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Revision as Censorship: Society's Alterations to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

When students are introduced to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, they are almost certainly interacting with the finalized, published novel form. However, as with most works, other versions of this novel exist that bear little resemblance to the completed novel. Unlike most texts, these changes, at least in some cases, were not a result of Wilde's artistic vision or plan for his only novel. Instead many, if not most, major edits to Wilde's novel were the result of outside pressures from magazine editors, society at large, and the threat of prosecution. I am not trying to argue that one version is necessarily superior to the other, or that students should treat the novel as somehow not Wilde's product; however it is important to acknowledge that the work mainly studied today has greater factors influencing it. Nicholas Frankel argues that "[r]eclaiming works of literature from the censorship that they were subject to, often for the duration of their authors' lifetimes, is not a Romantic endeavor, but rather an effort to reveal the social antagonisms and broader political forces shaping their accepted social face" (XI). Ultimately, there are three major changes that occurred in Wilde's novel, and most of them point to a Victorian editor's attempt to make the story more palatable for readers. First, the plot lines containing Dorian's heterosexual romantic partner Sibyl Vane were expanded; second, sexual content, both heterosexual and homosexual, was drastically cut from the text; and third, the ending of the novel was changed so that it presented a clearer moral than Wilde originally wrote.

Before going into the specifics on textual changes among the versions, it is important to understand the different versions of the texts that lead to the final product. There are basically three major versions of the text. The first version is the manuscript that Wilde originally submitted to *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*. At this point, the only revisions were done by Wilde himself, and this is presumably how he had envisioned having the work published in the magazine. The next version of the text is what actually appeared in the magazine when published in 1890. Upon receiving Wilde's manuscript, the editor of *Lippincott's* removed some five hundred plus words that the magazine found objectionable. These changes were made without Wilde's permission, and he probably only became aware of them at the time of publication. The third version is the text published in novel format in 1891. These changes included expansions from the magazine version and were largely made by Wilde himself. He did not try to revert the changed material, and he continued to dilute the text after harsh backlash from reviewers and his Victorian critics. It would be almost impossible to discuss the areas I have outlined and at the same time trace them across all three texts in the scope of this essay; for this reason, I will for the most part highlight changes between the original manuscript Wilde submitted to *Lippincott's* and the version that was published in novel format without specifying changes made at the magazine stage.¹

1 When referencing the manuscript version of *Dorian Gray*, I use Nicholas Frankel's *Uncensored Picture of Dorian Gray*. The textual introduction Frankel provides is invaluable for any scholar seriously looking to delve into textual changes in the novel and is a major cornerstone of my own research.

In the interest of understanding the editor's decisions, it is important to understand that making changes to an author's work was fairly standard practice for magazine publications at the time; work was frequently changed without the writers' permission. Also, it was not unreasonable for the editors at *Lippincott's* to fear critical and legal retribution. In 1857 (not long enough in the past to be forgotten by publishers of the time) Gustave Flaubert was brought to trial for *Madame Bovary's* allegedly immoral qualities. In addition to the author coming under attack, the owner and printer of *La Revue de Paris* (the periodical in which the novel appeared in serial form) were charged as well. According to Elisabeth Ladenson, the year of Flaubert's trial signaled the beginning of "modern literature" as well as "efforts to stamp it out ... producing a bumper crop of literary trials in France, as well as unprecedented obscenity legislation in England" (17). Although the three men involved in the *Madame Bovary* trial were acquitted, the editors at *Lippincott's* were almost certainly anxious to avoid a similar scandal with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Expanded Plot Lines

Moving now to the textual changes, the first major alteration is Wilde's expansion of many dramatic plot lines in order to appeal to a wider Victorian audience. These changes occurred after its original publication in *Lippincott's*. Wilde later added any and all interaction with Sibyl Vane's family, as well as development of the Sibyl character herself. In the original magazine version, there is only one scene in which the reader hears Sibyl voice her own emotions rather than Dorian interpreting them for Lord Henry. This scene occurs after she is no longer able to act and leads to Dorian abandoning her. When Wilde expanded the work, he added an additional scene before Sibyl takes the stage in which she discusses her feelings for Dorian with her mother and brother. As a result, Sibyl is much more developed in the novel than she is in the magazine form. Most of the audience's information about Sibyl comes from Dorian's perspective, so having another scene where Sibyl expresses her own feelings without being seen through Dorian's lens adds another dimension to the character. It also gives the audience more insight into Sibyl's decision to kill herself. The impetus for these particular changes were probably less to do with censorship and more with genuinely needing to expand the text. The work that Wilde produced for *Lippincott's* was far too short to be published as a novel, so some aspects of the story needed to be expanded upon; these characters are one of many places where Wilde elaborated.

In the magazine version of the text, Sibyl has no apparent family, but Wilde added lengthy interaction with Sibyl's mother and brother, James Vane. Sibyl's mother furthers the parallel between the family's life and the stage drama. She is overtly theatrical, and Wilde describes her as embodying "false theatrical gestures that so often become a mode of second nature to a stage player" (61). More important than Sibyl's mother is the addition of James Vane and the plot elements that change as a result of his presence. James' hunt for Dorian is entirely missing from the original manuscript and the published magazine version of the text. The main effect of James' presence is an added dimension of sensationalized drama that appealed to a much wider audience for book publication. According to Stephen E. Severn, "there is little doubt that Wilde courted the favor of a number of groups that could be grouped under the general heading of 'middle class.' Although his relationship with these groups was complex and contradictory, he nonetheless hoped to benefit from them" (81). Severn continues that "there can also be no doubt that scandal sells" (103). Providing his audience with a family drama to accompany the other elements of the story guaranteed Wilde a wider readership and more profit. In addition, James's attempt to punish Dorian for his sins makes the message much more moralistic. The audience will almost certainly sympathize with James over Dorian, making Dorian a much darker figure. I will return to this idea in more detail later when I discuss the changes to the ending.

Removed Sexual elements: Heterosexual

Perhaps the changes which most directly resulted from societal pressure were the removed sexual elements in the text, both heterosexual and homosexual. These changes were initially made before the text was published in its magazine form and then endured during its publication in book form. To modern readers, these changes may appear somewhat minor, and the original content may seem very tame. However, for a Victorian audience, the original text would have been quite explicit. One of these distinctions was in labeling Sibyl as Dorian's "mistress." For example, in the original manuscript text,

Lord Henry asks Dorian, "Tell me, is Sybil Vane your mistress? ... I suppose she will be your mistress someday" (95). Before publication, this exchange was altered. Instead, Henry asks, "What are your actual relations with Sibyl Vane? ... I suppose she will belong to you one day" (56). This example is by no means the only instance of this change of phrase, but it is emblematic of these types of alterations in general. By removing the word "mistress," the editors were able to remove implications of sexuality that might have been objectionable to a Victorian audience.

This is not only the case with Sibyl Vane, but also in Dorian's relationship with Hetty Merton towards the end of the text. The original manuscript is quite explicit with Dorian's intentions. He tells Lord Henry: "[S]he promised to come with me to town. I had taken a house for her and arranged everything" (208). This leaves little imagination regarding his intentions towards Hetty, but this dialogue is removed in the novel form. Instead, there is the much more vague admission that "she met me in a little orchard ... We were to have gone away together this morning at dawn" (216). Additionally, Lord Henry's comments concerning what to do with her after she no longer interests Dorian were expunged from the published version as well. The following text was removed completely:

[H]ad she become your mistress, she would have lived in the society of charming and cultured men. You would have educated her, taught her how to dress, how to talk, how to move. You would have made her perfect, and she would have been extremely happy. After a time, no doubt, you would have grown tired of her. She would have made a scene. You would have made a settlement. Then a new career would have begun for her. (208-209)

Again, *Lippincott's* editors feared that the content was too graphic for their audience and attempted to soften it.

In addition to the removal of heterosexual content from the text, elements that spoke too explicitly of homosexual or homosocial relationships were removed as well. This is not surprising considering that homosexuality was illegal in England at the time of *Dorian Gray's* publication, and it is worth noting that relationships merely implied in the published version of the text are nearly explicitly stated in the manuscript. This is in regards both to Dorian's relationship with the painter Basil Hallward and also to his relationships with other young men. In the original text, Basil pointedly asks Dorian, "Why is it that every young man that you take up seems to come to grief, to go to the bad at once?" after Dorian's reputation begins to fall apart (182). In the published version, this question changes dramatically to "Why is your friendship so fatal to young men?" (154). Changing the wording from men that Dorian "takes up" to men that he befriends lessens the homosexual implications that this accusation somewhat naturally invokes.

Perhaps more importantly, though, is how the relationship between Dorian Gray and Basil completely changes; where originally Wilde writes Dorian as an object of Basil's love and desire, the published version alters this to a relationship between an artist and his artistic ideal. Or, at least it attempts to make this switch. One such example is the following exchange between Lord Henry and Dorian. Dorian asks "You don't mean to say that Basil has got any passion or any romance in him?" and Lord Henry replies, "I don't know whether he has any passion, but he certainly has romance ... Has he never let you know that?" (99). This discussion clearly implies that the romance Basil feels is directed toward Dorian. This passage, while present in the original manuscript version, was completely deleted from any published version of the text. A similar change occurs when Dorian shows Basil the painting at the end of the novel. In the original manuscript, Dorian asks Basil, "Can't you see your romance in it?" Basil responds, "There was nothing evil in it, nothing shameful. This is the face of a satyr" (188). This exchange is altered in the published version of the story so that Dorian asks him if he can see his "ideal" rather than his romance. Basil's response is also changed, as he adds that "You were to me such an ideal as I shall never meet again. This is the face of a satyr" (161). Again, the editors attempt to solidify the point that Dorian is an artistic ideal for Basil and *not* a romantic interest.

The scene that most clearly illustrates this change in content is Basil's confession of his feelings for Dorian. This scene is so important and the edits so crucial that it merits quoting both passages at length. In the original manuscript, the scene reads as follows:

It is quite true that I have worshipped you with far more romance of feeling than a man should ever give to a friend. Somehow I have never really loved a woman. I suppose I never had time. ... Well, from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I quite admit that I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly. I was jealous of every one to whom you spoke. I 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. It was all wrong and foolish. It is all wrong and foolish still ... One day I determined to paint a wonderful portrait of you ... But, as I worked at it, every flake and film of colour seemed to me to reveal my secret. There was love in every line, and in every touch there was passion. (144)

The previous passage is fairly explicit concerning Basil's feelings. The scene is dramatically changed when it appears in the printed version:

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 was 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. When I was away from you, you were still present in my art ... I determined to paint a wonderful portrait of you ... But, as I worked at it, every flake and film of colour seemed to me to reveal my secret. (117-118)

The changes are quite dramatic. Noticeably, the editor removed Basil's comment about never loving a woman. His feelings for Dorian that are "far more ... than a man should ever give to a friend" illustrate the sexual nature of Basil's feelings more clearly. While the middle content is fairly similar, Basil's admission that he adores Dorian is replaced with his claim that he worships him. These may be minor distinctions, but it would have been more acceptable at the time for Basil to worship Dorian as the perfect model for his art than it would have been for him to love Dorian. Finally, his confession ends with the remark that Basil painted the picture of Dorian with "love in every line." All told, the version ultimately published and available to the public arguably portrays only that of an artist and his muse.

The reasons *Lippincott's* censored the sexual content in the text is almost certainly because both Wilde and his publishers were afraid of being prosecuted. According to Frankel:

Given, then, the public outrage that greeted the novel when it appeared in Lippincott's, and given too the anxieties of Ward, Lock, and Company, it is entirely understandable that Wilde would not have felt at liberty, as he revised the novel for book publication, to restore controversial material that has already been expunged ... in an atmosphere of heightened paranoia, Wilde and his publishers were unwilling to risk prosecution. The potential repercussions were simply too great. (42)

The editors at *Lippincott's* were afraid of the backlash that would come from printing the text as Wilde submitted it. After their edits, the editors were confident the text would not be objectionable, but they were wrong in this regard.

The final change that was made to the novel asserted a more transparent moral into the ending. While Wilde repeatedly stated, "there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book" (*Dorian Gray* 1), the ending that is present in the novel form had drastically changed from the ending in the original manuscript. For one thing, as mentioned previously, the book has the added character of James Vane, who acts as a spirit of vengeance for Dorian Gray. The audience will more naturally sympathize with James, who acts out of familial love, than they will with Dorian, who acts out of desire. Giving Dorian this counterpoint makes him more of a despicable character, and because James is not able to punish Dorian before his death, Dorian's destruction by the painting becomes his punishment. Without the character of James Vane, the ending has more of a feeling of repentance on Dorian's part. Like the earlier passages examined, the changes made are subtle, but they are important and they drastically change the meaning. The ending in the original manuscript reads as follows: "For it was an unjust mirror, this mirror of his soul that he was looking at. Vanity? Curiosity? Hypocrisy? Had there been

nothing more in his renunciation than that? There had been something more. At least he thought so. But who could tell?" (216). In the original version, this musing ends here, and leaves the question open. There is no definitive answer to whether there is something more behind Dorian's actions. In the published novel version, a definitive answer is provided: "No. There had been nothing more. Through vanity he had spared her. In hypocrisy he had worn the mask of goodness. For curiosity's sake he had tried the denial of self. He recognized that now" (228). This version leaves no doubt as to Dorian's intentions as well as no doubt about his guilt.

Continuing with the ending, his rationale for destroying the painting has also altered slightly. In the original version, he uses the knife he had used to murder Basil, and reasons that as "it had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter's work, and all that that meant. It would kill the past, and when that was dead he would be free" (216). Again, this ends the matter in the original manuscript version, but not in the published novel. In the novel, Dorian continues, "It would kill the monstrous soul-life, and, without its hideous warnings, he would be at peace" (229). With the added motive of destroying future warnings, Dorian's intention with the portrait becomes much more nefarious. Without the added text, Dorian seems to be destroying the painting so that he can be free from past sins, and perhaps free to change his ways and stop himself from sinning again. However, once the text is extended, his intentions change. Instead of being free of the past, it now seems that Dorian intends to be free to act as he pleases in the future without being plagued by a guilty conscience. While the action ultimately ends in Dorian's death in every version of the text, his intentions have changed drastically from one version to the other, perhaps in an attempt to prove how much Dorian deserves this "punishment." In the finalized version, Dorian appears to be destroying the evidence of past crimes and preventing warnings of future ones rather than trying to aid his soul in any way.

I have established that drastic changes were made between the original manuscript and the published novel form. I have also established that the editors and publishers who strove to remake the story were probably aware of the negative backlash they were likely to receive if the story ran as Wilde had originally submitted it. Many, although not all, of their changes can be read as an attempt to avoid scrutiny for immoral and sexually explicit content. However, despite the changes made to the novel, they were unsuccessful in this endeavor. Negative reviews regarding Wilde's work proliferated. Many of these reviews had similar content and complaints about the work, so I will only engage with two of them.² The first is probably the most famous review of Wilde's work and it comes from the July 5, 1890 edition of the *Scots Observer*:

Why go grubbing in muck-heaps? ... it is false art—for its interest is medico-legal; it is false to human nature—for its hero is a devil; it is false to morality—for it is not made sufficiently clear that the writer does not prefer a course of unnatural iniquity to a life of cleanliness, health, and sanity. The story—which deals with matters only fitted for the Criminal Investigation Department ...—is discreditable alike to author and editor. Mr. Wilde has brains, and art, and style; but if he can write for none but outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph boys,³ the sooner he takes to tailoring (or some other decent trade) the better for his own reputation and the public morals." (*Uncensored Dorian Gray* 6)

The language concerning "iniquity" and uncleanness are fairly clear references to the implied homosexuality in the text. More disconcerting, both for Wilde and the publishers of *Lippincott's*, is the insinuation that the Criminal Investigation Department should be involved with the work. The idea of the text being "unclean" continues in a similar passage from *The Daily Chronicle*:

The element that is unclean, though undeniably amusing, is furnished by Mr. Oscar Wilde's story of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It is tale spawned from the leprous

² Both reviews deal with the version published in *Lippincott's Magazine* and not in the novel form, i.e. the text that does not include the expanded plot lines with the Vane family but does censor sexual content.

³ The author's reference to "perverted telegraph boys" is a reference to the recent Cleveland Street Scandal, in which telegraph boys were used by night in an illegal homosexual brothel. Men of all classes were exposed in this scandal.

literature of the French decadents—a poisonous book, the atmosphere of which is heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction—a gloating study of the mental and physical corruption of a fresh, fair and golden youth, which might be fascinating but for its effeminate frivolity, its studied insincerity, its theatrical cynicism, its tawdry mysticism. (*Uncensored Dorian Gray* 5)

Again, language of sickness and corruption permeate this review, continuing to attack the content of the text. Backlash such as this is probably why Wilde did not attempt to change any of his content back to the original version before he published *Dorian Gray* in its novel form.

The novel's negative influence on Wilde and his career did not end with its hostile reception by the public—the novel was also used against him during his trial for “gross indecency” in 1895. In 1885, The Criminal Law Amendment Act made homosexual activity illegal in England. Section 11 states that “Any male person who, in public or private, commits ... any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor, and being convicted thereof shall be liable at the discretion of the Court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour.” This wording is vague enough to prosecute almost anyone for any homosexual act. In 1895, following Wilde's botched attempt to sue the Marquess of Queensberry for slander, Wilde himself was tried for “gross indecency” and *Dorian Gray* was used against him.

While Wilde's novel was not ultimately responsible for his conviction (and sentencing to two years hard labor), that his enemies decided to use passages from the text at his trial indicates how strong the public outcry was against the work. The prosecution's Edward Carson read from *Dorian Gray* and attempted to make comparisons between Basil's relationship with Dorian and Wilde's relationship with younger men, namely Alfred Douglas.⁴ Carson read the passage I quote earlier, which focuses on Basil's feelings for Dorian, and asked Wilde numerous questions regarding the text:

C—Now I ask you, Mr. Wilde, do you consider that that description of the feeling of one man towards a youth just grown up was a proper or an improper feeling?

W—I think it is the most perfect description of what an artist would feel on meeting a beautiful personality that was in some way necessary to his art and life ... I think it is perfectly natural for any artist to admire intensely and love a young man. It is an incident in the life of almost every artist.

Wilde at this point adheres to the idea presented by the altered version of the text by insisting that Basil's (as well as his own) relationship with young men is based purely on artistic idolization and not in romantic feelings. Carson continues his line of questioning by quoting further from the novel:

C—“I grew afraid that the world would know of my idolatry.” Why should he grow afraid that the world should know of it?

W—Because there are people in the world who cannot understand the intense devotion, affection, and admiration that an artist can feel for a wonderful and beautiful personality. These are the conditions under which we live. I regret them.

C—These unfortunate people, that have not the high understanding that you have, might put it down to something wrong?

W—Undoubtedly; to any point they chose. I am not concerned with the ignorance of others.

This is by no means the extent of the text that Carson used at Wilde's trial, but it is indicative of the kind of accusations the negative reviews of the work suggested.

Ultimately, Wilde's novel radically changed from his original vision of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. While this could be said of many novels, it is especially important to highlight the changes in

4 The Marquess of Queensberry accused Wilde of “posing as a sodomite” [sic] while the author was engaged in a prolonged relationship with the Marquess' son, Alfred “Bosie” Douglas. Because the Marquess put this accusation in writing, Wilde took his lover's father to court and attempted to charge him with slander. The Marquess was acquitted, and information that surfaced during this trial led to a second trial in which Wilde himself was accused of committing homosexual acts with young men, which fell into the category “gross indecency.” Wilde was eventually found guilty of this charge and was sentenced to two years hard labor, the maximum sentence. Douglas O. Linder's website is a useful resource that includes all legal transcripts from both trials.

Dorian Gray because many of them were made without Wilde's knowledge and were not part of revisions to improve the text. Most if not all novels undergo revision throughout the publication process, but I argue that these changes are not as important to analyze because, for the most part, the authors' meaning and intentions are not changed. In the case of *Dorian Gray*, rather than attempting to make the novel better, the changes made by publishers and editors reflect their desire to make the story more palatable for a Victorian audience. What we see in the final text of *Dorian Gray* is a censored version that does not necessarily reflect Wilde's intentions for the novel. Scholars and students should not disregard the final form of Wilde's novel, for it is indeed a masterpiece; however, studying the final text side by side with the manuscript version provides a clearer picture of Victorian views on homosexuality, a deeper understanding of the novel, and important insight into Oscar Wilde himself.

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