

Queer Aestheticism in Henry James's *Roderick Hudson* (1878)

Abstract [paper]:

In his recent study about the influence of aestheticism in the formation of queer cultures and identities, Dustin Friedman argues that aestheticism is, at best, a hard movement to define; its members just as hard to identify (Friedman 2019, 8). He states, however, that for aesthetes art provides a venue where they “can test whether the conceptual limits structuring their lives are absolute and uncontestable, or whether they can be challenged and reimagined” (Friedman 2019, 14). Acknowledging a connection between Greek art and culture and aestheticism through the writings of Walter Pater and Johann Joachim Winckelmann, this paper aims to explore how Henry James's *Roderick Hudson* (1878) employs aestheticism as a re-orienting device toward its implicit queer aspects.

As Sara Ahmed points out in her now seminal “Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology”, individuals are usually oriented towards heteronormative realities, relegating queer realities and manifestations to the background (Ahmed 2006, 547-9). In this sense, it could be argued that aestheticism's engagement with re-imagining social limits could enable a re-orientation that allows authors to explore and discuss those aspects of queer existence that are socially or culturally obscured.

In many ways, *Roderick Hudson* could be considered to be a novel in which aestheticism and its Greek influences re-orient readers toward queer possibilities that, as Ahmed indicates re-orientations should do, “disturb the order of things” (Ahmed 2006, 565). In James's early novel, the American socialite Rowland Mallet acts as the patron of the younger, beautiful sculptor Roderick Hudson, taking him to Italy so that he can develop as an artist under the influence of Classical aesthetics. Roderick's aesthetic ideal is “perfect beauty” (James 1986, 123) inspired by Greek art. His most admired pieces, and those in which the novel dwells the most, orient Rowland's and the viewers' gazes toward the male body. In doing so, a re-orientation toward unconventional, queer realities is created, as the boundary between art, aesthetic discourse, and desire is blurred. In addition, in terms of Greek ascendancy within the novel, Rowland and Roderick's connection ultimately resembles the classical dynamics of social, romantic and erotic relationships between men in ancient Greece culture, as they can be identified as *erastes* and *eromenos*.

At multiple levels, thus, the text uses aestheticism and its accompanying set of ancient Greek cultural references to explore sexual tensions and possibilities that are left unsaid. Ultimately, the novel manages to negotiate into mostly normative discourse a way to discuss queer experiences, effectively disturbing the (heteronormative) “order of things”.

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References (maximum 150 words) (Chicago style)

- Ahmed, Sara. 2006. “Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12 (4): 543-74.
- Friedman, Dustin. *Before Queer Theory: Victorian Aestheticism and the Self*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2019.
- James, Henry. *Roderick Hudson*. London: Penguin Classics, 1986.

Keywords (maximum 5) (separated with semi-colons)

Aestheticism; Queer Theory; Henry James; Orientation; Ancient Greece