

## A Wilde Scoundrel: Villainy and “Lad Culture” in the Filmic

### Afterlives of *Dorian Gray*

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#### Abstract

This chapter examines the intersection of villainy and male sexual politics at play in film adaptations of Oscar Wilde’s classic novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), predominantly (though not exclusively), Oliver Parker’s recent reworking, *Dorian Gray* (2009). I argue that not only does Parker problematically heterosexualise Wilde’s anti-hero but that the representation of male heterosexuality he offers reflects the questionable ideals of contemporary ‘new laddism’, a culture predicated on the celebration of sex, drugs, sexual exploitation, and violence. I suggest that rather than critiquing this negative expression of masculine heterosexism (and villainising it), the film instead glamorises the troubling behaviours of the ‘new lad’. As such, in stark contrast to Wilde’s original text, Parker’s film demonstrates the difficulty of associating villainy with particular sexual behaviours in the new millennium.

**Keywords:** Oscar Wilde, adaptation, lad culture, heterosexuality, masculinity, sexism, homophobia, *Dorian Gray*, film, villainy.

“Why go grubbing in muck-heaps? [...] Mr. Oscar Wilde has again been writing stuff that were better unwritten; and while *The Picture of Dorian Gray* [...] is ingenious, interesting, full of cleverness, plainly the work of a man of letters, it is false art - for its interest is medico-legal; it is false to human nature - for its hero is a *devil* [...] The story – which deals with matters only fitted for the Criminal Investigation Department [...] is discreditable to author and editor.

(Frankel, 2011, pp. 6-7, added emphasis)

In this damning review of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) for the Scots Observer in 1890, W. E. Henley, Wilde’s onetime friend, makes apparent his distaste for both author and textual subject matter. Henley’s assertion that Wilde’s novel engages with “muck heaps” enunciates his pejorative view towards the vices that make the titular Dorian “a devil” (Frankel, 2011: 6). The reference to a ‘medico-legal’ context is, today, recognisable as a veiled allusion to the text’s exploration of homoerotic (if not homosexual) desire, and his comment that the story “deals with matters only fitted for the Criminal Investigation Department” draws attention to how homosexual acts were generally regarded — at that time — as repugnant (Frankel 2011: 7). Accordingly, Dorian’s – and by implication Wilde’s – villainy, centres on sexuality, specifically, the act of sodomy, but also homosexuality more broadly. Of course, there is a distinct difference in how Wilde portrayed the relationship between homosexuality and corruption, on the one hand, and how that was (mis)construed by his tormentors, on the other. Where Wilde’s prosecutors suggested that Dorian’s portrait reflected how homosexuals themselves had ‘intrinsically’ corrupted souls, Dorian’s picture is, in a more recent interpretation, “an internalisation of what the twenty-first century would call homophobia”, and his attack on the portrait at the end of the text “reflects a desire to purge

the self-hatred imposed by Victorian culture” onto the homosexual subject (Andrew-Cooper 2010: 85).<sup>1</sup>

As numerous critics have noted, Wilde’s novel was published five years prior to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1895 which criminalised male homosexuality, and the example made of his life and work from the publication of *Dorian Gray* onwards are widely credited with instating homosexuality as a distinct sexual and social identity (Frankel 2011: 7). Indeed, the story of Wilde’s subsequent downfall– his scandalous public ‘outing’ (to use a modern term), his prosecution, imprisonment, and lonely death in a seedy hotel room in Paris in 1900, did little to sustain Wilde as a Victorian villain for the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>2</sup> Instead, these tragic events have made him “the archetypal gay martyr” (Elfenbein 2014: n. p) and, as such, today, just as Wilde is readily accepted as a queer icon, *Dorian Gray* is received as a canonical queer text.<sup>3</sup>

The enduring fable-like quality of *Dorian Gray* has enabled its proliferation across neo-Victorian mediums. Interestingly, texts such as Jeremy Reed’s *Dorian* (1997), Will Self’s

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this see the work of Joseph Bristow and Alan Sinfield.

<sup>2</sup> The role of villain in the Wilde scandal has long-gripped critics and social commentators. Although the Marquis of Queensbury’s criminal allegations placed Wilde – publicly – in the role of predatory queer villain who corrupted Queensbury’s innocent son Lord Alfred Douglas (Bosie), Alfred has also been dubbed the villain for his silent role in Wilde’s downfall. For more on this see, for instance, Douglas Murray’s biography *Bosie: A Biography of Lord Alfred Douglas* (2000) or N. John Hall’s *Max Beerbohm: A Kind of Life* (2002).

<sup>3</sup> For more on Wilde’s construction as a queer icon, see Alan Sinfield’s *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (1994).

*Dorian: An Imitation* (2002), and Vernon Bauer's *Dorian: A Graphic Novella* (2013) all retain an emphasis on the homoerotic component of Wilde's novel. In different ways, Reed, Self and Bauer not only extend but also make explicit the homosexual subtext in Wilde's novel. By contrast, film adaptations of *Dorian Gray* tend to resist the homoerotic components of the novel to instead over-emphasise Dorian's heterosexuality. Such sexual politics challenge Joseph Bristow's observation that "it would seem that we can once and for all celebrate what was referred to during the trials of 1895 as "Love that dare not speak its name"" (Bristow 1997: 196). Instead, the heterosexualisation of *Dorian Gray*'s afterlives speak to Thomas Piontek's assertion that claims of "seismic shifts in social attitudes towards homosexuality [in British and American film] are greatly exaggerated" (Piontek 2012: 123).

Notwithstanding this, William Everson asserts that "the activities of the bad guys tell us far more about the changing mores and morals of our times than a similar study of the good guys ever do [sic]" (Everson 1964: xi). Using Everson's comment as a point of departure, this chapter explores the nexus of heterosexual politics and villainy in neo-Victorian film adaptations of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Focusing primarily on the recent Ealing Studios film adaptation, *Dorian Gray* (2009) by screenwriter Toby Findlay and directed by Oliver Parker, I argue that the film's portrayal of Dorian's sexuality is not just heterosexualised (a notion which is rather problematic for *the* archetypal gay *ur-text*) but also in dialogue with twenty-first century 'lad culture', the received traits of which are heterosexism and homophobia. While Parker aims to replicate the sentiments of the Faustian parable offered by Wilde, the film's expression of male heterosexuality glamorises Dorian's questionable behaviour and downplays the villainy of his 'laddishness'. As such, Parker's reworking unproblematically accepts heterosexist hedonism, misogyny and, regrettably, homophobia, as requisite components of the twenty-first century new lad. This, I contend, highlights the particular difficulty in rendering male heterosexuality as expressive of villainy

in the hyper-sexualised context of twenty-first century culture, a point explored in the course of this chapter.

In unfolding this argument, this chapter begins first by considering the heterosexist politics at play in Wilde's novel and paralleling its contemporaneity in 'new lad' culture of twenty-first century in order to then critique such questionable sexual politics. I then explore how Parker glamorises female sexual exploitation, before interrogating how heterosexism is valorised at the expense of homoeroticism and homosexuality.

## 1. A Wilde Lad

Although feminist critics are divided over Wilde's misogyny<sup>4</sup>, Neil McKenna is in no doubt that not only was the much-loved Victorian raconteur a misogynist but that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* exemplifies how, in Oscar's world, art imitated life. McKenna suggests that the poor state of affairs between Oscar and his long-suffering wife Constance finds expression through the cynicism of Henry Wotton. McKenna observes that "The novel oozes a dislike, a contempt, for women and their feelings, and, significantly, it is Lord Henry Wotton, the only married man in the trinity of the novel's leading characters who is far and away the most misogynistic" (McKenna 2004: 216). McKenna considers how, in the novel, women are rendered as "bovine, stupid and dull" (McKenna 2004: 216). Henry informs Dorian that "no woman is a genius" because women are purely "a decorative sex. They never have anything to say, but they say it charmingly" (Wilde 1890: 54). Latterly, he impresses upon Dorian that had he married Sibyl Vane, "he would have been 'wretched'" (McKenna 2004: 216). Thus,

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<sup>4</sup> For a useful overview on the diversity of feminist responses to Wilde's misogyny, see Margaret Stetz's 'Oscar Wilde and Feminist Criticism' in Frederick S Roden's *Oscar Wilde Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 224-245.

Henry guards Dorian from emotional investment in women, encouraging him to view women as temporary and sexualised playthings.

Wotton's comments encapsulate the heterosexual politics at play in Parker's adaptation in which sexism and misogyny are not merely expressed but glamorised. Interestingly, the heterosexualisation of Wilde's novel on screen is something of a tradition in neo-Victorian adaptations. The advertising campaign for Metro Goldwyn Meyer's 1945 production directed by Albert Lewin, for instance, used the 'tag' line "Women were his prey...romantic thrills his bait" (Lewin 1945: n.p.). As Harry M. Benshoff notes, the story itself was "considerably heterosexualized [...] primarily through the pointed use of a normalised heterosexual couple (Donna Reed and Peter Lawford) who [...] survive to bear witness to his tragic, monstrous (and deserved) end" (Benshoff 1997: 112). Similarly, Dan Curtis's 1973 telefilm offers an expansive portrayal of Dorian's heterosexual misdemeanours, showing him openly cavorting with prostitutes *and* paying extra to seduce their apparently underage daughters, a questionable extension of villainy to paedophilia.<sup>5</sup> In adapting Wilde's text for the mainstream cinema audience, Finlay's screenplay continues this heterosexualised tradition but, unlike these earlier incarnations, the sexual hedonism of *his Dorian* can be interpreted in relation to the contemporary figure of the 'new lad'.

The figure of the 'new lad' materialised from a particular form of popular culture in the 1990s and across the early years of the new millennium. It moved away from depictions of the egalitarian 'new man' of the 1980s, who was "born of feminist demands for equality in

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<sup>5</sup> In his discussion of Curtis's telefilm, Jeff Thompson notes how the suggestion that Dorian pays prostitutes extra to let him sleep with their underage daughters was censored by the production company who felt it was far too risqué a plotline to be broadcast. See: *The Television Horrors of Dan Curtis* (North Carolina: McFarland, 2009), p. 99.

the home and workplace”, toward a more “assertive articulation of the post-permissive masculine heterosexual script” (Nixon 2001: 379). The emergence of ‘laddism’ and ‘new lad’ ideals could be found in the pages of so-called ‘lad mags’, such as *Loaded* and *FHM*, which David Hansen-Miller and Rosalind Gill describe as offering “a hedonistic, apparently shameless, celebration of masculinity, constructed around men's assumed obsessions with drinking [and] (heterosexual) sex” (Hansen-Miller and Gill 2011: 37). Such contemporary masculine behaviours are, of course, in these media outputs, valorised rather than problematised with readers (i.e., budding ‘lads’) encouraged to adopt such behaviours and outlooks. As Imelda Whelehan points out, the tag lines of these products – in the case of *Loaded*, “for men who should know better” – indicate how the objectionable behaviours promoted in their pages sanction “naughtiness” and “schoolboy vulgarity” alongside more objectionable expressions of sexism and misogyny (Whelehan 2000: 65-6). The effect of this contributes to the sexualisation of culture, normalising what might ordinarily be morally questionable and unpleasant behaviour.

With its focus on decadence and hedonism in the *fin-de-siècle*, Wilde’s classic novel is the perfect vehicle for what Brian McNair describes as the “bachelor hedonism” of laddism in the twenty-first century (McNair 2002: 77). Whereas Wilde’s novel was concerned by aesthetics and unbridled immorality, Parker’s Dorian is, like the figure of the ‘new lad’, concerned with drinking, sex, violence, “consumerism and fashion labels” (Benyon 2001: 111). The focus on eternal youth in Wilde’s Faustian tale remains in Parker’s production, but here its inclusion not only speaks to the age-old quest for beauty and immortality, but also to the importance of youth and affluence in a contemporary ‘lad cultures’. This context arguably makes Dorian compelling – or at least comprehensible – for a contemporary audience, but it also compromises the didactic nature of Wilde’s parable concerning the villainy of

decadence, especially when the virtues it appeals to are called into question in an era in which the hedonism of 'new laddism' is celebrated rather than problematised.

## 2. Desensitising villainy

In Parker's adaptation, Dorian's sexual hedonism is secondary to his criminal depravity, a point reflected in how the film begins, with Dorian committing murder. The opening scenes are a pixelated visual through which Dorian fades onto the screen where, visible only from the chest up, he appears mid-stance posing, perhaps, for his infamous portrait. This statuesque pose serves as a reminder that Dorian's villainy is masked by his beauty. But the serenity is undercut abruptly by the sudden jerking back of Dorian's arm as he brings a knife down on an already wounded body (for viewers in the know, clearly that of his friend, Basil Hallward). Parker amplifies the violence through by a grisly close-up shot of a knife turning in a bloodied chest wound and juxtaposed by an equally sudden return to Dorian in an almost identical pose to that earlier, but now covered in Basil's blood, using his friend's scarf to wipe his face, exerted from his maniacal labours. This horrific opening certainly underlines Dorian's metamorphosis and criminal villainy; the ease with which Dorian switches from handsome gentleman to murderous knave is captured through three quick shots that accentuate his baseness. He is not affected by his wrongdoing (a point signalled by the fetishistic face wiping) and, as the film comes to show, his actions *were* premeditated. Parker's opening thus casts Dorian villainy akin to that of a homicidal butcher. He is more *Sweeney Todd*<sup>6</sup> than decadent dandy, a notion developed through the extended scenes devoted to Dorian's deposal of Basil's body limb-by-limb into the Thames. This melodramatic Gothic imagery is entirely in keeping with the mode of Hammer-esque horror that Parker adaptation practices. But its effect is to undercut the brutality of the other

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<sup>6</sup> Specifically, *Sweeney Todd* in its Tim Burton film incarnation, released two years earlier.



behaviours that comprise Dorian's villainy and desensitise the audience to the immorality of his subsequent depravity. After all, if murder is considered *the* most serious crime in the eyes of the law (in terms of sentencing at least), where else does Dorian have left to go after this opener? Moreover, what is the implication of this for the novel's depiction of sexuality which, in the 1890s, was clearly considered the worst part of Dorian's wrongdoings?

The answer is that in Dorian's sexual transgression(s) plays no part in the film's conceptualisation of villainy. To the contrary, Finlay's neo-Victorian adaptation gives new meaning to Michel Foucault's conception of the repressive hypothesis; here, the Victorians really are no longer as inhibited or repressed as was once imagined. The villainy of Dorian's sexual proclivities is downplayed throughout the production and placed, instead, on a 'playboy' spectrum where he veers between roving Casanova and charming but naughty rogue. Bizarrely, this point is endorsed by a revelation in the film's production notes that producer Barnaby Thomson and screenwriter Finlay modelled their incarnation of Dorian on Rolling Stones frontman, Mick Jagger, a man who, according to his recent biography, is famed for sleeping with over 4000 women. So, it is unsurprising that although, as Peter Bradshaw notes, the film's "posters make it [*Dorian Gray*] look like a *Twilight* knockoff", the portrayal of sex onscreen is "socked over with gusto" as the "intoxicating effect" of the "doctrine of pleasure" whispered into Dorian's ears by Lord Henry (Colin Firth) are given explicit expression (Parker 2012: n.p).

Indeed, within the first twenty minutes of the film, Dorian not only seduces Sybil Vane (Rachel Hurd-Wood) but takes "one puff on an opium pipe and suddenly becomes a cold-eyed seducer", indulging wantonly in the debauchery offered at one of Henry's favoured brothels (Quinn 2009: n. p). At the brothel, which is styled as an orientalisised harem, Henry deploys many of the cynicisms Wilde originally gave this figure in the novel (such as his reference to a life of deception as necessary in marriage) as well as unveils the influential

rhetoric that predicates Dorian's villainy. In this exoticised setting, Henry's words are decidedly sexualised. It is while being fondled, for instance, that Henry tells Dorian that "no civilised man regrets a pleasure" and "the only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it" (Parker 2009: 31.22). Construed in this way, Henry presents prostitution to Dorian as a rite of laddish initiation. The orgy scene that follows reflects Feona Attwood's concern about the expansion of soft pornography into current representations of male heterosexuality in popular culture. By surrounding Dorian with three women, Parker demonstrates Attwood's observation that in contemporary lad culture, "hedonism is often presented as a form of accumulation rather than sensual pleasure" (Attwood 2005: 89). As such, this soft pornographic vision of licentious male heterosexuality posits Dorian's sexual villainy (if indeed it is villainy at all) as a mere playful component of his coming-of-age overseen by the tutelage of Firth's bearded Wotton.

### 3. Men behaving badly

However, the pornographic portrayal of Dorian's erotic awakening soon metamorphosises into a more guttural portrayal of the sexual exploitation of women, a notion exemplified through the scenes devoted to Celia Radley's debutante ball. In response to Harry's dare to liven the event by "raising a little hell" (Parker 2009: 44:36) Dorian not only sexually ensnares Celia (Jo Woodcock) – deliberately getting her drunk and taking her virginity, a scene revelled in by the display of Celia *in flagrante* with her hands behind her back and wine being poured over her face and into her corset - but then seduces her mother, Lady Radley (Caroline Goodall). Dorian's debauchery is heightened by the fact that Celia it is only after Dorian has finished with Lady Radley that Celia is revealed to be hiding under the bed. The playful manner in which this is treated is underlined by how Dorian's swaggering down the stairs and immediately mockery of the newly cuckolded Lord Radley, grinning (and

crudely punning) in front of him that “Harry has just lost a wager” in a “little game of double or nothing” (Parker 2011: 48:06). This scene reinforces how, to Dorian *and* Harry, women are sexual playthings. Reflecting the sentiments of ‘lad culture’, the men inform Basil (Ben Chaplin) loudly and in unison that their sexualised gambling has “no limits” (Parker 2011: 48:12). Female sexuality thus becomes interlocked by games of male power. The light-hearted treatment of Dorian’s behaviour positions both figures as merely men behaving badly (to evoke the 1990s new lad comedy programme of the same name starring Martin Clunes and Neil Morrissey) rather than sexist and exploitative villains. Such expressions of laddish exploitation are unproblematised. There is no villainy in Dorian’s sexual mistreatment of women, just narcissism and sexual titillation for both ‘lads’, which reflects David Hansen-Miller and Rosalind Gill’s concern that what marks ‘new laddism’ as distinct from other modes of contemporary masculinity is its self-awareness in offending “probity, good taste, and ‘reasonable’ attitudes to women” (Hansen-Miller and Gill 2011: 38-39).

The message that Parker’s film is promoting here is that not only does Dorian objectify every woman as a potential sexual conquest, but that every woman *will* succumb to Dorian. More than that, however, women are happily objectified by Dorian. The film literally visualises this point in another scene when Henry shows Dorian a group of ten women ogling the handsome youth from across a stairwell. Their smiles and suggestive body language indicate to Dorian (and therein the viewer) that they are waiting, queuing, even, for him to seduce them. Henry’s dialogue here, taken from Wilde’s original text, that “the world is yours for a season” (Parker 2009: 36:31) play on the notion of sexual objectification and possession. Interestingly, Parker follows this dialogue with a soft pornographic montage showing Dorian having sex in varied places, positions and states of undress. Women are thus a marketplace for Dorian, and Henry’s encouragement supplements his protégée’s promiscuity with camaraderie. In this way, although Parker retains Wilde’s exploration of

hedonism, he subverts the novel's moralistic agenda, a notion evidenced by the removal of 'The Picture of' from the film's title. This subtle excision undermines symbolically the importance of the moral reminders offered *to* Dorian by the presence of his degenerating portrait, and the struggle for good and evil played out *between* Dorian and the portrait.

Developing this, it is significant that, in line with 'new laddism', Dorian's villainous mistreatment of Sybil Vane is also diminished from detestable deception to mild cliché. Several scenes build up the relationship between Dorian and the pre-raphaelite-esque Sybil, showing the young couple enjoying, for instance, a picnic by a lake where Sybil gazes lovingly at the ducks (a hackneyed image of romance which does as much to infantilise Sybil as it does equate her with nature and innocence). The day ends with Dorian trying to kiss Sybil and her pulling away, claiming that she "should be going" (Parker 2009: 26:03). Perturbed by this rebuttal, Dorian desperately claims "...or we could. Or, you could...stay here...with me" (Parker 2009: 26:15). Barnes's slow delivery of the dialogue here implies Dorian's knowing crossing of respectable boundaries, something that recalls the earlier observation regarding *Loaded* magazine's strapline; Dorian does know better but, to borrow Hansen-Miller and Gill's point, the new lad "takes pleasure in not caring" anyway (Hansen-Miller and Gill, 2011: 39).

However, Dorian's knowing inappropriateness is supplemented by an appeal to Sybil's 'common' sense as well as heart: "we shouldn't be afraid of our feelings, Syb" (Parker 2009: 26:32). Initially silent, Sybil conveys that she understands the social and political implications of his proposal, responding that "it is just that I've seen other girls. They give themselves...I've seen what becomes of them" (Parker 2009: 26:35). Sybil's words here gesture to the ways in which sex continues to signify differently for heterosexual men and women, sadly reflecting Petra Boynton's view that "sex is something women do in order to [...] maintain relationships" whereas sex, in the twenty-first century, operates for

men purely within “a ‘Playboy’ ideology” (Boynton, 2003: 7). Nonetheless, Sybil’s momentary awareness is crushed by Dorian’s apparently more powerful albeit trite interjection: “I love you” (Parker 2009: 26:40). The inclusion of such cliched and unimaginative rhetoric works, however, to place responsibility on Sybil to sleep with Dorian because of his declared affection for her. Consequently, the scene then shifts to a bedroom where Sybil lies mute, naked, and looking somewhat fearful. The camera provides first a wide-angle shot of her naked where she is quite literally on display and only modestly protected by the strategic placement of her arm and hip across her breasts and genitals, before then moving to a close up of her face, which, uncomfortably, is progressively obscured by Dorian’s body as he mounts his conquest.<sup>7</sup> What is really important here is that any problematisation of Dorian’s corruption (by nineteenth-century standards) of a virginal woman is effortless and romanticised, a notion substantiated by the sudden change in tone in the next moment from grim seduction to a sentimentalised, post-coital image of the young lovers in bed. This shift is expanded further by reference to the fact that Dorian’s suffers nightmares concerning the abuse he suffered at the hands of his uncle as a young boy. By ending Sybil’s seduction in this way, Parker problematically undermines Dorian’s villainy by moving away from Dorian’s cruel ‘test’ of Sybil’s chastity and re-casting him from deviant seducer to traumatised victim.

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<sup>7</sup> With such a focus on Dorian’s sexual gratification, it is unsurprising that Wilde’s novel is one of the latest Victorian texts to be parodied via popular erotica. Indeed, given the popularity of Dorian’s near-namesake, Christian Grey, from E. L. James’s popular erotic trilogy *Fifty Shades of Grey*, it was perhaps inevitable that Dorian would be seized upon and transformed into a heterosexual S&M fantasy romance in *Fifty Shades of Dorian Gray*.

The manipulative sexual imagery at play here sits in stark contrast to the corresponding section in Lewin's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945). Lewin moderates the ill treatment towards women evident in Parker's screenplay by gesturing both towards Dorian's (Hurd Hatfield) knowing inappropriate behaviour, and coupling this with a more obvious focus on Sybil's (Angela Lansbury) agency. In comparison to Barnes, Hatfield plays a far gentler Dorian. Critics have debated the effectiveness of Hatfield's delicacy in playing Dorian. Richard Barrios, for instance, describes Hatfield as "a memorable Dorian, wearing his youth like fine pottery wears its glaze, with an extra shimmer courtesy of Harry Stradling's Oscar-winning cinematography" (Barrios 2003:195-196), whereas Shane Brown complains that

Hatfield's looks and performance deprive the film of what, in fact, could have been an ultimate selling point: sex. Unlike later portrayals by the likes of Helmut Berger and Ben Barnes, Hatfield is not as much sexy as sexless, not as much handsome as he is pretty (Brown 2012: n.p).

Brown's perspective here characterises how sex is *the* selling point of the later adaptations (Parker's in particular) and erotic parodies (the recent *Fifty Shades of Dorian Gray*, for instance), but also how sex has, until Parker's interpretation, played a more significant role in Dorian's villainy.

Importantly, just as Barnes's portrayal is congruous with the sexualised appetites of twenty-first century audiences, so too is Lewin's production and Hatfield's performance befitting the reserved sexual politics at play in the 1940s. Irrespective, Lewin persuasively conveys Dorian's villainy and impropriety with Sybil without sexism or misogyny. In the production, Sybil is not the Shakespearean starlet that Wilde proposed, but a gifted music hall singer whose signature song 'Little Yellow Bird' underlines her canny sense of agency and autonomy. She sings this song for Dorian on his nightly visits to the Two Turtles Pub.

Clarence Wainwright Murphy's lyrics to 'Little Yellow Bird', written specifically for the production, provide an analogy for the relationship between Dorian and Sybil. The song describes an exchange between a "weather beaten sparrow" and a beautiful "little yellow bird" (clearly, a decadent canary) that is "struck by Cupid's arrow" (Lewin 1945: 15:19, 16:17). The sparrow appeals to the yellow canary to share his golden cage with him, but the "common sparrow" refuses the space with "a bird with blood so blue", opting instead for life on "a leafless tree, [rather] than a prisoner be, in a cage of gold" (Lewin 1945: 16:18). What is important about these lyrics is how they map onto the sexual politics of Lewin's film; Dorian is the decadent canary and Sybil the agentic sparrow.

Pre-armed with this musical context, Lewin's portrayal of Dorian's seduction of Sybil thus retains a focus on his villainy by emphasising how his behaviours are cruel. After a romantic evening in which Sybil had met Henry and Basil (and they had approved of her, a distinct difference to Wilde's original text where they are dumbfounded by her inability to act), Dorian callously changes the mood by testing his fiancé's virtue: "what would you do, Sybil, if I should say to you don't leave me now, don't go home" (Lewin 1945: 35:09). Her response to this is telling and adds to Dorian's knowing cruelty: there is a close-up camera shot that traces her smile fade and sadden slowly, moving from a broad and buoyant gaze to a heart-breaking downward glance. Dorian's villainy is emphasised, too, by his cold repetition of his enquiry: "what would *you* do, Sybil?" (Lewin, 1945, n.p, added emphasis). The question, however, is greeted by silence. By framing Sybil's seduction in this way Lewin underlines the brutality of Dorian's experiment. Sybil is not as self-sufficient as the little yellow bird of her song, but she is also not as easily swayed as Parker's Sybil. Indeed, the subsequent scene emphasises this by subtly recasting this pivotal moment in *his* downfall as one of equal degeneration between consenting adults. By any feminist standards, this is not 'good'; Dorian *does* exploit Sybil through this cruel test (something heightened by the way in

which he discards her the following day), but where Parker shows Sybil's sexuality as vulnerable to male exploitation and the apparent power of romantic cliché, Lewin (at least) gives Sybil a choice in the loss of her virginity.

Significantly, Lewin emphasises Dorian's particular villainy here through an extended scene devoid of dialogue but presided over by the foreboding sound of Frédéric Chopin's *Prélude Op. 28: 24* (the 'Allegro appassionato'). Having been propositioned sexually by Dorian, Sybil moves to leave and return home, but she changes her mind, gingerly walking back to him at the piano where he plays Chopin's haunting piece, thus implying her sexual consent. The camera in this scene provides a suggestive shot from Dorian's seated perspective: Sybil's shadow enters the room before she does, and all that is visible of her are her exposed ankles as she lifts her gown to walk. The revelation of flesh is clearly not intended to titillate the audience in the same way as the fully-displayed Sybil in Parker's movie. But, coupled with the darkness of the shadow, the scene denotes Sybil's loss of purity *and* Dorian's descent into degeneracy.

#### **4. True villainy: scapegoating queerness**

Returning to Parker's film, the director and his screenwriter, Toby Finlay, undercut the homosexual overtones of Wilde's novel in two distinct ways. Firstly, any genuine homoerotic affection between Basil and Dorian is entirely one-sided on Basil's part and transformed into another of Dorian's exploitative sexual challenges. Dorian manipulates his friend's homoerotic feelings for his own ends. He kisses Basil to misdirect his requests to exhibit his famous painting. The uncomfortable tone of this scene is emphasised by the portrayal of the kiss itself. Here, in contrast to the numerous scenes of Dorian kissing dozens of women and girls, Dorian's body language is hesitant so as to allow us to infer that he is heterosexual (and not homosexual) and merely exploiting his friend's feelings. As Tim Robey colloquially puts



it, “Dorian has a pretty clear idea how to keep the portraitist Basil Hallward (Ben Chaplin) under his, er, thumb” (Robey 2009: n.p). Indeed, Parker displays this sense of manipulation by ending the scene with Dorian undoing the zip of his trouser (via a close up) and Basil dropping to his knees, imagery that conveys Dorian’s expectation of oral sex and Basil’s willingness to pleasure his friend.

This is perhaps the one point in the film where Parkers overtly equates Dorian’s sexual practices with villainy, but its effect is entirely homophobic since it centers on an abuse of male power. Basil’s dialogue afterwards underlines this point, as he tells Dorian, “When I look at you I find it hard to imagine that I know you are treating people poorly, even me, when I ask you the small favour to loan me my own picture”, words that also point to the long-standing notion that villainy is typically inscribed on the body and which Wilde’s novel plays upon (Parker 2009: 53:53). Interestingly, in his review of the film, Rich Cline also acknowledges the “bizarrely homophobic undertone” at play in “the only gay scene” in the film, but goes further in arguing that it constitutes “a power-play rape” (Cline 2009: n. p). Cline does not elaborate on this point. While I do not share his perspective here because, in my view, Basil consents to their sexual exchange, nonetheless the director’s decision to focus on exploitation in relation to gay oral sex is instructive, for it recalls Attwood’s important observation that despite the sexual permissiveness of new lad culture, ‘the real remaining taboo is on male penetration’ (Attwood 2005: 87).

As if endorsing Henley’s early equation of homosexuality with vulgarity, the scenes immediately following Dorian’s receipt of oral sex from Basil culminate in his being violent to another male partygoer. Fondling the chain around Dorian’s neck, attached to which is the key to Dorian’s attic where the infamous picture is stored, the unnamed man whispers to the decadent dandy, “I know the secret to your soul”, words that are both sexually playful and implicitly suggestive of the idea that Dorian enjoys male sexual attention (Parker, 2009:

59:12). Dorian overreacts violently, attacking the man by swinging his neck back and shouting at him “Don’t ever touch that. Ever.” (Parker 2009: 52: 24). The suggestion of these words is twofold. Dorian is (evidently) sensitive about access to the attic room in which his portrait is kept since the Gothic portrait - replete with falling maggots - bears witness to his sins. Moreover, this domestic space is also where the young Dorian was physically abused as a child, thus there is a suggestion of self-protection is implied in Dorian’s vehement reaction. However, because the scene follows immediately on from Dorian’s receipt of oral sex from Basil (it is the same hedonistic party), the words are also homoerotically suggestive. The reference to a “secret” plays on the suggestive coding of homosexuality at play in Wilde’s original novel (Parker 2009: 52: 15). But this is not the case here since the fierceness of Dorian’s rebuke serves only to dismiss the unwanted (physical) attention he is receiving from another man, and his violence towards him coupled with the vehemence of his instruction are a double entendre about Dorian’s body, specifically his genitals (Parker 2009: 52: 24). The effect of this scene, therefore, shores up Dorian’s heterosexuality, reaffirming him as a ‘lad’, while implicitly denoting his abusive mistreatment of Basil. In this sequence, then, sexuality is equated with villainy, but only in homophobic terms.

## **5. Concluding Dorian’s Terror**

Whereas Wilde’s text and Lewin’s film end with Dorian’s recognition of his own corruption, Parker’s film is entirely ambivalent about the extent of the protagonist’s villainy. Dorian departs from London and returns some years later, announcing to Henry that he is “tired” of life (Parker 2009: 1:07:56). This disclosure, however, comes only after the viewer has experienced another soft-porn montage of Dorian’s sexual exploits in the interim years, scenes that intercut sexualised images with willing acts of thuggish violence. The combination creates an uneasy effect that concurrently recalls the accepted brutality of male violence in David Fincher’s *Fight Club* (1999) and the absurdity of rapid sexist

montages in British comedy television from the 1970s, specifically as seen in *The Benny Hill Show*. Indeed, Dorian's comment that he is "tired" implies only that his hedonism has peaked and not necessarily any self-realisation of his mindless immorality, but rather through a new found apathy to his 'sex, drugs and "rock 'n' roll" lifestyle (Parker 2009: 1:07: 56).

Dorian's return to London also marks his encounter with Emily Wotton, Henry's daughter, for whom Dorian cultivates a growing affection. Complexly, it is through this relationship that Finlay and Parker elucidate the hypocritical aspects of 'lad culture', specifically the male double standard whereby women can be objectified at large, but female family members are deemed sacrosanct. Henry and Dorian fall out when Henry finds his friend asleep on the living room floor one morning. An annoyed Henry sternly rebukes Dorian, reminding him that "she's [Emily] my daughter [...] stay away from her" (Parker 2009: 1:287:11). The implication of Henry's words is that all women are fair game for Dorian's proclivities except for the daughter of Henry Wotton, suggesting that even Henry draws a line between behaviour inside the domestic circle and his 'bad boy' behaviour beyond the home.

Ultimately, Dorian dies at the end of the text, but he offers no real apology for his behaviours, thus his actions are barely condemned. It is suggested that, like Dorian, so, too does his famous portrait burn in his attic; we see Dorian stab it and the picture engulfed in flames. Yet the final scene oddly backtracks on that notion, showing Henry to be in possession of the picture *after* Dorian's death and its image returned to its original glory. It is also not explained how the portrait survives the fire. In a sense this ending—and particularly the portrait's survival—raises the question: what is the moral of Parker's reworking of the story as fable? On one level, Finlay's screenplay and Parker's film highlight the pretence in 'exposing' (Victorian) gender and sexual hypocrisy, because in the very act of villainy both adaptors and audience are party to the titular Dorian's prurience and are

voyeuristically complicit through our gaze. However, in the case of this particular adaptation this idea is precisely what the film embraces and what shores up the taboos and double-standards of 'lad culture'. Wotton's harbouring of the portrait, his playful scolding of it, and the final glisten in its eyes (the last shot of the film) function as a suggestive 'wink wink' to the audience; the lad is dead, but long live the lad.

Further, the decision to make Dorian's reign stretch into the twentieth century, and to make Emily Wotton something of a Suffragette (which her father frowns upon) also function as part of the said 'wink wink' to the audience. The implication here is that every age has its Dorian Gray and/or Henry Wotton, a notion which perhaps also makes the film not simply neo-Victorian but neo-historical (or ahistorical), implying a transhistorical constant of male license and debauchery. From a feminist perspective, Dorian (and indeed Henry) is a sexist villain and a film that glamourises such questionable behaviour unproblematically is culpable in this villainy. If, however, as Everson proposed, the role of the villain is instructive in revealing the "the changing mores and morals of our times" (Everson, 1964, xi), then Parker's adaptation suggests that future neo-Victorian reworking of Wilde's novel may have to find madder and even 'badder' ways of conceptualising Dorian's villainy.

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