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AESTHTICIZATION AS A TYPE OF ERASURE: AN ECOCRITICAL EXAMINATION OF

THREE ETCHINGS FROM JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER'S 'THAMES SET' (1859-1871)

by

Sydney Ann Ion

A Thesis Submitted in

Partial Fulfillment of the

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ABSTRACT

AESTHETICIZATION AS A TYPE OF ERASURE: AN ECOCRITICAL EXAMINATION OF
THREE ETCHINGS FROM JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER'S 'THAMES SET' (1859-1871)

by

Sydney Ann Ion

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2023
Under the Supervision of Dr. K.L.M. Wells

This thesis explores "A Series of Sixteen Etchings of Scenes on the Thames" (1859-1871),

Thames Set, by James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), a group of etchings that negotiates

the effects of the "Great Stink" on the Thames riverbank and its people. I argue that the series

exhibits a strange paradox: the intentional exclusion of accurate environmental elements and

sensorial details to achieve a romanticized nostalgic framework that serves Whistler's aesthetic

ideals. This aestheticization of the environmental crisis is the foundation from which Whistler's

modernization grew. Recent research has understood the *Thames Set* as evidence of Whistler's

involvement in depicting lower-class environments with domestic realism. Yet this paper

demonstrates how the *Thames Set,* although photographic in style, is a romanticized view of the

river's banks and ignores the harsh realities of filth that surrounded the river. Only a year before

the creation of the first etching in the series, *Thames Warehouse* (1859), London endured the

summer of the Great Stink. While Whistler's series of etchings capture the changing

environment and society on the Thames, they avoid the filth imposed on citizens of London

brought by the Great Stink. Drawing on recent approaches to ecocritical art history, this paper

shows how Whistler's *Thames Set* creates a view of the river Thames without "the Stink,"

idealizing the scenery over the sensory, and capturing life without filth, or more accurately with

aestheticized filth.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

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This research would be impossible without the continuous support and advice from Dr. Catherine Carter Goebel.

Introduction

James McNeill Whistler's *Thames Set*, a series of 16 etchings created from 1859 to 1871, focused on the industrial life and character of the Thames River, London, and its banks, depicting characters who seemed comfortable with their way of life. Fourteen of the set are Thames subjects and two are French. The set comprises *Thames Warehouses, Old Westminster Bridge, Limehouse, Eagle Wharf, Black Lion Wharf, The Pool, Thames Police, Lime-Burner, J. Becquet, Sculptor, Rotherhithe, The Forge, Millbank, The Little Pool Battersea Dawn, Old Hungerford Bridge,* and *Chelsea Bridge and Church*. The entirety of the set was printed in London and includes thirteen horizontal scenes, beginning with two in a narrower envelope format, and three in a vertical format.[1] The *Thames Set* was published in 1871, permanently preserving the wharfs and warehouses lining the banks that would soon undergo radical change by the construction of the Thames Embankment. This thesis explores how the *Thames Set* engaged with major changes to the Thames during the period, including an ecological disaster known as The Great Stink and the massive infrastructure project of the Thames Embankment. Firstly, this paper identifies the industrial and climate changes occurring on the Thames in the 1850s, then it discusses the response of Parliament and the commencement of construction of the Thames Embankment, and finally it explores the dichotomy of Whistler's realist depictions and the environmental nostalgia experienced by his modern viewers.

James McNeill Whistler's artistic interest and talents had long included etchings. Historically, Whistler's etchings were well received, with his subject matter focused on

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[1] Margaret F. MacDonald, Grischka Petri, Meg Hausberg, and Joanna Meacock, *James McNeill Whistler: The Etchings, a catalogue raisonné*, University of Glasgow, 2012, on-line website at http://etchings.arts.gla.ac.uk.

economically driven urban change.[2] Whistler was ten years old when he went to London to stay with his half-sister Deborah and her husband, physician Francis Seymour Hayden, who was an avid collector of Rembrandt etchings and helped introduce Whistler to art galleries and lectures. In 1849, after his father's death, Whistler returned to America. He entered the United States Military Academy at West Point, and later the U.S. Coast Survey, during which he learned to etch plans and elevations of the coastline of Anacapa Island at the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey in Washington.[3] This previous experience with shorelines is evident in his landscape etchings of the Thames riverbanks and docks to capture an area's layout, but it ignores the small details, or in this case the smelly details. In 1858, Whistler made his way to London and spent the summer etching in Greenwich Park with his brother-in-law, Hayden. However, after roughly a year, Whistler and Hayden had a falling out, ending the project together, and went on very different paths. Moving to the front lines of change in London, Whistler rented rooms in the inns of Rotherhithe and Wapping in July 1859 while he worked on the first few etchings of the *Thames Set*.[4]

Previous researchers have long viewed Whistler's early etchings in the *Thames Set* as the artist's attempt to move away from themes stressing domestic scenes towards focusing on the environment. Scholars haroled the reality of the Thames through Whistler's photographic qualities in the etchings, capturing the Thames and its' inhabitants. The Thames River combined with depictions of the working class and elements of seascape and cityscape created the most

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[2] David Park Curry and James McNeill Whistler, *James McNeill Whistler: Uneasy Pieces* (Richmond : New York: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts ; In Association with the Quantuck Lane Press : Distributed by W.W. Norton & Co, 2004).

[3] Margaret F. MacDonald and Patricia de Montfort, *An American in London: Whistler and the Thames* (London, England: Philip Wilson, 2014), 14.

[4] A letter from Anne Gregory, most likely Whistler's tenet owner, provided him with a balance of his board and lodgings for multiple weeks of lodging. Although there is no address, this letter may relate to the period when Whistler stayed at an inn in Wapping during the summer of 1859 to work on the *Thames Warehouses.* Margaret F. MacDonald, "James McNeill Whistler: The Etchings, a Catalogue Raisonné," 2012, https://etchings.arts.gla.ac.uk.

appropriate realist subject for Whistler.[5] Prominent author in early Whistler scholarship, Katherine A. Lochnan, argues in *The Etchings of James McNeill Whistler*, that part of the artist's shift away from domestic scenes stems from Whistler's recognition that his early Thames etchings could go beyond topographical issues and could embody restructured pictorial space.[6]

Patricia de Montfort, co-author of "An American in London: Whistler and the Thames," correlates Whistler's pictorial narrative in his Thames images with a public narrative to promote social order and commercial prosperity reinforcing his bourgeois status.[7] De Montfort produced a foundation for an understanding of the *Thames Set* as a complete set, but she does not include the outside factors impacting the creation of the set which this paper further explores. Without contradicting De Montfort, I expand on how Whistler's anesthetization of the environmental crisis acts as erasure of the filth by setting a foundation for Whistler's modernization of the Thames. Previous literature has focused on the set as a complete work, unable to see the set as comprised of many works, each with its own rich story. By shifting the focus from the understanding of the *Thames Set* as a whole, this paper is able to explore and discuss three individual etchings that lead to a deeper understanding of how the *Thames Set* negotiates a rapidly changing urban climate and Whistler's attempt to grapple with it.

The river Thames can be understood as a significant energy source for London, acting as a vehicle for transportation and rapidly expanding its economy and industrial needs while aiding in its destruction and degradation. This transportation channel exposed London and its docks to imported pathogens from abroad, such as cholera and smallpox. A severe strain of smallpox was

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[5] Katherine Lochnan, *The Etchings of James McNeill Whistler* (New Haven: Published in association with the Art Gallery of Ontario by Yale University Press, 1984). 80-3.
[6] Lochnan, *The Etchings of James McNeill Whistler* (New Haven:1984).
[7] Margaret F. MacDonald and Patricia de Montfort, *An American in London: Whistler and the Thames* (London, England: Philip Wilson, 2014), 32.

introduced from France, resulting in the horrific 1871-1872 epidemic. Whistler was placing

himself in a very vulnerable position by creating the etching on the banks of the Thames, not

only susceptible to the disease in the water or the horrendous air quality but also newly imported

diseases.[8] In a recent article on "Whistler and Battersea: The Aesthetics of Erasure and

Redevelopment," Jon Newman discusses Whistler's later etchings of the *Thames Set* in terms of

their impressionistic titles that still suggest a purposeful imprecision. Newman focuses on the

effects of the etching process of the *Thames Set* when the outline etched into the copper plate

becomes reversed when printed onto paper, and the sense of locatedness heightened by the

disorientation implicit in the etchings process, but he does not address the environmental or

historical context of the Thames that Whistler was etching.[9]

This paper will explore an ecocritical analysis of James McNeill Whistler's etchings,

Thames Warehouses, Millbank, and *Chelsea Bridge and Church,* considering them

chronologically to explore how Whistler's aesthetic alterations of the landscape create an

environmental nostalgia to cope with the catastrophic state of the London environment.[10] Early

notions of "environmentalism" lacked the belief in the interconnectedness of the world into one

ecosystem that is assumed in the twenty-first century.[11] Ecocriticism emphasizes issues of

environmental interconnectedness, sustainability, and justice in cultural interpretation. When

historically oriented, ecocriticism may present unseen evidence of ecological sensibility or may

cast figures in a new frame by revealing previously unnoticed questions regarding environmental

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[8] Anne Hardy, "Death and The Environment in London: 1800-2000," in *A Mighty Capital Under Threat: The Environmental History of London, 1800-2000* (Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 74-9.

[9] Jon Newman, "Whistler and Battersea: The Aesthetics of Erasure and Redevelopment," *British Art Studies*, no. 22 (April 14, 2022).

[10] Kathleen Pyne, "Whistler and the Politics of the Urban Picturesque," *American Art* 8, no. 3/4 (July 1994): 61–77.

[11] Bill Luckin and Peter Thorsheim, eds., *A Mighty Capital under Threat: The Environmental History of London, 1800-2000*, History of the Urban Environment (Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 89.

concerns. An ecocritical approach reveals a question that historians of James McNeill Whistler's *Thames Set* (1859-1871) etchings have hardly yet considered: how far did Whistler's aesthetic filtration take him from the environmental truths of the Thames and its surroundings? How does knowing the reality of London's environment at the time change how we view etchings from the set?[12]

Whistler's etchings can also be understood as negotiating between two types of environmental history usually considered entirely distinct, topographical surveys and picturesque landscapes. Through his prior travels throughout the United Kingdom, Whistler would have been witness to the English picturesque. As art historian Ann Bermingham and others have explained, the English picturesque was a tradition that thrived on the depiction of decaying farmsteads, ruined manor houses, and ancient abbeys, just as the new industrial capitalist economy was coming to power.[13] The English picturesque, with its nostalgic vision of the past, offered a sense of comfort to a generation experiencing rapid change.[14] Whistler plays with the dichotomy of rapid and massive industrial change merging with smaller row boats in a transforming cityscape, just as he combines topographical landscapes and the picturesque together in his etchings. He departs with the aestheticization of the environment to present a modernized view onto the Thames. The three etchings I focus on here depict activity on the Thames, capturing everyday reality as industrial change divided social class. Whistler provides a bourgeoisie viewpoint into the lives of those trapped by filth, by recreating the industrial landscape with selective perspectives, looking down, both literally in the viewpoint of the etchings and figuratively in their

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[12] Alan C. Braddock, "Ecocritical Art History," *American Art*, June 2009, 37.

[13] Ann Bermingham, *Ideology and Landscape: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 68-69.

[14] Kathleen Pyne, "Whistler and the Politics of the Urban Picturesque," *American Art* 8, no. 3/4 (July 1994): 61–77.
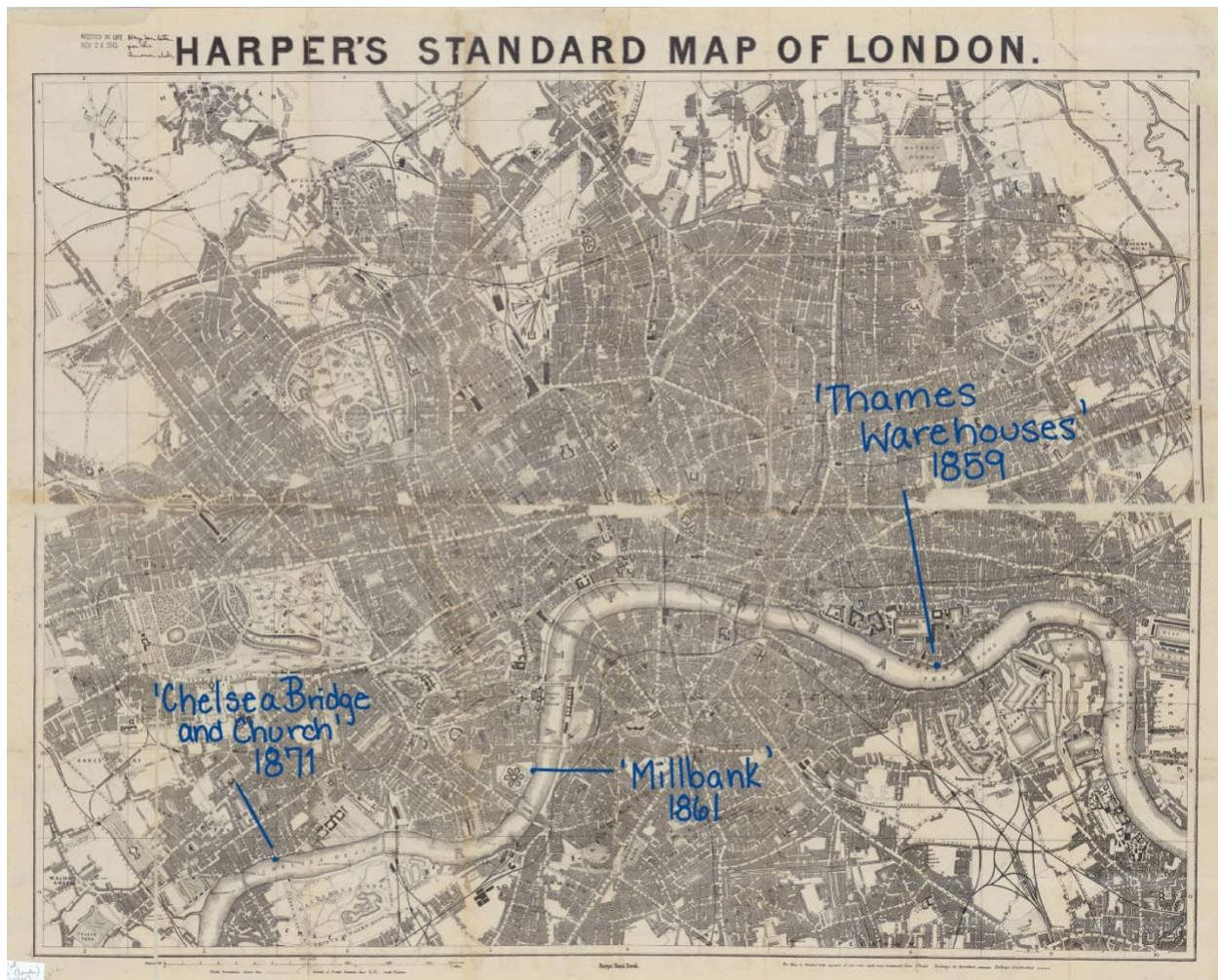
Figure 1 Harper's Standard Map of London, Harper's Handbook (Harper's Weekly: London), 1873. Details of Whistler's etching locations indicated.

opinions of the inhabitants of the river's banks. This perspective mimics the bourgeoisie's privilege to only see what they wanted, the ability to look away from the filth, turning inward to decorate their homes instead. While the bourgeoisie distance themselves from the crumbling environment and disgust that fills the air outside their homes, the lower and working class are stuck surrounded by filth with no escape. It is not until his final etching in 1871 that Whistler can no longer avoid the filth himself, and thus his aestheticization of the filth acts as a façade for the realities he can no longer separate himself from.

Crowded Commerce

As industries grew utilizing the Thames, overcrowding on the river was inevitable. In one of his first etchings, Whistler utilized an elongated narrow envelope shape format when depicting the active bustling port filled with people and boats to emphasize a streamlined view and highlighting his long linear line work with a weighted line. The copper plate for *Thames Warehouses* and another etching from the *Thames Set*, *Old Westminster Bridge* (1859), are the smallest plates in the set's entirety, and are the most exaggerated in format, the narrow horizontal rectangle emphasizing the shape of the long barge in *Thames Warehouses* (Figure 2). The first title recorded in 1860 at the *92nd Exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts,* 'The Thames, from the Tunnel Pier' provides a more precise location than the current title, 'Thames Warehouse' which strips this identity and specificity away, leaving the viewers with only a hint to where we are looking.[15] This title change reinforces his aestheticization of the river because he is generalizing the area, removing specific attitudes or opinions. It also highlights his bourgeois status and the urgency to separate himself from filth; Whistler himself is not filthy, he is only observing the grime.

The Thames is a tidal river and runs in progressive cycles averaging two per day. These tides interfere with the river's natural occurrence to carry solid material (i.e., soil deposits or sewage) downstream in a regular cleansing motion. Objects thrown in the Thames could be said to be seen floating back and forth for days before eventually passing on.[16] And yet, the etching's hazy atmosphere hardly mimics the living conditions of the Thames in 1859. Whistler did attempt some reproduction of the air pollution through wispy curvilinear lines emitting out of the

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[15] 92nd Exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts, Royal Academy, London, 1860 (cat. No. 944) 'The Thames, from the Tunnel Pier'.

[16] Dale H. Porter, *The Thames Embankment: Environment, Technology, and Society in Victorian London*, Technology and the Environment (Akron, Ohio: University of Akron Press, 1998), 40-3.

stacks in the background, growing as the plumes move farther from the stack, spreading waste through the air. A perception of a "congestion crisis" emerged in nineteenth century London, and the consequent results to ease congestion involved the creation of new roads and improvements to the navigation on the river, coincidently both of which could be successfully achieved through an embankment plan.[17] Whistler is reacting to this "congestion crisis" with his bourgeois perspective, offering insights into the lives of the lower and working classes.

Industrial pollution was never regarded as a concern by the London population at large until the rise of domestic pollution in the form of smoke and sewage, especially the mid-nineteenth century cholera outburst, the "Great Stink" on the Thames in 1858, and the London fogs. Manufacturing labor accounted for 34% of London's workforce in the 1851 census. Industrial pollution was created by the larger manufacturing sectors, such as iron and steel production, metal trades, building materials, furniture making, textiles, and instrument making. In addition to the putrid conditions of the Thames, urban air quality was extremely poor, containing toxins from sewage, animal waste, garbage, animal processing, industry, and coal

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[17] Stuart Oliver, "The Thames Embankment and the Disciplining of Nature in Modernity," *The Geographical Journal* 166 (September 2000): 227–38.

FATHER THAMES INTRODUCING HIS OFFSPRING TO THE FAIR CITY OF LONDON.
(A Design for a Fresco in the New Houses of Parliament.)

Figure 3 'Father Thames Introducing his Offspring to the Fair City of London,' July 3, 1858, "Punch Cartoon."

fires. Manufactured gas works became popular, which involved heating coal in an oven with a

low-oxygen environment to prevent combustion. Gas was used for lighting, and later in the

nineteenth century for heating and cooking. The coal manufactured methane, ethylene, and

hydrogen which would have been piped throughout the city to be burned for lighting and heating.

Manufactured gas was beneficial to industrial needs and the economy, while simultaneously

striding toward mass pollution and degradation of the environment.[18]

In 1842 Edwin Chadwick published his influential sanitation report dominated by rhetoric

of "danger, filth, and alienness," asserting his disagreement with the voices asserting the health

benefits and effects of sewer gases.[19] By identifying and locating dilapidated wharves, sewers,

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[18] Leslie Tomory, "Moving East: Industrial Pollution in London, 1800-1920," Bill Luckin and Peter Thorsheim, eds., *A Mighty Capital under Threat: The Environmental History of London, 1800-2000*, History of the Urban Environment (Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 132-154.

[19] William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson, *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life* (Minneapolis, Mn: University of

and cesspools for the bourgeois reader, Chadwick and other sanitation reformers engineered a city plan that drew theoretically "safe" and "sanitary" borders around the middle-class shopping districts, neighborhoods, and the middle-class home.[20] This report allowed the bourgeoisie, like Whistler, to be able to label everything and everyone out of these safe zones as "filthy." Shortly afterward, a nationwide epidemic of cholera killed over sixty thousand people. Water drawn from the Thames River below London's sewage outfall was found to be a source of a cholera outbreak in the early 1850s.[21] The Thames became a receptacle for numerous decaying bodies especially around the docks of Rotherhithe, where a criminal population grew because of disease ridden, filthy, and overcrowded housing.[22]

John Simon, the London Medical Officer of Health, summarized the environmental crisis in 1855, "Soon after day break, the great factory shafts beside the river begin to discharge immense volumes of smoke… the sky is overcast with a dingy veil."[23] In 1858, the bodily waste of Londoners flowed through sewers directly into the river Thames. The environmental crisis evoked ideals of purity and impurity among those surviving the cholera outbreak. The scorching summer of 1858 was the last straw for the citizens of London, the low tide allowed the fermented waste on the sides of the river to become exposed, so that citizens blamed the foul smell in the air from the river Thames. Passing through the center of London, the Thames runs through many of the most heavily populated areas of the city, leaving people inescapably surrounded with the

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Minnesota Press, 2004).

[20] Eileen Cleer, "Victorian Dust Traps," in *Filth: Dirt Disgust and Modern Life*, by William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 133-35.

[21] National Research Council. Use of Reclaimed Water and Sludge in Food Crop Production. Washington: National Academy Press, 1996.

[22] Kathleen Pyne, "Whistler and the Politics of the Urban Picturesque," *American Art* 8, no. 3/4 (July 1994): 61–77.

[23] Leslie Tomory, "Moving East: Industrial Pollution in London, 1800-1920," Bill Luckin and Peter Thorsheim, eds., *A Mighty Capital under Threat: The Environmental History of London, 1800-2000*, History of the Urban Environment (Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 144-5.

river's stench.[24]

John Leech, creator for *Punch*, produced a series of six cartoons aimed against social abuses in which he contrasted the opulence of the upper class with the poverty of the spectators who lived in the filth waiting for Parliament to help in any way. This cartoon of "Father Thames" contains the bones of the corpses that float along his banks, a depiction of the filth, slime, and gas of the river.[25] (Figure 3) 'Father Thames' embodies the damages industry has imposed on him, dark, scaley, and debilitated with distorted features, and offering three diseases thought to be water-borne during this period as his offspring. Built upon pollution from both industrial and human wastes, Father Thames presents his three sick-looking children. The offspring are depicted with deformed appendages and facial features, surrounded by floating lifeless pigs. These embodiments of Diphtheria, Scrofula (a type of chronic tubercular abscess), and Cholera are placed opposite of the idealized goddess representing the upper class 'City of London,' representing the removed high upper class, peering her nose down on the diseases of the lower classes.[26] The personification of 'Father Thames' comes as a humbled warning to the people of London, that the rivers and sewers, drains and cesspools, will have their revenge on the people of the city for neglect and procrastination, for disease and filth favor no particular social class. It was during the summer of 1858 that the recently rebuilt Houses of Parliament stood on the Thames banks, and the putrid smells enraged the politicians who previously had ignored cries for action. The concentrated stench shifted their focus to the rivers conditions, after many previous

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[24] "Confronting Sensory Crisis in the Great Stinks of London and Paris" by David S. Barnes in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life,* ed. William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson, *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) 2004.

[25] Clare Horrocks, "The Personification of 'Father Thames': Reconsidering the Role of the Victorian Periodical Press in the 'Verbal and Visual Campaign' for Public Health Reform," *Johns Hopkins University Press*, Victorian Periodicals Review, 36, no. 1 (2003): 2–19.

[26] *Father Thames Introducing His Offspring to the Fair City of London from Punch*, Print Cartoon (The British Library, July 3, 1858), British Library, https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/father-thames-introducing-his-offspring-to-the-fair-city-of-london-from-punch.

years of arguments and campaigning and little to show, resulting in immense pressure to resolve the disputes over London's main drainage systems.[27] A parliament member recorded a claim by an honorable member, 'It was a notorious fact that Hon. Gentlemen sitting in the Committee Rooms and in the Library were utterly unable to remain there in consequence of the stench which rose from the river.'[28]

Both Whistler and the *Punch* artist include plumes of smoke rising from the industrial works on the bank of the river, resulting in a partly hazy atmosphere. The smoke implies the multitude of industrial companies on the river actively adding to the environmental degradation. The company names on the front of the buildings in Whistler's *Thames Warehouse* indicate that this was a stretch of the London docks backing onto Wapping Street. James Smith & Son, coal merchants, were based at Hermitage Coal Wharf; their postal address was 343 Wapping High Street.[29] Whistler's selective realism of the *Thames Warehouse* cements his bourgeois status, which employed a highly romanticized depiction that additionally contributes to the nostalgia of the etchings, or the creation of very "meaningful places through an ethic and aesthetic of care for old and neglected objects, homes and landscapes."[30] Through this understanding, Whistler's etching embraces a positive bourgeois depiction of the river's banks with bustling ports and growing commerce between its' inhabitants, a moment not concerned with the darkened reality of the filth consuming the city. Additionally, Whistler's *Thames Warehouse* provides a starting place for discussing how Whistler was dealing with the climate change both emotionally and artistically within a growing and changing industrial scene. Scientists recognize nineteenth-

[27] Stephen Halliday, *The Great Stink of London: Sir Joseph Bazalgette and the Cleansing of the Victorian Capital* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Pub, 1999): 68-73.

[28] Hansard, 11 June 1858, 3rd Series, vol. 150.

[29] Street directory, "London Postal Directory," 1859.

[30] Jordan P. Howell, Jennifer Kitson, and David Clowney, "Environments Past: Nostalgia in Environmental Policy and Governance," *Environmental Values* 28, no. 3 (June 1, 2019): 311.

century London as the beginning of the Anthropocene age, that is, the peak of when the human

population began to irreversibly impact the planets ecosystems.[31]

Selective Perspective

The 1850s through the early 1870s was a critical time for the development of modernity on the

streets of London, as the growing population required change on the banks of the river Thames.

Levels of overcrowding in the city of London during the nineteenth century among the working

class and poverty-stricken communities, especially those living immediately to the south of the

river, allowed disease and infection to run rampant through London's businesses and homes.[32]

While flushing toilets were available in homes that could afford them, they simply moved

excrement from buildings into London's old sewers and dumped into the Thames. Because old

sewers carried sewage into the city's waterways, they passed pollution directly to the population

when they digested the polluted water. In 1862, the House of Parliament accepted a proposal for

a new sewage system to bypass polluting the river Thames. This new sewage system involved

the construction of embankments along large sections of the river in central London, which

would conceal the new sewers and act as flood defenses. During this time, many houses,

warehouses, and businesses with river frontages lost not only boat access to the Thames, but

their business and neighborhoods. This proposal, the Thames Embankment (North) Act led to

many negotiations between the Board of Metropolitan Works and wharfingers, property owners,

and numerous other parties before construction could begin in 1864.[33]

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[31] Jesse Oak Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture: the London Fog and British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 9-10.

[32] Bill Luckin and Peter Thorsheim, eds., *A Mighty Capital under Threat: The Environmental History of London, 1800-2000*, History of the Urban Environment (Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 7.

[33] Stephen Halliday, *The Great Stink of London: Sir Joseph Bazalgette and the Cleansing of the Victorian Capital* (Thrupp, Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Pub, 1999) 144-8.

Figure 4 James McNeill Whistler, 'Millbank', *Thames Set*, etching, 1861.

James McNeill Whistler's *Millbank* (Figure 4)*,* etched in 1861, captures the unloading of a barge named '[D]elight 1861,' as he inscribed on the stern in the lower left corner of the composition. One of Whistler's primary goals was to show the river as it was and make each plate "a little portrait of a place."[34] A large man stands on the prow of the barge with slats of wood tossed aside the open hatch, while two more men stand with hands in pockets on the bare shoreline in the foreground. If you were to remove these figures from within the composition, the viewer's eyes would leap immediately to the background of the composition, so that the figures mediate between the foreground and background.[35] Although Whistler's etchings included few people, in this scene they provide a visual anchor for the viewer's gaze beyond the foreground down the river's banks. Long linear lines on the right side of the composition draw the eye back into the

[34] Katherine Lochnan, *The Etchings of James McNeill Whistler* (New Haven: Published in association with the Art Gallery of Ontario by Yale University Press, 1984), 82-82.

[35] Daniel E. Sutherland, *Whistler: A Life for Art's Sake* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 55-8.

receding space, passing in between the long timbered embankment and tall wooden piles following parallel, casting dark shadows behind them to the right. This unusual perspective enables Whistler to avoid etching the disfigured and dilapidated wharves that lined the Thames on the right side. Neither Whistler nor his bourgeois followers wanted to see the filth invading the poor and working class. Thus, Whistler was recording a site that would be radically changed when the new bridge and the building of the embankments were completed, capturing an area that would soon no longer be recognizable, as the Embankments created a steamlined view of the river's banks.

Katherine A. Lochnan discusses, briefly, the etchings done by Whistler in 1860-1, noting a shift by Whistler away from a linear composition and toward a tonal depiction of nature.[36] While I do no disagree, I argue Whistler is selectively curating a bourgeois view of the Thames by aestheticizing the 'impurities' of the banks, producing a pleasing image to the bourgeois viewer. Through an ecocritical approach, we can understand Whistler's *Millbank* as shifting the primary focus from the dock workers to the Thames itself, and understanding the etching as an example of how Whistler begins to grapple with depicting the environmental crisis as well as the social tensions that are permanently changing this riverbank. The erection of a bridge at Lambeth was authorized by an Act of Parliament in 1860. It would eventually obscure this view.[37]

Joseph Bazalgette engineered the Thames Embankment, which consisted of intercepting sewers that prevented waste from pouring into the river in central London. These sewers were designed to move waste downstream from the city before discharging them into the Thames twice daily with the outgoing tide on mud flats that extended right up to the buildings along the

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[36] Katherine Lochnan, *The Etchings of James McNeill Whistler* (New Haven: Published in association with the Art Gallery of Ontario by Yale University Press, 1984), 127.

[37] Margaret F. MacDonald, "James McNeill Whistler: The Etchings, a Catalogue Raisonné," 2012, https://etchings.arts.gla.ac.uk.

river. Thousands of workers constructed the stone embankments, within which were hidden the new intercepting sewers and an underground train line, and above ground, the embankments created space for a new road and green space.[38] Constructed with brick and concrete, thirty feet high and ten feet wide at the base, the embankments were faced with granite and topped with lighted parapets.[39]The embankments served a dual purpose of providing free circulation while also creating clean-lined architecture and flush surfaces to deliver a controlled bourgeoise view of the river.[40] The main drainage and embankments transformed the unsightly riverfront into a monumental structure that attracted visitors and traffic. At the same time, it also involved the reclamation of nearly fifty-two acres of the river which shows the Parliament's bias to the bourgeois as they hardly concerned themselves with the direct impact to the lower and working classes.[41] Bazalgette's plan also included the Chelsea Embankment, a three-quarter mile stretch in front of Cheyne Walk, to the east of Linsey Row, leading to the Chelsea Hospital, constructed in 1871. Additionally, the Thames embankments proclaimed London's growing industrial needs and demonstrated the city's commercial and political dominance.

[38] Peter Thorsheim, "Green Space in London: Social and Environmental Perspectives," in *A Mighty Capital under Threat* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 118; Dale H. Porter, *The Thames Embankment: Environment, Technology, and Society, in Victorian London* (Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 1998).

[39] Dale H. Porter, *The Thames Embankment: Environment, Technology, and Society in Victorian London*, Technology and the Environment (Akron, Ohio: University of Akron Press, 1998): 3-6.

[40] Stuart Oliver, "The Thames Embankment and the Disciplining of Nature in Modernity," *The Geographical Journal* 166 (September 2000): 227–38.

[41] Margaret F. MacDonald and Patricia de Montfort, *An American in London: Whistler and the Thames* (London, England: Philip Wilson, 2014): 30-8.
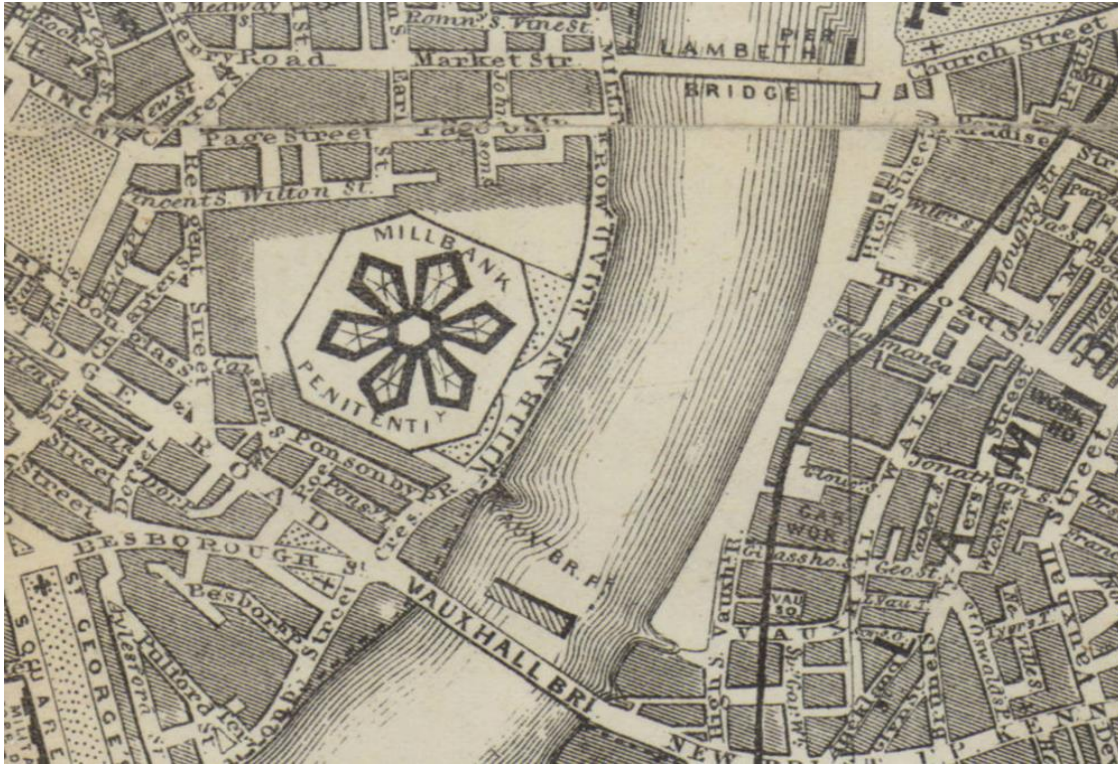
Both the title and view of *Millbank,* begun in 1860, is taken from Millbank (Figure 5),

originally receiving its name from the mill that belonged to Westminster Abbey and stood on the

isolated marsh filled foreshore that linked Westminster to Chelsea, on the River Thames at low

tide, looking northwest on a clear day. The mill was demolished in 1736 by Sir Robert Grosvener

who lived on site until 1809 when the land was set aside to build London's largest prison. Along

these banks stands the notorious Millbank Penitentiary or Millbank Prison, later replaced by The

Tate Gallery in 1897, which emphasized solitary confinement and rigid work principles. At first,

its convicts were considered capable of redemption and were offered five to ten years jail

sentences instead of banishment to Australia's Botany Bay.[42] When Millbank Penitentiary

opened in June 1816, it was the largest prison in Britain. The prison, influenced by Jeremy

Bentham's panopticon design, was constructed in a hexagonal shape encompassing six petal-

shaped wings, each three stories high and containing five courtyards, all surrounding a single

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[42] Dale H. Porter, *The Thames Embankment: Environment, Technology, and Society in Victorian London*, Technology and the Environment (Akron, Ohio: University of Akron Press, 1998): 30.

Figure 6 Detail of inscription in lower right had corner of Millbank advertising for Whistler's upcoming exhibition.

chapel in the center. Prisoners were given minimal rations of bread and water and five minutes of daily exercise. Lack of sanitization in the prison led to regular cholera, malaria, dysentery, and scurvy outbreaks. By May 1843, the prison had sunk into such degradation that Parliament decided the facility was no longer fit for holding inmates long-term. Millbank Penitentiary was demoted to a general prison for all offenders; it became a holding facility in which those sentenced to transportation were usually detained for three months until a place became available on a prison ship bound for the Australian penal colony. Transportation continued to and from Millbank until the late 1860s when around 162,000 men and women had been sent to Australia.

Interestingly, Whistler does not depict any of the prisoner ships that would be in or out bound because to do so would contaminate a cleanly bourgeoise perspective with undesirable people.. Whistler's selective perspective of his *Millbank* etching and the erasure of what is deemed grotesque or repulsive is the product of his bourgeois attitude needing to establish a distinct separation from filth. The bourgeois thought was to separate themselves as to not potentially encounter filth and become filthy in the eyes of society; something that is filthy is

fundamentally alien that it must be rejected, thus labeling something filthy is a forceful means of excluding it.[43] Whistler would certainly not want the filth of transporting prisoners in his etching, especially as this etching would be the advertisement for an upcoming exhibition, as seen in the lower right of the etching.

The *Millbank* etching was made and used by Whistler to announce his exhibition of his etchings and dry points at 39 Old Bond Street in 1861 (Figure 6). To provide a source of income, Whistler promised his etchings to a lawyer and patron of the arts, Ralph Thomas.[44] Thomas asked to reissue Whistler's earlier *French Set*, exhibit the Thames etchings, and purchase the rights to all Whistler's etchings over the next seven years. Thus, the exhibition would be held at a small gallery owned by Thomas' son Edmund, at 39 Old Bond Street, with earnings being split in half with Whistler.[45] This exhibition is thought to be one of Whistler's first one-man exhibitions as discussed by a column 'Art' in *The Critic*, 25 May 1861, reading "At E. Thomas in Bond – Street, who is publishing them, may now be seen 'The Works of James Whistler etchings and dry points'. These comprise a series of views of Thames shipping and Thames life, and more than all, a series of studies from Parisian life and circumstances…" This criticism of Whistler's early exhibition reveals a bourgeois perspective of the critic because he does not give the slightest indication that Whistler is dancing around the environmental crisis occurring, nor that he really care that Whistler has aestheticized and essentially erased the filth. Impressions of Whistler's *Millbank* etching with Edmund Thomas' name and address inscribed may have been

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[43] William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson, *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life* (Minneapolis, United States: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

[44] Ralph Thomas senior, Serjeant-at-law, who died early 1861, was the father to four sons, two being Ralph junior (b.1840) and Edmund (b. 1842). The Thomas family's presence at 39 Old Bond Street is first recorded in the London Street directories in 1862 under the name of Ralph Thomas (Junior), with no indication that there was a business address. Ralph Sr. was the author of a manuscript life of the painter and printmaker John Martin, who had lived by the river in Chelsea, like Whistler.

[45] Daniel E. Sutherland, *Whistler: A Life for Art's Sake* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014): 63-5.

placed in his Old Bond Street window to advertise the prints and exhibition. Bourgeois strolling by the Old Bond Street window would see Whistler's interpretation of the clean and modern Thames River, void of all things filthy.[46]

It is problematic to think about what Whistler chose to exclude, or more specifically what he chose to highlight in his image. Whistler specifically chose this view from Millbank, as his hides the monstrosities that lie within the walls of Millbank Penitentiary. Michael Foucault famously theorized in his book "Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison," panopticon designs like that of Millbank prison rely on hierarchical observation, an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power and make those on whom they are applied visible. He described the perfect prison where all power would be exercised through observation, and every gaze would contribute to the overall functioning of power.[47] We can see this relationship between power and the gaze in the building of the Thames embankments, which altered past perspectives, as well as in Whistler's print. Even without depicting the crowded wharves, Whistler creates an oppressive impression, narrowing the viewer's perspective and replicating the unpleasant confinement of the people who lived on the banks and in prison as populations grew and space dwindled. Whistler's *Millbank* can be understood through the prison's hierarchical observation techniques and use of power to control one's perspective and view of their surroundings. But the embankment project itself took part in this dynamic. According to Bazalgette, embanking aimed to 'present irregular line of frontage into a regular line' and to 'reface the present defective wharves,' while the First Commissioner of Works, William Cowper, claimed it would 'secure a better architectural effect' by eliminating the

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[46] Martin Hopkinson, "Whistler's First Print Exhibition," *Print Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (2009): 257–67.
[47] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 1st American ed (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977): 171.

'irregularities' of the river's banks.[48] Whistler essentially erases the irregular shoreline and replaces it with the regular straight-lined bank, mimicking the bourgeoise perspective of the future embankment project laid over the working class perspective. Carefully etching a few people on top of the embankment on the right side reinforces the separation of the lower working classes and the bourgeoisie looking down literally and figurately upon the crowded filth and its inhabitants. On the far bank are the wharves and warehouses along For Street, past White Hart Stairs and Lambeth Stairs, with the towers of Lambeth Palace visible in the distance.

In the early 1860s, dirty white air was beginning to be replaced with a sulfurous yellow hue, with periods of extended foggy weather seriously disrupting daily casual labor in the eastern and inner-city core districts.[49] But yet, a letter from Anna Whistler to James H. Gamble on February 10, 1864, refers to Whistler's time spent on the Thames so far and does not mention the environmental crisis or the filth of her son's surroundings, "The Thames and so much of its life, shipping, building, steamers, coal heavers, passengers going ashore, all so true to the peculiar tone of London and its river scenes, it is so improved by his [Whistler's] perseverance to perfect it…"[50] The Thames became an important symbol to the citizens of London as it captured the narrative history of the City, the only thing to cling to as industrial change swept through the town, and life became unrecognizable. The state of the Thames had a particular cultural importance because of the river's role as a symbol of old England, having 'long signified the nation's condition and power,' thus pollution suggested corruption at the very heart of England.[51]

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[48] Stuart Oliver, "The Thames Embankment and the Disciplining of Nature in Modernity," *The Geographical Journal* 166 (September 2000): 235.

[49] *The Globe*, 24 January 1865; see also *the Times,* 11 January 1861 and 'Fog in a metropolitan light,' *The Builder,* XXIII (1865), 537-8. From Bill Luckin, "'The Heart and Home of Horror': The Great London Fogs of the Late Nineteenth Century," *Taylor & Francis, Ltd.*, Social History, 28, no. 1 (January 2003): 31–48.

[50] James McNeill Whistler, *Whistler on Art: Selected Letters and Writings, 1849 - 1903*, ed. Nigel R. Thorp, 1. publ, Fyfield Books (Manchester: Carcanet Pr. [u.a.], 1994): 24–26.

[51] Stuart Oliver, "The Thames Embankment and the Disciplining of Nature in Modernity," *The Geographical Journal* 166 (September 2000): 227–38.

Whistler's *Millbank* captures a sweeping moment of change through the city, change that will ultimately lead to further divisions between the working lower class and the bourgeoisie. This etching narrows the viewer's sight line, like parliament and the bourgeoise, focusing on how the embankments benefit their livelihoods while ignoring the communities and homes destroyed. Whistler presents a moment in a calm riverscape while simultaneously capturing a moment filled with tension and stress between classes, industrial change, and modernity as the banks underwent a radical change which can be felt in the thick smoke he depicts with long curvilinear lines stretching back and forth between the banks.

Inescapable Truths

In addition to the foul smell in the air from the horrific state of the river, London was notorious for the thick black smoke that enveloped the sky from the ubiquitous industrial furnaces and the increased use of steam engines, coined the "London fogs."[52] Chelsea Old Church (All Saints) is on the north bank of the River Thames near the Albert Bridge in Chelsea, London. It stands at the corner of Old Church Street and Cheyenne Walk, where Whistler lived in different houses for many years. This last work *Chelsea Bridge and Church* (Figure 7) was printed in 1871 and published the same year along with the other fifteen prints of the *Thames Set*, the year the Embankment along the Chelsea shore commenced.[53] As the last etching in the set, reveals how Whistler, from him bourgeoise perspective, grapples with the realities of life on the Thames and emotionally processes the ongoing environmental crisis eating away at his surroundings right in front of his eyes. Despite the evident environmental crisis and industrial

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[52] Leslie Tomory, "Moving East: Industrial Pollution in London, 1800-1920," Bill Luckin and Peter Thorsheim, eds., *A Mighty Capital under Threat: The Environmental History of London, 1800-2000*, History of the Urban Environment (Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 132-144.

[53] Margaret F. MacDonald, "James McNeill Whistler: The Etchings, a Catalogue Raisonné," 2012, https://etchings.arts.gla.ac.uk.

Figure 7 James McNeill Whistler, 'Chelsea Bridge and Church,' "Thames Set", etching, 1871.

pollution, by the middle of the 1870s, many bourgeoisies were convinced that the influx of immigrants (and the transport of prisoners) into England, and specifically London, was a direct correlation of the vice, degradation, and filth that ran rampant through the river and its cities.[54]

Here I focus on the final state of the etching. Whistler utilizes the etching medium and manipulates foul biting to vary the textures around the boats, possibly applied using sand or salt grain or open bite, in addition to providing visual evidence of stopping out or burnishing to create contrasting white areas. The combined use of varying etching techniques creates an imperfect surface, aestheticizing the 'London Fogs' by providing varying tones of white. In early November 1870, Anna Whistler wrote to her sister Catherine ('Kate') Jane Palmer about the fogs, saying, "If I can see thro the dense fog, dearest Kate I may be thankful at being alone… I hope my dear Jemie [James Whistler] is not hindered by fog, he certainly could not see to paint if here

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[54] Childers, Joseph W. "Foreign Matter: Imperial Filth." In *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life*, by William A. Cohen. Minneapolis, United States: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. 201-3

today!"[55] This is one of the only times in written correspondence Whistler or his mother acknowledge the environmental crisis. Whistler represents the consequences of the sulfurous yellow fog, particularly its disruption of the casual labor markets and obstruction of vision, when capturing the *Chelsea Bridge and Church*. Although the thick heavy fog was detrimental to London's inhabitants, Whistler offers a perspective like a dream-like state of hazy perception. By this final etching in 1871, Whistler could no longer ignore the realities of the environmental degradation around him but still cloaks the present in a dreamy, romantic, aestheticized veil that makes the environmental crisis more palatable, at least in art, to the bourgeoise.

This etching provides an opportunity to understand how Whistler acknowledged the environmental crisis and became unable to cover up the realities of the river's desolation, but still attempted to cover the filth with a modern perception. Margaret MacDonald's catalog of *Thames Set* highlights Whistler's ability to engage with the domestic realism of the lower class, but an environmental analysis challenges their idealized modernity.[56] Through ecocriticism, the etching can be understood through the lens of 'Solastalgia,' or the distress caused by climate change and the fear of environmental catastrophe. Solastalgia is a kind of nostalgia in reverse, caused not by having to leave a particular place but by having that place leave us or dissolve before our eyes. Whistler was able to document much of the change between 1858 and 1867 during the building of Joseph Bazalgette's main drainage system, which would come to be seen as an engineering achievement to solve a public health problem rather than as a reconstruction of and response to

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[55] *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler, 1855-1903*, edited by Margaret F. MacDonald, Patricia de Montfort and Nigel Thorp; including *The Correspondence of Anna McNeill Whistler, 1855-1880*, edited by Georgia Toutziari.

[56] Bill Luckin, "'The Heart and Home of Horror': The Great London Fogs of the Late Nineteenth Century," *Social History* 28, no. 1 (2003): 31–48.

London's environmental systems.[57] While this was what the bourgeoise and upper class wanted, they could not escape the feelings of change and irreversible modernization both industrial and environmental around them.

While etching the *Chelsea Bridge and Church*, Whistler would have been outdoors experiencing many environmental sensations, such as air that may not be very transparent or breathable, in addition to London's noises and the river's wretched smells. Whistler would have been witness to those directly affected by the river and its changes, particularly those who walked along the bank to get to work or who worked on the river itself. After etching the lives of the inhabitants of the Thames for just over ten years, Whistler could not ignore the filth consuming the citizens experiencing the river every day. Therefore, when viewing Whistler's *Thames Set* chronologically, we can see a progression in which Whistler starts in 1859 by treating the riverbank scene as a façade covering the truths of the Thames and ends in 1871 with some of the undeniable realities he could no longer ignore. It is also possible that Whistler did not recognize this transition as he would become somewhat used to being around the stench and smell for so long that depicting it here in *Chelsea Bridge and Church* was less a radical shift from the early *Thames Set* etchings than an unconscious influence of environmental pollution on his aesthetic.[58]

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[57] Christopher Hamlin, "Imagining the Metropolitan Environment in the Modern Period," in *A Mighty Capital Under Threat: The Environmental History of London, 1800-2000* (Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 60.

[58] Christopher Hamlin, "Imagining the Metropolitan Environment in the Modern Period," in *A Mighty Capital Under Threat: The Environmental History of London, 1800-2000* (Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 46–51.

Figure 8 John Constable, 1776-1837, Hadleigh Castle, The Mouth of the Thames--Morning after a Stormy Night, recto, cropped to image, 1829, oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.42.

Margaret F. MacDonald and Patricia de Montfort, authors of "An American in London: Whistler and The Thames," discuss the tensions between narrative and realist painting traditions and a more formalist view of art in Whistler's works depicting the Thames.[59]

Yet, Whistler's desire to strive for complete compositional harmony, atmosphere, and realism is in tension with the creation of his final etching, as he was no longer able to ignore the environmental truths. Comparing Whistler's *Chelsea Bridge and Church* (Figure 7) with near contemporary John Constable's *Hadleigh Castle, The Mouth of the Thames—Morning after a Storm* (referred to as *Hadleigh Castle)* (Figured 8) painted almost fifty years prior in 1829, shows how Whistler creates modern topographical images and tourist views in his set of

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[59] Margaret F. MacDonald and Patricia de Montfort, *An American in London: Whistler and the Thames* (London, England: Philip Wilson, 2014), 9–11.

etchings.[60] The mouth of the river Thames during the early nineteenth century would be bustling

with the activity of in- and outbound shipping boats, which is not evident in the painting. Instead,

Constable highlights the meeting of past and present. A shepherd stands in the lower left corner

with his dog looking out on a diagonal, leading the viewer's eyes across the canvas to the ruins of

Hadleigh Castle. Without the details of the shepherd's red vest and long staff, he would be

unnoticeable in the composition and blend into the landscape.[61]

   Although both Whistler and Constable reveal their inner emotions toward the environmental

crisis of the nineteenth century London through their depictions of the Thames, Constable

presents a classically nostalgic landscape while Whistler disguises the present in a dreamy haze.

As scholars, we have long assumed hazy landscapes were aestheticized and modern, but this

paper demonstrates that they are also dystopian, as Whistler could not bear to portray such a

horrid and decrepit place that he must use hazy perspective to his advantage to create a dream

like state.[62] The battered, abandoned ruin in *Hadleigh Castle* is interpreted as Constable

associating with his own shattered home life, the end of his time in the castle, leaving this place

behind as he moves forward. On the other hand, Whistler's *Chelsea Bridge and Church* depicts a

modern Solastalgia, a landscape that is leaving him. He does not have a choice but to accept the

riverscape and cityscape he once knew will never look the same again. I argue that an ecocritical

approach reveals Constable's painting as a reaction to leaving behind what he once knew,

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[60] "Hadleigh Castle, The Mouth of the Thames--Morning after a Stormy Night - YCBA Collections Search," accessed November 16, 2022, https://collections.britishart.yale.edu/catalog/tms/5001.

[61] Louis Hawes, "Constable's Hadleigh Castle and British Romantic Ruin Painting," *The Art Bulletin* 65, no. 3 (1983): 455–70. And also, Michael Rosenthal, *Constable, the Painter and His Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

[62] Rosenthal, Michael. *Constable, the Painter and His Landscape*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983. 214-17.

whereas Whistler's etching reacts to the environment as a bystander watching the familiarity of his surroundings vanish without any choice or any control.[63]

Whistler creates a tone of reflection into the past, like Constable, but uses the great 'London fogs' to push his aestheticization of imagery forward while also revealing the heaviness of the fogs and his inability to ignore the darkening of the city's skies. In comparison, Constable focuses on archaic elements of the past and ignores present day realities of commerce and the earliest degradation of the river. Whistler stands out among his contemporaries because he grapples with depicting a modern landscape while being forced to address the environmental crisis. The air quality was the most apparent and most tangible evidence of ongoing environmental degradation in nineteen-century London. The concept of miasma, understood as the noxious vapors given off by rotting organic materials, was the prominent factor among contemporary ideas of disease causation until the late 1860s, which started much of the urban cleanup across the nation in the late 1800s. The work of the anesthetist John Snow (1813-58) held the most notable early contribution to the idea that polluted water, rather than air, was the principal cause of cholera epidemics.[64] While these vapors were highly unpleasant to the senses, they did not cause cholera, but certainly caused other diseases such as asthma or other chronic conditions.

The darkening skies over London were caused by one of the city's primary energy sources, coal. Fueling London fires for centuries, coal was used in record-breaking amounts in the nineteenth century, and the city's industries and population rapidly grew. The by-products of manufactured coal, combined with the products of factories, steam railway engines, steamboats,

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[63] Hawes, Louis. "Constable's Hadleigh Castle and British Romantic Ruin Painting." *The Art Bulletin* 65, no. 3 (1983): 455–70.

[64] Stephen Halliday, "Death And Miasma In Victorian London: An Obstinate Belief," *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 323, no. 7327 (2001): 1469–71.

and machinery, created fogs containing such various elements as carbon soot, oily hydrocarbons, and sulfur oxides, a concentrated and harmful concoction.[65] Whistler recreates the heavy dirt-filled hair by repeatedly drawing lines over each other to create darkness at the top of the plate, evoking the feeling of the fog surrounding him, almost forcing him to succumb to the darkness and filth. The darkening of the skies brought forth other consequences than the shadowing of daylight, such as the domestic atmospheres being stifled with heat and stale air. Many medical contemporaries believed the rebreathed air to be the actual cause of respiratory tuberculosis. The grit and grimy quality of the surface of the etching in the bottom right reinforces the texture of the dirt and toxins that linger in the air, which all citizens have to breath. [66]

By the 1870s, the yellow-grey fog, by midday, became black and choking, obscuring visibility and impairing breathing so that even the healthiest choked to death if overexposed. The thick fog could factor into why this final etching has a highly sketch-like quality and feels rushed or sped up because Whistler could not remain in position for the etching long without reacting to the treacherous fogs. *Chelsea Bridge and Church* represents the isolation and separation of individuals and groups caused by the fog and the darkening skies, leaving the scene void of human life. This absence of human figures in addition to his sketchy quality of fill in the receding buildings, contrast with his early etchings of the *Thames Set*.[67]

Chelsea Bridge and Church concludes the series with a seemingly more truthful representation, or perhaps a personal reflection of his current time on the Thames. Through his time etching the lives of the dockworkers and creating these miniature "portraits of places,"

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[65] Anne Hardy, "Death and The Environment in London: 1800-2000," in *A Mighty Capital Under Threat: The Environmental History of London, 1800-2000* (Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 69–71.
[66] Anne Hardy, "Death and The Environment in London: 1800-2000," 73.
[67] Bill Luckin, "'The Heart and Home of Horror': The Great London Fogs of the Late Nineteenth Century," *Social History* 28, no. 1 (2003): 43–8.

Whistler slowly reveals his interconnectedness with his surroundings and environment, revealing his fading connection with the places around him that no longer exist in the ways he remembered. The Thames Set provides the context to understand how Whistler could separate or remove himself while looking down upon the people who could not escape the filth. By his final etching, he is fully emerged in the environmental crisis that will close its grasp tightly on anyone, regardless of social class. The shift in Whistler's perspective could indicate that he has pushed passed his close-minded bourgeoisie perspective through his time and experiences on the banks of the river Thames and its inhabitants.

Conclusion

Whistler's early etchings in the *Thames Set* follow typical subject matter of depicting modernity in landscapes during the 1860s and 1870s, which was emphasized in his selection of vantage points from which he creates his etchings. I argue that Whistler depicts the mixed feelings of the bourgeoisie, grappling with accepting the inevitability of progress while remaining solastalgic about a view that will never be the same. Whistler's urge to explore the Thames and the areas surrounding it may have stemmed not only from his time with his half-sister Deborah and her husband Francis Seymour Hayden, but also from the contemporary critic, Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), and his Salon review of 1859, where he expressed weariness of landscape subjects and asks why there was no modern seascapes or cityscapes.[68]

In 1862, Whistler exhibited the first few impressions of the *Thames Set* at Martinet's gallery in Paris inspiring Baudelaire's appreciation: 'A marvellous tangle of rigging, yardarms and rope; a chaos of fog, furnaces and gushing smoke; the profound and complicated poetry of a

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[68] Katherine Lochnan, *The Etchings of James McNeill Whistler* (New Haven: Published in association with the Art Gallery of Ontario by Yale University Press, 1984), 77.

vast capital.'[69] The review flustered Whistler because 'Baudelaire says a lot of poetic things

about the Thames, and nothing about the etchings themselves!' But Baudelaire's positive

reception of the etchings was important to Whistler as some reviews encouraged potential

buyers, and because prints were considered lower than paintings in the hierarchy of art, reviews

of etchings were few and far between. [70] The salon review speaks to modernity of Whistler's

etchings because of their streamlined and interesting perspective that creates a dynamic, bustling,

and complicated landscape, and yet appears in a calm aestheticized moment devoid of all things

filthy. While the review acknowledges the modernity of Whistler's etchings, it fails to

acknowledge the ongoing environmental crisis.

Lochnan's *The Etchings of James McNeill Whistler* celebrates the *Thames Set* as evidence

of Whistler's involvement in depicting lower-class environments with domestic realism because

of their photographic quality, which additionally lends itself to the modernity of Whistler's

etchings. Using Whistler's *French Set* for comparison, created a year prior to the creation of

Thames Warehouses, Lochnan states the *Thames Set* abandons the picturesque line that evolved

from his study of Rembrandt, in favor of the clean line of topographers. Without contradicting

Lochnan, I argue the *Thames Set* is also a selectively modern and curated bourgeois view of the

river's banks that ignores the harsh realities of the filth surrounding the river. However, over

twelve years and sixteen etchings in final states, Whistler eventually depicts a reluctant

acceptance of the environmental crisis in his final etching. The *Thames Set's* chronology reveals

the progression and inevitable moments when the bourgeoise could no longer see the separation

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[69] The original French reads 'merveilleux fouillis d'agrès, de vergues, de cordages; chaos de brumes, de fourneaux, et de fumées tire-bouchonnés; poésie profonde et compliquée d'une vaste capitale.' C. Baudelaire, 'Peintres et Aqua-fortistes,' *Le Boulevard*, September 14, 1862; and in *Revue Anecdotique,* April 2, 1862; C. Pichois, ed., *Charles Baudelaire, Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris, 1975-76), 1148-50.

[70] Margaret F. MacDonald and Patricia de Montfort, *An American in London: Whistler and the Thames* (London, England: Philip Wilson, 2014), 13-9.

of its class from climate and was forced to accept that filth and disease spared no one. Although *Chelsea Bridge and Church* demonstrates how Whistler and the bourgeois are accepting the departure of the sights and cityscapes they once knew, it also conveys the bourgeois' continued desire to maintain some separation from the filth. Thus, Whistler is utilizing the horrific fogs to create a romantic and nostalgic haze to try and begin to understand the environmental crisis, in terms they (the middle and upper class) would understand.

Only a year before the creation of *Thames Warehouse* (1859), London endured the summer of the Great Stink. While Whistler's series of etchings capture the changing environment and society on the Thames, they avoid the filth imposed on citizens of London brought by that ecological disaster. Drawing on recent approaches to ecocritical art history, I have argued that Whistler's *Thames Set* creates a view of the river Thames without "the Stink," idealizing the scenery over the sensory and capturing life without filth. Yet Whistler still manages to reveal the fear and anxiety resulting from the recognition of industry and modernity's irreversible impact on the environment. While idealizing the scenery and selectively choosing a bourgeoise perspective for each etching, Whistler reveals how he is grappling with environmental and industrial change occurring rapidly around him. The confidence of his dark, deeply etched lines in *Thames Warehouses* in 1851 shifts toward light marks and sketchy, nervous line work in *Chelsea Bridge and Church*, suggesting his hesitation moving forward in his ever-changing environment. It is possible that some of the positive reception of the *Thames Set* when exhibited was influenced by the bourgeoises attempt to forget the rapidly changing landscape. Or perhaps Whistler's bourgeois viewers had grown accustomed to the ongoing environmental crisis by letting their optimism toward growing industries and commerce create a positive emotional

association to the changing landscapes within Whistler's etchings.[71] Further study of the *Thames Set* could examine its reception within the context of London's environmental crisis, to understand the extent to which Whistler's viewers found his images comforting or challenging in their partial and paradoxical acknowledgement of that crisis.

Historically, climate change has not been included in the conversation with modernization regarding Whistler's *Thames Set,* but I argue Whistler has captured the transition to the beginning of thinking about how the environment is impacting him and his renderings. Modernity was driven by economic forces in which both production and consumption mattered, and the wealth created by increasing production was the condition for consumption. While artistic representations of modernity often emphasize movement and progress forward, this paper demonstrates how modernism can also be understood as an erasure of elements. By the completion of his final etching in 1871, Whistler departs from depicting the typical modernist landscape and instead places emphasis on the seemingly uncontrollable variable, the environmental crisis that consumed London and the Thames. [72] Whistler's transition to a foggy, moody quality suggests his increased understanding of his own vulnerability to continual environmental degradation and the spread of deathly disease, both of which had no regards for social class. I argue, these three etchings suggest Whistler's larger contribution to modernism by introducing climate change and environmental crisis as part of modernity. Whistler's modernism has grown from his aestheticization of the environmental crisis and climate change.

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[71] Early exhibitions of impressions include Royal Academy, London, 1860; *The Works of James Whistler – Etchings and Dry Points,* E. Thomas, 39 Old Bond Street, London, 1861; *International Exhibition,* London, 1862; Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1862.

[72] James Henry Rubin, *Impressionism and the Modern Landscape: Productivity, Technology, and Urbanization from Manet to Van Gogh* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), ix-5.

A continuation of my research would also proceed with an ecocritical analysis of the entirety of the *Thames Set,* providing a deeper examination of some of his most famous prints from the series that depict a closer look into the lives of the dockworkers and inhabitants of the Thames. This paper has laid the foundation of my future research by examining his etchings with few or no people in the compositions through an ecocritical lens. There is potential to apply this same ecocritical approach and examination of Whistler's *Thames Set* to his first published set of etchings, the *French Set,* in 1857 and 1858. The set includes etchings done in London, Paris, and on a trip to Alsace and along the Rhine into Germany in 1858. My thesis provides an small window of opportunity to understand how art, such as Whistler's *Thames Set* (1859-1871), can aid in our understanding of past environmental catastrophes through the perspective of different social classes and experiences. My approach allowed for opportunities to examine the relationships between humans and their direct impact on their surrounding environments, in addition to exploring how the different social classes are separated and treated in environmental disasters.

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