down the river, close under the windows of the Pump-room, afford such an enchanting variety of Moving Pictures, as require a much abler pen than mine to describe. To make this place a perfect paradise to me, nothing is wanting but an agreeable companion and sincere friend. (26-27)

Though parodic, this letter reveals the style of sentimental letters with more accuracy than exaggeration. The writing emphasizes the personality and perceptions of this inexperienced young woman; she describes what she has seen and experienced largely in terms of how she feels about it. There are some physical details such as types of flowers and birds in the natural landscape, but they are largely confined to naming animals and plants. Indeed, sensibility was more concerned with nature's beauty than with the cultivated personal tastes that aestheticism would later privilege. In this passage, the only classical reference is the use of Philomel in place of Nightingale: again emphasizing Miss Melford's grasp of description far more over nature and names rather than description, comparison, association or interpretation. When she describes her more social activities her language becomes even more prosaic; she feels strong and positive emotions about her company and their activities but she fails to communicate any sense of difference about them or her experiences of them.

More directly influential to aestheticism than sensibility in the mid nineteenth-century are the writings of John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold; their works explicitly consider both receptivity and its attendant risks. Looking at Ruskin and Arnold affirms that the intersections and occasional clashes between art, morality, and criticism were key nodes in Victorian intellectual discourse.

Though Ruskin values some degree of receptivity to art, he never disconnects art's style from its subject or art from morality. Wendell V. Harris traces this view back to the late eighteenth century when he finds that “Ruskin's belief (later recanted) that impious men cannot be great painters (*Works*, IV, 211) had been influentially expressed long before he urged it. The identification of the artist's morality with the wholesomeness of the resulting work appears, for instance, in Benjamin West's comment in his *Discourse Delivered to the Students of the Royal Academy in 1792*” (“Ruskin’s” 84). Until his humanist conversion Ruskin connects art and viewers' enjoyment of art to religion via the gratitude that the viewer feels to God simultaneously for both the goodness and loveliness of creation and the talent of the artist in reflecting parts of that creation, both of which should come through the experience of viewing a piece of visual art.<sup>4</sup> In Ruskin’s view, then, viewers feel gratitude to artists and receptivity to God through art, but receptivity to art is not an end unto itself. Art is good or bad based on how well it facilitates this emotional, spiritual, and aesthetic process. Part of that judgment comes from the perceptions of the suitability of the subject, the artist as a figure, and from the work itself. Even later, when Ruskin's humanism has displaced spirituality in his philosophy, the receptivity he advocates is far from an individualistic one. Instead he asserts that “the right feeling is, 'How strange this is! I never thought of that before, and yet I see it is true; or if I do not now, I hope I shall, some day.' But whether thus submissively or not, at least be sure that you go to the author to get at his meaning, not to

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<sup>4</sup> As Harris puts it, “Simply stated, the beauty of nature, including that of the human form, was the expression of God's goodness; the artist who represented that beauty offered a reminder of God's beneficence and power, a reminder that challenged viewers to prove themselves worthy of such a God” (88). Though this is a very malleable maxim, it nonetheless is one from which Walter Pater and the aesthetic movement’s views deviate significantly.

find yours. Judge it afterwards if you think yourself qualified to do so; but ascertain it first” (*Modern Painters* 34). Receptivity in this form is a matter of both correctness and respect for one's sources; the goal is not enjoyment but education and exposure to new things.

Following Ruskin, Matthew Arnold also recommended certain ways of approaching aesthetic objects and experiences. His ideas lead directly into Pater's aestheticism, and indeed in the eyes of scholars like William Anthony Madden, he is a proto-aesthete. In “On the Function of Criticism in the Present Day,” Arnold's main point centers around the apolitical, unbiased, or as he puts it, disinterested role that criticism should play when performed properly. He writes that criticism should promote what is best, but he never actually acknowledges what that might be. When he explains how this functions he says:

And how is criticism supposed to show disinterestedness? By keeping aloof from what is called 'the practical view of things;' by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches. By steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical, considerations about ideas, which plenty of people will be sure to attach to them, which perhaps ought often to be attached to them, which in this country at any rate are certain to be attached to them quite sufficiently, but which criticism has really nothing to do with. (“The Function of Criticism” 37)

His essay on translating Homer makes disparaging remarks about the relative status of criticism to creative thought. He defends skilled critics using their talents where they lay instead of forcing themselves to become artists, in contrast to how aestheticism via Wilde

theorizes the position of critics. Arnold argues that criticism's purpose is to "to see the thing as in itself it really is."<sup>5</sup>

Walter Pater replies to this view respectfully in *The Renaissance* and goes so far as to quote a famous phrase of Arnold's in his preface before distinguishing what the aesthetic critic does in particular: "[I]n aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly" (xix).<sup>6</sup> In some ways Pater follows Arnold's maxims, particularly his separation of political views from critical appreciation of art, but this is not necessarily for the same reasons or with the same ends as Arnold. Readers can easily connect this passage of Arnold to Pater's advice regarding the result of proper engagement with art in the role of a critic: "It will be said that it is a very subtle and indirect action which I am thus prescribing for criticism, and that, by embracing in this manner the Indian virtue of detachment and abandoning the sphere of practical life, it condemns itself to a slow and obscure work. Slow and obscure it may be, but it is the only proper work of criticism" ("The Function of" 41). Slow and obscure is how Arnold characterizes life engaged with art but not politics. In some ways, this is a far cry from the pulsations and flames that Pater offers to those willing to choose receptivity to art as their critical goal and primary form of engagement. Nonetheless, these reverberations of Arnold continue in aestheticism through Wilde's own published work on criticism, which appears after Arnold's death and directly positions itself as a descendant.

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<sup>5</sup> Arnold first declared this phrase in his lecture series "On Translating Homer" (1861) but the idea remained important to him. In *Culture and Anarchy* it appears associated with Hellenism on page 97.

<sup>6</sup> Because Pater published three editions of this work during his lifetime, under two similar but not identical titles, for the sake of simplicity, I use the core phrase shared between both titles: *The Renaissance* and quote from the 1893 version which reflects the author's last changes.

When Arnold argues for disinterestedness, he argues for art and criticism that doesn't belong to a particular political school, but he does not argue not for the importance of art over politics or morality in the general case as Pater does. He makes a case about a separation of art and art criticism from party lines, saying that critics should be free from political pressure to respond to art and explain it so that it can be clearly seen and understood by others. This is a major source in Pater's intellectual heritage, though he has his own ideas of what to do with the separation of art, criticism, and politics.

By approaching aestheticism in the context of some of the leading voices from earlier in the nineteenth century, modern readers can better grasp the changes that Pater— aestheticism's architect, brings to criticism. Though Ruskin, Arnold, and Pater at times address different artistic and cultural media, they are nonetheless writing in different veins of criticism. For example, in 1865, Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* was published from several of his lectures, one of which was in support of a library fund; in it he discusses books and culture, but in so doing makes clear his fundamental tenor as a critic. Ruskin defines a book in terms of the source of its value, saying that it is “not a talking thing, but a written thing; and written, not with a mere view of communication, but of permanence... a book is written, not to multiply the voice merely, not to carry it merely, but to perpetuate it. The author has something to say which he perceives to be true and useful, or helpfully beautiful” (*Sesame* 32). Though ostensibly talking about books, he ultimately makes an argument for a connection between use and beauty, as well as for the idea that books ought be transparent vehicles for expressions of authors' truths. Ruskin's writings touch on many topics, but his arguments frequently make suggestions, at times

more or less directly, about what society and its various components should do and be. All of this prepares modern readers for the responses and changes Pater brings to this discourse and for the rather strident responses to *The Renaissance* and its sensual, subjective, and amoral approach to art and criticism.

### III. Pater's Aestheticism and Sexual Appreciation

Walter Pater's arguments substantially shape the philosophical base and many stylistic hallmarks of the aesthetic movement in the late Victorian period.<sup>7</sup> His theoretical moves recommend a different approach to and relationship with art. In particular, the new possibilities offered by nonproductive sensualism and sexuality allow for the innovations that set the aesthetic movement apart from others both artistically and erotically. A line of argument appears in Pater that leaves room in this philosophy for the science of beauty to become a sexually charged appreciation. Pater's *The Renaissance* shows the philosophic underpinnings for aestheticism's significant investment in exploring individual sexuality, and indeed early aesthetes urge aestheticism's devotees to leave behind or ignore the febrile taste of others and only look within for a personal aesthetic standard. Though Pater clearly draws from earlier sources within aesthetic philosophy, notably Shaftesbury, Mill, Goethe, Burke, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Kant,<sup>8</sup> his focus is not concerned with

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<sup>7</sup> Many scholars make this case or move forward from this premise. Some of them include: Stephan Bann (2004), Arthur Christopher Benson (1906), Ruth C. Child (1940), Wolfgang Iser (1960 and 1987), Lionel Lambourne (1996), Gerald Monsman (1977), and Rachel Teukolsky (2009).

<sup>8</sup> On Shaftesbury see *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711). Authors whose work appears repeatedly in this project draw out the connection between Pater and Shaftesbury including Linda Dowling (1996) and Matthew Potolsky (2006). Mill's *On Liberty* (1859) is relevant here and Dowling (1996) discusses it in relation to Pater. Goethe's *Winckelmann and his Century* (1815) has been examined by many such as Warren Herendeen (1964), Anthony Ward (1966), Wolfgang Iser (1980), and Carolyn Williams (1990). See *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756) for Burke's aesthetic influence on Pater; it

classifying types of aesthetic response or types of artistic stimuli, but instead he highlights the importance of potential reactions and impressions made by art or history or life. The arguments Pater makes throughout his career can connect to strands of both empiricism and German idealism.<sup>9</sup> Readers can find Pater's points of departure from these earlier thinkers, and following his unique developments can help us make the case for aestheticism's connection to sexual exploration.

Pater lays groundwork for an unusual bond between aestheticism and sexuality through the relationship that he recommends between art and the viewer: instead of placing the viewer in a position of power and command, Pater recommends maximum receptivity and subjectivity by the viewer. A proper critic or aesthete approaches art in an open, even submissive position with the goal of individual perception and impression rather than an attempt at objective judgment. When this is taken together with Pater's emphatic assertion that “our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time,” (190) it becomes clear how differently Pater's aestheticism values art and beauty. Pater recommends that people seek the most numerous and vivid sensations possible both from art and from life. Pater's advice positively recommends a sensually motivated gaze: “What is this song or picture, this

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is noted by John Paul Riquelme (2000) and Kevin McLaughlin (2008) among others. Wordsworth and Coleridge's “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* is connected by Kathy Psomiades in *Beauty's Body* (1997). Jonathan Loesberg discusses her use of it in “Fin de Siècle Work on Victorian Aestheticism” (2001). Noel B. Jackson explores it and other philosophical sources of Pater's philosophy in “Rethinking the Cultural Divide: Walter Pater, Wilkie Collins, and the Legacies of Wordsworthian Aesthetics” (2004). Lastly see Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Several scholars explore Pater's engagement with Kant; these include but are far from limited to Helen Wadsworth Young (1933), Ruth Child (1940), Gerald Monsman (1977), Ian C. Small (1978), R. M. Seiler (1995) and Kanarakis Yannis (2010).

<sup>9</sup> Iser looks at Pater's relationship to empiricism through Hegel in many places including pages 21-25, 31, 58, 62-63, and 72-87. German Idealism appears on pages 7-8 and 173.

engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? And if so, what sort or degree of pleasure?" (xix-xx). He argues against the idea that the viewer should distance him or herself from art, saying instead that he or she should be as receptive as possible to its stimulation, making the experience primarily a sensuous and individual one. Pater advocates focusing on the subjective associations and reactions of each viewer and on not asking more of either the art object or the viewer. In aestheticism there is thus a sensual, personal, individualized, and subjective relationship between art and viewer; the end result desired by Pater goes no further than these vivid personal impressions. This goal for art and art appreciation can be described as nonproductive sensualism because the sensual appreciation is valuable in and of itself to Pater. Appreciation does not need to produce, analyze, or synthesize anything after receiving stimulation from art in order to be fully complete. This contrasts with a productive and sensual view that bases its beginning on what a viewer experiences from art, but which then asks the viewer to make something of that experience either in terms of a lesson learned from the art experience, or as an inspiration to do something external in the world because of the art's effect, or with any other view in which art is a medium or stepping stone to an end beyond experiencing and associating from an art object or experience.

Pater's nonproductive sensualism allows for explorations of non-reproductive, ambiguous, or otherwise marginalized sexuality within aestheticism. The idea that receptivity, associations, and experience are positive ends unto themselves has a distinct

reflection in terms of sexual desire and experience.<sup>10</sup> Nonreproductive sexuality and nonproductive sensualism are, however, distinguished from one another in that nonreproductive sexuality functions relationally as a significant part of one's social identity, whereas nonproductive sensualism frames the passive recipient in isolation as a depository for sensory experience. Both models nevertheless make their subscribers endpoints instead of links in an ongoing chain; in Victorian modes of reproduction, as treated by Gagnier and Psomiades, family trees end with non-reproductive sexuality.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, action ends with the reception by nonproductive sensualism. A passage from Pater's conclusion reveals this emphasis:

The service of philosophy, of speculative culture, towards the human spirit, is to rouse, to startle it to a life of constant and eager observation. Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood or passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us,—for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself is the end. (188)

Sensual, associative, and critical experience are all valued rather than experience intended to produce results. Non-reproductive sexuality can be described as a possibility that branches off from nonproductive sensualism, which is itself more an attitude and a way of being than a set of specific activities. The finality, individualism, and lack of contribution to progress make both types of non[re]productivity suspect and threatening in Victorian culture, in which marriage and reproduction were very highly valued, as was

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<sup>10</sup> Dellamora explores these multiple possibilities of critique, reception, and response in *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Aestheticism* (Page 222).

<sup>11</sup> Sexual and artistic productivity are compared in several of Gagnier's works including *Idylls of the Marketplace* and "Productive Bodies, Pleasured Bodies: On Victorian Aesthetics." Psomiades deals with this line of thinking most directly in *Beauty's Body Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism*.

an individual's ability to make a concrete impact on the external world.<sup>12</sup>

Aestheticism, through Pater, leaves these values behind in favor of sensual and sexual experience and appreciation. This movement did not occur outside of cultural constraints, however. As we shall see, oblique communication of these values becomes important to aestheticism and the aesthetic novel.

#### IV: The Aesthetic Novel and Suggestive Silences

By the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the novel had experienced a number of shifts in its role and reputation. According to Andrew Sanders, by the *fin de siècle* “mid-Victorian moral confidence [in earnestness] had begun to sound oppressively, even comically, out-moded” (458). Aestheticism as a movement, especially Wilde's works, makes this Victorian perception clear. However, remnants of the mid-century debates between realism and idealism remained alongside new artistic and critical conversations over whether novels should be more substantially shaped by plot or character. These arguments shaped both aesthetic novels and contemporary responses to them. When writing about Victorian theories of the novel, Joseph Childers posits that one Victorian perception was that during “the last quarter of the century, an over-attention to detail keeps the novelist from penetrating to a realm of truth and beauty, miring him instead in the grime of 'reality' ” (418). Whether or not aesthetic novels draw their details from reality, the criticism of the appearance of 'grime' in novels influenced the reception

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<sup>12</sup> Trying to cite adequately the many and diffuse ways Victorians established their valuation of both worldly achievement and reproduction is daunting, but these values can clearly be seen in projects such as the Great Exhibition of 1851 which was devoted to development, progress, and exploration and texts as diverse as: Thomas Carlyle's *Past and Present* (1843) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) by Charles Darwin among many others.

not just of aesthetic novels but of a number of late Victorian genres including naturalist and New Woman novels.

Of the more recent scholarship to engage with these viewpoints, the feminist recuperative work of Talia Schaffer is most significant. Schaffer has sought to expand current understandings of the aesthetic novel, though that is not her sole aim; in the course of her larger project of investigating female literary predecessors to participation in the aesthetic movement, she has shown the inadequacies of previous definitions of the aesthetic novel. The incidental description she offers—which this dissertation’s first chapter will address—is the most recent in the critical exchange and a logical source from which to draw.

Investigation of previous uses of the term and idea of the aesthetic novel leads to my description of this genre. Characteristically, in an aesthetic novel a main character makes a self-conscious choice between selfish and generous action, while the text itself exhibits detachment from moral judgment. The aesthetic novel, like the larger movement, shows an investment in beauty, both on the level of language as well as within the world of the novel; characters participate in connoisseurship, collecting, and artistic appreciation applied to more than simply art. This is their way of relating to the physical and social world. Significant yet ambiguous same-sex bonds that are either mutually supportive or based on influence decentralize depictions of courtship or marriage consistently. For those marriages and courtships that do appear within aesthetic novels, the romantic heterosexual bond is far from revered. Finally, these texts abound with what I term suggestive silences.

These tendencies and characteristics of aesthetic novels are connected to one another. Distinct from other descriptions (which will receive attention in this dissertation's first chapter), I specifically posit that a central character's choice between generous or selfish behavior—more often seen as a direct decision between perceived good and evil—results consistently in a substantial section of the novel spent exploring the more selfish, evil choice. Any sense of a moral compass in an aesthetic novel functions primarily as a way to separate its willfully negative character from his or her more lawful contemporaries without necessarily siding with society or the law.

This pattern connects both with the movement's recognized association with perversity and its investment in artistic appreciation: when aesthetic novels' characters choose to disregard the morals of the day in favor of the liminal space outside of both laws and social mores, it is nearly always to assume a purely spectatorial position rather than an involved and disapproving one—and it implicitly asks readers to do likewise. This is a central thematic element in the significant aesthetic novels *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Miss Brown*, *The Lost Stradivarius*, *Marius the Epicurean*, and *The Green Carnation*—as well as in the Aubrey Beardsley's never completed *Venus and Tannhäuser* and several other works more loosely associated with aestheticism, such as Arthur Machen's *The Hill of Dreams* (1907) and Florence Farr's *The Dancing Faun* (1894).

This new description is necessary in part because it does not divide all novels into a binary of either aesthetic or not aesthetic, but instead reflects the more nuanced and gradient-like way in which the genre functions. The fable-like quality of a clear and self-conscious moral choice further separates these novels from many other types such as

realist or naturalist novels, both of which frequently give characters morally ambiguous choices or force them to act without awareness of the moral content or consequences of their choices. An aesthetic novel does not problematize or complicate conventions of morality in the way realist novels often do. Instead, these texts present key characters with seemingly clear choices so as to disrupt the valuation of a moral choice by Victorian societal and legal standards. They instead treat negative choices as possible sources for spectacle, exploration, and suggestive silences.

Continuing, the latter two stylistic hallmarks of the aesthetic novel are worth noting on their own terms. First, the aesthetic novel shows an investment in beauty, both on the level of language as well as within the world of the novel. Characters are invested in connoisseurship, collecting, or dandyism as their way of relating to art objects and the physical world. Artistic appreciation and curating are the rule rather than the exception. Furthermore an emphasis on linguistic play and performance in the tone and descriptions of both characters and narrators reflects a valuing of unexpected metaphor, minute physical details of both significant and passing objects, and a commitment to language itself as art. In dialogue, description, and narrative, the aesthetic novel uses language as an end as well as a means. Readers are thus encouraged to enjoy multiple levels of nonproductive sensuality—a notion that Linda Dowling points out in *Decadence and Language*, where she argues that aesthetic writing uses language stylistically not merely to communicate content, but to express aestheticism's preferences in and emphasis on technique.

The third aspect of aesthetic novels is that significant relationships other than those involving courtship or marriage between a monogamous heterosexual dyad are

consistently prioritized. These include friendships, enmities, family bonds, and many ambiguous relationships that hinge in some way on desire and sexuality. The most frequently occurring of these are ambiguous same-sex friendships that are either mutually supportive or more asymmetrical and based on the transmission of influence from one person to the other. Frequently, these friendships struggle with sexuality either in direct or indirect ways. Victorian readers saw connections between aesthetic writing and sexual oddities from the first critical essays and cartoons responding to the movement, all the way through Wilde's famous trials concerning his relationships with other men. During these trials and in their aftermath, aesthetes and their sympathizers became more suspect and unpopular than ever. The history of aestheticism indeed supports its crucial connections to sexuality.

I describe the consistently appearing omissions that take the place of sexual representation or content within aesthetic novels as suggestive silences. Just as a pointed silence communicates in a conversation, the suggestive silences within these novels do not merely function as the unsaid or un-described: they appear at points that beg for explanation or exploration and indicate the presence of the forbidden through the frisson between interest and absence.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* provides a quick example in a passage where Dorian's influence or company is shown to be socially destructive, even damning to former intimates—"Your name was implicated in the most terrible confession I ever read" (Wilde 258-9). The audience never gets to witness or know what the characters allude to. Such tempting allusions are not expressions of disgust—the aesthetic novels decidedly explore revulsion, from the morally bankrupt past of Lee's Madame Elaguine,

to Wilde's depiction of murder. Nor are suggestive silences mistakable for mere apathy—the oddities and peccadilloes of Mrs. Windsor garner neither the same quantity nor quality of attention as Lord Reginald Hastings's pointed disinterest in marriage in *The Green Carnation*. Instead, these silences in question are sites of curiosity, where potential prurience is actively aroused but never answered.

These suggestive silences appear in the unnamed sins of Dorian, in Marius's philosophical and passionate friendships, in the instinctive revulsions of Miss Brown, and in the aforementioned Hastings's sexual ambiguity. Such suggestive but vague moments form a pattern of mysterious sexual omissions, titillating or alarming audiences with their implied perversities, but never explicitly exploring them due to legal, economic, and social censorship. But what legal above-ground literature cannot do can easily be done in the already illegal world of pornography.

One of the results of aestheticism's use of multiple genres in the late nineteenth century was that it meant different things to different audiences; there was a spreading network of aestheticism that had nodes of critical, creative, and consumerist participation. Pornography creates an underground node for aestheticism as well; this results in a widening of the possibilities available to aestheticism because working outside of legal restraints allows for more direct representations of sexuality. Taboo subjects are by definition a staple in pornographic material, including illegal and "obscene" sexual acts—something particularly significant to a movement invested in criminalized forms of sex and desire. Accordingly, this project will argue for the inclusion of two additional works in the aesthetic novel genre: Aubrey Beardsley's incomplete erotic parody *Venus and Tannhäuser* and the pornographic work *Teleny*, the latter of which warrants special

treatment here. *Teleny* both fits into the philosophical and stylistic idioms of aestheticism and uniquely offers direct and explicit insights into these questions of sexuality and form. *Teleny* can say what other works cannot precisely because it is illegal, underground, and pornographic; it is nearly unique for the period in its combination of explicit sexual representation and a developed plot that is as important – if not more so – than the pornographic content. *Teleny's* clear use of aesthetic tropes and mannerisms further distinguishes it. The project does not posit that readers can substitute what appears in *Teleny* (or any other work of pornography) for what does not appear in the suggestive silences of aesthetic texts. Rather, the fact that pornography and aestheticism blend so completely in *Teleny* makes it illuminating for both worlds that created it. *Teleny* genuinely includes both aestheticism and direct representations of sexual acts, desires, and ongoing considerations of the connections between sexual and emotional desires and personal identity. It is an aesthetic work that functions outside of the extraliterary constraints of legality and censorship.

Throughout its history, *Teleny* has been dubiously but persistently connected to Wilde. While this is likely inaccurate, both anecdotal and stylistic evidence joins this work to the wider network of aestheticism. Sustained engagement with *Teleny* is particularly lacking; several scholars acknowledge it in passing throughout texts on gay history or pornography, but little has been said about either its form or its uniquely aesthetic tone. From an even broader angle, though, the inclusion of this piece of pornography helps readers to understand how a prominent Victorian subculture grappled with one of the most vexed and complicated issues in the wider Victorian world, both within the confines of that society's mores and outside of them. Simply put, the aesthetic

novel cannot be completely understood *vis-à-vis* sexuality without *Teleny*; its special form of suggestive silences and the differences allowed it by its illegality give it a different angle of access into the aesthetic novel and sexuality. No previous study has explored aestheticism's suggestive silences and widely prevalent indicators of a transgressive sexuality, nor connected them to issues of form and style. This dissertation will explore both elements in an attempt to access the relationship between the novel as a form and aestheticism as movement.

In contrast to *Teleny's* direct representations of desire and sexual activity, legally published aesthetic novels are riddled with strange omissions or silences pertaining to these themes. These suggestive silences come at moments of curiosity and interest that are never fully satisfied, but this project explores them throughout all of the dissertation's chapters, as they play a significant and under-explored role within the aesthetic novel. In each of the aesthetic novels discussed the main characters suffer from some form of sexual or emotional barrier or gap. In *Miss Brown* an idealistic woman watches the sexual degradation of a man to whom she owes her education and social position; when she realizes the seriousness of his weakness, she marries him despite her revulsion. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian seduces and soon vigorously rejects a lower class actress, socially ruins several young men and women, and hides the artistic and personal idolatry that make his unearthly portrait real. In *Marius the Epicurean* the ambiguously asexual Marius struggles to discover a philosophy and way of life that can suit his unusual aesthetic and spiritual yearnings while organizing this search and his life around his same-sex friendships. In the gently parodic novel *The Green Carnation*, Reginald Hastings, coded as male-oriented, offers a knowingly loveless proposal of marriage for

the sake of financial gain at the suggestion of his influential friend. And in *Teleny*, set against a decidedly overripe and morbid aesthetic social backdrop, central characters variously are blackmailed, inflict and receive sexual injuries, and commit suicide. What this project considers is how all of these incidents are depicted or not depicted, discussed or not discussed.

## V: Chapter Overviews and Conclusion

This dissertation is motivated by the need simultaneously to multiply and focus the ways that readers can approach the aesthetic novel. To this end, an explanation of the project's structure is warranted. This dissertation contains four chapters, this introduction, and a short conclusion. Each of the four chapters isolates a facet of the aesthetic novel and explores it in depth. Together, they demonstrate the usefulness of developing the genre as a way to approach novels produced by the aesthetic movement with particular reference to and use of the description of the aesthetic novel put forth briefly here and in more detail in the first chapter. What connects the chapters is their shared aim of exploring the form and sexuality of the aesthetic novel in an attempt to understand more fully this small and strange genre of the *fin de siècle*. While each chapter can stand alone with its own argument, they share a vocabulary, a critical heritage, and a loosely constellated group of texts. A brief description of each chapter should identify the facets of the aesthetic novel central to this project.

The first chapter begins the narrative arc of the dissertation arguing for a need for clearer study of aestheticism's relationship to the novel, style, and sexuality. Preparing the way for this entire project, chapter one first addresses earlier definitions of the

aesthetic novel with an eye toward insights and oversights, clarifies the aesthetic novel's relationship to the decadent novel, and contextually constellates a small repertoire of aesthetic novels. I then propose in-depth the more inclusive description briefly explained earlier. The chapter concludes by demonstrating this new definition's scholarly usefulness with two examples: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Teleny*.

Transitioning into chapter two, the project offers quantitative readings whose results prepare close qualitative readings of language, tropes, and allusions within aesthetic novels—an important task, because aesthetic works define themselves significantly through their style and relationship with form. Part of this exploration means distinguishing the aesthetic novel's pointed suggestive silences from other sorts of narrative gap. In identifying the images, phrases, and tropes that indicate suggestive silence, it becomes clear that many of the same stylistic gestures that mark a work as aesthetic also clue a select audience of invested readers in to a potentially affirming representation of sexual deviance. Small formal indicators of aestheticism and double readings are expressed through the conventions shared between the movement and perversity as defined by social mores and laws of the era.

Chapter three focuses on the interpersonal relationships most prevalent in the aesthetic novel. Aesthetic novels particularly prioritize intense friendships, whether equal and supportive or exploitative relationships of influence, both of which downplay the primacy of courtship and the marriage plot.<sup>13</sup> This chapter examines what options are and are not available to texts fascinated with non-sanctioned relationships both platonic and

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<sup>13</sup> For more detail on the incompatibility between aestheticism and the marriage plot, see Jonathan Loesberg's review article "*Fin-de-Siècle* Work on Victorian Aestheticism" synthesizing late twentieth century work on Victorian aestheticism.

sexual. The other significant segment of this chapter reads negative portrayals of romantic relationships in these novels, particularly focusing on the sexual and romantic danger that furthers undermines the marriage plot.

The fourth chapter investigates why aesthetic parodies form a major proportion of the small genre, paralleling the prevalence of parody within aestheticism on a larger scale. The primary argument of this chapter continues from chapter two's focus on double reading and asserts that parody frequently participates from within the genre, rather than from outside. These hybrid possibilities enhance the visibility, style, and range of relationships available between the aesthetically invested reader and the text. Because of this chapter's intersections with many earlier parts of the dissertation, it acts as a culmination of sorts, effectively concluding some of the larger inquiries posed about aestheticism, the novel, and sexuality.

The conclusion of this dissertation takes a more speculative turn, in which new questions are posed for further scholarship in the area. Exploring what the preceding chapters have begun by assessing the aesthetic novel as a genre, it lays some groundwork for future study.

My dissertation aims to do two things. Using my description—grounded in plot, characterization, narrative language, and cultural history—this dissertation will not be building a final and formalized canon of aesthetic novels, but instead, using these qualifications to direct us to the first goal: a fluid and gradated way to describe a range of novels that are more and less aesthetic. With these effective criteria of the aesthetic novel in hand, this project will closely consider works that most completely fulfill them, and that can thus be confidently and helpfully categorized as aesthetic novels, exploring what

they have in common. These commonalities will reveal aspects of how the novels relate to both aestheticism as a movement and to Victorian sexualities with which they were and are heavily associated.

The second major contribution of this dissertation to the field concerns sexuality. As Schaffer, Denisoff, and many others note, there is a (homo)sexual current running through the novels of aestheticism. Although the aesthetic novel is but one among several late Victorian genres whose content deals expressly with sexuality—the sensation novel and New Woman fiction also engage the topic—it offers a broader and more transgressive mode and range of sexual representation. Denisoff writes of “an ideological reconfiguration toward which the ethical content of aestheticism has, it appears in retrospect, ultimately been impelled—the affirmation of sexual diversity and the formation of marginalized sexual identities, primarily that of the homosexual” (147). This dissertation posits that whether politically engaged as affirmation, or using sexuality as a way to communicate aestheticism's rejection of middle-class morality and its own fascination with the unusual, both the aesthetic movement and its novels define themselves substantially by their inclusion and ways of representing unusual sexual situations.

This dissertation will occupy a relatively unexplored space within the broader discipline. Many studies of the sexualities of the Victorian period focus on gender, sexual orientation, a location or time within the period —Matt Cook's *London and the Culture of Homosexuality 1885-1914* (2003) and Linda Dowling's *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (1996) are prime examples of this type of coverage—but the focus on a

single literary genre, in this case the novel, is less often paired with an investment in sexuality.

Some work from the past fifteen years identifies and interprets aestheticism's resistances in terms of gender and sexuality (Loesberg 522), but my project builds from these new insights, connecting them more closely with literary style and form. Grouping these novels together with a focus on their uses and inclusions of the sexual further distinguishes this project from previous study by taking the common association between aestheticism and sexuality and exploring deeply how this interacts with aestheticism's experiments with novels as well as the arguably inherent relationship between sexuality and aestheticism. This dissertation relies on incorporating both historical and political approaches to sexuality, a short foray into quantitative support for qualitative claims, as well as more traditional methods of literary study that explore genre and form. In delving thus into the relationship of sexuality to the aesthetic novel, this study seeks to yield a fresh perspective on the material to see newly the form and function of the aesthetic novel. I hope to encourage readers to listen more critically to the suggestive silences of the aesthetic movement and its relationship with sexuality and pornography. As it stands, few scholars have addressed in any depth why aestheticism sits so uneasily with the form of the novel; hopefully, this study of sexuality and the aesthetic novels can begin to answer that question and prepare this ground for future academic exploration.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> A small number of scholars over the past many decades have addressed the aesthetic novel. Chapter one deals with this scholarly history in more depth, but scholars that treat any concept of the aesthetic novel include: Alison Byerly (1997), Linda Dowling (1977, 1992, and 1996), Dennis Porter (1971), Talia Schaffer (1999, 2000, and 2003) among others.

## CHAPTER 1

## CHARACTERIZING THE AESTHETIC NOVEL

## I. Current Descriptions

Aestheticism created a recognizable style and set of tropes that maintains its identity across many literary and cultural forms, but the aesthetic novel as a genre has remained only loosely characterized. At first glance, the aesthetic novel deals with class, identity, art, and philosophy—concerns that are not the exclusive territory of aestheticism, for indeed they overlap with the foci of New Woman writings that question societal norms, and they overlap differently with both the Victorian democratization of art and the wider nineteenth-century reclamation and reshaping of Classical literature and education.<sup>15</sup>

At the time of writing, Talia Schaffer offers the most recent description of the aesthetic novel in her article “The Origins of the Aesthetic Novels: Ouida, Wilde, and the Popular Romance.” This article is concerned with gender and popular fiction, but the parameters Schaffer defines primarily serve her argument as a model to be reshaped by the connections to earlier popular fiction by women that she highlights. Beyond the expansion of the repertoire, which she argues for in this article and others, Schaffer does not fully flesh out the dimensions of the aesthetic novel, although she makes significant

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<sup>15</sup> See Martha Vicinus (1995) on the New Woman and gender roles. On Victorian uses of Classical sources: Linda Dowling (1994) and Stephano Evangelista (2009). On democracy and art: Regenia Gagnier (1986) and Linda Dowling (1996).

progress in this direction.<sup>16</sup> She functionally separates the aesthetic novel from the British aesthetic movement and instead seeks to connect it to a female popular tradition whose tropes several more widely known aesthetic novels later appropriated. Schaffer's intentionally incomplete description of aesthetic novels reads as follows:

They [aesthetic novels] are written in a stylish epigrammatic or archaic discourse, the kind of "archaisms and argot" whose development Linda Dowling has described. They are set in a fantasized locale, either an aristocratic establishment composed of rare and priceless artifacts, or a nostalgically idealized remote past. They center on a languid, often effete male dandy who searches for emotional fulfillment, rather than more concrete rewards such as political power or wealth. They have strong homoerotic undercurrents, for the dandy often has ambiguous but powerful bonds with other men. Finally, as you will have noticed from the list above, they are novels about men written by men. ("Origins" 212)

I do not aim to tighten this description into any type of binary exclusivity, nor to reify a label of convenience, but instead to bring several novels together under the heuristic of the aesthetic novel so as to focus on their similarities. Developing a new description of the aesthetic novel will anchor it more to the aesthetic movement itself, consider and use previous scholarship in detail, and focus on the genre directly instead of treating it as an aside or subgoal from a larger project.

I will start by reformatting Schaeffer's description into a list of elements (Schaffer calls them hallmarks) that she expects an aesthetic novel to include: a stylish epigrammatic or archaic discourse, a fantasized locale, a languid or effete male dandy as the protagonist, that dandy's search for emotional fulfillment, and bonds between men. She furthermore presents strong homoerotic undercurrents as a common though not

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<sup>16</sup> Talia Schaffer *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England*. and "Connoisseurship and Concealment in Sir Richard Calmady: Lucas Malet's Strategic Aestheticism" in *Women and British Aestheticism*.

universal trait. What the aesthetic novel does not prioritize, according to Schaffer, is the dandified main character's search for material wealth or position. Current descriptions of the aesthetic novel understand them to be by and about men, though Schaffer's own article reveals the limitation of that position.

Schaffer's description is more of an introduction to her argument than a dedicated attempt at delimitation, however; she lists only a few novels that she considers aesthetic, but her generic criteria do little to exclude silver fork novels from the early decades of the nineteenth century, for example.<sup>17</sup> Once we do away with the extra-literary prejudices that she successfully argues against, then the women's popular fiction that she seeks to include in aestheticism fits seamlessly into her description, as do many New Woman novels and sensation novels. These characteristics, then, are not sufficiently distinctive on their own to create a fully useful description of the aesthetic novel. To consider some of these criteria in particular, every novel's locale is to some degree fantasized: Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Dickens's London, and Hardy's countryside are all distinct from any supposed counterpart. The specificity with which Schaffer expands aesthetes' geographic fantasy is more useful, though it is still common enough outside aesthetic novels to find the sort of aristocratic establishment or variations of an idealized remote past that she mentions. Novelists use setting to create atmosphere, and in so doing, fantasize a version of a place that exists, or create a fantasy location wholesale. Similarly, we can rely on nearly any novel of any genre to include a primary character's

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<sup>17</sup> Here is her full list: "When we think of the aesthetic novel today, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, 1891) springs to mind, followed perhaps by Joris-Karl Huysmans' *A rebours* (1884), Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) and a few less well known examples like Henry Harland's *The Cardinal's Snuff Box* (1900), John Meade Falkner's *The Lost Stradivarius* (1896) and Maurice Hewlett's *The Forest Lovers* (1898)." ("Origins" 212)

search for emotional fulfillment. A more distinctive and useful portion of Schaffer's description concerns the figure of the dandy, his bonds with other men, the propensity for homoerotic undercurrents, and the same formal use of language that Linda Dowling finds in decadent literature.<sup>18</sup> Certainly these aspects are thematic among aesthetic novels, though they do little to separate the aesthetic novel from certain genres, and they do even less to address issues of aesthetic style and morality.

## II. Aestheticism and Decadence

A major task in exploring the nuances of aestheticism lies in understanding its relationship with decadence. Sometimes aestheticism and decadence blend together, and sometimes they differ more significantly. Thankfully, many scholars over a period of decades have turned their attention to these closely related schools, though the accumulated commentary on this relationship reveals more disagreement than accord. From the *fin de siècle* to the present, aestheticism and decadence have been defined in relation to one another. More scholars deal explicitly with decadence than aestheticism, though oftentimes their insights can be useful for both.

Arthur Symons was the first of these; he brings the word “decadence” into modern English literary usage with his essay “The Decadent Movement in Literature” (1893). Throughout the article, he puts forward different but overlapping definitions of decadence, symbolism, and impressionism among other terms, but this clear definition of

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<sup>18</sup> The complex and intriguing figure of the dandy deserves more attention than this project can offer. Already a loaded identity by its resurgence in the later decades of Victorian period, the swirl of associations surrounding the dandy: nostalgia, luxury, style, education, sexuality and individuality among others. Sources for how this project treats the term include: Adams (1995), Cook (2008), Dellamora (1990), Denisoff (2000), Garelick (1998), Livesey (2007), and Moers (1960) among others.

decadence serves well as a starting place: “[decadence] has all the qualities that mark the end of great periods, the qualities that we find in the Greek, the Latin, decadence: an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research and over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity” (“Decadent” 224). Symons associates decadence with dead languages, endings, artificiality, selfishness, instability, and transgression. He frames all of these qualities in terms of a culture in decline. They could apply to the style, content, or progenitors of decadence, but clearly he draws a parallel between the culture that produced certain ancient writings in Latin that are called decadent and those labeled similarly by his contemporaries.

According to Symons, decadence came to England as an idea already formed, whereas aestheticism developed in no small part within England. England’s aesthetic philosophical tradition created a movement, a philosophy, and a fad that used continental sources, but only after it had studied and digested them. England spawned the aesthetic movement (though notably not the study of beauty which gives the movement its name); decadence was always more deeply embedded in French philosophy and literature, and that was reflected during the Victorian period in how people spoke of each movement (859). In aestheticism, England must address itself in the mirror—perhaps a warped carnival mirror—but nonetheless a reflection of its own culture, rather than through a window, as with decadence, which offers a view of a different culture.

Differentiating between aesthetic and decadent writing matters because although the two movements were variously intertwined in their own era (and have been ever since in scholarship), they each take part in separate genealogies of thought that diverge in both history and context, and perhaps more importantly, in terms of content.

Certain novels that are considered aesthetic by many scholars are labeled as decadent by others, and some critics use the terms interchangeably. Many choose a preferred term, creating or subscribing to a definition of that term for their purposes, and only occasionally using the other. For example, in one of the most complete pieces of scholarship to address the decadent novel, Richard A. Long and Iva G. Jones give a thoughtful, helpful definition some of whose qualities can help us approach the aesthetic novel:<sup>19</sup>

We must attempt, then, to give at least some general characteristics of the 'literature of decadence' and the 'novel of decadence'. The most salient of these is the attenuation of emotion and the detailed analysis of it. Its great themes are ennui, frustration, and moral confusion, all themes of disintegration and alienation. Its general temper is static; there is no sensation of movement; time acquires in this type of novel a spatial quality. Indeed, time and space are fused. Of necessity it treats the leisured classes, and in a highly mannered fashion. The hallmark of the novel of decadence is conscious form, not only in structure, but more especially in language. The language becomes an end in itself. Vocabulary, syntax, imagery develop in elaborate patterns, which become the real foci of attention, frequently overshadowing the situation. (246)

This is a useful definition; it addresses patterns of form and content. It distinguishes this type of novel from other groups and types of novels, and it even prioritizes within the group of characteristics it attributes to this genre. The article then goes on to explore these themes and formal elements in greater depth, using extended examples from French, English, and American literature, as well as describing those novels in the abstract. This focus on endings recurs again and again in descriptions of decadence, and it is one of the most consistent features of decadence that helps distinguish it from

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<sup>19</sup> I say definition because their goal is specifically one of definition rather than description, which is more often the aim of more recent scholars.

aestheticism, which only occasionally stresses themes of termination or decay.<sup>20</sup> The focus on form and language over issues of activity and plot, however, is common to both.

Imprecise use of aesthetic and decadent as genre descriptors can lead to problems of clarity. For instance, when discussing *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Long and Jones make a change in terminology that muddies the waters considerably:

In Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* we have a quintessential example of the aesthetic novel. There is the supreme consciousness of art objects, a portrait being the key to the whole. There is the implicit theme of sexual perversion. There is the constant evocation of the exotic and the strange. Finally there is the basic theme of alienation from the general pattern of life, indicated by Dorian Gray's pursuit of his own ends. (247)

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is here described specifically as an aesthetic novel, which their article does not define, but the description they give of the text matches their account of the decadent novel. So what readers are left to surmise—for the authors give no explanation—is that they use these terms interchangeably, subsuming the aesthetic novel into their preferred category of decadence. What further complicates and frustrates the project is that, published in 1961, this might be the first use of the term “aesthetic novel.”<sup>21</sup> To coin a genre and immediately use it interchangeably with another is unfortunate. This is an inauspicious beginning for a term that, fifty years later, still surfaces from time to time without total clarity.

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<sup>20</sup> See Nordau (1892), Beckson (1981), Reed (1985), Pittock (1993), Sturgis (1995), Willsher (2004), and others.

<sup>21</sup> Long and Jones' essay as well as Linda C. Dowling's thoroughly annotated bibliography, *Aestheticism and Decadence: a Selective Annotated Bibliography* (1977), do not reveal earlier uses of this term.

Twenty years later, Wendell V. Harris makes a much more helpful foray into the confusion between aesthetic and decadent writing. He also prioritizes the decadent novel, but under its umbrella category, he delineates three specific subgroups, one of which he identifies as aesthetic:

The types of fiction which find themselves labeled as decadent emerge clearly. These types were, I think, three: the 'new realism' which so scandalized the guardians of British morality, the sentimentally melancholy stories of love and romance such as were provided by Henry Harland and Ernest Dowson, and the stream of "aesthetic" prose represented by Wilde and Beardsley (and by others whose names are no longer associated with decadence). ("Identifying" 4)

Though his categories are far from parallel in terms of breadth or clarity, they help move toward a more specific definition. Unfortunately, unlike his other two categories, he does not offer much detail about the aesthetic branch. Readers are merely to accept this assertion that Beardsley and Wilde are representative and that this group extends over the borders of what is now considered decadent. This is an interesting claim, but Harris does not provide the development or support that could make it more substantial. The only other description of aesthetic fiction he offers is that of "a product of the blending of a highly wrought style with subject matter of highly exotic improbability if not manifest impossibility" (7). This gives some inclusion of content as well as style, but remains frustratingly vague. Aesthetic fiction belongs to the realm of the unlikely or fantastic and reveals a focus on form, according to Harris. While this is fairly compatible with other definitions, what readers glean most appreciably from Harris is a way to eliminate the two types of decadent fiction that are not aesthetic.

Even this early in its study, the aesthetic novel proves difficult to pin down because it crosses so many other categories. Harris' definition matters especially because

a few texts within Schaffer's group of aesthetic novels have been labeled earlier by Harris as belonging to these other subgroups of decadent novels. The genre of the melancholy and sentimental romance unambiguously claims both Hewlett's *The Forest Lovers* and Harland's Catholic romance *The Cardinal's Snuff Box*. These novels focus on romantic relationships in ways that noticeably separate them from aesthetic novels.

John Reed's *Decadent Style* (1985) specifically and carefully investigates style in decadent writing. According to Reed, and earlier scholars going back to the 1870s, aestheticism branches from Pre-Raphaelitism early in its history (13) and substantially involves yearning for an impossible ideal (65).<sup>22</sup> Both of these claims have meaningful traction, but Reed's claim that "Aestheticism as a broad movement recognizes the connection between beauty and evil" (14) begs for elaboration, and it is difficult to accept his claim that "Decadence combines Aestheticism and Naturalism, Parnassian precision and innovative intent" (14). While it is useful to map schools of style within a context, sometimes that context is complex enough that it cannot be fully explained so succinctly. While many works of aestheticism show some resemblance to decadence and naturalism, and many do make a connection between beauty and evil, these claims neither delineate aestheticism successfully nor apply to its full oeuvre. As with all generalized descriptions, scholars must ask what these descriptions do for the field. In this case, they give a set of loose expectations that will frequently hold true not only for decadent novels, but also for most aesthetic works of the period and some texts from handful of other genres.

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<sup>22</sup> Victorian writers connecting aestheticism to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood include Buchanan (1871), Quilter (1880), Hamilton (1882) and others.

More specific to aestheticism, Reed gives a useful impression of aestheticism that can more usefully help readers approach the style of the aesthetic novel:

“Aestheticism, an inclusive term, signifies the supersession of art over meaning, the rejection of the ugly and vulgar in favour of harmonious subject and composition, and the gratification of highly refined sensibilities, emphasizing mood and reflection over vigorous action” (14). Aestheticism maintains a sense of hierarchy between style and content, with style remaining more important. Unlike decadence, in aestheticism harmonious composition guides aesthetic ideals of style.

Another immediately relevant modern scholar, Shafquat Towheed, comes to decadence through the analysis of particular methods of reading both within the texts themselves and also in their reception by devotees and critics. Towheed claims that “the history of Decadent writing is inseparable from a concept of decadent reading, and specifically, from a socially constructed, aesthetically self-conscious, and fictionally mediated practice of fugitive reading, with the ‘whole subordinated to the parts’ that defied attempts to control it and offer us both a possible taxonomy and epistemology of Decadence” (27). Including and prioritizing reading—specifically reading not supported by society—again places the emphasis on reception, subjectivity, and the small deviant details that appear in decadent writing. This supports the examination of double reading that appears in chapters two and four of this project. More broadly, what this claim does for the examination of the aesthetic novel and of aesthetic writing in general is to encourage looking at the activities performed by aesthetic literature, an approach taken in chapter three. Many of the novels Towheed treats as decadent can also be read as

aesthetic, and scholars can benefit from looking at how these function and react within their historical context.

As this review of scholarship on decadence illustrates, the majority of scholars who have attempted to differentiate between decadence and aestheticism are scholars of decadence; J. G. Hepburn summarizes the situation thusly: “We can neither isolate the traits of aestheticism nor decide if the word refers to artistic form or literary content. In short, less is known about aestheticism than about decadence” (18). Hepburn, who, unlike many others, focuses primarily on aestheticism, also divides his focus between content and form, saying:

Estheticism refers to at least three sorts of things: the precious personal conduct that got Wilde and others into trouble, the philosophical views that made Pater withdraw his “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*, and the artistic principles and practice of Rossetti or Whistler. From the perspective of the Victorian standard bearer, all three were to be judged partly or wholly on moral grounds. Estheticism links intimately to realism, or naturalism, in at least three respects: (1) a setting in abeyance of moral judgments and hence a treating of previously forbidden and ignored subject matter (*Salomé* and *Esther Waters*), (2) a concern for esthetics and an introduction to new principles (the ideals of the Rhymer's club and the technique of realistic plot construction), and (3) an appreciation of the notion that beauty is truth. The link is personified by George Moore. Given such facts and complications, it does not seem possible to distinguish between decadence and estheticism on a basis that the former refers to a shift in artistic forms and in the latter a shift in subject matter. (17)

Hepburn's definition is an outlier among attempts to illustrate decadence and aestheticism, not only for its focus on aestheticism, but also for its focus on personal behavior of artists and on a close relationship between realism and aestheticism. The first of his respects, the choice not to engage in moral judgments, can be traced back to Pater's aestheticism as it is revealed in *The Renaissance*. It can be argued to be a factor—if not

the major factor—in the persistent connection between transgressive sexuality and aestheticism.

His second suggestion, that aesthetic writing is concerned with aesthetics, at first sounds redundant, but becomes more useful when we focus on how aesthetic texts emphasize form, exploration, and experimentation. Certainly they do, though his specifics of realistic plot construction and adaptation of tenets used by the Rhymer's Club are not particularly strong. Realistic plot construction is not a phrase that can stand on its own without contextualization or explanation. The Rhymer's Club's chronology is problematic because its years of activity, 1892-1894, only make up a very small portion of the time the aesthetic movement was active. It seems strange to suggest that this group's principles were informative when many aesthetic texts predate the group by decades.

The third of the respects of aestheticism that Hepburn describes does not ring true because in the expressly critical works of Wilde and Pater, truth is divorced from beauty and is never prioritized in the same way as novelty, beauty, and form. Hepburn bases his assessment on George Moore who, unlike Wilde and Pater, is not consistently interpreted as one of the primary writers of aestheticism.

Aestheticism and decadence can be partially divided through the different literary and social networks that each group coalesced from created; the Victorian aesthetic movement centered itself more in the literary communities of London, and Oxford while Decadence connects outwardly from its more continental roots.<sup>23</sup> Looking at this body of

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<sup>23</sup> For reading on Oxford's particular relationship to aestheticism see Linda Dowling (1995) and others.

scholarship on descriptions of both aesthetic and decadent novels, it becomes clear that the groups partially overlap in terms of their concerns, authors, and texts. This means that some of what is said about decadent novels also applies to aesthetic novels.

When thinking about genre, it is important to acknowledge that any genre is more than a list of requirements. Unless one goes beyond this, each genre will have inexplicable gaps and strange outliers that fit in through the requirements but do not meaningfully resemble the genre group as a whole. Alastair Fowler's work on genre helps our involvement with genre in a few ways. His idea is that "every genre, too, has multiple distinguishing traits, which however are not all shared by each exemplar... the character of genres is that they change. Only variations or modifications of convention have literary significance" (18). By placing extra weight on deviations from literary conventions and changes within a genre, Fowler encourages readers to look simultaneously at the overarching attributes and the small details of each work. Readers can better understand the aesthetic novel by considering both the similarities and differences within the group. In terms of looking at small similarities and differences within a group of texts with multiple shared traits, the heuristic of genre gives excellent access. Fowler makes it clear that "genre criticism is very much more than identification. The group allows the critic to interpret a work's individual contribution by discerning kindred forms and to evaluate it by distinguishing superior from inferior representatives of them. It allows the comparison between similars" (34). Beyond evaluative judgments, scholars can also learn how genres change over time and what they borrow from earlier genres or how they influence other related genres.

The idea of defining a genre through close similarities and small differences matters a great deal to the aesthetic novel in particular. The ways in which the novel and aestheticism interact are interesting in part because the novels that the movement produced are so often described as unsatisfying. For example, Alison Byerly describes *Marius the Epicurean* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as having “a peculiarly flat quality. They are dispassionate even in their descriptions of aesthetic passions, and this prevents the reader from becoming deeply engaged in the story” (187). Whether or not her generalization is fully supportable, it represents one thread of reception. Part of the need for a fully developed description of the aesthetic novel is to discover what criteria are more and less relevant to the genre. Perhaps some previous judgments of individual aesthetic novels have missed some ways of accessing those texts through approaching them with some unhelpful expectations. By engaging the works mentioned in this project’s introduction—Lee’s *Miss Brown*, Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean*, Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the anonymously authored *Teleny*, Hichens’ *The Green Carnation*, Falkner’s *The Lost Stradivarius*, and Beardsley’s *Venus and Tannhäuser* — this study aims to find the patterns of the group and explore what that illuminates about the genre and the large movement that created it.

### III. A New Description

In an aesthetic novel a main character often makes a self-conscious choice between selfish and generous action or between good and evil behavior. Furthermore, the aesthetic novel spends a significant amount of time following the main character’s exploration of the more selfish or evil path. The fable-like or fairy tale quality of making

the moral choice a clear and self-conscious one separates these novels from the realist novel's tendency to give characters morally ambiguous choices, or to have them act without awareness of the moral content or consequences of their choices. The choice to follow a character's moral downfall and extended degradation from a position of distanced curiosity rather than offended righteousness contributes to this genre's widely acknowledged connection with perversity in the broadest sense.

The investment in style characteristic of the aesthetic novel comes from more sources than are explicitly acknowledged by many scholars, and occurs in both theme and form. Thematically, characters are invested either in connoisseurship, collecting, art appreciation (broadly defined), or dandyism as ways of relating to art objects and the physical world. In form, the novels offer an emphasis on language as a medium for performance and play. For example, in *Miss Brown* both Anne Brown and Walter Hamlin are aware of language as performance even as Hamlin courts Brown with it and with his performances:

“Don't take what I say in bad part,” he went on, conscious to himself that he was speaking the truth, and at the same time that he was acting, telling it at a moment and in a manner that made it untruthful; “and don't think that I mean anything horrid against you or against myself, when I say that you don't yet know me, and will not know me perhaps, for some time. You see me through your own nature, your own enthusiasms, your own aspirations; you think I am strong where I am weak, and pure where I am impure.” (Lee 177)

Hamlin gains aesthetic and emotional pleasure from his dramatic use of language that undermines the honesty of his speech. This happens at the same time as the more recognized aesthetic pattern of taking pleasure in paradoxes and the close proximity of opposite terms when he pairs weak and strong and pure and impure. This enjoyment of

his own aesthetic speech overwhelms the ostensible goal of communication with Miss Brown.

Similarly, the tone and descriptions of aesthetic texts reflect an authorial investment in surprising comparisons, such as Wilde's analogy in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* of "metaphors as monstrous as orchids, and as evil in color" (241). Similarly, aesthetic novels use lavish physical details in descriptions of both significant and passing objects. In *The Lost Stradivarius*, Maltravers takes great pains to explain the history of a bit of architecture connected with the previous owner of his violin:

It was clear that its curved outline might very easily, as John said, have formed part of the front of a covered gallery. I looked closely at the relief-work which had adorned it. Though the edges were all rubbed off, and the mouldings in some cases entirely removed, I could trace without difficulty a shield in the midst; and a more narrow inspection revealed underneath the whitewash, which had partly peeled away, enough remnants of colour to show that it had certainly been once painted gold and borne a cherub's head with three lilies. (Falkner 119)

That minor moment receives comparable detail and physical consideration, as does the primary object in the text, the fabled Stradivarius, when discussed by an expert and appraiser:

The varnish is of that rich red which Stradivarius used in his best period after he had abandoned the yellow tint copied by him at first from his master Amati. I have never seen a varnish thicker or more lustrous, and it shows on the back that peculiar shading to imitate wear which we term 'breaking up.' The purfling is also of an unsurpassable excellence. Its execution is so fine that I should recommend you to use a magnifying glass for its examination. (47)

This description reveals how the appraiser takes joy in the fineness of the violin, just as Falkner shows joy in language as art throughout his book—including but not limited to the level of characters' speech. The example is highly representative of the text and the

genre. A deeper look at the aesthetic novel's stylistic approach to language is offered in the following chapter.

This description of the aesthetic novel relies on both formal and thematic elements, reflecting the aesthetic movement's historical awareness of and engagement with the relationship between form and content. Many aesthetes, including Pater, Wilde, and Whistler, wrote about this relationship, so it engages the ideas and concerns of the movement to explore dialogue between them. Beyond this, these novels differentiate themselves from other genres both through consistently covering topics left alone by other genres such as dangerous influence (by either art or certain individuals) or the failure to distinguish between art and life, and through exploring their themes in a way that reflects the larger movement. Aesthetic novels take the approach of narrative detachment from moral judgment, replacing that with an emphasis on and exploration of language.

This description—grounded in plot, characterization, narrative tone, and cultural history—is useful in directing readers toward a fluid and gradated way to describe the aesthetic novel; it does not aim to name or label any finalized list since that would not reflect the more complex nuances of many *fin de siècle* texts. By bringing together *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Miss Brown*, *Marius the Epicurean*, *Teleny*, *The Green Carnation*, and *The Lost Stradivarius*, this dissertation aims to use multiple angles and scales of analysis, from the level of diction to holistic close readings, to better understand aestheticism's many connections to sexuality and novelistic form. The goal is new access and new encouragement towards these unread novels rather than classification, following Fowler's guideline "that genre theory, too, is properly concerned, in the main, with

interpretation. It deals with principles of reconstruction and interpretation and (to some extent) evaluation of meaning. It does not deal much with classification” (38). In aiming for description and inclusion rather than classification and exclusion, our study focuses on a few works that significantly display the different attributes and qualities that have been identified with aesthetic novels, exploring what they have in common as well as their differences. These commonalities will reveal aspects of how the novels relate to both aestheticism as a movement, and—as will later be established as important—to Victorian sexualities with which they were, and are, heavily associated.

Specifically in the aesthetic novel, however, the aforementioned themes converge and engage with sexuality in ways that become apparent through time and close reading. Considered carefully, novels of aestheticism concern desires and sexualities that are not supported by the culture of the time, and they contextualize their oblique explorations of these desire and sexualities differently than most contemporary pornographic works or sexological narratives. As a genre, the aesthetic novel provides unique insights into aestheticism’s values and their connection to sexuality in the *fin de siècle*, all within the context of a particular literary form.

#### IV. Sexuality and Aestheticism

As Richard Dellamora, Dennis Denisoff, and many others note, a connection with same-sex desire runs through aesthetic novels though at times it is more or less apparent on the surface. This is an important idea that will receive attention repeatedly and with varying inflections throughout this dissertation. Although a few genres such as New Woman and sensation novels in the last decades of the Victorian period deal

unequivocally with sexuality, aesthetic novels offer a wider and more transgressive range of sexual representation, which has been noted from the 1880s onward. Many scholars from the Victorian era through today connect aestheticism and sexuality, most often a disruptive or deviant sexuality. It seems, however, that for almost every scholar making this connection there is a different reason for it. The connection is made sometimes through decadence, or through Pre-Raphaelitism, or through the commercialism or professionalism of aestheticism, its desire to shock the bourgeoisie mainstream of Victorian culture, or its roots in an Oxonian adaptation of Hellenic cultural traditions, and occasionally in aesthetic philosophy itself.<sup>24</sup> Because aestheticism has such a huge vertical range of interest and execution from the realms of philosophy, education, literature, art, design, fashion, entertainment, and humor, it is particularly difficult to find one starting point for the interconnectedness of sexuality and aestheticism. As the introduction to this dissertation explores at length, Pater grounds a line of argument in *The Renaissance* that encourages would-be aesthetes to appreciate art, life, and experiences both personally and sensually. This opens up possibilities for sexual freedom when it is combined with the recommendation to move beyond the limited tastes of the past and instead look simultaneously for new external sources of stimulation and within for guidance in how to relate to them. As Dellamora says, “when Pater addresses the question of the meaning of self-development or *Bildung*, he places erotic issues at the

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<sup>24</sup> For the connection with decadence see Alan Sinfield (1994). For a connection with Pre-Raphaelitism see Kathy Psomiades (1997). The commercialism and professionalism of aestheticism is treated effectively by Regenia Gagnier (1987) and Jonathan Freedman (1993). Many have written (and argued) about the political engagement of aestheticism. A recent and notable contribution to this discussion is Rachel Teukolsky’s 2009 book: *The Literate Eye: Victorian Art Writing and Modernist Aesthetics*. In regards to Classical literature, scholarship and education see Linda Dowling (1995) and Stephano Evangelista (2009). The philosophic underpinnings of a connection to sexuality are argued in Jonathan Dollimore (1991) and Jeff Nunokawa (2003) both make this connection through Wilde.

center... Pater develops a norm of culture focused on the individual and positive about the body” (109). This positivity about the body, and specifically about the body's capacity to sense and receive impressions, makes aestheticism permeable to sexual stimulation under the broader name of sensual experience. The focus on the individual makes standards and choices less about the opinions of society and instead more about personal choice. Denisoff reinforces this point by considering responses to Pater's text:

While Walter Pater's aestheticist description of sympathy and his homoerotic idealization of sensuous pleasure advocated a supportive notion of sexual diversity, literary reviewers' almost entirely negative affirmation of this diversity helped to establish the discourse in mainstream society, thereby informing a broader range of people who experienced unconventional desires that they were not alone. (“Comic Promiscuity” 233)

While Pater's homoeroticism is not obvious to every sort of reader, his sensualism and emphasis on receptivity are obvious. As Pater puts it, “our education becomes complete in proportion as our susceptibility to these impressions increases in depth and variety” (*Renaissance* xx). He actively recommends embracing this sensuality in his creation of Victorian aestheticism.

Understanding how and why Pater values art so highly, and how that underwrites the relationship between art and viewer that he recommends, readers can watch to see how Pater's view of art challenges not only traditional Victorian morality, but the value of a moral code altogether. As Iser makes clear, “only passions—preferably those aroused by art—can momentarily cover the pain of finiteness by capturing the intensity of the passing moment.” (30) This makes art, for Pater, the highest valued thing in life and one not replaceable by previous cultural comforts like morality or religion. Pater's rejection of morality (and other cultural systems) in favor of art makes room for non-normative

sexuality. Pater champions sensual and associative experiences of art as opposed to basing judgment on art's potential moral consequences. This appreciation moves into a restless desire for new and unique sensations. Not only must morality be ignored, but societally supported types and sources of sensations must no longer be seen as the limits of exploration. Pater wishes to include what was previously forbidden, as can be seen by his decision to re-instate the 'Conclusion' of *The Renaissance* in the text's third edition despite the many negative reactions that prompted him to temporarily remove it from the second edition.

Pater's claims anchor the connection between aestheticism and sexuality, and this connection can be cemented by looking at a few of the responses to the first edition of *The Renaissance* that begin to perform the same pattern of omissions that aesthetic writing does. Margaret Oliphant was among the more strident detractors of the text. She condemned the sensuality of Pater's approach because she connected it with a certain set of negative social characteristics that she will not describe openly:

The conclusion of this very artificial book has a curious kind of human interest in it, as showing what Greek — not the language but the tone of mind and condition of thought, taken up a thousand years or so too late, on the top of a long heritage of other thoughts and conditions - may bring Oxford to. Poor, young, too rich, too clever, too dull, too refined souls! ("Pater's History" 607)

Oliphant finds Pater wanting and fears that his ideas may be contagious to others at Oxford. What he is missing or how he might influence young men, she only alludes to in the roundabout way of describing his mental condition and tone of mind as Greek. This allusion is meant to convey both Oxford's education in Classical literature and same-sex connections, but Oliphant doesn't say either directly. Surprisingly, readers find a similar,

but even more resolutely negative in a letter from Classics scholar and homosexual apologist John Addington Symonds:

You shall have Pater reviewed by me when the Academy comes. There is a kind of Death clinging to the man, wh[ich] makes his music (but heavens! how sweet it is!) a little faint and sickly. His view of life gives me the creeps, as old women say. I am sure it is a ghastly sham; that live by it or not as he may do, his utterance of the theory to the world has in it a wormy hollow-voiced seductiveness of a fiend. (Symonds qtd in Seiler's *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage* 55)

Symonds and Oliphant have little in common beyond their dislike of Pater, but both are talking around a problem they perceive rather than delving into what exactly is so dangerous, seductive, or fiendish about the implications of *The Renaissance*. These descriptive evasions that evoke while simultaneously forbidding further exploration are suggestive silences. This reveals that suggestive silences are common to both aesthetic novels and the negative reactions against all things aesthetic, something further supported throughout backlashes against aestheticism. Critics hesitate to name what they suspect they find in the silences of aesthetic writing.

Suggestive silences create a difficulty for those who wish to describe them both in the Victorian era and later. D. A. Miller, in his article "Anal Rope" vividly illustrates a helpful related concept when he explores the differences between connotation and denotation of homosexual contact specifically as they function in a text. In brief, he finds that once the audience has detected the connoted presence of homosexual contact, all subsequent connotation becomes homosexual, and the process of reading becomes an active and futile pursuit of enough connotation to constitute denotation, though no amount of connotation can ever achieve this. In order to avoid this trap of denotation and connotation, I propose to leave the suggestive silences *suggestive* rather than attempting

to pin down their meanings definitively. This allows silence itself to *be* rather than to serve only as a clue motivating a perpetual search for more and more fixed evidence. Instead, I look at the context and patterns of these silences and how they are treated within the text. As a clear example, readers can turn to the meaning of the eponymous green carnation, and the nature of the relationship between Esme Amarinth and the young Reggie Hastings. These tantalizing not-quite-mysteries are one of most notable sexualized omissions within that novel. The green carnation, a visual symbol of the dandy or aesthete, frightens the upright and sweetly sincere Lady Locke; she persistently questions others so as to find out and clearly establish its exact meaning, but never with any success. The arch-dandy Amarinth tells her that these dyed flowers are used as a symbol for difference and that green carnations have been chosen by dandies because they are more lovely than natural flowers. He does not say why artifice is valued more highly than nature but implies some parallel between this choice and other choices, potentially emotional or sexual ones, made by his group of aesthetes. She never satisfies her curiosity, but she finds out enough about her lackluster suitor Hastings to know that she does not wish to join her life to his. Though she cannot give voice to the suggestive silence in her own life, she apprehends that she is being excluded and that marriage to Hastings would perpetuate this exclusion. The suggestive silence acts; it warns Lady Locke. In looking at the pattern of suggestive silences like those of *The Green Carnation* and reviews of *The Renaissance*, readers can see what cannot be said and cannot be explored openly in Victorian literature or criticism.

### V. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as Model

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the most famous and most widely acknowledged aesthetic novel, and it thus serves as an excellent ground to expand and elaborate on the new description of the novels that I propose. To reiterate, the key features in this description include use of language for style and craft as well as communication, an investment in objects and art on the part of both characters and the authorial voice, a primary character willfully making a negative choice, and suggestive silences. Wilde's stylistic concern with language presents itself clearly throughout the text. Descriptive passages abound, such as: "It was an exquisite day. The warm air seemed laden with spices. A bee flew in, and buzzed round the blue-dragon bowl that, filled with sulphur yellow roses, stood before him. He felt perfectly happy" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 75). Here Wilde goes beyond the narrative requirements of prose, using specific tropes that his Victorian audience could recognize as aesthetic. For instance, blue and white porcelain or china was a specifically aesthetic fad related to the popularization of all things Asian, and popularized by Wilde's almost mythically famous statement: "I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china" that launched a host of *Punch* cartoons.<sup>25</sup> Nature's pleasures have been surpassed by more cultivated dandyish ones even for the bee who has abandoned the work of pollinating living plants to dally in the spiced atmosphere of Dorian's room and admire his china. The choice for Wilde's roses to be yellow is another widely recognizable aesthetic selection; certain colors are more associated with the movement and its fads than others, with yellow, purple, green, and

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<sup>25</sup> For excellent coverage of the fad, see Lionel Lambourne (1996). The most famous of the cartoons is George DuMaurier's "The Six-Mark Tea-Pot."

black being far more aesthetically affiliated than red or brown.<sup>26</sup> Last, consider the choice of the word *sulphur* to describe the roses. This is aesthetic in two ways. First, sulphur, though it is a color, is not generally associated with sight nearly so much as with scent. An aesthetic trope highly associated with aesthetic writers and visual artists was to confuse or conflate senses in descriptions or titles in an evocation of artistic synesthesia. Whistler, for example, gave several of his paintings the titles of common musical forms. Secondly, the sensory profile of sulphur is unpleasant in any sense; the smell is brimstone, a signifier of the underworld. Thus turning roses into something yellow and otherworldly, and then suggesting with them a terrible smell is a literary move best grouped in the decadent and aesthetic fascination with the overripe and the grotesque. To convey this much sensory and associative information in a short descriptive sentence reveals Wilde's decidedly aesthetic commitment to language as a medium for more than prosaic direct communication instead deferring to play, allusion, and unusual sensual exploration.

Wilde's characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* perform a similarly playful and associative attitude towards language. Not only does the dandy Lord Henry Wotton speak in a self-consciously artful way, but Dorian and Basil join in to varying degrees. We see the sorts of paradox and epigram most associated with Wilde, but the characters also describe their world in ways that are fundamentally similar to those of the unseen narrator. Everyone in the world of the text speaks an aesthetic language. When describing

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<sup>26</sup> For resources focusing on the visual culture of aestheticism see Lambourne (1996) and Chai (1990).

the theatre where he first watched Sybil Vane, for instance, Dorian paints this vividly negative picture:

I found myself seated in a horrid little private box, with a vulgar drop scene staring me in the face. I looked out behind the curtain, and surveyed the house. It was a tawdry affair, all Cupids and cornucopias, like a third rate wedding-cake. The gallery and pit were fairly full, but the two rows of dingy stalls were quite empty, and there was hardly a person in what I suppose they called the dress circle. Women went about with oranges and ginger-beer, and there was a terrible consumption of nuts going on. (43)

Dorian uses alliteration, makes unexpected comparisons, and never misses a place to put an adverb or adjective. Wilde writes Dorian's voice archly, with dry scathing wit and an overdeveloped sense of detail. Though his characters each speak differently and show unique character traits in their relationships with language, the text on the whole never drops its affinity for using language to aesthetically oriented effect.

Connoisseurship takes a significant role in Dorian's foray into dandyism. He becomes a collector of gems, musical instruments, and perfumes among other rarities. Through this he develops an appreciation for the sensual effects of sight, sound, and smell, as well as for the old, rare, and unusual. The text thoroughly explores each of these collections and Dorian's responses to them, and in so doing gives the narrative voice ample opportunities for opulent descriptions. This investment in objects goes beyond creating a forum for linguistic play, and shows readers how Dorian relates to the world around him. He is at home in the role of the collector, the appreciator, the evaluator; that is how he perceives his social role as a dandy.

What has been called the flaw of Dorian's dandyism is his conflation of humans and objects, which leads to his treating them in much the same way.<sup>27</sup> This is the path Dorian takes after realizing that he has, in actuality, traded his soul for an unchanging face, only to see the consequences of his actions and of the years take their toll not on him but on his portrait. It is this choice that makes clear the novel's inclusion of a negative moral choice.

At the start of the novel, Dorian poses for Basil Hallward and basks in the seductive praises of his youthful beauty from Lord Henry. The words affect him mightily and he fears for the fading of both his good looks and the power he could exercise through them, and so impetuously offers his soul in exchange for unchanging youth. This is a fantastical moment; the novel prepares readers to take Dorian's words as seriously as he himself took Lord Henry's praise, and Hallward treats his life-size portrait with the same gravity. The deal is struck with some unknown, unnamed force, without Dorian's knowing, but in the moments of the bargain Dorian shows a callousness to Hallward that clues readers in to how Dorian will use his immortality, saying, "You like your art better than your friends. I am no more to you than a green bronze figure, hardly as much I dare say" (26). He responds to his own fear of aging and mortality by showing ingratitude for the gift of a devoted friend. In all, Dorian chooses to sell his soul; he chooses to be cruel; and he reinforces those choices again and again in the novel, showing little distinction between his treatment of people and objects: be they strangers or friends.

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<sup>27</sup> Texts that explore Dorian as a flawed dandy or aesthete include Cohen (1987), Sedgwick (1990), and Lane (1994).

The apex of this trend happens in his ill-fated love affair with the actress Sybil Vane, with whom he falls in love because of her ability to be many women to him. Dorian does not distinguish between her profession as an actress and her real identity. Beyond her beauty, he loves her only for her ability to perform. She responds enthusiastically to his love, but this impairs her escape into acting. When he sees her perform badly, her charm has been broken for him. Dorian does not love the woman who loves him so much as the figure who can wear all masks for his benefit and entertainment. He shows his coldness not only in how he speaks to her after the play, severing their attachment abruptly, but also in the transience of his grief when he learns of her suicide the next day. Dorian simply does not interpret people as more than objects, nor does he understand relationships and obligations to others beyond the level of whim. This connects to the danger of those unnamed activities that so often lead to the social and physical ruin of Dorian's companions while leaving Dorian untouched, forming some of the novel's suggestive silences.

Dorian's propensities and weaknesses, as well as the stylistic choices Wilde makes throughout the novel, help illustrate this new description of the aesthetic novel. This text plays with and appreciates language; its characters do the same. The novel separates itself from the conventions of realist fiction by creating a fable-like atmosphere, in which a clear moral choice sets Dorian down the negative, selfish, and ostensibly evil path.<sup>28</sup> This short exploration of how *The Picture of Dorian Gray* functions as an aesthetic novel clarifies the description itself. The novel functions as a model because it so clearly and unambiguously displays the traits this project seeks to investigate.

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<sup>28</sup> Harp explores this theme in "Fables, Myths, and Fairy Tales in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*."

## VI. Understanding a Variation: *Teleny*

In taking these same requirements and looking at *Teleny*—a much less studied pornographic text of the same period—one can find consistent similarities, enough to confidently call *Teleny* an aesthetic novel. This variation reveals the breadth, flexibility, and inclusiveness of the aesthetic novel as a genre, showing the practical use in making many novels accessible under the rubric of aestheticism. Because *Teleny* remains relatively little known, a bit of introduction and contextualization is warranted. Apocryphally connected to Wilde, this text has always garnered a hybrid status between the novel and pornography, but by treating it as an aesthetic novel we can understand how this text works within the novel form.<sup>29</sup> The dubious connection to Wilde is the result of innuendo by Leonard Smithers—the text's first publisher, who also published many of Wilde's works—in his catalog advertisement, as well as in a more complete but doubtful story put forth by the text's 1934 Parisian publisher, Charles Hirsch.<sup>30</sup>

The recognition of *Teleny*'s importance in homosexual literature is far from new; Byrne Fone calls it “the first novel in English to focus exclusively on homosexuality, not only presenting explicit sexual descriptions but also using its subject as an occasion for sensitive exploration” (280), while Liza Sigel categorizes it as “one of the first pornographic novels to explore homosexuality as an identity rather than a practice” (115). Approaching *Teleny* in this fashion, readers encounter some atypical challenges to

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<sup>29</sup> For sources on *Teleny* as a hybrid or unusual text see Cohen (1987) and Sigel (2002) among others.

<sup>30</sup> The full text of the advertisement as well as extensive historical and bibliographic work see *Teleny*'s entry in Mendes (1993).

a goal of contextualization; little can be known about the Victorian reception or readership of *Teleny* because it was an illegal underground text. Thanks to Peter Mendes' intensive bibliographic work, scholars do know some facts about its publication, which are largely preserved and available through the interest in the text's doubtful attribution to Oscar Wilde. *Teleny's* advertisement, which clearly marks it as pornography and already acknowledges a certain uniqueness within that realm, boasts that “This work is, undoubtedly, the most powerful and the most cleverly written erotic Romance which has appeared in the English language during recent years.”<sup>31</sup> Though readers can take all of the advertisement's claims in light of their financial motivation, they are only the first in a long line of commenters to note *Teleny's* differences from other pornographic texts.

Paratextual clues give a better frame for understanding *Teleny* in terms of the new rubric of the aesthetic novel. To first address issues of language, *Teleny* reads remarkably like the other novels in this project in terms of the descriptions for items, settings, characters and activities throughout. Most characters maintain a decorative florid element to their conversation, and at least one character speaks with the dandy-like aim for conversation as art via Wildean epigram. When the narrator, Des Grieux, speaks directly to his unnamed companion whose listening frames the text, he artfully describes a secret meeting of homosexual men, “Yes, but then it seemed to me as if I were in some rank

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<sup>31</sup> The text of the advertisement makes a series of interesting claims for the work, “Its author—a man of great imagination—has conceived a thrilling story, based to some extent on the subject treated by an eminent littérateur who died a few months ago—i.e. On the Urning, or man loving man. It is a most extraordinary story of passion; and whilst dealing with scenes which surpass in freedom the wildest license, the culture of its author's style add an additional piquancy and spice to the narration. The subject was recently treated in a veiled manner in an article in a largely-circulated London daily paper, which demonstrated the subtle influence of music and the musician in connection with perverted sexuality. It is a book which will certainly rank as the chief of its class, and it may truthfully be said to make a new departure in English amatory literature.” (Mendes 252)

jungle, where everything that is beautiful brings about instant death; where gorgeous, venomous snakes cluster together and look like bunches of variegated flowers, where sweet blossoms are ever dripping wells of fiery poison” (*Teleny* 144). This focus on sensual details, vivid and surprising comparisons, and on the tempting negative clearly point to this novel's aestheticism of language.

*Teleny* places an investment in language by creating and describing aesthetic spaces through the use of rare and unusual materials combined in such a way so as to highlight their distinction linguistically. On the night Teleny and Des Grieux declare and physically enact their romantic feelings for one another, Teleny brings Des Grieux into a room designed and decorated for that purpose alone:

It was a most peculiar room, the walls of which were covered over with some warm, white, soft, quilted stuff, studded all over with frosted silver buttons; the floor was covered with the curly white fleece of young lambs; in the middle of the apartment stood a capacious couch, on which was thrown the skin of a huge polar bear. Over this single piece of furniture, and old silver lamp — evidently from some Byzantine church or some eastern synagogue — shed a pale glimmering light, sufficient, however, to light up the dazzling whiteness of this temple of Priapus whose votaries we were. (117)

Teleny is himself participating in aestheticism in how he decorates and uses this unique room. The room is meant to remain special and apart from everyday life, not only in its appearance with the extreme dominance of whiteness, but also in the fact that it was created for the use of one person without his prior knowledge or consent. It exhibits knowledge of aestheticism's effects on home décor trends particularly through the choice to create an extreme and overwhelming effect through the space's near-exclusive use of white. This one room has two types of animal skin: polar bear and lamb. These skins are sensual and carnal in terms of being both texturally stimulating and quite literally bodily.

The two choices are alike in color but dissimilar in their animals' demeanor and symbolic associations; young lambs are pure, sacrificial, and vulnerable as prey, whereas polar bears are massive, foreign and dangerous. The room plays on these differences and parallels. Its silver lamp is from specifically described as religious and exotic, particularly in the context of nineteenth-century England since its source is named as either Eastern Orthodox or Jewish and mid-eastern. These items come from many sources and bring diverse affiliations, but ultimately share in the impression of escapism via exoticism, sensuality and luxury. Other spaces of the novel are also highly unusual in their style and decoration. The underground society dedicated to love between men meets in a secreted room, and is thematically and richly decorated for the enjoyment and stimulation of its celebrants. Des Grieux describes his first glimpse:

It seemed as if from this everyday world of ours I had been transported into the magic realms of fairy-land. A thousand lamps of varied form filled the room with a strong yet hazy light. There were wax tapers held by Japanese cranes, or glowing in massive bronze or silver candlesticks, the plunder of Spanish altars; star-shaped or octagonal lamps from Moorish mosques or Eastern synagogues; curiously wrought iron cressets of tortured and fantastic designs; chandeliers of murous, iridescent glass work reflected in Dutch gilt, or Castel-Durante majolica sconces. (143)

*Teleny* again participates in aestheticism's focus on bringing art and beauty into the home, and on transforming the domestic space into a showcase for the exotic, rare, and costly. Escapism remains a part of this room's impression as well, but the narration draws specific attention to this element through its comparison of the room to fairy-land. Design elements come from diverse sources: Japan, Spain, North Africa, the Middle East, Italy and the Netherlands. Aside from the international nature of the room's lighting, this description emphasizes impressionistic qualities like haziness, iridescence, glow and

reflections. All of these work together to associate this space with the unnatural and the dreamlike. Aesthetic trends are reflected clearly in how *Teleny*'s characters create and enjoy their personal spaces, giving them meaning and importance within the world of the text and within the text itself.

The aesthetic novels' fascination with negative moral choices appears in a more diffuse way in *Teleny* than in most of the other focus texts. There is no shortage of bad decisions, or of sympathetic characters choosing to hurt, harm or disregard others, but no single decision decides the trajectory of the text. One incident, that will be discussed in more depth in chapter three, however does have particularly severe consequences for the characters and the text's primary sexual and emotional relationship. The main characters, Des Grieux and Teleny, become separated because of Teleny's financially motivated sexual infidelity. This fulfills the basic requirement; readers are given no complication or justification for Teleny's decision, but the text makes clear that this prostitution and its consequences could have been prevented. Teleny and Des Grieux are not of the same class background or of a comparable degree of financial stability. When suffering from money troubles, Teleny will not allow his lover to take on any of his debts or work with him to improve the situation, saying, "You perhaps might even love me more on account of the money I cost you — for we are often fond of a friend according to what we do for him — but I might be induced to love you less; gratitude is such an unbearable burden to human nature. I am your lover, it is true, but do not let me sink lower than that" (159). This unwillingness to take money from his partner does not, however, prevent Teleny from agreeing to sleep with Des Grieux's mother for coverage of the same debts. This decision negatively affects all involved and pushes the story towards melodrama and

away from most pornographic texts or realistic fiction. This conclusion resembles in particular the dramatic endings in *Miss Brown* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which all conclusively depict miserable ends for their respective protagonists.

Including a pornographic text such as *Teleny* in the group of aesthetic novels does not only make the list more complete and rounded. It also provides a chance to see a novel that does not display the same use of suggestive silences. *Teleny* is an underground, anonymous, illegal work; it does not have the concerns for censorship, negative reviews or social stigma that motivate suggestive silences. Violence and sexuality are both explored emphatically; the text's status as illegal pornography not only allows but requires explicit sexual material. The novel incorporates the suggestive silence in a different fashion, however, by choosing not to foreground the artistic and social lives of its characters. Readers do not get to explore Teleny's muscianship, or Des Grieux's social circle outside of its homosexual members. Aestheticism becomes a form of silence in this novel because it is consistently shown, but never directly discussed or foregrounded.

Though no previous study has joined this group of novels together for analysis, some trends emerge distinctly within them, and these, along with the specific yet inclusive description this project works to establish, flesh out the genre of the aesthetic novel. Having now described that category, this dissertation can use it to address in the following chapters the patterns, in both form and content, within these novels that give the group such a strong association with sexuality, both in the era of their publication and continuing to the present. Furthermore, the project can begin to address why there are so few novels that fit the set of criteria. These two nodes, that of the relative rarity of aesthetic novels in an era known for novel production, and that of the persistent

connection between aestheticism and sexuality, together allow for a greater perception of the Victorian understanding of the novel, aestheticism, and the varied and difficult to contain sexuality of the *fin de siècle*.

## CHAPTER 2

### STYLE, PLEASURE, AND THE AESTHETIC NOVEL

#### I. Aesthetic Style

It is not especially difficult to identify commonalities of plot, setting, and characterization across aesthetic novels. Because aestheticism is decidedly more concerned with style than content, however, we must grant a critical importance not only to the aesthetic novel's treatment of language, but also to the reasons behind and effects of its particular style. This chapter thus explores the aesthetic novel's style, considers it historically, and ultimately connects it to a sexual undercurrent that manifests in significant and unexpected ways.

Aestheticism, as readers approach it, grows most directly from premises explained and illustrated in Pater's *The Renaissance*. As much through stylistic demonstration as analytic argument, Pater proposes new, embodied ways for readers to understand language, art, desire, and pleasure. Combining artistic creation and criticism, he exhibits consistent preference for oblique and partial communication, advancing via demonstration his argument for the richness of experience that comes from associative receptivity.

To offer one of many possible examples, this stylistic hallmark is observable in Pater's passages on fifteenth-century Italian sculpture, in which he draws connections to other arts and artists, ruminates on personalities and cultures, shares his personal

interaction with this art, and, most of all, plays with language.

Their sculpture shares with the painting of Botticelli and the churches of Brunelleschi that profound expressiveness, that intimate impress of an indwelling soul, which is the peculiar fascination of the art of Italy in that century. Their works have been much neglected, and often almost hidden away amid the frippery of modern decoration, and we come with some surprise on the places where their fire still smoulders. One longs to penetrate into the lives of the men who have given expression to so much power and sweetness. But it is part of the reserve, the austere dignity and simplicity of their existence, that their histories are for the most part lost, or told but briefly. (*Renaissance* 49)

This passage shares Pater's valuations within art through his diction rather than a more specifically anchored and concrete analysis; he does not name any works, but he establishes a positive vocabulary about qualities worth pursuing, admiring or exploring. He praises expressiveness, intimacy, hiddenness, power, sweetness, reserve, dignity and simplicity. The concept that he approaches from the most angles relates to what is unseen or hidden; rueful toward public underappreciation of this art, he ascribes to it an obscurity, simultaneously elevating the artist and criticizing the public. The artist—and all artists—gain doubly this way. Pater also declines to remove the shroud from what he admires through incision or display, instead appreciating both what he can and cannot observe, making his own experience duly mysterious.

As both a participant in the Victorian sage tradition and as a novelist, Pater offers in *The Renaissance* and elsewhere what many scholars have taken to be the primary articulation of aesthetic style and philosophy. Within the context of decadence, Linda Dowling addresses this style “as a counterpoetics of disruption and parody and stylistic derangement, a critique not so much of Wordsworthian nature as of the metaphysics

involved in any sentimental notion of a simple world of grass and trees and flowers. The world as it then survives in Decadent writing is by contrast a belated world, a place of hesitations and contrarities and exhaustions” (*Language and Decadence* xi).<sup>32</sup> Dowling argues that decadent writing is a formal reaction to previous styles—one that bears a close philological relationship with aestheticism’s investment in beauty and its evaluation of art based on form rather than content.

However, Dowling also asserts that as the nineteenth century drew to a close, literature’s power to reinscribe aestheticism as a social identity had increasingly less to do with *The Renaissance*’s style-as-philosophy and more to do with the tropes and wordplay of aesthetic writings, and this process was contemporaneous with (and implicitly connected to) the popular ascendancy of aestheticism and decadence more broadly. Indeed, while a few writers such as Wilde followed Pater’s lead, explicitly engaging with the wider world through both literary and critical work, other authors of aesthetic novels like Faulkner and Hichens had limited philosophical and professional stake in aesthetic subculture. To Dowling, what had begun as a pioneering new way of relating to art unilaterally lost ideological meaning and depth in this process: “The parodic mode of Victorian literary Decadence, granting the philological estimate but deflating Pater’s exquisite stylistic rationale of it into a mere slogan, delights at the same time in showing how complete a world can be fashioned out of mere archaisms and

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<sup>32</sup> Dowling's view of decadence is separate from many scholars in the previous chapter's outline who relates it to a breakdown of society or a fascination with evil and depravity—whether for their own sake or merely for their novelty.

argot” (Dowling 144).<sup>33</sup>

At this point, two critical issues arise. First, the emergence of a linguistic style and the means by which it came to signify aestheticism as a social practice—rather than derive from it as philosophical approach—can tell us much about how the aesthetic novel developed and cycled through its popularity. Second, we might consider more honestly and openly Dowling’s assertion that aesthetic writing can fashion worlds even when stripped of the specific investment in style-as-philosophy that Pater so conscientiously develops; beyond “mere” archaisms and argot, might there be something more in the aesthetic novel that rewards readers?

## II. Aesthetic Language Considered Quantitatively

By studying its particular brand of wordplay, we can ultimately understand the aesthetic novel more deeply, both in the capacity of its superficial style and its linguistic relation to other bodies of work. Scholars have almost universally recognized aesthetic writing’s engagement with language, often constructing arguments via close reading. However, by taking a cue from the analytic approaches of Franco Moretti and looking at texts from a distance in attempt to see larger patterns that function less anecdotally and more quantitatively, we can reveal some significant trends.

While quantitative measurements can offer a reassuring illusion of objectivity and

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<sup>33</sup> Dowling’s use of “parodic” here is generic; she does not refer exclusively to those works created or primarily read in irony.

finality, they are in the end only tools, and what they reveal says as much about how they are used as it does about any innate qualities of the works studied. As Willard McCarty makes clear: “software furnishes a practical means for the scholar to record, assemble, and organize a large number of suitably minute observations, to which all the usual scholarly criteria apply” (396). Quantitative measurement does not aim for sleight of hand or any obscuring of either process or results; instead it functions as a facilitator of fast and accurate reading and helpful organization.

In this case, I use computer-assisted analysis<sup>34</sup> to demonstrate quickly and clearly some important linguistic similarities between aesthetic novels and a small group of novels ancillary to aestheticism that collectively illustrate certain inheritances beyond the lineage of Pater and the Victorian sages—connections drawn elsewhere by in the Victorian era Walter Hamilton, Vernon Lee and others and more recently explored by Gene H. Bell-Villada, Talia Schaffer, Maurizio Ascari, and others. I also analyze other popular novels of the late nineteenth century as a control group in order to isolate aesthetic novels’ linguistic markers. The point here is not to retread the fact that similarities and differences between bodies of work exist; rather, the specific similarities and differences revealed here can spur closer analyses and indicate fruitful and distinguishing points of entry for further articulating the aesthetic novel’s stylistic characteristics and relationships to other repertoires.

The first group analyzed consists of aesthetic novels discussed in this project:

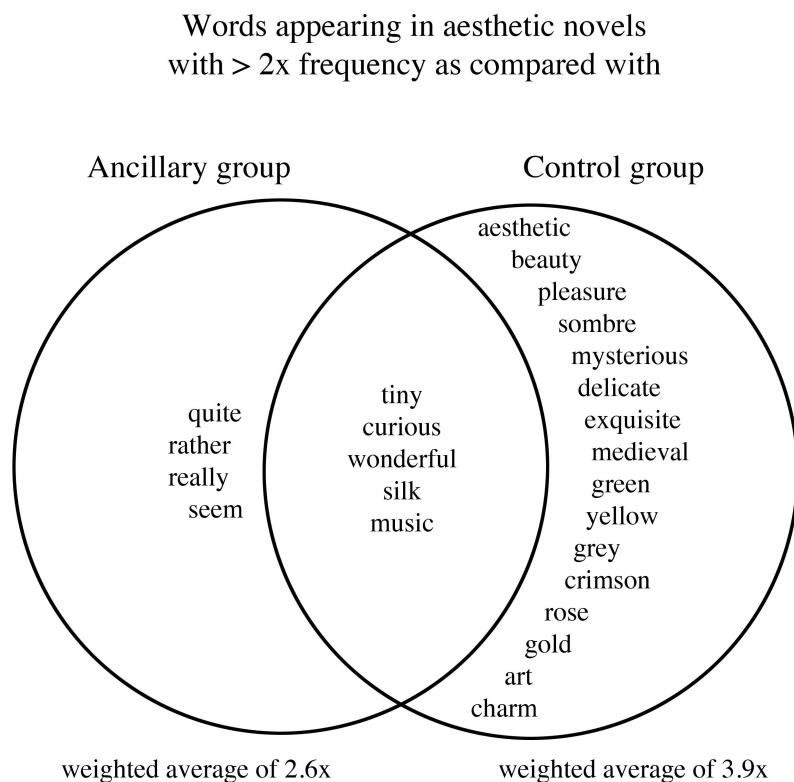
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<sup>34</sup> I used Concordance, a program by R. J. C. Watt.

*Miss Brown, The Picture of Dorian Gray, Teleny, Marius the Epicurean, The Green Carnation, Venus and Tannhäuser, and The Lost Stradivarius.* The second group brings together several works that, either in specific argument or in passing, other scholars have related to aestheticism: *Mademoiselle De Maupin* (1835) by Theophile Gautier, *Under Two Flags* (1867) by Ouida, *À rebours* (1884) by Joris-Karl Huysmans, and *The Confessions of a Young Man* (1886) by George Moore. These novels come from a much wider range of chronological and geographic sources, but they share many qualities that Schaffer and others attribute to aesthetic novels. The French texts' English translations used for this analysis are those contemporary with the aesthetic movement. The contrasting last body of texts comprises a group of best selling novels in England from 1885 to 1895—the range of years in which the aesthetic novels considered here were published; it consists of *Madame* (1885) by Margaret Oliphant, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) by Thomas Hardy, *Scylla or Charybdis* (1895) by Rhoda Broughton, *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889) by Robert Louis Stevenson, and *New Grub Street* (1891) by George Gissing. These groupings create a continuum from aesthetic to non-aesthetic works in which each group has sufficient range to be representative and broad rather than idiosyncratic and narrow.

Indexing software was used to look at the specific word choices in the novels. Software counted the words as tokens, indicating those that appear more than twice as frequently in aesthetic novels than in either the ancillary group of aesthetic-related works or concurrent best sellers. This approach means that words that are simply very common

are ignored in favor of words peculiar to the specific groups of novels. Near-identical tokens (e.g. *seem* and *seems*) are grouped under one heading. The results are visible in the following graphic:



*fig. 1: Diagram of comparative word frequency*

Comparing aesthetic novels with those cited elsewhere as ancillary to aestheticism, we first notice the proportion of words of emphasis and degree. *Quite*, *rather*, *tiny*, and *really* all act to reinforce, appearing in a supporting role to draw additional attention to the focus of their sentences, hedging and deferring in some cases. The list notably includes no active verbs, and two-thirds are adjectives or adverbs. *Seems*,

*wonderful*, and *curious* all establish a sense of deviation, concerning false appearances or immediately recognizable strangeness. Indeed, self-conscious deviation from social, legal, or ethical systems and other sets of expectations plays a large role in aesthetic novels. The two nouns on the list are similarly revealing. *Music* emphasizes the interest in the fine arts that readers see in all of the aesthetic novels (whether or not music or musicians are central to their plots), while *silk* functions as a luxurious class marker.

In comparing the aesthetic novels with solely the control group of concurrent best sellers, the twenty-one distinguishing words immediately suggest a palette of aesthetic style. Nouns and adjectives dominate this list, and there are no verbs that cannot also function as other parts of speech, thus suggesting aesthetic novels' prioritization of the inert and beautiful over the active.

The twenty-one words appear on average nearly four times more frequently in aesthetic novels than in contemporary best sellers. Contributing to this (but not indicated in the graphic) are eight words within the set that appear at least five times more frequently in aesthetic novels: *aesthetic*, *exquisite*, *gold*, *medieval*, *art*, *tiny*, *silk*, and *music*—all sensual, imagistic, evocative words. As with the previous list of nine, this list is deeply connected with the fine arts, luxury, emphasis, history, deviation and mood.

As points of critical entry, we can ascribe significance both to the particular tokens of difference that stylistically differentiate the aesthetic novel and to the quantitative degree of that difference. These will both be fruitful approaches.

First, the words that separate the aesthetic novel from its contemporaries point

collectively toward the idea of materiality. The six color words on the list remind us of how unabashedly the aesthetic novel revels in visuality and sensation. Passing views are given considerable levels of detail and interest, and as one may guess from the numerous appearances of gold and green, objects and materials are central points of reference, rather than nature. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* offers a telling passage in which Dorian, after a restless night of worry, sees the cold land at dawn inscribed with the material accessories of drinking and consuming: “The crisp frost lay like salt upon the grass. The sky was an inverted cup of blue metal.” (Wilde 154). The emphasis that our quantitative analysis reveals on color and on the exquisite, the silken, and the medieval beckons us to engage in particular with the aesthetic novel’s depiction of rich, fabulous, detailed, and exotic settings and items.

Beyond merely observing materiality’s central role in aesthetic style, we can ask what it achieves, how, and to whom. One set of answers is that this language functions as code, as instructions for would-be dandies and aesthetes, and as a signifier of leisure, taste, and experience. This latter function is characterized especially by an emphasis on the foreign and exotic made possible by the commodities of colonialism of the nineteenth century, heightening aestheticism’s class-based nature. Just as with Dowling’s reading of Pater, the *what* and the *how* work together. Characters do not dispassionately fill their homes with Queen Anne antiques, exotic collectibles, and odd fripperies, but are instead defined in part by their love of these objects. They are collectors who reinscribe their identity through amassing an array of objects that establish them as arbiters of good taste,

or in some cases, as bold explorers attempting to move beyond good and bad taste and into something altogether rarer. In *Teleny*, the luxurious and sexual objects for the secret men's club add to the history and positive self-image that those men struggle mightily to create along with their erotic connections. In *Miss Brown*, objects are the conduit through which emotion travels when Walter Hamlin's creation of the proper domestic setting for his muse becomes an extended act of love and devotion. Alternately in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian uses his material possessions to obtain cultural clout, as they are a large part of how he stays in the good graces of the *bon ton* despite his unchanging appearance and the growing rumors that swirl around him. *The Lost Stradivarius* is ripe with tragically inspired historical décor, touched with a sense of the macabre, as in this passage:

In the house above, my brother had built a large hall after the ancient Roman style, and this, with a dining-room and many other chambers, were decorated in the fashion of those discovered at Pompeii. They had been furnished with the utmost luxury, and the beauty of the paintings, furniture, carpets, and hangings was enhanced by statues in bronze and marble. The villa, indeed, and its fittings were of a kind to which I was little used, and at the same time of such beauty that I never ceased to regard all as a creation of an enchanter's wand, or as the drop-scene to some drama which might suddenly be raised and disappear from my sight. The house, in short, together with its furniture, was, I believe, intended to be a reproduction of an ancient Roman villa, and had something about it repellent to my rustic and insular ideas. In the contemplation of its perfection I experienced a curious mental sensation, which I can only compare to the physical oppression produced on some persons by the heavy and cloying perfume of a bouquet of gardenias or other too highly scented exotics. (Falkner 112)

Through this narration, Falkner not only paints a sensuous and rich picture of the villa's

luxury, but also includes the negative emotions and associations it inspires in a non-aesthete guest of the house. These decorative fantasies and associative visions are detailed, emotive, and rich in the same way as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* treats Dorian's antique textiles or *The Green Carnation*'s employs ironically rural tropes. These commodities either parallel or stand in for the verbal articulation of aesthetic subculture in these texts.

The second insight that the quantitative analysis supports concerns the comparative stylistic similarity between the aesthetic novel and the small constellation of novels to which other scholars have ascribed an aesthetic kinship. The tallied group of aesthetic novels in comparison to the control group exhibits twenty-one significant differentiating words, appearing with nearly quadrupled frequency, but when we match it up alongside these supposedly related works, not only do the differentiating words suggest less contrast in referential materiality (if more in descriptive deference), but they are fewer in number and lesser in degree, with two point six times greater a frequency of occurrence (rather than three point nine).

This result affirms some stylistic likenesses between the aesthetic novel and these works. In some cases this is unsurprising, given, for example, the care that Schaffer takes in situating Ouida and aestheticism so closely. From our findings, we might also ask whether the stylistic overlap between these groups includes that which distinguishes aesthetic novels from their contemporaries—and in fact it largely does, according to the numbers: twenty words significantly differentiate the ancillary group from the control

group, and sixteen of them overlap with the aesthetic novels' distinguishing words.<sup>35</sup>

Most of all, though, it invites us into a closer reading of these partially aesthetic novels to see whether, following a central question of this chapter, they might help us to find in common with the aesthetic novel's style some element beyond wordplay and materiality that contributes to the meaning and danger of aestheticism.

### III. Stylistic Silence

Within the analyzed group of novels related to aestheticism, the two French novels are of particular interest to this project, and warrant closer investigation. *Under Two Flags* almost comedically resolves the romantic and aesthetic ambiguities of its plot with populist neatness, and *Confessions of a Young Man*—more memoir than fiction—takes little joy in beauty or materiality, instead wallowing in a manic, decadent cynicism. On the other hand, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* and *À rebours* readily share aestheticism's stylistic and thematic tropes while offering a peculiar sexual irresolution that may help us better to understand aestheticism's ripe pleasure.

Biographer Richard Ellman notes that Wilde was particularly influenced by Theophile Gautier's 1835 *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, having read it as a young man, before publishing even his earliest work; Maurizio Ascari similarly connects the book to aestheticism, and indeed it may be the earliest clear predecessor to the aesthetic novel,

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<sup>35</sup> The four new differentiating words here are *subtle*, *blue*, *morbid*, and *style*. The five not carried over from the aesthetic group's word list are *curious*, *mysterious*, *wonderful*, *crimson*, and *pleasure*.

displaying a prescient joy in luxury and description. For instance, the following passage dwells on details of material as well as associations with it to create the same sort of escapist richness so common to aesthetic novels:

The fairy architecture has not its equal save in Arab tales. Piles of columns with arches superposed, pillars twisted in spirals, foliage marvelously carved, hollowed trefoils, porphyry, jasper, lapis-lazuli, but what know I of the transparencies and dazzling reflections, of the profusion of strange gems, sardonyx, chrysoberyl, aqua marina, rainbow-tinted opals, and azerodrach with jets of crystals, torches that would make the stars grow pale, a lustrous vapor giddy and filled with sound—a luxury perfectly Assyrian! (Gautier 29)

This passage particularly prefigures the fascination with gems shown in the later *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which even includes some of the same minerals.

More remarkable in Gautier's novel, however, is its thorough and self-aware contemplations of bisexuality, wherein a man and woman who think themselves sexually "normal"—heterosexual—both go through intense questioning and self-examination after each feeling a bodily and emotional attraction to someone they perceive as belonging to their own gender. What makes this event so compelling is Gautier's (and his characters') refusal to simplify. Both characters go through profound, mixed feelings when they find themselves drawn to their own sex, and furthermore, the two do not have identical nor even symmetrical experiences of their perceived same-sex attraction. When the cross-dressing Madelaine de Maupin writes to her dear friend Graciosa of her love for Rosette she says:

Oh! how many times have I wished to be really a man as I appear to be!  
How many women are there with whom I should have had a fellow-feeling,

and whose hearts would have understood mine! how perfectly happy should I have been rendered by those delicacies of love, those noble flights of pure passion to which I could have replied! What sweetness, what delight! how would all the sensitive plants of my soul have loomed freely without being obliged every minute to contract and close beneath some coarse touch! (334)

In this quote one can see many of the characteristics of “Théodore's” feelings after spending a significant period in male dress. It may on the surface appear wholly lesbian, but the rest of the novel belies this. On the first night that she wears men's clothing, Madelaine chastely and tipsily shares a bed with a new male acquaintance, nearly revealing her sex to him out of immediate and visceral desire. Simply the proximity of and access to a man sparks a response in her.

During this scene, she acknowledges that there is nothing particular about the drunken bed-sharer that makes him alluring; it is simply that he is male and she feels very female beside him, aroused powerfully by the tension. It is only after she has seen men's habits and traits that are usually invisible to women that she begins to think of men as coarse or unsuitable as potential lovers. This preference becomes particularly highlighted after she meets and playfully courts the sister of her earlier male bedfellow.

After she plays the part of a man, however, she feels genuinely drawn to the woman she courts. In her role of active wooer, she feels herself superior to men she has seen in the same position. The experiences of cross-dressing, spending time in company with only men, and wooing a woman are transformative to Madelaine. She recalls her own feelings before the experiment: “If I had had a lover I should have greatly liked to know the way in which he spoke of me to another man, and the terms in which, with a

little wine in his head and both elbows on the table cloth, he would boast of his good fortune to the companions of his orgy. I know this now and in truth I am sorry that I know it. It is always so.” (187-188). Her regret makes her feel unable to love men, and far more interested in women. Though she later feels attracted to one man in particular, she comes through her period of turmoil over a same-sex attraction with some acceptance of herself and rejection of societal codes that do not allow for her feelings and experiences.

As stated, it is particularly interesting how this contrasts against the way that Gautier treats male desire in the same situations. D'Albert undergoes a series of mental and emotional contortions when he thinks his ideal love has finally appeared to him in the form of a male courtier. For a long while D'Albert has been filled with longing for a very particular type of woman that he believes is impossible to find, but who is ultimately the only woman he can really love. He enters into an exploratory romantic and sexual relationship with a woman who is not his ideal, but he remains acutely aware of the difference between his actual experience and his still unfulfilled desires. This bears considerable similarity to aesthetic novels, in which characters are acutely aware of the gap between what they can desire or imagine and what is available to them in their lives. The frustration and ennui in these novels comes in no small part from this awareness.

For instance, consider how D'Albert writes of his successful overcoming of fear, anxiety and rejection of his apparent attraction to a man:

It is a singular thing that I have nearly ceased to think about his sex, and that I love him in perfect indifference to it. Sometimes I seek to persuade myself that such love is abominable, and I tell myself so as severely as possible; but it only comes from my lips it is a piece of reasoning which I go through but do not feel; it really seems to me as if it were the simplest thing in the world and as if any one else would do the same in my place.  
(179)

At first this might be chalked up to the semi-pornographic plot and style of the novel, for so many pornographic texts of the nineteenth century feature sexual contact not only between opposite sex pairings, but between members of the same sex, and among groups that simultaneously hold both same- and opposite-sex contact. But D'Albert isn't talking about sexual contact; the text (much as in later aesthetic novels) is very strategic in this point. While the audience is teased and titillated, Gautier's writing text remains distinctly inexplicit. D'Albert instead considers his attraction to a person to be based on his whole self and identity rather than on his sex—but all the while he is contemplating his relationship to the social taboo of same-sex attraction. Like Madelaine, he struggles with this, but comes to the realization that he values his own perceptions and desires more than society's strictures. In the end, the book takes the easy way out by allowing D'Albert to realize Madelaine's hidden sex after he has accepted same-sex attraction to "Théodore," but before he has acted on it. An unspoken, uncrossable border is preserved around the very dangerous territory of male-male genital expressions of sexual desire.

On the other hand, when Madelaine reveals her sex and acts on her feelings for Rosette, the reader is led to believe that this results in two sexual escapades, although Gautier shows neither of them and tells much more unambiguously about the

heterosexual affair. The novel lovingly details many scenarios in which the two participate in sensual foreplay, but for one reason or another the two are unable to take their intentions further within the language of the novel.

Instead, at this point in the novel, the narrator intrudes to say that he could not find more information than what he is about to present, but he insists that he tried diligently to find more. He can only share the clues that he receives from talking with Rosette's maid about what she found the morning of Madelaine's disappearance, which is also the morning after her revelations. This evidence adds up to the imprint of two bodies on a bed, a pearl hair clip belonging to one of the women, and the knowledge that Maupin did go into Rosette's bedchamber to tell her the truth about her previously hidden sex.

The elision of the actual event clearly sets the groundwork for what this dissertation terms a suggestive silence by authorizing the reader to fill the text's unspoken moments with same-sex desire. The omission of this same-sex encounter is thrown into relief against the candor and deviance for which the novel is infamous—indeed it was brought to trial for obscenity, and to offer but one example of its more explicit content, Gautier details a scene of elaborate role playing in an empty ballroom in which D'Albert dons a papier-mâché bear costume to achieve sexual gratification with Rosette. Thus we cannot attribute the omission or avoidance of same-sex encounters to mere self-censorship on the part of Gautier. Rather, a subtler strategy governs what the novel shows and conceals, and as we will see, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* shares with *fin*

*de siècle* aesthetic novels not only a linguistic profile and not only an upper-class setting of riches, ennui, dilettantism, and frustrated idealism, but also these strategies of omission—strategies that ultimately may have played significant roles in the social reception of aestheticism.

The other French novel consistently connected to aestheticism is Huysmans' infamous *À rebours*, which half a century later continues many of the same strange literary behaviors introduced in *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. Published in 1884, not long before the first aesthetic novels, *À rebours* explores a strange world of the senses both in terms of the deep interest that protagonist Des Esseintes shows in the material world and in terms of the author's prose. In a now familiar move, *À rebours* tantalizes the reader with language that implies far more than is overtly stated. Instead of detailing a taboo or sexual moment of the text, Huysmans instead offers thorough and nuanced coverage of the physical items or sensual experiences that immediately surround it. Take, for example, the elaborate feast held as a funeral for Des Esseintes's libido. Despite the implicit sexual past, the textual description remains focused squarely on the feast.

The viands were served on black-bordered plates,—turtle soup, Russian black bread, ripe olives from Turkey, caviar, mule steaks, Frankfurt smoked sausages, game dished up in sauces colored to resemble licorice water and boot blacking, truffles in jelly, chocolate-tinted creams, puddings, nectarines, fruit preserves, mulberries and cherries. The wines were drunk from dark tinted glasses,—wines of the Limagne and Roussillon vintages, wines of Tenedos, the Val de Penas, and Oporto. After the coffee and walnuts came other unusual beverages, kwas, porter, and stout. (Huysmans 11-12)

Many of these foods are labeled by location of origin or color as well as by their names.

In addition to supporting the funereal theme, some of these foods hint at the reason for the party by having a phallic shape or a sexual-sounding name, but they remain merely suggestive instead of directly sexual. Unsurprisingly, this feast features many foods atypical for nineteenth-century France. In this way it typifies the sort of textual gallery of rarity, exoticism, and sensually detailed description so often offered in aesthetic novels.

In an episode that foregrounds sex as a plot element, Huysmans still manages to be oblique both in his representations of anything sexual, but even more, to make the episode suggestive rather than explicit by turning readerly expectations to the side by bringing up sexuality and desire, then turning them into a means rather than an end. Des Esseintes picks up a boy, Langlois, on the streets in such a way as to prefigure a tryst between them, but then the protagonist offers to treat Langlois to an evening at a brothel. Even the proposal and description appear via description rather than name, “‘Look here,’ said Des Esseintes suddenly; ‘how would you like a bit of fun tonight? I’ll foot the bill of course.’ And he had taken the youngster off to an establishment on the third floor of a house on the Rue Mosnier, where a certain Madame Laure kept an assortment of pretty girls in a series of crimson cubicles furnished with circular mirrors, couches, and wash basins” (80). When at the brothel, the prostitutes claim the boy is too young and question Des Esseintes’s motives, but in the end agree to treat Langlois once a fortnight for a period of three months after Des Esseintes describes how his ultimate plan is to addict the young man to heady luxuries he cannot pay for himself. This cruelty is intended to make a criminal, first a thief and then eventually a murderer, out of an anonymously

attractive young man. Though the whole situation is predicated upon various expectations of sex, none takes place. Des Esseintes was not picking up Langlois to propose anything direct between them, upsetting the first set of expectations set up by the episode. Later, the prostitutes at this first visit do nothing more than cuddle and embrace the young man, overwhelming him with merely perfume and the nearness of their bodies. In the end, sex is merely a smoke screen for Des Esseintes' longer game with the young man's life. Like *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, *À rebours* embraces sensual detail and even foregrounds sexual situations, but at every turn deflects not merely sexuality but specifically deviant and same-sex activity in favor of other tropes related to aestheticism, whether ornate materiality or the active choice to explore "evil," as enacted here and as described in the previous chapter.

When enacted with varying conspicuousness over a whole body of literature, however, this sort of deflection eventually acquires the power not to silence deviant sexuality but instead to stand in for it. Continuing in the spirit of the distant reading conducted earlier this chapter, we can investigate the aesthetic novel's style as a potential hotbed of suggestive silences, not just through case-by-case close readings, but by considering how these novels collectively reinforce their shared style and imbue their silences with increasingly suggestive meaning as they effectively teach certain audiences how to read them.

#### IV. Doubleness

Aesthetic novels share an oeuvre of language, reference, and tropes developed

among each other. It is an oversimplification to assert that aesthetic style derives foremost from the likes of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* or even *The Renaissance*, but it certainly continues and absorbs many of the literary practices in those works. By doing so, it establishes a stylistic network. Aesthetic writing takes pleasure in itself, but its pleasure is redoubled by the way that the language is mutually referential across works.

Crucially, however, the aesthetic novel's tropes are observed only casually by a wider readership while being seen acutely by a proscribed community. The knowing eye might, for instance, recognize a peculiar word in Hichens or Wilde that Pater or Huysmans highlights elsewhere, thus reinforcing a conscious readerly connection between the works. This interpretive act expressly rewards those most attuned audiences who recognize a dialectic in which they are included in the social delineation of a coherent textual genre. Aesthetic novels participate in a constant dialogue whose setting is as much social (*à la* Thaïs Morgan's notion of homosexual code) as it is on the page (*à la* Dowling). To adapt an idea from Peter Michaelson's *The Aesthetics of Pornography*, the readerly subculture of aestheticism finds in these novels a pleasure of approval via representation; a novel's inclusion of a shared diction, a character type, or activity effects positive feedback and reinforces the aesthetic style as made of up of all of these things. Aesthetes and aestheticism mutually outline and support each other in their ways of being, including, and representing.

The simultaneous position of outsider and insider is powerful for this community building. In this regard, *The Green Carnation* is perhaps the most self-conscious of the

aesthetic novels, as it expressly depicts the slow, unwilling discovery of this self-same subculture. The novel speaks differently to its two audiences. The non-aesthetic protagonist Lady Locke serves to flatter uninitiated audiences who relate to her, while the coded aesthetic reading of the text in fact compels savvy readers to reject her. Through the possibility of double reading, invested audiences instead recognize that the text's actual pleasures are situated *around* Lady Locke in the descriptions of Reggie and from the dialogue shared between aesthetic characters.<sup>36</sup>

## V. Stylistic Suggestion

This sort of doubleness, as we will explore, is central to how aesthetic novels behave, particularly with relationship to sexuality. Before we can fully explain how an aesthetic audience experiences these works, however, it is important first to understand—beyond suggestive silences and beyond the previous chapter's investigation of Pater's submerged sexuality—some particularly pertinent ways that aesthetic style pervasively exhibits signifiers of deviant desire, such that when it speaks its silences, their range of suggestion is already tinted. To initiated readers, these signifiers generate an undeniable tension in the aforementioned French novels and in aesthetic works like *Venus and Tannhäuser* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which leads us to this question: Beyond

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<sup>36</sup> Chapter 4 of this dissertation addresses the issue of parody, relevant in the case of *The Green Carnation*.

mere associative juxtaposition with overt sexual content—tantalizing and rare—how does the ornate aesthetic style lend itself so easily to coding sexual taboo?

Ruth Robbins characterizes the school of criticism that followed from Pater, saying “the Paterian critic does not seek the reflection of appropriate community ideals in the work of art or literature; he... seeks his own personality in the work he values” (10). This emphasis on individuality shines in Pater’s style through his distinct use of words like “personality.” He does not refer simply to someone’s social identity or behavior when he uses this term, but instead turns “personality” into the object of artistic contemplation and desire. In doing this, Pater blurs the line between the artistic, the personal, and by extension, the sexual. As discussed early in this dissertation, each object or experience is measured by an individual’s response to it, and thus one’s ability to respond must be finely tuned. Robbins explains this well using the Victorian chestnut of solipsism:

Pater's argument moves, then, from solipsism to a kind of qualified hedonism. Life, philosophy and art exist for the purpose of “rousing” the human spirit to “a life of constant and eager observation.” The pursuit of that experience is what counts... we judge the quality of experience not by its results as a moral or didactic criticism would... we judge by what we felt “for that moment only.” (15)

The term “qualified hedonism” refers to Pater’s investment in non-productive sensualism, which makes possible the bridge between aestheticism and a freer, more deviant relationship with sexuality. This deviance palpably shapes the novels that come out of the aesthetic movement; they are sensually invested as well as sexually curious. The writers

explore the sensory world of their fiction and share those sensually appreciable aspects with their readers, and as mentioned, that which cannot be fully explored—the sexuality within many of these novels—is displaced or dispersed (though not replaced or repressed) through this sensuality.

This sensuality is itself always awed, requiring its subjects of reference to be awe-inspiring: thus, beyond instructing readers in material curation, aesthetic style relies on grandiose literary and historical references. DaVinci, Michelangelo, and other specifically Italian renaissance figures form the basis for visual art references, though the genre is not without its appreciation of medieval and modern modes of art as well, perhaps in part due to the Pre-Raphaelite love of all things medieval. Though a preference for old, out of fashion, and obscure things predominated, some writers expressly investigated and promoted the avant-garde and ultramodern. Although Pater himself tempers his references with a certain Oxonian eye, his followers broaden the range of acceptably aesthetic references in later years, expanding most notably into the obliquely taboo.

Prior to Pater, Swinburne's controversial poetry alluded to a wealth of salacious material culled from classical texts. *Miss Brown* imitates this, affectionately demonstrating how the use of allusion in aesthetic texts simultaneously displays both snobbery and sexuality. Lee's aesthetic characters' references veer consistently toward the taboo while still belonging recognizably to high culture. Edmund Lewis makes Anne Brown angry when he names the scandalous text *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, while another

poet, the more aesthetically scattered Cosmo Chough, frequently mentions Lucretia Borgia, Medea, Medusa, and various famously violent and disruptively sexual women alongside his mentions of saints and more pedestalized women of history.

Antinous, Sappho, and Ganymede are the most common mythological references within aesthetic novels, though Paris, Hyacinth, and Narcissus also make appearances. All of the male figures listed here are famous for their beauty, and some are also known for their love or their tragic endings. Antinous and Narcissus are the default mythological comparisons for an aesthetic text seeking to establish an adult male character as exceedingly beautiful. Readers with a Classical education or an interest in expressions of male homosexuality will recognize many of these as tragic examples of males who were romantically and sexually oriented towards other males. Hyacinth was Apollo's lover. Antinous was a male slave of an emperor, but also his lover; their story is one of passion, devotion, and suicide. Narcissus' reference to homosexuality is more oblique, as his vanity caused him to fall in love with his own reflection, but this self-love can be viewed as a form of same-sex desire. Additional Greek references abound: in at least one aesthetic text characters are compared to Selene and her eternally youthful sleeping husband Endymion. Unsurprisingly this list of figures overwhelmingly emphasizes male beauty.

In terms of female references, neither Sappho nor Selene stand out in the Greek pantheon or histories for their appearance. Sappho was known simultaneously for her intense love, her poetry, and her suicide. She makes an interesting case study in that her

writing was already known, beloved, and studied deeply before some of her poems were translated to reveal the gender of some of her paramours as female. At the time of the aesthetic novel, Sappho's reputation was changing. Jonathan Loesberg describes this, noting that “Sappho was increasingly becoming figured as a lesbian, in a historical moment at which lesbianism, as well as male homosexuality, was becoming defined and reified” (532). Crucially, prior to her association with same-sex passion, Sappho was already well-known as a poet of love. For this more known figure to be claimed by aesthetes and known as the prototypical woman-loving-woman must have made her a fraught choice of reference. Selene, on the other hand, seems barely known for anything besides her cleverness in choosing to include her husband's eternal youth along with his happy peaceful dreaming in her request to Zeus. This turns her lover into an object to be enjoyed and admired eternally, something fundamentally compatible with aestheticism's frequent objectifications.

As a group, these choices show that male beauty was more important to aesthetic writers than female beauty, and perhaps that great passion and love were valued more than stability or a happy ending. They also show how aestheticism assumed a base knowledge of classical literature and mythology in its audience. This shared knowledge and investment in passion and male beauty begins to create a malleable but identifiable set of tastes. This continues in aesthetic tendencies to favoring a small range of very recognizable details.

The aesthetic novel diffuses and deploys sexuality in other subtle ways. *Marius*

*the Epicurean* is essentially a *bildungsroman*, as its sincere young protagonist seeks wisdom, growth, and philosophical guidance. Even if the aesthetic novel ultimately reduces the philosophical underpinnings of Pater's work to a slogan, as Dowling asserts, the basic format here persists in the movement's later output, for indeed, this archetypal young character is central to other aesthetic novels. Although this pattern is ostensibly a matter of content, such an eager, impressionable protagonist proves ideal for inscribing aesthetic style in all its attention to education, subjectivity, and brashness. This youth, whether Marius, Dorian Gray, Reggie Hastings, or John Maltravers, is attractive, naïve, receptive, and holds all of the wrong opinions. Notably, he is also frequently taken in by an older aesthetic man—or in the case of Marius, by a series of more confident peers. This mentoring aesthete, in contrast, is verbally astute, cynical, dandy-ish, and concerned with the young man in a way that is not wholly reciprocal. Wilde was the master of this characteristic pair, and beyond their appearance in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, they populated all of his plays and even his dialogues about art.

Victorian culture at large had complicated reactions to these male-male bonds: the pairing was neither equal nor always mutually beneficial, and so the older man as an archetype developed into a sinister figure of influence and control, but simultaneously the bond never entirely loses the previous positive associations with high culture, education, and protection.

Indeed, on the one hand, this pair can be read as the aesthetic variation on the blank slate characters of classical philosophy. Plato's depiction of Socrates and his

various interlocutors displays a similar mentor-student relationship, and the Greats program at Oxford was explicitly modeled on this concept. Aestheticism remains deeply indebted to this tradition, particularly in its negotiation of doubleness: the tradition had tremendous cultural capital within Victorian middle- and upper-class culture, but for those in the know, it was linked intimately with the valuing of male-male relations in Classical Greece, and was duly idolized by men-loving-men of the period, like Edward Carpenter and John Addington Symonds. The first interpretation of the male-male bond as classical is supported in the aesthetic novel through the intense stylistic focus on the archaic and philosophical, evident both in the materiality of exotic antiquity and the pervasive allusion to myth.

On the other hand, this dynamic can also be seen as a modification of, or even an outright replacement for the romantic heterosexual dyad that was dominant in the same era within broader class circles. This dyad still pairs innocence with experience, youth with knowledge, optimism with cynicism, and beauty with wisdom, much like the Ruskinian ideal for marriage from *Sesame and Lilies*. In it, there is the expectation that the younger partner is male, and that both partners will remain in social circulation even amidst the intensity and exclusivity of their intellectual and emotional bond. This second interpretation of the male-male bond as a substitute for heterosexual pairing gains support in the aesthetic novel's denial of leeway for satisfying heterosexual companionship. The most common female archetype in the aesthetic novel is in fact the endangered protégé or lover—a role oddly widespread for its specificity. An outsider, she is romantically

entwined with an aesthete, but her role invariably becomes mingled with and crushed beneath the male aesthete man's relationship to art, and their courtship invariably ends on unsatisfactory, negative, or even violent terms. This role belongs almost exclusively to decadent and aesthetic novels: poems, essays, and plays do not feature this character nearly as often. As we will discuss more deeply in the next chapter, Lady Locke in *The Green Carnation* gets the rare chance to dress down an aesthete verbally after romantically rejecting him, but hers is most positive outcome of nearly any woman in the entire corpus of the aesthetic novel. Less fortunate are Sybil Vane, who commits suicide in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Miss Brown, who ends up knowingly sacrificing herself to her aesthetic pursuer, the neglected Mrs. Maltravers in *The Lost Stradivarius*, who perishes of infection nearly unnoticed by her bewitched aesthetic husband, and poor Catherine, who in *Teleny* dies when she jumps out a window after being raped.

Like many parts of aestheticism, identity comes from what separates the group from the rest of Victorian society. Running against the grain of society at large is the aesthetic fascination with the classical, with male-male mentorship, and for that matter, with the aesthetic love of fine speech and adherence to the letter of etiquette (if not its spirit), or its color palette discussed earlier—more invested in darkness than light, more in mixed colors than primary ones, and more in off shades than pure hues.

At first glance, all this may be excused merely as zeal for deep education, confident intellectualism, class-affirming material signifiers, and recreational creativity. But just as our quantitative analysis spoke of both the kind of difference aestheticism

bore and its numerical degree, we can consider aestheticism's identity-forming difference as a trait unto itself. We might then access and understand how even where sexuality is most distant from content, one who seeks self-affirmation and identification through difference might write and prioritize the new and the unusual for its own sake. Difference itself becomes the dandy's site of self-affirmation, and aestheticism follows from this, not only in its quest for the ever more unusual and its fascination with what society views as negative or corrupt, but also in how it proclaims the unusual and new to be inherently lovely, beautiful, or fashionable. Thus for certain writers and readers, the argument that aestheticism makes via Pater for new relationships between art and audience is, in the end, less important than its stylistic habilitation of the odd, dark, and different, all framed within language that offers a nod toward same-sex desire for those who knew how to look. Its popularization, then, might be seen not so much in terms of its philosophical element receding, but rather in terms of an aesthetic community of writers and readers seizing on its capacity to offer an identity to those whose values of beauty and goodness were inverted against society's. Understated in Pater's high-minded work but abounding both in the popular novels of late aestheticism and their French forerunners is the use of suggestive silence, and as a locus where same-sex desire is free to be imagined, one may argue that through doubleness, its stylistic role in the aesthetic novel is as significant as philology itself.

## VI. Code, Sexuality, and Language

Suggestive silence, being only an implied communication, is defined by the words and actions that surround it. This play of negative and positive space offers a peculiarly shaped gap, closely outlined by attention and detail on all sides. By reading this outline, one can thereby bring into focus more accurately the unspoken sexuality that, as now established, appears so consistently and enticingly in aesthetic novels. This approach resembles Thaïs Morgan's description of Victorian homosexual code, particularly in terms of the double vision of presences and absences: “the homosexual code in Victorian criticism has a double status: it is at once widely dispersed in the culture... and preciously cultivated by a small ‘proscribed’ group within that culture” (141). Deeply compatible with the homosexual code and similar to it—though not interchangeably so—these suggestive silences are understood in one way by a wide and varied audience who chiefly reads the aesthetic cues, and in additional ways by a smaller community attuned to the outlines and gaps in the aesthetic novel’s language.

In light of the encoded permissions for desire otherwise woven into the aesthetic novels style, suggestive silences should not be considered merely as tropes, but as a technique. To an initiated readership, suggestive silences say, “Look closer.” This thinking moves our focus from the noun *silences* to the adjective *suggestive*—from the unspoken object to a literary function whereby these silences act: they suggest. Through this active suggestion they guide ways of reading and perceiving aesthetic novels, and more widely, aestheticism itself. By highlighting absence, or making a silence

suggestive, these textual moments show readers that more exists than can be represented.

Casting the unrepresentable, suggestive silences cannot be definitively filled in, but instead encourage provisional imagining, reimagining, and free play. The content of these imaginings is almost necessarily illicit, and likely both dangerous and erotic. These silences foster space for sexual or emotional imaginings beyond what is permissible to appear more explicitly—even opposite-sex contact. Specifically, they help to legitimize a reading both in the *fin de siècle* and today aimed at same-sex attraction or intimacy.

In analyzing the homosexual code, Morgan connects it to another useful concept that she calls “aesthetic minoritizing discourse” (140). She claims that aesthetes become a group by perceiving and writing about themselves as a minority, and that the homosexual code serves this purpose. The minority of which she speaks can apprehend the full meaning of the homosexual code regardless of whether or not each person physically or emotionally prioritizes same-sex contact. Thus aesthetes define themselves as a group in part by writing about their exclusively shared traits through a style that is simultaneously indicative of high culture, classical education, and same-sex investment. Morgan illustrates this through the examples of Swinburne and Pater, whom she says “foster a minoritizing discourse about art and artists in which male beauty and male-male desire are validated and preferred over the heterosexual norm as the cultural ideal” (141). Because Swinburne and Pater created this discourse early in aestheticism, by the *fin de siècle*, when aesthetic novels began appearing had begun to appropriate tropes from other ancillary repertoires, aestheticism’s stylistic codes had been well and thoroughly

established.

It is important to remember the malleability and non-unity of suggestive silences, as it is crucial to understanding the nature of their implicit content and furthers the compatibility and parallel between them and homosexual code. Describing the homosexual code, Morgan says that “due to its mode of existence in between dominant and minority discourses,” the code is “a system of interlocked rhetorical figures and connotative subcodes [that] has a very precarious status and typically generates ambiguous representations” (141). This description applies equally well to the suggestive silences of the aesthetic novel. Suggestive silences equally thrive on the availability of multiple interpretations, including both those that centralize same-sex desire and others that do not.

Historically, for a variety of reasons, the sexual temperament that underlies aesthetic novels—no matter how evocative—had to remain clandestine. These texts nevertheless offer their audiences something unique. Specifically, the aesthetic novel can be distinguished from other contemporary novels by how it *sounds*. Pursuing its style and investigating common language and motifs reveals that not only do the words, tropes, and references of aestheticism become associated over time with deviant sexuality, but as suggested previously, they become shorthand for aesthetic (same-sex) sexuality itself.

Dennis Denisoff describes the social reaction to aestheticism’s visibility:

During the 1870s, the permeation of bourgeois culture by aestheticist characters and an appreciation for refined taste further enmeshed the already interwoven communities for sincere admirers of aestheticism’s

tenets, people who felt the doctrine supported their developing identities to a degree and gave a usefully elusive discourse for communicating them, those who adopted aestheticist codes in order to articulate their individuality in public, and those who simply viewed the movement as an entertaining novelty. (234)

It is among these multiple motivations for aesthetic pleasure that a sexual subculture could camouflage itself. We can imagine that this subculture was capable of recognizing suggestive silence as a technique across aesthetic novels, compounding their individual power to represent illicit sexual possibilities with an intertextual, stylistic power to signify and bolster aesthetic identity. In this way, such language takes on exclusive meaning to the initiated, having the potential to behave quite directly as part of the larger homosexual code. Homosexual culture, because it has to remain invisible to the dominant society while also pragmatically remaining visible enough to allow same-sex oriented individuals to meet, must simultaneously be a marginal subculture and a covert component of the dominant culture. Aesthetic style—and within it, suggestive silence—does this nimble work with both artistic and social effects.

Doubleness becomes less exclusive over time, however. The readerly connection between this highly wrought sensual style and an unspoken but palpable sexual deviance became more widely understood. One might imagine that in its first stages this may have been an exciting process for the subculture of sexually aware aestheticism. However, by bringing aestheticism's submerged sexuality ever closer to the surface through the popularization of the movement and its literary texts, core participants ultimately risked endangerment and even incrimination. Denisoff observes that parodists, whether writing affectionately or savagely “based much of their humor on images of apparent deviancy such as male effeminacy and erotically inflected rhetoric that were intended to evoke the

hidden depths of unconventional attractions.” (*Aestheticism and Sexual Parody* 234). As the wider public thus began to clue in to the sexual codes of aesthetic style, a trajectory takes shape, pointing historically to aestheticism’s legitimized “outing” at the 1895 trials of Oscar Wilde.

From *The Renaissance* up to this symbolic moment, however, aestheticism and decadence develop their shared minority language and thereby build a stylistic and social community. Dowling writes of the “point that Pater’s chivalric, sacred, ritual service to the national language begins to lose its patriotic coloring and first offers itself as a secret language, a code for conspirators, or simply a self-expressive dialect. It is at this point, in short, that Euphemism becomes Decadence” (*Decadence and Language* 140). The concept of euphemism shifts seamlessly into Morgan’s notion of minoritizing discourse, which in turn leads towards this project’s notion of suggestive silences. This is part of a much larger shift in how language is used, and Morgan points out that the same changes can be interpreted far more socially in terms of building a shared discourse and thus a literary and sexual community. Taken along with the idea of suggestive silences, these ideas build a more full and complete view of the multiple purposes and achievements of aesthetic literature, offering a range of sexual representations otherwise impossible outside of pornography.

In this chapter, a quantitative approach to language reveals trends across repertoires, and a logical unpacking of those trends demonstrates three things. First, aesthetic novels rely on a consistent set of tropes and linguistic signifiers, all in dialogue with one another across texts, demarcating, developing, and honing (whether in earnest or through parody) what it means to be aesthetic. Second, aestheticism’s touchstones come

over time to signify a submerged sexual content whose most expressive power lies in the suggestive silences on which aesthetic novels depend. Finally, these texts educate and identify a central community and socially inscribe a genre through what they offer their audience conceptually versus textually. The arousing tantalization of the suggestive silence finds its fulfillment not in sex itself but in lavish descriptions, a gratifying catalog of recognizable cultural references, and a classical, overripe treatment of language. Arthur Symons hints at this approach in describing decadence, saying that “what decadence, in literature, really means is that learned corruption of language by which style ceases to be organic, and becomes, in pursuit of some new expressiveness or beauty, deliberately abnormal” (“A Note” 462). This learned corruption of language points to the diverse heritage of texts from which the aesthetic novel draws and, over time, adapts. The social and stylistic intentions of the aesthetic movement ultimately find their narrative shape in the suggestive gap between the light of pervasive opulence and the shadow of silent deviance.

## CHAPTER 3

### DECENTRALIZING MARRIAGE

#### I. The Marriage Plot

Many novels of the Victorian period deal with the transition from youth to adulthood, and in particular the search for a marriage partner as part of that process. Some critics, such as Wendy Jones, go so far as to claim that the Victorian novel has “focus[ed] on courtship and marriage almost exclusively” (8). These marriage-oriented plots, however, are far from uniform or identical. What they share—stories of relationship formation that frequently lead to marriage—connects different genres of nineteenth-century novels. Armstrong makes the case for the common occurrence of courtship stories and posits a reason for it: “by then it had been established that novels were supposed to rewrite political history as personal histories that elaborated on the courtship procedures ensuring a happy domestic life” (38). She argues that in the novel, an individual's path through different relationships and into marriage constitutes a way of organizing and transposing political concerns onto personal ones.

As we will see, however, the aesthetic novel is part of a counterargument to the centrality of marriage suggested by critics such as Jones and Armstrong—to the degree, in fact, that it uniformly cannot end with a protagonist's happy marriage to a long desired but previously unattainable partner. Relationships, loosely described as connections between people, do indeed shape the narratives of aesthetic novels, but these foregrounded relationships leave no narrative room for marriage, and thus occupy its

space with their own new shapes. Some of these alternatives, to be explored shortly, include the unequal relationship—romantic or otherwise—centered around influence, objectification, danger, and desire, often to the detriment of one or more participants, or in positive contrast, the empathetic friendship of equal, same-sex peers. By highlighting the very possibility of such bonds, aesthetic novels decentralize courtship and marriage both as narrative features and as cultural institutions.

Aesthetic novels are not the only challenge to the idea that marriage plots defined the novel during the *fin de siècle*—naturalist and New Woman novels do this as well, and many realist novels reveal the a broad range of possibilities available within the marriage plot. Nonetheless, the marriage plot was common enough that audiences might reasonably have read instinctively toward marriage, and writers certainly moved unwed characters toward courtship through circuitous paths. Davida Pines emphasizes the extent to which marriage dominated literature and culture, noting that “in [marriage’s] persistent reign over our cultural imagination, the marriage plot interferes with our ability to envision and enact acceptable alternatives to . . . ‘long term property-sharing, monogamous couplehood.’ Marriage appears to be the only thinkable form of adult social relations” (1-2). She is far from alone in making this point; scholars such as Nancy Armstrong, Richard A. Kaye, Sharon Marcus, Ginger S. Frost, Leonore Davidoff, and Catherine Hall have addressed fictional and historical representations of marriage, courtship, and domesticity from a variety of perspectives while acknowledging its

novelistic centrality, and their work shows that courtship themes undeniably affect the shape of narratives.<sup>37</sup>

When marriage is the goal or climax for a protagonist or novel, a basic teleology forms, and any variation of the approach to this goal—as we might see in Austen or Trollope—only supports the notion that a basic understanding exists between novel and reader when marriage is a plot’s primary object. As Nancy Armstrong puts it, “readers remain thoroughly enchanted by narratives in which a woman's virtue alone overcomes sexual aggression and transforms male desire into middle-class love, the stuff that modern families are made of” (6). So even though one can trace an evolution from the novels of courtship such as *Evelina* (1778) that were popular and influential in eighteenth-century fiction<sup>38</sup> to a more domestically oriented novel like *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866) in which more interpersonal diversity appears, a common set of expectations still limits the novelistic possibilities drastically.<sup>39</sup> In both courtship novels and domestic novels, protagonists focus their energy on the development or maintenance of monogamous heterosexual dyads. Certainly this courtship takes place alongside other conflicts, interests, and incidents, but these other issues do not impinge on significance of the heterosexual ritual within narratives; rather, the courtship of individuals regularly

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<sup>37</sup> These texts respectively are *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987), *The Flirt's Tragedy: Desire without End in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction* (2002), *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (2007), *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class, and Gender in Victorian England* (1995), and *Family Fortunes Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (1987).

<sup>38</sup> Scholarship supporting and exploring the importance of courtship to eighteenth-century novels is too plentiful to be fully listed for this project, but a good starting point is *The Courtship Novel, 1740-1820: A Feminized Genre* (1991) by Katherine Sobba Green and its references to earlier work.

<sup>39</sup> See Armstrong (1987).

appears to be just as riveting to characters and audiences as larger affairs of family, community, and nation.

*North and South* (1855) by Elizabeth Gaskell serves as a representative example of this. Though the story substantially concerns family, industry and region, it also tells the story of a tumultuous coming together of two very different people, Margaret Hale and John Thornton. Throughout the many changes these characters make in response to both external events and their expanding worldviews, Gaskell repeatedly focuses on their interactions with one another, long before those interactions become romantic or even particularly friendly. Even their first encounter is cued to readers as important:

Margaret opened the door and went in with the straight fearless, dignified presence habitual to her. She felt no awkwardness; she had too much the habits of society for that. Here was a person come on business to her father; and, as he was one who had shown himself obliging, she was disposed to treat him with a full measure of civility. Mr. Thornton was a good deal more surprised and discomfited than she. Instead of a quiet middle-aged clergyman, a young lady came forward with frank dignity, — a young lady of a different type to most of those he was in the habit of seeing. . . He did not understand who she was, as he caught the simple straight unabashed look, which showed that his being there was of no concern to the beautiful countenance, and called up no flush of surprise to the pale ivory of the complexion. He had heard that Mr. Hale had a daughter, but he had imagined that she was a little girl. (61-62)

The scene continues in a similar vein. Length, detail and repetition assure that the reader takes particular notice of this meeting. Gaskell emphasizes the tenor of interactions between Margaret Hale and John Thornton, leaving no question that Hale's beauty and calmness together throw off Thornton's equilibrium. Both characters have reasons to be thinking about other things at the time of this introduction: Hale is anxious over her mother's illness and her family's move, while Thornton makes clear during the scene that before seeing Hale, he was worrying about taking the time to help out the clergyman.

From this moment through their extended period of debate and eventual cooperation, the fact that Margaret Hale and John Thornton are on a winding path to marriage is signaled by both the behavior of the characters and their narrative framing.

In describing the formation of the novel, Armstrong illustrates a change from coverage of directly political and frequently male-coded concerns to a domestic arena that nonetheless focuses upon many of the same conflicts and tropes, but which translates them into the language of the personal and the sexual. Though some scholars, among them McKeon and Thompson, critique or adapt Armstrong's formulation of the interconnected beginnings of subjectivity, the middle class, and the novel, her Foucauldian insights speak significantly to the specifics of marriage and courtship plots and their prominence in literature of the nineteenth century.<sup>40</sup> Her description of the female protagonist in just such a plot is worth quoting in full:

As women, furthermore, these protagonists understand social experience as a series of sexual encounters. Although characteristically naïve, their responses are far from simple. Indeed, they constitute a sophisticated range of sensations, emotional nuances, and moral judgments. Novelists could make a woman's response as flattering or caustic as they wished if the woman in question interpreted behavior on the basis of sexual rather than political or economic motivations. Domestic fiction mapped out a new domain of discourse as it invested common forms of social behavior with the emotional values of women. Consequently, these stories of courtship and marriage offered their readers a way of indulging, with a kind of impunity, in fantasies of political power that were the more acceptable because they were played out within a domestic framework where legitimate monogamy—and thus the subordination of female to male—would ultimately be affirmed. (29)

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<sup>40</sup> McKeon's text is *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge* (2005), and Thompson's is "The Personal is Political: Domesticity's Domestic Contents" (2009).

In genres such as the aesthetic novel in which different relationships begin to replace this novelistic ideal, however, the constraints on narrative shape that Armstrong and others have identified loosen. In this way, the form of the novel itself is freer to highlight narrative gestures and characters, as well as relations and activities among those characters relegated frequently to the background of Victorian novels. This chapter examines these relationships that exist outside nuptially enforced heterosexual monogamy, including friendships that can either mutually benefit participants or create a more harmful one-way relationship of influence or patronage.

Although marriage can indeed occasionally become an issue of power in aesthetic novels, as it does in *Miss Brown* and in *The Green Carnation*, it is never a positive center of signification for protagonists; consistently, characters feel no need to marry in order to become who they really want to be, to understand themselves, or to fulfill their hearts' greatest desires.

This is an important literary phenomenon at the center of a cultural struggle in the nineteenth century. Changes in literature happened alongside changes in English society; when the nation became concerned about the diminishing appeal of marriage, this was reflected in novels. Elaine Showalter observes, "when sexual certainties broke down, fictional certainties changed as well. The disappearance of the three-decker suggested a movement away from subjects, themes, and forms associated with femininity and maternity" (17). But just as the aesthetic novel was offering primary attention to a spectrum of previously secondary, tertiary, or even unwritten relationships, conservative forces responded to these changing ideas, seeking to reinvigorate the ideal of companionate marriage. Legal and social changes policed this supposedly natural state

more and more, and this conflict was waged both on the page and in nineteenth-century life. In light of this, identifying a diverse array of unusual relationships in the aesthetic novel is not only narratively significant, but it also reflects the genre's political and historical context, revealed through transgression.

As mentioned, many of the relationships in aesthetic novels contain an element of sexual or romantic danger that is frequently borne by the character or figure who chooses to ally him- or herself with an aesthete through some emotional bond, thus becoming vulnerable to either the influence of the aesthete or to being themselves aestheticized and objectified. This theme occupies the first half of the present chapter. The second half explores the ways in which aesthetic novels feature heterosexual courtships and encounters marked by disgust, revulsion, death, alienation, objectification, sadness, abandonment, blackmail, and injury.

As was the case with the decentralization of the marriage plot, aesthetic novels are not the only Victorian repertoire to include romantic and sexual danger—again, sensation and New Woman novels do so too. These, like aesthetic novels, are experimental genres with inceptions between the 1860s and 1890s, and thus it is tempting to say that their collective themes of danger and anti-nuptiality speaks to the *fin de siècle* zeitgeist, suggesting that questions of gender, sexuality, marriage, divorce, degeneration, artificiality, and decay were part of the cultural and psychological ferment of the time. However, scholars have to take such questions and associations much further, and look at when, where, and most importantly, how sexual danger appears in a given genre.

For their part, aesthetic novels more directly focus on the negative potential within relationships than other new genres of the day. Aesthetic novels uniquely offer this

negative potential in that their characters are necessarily prone to aestheticizing one another. When an aesthete approaches another human as he would a work of art, the Paterian divorce of morality from style renders empathy impossible. This extreme narcissism often has disastrous effects on those around the self-centered character. In the aesthetic absence of a narrator's didactic processing, these novels offer little denunciation of this harmful behavior. In cases like *Miss Brown* and *The Green Carnation*, characters of this archetype are narratively permitted to continue ultimately undeterred in their aestheticism, while in other texts like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, they are driven to ruin, but in the aesthetic novel they certainly fare no worse as a lot than more pious ancillary characters—and despite Dorian's comeuppance, the pages of Wilde's novel overwhelmingly revel in the strange pleasures of aesthetic detachment. Other experimental novels of the late nineteenth century routinely condemn evil and negative characters either through righteousness or tragedy, but aesthetic novels tend to present them as merely another spectacle adding abundance and variety.

Beyond its connections to other genres, the aesthetic novel's regular inclusion of sexual danger reflects Victorian culture's treatment of sexuality as a source of significant anxiety, as something connected to danger, and as something that must be controlled. This concern helped pave the way for sexologists like Charles Acton and Richard von Krafft-Ebing, whose work enabled authoritarian Victorian institutions to address sexuality directly in a nonfictional way. Not without its own controversies, the very existence of sexology as a significant voice in culture in some ways created a feedback loop, helping to inspire eruptions of social panic over sexual danger.

When sexual or romantic dangers appear, a character's narrow escape or (more often) victimization may function for the reader as titillation or sheer exhaustion, but in either case, the sexual or romantic threat helps further the displacement of the marriage plot, which relies in other Victorian fiction on unruined characters. In aesthetic novels, this sort of danger uses relationships as a conduit for influence and objectification via aestheticism. Marriage, instead of being a happy state to which readers must all aspire, can be a trap, a nightmare, a bitter reminder of chances lost, or simply irrelevant. Both the wider diversity of important relationships and the strong prevalence of sexual danger within aesthetic novels coordinate with the possibility of aestheticizing people into objects or experiences, and all of these factors work together through coordinated negative and positive reinforcement to disrupt the normativity of the monogamous heterosexual dyad.

## II. Subverting the Marriage Plot

Aestheticism's limited interest in empathy and its stylistic investment in same-sex desire help to steer its values away from celebrating marriage, but the point argued here is not that aesthetic fiction stages a plot-level exercise in which aesthetic desires are rewarded and more traditional ones are denied; rather, aesthetic novels, through the sexual, philosophical values coded into their depicted reality (regardless of authorial intent), do the individual and collective work of distracting attention from and casting doubt on marriage.

We can begin with an instructive subversion of the marriage plot in Lee's *Miss Brown*, in which a courtship turns grotesque on account of a suitor's aestheticism. The

reader is encouraged to sympathize with Miss Brown in her miserable involvement with a dandy, and some scholars like Leonee Ormond and Jane Thomas claim the novel is anti-aesthetic; however, we might read the novel not as condemnation of aestheticism in its incompatibility with marriage, but in light of the text's concessions to stylistic pleasure in aesthetic tropes, as a condemnation of marriage in its power to trap, where aestheticism is not the enemy, but the messenger—that which exposes the underbelly of commitment as objectification.<sup>41</sup>

Hinnant describes narrative expectations in terms of the courtship novel, which she says is defined by

the entrance of a young woman into adult society and her subsequent choice among competing suitors. The choice is not without its anxieties, however, for one of the unstated conventions of the courtship novel is that the lovers must undergo a traumatic experience, a violent shift from innocence to self-knowledge before their union can be consummated.  
(294)

In *Miss Brown*, however, Walter Hamlin demonstrates no interest in shifting from his depraved innocence, preferring to experience himself as reflected in the aesthetic experience of external objects rather than in a developmental self-knowledge. As such, he sees Miss Brown, his future spouse, primarily as a convenient object, an aesthetic appendage. In turn, both Miss Brown the character and *Miss Brown* the novel respond by making the avoidance of marriage a central goal. Hinnant tells us that readers can expect unfolding realizations of love on the part of the protagonist, but here, when Anne Brown

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<sup>41</sup> At stake in these conflicting readings of *Miss Brown* is the role of parody, which receives a more focused treatment in this project's fourth chapter.

realizes the qualities of Hamlin and his aesthetically oriented companions, she seeks only escape.

The relationship between Walter Hamlin and Miss Brown becomes progressively asymmetrical as it undergoes multiple transformations from their first meeting in Italy. Initially, Miss Brown captivates Hamlin, seeming like a piece of living mythology. He attempts to flatter her but only offends her. Hamlin then comes up with the idea of casting her as his muse and project, a decision that changes Miss Brown's life forever, and almost instantaneously he becomes the most significant man in her world. This appears as a surprisingly negative revelation, however, "as if Hamlin had struck her; she felt insulted, outraged, by this strange interference with her fate, this wonderful intrusion of excitement into her dull and somber life" (Lee 79). Initially following Hinnant's script, Anne Brown lays the groundwork for further readerly expectations of marriage by only slowly coming to enjoy their interactions. These first stages resemble a successful novelistic courtship due to their presumably temporary focus on miscommunication and on a slowly building relationship. The relationship's development takes another path, though, as it becomes clear that Hamlin is not interested in knowing Anne more deeply as a person but only as a reflection of his artistic genius and aesthetic good taste.

The couple's small degree of mutual satisfaction ends after Miss Brown enters London's artistic society through Hamlin. She discovers that he has bought and decorated a house for her without her input, making its interior like a jewel box to display the visual and aesthetic evocations that her face and body create in him. He wants others to see the Pre-Raphaelite goddess whose looks so arrested him in Italy, and this places her in a very limited role within his world. To his annoyance, she offers a voice, a personality, and

preferences rather than the instant gratitude and passion he desires, and for her part, she finds that he makes decisions for the both of them concerning fashion, friends, and scheduling. His self-involvement does not allow room for another complete person.

Over the course of months and eventually years, they play out a strangely unsettling variation on both courtship and patronage in which Hamlin is as much a guardian as a suitor. Housed, clothed, and painted by him, Anne Brown is too marked as belonging to Hamlin to be with anyone else. To allay her worries over accepting his favors, Hamlin draws up a written agreement that places in her hands any potential decision for the pair to marry; the letter of Hamlin's law empowers Miss Brown to leave or advance their relationship as she wishes, but the social debt she incurs by his financial and contractual generosity paralyzes her with the dread that their eventual marriage is a foregone conclusion. Lee writes, "as little as he could understand her, she was obliged, forever, to try to understand him. . . sometimes the sense of Hamlin's weakness would come home to her, and with a pang make her feel how she was bound to suffer, how much she was bound to do for him" (258-259). All of her thoughts of future marriage with Hamlin focus on her obligation and her expectation of unhappiness.

This problematizing of marriage affects the narrative shape of the novel significantly; under Victorian conventions, a more suitable marriage must take place to supersede her involvement with Hamlin. The novel presents two possibilities for this, but both are unsatisfying. The first is for Miss Brown to escape from the clutches of Mr. Hamlin into the embrace of her cousin. This idea, however, repulses her and she chooses to ignore it. The other relationship that might displace Miss Brown and Hamlin's is one between Hamlin and his own equally self-absorbed cousin Sacha Elanguine. Though the

woman is vile, for a time she and Hamlin seem genuinely absorbed in one another, leaving Miss Brown a way out that she finds thoroughly respectable. Virtuous Anne Brown, however, breaks the stalemate of their courtship when she discovers the depth of Madame Elanguine's past depravities, and refuses to allow the man who helped her throw himself away in this draining relationship. Convinced of an unspoken debt to Walter Hamlin, Ann Brown sacrifices her own future by feigning the passion he so desires in order to lure him away from his nefarious cousin. The novel ends with them riding away together in a carriage, an unpleasant reversal of a marriage plot novel. There is neither uncertainty nor hope here: Walter Hamlin is a ruined man still focused on himself, and Anne Brown is consciously laying down her life as an act of unhappy sacrifice for his earlier generosity to her. Beneath their Bohemian exterior, they will be fundamentally conservative, traditional, mainstream, and un-aesthetic. This objectifying courtship is the scandal of *Miss Brown*.

### III. Attacking the Marriage Plot

Aestheticism, or the science of the beautiful as it is sometimes called, makes a study of perfecting the appreciation of beautiful objects and experiences, but this same action has an objectifying effect when aimed at individuals. This behavior lies at the root of Hamlin's churlishness, and as we will later see, it helps to explain Dorian's exploitation of others. In the aesthetic novel, it also significantly generates troubling patterns of sexual danger, victimizing the unconsentingly aestheticized. Though these actions involve more than one individual—usually of opposite sexes—the real relationship explored is that between the perceiver and him- or herself; one might say this

is the fundamental relationship of aestheticism. While some of these interactions then might initially indicate the start of a narrative trajectory toward marriage, the presence of aestheticism again acts as a conduit of violence, no longer subverting the marriage plot but arguably attacking it.

One of the most striking examples of sexual danger occurs in *The Lost Stradivarius*. The novel does not prioritize the courtship or marriage relationship between John Maltravers and Constance, but instead she comes to great harm through her connection with Maltravers. Before he finds the cursed violin, the two seem genuinely fond of one another and their relationship seems a natural extension of the close friendship Maltravers has developed with William Gaskell at Oxford. Similar relationship structures recur throughout Victorian literature; it is common for a gentleman to marry the sister of his good friend.<sup>42</sup> From this promising start, however, the relationship takes a dark turn once Maltravers realizes that Constance is a relative of the violin's former owner, Adrian Temple. Feeling that he might grow closer to the ghostly owner through a descendant, he rapidly escalates the relationship by proposing marriage, and even uses his honeymoon as an excuse to visit the Italian site of his musical and occult visions. Almost immediately after they are married, Maltravers seems to forget entirely about his wife. Their last conversation happens when he asks her to accompany him on the piano one night. She makes two mistakes in the relatively unknown music, and he scolds her harshly. In an obsessive rage, he leaves the country that night without another word for her. Less than a month later, she dies from a post-pregnancy complication. By

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<sup>42</sup> See Marcus (2007).

objectifying Constance, Maltravers invokes aestheticism to attack the marriage plot, conflating marriage, love, and, ultimately, reproduction with death.

We can find yet more extreme examples that shed new light on aestheticism's stake in disrupting marriage. In *Teleny*, the prevalence of sexual danger erupts when societal pressures towards heterosexual conformity intrude upon the plot. *Teleny* features sexual assault, blackmail, prostitution, suicide, and four deaths, two of them quite grotesque, all caused by sex or a sexual situation. What stands out in this pornographic novel is how much danger, disgust, and unhappiness appear in a genre normally reserved for the utopian fantasy of pleasure as described by Steven Marcus's memorable term "pornotopia." In *Teleny*, however, characters fly into fits of jealousy, and unlike most works of pornography, this jealousy does not resolve itself into group sex. At other times, characters within the novel are uninterested in sex, or unable to be aroused, again setting this novel apart from other erotic works.

When Des Grieux attempts to reject his own homosexual attraction to Teleny, he attempts a highly wrought liaison with Catherine, a servant woman. She threatens that the ruin of her reputation will inspire suicide unless he loves her, but she fatalistically offers herself nonetheless. Before the affair can be consummated fully, her spurned suitor hears of it and assaults her, immediate after which she commits suicide. Des Grieux similarly remembers an earlier occasion in which he traveled to a brothel where he found the women to be disgusting, but forced himself to stay and feign enjoyment. In so doing he witnessed the disturbing death of a sick prostitute during a sexual show performance.

In the novel's most significant episode, Des Grieux, missing his lover, goes to Teleny's apartments. He expects to find them empty, as he believes that Teleny is playing

some concerts abroad for money to cover his debts. Instead he finds a locked room occupied by an amorous heterosexual couple. He watches their passion through a keyhole and slowly realizes that the male partner in this dyad is Teleny. He bursts into the room only to discover that the beautiful unknown woman is his own mother. He flees the scene, contemplates suicide, falls ill, and only returns to the apartment to give his lover forgiveness several days later. By then, though, he is too late, and he finds Teleny mid-suicide over remorse for prostituting himself to his lover's mother.

To separate these incidents from mere misogyny, readers can look at the sexual situations featuring women but without the expressly homosexual Des Grieux. His lover Teleny seems far more flexible, and though he shares his most intense emotional and sexual connection with Des Grieux he performs sexually with women without difficulty—his final *post-facto* suicidal guilt notwithstanding. Only when homosexuality is threatened, kept secret, or rejected does heterosexual contact become an actively negative or dangerous force within the text. Though other aesthetic novels do not necessarily follow quite such a strict pattern of positive and negative appearances of sexuality, clear patterns still emerge within the instances of sexual or romantic danger. Usually the danger comes either from a connection to a character whose primary relationship is one with the self, or as in *Teleny* from an outright rejection of the societal pressures towards opposite sex pairings, monogamy, and marriage.

Scholars such as Byrne Fone and Lisa Z. Sigel<sup>43</sup> consistently express how different this novel is from the vast majority of Victorian pornographic texts. Indeed,

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<sup>43</sup> Fone briefly mentions this difference in his 2001 work *Homophobia: A History* (280) and in 1998 in his introduction to an excerpt of the text in *The Columbia Anthology of Gay Literature*:

while pornography's narrative endings defer closure by offering the promise of new and different sex in some future text, in *Teleny*'s context of aestheticism this is impossible.<sup>44</sup> Pornography certainly decentralizes marriage, but with no pretense to legality in the late nineteenth century, its occupation and political affirmation of a non-marital sexual space is moot: there is no angle by which pornography can insinuate its values into Victorian public discourse. Aestheticism, on the other hand, occupies an opulent public space of visibility and suspicion, and is thus under more direct threat by marriage and by extension, the marriage plot—especially given the movement's explicitly literary component. Thus we see in *Teleny* an uncommon attack on heterosexual expectations' infringing on same-sex pairings, a move more aesthetic than pornographic. While pornography of the day freely includes orgies, incest, and bisexual contact, *Teleny* rejects all three of these tropes, and instead of joining his lover and mother, Des Grieux nearly jumps into the Seine. Remarkably, the sexual moment—pornography's *raison d'être*—becomes an instance here of nuanced emotional torture. The text uses danger to express the pressures upon men who desire and love other men to conform to a hegemonically heterosexual pattern of desire. It is ultimately heterosexual pressure that instigates these dangerous situations that harm both men and women. If homosexuality were socially accepted, these situations would have been entirely prevented or at least defanged because they occur when a homosexual character is forced to behave in an inauthentic way.

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*Readings from Western Antiquity to the Present Day* (314-322). Sigel's work is *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England* (2002).

<sup>44</sup> See Michaelson's *The Aesthetics of Pornography* (1971).

#### IV. Negative Relationships of Influence

The aesthetic novel suggests by illustration that heterosexual monogamy is variously banal, timewasting, dishonest, and violent. In addition to subverting or attacking the marriage plot, aestheticism edges it out of the novel's narrative frame, asserting that alternative relationships are at the very least worthy of the printed page. Consistently, these are same-sex relationships, and they broadly operate in one of two ways—either as relationships of influence and control or of equality and affection.

We can liken the panicked Victorian notion of influence to a disease, and certain types of relationship place individuals at high risk of communication. Influence spreads from an immune carrier to a helpless victim, whom it infects, addicts, and ruins. While we find compelling instances of this dynamic in many aesthetic novels—including a rare alignment of female influence from Madame Elanguine to Miss Brown in Vernon Lee's novel—the theme of relationships as carriers of influence is given its exemplary articulation in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Dorian first comes under the sway of the arch-dandy Lord Henry Wotton, developing an unquestioning belief in the elder's paradoxical tenets. Readers know for certain that the impulsive bargain he makes to give himself the appearance of unchanging youth and immortality would never have occurred were it not for the honeyed praise of youth and beauty presented to Dorian only moments before. Dorian declares, "Lord Henry Wotton is perfectly right. Youth is the only thing worth having. When I find that I am growing old, I shall kill myself" (26). Having earlier that same day thought nothing of youth, he was profoundly swayed by Wotton's

seductive words. Dorian has taken up the relationship with the self that Wotton speaks of so wittily as a model, and it provides the motivation for his further self-involvement.

Oulton sees this as a direct borrowing from Pater, explaining, "*Dorian Gray's* focus on the relationship between passion, hedonism, and morality seems able to bypass the question of whether or not such attraction is sexual or simply, to use David [Copperfield's] term, enthusiastic. It is arguably one of the most modern features of the novel that sexuality becomes irrelevant in determining moral worth" (148). Wilde's novel reflects that Pater's philosophy divorces the search for new stimulation from morality in the form of Dorian's choice of how to live his life. This is enabled by Dorian effectively becoming immune to the rot of influence through his bargain to bypass consequence via the eponymous portrait. In a literal analogue with the idea of disease and immunity, Dorian becomes able to sample substances and chemicals usually thought of as dangerous, and to make relationships with a fundamentally different set of boundaries and priorities than most. Similarly, as he no longer needs to fear venereal disease, he can engage in sexual exploration with a confidence previously only experienced by the ignorant and foolhardy.

Following the paths of influence shows that Dorian does not remain a passive receiver; his very presence mysteriously influences Basil Hallward, who describes the unique feelings upon first seeing Dorian in a crowd, saying, "I knew I had come face to face with some one whose mere personality was so fascinating, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my art itself. I did not want any external influence on my life" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 11). This influence is located in the sphere of visuality, befitting Basil's trade as an artist. Dorian's influence has the amoral

effect of aestheticizing people, reducing individuals into merely pleasing figures or symbols that exist only to be acted upon. Beauty is a source of both power and subjugation for Dorian because it draws so many different people to him with their variety of intentions and goals. Thus we can see the influence that begins with Lord Henry goes through Dorian and then reaches out to touch those who draw Dorian's attention. A cast of lovely young men and women all feel this influence, and it comes to harm them all eventually. By both supplanting and overcasting romantic subplots, these relationships of influence serve as significant if largely negative aesthetic alternatives to the dominance of marriage-oriented narrative.

#### V. Positive Relationships of Submerged Sexuality

Having outlined a series of aesthetic negative strategies to destabilize the theme of marriage, it is worth considering a positive alternative that appears frequently in aesthetic novels.

Although the types of interpersonal relationships seen in aesthetic novels vary widely and their suggestive silences refer to many forbidden subjects, it should be clear by now that an association already existed between aestheticism, decadence, and homosexuality, both in the eyes of the public and within the movements themselves. Though Showalter subsumes aestheticism under her primary focus of decadence, she speaks to both when she describes “a *fin de siècle* euphemism for homosexuality, the public or cultural facade that marked out one complex and indeed contradictory position along the axis of English homosexual identity formation in the late nineteenth century” (171). Krafft-Ebing along with John Addington Symonds worked on the notion of a third

sex that expressed androgyny through a male body housing a female soul.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, Edward Carpenter and a group of largely classically educated poets who considered themselves Uranians theorized same-sex desires alternately through ideas of intermediate genders and a desire for more separation between the sexes.<sup>46</sup>

These thinkers, some influenced by Walt Whitman's notions of comradely relationships, posited that the most feminine women and masculine men who want only to be with and near their own gender could create emotionally superior romantic relationships without reproduction or societal approval. Carpenter's cadre wrote that male homosexuality was superior to heterosexuality or female sexuality, which they strongly associated with children and domesticity—a line of thought not shared by aesthetic novels. Though the importance of same-sex friendship extends to both groups, there is little evidence of the Uranian or Carpenter-influenced model of gender expression in aesthetic novels. Androgyny and femininity appear far more often, although they are not portrayed in a clinical light, while hypermasculinity, which does not sit well with the figure of the dandy, was far less common. Characteristics like refinement, languor, and carefully cultivated tastes are traditionally associated with women, aristocrats and dandies.<sup>47</sup> In the cases of aristocrats or dandies, these traits did not lose their connection with femininity; instead, these groups were sometimes described as either androgynous or

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<sup>45</sup> See *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886).

<sup>46</sup> He wrote *The Intermediate Sex* (1908). These ideas circulated in his works earlier, such as his “Homogenic Love” (1895) as well.

<sup>47</sup> These aspects are discussed by Thaïs E. Morgan (1994) and Rhonda K. Garelick (1998).

as outright feminine.<sup>48</sup> This is interesting because androgyny in aesthetic novels seems almost incidental compared to other more emphasized character traits. The personage of the dandy is far more important to the genre than the medically defined invert, and this figure goes back much further in history. Its associated signifiers have remained stable: high class status, love of luxury, particular attention to dress, wit and verbal skill, male same-sex bonds—either homosocial or more sexual—and connoisseurship.<sup>49</sup> Dandyism cannot be singled out as a cause or result of homosexuality, nor can the dandy be read as simply as the social mask of the invert, though the connection between dandyism and homosexuality is persistently debated, as shown in writings by James Eli Adams (1995) and Alan Sinfield (1994) among others.

Nearly always foregrounding a character marked by worldly taste, dandyism, or Epicureanism, same-sex relationships motivate many characters and plots within aesthetic novels, providing energy and tension both through their narrative importance and the novels' representational limitations. Aesthetic novels that deeply explore same-sex connections lack the cultural and linguistic means of articulating the bond as a replacement for marriage, largely because of the social and legal limitations that disrupted same-sex desire, contact or sexual relationships in the nineteenth century.<sup>50</sup> Authors could not openly depict what people in society could not legally do without endangering the book's publication and implicating themselves.

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<sup>48</sup> Fictional portrayals showed this implicitly as in Bertie the protagonist of Ouida's *Under Two Flags* (1867). More explicitly James Eli Adams works with the theme in *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (1995).

<sup>49</sup> These features make up parts of the definition by Ellen Moers in *The Dandy Brummell to Beerbohm* (1960) and are used by Schaffer (2000) but appears similarly in too many sources to list.

<sup>50</sup> See Marcus *Between Women: Friendship Desire and Marriage in Victorian England*.

In literature, the label of friendship protects a variety of same-sex connections from the moral suspicion, censorship, and legal persecution that threatened same-sex bonds without that avenue of plausible deniability. Matthew Michael Kaylor vividly describes the consequences of being legally and socially accused of same-sex contact or suggestion: “a conviction for committing 'an act of gross indecency'” was “for the Victorians and the Edwardians, equivalent to the brand of Cain” (xix). In the last decades of the nineteenth century, especially after Wilde's public downfall, writers like Cesar Lombroso and Max Nordau publicly aligned same-sex sexuality with a plethora of sicknesses and criminal behaviors.<sup>51</sup>

Elaine Showalter describes the goals and effects of this late Victorian sexual policing through the Labouchere Amendment and various other authoritative discourses, and the significant gulf between their intended and actual consequences. She describes how “*fin-de-siècle* efforts to define and control homosexuality, and to bound it off from masculinity in general, were not successful, and may have had the effect of strengthening homosexual bonds” (14). Showalter adapts the theoretical positions of Jeffrey Weeks and Michel Foucault to talk about the emergence of a counter discourse to which the aesthetic novel belongs. The conceptual yield is that a homosexual community, identity, and set of social tropes coalesced during this period as well as a more public discourse of separation, shame, punishment, and silence. Simultaneously then, both forces of authority and disruption shaped aesthetic novels, and the resulting tensions concerning their portrayed relationships are palpable.

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<sup>51</sup> See Lombroso's *Criminal Man* (1911). Lombroso wrote many related works earlier in Italian. Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892) specifically addresses connections between disease, desire, and art.

The enforced shame of same-sex desire made it an intensely confusing experience that required conscious deprogramming to sort through. As we will see, its effects radiate into the structure of friendship-oriented fiction, but before considering that issue, it is useful to consult a contemporary account. *Teleny* centers on the formation of a romantic same-sex bond, and although it is a work of fiction, passages concerning this confusion and shame are assuredly written from the vantage of real human experience. The work does not have the same extra-literary considerations of other aesthetic novels because of its illegal status as pornography. In the novel, Teleny's lover Des Grieux describes his desire for men as innate and lifelong: "I know that I was born a sodomite, the fault is my constitution's not mine own" (44). Earlier in the same conversation he communicates how eventually he came to a less blame-oriented understanding of his desire for men but only after overcoming societal rules, "I had been inculcated with all kinds of wrong ideas, so when I understood what my natural feelings for Teleny were, I was staggered, horrified; and filled with dismay, I resolved to stifle them" (44). Part of overcoming this horror lay in reframing the taboo of same-sex contact as artificial. Another of the most famous and most extensive pornographic texts of the Victorian era, the pseudonymous sexual autobiography *My Secret Life* (1888-1895), discusses this:

Why may a man and a woman handle each other's privates, and yet it be wrong for a man to feel another's prick, or a woman to feel another's cunt? Every one in each sex has at one period of their lives done so, and why should not any society of association of people indulge in these innocent, tho sensual, amusements if they like in private? What is there in their doing so that is disgraceful? It is prejudice of education alone which teaches it is. (248)

In the eyes of Victorians such as the author of *My Secret Life*, we might then suppose it is the same prejudice of education that directs societies and individuals toward marriage,

that marriage is as culturally contingent as—and likely related to—the prohibition against same-sex desire. The previous chapter illustrated how easily aesthetic style overlaid with homosexual code, and indeed the documented and insinuated instances of same-sex romantic pairings in historical aestheticism are innumerable. While by no means can we assume same-sex friendships in aestheticism to be romantic in nature, the real and presumably known presence of same-sex activity in aesthetic circles strongly suggests that Des Grieux's experience of self-recognition was neither isolated nor unfamiliar to many, or, stopping short of so taboo an idea, that the revelation of the apparently mostly heterosexual author of *My Secret Life* was not unheard-of in aesthetic circles. At the fringes of affectionate same-sex bonds in the aesthetic novel, then, lurks the potential for marriage and its attendant structural forces within a narrative to be acknowledged as arbitrary, or more likely, as compositionally irrelevant. Indeed, in plots where same-sex bonds are centralized, neither marriage nor any real-world equivalent can serve as a climax to a novel's plot. As a result, these novels do not share a common shape or telos with other contemporary works.

To this effect, consider *Marius the Epicurean*. In this most apparently austere of the aesthetic novels, Marius eschews human bonds in favor of spiritual explorations and self-development. Pater gives himself a significant difficulty in creating crucial human relationships by making concerns of plot and character notably secondary to his expounding upon and thoroughly exploring multiple philosophical and spiritual approaches to life. Even so, Pater gives ample narrative attention to Marius's few friendships with male peers. These pairings shape him along his path and are the only significant relationships within the cerebral novel. Pater not only uses ambiguous same-

sex bonds as stepping stones for his protagonist's spiritual development, but also shields these close ties from unwanted scrutiny through suggestive silences and by labeling them as "friendships." Even though they are expressed with Pater's characteristically circumspect style, these bonds can and have been considered homoerotically invested by scholars such as Dowling, Higgins, and Evangelista.

*Marius The Epicurean* can be read as Pater's response to those who criticized the first edition of *The Renaissance* and led to his bowdlerizing of its second edition. The novel is a measured, mannered work that explores paganism, death, disease, the declining years of an empire, and the early rise of Christianity, yet it does all this indirectly enough to avoid scandal or sensation. Indeed, articles by Gerald Monsman, Lesley Higgins, and Matthew Potolsky among others show that even with his remarkable self-censoring and unusual restraint, Pater was dogged by scandal enough, having come dangerously close to being publicly outed in 1876.<sup>52</sup>

The suggestive silences of *Marius the Epicurean* fall where readers learn about Marius's bonds with other men. The novel calls them friendships but describes them in very limited terms while at the same time letting the audience know how precious they are to Marius. The first of the bonds and arguably the most long lasting in its effects occurs between a young Marius and his schoolfellow Flavian. We do not know what is so special about Flavian beyond his instinctive and physical appeal, or what later attracts Marius to the young Christian who becomes "more than brother" to him (*Marius* 288), but Marius forms an important exclusive bond with each of these men for a time during

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<sup>52</sup> Respectively these are "The Platonic Eros of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde: 'Love's Reflected Image' in the 1890s" (2002), "Walter Pater: Painting the Nineteenth Century" (2007), and "Fear of Falling: Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* as a Dangerous Influence" (1998).

which he allows himself to be swayed and temporarily influenced by their strands of ethics and philosophy or spirituality. It is clear is that no creed or belief system matches the intensity of these mysterious relationships.

Given that the bachelor Marius's most meaningful relationships are with men, the text bypasses the marriage plot, and Marius can thus access these relationships through his quest instead of through any other part of himself. Never does he feel these bonds for women, instead imagining himself in the positions of his male companions. The climax of this novel fits in with this, even on the level of the chapter title, "Will as Vision." In a euphoric realization, Marius sees his spirit as one of a matching pair, eternally accompanied by one who is very much like him. The novel leaves this accompanying spirit ambiguous and unnamed; it may be Jesus, a guardian angel, or a quite literal male soul mate. Whomever it may be, this vision makes Marius feel a sense of love, relief, and peace when he knows that his invisible male double has been with him always and will never leave him alone—even if it suggests bittersweetly that such an apotheosis of same-sex companionship can only occur as a vision.

Same-sex relationships appear in a variety of other ways in aesthetic novels; what connects these representations is their centrality within the sub-genre. They appear not only in *Marius the Epicurean*, but also in *The Green Carnation*, *The Lost Stradivarius*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Miss Brown*, and *Teleny*. Some instances of these relationships are explicitly defined or described at length while others are not, but with no small frequency their importance steers the novel's shape in a way that definitionally marks aestheticism as offering new alternatives within both the form of narrative and the expression of desire.

## VI. *The Green Carnation* as Praxis of Multiple Strategies

The aesthetic novel's work of questioning the marriage plot is closely tied to its disdain for bourgeois tradition, its valuing the self above others, its investment in classical same-sex friendships, and its dedication to the new—*art pour l'art*, as Gautier puts it. We have explored four means by which aesthetic novels map out new possibilities for social living and for sexual expression. One final reading in this chapter allows us to see the aesthetic novel's tactics in concert with one another.

*The Green Carnation* foregrounds romantic danger, but in a potentially productive, cautionary way that is deeply connected to other relationships of friendship and influence. This novel again shows the danger of a romantic connection between a non-aesthete and an aesthete. Luckily for Lady Locke, it ends very differently, and the courted Lady Locke recognized the negative influences brought by her suitor, Reggie Hastings, before she has to decide about the future of her own relationship with him. As ever, aestheticism is less the enemy here than the means by which arbitrary and inauthentic behaviors and relationships are exposed. As Lady Locke discovers, Esme Amarith has a very real amount of social and philosophical influence over their young friend Reggie Hastings. Readers do not know the exact source or ongoing fuel of their intense relationship, but the suggestive silences that surround their bond indicate it as a homosexual affair, and likely a stand-in for the real-world relationship between Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas. Beckon's *Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890s* (1993) introduces its excerpt of the novel as a *roman à clef* naming Wilde and Douglas as the inspirations for the Esme Amarith and Lord Reggie Hastings. *Oscar Wilde as a*

*Character in Victorian Fiction* (2007) by Angela Kingston goes so far as to name the book and the obviousness of its real-life inspiration as a major factor in the growing animosity between the Marquess of Queensbury and Wilde.

*The Green Carnation* never examines the Hastings-Amarinth connection directly, though it significantly influences Reggie's choice and manner of lackadaisical courtship. Instead, this pairing appears more in sidelong glances; characters speak of the relationship to one another, and Lady Locke shows significant curiosity about it during the days of her courtship with Reggie, enough to cast it in oblique competition with Lady Locke's claim on Reggie. During an early conversation begun by a comment about Reggie's carnation, he speaks briefly and vaguely to Lady Locke about Amarith: "Esme is the bravest man I know" said Reggie, taking some marmalade. "I think sometime that he sins even more perfectly than I do. He is so varied and he escapes those absurd things, consequences. His sin always finds him out. He is never at home to it by any chance" (Hichens 58). From there, the conversation frustratingly moves on. Lady Locke wants to know what the green carnation buttonholes mean and why so many young men seem to behave in the same ways in the name of originality. More urgently, she feels curious about why the young man she enjoys seems to attend so much more to his older portly friend. Because she so pointedly asks these questions without receiving clear or straightforward answers, we notice them and share her curiosity.

Many conversations that address aestheticism, homosexuality, or the bond between Amarith and Reggie are on the surface about the trend of green carnations. They are a symbol for all suggestive silences and unrevealed answers of this text. At one point Lady Locke's young son and Reggie have a conversation about the unusual flower.

“We don't care to find out how the tailor cuts and fashions, how he sews and stitches. He does all this in order that you may be beautiful. And we have only to think of you. Do you love this carnation, Tommy, as I love it? Do you worship its wonderful green? It is like some exquisite painted creature with dyed hair and brilliant eyes. It has the supreme merit of being perfectly unnatural. To be unnatural is often to be great. To be natural is generally to be stupid. To-morrow I will give you a carnation, Tommy, and you shall wear it at church when you go to hear my beautiful anthem.”  
Tommy gave vent to ecstatic cries of joy. (79-80)

Lady Locke eavesdrops accidentally and finds herself deeply displeased by how Reggie speaks to her son. Once the two adults are alone, she makes Reggie take back his promise to provide her son with a green carnation for the next night's dinner. She comes to realize that as much as she enjoys Reggie, she does not trust him in the role of a father; she perceives a threat that mires sexual danger with influence, its disease ultimately traced to the source of Esme Amarith, whom she wishes never to hold sway over her child. The conversation in which she rejects Reggie's proposal is an effective one in which she speaks to him as a captive audience, giving voice to mainstream concerns about aestheticism when she tells him why she will not marry him. She feels that choosing to be with him would put herself and her child at risk, saying that “Men like you do not understand women. They do not try to; probably they could not if they did. Men like you are so twisted and distorted in mind that they cannot recognize their own distortion. It seem to me that Mr. Amarith has created a cult. Let me call it the cult of the green carnation. To me it seems very silly and rather wicked” (109). It is the sharpest moment of the novel's criticism of the movement, but it also rejects marriage in favor of each character's individual actualization, and it furthermore leaves Reggie intact in his aesthetic pursuit, temporarily diminished by Lady Locke's tell-off, but fulfilled in his

final gesture of offering gems of aesthetic advice to a group of young people. The novel, even in denouncing the aesthetic fascination with influence, ultimately takes a strange, freeing shape that without the threats of influence and sexual danger may have more resembled *Miss Brown*, or worse, a simple, dishonestly tidy and successful courtship narrative.

Invoking multiple interruptive forces—that of same-sex friendship mattering more than opposite-sex courtship, and of protagonists either aestheticizing or being aestheticized as people—*The Green Carnation* makes clear the connection between this wider diversity of important relationships and the prevalence of danger associated with either sex or romance in aesthetic novels. These forces work together from multiple angles and with several forms of resistance to displace the heterosexual monogamous dyad whose telos is marriage.

Instead, the aesthetic novel highlights friendships closely linked with suggestive silences that indicate same-sex attraction or connection that is not fully representable. At times these friendships create a dark variation of a marriage-oriented plot in which negativity and danger erupt to express frustration at the limits of openly representable relationships.

## CHAPTER 4

## PARODY AND THE AESTHETIC NOVEL

## I. Understanding Parody and its Relationship to Aestheticism

The aesthetic movement's reputation does not rely on its novels, which form only a small portion of its output. Aesthetic poetry, essays, plays, cartoons, fashions, and décor all make up a larger part of the movement's reputation. Its novels, however, still engage in many of the same techniques present in other aesthetic works, and one of the techniques that has always been disproportionately represented in and with aestheticism is parody. The *Punch* cartoons, *Patience*, *The New Republic*, and figures more closely associated with the movement like Ada Leverson, Vernon Lee, and Max Beerbohm all join parody and aestheticism. This chapter asks why, when there are so few aesthetic novels, do so many of them include elements of parody. Parody appears in Aubrey Beardsley's *Venus and Tannhäuser*, Vernon Lee's *Miss Brown*, and Robert Hichens' *The Green Carnation*. Some scholars make cases for it in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as well. What about parody or aestheticism brings them together so frequently?

Although aestheticism's most immediate connection to parody appears to be a negative one in which aestheticism only serves as an object for ridicule, there is a wider range of relationships and interconnections between aestheticism and parody that offers benefits for both the objects and audience of aesthetic parody. Wilde may have said it best in a letter to Walter Hamilton: “[P]arody, which is the muse with her tongue in her cheek, has always amused me—but it requires a light touch, a fanciful treatment, and, oddly enough, a love for the poet whom it caricatures” (*Complete Letters* 390). Further

investigation reveals the breadth of possibilities made available to aesthetic novels through parody, including hybridity, simultaneous parody and participation, and partially legible disguise for sexual concerns.

Though definitions of parody have changed and changed again over time, most understandings of the term focus on the way in which parody simultaneously creates and critiques. Margaret Rose offers one definition, explaining: “[P]arody in its broadest sense and application may be described as first imitating and then changing either, and sometimes both, the 'form' and 'content', or style and subject-matter, or syntax and meaning of another work, or, most simply, its vocabulary” (*Parody: Ancient, Modern* 45). Despite the changing definitions, Rose finds that it is most accurate and useful to consider parody broadly, arguing that narrow definitions create confusion with other related genres while excluding many examples of parody. She says that the effects of successful parody are multiple; they include “some comic, amusing, or humorous effect, which, together with the changes made by the parodist. . . may act as 'signals' of the parodic nature” (45) as well as some critical reworking of the original. In order to understand parody, one must acknowledge the possibility for an ambiguous relationship of a parody to its object, the potential for comedic effects, the availability of both subject matter and style for parody, and the importance of both imitation and change to parody.

Parody can serve many purposes, however, and other critics have focused on different elements of it. In her introduction to *The Victorian Comic Spirit* (2000), Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor describes the connections among these collected scholarly takes on parody, arguing that “humorous and comic representations function politically by revealing contradictions in ideological discourses, by exposing repressed illogicalities

and prejudices, by what if by way of irony or ridicule, attendant to nineteenth-century ideologies of gender, class, race, nationalism” (xvi). The same connective tissue joins parodies to each other as well as to their subjects. Crucially, a parodic text can participate in and parody aestheticism at the same time; this chapter explores the possibilities opened up by this dual role. Parody’s political function is based on its being simultaneously inside and outside of the discourse it engages. Rose addresses this special quality of parody when she distinguishes it from other closely related genres and activities because “the complicated structure of the more complicated parody—in which the target text may not only be satirized but also 'refunctioned'... demonstrates a more subtle (though still comic) use of other literary works than is implied by the term burlesque, or even by the term 'mock-epic' when the word mock is used in the sense of 'mockery', 'ridicule', or 'spooft’” (*Parody: Ancient, Modern* 28-29). When she says “refunctioned,” this can be understood as participatory parody. The use of multiple levels of meaning allows parody to appear to represent aestheticism negatively while simultaneously presenting a more complex reflection of the movement. Additionally, not all of these levels of meaning would have been fully apparent to all contemporary readers, making parody an excellent tool for oblique communication to multiple audiences simultaneously.

Frederic Jameson, referring to this ambiguous relationship between parody and its object, describes parody through a prioritization of style and critique:

Now parody capitalizes on the uniqueness of these styles and seizes on their idiosyncrasies and eccentricities to produce an imitation which mocks the original. I won't say that the satiric impulse is conscious in all forms of parody. In any case, a good or great parodist has to have some secret sympathy for the original, just as a great mimic has to have the capacity to put himself/herself in the place of the person imitated. Still, the general effect of parody is—whether in sympathy or with malice—to cast ridicule on

the private nature of these stylistic mannerisms and their excessiveness and eccentricity with respect to the way people normally speak or write. So there remains somewhere behind all parody the feeling that there is a linguistic norm in contrast to which the styles of the great modernists can be mocked. (Jameson “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”)

Though Jameson refers to postmodern parody here in specific, this thought is still useful for understanding Victorian parody.<sup>53</sup> Sympathy and mockery can work together, whether simultaneously or through the careful separation of various elements and ideas of the parody’s subject.

Among the parodies targeting the aesthetic movement, readers more commonly see general parodies that incorporate recognizable elements of the movement instead of specific parodies that base their details on one text as a model. Aesthetic parodies focus on a style and create an implied comparison with “normal” writing speech that remains at the forefront. Walter Hamilton, whose *The Aesthetic Movement in England* (1882) is one of the first critical works about the aesthetic movement, acknowledges this disparity between aestheticism as a style and other concurrent trends, and how that distinctiveness has made the school vulnerable to stylistic parody. This aesthetic apologist and collector of English parodies argues that time will reveal the value of aesthetic works and the weakness of the common aesthetic parodies:

But let it be borne in mind that that higher Aestheticism has nothing in common with the affected and superficial aestheticism which has been forced into a hot house existence by caricaturists, and fostered by those who mistake artistic slang, and stained-glass attitudes, for culture and high art. For herein lies the essence of it all :—Real culture is a hardy plant, it will thrive where it has once taken root; *pseudo*-Aestheticism may for a time be confounded with it by those who have learnt all they know of it

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<sup>53</sup> Carolyn Williams makes the case in her article, “Parody, Pastiche, and the Play of Genres: The Savoy Operas of Gilbert and Sullivan” (2000).

from *Punch* and *Patience* but assuredly by no others, and it will fade away as rapidly as it sprang into existence, with all the more speed now that as a theme for comic writers it is nearly exhausted. (142)

He trusts that the quality of thought and achievement will adequately distinguish between what he views as real and pseudo-aestheticism. He does not see potential for humor or parody to play a supportive or reforming role within the movement, but neither does he see these parasitic texts as genuinely dangerous to aestheticism or its legacy.

Parody remains important when addressing the notion of suggestive silences, with which it shares the idea that audiences can read beyond what a text says. Instead of only seeing immediately signified meanings, audiences can see various codes or absences that are also communicative. It is, however, important to differentiate the sort of multisignification that parody offers from other frequently confused or conflated genres.

To this end, it is useful to consult Rose's work again:

To summarise some of the mechanics of parody which distinguish it from satire, it can be said that such parody works by juxtaposition, omission, addition, condensation, and by discontinuance of the original structure and/or content of the literary or artistic context which it quotes, imitates, or alludes to in order comically to refunction it, and that it is hence to at least some extent ambivalently constructed from the target which it refunctions. (*Parody: Ancient, Modern* 83)

Rose's delineation makes clear that parody allows covert, ambiguous, and doubled communication between text and reader that relies on both resemblance and difference. Parody does not necessarily endorse what it represents and uses, thus expanding what it can depict without censorship or negative repercussions, but neither does some element of critique imply that the parody offers only mockery or negativity. One aspect of parody that plays a crucial role in how it interacts with aestheticism can and has been described

with many terms such as polyvalence, double-voiced, hybridity, and plurisignification among others. Bakhtin has described the novel as an inherently parodic genre on the grounds that both are doubled-voiced.<sup>54</sup> For aestheticism, this quality has a particular value.

Specifically, parody can explore sexual expression and identity in ways not usually possible because of the breadth and vagueness of the Labouchere Amendment which aggressively persecuted male same sex contact or interest.<sup>55</sup> The prevalence of homosexual or other sexually criminal subtexts plays a significant role in aestheticism's use of parody (among other strategies) to mask its illicit preoccupations. The popularity of parodic aesthetic novels relative to the number of non-parodic participants in the genre emphasizes the myriad of prospects afforded by parody. These include disguising the movement's stake in sexuality, affecting aestheticism as a larger movement, forming hybrid works, and creating a dialogue between an un-aesthetic public and this distinctive school.

Williams, addressing variety within pastiche as a technique for parody and humor; makes an observation that applies to aesthetic parody as well:

This hodgepodge variety [in the Savoy operas of Gilbert and Sullivan], this rampant eclecticism should be as important to our historical sense of pastiche as is the more dominant sense of the term, which indicates an extensive, pervasive, or diffuse imitation of one stylistic model. The Savoy operas take advantage of pastiche in both these senses, reveling as they do

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<sup>54</sup> Rose (1993) goes through Bakhtin's multiple contributions to our understanding of parody on pages 125-170.

<sup>55</sup> The text of the amendment reads as follows, "Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures, or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency shall be guilty of a misdemeanour, and being convicted shall be liable at the discretion of the Court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour" (*Irish Law Times and Solicitors' Journal Vol. 19 40*).

both in general parodies of style and in recombinant mixtures of disparate generic take-offs, juxtaposed and jostling against one another. (“Parody, Pastiche” 2)

Parodic aesthetic novels function similarly through their productive mixtures; they can be aesthetic while simultaneously humorously parodying aestheticism. This is part of what allows the range of artistic positions and audience reactions that are key to this fluid hybridity.

At times the relationship between parody and aestheticism is one of mutually beneficial collaboration. When authors add elements of parody and satire, the aesthetic novel works in ways that it otherwise cannot. Fowler observes that “parodic satire has no structure of its own: it must of necessity have a host form to inhabit and subvert” (189). Parody gives the form of the novel the flexibility needed to be aesthetic. The differing expectations of the novel and of aestheticism combine otherwise under the additional constraint of parody. Counterintuitively, the additional restriction creates a more moderate and readable text through the admixture of parodic expectations with aesthetic ones.

In thinking about aestheticism and parody, it is important to keep in mind the diversity of representations of aestheticism that come to even more diverse audiences. Aesthetic poems, plays, pamphlets, essays, comic operas, speaking tours, cartoons, fashions, interior decorations, and other artifacts reached widely diverse audiences, and nearly as many media gave voice to aesthetic parodies. From Bunthorne's acknowledgment in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience* of aesthetic shamming to teapots resembling caricatures of aesthetic artists that would allow the user to pour hot tea from a

pale and languid china hand, both aestheticism and poking fun at aestheticism were culturally recognized and quite popular. Neither these occurrences in different media nor their audiences functioned as a unified group.

No one single way of interacting with aestheticism dominated others. Dennis Denisoff, in *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody 1840-1940* helps current readers approach parody and aestheticism by explaining how audiences could find humor in parody without necessarily having strong positive or negative opinions of aestheticism. He pays particular attention to why the spoofs of romance and or sexuality appealed to many different audiences and therefore worked for a range of writers as well:

Even if they [the parodists] were not necessarily sympathetic to the sexual desires that they insinuated, the writers, in an effort to amuse an audience that not only enjoyed aspects of aestheticism but also found pleasure in mocking traditional notions of love and the family, popularized dandy aesthete characters that could be, and were, read as supportive portrayals of people who identified themselves by less familiar sexual traits and proclivities. (*Aestheticism and Sexual Parody* 235)

This description shows the multiple angles of interpretation that coexist without conflict here. Parodic works can both represent aestheticism and mock it. These same works can also tweak the nose of Victorian courtship rituals and expectations in the arena of love and marriage. Though they are clearly distinct, parodies of aestheticism and parodies of courtship rituals do not work against each other. Instead, both allow the audience a much wider range of identification and reflection when they enjoy the dual parody of a current subculture and the larger culture with which it is frequently at odds.

## II. Simultaneous Parody and Participation

That a work is a parody of aestheticism has no necessary effect on whether or not it also participates in aestheticism; as we have just seen, parodies of the aesthetic movement can treat it positively, negatively, or ambiguously. Parody, whether specific or general, functions to create hybridity within each of the texts that combine parody and aestheticism. It can also shape aestheticism itself through critique and exploration and can be strategically employed to shape the perception of a text that will be read by a diverse audience.

There are nearly as many texts that are considered by some scholars to be anti-aesthetic as there are aesthetic texts, and a few more that are not largely concerned with aestheticism on the largest scale but take the time to include a character or scenario that caricatures the aesthetic movement into silliness, immorality, or impotence. W. H. Mallock's *The New Republic* (1877) with the sensual and nonsensical Mr. Rose—a clear parody of Pater—can be held as representative of these. During a discussion of the purpose of life, Mallock draws from *The Renaissance* in the personage of Mr. Rose, but in broad strokes and exaggerations quite unlike Pater's original:

“To me” he [Mr. Rose] said, raising his eyebrows wearily, and sending his words floating down the table in a languid monotone, “Mr. Herbert's whole metaphor seems misleading. I rather look upon life as a chamber, which we decorate as we would decorate the chamber of the woman or the youth that we love, tinting the walls of it with symphonies of subdued colour, and filling it with works of fair form, and with flowers, and with strange scents, and with instruments of music.” (40-41)

Mallock transforms Pater's belief in individual subjectivity and his focus on art as the best way for an individual to lead a full life into languid and sensual emptiness in the form of the chamber to be decorated. He makes a far balder statement of same-sex

attraction by making Mr. Rose's imagined object of desire either a woman or a youth. He uses recognizable words and ideas from aestheticism but alters them dramatically. The novel on the whole is overwhelmingly didactic and non-aesthetic even when it is overtly concerned with aestheticism. These novels employ parodic strategies because the author has a message to give about his or her subject matter and either chooses to say it obliquely or can say it best that way. These texts remain separate from aesthetic works or participatory aesthetic parodies because their didacticism fails to maintain a neutral tone which, as discussed in chapter one, plays a crucial part in the identity of aesthetic novels.

Participation in aestheticism lends itself well to parody in part because in aestheticism, there is no such thing as excess. Aestheticism attempts to remake tastes, and, in so doing, grossly violates other types of Victorian taste. Aesthetes work to destroy Victorian tastes as part of the process of developing new ones. Parody is of direct use to this project. It can be disruptive, non-hegemonic, genuinely provocative, and sincere at the same time. Aestheticism does not attempt to puncture Victorian tastes in order to remake the same kind of cultural edifice, but to critique the idea of mass-market taste-making in general. Regenia Gagnier helpfully delineates a relevant political position of aestheticism here:

The elements of aestheticism include its detachment from praxis (a detachment that according to Adorno indicates a break with imperialist society) and a preoccupation with the formal or technical qualities of artistic media. Its function is to negate the means-end rationality of bourgeois everyday life by theorizing art as an 'autonomous' useless realm. In consequence it lacks both political content and social impact, and this in turn contributes to its repetition of worn-out forms and finally to unproductiveness on the part of its artists. (*Idylls* 6)

This seemingly contradictory position of the apolitical political remains in conflict with much capitalist, progress-oriented Victorian culture, and parody is able to explore this conflict from both sides. Artists can play in this avowedly useless space and demonstrate the value of play, both in terms of language and style and in terms of time spent without overtly pursued goals. Furthermore, artists who use parody can do this without necessarily signing up for all tenets and creeds of aestheticism, instead retaining the freedom to pick and choose among them. Later, this chapter will explore how both Vernon Lee and Robert Hichens use parody to maintain this freedom for themselves.

Frequently a work can be aesthetic and a parody of aestheticism when the movement itself is portrayed. *Marius the Epicurean*, taking place during the decline of the Roman Empire, has never been classified as a parody, and never treats with aestheticism as a movement. Both *The Green Carnation* and *Miss Brown* are usually classified as parodies. Their plots are set in their contemporary society, and substantially concern the social and artistic sides of the aesthetic movement. However, unlike *The New Republic*, a few of these seemingly anti-aesthetic texts maintain their aestheticism in spite of their superficially negative perspectives, even using the same coded or silenced references to sexuality. In addition to acting as humorous critique, sometimes parody is also participation in what is being parodied.<sup>56</sup> The negative aspects of aestheticism in a parody text do not differ significantly from the self-critiques offered in less parodic aesthetic novels. For example, comments in the latter half of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* such as Dorian's, "he himself could not help wondering at the calm of his demeanour, and

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<sup>56</sup> Margaret Rose explains communication like this between the subject of parody and audiences in the first two chapters of *Parody // Metafiction*.

for a moment felt keenly the terrible pleasure of a double life” (135) look very much like comments made by the narrator throughout *Miss Brown* and *The Green Carnation*. The narration creates its effect by emphasizing what is negative about an aesthetic character or situation while not detracting from the appeal of the same character or situation. Dorian's pleasure in his double life is terrible, but it is still a keenly felt pleasure.

*The Green Carnation* provides excellent examples of this. The arch aesthete Esme Amaranth encourages his friend and follower, Reggie Hastings, to attempt to mislead a wealthy widow and entice her into a loveless mercenary marriage. The text makes these negative motivations very clear, but at the same time the text emphasizes the intense charisma, wit, and charm that both Hastings and Amaranth possess. During a nighttime conversation, Hastings and Locke discuss sadness, beauty and renunciations. Hastings creates an associative impression of their setting, only to have the more prosaic Lady Locke wax moralistic about the value of renunciation and sadness. He responds:

“I think renunciations are foolish,” he said. “I only once gave up a pleasure, and the remembrance of it has haunted me like a grey ghost ever since. Why do people think it is an act of holiness to starve their souls? We are here to express ourselves, not to fast twice in a week. Yet how few men and women ever dare to express themselves fully?” (Hichens 72)

During this exchange, readers know that Hastings is untroubled by his insincere courtship, but that does not tarnish the pleasure of his speech. Both Lady Locke and readers can see that he is calling selfishness self-expression and justifying his own behavior thereby. She is still at this point in the novel considering him as a suitor, though the things he has said give clear indications of his lack of interest in the feelings of others. In this way, the text distinctly resembles non-parody aesthetic novels.

### III. A Case Study of Participating Aesthetic Parody: *Miss Brown*

Some of the aesthetic novels considered in this project were first published and read under conditions that marked them as aesthetic parodies. Vernon Lee's *Miss Brown* is one of these; Lee chooses not to place her novel in a far distant time or place, but instead treat the aesthetic subculture explicitly. Other than this difference in setting, however, this novel's plots is indistinguishable from other aesthetic works; an explicitly aesthetic character knowingly makes a negative moral choice in each, materiality matters within the world of the novel, and language is a medium for exploration and play. Similarly, sexuality remains the fascinatingly forbidden subject that the author circles, hints at, and writes around instead of openly exploring.

Looking at *Miss Brown* helps us define a more certain shape for contemporary aesthetic parodies. This novel has been criticized by many for its lack of control because its tone is strident and overwrought. *Miss Brown* is a parody that participates in aestheticism even as it lampoons aspects of it. Looking at Lee's text this way adds nuance to the novel's treatment of aestheticism. *Miss Brown* is Vernon Lee's first published novel, and though financially successful, it remains the least well-received of her works. Reviewers' negative reactions and modern scholarship tend to agree that the text's treatment of aestheticism is passionate but muddy. Shafquat Towheed, for instance, complains:

Lee was not able to synthesize her ideas successfully in a novel that can be described at best as an entertaining moralistic satire on British aestheticism, and at worst as a crassly offensive *succès de scandale* that mercilessly and transparently caricatured many of the leading characters of artistic and literary London, resulting in the author's own social estrangement and ostracism. (223)

No part of this range is particularly positive. Similarly, certain members of Lee's literary acquaintance, including the novel's dedicatee Henry James, wrote of it to Lee without overmuch affection or approval: "You take the aesthetic business too seriously, too tragically, and above all with too great an implication of sexual motives. . . you have impregnated all those people with too much the sexual, the basely erotic preoccupation: your hand has been violent, the touch of life is lighter" (86). James' negative comment presumes total sincerity from Lee in terms of the text's extremely negative and sexual view of aestheticism and a complete identification between her and both the novel's narrator and the morally fatalistic Anne Brown. In an unpublished letter, Francis Power Cobbe also conflates the author Vernon Lee with her novel's protagonist, but she praises the book for the same qualities that weaken it in James' eyes. She criticizes aestheticism violently in the name of praising Lee's novel, proclaiming it to be "a great book—in many respects I venture to say a wonderful book. The insight whereby you have pierced to the core of modern aestheticism—the power wherewith you have torn off its fine clothes and exposed its thin and pitiful ugliness, can have no other name than genius" (Cobbe). Nonetheless *Miss Brown* is a parody that maintains a more complex view of aestheticism than either James and Cobbe see.

*Miss Brown* could however be considered uniquely ahead of its time; Lee was the first aesthete to participate in the backlash against aestheticism through fiction, although many would follow. Her novel portrays negatively both the tenets and the society of aestheticism from a uniquely intimate position. But parodically depicting aesthetes, whether in a positive or negative light, does not in and of itself make a novel aesthetic. Lee's style exhibits the very traits her plot condemns, and her participation in the style as

well as its tropes make the novel solidly aesthetic as well as parodic. Lee's negative feelings regarding aspects of the movement are complicated by her own participation in the movement both before and after writing this text. Lee, while parodying the movement, works to change aestheticism through parodic critique and participation. Her letter in reply to Cobbe's makes this clear:

I cannot join in your animosity against aestheticism. The movement had much that was morbid, though much less than the aesthetic Baudelaire-Gautier movement whence it was partially derived; and it had, besides a great deal of artistic selfishness, a lot of mere polissonerie, as in Swinburne's earliest books, disagreeably mixed with its dead serious morbidness. Still it has on the whole been a most healthy and useful movement, I think; and some of its members, as for instance W[illia]m Morris, have been men of the most generous impulse. My object was rather to paint the dregs of the set. . . (Lee Letter)

This letter communicates the distance between the narrative voice within her novel and her own personal feelings. Lee has no desire to completely tear down aestheticism as a movement; she critiques it through selective imitation, parody and exaggeration for artistic effect. Her opinions as she expresses them to Cobbe show far more nuance in shade than the voice she creates in *Miss Brown's* narration, not because the novel fails to represent her opinion, but because she creates a narrative voice that is distinct from her own personality and views.

As an aesthetic novel, Lee's *Miss Brown* is clearly invested in language as an arena for craft and play; she also uses language to connect her vision of aestheticism to other non-parodic ones. This unambiguously shows the novel's participation in aestheticism. Lee creates a description of Anne Brown that shows this similarity by highlighting several nodes of aesthetic standards of beauty that the character exhibits, as

well as displaying her own stylistic touches in a way that markedly resembles how aesthete and critic Walter Hamilton identifies aesthetic beauty. He describes it as—

that of a pale distraught lady with matted dark auburn hair falling in masses over the brow, and shading eyes full of love-lorn languor, or feverish despair; emaciated cheeks and somewhat heavy jaws; protruding upper lip, the lower lip being indrawn, long crane neck, flat breasts, and long thin nervous hands. (Hamilton 24)

These traits are very similar to those Lee includes in Brown's appearance. Like the parodies, rather than the most straightforward aesthetic novels, this description of the heroine is included in a fairly conventional moment of the novel for just such a description. The novel must show an extended and aesthetic description of Miss Brown when she first appears because her beauty moves the plot significantly and has to fit the aesthetic standard in order to justify multiple analogous reactions to her appearance. Lee depicts Brown's aesthetic beauty:

The complexion was of a uniform opaque pallor, more like certain old marble than ivory; indeed you might almost imagine, as she sat motionless at the head of the table, that this was no living creature, but some sort of strange statue — cheek and chin and forehead of Parian marble, scarcely stained a dull red in the lips, and hair of dull wrought iron, and eyes of some mysterious greyish-blue, slate-tinted onyx; a beautiful and sombre idol of the heathen. And the features were stranger and more monumental even than the substance in which they seemed carved by some sharp chisel, delighting in gradual hollowing of cheek and eye; in sudden cutting of bold groove and cavity of nostril and lip. The forehead was high and narrow the nose massive, heavy, with a slight droop that reminded Hamlin of the head of Antinous; the lips thick, and of curious bold projection and curl; the faintly hollowed cheek subsided gradually into a neck round and erect like a tower, but set into the massive chest as some strong supple branch into a tree-trunk. (*Miss Brown* 18-19)

These are not typical Victorian signifiers of beauty. Miss Brown is not a delicate, rose-tinted lass full of golden curls and sunny smiles. Instead she is a pagan idol, and specific,

alienating, and unexpected words and associations like “dull”, “massive”, and “strange” describe her. Several features that are not usually associated with female beauty connect the two descriptions: protruding lips, a heavy jaw, and hollow cheeks. The only human or artistic comparison Anne receives is to Antinous, who functions as an icon for aesthetic and homosexual beauty.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, readers see that her looks captivate not only Hamlin, but also her cousin Richard, a young girl at her finishing school, her friend Mary Leigh, her romantic and aesthetic rival Madame Elanguine, and indeed the whole aesthetic crowd into which Hamlin launches her.

This means that Lee’s unusual description indicates beauty aimed at aesthetic readers of the novel, and that she, as a writer, communicates aesthetic beauty in a way not designed for universal appeal. For example, some of these same qualities appear in a decidedly non-participatory parodic poem, “Arry on 'Igh Art” (1879) by E. J. Millikens. This comic poem is written from the point of view of a young man observing the fashion in Madame Tussaud's.

I like limbs as *is* limbs, my dear CHARLIE, and faces as ain't got the chalks;  
A fig for your classical attitoodes, wobbles, and slommocking walks!  
Slanticular saints on the goggle, and mooney young women in grey,  
With their muslins all twisted tight round 'em don't elevate me, I must say. (53)

Though some elements from the two aesthetic descriptions appear in this verse or elsewhere in Milliken's poem, the language used to relate to these features is quite different. The young man does not want attractive women to have aesthetic traits or trappings. In Lee's novel, Miss Brown herself experiences the strangeness of being asked

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<sup>57</sup> References to Antinous appears in this way in *Teleny* (1893), Aldous Huxley's *Island* (1962), Sarah Water's *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) among others. Scholars including Kopelson (1994), Waters (1995), Gray and Keep (2008) and others explore or rely upon this connection as well.

to dress in clinging muslins designed by a stage costumer for the sake of aesthetic fashion and appeal. These descriptions focus on elements associated with aestheticism, and are meant to be respectively appealing or ridiculous as they are aesthetic, and thus alienating to non-aesthetic readers (perhaps including Henry James and other Victorian reviewers). In terms of parody, this alienation serves to draw attention to the very different standards of beauty at work in Victorian culture and question them.

*Miss Brown* certainly shares the aesthetic novel's focus on beautiful objects and materiality. The larger scale of the novel performs in some ways like many un-aesthetic novels while still fulfilling the tenets of aesthetic expectations on the level of sentence detail. When Anne Brown explores her new home, she is astonished at the collection of fantastical items Hamlin has procured for her. Again, this is a very predictable moment for description in a parodic text. Lee gives readers substantial descriptions of a new space for which she has prepared the audience to have grandiose expectations:

It was, indeed, an enchanted palace; the walls were all hung with pictures and drawings, and pieces of precious embroidery, and in all corners, on brackets and tables and in cabinets, were all manner of wonderful glass and china, and strange ivory and inlaid Japanese toys. There were flowers, also, about everywhere, and palms in the windows. In the library were more books than Anne had almost ever seen; in the chief drawing room a beautiful grand piano, not made like those of our days, but with slight straight legs and a yellow case painted with faded-looking flowers. (*Miss Brown* 131)

Some of the specifically aesthetic tropes that Lee includes here are the faddish Japonisme of the late nineteenth century, the antique style of the piano (down to its Hepplewhite legs), and the choice for the house's ivory to be *strange* and its flowers *faded*. Hamlin has filled Miss Brown's house with antiques; in the same scene Lee specifically name checks

the Queen Anne period as the preferred era for furniture as do many other aesthetic texts.<sup>58</sup> The colors, furnishings, and even the location of the house, enough away from London for the house to have a garden and old trees, are chosen as an aesthetic setting for Miss Brown. The lengths Hamlin has gone to for an effect are presented simultaneously as absurd and yet enjoyable; parody and participation work together here.

In the dialogue of *Miss Brown* as well as in descriptions, Lee reveals a rich investment in language and its artistic effects. Instead of the paradoxical and epigrammatic style of Wilde, in *Miss Brown* Lee's characters speak with exuberance and dramatic flair. As an example, this is small talk between Miss Brown and her chaperone: "His only weakness is that he is thought a great republican and democrat, but would like to be thought the son of a duke...Oh, the natural son, of course — forgive me, my dear," said Mrs. Macgregor. "People nowadays like anything illegitimate — it's a distinction. It wasn't back in my day, but things have changed'" (136). Mrs. Macgregor, the bemused non-aesthete, describes an identity for the artist Chough that he would enjoy. She relishes the partially reversed contradiction within it because she knows that Chough undermines his political stance by desiring a connection with nobility, and he complicates this desire by specifically wanting a non-legal connection like bastardy. Her outsider point of view makes his contradictions humorous rather than interesting or striking. Like in many aesthetic paradoxical phrases, the humor and play come through reversals of expectations. Though repartee is not the primary mode of communication in *Miss Brown*, the novel uses several different techniques for using language beyond the level of prosaic

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<sup>58</sup> The play *Patience* (1881), *The Aesthetic Movement in England* (1882), and others make specific reference to this period.

representation. Again, the hybridity of expectations caused by aestheticism and parody work together in the novel form. Language can be an arena for play, but in a parody this must not come at the expense of plot.

Vernon Lee excels in creating a parodic aesthetic novel that sharply critiques the Pre-Raphaelite and aesthetic social circles, and their respective art movements, in terms of how each treats women. Because a major part of the aesthetic novel comes from the narration's following of a negative choice, it only makes sense for a novel set within a modern aesthetic milieu to feature the negative side of aestheticism. However, as explained above, enough aesthetic novels can be seen as either parody or anti-aesthetic in other ways that a negative view or treatment of aestheticism does not challenge to a novel's participation in the movement but instead attests to the multiple ways parody can interact with the aesthetic novel.

#### IV. Parody and Sexuality in the Aesthetic Novel: *Venus and Tannhäuser*

Sexuality and aestheticism remain connected in aesthetic parodies. As has been established earlier, the confluence of parody and aestheticism frequently creates a space for the expression of sexual identity through indirect means. Aestheticism in particular provides a fertile ground for sexualized parodies or the inclusion of sexuality in broader parodies. It is difficult to adequately express the commonness, popularity, and broad range of aesthetic parodies. They vary from the vituperative to the congratulatory and participate in almost every medium that aestheticism uses for expression. On one level, these parodies go hand in hand with the outraged negativity leveled at many aesthetic works. Both can be viewed as a part of aestheticism's building of its own identity and

relationship with the wider culture. As Denisoff argues, there are some very real benefits to bad press:

While Walter Pater's aestheticist description of sympathy and his homoerotic idealization of sensuous pleasure advocated a supportive notion of sexual diversity, literary reviewer's almost entirely negative affirmation of this diversity helped to establish the discourse in mainstream society, thereby informing a broader range of people who experienced unconventional desires that they were not alone. (*Aestheticism Sexual Parody* 233)

His use of Pater as an example works well; all of the horror expressed by mortified matrons only increased the appeal of his book for those who wished to set themselves apart in some way. *The Renaissance* became the bible of aestheticism in part because of its notoriety, which seemed to bother Pater far more than it did many of his devoted readers. As discussed in chapter one, Pater makes the connection between particular types of art appreciation and an interest in non-productive sensuality and sexuality. This unconventional desire that readers could detect in Pater created a bond between these readers and the beginnings of a group identity that would in part develop through aestheticism. This group identity provides ample fodder for parodic treatment for many qualities of the movement. In many cases, parody focuses on the ambiguous or seemingly contradictory positions on any issue of the day, including courtship, marriage, sexuality and gender.

Aubrey Beardsley's never-completed pornographic text *Venus and Tannhäuser* is excellent for exploring these ideas because it parodies both aestheticism and sexuality in a broadly recognizable way that incorporates elements of both style and content. Installments of the expurgated text under the name *Under the Hill* (1896) made two appearances along with Beardsley illustrations in aesthetic serial *The Savoy*. Beyond its

interest as a coming together of aestheticism, parody, and sexuality, *Venus and Tannhäuser* demonstrates many ideas key to this chapter concerning audience and hybridity.

This text, more than many others, demonstrates what parody can do both to and for aestheticism. In addition to its use of aestheticism to parody love, sexuality, and pornography, *Venus and Tannhäuser* parodies simultaneously novelistic pornography alongside decadence and aestheticism. Dowling observes how crucial these parodic elements are to the text, arguing:

Interpretations that concentrate upon the autobiographical or pathological aspects of the work, however, ignore its larger satiric and essentially self-parodic dimension. And if we ignore its satire, we shall fail to recognize the place of *Venus and Tannhäuser* in the characteristically self-conscious reevaluation of contemporary aesthetic assumptions carried on by avant-garde writers, artists, and poets of the Victorian fin de siècle. (“Satire of Decadence” 27)

Dowling does not focus on the multiplicity of parodic strategies at work in Beardsley's text, but instead prioritizes its parody as context and point of access. Combinations of counter-discourse and established institutions work well with parody, which relies upon the illegibility and obliqueness of its communication with both the un-initiated and underground Victorian cultures. The possibility of multiple simultaneous readings in parody mean that a single text can function as either counter-discourse or an institutionally approved voice; the reader, no matter his or her relationship with aestheticism, can take from parody what he or she needs.

*Venus and Tannhäuser* retells the story of the dandy 's trip to the underworld to seduce Venus and experience the delights of her erotic realm. Even before the traveler reaches the goddess' dwelling, the text makes clear its parodic connections to

aestheticism through Tannhäuser's and the narrator's overabundant investment in the material pleasures offered by clothing and the archly playful use of language associated with the movement:

A wild rose had caught upon the trimmings of his ruff, and in the first flush of displeasure he would have struck it brusquely away, and most severely punished the offending flower. But the ruffled mood lasted only a moment, for there was something so deliciously incongruous in the hardy petal's invasion of so delicate a thing, that withheld the finger of resentment and vowed that the wild rose should stay where it had clung—a passport, as it were from the upper to the lower world. “The very excess and violence of the fault,” he said, “will be its excuse.” (Beardsley 23)

This parodies aestheticism's preference to upset expectations and common perception—in this case the dandy's choice to describe a rose as hardy and his clothing as delicate, as well as the tendency to overstate. Tannhäuser does not even need an audience before him to perform as the arch and absurd dandy, establishing a parodic level of participation in aesthetic conventions.

Dowling sees in parody the chance to play more than one side of an argument, or rather to avoid traps of binarism at play in Victorian culture, particularly when using parody as a way to question oneself or artistic movements in which one participates instead of as a weapon against others. This is very useful for sexuality and aestheticism.

She notes that:

Beardsley, like Beerbohm and Wilde, found in satire and self-parody a way of evading the ideological claims of conventional late-Victorian aesthetic culture. Moreover they perceived that self-parody offered an amusing if unstable mode of self transcendence, as when Wilde, for instance, conflates and lampoons the plots of his early social comedies in order to overthrow in *The Importance of Being Earnest* his own earlier notions of language and self. (“Satire of Decadence” 29)

She describes a fork, or divide, within parody with self transcendence on one path and escape and play on the other. Beardsley, in her view wavers between the two in his work, particularly in *Venus and Tannhäuser* with its unpublishably pornographic but indirect depictions of aestheticism and sexuality. This precarious place she describes remains theoretically useful for its description of how parody can simultaneously achieve multiple effects. *Venus and Tannhäuser* supports this by critiquing aesthetic and decadent relationships to sexuality in its parody while also revealing the limited potential of more direct representations of sexuality when taken as the center and apex of interest.

Dowling describes the first of these functions in *Venus and Tannhäuser* when she observes:

[T]he sublimations and evasions of sex by which art in the 1890s officially existed seemed to Beardsley like so many 'unwilling disguises' which were put on by artists and connoisseurs for the sake of propriety but which sadly hampered their real purpose. To help them consummate this purpose Beardsley's satire strips away their involved veils and artistic pursuits are revealed as what they are, sexual performances. (35)

At the same time, however, Beardsley reveals sexual performance as ultimately ridiculous despite finding it sublime and all encompassing. He critiques both the oppression or censorship of sexually motivated art and the urge to put sexuality as the center of all artistic impulse. Beardsley finds the critique of sexuality and of societal regulations of sexuality far more inspiring than sexual content that can exist without these filters and mediations, creating a complex relationship between parody and aesthetic subject matter.

Turning to the style and descriptions within *Venus and Tannhäuser* it is evident that this work differs from the sincerely pleasurable lists and descriptions that so many

other aesthetic works usually provide and that chapter two investigates. These expectations come from its social connection to aestheticism through Beardsley and its genre and source material. Audiences are therefore prepared for aesthetic titillation, but Beardsley does not deliver that in any straightforward way. This deviation between what is expected and what is delivered is one of the most recognized sources of humor, particularly in parody. Rose formulates this more explicitly by noting how “for some students of comedy the essence of humour has resided in general in raising an expectation of X and giving Y or something else which is not entirely X” (*Parody: Ancient, Modern* 32). Instead of full and detailed descriptions of beauty, pleasure, and sensuality, Beardsley offers frustrating confusion, elision, and hints of the grotesque.

An example of this sort of deviation can be found in Beardsley’s description of the goddess Venus, which begins by talking about how “her neck and shoulders were so wonderfully drawn, and the little malicious breasts were wonderfully full of the irritation of loveliness that can never be entirely comprehended, or even enjoyed to the utmost” (Beardsley 27). This moment that upsets expectations of artistic depictions of divine beauty represents the tone of Beardsley's writing throughout. Readers, for example, do not expect to associate the breasts of the goddess of love with irritation or malice. This ostensibly pornographic work acknowledges limits of pleasure and sensual impossibilities, using surprising diction and comparisons for a work nominally concerned with sex. This remains true at the level of the sentence and on the larger level of plot and structure. Dowling describes how within the text “the familiar Decadent imagery. . . and the familiar conventions of Decadent writing—the interminable catalogues of exotica, the insistent adjectivalism—are made to couple promiscuously, juxtaposed as they are with

episodes of cheerful humor and naïveté” (“Satire of Decadence” 37). The descriptions in Beardsley's text push past all comprehensibility into complete strangeness: most certainly creating expectations and then subverting them. The pleasure of this language comes from its nonsensical combinatorialism—a tenet of the genre identified in this project's first chapter. These unexpected linguistic combinations help Beardsley accomplish his satiric goals. The text makes all aesthetic catalogs absurd, while at the same time paying homage to them and clearly investing in words and strangeness as sources of pleasure in a pornographic text wholly unlike other Victorian representations of sex.

When describing *Venus and Tannhäuser*, Dowling says that the text functions as a reduction of Beardsley's subject matter into a mockery of what readers expect from pornography. It becomes a ridiculous aggrandizement on the level of structure even as it trivializes the same subjects on the sentence level (29). He uses parody to make the two levels in his text actively work against one another. Even though it is an illegal text that can therefore speak about topics other aesthetic texts must remain silent upon, the novel chooses some forms of explicitness while still representing sexual activity in a largely oblique fashion. Readers must decode the language to discover what sexual acts the characters perform. For example, the description of a typical day in Venus's realm explains how the goddess brings her pet unicorn to climax each day and that the beast's amorous cry is the universal call for everyone to begin their morning meal, but the clearest statement of this incident is still comparative and evasive: “The queen bared her left arm to the elbow, and with the soft underneath of it made amazing movements upon the tightly strung instrument” (Beardsley 68-69). This text does not have the same need for suggestive silences, yet it still chooses hints, absurdity, and allusion over

pornographic direct representation. The previous evening, Venus's court feasts to celebrate a guest's arrival. During their dinner conversation, Beardsley's text refers obliquely but communicatively to a vast range of sexual situations and problems, but does not give detail to any of them, instead exciting, frustrating, and confusing the reader as the allusions grow more sinister and mysterious by turns:

As the courses advanced, the conversation grew bustling and more personal. Pulex and Cyril and Marisca and Cathelin opened a fire of raillery. The infidelities of Cerise, the difficulties of Brancas, Sarmean's caprices that morning in the lily garden, Thorillière's declining strength, Astarte's affection for Roseola, Felix's impossible member, Cathelin's passion for Sulpilia's poodle, Sola's passion for herself, the nasty bite that Marisca gave Chloe, the épilatiere of Pulex, Cyril's diseases, Butor's illness, Maryx's tiny cemetery, Lesbia's profound fourth letter, and a thousand amatory follies of the day were discussed. (41-42)

This strange paragraph ends with a reminder that readers should look at all of these hints and stories through a sexual lens by describing all of these 'follies' as 'amatory' which, unlike many of Beardsley's other descriptors, is a known and recognized linguistic reference to pornographic texts.<sup>59</sup> Parody comes from both the epic scale to which sexual escapades are elevated and the nearly unrecognizable ways in which sexual incidents are described; Beardsley chooses to inflate sexuality to impossible proportions through his unique and grandiose take on aesthetic style

Part of reading this text is the choice to either attempt to decode these allusions or to simply see them as a wash of sexual grotesquerie. Speculation could be argued as the most pornographic activity offered by the text. When reading *Venus and Tannhäuser* it is difficult to separate the descriptions of clothing from those of people and actions.

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<sup>59</sup> See Mendes' *Clandestine Erotic Fiction in English 1800-1930: A Bibliographic Study*.

Furthermore, sexual incidents are so far linguistically removed from the explicit, prosaic language of most Victorian pornography that readers can barely separate them from any other part of the text. This pornographic text manages to be deeply invested in sexual oddities while being nearly non-sexual in its depiction of them. Silliness, grotesqueness, and sexual inadequacy undermine these pornographic imaginings and depictions of sexuality. In the paragraph quoted earlier, there are references to negative sexual topics including impotence, abortion, sexually transmitted disease, as well the more comic allusions such as someone's choice of a friend's poodle for a zoophilic fixation, or the aggrandizement of someone's hair remover into an *épilatière*. Aestheticism's fascination with the exotic, costly, and highly unusual appear here in ridiculous sexual variants.

When describing the tricky balance that sexual parody must maintain, Denisoff observes:

Parody always carries the risk of educating its audience about the very subject that the author aims to denigrate. Sexual parody in particular relies in part on titillation for its own attraction and encourages its readers to take pleasure in speculating on the *outré* behind the ambiguities. There is even the need for some risk that people will side with the subject of parody rather than the parodist. (*Aestheticism and Sexual Parody* 38-39)

The enjoyment in Beardsley's near asexualization of highly unusual sexual behaviors comes from the speculation necessary to decipher the text's inclusions of the sexual though it is perhaps a more writerly pleasure than a readerly one.

In Beardsley's text, genre, parody, and form all work together to create a self-questioning text; this multi-faceted, self-reflexive quality is what drives Beardsley's text even as its narrative shape and formal qualities of novelistic pornography create its exterior frame. Dowling describes the special qualities pornographic novels offer as parodic source material thus:

Open, obliging, freely permitting any new episode to insert itself, and reluctant to conclude, the form [of the pornographic romance] as has been so often noted, imitates the ideal sex it depicts. But the pornographic *donnée* has even more important advantages for Beardsley's satiric purposes: for only pornography with its powerful urge toward leveling and reductionism—by which all classes and conditions of creatures are made equal and by which heterogeneous experience is simplified to become exclusively sexual experience—only pornography could best satirize the equation of categories—good and evil, serious and trivial, beautiful and ugly—that avant-garde aesthetic theory had sought to bring about. (“Satire of Decadence” 38)

This means that not only does the form and content of pornography add to the possibilities of meaning for Beardsley's satire in terms of context and politics, but also in its theoretic implications. Dowling suggests a critical aim beyond what has already discussed; she pins on Beardsley the notion of collapsing good and evil altogether and thus ultimately epitomizing decadence as she understands it in this novelistic, pornographic parody.

Sexually, what sets apart the aesthetic text from aesthetic parody is largely an issue of degree and clarity. Ambiguities caused by suggestive silences still appear, and allow for multiple interpretations or readings of the same situation. This ambiguity is created in different ways, and parody more often implies ambiguity of detail while communicating in broad strokes clearly albeit obliquely. As audiences adapted to reading through ambiguity, aesthetes were forming nuanced parodies of their movement that were both critical and participatory. These maintained an interest in oblique and incomplete representations of desire, but at the same time began to focus on shaping the aesthetic movement itself. They parodied themselves strategically.

### V. Audience, Hybridity, Sexuality, and Parody in *The Green Carnation*

The parodic texts discussed thus far still explore and support aestheticism; even as they exaggerate or question some aspects of it, they blend its unique characteristics with other types of Victorian fiction. One aspect of aestheticism involves exaggeration; this sometimes actually works to moderate the movement's more esoteric characteristics so as to make it comprehensible to outside readers. One of the many functions of parody is the creation of hybrid texts; parody brings in outside qualities and outside perspectives alongside aesthetic ones. This study of genre makes focus on small difference important. The aesthetic novel is better understood through seeing its range and how it can parody the aesthetic movement while also expanding and developing it. While *Miss Brown* certainly received more criticism than praise, both within and without the aesthetic movement, the lighter, frothier parodic text, *The Green Carnation* was roundly appreciated. Even as it parodied and examined the close relationship of Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas through that of Lord Reggie Hastings and Esme Amaranth, it fleshed out these compelling and rounded figures as more than simply the source of a deviant bond of sexuality and influence. Even the subjects of the parody, Wilde and Douglas, sent a congratulatory telegram to Hichens once they determined his identity as the author, showing their appreciation for the humorous picture.

*The Green Carnation* has stimulated a large range of reactions and receptions since its publication in 1894. It first appeared anonymously as a highly topical parody of the very public relationship between Wilde and Douglas and gained significant popularity thereby. Robert Hichens, a friend to Douglas and to his aesthetic social circle, eventually admitted that he had authored the text, but only after various newspapers made

several incorrect guesses. Though the book was treated as sharp and witty criticism of the aesthetic pair, reading it now, with or without consideration of paratextual materials added by Hichens in the 1940s, reveals the gentle restraint of its parody. *The Green Carnation* is not an angry book, but it instead uses the tones and tropes of aestheticism in a light way to tell a light story that is both aesthetic and simultaneously critical of aestheticism. It combines a Victorian courtship story with the portrayal of two male aesthetes in a nearly parallel very close relationship. This text clearly embodies the hybridity available to parodic texts and the multiple simultaneous roles that aesthetic parody can play in relation to aestheticism.

*The Green Carnation's* comedy resembles this description by Rose of how reversals of expectations, exaggeration, and the bringing together of opposites all make this story humorous specifically about aestheticism:

In parody the comic incongruity created in the parody may contrast the original text with its new form or context by the comic means of contrasting the serious with the absurd as well as the 'high' with the 'low', or the ancient with the modern, the pious with the impious, and so on. Here the expectations of the reader of the literary parody for a certain text may also be played upon, and direct and indirect comments made upon the reader and those expectations. (*Parody: Ancient, Modern* 33)

These sources of humor help readers look at what parodic aesthetic novels have in common, both with each other and with parodies more generally. These aesthetic parodies are less narrowly aesthetic in their focus on materiality through rich collections of objects. Though they offer the linguistic pleasures of the lengthy descriptive catalog that is common to the aesthetic novel, these descriptions do not run rampant in this group of parodic novels in the way they do in aesthetic novels in general.

The narration of these novels gives readers abbreviated flights of fancy inspired by objects or people, usually near the beginning of the text or when an important new space, person, or object comes into play. These restrict themselves in length, in range of detail, reference, and number. One of the effects of the hybridity in *The Green Carnation* is this amelioration of extremes that occur within aesthetic novels as well as the introduction of elements of humor.

The opening paragraphs of *The Green Carnation* provide the best example of this hybrid version of aesthetic description. Hichens first describes Reggie's surroundings and first appearance thus:

Floating through the curtained window the soft lemon light sparkled on the silver backs of the brushes that lay on the toilet-table, on the dressing gown of spun silk that hung from a hook behind the door, on the great mass of Gloire de Dijon roses, that dreamed in an ivory white bowl set on the writing-table of ruddy brown wood. It caught the gilt of the boy's fair hair and turned it into brightest gold, until, despite the white weariness of his face, the pale fretfulness of his eyes, he looked like some angel in a church window designed by Burne-Jones, some angel a little blasé from the injudicious conduct of its life. (1)

As in Lee's novel, Hichens is simultaneously parodying and participating in aestheticism. His use of language is exaggerated to poke fun at the aesthetic movement, but it does so without taking away from the aesthetically oriented details and tropes that appear. Hichens includes the same sort of yellow roses readers see in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, again in a china bowl. His narrative also creates a real but moderate focus on interior décor. The details of rooms matter, but Hichens describes them without the extended metaphors that are so common in Wilde's texts. Hichens plays on aesthetic tropes, but his use of them does not use strangeness or incomprehensibility to alienate readers; fabrics are silk, wood is brown, light sparkles, and the type of rose mentioned,

despite its French name, is a well-known and much-beloved type of English rose. While the text still takes pleasure in description and spends time on the physical details of the vain Reggie's luxurious boudoir, the specifics are not discomfiting. Reggie arouses parodic humor by being depicted as unmanly and fascinated by his own good looks, but neither his behavior nor his surroundings are threatening or completely outré.

For comparison, a small portion of Elizabeth Gaskell's lengthy description of the Barton home in *Mary Barton* (1848) shows the surprisingly parallel level and type of detail for a sketch of a domestic space that does not hinge upon fantasies of luxury, exotica, or aestheticism:

On the right of the door as you entered, was a longish window, with a broad ledge. On each side of this, hung blue-and-white check curtains, which were now drawn to such in the friends met, to enjoy themselves. Two geraniums, unpruned and leafy, which stood on the sill, formed a further defense from out-door pryers. In the corner between the window and the fire-side was a cupboard, apparently full of plate and dishes, cups and saucers, and some more nondescript articles, for which one would have fancied their possessors could find no use-such as triangular pieces of glass to safe carving knives and forks from dirtying table-cloths. However, it was evident Mrs Barton was proud of her crockery and glass, for she left her cupboard door open, with a glance round of satisfaction and pleasure. (Gaskell 44-45)

This picture continues for some time, highlighting the layout of the home, the clever economies of space and style that the Barton family has innovated, and various individual articles that have pleasing or curious details. Though Gaskell is illustrating a very different space for obvious reasons of class and background, the style of description shares elements with the aesthetic parody that it would not with a non-parodic aesthetic description. Though we have moved from a bedroom to a multi-purpose room, readers still see a window, its curtains, flowers, and china. Hichens' blend of aesthetic relishing

of description with a more familiar palette of detail makes this parodic aesthetic novel more approachable than most aesthetic novels and mediates between aesthetic and conventional description while still pointing out the unique features of aestheticism in a parodic and recognizable way.

There are a variety of characteristically aesthetic behaviors that the novel's main character, Reggie Hastings (who is modeled after Douglas) enacts. Hastings has a poor relationship with his blustery father, no money of his own, a near total indifference to women, and a great deal of curiosity, cleverness, and vanity. In these ways, he resembles not only Lord Alfred Douglas but also multiple young dandies from Wilde's society comedies, as well as several of the aesthetic figures lampooned so often in *Punch* cartoons.<sup>60</sup> When the idea of courting a wealthy woman is suggested by his closest friend, aesthetic leader, and implied lover Esme Amaranth, (based on Wilde), it takes Reggie by surprise. Nonetheless, he soon decides to woo the respectable and affluent widow Lady Locke, although he has no romantic or emotional interest in her. This is the source of the other strand contributing to this hybrid, that of the courtship novel. The plot organizes its focus around a courtship, but the aesthetic portrayal of courtship is tepid and quite unlike what appears in so much concurrent literature and popular fiction, hence the text's hybridity. The style, dialogue, and many characters reflect Hichens' parody of aestheticism, but this parody differentiates itself from other aesthetic texts with its investment in plot and activity.

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<sup>60</sup> He resembles similar characters including Lord Goring in Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and Algernon Moncrieff in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) as well as Du Maurier's reappearing aesthetic parodic figures Jellaby Postelwaite and Maudle.

Reggie Hastings makes a dishonest choice in pursuing Lady Locke, for in wooing so ambivalently, he indicates feelings that he cannot support, feigning intentions of building a relationship, maintaining an interest, and of becoming a good husband and father—intentions that he admits to Amarith are completely false. When dining late at a club, Hastings says, “I have no intention of being a good one [husband]. It is only people without brains who make good husbands. Virtue is generally merely a form of deficiency, just as vice is an assertion of intellect” (Hichens 16). Though he has no spiteful intentions towards Lady Locke, he despises marriage in general, and for that he is willing to sacrifice her happiness. Hints of this appear throughout the text and allow the audience to understand that this courtship is unlike many protagonists' courtships within Victorian fiction; audiences do not hope that the two main characters will come together for their mutual betterment, but instead hope that this connection never fully forms. Aesthetic audiences do not wish to see the Amarith/Hastings bond interrupted or witness a dandy's life compromised by practical domestic duties, and un-aesthetic readers do not wish to see Lady Locke trapped in a false marriage to a uninterested man. Negative, financially motivated courtships are not unusual in Victorian novels, but this hybrid text is unusual in that neither negative character is truly a villain, and there is no positive courtship to compete with the negative one. This aesthetic courtship cannot sustain progress and a happy conjugal conclusion when Reggie's real commitments are to himself, aestheticism, and Amarith. One of the aspects of this parody comes from these altered expectations.

*The Green Carnation* takes place within an aesthetic circle, and many of Hichens' characters speak in ways that expressly parody the aesthetic community. They use epigrams, paradoxical comparisons, and statements intended to be morally shocking and

that help mark this novel as both stylistically similar to other aesthetic novels and as clearly parodic. This unusual prose takes speech as an end unto itself as well as a means of communication and appreciating language on multiple levels. Esme Amarinth utters many of the most striking phrases and opinions within the text, taking his orations very seriously but striving to say things that are difficult for others to believe or consider earnestly themselves. He is as a figure of parody in part because he takes himself so seriously while saying very little. There is not much change between an appreciative view of Amarinth and a censorious one. He takes immense pride in saying ridiculous things and shows tremendous self-awareness in this. Parody could not be simpler than when an undistorted representation can already lay claim to absurdity and humor.

One example of Amarinth's particular parodic wit is found in the episode in which the party at the country house creates a day of fun for local needy children, and Amarinth addresses the children about folly. Aesthetic language and a playful relationship with words come to the fore here. He ends his lecture in a tremendous crescendo:

Remember, then, to be self-conscious, to set aside the normal, to be young, and to be eternally foolish. Take nothing seriously, except yourselves, if possible. Do not be deceived into thinking the mind greater than the face, or the soul grander than the body. Strike the words virtue and wickedness out of your dictionaries. There is nothing good and nothing evil. There is only art. Despise the normal, and flee from everything that is hallowed by custom, as you would flee from the seven deadly virtues. Cling to the abnormal. Shrink from the cold and freezing touch of Nature. One touch of nature makes the whole world commonplace. Forget your Catechism, and remember the words of Flaubert and of Walter Pater, and remember this too, that the folly of self-conscious fools is the only true wisdom! (105)

Despite seeming initially absurd, these words are not merely the shallow reversals of Victorian morality that they appear. Hichens claims to be taking Esme's positions and statements directly from Wilde, rather than improvising in a Wildean tone, and thus it makes sense that these sound like parody at first glance, but develop under greater examination into aesthetic word and thought play—light, but not without content. We can appreciate again here the simultaneous dual function of parody; the absurdities of aesthetic aphorism appear through small differences between this speech and many in Wilde's writings. Amaranth's phrases are balder and more direct in both their self-contradiction and in their statements of belief. At the same time, upon reflective reading, this Wildean speech does not entirely undercut the priorities and preferences in other aesthetic writing by Wilde and others.

Unlike Amaranth's speeches, the connoisseurship of *The Green Carnation* works in the background instead of driving the novel forward. Connoisseurship does not play a major role in the plot. Reggie and the needy schoolchildren both appear enjoying food in a relatively ordinary way, and no one collects anything. Nonetheless, a more sensual connoisseurship consistently frames the characters within their aesthetic society and remains more compelling to Esme and Reggie than many more socially connecting or external concerns do. The aesthetic experience that most captures the imaginations of this text's aesthetes is the detached and ironic enjoyment of a week in the country. The aesthetic crowd wants to see the contrast of their sophistication against what they perceive as the innocence and naïveté of rural life. For them, the Paterian search for new sensation and stimulation leads them out of their native urban landscape. This is why going to a small country church is so appealing to them, even as they talk about

banishing morality and relishing behavior that others might call sinful. The apex of their rural experiment comes when, as mentioned earlier, they plan and participate in a day of treats for students at the church school. This is the ultimate contact with innocence, and they approach this act of charity as connoisseurs.

Within *The Green Carnation* no conflict appears between its gentle parody and its aesthetic participation. Connoisseurship, linguistic play and exploration, negative moral choices, and the use of recognized aesthetic signs and tropes all connect this book to its parodic subject through its hybridity. Aspects of other genres of Victorian fiction, specifically courtship narratives, combine with parodic elements and qualities most readily associated with aesthetic novels to create a highly readable hybrid text. Parody helps the aesthetic novel make room for qualities taken more directly from other genres of Victorian fiction.

Suggestive silences, as briefly discussed earlier, cooperate well within the hybridity made available through parody. Multiple ways of reading, multiple audiences, and oblique communication between a text and a sub-group within its audiences give parody a privileged position within the aesthetic movement because of its ability to *pass*, as it were. Part of what Denisoff contributes to the creation and understanding of this concept is a notion of how these ambiguities, absences, and doubled signs with a mixed audience. He argues that “the codes were not only unclear in their implications, but often relatively obscure in their classical and historical references. A broader spectrum of British society, however, was engaged in the less serious manifestations of aestheticism — its jumble of popular terms and images” (*Aestheticism and Sexual Parody* 8). These “less serious manifestations of aestheticism” allowed the public a wider range of

reactions than would otherwise have been available to works in such an allusion-heavy and elevated style.

For example, in *Patience*, the aesthetes and their admirers appeared in broad strokes as one half of a dual parody. Aesthetes are figures of fun, but so are the militaristic and manly dragoons. Carolyn Williams describes the dualism of this parody, noting that “the Heavy Dragoons are seen as representations of a discarded, dense and outmoded masculinity, while the ‘twenty love-sick maidens’ of the female chorus prefer another sort of man, newly emergent on the cultural scene, the aesthete and poet, Bunthorne” (“Parody, Pastiche” 4). The joke works no matter how deeply or shallowly its audience understands aestheticism. Partially initiated audiences do not have to be confused, suspicious, or alienated when they see something that is only somewhat familiar presented as parody. Instead they can respond with amusement at how far removed aesthetic speech and its concerns are from what they are familiar with and how it compares to the also ridiculous behavior of the dragoons. A mixed audience does not have to compare themselves to aesthetes. Earlier in his text, Denisoff explains how “by the late 1870s, the cultural decadence of the self-promoting authors and artists had melded within culture with that of the ambiguously gendered and sexually mysterious dandy-aesthete” (*Aestheticism and Sexual Parody* 82). It is not only gender that can be lampooned, but also the contradiction of being simultaneously aristocratic, artistic, and professional through the inherent humor of the self-promoting snob. Such contradictions made the figure more than ripe for parody and made parody a very useful way to bridge the difference between aesthetes and the many types of non-aesthetes. These topics allow the public and other artists to puncture the figure of the dandy without creating a

sexualized witch-hunt that would call for the disappearance of such an amusing and entertaining role.

As it was described briefly at the start of the chapter, parody affects how mainstream audiences respond to aestheticism. Having begun to explore what parody of the aesthete actively offers to a general audience and how that assists and benefits aesthetes, it makes sense to look at what these parodies offer directly to aesthetes themselves. As Denisoff sees it:

[T]he persona [of the dandy] offered those involved in unsanctioned relations an excellent guise for what they might have felt was their actual, albeit, clandestine, identity. In the eyes of most of the public, they could pass as 'ladies' men.' And yet, the aura of sexual mystery that surrounded the dandy-aesthete also encouraged them to sustain some representation of what they saw as a crucial difference. Sexual ambiguity became inscribed upon the persona as a characteristic hyper-awareness of performed and assumedly actual identities. (*Aestheticism and Sexual Parody* 7-8)

This idea of being hidden in plain sight would certainly have some practical as well as intellectual benefits to a group whose interest in sexuality could put them on the wrong side of the dangerously ambiguous and inclusive Labouchere Amendment before any physical contact between two males even occurred. The Labouchere Amendment made any male same-sex interest very risky because intent or attempt was as punishable as any actual sex acts. The figure of the uncaught criminal, the mysterious man of secrets, or of anyone leading a double life features heavily in the movement. This fascination appears so much that in Ellman's biography of Wilde, the author makes significant claims connecting Wilde's desire for the clandestine to his enjoyment of sexual contact with his first male lover, Robert Ross (Ellman 275). It is useful to acknowledge the pleasures made available through the taboo, clandestine, and illicit. Parody allows for oblique or

ambiguous representation of the hidden and suggestive. Parody does not inherently support what it depicts and thus broadens what it might safely represent. As has been said throughout this chapter, this plausible deniability matters tremendously when the subjects of parodic and aesthetic exploration have a negative reputation and poor record with the court system.

Unlike ambiguous or overtly negative representations, parody and other aspects of aestheticism rely heavily upon multiple levels of meaning, some of which would be available to all readers, while others would require certain knowledge or ways of reading. Whether or not the full range of meanings was widely available during the Victorian period, some resources such as reviews and testimony in the Wilde trials indicate their readability, the possibility exists within these works.<sup>61</sup> Many scholars return again and again to the oft-named bible of aestheticism, *The Renaissance*, but aesthetic novels do much the same thing with their hybridity of story and philosophy, of high tropes and low, of oblique and direct presentation, and, of course, with parody. Proof can come from more than simply the aesthetic texts themselves; contemporary responses to these works through reviews and sources, such as the letters between Vernon Lee and Francis Power Cobbe, help flesh out the argument. Knowing how people responded to these texts in their own day and how authors later re-introduced their own works in later editions, particularly in the case of *The Green Carnation*, allows for an ongoing dialogue between writers and readers.

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<sup>61</sup> Evidence brought against Wilde in his trials included: selected personal letters, "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young," *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Spirit Lamp*, a literary magazine put forth by Lord Alfred Douglas and his Oxford coterie.

Even when the humor of a parody comes from relatively obscure references or subtle shifts, the parody does not lose its status as comic. Whether or not Victorian or modern audiences can appreciate all of the facets of Hichens' parody, the presence and explanations of the author's personal connections with his inspirations remains significant. In his lengthy introduction to the 1949 edition of *The Green Carnation*, Robert Hichens tells of his personal connection and interactions with Douglas and Wilde both before and after the writing of his book. He writes of the motivation and inspiration behind it, and most of all he conveys, in gestures large and small, his genuine respect and warmth for that period and those figures. He played only a small role in the aesthetic movement, but it meant a lot to him as a young man, as its memory does in later years. Even so, readers cannot take everything he says at face value; he surely changed over the fifty years that separate the 1890s and the 1940s. He did remove the book from circulation when Wilde went to trial out of respect and a wish to prevent serious trouble for him. This choice was made against profit and for the sense of community within the aesthetic circle it shows. *The Green Carnation* is better understood in light of his generous action and his these fond memories; it demonstrates the gentle voice parody can assume when affection lies at its root.

Parody provides a set of tools that the aesthetic novel uses occasionally to make itself better at its own goals through hybridity. There are several benefits to the aesthetic novel available through the use of a parodic relationship between a narrator and subject, or through other parody techniques as this chapter previously explored. Denisoff provides an example of how humor through parody functioned positively for aestheticism, at least for a few years, "The text's [*The Picture of Dorian Gray*] humor helped convince readers

that the dandy-aesthete was not a major threat, while at the same time giving them room to enjoy the persona as a tantalizing and worthy component of their social mix” (*Aestheticism and Sexual Parody* 99). A parodic text can utilize tropes without seeming to approve or evangelize them. Thus, an aesthetic novel can save itself from the vituperative anger and scorn of critics on moral terms by portraying a subject without necessarily allying with it. Wilde argues this when he says as much to the *Scot's Observer's* review of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* when brought up by Edward Carson at his trial: “That is according to the temper of each one who reads the book; he who has found the sin has brought it” (Holland 78). Readers see what they expect to see, and what they themselves bring to the work. Wilde uses suggestive silences to increase the distance between himself and the tale, between the implied author and the protagonist.

Aestheticism was also a movement invested in layers and masks and contradiction. Parody allows for all of these things most successfully. Parody can mask an author's attitudes either positively or negatively, and certainly adds a level of performance and theatricality to a text. As discussed earlier in the chapter, this is a more perceptive way to access *Miss Brown*. Lee's professional and personal connections with Pater's circle, as well as her own positive descriptions of aestheticism, lead readers to question how sincere was her identification with the overwrought voice of the narrator. By viewing her work through the lens of parody, readers can see the negativity as productive instead of as simply reactionary. Rose's definition of parody illuminates this possibility by describing parody as a motivated text that critiques in order to shape or influence the subject of parody. Lee negatively parodies aestheticism to highlight its flaws, but she does not condemn it altogether.

When aesthetic novels use parody they are still nevertheless aesthetic, which makes them hybrid. Hybridity is good for the aesthetic novel in that it frequently moderates a difficult genre by making the novels more readable. A wide variety of potential external influences enter in these modified formal expectations. The parodic aesthetic novels focus on extremes of plot and character, whereas the philosophical-aesthetic hybrids such as *Marius the Epicurean* give thorough explorations of life under various philosophical schools. A novelistic genre makes the aesthetic text resemble other types of Victorian writing more, sometimes increasing its appeal and readability this way. Parody, in this instance can bring a great deal of human focus to balance out the aesthetic preoccupation with things and impressions while still retaining a commitment to description and finery. More interactions appear between aesthetic characters and non-aesthetes, and these cogently illustrate their differences. Aesthetes, as a group, become more understandable when their subtle nuances of speech and action are highlighted against those of a decided non-aesthete, as in the case with *The Green Carnation's* Lady Locke. Aestheticism allows all possible motivations for parody, including: the reshaping of aestheticism, the creation of hybrid texts, and the complex negotiation between a partially suspicious or hostile public and a readily identifiable group of artists. Above all these many functions of parody bring variety and flexibility to this small and disruptive group of texts.

## CONCLUSION

### I. Organizing and Perceiving

Over the course of four chapters and an introduction, this project has taken the aesthetic novel, an idea already sporadically in academic use, given it a cogent description, and explored a few of its noteworthy characteristics. Using previous scholarship, close reading, quantitative analysis, and historically informed queer theory, the project categorizes this genre and investigates a small group of novels that clearly function as aesthetic novels. These texts: *Miss Brown*, *The Green Carnation*, *The Lost Stradivarius*, *Marius the Epicurean*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and *Teleny* share many aspects in common in terms of their styles, tropes, narrative shapes, and priorities; these similarities and their social connections to the aesthetic movement allow them to come together under the rubric of the aesthetic novel. Thereby they allow both the aesthetic movement and the novel to be explored in new ways. Though this is a conclusion, it by no means brings to an end the possible explorations of the aesthetic novel; rather, it is intended to look at what the project has done from a broader perspective and to imagine what can be done in the future with improved understandings of the aesthetic novel as a genre.

This project's implications are partially organizational and partially perceptual. The dissertation helps to constellate different genres of the *fin de siècle* by adding the useful category of the aesthetic novel. This category has been used and referred to for decades but without a fully coherent anchoring that describes it in detail and connects it to any specific texts beyond the most famous and canonized. By taking time to comb

carefully through the previous scholarship concerning the aesthetic novel and the decadent novel, several ways of specifically and beneficially approaching the aesthetic novel as a unique but not rigid group open up.

Organizationally, this project clears up previous confusion by creating a distinct description for the aesthetic novel. To paraphrase the description from chapter one: aesthetic novels consistently concern sexual and emotional desires not supported by their society; depictions of these activities or desires appear therefore as suggestive silences that obliquely communicate rather than directly represent. Protagonists within aesthetic novels make a self-aware decision between selfish and generous behavior, and the aesthetic novel observes this character's progress along the more selfish, evil, or negative path. The narration assumes a position of distanced curiosity throughout. These novels' investment in style is a key characteristic on levels of both theme and form. Thematically, characters within aesthetic novels value connoisseurship, collecting, art appreciation or dandyism. This frames how they interpret the world around them. Stylistically, readers can look for language behaving as a medium for performance and play. In terms of specifics, the tone and descriptions of aesthetic novels display a significant and consistent interest in surprising comparisons, physical details of objects and settings, as well as in language as art—including dialogue and description. This description manages to differentiate the aesthetic novel from other related groups while not exaggerating the distinguishing features or erasing the resemblances between aesthetic novels and other groups. Furthermore, this description allows novels to be more or less aesthetic. It is not a checklist from which a binary emerges. Instead, a better way to understand aesthetic

novels looks more like a spectrum in which different texts occupy different positions that are more and less centrally aesthetic.

The major discovery of the project is the pattern of suggestive silences. Aesthetic novels share a relationship to sexuality that includes oblique representations of societally unsupported desires. The term suggestive silences describes a method of simultaneous investment in sexual content and partial, limited, or indirect coverage of it in legal aesthetic novels. These texts hint, titillate, approach, surround, and ultimately communicate through absence their explorations of underground sexual interests. Readers can better understand these texts through the idea of suggestive silences and through what they communicate about desire, censorship, audience, and community. These connect not only this group of aesthetic novels, but aesthetic writing in a larger way.

Perceptually, the project changes how readers can access any and all of the novels most immediately describable as aesthetic. This spectrum connects these novels to one another, to the movement, and to other movements and novels of the period. These connections can potentially shed considerable light on novels that go largely understudied and are not frequently read. Novels such as *Miss Brown*, *The Green Carnation*, and *Marius the Epicurean* are all by writers better known for other works. For both Walter Pater and Vernon Lee, their novels are passed over, leaving them almost exclusively known for their contributions to other forms of writing and thought. That could be because these aesthetic novels do not necessarily fit easily with many novelistic expectations of form; most criticism of aesthetic or decadent novels, as was discussed in chapter one, focuses on the incongruity of those movements with the novel's form and

readability. Their oddities can at first make them seem failed attempts, but when understood within this genre, some of their unique features begin to make more sense. This project encourages readers to spend time with these interesting, troubling, and unusual texts and to read them within a group that contextualizes them meaningfully.

## II. The Utility of Genre

The point of this project is not simply to create a category—categories do not in and of themselves have value. Instead, this project aims to create a category that helps readers approach aestheticism, sexuality, the *fin de siècle*, and all of these novels in particular. This project also aims to expand what texts are read when people want to connect with the aesthetic movement. Though the novel remains important to any notion of Victorian literature, the aesthetic movement is rarely represented by any novel other than *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—and even that novel often endures the attempts of critics, editors, and booksellers to relabel as something other than a novel.<sup>62</sup> Through seeking out other novels produced by the movement and looking at the ways these novels resemble one another and differ from one another, this project hopes to enrich how aestheticism is perceived both by modern scholars and casual readers. Once audiences read beyond Wilde's text, they can both see patterns that extend from one novel to another and also find oddities less shared. This way, readers can better understand other novels of the era, other forms of aesthetic writing, and those decades whose debates, laws, fashions, and fascination all appear so pervasively in these aesthetic novels.

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<sup>62</sup> Wilde himself called it “an essay on decorative art” (*Letters* 264), Julian Hawthorne, one early reviewer, found it more palatable as a romance, and almost uncountable numbers of scholars have called it a fable or parable. Two writers, Claussen (2003) and Ferguson (2002), have published fairly recent articles that discuss and trace the different categorizations of this text.

This project demonstrates its improved access to texts through the genre of the aesthetic novel by exploring a few select facets of the aesthetic novel. By looking at narrative shape through different important relationships, investigating style through shared imagery and diction, and exploring community and readership through doubleness and parody, this project demonstrates the usefulness of the aesthetic novel as a genre even as it fleshes out its characterization over the course of these chapters.

Expanding notions of aestheticism and the aesthetic novel can also offer readers a better way to understand works not fully explored in this project such as anti-aesthetic fiction like *The New Republic* by W. H. Mallock. Thinking of the stylistic qualities and shared tropes as descriptive of a genre makes it easier to understand how anti-aesthetic works respond to the aesthetic movement through its novels. This can considerably alter perceptions of novels by Marie Corelli and Ada Levenson among others. Corelli's *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895) asserts that aesthetic and decadent literature are ultimately corrupting to their readers through the example of a physically innocent young woman who aspires immediately to cynicism, dishonesty, and lust after reading Swinburne's verse. Active conversation and disagreement surround our understanding of Ada Levenson's relationship to the aesthetic movement. Whether or not she had a consistent position of disapproval or support, her novel *The Twelfth Hour* (1907) certainly puts forth some sharp critiques of qualities and behaviors associated with the movement. There are other authors like these who show a significant awareness of aestheticism in their fiction,

but choose to critique or condemn the movement as they engage with it; they instead direct their novels to resemble and group with other genres of the period.<sup>63</sup>

Knowing the aesthetic novel as a genre also helps readers to understand novels that only partially fulfill its terms or only resemble the group in some ways whereas not in others. An example of this would be Florence Farr's *The Dancing Faun* (1894). The novel was published with an Aubrey Beardsley illustration for its frontispiece, and it opens with a paradox-filled dialogue. The text ends with the successful cover-up of a dandy's murder by the young woman with whom he flirted disingenuously. Such texts draw upon the aesthetic movement for some elements perhaps of style or in choices of tropes, references, or plot elements, but in other significant ways deviate from the tendencies observed in aesthetic novels. Similarly, the genre helps readers make connections between other genres of the period and understand novels that are not clearly products of just one genre. *The History of Sir Richard Calmady* (1901) by Lucas Malet, the *nom de plume* of Mary St. Leger Kingsley Harrison, would be an excellent example of a novel highly informed by aestheticism but not limited by the constraints of the genre or the movement. The text exhibits aestheticism's fascination with the dramatic and bizarre along with its preponderance of luxurious items; it also contains suggestive silences, but the style of writing and treatment of language within the work do not follow aesthetic trends or patterns significantly. The tone of the narration includes a much more pronounced and conventional moral valence than almost anything produced by the movement.

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<sup>63</sup> Here is a short list of examples of authors and texts that evoke aestheticism specifically but negatively: Max Beerbohm in *Zuleika Dobson* (1911), George DuMaurier in *Trilby* (1894), and George Moore in *Confessions of a Young Man* (1882). There are many others that use the movement or its participants or tenets to a greater or lesser degree.

### III. Avenues of Research

In thinking of what can be done with this dissertation or building from this work in the future, interesting potential lies in developing scholarly connections between the novels most closely studied and more frequently studied novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Scholars can use those texts that focus this dissertation and other aesthetic novels to help create more close comparative readings, either of works within this group or others. Studying aesthetic novels brings up many avenues of exploration that can be expanded with this group of central texts including expressions of gender, interactions between social classes, the shared group of allusions most common to aesthetic works, dialogue in aesthetic novels, and how aesthetic novels use and portray connoisseurship among others. This project lays the groundwork for a nearly any future project that seeks to isolate elements of the aesthetic novel or aestheticism more largely and study them from a wide variety of perspectives. Considering these novels and qualities as a genre helps all readers to access both the movement and the novels themselves. This access can be used in any number of directions either within the aesthetic movement's output or to develop a better understanding of the connections and disconnections between aestheticism's texts and other genres of the period.

One example would be an examination of the ways different Victorian genres create spectacles of consumerism and luxury. Aesthetic novels certainly exhibit a style of presenting the collection and consumption of luxury, but it is not the only genre of the period to frequently feature such goods or experiences. The sensation novel and, earlier in the century, the silver fork novel both frequently feature the trappings of wealth and

opulence. Thematic work becomes easier when scholars and reader can look at the patterns in small groups of texts through genre.

A major step in expanding upon this project would be to look at how the aesthetic movement either historically uses or deviates from the sort of oblique representation of sexualities found in aesthetic novel's suggestive silences in its other forms and media. Exploring the issues made most clear by these novels in poetry and essays of the parent movement will make good use of this beginning and demonstrate how describing a genre does so much more than simply create a box or checklist into which works either fit or do not.

More directly extending this project, we seeing that the delineation of aesthetic novels from New Woman novels in terms of gender portrayals, political engagement, sexuality, and style is potentially fruitful comparative work. Connections to related works might extend study either back earlier in the Victorian period or forwards into the twentieth century. Focusing more closely on one or more novel from this project within the context of the genre could also stimulate some interesting future projects, particularly on the works less frequently studied. Talia Schaffer and Kathy Psomiades have already done tremendous work to expand scholarly understanding of aesthetes and to make that group more inclusive in terms of gender; that work could be expanded through working with this description of the aesthetic novel and focusing on those qualities more than aesthetic pedigree.

The aesthetic movement's creative output connects directly to other genres of the last two decades of the nineteenth century and indirectly far further in one direction to expressions of Sentiment and in the other to Modernism. All of these aesthetic novels

and their connections reflect in myriad ways the intellectual and cultural ferment that created the need for and the expressions of these submerged interactions and explorations of material objects, sexuality, gender, class, and style. By using the genre actively and strategically, we can better understand these texts and the times that produced them.

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