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Oscar Wilde
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Gagnier, Regenia. "Wilde and the Victorians." *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Peter Raby. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
(Unknown page numbers). Print.

In her essay, "Wilde and the Victorians," Regenia Gagnier examines how Oscar Wilde's lived in a society that was both steeped in the values of modernism ("progress, technology, global markets and individualism" [Gagnier 1]) and was transitioning to the transvaluation of values and perspectivism of postmodernism. Along with touchstone concepts such as Jean-Francois Lyotard's 'crisis of legitimation' and Nietzsche's rejection of values, Gagnier illuminates Wilde's position through William Lovett's explanation of the three master narratives of the Victorian age, titling the paper's three sections "Bread," "Knowledge," and "Freedom."

In the first section, Gagnier describes how Wilde's literary works reflect the period of "economic transition from industrial production to high mass consumption" (3) that he lived in. Wilde's criticism, Gagnier argues, shows "a faith in technology and enlightened self-interest [...and] consistently promotes the utopian goal of individual creativity" (5), values distinct of widespread modern industry, while it at the same time "he was also tempted by the more subjective calculations of pleasure that the new psychologically based economics had introduced" (5). While the "new Hedonism" of Wilde's *Dorian Gray* is clear evidence that the writer contemplated and even supported the effect of the new high-consumption economy

on morality and individualism, Gagnier also notes that Wilde “did frequently [...] deplore his materialism and sensuality as a weakness” (3).

In the section of her paper titled “Knowledge,” Gagnier suggests that “more than any specific content of knowledge, the values of dialogue and debate, of individuality in the face of mass custom and of autonomy infuse Wilde’s life and work” (8). Wilde runs into conflict when he presents these values through his art to audiences who have differing interests and interpretations. Hence Wilde’s critics and audience, Gagnier states, saw him as “both romantic and cynical [...] both sentimental and satirical” [...and] “both a martyr and a mannequin” (10). Gagnier goes on to explain that Wilde’s philosophy of art was shaped by his understanding of the progression of cultural evolution, in that since “life imitates art, art should be progressive” (9) and therefore idealistic and utopian.

Gagnier devotes the last section of her essay, titled “Freedom,” to explaining the social criticism of Ruskin, Morris, and Wilde, three aesthetic thinkers of the era. For all three thinkers, advocating for freedom and rights for the individual meant critiquing mass convention and embracing the values of socialism. While Ruskin focused on the economic exploitation of the age and Morris argued that the class system distracted humans from realizing their genuine needs, Gagnier shows that Wilde advocated for universal acceptance and tolerance. Wilde, explains Gagnier, insisted that “human individuals had unique temperaments and tastes that should be allowed to flourish according to the laws of their own being” (15).

Gagnier clearly traces how the flamboyance, the freedom from tradition, and the intense love of pleasure that is so infamously associated with Oscar Wilde is as

much a sign of the era that he lived and wrote in as it is a sign of his own character.

According to Gagnier the changing economy, knowledge, and politics present in Wilde's life and work is a sign of a society transitioning from a rooted existence in the values of modernism to one of deconstructed values and the perspectivism of postmodernism.