The ekphrastic fantastic: gazing at magic portraits in Victorian fiction

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Abstract
While Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray depicts the quintessential literary portrait endowed with uncanny life and movement, dozens of such magic portraits are featured in Victorian fiction. From the ravishing picture of the title character in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Lady Audley's Secret to the coveted portrait of a Romantic poet in Henry James's The Aspern Papers, imagined portraits in these texts serve as conduits of desire and fear—windows into passions and repressions that reveal not only the images' external effects but their relation to the unconscious of their viewers. My dissertation turns a critical eye on this gallery of ekphrastic pictures—those not actually visible to the reader but rather visualizable through verbal description—to argue that the meditations on representation and desire that these novels and stories perform not only anticipate but augment theories of the image and the gaze developed primarily since the advent of cinema. Though the dissertation benefits from film theory's models of visual exchange, the distinctions between these portraits and images in film open up fertile analytical terrain. Ekphrastic magic portraits provide a unique opportunity to delve into the intersecting realms of word painting and image perception, the optics of desire and subjectivity, to advance critical discourses in visual studies that are framed both historically and theoretically. Using psychoanalytic and narratological methodologies, particularly those relevant to feminist and queer image theory, "The Ekphrastic Fantastic" demonstrates how the fictional visual exchanges on display in magic portrait stories elucidate various power struggles regarding sexuality and narrative structuring. These literary pictures thereby provide new access to the social and artistic commentaries that often subtend Victorian fiction.

Each chapter considers three primary texts and the branch of image theory most relevant to their deployment of magic portraits. Laura Mulvey's foundational essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," provides the point of departure in the first chapter, which looks at Charles Dickens's Bleak House, Braddon's Lady Audley's Secret, and Wilkie Collins's The Woman in White. The second chapter addresses Margaret Oliphant's "The Portrait," Thomas Hardy's "An Imaginative Woman," and James's The Aspern Papers with further feminist insights from Vivian Sobchack and Teresa de Lauretis. The final chapter determines the relationship of principles of visual representation and narrative production of the Aesthetic movement to magic portraits in...
Walter Pater's "Sebastian van Storck," Vernon Lee's "Oke of Okehurst," and Wilde's
Dorian Gray, particularly as they relate to the nascent medium of cinema and the theories
that soon as well as later arose to account for the impact of its kinetic mirage. The arc of
my argument emphasizes how, as the Victorian period advances, the portraits become
increasingly animate and subversive in their challenges to patriarchal gender norms and
narrative formulas. In this way, they become the mechanisms by which new models of
psycho-sexual relations can be expressed and new social and narrative systems can
emerge.

**Keywords**
- ekphrasis, film and literature, magic portraits, painting and literature, the gaze, Victorian
  fiction

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