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‘Where there is merely love, they would see something evil’:

The Revisions in the First Chapter in *Dorian Gray*

This paper examines the revision history of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to trace the development of the story’s homosexual themes. It considers three textual witness: Wilde’s manuscript held at the Pierpont Morgan Library (*MS*), the 1890 version of the story in *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine* (*DG90*), and the 1891 version, published by Ward, Lock & Company (*DG91*).[[1]](#footnote-1) In comparing these witnesses, I isolate the additions, deletions, and alterations that Wilde and his editors imposed the first chapter of the story. My goal is to reveal the strategies by which Wilde obscured homosexual and homoerotic content, and to compare my findings with the conclusions of prominent textual scholars on *Dorian Gray*.

The bulk of this paper engages in a close examination of the changes to the first chapter. I limit my focus to the first chapter of the manuscript, magazine, and book version of the story for three reasons: first, it lays out the dynamics between the central characters—Basil Hallward, Lord Henry and Dorian Gray; second, compared to other chapters, it is heavily revised and presents a rich resource for analysis; and third, I have personal access to high-quality scans of this chapter from the MS at the Morgan Library. In comparing the different textual witnesses, I consider the revisions both within the manuscript, of the several additions, deletions, and alterations Wilde made as he wrote, and between the published versions of the story, *DG90* and *DG91*. My examination of the first chapter ends by looking closely at a passage that was altered at each stage of the composition and revision process. Here, I consider how Wilde’s continual work on this passage crystallizes his revisionary project. Ultimately, I find that Wilde codes or otherwise obscures references to homosexuality and homoeroticism in several interrelated ways. First, he obscures the deep intimacy and sense of trust that originally permeates the dynamic between Basil and Lord Henry. Second, he alters the nature of Basil’s devotion to Dorian, removing signs of its intensity and fatality. These revisions work together to reframe Dorian’s character as an aesthetic, rather than erotic, object. My paper then ends by engaging these findings with the analysis of prominent Wildean textual scholars and editors, particularly Donald L. Lawler and Nicolas Ruddick. Before going into the revisions, I will briefly review Wilde’s composition and revision history over two years, from the summer of 1889, when the story was first solicited from Wilde by the editor of *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*, to the spring of 1891, when it was finally published in book form by Ward, Lock, and Company.

As far as scholars know, the history of *Dorian Gray* begins with a dinner on August 30th, 1889 between John Marshall Stoddart, Arthur Conan Doyle and Wilde (Lawler 7). Stoddart, an American publisher from J.B. Lippincott Company in Philadelphia, travelled to London in 1889 to recruit material for J.B. Lippincott’s serial publication, *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*. The outcome of the dinner is reported by Doyle in his memoirs: “both Wilde and I promised to write books for ‘Lippincott’s Magazine’” (Rpt. Lawler 7). Though the dinner eludes mention in Wilde’s own records, he writes to Stoddart in December of 1889, responding to Stoddart’s rejection of his initial submission, a fairy tale entitled “The Fisherman and His Soul”. In this letter, Wilde promises Stoddart “a new story which is better than ‘The Fisherman and His Soul,’” on which he “quite ready to set to work” (Rpt. Lawler 8). Presumably, Wilde drafts this new story until April or May of 1890, when it is typed and revised before being mailed to Stoddart’s offices in Philadelphia. The surviving manuscript and typescript indicate that Wilde revised his work through every step of composing and transcribing. Joseph Bristow, the editor of the Variorum Edition of *Dorian Gray*, remarks that “it remains obvious from the manuscript and the typescript that the author… worked with immense care and forethought in preparing his work for Stoddart” (xxxv). At this stage of the revision process, critics generally agree that Wilde aimed to suppress the “implicit moral” of the story, which he felt was too apparent (Bristow xxxvii). In a letter to the *St James Gazette*, Wilde divulges this moral—that “all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment” (“To the Editor of the *St James Gazette*,” June 26 1890). One of the questions this paper will pose is whether Wilde’s treatment of homosexual and homoerotic themes during this early stage of revising relates to the presentation of the story’s moral.

After excising some 500 words from the manuscript, Stoddart finally publishes the story on June 20, 1890.[[2]](#footnote-2) This initial version of “The Picture of Dorian Gray” runs just over 50,000 words, spanning ninety-eight pages and thirteen chapters, and was released simultaneously in Philadelphia and London on June 20, 1890. In England, the *Lippincott’s* story created a national sensation, and it was widely reviewed by the popular press. Though it did receive some praise, many of the prominent newspapers criticized the story for the ambiguous stance that it takes toward a clearly immoral protagonist: “[Wilde’s] narrative struck the ostensibly liberal *Daily Chronicle*, the high Tory *St James Gazette*, and the staunchly imperialist *Scots Observer* as a work that appeared ‘corrupt’, displayed ‘effeminate frivolity’, and dealt ‘with matters only fitted for the Criminal Investigation Department’” (Bristow xviii). Wilde would spend the next several days defending his work in letters to the editors, even entering into a public correspondence with them.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The exchange between Wilde and the editors of *St James Gazette* and the *Daily Chronicle* illuminates the central ambivalence about the story’s moral that confounded many critics. According to the editors, the narrative apparently celebrates the hedonistic lifestyle, despite Wilde’s insistence on the destructive consequences of such indulgence—“all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment” (“To the Editor of the *St James Gazette*,” June 26 1890). Though Wilde thought this moral “obvious”, it apparently eludes the editors at the *Chronicle*: they complain that “the ‘moral,’ so far as [they] can collect it, is that man’s chief end is to develop his nature to the fullest by ‘always searching for new sensations’” (*Daily Chronicle* “Review” 30 June 1890). In response to the *Chronicle,* Wilde writes that “far from wishing to emphasize any moral in my story, the real trouble I experienced in writing the story was that of keeping the extremely obvious moral subordinate to the artistic and dramatic effect” (“To the Editor of the *Daily Chronicle*” 30 June 1890). This exchange reveals two fundamental misunderstandings between Wilde and his critics: first, the content of moral itself—whether it supports or condemns the “searching for new sensations” and the role of renunciation; and second, the prominence of the moral in the story. In another letter, to the *Gazette*, Wilde attributes these misunderstandings to his readers’ sensibilities. He ends the letter with the following provocation: “Yes; there is a terrible moral in *Dorian Gray*—a moral which the prurient will not be able to find in it, but which will be revealed to all whose minds are healthy. Is this an artistic error? I fear it is. It is the only error in the book” (“To the Editor of the *St James Gazette*,” June 26 1890). In making the distinction between “prurient” and “healthy” sensibilities, Wilde suggests that the reader’s stance toward sexual matters has a decisive bearing on her interpretation of the moral.

A few months later, in the early spring of 1891, Wilde publishes a “Preface” to the *Picture of Dorian Gray* in *The Fortnightly Review*. This “Preface”, which will be included in the 1891 book version of the story, consists of a series of witty epigrams and aphorisms about the relationship between art and morality. Barbara Leckie asserts that it responds to the suppressive climate that surrounded the *Lippincott’s* publication: “Wilde advances an art-for-art’s sake position that attempts to remove the novel from the debate by severing the connection between art and society and, despite other statements to the contrary, denying the moral force of literature” (171). In a list of pithy aphorisms, the “Preface” makes claims such as, “*Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault*”; and “*To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim*” (Gillespie 3-4). In these complex and incisive statements, Leckie maintains that “Wilde’s strategy is to refocus on art and disparage the focus on the reader by saying that the reader is the one who makes a work immoral” (173).  From a similar perspective, Lawler argues that “the ‘Preface’ relates to the novel only obliquely by subverting the standards of Philistine art criticism and holding up aesthetic beauty and artistic effect as the only legitimate criteria of critical evaluation” (16). Though Wilde may have seen the *Preface* as an opportunity to indict those readers who would impose a moral judgement on Dorian, as indeed many of his critics had done, the “Preface” actually obscures this message by burying it in paradox and contradictions. The effect would be to confuse and distract some readers from realizing that they were the objects of Wilde’s critique. Nicolas Ruddick points out that “the obvious contradiction between the retained episode of the poisonous yellow book and the prefatory aphorism beginning *‘There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book*’ would be offered as one of the delicious paradoxes that might bother only the small-minded” (131). Considering the negative and condemnatory responses of Wilde’s critics, one might assume that “the small-minded” consists of a very vocal portion of the reading public.

    Wilde’s worked extensively in revising the *Lippincott’s* version of the story for publication by Ward, Lock & Company in April 1891. This new edition, containing 78,000 words, includes the “Preface” and twenty chapters, and spans 337 pages. During revision, Wilde added six chapters to “broaden the social canvas of [his] story by accentuating the double life that Dorian Gray leads in the contrasting worlds of upper-class Society, on the one hand, and drug-addicted dissipation, on the other hand” (Bristow liv). Wilde also continued his revisions from the manuscript and typescript, deleting and altering passages that express moments of intimacy and romantic passion between the characters. According to Frankel, significant deletions include passages with explicit homosexual references, promiscuous or illicit heterosexuality, and “anything that smacked generally of decadence” (47-48). Wilde also revised the ending of the novel in order to resolve the ambiguity about Dorian’s apparent repentance: for the 1891 edition, Wilde “heighten[ed] Dorian’s monstrosity toward the novel’s conclusion, making clearer the suggestion that Dorian’s destruction of the portrait was only an attempt to destroy ‘the evidence’ against him” (Frankel 30). In this way, Frankel argues, Wilde aimed to bring “the novel to a moral conclusion that he thought would silence his critics” (30).

While this paper lacks the space to examine the overall development of Dorian’s character and the expansion of the social landscape over six additional chapters, it does question how the revisions in the first chapter might relate to the story’s moral. Lawler argues that “The controlling purpose of the author in revising his novel was to suppress the original moral so that it would become subordinate to an aesthetic end” (22). According to Lawler, Wilde revised the novel so the originally moralizing elements would serve an aesthetic end. The revisions therefore work to make “the moral a dramatic element in the work of art and not the object of the work of art itself” (Lawler 20). For example, by solidifying Dorian’s character as thoroughly corrupt in the ending, the story could then draw the reader’s attention to its dramatic, rather than didactic, effects. This paper questions, without answering, how Wilde’s revisions in the first chapter of the story might also affect the presentation of the moral. In my conclusion, I will open some possibilities for engaging Wilde’s revisionary practice with  the complex question of Wilde’s moral.

But first, I consider how Wilde revised the first chapter. This opening scene, which consists of a lively dialogue between Basil Hallward and Lord Henry, sets the tone, reveals character dynamics, and lays out the conflict for the ensuing story. In these first few pages, Basil comes across as a sympathetic, sensitive, albeit slightly exasperated artist, who struggles to tell his close friend about the powerful influence that Dorian Gray has had upon his life and work. Lord Henry, by contrast, appears as an affable and witty gentleman aesthete, who counters Basil’s confessional and dramatic utterances with detached and offbeat statements, paradoxes, and aphorisms.  Many of the revisions focus on Basil’s hesitance and difficulty in explaining the nature of his devotion to Dorian. They also work to stifle the emotional intensity and sense of sympathy in the dialogue between these men, and replace it with a lighter tone. Cumulatively, the revisions focus on Dorian’s beauty and eroticism, and reformulate his role as an artistic subject, rather than romantic object, for Basil’s painting.

I will begin with the revisions that suppress the more obvious signs of intimacy between Basil and Lord Henry. In the manuscript, Wilde’s pen slashes through evidence of physical contact, such as on page nine, when Basil “tak[es] hold of [Lord Henry’s] hand.” And later on, in *DG91*, he deletes more evidence of touching, this time by Lord Henry, “Laying a hand on [Basil’s] shoulder” and again from Basil, “shaking his hand off” (Gillespie 187-188). These changes are only the beginning a series of more discrete revisions that work to obscure the intimacy and understanding between Basil and Lord Henry.

Besides removing evidence of their touching, Wilde also alters the mood in their conversation, replacing tense pauses with laughter or exchanging dramatic statements and descriptions with more playful ones. Two particularly striking moments will serve as examples, both of which depict Basil’s struggle to convey why he cannot exhibit Dorian’s portrait. In the first example, Lord Henry encourages Basil to explain his hesitation. Prior to any revisions, the dialogue in the manuscript reads: “Lord Henry hesitated for a moment. ‘And what is that?’ he asked, in a low voice. ‘I will tell you,’ said Hallward, and a look of pain came over his face. ‘Don’t if you would rather not,’ murmured his companion, looking at him” (MS 9). The revised version in the manuscript, incorporating the deletions and interlinear additions, reads: “Lord Henry laughed. ‘And what is that?’ he asked. ‘I will tell you,’ said Hallward, and an expression of perplexity came over his face. ‘I am all expectation Basil,’ murmured his companion, looking at him” (MS 9). Here, several changes mitigate the emotions of the scene. First, rather than hesitate, Lord Henry laughs, and he no longer speaks “in a low voice”: the effect is to overwrite a previously intimate moment with joviality. Basil also exchanges his emotional misery for mental confusion when “a look of pain” becomes “an expression of perplexity”. And lastly, Lord Henry, rather than sympathizing with his friend’s difficulty and releasing him from the obligation to explain himself, instead encourages him to speak, “I am all expectation, Basil”. Together, these changes work to lighten the mood of the scene and obscure Basil’s internal suffering. The revisions in these lines continue past the manuscript, into *DG91*. In the book version, “and” is exchanged for “but”, “murmured” for “continued”, and “looking” for “glancing”; so the line finally reads, “‘I will tell you,’ said Hallward; but an expression of perplexity came over his face. ‘I am all expectation, Basil,’ continued his companion, glancing at him” (Gillespie, 188). The change in coordinating conjunction—“but” for “and”—opposes Basil’s words against his “expression of perplexity”, suggesting that Basil is able to maintain a degree of composure, at least in his speech, if not his expression. The other, more obvious changes shift the emotional tenor of Lord Henry’s speech and action. Rather than “murmur”, Lord Henry “continue[s]”; and rather than “look”, he “glance[s]” at Basil. These alterations, which might appear insignificant when isolated, together work to further neutralize the tension and sense of mutual understanding that originally permeates their exchange.

A second revision that similarly tempers the scene’s emotional energy occurs on the next page, when Basil is on the verge of revealing the reasons behind his attraction for Dorian. The original dialogue proceeds, “Lord Henry felt as if he could hear Basil Hallward’s heart beating, and he heard his own breath, with a sense almost of fear. ‘Yes. There is very little to tell you,’ whispered Hallward, ‘and I am afraid you will be disappointed. Two months ago...’” (MS 10). The manuscript’s revised version reads, “Lord Henry felt as if he could hear Basil Hallward’s heart beating, and he wondered what was coming. ‘Yes. There is very little to tell you,’ whispered Hallward rather bitterly, ‘and I dare say you will be disappointed. Two months ago...’” (MS 10). Here, rather than draw attention to Lord Henry’s breathing, Wilde mentions Lord Henry’s “wonder” about Basil’s pending explanation, shifting Lord Henry’s sense of anticipation from fear to curiosity. He also makes slight changes to Basil’s delivery: in the revised version, Basil speaks “rather bitterly” and uses the expression “I dare say” rather than “I am afraid”. Both changes diminish the confessional tone that originally precedes Basil’s revelation about Dorian Gray. This exchange is again revised in *DG90* and *DG91*, where Wilde first replaces some of Basil’s dialogue, and then cuts it altogether. In *DG90*, Wilde removes the following line, “‘Yes. There is very little to tell you,’ whispered Hallward rather bitterly, ‘and I dare say you will be disappointed’”, and adds, instead, “‘Well this is incredible,’ repeated Hallward, rather bitterly,—incredible to me at times. I don’t know what it means. The story is simply this” (Gillespie 189). The effect is to further diminish the tension and confessional tone and replace it with a sense of exasperation and confusion. In revising for the book, these intermediate lines are removed altogether, and the narration cuts straight to Basil’s story. The final version proceeds, “Lord Henry felt as if he could hear Basil Hallward’s heart beating, and he wondered what was coming. ‘The story is simply this. Two months ago…’” (Gillespie 9). Here, in shortening the pause between Lord Henry’s anticipation and the start of Basil’s story, the revisions do away entirely with Basil’s expressions of a troubled interiority. The revised scene proceeds on a more neutral pacing, as opposed to the earlier versions, where Basil’s dialogue is preceded by tension or anguish. By reducing the dramatic valence of the exchange, the revisions diminish the intimacy between the two friends.

In addition to allaying the emotional intensity in the dialogue between Basil and Lord Henry, Wilde also removes suggestions of jealousy between them. At the end of the first chapter, Basil implores Lord Henry in vague terms to abstain with regard to Dorian. Although the full meaning of Basil’s request emerges in Lord Henry’s response, Wilde’s continual revisions alter Basil’s connotation, and the meaning therefore changes from version to version. The original version reads:

‘Don’t take away from me the one person that makes life lovely for me. Mind, Harry, I trust you.’ He spoke very slowly, and the words seemed wrung out of him, almost against his will.

‘I don’t suppose I shall care for him, and I am quite sure he won’t care for me,’ replied Lord Henry smiling, and he took Hallward by the arm, and almost led him into the house. (MS 27, 27B, 28)

In this dialogue, the meaning of Basil’s request—“Don’t take [Dorian] away from me”—reveals itself in Lord Henry’s assurance that neither he nor Dorian shall “care for” each other, suggesting that Basil’s anxiety is about maintaining Dorian’s affection. This response characterizes Basil’s possessiveness over Dorian as a jealous one. However, the source of Basil’s anxiety changes with the next revision, where Wilde gives him more lines of explanation and accordingly alters Lord Henry’s response. The revision thus proceeds:

‘Don’t take away from me the one person that makes life absolutely lovely to me, and that gives my art whatever wonder or charm it possesses. Mind. Harry, I trust you.’ He spoke very slowly, and the words seemed wrung out of him almost against his will.

‘What nonsense you talk,’ said Lord Henry smiling, and, taking Hallward by the arm, he almost led him to the house. (MS 27, 27B)

In this revision, Basil attributes an aesthetic value to Dorian. Here, Basil asserts Dorian’s importance for his *art*, giving it “whatever wonder or charm it possesses.” And Lord Henry’s response, completely altered from his original attempts to reassure Basil, is instead dismissive, rejecting Basil’s anxiety as “nonsense”, and ending the scene on a slightly humorous note. By portraying Dorian as an artistic subject and asserting Basil’s anxiety about losing that subject, Wilde evacuates the jealous tension between the two men. And by transforming Lord Henry’s emotional tone from reassurance to lighthearted repartee, the interaction loses its sympathetic intimacy. The effect is to remove the sense of jealousy between Basil and Lord Henry and replace their mutual understanding with a friendly banter.

    This dialogue is further revised for the book version. The changes for *DG91* work to solidify Dorian’s position as an aesthetic subject by removing any indication of Basil’s romantic or emotional affection for him. Once Basil attributes his anxiety to his painting, his jealousy for Lord Henry appears excessive, and the latter’s dismissal comes across more naturally. The scene thereby conveys a sense of comedy that is missing from its original in the manuscript. The final version of the passage reads:

‘Don’t take away from me the one person that gives my art whatever charm it possesses: my life as an artist depends on him. Mind. Harry, I trust you.’ He spoke very slowly, and the words seemed wrung out of him almost against his will.

‘What nonsense you talk,’ said Lord Henry, smiling, and, taking Hallward by the arm, he almost led him to the house. (Gillespie 16)

In this version, Dorian’s significance in Basil’s life is relegated to his influence upon Basil’s art. The book gets rid of the words, “makes life absolutely lovely to me” as well as “wonder”, and includes the following addition, “my life as an artist depends on him”. These changes enhance the shift of focus, from romance to aesthetics, begun in the manuscript. Accordingly, Lord Henry’s dismissal, rather than suggest Basil’s emotional or romantic feeling for Dorian, responds directly to Basil’s anxiety about his work. And the tone of his response, maintaining its humorous note from the manuscript revisions, here comes across more naturally. When the topic shifts from romantic possession to Dorian’s position as an artistic subject, Basil’s worries seem exaggerated, and do appear to be “nonsense”. The dialogue thereby succeeds in eliminating a sense of sympathy and sensitive understanding between the two characters, and turns a jealous tension into an exchange that ends in a jaunty dismissal.

Often throughout this chapter, Wilde cuts through individual words and replaces them with ones that are less precise and suggestive, or that distract from the original meaning. He focuses this type of revision on Basil’s dialogue, particularly when Basil speaks about his attachment to Dorian, his beauty, and its effect upon his art. Here, Wilde will trade expressive nouns with words that convey relatively weaker or less specific descriptions, and the effect is always to obscure or diminish the intensity of Basil’s attraction for Dorian. For example, in the sentence “Every portrait that is painted with passion is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter”, Basil replaces “passion” with “feeling” in the manuscript (MS 9), exchanging the romantic connotation with a more general one. Another replacement, which occurs in the revisions between *DG90* and *DG91*, also diminishes Basil’s emotional intensity. Describing his first meeting with Dorian, Basil admits, “It was mad of me, but I asked Lady Brandon to introduce me to him” (Gillespie 190). In *DG91*, Wilde switches the word “mad” for “reckless”, so the line reads: “It was *reckless* of me, but I asked...” (my italics; Gillespie 10). This change distinguishes the notion of mental stability from impulse control: when referring to his action as “mad”, Basil admits an element of irrationality that dominates his ability to make decisions. By using “reckless” instead, Basil acknowledges the irrational element as a deliberate choice, taking a greater responsibility for his action. In this way, Dorian Gray’s influence shifts from a dominating one that compels Basil almost against his will, to one that tempts him but ultimately defers to his volition.

Particularly interesting is Basil’s use of the word “Beauty” to refer to Dorian. In his revisions, Wilde replace this term with ones that appear to lessen Dorian’s mysterious appeal. In the sentence, “Suddenly I found myself face to face with the young man whose beauty had so stirred me”, Wilde replaces “beauty” with “personality” and he adds the word “strangely” in superscript (MS 13). The revised sentence therefore reads, “Suddenly I found myself face to face with the young man whose personality had so strangely stirred me” (MS 13). The replacement of “beauty” with “personality” allows Basil to completely avoid mentioning Dorian’s physical appearance, and the addition of “strangely” serves to mystify Dorian’s influence over Basil. Throughout the chapter, Wilde makes several more revisions of the word “beauty” when they relate directly to Dorian: on page six, he replaces “Dorian Gray’s beauty” with “Dorian Gray’s good looks”; and on page 18, he exchanges “the beauty of Dorian Gray” with “the face of Dorian Gray”. Unlike the previous revision, where attention is diverted from Dorian’s physical qualities, the decision here to replace “beauty” with references to Dorian’s “face” or his “good looks”, while maintaining the emphasis on the physical, also mutes the suggestive power of “beauty” in the abstract. In doing so, it rids the text from the connotations that generally accompany “Beauty,” including the ideal, the charming, and the alluring, to instead convey more particular and muted descriptions of body parts (the “face”) or visual attractiveness (“good looks”). By redirecting the attention from suggestive “Beauty” in the abstract and toward Dorian’s specific attributes, these revisions evacuate his mysterious allure. In diverting attention from the enigmatic implications of Dorian’s beauty, they work with the previous revisions to diminish the overwhelming influence that Dorian holds over Basil.

Wilde’s revisions also work to reduce Basil’s intense, consuming devotion for Dorian and the resulting signs of his troubled state of mind. First, Wilde takes out two of Basil’s references to a fatality about his attachment to Dorian. The first occurs when Basil recounts his first meeting with Dorian to Lord Henry. In the original version, Basil admits: “I had a strange feeling that Fate had in store for me exquisite joys and exquisite sorrows. I knew that if I spoke to him, I would never leave him till either he or I were dead. I grew afraid, and turned to quit the room” (MS 12). In the manuscript, Wilde crosses through “never leave him till either he or I were dead” and adds, in superscript, “become absolutely devoted to him, and that I ought not to speak to him.” So, the revised line reads, “I knew that if I spoke to him, I would become absolutely devoted to him, and that I ought not to speak to him” (MS 12).  In removing the reference to Basil’s death, wilde mitigates the nature of his devotion from the self-consuming to the merely full or complete. Interestingly, while this line appears in the *Lippincott’s* version of the story, it is completely omitted from *DG91*. The passage here reads: “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” (Gillespie 10).  Wilde may have removed the line due to its awkward, slightly repetitive phrasing, or he may have meant to completely eliminate the suggestion about Dorian’s influence over Basil. Either way, it remains clear that the revision is driven, at least in part, by a desire to reduce the fatal seriousness of Basil’s devotion to Dorian. Wilde again revises a reference to Basil’s death a few pages down, when he professes that “I could not live if I did not see him every day” (MS 17). On the manuscript, Wilde changes the line to read, “I couldn’t be happy if I didn’t see him every day” (MS 17). Replacing the word “live” with “happy,” Wilde again avoids admitting the extent to which Dorian has influenced Basil. Like the previous revision, this one exchanges the question of life and death, suggesting inevitability and doom, for one of emotional fulfillment.

Closer to the end of the chapter, Wilde deletes an entire passage describing the masochistic and jealous qualities of Basil’s attachment. When explaining to Lord Henry the nature of his devotion, Basil confesses:

‘...I feel, Harry, that I have given away my whole soul to someone seems to take a real delight in giving me pain. I seem quite adjusted to it. I can imagine myself doing it. But not to him, not to him. Once or twice we have been away together, then I have had him all to myself. I am horribly jealous of him of course. I never let him talk to me of the people he knows. I like to isolate him from the rest of life, and to think that he absolutely belongs to me. He does not, I know. But it gives me pleasure to think that he does, Harry!’ (MS 23)

In the manuscript, Wilde crosses out everything after “a real delight in giving me pain”, including “But it gives me pleasure to think it does, Harry!” In doing so, he removes suggestions of Basil’s complicity in his suffering—“I seem quite adjusted to it”—and his dominating jealousy—“I never let him talk to me of the people he knows”. By withdrawing these lines, Wilde stifles the destructive connotations of Basil’s devotion to Dorian.

    The passage is further revised in *DG90,* where Wilde rearranges lines and cuts them. In *DG90*, it reads:

Now and then, however, he is horribly thoughtless, and seems to take a real delight in giving me pain. Then I feel, Harry, that I have given away my whole soul to some one who treats it as if it were a flower to put in his coat, a bit of decoration to charm his vanity, an ornament for a summer’s day. (Gillespie 194)

Wilde here deletes a series of lines from the manuscript that describe Basil’s possessiveness and his sense of complicity in his suffering. In *DG90*, the passage maintains a few hints about Basil’s suffering—“giving me pain”—but he emphasizes Dorian’s response—his frivolous regard for Basil’s affection, “as if it were a flower to put in his coat, a bit of decoration to charm his vanity, an ornament for a summer’s day” (MS 23). The revision shifts the focus away from Basil’s tortured and jealous attachment to Dorian, and toward Dorian’s careless regard for his devotion. In this way, Wilde diminishes the serious and destructive effects of Basil’s attachment and instead emphasizes Dorian’s oblivious attitude toward him.

My final example concerns a longer passage that was heavily revised in the manuscript and book versions of the story. The development of this passage over time crystallizes the various patterns of revision seen so far—removing signs of physical intimacy and jealousy, diminishing tension in dialogue, and emphasizing Dorian as an aesthetic object. The passage in the manuscript bears quoting in full. Prior to any revisions, it proceeds:

‘You remember that landscape of mine… 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, and as he leaned across to look at it, his cheek just brushed my cheek. The world becomes young to me when I hold his hand, as when I ask him the [indecipherable].’

‘Basil, this is [indecipherable] you must not talk [indecipherable]  [indecipherable] his power, [indecipherable]  to make yourself the [indecipherable] slave! It is worse than wicked, it is silly. I hate Dorian Gray.’

Hallward got up from the seat, and walked up and down the garden. A curious smile curled his lips. He seemed like a man in a dream. After some time he came back. ‘You don’t understand, Harry…’ he said. ‘Dorian Gray is merely to me a motive in art. He is never more present in my work then when no image of him is there. He is simply a suggestion, as I have said, of a new manner. I see him in the curves of certain lines, in the loveliness and subtleties of certain colours. That is all.’

‘Then why won’t you exhibit his picture?’

‘Because I have put into it the romance of which I have never dared to speak to him. He knows nothing about it, but the world  [indecipherable] guess it, where there is merely love, they would see something evil, where there is spectacular passion, they would suggest something vile.’ (MS 20-21)

Many of these lines are crossed out, some so heavily, that entire phrases are undecipherable, as indicated by the tags. What remains legible, however, suffices to draw some conclusions about Wilde’s revision practice. In the first paragraph, the section from “and as he leaned across” to the end of the paragraph is crossed out in a likely attempt to remove evidence of physical intimacy (“his cheek just brushed my cheek”) and suggestions of romance (“the world becomes young to me when I hold his hand”). While some of this paragraph is legible, the next one, by contrast, is almost completely blotted out. From what I can gather, it consists mostly of Lord Henry’s condemnatory and jealous protestations— “his power”, “to make yourself the… slave!”, and “I hate Dorian Gray”. In striking through these lines, Wilde obscures Lord Henry’s exasperation about Basil’s surrender to Dorian’s charms. Most of the third paragraph eludes erasure, and is preserved in the manuscript: here, Basil finally explains the precise influence that Dorian has upon his art—as an ideal that inspires and stimulates beauty in the natural world. In the final paragraph, Wilde again obscures much of language, particularly this revelatory line: “where there is merely love, they would see something evil, where there is spectacular passion, they would suggest something vile”. With this admission, Basil’s meaning throughout the passage attains clarity: Dorian Gray inspires a powerful, romantic attraction in Basil that suffuses all of his work with beauty and wonder. This message, however, is heavily obscured by the revisions on the manuscript, where indications of physical intimacy, Lord Henry’s condemnation, and the depth of Basil’s love and passion are removed. Despite Basil’s difficulty and suffering, it appears that his attachment to Dorian has positive, creative effects. The revisions in the manuscript, however, begin to detach this creative effect from the passionate cause.

    Wilde again alters this passage for *DG91*. This time, he focuses on portraying Dorian as an aesthetic subject by reframing the terms of Basil’s devotion. In the following excerpt, all relevant additions are written in italics and deletions are indicated with a strikethrough:

‘You remember that landscape of mine, for which Agnew offered me such a huge price, but which I would not part with? 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. *Some subtle influence passed from him to me, and for the first time in my life I saw in the plain woodland the wonder I had always looked for, always missed.’*

‘Basil, this is extraordinary! I must see Dorian Gray.’

Hallward got up from his seat, and walked up and down the garden.  After some time he came back. ‘You don’t understand, Harry,’ he said. ‘Dorian Gray is merely to me a motive in art. *You might see nothing in him. I see everything in him.* He is never more present in my work than when no image of him is there. He is simply a suggestion, as I have said, of a new manner. I find him in the curves of certain lines, in the loveliness and the subtleties of certain colours. That is all.

‘Then why won’t you exhibit his portrait?’ asked Lord Henry.

‘Because, *without intending it,* I have put into it ~~all the extraordinary romance~~ *some expression of all this curious artistic idolatry,* of which, of course, I have never cared to speak to him. He knows nothing about it. He shall never know anything about it. But the world might guess it; and I will not bear my soul to their shallow, prying eyes.’ (Gillespie, 13-14, 193)

Before turning to the revisions for the *DG91* version, I will first acknowledge a couple of significant changes from the manuscript that have a bearing on the more recent ones. First, in deleting evidence of physical intimacy, Wilde retains the line, “Dorian Gray sat beside me”, maintaining the influence of Dorian’s physical presence on Basil’s painting. Second, Wilde completely removes indications of Lord Henry’s jealousy and disapproval; he now responds to Basil’s admission with wonder and interest, “This is extraordinary! I must see Dorian Gray.” The decision moves the attention from Lord Henry, and redirects it to Basil and his explanation, to which Wilde adds significant lines. The addition in the first paragraph—“Some subtle influence passed from him to me, and for the first time in my life I saw in the plain woodland the wonder I had always looked for, always missed”—serves to concretize the nature Dorian’s influence with an example, by which Basil explains how Dorian’s mere presence can affect his art by permeating beauty. The addition in the third paragraph—“You might see nothing in him. I see everything in him”—elevates Dorian to the abstract. The possibility that Lord Henry might see nothing in Dorian implies that Dorian’s influence is beyond the visible, and has a spiritual significance. The additions in the final paragraph define the nature Basil’s of worship expressed by the painting. Rather than portray an “extraordinary romance,” the painting expresses a “curious artistic idolatry”, which Basil betrays “without intending it”. The revisions here reinforce Basil’s devotion as an aesthetic and accidental one, a creative impulse beyond his control. They reframe Dorian from a painter’s perspective, as an ideal object. Together, the revisions work to fully sever the erotic from the aesthetic, which were inseparable prior to revision in the manuscript.

Together, the changes between the different textual witnesses suggest that Wilde had a deliberate purpose in revising the first chapter of the story. It appears that the revisions work to obscure or diminish the homosexual and homoerotic elements by turning Dorian into an aesthetic object. They achieve this goal in three ways: first, by removing the negative connotations of Basil’s attachment to Dorian, particularly the consuming intensity of his devotion; second, by easing the tension surrounding his dialogue with Lord Henry, sometimes lightening the heavier moments with a touch of comedy; and finally, by emphasizing Dorian as an ideal subject for art, expanding his appeal from the romantic and the physical toward a spiritual influence that inflects his surroundings. In these ways, the revisions turn something troubling and potentially fatal into a celebration of ideal beauty.

I now return to my question at the beginning of this paper—might there be a possible connection between Wilde’s revision of the homosexual content and the moral of the story? The textual scholarship on *Dorian Gray* generally agrees that Wilde’s aimed to silence a moral that was too apparent, and there appears to be a similar motive in his handling of the homosexual elements. Joseph Bristow argues that Wilde aimed to obscure the moral from the story’s early stages, when he was preparing it for publication in *Lippincott’s*: “In keeping with the manuscript, in the typescript Wilde proved reluctant… to preserve any statements that might lend unnecessary emphasis to what might be viewed as the implicit moral of the tale’” (xxxvii). Bristow draws from Donald Lawler’s extensive work on the story’s transmission history, in which he argues that Wilde attempted to obscure the moral in each round of revisions, from the manuscript to the book version. In his book, *An Inquiry into Oscar Wilde's Revisions of the Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lawler explains that “the dominant motive underlying all of the important changes made by Wilde was an artistic desire to suppress an underlying moral which Wilde considered to be too obvious and, for that reason, distracting” (2). The solution, according to Lawler, was for Wilde to transform the moral into a dramatic element in the story. For example, by emphasizing Dorian’s corruption, Wilde could “make that moral function as a dramatic principle of character and action” (Lawler 23). Lawler demonstrates how Wilde altered the ending of the story in order to settle the ambiguity about Dorian’s sense of remorse. The new ending emphasizes Dorian’s monstrosity by removing signs of a sincere repentance behind his decision to destroy the portrait. In this way, the moral action could serve a dramatic role. According to Lawler, this revision makes the moral “subordinate to an aesthetic end” (22).

Lawler goes further, arguing that subordination of the moral to aesthetic concerns extends to Wilde’s treatment of the homosexual content in the story. He argues that Wilde cut and revised this type of content for two reasons: first, to emphasize Dorian’s responsibility over his own degeneration, and second, to improve the quality of the writing. According to Lawler, “By Wilde’s shifting his emphasis in the *Lippincott’s* and in the Ward, Lock & Company *Dorian Gray* from homosexual passion to aesthetic interest, Basil’s culpability is Dorian’s fall from grace is muffled and reduced finally to that of the author of the detested painting” (26). The result of the revision is that Dorian becomes responsible for his own corruption, assuming the dramatic role as the fallen one. Lawler’s second explanation behind Wilde’s revisions is more superficial. Here, he argues that “in most cases the offensive passages shown above in the notes were cut because of their mawkish and sentimental writing as much for their affront to contemporary moral standards” (65). So, from this view, the homosexual content was removed either to reduce Basil’s complicity in Dorian’s corruption or for the sake of style.

Nicolas Ruddick offers another perspective on Wilde’s treatment of the homosexual content as it relates to the moral. Examining the differences between the *DG90* and *DG91*, Ruddick argues that *DG90* is the “aesthetically superior” text, because it does a better job than *DG91* maintaining a coherence between the story’s two morals. According to Ruddick, while *DG90* creates a disjunction between the two morals—what he calls the “overt” and “covert” parables, of the story—the revisions in *DG91* fail to resolve this flaw. The two parables concern the dangers of vanity and the liberalization of homosexuality: while the overt parable “dramatize[s] the disastrous consequences of the preference of the beautiful at the expense of the good”, the covert parable, by contrast, “explores the destructive effects of the clandestine or closeted life” (126, 128). Ruddick contends that Wilde, in *DG91*, “chose the route of suppression,” reducing the homoerotic elements and including a preface defending art from the moral judgements of the bourgeois critic (133). Ruddick makes a fair point that, when read together, the two parables appear to associate vanity *and* homosexuality with corruption: “the appalling changes to Dorian’s painted image in *DG90* strongly suggest that the unspeakable practices indulged in by the protagonist are unspeakable in themselves” (129). So, according to Ruddick, Wilde’s later story emphasizes a moral that warns against the dangers of vanity at the expense of one about the liberalization of homosexuality.

Both Lawler and Ruddick argue that Wilde had to diminish the homosexual elements in order to further develop and highlight the moral of the story. Though Lawler asserts that the homosexual content was removed to emphasize Dorian’s corruption and for stylistic reasons, it seems that the revisions also work to remove the negative connotations of Basil’s attachment: much of the original content in the first chapter serves to emphasize Basil’s passion as a tortuous struggle, and the revisions mitigate this passion and resultingly present Dorian as an aesthetic object. In this way, the revisions appear to lay the groundwork for severing Dorian’s corruption from the homosexual or homoerotic and associating it more firmly with vanity. This result also accords with Ruddick’s contention, that the revisions emphasize a moral that warns against the dangers of vanity at the expense of a moral about the liberalization of homosexuality. It seems that, by tempering Basil’s passion and aestheticizing Dorian, Wilde is able to remove the negative consequences of passion and replace them with the ones of worshipping beauty. However, while the earliest version of the story appears to associate homosexuality and vanity with corruption,it also warns against interpreting passion as a negative quality.Indeed, Basil makes precisely this argument when he explains to Lord Henry his reason for not exhibiting the portrait: “where there is merely love, they would see something evil, where there is spectacular passion, they would suggest something vile” (MS 21). This line, struck from the manuscript, leaves one with the suspicion that Wilde may have silenced the homosexual themes for the same reason that Basil could not exhibit his portrait.

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1. All references to *DG90* and *DG91* pertain to the Norton Critical Edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, edited by Michael Patrick Gillespie. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Though this paper considers some of Stoddart’s editorial influence on the typescript, see pp. 40-54 in Nicolas Frankel for a more complete accounting of his role in preparing the typescript for publication. As editor of *The Picture of Dorian Gray: An Annotated, Uncensored Edition*, Frankel attempts to reinstate Wilde’s original intentions in the typescript, “representing the novel as Wilde envisioned it in the spring of 1890, before Stoddart began to work his way through the typescript with his pencil and before Wilde’s later self-censorship of the novel” (21). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See the Norton Critical Edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Michael Patrick Gillespie, for a selected list of full-length reviews from the *Scot’s Observer,* the *St James Gazette* and the *Daily Chronicle*, and Wilde’s responses. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)