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Manipulating the Portrait of the East: Evidence of Negative Cross-Cultural Narratives within *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Dracula*

Within *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde displays for his readers the ‘exotic’ indulgences of the East in the form of aesthetics, opium, and moral depravity. Within *Dracula*, Bram Stoker constructs a world that conveys the dangers of a mystically ominous force of the East that threatens the integrity of Western civilization. Through depictions of aesthetic exoticism, cultural imperialism, and the Western desire to sustain imperial control over historical knowledge, Wilde and Stoker create portrayals of negative cross-cultural narratives. Such negative narratives are emphasized through their characters’ appropriation of desirable Eastern cultural qualities and projection of their moral faults onto the constructed narrative of the East in order to remain unblemished and righteous.

Through *Dorian Gray*, the East is viewed as the projection of Wilde's artistic fantasies resulting from his disappointments with nineteenth-century British culture. John Allen Quintus, author of multiple articles concentrating on the works Wilde, suggests in “The Moral Implications of Oscar Wilde's Aestheticism” that this culture is seen through Wilde's collective works as suffocated by social realism enacted by the trivial routines of the working class (562). Wilde’s criticism is exemplified through Dorian asking Lord Henry to join him in viewing Sibyl’s performance of *Romeo and Juliet* at six-thirty to which Lord Henry replies, “What an

hour! It will be like having a meat-tea, or reading an English novel” (62). The awareness of an English tendency to schedule consumption of culture is reinforced within “The Soul of Man under Socialism” in which Wilde resists against the English attribute of “swallow[ing] their classics whole, and never tast[ing] them.” In combination, these critiques expand beyond the idea of a shallow literary diet and extrapolates that English culture binds awareness of reality. Wilde thus turns Dorian Gray toward an aesthetic alternative within the East that offers liberation from the narrative of the British Empire and a separation from English conventions. Wilde, himself, conveys in one of his lectures that the East maintains aspects of an ideal artistic culture keeping “true to art’s primary and pictorial conditions” without the “burden of intellectual doubts” which characterize England (Wilde, “The English Renaissance of Art”).

Wilde’s appreciation transforms into exoticism as he stresses the East’s aesthetically sensual qualities hold a quality of mystique as Dorian “wonder[s] what there was in frankincense that made one mystical, and in ambergris that stirred one’s passions, and in violets that woke the memory of dead romances, and in musk that troubled the brain, and in champak that stained the imagination” (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 150). This exoticism transcends into Wilde’s opening paragraphs of *Dorian Gray* as his readers are made to visualize a vivid visage of Basil’s garden and studio that produce what Wilde calls “a kind of momentary Japanese effect” (1). The area Wilde gives for his characters to observe is strategically decorated by “honey sweet blossoms” and “tussore silk curtains” thus conveying illustrative synchronization reminiscent of “pallid jade-faced painters of Tokyo” (1). Through such a description, Wilde persuades the reader to take on an impressionistic way of viewing Eastern aesthetic objects by transposing sights onto an illustrative surface (Quintus 566). Thus, the literal space characters occupy

becomes a figurative canvas onto which Wilde exotifies reality by converting it into a sensual experience.

Given that Wilde's characters are preoccupied with an imaginary canvas in these aesthetic spaces they create, they distance themselves from the realities of life outside of their created canvas as they transform any evidence of reality into another sensual experience. For example, the presence of sound is transformed by Wilde as “the dim roar of London” becomes “the bourdon note of a distant organ” thereby maintaining the illusion of a sensual experience (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 1). In effect, Eastern objects are manipulated in Wilde's presentation to serve merely as a barrier between the dullness of everyday realities within England and the sensual experiences of imaginary art stripped of its cultural background.

Wilde's Orientalism, however, must be analyzed with his national origins in mind. Wilde notes the discrepancy between regional perceptions of art within his essay, “The Decay of Lying,” in which he conveys the Western conceptions of Japanese culture as “a pure invention...there is no such country, there are no such people.” Wilde goes on to build these conceptions as “deliberate self-conscious creation of certain individual artists.” Applying this in the context of Wilde's identity, his homeland of Ireland is misrepresented through the eyes of colonial powers and perceived as a culture best experienced beyond its geographical borders where cultural realities have the tendency of becoming abstractions (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 229).

Although Wilde acknowledges that the imperial lens placed upon the East can only be described and understood as an imaginary fabrication fit to the projection of imperial thirst, he also adheres to the idea that indulging in Oriental delusions creates an effect of escapism for the Irish. Joseph Lennon, director of Irish Studies at Villanova University, interprets the Irish gaze

on the East as a bearer of exotic freedom juxtaposed from the realities of colonial oppression within his book *Irish Orientalism: A Literary and Intellectual History* (262). Ultimately, Wilde's collective work suggests that such escapism into these Oriental abstractions gives the Irish a fleeting forgetfulness of the burdensome, forceful hand of the British Empire. Furthermore, the Irish's excessive indulgence of Oriental fantasies contributes to a separate imperialist gaze on an area similar to a gaze that oppresses them (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 178). While Wilde addresses the effects of strife under English occupation, the pervasiveness of cultural imperialism and appropriation within *Dorian Gray* exposes an adherence to a Victorian-perceived view of Ireland as a decadent, orientalized space (Lennon xxix) thus supporting the imperial exploitation of other countries and itself (Bhabha i).

Considering that Wilde's characters specifically appropriated aesthetic stylings from Eastern cultures on the verge of death or at the end of their golden age, it is possible that Wilde held the belief that Western artists hastily assume the right to appropriate objects of inferior cultural power in order to introduce the West as grounds for a superior, sensual artistic experience. Wilde's critical tone within *Dorian Gray* toward such a belief may have been implemented, as bell hooks criticizes in her article "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," to combat the idea that Eastern cultures needed to perish and sacrifice their riches so that Western culture could prosper through their demise (24). This may also be interpreted as a need for the Irish collective consciousness to develop an identity separated from England and made up of a conglomeration of Oriental aesthetic relics and remnants (Lennon 315).

As Wilde writes of Dorian's aesthetic appeal towards the "luxury of the dead" found "either in the tombs of dead nations or among the few savage tribes that survived contact with western civilization" (151), one can conclude that Western culture harbors the habit of

‘inheriting’ (i.e. taking) what these dead nations ‘passed on’ (i.e. left behind). As these remnants of Eastern cultures are stripped from their cultural background, Wilde uses them through *Dorian Gray* to aid in the manipulation of historical memories and influence them to fit snugly into Western culture, a tactic that late English and Comparative Literature professor at Columbia University and greatly influential literary theorist of the twentieth century, Edward Said, emphasizes in his book, *Culture and Imperialism* (xii). This snug fit manifests itself in the eyes of the West as the purified version of cross-cultural impressionist visions which are perceived through a frame dominated by preference for pleasurable sensations.

Wilde reflects upon such pleasurable sensations by using the existence of Eastern imports not only of an aesthetic nature, but also of opiates and other intoxicants. Within *Dorian Gray*, Wilde places his audience into a literary air through his use of imagery as his characters are enveloped in a shroud of overwhelming opium smoke and heavily sensationalistic Eastern aesthetics (1, 150). Eve Sedgwick, a major figure in contemporary queer theory and literary criticism, aligns Dorian’s use of opium and his compulsion towards sensualized Eastern aesthetics in her book, *Epistemology of the Closet*, to be representative of the dominating atmosphere of Western cultural hegemony actualized by political and economic power; however, by doing so Sedgwick narrowly concentrates on an Orientalism merely characterized by exchange in commodity and perhaps overlooks cultural significance. Dorian’s escapism into the desolate edges of London’s East End to an opium den—symbolic of an East within the West—is accompanied by the presence of crouching “Malays” and women who Dorian rendered unchaste (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 209-219). Through such imagery, Wilde establishes the prevailing sense of an atmosphere reflective of a harem where people of the East are ironically covered behind a green curtain—symbolic of Ireland—in a building named Daly’s. Moving past

Sedgwick's application, Dorian's experience with this drug can also symbolize the threat of opium's movement within the whole of England's population which, given the racialized history of opium, threatens the movement and spread of a racialized Other, a historical context that Michael Montagne, associate professor of Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science, supports in his work, "The Influence of Literary and Philosophical Accounts on Drug Taking" (230). Dorian's actions are conceptualized through the Western eye as a migratory threat of both the Western-perceived depravity of intoxication and sexuality; thus, both vices must be sequestered within the West and banished to the East.

These acts of sequestering and banishing are evident as *Dorian Gray* presents opium to England with a pervasive sense of exoticized dangers; however, it should be noted that Wilde's work is manipulative in that it is created in a way that insinuates that opium was introduced into Britain as a Chinese import despite actually being introduced by the British into China (Montagne 227). Given the international economic dominance of Britain in the nineteenth-century, it is also imperative for historical context to note that opiates were accessible and prevalent through the country but were only perceived as a threat when combined with the increasing presence of Chinese immigration (230). The English masses racialized opium as a "yellow peril" in reaction to increasing Chinese emigration, deeming the drug particularly malevolent when put in a light that was suggestive of racial mixing (230). Shifting across to *Dracula*, Stoker's literary depictions of opium use represented a duality of fear within the British public. Dracula functions not only as a character, but also as an embodied fear of racial mixing of blood between societies of the East and West and as the terror of invasion of Britain. Opium's appearance within Stoker's novel suggests that the drug has the power to literally turn Western

bodies into the racialized Other as symbolized by Mina succumbing to Dracula after taking laudanum and blood being the medium through which his foreignness is diffused.

Therefore, in order to maintain Western power and identity, it is imperative that Dracula is not only banished from the West but also executed. This execution of Dracula thereby acts as the execution of the embodied threat of migratory immorality. However, as Edward Said conveys in his book, *Orientalism*, the core Eastern threat to the West lies in its ability to connect with the past (35). Through Stoker's interpretation of the myth of vampires, there is a relationship between the region of the Balkans and political invasion as the grounds on which the novel is set "has been enriched by the blood of men, patriots or invaders" (Stoker 27). Through such an account, one must assume that *Dracula* holds a specific historical background of Western powers stifling Ottoman control over its Balkan territories in fear of the threat these territories carry (Porter).

Within *Dracula*, this historical background carries over political implications which are evident through the context of noticing interchangeable of narratives from different geographical peripheries of an imperial power (Lennon 373). Although the historical setting Stoker chose to convey relates to English demonization of the Balkans region, one can interpret that the surrounding areas of England that pose potential "reverse-colonial" threat—i.e. Ireland and the Balkans—are comparable through their peripheral classification and cultural divergence from their oppressors (373). Thus, *Dracula* aligns past political turmoil from the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries through the image of a medieval Eastern Europe lashing out against the modernity of the West and advancement of time. This impending conception of time exposes readers to an image of the West fighting for the preservation of a present state of order in defense against a political past. Therefore, *Dracula* represents the conflicting aspects of a history that

falls in a lopsided manner within the dominant Western historiography of the nineteenth-century. However, this history cannot be accommodated without implementing a crucial change within the identity of the West (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 247). In order to defeat the Eastern threat, Stoker's characters are plagued with the task of containing Dracula physically and pushing him back towards his domain within the East. Through such a task, Stoker conveys that geographical locality becomes a symbol for Europe's historical past.

This historical past is acknowledged when Van Helsing defines the trial of Dracula's defeat to those seeking to overcome the threat he carries as Van Helsing questions, "How shall we find [Dracula's] where; and having found it, how can we destroy?" (Stoker 209). Through such a quotation, Van Helsing implies that Dracula and the threat he encompasses is tantamount to his place of origin. Therefore, destroying Dracula is accomplished by destroying the place with which he intimately identifies—the literal soil of the East. Dracula's demise is defined in terms of physical boundaries and geographical location which directly correlates with the ending of the novel to extend and unravel spatially rather than chronologically. The repetitive temporalities given for Stoker's novel through the use of folklore and an epistemological premise are temporalities outside of a purely historical narrative which gives space for Irish and Balkan cultural transformation.

Thus, like Dorian's portrait, the manipulation of the East's political, militarist, and cultural historical presentation leads the development of the West's negative alter ego. Given that both works were written within a decade of each other, *Dorian Gray* and *Dracula* express a Western tendency of desiring separation from the degradation of morality resting on historical oversight. Examining the historical context in which these books were written expands knowledge of how the complex dynamics of power is related to perpetuation of cultural

stereotypes and misrepresentations of peoples. Furthermore, such study encourages better understanding of how Eastern cultures became a source of economic and cultural exploitation and of how Irish writers were connected to the Orientalist perspective. The result is a contribution to the mapping of literary history that promotes discussion of how Irish Orientalism provided and undermined imperial and colonial discourses.

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