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Alexandra Wohlford

University of Mary Washington

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Dr. Foss

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Dorian and the Double: Repressed Homosexual Desire in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

As the sun set on the year of 1894, trouble was brewing for Oscar Wilde, whose relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas was garnering problematic legal attention from the younger man's father. By the dawn of 1895, Wilde would be tried not only for his relationship with Douglas, but also for allegedly seducing and sodomizing twelve other young men. Thus began the downfall of one of modern audience's most celebrated literary figures, and Wilde's own work was used against him in court to facilitate it. Passages from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* were read aloud during trial, with Wilde scrutinized by his opposition regarding the narrative's premise and content: "The affection and love of the artist of Dorian Gray might lead an ordinary individual to believe that it might have a certain tendency?" Edward Carson is reported to have asked him (Ellman 449). First published in 1890 and maintaining its position as Oscar Wilde's only full-length novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has drawn both criticism and praise for upwards of a century. The presence of homosexuality is never truly explicated in the text; however, it would be difficult to argue that the thread of homoeroticism and same-sex desire is not entangled within the novel's narrative. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* portrays a multiplicity of doubles, foregrounding a narrative that is suffused with fragmented identities and hidden desires. In particular, Basil's portrait of Dorian Gray acts as the axis around which this repression orbits, and is the surface that it is reflected upon. Not only does the portrait act as a double for both Dorian Gray and Basil Hallward, representing the homosexuality they wish to repress, but on a deeper level, also works as a mirror image of all that Victorian society hoped to suppress in terms of "alternative" sexual identity.

The figure of the double has consumed literature for centuries, emerging as a particularly notable motif within the Romantic and Gothic literary traditions. The origin of the double as it is understood today is complex, combining myriad theoretical perspectives; however, the idea of the double is most often linked to the work of Sigmund Freud and Otto Rank, and is intimately tied to the concepts of repression, narcissism, and mirroring (Robinson). Freud generally conceives of the double as being a product of repression, a kind of self-censorship that occurs when a desire is stifled because the satisfaction or pleasure that accompanies its fulfillment would be painful or inappropriate (Robinson). This repressed desire, however, is always seeking to reemerge into consciousness, and attempts to do so by disguising itself, adopting different forms in order to evade detection by the consciousness that initially refused it. Thus, the configuration of the double appears, a representation of an “undesired element or trait of the protagonist, such as immorality, greed, or sexual desire” that can manifest through shadows, reflections, portraits, or any “external figure, which is identical or attached to the protagonist” (Dorfman 12).

Rank, a disciple of Freud’s, expands upon the double both as a psychological approach and a literary conception, noting how its connection to narcissism functions. For Rank, the double suggests “an active attempt to find a compromise between the need for love and a fear of the outside,” and from this dynamic arises “both the attraction and the aversion towards the double, as well as the general paranoid atmosphere that surrounds our wishes concerning others and ourselves” (Dorfman 27, 29). From both perspectives, the double is intimately related to death, and narratives that engage with this motif typically end with a fatal fusion of the double and the figure it mirrors. As Dorfman explains, the double “gradually takes over and finally destroys the protagonist through a last-moment introjection, in which the undesired element

returns to the latter at the moment of death” (12). The concept of the double and its nuanced implications is particularly relevant to the discussion of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a narrative that introduces the audience with classic example of the double through the presence of the portrait.

The origin of the portrait is perhaps the most significant place to begin the discussion of its position as the doubled identity (or *identities*) representative of hidden queer desire. As evidenced by the callous response to Wilde following the public revelation of his sexual propensities, the Victorian era was not one where homosexuality could be openly advertised. Explicit mention of same-sex desire in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* would almost certainly have prevented it from being published, and could have resulted in action taken against Wilde. Thus, the necessity of subverting the verbal space arises in order to hide the undesirable yet inevitable fact of homosexuality within the novel’s own identity. At the start of the novel, Dorian, as Cohen suggests, is “an image—a space for the constitution of male desire” (806). His identity, and that of the portrait, is “born of the conjunction between Basil’s visual embodiment of erotic desire for Dorian and Lord Henry’s verbal sublimation of such desire” (Cohen 806). The construction of the portrait requires the passionately erotic gaze of Basil and the more overtly sensual erotic gaze of Lord Henry—neither of which make explicit reference to the nature of their interest in young Dorian—in order to come to fruition. Cohen suggests that this combination of the private male-centered erotic gaze allows for same-sex desires to be “suggested by a verbally unrepresentable medium, the painting” (806). Similarly, Nunokawa identifies this as “a current of desire whose subject is finally nowhere, and thus everywhere at once” (320). Furthermore, in terms of the impact of this process on the narrative overall, “Wilde

demonstrates how the psychosexual development of any individual gives rise to the ‘double consciousness’ of a marginalized group” (Cohen 806).

Consequently, the desires of both Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton, and to a lesser extent, Dorian himself, who is captivated by the sensual words of Lord Henry, coalesce on the canvas, cultivating an emotionally and erotically charged exhibition of homosexuality that may not be explicitly expressed by the characters nor by the text itself. Thus, the novel itself mirrors the characters it represents in the sense that it is also working to repress the issue of homosexuality while being confronted by a manifestation of it. In this way, the events of the entire novel are foregrounded in the concepts of repression, doubling, and male same-sex desire. The portrait becomes a larger symbol, not just of repressed homosexuality within the confines of the novel’s characters, but as an emblem of cultural sexual repression and denial as well.

The text, though lacking explicit confirmation of Basil Hallward’s same-sex tendencies, makes it clear that the painter’s relationship to his subject is more than professional, and indeed surpasses the boundaries of what might be expected of male friendship at the time. As Nunokawa suggests, Basil’s “attraction to Dorian Gray appears as nothing other than the first act of the now well developed drama of self-realization we call coming out” (312). The closest that the novel comes to explicitly addressing the presence of homosexual desire emerges in a confession Basil makes to Dorian regarding the nature of his portrait and its meaningfulness to him:

...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 everyone to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you. (93)

Indeed, Basil repeatedly alludes to his affection for Dorian, sometimes coming across as juvenile in his musings, during which he confesses that he ““dreadfully”” flatters Dorian, and takes “a strange pleasure in saying things to him that [he] knows [he] shall be sorry for having said”” (25). However, despite his evident fascination with Dorian, Basil attempts to deny the full implications of his adoration for the man he has painted: “Dorian Gray is to me simply a motive in art” (Wilde 24). His dismissal of what has clearly been elucidated in the text suggests that the presence of these feelings is unwelcome or troublesome, indicating a figure who seeks to repress a desire. Thus, the portrait, which Basil claims to have put ““too much of [himself] into,”” arises as an exemplification of the double (Wilde 19). Basil rejects any notion of exhibiting the painting that he previously refers to as his ““masterpiece,”” fearing that his ““curious artistic idolatry”” will be spotted. He fears that the ““world might guess it,”” and fiercely maintains that he will not ““bare his soul to their shallow, prying eyes,”” nor allow his heart to ““be put under their microscope”” (Wilde 30, 25). For Basil, the portrait wholly embodies the Wildean “love that dare not speak its name.” Reflected in the brushstrokes is what the painter fears will be magnified and inspected before an audience, a component of his identity that he seeks to deny but has effectively brought to life on the canvas: male same-sex desire. In this way, the portrait acts as a double for Basil, a projection of the repressed, socially undesired “secret of [his] life” (Wilde). Further, Basil’s fluctuating attitude towards the portrait certainly suggests duality:

As the painter looked at the gracious and comely form he had so skillfully mirrored in his art, a smile of pleasure passed across his face, and seemed about to linger there. But he suddenly started up, and, closing his eyes, placed his fingers upon the lids, as though he

sought to imprison within his brain some curious dream from which he feared he might wake. (18)

Thus, Basil privies us to the simultaneous fascination and repulsion that accompanies a confrontation with the double. On one hand, Basil is enamored with the painting, but on the other hand fears it, wishing to hide it from view.

The issue of the portrait as a representation of Dorian's own homosexual urges and desires is slightly more complicated, as Dorian's relationship both with and to the portrait is constantly called into question. Clearly, the artwork functions as Dorian's double, an external figure that reflects a fragmented identity: "It is a part of myself," he declares, both merging and splitting his identity with the portrait (Wilde 35). Circling back to the discussion of the portrait as being born from a culmination of same-sex eroticism, Dorian's identification with the portrait as a part of himself suggests an inherent identification with that same homoeroticism. The concurrent affection and anxiety that the changing portrait evokes in Dorian validates its position as an uncanny double; when confronted with the manifestation of his hidden desires, Dorian both recognizes it as a part of him, a representation of what he wishes he could obtain, but also views it with disgust, as it represents what he believes to be inherently wrong and unobtainable:

He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul. He would examine with minute care, and sometimes with monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead, or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth, wondering sometimes which were the more horrible, the signs of sin or the signs of age... There were moments, indeed, when... he would think of the ruin he had brought upon his soul, with a pity that was all the more poignant because it was purely selfish. (103)

In this way, Johnson asserts, “Dorian aestheticizes his homosexuality from a socially safe distance,” allowing himself to privately confront the figure of the double and all that it represents while still maintaining a sort of separation from it (Johnson 35). Despite his partial fascination with the portrait as a safeguard that protects his public persona, “the painting also terrorizes him with the possibility that it could reveal to an external observer the truth behind his respectable public behavior and therefore bring about society’s condemnation” (Sanna 35).

The moment Dorian first observes his portrait to have changed follows his estrangement from Sibyl Vane, one of the only women that he is directly romantically linked to over the course of the novel. Noting that the picture seemed different, as if “there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth,” that was not represented on Dorian’s “true” form nor his reflection in another mirror, Dorian finds himself fearful of the image before him (Wilde 77). It is significant that this is the moment the portrait begins its descent into the depraved image it will eventually become, not only because it marks the impending corruption of Dorian’s character, but also because of what it signifies from a psychosexual perspective. If we accept that the portrait is indeed Dorian’s uncanny double, evidenced by its role of bearing the sinful elements of his identity that he refuses to acknowledge or accept, then the marking of the portrait can be seen as directly corresponding to the destruction of the heterosexual relationship, making the image a mirror of Dorian’s repressed homosexual desires. The portrait’s increasingly monstrous appearance “stands in to chronicle the progressive changes in Dorian’s homosexuality, which, due to socio-legal contexts and constraints, appears increasingly terrifying to Dorian” (Johnson 35). In other words, Victorian society has placed social and legal obstructions to any engagement with same-sex relationships, causing Dorian to view his own homosexuality as something sinful and grotesque. These attitudes are projected metaphorically onto the portrait, resulting in the horrid

image that emerges. Thus, the portrait can be viewed as representing Dorian's own fear of his repressed desires—deep down, he suspects that his same-sex desires make him as gruesome as the artwork has become, and this fear is what is reflected in the portrait.

The death of both Basil Hallward and Dorian Gray ultimately solidifies the portrait's position as a double for both men. The fact that the image is present for both deaths suggests the fatal unification of the repressor and the repressed that typically marks a narrative containing the figure of the double. In fact, both men meet their fate in the midst of confrontation with the double. Examining the decrepit portrait, Basil begins to recognize the image as representing the consequences of his hidden desires, the same way that Dorian has conceived of the portrait as illustrating the monstrosity of his sexuality. Similarly, Dorian's final confrontation with the portrait suggests that he seeks to destroy the desire and its social connotation that the image represents: "As it had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter's work, and all that that meant... It would kill this monstrous soul-life, and, without its hideous warnings, he would be free" (Wilde 167).

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has captivated audiences since its original release in 1890, providing extensive material for analysis under a variety of different perspectives. Psychoanalysis is a particularly compelling lens to view the text from considering the abundance of hidden desire that lurks within the narrative. Although the text finds itself confronted with the issue of repressing its true nature, due to both the social and legal conventions of Victorian society, the portrait of Dorian Gray serves as a mirror that reflects the repressed desire back to the reader, creating one of many doubles that are at work within the novel. Against the foreground of this culture of intratextual repression, several other instances of the portrait as a doubled figure emerge. For Basil Hallward, the painting he creates acts as a

manifestation of his same-sex orientation, a mirror of sorts that is intimately attached to his identity but kept separate as a means of protection. Dorian Gray, as well, is doubled by the portrait. While the image starts as an identical representation of him, it quickly transforms into a portrayal of the homoerotic desires that he misunderstands and fears, resulting in the monstrous image that the portrait becomes. Both Basil and Dorian are acutely aware of the fact that the portrait functions as a mirror that not only reflects their desires back to them, but to the rest of the world as well, and they fear the potentially magnifying properties of the work of art. Ultimately, the portrait spells fatality for both men, who meet their end in the same room where the portrait and its true meaning are housed, completing the typical motif of the double.

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