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Wilde Style: The Plays and Prose of Oscar Wilde (review)

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Wilde Style: The Plays and Prose of Oscar Wilde, by Neil Sammells, pp. 143. Singapore: Pearson Education Asia Pte Ltd., 2000. \$16.99.

Rarely have we “read” such outré and flamboyant style, whether in fashion or in letters, as that of the irrepressible Oscar Wilde as subversion, rebellion against “normalcy,” and as an indictment against intolerance. Neil Sammell’s book intends to reconcile Wilde in just those terms. In fact, throughout *Wilde Style*, Sammells argues that some of the styles of Wilde that we now consider pedestrian or outlandish, such as his use of the fairy tale genre, his appropriation of the society comedy conventions and finally, his dandyism, were elaborately constructed rebellions against the norms of classicism, sexism, racism, and homophobia rampant in England during the final decades of the nineteenth century. Sammells contends that Wilde was not, as others have argued, working against one dominant stereotype (against homosexuals, for instance); he was, instead, challenging most of the dominant stereotypes prevalent in English society.

Sammells’s use of differing disciplines of criticism, particularly pop culture criticism and Irish Studies, show him to be a thorough and careful scholar—though too often this text becomes mired in the scholarship of other critics, causing Sammells’s own point to become overshadowed. Similarly, his determination to incorporate too many disparate points—for example, postcolonialism, Irishness, and feminism—all in the scope of a few paragraphs and without adequate support, explanation, and transitions tends to frustrate rather than stimulate, the reader.

Yet there are many gems in this book. Two occur in chapter 3, “Theory into Practice: Dorian Gray and Salome.” Sammells’s analysis of Dorian Gray as a demonstration of the multiplicity of self is intriguing and provides provocative and interesting illuminations of the novel. But it is his critique of Quentin Tarantino’s films in relation to Wilde that make this book most rewarding. Sammells is possibly a bit too insistent upon forcing an analogy between the work of Wilde and Tarantino but he does manage to demonstrate an important par-

allel of subversion of convention. Both artists, Sammells contends, were well aware of the stale conventions of their respective mediums and have been criticized for their use of these set pieces in their work. However, Sammells effectively argues, both have managed to take those old stand-bys and, by inverting them, essentially deconstruct them.

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