



## Different Approaches, Same Achievements --- Aesthetic Wilde VS. Realist Cao Xueqin

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### Abstract

The charmingly written Chapter 11 of Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* seems overlooked by the critics, but actually, it is a best footnote of Wilde's literary creation of aestheticism and a great achievement of his writing with extreme simplicity. Its presentation of luxurious arts, though strikingly different from that of *The Dream of the Red Mansion* by Cao Xueqin, results in the same excellence. Making an analysis of the different approaches to the "display" of the four luxurious artistic works: fragrance, music, jewelry and embroidered work, this paper finds that although there seems no comparison between Wilde's aestheticism and Cao's realism, simplest as Wilde and most elaborate as Cao, they both delivered the world the extraordinary beauty of arts with their pens and both revealed their thoughts on literary creation through the extreme beauty.

**Keywords:** Aestheticism, Realism, Art, Extreme excellence

Many researches have been done and are still being done about the Irish writer Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) and his fiction *The Picture of Dorian Gray* since it was published in 1891. According to Huang Yuanshen, scholar and translator of Wilde's works, different people appreciate Wilde from different angles: "Chen Duxiu saw his talent as a writer; Zhang Wentian was shocked by his depiction of the chilly hell; Winston Churchill appreciated his rarely-seen wittiness and humor; while Liu Yazhi valued his maverick character the most. Wilde was indeed such a writer who was orthodoxy-against and behaved abnormally, had unique individuality, spoke wittily and thought sharply" (Huang, 2004, p.1). However, "*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a fiction with profound connotation, and a thorough exploitation of it will be a challenge for the readers. And just because of the challenge, the fiction is so charming" (Huang, 2004, p.5). Chapter 11 of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is just such a chapter that is irresistibly charming but has not yet been exploited. While we kept discussing the aestheticism of the fiction and admiring its gorgeous language, we seemed to have unfortunately overlooked Chapter 11. With several paragraphs of merely 3500 words, Chapter 11 vividly exhibited the extremely luxurious art works of the noble family and a most mysterious legend. It was the best footnote of Wilde's doctrine of "Art for Art's Sake" and Hedonism. Moreover, Chapter 11 reminds me of *A Dream of Red Mansions* by Cao Xueqin. While huge difference between the two masterpieces exists, they are equally fascinating as they both splendidly show us the ultimate beauty of arts. Wilde used only a few thousand words to show off millions of fancy precious jewelry-- the mysterious perfumes, the wonderful music instruments, the rare jewels and the glowing brocade -- building up a marvelous kaleidoscope of arts. By "showing off", I not only mean that the precious artworks Wilde depicted were so shining, but also that his profound knowledge of arts deserved it. Correspondingly, I found, the perfumes, the instruments, the jewels and the brocade appearing in the Chinese greatest fiction *A Dream of Red Mansions* were equally brilliant, only that Cao was not simply for "showing off". In his arduous work of realism, Cao related all those fine arts to the characters and their feelings, to the settings and the atmosphere---each was written for a particular reason at a particular time.

### 1. Perfumes

In Chapter 11 of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde led us into the kingdom of scents by this sentence only, "so he would now study perfumes and the secrets of their manufacture, distilling heavily scented oils and burning odorous gums from the East" (2004, pp.156-7). With only 239 words, the whole paragraph introduces numerous types of perfumes

Dorian studied. “wondering what there was in frankincense that made one mystical, and in ambergris that stirred one's passions, and in violets that woke the memory of dead romances, and in musk that troubled the brain, and in champak that stained the imagination; and seeking often to elaborate a real psychology of perfumes, and to estimate the several influences of sweet-smelling roots and scented, pollen-laden flowers; of aromatic balms and of dark and fragrant woods; of spikenard, that sickens; of hovenia, that makes men mad; and of aloes, that are said to be able to expel melancholy from the soul” (ibid:157). For an aesthetic author, the only thing Wilder needed to do was to present the beauty and to spread the scents. Whether the “sickening or mad-driving” perfumes were relevant to the story or to the characters was not taken into his consideration. At best it was only to announce how luxurious and dispirited Dorian's life was. Wilder, a writer who worshiped hedonism and aestheticism, would naturally pour his knowledge of perfumes onto paper to his heart's content and let those mysterious scents overwhelm the readers.

Cao's scents, instead, were toward the other end of extreme. musk, aloeswood, sandalwood, rue, benzoin, borneol...—no less than several dozens of different types, Cao's scents deeply penetrated into the characters' personalities and fates. “Chin Ko-ching's bedroom was full of sweet scent, which drove Pao-yu into the mysterious dream to the Illusory Land of Great Void (Yang,1978,Voll, p.72); Tai-yu's window sent out a subtle fragrance which refreshed people; Pao-chai's sleeves had whiffs of cool, sweet fragrance which everybody found surprising; while poor Miao-yu got kidnapped after being seized by a numbness due to a whiff of narcotic incense” (Yuan,2006, B05). Further, the scents and incenses were not only related with the characters but also a must at different ceremonies and in daily lives in the House of Chia-- they were used to commemorate the Chias' ancestors, to celebrate festivals and to scent their chambers.... The title of Chapter 60 was even composed of four flower perfumes: “Jasmine Powder Is Substituted for Rose-Nitric Powder/ Rose Flavoured Juice Is Repaid with Pachyma Cocos”(Yang, 1978,Vol2, p316). Chapter 60 wrote about the powder, lotion and cream of the four flowers all the way from how to use, how to eat, their smell, their taste to their functions so that all the female characters in Grand View Garden, the masters, the maids and etc, stood in front of the readers as if they were vividly alive. From Pao-yu, Tai-yu, Pai-chai and Tan-chun to Li Wan, Madam Yu and Aunt Hsueh, from Concubine Chao, Chia Huan, Tsai-yun to Ping-erh and Hsi-jen, from matron Hsia, Mrs Liu to Jui-kuan, Fang-kuan, Ou-kuan and Ai-kuan...four flower perfumes introduced lots of characters and built up an involving story. Reading *A Dream of Red Mansions*, you will not be drunk by the suddenly strong scents as in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but will always be led by all kinds of scents in the House of Chia and will be deeply impressed by the inner strength of Cao's aesthetics.

## 2. Music

Scents still around, Wilder led the readers to “devote themselves entirely to music” with Dorian. The part of music only contains about 800 words, a little longer than the other parts though, which again covers such a great number of never-heard-of odd instruments and legends: the mysterious “juruparis” of the Indians which can be played only by fasted or scourged young men; the earthen jars of the Peruvians that have the shrill cries of birds; flutes of human bones Alfonso de Ovalle heard in Chile; the sonorous green jaspers found near Cuzco that give forth a note of singular sweetness. There are painted gourds filled with pebbles that rattle when shaken; the long clarion of the Mexicans, through which the performer inhales the air; the ture of the Amazon tribes, sounded by the sentinels, whose harsh sound can be heard at a distance of three leagues; the teponaztli, that has two vibrating tongues of wood and is beaten with sticks that are smeared with an elastic gum obtained from the milky juice of plants; the yotl-bells of the Aztecs, that are hung in clusters like grapes; and a huge cylindrical drum, in the Mexican Temple, covered with the skins of great serpents giving off doleful sound (Wilder, pp.157-8)...Through Dorian, Wilder expressed his pride and cynicism when talking about those bizarre instruments: “The fantastic character of these instruments fascinated him, and he felt a curious delight in the thought that art, like Nature, has her monsters, things of bestial shape and with hideous voices” (ibid: 158-9); “he used to give curious concerts in which mad gypsies tore wild music from little zithers, or grave, yellow-shawled Tunisians plucked at the strained strings of monstrous lutes, while grinning Negroes beat monotonously upon copper drums and, crouching upon scarlet mats, slim turbaned Indians blew through long pipes of reed or brass and charmed-- or feigned to charm--great hooded snakes and horrible horned adders. The harsh intervals and shrill discords of barbaric music stirred him at times when Schubert's grace, and Chopin's beautiful sorrows, and the mighty harmonies of Beethoven himself, fell unheeded on his ear”(ibid: 157-8). However, this time, Wilder who always did arts for arts' sake led the readers back to the raw barbarous arts. Although it seemed to be only announcing that “art, like Nature, has her monsters” (ibid: 157), it somewhat implied the realistic significance, showing his rebel to the advocated orthodox arts in the Victorian Era.

Let's now step into the music world of Cao's. The music in *A Dream of Red Mansions* is a huge collection of Chinese music which has a long history. According to “A Survey of the Historical Data on the Music in *A Dream of Red Mansions*”, Cao mentioned 40 types of 8 categories of operas, 20 forms of instrumental performances for solo, ensemble or accompaniment, 31 different instruments and combinations, 13 dance repertoires, 27 tunes and 6 forms of folk arts...the instruments that appeared most frequently include Guqin, Xiao, Sheng, Flute, Guan, Zither, Pipa, Huqin, Gong, Drum, Plate and etc, among which Guqin, Flute, Drum, Xiao and Guan were depicted in the greatest details (Meng,2004, pp.30-34). Although all the music events were within the big mansion of Chia's, they were a fine epitome of the

prosperous opera and music nationwide during the booming era of Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong dynasties. From Chapter One when “the sound of flutes and strings could be heard from all the houses in the neighborhood; everywhere was singing” (Vol1, p13) to Chapter 87 when Tai-yu chanted the four mournful stanzas to the lute, music accompanied us all the way---we hear the solo of the drum, the solo of the flute, the ensemble of the percussion, the philharmonic orchestra, the ballad, the songs with Guqin....The colorful description of the music, sometimes graceful, like the soft rhythm when the Imperial Consort Yuan-chun was back home for a visit (chap.17 and 18) and sometimes desolating enough to crack metal or stone (Vol3, p108), like the tunes played by the lutist Tai-yu when moved by an autumn poem she mourned the past (Vol3, p97) (Chap 87). Pao-yu was awakened to esoteric truths by a song on Pao-chai’s birthday (Vol1, p311) (Chap 22); the Lady Dowager talked about elegance when appreciating the flute in the fall moon light (Chap 76) ...Cao joined the music with the scenario, bridged the music with the souls. He put music at everywhere at any time and analyzed the instruments at every tiny point. His very high art accomplishments and very deep knowledge of music served for every character at a low profile. Arts, stories and characters perfectly integrated into his finest design.

### 3. Jewelry

“On one occasion he (Dorian) took up the study of jewels” (Wilder, 2004, pp.159) -- Wilder once again turned his marvelous kaleidoscope of precious treasures. Let’s take a look at those jewelry Dorian settled and resettled everyday in their cases: the olive-green chrysoberyl that turns red by lamplight, the camphene with its wire-like line of silver, the pistachio-coloured peridot, rose-pink and wine-yellow topazes, carbuncles of fiery scarlet with tremulous, four-rayed stars, flame-red cinnamon-stones, orange and violet spinels, and amethysts with their alternate layers of ruby and sapphire, the red gold sunstone, the pearly white moonstone, the broken rainbow milky opal, three emeralds of extraordinary size from Amsterdam, a turquoise de la vieille roche that was the envy of all the connoisseurs and the coat decorated with 560 pearls that he wore in a makeup ball (ibid). Legendary stories related to jewels include: the serpent with eyes of real jacinth mentioned in Alphonso’s “Clericalis Disciplina”, snakes in the vale of Jordan “with collars of real emeralds growing on their backs” mentioned in the romantic history of Alexander, the dragon with a gem in its brain in the story of Philostratus, that “by the exhibition of golden letters and a scarlet robe” the monster could be thrown into a magical sleep and slain; said by alchemist Pierre de Boniface that the diamond rendered a man invisible, and the agate of India made him eloquent, the cornelian appeased anger, and the hyacinth provoked sleep, and the amethyst drove away the fumes of wine. The garnet cast out demons, and the hydropicus deprived the moon of her colour. The selenite waxed and waned with the moon (ibid: 158)...The legends about jewelry that Wilder knew were countless. Wilder even exhibited superb treasures owned by 12 kings including the King of Ceilan, son of Alexander VI, i.e. Duke de Valentinois, Charles of England, which conquered everybody’s eyes. “How exquisite life had once been! How gorgeous in its pomp and decoration! Even to read of the luxury of the dead was wonderful.” -- “Dreaming of the luxury of the dead” -- Wilder pointed out the reason why he put so many sentences on jewelry through Dorian.

Correspondingly, Cao did not spare any ink writing about jewelry. However, just like his “scents” and “music”, every piece of his gems and jades interacted perfectly with the characters, emotions and scenarios. One could argue that without gems or jades, there would not have been a masterpiece called *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Not only Pao-yu’s jade, which was the size of a sparrow’s egg, iridescent as clouds at sunrise, smooth as junket, and covered with coloured lines (Vol1, p120), and Pao-chai’s bright gold necklace studded with glittering pearls and jewels (Vol1, p122) (Chap 8) derived so many touching stories, but also every precious jewelry of everyone in the house of Chia, from the Lady Dowager to the maids, was depicted vividly in details -- Hsiu-yen’s green jade pendant, Chia Lien’s Nine-Dragon Pendant, the red cornelian rings Shih Hsiang-yun gave Hsi-jen, Yuan-yang and the other maids, the agate pillow Yuan-chun sent the Lady Dowager, the jade rings Tai-yu and Hsiang-yun got as gifts from the Dowager Princess of Nanan, not to mention all assortments of carol, cat’s-eyes, and emerald...Related with them were millions of stories. The debut of Hsi-feng was gorgeous: “Unlike the girls, she was richly dressed and resplendent as a fairy. Her gold-filigree tiara was set with jewels and pearls. Her hair-clasps, in the form of five phoenixes facing the sun, had pendants of pearls. Her necklet, of red gold, was in the form of a coiled dragon studded with gems. She had double red jade pendants with pea-green tassels attached to her skirt. Her close-fitting red satin jacket was embroidered with gold butterflies and flowers. Her turquoise cape, lined with white squirrel, was inset with designs in coloured silk. Her skirt of kingfisher-blue crepe was patterned with flowers” (Vol1, p38)(Chap 3); The decoration and utensils were extremely luxurious, made of gems, jades and opals, and even the musical instruments in Tan-chun’s room were made of white jade: a white jade musical stone suspending on a lacquer frame (Vol1, p591) (Chap 40). And the glass vases, amber glasses, agate bowls, the red soapstone cup shaped like a palm leaf and the large emerald plate in the form of a lotus leaf, and the white agate plate with spiral designs...“The Chinling Chias/ If truth be told/ Have halls of jade/ Stables of gold” (Vol1, p56), “The Hseuehs in their affluence/ Are so rich and grand/ Gold is like iron to them/ And pearls like sand” (Vol1, p56), this is nothing but true. Similarly luxurious as in Wilder’s world, the precious treasures in Cao’s stories not only made people longing for, but also carried the heavy destinies of the characters.

#### 4. Embroideries and Tapestries

Preceded by jewelry, Wilder started to devote his writing to the embroideries and the tapestries. Still beginning with a seemingly relaxing sentence “Then he turned his attention to embroideries...” (Wilder, p. 162), here comes the storm of the finest embroideries and the tapestries in the world – “the dainty Delhi muslins, finely wrought with gold-thread palmates and stitched over with iridescent beetles’ wings; the Dacca gauzes, that from their transparency are known in the East as “woven air,” and “running water,” and “evening dew”; strange figured cloths from Java; elaborate yellow Chinese hangings; books bound in tawny satins or fair blue silks and wrought with fleurs-de-lis, birds and images; veils of lacis worked in Hungary point; Sicilian brocades and stiff Spanish velvets; Georgian work, with its gilt coins, and Japanese Foukousas, with their green-toned golds and their marvellously plumaged birds” (ibid: 164)... Every piece of his collection is a rarity. Still a lot of legendary stories: the great crocus-coloured robe of Athena, on which the gods fought against the giants; the huge velarium that Nero had stretched across the Colosseum at Rome, that Titan sail of purple on which was represented the starry sky, and Apollo driving a chariot; the curious table-napkins wrought for the Priest of the Sun, on which were displayed all the dainties and viands that could be wanted for a feast; the coat that Charles of Orleans once wore, on the sleeves of which were embroidered the verses of a song beginning “Madame, je suis tout joyeux”, the musical accompaniment of the words being wrought in gold thread, and each note, of square shape in those days, formed with four pearls (ibid: 162-3)...and many more royal embroideries, among which each piece is priceless. Wilder’s knowledge and anxiety about the exquisite arts and life were the best, and the breath taking overwhelming luxury was the best of the best.

Cao’s expertise in the embroideries and the tapestries, the varieties he knew and the accuracy of his description were second to none. The thin leno, the soft ghatpot and gauze, thin but strong spun, and sateen, satin, silk...several tens of different silk products were used in the House of Chia (Xie, 2003, pp.44-47). Moreover, the Lady Dowager, who had experienced the climax of the Chia Family, was a true connoisseur of silk. She was even an expert in leno for bed-curtains and windows: “This soft-mist silk comes in four colours only: light blue, russet, pine-green and pink. Used for bed-curtains or window gauze, from a distance it looks like smoke or mist—that’s how it got its name. The pink’s also called rosy-cloud gauze” (Vol1, p584) (Chap 40) -- Leno and silk, though still popular among the other people under the roof of the Red Mansion, were not as well understood as by the Lady Dowager, implying the downtrend of the Chia Family from the climax. The embroideries were gorgeous, but not solely aesthetic. Every piece had its realistic meaning -- the ‘golden peacock felt’ woven of peacock feathers in Russia (Vol2, p185) that the Lady Dowager gave to Pao-yu, which shimmered gold, green and blue (Vol2, p185) (Chap 52), provided the chance for the sharp but nice Ching-wen to show her extraordinary skill; mending it at midnight in sickness; the soft scarlet flowered portiere, the back-rest and bolster of brocade with chain designs and the glossy satin mattress with a golden centre (Vol1, p95-6) in Hsi-feng’s chamber was so beaming that the suburban lady Granny Liu could not find a word other than “Gracious Buddha!”; the large kang by the window, which was covered with a scarlet foreign rug, and the red back-rests and turquoise bolsters in the middle, both with dragon-design medallions (Vol1, p42) in Madame Wang’s chamber fully declared her status (Chap 3) and stunned the new-comer Tai-yu; and the most words were certainly put on Pao-yu’s satin apparel: “His red archer’s jacket, embroidered with golden butterflies and flowers, was tied with a coloured tasseled palace sash. Over this he wore a turquoise fringed coat of Japanese satin with a raised pattern of flowers in eight bunches. His court boots were of black satin with white soles” (Vol1, p46) (Chap 3); “...Pao-yu was wearing his red archer’s tunic embroidered with golden dragons and lined with fox-fur under a fringed bluish-grey sable coat” (Vol1, p270-1) (Chap 19); “...Pao-yu was wearing, over his brown velvet archer’s coat lined with fox fur, a scarlet felt jacket embroidered with gold thread. Its slate-blue satin border was fringed with tassels” (Vol2, p185) (Chap 52)...Every appearance of Pao-yu was extremely luxurious, which forms a sharp contrast to the ending of his leaving the material world. Cao’s exquisite embroideries and tapestries were more than gifts of arts. They embedded deep thoughts as well.

#### 5. Conclusion

Chapter 11 of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* presents the readers the luxury of artworks -- perfumes, musical instruments, jewelry and embroideries that the royals own and tells the legends about those luxurious arts. As an author being “art for art’s sake”, Wilder did not have to consider the meaning of showing those artworks. To make sense, all he needed was one simple sentence -- Dorian was interested in the precious artworks. As long as it was a gorgeous piece of art, Wilder would pour all his knowledge about it to the readers, following his own will. To Wilder, art is art, with no attached purpose. Art is just for the joy of the sensory. On the opposite, every piece of art that had been willfully used by Wilder as “art for art’s sake” appeared in Cao’s renowned realistic fiction *A Dream of Red Mansions*, only that they were perfectly integrated into the characters and their destinies, without a single exception. Although Cao described the artworks meticulously throughout the whole story, we could still sense his particular design that organized words as precisely as possible. The two masters, western or eastern, aesthetic or realistic, were so different in times, regions, languages, thoughts, writing ideas or writing styles that they seem to be incomparable at all, whereas we could not help exclaiming the same excellence achieved by different approaches in their novels-- this is where the charm of literature lies--simplest as Wilder or most elaborate as Cao, they both delivered the world the extraordinary beauty of arts through their literary

creation and both revealed their thoughts on literary creation by the extreme beauty.

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