

Theme

From Overt to Covert: using *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to illustrate how fear remains a primary motivator of censorship

Abstract

Censorship is a negative process. Taking the nature of a taboo, it derives its excluding force from fear and threats of power. In the responses to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian's progressive moral degradation could be seen as a threat to the propriety of the Victorian upper-class. Oscar Wilde, a proponent of the Aesthetic Movement, espoused the pursuit of the beauty in one's life but was simultaneously conscious of the superficiality of this hedonism. The foreboding was met with hostility from the Victorian public. When first published, the novel was heavily edited and invited criticisms of being 'vulgar and 'unclean' – reflections of the society's attempts to reinforce public morality and disengage themselves from the taboo. Wilde calls out on this uncritical reaction, responding that 'the books that the world calls immoral are the books that show the world its own shame'.

In this fashion, we see how censorship assumes that the avoidance of an opposing stimulus would preserve the status quo. However, this comes at a price of an uncritical society. The 19th century believed itself superior to any other and yet was falling victim of its own achievements (Wagatsuma, 2011). The fully uncensored version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was only formally published in 2011 when the taboo has long shifted away from 19th century morality. It is only when ideologies change that society can use such texts to critique the flaws in the societies before them and to map its progression.

In the 21st century, this pattern of fear remains in society today even as censorship shifts from covert to more overt forms. Fear now takes the form of disproportionate political correctness. For traditional media, exclusion of texts from the school curriculum and rearrangement of controversial books in libraries reveal an invisible control of information. For new media, content on the internet are flagged for 'inappropriate content' and removed without clear notice. While no doubt recent acclaim demonstrates how 'vulgar' texts are often censored only for a period of time, retrospection must not be the only respite. Quoting Socrates, an unexamined life is not worth living. An intolerance of criticism is unfit for this model of society today where knowledge has often been deemed as the currency of a functioning democracy.

By

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