What a Dandy! Victorian Dandyism in Ada Leverson's Short Stories

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"There are more weak men now than ever before," at least that's what Stephen Marshall claims in his article titled "The Softest Generation" (Marshall). Social media is illuminating a current societal sentiment that views modern men as having become soft, weak, and effeminate (Illing). People like Marshall, usually those in older generations, argue that many young men of today are not fitting into the traditional masculine role of contributing hard work, grit, and determination to society. Instead of lining up for blue-collar jobs or picking up a shovel, some men are choosing to be stay-at-home fathers or to pursue jobs in nursing, which are roles that have historically been associated with women. Although the people who are cynical of these "effeminate" men claim that weak men are only now emerging, Victorians in 19th century England also complained about young men becoming too soft. For them, the term used to describe a man who did not fit into the stereotypically-masculine mold was a "dandy." Although the OED defines a dandy simply as someone "who studies above everything to dress elegantly and fashionably," the Victorians had a lot more to say about what

the life of a dandy looked like (OED). Ada Leverson was a female Jewish writer and a close, trusted friend to Oscar Wilde who wrote many works that were published in the periodicals *Punch* and *The Yellow Book* (Wenman-James). In her short stories "Suggestion" (1895) and "The Quest of Sorrow" (1896), Leverson pokes fun at dandyism and subverts traditional roles of masculinity by writing about the life of Cecil Carington, a quintessential dandy. In this essay, I will explore how Leverson illustrates the plethora of qualities that Victorian society deemed to be characteristic of a dandy through her portrayal of Cecil's character in "Suggestion" and "The Quest of Sorrow."

Leverson highlights the importance that dandies were thought to place on appreciating and contributing to art, aesthetics, and beauty in their lives on a number of different levels. These various levels could include artistry and beauty through literature, attention to one's appearance, or arranging one's life to prioritize aesthetics. We can explore the latter level through Leverson's character Cecil who is described as an "intolerable, effeminate boy" by Lady Winthrop in "Suggestion" (Leverson 249). In his essay titled "Oscar Wilde's Aestheticism," Beibei Guan discusses some of the defining characteristics of a Victorian dandy, one of which being the desire to create an aesthetic living environment for oneself. Guan describes that Oscar Wilde "began collecting beautiful and

exotic antiques during his early years at Trinity College" and that "his room at Oxford was filled with a variety of exquisite items, including celadon vases, Greek statues and rugs, and photographs of his favourite paintings" (Guan 26). He further adds that Wilde "constructed in his house an atmosphere that he claimed was essential for cultivating the dandy temperament" (Guan 26). Known as being a prominent dandy figure in the Victorian Era, Oscar Wilde's desire to create an aesthetic environment for himself displays the love for beauty and art that dandies were thought to hold. We can see Wilde's influence on Leverson's writing through Cecil's character, as he too shares a love for creating a highly aesthetic living space in "Suggestion" (Bristow). After chatting with Marjorie about her birthday, Cecil recalls that his father got him a copy of *Robinson Crusoe* for his birthday but that he prefers Pierre Loti and intends "to have an onyx-paved bath-room, with soft apricot-coloured light shimmering through the blue-lined green curtains in my chambers" (Leverson 254). Through this Romantic description, we can tell that Cecil has a deep appreciation for the beauty that can be created in everyday life and his desire to design a space that is reflective of his personality and artistic imagination. Similarly in "The Quest of Sorrow," Cecil explains that in his current living space, "I was able to arrange [my rooms] in harmony with my temperament" which was "at once simple and

elaborate, severe and florid" and "an interesting result of my complex aspirations" through the "astonishing patience of a bewildered decorator" (Leverson 412). He goes on to explain that "here I was able to lead the life of leisure and contemplation for which I was formed and had those successes — social and artistic — that now began to pall upon me" (Leverson 412). In this second short story, Leverson again conveys Cecil's desire for creating a living space that is aesthetically pleasing to him and supportive of his pursuit of a life full of beauty and artistic endeavors. His desire to create such a space for himself also shows his desire to deviate from Victorian norms of style by decorating his space in a way that reflects his unique personality through unconventional decor choices and an abundance of variety in colour, texture, and mood. Guan discusses how "a dandy's only mission was to be himself" because he "refused to accept a lifestyle which would conceal his own individuality and personality, the kind of lifestyle which he believed typified that of the bourgeoisie" (Guan 25). Thus, Cecil's desire to design his living space according to his own tastes and preferences irrespective of the current trends guiding most of society embodies the sense of rebellion and proud individuality that the Victorian dandy was known for.

This uninhibited expression of one's unique personality through their living space also applies to one's appearance,

which is another level of aestheticism that the Victorian dandy was thought to appreciate and pursue. In his book chapter titled "Dandyism and late Victorian masculinity," James Eli Adams explains that "an emergent middle-class discourse (derived from broadly puritan tradition) celebrated [...] a masculinity associated above all with industry and self discipline" (Adams 221). This "manly 'character' thus became associated with inner moral being, whose confident possession would be confirmed by obliviousness to outward regard" (Adams 221). He notes that one way this emerging sentiment manifested itself was through "an increasingly sober and self-effacing normal of male attire, characterized by dark, loose-fitting clothing that extinguished any display of individuality" (Adams 221). Guan further supports this assertion by explaining that "in general in late Victorian England, individual behaviour was guided by rigid conventions, including clothing" as "flowery and flashy colours were disapproved of, and the wearing of black or grey was universal" (Guan 26). To display masculinity then, a Victorian Englishman was expected to pay very little attention to his appearance in order to signify that he prioritizes his inner pursuit of respectable morality and productivity rather than superficialities such as his appearance. The Victorian dandy, however, rejected this idea of sacrificing one's appearance in order to convey a superior morality and chose to pay close

attention to their appearance and prioritize developing "an extraordinary and elegant self-image" (Guan 25). In "The Quest of Sorrow," Cecil is engaged with his servant, Collins, "in putting some slight final touches to [his] toilette" and later asks him to "take away this eau-de-cologne" after he finishes getting himself ready (Leverson 414). Further along in the story, Leverson also notes that Cecil was "wearing violets in [his] button-hole" while sitting with Alice in the brougham after ice-skating (Leverson 416). Cecil defies the social conventions associated with Victorian men by putting significant effort into every detail of his appearance and striving to enhance his perceived beauty. Similarly in "Suggestion," we come to understand how involved Cecil is in appearances through his expertise in clothing and style. Cecil's sister Marjorie and friend Laura always say that "Cecil knows everything" and "they do nothing—not even choosing a hat—without asking my advice" (Leverson 251). The girls' reliance on consultation with Cecil in deciding what to wear conveys his proficiency in the art of dress and how he pays special attention to his attire so as to best accentuate his beauty and express his personality instead of surrendering to wearing drab black clothes to fit in with the majority of Victorian men. It is his love for creating an aesthetic self image that authentically reflects his personality regardless

of the social norms being thrust at him that makes Cecil an excellent example of dandyism in late-19th century England.

This deviation from the masculine fashion norm permeating Victorian society is partly what led many people to view dandies as effeminate and, ergo, oriented somewhere outside of heterosexual norm as well. Adams contends that dandies were "associated principally with men who devoted fastidious attention to dress" as we have explored previously (Adams). However he further argues that "this emphasis on outward appearance obviously unsettles traditional notions of masculinity, as it aligns the dandy with a conventionally feminine posture, which leads to a frequent association of the dandy with unorthodox sexuality" (Adams). In her book chapter called "Dainty Malice: Ada Leverson and Post-Victorian Decadent Feminism," Kristin Mahoney argues that in "The Quest of Sorrow," Cecil sabotages the relationship between Alice and Freddy and then "exits the heterosexual drama for a more exotic narrative terrain in the sexually permissive space of France" (Mahoney 30). At the end of the story, Cecil describes that "on the golden sands, with the gay-striped bathers of Trouville, I was content to linger with laughter on my lips, seeking for Sorrow no more" (Leverson 419). Cecil's lack of authentic interest in Alice and other women mentioned in "The Quest of Sorrow" further contribute to the possibility that he

may not be heterosexual. In the beginning of the story, Cecil asks the reader "how can one sit down and write 'My dear lady — I am so sorry, but I am really too busy?'" to the many women who "have appealed to my heart" (Leverson 412). Cecil suggests that he has "perhaps no inclination" to these girls rather than a true lack of time to court them, which conveys that he may not be romantically attracted to women in general (Leverson 412). Furthermore, he makes it clear that he is not actually in love with Alice but that he has "a theory that if you make love to a woman long enough, and ardently enough, you are sure to get rather fond of her at last" (Leverson 415). Although he seems to be in good standing and a well-liked person to these women, he does not reciprocate the feelings of attraction and romantic love that they have for him which suggests that he is not heterosexual. Though these nods to the possibility that Cecil may not be confined to heterosexuality may be subtle, Leverson conveys to the reader that Victorian society often perceived dandies to be homosexual because they were seen as effeminate. In "Suggestion," Cecil tells Marjorie "I never marry" while talking about the design for her dress that he has in his head (Leverson 254). This unwillingness to marry suggests that Cecil does not want to be contained in a long-term heterosexual relationship and instead wants to keep himself available to sexual relations with other men, women, or perhaps both. Instead of wanting to commit to

a monogamous long-term marriage, Cecil wants to be unattached and sexually free, which conveys the sexual permissiveness and adventurousness that dandies were perceived to embody.

The effeminate nature of the Victorian dandy is further illustrated through the emotional passion and Romantic expressiveness of Cecil's individuality that we see through his thoughts and speech. Guan explains that "dandyism is a complete theory of life [...] it is a way of existing" and that "dandyism is not about the clothes alone, elegant as they are, but what they mean as an outward sign and as a form of rebellion—they are part of a style and approach to life" (Guan 26). Much like the attention paid to the aesthetics of clothes, the dandy's way of living required that he appreciate and exude beauty as well as express his individuality. One way that Cecil embodies this lifestyle is through his Romantic descriptions of the world around him and the depth of emotion he expresses throughout Leverson's short stories. While talking about Lady Winthrop and others, Cecil tells us that "Laura has, like myself, the artistic temperament; she is cultured, rather romantic, and in search of the *au-delà [the hereafter]*" (Leverson 250). Leverson thereby gives us direct characterization of Cecil as a romantic, but also conveys a sense of femininity to him by comparing him with Laura and her personality. Later in "Suggestion," Cecil describes

his mother with Romantic detail and an appreciation for beauty through an overflow of personal emotion by saying:

> Every one says I am strangely like my mother. Her face was of that pure and perfect oval one so seldom sees, with delicate features, rosebud mouth, and soft flaxen hair. A blondness without insipidity, for the dark-blue eyes are fringed with dark lashes, and from their languorous depths looks out a soft mockery. I have a curious ideal devotion to my mother ; she died when I was quite young—only two months old—and I often spend hours thinking of her, as I gaze at myself in the mirror. (Leverson 253)

In his essay, Adams notes that for Beau Brummeell, who was "the star mascot for the dandy man in the 19th century," "labour was sublimed in the fine art of dressing well and contemplating society with an exacting eye to form" (Adams 221). We see Cecil embody this exacting eye to form in his description of his mother. Cecil pays meticulous attention to the details of his mother that develop her beauty and describes her features with imagery and adjectives that paint a Romantic picture of her. This description of his mother shows his profound ability to appreciate and articulate her aesthetic nature and the beauty in other people in general. Furthermore, he reflects upon his own personal experience of emotions while thinking of his mother which conveys the sense of curiosity of oneself and the emphasizing of one's own opinions that Romanticism advocates

for. In addition, Cecil's identification with his mother associates him with a sense of femininity, which speaks to the effeminacy that Victorians associated with dandies. Cecil subverts the strict code of masculinity that emphasized restraining one's emotions and glossing over superficial details like beauty in exchange for efficiency and practicality.

This Romantic emphasis on the self seeped into what many people in Victorian society viewed as narcissism and a degree of self-involvement that meant dandies did not contribute to society and lacked the productivity that traditionally masculine men exerted. Adams explains that in 19th century England, the concept of the dandy "had long vexed the middle-class imagination as an emblem of idle, unproductive existence, and thus of effeminacy" (Adams 220). He further discusses this perception by detailing that the dandy was thought of as being "an icon of parasitic idleness and superficial pleasures disdainful of common human struggle" due to their narcissistic self-involvement (Adams 221). After listing a few frivolous, lighthearted events that he does on a day-to-day basis in "The Quest of Sorrow," Cecil tells us "you must admit I had a sufficiently occupied life" (Leverson 413). Being that the activities that make him busy include having two appointments in one day and having to talk to someone "of whom one has grown tired" of in the evening, it is clear that Cecil is not actually

very busy (Leverson 413). His obliviousness as to what it truly means to be busy doing hard work and exerting oneself all day exemplifies the ignorance that much of Victorian society perceived dandies as having because of their pursuit of art and beauty. In "Suggestion," Cecil and Marjorie are chatting about her prospects with potential marriage suitors when she changes the subject with a sigh and tells Cecil that "father was complaining again to-day of your laziness" (Leverson 254). It was thought that dandies did not understand and appreciate the hard work and effort of the productive "masculine" men in society who put themselves to use through jobs that demanded intense physical exertion or made significant contributions to the health of society. Devotion to living a life of abundant beauty through personal style, literature, painting, music, and other forms of art was not seen as industrious but rather a waste of masculine ability for involvement in the public sphere. In his essay, Guan quotes Charles Baudelaire who proclaimed that "the dandy stands on an isolated pedestal of self" and that "the dandy has neither obligations nor attachments" and "no occupation" because "the dandy's achievement is simply to be himself" (Guan 25). This lack of responsibility and obligation to helping improve the good of society in favour of prioritizing one's own passion for art is part of what contributed to the disapproval that most of Victorian society felt for dandies. Cecil's relaxed and

unproductive lifestyle illuminates this perception of dandies as being soft, weak men that do not commit themselves to pursuing a life of generativity.

Leverson's writing of Cecil in her short stories "The Quest of Sorrow" and "Suggestion" works to reflect the many perceptions that Victorians had towards men they considered to be dandies. Fundamentally, being a dandy involved seeing the world through a lens that is highly sensitive to beauty and constructing an aesthetic environment for oneself. Various manifestations for this prioritizing of aesthetics led others to associate the dandy with femininity and a sexual orientation different from heterosexuality. This perception of effeminacy was further strengthened by the dandy's Romantic nature and self-exploration. Such a preoccupation with the self and effeminacy in conjunction with the perception of dandies not being productive for society all contributed to the disapproval many Victorians had for these men. Similarly, many people in today's society view the new generations of men as being soft and weak because they are not pursuing the traditional roles of masculinity that prioritize hard physical labour and setting one's own personal expression aside. Stephen Marshall claimed that men are now weaker than ever before at the beginning of this essay, but now that we have learned about how Victorians claimed the same thing, is that really true Stephen?

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