

The Literary Legacy and Legendary Lifestyle of Oscar Wilde

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Abstract

Abstract: This paper explores Oscar Wilde's homosexual literary agenda, chiefly how Wilde sought to use his work and lifestyle to disrupt conventional views of normality. The article then explores the legal repercussions of Wilde's homosexuality, chiefly how Victorian England sought to scapegoat and persecute Wilde in order to "cleanse" society and reestablish normality through the infamous Wilde trials. An analysis of Wilde's reception in different countries, as well as his perceived threat, establishes the rigidity of the Victorian ethos, as well as the fascination of both the public and the press with celebrity scandal.

Key words: Oscar Wilde, homosexuality, Victorian England, legal scandals, media

Over a century after his death, Oscar Wilde remains a prominent and celebrated figure in English literature. Beloved for his plays and endowed with an unparalleled wit, Wilde is easily one of the most quotable writers of all time. Contrasted against the rigidity of Victorian society, Wilde was a flamboyant figure famed just as much for his writing as he was for his infamous public persona. This persona, however, ultimately proved to be Wilde's downfall, leading to Wilde's persecution in the most prominent of a string of homosexual trials in Victorian England. The Wilde trials reveal the dual repugnance and fascination of the public with celebrity scandal, as well as the need to scapegoat and put on trial characters who threaten conventional society. Wilde's endangerment of the Victorian ethos was in part due to his homosexual literary schema, which led Victorian society to persecute Wilde in order to reinstate societal norms.

Though Wilde was a married man, he was well documented to have a string of male lovers. Homosexual acts were not decriminalized in England until the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 ("The Sexual Offences Act"). His

downfall was ultimately initiated due to his affair with fellow writer Lord Alfred Douglas, whom he met in 1891 (Hyde 133). In 1895, Douglass's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, accused Wilde of sodomy. Schulz notes that the Marquess had "his own reputation as a belligerent, nonconforming aristocrat," a status which fueled the public's engrossment with the trials (39). Wilde's legal woes began when he attempted to sue the Marquess for libel—a charge he was unable to prove—which ultimately led to Wilde being ensnared in a ruthless trio of trials over his "indecent" relations with men (Hyde 197). In court, excerpts from *Dorian Gray* were used against Wilde as proof of his homosexuality (Hyde 256). Additionally, Wilde's former lovers were called to testify against him, verifying after three trials that Wilde had "commit[ted] acts of gross indecency with various male persons" (Hyde 226). The trials led to a complete upheaval of Wilde's life: his house was sold by creditors, productions of his plays were immediately shut down in England, and English society quickly turned on him (Hyde 233). Journalist Frank Harris wrote, "his arrest

was the signal for an orgy of Philistine rancor such as even London had never known before. The puritan middle class, which had always regarded Wilde with dislike as an artist and an intellectual scoffer, a mere parasite of the aristocracy, now gave free scope to their disgust and contempt, and everyone tried to outdo his neighbor in expressions of loathing and abhorrence” (qtd. in Hyde 232). The immediate shock of the trials and devastation to Wilde’s hedonistic lifestyle are largely cited as the reason for his depression and death three years after his release from prison. Though his jail sentence did not destroy his ability to write, life in prison altered the once witty and upbeat figure, as evidenced in Wilde’s later writings which show a marked departure from gaiety to a focus on human misery and suffering.

Victorian society, notorious for pushing doctrines of decency and morality, felt the need to punish Wilde because they perceived him, his art, and his homosexuality as a threat to this order. In her essay “Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo,” Mary Douglas writes, “There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. . . . Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment” (2). In relation to Wilde, this “dirt” refers to the taboo nature of his sexual acts. The “elimination” of this dirt required making an example of Wilde to maintain societal order. Douglas explains that the concept of “pollution” works in both instrumental and expressive ways in society. People attempt to influence each other’s behavior through social pressures, since the order of society is “guarded by dangers which threaten transgressors,” or so-called “danger-beliefs” (Douglas 3). These danger-beliefs are very telling in the way they determine which figures earn both the hatred of the public and attention of the court; danger-beliefs lead society to publicly condemn figures that transgress convention, for they pose a threat to order.

Wilde was perceived as a threat in part because of his homosexual literary agenda. Wilde’s homosexuality is a theme subtly present in his works. An intriguing aspect of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the fact that Dorian’s multifarious sins are often referenced, but never clarified. Wilde was attacked in *The Scots Observer* for being accused of alleged implied homosexual relations between the characters, prompting him to write an eloquent letter in response. He states: “An artist, sir, had no ethical sympathies at all. Virtue and wickedness are

to him simply what the colors on his palette are to the painter. They are no more, and they are no less. He sees by their means a certain artistic effect can be produced and he produces it.” He then writes, “each man sees his own sin in *Dorian Gray*,” forcing the readers to confront their own depravity through Dorian’s debauchery (qtd. in Hyde 118). Since Wilde’s own personal “sin” was his homosexuality, it seems suitable to suggest that this could be Dorian’s sin as well. In the novel, Dorian’s friendship is regarded as “fatal to young men,” and the nature of Dorian’s relationship with Lord Henry is left open to interpretation (195). Dorian and Lord Henry are exceedingly close friends, and it becomes abundantly clear that Basil also holds deep feelings for Dorian, for the younger man becomes his muse. Basil grows jealous of the time Dorian spends with Lord Henry, and he sycophantically tells Dorian: “You have been the one person in my life who has really influenced my art” (*Dorian Gray* 152). Dorian blushes upon meeting Lord Henry, and Lord Henry drinks in Dorian’s beauty as they first meet (*Dorian Gray* 22). He thinks, “no wonder Basil Hallward worshipped him” (*Dorian Gray* 23). Dorian is known as an exceptionally lovely looking young man, and the tremendous hold that he has over both Lord Henry and Basil certainly seems to suggest more than mere friendliness. Coupled with Dorian’s penchant for ruining the reputation of young men and Lord Henry’s suggestion that Dorian should give in to his temptations, Wilde implies that the true nature of these men’s relations transgressed platonic grounds, creating an undertone of homosexuality in his novel.

Wilde’s introducing homosexuality subverts the traditional thinking of Victorian society. It is fitting for Wilde, a well-known homosexual, to use the characters of Dorian and Lord Henry, as well as Vivian from his essay “*The Decay of Lying*,” as mouthpieces to advocate for homosexuality. Through these writings, Wilde seeks to challenge the common philosophies of Victorian society, namely the fact that heterosexuality was deemed “normal” and acceptable, while homosexuality was condemned as a twisted perversion. By using these characters to argue that art is unnatural and should go against nature, Wilde is subtly but firmly introducing a homosexual doctrine of thinking to the public. Though the term “unnatural” could refer to homosexuality, Wilde is known for his tongue-in-cheek terminology to mock the accepted notions of his time. Writer Dominick Wohlforth states, “Victorian society is conventionally regarded as a

time of prudery, Puritanism, sexual repression and moral strictness in nineteenth century England.” Wohlfarth also adds, “The expectation for literature during the Victorian Age was to be decent and to always have a moral.” Even the mere suggestion of homosexuality would have been enough to scandalize the morally upright members of Victorian society, so Wilde is careful to never openly use such stigmatizing terms, though he certainly suggests a deviation from the norm in his writings.

In contrast to what was considered acceptable, Lord Henry states in *Dorian Gray* that “being natural is simply a pose, and the most irritating pose I know” (9). The subtext of this line likely suggests that Lord Henry dismisses accepted notions of heterosexuality and conventionality by encouraging Dorian to explore his true nature. Lord Henry also tells Dorian: “I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream—I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of medievalism” (*Dorian Gray* 26). This is the beginning of Lord Henry and Dorian’s friendship, the point at which Lord Henry inducts Dorian into a life of pure pleasure. Here, Wilde references a forbidden desire that was not accepted at his time, a very thinly veiled implication of homosexuality. Later, Dorian becomes deeply influenced by a book described as relating the psychological study of a man who tries to figure out the nineteenth-century, including “those natural rebellions that wise men still call sin” (*Dorian Gray* 164). This is another instance which seems to suggest homosexuality, for here “natural rebellions” could refer to homosexuality and the “wise” men are referred to sarcastically. Further, this line mocks the popular conception that homosexual behaviors were deemed unnatural. Wilde is careful to never to explicitly state any instances of homosexuality, but these mere suggestions were enough to cause *Dorian Gray* to be used against Wilde during his trials (Hyde 256).

Wilde’s argument against “natural” art is even more apparent in the essay “The Decay of Lying” which he penned for his essay collection, *Intentions*. “The Decay of Lying” involves a whimsical conversation between characters Vivian and Cyril in which Vivian defends Aestheticism and Romanticism. Vivian makes many statements that support Wilde’s theory of art, one of which is his firm adherence to art being unnatural. Vivian openly lambastes nature, casting it in a purely pejora-

tive light as he proclaims, “wherever we have returned to Life and Nature, our work has always become vulgar, common, and uninteresting” (*Intentions* 19). Vivian creates a clear separation of art from nature, elevating the former over the latter. Wilde declares through Vivian that “Art creates an incomparable and unique effect. . . . Nature, upon the other hand, forgetting that imitation can be made the sincerest form of insult, keeps on repeating this effect until we all become absolutely wearied of it” (*Intentions* 31). By separating art from nature, Vivian therefore places art in the category of the “unnatural,” allowing it to inhabit the world that Wilde’s homosexuality cast him into. Wilde makes a clear reference to the rigidity of the mindset of his time when Vivian tells Cyril: “Nature is always behind her age” (*Intentions* 15). Here, Vivian believes art is entirely removed from nature, for nature fails to keep up with the times due to the backward thinking and limiting beliefs of Victorian society. Lastly, Vivian firmly underlines his contempt for nature in art, stating, “All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals” (*Intentions* 39). Additionally, in another essay in *Intentions* titled “Pen, Pencil and Poison,” Wilde states, “Like most artificial people, he had a great love of nature” (58). Through these works, Wilde made a stand against the conventionality of his time and what society collectively deemed “natural,” allowing him to tear it down in order to create an alternative doctrine of the “unnatural” or homosexual mindset.

Wilde’s doctrine of subverting normality was ultimately punished by society, leading to a massacre of Wilde’s image in the media, which Victorian society was quick to take part in. The invention of the printing press allowed for celebrity and cultural fodder to quickly circulate at a low-cost rate, making gossip immediately accessible for all classes. Critic David Schultz notes in his essay “Redressing Oscar: Performance and the Trials of Oscar Wilde” that Wilde was already a prominent figure in the media prior to his infamous trials. Before his trials, Wilde was known to feed into media speculation, frequently changing his image to advance his social status and public reception (Schulz 40). However, fame and over-exposure proved to be a double-edged sword that eventually extinguished as much as it once produced. Schultz asserts, “With his notoriety developed largely through the media, it was perhaps inevitable that the media would likewise be responsible for Wilde’s downfall” (40). While the press initially serves to fuel

the star power of public figures, reporters also seem to relish in witnessing the demise of the same people they once built up (Schulz 40); this duality accurately depicts the downfall of Wilde, for Victorian society seemed to revel in his crucifixion.

Victorian England, known for a moralizing mindset, felt the need to persecute Wilde due to the dangers he posed to the Victorian ethos. The century was coming to a close, and the *fin de siècle* atmosphere—filled with apprehension and looming anxieties—threatened to unravel the carefully composed image of decency and tradition that Victorian England strived to dutifully maintain. Schulz claims that Wilde's "decadence and degeneration . . . threatened cultural collapse as the century drew to a close" (38). The public therefore felt justified, if not obligated, to punish Wilde for the crime of challenging cultural convention. At the same time, the press and public were quick to devour the scandal—for what better way to declare one's own probity than by attacking the integrity of another? The outcome of the trials is well documented: Wilde received two years of hard labor, the harshest punishment permitted. Still under speculation is the reason the Marquess and the legal system punished him in the first place.

In his attempt to subvert the dominant narrative about Wilde—chiefly that he was cast out by an unintelligent society for his homosexuality, thus ending his literary career—Andrew Elfenbein presents an alternative narrative in his article, "On the Trials of Oscar Wilde: Myths and Realities." He argues that the "master-narrative of Wilde as a gay martyr" takes an all or nothing approach to Wilde, making Wilde "either all about sexuality, or he is not" (Elfenbein). By forcing people to either view Wilde as a sexual figure or a literary figure, Elfenbein's theory undermines Wilde's impact on the gay community and the emergence of a homosexual discourse that was aided by Wilde's public ordeal. Schultz acknowledges that despite Wilde being typecast, his homosexuality was an integral aspect of his being that cannot be divorced from one's perception of Wilde. In reference to the trials, Schulz argues: "What was on trial, then, was the 'nature' of performance itself. By insisting that his life was a work of art, higher in style due to a cultivated artistic sensitivity, Wilde insisted that all lives may in fact be artificial, that what is seen as 'natural' may in fact only be a performance misrecognized as nature" (55). Therefore, since Wilde was a performer—one who sought to blur the lines between natural

living, artifice, hedonism, life, and art—Wilde may be conceptualized as both a literary figure of tremendous impact and an individual reduced to a type used to represent a larger cultural crisis. By arguing that audiences must take an all or nothing approach to Wilde, Elfenbein accomplishes the very thing he attempts to avoid—reducing Wilde to a stereotype. Wilde's colorful personality certainly reflects the ability for a dual embodiment. Wilde's ideology of art is largely reflected in his personality and lifestyle. In addition to his status as a prominent social figure, Wilde was lauded by many for his unparalleled conversation skills. He was praised for his verbal repartee, wit, and cleverness from as early as his Oxford days (Hyde 19). Wilde biographer Richard Ellman asserts that Wilde's "language is his finest achievement. It is fluent with concession and rejection. It takes what has been ponderously said and remakes it according to a new perspective and a new principle" (xiv). Wit and cleverness infiltrated Wilde's life in both literary and social aspects, for Wilde did not merely preach an Aesthetic writing doctrine for his professional career, he lived fully by its creed, devoting himself to an openly hedonistic lifestyle. Hyde states that to Wilde "sin in all aspects became a preoccupation . . . amounting almost to an obsession" (185). Unafraid to embrace his sexuality, Wilde was known to be "candid" with his literary friends about the societal taboo—his "emerging homosexuality" (Hyde 187). In his "Art and the Handicraftsman" lecture, Wilde declares, "For the artist is not concerned primarily with any theory of life but with life itself, with the joy and loveliness that should come daily on eye and ear for a beautiful external world." It seems entirely plausible that the immensely gifted Wilde is able to simultaneously exist as both a gay martyr figure known for infamous sexuality and as a gifted artist known for clever repartee; one does not have to know about Wilde's personal life in order to appreciate his non-biographic work, nor should the revelation add to or dilute from the appreciation of his art.

Both Schulz and Elfenbein agree that the Wilde trials were about far more than just homosexuality. Elfenbein states that Wilde was not on trial for "being a homosexual," since he was not specifically charged with homosexual behavior. Rather than be charged with the greater crime of sodomy, Wilde received the less defined charge of "gross indecency." Sodomy—a broader category—was a felony that required proof of penetration, while gross indecency was a misdemeanor specifically

referring to an act of homosexual male sex that did not need proof (Elfenbein). The association of gross indecency with sex between men was a consequence of the Labouchère Amendment, known as Section 11, which was an addition to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 (Elfenbein). The amendment prohibited “any male person” from soliciting “in public or in private . . . any act of gross indecency with another male person” (Schulz 47). This widened the gap of legal persecution for male sexuality, criminalizing any physical relations between men. Schulz denotes that such language “shifted the focus of the law from the crime of sodomy . . . to a crime against gender” (Schulz 47). This technicality prevented Wilde from being tried for sodomy, and instead for violations against the male sex (Schulz 47). These violations embodied a number of Victorian moral and social codes that Wilde was perceived to pervert. Elfenbein cites the vagueness of the Marquess’s threat of “posing as a sodomite” as open to interpretation. The Marquess admitted that he was not “quite certain of the thing” that he had accused Wilde of in his note, therefore rendering the term “posing” as opposed to certainly being (Elfenbein). “If I was quite certain of the thing I would shoot the fellow on sight, but I can only accuse him of posing,” the Marquess was reported to have said (Elfenbein). Additionally, Wilde was never accused of sodomy by the Marquess’s brilliant lawyer, Edward Carson, in his first trial. Though perhaps uncertainty was at play, this dancing around the subject seemed to reveal Victorian society’s recognition of homosexuality as well as its hesitance to admit to such an understanding. While homosexual activities certainly existed in private, the Victorian public had not developed a vocabulary for male homosexuality that they felt comfortable using. Therefore, rather than discuss Wilde’s alleged crimes, the press tended to instead make a spectacle out of the trials, skirting around the term “homosexual” by developing a narrative that was perhaps as much of a performance as Wilde himself.

While Victorian society was hesitant to openly print terms related to homosexuality, the press did devote a great amount of attention to the trials. Schulz underlines the skittishness of the Victorians on the subject of sodomy, noting, “the newspapers recoiled in horror but remained voyeuristically fascinated” (Schulz 46). The trials were known to be theatrical. In addition to the sharp and witty banter exchanged between the outspoken and decadent Wilde and the equally sharp Carson, Shultz

deems that the trials deliberately invoked performance tropes (44). Media coverage of the trials frequently focused on Wilde’s body (Schulz 45). But rather than sanitize his image for the public, Wilde remained dedicated to his larger-than-life persona, which the media clearly accentuated. Schulz states: “By using a language of performance, the newspapers sought to render the trials real to their readers, to enhance their stories, and, finally to sell more newspapers” (45). Schulz adds that all three trials were enormously crowded, because the public was “eager to witness their celebrities in risqué melodrama” (43). The celebrity influence morphed the court into a sort of circus, revealing the mass voyeuristic appeal of reveling in debauchery without being personally tainted. The reaction of the press to the trials is crucial, for the press represents an archived account of the public opinion fed to the masses at the time. The varied European responses to Wilde will shortly be explored in more detail, but Stefano Evangelista sums up the overwhelming response in his book, *The Reception of Oscar Wilde in Europe*, stating, “Whatever the local legislation, male homosexuality was a taboo topic everywhere in nineteenth-century. . . . [C]ries against Wilde and the immorality of the age seem to have outnumbered deferences in the European press” (5). Elfenbein reiterates the opinion of many other Wilde historians: the press had already deemed Wilde guilty prior to his conviction, an opinion that many believed was influenced by government pressures (Elfenbein). Schulz argues that the cultural significance of the trials was largely molded by the sacrificial paradigm of Wilde, since sacrifices often rely upon scapegoats or victims. He defines such a victim as one “who embodies those characteristics the community wishes to expel and whose sacrifice will effectively rid the culture of its crisis by destroying the socially repellant attributes along with their embodiment.” The persecution of Wilde was evidently an attack on more than just the individual, falling in line with Mary Douglas’s argument regarding the need for societies to purge in order to purify.

Several other aspects of the Wilde trials posed particular threats to Victorian society. Schulz explores the possibility that perhaps it was not the nature of Wilde’s acts that led to the Marquess’ infamous note, but it was instead the openness with which he flaunted his homosexuality that ultimately drew ire. Wilde dressed like a dandy and was known to parade his lovers without discretion, thus threatening the sanctity of public image (Schulz

51). Since Section 11 allowed for the regulation of private behavior, Wilde's choice to openly present himself as homosexual was particularly offensive. Schulz quips that "A public scandal was often for Victorians more appalling than private sin" (51). Another aspect of the trials that provided an upheaval was the concept of class. The Wilde trials depicted two cases of Wilde offending class order, since the middle-class Wilde was accused of violating the upper class and erroneously attempting to elevate the lower class. Elfenbein notes that one aspect of Wilde's class perversion was that he was a middle-class man—unlike popular assumption that he was an aristocrat—having an affair with the son of the Marquess of Queensberry. The aristocratic Douglas appeared to be the only involved party who received protection during the trials, demonstrating the clout of aristocracy likely at play during homosexual Victorian trials (Elfenbein). Similarly, Wilde's alleged attempt to masquerade lower-class men as upper-class patrons by decadently dressing his young male lovers was considered yet another class perversion. Schulz went so far as to state that Wilde brought unwelcome lower-class members to clubs "dressed in a type of class 'drag'" that was viewed as a complete corruption of Victorian class distinctions (50). The press accused Wilde of perverting both public spaces with forbidden private matters and upper and lower class barriers, which were two important areas of distinction in Victorian society.

The two critics disagree on the concept of Wilde's perversion of patriarchy. Schulz deems that his critics defined Wilde as the "unnatural male" for his "unnatural" acts and suggested that the Marquess fulfilled the opposite role of "natural" man who served as a concerned father figure defending his son's debasement (54). Schulz states there was a "characterization of Wilde as a father-usurper" (48). Wilde, however, was a married man with two children, proving his manhood to apparently be quite intact despite his alleged crimes, while the Marquess was known to be an open atheist and an awful husband. Elfenbein reports, "his miserable first marriage ended in divorce, and his second marriage was annulled when his second wife claimed that he was impotent and had a deformed penis." Wilde as a "father-usurper" therefore seems like a hyperbolic characterization, although it is commonly applied to him. Shultz deems that Wilde threatened the masculinity of Victorian culture, though the extent of this threat can be questioned (47). Part of the threat of Wilde's behavior had to do with the

young age of most of his lovers, which was cited as a perversion of youth. Wilde represented a moral deterioration that threatened to corrupt the young members of society—the very beings that were meant to reproduce and carry on the English race (Schulz 50). This was believed to be a particularly heinous crime, because while it upset present society, it also posed a risk to the nation's future.

Whatever the degree of his perversion, Wilde threatened the masculinity of Victorian culture. Evangelista chronicles the bifurcation in response to the trials, stating that the trials were the most prominent in a series of homosexual scandals in European media at the time. He notes that the trials functioned "as a symbolic event in the twin histories of anti-homosexual legislation and homosexual literature in Europe" (6). Despite the extensive press coverage of Wilde the infamous social figure, Wilde the literary genius became a ghost in the London society where he once thrived, though his infamy did not staunch out his star power permanently. Wilde was presented with many opportunities to flee England, but several factors likely influenced his choice to stay. Elfenbein argues that though Wilde's lack of class stature and money did not necessarily contribute to his downfall, they prohibited him from potential exits. A theory that more adequately explains Wilde's decision is the stigma of fleeing and its societal repercussions. "If he fled, he as good as admitted guilt, cut himself off from his acquaintances, and lost the publishing connections that earned him his money," declares Elfenbein. This speculation therefore places the wrath of the Victorian public as the factor that prohibited him from escaping his ultimate sentence, since Wilde felt the pressure to clear his name and uphold his reputation.

Wilde, however, was not universally received in a negative manner. The trials, rather than completely ruin Wilde, made him better known in other societies than he initially was to begin with. Furthermore, Evangelista's analysis suggests that the trials significantly influenced the literary and legal definition and view of homosexuals in Europe. Though Germany, like Britain, still punished homosexuality by imprisonment, the Wilde trials, nonetheless, seemed to have a large social impact (Evangelista 5). Evangelista notes that in Germany, "the Wilde trials had a determining influence in the formulation and growth of an organized political movement for the emancipation of homosexuals, which challenged the legal and medical cultures of the times" (6). Thus,

Wilde's branding of a "gay martyr" appeared to serve as a catalyst—or at the very least a supporting player—in beginning to confront societal views on homosexuality. Wilde became something of a myth in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly Russia, with a spike in popularity after his death. This "Wilde fever" popularized public imitation of his flamboyant style of dress, with Evangelista noting, "Wilde's reputation as a transgressive figure made him the ideal object of such forms of cultish devotion" (6). The European press's extensive coverage of the trials preceded the literary fame of Wilde in nations such as Russia. Evangelista remarks that this left "a profound mark on the modes of his subsequent reception" since Russian papers linked the trials to "issues of public morality and political debates at home" (5). The Wilde trials also received extensive coverage in France, but the coverage was far less critical of Wilde since homosexual acts had been decriminalized in France after the Revolution (Evangelista 5). Such responses reveal the benefits of Wilde's gay martyr branding as well as the resilience of his public figure, bringing to light a notoriety that may have in part forged his legacy.

Lastly, the Wilde trials did not entirely extinguish Wilde's existence as an artist, despite popular opinion. Though Wilde documented his time in prison as soul crushing, the morose experience inspired him to write the letter "De Profundis" and the poem "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (Hyde 344). Schultz additionally notes that the trials were historically cited as the marker for the emergence of a clear homosexual identity, as well as for allowing homosexuality to emerge as a social subject (37). In addition to aiding the circulation of homosexuality as a social subject, the continued success and popularity of Wilde's work and the scholarly devotion to numerous biographies and articles about the writer are testaments to Wilde's lasting literary and social legacy. Wilde himself states, "I awoke the imagination of my century" (qtd. in Schulz 56).

Overall, Wilde was unable to divorce his flamboyant personality from his art, a Victorian sin that eventually consumed his success. Wilde's refusal to conform to the Victorian ethos posed a threat to public space, youth, class issues, gender issues, and conventionality. These multifarious sins proved too deplorable for the Victorian justice system, thus replacing Wilde's hedonism with a newfound realization of pain and misery. The paradox between the public's repugnance and fascination with Wilde's scandal ultimately reveals the voyeuristic and

judgmental aspects of the seemingly moralizing time period. While the public lambasts those who transgress conventionality—making a martyr out of Wilde—it is undeniable that the very same figures serve to fascinate.

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