Maisie's Moral Sense: Aesthetic in *What Maisie Knew*

Rebekah Lawler

ABSTRACT

Despite being born American and being considered a major American author, Henry James spent the majority of his adult life in England, becoming a British citizen a year before his death. James lived in England during the *fin-de-siècle*–the end of the nineteenth century– a period when art and literature were at their height in upper-class London. The *fin-de-siècle* was also the height of the aesthetic movement–one in which James participated. Another author at the pinnacle of his career in the *fin-de-siècle* and a leader within aestheticism was Oscar Wilde. Though they ran in the same circles and shared similar beliefs, James and Wilde were not close friends. James thought Wilde was too flamboyant and likely felt ill feelings towards Wilde since he was a successful dramatist and James–despite his best efforts–failed in this genre. In this article, I will examine the ways in which both James and Wilde approached aestheticism and how James's background as an American influenced his views of this idea. Although Wilde did spend time in America–albeit significantly less than James spent in England–Wilde remained overtly British in his mannerisms and opinions. While aestheticism is primarily a British ideology, this paper will discuss the ways that James and his role as an American influenced this movement.

Dating back to the ancient Greeks and further developed by Immanuel Kant, the aesthetic movement dominated the art, literature, and culture of the *fin-de-siècle* in both England and America. Aestheticism, defined as art for art's sake,

> represents that moment in British literary history in which a group of writers and artists took to claiming that the thing they valued—the life of the mind, for example, or art itself—called forth a compelling awareness of the value of their opposites—the life of the body, for example, or the virtues of sincerity and artlessness… [they] all found themselves yearning after. (Freedman 8)

During his career, Henry James took inspiration from the fathers of aestheticism—Walter Pater and John Ruskin—to develop his own view of aestheticism that he incorporated into his canon. While current scholarship focuses on the themes of morality and child/adult relationships in the Jamesian classics *The Turn of the Screw* and "The Author of Beltraffio," the same themes also underscore *What Maisie Knew*. The concepts of Jamesian aestheticism are demonstrated in *What Maisie Knew*; thus, *What Maisie Knew* should be viewed as an aesthetic text.

The two fathers of nineteenth-century aestheticism were John Ruskin and Walter Pater, and both influenced James and his views on aestheticism. James met John Ruskin in 1869 and heard Ruskin's "The Queen of the Air" lecture at University College in London. Ruskin's view of aestheticism, as presented in his lecture, significantly influenced James's own ideals on morality within art. For Ruskin, art should subtly promote morality among its readers without it being too didactic. James would also say that "there is a point at which the moral sense and the artistic sense lie very near together" (qtd. in Eguchi 6). This moral sense is what lies at the heart of *What Maisie Knew* as Mrs. Wix frequently encourages Maisie to develop her moral sense. This emphasis on morality is evident in other books published around the same time by aesthetic authors.

Contemporary to Ruskin and James was the aesthete Walter Pater. Pater coined the term "art for art's sake" in his book *The Renaissance*: "[b]e sure it is passion—that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most" (190). Pater was a prominent aesthete who influenced Ruskin, Oscar Wilde, and Henry James. Pater and James shared many of the same views on aestheticism, as James "turn[ed] from the dominant aesthetic orthodoxies of early-nineteenth-century neoclassicism and mid-nineteenth century medievalism toward an explicit praise for the art of the Renaissance" (Freedman 134). Pater's influence on James allowed James to further develop his opinions and views on British aestheticism. Although he originally disliked the aesthetic movement for its "hypocrisy, its fraudulence, its moral and aesthetic failures," he was

eventually able to "encounter the aestheticist dream of the aesthetic, an autonomous realm separate from but oddly redemptive of the social sphere it inhabits" (Freedman 136). While James was not a frivolous dandy like Wilde, he was able to find his own niche of aestheticism that, as Freedman claims, allows James's fiction to bridge the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—to straddle Victorian and Modern literature. While this is something that Wilde attempted with *Salomé*, which was published in 1893 but not performed in England until 1905, Wilde did not live long enough to develop his sense of modernism as fully as James (Robson).

What Maisie Knew was published in 1897 during the height of London's aesthetic movement. Wilde and James met during Wilde's American aesthetic tour in the 1880s, and they maintained a rocky professional relationship. Wilde thought James "wr[ote] fiction as if it were a painful duty, and wastes upon mean motives and imperceptible 'points of view' his near literary style, his felicitous phrases, his swift and caustic satire" (Wilde 219). James's view of Wilde was just as shaded:

> I was at the *première* [of *Lady Windermere's Fan*] on Saturday last and saw the unspeakable one make his speech to the audience, with a metallic blue carnation in his buttonhole and a cigarette in his fingers. The speech, which, alas, was stupid, was only to say that he judged the audience felt the play to be nearly as charming as he did. (Edel 4:45)

James also viewed Wilde as his competition. James aspired to delve into plays during the mid-1890s; however, this was the height of Wilde's career and after James's play *Guy Domville* failed at the St. James' Theatre, Wilde's most famous play—*The Importance of Being Earnest*—replaced *Guy Domville*. After attending the opening night of one of Wilde's previous plays, *An Ideal Husband*, James wrote to his brother William that "I sat through it and saw it played with every appearance (so far as the crowded house was an appearance) of complete success, and that gave me the most fearful apprehension. The thing seemed to me so helpless, so crude, so bad, so clumsy, feeble and vulgar" (Beckson 183).

Although James and Wilde did not enjoy each other's work (or personalities), the fact that they were both influenced by Ruskin and Pater and incorporated similar themes in their work, signifies that the two authors are more alike than they probably would have wished. Fisher states,

> Despite their mutual distaste, there are distinct similarities in their decidedly different styles; both impose a strict order on their compositional style, reflecting the rigid social order they examine in their works, and both scale the ladder of social observation to probe the moral shadings of their time. (169)

The fact that James shared a similar style to Wilde, who was the embodiment of Victorian aestheticism, shows that James has a rightful place in the aesthetic movement, and that *What Maisie Knew*, which overlaps the Victorian and Modern period, deserves a spot in James's aesthetic oeuvre.

An additional similarity between the two aesthetic authors was their representation of children in their work. While neither Wilde nor James wrote children's literature, they each portray children, or child-like figures in their work. For James, this is clearly seen in *What Maisie Knew* (as the protagonist is a young girl) and for Wilde, in his epic prison letter *De Profundis*, he represents his ex-lover Bosie Douglas in a childlike manner. Michèle Mendelssohn marks the publication of these two works (both in the latter half of the 1890s), as the end of the innocence of aestheticism. For Wilde and James,

> the child's figure's unusual and conspicuous lack of innocence and moral values generates a nightmarish situation for the adult characters, who struggle in vain to control the children. By projecting onto the child the problematic questions aestheticism was facing, James and Wilde probed its moral quandaries more deeply than before. (Mendelssohn "Fate" 144)

This sense of morality—and its representation in the literature of two prominent aesthetes—shows how important "the moral sense" is to aesthetic literature and proves that *What Maisie Knew* should be viewed as an aesthetic text. Finally, James and Wilde share similar themes of child/adult relationships and morality in their work. In several of Wilde's plays, he explores the relationships that exist between children and their parents and many of his characters are morally gray and make questionable decisions. These similarities further show that since Wilde's works—which are traditionally considered aesthetic texts—have the same themes as *What Maisie Knew*, that this book can also be considered an aesthetic text. The central theme behind *What Maisie Knew* is how her interactions with the adults in her life shape her maturity, and many of the adult characters possess few redeeming qualities. *What Maisie Knew* is an exemplary text that bridges the gap of nineteenth century views of children and aesthetic ideals with the stylistic choices of twentieth century modern literature and serves as an example of how the landscape of British literature was changing with the new century.

Despite being published in 1897, *What Maisie Knew* is viewed as a modern text and considering James's later texts, the style of writing in *Maisie* can be seen as the beginning of James's venture into modernism. Most important to *Maisie* is the radical rethinking of childhood in the late nineteenth-century and James's choice to include a child as his protagonist. According to Michèle Mendelssohn, James uses children in

his works as representations of the aesthetic movement and to bring out "adult panics" including moral, religious, and nationalistic fears. One of the primary reasons James's selection of a child-protagonist for this novel is surprising is the fact that James himself had a negative view towards writers of children's stories. In her foundational book, Beverly Lyon Clark examines the preconceived notions of childhood and children's literature at the turn of the twentieth century and the ways in which authors such as Henry James looked down on this genre of literature. Although not all literature with child protagonists is considered children's literature, Clark examines James's critical view of childhood and children's literature and the reasons why James wrote from the perspective of a child. She argues:

> Henry James frequently characterized the audience for literature that sold—literature by such a writer as [Frances Hodgson] Burnett—as childish. And I turn here to scrutiny of James's rhetorical deployment of childhood, in his nonfiction and fiction. I do this in part because his thinking was profoundly influential. His protestations and tropes, his condemnations and swerves, also register shifts that were occurring more broadly throughout the culture at the turn of the century. (35)

For someone who frequently railed against children's literature in the press, it is puzzling that he would write from a child's perspective.

Additionally, James's harshest criticism was towards women writers (i.e. Frances Hodgson Burnett, author of *The Secret Garden* as mentioned in the above quotation), yet he gave high praise to children's literature authors who wrote primarily for boys—most notably Robert Louis Stevenson. James, in his essay "The Future of the Novel," describes how "[g]reat fortunes, if not great reputations, are made, we learn, by writing for schoolboys"; yet earlier in that same paragraph, James says that children's literature is that of girls, especially if the term is applied to the "later stages of life of the innumerable woman who, under modern arrangements, increasingly fail to marry—fail, apparently, even, largely, to desire to" (James "House of Fiction" 49). If James despised children and their fiction so much, then why would he include a child—and a female child at that—in one of his books?

Mendelssohn offers her commentary on the role that children play in aestheticism and how James utilizes this in *What Maisie Knew*:

> James's engagement with Aestheticism and Decadence can fruitfully be read in conjunction with his response to the paradox of childhood. James's ambivalent attitude to these movements is reflected in his portrayals of children, either as the blameless casualties of grown-up games, or as cunning little operators in

> these games. ("Aestheticism and Decadence" 97)

Henry James backs up these claims in his preface to *What Maisie Knew:* "[s]mall children have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them; their vision is at any moment much richer, their apprehension even constantly stronger, than their prompt, their at all producible, vocabulary" (*WMK* 27). Whereas children's literature authors were beginning to give their characters agency where they are at the mercy of adults, at the end of James's novel, Maisie gains no more agency than she had at the beginning of the book.

Furthermore, "[i]n treating Maisie seriously, in having Sir Claude treat her seriously, James has had to prise her out of the pigeonhole to which he has elsewhere tried to confine children" but "ultimately James takes Maisie seriously only in order to use her" (Clark 39, 42). For James, Maisie is an instrument to display the selfishness of the adult characters as they continually disregard Maisie to chase their own pursuits. Yet, instead of the traditional childhood innocence that dominated the fiction of this period, Maisie "knows" more than she should at this age, and she is often no more mature than the adults who are making the decisions for her. Phillips writes, "In Maisie's precocity, James implicitly offers a challenge to the Romantic ideals of childhood immaturity circulating in nineteenth- and twentieth-century society. But in making characters like Ida and Beale Farange the mouthpieces of these ideals, James appears to ridicule much of mainstream adult society" (47). Maisie's innocence—and thus, her childhood—is exploited for her parents' gain, forcing Maisie into being an adult before the appointed time. James, in having Maisie masquerade as an adult in a child's body, allows himself to, as Phillips said, reject those Romantic views of childhood, an action that lines up well with modern approaches to literature. *What Maisie Knew* also adds an additional representation into modern literature in:

> the way it lifts the conventional child protagonist out of the subversive world of children's literature and sets her down in the middle of a more overtly abrasive modernist universe… It becomes a scathing critique of society's preoccupations with an unreal child figure, and it becomes a narrative petri dish for rethinking literature's own relationship to childhood. (Phillips 40)

This alternative view of looking at childhood is what makes *What Maisie Knew* both a modernist and an aesthetic text. It is the combination of these two literary movements that allows Maisie to be such a complex, intricate text that is worthy of study.

Maisie's childhood is atypical of the average child as she is tossed about between her parents and subsequent stepparents, none of whom seem to care about her well-being or general happiness. Although she always has someone to live with, she is emotionally manipulated into forgetting—and often forsaking—the family structure she has just left.

Maisie longs for her mother's love, and while Sir Claude assures Maisie that her mother loves her, Mrs. Wix continually reminds Maisie of how immoral her mother is because of her many lovers. Maisie is never granted her own agency, and while most children are not able to dictate where they live, Maisie is left with no opportunity to maintain a stable living situation: "the tearfulness was far from deterrent to our heroine's thought of how happy she should be if she could only make an arrangement for herself" (*WMK* 136). Maisie longs for a moment where she can make one decision for herself and eventually stands up to Mrs. Wix:

> "You give me up? You break with me for ever? You turn me into the street?" Maisie, though gasping a little, bore up under the rain of challenges. "Those, it seems to me, are the things you do to me." (*WMK* 207)

However, Maisie's agency does not last long as she is continuously manipulated by the adults in her life and in the end, she is forced to decide with whom she wants to permanently live. Maisie chooses Mrs. Wix, and although she loves Mrs. Wix, she must give up Sir Claude and his love in the process. Even at the end of the novel, Maisie is being emotionally manipulated by Mrs. Wix who believes that Sir Claude will not love Maisie as well as she can, even though Sir Claude was possibly the one adult who truly loved Maisie although he most likely had ulterior motives as well. Mrs. Wix claims that Sir Claude "would like to please her [Maisie]; he would like even, I think, to please me. But he hasn't given you [Mrs. Beale] up" (*WMK* 265). Though on the next page, Maisie and Sir Claude share a tender goodbye that perhaps indicates that Sir Claude does not want to give up Maisie but is not man enough to give up his life with Mrs. Beale for the sake of Maisie: "[o]n the threshold Maisie paused; she put out her hand to her stepfather. He took it and held it a moment, and their eyes met as the eyes of those who have done for each other what they can" (*WMK* 266). Mrs. Wix's disapproval of Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale's relationship—and morality—prevent her from allowing Maisie to live with someone who truly cares about her. It can be argued that Mrs. Wix's only reason for wanting to raise Maisie is that she sees Maisie as a replacement for her own daughter. If this is the case, even in her permanent living situation, Maisie is only seen as a substitute and not as her true self.

Morality is another aspect of Jamesian aestheticism that is discussed in the scholarship yet has not yet been applied to *What Maisie Knew*. Mendelssohn's theories on morality as applied to "The Author of Beltraffio," are also applicable to Maisie as they both "revea[l] the repressive, suffocating and ultimately crucifying power of the righteous" ("Aestheticism and Decadence" 99). Throughout the novel, Maisie is continually plagued with Mrs. Wix's desire for a moral sense, despite the fact that Maisie has no model—not

even Mrs. Wix—to show her what morality entails. Much to Mrs. Wix's chagrin, Maisie never really seems to gain that "moral sense" that Mrs. Wix has decided is of utmost importance in Maisie's development as a person. Yet, that behavior is never modeled to Maisie as all the adults around her lack any morality. Even Mrs. Wix is incredibly judgmental of those she deems beneath her. Towards the end of the novel, Maisie, in a rare display of her childhood agency, disregards Mrs. Wix when she chides Maisie for her absent morality: "'[h]aven't you really and truly any moral sense?' Maisie was aware that her answer, though it brought her down to her heels, was vague even to imbecility, and that this was the first time she had appeared to practise with Mrs. Wix an intellectual inaptitude to meet her" (*WMK* 211). Maisie has no inclination for why developing this moral sense will be beneficial for her as she is simply trying to survive being tossed around between four different parents and the emotional damage that ensues from the two households despising each other. Maisie "must also discover that in acquiring a 'moral sense' she will still lose. Even Mrs. Wix is the enemy of Maisie's free spirit, for Mrs. Wix only differs from the rest of Maisie's mentors in offering to confine her in sentimentality and conventional morality" (Bell 247). James's representation of morality in *What Maisie Knew* places this book in the aesthetic movement, and further cements the duplicity of the adult characters in their relationship to Maisie.

What does this mean for *What Maisie Knew* in that it can be viewed as both a Victorian and early modern text? How do the themes and values of each movement work together (or against each other) to produce a book like *Maisie*? Since modernism is a rejection of Victorian ideals, it seems impossible that a text could exist in both worlds simultaneously. However, *What Maisie Knew* breaks the binary of Victorian versus Modern; while the form resembles traditional modernist texts, the themes reflect that of Victorian aestheticism during the *fin-de-siècle*. James was the master of existing in two different worlds—living in both America and England, publishing in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—therefore, it is easy to see how his fiction could exist in two different literary movements. Viewing *What Maisie Knew* as both an aesthetic and modern text opens the book to multiple interpretations of childhood, child/adult relationships, and morality: ideas that are crucial in Jamesian aestheticism and modernism. Despite its similarities to others of James's aesthetic works, *What Maisie Knew* has not yet been discussed in this context. By looking at *Maisie* through this lens, readers can better understand both aestheticism and the themes and issues in the book. By *What Maisie Knew* being an aesthetic text, Henry James further solidifies himself in the Victorian period while at the same time blurring the lines between the Victorian and the Modern in a way that calls into question the rigid definitions of literary movements

and creates new interpretations for these books.

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