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Whistler and His Revolutionary Esthetics

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Abstract. This research deals with James Whistler, one of the leaders of revolutionary esthetics in the nineteenth century. His art went through various stages of development. These stages of expression were influenced by various factors, which were mainly; realism, Pre-Raphaelite characteristics, Oriental motifs, esthetic trends, and impressionism. These stages led him finally to bring to life his own "symphonies" of painting. These paintings represent a turn towards abstract art, and this is a significant cornerstone in the history of art. His work and esthetic ideas reflect a major change that extends into modern times. This research also traces Whistler's influence on the English poets of the 1880s in their interest in "abstract" expression where no concern for the anecdote is present. Thus, he was able through his esthetics to influence the artistic bent of his age and direct it towards the realm of the "abstract."

While reading works by and about John Ruskin, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Oscar Wilde, the reader encounters the name of an artist, James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903). What is intriguing is the relationship of Whistler, a painter, to those literary figures. His work has been neglected in the past fifty years, in spite of his revolutionary style and the significant influence he had on his contemporaries and even more so on the generations to come. He is usually referred to in the index and not the table of contents, as for example in Philippe Roberts-Jones' book, *Beyond Time and Place: Non-Realistic Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (1978), or referred to in connection to other writers such as Ruskin. Even then he is only given two pages (in a book of one hundred and sixty-two pages) as in both Robert L. Peters' book *Victorians on Literature and Art* (1961), and in William H. Gerdt's *American Impressionism* (1980).

While Whistler influenced and was exposed to Victorian aesthetic principles, he sought to transcend them and create a new expression reflecting his artistic values

and vision. He was the first major American artist to impose his own way of expression on English art. He was the first to paint the night. Before him artists may have attempted to portray scenes at night, but

> ..., before Whistler, not one had endeavored to render on canvas the very quality of night, its atmosphere, its color, the depths of its darkness, its mystery, its pale dim light from the stars and the moon. ... His Nocturnes were scoffed at in the beginning, but now people who are caught in the blue twilight or the paler starlight and condescend to be conscious of the fact, say "How like a Whistler!"(1)

Whistler was a man of great and various talents: painting in oil and water color, drawing in pastel and in black and white, etching, lithography, and interior decoration. It would be very difficult to cover all his artistic works in one presentation, and therefore this paper will be limited to his paintings of portraits and Nocturnes and their influence in late 19th C. literature.

For the purpose of orienting the reader with Whistler the man, a brief summary of his life will follow.

James Abbott McNeill Whistler was, if anything, cosmopolitan. Born in America in Lowell, Massachusetts in 1834, he went at the age of nine to St. Petersburg in Russia, where his father was building railroads for the Czar. The family lived in St. Petersburg from 1843 until 1849. His father died in 1849, and the family returned to America. On their way Whistler spent several months in England with his sister, who was married to an Englishman. In America Whistler entered West Point in 1851 and was expelled in 1854 for a deficiency in chemistry, yet he was top of his class in drawing. He then joined the drawing division, in the U.S. Coast Geodetic Survey, where he etched maps and topographical plans. At the age of 22, in 1855, Whistler decided to become an artist, and in October he set off for Europe. He first went to England but stayed for a short period after which he left for Paris, where he stayed until 1859, when he moved to London. In 1857 he had gone to England to see the Art Treasures exhibition in Manchester, where, among other things, he was exposed to large groups of works by Velasquez and by the contemporary English Pre-Raphaelites. In 1858 he began his first major painting, *At the Piano*. He met Rossetti in 1862 soon after they became neighbors in Chelsea, and Whistler was immediately plunged into Rossetti's circle of intimates. George Du Maurier, who had shared quarters with Whistler in 1860, wrote resentfully to Thomas Armstrong in 1863, "Jimmy and the Rossetti lot, i.e., Swinburne, George Meredith and Sandys, are as thick as thieves."(2)

(1) Elizabeth Pennel and Joseph Pennel, *The Art of Whistler* (New York: The Modern Library, 1928), p. 94.

(2) Allen Staley, *From Realism to Symbolism: Whistler and His World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), p. 12.

Whistler had travelled occasionally in Europe, but usually with the purpose of seeing things that interested him. In 1862 he set off to see the Spanish paintings in Madrid, although he got no further than the Pyrenees. In 1863 he went to Amsterdam. The trip was only one of several steps in which Whistler broke with the previous patterns of his life. At about this time he parted with Joanna Hefferman, who had been his mistress and chief model since 1859. He fought with most of his friends and, as will be shown, even his style took a different turn. From 1868 to 1878 Whistler's world was England. Due to a law suit with Ruskin, which will be discussed later on, he became almost homeless and under heavy financial pressure, so he accepted a proposal to make a series of etchings of Venice. He set off in September and remained in Venice for fourteen months.

Whistler returned to England from Venice, but his attitude towards his adopted country was henceforth bitterly contemptuous. After 1880 Whistler's chief patronage was no longer English, but American. In 1881 he sent *The Mother* to Philadelphia to be shown at the Pennsylvania Academy, and in the following years he began to gain some reputation in his native land. American artists began to seek him out when they went abroad, and most of his friendships with American artists dated from this period.

In 1882 Whistler sent a work to the Salon in Paris for the first time since 1867, and he exhibited regularly at the Salon and other major international exhibitions for the rest of his life. In the 1880s he began to travel on the continent, and in subsequent years he spent increasingly longer periods abroad, and in 1892 he finally settled in Paris. He maintained an apartment and his studio there until 1901. In 1888 he had married Beatrix Godwin, whose ill health forced him to return to London to seek medical help in 1894. After her death in 1896 he drifted back and forth between Paris and London, but he lived mainly in Paris, until, in failing health himself, he returned to London in 1901. He took a house in Chelsea, overlooking the Thames, where he was cared for by his wife's mother and sister until he died in the summer of 1903.

Nothing is more tempting than to gossip about James McNeill Whistler. "Striding through the streets of Chelsea and Montmartre in patent leather pumps, decked out in colors that drive Degas to remark 'If you were not a genius you would be the most ridiculous man in Paris.'"[3] He loved publicity and he got lots of it. He worked hard to shock people; and he succeeded in scandalizing as many people as a man could without the aid of television or mass magazines. He was a master of insult, and his quarrels with Ruskin, Wilde, and a host of others became as famous as other men's duels and love affairs.

(3) Donald Holden, *Whistler Landscapes and Seascapes* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 1969), p. 11.

Yet he was a man full of paradoxes, which was one of the characteristics of his age and might have been due to the sense of the "divided self" which most of the Victorians shared as they felt torn between two worlds which Matthew Arnold so well defined as "one dead and the other powerless to be born." Whisler scoffed at religion but never forgot that his New England mother wanted him to be a parson, diligently took her to church each Sunday, and kept his promise never to draw or paint on the Sabbath. A self-proclaimed genius in public, Whistler was obsessively self-critical in the studio, ruthlessly wiping out and repainting, grimly destroying piles of pictures which he might have sold but which he considered failures:

> All along I have carefully destroyed plates, torn up proofs, and burned canvases, that the truth of the quoted word shall prevail, and that the future collector shall be spared the mortification of cataloging his pet mistakes. To destroy, is to remain. What is commercial imitation beside a clean canvas? What is a gentlemanly firm in Bond Street beside Eternity?(4)

Although born and educated in America, Whistler spent his entire mature life abroad; yet he always regarded himself as an outsider to European society, which he found corrupt and ignorantly self-righteous. In fact, his best lines sound surprisingly like those of the most American wit of the day, Mark Twain. When a dissatisfied portrait sitter pointed to the canvas and asked Whistler if he considered that a great work of art, the painter shot back, "Do you consider yourself a great work of nature?"(5)

It is important in understanding Whistler's personality, which affected his written word if not his paintings, to note that his hostility, arrogance or what was considered as indifference to public opinion, that marked him as a youth and continued throughout his life, might have been a shield of a sensitive soul. He used this dandy arrogant attitude that made him seem callous to ridicule as a protection against hostile criticism, which sometimes verged on the edge of personal insult. Yet ironically enough it was this attitude that might have prevented people for a long time from considering him and his work seriously.

It is a little more than eighty years since Whistler died. Fashions among artists have come and gone, and various trends have arisen and then disappeared. To many supporters of the new trends Whistler seemed a second-rate artist who was overlooked as inessential or at best as limited in influence. Yet there is now a renewed interest in Whistler, as can be seen for example, in the publication of new books dealing with his paintings such as John Walker's *James MacNeill Whistler* (1987) and the one being prepared by Mrs. Margaret MacDonald, a former member of the staff of

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(4) J. McNeill Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (New York: C.P.Putnam's Sons, 1924), p. 292.

(5) Holden, p. 11.

the Hunterian Art gallery in Glasgow. Also his paintings are gaining popularity and high prices[6] in European auctions. Ironically, an American, who managed to force himself into Whistler's studio asked him:

"How much for the whole lot, Mr. Whistler?"

"Five millions."

"What?"

"My posthumous prices."[7]

This price is now considered a bargain.

But before reaching this kind of status, his work had to go through stages of development and, not surprisingly, rejection by his contemporaries. In his art Whistler broke away from all literary dependence that was the trend of his age. He rejected the accepted conventions and relied purely on qualities of paint in tone, line, and color.

The Victorian age posed a serious problem that was entirely new to British artists

> ... never before had they been challenged to provide aesthetic meaning for so broadly based a society. Earlier writers and painters (for example, Shakespeare, Milton, Hogarth, Swift, and Pope) had traditionally exposed human folly and excess...; but they hardly felt compelled to improve public taste; art was the privilege of the wealthy, and the boundaries were clear.[8]

By the nineteenth century the traditional noble patron was almost extinct. The industrial revolution led to a change in the economic classification of society, where merchants and factory owners were in the ascendancy; the rational philosophies of the preceding century, the French Revolution, and the series of reform bills all contributed to the rise of the middle class into the position of dominance.

A number of Victorian writers and artists, especially the early ones such as Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning, were able to compromise, but not before undergoing their moments of the "divided-self" and its uncertainty and indecision as Tennyson expressed in "The Lotos-Eaters" or "The Palace of Art," where the public and private voices of the poet were still struggling for unity, or at least co-existence.

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(6) One of Whistler's paintings, *By the Shore, St. Ives,* according to *World Collectors Annuary,* 33 (1981), 248, was sold for $38,000.

(7) Pennell, p. 177.

(8) Robert L. Peters, ed., *Victorians on Literature and Art* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1961), p. 3.

But not all artists were able to adapt. Actually, many facing the dilemma of the two worlds were often severely repelled by the didacticism to which literature and art were turning. A story must teach a moral and a painting must tell a story. This led some artists to look back, in their distrust of intellectual generalities, to Romanticism. There grew a distaste for art that was too formal or pretentious. They conceived of the artist as an individual in conflict with traditions and conventions, continually seeking the new, and finding spiritual fulfillment in nature and seclusion. This renewed interest in nature was coupled with growing scientific curiosity and desire for accuracy, and it was best portrayed in the works of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

In autumn of 1848 three young painters bent on reforming English art banded together. They were D.G.Rossetti, W.H.Hunt, and J.E.Millais. They named their group the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and vowed to recapture the honesty and simplicity that they found lacking in current British painting, but which they saw in abundance in Italian painting before the sixteenth century and the time of Raphael.

The Brothers believed that the artist must observe a scrupulous fidelity to nature. If he painted an outdoor scene he should use the bright color of the real countryside, and render every leaf with botanical accuracy. His subject should be a serious one. Therefore, if he drew on literature, he should choose a significant moment from an important work; or if he turned to contemporary themes, he should show an awareness of social problems—those, for example, of the new industrial proletariat.

Above all, the Pre-Raphaelites' credo asserted that the artist must present his personal vision with total integrity. In seeking this goal they struck off on divergent paths, and by 1854 the group had disintegrated. But its gift to the Victorian world was the moving idealism of its members and the indisputable beauty of some of their works.

This trend of realism in the Pre-Raphaelites went beyond the realm of that seen in France. The impressionists in France were concerned together with the impulse toward reality, with the desire to realize the unseen. It was not enough for Monet to paint the surface of the natural world; he was impelled to search the sources of movement and vibration in air and light and to know why appearances were as they were, in order intellectually to create instead of imitatively to reproduce them.

However, Whistler was not part of this contemporary stream, and he never would be. In art circles the moralizing aspect of the Pre-Raphaelites had fallen out of style, allowing a new trend towards aestheticism. This new developing trend was influenced by many factors, most prominent among them were Whistler's *Ten O'Clock Lecture* and Walter Pater's *The Renaissance,* where he sums the aesthetic concern as follows:

> Only be 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. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake.(9)

On first hearing this passage, one likens it to Whistler's cry for "Art for Art's Sake," but although he influenced the movement, he never became part of the eccentric cult that later waned into a shallow reaction against Victorian morality, assuming forms that were whimsical and superficial. He influenced the aesthetic movement in the sense that his tastes and his search for beauty in an innovative manner – such as in painting night or using the color gold or black in abundance – asserted the principles of aestheticism and gave soundness to a theory now held to be essential to the principles of modern art. Whistler himself produced what is probably regarded as the most extraordinary single monument of the "Aesthetic Movement," *The Peacock Room,* which he painted in the house of his patron Fredrick Leyland in 1876-1877. But how did Whistler reach this dedication to the muse of art? And what is exactly his own dedication?

In 1858 Whistler began his first major painting, *At the Piano,* and in the early 1860s he came into contact with the English Pre-Raphaelites, who influenced such works as *The Little White Girl: Symphony in White No. 2,* with its reflections of their moody and enigmatic spirit. This latter painting led the distinguished critic Theodore Duret to say: "She is painted like a vision, which appears not to everybody but to a poet."(10) No wonder, then, that this same portrait inspired Swinburne to write the poem "Before the Mirror," which begins:

> White rose in red rose-garden
> Is not so white;
> Snow drops that plead for pardon
> And pine for fright
> Because the hard East blows
> Over their maiden rows
> Crow not as this face grows
> from pale to bright.(11)

Whistler's first response to the East in his art was like that of Rossetti and Burne-Jones to any remote civilization; he incorporated Oriental objects into his pictures

(9) Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (Chicago: Pandora Books, Academy Chicago Ltd., 1978) pp. 238-39.

(10) John Walker, *James McNeill Whistler* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987), p. 37.

(11) T.R.Way and G.R. Dennis, *The Art of James McNeill Whistler: An Appreciation* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1905), pp. 28-29.

for their decorative and exotic appeal. He saw what was beautiful in Oriental art and developed his own art for a time on the same lines. Whistler used lavishly Oriental motifs in his art before he truly integrated the influence of the East into his style. In *La Princess due Pays de La Porcelain, Purple and Rose: The Lange Lijzen of the Six Marks* and *Caprice in Purple and Gold No. 2: The Golden Screen,* all dated 1864, he parades all sorts of Chinese and Japanese artifacts, but he has not yet substituted the airy space of a Japanese interior for the clutter of a Victorian parlor. This latter effect was reflected in his slightly later works such as *Old Battersea Bridge* (1865), where the high horizon, strong linear pattern, and elimination of naturalistic detail show that Whistler had begun to reshape his vision by incorporating stylistic hints from prints by Japanese artists such as Hirochige. Describing his debt to Japan, Whistler later told his biographers, Joseph and Elizabeth Pennell, that his idea

> ... was not to go back to the Japanese as being greater than himself, but to learn what he could from them... and to produce another work of art: a work founded in tradition no less than theirs and yet as western as theirs was eastern.(12)

Basically his goal was to create a classically, even scientifically disciplined, art, remote from the Realism of Courbet.

Whistler's creativity was in interpreting character and using terms of color through which it could be expressed. His ingenuity as a colorist was not only in his ability to reproduce what he saw but in creating new harmonies in paint. Yet it must be pointed out that science, especially in the field of optical research, had a significant influence upon painters, especially in relation to color combinations and light compositions. In addition, optical discoveries hastened the development of the camera, which had a considerable effect on mid-nineteenth century painting. Aaron Scharf, who has conducted extensive research into the relationship of painting and photography in that period, presents some significant conclusions. He shows that a number of photographers who usually worked with nature and landscape photography were "known to painters generally" and could have influenced the artist's realization that "... sunlight is seen to have impinged on the structure of solid objects, eating into the shadows.... This effect, called 'halation,' destroys the clarity of contour...."(13) Therefore one may assume that Whistler might have been influenced by these scientific discoveries in his style and use of color. Such discoveries caused him as an artist and painter to express the difference between art and photography. Actually Whistler himself said, in explaining the principles by which he was guided in portrait painting:

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(12) Pennell, p. 92.

(13) Phoebe Pool, *Impressionism* (New York: Fredrick A. Praeger, 1967), p. 15.

> The imitator, is a poor kind of creature. If the man who paints only the tree, or flower, or other surface he sees before him were an artist, the king of artists would be the photographer. It is for the artist to do something beyond this: in portrait painting to put on canvas something more than the face the model wears for that one day; to paint the man, in short, as well as his features; in arrangement of colors to treat a flower as his key, not as his model.(14)

Speaking of portraits brings us to the years between 1867 and 1871, which were difficult ones for Whistler. At this time he denounced his own earlier works, including *At the Piano* and *The White Girl.* Actually the *Symphony in White, No. 3,* sets the path along which he was to struggle for the next several years. Bewteen 1865 and 1872 he turned his back upon his most progressive contemporaries, the artists soon to be known as Impressionists. But he forged a style which would have profound significance and appeal for the younger artists who after 1880 in turn sought an art more formally controlled than Impressionism. When Whistler did send his works again to the Salon, it was with works of the early 1870s that he began to gain some recognition. Portraits of single figures in somber modern dress have displaced the earlier groups of classically or Orientally robed ladies. Yet the discipline underlying Whistler's portraits and Nocturnes of the 1870s – their austere simplicity, linear elegance, the geometrically patterned compositions – was the outgrowth of his earlier struggles. "Whistler began hundreds of portraits," says James Laver, "He finished about a dozen."(15) A handful of his portraits are masterpieces, but Whistler recognized that the human figure was not his strong point.

The human form simply did not cooperate in Whistler's search for a radically new kind of vision. Whistler demanded a new kind of relationship between the audience and the work of art. The portrait painters of his period presented big, bright salon pieces which clamored for attention: the portrait subject virtually stepped out of the frame and forced himself on the viewer's company. Whistler had begun to consider not merely the figure in the portrait; he was not satisfied to paint an exact copy of his sitters, but rather to portray the relation of his sitters to the canvas they had to fill and the harmony in line and color of which they were the theme. Though his portraits were received with the same rejection and ridicule which ever greets what goes beyond the conventional in art, yet it is now permissible to believe that his portraits of Thomas Carlyle, of his (Whisiter's) mother, of Miss Alexander, of Theodore Duret, of Lady Meux Valerie, and of many others will always be ranked among the greatest pictures of 19th C. art.

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(14) Whistler, p. 128.

(15) Holden, p. 14.

What led to the rejection of his portraits by the conventional public was that his portraits differed radically from those of his contemporaries. He seemed, first of all, to have considered what may be called the beautifying qualities of his sitter; he aimed at presenting a picture which in its harmony of color and arrangement of shades of light and darkness should be beautiful in itself. Thus the beauty and value of these paintings depend on the color-scheme and composition, rather than on the individual sitters themselves. He even gave them titles to reflect where the importance lies, as for example, *Arrangement in Flesh Color and Black: Portrait of Theodore Duret.*

But it is of significance to point out that even when Whistler used similar titles, or colors, his treatment was different, as for example, in *Portrait of the Painter's Mother: Arangement in Gray and Black, No.1* and *Carlyle: Arrangement in Gray and Black, No.2.* These two portraits resemble each other in general arrangement; both present the same gray wall with the same frames hanging on it, the same black dado, and the same profile position. Yet there is a marked difference in the handling of the two portraits. In *The Mother* portrait the composition of the picure is of the simplest; its complete simplicity renders a sense of repose and dignity to its subject matter. Also the face is painted with ubiquitous tenderness and superb delicacy of color. As for Carlyle's portrait, we notice a very marked difference in that the

> ... rugged strength of the great writer and critic (is) being emphasized by the vigorous brushwork, especially in the painting of the head, while in the mother's portrait the treatment is made to accord with the sweetness of simplicity of the sitter... (Carlyle's portrait) is a marvellous study of character, revealing to us the whole nature and intellect of the man, the weariness of the philosopher near the end of his long life musing upon the folly and futility of human life.(16)

Hearing a portrait described as merely "an artistic arrangement" would not now surprise anyone reasonably familiar with modern art. But in Victorian times this was a revolutionary concept. Most Victorians believed a portrait should be painted with microscopic accuracy. How could they accept Whistler's "arrangements"? Many did not, let alone accepting his Nocturnes in which, according to Victorian standards, reality was blurred almost beyond recognition.

By 1873 Whistler had painted the first of his many Nocturnes, *Nocturne in Blue and Silver: Cremorne Lights.* He had abandoned his frustrating struggles with ambitious compositions of several figures, and had, in fact, established the types of picture upon which his ultimate reputation would be based. Henceforth, there would be no more dramatic renunciations or reversals of style. In one of his last letters to Fantin, written after he had painted *The Mother,* he claimed "that he had reduced the science

(16) Way, p. 43.

of color to a system. He reduced it by reducing the number of colors." The variety of hues that appears in most of his works of the 1860s, even in the foreground of *The White Girl,* have been replaced by an almost "monochrome palette and a concentration on the relationship between light and dark.(17)

In the Nocturnes, Whistler tried to capture that "blue mystery that veils the world from dusk to dawn" revealed in dark river and harbor scenes marked by shiftings, vague silhouettes of forms and by hazy distant lights. These paintings are harmonies of subtly blended color. Harmony suggests unity, and the unity Whistler desired was both atmospheric and tonal. His emphasis now was not upon repeated color areas as it has been in *The White Girl;* instead, he wrought a harmony through carefully modulated single color tones, which in turn would result in the effect of a musical mood. From 1868 to 1878 Whistler's world was England.

Whistler's paintings represented the systematic negation of the values which his contemporaries had been trained to seek in art. The lifelong trust of Whistler's art was toward what we now call "abstraction." In an era dominated by story-telling pictures Whistler declared war on subject matter and insisted that the painter's subject is painting. He gradually evolved an art in which the outlines of the visible world began to melt away and the language of painting began to emerge as an end in itself. Whistler's best work – the landscapes and seascapes of his final three decades – gave the viewer practically nothing to hold onto: no recognizable people, rarely a familiar landmark, no local color, no detail, no sense of perspective or three dimentional form. Whistler expected his audience to respond simply to what they saw on the surface on the canvas: light and shade, color and texture, the subtle interplay of shapes on the picture plane.

Whistler, using his brush and paint, rendered the tone, the mystery, the actual truth of night rather than its symbol. The Nocturnes are simple in effect – a stretch of formless blue water under a range of formless blue sky, buildings on the distant shore, sometimes a bridge high across the canvas, sometimes an unclear sail moving out of the darkness – so that to the public eye the paintings seemed incomplete. But to Whistler "a picture is finished when all trace to bring about the end has disappeared."(18) Actually, the word "Nocturne" was suggested to Whistler by Mr. Frederick Leyland; he wrote to his patron, thanking him:

> .... I can't thank you too much for the name 'Nocturne' as the title for my moonlights. You have no idea what an irritation it proves to the critics and consequently pleasure to

(17) Staley, p. 16.

(18) Pennell, p. 89.

> me – besides, it is really charming and does so poetically say all I want to say and no more than I wish.(19)

To most of his contemporaries the absence of detail and the simplification of form in Whistler's work meant a loss of acceptability. To Whistler the eliminations were a way of enforcing the abstract power of his art. To his critics the dominance of a single color, like blue, was a misrepresentation of the reality. To Whistler limiting the range of color expressed a harmony and a deepening of poetic mood, for its own beauty. This beauty that he expressed in words that are in themselves poetic:

> And when the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry, as with a veil, and the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky, and the tall chimneys become campanili, and the warehouses are palaces in the night, and the whole city hangs in the heavens, and fairy-land is before us – then... Nature, who, for once, has sung in tune, sings her exquisite song to the artist alone, her son and her master – her son in that he loves her, her master in that he knows her.(20)

Speaking of Whistler's art being misunderstood, one cannot but think of John Ruskin. The success of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* had made its author a critical force to be reckoned with in the art world. He stressed the importance of truth to nature. "Go to nature...," Ruskin said, "selecting nothing, rejecting nothing."

Thus, no wonder that after the opening exhibition in 1877 and the presentation of Whistler's painting *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* Ruskin, in print, accused the artist of "willful imposture" and described him as "a coxcomb... flinging a pot of paint in the public's face."(21) Whistler sued Ruskin for libel, and the case came to trial in November of the following year. During the trial Whistler was able to express his views of "art for art's sake":

> 'That is Mr. Grahame's picture. It represents Battersea Bridge by moonlight.' Baron Huddleston: 'Which part of the picture is the bridge?' (Laughter)
> His Lordship earnestly rebuked those who laughed. And witness explained to his Lordship the composition of the picture.
>
> 'Do you say that this is a correct representation of Battersea Bridge?'
>
> 'I did not intend it to be a 'correct' portrait of the bridge. It is only a moonlight scene, and the pier in the center of the picture may not be like the piers at Battersea Bridge as you know them in broad daylight. As to what the picture represents, that depends upon who looks at it. To some persons it may represent all that is intended; to other it may represent nothing.'
>
> 'The prevailing colour is blue?'

(19) Walker, p. 81.

(20) J. McNeill Whistler, *Mr. Whistler's "Ten O'Clock"* (Chicago: The Alderbrink Press, 1907), p. 21.

(21) Staley, p. 17.

'Perhaps.'

'Are those figures on the top of the bridge intended for people?'

'They are just what you like.'

'Is that a barge beneath?'

'Yes. I am very much encouraged at your perceiving that. My whole scheme was only to bring about a certain harmony of colour.'(22)

The Ruskin trial also encouraged in Whistler an instinct, which previously had not been entirely dormant, to become a preacher, teacher, and pamphleteer. In the trial he presented his case with wit and eloquence and afterwards he printed a pamplet, *Whistler versus Ruskin* and *Art and Art Critics*. The most substantial of these was the *Ten O'Clock Lecture,* which he presented in 1885 in a theatre in London. It was basically an attack on the aesthetics of Ruskin and an assertion of the difference between art and nature. In describing art he said:

> She is, withal, selfishly occupied with her own perfection only – having no desire to teach – seeking and finding the beautiful in all conditions and in all times, as did her high priest, Rembrandt, when he saw picturesque grandeur and noble dignity in the Jew's quarter of Amsterdam and lamented not that its inhabitants were not Greeks.(23)

As for nature, he said:

> Nature contains the elements, in colour and form, of all pictures, as the keyboard contains the notes of all music.
>
> But the artist is born to pick, and choose, and group with science, these elements, that the result may be beautiful – as the musician gathers his notes, and forms his chords, until he brings forth from chaos glorious harmony.
>
> To say to the painter, that Nature is to be taken as she is, is to say to the player, that he may sit on the piano.(24)

Thus, the *Ten O'Clock* was a significant document in the history of art. It reflected a major change in the artist's role in society, a change that became conspicuous during Whistler's day and extends into modern times. The artist, to a greater extent than ever before, had begun to think of himself as an outsider. Actually the whole story of modern art lies in Whistler's words during the trial, when he said: "....As to what the picture represents, that depends upon who look at it." What neither Ruskin nor the conventional public understood was that a fundamental new esthetic was developing, in which the true beauty of a work of art lay in the experience of the painter and the viewer. Accordingly, the object represented on the canvas is no longer as significant as the interpretation the artist chose to make it.

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(22) Whistler, *Gentle Art*, pp. 7-8.

(23) Whistler, *Ten O'Clock*, p. 9.

(24) Whistler, *Ten O'Clock*, pp. 18-19.

It is scarcely surprising that there should be parities between the literature and the art of this period (19th C.), since both painters and writers were subject to many of the same pressures: social, economic and scientific. In the mid-nineteenth century there were complaints that writers and artists had become too close. There were similarities in the usage of similes and painting-like language in the works of poets such as Oscar Wilde, Ernest Henley, and Arthur Symons. But this trend in the poems of these artists was not a coincidence; it reflected Whistler's great influence on the English poets of the 1880s.

Whistler regarded poetry as the closest form of art to painting; this can be seen in his poetic descriptive words of art, mentioned previously, as well as in a letter to Swinburne, where he expressed his hurt from his friend's attack on his *Ten O'Clock Lecture:*

> Do we not speak the same language? Are we strangers then, or, in our Father's house, are there so many mansions that you lose your way, my brother, and cannot recognize your kin?(25)

Swinburne's attack on Whistler did reflect how some of the poets of the late Victorian period felt towards his art, but other artists, in contrast, found in Whistler an example to be followed.

Whistler's art was distinctive due to its selective nature, in choice of scenes, colors and designs. He did not care for "anecdotage" art but was interested in color, tone and, design in relation to space. His techniques in painting were echoed and imitated by more than one poet.

W.E. Henley's descriptions of nature seem almost like poetical interpretations of some of Whistler's paintings. Is it not possible that on reading the following stanza one can visualize it into a Whistlerian painting?

> The smoke ascends
> In a rosy-and-golden haze. The spires
> Shine, and are changed. In the valley
> Shadows rise. The lark sings on. The sun,
> Closing his benediction,
> Sinks and the darkening air
> Thrills with a sense of the triumphing night,
> Night with her train of stars
> And her great gift of sleep.(26)

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(25) Way, p. 154.

(26) Jerome H. Buckley, *William Ernest Henley: A Study in the "Counter-Decadence" of the Nineties* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1945), p. 91.

To artist and poet alike the mystery of the night, with the sparkling of lights through the darkness, the beauty of the morning haze, the solemnity of gray London days were more captivating than the brightness of sunlight. Both were more concerned with tone, harmony, and color than with distinct aspects.

Oscar Wilde in his poem *Impression du Martin* clearly portrays Whistler's style:

The Thames nocturne of blue and gold
Changed to a Harmony in Gray:
A barge with ochre-coloured hay
Dropt from the wharf: and chill and cold

The yellow fog came creeping down
the bridges, till the houses walls
Seemed changed to shadows, and St. Paul's
Loomed like a bubble o'er the town.(27)

Most of the Whistlerian poems, by Wilde, Henley and Symons, do however, represent "an objective seeing and feeling, and do assert – and again the indebtedness to Whistler is clear – that poets and painters should not be anecdotal, should not present sentimental lessons based on life, but should record life itself, directly, no matter how refined or pallid their chosen areas of life appear to be.(28) This doctrine of "art for art's sake" influenced many poets who admired the Nocturnes and like Whistler described the effects of grey, twilight, deep night and fog; as William Ernest Henley did in *Echoes: XIV:*

The wan sun westers, faint and slow;
The eastern distance glimmers gray;
An eerie haze comes creeping low
Across the little, lonely bay;
And from the sky-line far away
About the quiet heaven are spread

Mysterious hints of dying day
Think delicate dreams of green and red.(29)

Also Arthur Symons described a scene at a bridge:

Under us the Seine flows through dark and light.
While the beat of time (hark!) is inaudible.

(27) Oscar Wilde, *The Poems of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1927), p. 81.

(28) Robert Peters, "Whistler and the English Poets of the 1980s," *Modern Language Quarterly, 18 (1962), 261.*

(29) Peters, "English Poets," p. 258.

Lights on bank and bridge glitter gold and red,
Lights upon the stream glitter red and white;
Under us the night, and the night o'erhead.(30)

Thus Whistler was one of the major influences on the poets of his period in their interest in "abstract" poetry where no concern for the anecdote or the moral is presented.

Whistler saw a successful painting as the thrust, movement, counter-movement, and final equilibrium of forms and colors in pictorial space – a fabric of paint, strong and lightly woven. Thus nature became a source of material to the artist and not a place to which he must pay tribute.

Whistler was demanding a new kind of audience, a more active and responsive audience, but the majority of the public were not ready for such an attitude yet. Some of Whistler's contemporaries did not understand his art; they even hung his pictures upside down. Whistler was proposing the unfamiliar idea that the artist was not paid for his labor but for his vision. Perhaps the most memorable moment in the painter's famous libel suit against Ruskin came when Whistler was asked to justify a price tag of 200 guineas for a picture which was "the labour of two days"; the audience applauded when he answered: "I ask it for the knowledge of a life time."(31) Whistler was a revolutionary: he set out to change his world with pictures and with words. He not only painted in a new way, but expressed his thoughts in words; he fought on more than one front: on the printed page, on the speaker's platform, in the courtroom, as well as on canvas. Thus his influence was not only on his period but extended beyond his age to the present time. His influence could be sensed in the still developing Impressionistic trend and in "abstract" painting where Whistler's influence can be sensed in its approach away from any story or image or moral. The total content of this art was a vibrant color and non-representational form.

Thus in spite of the fact that Whistler was rejected by many of his period, yet as a revolutionist he managed to influence the artistic bend of his age and direct it towards the realm of the "abstract." He was one of the leaders of that decade as Ezra Pound expressed in his poem *To Whistler, American:*

You also, our first great,
Had tried all ways;
Tested and pried and worked in many fashions,
And this much gives me heart to play the game.

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(30) Peters, "English Poets," p. 259.

(31) Holden, p. 14.

Here is a part that's slight, and part gone wrong,
And much of little moment, and some few
Perfect as Durer!
"In the Studio" and those two portraits; if I had my choice
And then these sketches in the mood of Greece.
You had your searches, your uncertainities,
and this is good to know – for us, I mean,
who bear the brunt of our America
And try to wrench her impulse into Art.

You were not always sure, not always set
To hiding night or tuning "symphonies";
Had not one style from birth, but tried and pried
And stretched and tampered with the media.

You and Abe Lincoln from that mass of dolts
Show us there's chance at least of winning through.(32)

Whistler's art, as Ezra Pound pointed out, developed through many stages, and he "tried" and "pried" many ways. He went through stages of expression influenced by realism, Pre-Raphaelite characteristics, Oriental motifs, aesthetic trends, and Impressionism. This lead him finally to bring to life his own "symphonies" of painting. We are now so used to pictures without subjects that we tend to forget Whistler's unique scenes of night. They represent a turn towards abstract art, and this is a significant cornerstone in art history. And what is of greater signifiance is that Whistler's abstract style appeared almost fifty years before the abstraction of the Cubists and more than a hundred years before that of the New York School. Thus Whister's influence was not confined to his contemporaries but has extended to modern times through the medium of abstract painting.

(32) Tom Prideaux, *The World of Whistler 1834-1903* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1970), p. 185.

نظرية ويسلر الجمالية في تطورها

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ملخص البحث. يتناول موضوع البحث أعمال الفنان الأمريكي ويسلر أحد رواد الثورة التشكيلية في فن الرسم الذي عاش معظم حياته في أوروبا خصوصا بين لندن وباريس في القرن التاسع عشر. يتتبع البحث تطور أسلوب ويسلر عبر مراحل عدة والعوامل التي أثرت على تلك المراحل. أدت هذه المراحل بالرسام في النهاية إلى تقديم لوحاته «السيموفونية» التي تعبر عن مرحلة مهمة في اتجاه الفن إلى التجريد. ويعتبر هذا الاتجاه ركنا من أركان تاريخ الفن الأدبي. إن فن ويسلر ونظرياته الجمالية تعكس تغيرا مهما في دور الفنان في القرن التاسع عشر، والذي يمتد أثره حتى عصرنا هذا. كما أن ويسلر كان له أثره المهم على شعراء أواخر القرن التاسع عشر، الذين اهتموا بالتجريد والابتعاد عن الأقصوصة في شعرهم. وهكذا استطاع ويسلر من خلال نظرياته الجمالية أن يؤثر على الاتجاه الأدبي لعصره نحو التجريدية، ذلك الأثر الذي يمتد إلى العصر الحديث.