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Petronius' and the *Satyrica's* influence on Oscar Wilde and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

The following thesis aims to look closer at the connection between Petronius' *Satyrica* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde was fascinated by Graeco-Roman classics having studied them in his youth, and I want to look at the ways in which the author was later inspired by the *Satyrica* when writing *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Also, I will discuss the differences between ancient Rome and Victorian London, especially in terms of gender and sexuality and how those issues are displayed in the two novels.

Method

I will apply Sedgwick's *The epistemology of the closet* and Rich's *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience* for the discussion on gender and sexuality. For the question of the legitimacy of Wilde's *Satyrica* translation, I will be using Boroughs' *Oscar Wilde's Translation of Petronius: The Story of a Literary Hoax* and also for some of its insights into Victorian times and on Oscar Wilde himself. For the *Satyrica* and Petronius I will apply Courtney's *A Companion to Petronius*, and also use it for some of its tidbits of Ancient Rome. For some historical context I used various texts to lay out the differences between Ancient Rome and Victorian London. I will address the *Satyrica* in its plural form, although some quotes will have the singular form *Satyricon*.

The *Satyrica*

Satyrica was a novel written in the first century AD under the reign of Nero, believed to have been written by Petronius, who was most likely forced to commit suicide by Nero. It is thought to be set under this time period or shortly before. The novel is encompassed by multiple fragmented episodes of a much larger work that has not been preserved. The story follows Encolpius, and his two lovers and friends, the boy Giton and the previous gladiator Ascyltus. The plot is quite loose and episodic and is more of a journey or a search, as they go in search of Encolpius' libido. The novel's focus on sexual escapades has made it quite controversial, but at the same time not as controversial as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Most likely because it was accepted that Romans had homosexual relations. (Courtney, 2001, p.5-12 ;Wilde, 2001, p. IX-XIV)

The Satyricon is part of Menippean satire, which mixes verse and prose and is seen as a kind of literary satire. Menippean satire is named after the philosopher Menippus, whose work has been lost. Also, Lucian is part of this satire with True Story, the very first preserved novel we still have. Menippean satire is especially present in the banquet scene, which is also the longest preserved part of the novel. In this scene Encolpion, Ascyltus and Giton are dining with the extravagantly rich freeman Trimalchio, who serve them all sorts of impressive food and entertainment. (Haaberg, Selboe, & Aarset, 2007, p. 126-128)

The Picture of Dorian Grey

The Picture of Dorian Gray was first published in 1890 to a generally poor reception, especially because of its homoerotic undertones. *The picture of Dorian Grey* follows the titular character as well as Lord Henry and the painter of the picture: Basil. Dorian Grey is a young wealthy man who become infatuated by his own beauty after seeing a picture of his likeness. Crushed by the thought of his looks deteriorating by age, he commits a pact to the picture so the picture of him will go grow old in his stead. "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, 2001, p.24) His wish of course comes true, and the picture grows old, but not him. As it becomes uglier and uglier, yet he stays the same. Not until he destroys the picture, is the spell broken and they switch once again, making for Dorian's demise. (Wilde, 2001, p. ix-xi)

The picture of Dorian Grey is considered a part of aestheticism, which was a response to symbolism and the focus inward on the soul. Something *The Picture of Dorian Grey* is preoccupied on with its focus on beauty and the decay of Dorian's soul symbolised in the deterioration of the picture (Haarberg et al., 2007, p. 406)

Its also focused on decadence, with the hedonistic life Dorian is lead into by Lord Henry. Where Dorian ends up doing horrible things, like killing the painter Basil after he is horrified how the picture has become. "Christ! What a thing I must have worshipped! It has the eyes of a devil" (Wilde, 2001, p.125)

Narcissism

The origin of the word is from the Greek character Narcissus. He was a young man in Greek mythology whom fell in love with his own reflection. He ultimately perished by drowning, after falling in when beholding his own reflection in the river's surface. Oscar Wilde was

undoubtedly influenced by this myth, as his interest in Greek mythology was quite known. There are several likenesses between Dorian and Narcissus. Dorian's and Narcissus demises are both because of their infatuation of themselves and their narcissism. The character of Sibyl Vane is quite alike Echo, they both fall in love only to ultimately reject and therefore being their demise in some form. Echo is a nymph whom fall in love with Narcissus and has been cursed by Hera and only able to repeat what others say to her. (Auerbach et al., 2005, p.74)

Sibyl kills herself after Dorian breaks off their engagement, because he thought her acting, which was one of the reasons he became infatuated by her, was now terrible and she had become pathetic. As Echo is only able to talk by repeating what other people say to her, she is unable to confess her love to Narcissus whom rejects her. So, she spends the rest of her life alone, slowly fading away. (Wilde, 2001; Auerbach et.al, 2005, p. 74)

The characters' view of women in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is that of grandeur and condescending. Dorian describes Sibyl as "she was the loveliest thing I had seen in my life" (Wilde, 2001, p. 42) On the other hand, Lord Henry mentions interesting women are rare and comments that there are only five interesting women in London that one would want to talk to. "As for conversation, there are only five women in London worth talking to, and two of these can't be admitted into decent society" (Wilde, 2001, p. 40) just after also expressing "My dear boy, no woman is a genius. Women are a decorative sex. They never have anything to say, but they say it charmingly. Women represent the triumph of matter over mind, just as men represent the triumph of mind over morals." (Wilde, 2001, p. 40)

An interesting point is how marriage is portrayed and talked about in *The picture of Dorian Grey*, especially how Lord Henry refers to his marriage to his wife. The couple do not see each other very often and according to an unspoken agreement they lie to each another on what they are actually up to, their relationship to others, past times and so on. For example, in the very first chapter Lord Henry tells Basil "you seem to forget that I am married, and the one charm of marriage is that it makes a life of deception absolutely necessary for both parties" (Wilde, 2001, p. 7) and later he tells Dorian "Never marry at all, Dorian. Men marry because they are tired; women because they are curious; both are disappointed" (Wilde, 2001, p. 40)

Homosexuality in ancient Rome and Victorian England

Our concept of homosexuality did not come until 1870 according to the philosopher Foucault, and as such the romans did not have a concept of homosexuality or heterosexuality. They had masculine and feminine, dominant and submissive; gender in the modern sense was largely irrelevant. They were also a patriarchal society where men oversaw both society and the family. For men, being with both sexes was not unusual or frowned upon, as long as you were the dominant subject. The submissive part was usually reserved for young men and boys, often lowborn or slaves, as it was seen as shameful to take the submissive position of a woman. Marriages were also for reproduction and securing political alliances, and it was almost expected for the man to have lovers outside of it. The wife however was expected to be faithful and submissive; little was thought of female sexuality. (Williams, 2010, p. 3-9; Sedgwick, 2017, p. 1014-1023)

Satyrical was written during the time of emperor Nero's rule. Whom had many lovers of both sexes. He also married several times, two of these times were with men or boys. One of which he castrated and presented as a woman to the public, as he bore an uncanny resemblance to Nero's late wife. Petronius was possibly a part of Nero's court and it is very probable that the Satyrical was read to him and his group. (Courtney, 2001, p. 5-11)

The Emperor Hadrian, who reigned Rome from 117 to 138 is one of the most famous gay roman emperors. The young Antinous, whom Hadrian considered his favourite lover, has often been seen as a gay icon. After Antinous' sudden death, Hadrian had him deified. Oscar Wilde references Antinous in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* when the artist likens Dorian to Antinous' beauty. "What the invention of oil-painting was to the Venetians, the face of Antinoüs was to late Greek sculpture, and the face of Dorian Gray will some day be to me." (Wilde, 2001, p. 11) Giton, the youth in *Satyrical* has also been referenced in other works during Wilde's contemporary time. As part of the liberation of sexuality in literature. (Boroughs, 1995, p. 18-19; Fox, 2014, p. 4-7; Wilde, 2001, p.14)

Between ancient Rome and Victorian England, Christianity had taken a major toll on the way sexuality was viewed across Europe. Although there was no longer a death penalty for homosexual activity, it was still illegal in Victorian England and sentenced by hard prison labour. In the late 1800s the puritans were pushing back at an increasingly sexual liberation movement, more women were able to vote, and more literature dealing with sexuality were being released from famous writers like Flaubert and Wilde. As in ancient times, women

were not viewed as sexual beings. The fears of Victorian England were masturbation and the promiscuous woman. (Abott, 1993, p. 83-86)

In the E.M. Forster's novel *Maurice*, the eponymous main character exclaims "I'm an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort." (Forster, 2011, p.159) to declare his homosexuality. The novel was written in 1913, but not released until 1971. Oscar Wilde was publicly known to engage in homosexual relationships despite being married to a woman. Most famously with the writer Alfred Douglas, whose father ended being involved in Wilde's trial for indecency. Wilde was sentenced to two years in prison for gross indecency. It took a toll on his health, and he died of meningitis in Paris in 1900 only 46 years old. He was not pardoned officially until 2017 under the Alan Turing Law for crimes relating to homosexuality. Having homosexual relationships were certainly safer and more accepted during ancient times, in contrast to Victorian England. (McCann, 2017; Boroughs, 1995, p.21-25; Forster,2011)

Gay erasure

In her text *Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Experience* Adrienne Rich suggests that there has been an erasure of historical persons who were not heterosexual. She points how the homosexuality of Leonardo Da Vinci have been denied or explained away by many historians. And how female history have been side-lined or ignored in favour of male narratives. It's important to keep that in mind when dissecting ancient history as the following years have been less favourable on same sex attraction. (Rich, 1980, p. 925-939)

Rich is also concerned with how a patriarchal lead society has led to misogyny and homophobia, which she states is an extension of misogyny. A gay man was often seen as less of man because they were grouped with women. Lesbians like in much of history has been ignored because of the idea that women did not have sexuality. Only when seen through the male gaze, was lesbianism acceptable. (Rich, 1980, p. 925-930)

Concerning *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, overt homoeroticism was edited out. And many translations of *Satyrica* removed or did not translate the explicitly homosexual content, or even changed sections. The Pergamene boy for example was changed to a girl, which took hold in English translation for decades until the supposed translation by Wilde. (Boroughs, 1995, P. 16)

In *The Epistemology of the Closet* Sedgwich continues many of Foucault's theories, while making them her own. She was concerned with how sexuality had been categorised, as up

until the 19th century people did not have definitions on sexuality. A stark contrast to ancient Rome's ambiguous and undefined labelling of sexuality. Which in many ways explains the openness of *Satyricon* and the subtlety of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Sedgwich, 1990, p. 1014-1023)

How classical times were viewed in Victorian England

Oscar Wilde studied at the Trinity College in Dublin, where he found love for Greek literature. He later went to Oxford, where he studied both Latin and Greek at Magdalene College, gaining a reputation for his talent as a translator and verse composer. Where he also later found interest in aestheticism and decadence. Petronius work was met with scepticism during Wilde's time and the English translation did not feature the obscenest part of the novel, either by removing them entirely or by keeping it in Latin. (p. 9-16)

Similarities in the contents and form of the *Satyricon* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

There is a direct reference to *Satyricon* in the eleventh chapter of *The Picture of Dorian Grey* "For, while he was but too ready to accept the position that was almost immediately offered to him on his coming of age, found, indeed, a subtle pleasure in the thought that he might really become to the London of his own day what to imperial Neronian Rome the author of the 'satyricon' once had been, yet in his inmost hearth he desired to be something more than a mere arbiter elegantiarum," (Wilde, 2001, p. 104,)

Giton and Dorian can be said to have similar functions within their respective stories, in that they are both temptations for other characters, and they are "stuck" in a triangle drama where they are both the source of conflict. The painter does not want Lord Henry to meet Dorian "He has a simple and a beautiful nature. Your aunt was quite right in what she said of him. Don't spoil him." (Wilde, 2001, p.15) They are both described as beautiful "Gorgeous little Giton" (Petronius, 2009, p. 33) and "he was certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair." (Wilde, 2001, p. 16) One could say that their admirers Basil and Encolpius have something in common in that they want to protect Dorian and Giton from Lord Henry and Ascyrtos. Also, Ascyrtos and Lord Henry have some common function in that they corrupt or try to lead away Dorian and Giton.

The homoerotic content is explicitly so in *Satyricon* "First I filled my hands with his milk-white tits, then came a very sticky kiss, and then I rolled all my pleasures into one" (Petronius, 2009, p. 92-93) While a lot more discreet due to its time, Basil's affection for Dorian is likely not only platonic. "You have been the one person in my life who has really influenced my art. Whatever I have done that is good, I owe to you. Ah! You don't know what it cost me to tell you all that I have told you." (Wilde, 2001, p. 93)

A passage in *Satyricon* that is similar to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in terms of the aesthetically pleasing and art, is chapter 83 where Encolpius is at a picture gallery. "The outline of the figures had been drawn with such subtle precision that you felt that their very souls were on display" (Petronius, 2009, p. 90) here we also have the mention of the soul, something that is quite important in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

The Question of the authenticity of Oscar Wilde's *Satyricon* translation

It is rumoured that Oscar Wilde wrote a translation of *Satyricon* from Latin to English. Although it has never been confirmed, there are lots of evidence that Wilde did indeed write it. Published in 1902, 2 years after Wilde's death, it has been met with both scepticism and interest alike. The publisher accredited the translation to Sebastian Melmoth, which was Wilde's pseudonym. In Rod Borroughs' text *Oscar Wilde's translation of Petronius: The Story of a Literary Hoax*, he discusses the legitimacy of a translation of the *Satyricon* published two years after Wilde's death in 1900. (Boroughs, 1995, p. 9-10)

"Whatever its shortcomings, this edition does hold the distinction of being the first new English translation for over 150 years not to have expurgated any of the *Satyricon's* sexual episodes and other so-called obscenities." (Boroughs, 1995, p. 10.) The translation was met with intrigue by contemporary scholars, but there was much doubt that the translation was made by Wilde, as many pointed to the translation's lack of style. (Boroughs, 1995, p. 10)

Harry C. Schnur considers the work to be "only a curiosity" among English translations of Petronius; but while he too regards Wilde's authorship as improbable, he does introduce a slight element of doubt: "The ascription may be based on no more than Wilde's affinity to the subject matter, though it should be remembered that he did very well in classics both at Trinity College, Dublin, and at Magdalen." (Boroughs, 1995, p. 10-11) Boroughs then points to the pornography supplier Charles Carrington, who supplied both hard pornography and

literature which contained sexual content, like the *Satyricon*. And Boroughs suggest a more sinister motive by Carrington in using Wilde's name on the translations. "Given the fact that the *Satyricon* was popularly regarded as a particularly unwholesome piece of literature, it is tempting to view Carrington's attribution of the translation to Oscar Wilde as a clever, tasteless, publicity stunt. To put it simply, the publisher recognized that the notoriety which still attached itself to the name of Oscar Wilde, who had died in Paris two years previously in 1900, could be exploited to underscore the homosexual themes of the *Satyricon*, and to arouse interest in the publication." (Boroughs, 1995, p. 18-19) and the fact that the *satyricon* was referenced directly in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. An inclusion Wilde was criticised for and had to defend

"As regards erudition, it is always difficult, even for the most modest of us, to remember that other people do not know quite as much as one does oneself. I myself frankly admit I cannot imagine how a casual reference to Suetonius and Petronius Arbiter can be construed into evidence of a desire to impress an unoffending and ill-educated public by an assumption of superior knowledge. I should fancy that the most ordinary of scholars is perfectly well acquainted with the Lives of the Caesars and with the *Satyricon*. The Lives of the Caesars, at any rate, forms part of the curriculum at Oxford for those who take the Honour School of *Literae Humaniores*; and as for the *Satyricon*, it is popular even among passmen, though I suppose they are obliged to read it in translation." (Boroughs, 1995, p. 19)

Something Carrington probably had taken note of. There is also evidence that Wilde and Carrington had met on occasions and discussed literature. And as it was common knowledge that Wilde was a homosexual, it would be obvious to assume that Carrington knew as well. He might have used it to drum up interest in his translation, as it was as mentioned Wilde's sexuality was no secret in England or France. (Boroughs, 1995, p. 17-22)

After Wilde's death his literary executor Ross worked tirelessly to undo the Wilde estate's bankruptcy. He bought back a lot of rights to Wilde's Work and drove to expose forgeries. Ross even defended Wilde in the columns in the papers. (Boroughs, 1995, p.26) "Carrington, together with Wilde's former publisher, Leonard Smithers, was responsible for the majority of these pirated private editions. In the years following the writer's death, Carrington issued unauthorized editions of several of Wilde's work" (Boroughs, 1995 ,p.27) It lends to the theory that Carrington was using Wilde's name for monetary benefit, but he never let on who wrote the translation. (Boroughs, 1995, p. 26-34)

In 1930 a translation of *Satyricon* was published that was identical to Wilde's. It was credited to Alfred R. Allinson and Borough makes the point that the rest of Allinson's career point to him being the actual translator as he had worked with Carrington on other translations.

Therefore, Boroughs concludes with the assumption that Oscar Wilde did not write a translation of the *Satyrica*. (Boroughs, 1995 ,p. 34-41)

Conclusion

In conclusion there is little doubt that Oscar Wilde was inspired by Petronius' *Satyrica* when writing *The Picture of Dorian Grey*. The similarities in character and plot, combined with direct references to *Satyrica* in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. There also is Wilde's obsession with the classics and the period in general. Also, how he lived his life, as being gay in Victorian London was quite different from Ancient Rome, where same sex relations were not looked down upon, as long as you were the dominant partner. The *Satyrica* was therefore most likely seen in a better light at its own time, than it was in Victorian London. It was part of the literary curriculum of the time and it was not viewed as harshly as contemporary homosexual literature, most likely because Romans were viewed at a distance in time and geography. *The Picture of Dorian Grey* was seen as immoral at the time, as any homosexual work. Their stark difference in explicitly can be partly explained by their contemporary times and the level of acceptance of same-sex relationships. Both novels were censored during the late 1800s due to their homoerotic content but revitalized at the turn of the century. On the supposed translation of *Satyrica* that Oscar Wilde made, it was most likely a fake. As Oscar Wilde's name was raked through the mud after his death by opportunists looking to make a quick buck, but his legacy still remains.

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