

## Reading Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Relation to Michel Foucault's Theory on Sexuality

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This essay critically comments on Michel Foucault's argument in *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1* that the nineteenth century witnessed a discursive explosion on sex, and despite repressive measures taken by the authorities, varied forms of sexual behaviour and practices kept multiplying throughout this period (17-49). It then goes on to analyse a passage from Chapter XI of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde in relation to Foucault's thesis, and attempts to establish a dialogue between the two.

The second part of Foucault's treatise offers a detailed argument on the forms in which the nineteenth century society attempted to control individual sexualities through a restrictive legal system and constant medical and pedagogical surveillance (17-49). However, this repressive policy did not necessarily diminish sexual transgressions and crimes. In fact, a wide range of alternative sexual practices and 'perversities' came into light during this period, which differed from the kind of sexual offenses committed in the previous century:

An entire sub-race was born, different – despite certain kinship ties – from the libertines of the past. From the end of the eighteenth century to our own, they circulated through the pores of society... They were children wiser beyond their years, precocious little girls, ambiguous schoolboys, dubious servants and educators ... they haunted the houses of correction, the penal colonies, the tribunals, and the asylums ... (Foucault, 40).

These multiple discourses on sex operated through a system of prohibition. The nineteenth century criminal law expanded its jurisdiction to incorporate within itself a wide range of sexual offenses which could be categorised under "gross indecency", as stated by the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885<sup>1</sup>. Sexual irregularities were no longer considered purely as moral and religious transgressions, but as medico-psychological problems – "illnesses" rather than "sins" (Foucault, 40 - 41). Any form of sexual behaviour that was not "economically useful and politically conservative" (Foucault, 37) (the sexuality of the bourgeois heterosexual married couple, which led to reproduction, thereby contribution to the "labour capacity" and maintaining the balance in domestic and societal relationships) would be immediately marginalised, brought under scrutiny, medically analysed, and be made a criminal offense.

However, Foucault argues that the agencies of power did not exercise control through any attempt of direct reduction and eventual eradication of such behaviours, rather, they hunted the subjects down, placed them under strict surveillance, and often turned them over to doctors or psychologists as case studies (41). Indeed, the legal system would often subject the sexual offenders to treatments instead of criminal sentences. Similarly, sexuality in children would be strictly controlled by pedagogical institutions (Foucault 42). A vast and complicated system was laid out just for the detection and analysis of such behaviours, which showed, according to Foucault, the dependence of the controlling agencies on peripheral sexualities to keep on

proliferating and evading repression, in order to perpetuate their own power (42). Also, the process of categorization and specification of various sexual behaviours which were earlier simply viewed as perverse ‘acts’, and not a trait inherent to the nature of an individual (such as homosexuality, gerontophilia, fetishism), solidified all these discourses into specific types (Foucault 42-44). Foucault argues that in this case, pleasure and power were not binaries; rather they went 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:

The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting. ... These attractions, these evasions, these circular incitements have traced around bodies and sexes, not boundaries not to be crossed, but *perpetual spirals of power and pleasure* (Foucault 45).

Power, far from trying to erase sexual deviance in the nineteenth century society engaged in what would seem to be a game of hide and seek with it. The increase in these sexualities also ensures for the agencies of control diversification and wider scope of penetration into the intimate and private life of nineteenth-century individuals.

Thus, throughout nineteenth century, there prevailed the bourgeois society with its repressive laws and codes of behaviour in social, domestic and marital spheres, and right underneath it an entire sub-culture of unusual sexual practices, and groups of individuals labelled under different categories of such “deviation”. While silence and verbal discretion is the mark of the former, the latter proliferated and solidified through a recurring discourse, comprising detailed description, minute observations and analyses of sexual actions and form of desire.

Theorists like Alan Sinfield have criticized Foucault for compartmentalising a certain mode of thought too neatly into a specific historical period, such as attributing the “birth” of homosexuality to the late nineteenth century (13). He also argues that Foucault “places too much emphasis on medical and legal discourses” in their role as controlling agencies of sexuality, instead of viewing them as “two among many, and as responding to and channelling social change rather than determining it” (13). We can, however, almost certainly agree on the fact that sexuality, far from being silenced by repressive measures, was one of the central sources of pre-occupation and anxiety in the nineteenth century society. Chiara Beccalossi and Ivan Crozier observe in the introductory chapter of *A Cultural History of Sexuality in the Age of Empire* that while the urban bourgeois society “promoted a morality based on sexual respectability”, there often prevailed sexual double standards amongst married couples, news of gory sexual violence were often reported in newspapers, and there was an eruption in pornography, which took advantage of the new medium of photography. The latter, especially, has proved to be a useful source which “exhibit[s] the forms of erotic imagination” of the century (which certainly depicted multiple forms of sexual practices) (Beccalossi and Crozier 1-25). This pre-occupation with sexuality can be discerned from the literature of the time as well. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be taken as an example.

In chapter XI of *Dorian Gray*, Wilde seems to almost sum up the Victorian condition of oscillating between fear and desire for different kinds of “sensations”. The opening lines of the chapter inform the readers of the influence of the book on Dorian that Lord Henry Wotton had presented to him, which prompts Dorian to reflect on the prudishness of his own age and society. He comes to the following conclusion:

...there was to be, as Lord Henry had prophesied, a new Hedonism that was to recreate life, and save it from that harsh, uncomely puritanism that is having, in our own day, its curious revival. ... Of asceticism that deadens the senses, as of the vulgar profligacy that dulls them, it was to know nothing (Wilde 278-279).

Dorian reflects on the self-deprivation of humans from experiencing any form of intense physical or sensual passion and reasons that instead of depriving the senses because of the false perception of them as being "savage", if one strove to refine them by means of varied sensual experiences, they could be turned into the basis for a new kind of spirituality. The main characteristic of this spirituality was "a fine instinct for beauty", and it would follow a way of life that was totally opposed to his present self-denying, puritan mode of existence; a life based entirely on sensual pleasures, "a new Hedonism" (Wilde 279).

This paragraph, like the entire text, could be read in multiple ways. The immediate response would be to interpret "sensations" as sexual experiences – indeed accounts of Dorian's lifestyle elsewhere in the novel tellingly suggests that he has been leading an extremely adventurous and experimental life in terms of sex. Yet, one may also notice the lack of directness of the description in the passage. Sensations here are related to spirituality, and the paragraph immediately following portrays the experience of waking up to an ordinary life after an exotic dream or even nightmare, and the consequent longing to wake up into "a world in which things would have fresh shapes and colours ... in which the past would have little or no place", thereby carrying the concept of pleasure to an entirely abstract level (Wilde 279). The next few pages would describe Dorian's successive obsession over material things, such as perfumes, precious stones, embroideries, cloths, ecclesiastical objects and so on. This may hint at Dorian's fetishistic tendencies, and his fascination for the two chapters detailed with accounts of violence and sexual acts or desires in his inspirational book may well suggest that Dorian himself would eventually lead a life similar to that described. Indeed, the entire chapter is overcharged with synaesthesia, and most suggestive of Dorian's future lifestyle. Yet, it almost never addresses the question of Dorian's sexual adventures directly. Readers know that Dorian's friendship inevitably corrupts and subsequently ruins young men, but whether it is because of sexual reasons, we can never be sure. Adrian Singleton has become the victim of opium addiction, but there is no way of telling whether Dorian was romantically or physically involved with him or not, even if he did introduce Adrian to his addiction. In his book, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment*, Alan Sinfield acknowledges this problem by pointing out "how tricky it is to get any fix on Dorian Gray's vices. The Victorians placed emphases that we do not place, saw vices where we see trivia, allowed confusions where we would expect clarity" (Sinfield 102).

It is interesting to note how language is in a sense inverted to turn the accepted, normative behaviour of the Victorian society into something unnatural:

There had been mad wilful rejections, monstrous forms of self-torture and self-denial, whose origin was fear, and whose result was a degradation infinitely more terrible than the fancied degradation from which, in their ignorance, they had sought to escape... (Wilde 278).

Here, repression of one's passions is called "monstrous" and "mad", which results in "degradation" of a far worse kind than what the society imagines "moral" degeneration to be. Again, however, we are not told explicitly whether the deprivations are at all sexual in nature. What can be discerned from the passage, and from the rest of the chapter, is the occasional verbosity on sex, as we see in the description of the two chapters of the book, and again reverting

back into silence about Dorian's actions. The silences, one would assume, are greater in number, but this brings into mind Foucault's observation:

Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, ... is less the absolute limit of discourse, ... than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things ... (27).

Indeed, it is the silences in *Dorian Gray* which tell the readers the different forms of 'unorthodox' sexual practices Dorian may have indulged in, and these suggestions continually evade direct questions, and attempts of penetration. Basil Hallward, the nineteenth century gentleman and moralist of the novel, repeatedly demands answers from Dorian about his actions, only to be met with the counter-question, "And what sort of lives do these people, who pose as being moral, lead themselves?" (Wilde 294).

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, if read in the light of Foucault's thesis, seems to tell its readers about the "visible explosion of unorthodox sexualities" through a medium of veiled language, and strategic silences. It certainly acknowledges – and seems to condemn – the repressive puritanism of nineteenth century society, but at the same time takes into account the alternative form of living already prevalent in that very society; the essentially "non-bourgeois" way of life that incorporated multiple forms of sexual behaviour – Henry Wotton's "prophesized" mode of Hedonistic living that was already a powerful sub-culture of nineteenth century England.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Section 11 of the Amendment (the main focus of which, initially, was protection of young girls) reads as follows: "Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanour, and being convicted thereof shall be liable at the discretion of the court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years..." Oscar Wilde was found guilty of violating this law in 1895.

## Works Cited

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