

The Hypocrisy of Oscar Wilde's Conviction: A Tale of British Victorian Society

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In Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the main character Dorian Gray succumbs to insanity partly due to mania over his atrocious acts, and partly because of an obsession he develops with a portrait painting of his beautiful, youthful self. Throughout the novel, he mysteriously maintains his beautiful bodily perfection while his likeness deteriorates into putrefaction, and his character degenerates as a result of his increasingly violent and immoral actions. Curiously, this cursed painting spends its time locked away in a forgotten room of Dorian's estate, and is only discovered when Gray's corpse is found lying before it. Before his death, Gray secretly gets away with several atrocious criminal acts—even after his perishing the discovery of his crimes seems improbable. Just as Gray's riches and beauty blind everyone around him to the reality of his conduct, the splendor of the upper classes of British Victorian society served as a way to conceal the hypocrisy of the elite. During the spring of 1895, Oscar Wilde was publicly convicted for the crime of homosexuality after being found guilty of twenty-five counts of "gross indecency," and was sentenced to two years of hard labor as a result. At this time, all homosexual acts were categorized as "unnatural offenses" and seen as attempts to commit sodomy—and rather than recognizing homosexuals the law saw each sex act as an individual offense (Janes 80). Following his trials and incarceration, he was heavily ostracized by society and consequently struggled to regain his previous reputation. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reflects Oscar Wilde's views on the covert nature of homosexual acts during nineteenth-century British society, where a hypocritical emphasis was placed on the building of a new and "improved" democratic society. The structures were, however, in place to allow the privilege of illicit behavior to the elite. Although it may seem that Wilde's incarceration was the response of a conservative society morally shocked by the famous author's actions, his prison sentence was in fact the consequence of his threatening the secretive Victorian elite by disturbing the status quo.

From a modern perspective, Wilde's trial appears to reflect a collective, "conservative," societal view about homosexuality as an identity. However, the existence of same-sex services was well-known at the time. This widespread knowledge of homosexual behavior is most visibly evidenced by the existence of laws which characterized homosexual behavior, the medical attempts to pathologize those individuals, and the 19th-century records of public reaction to famous cases like Oscar Wilde's. Victorian Britain was preoccupied with creating labels and categories for the crime of sodomy as an "unnatural offense," as seen in the creation of the new "Gross Indecency" category of the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment (Hindmarch-Watson 285). This law was meant to protect underage boys from participating in sexual acts with older men. This Gross Indecency policy was seen as a progressive measure at the time. Previously, Victorian law did not have a defined way to protect young boys from sexual exploitation by older men (Linder). In practice, this law wasn't so much about punishing the homosexual interactions of consenting adults as it was about protecting young, naïve boys. Popular acceptance with homosexuality is also evident in the way that "unnatural offences" were ranked as less serious than murder and rape, but more so than sedition and assault, according to the Criminal Lunatic Admission Books (Janes 85). Widespread knowledge in Victorian society about the availability of same-sex services can be seen by the use of the word *Bunbury*, coined by Oscar Wilde as a slang term for male brothels, and by public reaction to the 1889 Cleveland Street Scandal (Craft 117).

The Cleveland Street Scandal was the first widely publicized case of homosexual sex work, which actually fell under the Gross Indecency category of the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment. The scandal caused public outrage as a number of prominent public figures appeared to be involved. The incident

arose after several high-ranking elite men were found to have had sexual involvement with telegraph boys in 1885. Telegraph boys were young men who served as go-betweens and service providers to the users of the telegraph services new to Victorian Britain. Near the end of the 19th century, the telegraph was a new invention, which seemed like a progressive, democratic means of communication. The telegraph took advantage of the latest scientific advances to provide swift messaging opportunities to all. Only the elite, however, could afford to use this new technology, and as a result, those boys who operated the telegraph services became confidantes to their elite clients by carrying their secret personal information (Hindmarch-Watson 284). It is important to note that these messengers were often underage males, so they were likely unaware of the magnitude of their disruption to the social order when they confessed to their acts. As a result, they exposed information to the public about an elite secret. The key reason why the scandal was so disruptive was because the telegraph boys' willingness to expose details of their sex acts with elite members of society. The information being publicly confirmed was more disruptive to the order of Victorian communications' structure than the homosexual nature of the acts themselves. Following the incident, it became difficult after 1890 to come by any public mention of the Cleveland Street Scandal, since no new public information appeared from any government entities. Even during the following century, the British Public Records Office did not release information about the scandal until 1976. Before then, any information on the scandal had to come from witness accounts of people who had lived through it (Hindmarch-Watson 285). This public scandal would have been wiped from public Victorian memory had it not been for Wilde's libel trial a couple of years later in 1895. If not for the Cleveland Street Scandal, Oscar Wilde's court case may have gone differently—however, this case set the backdrop for the type of societal disruption that resulted from homosexuality. Societal disruption happened not just because of the theological immorality of these “unnatural offenses,” but because people disturbed the confidentiality of British society's elite at the time. Oscar Wilde's trial unearthed public outrage at more than just the idea of homosexual behavior between two males; his trial also reflected the law's disdain towards same-sex interactions and raised concern about protecting young men from sexual exploitation. Wilde's trial reminded the public that members of the elite classes could get away with whatever they wanted. Since no repercussions were brought to these elite men involved in the Cleveland Street Scandal, Wilde's trial offered an opportunity for the general public to punish a member of the elite. On the other hand, the outcome of the scandal reminded the members of the elite that in order to protect their secrets and their status, they must protect each other from legal repercussions.

This class conflict revealed a darker image of Victorian society that is not commonly discussed. For example, late Victorian society is often characterized as a new and invigorated period of scientific advancement and democracy. However, upon closer inspection, it is apparent that although the elite could afford to believe in a picturesque vision of freedom and democracy, the vast majority of the working classes had no access to the resources that supposedly served as technological equalizers. The telegraph, faster travel, and increased access to knowledge from new global literary publications were all technological luxuries that the lower classes could neither afford nor access. Often, the science used was inherently biased—as can be seen in how the Criminal Lunatic Admission Books categorized patients as sane or insane (Janes 85). Lunacy standards were inconsistent, and they tended to favor the rich. Often, deciding if someone was crazy enough depended on class—and since no reliable standard for determining lunacy existed, the status of an individual would be decided on a case-by-case basis. As Janes

perfectly describes the situation, “the logic of this was that if the accused was a gentleman (that is, of the middle or upper class), he might be given the benefit of doubt, since the ‘better classes’ were thought to possess greater powers of moral self-control, thus making their criminal guilt seem more doubtful in the minds of a socially impressionable jury” (81).

The courts also had to consider family respectability in the trials, and it was more likely that someone of the lower classes would have “inherited ‘degeneration,’” and thus be more likely to be declared insane (Janes 81). For these reasons, Oscar Wilde attempted to get out of his conviction by diagnosing himself as crazy and arguing that he was not a criminal. The doctors who tested him, however, refused to diagnose him as crazy, even after he wrote his work *De Profundis* in his confinement and attempted to sway outside opinion to be sympathetic to his cause (Foster 88). Wilde’s class was instrumental in his failure to persuade the courts that he was insane. The argument used to prove lunacy for the majority of other lower-class cases was that the perpetrator was unashamed of the crimes he was accused of. For other patients, “such lack of shame was presented as evidence of their insanity” (Janes 86). When this argument was applied to Wilde’s case, his upper-class status combined with his “cheerfulness prior to the doctors’ arrival suggested to them that his distress was to some degree feigned, and this they read as the response of a rational mind attempting to engage their sympathies” (Janes 86). The doctors noted that before they tested Wilde, he seemed to be socializing normally with other patients—and that by the (unreliable) medical lunacy standards they used, that this made him sane. Another argument used against Wilde was his consistent sexual involvement with men of lower classes. People were shocked that Wilde had performed homosexual acts with men “not merely with one or two individuals of a better station in life, but apparently with the most casual acquaintances of comparatively low social position” (Janes 80). Public outrage at the fact that Oscar Wilde has indulged in these “odious sexual practices” with several different men of lower classes shows that society would not have been as displeased if this homosexual behavior had been performed as a transaction in order to attain certain social or economic benefit. Considering that he was not ashamed of his male love interests, and was a member of the “better” upper classes, it was concluded that he must be willingly choosing to perform illegal acts and therefore be a criminal. For the elite, Wilde’s case unearthed the Cleveland Street Scandal fiasco from 6 years before—which posed a risk to all involved. Additionally, if homosexual practices exclusive to the upper classes of society became more widely accepted by the public society, then this specific service would lose its exclusivity. This train of thought brought fear of instability—if this exclusivity were lost, it would allow the lower classes to engage in elite behavior. As a result, this could bring a greater desire for equality and independence from those oppressed by the societal order of Victorian society.

Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* offers a reflection of this controlling society. The novel serves as an artistic amalgamation of Wilde’s views on society, and a portrays his interpretation of Victorian ideals. The intersection of movements and ideas in the book provides commentary on this nineteenth-century British society, and it is important to note that even at the time of its release, most had a difficult time categorizing the book. The ambiguous genre, the novel’s elements, the issues depicted, and the storyline various outcomes made it difficult to classify (Clausson 339). Oscar Wilde plays with experimental literary themes of his era, leaning on the idea of the “scientific experiment with unexpectedly horrific consequences” where “young Dorian” is the experiment, while Lord Henry plays the role

of the “disinterested scientist.” Wilde changes the mode of the transformation of homosexuality from science to art, and this follows the trend of scientific advancement in medicine previously mentioned. In this genre, ideas focusing on experimenting and science became part of a common experience for the literate members of society at the time. Other novels including this theme were *Frankenstein*, *Jekyll and Hyde*, and *The Great God Pan* (Clausson 352-353). Another important idea woven within the novel is aestheticism. Aestheticism was a key element in characterizing the novel as original, since it added a layer of intrigue. Aestheticism in Wilde’s work allowed every individual to contribute his or her own interpretation on the novel, and have it matter just as much as any other reader’s interpretation. At the time of its release, critics said *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was simply a watered-down version of a French Decadent work, while others saw it as “spiritual putrefaction.” Christian publications pitched the moral of the story as “a work of high moral import” while some others had no clue how to classify the novel, since it was so different from other English works at the time. The early chapters contain Bildungsroman elements for the young Dorian Gray, as he is placed in the coming-of-age role of the heroine, which was traditionally reserved for young women in Victorian storytelling. This storyline challenges the regular structure of novels at the time, and goes a step further in breaking convention once the story takes a turn into the dark themes of degeneration. As Clausson describes it, there were sharp dissonances between the Gothic plot of degeneration and the Bildungsroman elements of the novel, since the downwards spiral of degeneration “takes over and eventually supersedes the incompatible Paterian plot of self-development and individual liberation” (343). This amalgamation of ideas presented by Wilde merges Victorian cultural and literary elements with his own personal commentary on the nature of society. Within these ideas we can see how *The Picture of Dorian Gray* speaks volumes about the glamorous lifestyle of those who seem like beautiful individuals living in the upper class—while warning against taking anything at face value. The novel also reflects the way in which homosexual individuals hid out in society under a guise of youthful happiness and indifference while deteriorating on the inside. Wilde subtly implies that it may be best if the unearthed evils of the upper classes were let out for the good of society, and perhaps also including homosexuality as well. He implies that, otherwise, the degeneration which occurs as a result of hiding could consume men from the inside out. Wilde conveys that with sexual repression in society, there is no way to tell who someone is underneath their beautiful façade. This commentary on the broader society applies not only to the themes of homosexuality found in the novel, but also to the supposedly well-off British classes who looked perfect but were actually falling apart from within.

All of these elements show that Oscar Wilde’s incarceration was a result of how he disrupted the secrecy of the Victorian elite by disturbing the social order. Much like his novel, society had a hard time categorizing Wilde himself—and as an outspoken member of the upper classes, he had the power to share ideas about freedom and morality with others through his writing. This made him dangerous, as we know by the Latin saying *scientia potentia est*, that “knowledge is power.” Wilde’s power to disseminate ideas about the corrupt state of society made him a dangerous enemy to Victorian social order. Wilde’s trial exposed skeletons, which the elite would have rather kept buried, by reminding society of the Cleveland Street Scandal that had seen many British Victorian elite uncomfortably exposed. We can see the elite’s powerful grasp on society by the way the government was able to keep the details of the incident a secret for almost eighty years, even after Wilde’s trial unearthed public outrage and immense

discomfort. It was inconvenient and alarming for the upper classes to have Wilde's trial other homosexual acts bring forth the faults and privileges of the upper classes, especially since these events surfaced democratic ideas of equality for all. In order to contain Wilde, higher-class society convinced the public that he was a criminal; his trial refused to declare him insane in order to sustain the same standards that were used to criminalize most other convicted lower-class citizens. Had Oscar Wilde not come forth publicly with the case, he never would have been found or tried for homosexuality seeing as he was a member of the secretive elite—much like Dorian Gray in the novel, who gets away with his crimes simply by being beautiful and staying silent. Had Wilde stayed silent like his character, he would have been allowed to continue leading a double life and performing these illicit behaviors indefinitely. However, much like in choosing to write his novels, Wilde also chose to disturb the status quo in his trial. This turned him into a threat to more than just young boys, and instead showed that he represented a danger to the secrecy to which the elite felt entitled.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wilde's commentary on the nature of deceitful appearances, status, and privilege is visible in Wilde's own life following his trials. His own life reflects the lessons from his novel and directly proves the popular advice that "not all that glitters is gold." As a wealthy and careless youth of the upper class, Wilde could afford to maintain a lavish lifestyle and commit as many "crimes" of homosexuality as he desired without any issue—as evidenced by the twenty-five counts of "gross indecency" for which he stood accused. Gray's last trial, as well as his incarceration, were the results of a societal self-protection mechanism. Elite Victorian society fought to protect the beautiful image it had flaunted and the illicit services that its members could privately afford as a result of their upper-class status. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Wilde's life both reflect the realities of living in Victorian society. His trial exemplifies the very issues that he criticizes. As this paper demonstrates, it is really the members of the elite classes who manipulate the strings behind things that occur around us. In today's world, we must notice the repeated flaws of human behavior and attempt to learn from the mistake patterns of past societies.

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