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LGBTQ Literature:

How Social Changes Changed How We Write Queer Characters

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Every new year brings new discoveries, progression, and development. The world and society are always changing, always moving on to new things and trends. These changes often correlate with the things we create. Art, music, literature—they all have the power to influence, and be influenced by, life. The writing of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde was certainly influenced by the era and society that he lived in. His work was censored and changed because the content was not in line with the values of the Victorian Era. Oscar Wilde was a gay man, and many of his writings include homosexual language or implications. Because of the society's views, he was not free to write explicitly gay characters. But times are changing, and LGBTQ literature is expanding all the time. The societal changes and acceptance of the LGBTQ community that have occurred since Oscar Wilde's time have given queer authors more freedom to write about their experiences.

Many people believe that there is a connection between life and the things we create. It is true that life and art seem to go hand in hand, and there have been many hypotheses about the relationship between society and art, and how they function in relation to one another. The main theories are that literature is a reflection of society and that literature is a controlling factor of society, and that literature works to maintain and uphold the already existing social order (Albrecht 425). The reflection theory claims that “Literature has been thought to reflect economics, family relationships, climate and landscapes, attitudes, morals, races, social classes, political events, wars, religion...” (Albrecht 426). According to this theory, literature functions as a mirror to show and reflect aspects of society and culture. By this definition, we can assume that as the values and structures of society change, the literature we write will change in order to reflect society. From a different angle, literature has a way of shaping and influencing society. Ruth A. Inglis describes the basis of social control theory as, “Related to literature are a passive suggestibility in readers and a dynamic power inherent in words” (526). According to this view

of the theory, literature has the ability to influence and shape the way that society thinks and acts. One of the most prominent examples of this is found in the use of political propaganda, but it can also be seen with creative fiction. Another perspective of social control theory is that literature, and art in general do not cause societal changes but has the power to uphold and reinforce the values and systems that are already in place.

One instance of society's influence on literature is Oscar Wilde's publishing of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde first submitted the typescript of his novel to be published in a magazine in 1890, where it was quickly intercepted by the magazine's editor (Frankel ix). The editor, J.M. Stoddart, worried that the novel would shock readers due to homosexual language so he, "...struck words, phrases, and whole sentences from Wilde's typescript" (Frankel ix). The Victorian Era was a difficult time to be involved with someone of the same sex, as it was deemed a crime at the time. Homosexuality, or sodomy as it was referred to, was criminalized, and deemed punishable by death by Henry VIII in 1533, and it wasn't until 1861 that the maximum sentence was changed to life imprisonment (Gleeson 337). Because of these views on homosexuality, Stoddart felt that he must make changes to Wilde's typescript in order to make it more palatable for Victorian society to accept. Many of the changes made were those of any scenes that may have implied romantic feelings between Basil Hallward and Dorian. In the 1890 version of the novel, Basil literally admits his feelings for Dorian:

I see you did. Don't speak. Wait till you hear what I have to say. It is quite true that I have worshipped you with far more romance of feeling than a man usually gives to a friend. Somehow, I had never loved a woman. I suppose I never had time. Perhaps, as Harry says, a really 'grande passion' is the privilege of those who have nothing to do, and that is the use of the idle classes in a country. Well, from the moment I met you, your

personality had the most extraordinary influence over me, I quite admit that I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly. (Wilde 51)

In the 1891 edition that was published, Basil's speech to Dorian was quite different:

I see you did. Don't speak. Wait till you hear what I have to say. Dorian, from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I was dominated, soul, brain, and power, by you. You became to me the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream. I worshipped you. (Wilde 91)

The original version of the novel shows Basil admitting to having romantic feelings for Dorian and admitting that he's never been in love with a woman. In the published version, however, those lines were removed from the text in order to downplay the homosexual content in the novel. The second version also plays off Basil's feelings for Dorian by making it seem as if he just admires him from an artist's standpoint. These changes, among many others, were made to the novel without Wilde's knowledge, and he didn't even know about the changes until after it was officially published (Frankel x). Wilde had no say in the matter of how his work was edited or changed. He was censored for writing about topics that were too scandalous or different for the people of Victorian society to accept. As a known gay man, it makes sense as to why Wilde would try to include romance between men in his writing. Because of the society that he was living in, he could not explicitly write about homosexual relationships without it being censored.

Three trials were held for Oscar Wilde in the 1890's. The first trial was a libel case that Wilde was presenting against the Marquis of Queensberry, who had accused Wilde of being a sodomite (Appleman 995). Wilde ultimately lost the libel case but was immediately arrested for gross indecency and brought to trial once again, this time ending in a hung jury. At the end of his third

trial, Wilde was convicted of the charges and was sentenced to two years hard labor (Appleman 995). One of the pieces of evidence brought against Wilde in his third trial was the work he had written, specifically *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Appleman 996). The evidence was meant to convince a jury that Wilde's writings were a reflection of his own life, "Wilde's writings were transformed into an assertion that his sexual practices were not only necessary public knowledge but also a reflection of his own life. Wilde's own writings were neatly co-opted by his accusers and turned against him" (Appleman 996). The way that Wilde's writings were used against him in his trial show just how seriously the Victorians took the "criminal" act of sodomy. Even vaguely homosexual writings were enough to convince people that the act of sodomy had taken place. While it is true that Oscar Wilde was actually a homosexual, his trials and the use of his own work to prove his guilt gives a pretty clear picture of what it was like for queer authors in the Victorian Era. Not being able to truly express oneself and one's feelings without the risk of being killed or imprisoned.

Thankfully, times have changed since Oscar Wilde wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. While the LGBTQ movement still has a long way to go, there has been so much progress and reforms that have helped the community feel more accepted. As stated previously, homosexuality used to be referred to as sodomy, and it wasn't until the late nineteenth century that it became known as homosexuality, and was referred to as an identity (Stulberg, Introduction, para. 10). Since then, the movement has only gotten bigger and more inclusive. It was in the 1950s that the first gay and lesbian political organizations were founded. These groups were small and secret, and it was known as the homophile movement (Stulberg, Introduction, para. 6). The homophile organizations were instrumental to the movement, but it wasn't until 1969 that the movement really kicked off. According to *Funk & Wagnalls New World Encyclopedia* (2022),

Most historians trace the birth of the modern LGBTQ rights movement to a 1969 police raid on a New York City gay bar called the Stonewall Inn. Such raids were common then, but this raid met with strong resistance from the gay community. Bar patrons began a riot that lasted several days and helped mobilize gay communities in North America, as well as in Australia and Europe. After Stonewall, gay-rights activists created new organizations and developed many political strategies still used today. (History of LGBTQ Rights, para. 2)

This raid sparked a new wave of LGBTQ development, with over 1,000 different organizations being created after the event (Stulberg, Introduction, para. 7). Other big milestones in the LGBTQ movement include laws against homosexual conduct being shut down in 2003 and the 2015 Supreme Court ruling that made same-sex marriages legal in every U.S. state (*Funk & Wagnalls New World Encyclopedia*, History of LGBTQ Rights, para. 3-4). All of these events have moved society into a new age of acceptance and have opened the door for new opportunities and more diversity, including what we see in different forms of media.

One major area of media that has shown growth and diversity is literature, specifically the young adult genre of literature. The beginning of YA LGBTQ literature is attributed to the year 1969, and only 11 LGBT YA books were published throughout the entirety of the 70s (Garden 2014). While the beginning of representation for LGBT people in literature is an important part of the movement, the representation was not completely helpful or positive. “In three ’70s books, for example, teen characters act on homosexual feelings, but ultimately emerge as straight, thereby perhaps implying that teenage LG relationships are just ‘phases’ or ‘crushes’” (Garden 2014). The characters were being represented, but the books still didn’t seem to take homosexuality seriously. Instead, they treated it as a temporary thing, something that would be outgrown or moved on from. Many of the other books published at the time always ended with gay or lesbian

characters having tragic endings such as death after they acted on their homosexual feelings (Garden 2014). These books didn't give characters a happy ending, and made it seem as if they needed to be punished for their homosexual feelings. As the decades progressed, however, more and more LGBT novels were being published with less tragic or harmful endings for the characters. Much of the books that were published in the 80s portrayed stories of LGBT characters coming out, or characters dealing with someone in their life coming out, and the 90s brought multiple books written that dealt with the AIDS epidemic (Garden 2014). Every decade seems to bring about more change and representation within LGBTQ literature, and it continues into the 2000s.

The 2000s have brought a wider range of LGBTQ novels to the public. Finally, books aren't just showing LGBTQ characters as a sidekick or being punished with a tragic ending, but as the protagonists of their own stories with happy endings. LGBTQ literature has taken over the YA Romance genre, which is important to young people of the community. In a periodical about LGBTQ romance, author Pooja Makhijani says,

Books featuring characters with marginalized identities often highlight pain and adversity, treating identity as a burden. By contrast, several of this season's YA novels spotlight queer love, many through BIPOC protagonists. While struggle and survival are important themes to explore in literature, the authors and editors say, so too is joy. (29).

It is just as important to show the positive parts of being gay as the negative, which is the stance that many YA authors are taking in recent years. In the periodical the author interviewed Megan Ilnitzki, an editor at Harper Collins. She said, "I want readers to know that LGBTQ love is beautiful and layered and so worthy of being talked about in books and stories" (30). LGBTQ kids and teens should be able to see themselves represented in a book and be proud of it. They

deserve to see people just like them in the media falling in love and having healthy relationships. Author Philline Harms said, “LGBTQ fiction doesn’t have to be heavy to be meaningful...Fun, trope-y stories that center queer joy are just as powerful and important” (Makhijani 30). Because of the social changes discussed previously, it has opened the door for queer literature that properly represents them and their stories. Societies acceptance has allowed queer authors to thrive and openly write about their community with no shame.

The acceptance of the LGBTQ community that we’ve seen over the years has changes the way LGBTQ literature is written. When Oscar Wilde wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, homosexuality was considered a crime and could be punishable by life in prison. Because of these Victorian views on homosexuality, many changes were made to the novel so that there wasn’t as much homosexual language or themes. His work was changed without his permission, showing how seriously Victorian society felt about homosexuality. Further proving this, Oscar Wilde was imprisoned for sodomy just a few years after the novel was published. Many changes came after Wilde’s time regarding the LGBTQ community. The community began forming their own organizations to push for more rights and acceptance. They were eventually successful, as homosexuality is no longer considered a crime in most places and same-sex marriage is legal in every state in the U.S. Further showing how far society has come is the way that LGBTQ literature is written. When authors first started putting openly gay characters in books, their sexuality was treated as a passing phase, or their stories ended in tragedies that felt more like punishment. In the 21st century however we are seeing the growing trend of queer characters being written in happy love stories. It shows how far we’ve come from Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Era that authors don’t have to hide their queer characters or worry about being arrested for writing them.

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