

## **Under the Guise of Art: Victorian Aesthetic Pornography**

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In *The Worm in the Bud*, Ronald Pearsall suggests that “a thesis could be written on the effect of pubic hair on Victorian sexual thinking” (106). This paper is not an attempt at that thesis, but instead an examination of why something so natural like pubic hair affected Victorian sexual thinking. Perhaps it is because from the classical period to the present art has idealised the human form to the point that it no longer reflects the flawed human being. Art constructs a new standard for the human being to live up to: perfection. In extreme circumstances, such as the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, art actually replaces the human. The creation itself, however, is not based upon real life, but artistic ideal. The depiction of the nude in mid-nineteenth-century England helped set up the artistic climate for such a movement to exist. The representation of the nude in art and literature during this time was socially acceptable to examine as an object of study. A curious dichotomy of Victorian aestheticism was adopted in the century. In *Erotic Art*, Richard Bentley observes the following:

While, for example, it was considered impolite to suggest that women had legs, it had become fashionable and ‘respectable’ to put skirts round the legs of pianos! At the same time, when visiting the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace, men and women were expected to admire marble statues of nude women, always provided that these conformed to what were considered classical canons of art. (107-111)

The nude as a feature of the canon authorised appreciation. Certainly there was a taboo against overt sexuality, but art allowed an outlet for sexuality, both in the private sphere with the decoration of piano legs or the possession of prints and photographs, and in the public sphere during a Royal Academy exhibition. Art provided a way to explore the human body

without necessarily having to touch it. Under this guise transgressions could safely take place. The nude of the nineteenth century, therefore, was a clever way to propagate aesthetic pornography, a new aesthetic in its own right. Fashioning these images as modern adaptations of canonical works allowed artists such as Lawrence Alma-Tadema and Lord Frederick Leighton to create socially acceptable art. Personalities such as Oscar Wilde also worked to create a cult of aesthetic pre-eminence by creating new ideals in pornographic writing by presenting homoeroticism within the construct of traditional and heterosexual desire. Art in the nineteenth century promoted this aestheticism by manipulating the old canon to suit the desires of the artist. The bold changes in visual art allowed literature to make a similar transition elevating pornographic writing into the realm of literature.

Aesthetics, the philosophical investigation of art, considers whether there are objective standards for judging it. In Kenneth Clark's 1956 study *The Nude*, he argues that there is an implicit ideal of beauty, but "no individual body is satisfactory as a whole. [T]he artist can choose the perfect parts from a number of figures and then combine them into a perfect whole" (10). Ideal beauty is not the average found in natural creation, but is an amalgam of images which co-exist in the mind of the human creator. William Blake expresses this idea explicitly: "All Forms are Perfect in the Poet's Mind but these are not Abstracted or compounded from Nature, but are from the Imagination" (Clark 11). The ideal is not found naturally; instead, it is a joint effort between what already exists in Nature and the mind of the creator. Almost a century later, Walter Pater reiterated Blake's claim, for he "believed it was with 'imaginative reason' that a percipient viewer apprehended the aesthetic quality of a work of art; beauty was not comprehended exclusively through the intellect or senses"

(*Victorian Nude* 114). The ideal of beauty exists within the consciousness of the viewer who is potentially also a creator.

According to Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*, the appreciation of beauty is not “purely aesthetic; [...] judging by an ideal of beauty is not a mere judgement of taste” (84). Once certain standards of judging beauty come into play, the ideal created fulfils a moral standard. Beauty no longer exists purely for itself. In the section entitled “On Beauty as the Symbol of Morality,” Kant offers a few maxims on the difference between the beautiful and the morally good:

- (1) The beautiful we like *directly*.
- (2) We like it *without any interest*.
- (3) In judging the beautiful, we present the *freedom* of the imagination (and hence [the freedom of] our power [of] sensibility) as harmonizing with the lawfulness of the understanding.
- (4) We present the subjective principle for judging the beautiful as *universal*, i.e. as valid for everyone, but as unknowable through any universal concept. (229)

Beauty, as it exists for purely aesthetic reasons, is appreciated outside of moral constraints, despite its ability to cause the admirer to meditate on morality. The four aphorisms above contrast with the idea of liking for the moral good. Although this may be true, we are still able to appeal to morality freely:

Taste enables us, as it were, to make the transition from sensible charm to a habitual moral interest without making too violent a leap; for taste presents the imagination as admitting, even in its freedom, of determination that is purposive for the understanding, and it teaches us to like even objects of sense freely, even apart from sensible charm. (230)

Kant suggests, therefore, that although choosing the beautiful object is of our own accord, in doing so, a greater good – the appeal to morality – is being served. The moral magnitude of art, therefore, is not overlooked in spite of the liberties taken within the composition. Kant’s

work, however, assumes that everyone acts with the best of moral intentions. It does not take into account individuals who act in order to satiate a perhaps deviant sexuality.

In *The Worm in the Bud* Ronald Pearsall reveals that the more suggestive the work of the artist, the greater their own repressive tendencies are revealed: “For many repressed artists, the demand for nude paintings meant that their sexual needs were sublimated in an acceptable and life-enhancing manner” (103). In painting nudes, artists were allowed the freedom to examine their own sexuality without necessarily having to publicly jeopardise their own moral stance. Pearsall illustrates this point by referring to William Etty, a devout celibate who happened to paint titillating nudes. The nude, especially when depicted seemingly straightforward in a historical or classical scene, was easily sexualised: “for the extremely repressed, their work, overtly mythological, was a substitute for sex, a kind of masturbation in paint” (*Worm* 104). With this idea in mind, it is not hard to imagine that the nude was able to thrive in the private sector, especially given its power as an agent of release. Robert Upstone, writing in Alison Smith’s *Exposed: The Victorian Nude*, claims that “ownership of nude subjects allowed close scrutiny and contemplation” made possible by artists who “sold pictures of this kind directly to their patrons allowing even greater erotic treatment of the body” (130). This convenience, along with the invention of the camera, made it possible to behold the body whenever desired. What is important to distinguish is that as long as these figures were considered art and not obscene, their permissibility was not jeopardised. As long as they maintained their status as artistic works and did not exist to deprave or corrupt the moral mind they were considered licit. A distinction between naked – “to be deprived of our clothes” resulting in embarrassment – and nude, which projects an

image “not of a huddled and defenceless body, but of a balanced, prosperous and confident body” is made (Clark 1). The object of perusal is sensual regardless of whether or not it is classified as naked or nude, but these terms can perhaps act as a means for differentiating between tedious, hardcore pornography, and aesthetically-driven pornography or erotica.

This idea that art exists purely in and of itself and is not a means of corruption is evocative of Oscar Wilde’s aesthetic of art. In the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he affirms that “[i]t is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors” (6). Whatever the spectator sees in the work is a reflection of his or her own personal tastes and desires. Art does not corrupt. What Wilde suggests is that the observer who chooses to identify corruption within a work of art is already corrupt themselves. Artistic creation is free from moral judgement. Those who criticise it – not as a means to create art themselves, but rather to blaspheme it – expose the demons in their own internal consciousness and consequently condemn themselves by doing so. In the Preface, Wilde uses art as a means to absolve himself and all writers from writing books that certain members of society would interpret as serving a sinister purpose. Lord Henry Wotton reiterates these same principles throughout the text, adding that art itself promotes stasis over action: “[a]rt has no influence over action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile. The books the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame” (*Dorian* 241). By stating that “[a]ll art is quite useless” the Preface identifies art as an elevated form of life because it resists functionality and just exists (*Dorian* 6).

The relationship between art and morality is depicted in the Preface through the following aphorisms:

The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium.

No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style.

Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art. Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art. (*Dorian 5*)

These maxims can easily be considered guidelines for the developing artist. Although art captures life through intimate visual and verbal portrayals, it is seemingly monitored by morality. In composing such work, the artist must often remove himself from his work in order that his own moral character does not impede him from creating art that is less than pure. In this respect, the artist at times must subvert his own moral agenda in order to create. Art as dialogue between the artist and his interior vision is fundamentally an expression of the moral life even though the compositions do not necessarily depict such an attitude. Art reinforces morality through the very obscenity it potentially reveals. The use value attributed to art depends on the spectator's being able to "admire it intensely" (*Dorian 6*). The relationship which is created between the spectator and the object of art is reciprocal; therefore, art cannot be considered completely autonomous from life. Instead, art thrives on its very acceptance and its link to the spectator. It is in variance, however, where art is potentially most appealing. The conflict and contrast of moral attitudes present in the work and in the spectator bring forth new dimensions to discover. This is why pornographic material, for example, is so appealing. When the line between art and pornography is crossed the contrast broadens artistic desire. In visualizing fantasy, pornography is an exploration which is no holds barred.

London's Holywell Street was the hub of the pornography boom from the mid-nineteenth century onward. In 1834 there were 57 pornography shops in this one street selling

everything from photographs to the current listing for prostitutes, complete with displays to attract the attention of passers by. The predominant magazines purchased at this time were *The Boudoir* and *The Cremorne*. The proud features of these magazines were etchings of flagellation, erect penises and same sex encounters between women. The editors of the magazines were well aware that the customers of Holywell Street were almost exclusively male. This was because sexologists such as Dr. Alfred Kinsey concluded after his examination of thousands of pornographic documents that “women are not interested in pure pornography. What females respond to much more readily is literature and art which reflect general emotional relationships, romance and love” (Hyde 18). That women are unaffected by pornographic writing is a flawed assumption; that women’s sexuality was unknown because the possibility was neglected is perhaps more accurate. The emergence of female desire – both within herself and the ability to evoke desire in others – created a fascinating shift from this old stereotype. This is not the figure of Monica in George Gissing’s *The Odd Women*, who must pay for what Fraser Harrison in *The Dark Angel* defines as “feminine self-assertion” (132). Instead, by the late eighteen-eighties, this figure of the new woman appears as one who is unafraid of her sexuality:

The sublimation of male sexuality into other activities had involved a gross underestimation and neglect of women’s emotional needs, but women were now making it plain that they no longer accepted the ignominious relegation of their sexuality. By demanding the right to play a fully-realised part in their relationships with the other sex, women automatically placed on men the obligation to expose and explore that part of their being which they had learnt to hide and shackle. Those men who sought the fulfilment of their sexuality set themselves a painful and demanding task, so demanding indeed that many abandoned the attempt in despair. (Harrison 133)

Both alluring and frightening, this woman – complete with pubic hair and legs – had to be sublimated, specifically for those men who could not measure up to her demands.

It appears, therefore, that the females present in the prints purchased in Holywell Street and the paintings on exhibition for the Academy, were both lusted after while feared at the same time. The sexual nature of these compositions, no matter how artistically driven, is impossible to overlook. An example of this overt sexuality is Lawrence Alma-Tadema's *Sculptor's Model*, a controversial painting for several reasons. In *The Victorian Nude: Sexuality, morality and art*, Alison Smith reveals that although the painting did project "a view of woman as a beautiful passive object," there is something too common in her portrayal (133). This is not a straightforward classical depiction, which actually promoted toleration of the nude in art. She is too realistic and too *naked*. This is not the stance of a modest Venus, but the stance of a commoner hired out by the artist. In this respect, it is possible to make a connection between the prostitute and the model, for each hires out her body in order to exercise male sexuality: the model on an aesthetic plane, and the prostitute on a physical plane. Both model and prostitute, however, were seen as victims of their social status in the nineteenth century: "For moralists (male and female) she was a victim of white slavery and child prostitution, an innocent who had been lured into the profession to satisfy the base appetites of a corrupt aristocracy," and as a result, was used to "attack the bastions of male privilege" (*Victorian Nude* 220 & 221). This is why Alma-Tadema's *Sculptor's Model* was so problematic. Her pose of weariness and desperation, complete with swollen ankles, is not a glorification of the classical feminine, but is one of contemporary malaise. Despite her being framed in a classical setting, her contemporary signature is unmistakable.

One of the key ways to avert sexuality away from the female nude was to frame her in a classical setting. This seems an odd arrangement, however, because the Greek myths of desire are highly libidinous, and their recreations by artists indeed reflect this carnal quality. This contradiction provided the perfect atmosphere to exploit the nude and indeed eroticise her. In theory, “[a]ssociations with the Antique helped divorce the nude from any implication of sexuality,” but it is not hard to imagine that this appeared the very vehicle for sexuality (*Exposed* 88). Frederick Lord Leighton’s *Venus Disrobing for the Bath* both revitalised the classical nude, but simultaneously sexualised her. On the surface, Leighton’s Venus appears the model of virtue and indeed was critiqued as such in the nineteenth century. This is not Venus present in a narrative which traditionally depicted her with a lover, but is a Venus in her own private chambers. She was naturally hailed as the embodiment of the classical ideal by critics who vied for a return to chaste classicism. She is not an overtly pornographic naked figure, but her nudity beckons the viewer to call attention to her body. This is not a Venus emblematic of motherhood, with a “fuller waist and proportions” who is a “model for ‘natural’ womanhood,” but a Venus who appreciates leisure and narcissistic indulgences (*Exposed* 89). While she seeks her own pleasure, however, she still exists for the viewer seeking his own pleasure he will achieve by gazing upon her sensuousness. Her very contortions, in fact, provoke desire; Venus is on display for the male viewer. The viewer, like Actaeon who spied on Diana whilst she was bathing, watches this scene with an intimate delight. The voyeur, however, is not punished, but instead encouraged to look upon this intimate moment. Venus, with her eyes cast downward, invites the viewer to gaze upon her nude body and follow her gaze toward the mystery she conceals.

As a precursory figure to the *l'art pour l'art* movement exuding sexuality, she exists “exclusive of religion, morality or duty” (*Exposed* 88). Under the guise of classicism erotic and pornographic works were able to emerge in the Royal Academy. Not all were as subtle as Leighton and were therefore controversial. Gustave Courbet’s *L’origine du monde* appeared in France in the same year as *Venus Disrobing for the Bath* but was far too pornographic and real to be accepted as a work of art of this genre. The blatant negation of classicism in the work was just one factor that was able to deem *L’origine du monde* as pornography. Courbet pushed the bounds of tolerability as did homosexual prints sold in the shops on Holywell Street. The images, promoting sexual ambiguity, were circulated without the same scrutiny of the Royal Academy or Salon de Paris. The work of artists like Simeon Solomon – who was “prosecuted for indecency with another man in a public lavatory” – were confined to the private sphere of the elite (*Exposed* 130). Solomon’s *The Bride, Bridegroom and Sad Love* is an exemplary drawing of a provocative scene between men. Even with its classical portrayal, the subject matter was unacceptable. The drawing, which features a man and a woman in an embrace, appears to be a proponent of heterosexual union insofar as these two figures are viewed in isolation from the younger Sad Love. This excluded figure is invited into the picture by the hand of the Bridegroom, who caresses the hand – and perhaps even the phallus – of his lover. Oblivious to these proceedings is the Bride who is devotedly fixated on her perfect male. It is more than likely that the Bride is choosing to ignore the contact between the two males and tries instead to distract her new husband with her own sex appeal.

What Solomon is addressing are the “particularly sensitive and dangerous areas of hidden Victorian social mores: the homosexual activity of married men, and the love between older men and youths” (*Exposed* 156). While the focus of the drawing is on the parting of the two men and looks toward a life of natural love culminating in procreation, the past life of debauch, featuring Sad Love, cannot be overlooked. The contact which still exists between them makes the assumption that the love affair between the Bridegroom and the young man—or the young men to come – is not over. It will be a constant battle for the Bride to detract her husband from such practices and she will have to be content with being one third of the bisexual lifestyle her husband will sustain. Wilde, who maintained a sexual relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas for the duration of his married life, also owned one of Solomon’s drawings: *Love among the Schoolboys* (*Exposed* 156). This apparent problem traces back to the idea of male homosocial behaviour which flourished when boys were sent off to school and there they remained for their formative years in limited company. It oftentimes escalated to homosexual bonding and discovery, but was not necessarily a means of sexual gratification. This kind of connection was not viewed as contrary to the natural union of man and wife, but rather as a healthy rite of passage which promoted heterosexual union. Homosexual practices were tolerated insofar as they did not become commonplace practice in public thereby displacing heterosexuality. Flagellation – which also thrived in the school house – was widely accepted, especially when the degrading image of a young boy being beaten by his schoolmaster was replaced by young women whipping one-another playfully. Sado-masochistic play amongst men and women was also condoned and appeared to be a popular vice, as is documented by Pearsall in *Public Purity, Private Shame* and Hyde’s *A History of Pornography*. Accepted homosexual play, however, was restricted to schoolboys

and the military. Of course homosexuality exceeded these two areas, but it was far more discreet and had to be in order for it to continue without moral backlash. As a result, whereas flagellation has been written on ad-nauseam as a common subject of pornographic writing, homosexual experimentation was reserved for documentation within the genre of non-fiction. Havelock Ellis' *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* and *Sexual Inversion* are two of the standard works of the nineteenth century on homosexual behaviour, complete with case studies and histories. Homosexual pornography was not published on a wide scale, but produced for a select audience. This ensured the protection and anonymity of the writer and publisher who could both be held accountable for mass production of obscene literature under the Obscene Publications Act of 1857.

Steven Marcus in *The Other Victorians* offers two interconnected conclusions in order to account for the absence of homosexual literature from nineteenth-century England. The first is that "social and cultural taboos against them [ie. homosexual fantasies] are correspondingly stronger than those that act against the heterosexual deviations" (Marcus 262). All fantasies are in violation of some social or cultural code otherwise they would easily exist in reality. Marcus also attributes the absence "to the possibility that once homosexual fantasies emerge into consciousness they are enabled, by the same force of energy that overcame the agencies which opposed their emergence, to proceed to action" (262). This is problematic because Marcus does not suggest that the same should be true of all sexual fantasies, and the period was not deterred from producing heterosexual pornography. Marcus does write that "[l]iterature is, after all, as much a deflection of impulses as it is a representation [typesetter's typo] of them and of action" (262). Perhaps

homosexual writers wanting to document their desires were afraid that their impulses would be solely considered pornographic or fantastic and be classified as sub-human. The stigma associated with homosexuality was a difficult one to bear.

The major problem with pornographic fiction, in general, is not the author's fear of prosecution, but the author's fear that it will not be able to stimulate his reader. The language employed has a tendency to bore, no matter how erotic or vulgar it attempts to be. For Marcus this is a most important point to distinguish. He writes that "[l]anguage is for pornography a preventing external reality; its function is to set going a series of non-verbal images, of fantasies – and if it could dispense with words it would" (208). Pornographic writing therefore is inferior to the painted image and even more so to the pornographic film as neither is bound by words. No matter how outrageous or grotesque the writings of the Marquis de Sade, after six-hundred pages the reader is bored after being subjected to a repetition of the same images. The framework and context adds the erotic element to writing that has a tendency to be taxing. The same applies to the stark naked figure in visual art which is potentially just as dry. Variety is what makes it enticing.

Oscar Wilde's and others' *Teleny* offered the reader a sought-after variable in pornographic writing. Written in a first-person narrative of internal retrospection, *Teleny* reads like a confessional similar to Henry Spenser Ashbee's eleven-volume *My Secret Life*. *Teleny*, however, is centred on a love story which makes Wilde's text beyond that of what Marcus calls "pornotopia: 'that vision which regards all of human experience as a series of exclusively sexual events or conveniences'" (Perkins 32). Although it begins with the

recollection of life in sexual time, it is not detached from people or emotions. It is not a catalogue of sexual vice and desire like *My Secret Life* which is why *Teleny* is easily cloaked under the guise of literature. Marcus explains the features of pornographic literature:

Pornography is not interested in persons but in organs. Emotions are an embarrassment to it, and motives are distractions. In pornotopia conflicts do not exist; and if by chance a conflict does occur it is instantly dispelled by the waving of a sexual wand. Sex in pornography is sex without the emotions. [...] The striking features of this literature are its childishness, extreme incoherence, absence of focus, confusion of sexual identity, and impulse toward play-acting or role-playing (281 & 263)

The pornographic fantasy is not jeopardised by conflicts in the plot. *Teleny* ends with a tragedy which immediately signifies that a strictly pornotopic world-view is not present here. In its place, the reader is left with a sordid love affair that leaves one lover destroyed by betrayal, in spite of a futile reconciliation. There is no separating sex from emotions in the love affair between René Teleny and Camille Des Grieux. Sex in *Teleny* is only devoid of emotions when heterosexual love is described.

Traditionally, emotions in literature emphasise an unrelenting connection between a man and a woman. In *Teleny* they are described in order to show the intensity shared between two men. The first half of the novel works toward the moment in the text where the culmination of their emotional desire for one-another is finally reached. Des Grieux recalls:

“I love you!” he whispered, “I love you madly! I cannot live without you any longer.”  
“Nor can I,” said I, faintly; “I have struggled against my passion in vain and now I yield to it, not tamely, but eagerly, gladly. I am your’s, Teleny! Happy to be your’s, your’s forever and your’s alone!” [...]  
“And you will be mine – mine alone?”  
“I never was any other man’s, nor ever shall be.”  
“You will love me for ever?”  
“And ever.” (*Teleny* 112 & 114)

The emotional love story drives the work toward its completion and is undeniably the important narrative within the text. According to Kinsey's findings on pornography, this work is an example of one which would appeal to females who are sensitive to emotions, and not to males. Framing its unveiling are subplots and stories of a more sordid fashion, which pale in comparison to this passionate love story, but are stimulating nonetheless. In reading this passage, however, it becomes evident that the presentation of homosexual love mirrors that of heterosexual love. The reader is presented with a marriage scene, an exchanging of vows, which is in actuality unnecessary and detrimental. The heterosexual association has the power to subvert the homosexual desire the work is trying to present to its reader. The love story between two men is presented in terms of its being a natural union; during an orgy scene, they are described by others as being "on their honey-moon" (*Teleny* 147). The need to legitimate their relationship, however, is problematic. Because *Teleny* is presented to the reader as above nature based in aesthetics, why does homosexual desire need legitimating? Why does it need legitimating? The desire to naturalise undermines Teleny and Des Grieux's relationship, and potentially the whole aesthetic doctrine Wilde helped to promote in England. What Wilde does is use traditional heterosexual construction in order to promote *l'art pour l'art*. He employs socially acceptable ideals in order to present his work in the mainstream, while still writing a pornographic text. Whether or not he is trying to write the first narrative of coming out, or reifying homosexuality is unimportant.

In order to present the homosexual love affair between Teleny and Des Grieux as a variation on heterosexual marriage, one of the companions must be effeminised more so than the other. In "Victorian Erotica," Peter Webb expresses his opinion that "*Teleny* distinguishes itself

from most Victorian pornography because it is not written to be enjoyed at the expense of women. The partners in the scenes of homosexual love are equals, enjoying a mutually pleasurable activity. [...] no partnership of dominance and submission” (110). Yes, this is not ‘most Victorian pornography,’ but not because the partners in the scenes are equals. They are of the same sex, but Des Grieux is clearly subservient to Teleny who caters to his every demand and desire. On a broader scale, the homosexual orgy scene depicts a hierarchy of power, where inexperienced fellows are dominated by the seasoned professionals. In sexual congress, arguably, someone is always being expended; in sodomy in particular, someone is always passive whilst the other is active.

As the weaker partner in their equation Des Grieux is effeminised. He quickly falls into infatuation after his first meeting with Teleny, feeling “lonely, forlorn, nay almost bereaved” when he is separated from Teleny, who has not yet fully acknowledged Des Grieux’s presence (*Teleny* 46). It is important to note that the reader is never given Teleny’s perspective on their love affair and must depend on unreliable narration. Des Grieux speaks of the spell-binding effect Teleny is able to produce on him during his piano playing. He sits over breakfast with his mother in the morning discussing whether his object of lust is good-looking or not. He is a vision of a stereotypical virgin who inevitably grows attached to the person who deflowers him, which should, according to social standards, result in marriage. To him, Teleny appears as this gallant beauty awakening Des Grieux to a world of homosexuality. But Teleny is an ambiguous character, who appears to enjoy his bisexual disposition. This causes Des Grieux to feel insurmountable jealousy:

“Teleny,” said I, feeling faint, “you have another lover.” And I saw him in the arms of someone else, tasting that bliss which was mine and mine alone.

“No,” said he, “I have not; but if I had?”

“You would love him – or her, and then my life would be blasted for ever!”

“No, not for ever; only for a time, perhaps. But could you not forgive me?” (*Teleny* 164)

Although the someone is unspecified, Des Grieux is more wary of the possibility that Teleny is sleeping with another woman rather than a man. His possessiveness drives him to irrationality, but Des Grieux is in fact not irrational at all. Teleny does betray him with another lover and is destroyed because of his feelings of abandonment. Des Grieux is awakened to homosexual bliss and thereafter destroyed by it once he witnesses the heterosexual union between Teleny and Des Grieux’s mother. The ideal, natural pairing between a beautiful man and woman subjugates the homosexuality of the text.

Throughout the text, there is juxtaposition between ideal male beauty and the decay of the female who exhibits a lack of beauty. These differentiations are realised during sexual activity. Teleny, obviously enough, represents this ideal of the male:

He was a very model of carnal comeliness; his chest was broad and strong, his arms rounded; in fact, I have never seen such a vigorous and at the same time agile frame; for not only was there not the slightest fat but not even the least superfluous flesh about him. He was all nerve, muscle, and sinew. It was his well-knit and supple joints that gave him the free, easy, and graceful motion so characteristic of the Felidae, of which he had also the flexibility, for when he clasped himself to you he seemed to entwine himself around you like a snake. (*Teleny* 120-121)

This Adonis is contrasted from the image of the “ghoul-like” women in the bordello, who are lecherous and seedy (*Teleny* 67). Women cannot sustain male desire because of their atrociousness. This is the predominant dichotomy until the final scene of the novel, which offers female beauty and heterosexual union in place of male beauty and homosexual union.

The figure of this female ideal is Des Grieux’s own mother:

Standing as she was not, and nearer the door, my eyes could not reach her face, still I could see her naked body – from the shoulders downwards. It was a marvellous figure, the finest one I had ever seen. A woman's torso in the height of its beauty. Her skin was of a dazzling whiteness, and could vie in smoothness as well as in pearly lustre with the satin of the gown she had cast off. Her breast – perhaps a bit too big to be aesthetically beautiful – seemed to belong to one of those voluptuous Venetian courtezans painted by Titian; [...] That aphrodisiacal body, as I could see, was made for, and surely had afforded pleasure to, more than one man, inasmuch as she has evidently been formed by nature to be one of Venus' Votaresses. (*Teleny* 181-82)

Freudian connections aside, the nature of the description and its very length are intriguing as they stand in relation to the entire text. Des Grieux's excitement and passion he feels for this woman is unparalleled. She excites him in a way far different from Teleny or the other male courtesan. What he feels with Teleny is naked passion, although it is accompanied by love and devotion. This woman – who happens to be his mother – excites him to a nude passion. He sees her only from the neck down, and as such, she is an object in its purest form. As one-half of a prolific, acephalic image, she reveals to Des Grieux his desire for the opposite sex. She appears as an object this way, but it is one that he is drawn to naturally, not only because she is his mother, but because she is female. Her description is highly erotic because of its familiarity.

In *Teleny*, therefore, what is familiar is erotic. When Des Grieux is effeminised and when Teleny is described as a great beauty, the ideals of a heterosexual society are being adhered to. Wilde's text enforces heterosexuality by describing homosexual desire in heterosexual terms. Wilde manipulates both the canon of pornography and literature in order to bring forth this new aesthetic. Naturalizing homosexuality, as aforementioned, is not the goal here. The manipulation of the canon to suit his own desires is. A moral end seems inevitable.

The aesthetic ideal which heralded independence from morality while at the same time enforcing it was possible because of the representation of the nude as a stylized form of pornography which began in the mid-nineteenth century. Once manipulation of the canon became tolerable within the art world, it was able to spread to literature. Victorian aesthetic pornography owes its indebtedness to personalities like Oscar Wilde who worked to legitimate it by applying the quality of aesthetic art to literature. *Teleny*, although a very capable, somewhat pseudo-pornographic work, would not have been able to flourish had it not been for Wilde's understanding of art which he applied to the text. Under the guise of art Victorian pornography was able to flourish amenably.

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