

The Theory of ‘Queer Temporality’ in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and “A Phantom Lover”

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“Queer time [...] exploits the potential of what Charles-Pierre Baudelaire called in relation to modernism “the transient, the fleeting, the contingent”. (Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, p.2)

“Queer time,” according to Jack Halberstam, “is a term for those specific modes of temporality that emerge...once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance.”¹ Queerness, then, for Halberstam and for the purposes of this essay, is the rejection of heteronormative institutions, sexuality, and conventions.² In resisting heteronormative institutions of family and prioritising of the future, Halberstam maintains, queer temporality capitalises on the opportunities available in “the here, the present, the now.”³ It is important to acknowledge, however, that queer temporality is a diverse critical field, with many scholars presenting theories which “have questioned, reframed, and reimagined how we enact our relations to the past and the future,”⁴ collectively offering “heterogenous possibilities for queer timing.”⁵ Two texts which embody tropes of queer temporality are *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde (1891) and “A Phantom Lover” by Vernon Lee (1886). In this essay, I will evaluate the extent to which *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and “A Phantom Lover” reflect Halberstam’s notion of queer time, identifying resemblances and limitations, and proposing where these texts resonate more closely with the

¹ Judith Halberstam, *In Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 20.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 13.

⁴ Stephen Moore, Kent Brintnall, and Joseph Marchal, "Introduction Queer Disorientations: Four Turns and a Twist," in *Sexual Disorientations: Queer Temporalities, Affects, Theologies*, ed. Kent Brintnall, Joseph Marchal, and Stephen Moore (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 1.

⁵ Elizabeth Freeman, "Introduction," *GLQ* 13, no. 2-3 (2007): 169.

views of other queer time theorists. I will argue that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* encapsulates the fundamental characteristics of Halberstam's queer temporality to a greater extent than "A Phantom Lover." While *The Picture of Dorian Gray* evidences Halberstam's notion of queer temporality almost perfectly, albeit with engagements with other queer temporalities, "A Phantom Lover" identifies more closely with other understandings of queer time.

Both *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "A Phantom Lover" embody the rejection of heteronormative time as outlined by Halberstam. For him, heteronormative time is driven by "the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction"⁶ and prioritises stability and futurity: "In Western cultures...we create longevity as the most desirable future" and "applaud the pursuit of long life."⁷ In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Henry displays extreme abhorrence towards this heteronormative longevity, crying, "Always! That is a dreadful word. It makes me shudder when I hear it. Women are so fond of using it. They spoil every romance by trying to make it last forever."⁸ For Henry, stability and permanence are ruinous features of heterosexual relationships; longevity is to be avoided rather than aspired to, and a relationship's success relies on its brevity. As such, heteronormative temporality is explicitly rejected in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, evidencing its reflection of Halberstam's notion of queer time.

Similarly, "A Phantom Lover" shuts down the notion that William and Alice Oke conform to expected marriage conventions, exemplifying queer time's rejection of heteronormativity. When arriving at Okehurst, the narrator shares his expectation that the Okes form a large, bustling household:

My fancy pictured very vividly the five or six little Okes – that man certainly must have at least five children – the aunts, sisters-in-laws, and cousins;...above all, it pictured Mrs. Oke, the bouncing, well-informed, model housekeeper, electioneering, charity-organising young lady.⁹

This image typifies the conventional family of "Western cultures"¹⁰: the many children and extended relatives demonstrate the value held by generation and reproduction; Mrs. Oke epitomises the family-oriented, community-spirited wife; and the household is the centre of activity, constantly progressing. This expectation makes the contrasting reality increasingly desolate. In response to the narrator's admiration for the house, William admits, "It's a nice

⁶ Halberstam, *In Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, 12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020), 24.

⁹ Vernon Lee, "A Phantom Lover," in *A Phantom Lover and Other Dark Tales by Vernon Lee*, ed. Mike Ashley (London: The British Library, 2020), 75.

¹⁰ Halberstam, *In Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, 17.

old place...but it's too large for us. You see, my wife's health does not allow of our having many guests; and there are no children."¹¹ Thus, the idea that the Okes form a typical Western household is established and then emphatically rejected. The house seems quiet, empty, and static, and the lack of children obstructs the continued inheritance of the family name. As such, despite being married, the Okes do not reflect the reproductive futurity of heteronormative temporality. "A Phantom Lover," therefore, embodies Halberstam's queer temporality to the extent that the Okes' marriage opposes generational and forward-moving time.

Despite this rejection of heteronormative time in "A Phantom Lover," the text does not completely embody Halberstam's queer time because it places little importance on 'the moment.' For Halberstam, queer temporality "expands the potential of the moment and...squeezes new possibilities out of the time at hand."¹² The present in "A Phantom Lover" is not filled with heightened sensations but is static and dull. Indeed, time has not seemed to progress since the seventeenth century. Alice Oke, for example, does not have her own independent identity and is instead completely engulfed by that of her seventeenth-century ancestor of the same name:

There were the same strange lines of figure and face, the same dimples in the thin cheeks, the same wide-opened eyes, the same vague eccentricity of expression... [T]he present Mrs. Oke distinctly made herself up to look like her ancestress.¹³

Alice is an identical replication of her ancestor and obsessively heightens the resemblance by dressing in seventeenth-century clothing, allowing her autonomous self to be defined completely by the past. Thus, "A Phantom Lover" does not resonate with Halberstam's temporality, reliant on the importance of every moment. Rather, I argue, it evidences the queer temporality outlined by Ben Davies and Jana Funke, to whom any temporality which opposes the heteronormative linear drive forwards is queer: "To be temporally backwards, to delay or defer the future, to expand or dilate the moment – all of these practices can be understood as resistances against a time that marches forward and connects past, present and future in a straight line."¹⁴ "A Phantom Lover"'s temporal reversal and stagnation is, thus, more reflective of the queer temporality discussed by Davies and Funke than that of Halberstam.

¹¹ Lee, "A Phantom Lover," 36.

¹² Halberstam, *In Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, 13.

¹³ Lee, "A Phantom Lover," 87.

¹⁴ Ben Davies, and Jana Funke, "Introduction: Sexual Temporalities," in *Sex, Gender and Time in Fiction Culture*, ed. Ben Davies and Jana Funke (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 10.

The Picture of Dorian Gray, on the other hand, is littered with moments which epitomise the fleeting moment of Halberstam's queer time. According to Halberstam, the AIDS epidemic created alternative temporal perspectives, whereby "the diminishing future creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now."¹⁵ Throughout the novel, Dorian follows such a hedonistic lifestyle, living for the sensual opportunities available in every moment, as demonstrated by his sadistic desire to see his portrait: "[H]e himself would... stand with a mirror...looking now at the evil and aging face on the canvas, and now at the fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass."¹⁶ This slippage into present tense is a manipulation of form which immerses the reader into the narrative, tangibly illustrating the significance of the moment. The narration continues: "He would examine with minute care and sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth."¹⁷ This narrative is sharply detailed, replicating every pulse of Dorian's pleasure, with every word emanating vivid images, just as every second of time is filled with heightened sensations. Dorian's lifestyle, therefore, excellently embodies "the here, the present, the now"¹⁸ which characterises Halberstam's queer temporality.

The Picture of Dorian Gray also depicts Halberstam's claim that queer time offers exciting versions of futurity outwith those of heteronormative time. For Halberstam, "queer time...is also about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing."¹⁹ Such alternative futures are demonstrated in the novel when Dorian reads the book gifted to him by Henry: "After a few minutes he became absorbed. It was the strangest book that he had ever read...Things that he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him. Things of which he had never dreamed were gradually revealed."²⁰ As he is reading, thrilling, new ways of life manifest themselves before Dorian, rendering in literal form Halberstam's notion that there exist exciting futures outside of heteronormativity. Indeed, this is the turning point which triggers decades of sensuous and scandalous behaviour. As such, Dorian's perceiving of new opportunities when reading the book further demonstrates *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'s embodiment of Halberstam's queer temporality.

¹⁵ Halberstam, *In Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, 13.

¹⁶ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 106.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Halberstam, *In Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, 13.

¹⁹ Ibid, 14.

²⁰ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 104.

Conversely, “A Phantom Lover” is less resonant with Halberstam’s queer time because it does not revolve around an alternative, nonnormative version of the future; there is no future at all. William’s and Alice’s disinterest in reproducing resists all forms of future. Alice tells the narrator, “We have no children, and I don’t suppose we shall ever have any. I, at least, have never wished for them.”²¹ Not only do they have no children, they likely never will, as Alice notes, a conjecture which is confirmed upon her death at the story’s conclusion. Without children, the Okes have no way of conforming to the reproductive, generational convention of heteronormative time. This resonates with the queer temporality outlined by Lee Edelman, who maintains that “the Child”²² is a symbol of “reproductive futurism”,²³ whereby all political decisions are made and enforced for the benefit of society’s future children, hence maintaining “the absolute privilege of heteronormativity.”²⁴ For Edelman, therefore, queerness is resisting “every realization of futurity,”²⁵ a concept which the Okes’ non-reproductive partnership signifies. This evidence, thus, indicates that Edelman’s queer temporality wherein the future is non-existent, is a much better framework through which to consider the Okes’ anti-reproductive non-futurity than the queer time of Halberstam, which envisions an alternative future, rather than none at all.

Thus far, I have demonstrated that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* excellently encapsulates the characteristics of queer temporality as presented by Halberstam. Nevertheless, there are ambiguities towards the end of the novel which complicate the extent to which the queer behaviour of Henry and Dorian is condoned. Dorian, for example, starkly realises that his life of egocentric over-indulgence has been excessively corrupt and immoral, blaming the book gifted by Henry for “poison[ing]” him and endeavouring to prioritise “his own future”²⁶ from now on. Dorian’s firm commitment to reversing his lifestyle suggests that there are frightening consequences to living for the sensual pleasures of the moment, thus, insinuating that queer temporality can be transgressive to the point of dangerous. Therefore, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is somewhat inconsistent in its embodiment of Halberstam’s queer temporality: while, on the one hand, Henry and Dorian’s actions and beliefs emphatically express motifs of queer temporality, the novel does not oppose heteronormative time altogether, on the other. As such, I believe that, as well as embodying

²¹ Lee, “A Phantom Lover,” 109.

²² Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (London: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

²³ Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁶ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 182.

Halberstam's view of temporality, the novel also aligns to an extent with that of Davies and Funke, to whom heteronormative and queer temporalities are not binary oppositions: "It is possible...to experience both reproductive and non-reproductive temporal orders, synchronically or sequentially."²⁷ Therefore, although the sheer amount of hedonistic ideology expressed and realised in the novel unequivocally suggests that it accords very well to Halberstam's view of queer temporality, the questions raised regarding the extent to which it supports such behaviours also demonstrate an alignment with the temporality discussed by Davies and Funke.

In conclusion, both Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Lee's "A Phantom Lover" reject heteronormative temporality's prioritising of family, reproduction, stability, and futurity, but their depictions of queer temporality are not in alignment with each other. While *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'s portrayal of exploiting the pleasures of the moment is resonant with Halberstam's queer temporality, "A Phantom Lover"'s temporality has remained stagnant for centuries, and so is more demonstrative of the queer temporality presented by Davies and Funke. Further, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* depicts the existence of thrilling opportunities outwith heteronormative time, embodying Halberstam's queer temporality, but the rejection of all forms of futurity effected by the Okes' non-reproductive marriage in "A Phantom Lover" is resonant with Edelman's queer time. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, therefore, encapsulates the fundamental characteristics of Halberstam's queer temporality to a great extent, but there are ambiguities in the novel which are reflective of Davies's and Funke's belief that there is no strict distinction between heteronormative and queer temporalities. Thus, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* embodies Halberstam's queer temporality to a great but not perfect extent, while the temporality in "A Phantom Lover" can best be described as an amalgamation of multiple notions of queer time.

²⁷ Davies and Funke, "Introduction: Sexual Temporalities," 10.

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