



## **Sexual Dissidence and Modernism: Oscar Wilde and After**

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### **Abstract**

Oscar Wilde was a man who possessed profound confidence and unending joy; however, he was reduced to melancholy and madness after facing the worst time of his life in 1895. The criminal trials against him began at the Old Bailey, London's main courthouse. During this time, Oscar Wilde faced the worst time of his life. The one who sparked the "imagination of his century" became a victim of that very century and the purported morality of that era. The life of Oscar Wilde is the focus of this paper, as well as his efforts to comprehend the sexual dissidence that led to his experiencing enormous suffering in 1895.

### **Keywords**

Homosexuality, Oscar Wilde, Prosecution, Sexual Dissidence, Trails, Victorian morality

1895 was the best and the worst year of Oscar Wilde's life. At the beginning of the year, he was at the height of his career as a literary figure and celebrity. A man of genius and intellect, Oscar Wilde has always been in a celebratory mood. As he writes in *De Profundis*

The Gods had given me almost everything. I had genius, a distinguished name, high social position, brilliancy, intellectual daring: I made art a philosophy and philosophy an art: I altered the minds of men and the colors of things: there was nothing I said or did that not make people wonder ... drama novel, a poem in rhyme, a poem in prose, subtle or fantastic dialogue, whatever I touched I made beautiful in a new mode of beauty [...] and showed that the false and true are merely forms of intellectual existence. I treated art as the supreme reality and life as a mere mode of fiction; I awakened the imagination of



my century so that it created myth and legend around me: I summed up all systems in a phrase and all existence in an epigram (857).

A man with profound confidence and everlasting joy was reduced to melancholy and madness after facing the worst time of his life in 1895 when at the Old Bailey, the main courthouse in London, criminal trials against him began only to victimize him. The man who awoke the ‘imagination of his century’ was victimized by the same century and its so-called dubious morality. An analysis of the trials would help us understand the reality behind it and also would make us understand the dubiousness of sexual standards of the late Victorian age.

The events that would bring Oscar Wilde to Old Bailey began four years earlier, in the Summer of 1891, when Wilde met a promising twenty-two-year-old poet Lord Alfred Douglas (Bosie) at a tea party. The two became extremely close. Douglas took great pleasure in the interest shown in him by Wilde. Wilde saw a lively intellect and a young Adonis–appearance in Douglas. Wilde made no secret of his interest. Anglais later said he continually asked me to lunch and dine with him and sent me letters, notes, and telegrams (The Trials of Oscar Wilde). He also showered Douglas with presents and wrote a sonnet for him. They stayed together in each other’s houses and hotels and went on trips together.

The first serious problem for Wilde growing out of his relationship with Douglas came when Douglas, still a student in Oxford, gave an old Suit to a down-and-out friend named Wood. Wood discovered in a pocket the suit letters Wilde wrote to his youthful friend. Wood extorted 35 pounds from Wilde to return most of the compromising letters. Wilde later described the money as a gift enabling Wood to start a new life in America. Two other would-be blackmailers were given smaller amounts of money after returning the remaining letters.

However, Wilde’s downfall came not from blackmailers but from the father of Alfred Douglas, John Shalto Douglas, the Marques of Queensberry. Queensberry, an arrogant, ill-tempered eccentric, became concerned about his son’s relationship with Wilde. By early 1894 Queensberry concluded that Wilde was most likely a homosexual and began demanding that his son stop seeing Wilde. In a letter to Douglas, his father Queensberry Writes:



Your intimacy with this man Wilde must either cease, or I will disown you and all money supplies. [...] Never in my experience have I seen such a sight as that in your horrible features. No wonder people are talking as they are. Also, I now hear on good authority, but this may be false, that his wife is petitioning to divorce him for sodomy and other crimes. Is this true, or do you not know of it? If I thought the actual thing was true, and it became public property, I should be quite justified in shooting him on sight. (The Trials of Oscar Wilde)

Douglas replies in a telegram: “What a funny little man you are.”

Queensberry began taking increasingly desperate measures to end the relationship. He threatened restaurant and hotel managers with beating if he ever discovered Wilde and his son together on their premises. Queensberry tried to disrupt the opening night’s performance of Wilde’s new play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Later at the Albermarle club, Queensberry left a card with a porter for Oscar Wilde. He wrote on the card: “To Oscar Wilde posing as a Somdomite (Sic).” After receiving that card, Wilde wrote to Douglas:

I don’t see anything now but a criminal prosecution. My whole life seems ruined by this man. The foul thing assails the tower of ivory. On the sand, my life split; I don’t know what to do (The Trials of Oscar Wilde).

Wilde, Douglas, and another longtime friend Robert Ross visited a solicitor, Travers Humphreys, in the following days. Humphreys asked Wilde directly whether there was any truth to Queensberry’s allegation. Wilde said no. Humphreys applied for a warrant for Queensberry’s arrest. On March 2, Queensberry police arrested and charged him with libel at the Vine Street police station.

Travers Humphreys asked Edward Clark, a towering figure in the London bar, to prosecute Wilde’s case. Before accepting the case, Clark said to Wilde,

“I can only accept this brief, Mr. Wilde, if you assure me on your honor as an English gentleman that there is not and never has been any foundation for the charges made



against you. “Wilde answered that the charges were false and groundless.” (The Trials of Oscar Wilde)

About a week before the trial began at Old Bailey, some of Wilde’s close friends, like George Bernard Shaw and Frank Harris, advised him to drop his libel suit, fly the country and continue his writing abroad, possibly in more tolerant France.

On April 3, 1895, the first trial of Oscar Wilde – with Wilde, in this case, cheering the prosecution, began at Old Bailey. Sir Edward Clarke delivered the prosecution’s opening statement. He read one of Wilde’s letters to Douglas that might suggest to many readers the existence of a ‘homosexual relationship.’ Clarke admitted that the letter might appear extravagant to those in the habit of writing commercial correspondence. Still, he said it must be remembered that Oscar Wilde is a poet, and the letter should be read as “the expression of true poetic feeling, and with no relation whatever to the hateful and repulsive suggestions put to it in the plea in their care.”

Edward Carron - a rival of Wilde since their days together at Oxford began his skillful cross-examination. The cross generally broke into two main parts: literary and fact-oriented, focusing on Wilde’s past relationships. In the academic aspect of the examination, Carson asked Wilde about letters to Douglas and two of his own published works, *The Portrait of Donan Gray* and *Phrases and Philosophies*, for the use of the Young. Wilde defended these works against Carson’s suggestion that they were immoral or touched on homosexual themes. Wilde said, “There is no such thing as bad work. Instead, books are well-written or poorly written .... The views of the Philistines on art are incalculably stupid (The Trials of Oscar Wilde).

Carson asked about a suggestive letter to Lord Douglas:

Your letter was a delightful red and yellow wine, but I am sad. Bosie, you must refrain from making scenes with me. They kill me; they wreck the loveliness of life. I cannot see you so Greek and gracious, distorted with passion. I cannot listen to your curved lips saying hideous things to me. I would sooner be blackmailed by every renter in London than to have you bitter, unjust, hating. I want to know how you are the divine thing I want, grace and beauty (The Trials of Oscar Wilde).

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On being asked, was it an ordinary letter? Certainly not, Wilde answered; it was a beautiful letter.

The jury appeared astonished when Carron produced items ranging from five clothes to silver-mounted walking sticks that Wilde admitted giving to his other young companions. Carron announced that he intended to call to witness a procession of young men with whom Wilde had been sexually associated. Edward Clarke understood that his client was in grave personal danger. An 1885 Act, the Criminal Law Amendment Act, had made it a crime for anyone to commit “an act of gross indecency.” The Act had been interpreted to criminalize any form of sexual activity between members of the same sex. The Act of 1885 follows like this. Sodomy (or buggery as it was called) first became a civil offense, punishable by death in 1533 when Henry VIII issued a formal decree on the subject, The Statute of 1533. Except for a short period in the 1500s, sodomy remained a capital offense in England until 1828. Throughout the remainder of the 1800s, sodomy was a felony punishable by imprisonment.

In 1885, the social purity movement was able to successfully rewrite England's sexually explicit statutes. The legislation's primary focus was not on same-sex partnerships, but rather the safety of young women. Assaulting someone indecently after they turn thirteen was not illegal in the United States until 1885. The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 raised the legal consent age for females from thirteen to sixteen in Section 11. Oscar Wilde was found guilty by a London jury in 1895 of breaking the Criminal Law Amendment Act's Section 11. (The Trials of Oscar Wilde). When the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 was passed, the minimum age of consent for females was raised from thirteen to sixteen. Oscar Wilde was found guilty of breaking the Criminal Law Amendment Act's section 11 by a London jury in 1895. "(Oscar Wilde's) Trials"

Clarke urged Wilde to allow him to withdraw the prosecution and consent to a verdict regarding the charge of posing. Wilde agreed, and the following day Clarke rose to announce the withdrawal of the libel prosecution.

The first criminal trial of Oscar Wilde opened at Old Bailey on April 26, 1895. Wilde and Alfred Douglas faced twenty-five counts of gross indecencies and conspiracy to commit gross



indecencies. On the fourth day of the trial came Wilde's response to a question about the meaning of a phrase in a poem by Lord Alfred Douglas:

Sweet Youth

Tell me why, sad and sighing, dost thou rove

These pleasant realms? I pray thee tell me sooth,

What is thy name? He said, 'My name is Love,

Then straight the first did turn himself to me,

And cried, 'He lieth, for his name is Shame.

But I am Love, and I was wont to be

Alone in this fair garden till he came

Unasked by night: I am true Love, I fill.

The hearts of boy and girl with mutual flame

Then sighing, said the other, Have thy will

I am the Love that dares not speak its name. (The Trials of Oscar Wilde)

Prosecutor Charles Gill asked, what is the Love that dare not speak its name? Wilde's response draws loud applause - and a few hisses:

"The Love that dare not speak its name in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. That deep, spiritual affection is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo and those letters of mine, such as they are. It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it they are. In this century, it is so misunderstood that I am placed where I am now ... there is nothing unnatural about it .... the world mocks it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it." (The Trials of Oscar Wilde)





The jury deliberated for over three hours before concluding without any verdict. Wilde's second prosecution was headed by England's top prosecutor solicitor, General Frank Lockwood. On May 25, the Judge sent for both defendants (Wilde and Douglas). Oscar Wilde and Alfred Taylor, the crime of which you have been convicted are so wrong that one has to put the sentiments that must rise to the breast in every man of honor who has heard the details of the two terrible trials. It is of us for me to address you. People who can do their things must be dead in all sense of shame, and one cannot hope to produce any effect upon them. It is the worst care I have ever tried. (Ellman, Richard) Wilde got two years of hard labor.

The Wilde trial caused public attitudes toward homosexuals to become harsher and less tolerant. Whereas before the problems, there was a certain pity for those who engaged in same-sex passion, after the tests, homosexuals were seen more as a threat. The Wilde trials had other effects as well. They caused the public to begin to associate art and homoeroticism and to see effeminacy as a signal of 'homosexuality.' Many same-sex relationships seen as innocent before the Wilde trials became suspect after the tests. People with close same-sex relationships grew anxious and concerned about doing anything that night, suggesting impropriety. Victorian society, because of Wilde's sexual inclination, saw him as a threat to its moral evolution. Homophobic, intolerant, and constraining, Victorian culture, for its so-called morality, convicted Oscar Wilde for a crime that was not a new thing even for them. The jury could not describe in language because of the same moral burden. And the same persisting 'misunderstood so much (homosexuality) that it may be described as 'the love that dare not speak its name.'

A close inspection of 'The Homosexuality Law, 1885 under which Wilde was convicted and suffered criminal prosecution, would clarify that the jury, government, and society were hypocritical in their work. Before 1885, sexual assaults on boys over 13 and falling short of rape were not crimes. The impetus for the new law - its main purpose - was to protect boys, not to punish consenting adults. Prosecutions for consensual homosexual conduct before the Wilde case were rare, and homosexual conduct at the time was widespread. What offended Victorian society about Wilde's conduct was not so much that it involved sex with other males as that it involved sex with a considerable number of young male prostitutes. Wilde was not prosecuted because he was the lover of a social equal who happened to be male - he was prosecuted for his participation

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in a not-very discreet prostitution ring. Had Wilde merely pursued a relationship with a male of his age – especially one in his social class he never would have found himself in the dock at Old Bailey. Wilde’s defense attorney rightly puts up his case, “Society is to blame; my client was merely a radical individualist. Oscar Wilde was just doing his thing.” (The Trials of Oscar Wilde).

Oscar Wilde’s notion of aesthetics propounded widely through his works, helps us to understand the mind and psychology of a person and artist accused of indecency. Wilde’s aesthetic idealism and the antithesis of a moralistic or religious aesthetic realism have their roles in Hellenistic culture. For an older man to love and mentor a younger man, for the psychological benefit of both, was seen as a cultivation of new forms of beauty for its own sake. Wilde claims he loved a young man’s spirit but that his body usually symbolized Nature (Dorian Gray). Art would impress these values upon people, liberating them from the oppression of a social caste system and a corrupt, self-perpetuating state. In Wilde’s terms, no government was the best political system for human freedom. Wilde was a libertarian and held such beliefs as he wrote in *De Profound*:

“All trials are trials for one’s life, just as all sentences are death sentences. Society as we have constituted it, will have no place for me, has none to offer; but Nature whose sweet rains fall on just and unjust alike will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, .... she will clean me in great waters, with bitter herbs make me whole.” (868).

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