

ERASING QUEER SUBTEXT: NETFLIX'S INTERPRETATION OF WILDE

In a recently announced Netflix adaptation of Oscar Wilde's 1891 novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it is reported that the novel's protagonist (Dorian Gray) and deuteragonist (Basil Hallward) will have a change of dynamic and relationship for the TV show- titled *The Grays*- in that they will be brothers in opposition to their original friendship. Enthusiasts of Wilde have criticised this choice with the argument that erasing the queer subtext within the relationship between the characters disregards the central theme of the source material.

The Aesthetic Movement and Wilde's Intentions

Now recognised as the face of the aesthetic movement, Wilde's identity as an aesthete was solidified through the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The aesthetic movement can be adequately summarised through its participants' selected slogan: "art for art's sake" (French: "l'art pour l'art")¹, as it sought to rebel against Victorian frigidity and obsession with morality through pursuit of beauty. Prior to this movement art and literature was expected to promote contemporary ideals, which the aesthetes opposed by prioritising aesthetic value. Wilde explored this theme in his 1895 play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which satirises the Victorian significance of honesty despite prevalent dishonesty in the upper-classes. An element of the aesthetic movement was incorporating useless beauty into everyday life², resulting in aesthetic architecture, fashion, interior design, etc. Such principles of aestheticism are woven into the novel, such as the character of Dorian being written as the characterisation of the movement Wilde was so fond of; the entire novel is driven by the relationship between the extremes of Dorian's beauty and immoralism. Dorian's aestheticism in his day-to-day life has the entirety of chapter 11 dedicated to its description. With all the aforementioned to consider, the queerness between its two leading characters, Dorian and Basil, comes to the forefront of the novel, as homosexuality was criminalised in Britain at the time of writing.

The Characterisation of Dorian and Basil

Dorian Gray, Basil Hallward, and Lord Henry Wotton are the leading triad of characters, each of whom engage in subtextually homoerotic relationships- most notably that of which between Dorian and Basil (one such example is that in the original typescript by Wilde³ Basil confesses his love to Dorian, which was removed from later publications). Wilde drew much inspiration from his real life when creating these characters, such as giving Dorian the surname of his homosexual lover at the time. Wilde once wrote, "I'm so glad you like that strange coloured book of mine: it contains so much of me in it. Basil Hallward is what I think I am; Lord Henry, what the world thinks of me: Dorian what I would like to be- in other ages perhaps"⁴. Wilde incorporated his own contemporarily

¹ Though its first usage was dated to an 1804 diary entry by Benjamin Constant (1767-1830), it was popularised in the late 1810s by French philosopher Victor Cousin (1792-1867) in his lectures.

² Souter, A. (2016). *The Aesthetic Movement Overview*. [online] The Art Story. Available at: <https://www.theartstory.org/movement/aesthetic-art/>.

³ Wilde, O. and Frankel, N. (2012). *The uncensored Picture of Dorian Gray*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press Of Harvard University Press.

⁴ Quoted from a letter to Ralph Payne on 12th February 1894: Wilde, O. and Rupert Hart Davis (1989). *Selected letters of Oscar Wilde*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

perceived immorality and thus aestheticism into the characters, and the plot centres around such. The first received plot device is Basil's infatuation with Dorian, which is extended to Henry upon meeting Dorian. It is Henry's own infatuation with and manipulation of Dorian that triggers the main plot of the novel, presenting as an unhealthy dynamic between the two men that Wilde was accused of in his own life. Despite his significance to the plot, Basil's identity within the story is being stripped away in the upcoming Netflix adaptation as his entire characterisation is centred around his relationship with Dorian. In becoming the brother of Dorian, his love for the titular character which drives his character arc has been removed emphasised by the apparent name-change. In terms of nomenclature, the surname Hallward⁵ holds little explicit significance yet by changing it to Gray signifies the loss of Basil's adjacency and implies, before the show has even debuted, that Basil will be an extension of Dorian rather than his own independent character.

Socio-Political and Historical Context

Due to the novel's contextual significance during its time of writing as well as its legacy, such has influenced its legacy and anchored it as an influential symbol of queer culture. The first of its socio-political context has been explored earlier in this essay in 'The Aesthetic Movement and Wilde's Intentions', but was soon followed by the editing of the original typescript by the editor of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, unbeknownst to Wilde until after publication: "Rest assured that it will not go into the Magazine unless it is proper that it shall" was written by J. M. Stoddart to Craige Lippincott⁶. It was deemed too immoral and thus was edited for its periodical publication within the magazine. It was then further edited for its novelisation due to societal outrage. However, the most fundamental context of the novel comes in the form of cross-examination of Wilde in his trials of 1895, during which it was referred to as a "perverted novel" and passages of the novel, many of which were scenes displaying the dynamic between Basil and Dorian, were read as evidence of Wilde's charge of gross indecency⁷. All of this additional context alters the perspective from which this novel is read and has heavily affected its legacy as well as assuring the queer subtext recognised at 3 separate major points as far back as to its original typescript. This highlights the integral queer subtext between the characters, and poses the question of whether it is moral to alter such a monumental part of the novel for this adaptation.

Replacing the Original Dynamic

With all of the aforementioned analysis of the novel and its context, it is hard to understand the choice behind changing their relationship despite its overwhelming relevance to the plot and legacy. However, one could argue that the decision was to venture through a new perspective on the source material and that the plot and themes would not be lost on the change of relation. An admiring younger brother could have the same effect as that of a romantic lover in the novel. But this point does not consider how the changing of their relation is damaging as it disregards Wilde's self-expression and insertion of his own identity within the novel. The importance of queer history is at least understood by its sibling executive producers, Katie Rose Rogers and Robbie Rogers, who also

⁵ The surname Hallward means "guardian of the hall".

⁶ Stated in the preface of *The Uncensored Picture of Dorian Gray* (see footnote 3).

⁷ Holland, M. (2003). *The real trial of Oscar Wilde : the first uncensored transcript of the trial of Oscar Wilde vs. John Douglas, Marquess of Queensberry, 1895*. New York: Fourth Estate.

produced *Fellow Travellers*⁸. It is arguable that the siblings wanted to express their own dynamic in relation to their career as artists, but in which case there are many other adaptable novels through which they can express themselves without infringing on and completely disregarding an established legacy and culture. How good of an adaptation can it be if it dismisses what has made the source material so timeless?

To conclude, I am of the opinion that Netflix's decision is detrimental to the show and disrespectful to the memory of Oscar Wilde, to the legacy of him and his work, to the culture surrounding the novel.

⁸ A 2023 television drama following the lives of two queer men between the 1950s and 1980s, which received 3 Emmy nominations.