

Caroline Sumpter, “No Artist has Ethical Sympathies’: Oscar Wilde, Aesthetics, and Moral Evolution.” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 44. 2 (2016): 623-640.

Challenging mainstream views on Oscar Wilde’s understanding of evolutionary theories in relation to morality, aesthetics and socialism, Caroline Sumpter argues that Wilde’s fiction and literary and social criticism need to be read in conjunction with debates around the evolution of morality; debates that were conducted in the same periodicals that Wilde published his essays. The *Nineteenth Century*, for example, in which Wilde published “The Decay of Lying” (1889) and “The True Function and Value of Criticism” (1890), featured important essays on evolution and ethics by T. H. Huxley and Herbert Spencer. Sumpter argues that reading Wilde’s writings within the context of these topical concerns revises our understanding of Wilde as anti-materialistic and as concurring with Spencer’s ideas on evolution and society. It also allows, she suggests, for a more nuanced reading of Wilde’s position on evolution, aesthetics and morality that sees Wilde’s thinking not as static and well-established by the 1870s, but fluid and changeable in its response to contemporary journalistic debates, an argument Sumpter unfolds via three stages.

In the first section, the author discerns the influence of T. H. Huxley on Wilde’s thinking. She quotes and paraphrases from Huxley’s “The Struggle for Existence” to reflect what she refers to as “intriguing parallels” between Huxley’s essay and Wilde’s “The Decay of Lying.” For example, for Huxley she suggests, “nature was non-moral, not immoral, and [the] conception of an evil nature was as erroneous as the conviction of its benevolence” (625). Sumpter bridges Huxley’s views with Wilde’s by explaining that to Huxley, creative activities are “wonderful ‘superfluities’” which are “a random by-product of evolution.” This is evident in Wilde’s “art and nature” arguments in his essay, “The Decay of Lying”, since creative faculties “allow individuals to distinguish themselves from the rest of animal life” (625). Here the author makes the passing remark that Huxley was countering “a Schopenhaurian pessimism”; a broad claim which could have been better supported by contemporary evidence, perhaps from Huxley’s work.

In the second section, Sumpter shifts focus from Huxley to Herbert Spencer. By explaining how Spencer’s work on the origins of morality departs from Darwin’s and at times disagrees with Huxley’s, Sumpter demonstrates Spencer’s distinct influence on Wilde, particularly in his emphasis on “an aesthetic instinct that was not a direct prompt to moral action” (628). The author, moreover, calls for a reading of Wilde’s statement in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) – “No artist has ethical sympathies” – outside the “context of the art for art’s sake movement”, for the statement, she argues, is not only a reflection of Wilde’s “suspicion of sympathy as an inherently ethical force” (632), but also an indicator of how Wilde stepped beyond the ideas of his influencers. For instance, Wilde departs from Spencer’s position, by “arguing against art’s appeal to our sympathies” in “The Decay of Lying” and by seeking to “sever familiar links between aesthetic taste and sympathy” (628).

In the third and final section of the article, Sumpter locates Wilde’s notions of innate “socialist” individualism within contemporary nineteenth-century evolutionary debates. She rightfully calls for a revision of Smith and Helfand’s assumption – editors of Wilde’s *Oxford Notebooks* – that “Wilde believed ‘humane qualities did not evolve

through natural selection” (634), since this assumption does not take into consideration Wilde’s later intellectual development and engagement with contemporary ideological debates. Sumpter, in addition, mentions briefly, but relevantly, William Morris’s “ethical evolution” and socialist utopian text, *News from Nowhere* (1890), discussing how Wilde was influenced in “The Soul of Man” by Morris’s notion of a “politicised form of ethical revolution” which can be seen in his condemnation of theories that rely on “the permanency of human nature” (636). There is, however, no mention of John Ruskin’s influence on Wilde in this section or elsewhere in the article, nor of the influence of Max Nordau and Cesare Lombroso, whose works Wilde refers to in his letters and his *De Profundis*. Discussing Wilde’s engagement with Nordau and Lombroso could have served to add another dimension to the article in regards to Wilde’s views on heredity and sexual orientation and would have also been of relevance to the author’s point early on in the article on how Wilde’s thinking was “not static”, as previously mentioned.

Nevertheless, the article closely examines Wilde’s engagement with evolutionary ideas in relation to the works of leading evolutionary scientists of the time, chiefly Huxley and Spencer. She establishes the influence of their writings on Wilde in points of parity as well as points of departure, and argues for the importance of the link between debates conducted in contemporary periodicals and the fluid nature of Wilde’s thinking on evolution, aesthetics and morality. In this way, Sumpter’s article is a valuable and significant contribution to scholarship on Wilde’s engagement with popular scientific theories of the time.

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