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THE NOTIONS OF THE “CLOSET” AND THE “SECRET” IN OSCAR WILDE’S,  
THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

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To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
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This thesis, written by Jessica Maria Oliveira, and entitled The Notions of the “Closet” and the “Secret” in Oscar Wilde’s, The Picture of Dorian Gray, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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## DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this thesis to my parents and grandparents, without whom I would not be here presenting my research today. Their hard work, countless sacrifices, and unwavering support of my academic endeavors has led me to write this thesis, as well as continue striving for perfection in all aspects of my academic and professional career. Although my family was unable to pursue a degree in higher, or even secondary, education, my achievements in the literary arts are subsequently their own: this thesis, and degree, belongs to them. I would also like to dedicate my research to Guillermo A. Bermudez, who helped me emotionally throughout my entire collegiate career. This thesis belongs to those who have shown me kindness, love, support, and encouragement throughout my academic studies: and for that, I want to specifically dedicate this work to my late grandfather, Lino Oliveira. Although he is physically gone, his love and care for me will continue to live on in my work: this thesis is also for him. ¡Os amo a todos, con toda a miña alma!

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS  
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This thesis will discuss the notions of the “closet” and “secret” within Oscar Wilde’s, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as well as offer a clear and precise definition of queer theory to assist in elucidating many of the concepts being discussed. Close reading techniques will be utilized to further uncover the metaphoric, symbolic, and otherwise figurative importance of certain aspects of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and supporting texts. Through Judith Butler’s conceptualization of sex and gender, as well as Jacques Derrida’s interpretation of the “secret”, this paper will explicate the intricacies of Wilde’s work and unveil queered aspects in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

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## INTRODUCTION

Queer Theory has lent its hand to various interpretations of literary works since its birth roughly a quarter of a century ago. As a theoretical mode, queer theory is particularly useful in analyzing Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The philosophical notions that ground literary theory, and subsequently queer theory, assist in the deconstruction of complex social constructs within texts, such as binaries, sexuality, and gender, as well as offer new methods of interpreting and analyzing narratives. Oscar Wilde's, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, lends itself to contemporary modes of analysis, particularly as they relate to the notion of "the closet" (Glick 129) within predominantly queer narratives, or texts that ground themselves on the basis of non-binary assumptions and alterity – which may or may not relate specifically to gender and sexuality (not necessarily homosexuality.) However, in order to continue exploring queer aspects of Wilde's work, especially in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, we must first attempt to accurately understand and define the term "queer," and how it will be conceptualized in relation to this text. However, given the inherent opposition to social constructs that queer theory supports, such as definitive definitions/categories, it is important to note the description of "queer" offered throughout this thesis is not absolute and is just one facet of the term.

Queer theory, in the context of this thesis, refers to that which actively opposes accepted societal norms and customs, whether they be of gender and sexuality or other forms of social boundaries, in a manner that promotes "strangeness" in a given society and/or time period. It is important to note that being categorized as a homosexual, or engaging in such acts, does not automatically signify said individual is theoretically

queer, but rather indicates that they may be participating in one form of queer identity that may directly oppose binaries and similar ideas; hence, being categorized as a queer (non-binary) subject. Being considered queer, in regard to sexuality and gender, relies primarily on the premise of non-binary principles, meaning the individual/thought is not limited to just two modes of expression (e.g. heterosexual/homosexual, male/female, feminine/masculine, etc.):

Further, even if the sexes appear to be unproblematically binary in their morphology and constitution (which will become a question), there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two. The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it (Butler, 9)

Judith Butler argues that sex and gender are interwoven, and in fact the same, insofar as they are both constructed rather than real categories. She goes on to claim that gender is culturally constructed and is imposed by culture at an early age, directly and indirectly. However, Butler also makes a distinction between the categorization of gender and sex, stating sex is “a gendered category” (10). In fact, Butler further notes that the categories of sex and gender are, in the end, “one and the same.” In other words, just as gender is culturally constituted, sex, it turns out, is as well. For instance, let us imagine a set of twins: one is named Marcel, and the other Marcela. The gifts these infants receive from close relatives and friends include, pink and pastel-colored outfits for Marcela, whereas Marcel’s outfits are darkly colored, and adorned with monster trucks and sporting equipment. Marcela then exhibits certain characteristics that, although also displayed by Marcel, prompts designations that reify her presupposed “feminine” nature. To Butler,

this is the means by which these false perceptions of gender, and simultaneously sex are constructed, causing the individual's ability to act freely without dichotomies to be inhibited.

Oscar Wilde was berated by many in Victorian society for displaying "feminine" characteristics through his wardrobe and overall demeanor in his later years, as determined by traditional late 19th century views on gender and sexuality, categorizing him as transgressive, or queer, in accordance with his respective society's accepted outlooks on the aforementioned topics. However, Butler would argue that Wilde's decision to eschew conventional Victorian perceptions on gender and masculinity would be an example of how said concepts are socially constructed, and consequently detrimental to an individual's sexual identity (as it refers to the idea[s], not act[s]):

"When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one ... gender can be understood as a signification that an (already) sexually differentiated body assumes, but even then that signification exists only in relation to another, opposing signification." (9) (13)

It is within this need to constantly "perform" one's cultural designations of what are accepted forms of gender, which are popularly thought to be consistent with sex, that Butler's argument thrives, making a note of how the two terms (gender and sex) are not at all dependent on anatomy but rather are socially constituted. Crucial to Butler is our ability to deconstruct the concepts of sex and gender so that people are able to not just

think within the oppositions that they presuppose, but also think and exist beyond these socially constructed dichotomies. For this reason (doing away with socially constructed binary oppositions), amongst others that will be explored within this thesis, it is clear that analyzing Wilde's work, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, through a queer lens is appropriate and vital to further understand the complexities that lies within it, as well as serves as a potential model for how other texts in the Victorian era could be assessed.

With that being said, by focusing on the notions of the "closet" and "secret" within Oscar Wilde's novel, readers can turn their attention towards the secluded mindset that often accompanies a queered character within *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. As described by theorist Jacques Derrida in *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, the nature of a secret implies the withholding of information from one subject to another, not necessarily transgressive in nature, although it can be (26). He then goes on to deconstruct the concept by pointing to the linguistic properties that compose it, stating that a secret as such may never be revealed since language in general is always interpreted by each person as well as the given society, causing a gap in comprehension between the one who tells the secret and the one who receives it, as well as within a single being. In other words, because an individual thinks in terms of their society and language, there is always room for interpretation within that relative boundary. Once they (the individual) divulge the contents of the secret to another, that person now interprets that secret in a particular way; it is never the same secret being told because it is never the same interpretation, either between the teller and the listener or within the teller themselves. This nebulous paradox of "telling" and "un-telling" lends itself to the nature of Dorian Gray, who must withhold the strange, or queer, properties of his changing

portrait from the rest of society, and himself, in fear that he will be persecuted or, worse, lose his beauty and subsequently be deemed immoral, or unappealing, according to Victorian popular thought and his own self-assessment.

#### EXPOSING SECRETS AND CLOSETS IN THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

Within Wilde's novel, we are confronted with its title character, Dorian Gray, who is engulfed by the hedonistic thoughts that are slowly unveiled to him by Lord Henry, causing him to alter his moral compass, as constructed by traditional Victorian principles. Such actions lead to the changing of his beloved portrait, the same one Basil, a close friend of Dorian, had painted to show him the magnitude of his beauty and charm, by traditional, not queer standards, and how such characteristics are perceived by others. Perplexed by the shifting facial expressions of his portrait, Dorian realizes his painting's face changes in accordance to every foul and unethical act he commits towards others (in accordance to traditional Victorian beliefs), causing him to banish this work of art to the dark corners of his schoolroom, or enlarged closet, and keep its existence and abilities virtually secret. This thesis will further discuss the importance of the "closet" and "secret" in Oscar Wilde's, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as well as continue dissecting said narrative through a queer lens. In other words, I will be reading Wilde's narrative in a way that elucidates the strange, or queer, aspects of his text, specifically focusing on how the inclusion of closets (figuratively and literally) and secrets assist in queering said novel through gender and sexuality. Notions relating to binaries and Wilde's use of such a philosophical ideal in his writing, or lack thereof, will also be covered in the thesis.

Moreover, in order to understand the ways in which secrecy weaves its way into Wilde's novel and seemingly dominates the grand majority of it, we must first look

deeply into the notion of a secret and how such a term is vital to the study of queer theory. Merriam-Webster defines a secret as “kept from knowledge or view,” “hidden,” or “not acknowledged.” In other words, a secret is a performance that is usually, although not always, known in some way to one person and yet kept from the view or knowledge of another or others, such as when Dorian Gray tells Mr. Ashton he may not gaze upon the heavy painting he had just helped carry up the stairs (Wilde 102). It may also manifest itself by a simple lack of acknowledgement of the existence of an object, person, or thought, as Dorian does when he denies the “real” (here indicating conscious and intentional rather than absolute and definitive) reason as to why he has covered Basil’s painting prior to admitting it to his schoolroom. ““My servant has nothing to do with it, Basil. You don’t imagine I let him arrange my room for me? He settles my flowers for me sometimes—that is all. No; I did it myself. The light was too strong on the portrait”” (Wilde 93). By denying Basil the right to know the actual reason as to why Dorian covered the atrocity that laid beneath that opaque screen, he (Dorian) is thereby adhering to this notion of “secrecy,” and how such a concept must be present, either explicitly or implicitly within a queer reading of a narrative. It is through Derrida’s *différance* that we are shown how, even if Dorian were to expose his secret to Basil, the meaning of that secret will always be defined by the meanings of other words. Words with specific meanings, connotations, and histories will be used to define other words with specific meanings, connotations, and histories, and so on. The final arrival, or revelation, never occurs. It is a never-ending cycle of defining and categorizing, as well as difference and deferral, with no fixed meaning that highlights the queered aspects of Wilde’s text. In order for Dorian, or Wilde, to accurately “define” themselves as individuals partaking in

society throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray* narrative, they must first conquer, or at the very least reveal, the unknown that is their sexuality (the idea, not act[s]). Once more, for the sake of this thesis' argument, deviant (against traditional social norms) sexual preferences are not sole indicators of queer identity (e.g. homosexuality, heteronormative, etc.), as that would suggest engagement in binaries which sexuality and gender should directly oppose, or at the very least be acknowledged as socially constructed terms, as described by Butler.

Furthermore, secrecy may also be conceived through the Derridean approach to “a secret.” In his essay, “Poetics and Politics of Witnessing,” Derrida asserts that given the inherently concealed nature of language itself, due to *différance*, a secret, specifically those utilizing language(s), can never be disclosed, but rather opened to therefore be closed once more. In other words, if an individual has a secret and decides to tell another that very secret using language(s), they are opening what is inherently already closed (the confidential, or “secretive”, nature of a secret) to open it up (tell someone said secret) to then have it closed once more (social constructs and tools [e.g. language, *différance*, history, etc.] that inhibit the precise and exact interpretation of another individual's thoughts and beliefs). Meaning or signification is simultaneously opened and closed in language. It, and therefore anything constructed from it (e.g. secret, etc.), opens by and through its own closure, which is to say, by and through the impossibility of arriving at a fully present meaning.

This paradox of ‘as such’ is the paradox we can experience -- and there is nothing fortuitous about this -- apropos of the secret and responsibility, of the secret of responsibility and the responsibility of the secret. How can one manifest a secret

as secret? To take up Murray Krieger's words again, how can one reveal a mask as a mask. (68)

To define a word refers to finding its true and singular meaning. However, to Derrida there is not just one meaning to a word; rather it is constantly being deferred to other meanings (*différance*), which are thereby deferred to others and others. It is a never-ending paradox of seeking meaning within meaning. Language, and therefore a secret, can never be revealed, according to Derrida's *différance*, as an individual can never provide absolute definitions for the words that eventually comprise said secret or phrase. For instance, if an individual were to stumble upon the dictionary definition of "pick", they would come across multiple options: one may refer to the act of choosing something or someone; whereas the other may refer to the manner in which birds and other animals eat their food. Both are relevant meanings of the word, however, do not offer an exact or final definition of the word itself. The meaning is simply deferred to another word's meaning (e.g. choose, eat, etc.). To Derrida, a secret comports itself in a similar way. As the receiver accepts a secret, they are unknowingly altering the giver's intended meaning (which was already inherently changed [or deferred] when they conveyed it): not in a way that completely changes the purpose or crux of the primary secret, rather in a way that can never be absolutely defined. A secret is a secret of a secret, meaning because secrets necessarily function within language, which is a paradox of endless meanings seeking other meanings with no original source to guide it or final resting place, it can never be fully defined. This secret is opened (revealed) as it is closed again (*différance* [endless meanings]).

Nevertheless, a secret in a more traditional sense may be revealed at some point to another. However, it will still rely heavily on the interpretation of the other to whom the secret is told, and in some cases, their society's history, belief systems, and manner of interpreting language. They never fully take into account the entire history that is attached to the initial bearer of said secret, or to language itself as it is constantly being defined to be redefined once more (différance): "...signifying itself in speaking to the other about the other, signing and de-signing itself in a single gesture...The possibility of a secret always remains open, and this reserve inexhaustible" (Derrida 67). Due to the paradoxical approach of Derrida's definition of "a secret," we can thereby deduce that, in relation to Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and queer theory in this thesis' context, by hauling the large portrait to the old schoolroom (a place that has been virtually hidden and forgotten, or secret, by others aside from the inhabitants of his home [98]), Dorian is essentially attempting to hide his secret (the portrait) in a secret place (the schoolroom) to guard a potentially larger secret (queer thoughts), all of which open doors to additional secrets (his subjective and relative past). Although Dorian reveals to Basil his portrait's progression from beauty to monstrosity, in accordance with traditional Victorian perceptions of said concepts, Hallward is still unable to grasp the circumstances behind what caused the painting to alter its original outline. Thereby, fortifying Derrida's assertion that a "revealed" secret is still a secret as it was always already revealed due to différance, or the deferring of meanings with meanings.

Additionally, the term "closet," in relation to queer theory, may convey a similar paradox as Derrida's notion of a secret proposes: one that is also steeped heavily in the realm of secrecy and the unknown (Glick 129). Although the concept of a closet may be

often envisioned as a location where an individual may store their items in an enclosed space, Oscar Wilde takes a different avenue of representation of this type of “closet,” specifically when he includes the use of an “old schoolroom” (98) to store Dorian’s mutable portrait. If a closet is defined as a location where individuals store objects, or in some ways, ideas, for later use, then one could argue that the use of the schoolroom in Dorian’s home, although filled with cobwebs and barely in use, can be classified as a temporary closet; especially since Gray decides to store his horrid painting in it, casting it away to never be seen again by anyone other than himself. Should we consider the old schoolroom a closet, we could say that by Dorian placing the portrait in it, he is thereby hiding a facet of his identity and literally partaking in the literal and conceptual secretive aspects of queer identity. However, we cannot assume that because a character, like Dorian Gray, is participating with a “closet”, that he is automatically deemed a queer character. Rather, it is through his description of other characters (particularly those who also consider themselves male), his admiration for their specific ideas, and the placing of aesthetic and sensual pleasure over Victorian notions of ethical righteousness, that may tip the scale towards a queer (non-conforming to inherently binary notions) identity.

According to Glick, queer identity is rooted in the concepts of the unknown and revelation (134). In other words, Dorian, or Wilde, would have to successfully conceal their queer identities while simultaneously demonstrating a certain level of engagement and interest in the aforementioned lifestyle. Hence, causing another sense of “secrecy” along with disclosure of the self’s needs and desires as there is no original categorization, or defining, of a queer identity, rather differing meanings that offer an idea of what a queer identity may be (opening in *différance*) but then simultaneously limited by the

impossibility of final meaning or closing of différance. The moment Dorian banishes Sibyl Vane from his life, even if it is momentarily, he begins to marvel in this realm of openness to one's feelings and desires. Although Dorian attempts to reconcile with Sibyl the day following their intense argument and end to their courtship, the moment he revealed to her his feelings of hate and disgust towards her attempting to abandon her work in theatrics, Dorian was essentially engaging in the idea of disclosure amongst secrecy that Glick references in her work (129). Dorian had clearly felt a sort of animosity towards Sibyl Vane prior to their altercation, if not he would not have brought up such horrid thoughts and notions so abruptly. This repeats the use of the "secret" in a queered manner, as Dorian is both relinquishing (revealing) and holding onto (silencing) his feelings towards Sibyl Vane (not necessarily opposing one another similar to other binary oppositions).

Moreover, the sense of "secrecy" within revelation may also lead an individual to potentially parallel said ideals to that of Wilde's more conforming (sexual binaries imposed by traditional Victorian principles), yet misleading, perception of sex and gender; in so far as it refers to his earlier years of matrimony and engagement with Constance Lloyd. Since it is known that Wilde engaged in queer activities, or acts that directly opposed traditional social norms at the time -- specifically through the dissolution of dichotomizing ideologies and methods of identity construction -- in his later years of life and was subsequently imprisoned because of a lack of social support in differing sexual identities in Victorian England, we may assume that he also meant to, in a way, impose similar ideals onto his characters. Dorian Gray demonstrates many of the qualities and traits that queered characters may exhibit throughout their lives: this sense

of secrecy and closeting one's desires to not infringe upon any social conventions that may have been imposed onto them; an affixation with hedonistic principles (a belief that traditional Victorian principles would have opposed); treating the concept of loving, or loving, as an object as opposed to a sentiment; battling with binaries revolving around what society says you can or cannot do, such as not acting upon one's own understanding of sex and gender or other social constructs. However, it is important to note this is not an all-inclusive list of the exact characteristics an individual should possess in order to be considered a "queered" character. The notion of the known and unknown cause this unnecessary binary between what is socially acceptable and what is not, producing a problematic presupposition that sexual identity (not necessarily queer) must ground itself in a similar, if not exact, method of construction. Dorian and Wilde both seem to portray most, if not all, of these characteristics in some way or another. Hence, categorizing Dorian and Wilde as queered characters/individuals, in accordance with the aforementioned characteristics and their ability to remain as subjects who do not conform to traditional binary oppositions.

A queer identity, similar to concepts of gender or sexuality (the idea, not act[s]), should not be interpreted in terms of binary suppositions, as such an assumption roots itself on the idea that there are only two forms of sexual identity: female or male. As this paper has shown, suggesting dichotomizing sexual and gendered identities that base themselves on socially constructed ideals continues to become detrimental to an individual's construction of their own identity, insofar as that is possible. That is, as society continues to impose their beliefs regarding how to conceive of one's sexual and

gendered identity, that individual will be continuously stripped of their agency in said creation of identification.

Can we refer to a 'given' sex or a 'given' gender without first inquiring into how sex and/or gender is given, through what means? And what is 'sex' anyway? Is it natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal, and how is a feminist critic to assess the scientific discourses which purport to establish such 'facts' for us? Does sex have a history? Does each sex have a different history or histories? Is there a history of how the duality of sex was established, a genealogy that might expose the binary options as a variable construction? (Butler 9)

Butler argues using dichotomies to describe one's sex, which is already inherently socially constructed, and gender -- a byproduct of sex, meaning it is also subject to the same possible relative biases -- is not practical in contemporary society. There are various methods to understand one's identity, or manner in which one categorizes themselves in relation to relative principles and ideals, whether that refer specifically to their sex and/or gender or their self in general. It is as if there is a hidden (secret) language that can only be understood by the initial entity who utilizes it. Sex and gender depend on the individual's consciousness to discern what is comfortable for them and what is not, respectively. If we were to then follow this binary approach to defining sex and gender that traditional beliefs tend to support, then the individual would be limited to only two choices: two options that may or may not necessarily apply to their phenomenological understanding of themselves and society. Why are we limited, as proposed by traditional notions, to only two ways of understanding sex and gender? What are we not able to access as a result of being forced to think and understand ourselves in terms of a

male/female, feminine/masculine dichotomy? It is this inability to pinpoint an exact definition of the two terms (sex and gender) that relate it so closely to Derrida's conception of *différance*, and the secret, as it (sex and gender) will always depend on the meanings of one individual which uses other meanings to define it. Therefore, always paradoxically opening (defining itself according to the individual) to be closed again (one definition used to define another to define another, etc.)

Dorian, a man of the Victorian era, is forced to play the game of sexual arousal and preference with Sibyl Vane, a woman who he does not seem to love. Due to Dorian's disdain, and the subsequent proclamation of said hatred, for Sibyl considering putting an end to her theatrical career, Wilde seemingly reveals to his audience Gray's inability to engage in romantic affairs with other individuals; at least, not as it is defined by traditional Victorian society. In other words, it is plausible that Mr. Gray does not love, or even care for Sibyl Vane, rather is enamored with the idea that her profession revolves around the act of secrecy and falsehood, or performance -- something Dorian, or Wilde, was known to engage in throughout his life. Because of her contemplation for quitting her profession as an actress, Sibyl sparks a sort of urgency and hatred within Dorian, causing him to lash out at her (Wilde 75). Sibyl attempts to explain to Gray that she no longer desires to continue her acting career, as she has found a new passion for which she could pursue endlessly: Dorian's love.

'Dorian, Dorian,' she cried, 'before I knew you, acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived. I thought that it was all true. I was Rosalind one night, and Portia the other. The joy of Beatrice was my joy, and the sorrows of Cordelia were mine also. I believed in everything. The common people

who acted with me seemed to me to be godlike. The painted scenes were my world. I knew nothing but shadows, and I thought them real. You came, —oh, my beautiful love! —and you freed my soul from prison. You taught me what reality really is...’ (76)

Sibyl implores Dorian to see her decision to perform horribly that evening as a sign of her finally coming to terms with her reality. Her career as an actress was just that, a series of acts. Sibyl Vane was and will always be Sibyl Vane, and Dorian does not seem to be in accordance with that realization. If Dorian were able to successfully understand and express his queered identity, in terms of opposing traditional dichotomies in categorizing sex and gender, in a way that was not deemed socially unacceptable by traditional Victorian thought, then perhaps he would not have felt such animosity towards Miss Vane when she confessed her love and devotion to him prior to her untimely demise. Could this be a simple demonstration of jealousy on Dorian’s part since he is unable to freely conceal or lie about his identity (queer or not), in the same way as Sibyl is able to when she pretends to be a new character in a play? Gray refuses to hear Sibyl speak of her change in career paths because he, himself, does not have that same option. Dorian is confined by traditional Victorian principles of identity construction and cannot express himself, at least not in the same way Sibyl does through her acting. It is this constant rift between what is real and fake (i.e. accepted and unaccepted, etc.) that leads to Dorian’s dismay and provokes him to end his relationship with Sibyl so abruptly. Consequently, this elucidates additional oppositions (e.g. real/fake, accepting/unaccepting, etc.) that inhibit Gray from transcending into a more conscious individual who asserts his own understanding of gender and sex, as well as in the overall construction of his identity.

Furthermore, the complications that arise from interpreting human sexuality in terms of binary oppositions lead to a myriad of other issues regarding queer thought and notions. If an individual is to only perceive and construct their sexual identity on the basis of what it is not (if heterosexual, then not homosexual, and vice-versa), then there can only be two choices: one or the other. As illustrated in Wilde's text, it is not at all improbable for an individual to engage in more than two ways of defining their own sexual identity:

'You filled me with a wild desire to know everything about life. For days after I met you, something seemed to throb in my veins. As I lounged in the park, or strolled down Piccadilly, I used to look at every one who passed me and wonder, with a mad curiosity, what sort of lives they led. Some of them fascinated me. Others filled me with terror. There was an exquisite poison in the air. I had a passion for sensations...my dear Harry, if I hadn't, I should have missed the greatest romance of my life...' (44).

As Dorian attempts to demonstrate to Lord Henry the circumstances that led to his meeting with Sibyl Vane, he in a way exposes his admiration and love for Lord Henry's teachings and thought-provoking lectures; while also maintaining a certain level of secrecy amongst openness that lies with Dorian's subjective and relative manner of conveying his feelings. It is as if Dorian is attempting to divulge his deepest sentiments for Lord Henry, in a non-platonic way, thereby infringing upon the previously imposed social "secret" that is discussing one's sexuality outside of the marital bed, in accordance with Foucault's analysis of traditional Victorian social thought on queer identity; even if it was done in an inconspicuous way. "You filled me with a wild desire to know

everything about life..." (Wilde 44). The use of terms like "wild" and "desire" can be closely matched to thoughts and notions derived from the sexual yearning of another individual, as well as "throb" and "passion" (44); most certainly between Dorian and Lord Henry, or perhaps Wilde and his counterpart of later years, Robbie Ross.

This exchange and use of terms that closely relate to the possibility of engaging in a sexuality that is not at all the same as one an individual attempts to be perceived as in public, may be construed as an act of secrecy or performance (i.e. acting as if an individual desires one thing, when in reality they want another). Further solidifying the notion that sexuality, particularly as displayed in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, can include more than two choices. In this case, sexuality is essentially a part to play, rather than something that is genetically controlling an individual. This thereby negates the presupposition that an individual's sexual preference must behave or be constructed in terms of binary oppositions (i.e. male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, etc.) This is not to say that Dorian cannot simply be demonstrating his love and care for Lord Henry's guiding words and principles, as a heterosexual male would behave towards a father figure or brother. Instead, his diction, which revolves around terms that can be easily interpreted as words meant for a person that is more than just a guardian, implies a sense of feelings that cannot be defined as simply platonic; they rather demonstrate a clear engagement in the sexual identity that is queer (i.e. gay, bi-sexual, strange, etc.), as well as heterosexual. Needless to say, although Dorian invokes a sense of queerness in his response to Harry as to why he is enamored with Sibyl, he is nevertheless still proclaiming his love for the actress. Therefore, he also demonstrates his capacity to partake in not only queer thoughts (i.e. gay, bi-sexual, openly sexual, etc.)

towards Lord Henry, but also heteronormative feelings towards Sibyl Vane, which could also be construed as queer in and of itself. Thus, this abolishes a dichotomizing approach to defining sexuality, as one could consider any individual who even contemplates a queered notion, despite falling under the non-queer category in a given society, as something inherently strange. Although the term “queer” could be defined as something opposing heterosexual notions (i.e. gay, bi-sexual, etc.), it could also be noted as something that is strange or goes against social norms. If thinking queered thoughts are strange in a society, even if the individual is “straight,” they are subsequently still considered queer in relation to that society’s standards. Hence, this negates the idea that binaries define or even exist within the construction of sexuality, in this case.

Once more, the thought of constructing an individual’s sexual identity based on binaries becomes problematic in their creation of a subjective identity that promotes sexual freedom and preference, which is further seen through Wilde’s use of the “queer closet” (Glick 129) in his narrative, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. First and foremost, Dorian’s decision to eschew the evolving painting that was gifted to him by Basil at the beginning of the novel demonstrates the plausible act of attempting to suppress one’s sexual identity so as to conform to the popular notion of heterosexuality (in the context of Victorian England). As Dorian searches the confines of the abandoned school room for an object that may assist in the transferring of such a horrid object into the cold, dark room that was once a sanctuary for his grandfather’s thoughts and other scholastic work, he in a way demonstrates to the reader how he, or Wilde, perceive late 19th-century sexual thought:

His eye fell on a large purple satin coverlet heavily embroidered with gold, a splendid piece of late seventeenth-century Venetian work that his grandfather had found in a convent near Bologna. Yes, that would serve to wrap the dreadful thing in. It has perhaps served often as a pall for the dead (98)

The color purple used to describe the appearance of the old cloth can signify a vibrancy that is found within a queered character, or, depending on the shade, may represent the growing darkness (potential animosity or disdain towards restrictive social norms) that may be found in a queered individual within certain social institutions (i.e. religion, etc.) By choosing to place this piece of cloth over the already covered, or hidden (secret), portrait, one could deduce, given the plausible context of the color purple in Victorian society, that Dorian is attempting to shadow his hidden feelings towards other characters other than Sibyl Vane, or any other female. Thus, this causes Gray to further suppress his probable queer identity in accordance to Victorian social thought, which is to never omit or openly discuss one's sexual, and gendered, experiences, identity, or preferences outside of the marital bedroom. Since we are speaking of sexual oppression in terms of the Victorian era, we may then assume the same may be applied to an individual such as Basil or Lord Henry, who are also caught in a web of queer (directly opposing dichotomies and binary oppositions imposed by their society) thoughts towards their friend, Dorian Gray.

To further attest to this idea that the inclusion of the color purple by Wilde in his description of the garb that was to cover the portrait may refer to the darkness, or vibrancy, of a queered character, Wilde also states it is "heavily embroidered with gold..." (98). Gold is usually in reference to a cache lifestyle, or one that is not typically

attained by the bourgeoisie or lower-class individuals. Because the piece of fabric including, not only a progressively dark toned aspect alluding to the darkness (as it may or may not refer to an individual's disdain or opposition to traditional definitions of sexuality/gender) that is inside a queer character, but also the luxury that is a gold embroidery, it can be deduced that perhaps the potential darkness of a queer identity may be softened by the economic wealth of the upper class. In other words, perhaps Wilde meant to imply that darkness (disdain or hatred drawn from limiting sexual/gendered expression) may be offset by the aesthetic beauty of some individuals, or the cache; just like the gold embroidery softened the vibrancy of the purple fabric. It is no surprise that Wilde would attempt to impose his views on aestheticism into his work, so as to further claim that a character like Dorian, whose sins are only relevant when it comes to his aging portrait, may be redeemed and morally righteous through his intoxicating beauty and measure of aesthetic pleasure.

These notions, accompanied by the fact that said fabric once belonged to his deceased grandfather, whom he was not fond of, may also allude to the possibility that what the cloth may symbolize (ancient thoughts on queer identity and characters) is also an outdated way of interpreting a queered self. He refers to the cloth as something that is old, stained, and belonged to his grandfather, someone whom he "had hateful memories of..." (Wilde 98). A queer thought, just like any other concept that is concocted in one's mind, has the ability to evolve into something completely different from its original creation. Although it was common to refer to those who engaged in sodomy or various other forms of sexual expression as unethical prior to the 20th and 21st century, such a notion could have been changed and thought of differently by certain individuals,

including Wilde himself. His decision to express his sexual identity despite it opposing the popular Victorian thought was not a crime against humanity, as some might have put it at the time, but rather a form of disclosure of his identity: someone who is queer, or strange, as compared to normative thought. It is not until the very last chapter that we are finally able to see Dorian's character release his oppressive state of mental and sexual confusion through the stabbing of the very creator of his "plague": Basil. I use the word plague heavily, as queer identity seems to be acting as a sickness in Wilde's narrative, which causes Dorian to turn mad with the thought that his physical appearance never changes whereas his soul, or closeted self, is slowly deteriorating as portrayed by Basil's painting.

Although Dorian may demonstrate common traits defined as queer, he is not the only individual in Wilde's novel that engages in said qualities. Basil also seems to partake in queer thoughts and notions, specifically as they relate to Dorian himself:

I have always been my own master; had at least always been so, till I met Dorian Gray. Then but I don't know how to explain it to you. Something seemed to tell me that I was on the verge of a terrible crisis in my life. I had a strange feeling that Fate had in store for me exquisite joys and exquisite sorrows. I grew afraid, and turned to quit the room. It was not conscience that made me do so; it was a sort of cowardice. I take no credit to myself for trying to escape. (Wilde 10)

As Basil attempts to explain to Lord Henry the reason why he is unwilling to display his own portrait of Dorian Gray, he tells him he is unable to do so because he sees too much of himself in the painting, as opposed to merely Dorian. If we can assume that Dorian is queer, then by admitting that the sole reason Basil would not demonstrate his artistic

talents through the use of the painting of Mr. Gray, we can deduce that he is openly telling Harry, and the reader, that he himself is also in fact queer. He continues to express his sentiments towards Dorian to Lord Henry, making it a point that his life had changed ever since he had met him. Basil believes he was about to experience “a terrible crisis” in his life, meaning he might have prophesied his own unraveling of queer (non-traditional methods of constructing one’s gender and sexuality) tendencies or at least strange as compared to normative Victorian ideals on sexual orientation. As Glick states in “The Dialectics of Dandyism,” “In Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the artist Basil Hallward expresses this sense of homosexuality as both known and unknowable.” (134). He is stuck in the paradox that is a nonconforming identity, in comparison to traditional Victorian values, as he is both aware of his weakness to Dorian in ways that he claims he is unable to discern, but also cannot voice his sentiments exactly in fear of being ostracized for being different, or the “other.”

Basil also admits to enjoying the act of secrecy and partaking in it from time to time; a key component of queer identity. “I have grown to love secrecy. It seems to be the one thing that can make modern life mysterious or marvelous to us...somehow it seems to bring a great deal of romance into one’s life” (Wilde 8). It is peculiar that Basil would wish to partake in secrecy just because it brings about a sense of pleasure, or perhaps arousal, to one’s romantic life. However, given the context of queer identity, it is not at all improbable that an individual may feel that their constant need for silence and omission be a tantalizing and dangerous occurrence; in turn, igniting a spark of pleasure in some who experience it. What makes Basil’s remarks queer is not in response to his enjoyment of remaining silent about his sexual identity, or other things, rather why he

must omit those details from his life that brand him as such. If an individual were to live in a time where sexual identity was free and unconstrained, then said individual would not necessarily enjoy remaining quiet, instead, they may proclaim their interests openly without repercussion. On the one hand, an individual could also enjoy secrecy in a romantic manner so as to offset the constant openness that is their newfound society, given the aforementioned example. However, due to various Victorian principles aligning more towards the hidden aspect of sexual identity and its confinement to only within the marital bedroom, it seems improbable that Wilde would allow his character to assert such a statement if he were not attempting to hide something larger. For instance, Basil possibly being another queer character, alongside Dorian, in his *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Subsequently, Basil Hallward's queer identity continues to unveil itself through his description and demeanor of Dorian, where he makes it a point to tell Lord Henry how much his artistic style has benefited from meeting and drawing him. "I can now re-create life in a way that was hidden from me before...it is what Dorian Gray has been to me" (Wilde 193). Through his diction, Basil seems to enjoy his friendship with Gray on a level that is not solely platonic, rather a similar relationship that may exist between an artist and his or her muse. However, by using words such as "hidden" and "re-create life," Wilde implores a sense of euphoric living that may only be satisfied through the gazing and friendship between Dorian and Basil. Hence, this relationship alludes to the notion that Basil's idea of a friendship with Dorian is not as related to that of an artist with his muse, rather a secret, or "hidden" thirst for love that may only be quenched through the ogling of one another (or at least Basil towards Dorian.) The following

passage continues to display the same sense of romantic interest on Basil's part towards Dorian, where he attempts to explain to Lord Henry just how much of an inspiration and tool Gray has been for him in his artistic career:

‘Unconsciously he defines for me the lines of a fresh school, a school that is to have in itself all the passion of the romantic spirit all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek...if you only knew what Dorian Gray is to me...it is one of the best things I have ever done. And why is it so? Because, while I was painting it, Dorian Gray sat beside me’ (Wilde 193).

Basil's inherent affixation towards another male character's companionship does not define him wholly as a queer figure, rather it is the manner in which he describes his relationship with Dorian that deems him as such. Given Wilde's romantic background, it is logical to deduce that he would, similar to Dorian's character, intend to impose some of the same views he held regarding sexuality and aestheticism; meaning, it is not at all implausible that Basil might be a hopeless, secretive admirer of Mr. Gray, and perhaps he too reciprocates that feeling subconsciously, given Dorian's interests and diction.

Furthermore, the scope of queer theory continues to grow within Oscar Wilde's text, as Lord Henry, a hedonistic, manipulative older man, attempts to persuade his younger counterpart (Dorian Gray) to partake in the aesthetic pleasures that marvel in the world around him, as opposed to saving his own soul from utter damnation. Given Lord Henry's influence on Dorian, one could say he represents queered thought and its manner of infiltrating, and in some cases ravaging, an individual's mind who had never partaken in such notions before. To an individual who is fully versed in the Victorian social conduct regarding sexuality, according to Foucault's "A History of Sexuality," said

person may feel as though queer thoughts or ideas are invading and causing said individual to alter their perception of the world around them; whether it be a positive intrusion or negative (Foucault, 4). Such a parallel between the oppressive nature of Lord Henry and Dorian's relationship, and that of a queer thought popping into a seemingly heterosexual person in the Victorian era might spark a sense of taboo or need to keep the "secret" that is now stirring within them:

'You, Mr. Gray, you yourself, with your rose-red youth and your rose-white boyhood, you have had your passions that have made you afraid, thoughts that have filled you with terror, day-dreams, and sleeping dreams whose mere memory might stain your cheek with shame--'...'Stop!' faltered Dorian Gray 'stop! You bewilder me. I don't know what to say. There is some answer to you, but I cannot find it. Don't speak. Let me think. Or, rather, let me try not to think' (Wilde 18).

The torment that ensues for Dorian the moment Lord Henry begins to tantalize him regarding what thoughts he should concoct, and how he should perceive others, baffles Gray to the point of pure disdain; not towards Lord Henry, rather towards the textual evidence of disdain for words. It is as if Wilde attempted to play on the allegory of the garden of Eden, where humans are faced with two choices: drink from the juices of sin; or remain pure and righteous in the eyes of a greater entity. Harry would, in this scenario, portray that of the sinful (in accordance with popular Christian beliefs) serpent that is meant to entice and sway Dorian's thoughts to think in a way that is queer, or strange, to him entirely. However, it is important to note that correlation does not dictate causation, and so because Lord Henry's intrusive manner of seducing (not necessarily sexually, but philosophically/theoretically) Dorian to engage in queered thoughts might relate to the

“sinful” views many popular religions ground themselves in, particularly in Victorian society, one does not cause the other. Thinking in a queered way does not mean an individual is automatically deemed “immoral” or “sinful”, rather may challenge certain conservative norms that might provoke the use of such ideals. This notion of queered thoughts becoming an invasive specimen resonates with that of Basil’s feelings as well, especially when he decides to approach Dorian for his actions and is consequently murdered because of it. A queered mind is no more different than a non-queered perspective. However, because it is steeped heavily in a paradox of secrecy and disclosure, a queered mind might act as a sort of itch that cannot be scratched and results in irrational behavior; at least, as illustrated through Wilde’s characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Dorian pleads with Henry to stop speaking to him in a manner that creates certain thoughts and notions in his head, thereby affirming the idea that a queered mind, or thoughts, when revealed to an individual who is not accustomed to its level of freedom and openness, becomes problematic and at times dangerous to the individual, or character. Queer identity is always already, meaning it lies within each and every person waiting to be unveiled; it is not developed. Due to the nature of secrecy in traditional Victorian society regarding sexuality and gender, such sentiments becoming a reality might prove to be hazardous in some ways to an individual’s construction of identity. For instance, if an individual is told something is “sinful” and “wrong” their entire life and is then allowed to transcend their previous inhibited state of thought (thinking in terms of the subjective conscious and unconscious, not social notions), that individual might react in a negative manner as they are not accustomed to the newly developed means of

thinking (although not necessarily restricted to only comporting in this way. This may allude to the reason why Dorian potentially becomes enraged and subsequently commits suicide, believing he must kill the very “creator” that made his horrific life a reality. However, another plausible reason as to why Dorian kills Basil, and then later himself, is due to his yearning for a life that is not at all socially acceptable by traditional standards and must continue to hold the burden of secrecy and “closetness” that is his life.

### **PERFORMING THE “SECRET” THAT IS GENDER IDENTITY**

Performance, as illustrated by Judith Butler in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”, serves to further describe the bounded effects dichotomous notions of gender and sex may play in traditionally constructed societies. Butler argues that “...gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time -- an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of facts” (519). In other words, gender, much like sex, is not a fixed term or identity that may be distributed and assigned to individuals throughout a society (e.g. language, traditional social norms, etc.), regardless of their (the individual) subjective thought or preferences. Rather, gender is a concept that is continuously evolving and adapting to the individual’s phenomenological consciousness and is only displayed, and therefore often misconstrued, through said individual’s performance of that particular category of gender, or sex. For instance, if we were to revisit the example I previously provided regarding twin siblings (Marcel and Marcela), and how even in infancy, they were unnecessarily being placed and shown dichotomizing definitions of sex and gender, respectively. Both siblings comported themselves in similar fashions but were given

differing compliments and criticism due to their particular society's perception of sex and gender, respectively. They are now subject to performing the part for which their society has assigned them, leaving the two siblings to act in a manner that may or may not be a reflection of their conscious and unconscious desires. They, like most individuals, were taught to define and categorize their sexual and gendered identity on the basis of traditional social norms and principles.

Furthermore, Butler urges her audience to understand that the performative aspect of gender construction is not simply reliant on the society that invokes constraints on defining said term, rather the overall construction of gender, and subsequently sex, is determined by repeating acts performed by the individual in a given society. In other words, human beings themselves participate with the social construction of gender by performing prescribed roles thereby reifying the categories that restrict them. What makes gender a performative function is that the individual is continuously replicating their understanding of gender through physical, and psychological, actions, and is therefore subconsciously redefining their idea of gender through the continual reiteration of said acts/doings:

Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. (Butler 520)

Gender should not rely on just one set of guidelines or norms in its construction, especially if said construction is assumed to definitively categorize an individual's

identity. In what way do relative notions, in this case, assist in the individual and phenomenological construction of a state of being (gender)? To define, or categorize, gender, and sex, an individual must come from a place of total subjectivity and eschew as many social constructs that aim to impede said individual's individualized conception of such term(s) as possible. In other words, gender is often defined in a given society by the individual's continual re-acting of a particular interpretation or perception of the term. The more frequently an individual portrays a certain gender, the more likely the individual will adopt said understanding in constructing their overall gender identity, which clearly makes said view non-subjective and thereby socially constructed.

Dorian perceives his gendered identity to conform to traditional Victorian ideals on how sex and gender should be described. However, he clearly demonstrates a certain level of opposition to said norms as he does not seem to follow any of the conventional interpretations of gender and sex (e.g. male/female, feminine/masculine, etc.) It is through his constant performance of what Dorian believes is the manner in which he should comprehend sex and gender, according to traditional views, that leads him to realize that is not who he is. Lord Henry consistently implores Dorian to see life for what he believes it to be: a place to marvel in one's "pleasures."

The mutilation of the savage has its tragic survival in the self-denial that mars our lives. We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us. The body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification. Nothing remains then but the recollection of a pleasure, or the luxury of a regret. The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it...It has been said that the great events of the world take place in the

brain. It is in the brain, and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place also. (Wilde 24)

If we were to take Wilde's assertion that "the great events of the world take place in the brain" literally, then we can assume that by Dorian deciding to accept Lord Henry's point of view on pleasures and life, he is acknowledging that his previous understanding of identity, as constructed by traditional Victorian society, is misleading and should be redefined accordingly. Dorian went from a wealthy, handsome young man to an individual whose soul is continually changing; much like his gendered and sexual identity. If we could assume Gray's mutable portrait is a reflection of his inner thoughts and beliefs, then we may correlate that variability to the conception of his understanding of his gender and sexual identity, as it too is in constant flux. Dorian must perform his identity to fit traditional Victorian norms, and for that, he must keep "secret" his shifting painting, as it reflects what conventional beliefs condemn: more than two options for sex and/or gender.

## CONCLUSION

Queer identity is manifested in a myriad of ways throughout Oscar Wilde's, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, depicting a sense of opacity in the "secret," while also maintaining transparency. Although a queered character is asked to shelter their desires and thoughts from outside forces, Elisa Glick explicitly states that because the term "telling" implies something that is "prohibited" and "required" within a secret, a queered person is always combating an internal paradox; hiding while also revealing one's deepest thoughts and feelings (129). Queer identity, as represented in Wilde's novel, demonstrates a sense of darkness while also elucidating some of the sentiments that may

have been felt by those who were regarded as queer entities in Victorian society. Dorian is forced to live most of his adult life under the control of Lord Henry, who invokes a sense of terror and wonder in the mind of the young man; such thoughts may reflect merely homosexual tendencies or other deviant notions that infringe upon traditional social views. However, thinking in terms of homosexuality and heterosexuality remains problematic, as previously illustrated, due to the allegedly bounded essence of the two individual terms. There cannot just be two choices when discussing gender and/or sexuality, rather they (the terms) must be catered to the specific individual and reflect their what they deem is appropriate given their respective backgrounds (e.g. social, cultural, etc.) There is no “one size fits all” when it comes to categorizing sex and gender, which is why Dorian and Lord Henry, in many ways, can be viewed as queer as they do not adhere to traditional Victorian principles on defining said categories (sex and gender).

Wilde also includes discrete love relationships between the three male protagonists, demonstrating another level of queer identity that possibly includes polygamy or other forms of communal sexual engagements. This may further challenge traditional Victorian norms on sexual and gender identity construction. Its need to constantly remain silent and within the social institution of marriage, as opposed to other non-dichotomizing methods, illustrates the obstructive qualities that plague traditional perceptions of sex and gender, and consequently Dorian Gray. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* embodies various complex notions and representations that may be construed as inherently queer, or strange to the norms of Victorian society. Thus, this allows succeeding authors and critics to continue unraveling the intricacies that envelope Oscar Wilde’s text through queer theory, adding to the complexity of queer identity. Although

the dubiousness of queer theory may not be fully understood through just one text, such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it surely offers sufficient basis for a somewhat clear understanding of queer identity.

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