

GOTHIC CONFESSIONS: CORRUPTION IN *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*
AND OSCAR WILDE'S INTENTIONS

by

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Oliver Buckton, Department of English, and has been approved by all members of the supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

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In 1890 *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published in *Lippincott's Magazine*, and the fate of late-nineteenth century Victorian Britain was forever changed. While over a century's worth of studies have been conducted on aestheticism, the novel's moral story, and whether or not Dorian Gray and Oscar Wilde are both gay figures, this thesis examines the possible intentions behind the writing of Wilde's novel. Wilde lived during the time of the 1885 Labouchere Amendment, –under which he himself would be prosecuted for “gross indecency”– making the novel's contents risky. Alongside this amendment, there were already existing instances of criminalized homosexuality such as the Cleveland Street Scandal, making the novel's publication all the more dangerous for Wilde. After publication, Wilde received numerous negative reviews attacking his novel and himself; even today, reviewers and critics have not fully understood why Wilde produced a novel with such an apparent and perilous homoerotic theme.

DEDICATION

Dedicated to the memory of my grandpa, Edward Prochak, who appreciated the things that aren't easy. One of his latest aphorisms was that people who purchase remote car starters are lazy. He would have loved to see this thesis finished.

April 16, 1927 – March 22, 2022.

And to all who have supported my academic endeavors.

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INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been critiqued for over a century and is most well-known for its discourse on decadence. Wilde's first and only novel, *Dorian Gray*, was first published in 1890 in *Lippincott's Magazine* where it received unfavorable reviews, especially in the United Kingdom. Despite its hostile reception, one year later it was extended and published in novel form, though heavily censored and expanded. After the novel's 1891 publication, once again the negative reviews flowed in. Reviewers had continuously critiqued it for what they deemed to be its immoral contents, as a reflection of Wilde being a "sodomite."¹ More recently, academic critics such as Jeff Nunokawa, Antonio Sanna, Helen H. Davis, and others have spent time discussing the harsh restrictions of the Victorian era especially regarding sexuality and gender, rather than painting Wilde as a negative figure. Most commonly the text of *Dorian Gray* is analyzed through a modern, queer lens with particular attention to the societal standards of the late nineteenth century. Critic Alan Sinfield discusses that while Wilde's characters are not explicitly gay, they anticipate the modern image of the gay male. Sinfield also explores the ways in which Wilde's scandal was a catalyst for development of terms such as "gay," and "homosexual," for the gay figure. Most often, critics such as Ed Cohen, Luljeta Muriqui, and James Wilper have discussed the context behind *Dorian Gray* being considered homoerotic, taking into consideration the contents of the novel, Wilde's life,

¹ Sodomite - "On 25 May 1895, Oscar Wilde went to jail after three humiliating trials – the first was Wilde's failed suit against the Marquess of Queensberry who libelled him for 'posing as a sodomite'" (Bristow 41).

and the Wilde Trials of 1895. While there is extensive discussion of how queer the novel is (or isn't), and why Wilde may have had to censor details due to the harsh restrictions of the time, what remains to be explored is *why* Oscar Wilde chose his first and only novel to incorporate such heavy homoerotic “undertones” in the first place, with little regard for the risk it posed him. And with Wilde’s uncensored, original version of the novel, edited by Nicholas Frankel, only being released by Harvard University Press as of 2012, critics have yet to analyze it in regard to answering this question. In analyzing *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I seek to understand why this novel was the most problematic of all his texts to be used as evidence to incriminate him for promoting “gross indecency.”² In doing so, I intend to consider to what extent these undertones have to be detectable in order to be considered problematic, and most importantly seek to answer the question why Wilde willingly chose to create such a text.

Wilde uses his novel to put on a performance, one in which his sexuality and his characters’ sexualities are concealed, but through a more hidden story saturated with homoerotic themes he subtly tells otherwise, and these themes are significantly less subtle in the uncensored version. From the Victorian era to now, one thing has remained the same - the overwhelming majority of critics and readers most convincingly deem the novel a queer text, and with the recent release of the uncensored version, there is little to room to argue it to be anything other than queer. The original, unedited version of the novel has recently (2012) been made accessible to the public and these homoerotic undertones are even more detectable in this version. This 2012 edition is the basis on which I will analyze all versions of the text as inarguably queer. Wilde seemingly leans

² Gross Indecency - “Wilde was vehemently vilified during his trials and was transformed into a pariah in the wake of his two-year prison-with-hard-labor sentence for gross indecency” (Adut 214).

on the expression of sexuality and disregards conventional sex and gender roles to challenge the ongoing power dynamic within Victorian society. *Dorian Gray* tells a story packed full of homoerotic suggestiveness through character relationships and behaviors, but whether he wrote the novel as a blatant effort to rebel, or as a subtle effort meant only for those in the community (now referred to as the LGBTQ+ community) to understand, is to be explored.

In analyzing both the novel and Wilde's life, I will consider the potential motives behind his homoerotic writing. Was his motive perhaps a reaction to the 1885 Labouchere Amendment that incriminated all forms of "gross indecency," otherwise known as same-sex relations? Was Wilde testing what he could get away with? At this time there was an atmosphere of suspicion surrounding Wilde, was he maybe provoking this suspicion? Or perhaps, Wilde thought that only people "like him" would notice the underlying homoerotic theme in the text, as perhaps somewhat of a secret code. Is it possible that Wilde wanted a scandal? I am going to root this analysis in Wilde's risk taking, looking at what he has to say in his prison writing, "De Profundis," as well as in the letters that were used to blackmail him. In doing this, I will analyze how his words and writings were used against him and how he reflected on that.

Most specifically, this research aims to unearth the motive behind Wilde's infamous novel through examining Wilde's confrontation with the prudishness and restrictiveness of the British Victorian era, his concept of sexuality, his personal life, and his arguably androgynous mind which aided in his writing of the text. In sum, I seek to analyze how Wilde's concept of sexuality is reflected in the novel and how his novel may also be viewed as a timely response to the newly introduced law, the 1885 Criminal Law

Amendment Act, as both a reaction and record of the restraints of this era. In doing so, I will analyze the 1890 *Lippincott's* version of the text, the well-known 1891 edition, and the newly released (2012) uncensored version of the novel. Analyzing the differences between the varying editions of this novel, I assess the revision history of the novel, demonstrative of the editorial decisions he made, providing a glimpse of his mindset behind the details of the novel and its publication. As well as the novel's revision history, I examine the Gothic genre of the novel, which I argue aids in Wilde's ability to explore the invisible and marginalized, just as a story like *Frankenstein* did, yet Wilde takes this a step further, bringing books into the realm of corruption and guilt.

In addition to a textual analysis of the novel's genre and contents, I evaluate the strict legislation of late-nineteenth century Victorian Britain and the emphasis of power at the time. Through this evaluation, I draw upon philosophers such as Plato and Michel Foucault and most specifically build upon Foucault's idea that power was harnessed as a way to regulate and exalt sexuality and sensuality, wrongfully exercising what was attempting to be limited. With regard to this limitation and prohibition of sexuality, I focus on Merlin Holland's transcription of the infamous Wilde Trials, using his firsthand reaction to the reception and accusations of the novel as further proof of a homoerotic theme that was intended to be covered. Alongside the trials, I examine Nicholas Frankel's annotations on Wilde's prison writings to highlight that Wilde was never willing to risk a prison sentence, making his decision to incorporate a homoerotic theme into the novel arguably well thought out. Though shortly after, it fell flat.

Ultimately, my approach to Wilde's intentions in this thesis is founded on the idea that Wilde is inarguably of a sexuality other than heterosexuality, in line with critics such

as Alan Sinfield, Richard Ellmann, Ed Cohen, and more. Together, many different elements worked to provide Wilde with what he believed to be the perfect outlet to create a homoerotic novel. Through my research, I argue that Oscar Wilde's intention behind *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was to implement a secret code/message for readers only of a specific community, that today we would call the LGBTQ community. And while there are a multiplicity of possible intentions to consider, a secret code is most reasonable. Though the Victorian era was strict on what was moral and immoral, Wilde challenged these ideas to great lengths and paved the way for same sex relationships to be more widely accepted, but at a cost he brutally paid, and I aim to understand why he took this risk to include the homoerotic theme at the time of the novel.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter 1, “Historical Context” serves as a close analysis of Wilde’s remarks and witty candor during his trials in order to understand his motivation behind the homoerotic theme embedded in the novel. This chapter also examines Wilde’s detailed replies to some of the reviews that were written regarding *Dorian Gray*, illustrating his mental outlook at the time and his thoughts on what many deemed “a monstrosity.” In analyzing Wilde’s remarks during his trials alongside his responses to hostile reviewers, it becomes apparent that there is an ongoing use of wit which seemingly plays a role in his intentions behind the novel, as well as his way of managing the backlash. Finally, I seek to demonstrate the vast differences between the three versions of the novel, the original uncensored version which was only released to us as of the 2000s, the *Lippincott’s* version, which is the version that contained additions by Wilde and redactions by editors, and the version that most readers have come to know, the 1891 version, published by Ward, Lock & Co. These differences shed light on Wilde’s revision process, highlighting any potential content concerns Wilde may have had and how he addressed them.

Chapter 2, “Gothic Confessions,” details the role that the Gothic genre plays in Wilde’s discussion of what society deems to be dangerous. And while this Gothic genre is typically meant to evoke horror, this novel's horror doesn’t end with the last page of the book. Gothic literature first came to life in 1764 with the publication of Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, yet it was not until Wilde that Gothic literature emerged as having the ability to corrupt. *Dorian Gray* –along with Wilde, its author– was

deemed a monstrosity, rejected by the Victorian public, yet transgressed the limits of the literary world. In analyzing this monstrosity, I examine the role that the gothic genre plays in providing Wilde with an outlet to explore the marginalized and invisible.

The goal of Chapter 3 “Sexuality, Power, and Wilde” is to illustrate the way in which the power structure at the time of the 1890’s impacted the ongoing sexual relationships between individuals and the effect this had on Wilde. I reference the work of Michel Foucault as he discusses the way in which power and pleasure, in the case of the British Victorian era, go hand in hand “because the exercising of power itself was a sensual process which generated pleasure. The pleasure, in turn, is intensified in successfully evading power” (Ghosh 45). The legal system harnessed power as a form of sensuality, while attempting to regulate sexuality, demonstrating the diversification of sexuality at the time and the overbearing power structure that was the government. Each of these factors affected Wilde not only in his daily life, but also his decision making behind his novel as well, providing further insight into the possibilities behind the intentions of his publication of the novel, *Dorian Gray*.

Chapter 4, “Gender and Wilde” serves to highlight Wilde’s arguably androgynous mind which aided in his unbiased writing of the text concerning gender and the outcomes of the relationships within the novel due to this neither overtly masculine, nor feminine stance and mindset. Wilde refused the categorization of sexual identity in both the novel and his life and did so by discarding labels and gender norms. Additionally, he showcased the view that sexual behaviors are traits inherent to the nature of the person, rather than representative of one’s identity, meaning that sexuality is not a choice, nor does it have to make up one’s entire identity. Wilde also disregarded the idea that because

one looks feminine, this makes them female and vice versa. This chapter illustrates the ways we can see Wilde's mindset and beliefs reflected onto the pages of his novel.

CHAPTER 1: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During the Victorian era in Britain in which Wilde lived, before 1861 specifically, homosexuality was referred to as “sodomy,³” and being a sodomite was punishable by death. During this same year the Offenses Against the Person Act removed this penalty and instead replaced it with imprisonment for a minimum of ten years. Though, nearly twenty-five years later in 1885, the Criminal Law Amendment Act (the Labouchere Amendment) came to life and criminalized all forms of “gross indecency,” such as sodomy.⁴ This Amendment allowed for the criminalization of any acts that seemed to indicate gross indecency. This included things such as two men linking arms or two men sitting too close to one another. In other words, they criminalized things that were merely viewed as platonic behaviors earlier in the nineteenth century. This meant that same-sex affection alone could lead to prosecution⁵, and unfortunately this is the law that Wilde fell victim to only ten years later, and five years after the publication of his most controversial novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This term “gross indecency” was not necessarily only criminalizing explicit sexual relations, but something as simple as two men walking together became deemed inappropriate when this term came to fruition. This also contributed to Wilde’s labeling as a dandy. Being a homosexual man himself

³ Sodomite - “On 25 May 1895, Oscar Wilde went to jail after three humiliating trials – the first was Wilde’s failed suit against the Marquess of Queensberry who libelled him for ‘posing as a sodomite’” (Beistow).

⁴ Swarbrick, David. “Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885.” *Swarb.co.uk*. 19 Jan. 2013.

⁵ Dryden, Steven. “A Short History of the LGBT Rights in the UK.” *British Library*.
<https://www.bl.uk/lgbtq-histories/articles/a-short-history-of-lgbt-rights-in-the-uk>

(the term gay did not exist at this time), Wilde likely felt pressured to hide his true self because of the law, creating the issue of the outlawed body, with his beliefs residing in this body, and his bodily actions being prohibited by law. It seems clear that he felt a pressure to conform to and abide by these laws. In “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” Wilde argued that “it is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and through rebellion” (10). Wilde continued to pursue same sex relationships anyway, behind closed doors, as a form of rebellion against sexual conformity. But because of the spotlight on Wilde, his secret life was exposed soon after it began.

Wilde’s homosexual relations began in the 1880’s, but it was not until 1891 that one of Wilde’s most controversial relationships was born. Anouska Kersten writes in “Gender and Sexuality in *The Picture of Dorian Gray and Dorian Gray*,”

In 1891 Oscar Wilde met the twenty-year-old handsome Lord Alfred “Bosie” Douglas, with whom he began an affair. Their relationship infuriated Bosie’s father, and after provocation, Wilde sued him for libel. Wilde lost, and Bosie’s father retaliated by starting a trial against Wilde for homosexuality. After two trials, Wilde was bankrupt and had to go to prison for two years. (2014)

Before anything was taken to court, Bosie’s father Queensberry wrote to Bosie asking him to put an end to his relationship with Wilde. Queensberry wrote, “Your intimacy with this man Wilde must either cease or I will disown you and stop all money supplies,” (Bertram 6). However, Bosie ignored his father’s wishes, fueling Queensberry’s hostility towards Wilde. As a result of this hostility, Queensberry went out of his way to send messages to Wilde and alert others of the sodomy. He planned to give Wilde a bouquet of

rotten vegetables, alerted people who went to the theater and sent a card to the Albemarle club in which Wilde was a member, accusing him of posing as a sodomite. The event embarrassed Wilde as it was given to the porter of the club, and this is when he decided to sue Queensberry for what he alleged to be libel (Bertram 8).

Queensberry's threats parallel chapter fourteen of the novel, after Dorian has already murdered Basil, readers are introduced to Alan Campbell, an old friend of Dorian's. Instead of Dorian being threatened, he is the one doing the blackmailing. He threatens Alan to dispose of Basil's body or else he will expose private information about him, and what this exact information is, Dorian never shares. This compares closely to Queensberry and his threats to send out private information about Wilde, similar to what he did with the club manager. I would argue that Dorian does to Basil what Wilde anticipates one would do upon discovering his sexuality, therefore, Wilde's fiction anticipates many of the dangers he himself would face. Additionally, some of Wilde's working-class friends had made attempts to blackmail him utilizing the letters he had written them. Through this, we are seeing some ironic parallels between Wilde's personal life and the character Dorian's, as the novel was published before these events happened in Wilde's life. It can be inferred that Wilde feared or even anticipated blackmail in his own life and translated this fear into the novel.

Eventually Wilde was called to trial for gross indecency. During the trials, *Dorian Gray* was used against him as evidence to prove him to be guilty as the novel was viewed as "obscene" due to the homosexual panic of the period. Eve Sedgwick describes homosexual panic in "Toward the Gothic: Terrorism and Homosexual Panic," as "the most private, psychologized form in which many twentieth-century western men

experience their vulnerability to the social pressure of homophobic blackmail; even for them, however, that is only one path of control, complementary to public sanctions through the institutions described by Foucault and others as defining and regulating the amorphous territory of 'the sexual'" (89). This homosexual panic plagued Victorian Europe and heightened society's retaliation against *Dorian Gray* as a response. Dr. Marco Wan, PhD at the University of Hong Kong and author of "A Matter of Style: On Reading the Oscar Wilde Trials as Literature" asserts, "Wilde's life was an affront to the Victorian establishment and the Victorian public; Victorian society punished him for this affront by convicting him and sentencing him to two years' hard labor at Pentonville" (710). Edward Carson, who had been a college friend of Wilde's at Trinity College, Dublin, represented Queensberry in the trial, and Sir Edward Clarke represented Wilde. Carson's strategy was to establish an incriminating link between literature and reality. He aimed to prove that somebody who could write such homoerotic texts, would be the kind of person that would commit sodomitic acts in real life (Wan 716). Wilde's trials highlighted the link between Oscar Wilde and *Dorian Gray*, and how unaccepting and homophobic the people and legal system of the late 19th century were.

In analyzing the trial transcripts of the first trial in which Wilde sued Queensberry for defamation, it is important to note Wilde's behavior during this time. While Wilde typically was seen creating a humorous, lighthearted atmosphere, he showed up to the courthouse "in a more serious frame of mind than he had shown at the Police Court, and he asked for a glass of water to be placed in front of him and handed to him when he went into the box. He is also said to have smiled at Carson, who looked coldly past him" (Hyde 98). His etiquette seemingly exemplifies an atmosphere of respect and seriousness

for the severity of the accusations Queensberry made against Wilde. Or, perhaps this was a performance intended to highlight that he took moral responsibility for his relations with Bosie. As the trial progressed, it became clear that his etiquette was not the result of the latter, but rather due to the severity of his reputation being at risk.

Wilde's attorney, Sir Edward Clarke, attempted to prove Wilde innocent not by demonstrating the ways in which his sexuality and publication should not be deemed immoral, but rather by showcasing the ways he is "misinterpreted" as explicitly homosexual. Clarke explains that Wilde is "a poet, and [his] letter [to Bosie] is considered by him as a prose sonnet, and one of which he is no way ashamed and is prepared to produce anywhere as the expression of true poetic feeling, and with no relation whatever to the hateful and repulsive suggestions put to it in the plea in this case" (Hyde 102). This referred to a specific letter Wilde had written to Bosie in which Wilde made statements such as "...those red rose-leaf lips of yours should have been made no less for the music of song than for madness of kisses... Always, with undying love, / Yours, / Oscar" (Hyde 101). Clarke utilizes this instance to demonstrate the ways in which literature can be interpreted as simply fantasy, of pure imagination, as opposed to Carson's perception of the literature as an autobiography. This also raises the question of why Wilde was willing to take the risk of sending the letters and publishing the novel, yet not willing to be open about his intentions for the novel during the trials. Presumably, he knew he was being tried for "gross indecency" and was in danger of going to prison. Or perhaps in writing all along he knew legal issues were a risk, and decided if it came down to a trial, he would simply deny all claims in court. He may have also believed that he was working within conventions that would offer him a form of protection from the

content being viewed as an autobiographical interpretation. Together, this adds to the curiosity regarding Wilde's intentions with the novel.

It is not until the end of the trial that Clarke finally begins to mention *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Specifically speaking of the 1890 *Lippincott's* publication, Clarke challenges Carson stating, "I shall be surprised if my learned friend Mr Carson can pitch upon any passage in that book which does more than describe as novelists and dramatists may – nay, must – describe the passions and fashions of life" (Hyde 103), remaining with the defense that *Dorian Gray* did not include any homoerotic content. In speaking to Wilde, Clarke continues, "Your attention has been drawn to the statements which are made in the pleadings referring to different persons and impugning your conduct with them?" "Yes," "Is there any truth in any of these accusations?" [Wilde responds,] "there is no truth whatever in any one of them" (Hyde 10), denying once again any claims against him. Denying these claims only created problems for Wilde, as Queensberry had produced evidence and witnesses telling otherwise.

In his questioning of Wilde, Carson asks, "You are of opinion, I believe, that there is no such thing as an immoral book?" "Yes." (Hyde 106), which we know from the preface of Wilde's novel. Carson adds, "I think you will admit that anyone who would approve of such a story would pose as guilty of improper practices?" "It would show very bad literary taste." [Carson continues,] "Am I right in saying that you do not consider the effect in greeting morality or immorality?" [Wilde responds,] "Certainly, I do not...I am concerned entirely with literature – that is, with art. I aim not at doing good or evil, but in trying to make a thing that will have some quality of beauty" (Hyde 107-8). This interaction aligns with Wilde's statement in his 1891 *Dorian Gray* edition preface that a

book is neither moral nor immoral, it is either well written or badly written. If in creating the novel, Wilde is not concerned with its moral or immoral value, he could be writing influenced by his own personal attributes alongside the gesture that whoever reads the novel will interpret it in the way that it is intended for them. In “The Decay of Lying” Wilde insists that “life imitates art” (Gillespie 353), highlighting that our individual experiences with art, influence how we view life. This does provide further reason to believe that he may have intended for the message of *Dorian Gray* to be interpreted differently by each person, depending upon their experience with art. Wilde further argues in “The Decay of Lying,” that “The third doctrine is that Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life. This results not merely from life's imitative instinct, but from the fact that the self-conscious aim of Life is to find expression, and that Art offers it certain beautiful forms through which it may realise that energy” (21). Depending upon your experience with art, you will have a different reaction to life, and Wilde demonstrates a separation of art and morality. “Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and then only, does it come into existence” (Wilde 15). For example, “At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects” (Wilde 15). Art provides us with the ability to notice things that were already there. It is not that prior to art there was no fog, we just failed to notice fog and all its mystery. The fog painting analogy parallels the picture of Dorian Gray. The painting gives Dorian an alias to live a double life, just as the novel does for Wilde, and Wilde’s life seems to closely imitate parts of *Dorian Gray*. For

example, Wilde writes his novel that highlights the secret intimate relationships and desires between men, most specifically Lord Henry, Basil Hallward, and Dorian, then after its publication he begins an intimate, romantic relationship with a young man (Bosie). In some ways, he parallels Basil, who wants to paint Dorian (something that becomes intimate to him), despite their age gap.

Wilde's claim that "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life," (21) can also be reflected onto readers of the novel. It can be argued that those who critique Wilde's relations with men can be deemed as only looking at his relationships, and not seeing them for what they are. They may view his relationships and sexuality due to their prior exposure and experience with sexuality, as well as society's conventions. Additionally, Thomas Wright in "Built of Books: How Reading Defined the Life of Oscar Wilde," proposes the argument that Wilde may have discovered his sexuality during the time of reading Plato, questioning whether Wilde would still be attracted to men, had Plato not put the notion in his mind.⁶ Some of these texts may have included Plato's *Lysis* and *First Alcibiades*.

In further investigating Wilde regarding his intentions, Carson asks him if he believes a well-written book with a "perverted" theme to be deemed a good book, in which Wilde simply responds "'No work of art ever puts forward views. Views belong to people who are not artists'" (Hyde 110). This calls further attention to the fact that Wilde is denying all claims that his novel is homoerotic, despite this being a prominent theme that readers are so concerned with. Wilde believed he was merely writing fiction for the average reader, as opposed to propaganda. Carson carried on asking, "'The affection and

⁶ Ross, Alex. "How Oscar Wilde Painted Over 'Dorian Gray.'" *The New Yorker*. August 2011.

love of the artist of Dorian Gray might lead an ordinary individual to believe that it might have a certain tendency?' [Wilde responded,] "I have no knowledge of the views of ordinary individuals'" (Hyde 110), aligning with Wilde's statement that whatever one thinks of Dorian is on them, that they brought scandalous things on Dorian, not Wilde. This also leaves the impression that Wilde believed himself to be separate from those who are ordinary, seeing himself as extraordinary.

Following this statement, Carson continues to question Wilde, interrogating the revision history of the novel prior to its first publication. It is important to recognize his history of revision and why he may have made the decisions he did. Rather than uncovering any particular revision history, Carson found that Wilde had only made additions to the novel prior to its publication and after being submitted to editors. H. Montgomery Hyde mentions in *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*, "Carson suggested that owing to certain criticisms which had been made, the work was modified a good deal before its publication in book form. This was denied by Wilde, though he admitted that additions had been made" (109), representing, if truthful, no hesitation to share the true and original contents of the novel with the world. Therefore, any redactions made to the 1890 publication were done so by the editors, not Wilde. Though, after the numerous attacks by critics on the *Lippincott's* edition, Wilde revised and toned down the language in the text prior to its next publication in 1891. Focusing only on the *Lippincott's* edition, Wilde's claims made in trial strengthen his argument that he did not put forth any specific views into his work, only the readers have done so, as Wilde did not shy from sharing the contents of the novel in their full and original form. In other words, he presented readers with a novel that's overarching message would vary depending on the person, supporting

the idea that the novel would deliver a specific message, only to those within the lgbtq community.

An anonymous reviewer of *Dorian Gray* published a piece in *St. James's Gazette*, and they too examined why Wilde may have told his story, *Dorian Gray*. They contend, Why has [Wilde] told it? There are two explanations; and, so far as we can see, not more than two. Not to give pleasure to his readers: the thing is too clumsy, too tedious, and -alas! - too stupid. Perhaps it was to shock readers, in order that they might cry Fie! Upon him and talk about him... It may be suggested (but is it more charitable?) that he derives pleasure from treating a subject merely because it is disgusting? (Gillespie 359-60)

They later added, "...[*The Picture of Dorian Gray*] ought to be chucked into the fire. Not so much because [it is] dangerous and corrupt ([it is] corrupt but not dangerous) as because [it is] incurably silly, written by [a] simpleton poseur" (Gillespie 360). This review is one of the many to spit disparaging remarks at Wilde and his novel, yet one of the few to consider why Wilde wrote the novel. Though, his attempts to understand are rather ill-mannered and aloof. Wilde responds in his usual witty manner to this review, declaring, "England is a free country," and later expressing, "I am quite incapable of understanding how any work of art can be criticised from a moral standpoint. The sphere of art and the sphere of ethics are absolutely distinct and separate" (Gillespie 361). The amalgamation of statements from Wilde about art not taking any moral standpoint shows that Wilde regarded writing/art as an outlet free from any moral responsibility. More specifically, this belief allowed him to write about the contents that his heart desires, and because it is in art form, he does not have to claim any responsibility for these contents,

hence why his personal relationships were intended to be private, while his works were not. Additionally, Wilde's usual witty spirit tells us he is in no state of shock due to his novel being used against him. It is almost as if he expected a trial to be the outcome, with well thought out and queued witty responses. But what Wilde seemed to not anticipate was the world's already existing reaction to same-sex relationships, and the role this would play once his novel was published, leading to not only his initial libel trial, but two additional trials in which he was tried, and eventually convicted of, committing acts of "gross indecency."

Wilde translated many of life's facets into artforms. When being further cross-examined he explains, "I say if a book is well written, that is if a work of art is beautiful, the impression that it produces is a sense of beauty, which is the very highest sense that I think human beings are capable of. If it is a badly made work of art, whether it be a statue or whether it be a book, it produces a sense of disgust; that is all" (Holland 80). This notion about art can be seen through Wilde's character Dorian who is consumed by physical beauty and things that produce beauty, such as romantic relationships. In Chapter eleven of *Dorian Gray*, Wilde writes, "He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul" (106), showcasing his infatuation with beauty. Dorian's hobbies are further representative of Wilde's attention to beauty, more specifically aesthetics, as he writes in the 1891 edition,

Once or twice every month during the winter, and on each Wednesday evening while the season lasted, he would throw open to the world his beautiful house and have the most celebrated musicians of the day to charm his guests with the wonders of their art. His little dinners, in the

settling of which Lord Henry always assisted him, were noted as much for the careful selection and placing of those invited, as for the exquisite taste shown in the decoration of the table, with its subtle symphonic arrangements of exotic flowers, and embroidered cloths, and antique plate of gold and silver. (107)

Wilde demonstrated an appreciation for art within people, portraits, and the little things. As Wilde continues to be cross-examined during the trial, he shares, “You cannot ask me what misinterpretation of my work the ignorant, the illiterate, the foolish may put on it. It doesn't concern me. What concerns me in my art is my view and my feeling and why I made it; I don't care twopence what other people think about it” (Holland 81). This indicates that Wilde was writing for a specific readership which I argue to be the LGBTQ community, not for the ordinary reader. While there is a story of morality versus immorality told for the ordinary reader, what lies beneath was not intended for them. Carson soon after asks, “The affection and the love that is pictured of the artist towards Dorian Gray in this book of yours might lead an ordinary individual to believe it had a sodomitical tendency, might it not?” (Holland 81), and Wilde chose to respond noting that he has no knowledge of the views of the ordinary individual, separating himself from the average and placing himself on a pedestal. Wilde’s sarcasm and wit should be taken into account when determining his intentions within the novel. Typically, such a witty persona would showcase defensiveness, though Wilde has long been known for his extremely witty personality. Trying to entrap Wilde in a confession, Carson later asks, “I want an answer to this simple question. Have you ever felt that feeling of adoring yourself madly a beautiful male person many years younger than yourself?” in which

Wilde responds, “I have never given adoration to anybody except myself” (Holland 91), highlighting further what we already know about the nature of Wilde’s social interactions. Carson asks, “Then you never had that feeling you depict there? [Adoration],” with which Wilde answers “No, it was borrowed from Shakespeare I regret to say” (Holland 92), at which the room laughs. His reference to Shakespeare is significant based on the suspicion that some of Shakespeare’s sonnets were written for a man, alleging that Shakespeare, too, was gay or bisexual. Wilde’s *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* analyzes the identity of the mysterious “W.H.” from Shakespeare’s sonnets, alluding to a relationship between Shakespeare and this mystery man. He writes in *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* explaining, “the Sonnets are addressed to an individual – to a particular young man whose personality for some reason seems to have filled the soul of Shakespeare with terrible joy and no less terrible despair” (12). Wilde refers to Shakespeare and his earlier literature hoping it will offer him a form of cover and defense. Wilde seemed to believe that one could not scrutinize his work and praise Shakespeare’s at the same time. In addition to believing that Shakespeare would offer a closet and form of cover for queer desire, author Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu may have been another example of what Wilde believed would be protecting him. Le Fanu’s 1871 *Carmilla*⁷ was a lesbian vampire narrative which included a similar hidden homoerotic theme as *Dorian Gray*, that Wilde may have assumed would provide a code for queer expression.

In “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde writes, “Art never expresses anything but itself. It has an independent life, just as Thought has, and develops purely on its own lines”

⁷ Le Fanu, Joseph S. *Carmilla*. E-Book, Project Gutenberg, 1872.

(20). This aligns with the concept that only those who are not artists have moral views on art. In claiming this, he is speaking for all artists, which may have contributed to his overall miscalculation regarding his justification behind his creation of the novel, assuming this explanation would deter readers from continuing to assume a homoerotic theme. He also argues that art is simply itself, as its artist has given it no preconceived meaning, only the viewers and readers do. Similarly, he argues that readers give meaning to the connection between Bosie and Dorian. This connects to Wilde's overall argument in the preface of his novel that whatever one thinks of Dorian is projected by the reader and that they have brought scandalous things onto Dorian. This is further evidence that Wilde wrote with a specific audience in mind, intended to catch on to Wilde's homoerotic theme that was arguably originally planned to be hidden. On the other hand, Wilde wrote in *Dorian Gray*, "'Harry,' said Basil Hallward looking him straight in the face, 'every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion'" (4). It can be argued that Wilde is also a kind of painter, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is his painting. When asked to explain this passage of his novel, Wilde explains, "I think this is the most perfect description possible of what an artist would feel on meeting a beautiful personality that he felt some way was necessary to his art and life" (Holland 85).

CHAPTER 2: GOTHIC CONFESSIONS

It is evident that Wilde used literature as a channel to write about content that would otherwise be entirely censored, and in knowing this, we should consider the opportunity that the Gothic genre provided Wilde. The term “Gothic,” when used in regard to literature, typically refers to all things dark, and when thought of, barbaric stories of crime and monsters likely come to mind, and more specifically, most think of *Frankenstein*. The term Gothic may also be used synonymously with “ugly,” when comparing a Gothic piece of architecture to a classical one (e.g., a Catholic church), and Gothic literature was, too, negatively classified, due to its prioritization of art over ideas and reason.⁸ In addition to this, the gothic genre is viewed as an outlier amongst the classics. “The word gothic means “medieval,” or “romantic,” as opposed to “classical” and was first used in a pejorative sense” (Schneider 2). More specifically, Gothic novels are known for challenging neoclassicism and neoclassical ideals. Wilde’s novel opposed neoclassicism in the sense that it rejected classical subject matter and disregarded conformity to produce an emotional reaction within a reader.⁹ With this “pathetic,”¹⁰ in Aristotle’s triad, upper hand, Gothic literature has the opportunity to pose readers with unexplored social and political matters. Gothic novels warn “of dangers of social and moral transgression by presenting them in their darkest and most threatening form”

⁸ Grado, Trabajo Fin De. *Dehumanized Sons at the Fin-Du Globe: The “Pictures” of Dorian Gray in the Context of Gothic Literature*. 2013. University of Castilla-la Mancha. Bachelor’s Thesis.

⁹ Schneider, Christina. “Monstrosity in the English Gothic Novel.” *The Victorian*, January 2015, pp. 2.

¹⁰ Bizzel, Bruce, and Patricia Herzberg. *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, Bedford/St. Martin’s, January 1990.

(Botting 7, as cited in Schneider 2). Wilde's most dangerous figure within the novel is Dorian, as he represented one of Victorian Europe's most feared concepts, homosexuality, and even bisexuality. From a twenty-first century point of view, one may consider Lord Henry to be Wilde's most dangerous figure, as he is the root of all evil; the one who led Dorian to such dangerous lengths. Lord Henry had even proclaimed that "to influence a person is to give him one's own soul" (Wilde 20). This indicates the ways in which Dorian and Lord Henry are the same in their quest to sin, and thus may both be considered Wilde's most dangerous figures.

Just as Wilde sought to fight against the dehumanizing factors of his modern world, so did one of Wilde's inspirations, John Ruskin. Ruskin's works often emphasized the individual and that the imperfections within the individual are what makes them human, a quality to be cherished, rather than criticized. Most specifically, Ruskin's "The Nature of Gothic," in *The Stones of Venice*, represents his promotion of individualism in regard to Gothicism. Ruskin's discussion of Gothicism is centered around architecture and the importance of uniqueness. Rather than all pieces of architecture being identical, their individuality is what gave them value, and so he pushed for gothic architecture. Ruskin classified Gothic architecture according to six characteristics. In order of importance, they are as follows: savageness, changefulness, naturalism, grotesqueness, rigidity, and redundance.¹¹ Ruskin discusses savageness in the context of barbarousness and the way in which Gothicism was classified by these terms. He additionally noted that society was conditioned to condemn and despise Gothicism, though he disagrees, arguing

¹¹ Ruskin, John. "The Nature of Gothic." *The Stones of Venice*. 1853, pp. 2, PDF. <http://www47.homepage.villanova.edu/seth.koven/gothic.html>

that we should respect this characteristic.¹² Just as Ruskin emphasizes individualism through his expression of the importance of Gothic architecture in an industrialist world where everything is mass produced and identical, Wilde's presentation of a "barbaric novel" does the same. With Gothicism being an outlet for individualism, the contents of Wilde's novel violated the conventions of the Victorian era and Victorian realism, strayed from the societal norm, and allowed for Wilde to be an individual artist. Rather than writing a realistic, social novel, Wilde sought to incorporate romance and fantasy into his novel. In doing so, he shut down realism, ultimately upsetting the Victorian public.

While John Ruskin inspired Wilde, it is argued that Wilde inspired Bram Stoker, author of the famous *Dracula*. More importantly, Wilde's trials inspired Stoker. Talia Schaffer, in her article "A Wilde Desire Took Me: The Homoerotic History of *Dracula*," analyzes this connection between the Wilde Trials and their impact on Stoker's Gothic novel, noting that "Dracula's victims constantly negotiate between hiding or revealing their condition" (382). This parallels Wilde's ongoing tendency to neither admit to, nor deny his sexuality. Schaffer continues, explaining, "The crisis of the closet in 1895 makes *Dracula* a horror novel; but *Dracula*'s happy ending only shows that the closet is no longer a crisis but a state of complex, lived social relations" (382). Seeing this complexity through Wilde and his trials, Stoker confirmed that there was a queer reader community he could write for. Stoker even wrote to Whitman stating, "[thank you for] all the love and sympathy you have given me in common with my kind" (Stoker, as cited in Schaffer 383). His referral to "my kind" can be interpreted as the queer community, with this

¹² Ruskin, John. "The Nature of Gothic." *The Stones of Venice*. 1853, pp. 3, PDF. <http://www47.homepage.villanova.edu/seth.koven/gothic.html>

reference significant in its classifying a particular group according to an identity, rather than an act of sodomy.¹³ Without Wilde's novel, and thus, trials, *Dracula* may not have been as progressive as it is, or may not have existed entirely.

Another aspect of *Dorian Gray* that is representative of the gothic genre is the literal picture of Dorian Gray, as it is illustrative of both immense sin and corruption. The portrait allows for Dorian to sin relentlessly, following his wish that they exchange places, as it takes on all the repercussions for him. In the end, we see that even in a world where a portrait can grow ugly while its subject remains beautiful, sin will always catch up. And while this is a seemingly positive message, what readers of the Victorian era disliked was the way in which the painter, Basil, and Dorian bonded through the creation of this portrait. This is seen even more so in the 2012 uncensored version of *Dorian Gray*, in which Basil's feelings for Dorian appear heightened. In chapter seven of the uncensored version Basil says to Dorian,

It is quite true that I have worshiped you with far more romance or feeling than a man should ever give to a friend. Somehow, I have never loved a woman... I quite admit that I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly. I was jealous of every one to whom you spoke. I wanted you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you. When I was away from you, you were still present in my art.

(Wilde 44)

Whereas in the 1890 *Lippincott's* version, it reads, "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 every one to whom you spoke. I

¹³ Schaffer, Talia. "A Wilde Desire Took Me: The Homoerotic History of *Dracula*." *The John Hopkins University Press*, vol. 62, no. 2, 1994, pp. 383.

wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you. When I was away from you, you were still present in my art” (Wilde 251-52). And in the well-known 1891 publication Basil instead says, “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 every one to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you” (Wilde 95). Comparing them, the 1890 and 1891 editions are significantly different in their expression of Basil’s feelings. Their most noticeable edit is the removal of “It is quite true that I have worshipped you with far more romance or feeling than a man should ever give to a friend” (Wilde 44), detailing directly that Basil’s feelings are inarguably romantic. When compared, the most revised edition is the 1891 edition, with its redaction of “I quite admit that I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly” (Wilde 44 & 251-52). What the three versions do have in common is their inclusion of Basil’s jealousy of everyone to whom Dorian spoke, with this not being as explicitly romantic nor homoerotic in 1891. Despite the 1890 and especially the 1891 editions removal of this more explicit text, society still rebelled against it by attacking the novel and Wilde’s reputation.

In his more censored versions, Wilde attempted to distract his readers from the underlying homoerotic code with a story of the battles between morality and immorality, as seen through instances of true sin as opposed to the “sin” that was hiding beneath. On the surface, Lord Henry and Dorian, his protégé, represent disgrace in regard to cruelty and poor treatment of others, but beneath the surface they represent disgrace due to their

expression of non-conforming sexuality, as seen through Britain's extreme reaction to the novel. Ultimately, Wilde utilized the gothic genre to aid in his cover up of the homoerotic theme, knowing that Victorian society would deem this theme a sin in addition to the murder and violent crimes already embedded in the novel. But along the way, he highlighted what society considers to be the monstrosity of nonconformity in regard to sexual orientation, as his theme did not end up hidden enough to escape the wrath of the Victorian government.

Wilde presented the world with gothic literature from a new perspective, a critical change, as he builds into his novel a sense that books have the power to corrupt. This change highlights the ability to bring books, and more importantly, authors, into the realm of guilt and corruption. Our first glimpse at this idea of corruption in the novel is when Dorian is gifted a book and with time, we see it corrupt him. Wilde writes, "On a little table of dark perfumed wood thickly incrusting with nacre... was lying a note from Lord Henry, and beside it was a book bound in yellow paper, the cover slightly torn and the edges soiled" (102-3). Dorian quickly took an interest in the book and deemed it "the strangest book that he had ever read. It seemed to him that in exquisite raiment, and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. Things that he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him. Things of which he had never dreamed were gradually revealed" (104), and shortly thereafter Dorian becomes consumed by the material world, participating in sin and immoral behaviors. Much like this book consumed and arguably corrupted Dorian (together with Lord Henry's influence), readers began to be wary of the corruption that *Dorian Gray* may be capable of. Wilde's novel, in a sense, normalized homosexuality and therefore was

deemed dangerous by lawmakers and heterosexual society. Readers feared both Wilde's surface level content and the content that held a deeper meaning, as Wilde often refers to sins such as murder, drug use, and crime, though Victorian readers only seemed to focus on the supposed sexual sin.

Lord Henry was not the only one seen corrupting Dorian, nor was the book. Basil is the origin of Dorian's immoral existence through his creation of the portrait of Dorian Gray. In creating this portrait he painted Dorian beautiful beyond his years, which is what originally evoked Dorian's haughty manner. Dorian's vanity only spiraled out of control from there and worsened when combined with Lord Henry's influence. Basil not only had the ability to corrupt within the novel, but Victorian readers equipped him with the ability to corrupt in the real world as well, by fueling his desire for Dorian with fear. Dorian and Basil were often seen bonding over this portrait, after all, Basil shared "the reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul (Wilde 9). The romantic ties between Basil and Dorian over this portrait are viewed as corrupting to readers of the novel, as it normalized and naturalized intimate and passionate relationships between men. Another aspect of corruption emphasized through the portrait were all the sins committed by Dorian that caused his image to degenerate. "It was true that the portrait still preserved, under all the foulness and ugliness of the face, its marked likeness to himself; but what could they learn from that? He would laugh at any one who tried to taunt him. He had not painted it. What was it to him how vile and full of shame it looked?" (Wilde 118). These sins include severe crimes such as murder, but also tended to include and even perpetuate smaller scale sins such as a mistreatment of others, just as Dorian mistreated Sibyl. Though with her death, Dorian

believes he murdered her with his cruel treatment, making this grow into one of his more severe sins. “It had made him conscious how unjust, how cruel, he had been to Sibyl Vane” (Wilde 81). The portrait represented all that Dorian had ever done wrong. “There were opiates for remorse, drugs that could lull the moral sense to sleep. But here was a visible symbol of the degradation of sin” (Wilde 81). Together, Victorian Britain had feared the novel for its inclusion of these sins, with the most horror lying within the sexual sin and relationships seen between Dorian and Basil, as well as Dorian and Lord Henry. Wilde incorporated these relationships and depicted them in a way that one would in describing heterosexual relationships, he drew no attention to the supposed sin within these encounters. Therefore, Dorian, Basil, and Lord Henry were all deemed monstrous, alongside the portrait of Dorian Gray.

Wilde writes in chapter 2, “The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful” (20). This appears to be a direct reference to the legislation of his time, and it is no coincidence that he refers directly to the terms “laws” and “unlawful,” deeming them monstrous, just as lawmakers deem him so. This “desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and lawful,” (Wilde 20) arguably refers to sexual desires and the illegality of homosexuality, illustrating that Wilde is aware of these strict laws and does not agree that what they deem monstrous to actually be such. The term monstrous is key in its connection to the gothic genre which is suitable to the discussion of power, confinement, romance, and fear that we see here. Gothicism is utilized as a way to represent the monstrous. He recognizes and implements what non-fictional fears were lurking in this

era; social and moral transgression, otherwise deemed by late-nineteenth century Europe as corruption. In knowing this Wilde writes, “‘Culture and corruption,’ echoed Dorian. ‘I have known something of both’” (174).

CHAPTER 3: SEXUALITY, POWER, AND WILDE

Michael Foucault, author of *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, analyzes sexuality in regard to the Victorian era's increasing repression. Daniel Boyarin and Elizabeth Castelli in "Introduction: Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*," summarize Foucault's concept of sexuality, stating, "the history of sexuality is part of a history of the present, the present within which one now experiences oneself as possessing a sexuality or embodying a sexuality with all of the regulatory and productive force - productive of shame, productive of desire, productive of pleasure, productive of love - of that experience" (359). It can be argued that Dorian Gray is the embodiment of Wilde and his unaccepted sexuality. And though his sexuality is deemed unacceptable, he is seen utilizing it as a source of power over characters such as Sybil and Alan Campbell via possession and blackmail. Through *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, readers are able to see the ways in which protagonist Dorian experiences sexuality in regard to shame, desire, pleasure and love.

While we know now that homosexuality is as constructed as heterosexuality, Foucault viewed it as a product of power-relations, such as the relations between the legal system and the public. Homosexuality also became associated with shame when confined by harsh legal restrictions such as the 1885 CLA Act. Foucault writes, "On the subject of sex, silence became the rule. The legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law. The couple imposed itself as model, enforced the norm, safeguarded the truth, and reserved the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy. A single locus of

sexuality was acknowledged in social space as well as at the heart of every household, but it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parents' bedroom” (3). He notes the way in which these standards were created and regulated by none other than the heterosexual couple, not only as a way to control the people, but their sexuality as well. The government controlled sexuality by regulating and by prohibiting couples that cannot procreate, taking it even further by tracking down those who not only engaged in acts of what this society referred to as “gross indecency” in public, but in private as well. And through this restriction of ‘pleasure,’ they found only to reinforce it through their quest to experience the pleasure of power and control.¹⁴ Foucault continues, “It is said that no society has been more prudish [than Victorian society]; never have the agencies of power taken such care to feign ignorance of the thing they prohibited, as if they were determined to have nothing to do with it” (49), representing the control of sexuality utilized in order to preserve power. Focusing on the power dynamic in relation to the regulation of sexuality, Foucault notes that sexuality “appears rather as an especially dense transfer point for relations of power: between men and women, young people and old people, parents and offspring, teachers and students, priests and laity, an administration and a population” (103). In *Dorian Gray*, we see relations of power between Lord Henry and Dorian, as well as Dorian and Basil. Within Wilde’s life we see relations of power between Wilde and the government.

It is clear that there was a power dynamic between the controller (the legal system and government) and the controlled (lgbtq community) during the Victorian era, one directly experienced by Wilde, though Foucault argues that power at this time, was not

¹⁴ Michel Foucault equated power with a form of pleasure, discussing the ways in which the two things often pursued one another.

just about power, but rather about sensuality. Foucault writes, “The power which thus took charge of sexuality set about contacting bodies, caressing them with its eyes, intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces, dramatizing troubled moments. It wrapped the sexual body in its embrace. There was undoubtedly an increase in effectiveness and an extension of the domain controlled; but also a sensualization of power and a gain of pleasure” (44). While the government criminalized sensuality in regard to homosexuality, they harnessed it when exercising their power. There is also an instance of an unnecessary power dynamic existing between Wilde and his prosecutors. Michael Lucey in his review of Jonathan Dollimore’s “Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault by Johnathan Dollimore” analyzes this dynamic, arguing, “Wilde operate[s] within contexts of power relations and personal desires in which essentialist and anti-essentialist rhetorics occur and have effects but do not seem sufficiently explanatory or determining. Such rhetorics obviously have some role both in perpetuating and in shifting relations of power, and doubtless they often function by producing belief. Wilde’s prosecutors, for instance, no doubt “believed” what they were saying about sodomites, but they need not have in order to perform their enforcing function” (315). Similarly, Dorian Gray exercised power over Alan Campbell based on his assumption (as readers interpret it) that Campbell was homosexual, needing no proof to perform blackmail. Though, it is clear Dorian seemed to have some kind of incriminating evidence against Campbell, even if only his own witness. Foucault in *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1 An Introduction* asserts, “The power which thus took charge of sexuality set about contacting bodies, caressing them with its eyes, intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces, dramatizing troubled moments. It wrapped the sexual body in its embrace. There was

undoubtedly an increase in effectiveness and an extension of the domain controlled; but also a sensualization of power and a gain of pleasure” (44). Wilde’s novel can be viewed as an attempt to regain power for the LGBTQ community. Though, it is unclear whether Wilde intended for this message to be blatant for everyone, or a form of code. In assuming this, it can also be argued that Wilde’s beliefs of sexuality aligned with that of Foucault, something that can be utilized to (re)gain and maintain power.

To argue that Wilde had created a secret code for readers, Wilde’s readership needs to be understood. While today we have terms like “lgbtq,” and “gay,” these terms or identities did not exist at the time of Wilde. Therefore, we can look to figures like Alfred Taylor who was also convicted of unlawfully committing acts of gross indecency with men. Prior to his conviction, he had run a male brothel and introduced Wilde to a series of men that he began relationships with. As well as his encounters with Taylor, it was also speculated that Wilde had an intimate encounter with Walt Whitman, as it was alleged that he had said “the kiss of Walt Whitman is still on my lips.”¹⁵ Referring again to Bram Stoker and the letter he had written to Whitman, Schaffer further explains, “It is significant that Stoker believes he has a “kind” – that he belongs to. A species set apart (his definition anticipates the turn-of-the-century decision that homosexuality is an essential identity peculiar to a recognizable minority, rather than a frequently practiced act called ‘sodomy’” (383). This species can also be considered a considerable part of Wilde’s target audience. Wilde determined that a queer readership existed for *Dorian Gray*, which shortly after became the readership for many authors, including Stoker.

¹⁵ Mendelssohn, Michele. “When Wilde Met Whitman: When He Told a Friend Years Later, ‘The Kiss of

Walt Whitman is Still on My Lips.” *Literary Hub*, Grove Atlantic, 16 July 2018.

Alongside the alleged encounter with Whitman, during the trials Wilde had reportedly been accused of soliciting men to commit acts of sodomy, some of these men including Freddie Atkins, Sidney Mavor, Charles Parker, Maurice Schwabe, and others.¹⁶ Wilde also participated in more well-known romantic relationships with Edward Shelley, John Gray, and George Ives, as well as the infamous relationship with Lord Alfred “Bosie” Douglas.¹⁷ All the while he was married to Constance Lloyd, from 1884-1898, who later had her name as well as her children’s names changed to her maiden one to avoid association with Wilde’s “disgrace.” Though, Wilde’s involvement with non-conforming sexual relationships did not stop there. Wilde has been known as having had friends and relationships with those who were also admittedly homosexual. In one instance, Wilde was introduced to the seventeen year old Alfred Wood by Douglas, and both Douglas and Wilde had intimate encounters with him.¹⁸ Through his encounters with Douglas, Wood noticed there were letters from Wilde to Douglas, and “Wood decided to exploit this find to get money for his trip to America” (Ellmann 390). Between his personal romantic relationships and his different involvements with men like Alfred Taylor and George Ives, through movements and scandals, Wilde knew there was a community that he could write for, and in knowing this, assumed there were others that made up the community. And in knowing this, Wilde may have intentionally geared his novel towards this community in an attempt to provide them with a narrative only they would realize and understand.

¹⁶ Ellmann, Richard. “Oscar Wilde.” *Vintage Books: A Division of Random House*, New York, 1988, pp. 443.

¹⁷ Ellmann, Richard. “Oscar Wilde.” *Vintage Books: A Division of Random House*, New York, 1988. Ellmann discusses Wilde’s relationship with Douglas, as well as his other less famous relationships most specifically in chapter 15, “A Late Victorian Love Affair.”

¹⁸ Ellmann, Richard. “Oscar Wilde.” *Vintage Books: A Division of Random House*, New York, 1988.

Wilde's relationship with Ives, whether proven to be romantic or not, is one in particular that further highlights that Wilde did not want his novel to be explicitly homoerotic, nor did he want to explicitly be campaigning for gay rights. In a biographical sketch of Ives' writings and letters, it is determined that Ives had begun to openly accept his sexuality and with that he had decided to start a movement titled the "Cause," which aimed to put an end to the discrimination against homosexuals. What stands out in this sketch is the fact that Ives had attempted to recruit Wilde to join the "Cause," yet Wilde "did not have the same compassion towards this movement that Ives did."¹⁹ The archives of Ives' papers, letters and notes states that Wilde and Ives met in 1892 when Ives made these attempts to recruit Wilde. Being that this was two years after the *Lippincott's* publication of *Dorian Gray*, and one year after the publication of the novel version, we know that he had already been experiencing backlash from a more subtle approach to promoting homosexuality and therefore understood the risks involved in Ives movement. Ives' movement would also not afford Wilde with the same protection that a novel could, as he could not make the same argument for it being simply an expression of art. Wilde's dismissal of Ives' movement showcases his rejection of recklessness in expressing sexuality, as he had already been reckless in writing his novel and had no intention of getting burned again. Wilde's "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" offers further explanation of Wilde's rejection of this movement. In this essay Wilde expresses his need for individualism, which provides artists with freedom to express themselves. Wilde desired this freedom of expression and renounced labels as he did not want to be branded. Because of Wilde's caution of Ives' movement, and claiming any kind of sexual identity,

¹⁹ Ives, George Cecil. "George Cecil Ives: An Inventory of His Papers at the Harry Ransom Center." *Harry Ransom Center*, Processed by Deborah Shelby. 1993, Austin, Texas.

we can assume that he carefully approached these controversial topics when crafting his responses and approach to the Wilde trials.

Knowing that Wilde's novel may have been published as a "secret message," one only for those in the queer community, we should consider his following statement from the Wilde Trials: "I think that the realization of oneself is the prime aim of life, and to realize oneself through pleasure is finer than to do so through pain" (Hyde 108-9). This is applicable to Wilde in his exploration of sexuality throughout his life, as opposed to suppressing his sexual identity. This also suggests Wilde's individualism. Rather than attempting to be a part of a movement, he wanted to realize individuality.

People referred to Wilde as "the corruptor of youth," but was this because his novel effectively served a safe space for others within the community? Wilde may have intended for *Dorian Gray* to serve as a form of self-discovery tale for those in the same position as himself. This also raises question as to what Wilde's sexuality was specifically. In *Dorian Gray*, Dorian has a non-sexual, romantic relationship with a woman named Sibyl Vane, yet the novel is known for Dorian's underlying relationship with Basil in which Wilde emphasizes Basil's obsession with and passion for Dorian. Wilde was married in real life, yet had a relationship with Bosie as well as other men. The notion that Wilde was exclusively gay may not be an accurate representation of his reality, but rather we can consider the possibility of bi-sexuality or sexual fluidity. Again, the Gothic genre, due to its emphasis on transformation, emotion, doubling, and sin, enabled this exploration, providing him with a space to explore a multiplicity of identities, rather than one fixed category. This immensely impacts the possible intentions behind the novel, as sexuality is often seen as something to be explored, rather than

“defined” – something not unknown to Wilde. This opens doors to the likelihood of Wilde intending for his novel to serve as a form of exploration for readers who struggle with their sexuality and identity formation; a way to be exposed to various relationships and encounters. Representing life in all its complexities, lgbtq related literature allows for sexuality to be explored as an abstract concept, as well as lived experience. Wilde’s novel raised same sex, literary desire between men, providing readers with an alternative to the “standard,” heterosexual married couple, and offers a model for resisting the societal norm.

It can also be considered that Wilde attempted to make a game out of the one that the ‘legitimate couple’ was already playing.²⁰ Because Wilde was married, with children, he was part of this “legitimate couple” and therefore may have thought he had an advantage in hiding his intentions behind the novel. Wilde lived a distinct double life and further explored this duplicity in his more well-received works such as *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In living his double life, Wilde attempted to use this experience to his advantage in implementing his secret message. Overall, the legal system sought to condemn acts of sodomy, and in order to prevent it, regulated the material taught by pedagogical institutions.²¹ Wilde’s novel, as subtly homoerotic as he thought he made it, was a way to slip through the cracks of this legal system and expose Victorian society to a narrative that was not as strictly regulated. But we now know that Wilde’s goal was partially unsuccessful considering the fact that it was immediately, viciously attacked

²⁰ Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: Introduction*, Translated by Robert Hurley, vol. 1, New York, Pantheon Books. 1978. Print.

²¹ Ghosh, Shambhobi. “Reading Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Relation to Michel Foucault’s Theory on Sexuality.” *Spring Magazine on English Literature*, Edited by Dr. KBS Krishna, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2016.

upon its publication, both in 1890 and 1891. This lack of success may be attributed to Wilde's failure to account for the already existing instances of homosexuality that were drawing society's attention. For example, the Cleveland Street Scandal, which was a case in 1889 in which a male brothel was discovered, and upper-class men were seen prostituting working-class men. With time it was discovered that many well-known, distinguished men with high-esteemed reputations were frequent visitors, and many were involved in the cover up of the situation.²²

Wilde even seemingly hinted at this in chapter twelve of *Dorian Gray* when Basil is speaking to Dorian and says, "Then there are other stories—stories that you have been seen creeping at dawn out of dreadful houses and slinking in disguise into the foulest dens in London" (128). With only readers familiar with the scandal able to pick up on this message, this implies a double meaning within the text and supports my reading of the novel as code. Henry Labouchere, the man who had successfully campaigned to create the Labouchere Amendment, requested an investigation of these men be done.²³ With affairs such as this one, everyone was on high alert of the great lengths that Wilde may also be going to, to cover up his story of "gross indecency." This scandal was even discussed during his trial by Queensberry's attorney. "One aspect of [the attorneys] strategy was to inscribe Wilde within a prior history of criminal sexuality. A hostile reviewer in 1890 already had sex scandal in mind when he suggested that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was fit only for 'outlawed noblemen and perverted delivery boys'²⁴" (Kaplan 114). It is unknown whether Wilde directly participated in the prostituting of the

²² Kaczorowski, Craig. "Cleveland Street Scandal." *GLBTQ Inc.*, 2015.

²³ Kaczorowski, Craig. "Cleveland Street Scandal." *GLBTQ Inc.*, 2015.

²⁴ Kaplan lists this information as coming from "Scots Observer, 5 July 1890, quoted in Holland id., pp. 77" (114).

young working-class men, yet being so closely involved in the scandal, Wilde should have better anticipated this to create issues for him, especially at the time of his novel's publication. This further draws on the complexities of dealing with Wilde. He involved himself in this exploitative system involving young, penurious men, making himself a participant in the economic and sexual exploitation it creates, yet on the other hand, he holds status as a victim. This parallels Dorian and his portrait; Dorian appears beautiful and thus is deemed as good, yet his portrait embodies all of his sin and ugliness.

Wilde's novel is most representative of his sexual self, as we can see his pioneering use of homoerotic codes and subtext in the novel as he lives out his reality through words on a page. Wilde violated the taboos and transgressed the literary conventions of fiction in his novel. When writing, Wilde had to keep the homoerotic themes as hidden as possible and could really only make the novel as queer as one could openly be in the Victorian era. And while some argue that there is no explicit homosexuality in the novel, with deeper analysis, these undertones become clearer and clearer for readers to see, and the story saturated with homoerotic feeling and style is uncovered. Critics have argued that Wilde wrote the novel as an attempt to live through the character Dorian, though I would argue that Dorian is just as oppressed as Wilde, and neither can freely nor entirely be themselves. In *Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry says to Dorian, "You, Mr. Gray, you yourself, with your rose-red youth and your rose-white boyhood, you have had passions that have made you afraid, thoughts that have filled you with terror, day-dreams and sleeping dreams whose mere memory might stain your cheek with shame" (20), and Dorian responds angrily. Wilde writes, "The few words that Basil's friend had said to him— words spoken by chance, no doubt, and with wilful

paradox in them—had touched some secret chord that had never been touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses” (20). This showcases the power of words, demonstrating language as having the power to inspire curiosity. This also reflects Wilde’s confusion of his sexual desires and a recognition of a lifetime’s worth of suppressed feelings. We see this further when Wilde explains that Dorian thinks, “Yes; there had been things in his boyhood that he had not understood. He understood them now. Life suddenly became fiery-coloured to him. It seemed to him that he had been walking in fire. Why had he not known it?” (20), as if almost referring directly to his hidden sexuality which Dorian appears fearful of admitting arguably for the same reasons as Wilde. Together, Wilde and Dorian spend a lifetime concealing part of their identities and suppressing their feelings in regard to this concealment. Dorian’s same-sex desire is directly linked to danger. With this same-sex desire comes danger in the realm of fear of discrimination and incrimination, as well as the daily battle of internal conflict through this concealment of the truth. In addition to Dorian’s desires being dangerous for himself, society deems them to be dangerous for them. Society openly rejects the kind of sexuality his character brings into question. Victorian Europe not only rejected homosexuality but appeared to fear it, viewing it as dangerous, having the ability to corrupt. This fear matches the fear that both Dorian and Wilde may have when considering the risks of being out and open with their sexuality and desires.

Wilde spent the majority of his life publicly “in the closet,” though out to a specific circle of people, much like the novel was intended to be. The closet is a lifestyle that can have detrimental effects on mental health as it promotes a feeling of confinement. Unfortunately, Wilde’s life free from the closet was short lived and

seemingly not any better. The decision to remain within the closet or to come out is one that is a double-edged sword. While either decision seemingly has their benefits, they both ultimately have their downfalls. Inside, Wilde was able to build up a successful reputation for himself and live out his career. At the same time, he lacked the ability to ever truly express himself beyond his way of dressing and the contents of his works, which were limited as well. Outside, Wilde was able to showcase the “secret of his own soul” but also faced ridicule and harsh punishment. It is possible that Wilde, like Basil, had “grown to love secrecy,” and found that living a double life was seemingly exciting. It is also possible that Wilde took pleasure in leaving people wondering. Eve Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*, discusses the detriments of those posed with the daily challenge of living both in and out “of the closet.” Sedgwick writes, “The gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people. It is still the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in which whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence” (68). The Labouchere Amendment served as a system for policing desire and sexuality and made attempts to limit behaviors associated with these desires and non-conforming sexualities. Not only was the Labouchere Amendment limiting to Wilde, but persons of all sexualities. Certain behaviors, appearances and attitudes were deemed features of gross indecency, and everyone had to be cautious to avoid this. Most notably during this time, coming out was not an option, and behaving in a way most aligned with his true sexuality meant putting his social, academic, and professional career on the line. For Wilde, this risk became a reality as he became a name that was associated with disgrace during the time of his novel. He was not regarded as a

scholarly man, nor treated with respect, nor praised for his contribution to the writing world, not until after his death. But when considering this amendment and Wilde's intentions, it appears that Wilde's end goal was not to be out of the closet. Therefore, if he was not willing to admit to his sexuality, his novel was probably not a response to the law, but rather an outlet for those having to conform to it.

Wilde was often referred to as a dandy due to his effeminate and flamboyant style, or rather due to society deeming his average stylistic choices to be "gay." While the average middle-class man during the Victorian era would typically be seen wearing a vest, a long, black coat, and a top hat during the infamous Wilde Trials, Wilde arrived "smartly dressed in a frock coat and wearing a flower in his buttonhole," (Hyde 98). While this effeminacy is often stereotypically linked to gender, it is also often associated with sexuality, and the combination of these details were enough to place Wilde outside the line of the norm at the time. Appearance was one of the major contributing factors to the accusations surrounding Wilde, and Queensbury had even said to Wilde, "I do not say that you are it, but you look it" (Hyde 104). Just as Wilde had his own individualistic writing style that broke from conventions of morality, his clothing style represented this "immoral" individualistic style as well, and he used his role as an artist as a cover for this dandyism, presenting his effeminacy as being about art and beauty, just as he did with the novel.

While Wilde's prosecution is one reason for Wilde to hide behind the claim that his novel was simply an art form, with no preconceived meaning, it is possible that his identity, separate from his reputation, was a concern of his. Wilde was a gay man and it is clear that he wanted to live freely in this way, though conceivable that Wilde grappled

with the possibility of his identity being consumed by the title of “gay,” or rather, “sodomite” at that time. Wilde was a writer and arguably would rather be known for his writing than by his sexuality. Wilde’s first publication of *Dorian Gray*, in *Lippincott’s*, contained no preface. Though when it was published a second time a year later, the preface was included most specifically as a response to the detractors and critics. Specifically, “To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim” (Wilde 3) sets the tone for Wilde’s novel; that no thoughts regarding the novel should be reflected onto Wilde, as he is simply the artist, and his art holds no didactic purpose.

CHAPTER 4: GENDER AND WILDE

Through *The Picture of Dorian Gray* we can not only see a reflection of Wilde's concept of sexuality, but also the way in which Wilde viewed gender. I argue that Wilde could not have written such a subtly queer text without an androgynous mind. Dietmar Geyer, author of "Nineteenth Century Concepts of Androgyny with Particular Reference to Oscar Wilde" explains, "the dandy turned out to be one of the most prevalent images of 'male androgyny' in the nineteenth century. Oscar Wilde's major works can hardly do without the figure of the dandy maintaining his superiority by giving samples of his wit, what we would nowadays term 'camp' humour" (120). Wilde directly referred to Dorian as a dandy, stating, "this young dandy who was making love to [Sybil Vane] could mean her no good" (58), and Wilde in his personal life was often referred to as a dandy (which he embraced), someone who paid attention to appearances and associated meaning with them, traits stereotypically associated with the feminine, which was just one of the ways in which Wilde was able to reflect femininity along with the masculinity within himself. In chapter eleven Wilde writes,

Fashion, by which what is really fantastic becomes for a moment universal, and dandyism, which, in its own way, is an attempt to assert the absolute of modernity of beauty, had, of course, their fascination for him. His mode of dressing, and the particular styles that from time to time he affected, had their marked influence on the young exquisites of the Mayfair balls and Pall Mall club windows, who copied

him in everything that he did, and tried to reproduce the accidental charm of his graceful, though to him only half-serious, fopperies. (107)

Wilde painted Dorian as taking a distinct interest in fashion and an overall fastidious appearance, tying to his theme of aesthetics. Through this aesthetic theme, Wilde can further argue that Dorian is simply a reflection of beautiful art, as opposed to a figure that does not conform to sex and gender roles. Through this, Wilde “now allowed for ‘a higher ethics’ in which artistic freedom and full expression of personality were possible, along with a curious brand of individualistic sympathy” (Ellmann 305), with individualism being emphasized in the novel. Geyer continues about androgynous figures stating, “One important prerequisite for designating an individual a dandy is that a dandy is free from any common ties that would link him to a certain definite background, i.e. family, milieu, social class and even gender” (121). Wilde wrote his characters to be both masculine upfront but more feminine beneath the surface, neither presenting his text to be overtly masculine nor feminine, much like himself. Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own* discussed this concept of the androgynous mind as originally introduced by romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Woolf writes,

And I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain, the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain, the woman predominates over the man. The normal and the comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating. If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have

intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilised and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought. But it would be well to test what one meant by man-womanly, and conversely by woman-manly, by pausing and looking at a book or two. (98)

Wilde further showcased androgyny through his role as an editor for *The Woman's World* fashion magazine. During Wilde's time as the magazine's acting editor, he shaped the magazine into an outlet to share ideas about femininity, dress, aesthetics, literature, and society.²⁵ Unlike the average Victorian, middle-class man, Wilde cared about the expression of femininity, and paid special attention to detail within the art of fashion and expression.

In arguing that Wilde held an androgynous mind, I also contend that he disregarded the separation of socially constructed versions of male and female, both in his personal life and within his novel. While aware of the societal divide, he seemingly overlooked this separation in his creation of Dorian, Lord Henry, and Basil, as well as the way in which they chose to live their life. Amber M. Wulu in "Liberating the Sexed Body: Oscar Wilde Erodes Victorian Conventions as a New World Is Created in the Importance of Being Earnest" writes "Wilde contends that gender is a performance of socially inscribed ideas of male and female behaviors and actions however, these distinct citations can and will overlap" (5). Focusing on this idea of overlap, it is possible that it played a role in the terror that society felt about his novel. Just as they feared

²⁵ Green, Stephanie. "Oscar Wilde's 'The Woman's World.'" *Victorian Periodicals Review*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1997, pp. 102–20. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20082978>. Accessed 11 Mar. 2023.

homosexuality, they feared the overlap of sexuality, such as bisexuality, as well as the blurring of gender performance and behaviors. There is also immense evidence of overlap within his own life, not just within the novel. We can see this when considering Wilde's marriage versus his romantic same-sex relationships, as well as his being Irish yet living in England. Returning to the affair that was the Cleveland Street Scandal, there is an overlap of class/status here that played a significant role in the outcome of Wilde's trial. Wilde was regarded as a high-class, respected writer, though involved himself with the prostitution of younger, lower-class men. "Wilde's 'feasting with panthers' had involved him with young men from the urban underclass whom bourgeois society would regard with fear or contempt" (Kaplan 115). Additionally, he disregarded the stereotypical standards associated with the way a man should both dress and act and instead behaved as an individual of multiple selves, with multiple identities depending upon who he was around or where he was, much like Dorian. Both Dorian and his creator opposed the stereotypical rules of masculinity and thus established their androgynous identities.

Wilde showcased this "great mind" in proving to be capable of creating a novel in which gender roles were often transgressed and the role of the male took on traits that are strongly associated with the female. Wilde described Dorian as "he was certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair. There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candour of youth was there, as well as all youth's passionate purity" (17). Traits such as finely curved scarlet lips, appeals to the feminine as women typically are noticed for details such as these, intentionally staining their lips red. Wilde also mentions Dorian's

initial purity which is a historically feminine trait, as women have been valued based on purity and encouraged to remain pure in various ways. Lord Henry is described as having a “low, musical voice, and with that graceful wave of the hand that was always so characteristic of him” (Wilde 21). Rather than placing the narcissus, Dorian, and Wilde’s other characters at a disadvantage due to the lack of gender restrictions, the intermingled gender roles and traits were often considerably beneficial to the characters, especially in the case of Dorian Gray who was admired daily due to his “beauty” and effeminacy. Dorian is also seen overlooking the traditional role of men in the Victorian era which typically consisted of men holding high paying positions and spending time hosting and attending parties. Instead, Dorian is seen as a well cross-dressed, put together, piano playing model, upholding the “feminine” part of his identity through such stereotypically passive traits and “accomplishments.” While the effeminacy of Dorian’s appearance and his interactions with other men perpetuate androgyny through an emphasis of femininity, his representation of masculinity through Dorian’s lifestyle promotes the androgynous theme as well by participating in relationships with women, specifically Sibyl Vane. Additionally, Dorian demonstrates power by controlling others, upholding part hegemonic masculinity. This further connects to the complexity of Wilde, both as a powerless figure and as a participant in exploitative systems. When considering what all of this may mean in regard to Wilde’s intentions with the novel, light is shed on the possibility that simply the way Wilde views the world in regard to gender, bled onto the pages of his novel. As for the novel's reception, this androgyny perpetuated readers' rejection of the novel and overall fear of its message, alongside its potential contagion.

Focusing on identity, both Wilde's and his character's identities transcend that of the physical body, tied to harsh laws and standards for how each gender should act, dress, speak and engage in relationships. Instead, Wilde found it important that people should not have to be categorized according to specific identities. Wulu continues, "What is important to note is that Wilde understands and illustrates that when overlapping [of socially inscribed ideas of male and female behaviors and actions] occurs, opportunities for variance allows those that feel limited by the matrix the chance to define an identity outside of categorization" (5). In recognizing this categorization of sexual identity, it is clear that Wilde's sexual identity was concealed, but in the novel as Dorian, it reigns more free. And with no need for labels, Dorian was able to define an identity outside of categorization. It is possible that Wilde's refusal to label his sexuality was his way of avoiding being categorized and put into a box. Dorian can be deemed a transgressive figure which Wilde utilized to express himself, though it is unlikely that this is the sole intention behind the novel, because if the narrative was only a form of expression, he would feel no need to publish it and risk imprisonment.

Continuing with identity, focusing more specifically on gender identity, Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter*, pronounces that "gender is instituted through the stylization of body" whereby "bodily gestures and movements and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler 519, as cited in Arundel 10). Butler contended that gender is performed, otherwise known as gender performativity, and with Wilde's open flamboyant and dandy-described appearance, Wilde's sexuality brought about a link between one's behavior and their sexuality.²⁶ This showcases the

²⁶ Arundel, Aisling. *Literary Masks Sexual and Social Identities in the Work of Oscar Wilde and Kate O'Brien*.

pressure someone like Wilde may feel when it comes to performance and behavior. Dorian and Wilde's attention to detail alone can paint them as feminine and thus, homosexual according to stereotypes. This connection between sexuality and behavior may have been intensified at the height of Wilde's publication, leaving Wilde to incidentally promote and endure these gendered stereotypes and restraints in regard to sexuality. Foucault explains in *The History of Sexuality*, "Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (43). Even though homosexual was not "a species" during the time of Wilde, his novel made attempts to eliminate the term "sodomite" and its association with "gross indecency," and instead acknowledge it alongside heterosexuality. While Wilde may not have been ready to label himself with a specific sexuality, he may have intended for his novel to provide others with the option to choose to do so, and to do so without any negative connotation.

With reference to negative connotations, with time, the feminine and masculine intermingling has developed one, meaning that, for example, when a man identifies as a homosexual, he is painted as feminine. Or when a man appears more feminine up front, he is labeled a homosexual. The same goes for women; masculine women are deemed homosexual and further labeled derogatory terms, and homosexual women are grouped with the masculine. Oftentimes homosexuals, as well as bisexuals and non-gender conforming persons are deemed as less than or faulty. Furthermore, "Homosexuals were seen as deeply flawed and defective because they shared certain psychic characteristics

2005. University of Limerick, Master's Thesis.

with women” (Kenneth Lewes 5, as cited in Sinfield 162), which was the case with Wilde’s public criticism of his alleged sexuality. Further, “A man whose character feminine attributes obviously predominate, who may, indeed, behave in love like a woman, might be expected, from this feminine attitude, to choose a man for his love-object; but he nevertheless may be heterosexual, and show no more inversion in respect to his object than an average normal man” (Freud 7, as cited in Sinfield 163). With this in mind, it is possible that Wilde was writing to shut down this association between the feminine and homosexuality, in addition to his writing to promote non-conforming relationships. This also brings to light Wilde’s promotion of sexual fluidity. Dorian was a man involved with both women (Sybil) and men (Lord Henry and Basil), and Wilde was married to a woman yet held romantic relationships with men. While readers and the Victorian public deemed him homosexual due to his narrative and his effeminacy, they never considered that he may have truly desired to be with his wife and was not only with her as a cover-up to his sexuality, claiming bisexuality, or even pansexuality, as opposed to homosexuality.

Referring back to Wilde’s countless, well-known epigrams, in *Dorian Gray* Wilde’s wit shines through in each of the characters, most often in Lord Henry. In chapter four Lord Henry shares, “Never marry at all, Dorian. Men marry because they are tired; women, because they are curious: both are disappointed” (Wilde 43). This wit brings into question the intentions behind Wilde’s novel once again. Specifically focusing on Lord Henry’s statement to Basil, claiming, “for there is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about” (Wilde 7), it is hard not to wonder if this is a belief of Wilde’s as well, as just as his characters are known for

their wit, so is he. While it is possible that Wilde had intentionally incorporated a secret message into the novel to avoid any form of conflict, because of Wilde's cleverly made comments such as the one above, it becomes questionable whether or not Wilde wanted a scandal. After all, this would, and did, get people talking about himself and his work. Additionally, Wilde's frequent use of humor and wit, as well as paradox in regard to his performance in the novel and at the trials offered him a kind of protection. Most specifically, his humor and wit allow for him to deny all seriousness with the message at hand. His paradoxical epigrams are most significant in this "protection" he seems to gain through his style of writing. Because he incorporates such self-contradictory statements into the novel and into his statements made in trial, he is seen taking no true side to any of his arguments. As mentioned prior, Wilde explains that "the only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it," (20) and in doing so is neither arguing for against giving into temptation.

CONCLUSION

Though living in a hetero-patriarchal society, Wilde did not care to promote only heteronormative relationships. Instead, Wilde harnessed the genre of Gothic literature as an outlet to build an archive for those who are queer and non-conforming. We're speaking of a world that has always colonized people, whether it be based upon race, religion, gender, sexuality, or another factor, and Wilde decided he was no longer going to contribute to this. And in resisting heteronormative narratives in literature, Wilde made room for other identities. In building this archive for those who are queer and non-conforming, Wilde went against the laws of the time, specifically the Labouchere Amendment. It is likely because of this amendment that he did not make his novel outrightly homoerotic but instead chose to implement a more subtle homoerotic theme that would be detectable through interpretation, alongside life experiences. Though, it is also likely that Wilde did not build into *Dorian Gray*, a homoerotic theme solely as a response to this amendment due to his unwillingness to address his sexuality. Instead, through this amendment and scandals such as the Cleveland Street Affair, he recognized there was a community of people like him, one in which could use a novel that validates their experience and normalizes what extends beyond strict categorization. And through this recognition he utilized the gothic realm as a space to explore the marginalized and invisible, and all that society deems "monstrous."

Wilde's main emphasis in the novel and throughout the trials was art. Through art he claims no moral responsibility for the contents of his novel. Whether he truly believed

this, or was claiming this to avoid jail time, is unknown. What is known is that this art may have offered him a form of cover, had it not been for the restrictions of his time. Just as Shakespeare was praised for his work despite its mysterious and potentially homoerotic contents, Wilde may have been able to publish his novel and continue his career unscathed in another time. Wilde did view himself as an artist and with that, his desires lay within art. In *De Profundis* he writes to Douglas, "...the fact that your desires and interests were in Life not in Art, were as destructive to your own progress in culture as they were to my work as an artist?" (61). Wilde cherished instances of art and poured himself into one of his greatest artforms, *Dorian Gray*, making it no surprise that we are able to see pieces of him on the pages of the novel. He writes in his preface to *Dorian Gray*, "All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors" (1). Most important is the third line in which he states that it is the spectator that art really mirrors, in the case of his novel meaning the reader. He says that what the reader makes of and interprets within the text is a reflection of them. Therefore, if a reader detects a homoerotic tone within his novel, perhaps they stray from the societal norm in regard to sexuality or have a friend or family member who does so. Wilde merely gives us a story of sin and immorality; what we do with it and how we interpret it will be unique to each individual based upon life experience.

Ultimately, this aligns with my argument that Wilde wrote *Dorian Gray* with the intention of incorporating a secret message that was intended for those belonging to the LGBTQ community, or for those exploring their sexuality. In believing that "it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors," (1) he, in all likelihood, believed that only

those “like him” would be able to detect this “hidden” theme. More specifically, anyone who was androgynous, non-gender conforming, experimenting, or not heterosexual were the secret audience of the novel, the few that were intended to pick up on the message. Where Wilde fell short was when he failed to acknowledge Victorian society’s ongoing suspicion of the gay community through affairs such as the Cleveland Street Scandal and even texts by other authors such as Walter Pater and Thomas Hardy in which revisions had to be made to make their own works late-nineteenth century appropriate. While hard to say, it is possible that if it were not for instances such as events, scandals, and texts, *Dorian Gray’s* secret code may have flown under the radar. Together, Wilde wrote partly for this LGBTQ related readership, as well as the wider public. The goal appears to have been to keep this underlying theme private, and while he failed at this, he was successful in his promotion of same-sex relationships for those in the community, and with time he promoted an overall acceptance of these relationships, and a dismantling of the overbearing and restrictive laws of the times. While readers in late nineteenth century Europe feared Wilde’s novel for what they deemed to be its virulent contents, “Many young men and women learned of the existence of uncelebrated forms of love through the hints in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*” (Ellmann 305). At the same time, he raised same sex literary desire between men through his writing. Not only did he do this, but he opened doors to more than homosexuality. He brought discussions of gender overlap, bisexuality, and exploration to fruition. He also set in motion the production of these terms, transforming from “sodomite,” to “homosexual,” and eventually “gay.” Wilde, who was originally known as “the corruptor of youth” is now known as a literary icon within the LGBTQ+ community.

Not only did the novel, *Dorian Gray*, prompt a new understanding of gender and sexuality, but the Wilde Trials did as well. In considering the legislation at the time, and again, the Labouchere Amendment, Wilde's literary choices remain questionable. It was obvious that this would all play a role in the reception of his novel and put him at risk for a criminal trial. Because Wilde went ahead with the contents of his novel anyways, some argue he paid no attention to what may happen to him. With this in mind, if Wilde was well aware that he may go to trial for his publication, making his book even more popular, prompting further discussion of sexuality, is it possible this was his goal? And could Wilde's use of wit and paradox during the trials been his attempt at an escape from facing any responsibility of his novel? It is more likely that Wilde wanted his homoerotic theme to go unnoticed by the heterosexual public, and this is emphasized further through his anger seen in his prison writing, *De Profundis*. He writes to Douglas stating, "If there be in [this letter] one single passage that brings tears to your eyes, weep as we weep in prison where the day no less than the night is set apart for tears" (57), and it can be assumed Wilde did not expect prison to be anything less than treacherous. Wilde further describes his experience in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, included in Nicholas Frankel's *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde*. Wilde wrote, "And I trembled as I groped my way / Into my numbered tomb. / That night the empty corridors / Were full of forms of Fear." (339).

Despite his novel, trials, and jail sentencing he never admitted to being gay; not to the public, nor in any of his prison writings. While we will not know why Wilde never freed himself from his secret life, just as there are many considerable intentions behind the novel, there are many considerable intentions behind his decision to remain in the

closet. Perhaps Wilde did not want to risk his prison sentence being extended, or maybe as mentioned before, he enjoyed basking in the double life in which he existed. One thing remains for certain and that is Wilde prioritized art in all forms. In the “Decay of Lying” he proclaims, “The final revelation is that Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art. But of this I think I have spoken at sufficient length” (21), and perhaps to Oscar Wilde, his secret was his most beautiful form of art.

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