

“From Lower Cells of Waking Life”: The Evolution of Oscar Wilde’s Poetry

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When Oscar Wilde published his *Poems* of 1881 one number in his collection, entitled “Panthea”, philosophically addressed the theme of nature as a constantly recycled entity. The word Panthea originates from Greek and Persian, and roughly means ‘of all Gods’ and in Wilde’s poem the gods are presented as in harmony with nature, lounging in bucolic splendor. Man meanwhile ascends, in seeming Lamarckian fashion, from “lower cells of waking life” (103) towards “full perfection” (104) before finally being reborn as a flower or small animal. Wilde also played with this theme of ascending human progress in his later *The Critic as Artist* (1891) where Gilbert claims that “Each little thing” that man does may be transformed “into elements of a new civilization, more marvelous and more splendid than any that has gone before” (147). During the latter half of the nineteenth-century a number of different poets such as Meredith, Browning, Melville and Hardy appeared to grapple with evolutionary concepts derived from Charles Darwin’s 1859 *On the Origin of Species*. Wilde’s “Panthea” also appears a part of this tradition but is perhaps more affected by the resurgence in neo-Lamarckian evolutionary ideas that were prevalent in Victorian artistic and literary culture from the 1870s onwards. Amongst these influences, Wilde’s poem seems particularly to draw from Walter Pater’s treatment of progressive evolutionary concepts in the Mona Lisa section of *Studies in the Renaissance* (1873). Yet by 1895 Wilde’s social position had suffered a dramatic and tragic regression. Arrested and imprisoned for indecency, Wilde had fallen from the ‘full perfection’ of high society to inhabiting a lowly ‘cell’ in Reading Prison. Thus the pessimism of his later poem “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” (1898) is underpinned by this tragic fall from grace, but the specific imagery Wilde uses, with lines describing how the prison contaminates, “what is good in Man/ That wastes and withers there” (561-2) also appears to draw from the late Victorian interest in biological degeneration. One of the key texts that underpinned interest in this idea was August Weismann’s *Essays in Heredity* (1888) which directly countered neo-Lamarckian evolutionary theory and opened the door to the idea of biological degeneration in humans. Wilde’s poetry appeared to have moved from a neo-Lamarckian, socially progressive stance to that of a degenerative, darkly pessimistic position. Thus this paper will discuss how Wilde’s poetic verse, while mirroring the events of his life, also followed a trend in nineteenth-century poetry, thematically addressing the concepts of social and biological evolution and devolution.

Biography: Neil Addison was born in the U.K and is associate professor in the Department of Literature and Culture at Tokyo Woman’s Christian University. His research chiefly focuses on the influence of nineteenth-century scientific and philosophical movements on the changing thematic texture of Victorian and early twentieth-century British poetry such as the verse of Barrett Browning, Rossetti, Swinburne, Hardy and Housman. He is also interested in the work of the cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu, and the historical reception and contemporary use of British literature in Japan.