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The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name:

Queer Relationships and Censorship in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

"There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all," (3) are the words written by Oscar Wilde in the preface of his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* The book follows the Victorian gentleman Dorian Gray, who, captivated by the eternal youth of his portrait, exchanges his soul to remain beautiful forever. It works, but Dorian's portrait begins to slowly age in his place, a horrific display of his sins. One of Wilde's most famous works, *Dorian Gray,* was a controversial novel during its release. While the preface of the novel claims that no book is immoral, many of Wilde's critics did not agree. In a period where any acts of homosexuality, private or not, were considered crimes (Bristow 1), Wilde's novel was heavily scrutinized due to the nature of the relationship between Dorian and his beloved portrait painter, Basil. In the original version of the novel published in 1890, Basil possesses a fervent adoration for Dorian, something that is toned down greatly in the next publication the following year. While censorship, attempted to create a more platonic explanation for the men's relationship, *Dorian Gray* is an important novel displaying the historic practice of queer coding in novels.

From the novel's first chapter, it's clear that Basil and Dorian's relationship transcends common norms of their society, starting with Basil's magnetic attraction to Dorian. The story begins with Lord Henry Wotton, a friend of Basil, visiting the artist at his studio as he is working

on his latest work. Henry asks about the subject of the painting, a gorgeous young man whom Basil has been hesitant to share the name of, whom, after some time, he reveals is Dorian Gray. Further in the conversation, Basil discusses how he first met Dorian at a party: “I had always been my own master… until I met Dorian Gray… I grew afraid, and turned to quit the room. It was not conscience that made me do so: it was a sort of cowardice. I take no credit to myself for trying to escape” (10). Basil explains a strange sort of fear he felt at the prospect of meeting Dorian after spotting the man for the first time. His unconscious reaction to flee the room seems bizarre, but additional dialogue that exists only in the original publication provides more context towards Basil's mindset: “I knew that if I spoke to Dorian I would become absolutely devoted to him, and that I ought not to speak to him” (233). This deleted passage answers some questions about Basil’s reaction to Dorian, while also opening more. He is not fearful of Dorian for typical reasons that a young Victorian man might be, but rather worries that he will become obsessed with him to the point of worship. This is quite an atypical, strong feeling for someone to have towards a person they’ve just met, and the fact that Wilde edited out the latter portion lends credibility to the idea that Basil’s feelings go beyond simply aesthetic, to nearly homoerotic in its devotion.

Chapter nine of the novel contains one of the first major conflicts between Basil and Dorian, which, even without considering the revisions later done, could easily resemble something similar to a lovers' quarrel. Basil visits his dear friend at his home, only to fall into despair when Dorian claims he will never sit for his painting again, nor let him see his original portrait. What follows is a heartfelt argument between the men, highlighted when Basil chooses Dorian's company over everything else, “If you wish me never to look at your picture again, I am

content. I always have you to look at… Your friendship is dearer to me than any fame or reputation" (108). Just as he proclaimed at the beginning of the novel, Basil is utterly devoted to Dorian. Even when the man is moody and rude, he wishes only to get to see him every day. "I always have you to look at" is a line worthy of a romance novel. The argument becomes even more layered with the contrast of the unrevised version, where several mentions of love and romance are removed from the text, such as, "Every flake and film of colour seemed to reveal me. There was love in every line, and in every touch there was passion." and "Something infinitely tragic about a romance that was at once so passionate and yet so sterile" (Wilde 242). The addition of these lines adds ambiguity to the nature of the men's relationship. The "love and passion" put into Basil's work comes across as more than a platonic confession, meanwhile, the tragedy of their romance feels like a toxic relationship about to crash and burn.

One of the most provocative passages in *Dorian Gray* can also be found in the previous chapter, whilst Basil is confessing what the portrait he created of Dorian means to him, and what he worried it would proclaim to those who viewed it:

> Dorian, from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I was dominated, soul, brain, and power by you. You became to me the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream. I worshipped you. I grew jealous of everyone to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you. (Wilde 110)

This is a powerful proclamation from Basil, reaffirming the themes of worship and devotion he holds for Dorian. However, Wilde places a focus on the artistic elements of this desire. Whilst Basil is possessive of his friend, jealous of those that speak to him, and claims he is dominated

mind and soul by him, it is purely Dorian's personality that has these effects on him. He worships him like any artist does a muse, with an emphasis on the fact that his fascination with Dorian is directly tied to his art. This passage is one where the revisions of the 1891 publication boldly stand out, Wilde's new words creating a completely different meaning of the confession. Originally, the artist's fear of his painting was not because of it being his magnum opus, but because of what it revealed about his feelings towards his subject:

> It is quite true I have worshipped with far more romance of feeling than a man usually gives a friend. Somehow, I had never loved a woman. I suppose I never had time... Well, from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I quite admit that I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly. I was jealous of everyone to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you. (Wilde 242)

In this version, Basil's desire for the artistic ideal found in Dorian is absent, with the platonic excuse for his extravagant worship gone. The most amorous line is Basil's admission that his worship has been tinged with more romance than normal for a man to feel towards another man, followed by the claim that he had never truly loved a woman. While there could perhaps be an argument in favour of Basil's feelings being purely platonic in other parts of the novel, the 1890 version of the paragraph appears far from that. With the danger associated with any acts or illusions of homosexuality at this time, it is not surprising that Wilde edited this passage to provide a more "conventional" explanation for the devotion of Basil.

Alongside Wilde's claim that no book is moral or immoral, another message he expresses through *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is that not all art is biographical, and that art should be

allowed to be created simply for art's sake (Wilde 3). This sentiment places Wilde's work, which often contains what could be considered confessions or similarities to the author's real life, in a difficult position for analysis. Should one focus on the author's intent, ignoring the connections between Basil and Wilde's own homosexual relationships, or should the queer coding of the novel take precedence? Ultimately, finding a balance between the two is vital for a proper understanding of Wilde's famous book. Sadly, many critics of Wilde's time strongly adhered to the latter idea, with the uncensored version of *Dorian Gray* being used as evidence in Wilde's very own trial, where the author was tried and convicted of "gross acts of indecency" simply for his relationship with another man (Bristow 10). While there are no explicit homosexual relationships in *Dorian Gray,* the life of Wilde himself and the censorship that the book was subjected to place the book in history as an important queer novel.

Works Cited

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