

Homosexuals: In or Out? Natural or Acquired?

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Abstract

This article discusses the changing perspectives towards homosexuality through the explorations of three cultural works. Homosexuals, as a group, are identified as narcissistic and aesthetic as represented in both *Dorian Gray* and *Farewell My Concubine*. Moreover, the heterosexual binary perception frame, *that is*, the division of female role and male role, is usually transplanted to the perception towards gay couples, with one featured by effeminacy or femininity and the other masculinity. Finally, the nature of homosexuality is inquired in both *Farewell My Concubine* and *A Boy's Story*, yet with very ambiguous answer.

Key words: Homosexuality; *Dorian Gray*; *Farewell My Concubine*; *A Boy's Story*

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INTRODUCTION

In or Out?

According to Patrick Higgins, the civilizations of Greece and Rome had been much celebrated for their homosexuality (Higgins, 1993, p.19). However, it was the impact of the Christian thought during the twelfth and thirteenth Centuries that led to the persecution and condemnation of men who indulged in their homosexual desires (Ibid, p.45). The Nineteenth Century still

associates homosexuality with vice and sin. Oscar Wilde's trial and prosecution testified the general antagonism towards homosexuality of the era. The inception of Freudian psychoanalytic theory, however, ushers in an era when homosexuality is defined as perversion. Homosexuals are hence deemed pathological and degenerated. In the 1970s, with the publication of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault totally subverts the general conception held towards abnormality and sexuality. For Foucault, perversions are endemic in modern society, as perversion itself is a social construction. In terms of sexuality, Foucault argues that, contrary to the prevailing thought that sexuality is being repressed, a discourse has been fixated around sexuality ever since the 17th century. This, in turn, has created sexual minorities such as homosexuals. Therefore, for Foucault, as well as for some others, sexuality is a social construction which facilitates social organization and control (Foucault, 1998, p.9). For a time, what people do (sex as an act) defines what people is (sexuality as identity): "The Sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species." (Ibid, p.43) Consequently, homosexuals are stuck in the paradox as to whether they should stand out collectively to fight for their rights or coming out as a group while risking a lose of individuality. As Judith Butler argues:

[...] identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression. (Butler, 1991, pp.13-14)

For Butler, any consolidation of identity requires differentiations and exclusions (Ibid, p.19), which in turn, induces limitations.

To date, homosexuality has been perceived at one time a vice, at another time, perversion, and in more recent years, an identity.

The more homosexuality emerges as culturally central, the less sure become the majority as to what, exactly, it is: a sensibility,

an abnormality, a sexual act, a clandestine subculture, an overt subculture, the enemy within, the enemy without? (Dollimore, 1996, p.30)

What exactly is homosexuality? To unravel the complexities surrounding homosexuality may seem to be a mission impossible within the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, it is hoped that by looking into how homosexuality is represented in some literary and cultural works, truth may gleamingly emerge. The literary and cultural works to be explored include Oscar Wilde's *A Picture of Dorian Gray*, Kaige Chen's *Farewell My Concubine* (movie), and Edmond White's *A Boy's Own Story*. Major theoretical works such as Freud's *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, and Judith Butler's "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" will be taken account of in the exploration in response to the inquires about the nature of homosexuality.

1. AESTHETICISM AND NARCISSISM

Two entities, Dorian the person and his portrait, are sources of contention in *Dorian Gray*. Basil Hallward, the artist, and Lord Henry Wotton compete for Dorian's attention. From the start, Art is mingled with 'same sex passion', though we are never explicitly informed. The novel's claim that Basil's desire for Dorian is neither physical nor sensual further surrounds the story with mystery. And Lord Henry is said to have brought bad influence to Dorian, a kind of influence which is never explicated, which we can only vaguely guess. As mysterious as the relationship between Dorian and Basil or Lord Henry is the same-sex passion, which is also never elucidated in the novel. Despite charges of adultery, debauchery, luxury, greed, vanity, murder, and opium addiction, the very vice which is most contested by readers and critics are absent. Yet people all read that book for that vice and make Dorian, or interchangeably Wilde, the stereotype of homosexual. Sinfield points out:

Same-sex passion seems always on the point of getting said in the novel; its omission, indeed, seems significant. [...] 'In the course of his evil career he is proved guilty of adultery, debauchery, luxury, greed, vanity, murder and opium addiction. Only one of his vices is hidden, only one sin cannot be named.' Same-sex passion is the impossible point of presence, at which the text might spring into miraculous coherence. It was there, almost, for some readers at least. (Sinfield, 1994, p.104).

The vague and obscure implication of same-sex passion in the novel, however, is more explicated following Wilde's trial and prosecution. Hence after, it is impossible not to make the association. Queensberry's plea of justification asserted that *Dorian Gray* was designed and intended by Wilde and was understood by the readers thereof to describe the relations, intimacies, and passions of certain persons of sodomitical and unnatural habits, tastes and practices (Hyde, 1994, p.114). Soon, Wilde is

to be identified with his protagonist Dorian, so is Dorian identified with him: "[...] meaning is contextual, and once Wilde enters the dock and his relations with Alfred Douglas are invoked, the book is deafeningly queer." (Sinfield, 1994, p.105) Queerness, thereafter, walks out of mystery, and Dorian turns out to be the embodiment of this queerness. Subsequently, homosexuals, as a group, are identified as narcissistic, decadent and aesthetic as Dorian in *Dorian Gray* is portrayed.

Narcissism and aestheticism in *Dorian Gray* is manifested in Dorian's indulgence in his own beauty.

"How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But the picture will remain always young ... If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that – for that – I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!" (Wilde, 1993, p.22).

Dorian's proclamation that he would exchange his soul for unfading beauty manifests this decadent aestheticism. Meanwhile, Dorian is portrayed as being surrounded with an atmosphere of moral corruption, which is a further testimony of the decadence.

The book *Dorian Gray*, and more importantly, the critiques surrounded the book create a discourse around homosexuality, which in turn create a sexual minority to prosecute and condemn. Wilde's case serves as convincing evidence in terms of how texts are read contextually, and how texts and contexts help to construct a collective identity for homosexuals, which serves both as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures and the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression.

2. THE PERVERSE TURN

If for Wilde, the battle is against legal prosecution, then for contemporary homosexuals, the struggle is between norm and abnormality. With the inception of psychoanalytic theories, the general perception towards homosexuality takes a dramatic turn. Homosexuals, once being deemed vicious, are now perceived as pathological and perverse. The discourse of sexuality fixates on pathology rather than on vice. For Freud, human infants begin life with a sexual disposition which is polymorphously perverse and innately bisexual, and the perversion is to be renounced, typically through repression and/or sublimation, which serves as the precondition for the successful socializing and gendering of the individual. Therefore, homosexuals are deemed pathological for their failure to repress or sublimate their perversions. Freud further categorizes inversions into three major types, namely, absolute inverts, amphigenic inverts and contingent inverts. Also, there is the distinction of innate inversion and acquired inversion (Freud, 1987, pp.46-47). Why homosexuals are reckoned perverse?

[...] the abandonment of the reproductive function is the common feature of all perversions. We actually describe a sexual activity as perverse if it has given up the aim of reproduction and pursued the attainment of pleasure as an aim independent of it'. (Ibid, p.46-47)

For Freud, it is the sole presence of pleasure and the absence of reproduction in a sexual activity that characterizes perversion. However, for Foucault, the judging criteria are more of social constructions and institutional regulations. The transition of the perception towards homosexuality, nevertheless, marks the transition of the way that power exercises.

For the first time in history, no doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence; [...] Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate domination was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself; it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body. (Foucault, pp.142-143)

The fact that homosexuals, once being constructed as vicious and were prosecuted, as what Wilde had suffered, indicates the reign of law on legal subjects. However, the change of the way that power exercises is evidenced when Freud's theory categorizes homosexuals as perverse. By now, power exercises through taking charge of life instead of through the threat of death. Foucault's anti-psychoanalytic account of sexuality restores both sexuality and the perverse dynamic to history. (Dollimore, 1996, p.227)

Attitudes towards, and concepts of, homosexuality are always culturally specific, and are shaped by complex historical forces. In particular, the history of homosexuality is not the story of the progressive unfolding of some essence of homosexual being, belonging to a constant minority through history. On the contrary, the idea of 'the homosexual' as a distinct sort of being has not always existed. It is an invention of the modern world. It is historically and socially constructed. (Weeks, 1990).

Then, there is the film *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) directed by Kaige Chen which wins the highest prize in 46th Cannes Film Festival. The film, actually, bears striking resemblance to the book *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* in its handling of the issues relating to Art and sexuality. Two male Peking Opera singers, Deyi and Xiaolou, grow up together, and are trained for the Opera business together, find themselves emotionally involved in a kind of love which is unnameable on stage as well as in real life. On stage, it is well required for them to show affections for each other, for Deyi has to sing the part of a female lover as Peking Opera business then allowed no female to play a role. Off the stage, Deyi's growing attachment to Xiaolou has become a source of his artistic creativity. Later, when Xiaolou marries a prostitute, Deyi finds them gradually estranged with the intervention of Xiaolou's wife as well as Chinese Cultural Revolution, and his artistic talent dies out simultaneously (Chen, 1993).

The portrayal of homosexuality in the film is of much interest. The film, first of all, is the illustration of the idea that same sex passion is characterized by effeminacy. The actor who acts as Xiaolou is quite masculine, with his voice as loud as a bell and his movement quick and determined. In contrast, Deyi walks like a woman with his hips swinging around. When he drinks, his index finger holds up exactly the same as the nun in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* does. Sinfield interrogates the effeminacy model as inhibiting, rather than producing what we regard as gay identity, as it causes confusion. "If there are two partners in a same-sex liaison, and one is reckoned to be effeminate, what is the other supposed to be?" In *Farewell to Concubine*, however, it is the feminine Deyi that pursues the masculine Xiaolou persistently. Xiaolou responds sometimes, yet later tries to shun Deyi by marrying a prostitute in order to demarcate from Deyi. Moreover, the construction of femininity and masculinity itself is problematic, as femininity and masculinity themselves are unstable constructions. However, many people do start to identify male homosexuals with unfulfilled men seeking for fulfilled men.

Furthermore, besides being effeminacy, Deyi devotes his life to arts and beauty. His persistence in his pursuit of beauty and perfection renders him aloof among others. Naturally, in this pursuit, his aestheticism, his tendency of narcissism is betrayed. His suicide, upon the realization that art is impossible, so is love, is tragic as well as aesthetic, for he commits suicide on his beloved opera stage when his role in the opera requires.

Meanwhile, the film justifies Deyi's homosexual tendency by alluding to a childhood trauma – being sodomized by an elderly bureaucrat, forcefully. According to Freud, external influences do serve to induce homosexual tendency:

In the case of many others, it is possible to point to external influences in their lives, whether of a favorable or inhibiting character, which have led sooner or later to a fixation of their inversion. (Such influences are exclusive relations with persons of their own sex, comradeship in war, detention in prison, the dangers of heterosexual intercourse, celibacy, sexual weakness, etc. (Freud, 1987, pp.50-51).

Acquired Homosexuals, according to Freud, therefore, are people whose childhood trauma directs them to a fixation of their inversion. It is on this basis that homosexual identity is constructed.

Soon after the release of the film, there is the rumor that the actor who plays the role of Deyi himself is a homosexual, which accounts for his excellent acting of the character Deyi. However, this idea is soon dismissed by his fans, who are attracted by his masculine sexy voice as a singer and his sunny and handsome appearance. Interestingly, five years or so after the film is released, he openly asserts his gay identity, and his partner is also disclosed, being his childhood acquaintance. To claim his identity, he even appears as a woman, wearing long hair

and skirt in his concert.¹ Perhaps, he, like us, finds the 'essence' of being homosexual, that is, being feminine and being artistic.

The actor Leslie Chuang's 'Coming out' is the personal process to accept and demonstrate in public the validity of his own homosexuality. It is also a historic process, a process indicating the gradual emergence and articulation of a homosexual identity and public presence. Through coming out, that silence is broken, and the proper rights are asserted. Nevertheless, by coming out in public, they more often than not fall into a fixed identity. Homosexuals, as a group, are always identified as being effeminacy, aesthetic and narcissistic, which simplifies homosexuals. It is no longer conceived as homophorous and diverse.

3. HOMOSEXUALITY: INNATE OR ACQUIRED?

Edmond White's autobiographical novel *A Boy's Own Story* records his own perplexity. In this novel, Edmond White gives an account of how his involvement in homosexual activity gradually turns him into being a homosexual, that is, how 'doing' is transferred into 'being'. He particularly interrogates the role of knowledge in this transferring process. "But knowledge wasn't power. He was the one with the power, the money, [...] It was his power hat stupefied me and made me regard my knowledge as nothing more than hired cleverness he might choose to show off at a dinner party." (White, 1982, p.5) Indeed, knowledge is powerless in face of such institutional powers as money and political power. Rather than equipping one with power, knowledge serves to empower one, to regulate one. In the novel, the protagonist's conversation with the boy Kevin, who is his first partner of sexual intercourse, demonstrates his profound knowledge about sex. However, it turns out that Kevin is much more sophisticated than him in doing sex. More importantly, in Kevin's understanding, male-male sexual activity, in his language 'cornhole', is probably only a phase of life, a kind of life experience that every boy experiences and passes through:

The Guys back home? Guys in my neighborhood?
[...]
We all cornhole each other. You ever do that?
[...]
Guess you have outgrown that by now. (Ibid, pp.15-16)

For Kevin, male sexual intercourse is prevalent, it is only a phase of life that one experiences and outgrows in the process of growing up. However, for the protagonist, it gradually becomes more of an identity than an act. There is the growing association within him to connect

his homosexual act with his sissy appearance, which is the general construction builds around homosexual people, socially constructed through writings such as *Dorian Gray*.

Unlike my idols I couldn't play tennis or baseball or swim freestyle. My sports were volleyball and Ping-Pong, my only stroke the sidestroke. I was a sissy. My hands were always in the air. [...] My sister couldn't wait to tell me I had been the only boy who'd sat not cross-legged on the gym floor but resting on one hand and hip like the White Rock girl. [...] A man crosses his legs by resting an ankle on his knee; a sissy drapes one leg over the other. A man never gushes; men are either silent or loud. I didn't know how to swear: I always said the final g in fucking and I didn't know where in the sentence to place the damn or hell. (Ibid, p.9)

The Boy's Own Story also witnesses the protagonist's struggle towards being normative, which again, is a social construction. In the camp event, when he finds out that his camp mate is rubbed longer by the camp captain, and is even rubbed down the front, he immediately says, "That's not right," I said. 'He shouldn't do that. He shouldn't. It's abnormal. I've read about it.'" (Ibid, p.98) However, in the night, we witness the struggle he undergoes:

Even as I was pleading with him (to send me to the infirmary immediately) I was wondering what it would be like to live in this spacious tent with him. But why hadn't he noticed me before? Why hadn't he tried to rub me? Was I inferior to my roommate in some way? Less handsome? At least I wasn't abnormal, I said to myself, glancing over at his haggard unshaven face, at his profile with its shelf of eyebrows in the darkness bright with mercury. (Ibid, p.100)

In this scene, the protagonist falls ill, perhaps deliberately, which is a good excuse for him to go to the camp captain in the evening. The eagerness to stay with the camp captain in that spacious camp wrestles with the desire to be straight and normal. His desire to be normal is further characterized by the attempt to be a heterosexual. His date with Helen Paper, and his pursuit for her becomes a light in his life, which he thinks would save him from the destiny of being homosexual. With Helen's rejection, he finds himself doomed to homosexuality. And he ascribes his 'abnormality to the influence of his mother, who prolongs his infancy by babying him, and that of his sister, who destroys his confidence:

The more isolated I became, the more incapable I thought I was of resisting my homosexual fate. I blamed my sister and my mother – my sister for eroding my confidence (as though homosexuality were a form of shyness) and my mother for babying me (homosexuality as prolonged infancy). (Ibid, p.140)

The general conception that homosexual men are incomplete men meets challenges here. Much as the protagonist wants to get away from this construction, he finds himself tangled in it anyway. In the meantime, the problematic nature of homosexual as an identity is also manifested in the novel:

¹ <<http://stars.zaobao.com/foreignstar/pages3/leslie010403b.html>> accessed 02/05/2017

Once I read about a woman patient in psychoanalysis who referred to her essential identity as her 'prettiness'; [...] She really was pretty – perhaps I haven't made that clear: a sad blur of smile, soft gray eyes, a defenseless availability. She was also crafty, or maybe willfully blind, in the way she concealed from herself her own sexual ambitions. (Ibid, p.38).

It may sound ridiculous if someone refers to his/her own essential identity as prettiness, however, nobody would ridicule the assertion that "I am essentially a Gay". The identity perplexity accompanies the protagonist throughout his growing up process.

CONCLUSION

To date, homosexuality has always been a social construction. At one time, it is constructed as being vicious, at another, pathological and abnormal. To subvert the unfair construction, however, commands homosexuals to stand out as a group, which in turn, induces identity problem. By coming out as a group, homosexuals suffer from the loss of individuality. One solution proposed by Judith Butler is to use the name but have its signification remain permanently unclear: "This is not to say that I will not appear at political occasions under the sign of lesbian, but that I would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that sign signifies." (Butler, 1991, pp.13-14) Butler's proposal sounds reasonable, however, may not be practical to a certain degree. After all, what a word signifies are socially constructed, and sign and significations have always accompanied each other. Much as she wants to have the sign 'homosexuality' remain permanently unclear, reality would not allow her. Therefore, it is my argument that we return to sexual act its due privacy and mystery that it should have

enjoyed, which, as Foucault points out, had been adopted by Chinese and Indians for many years until recently. Foucault terms this procedure for producing the truth of sex as "Ars erotica" or "erotic art", which deems sex as a kind of experience and something to be kept secret, because of the view that it would lose its power and its pleasure if spoken about (Foucault, p.57).

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