

STILL WILDE AFTER ALL THESE YEARS.

THE RESURGENCE OF OSCAR WILDE

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## DEDICATIONS

This thesis is dedicated to the memories of my grandmother Myrtis Burdett who loved and supported me no matter what, and my friend Chris Usinowicz who was there when I first fell in love with Oscar I love and miss you both.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over one hundred years have passed since Oscar Wilde first graced Victorian society with his extravagant presence and the writings that hailed him as a literary genius. The society of which he was so much a part and mocked in his writings serves today as a history lesson to modern audiences. Many of the topics about which he wrote (a woman with a past, unfair business dealings, and blackmail), as well as the scandal that brought on his demise (the crime of “gross indecency”), seem tame and even absurd compared to what is read in today’s newspapers. His works have been read for years in many drama and English classes, his plays are very much still a part of the theatre world, and his life continues to be the subject of many books. Recently not just his writings are getting showcased, but Wilde’s life has also been the subject in a variety of movies, plays and books. Though the charm and humor still remain, what has brought on this resurgence of interest in Oscar Wilde? This thesis will look into the recent interest in Oscar Wilde’s life and works, and find out why modern society is still wild about Wilde.

The renewed interest in Oscar Wilde has not been ignored by the scholarly community. Though many scholars have reevaluated Wilde’s writings and his biography, none have yet taken notice of the abundant interest in the Irishman in our contemporary culture. My aim in this thesis is to make our world aware that a man who lived a century ago is still as popular today as he was in his time.

This paper, limits its discussion of the revival of Wilde’s writings and life story to those that have occurred in the past thirty years, including the added interest that took place in 2000 on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Wilde’s death. The elements of the revival will be

chapters discussing plays and books, film, and popular culture that have a Wildean connection.

The first chapter begins with a brief biography of Oscar Wilde. Starting from his birth, this chapter discusses his proper upbringing in Ireland, scholarship at Trinity College, Dublin and Oxford University, England, Wilde's love affairs, and the meteoric rise and fall of his career. Due to the scandal of the three trials, Wilde was excluded from proper English society. After his prison term, he moved to France and lived poor and as a public outcast until his death in 1900. Yet less than a decade after his death, a resurgence of his works began. His works were being published for the first time, and the society that outcast him once again began to embrace his genius and wit. This trend has continued through the years and peaked in the year 2000, the centenary of his death. Though there has been sporadic interest in Wilde and his work throughout the years, the next chapter focuses on contemporary society's reintroduction to Wilde.

Chapter two discusses Oscar Wilde's reintroduction via contemporary authors' works, as well as Wilde's own works. Several modern writers have looked to Wilde for their source of creation. They have written biographical and scholarly works, as well as adaptations of Wilde's literature. Though their contributions have been significant, they are discussed only briefly in this thesis. Wilde's works will encompass the body of this chapter, dealing specifically with Wilde's plays and plays about his life that have been produced or written in the past thirty years.

This second chapter on plays examines the recent West End revivals of Wilde's works, such as An Ideal Husband (1999) and Lady Windermere's Fan (2002), as well as Al Pacino's recent staged reading of Salome (2002-2003) in New York. The West End

productions were more historical in their staging of the works and showed the decadence of Victorian society, while the New York production, as a staged reading, took a more modern approach to the text. No matter how these works were staged, Wilde's writing has a universality that can appeal to even contemporary audiences. Richard Allen Cave wrote, "Wilde sustains between the Victorian and the innovatory" (220). These facets of Wilde's plays have made them canonical and frequently produced.

This chapter also discusses several plays that have been written featuring Wildean characters, including Travesties by Tom Stoppard, and The Picture of Dorian Gray adapted by John Osborne. The use of Wildean characters outside of their plays, as seen in Travesties, serves as analogy in these new plays and the plot (Fleming 105-106). In adapting Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray, John Osborne believed that the themes in the novel are ever present and relative to today's audiences. Osborne felt that "the parallels with the historical consciousness of the last 100 years are, in fact, endless" (14). Wildean works as reference in these plays show modern audiences how he has influenced contemporary playwrights and theatre.

The key feature of this chapter, though, focuses on the depictions of Wilde as a character on stage. This idea can be seen in works such as The Judas Kiss by David Hare and The Invention of Love by Tom Stoppard. The Judas Kiss tells the story of Wilde's turbulent love affair with Lord Alfred Douglas and two critical decisions that sealed his fate. Hare's work deals with how love can affect choices that shape one's future. That theme is also true in Stoppard's The Invention of Love, but the story revolves around writer A.E. Housman. Though Wilde and Housman never met, Stoppard creates a

conversation between them discussing their choices and fates. Stoppard uses Wilde as a symbol to contrast Housman's life choices.

The chapter finishes with a discussion on the most historically accurate, and in my opinion, the most interesting of the plays on Wilde, Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde by Moises Kaufman. The play deals with Wilde's experience with the Victorian criminal justice system along with witnesses at the trials. Though many of those witnesses had different views of what happened in the trials, Kaufman shaped their stories together, along with trial press, and created a historical, theatrical event. In writing the play, Kaufman wanted, "to tell the story -- a story -- of these trials. And second, I was interested in using this story to continue to explore theatrical language and form. Specifically, how can theater reconstruct history?" (xiv). Kaufman's work makes something wonderful out of a horrible experience in Wilde's life. He proves that despite Wilde's dramatic downfall, there continues to be such an interest in Wilde, the man. Tony Kushner, in an afterward to Kaufman's play, wrote, "Look at the legacy that Wilde's industry has left behind, from which so much has descended, including this beautiful play" (143).

Films on Oscar Wilde and his writings have been made as early as 1908, but in the past decade more and more of these films have been released. Some of the earlier classics I will briefly discuss include the re-release of 1952's The Importance of Being Earnest starring Michael Redgrave, and the BBC's classic televised productions of The Importance of Being Earnest (1988), An Ideal Husband (1969), Lady Windermere's Fan (1985), and The Picture of Dorian Gray (1976) with John Gielgud, and their transfer to DVD in 2002.

This chapter also discusses the films based on his works, starting with the 1999 Miramax production of An Ideal Husband starring Rupert Everett, and last summer's release of The Importance of Being Earnest also starring Rupert Everett.

The bulk of this chapter examines the movie which I think started the renewed interest of Wilde for film, 1997's Wilde starring Stephen Fry. This film, though not the most accurate in its representation of the Irishman, proved that for the first time that Oscar Wilde's life was film worthy. Along with this film, I will look at the special features and documentaries that encompass the 2002 release of Wilde on DVD.

In recent years, Oscar Wilde has become a virtual popular cultural icon. It seems that in almost any London museum or theatre gift shop one can visit, there is some kind of Oscar Wilde paraphernalia for sale: T-shirts, coffee mugs, mouse pads, etc. His extravagant lifestyle and cutting wit made him popular in his day as well as ours.

His witticisms can be found all over merchandise, websites, any and everything, and even in the least likely of places. Bennigan's, an Irish Restaurant and Tavern chain, has recently published the Wilde quote "I can resist everything except temptation" on their dessert menus.

This reputation has spawned such websites as Oscar Wilde Comics, which shows what Wilde's imprisonment would be like today, and Oscariana, a virtual anything you want to know about Oscar Wilde site. A search for "Oscar Wilde" on the internet in March 2003, produced over 300,000 sites in under a second, proof that even modern technology has embraced Oscar Wilde.

Modern musicians have even taken quotes from Wilde for their music. English DJ Fatboy Slim's album Halfway Between the Gutter and the Stars and American Techno

artist Moby's album and title song We are all Made of Stars are loosely based on the Wilde quote: "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."

Oscar Wilde has also become a tourist magnet. The three cities in which Wilde spent most of his life, London, Paris and Dublin, have tributes and tours to him all across their cities. Tourists can look at his home in London, visit his birthplace in Dublin, or even visit his grave in Paris. His popularity stands with millions of tourists visiting these places every year.

Wilde's biggest contribution to popular culture is his status as a homosexual martyr due to his imprisonment for his crimes of sodomy and homosexuality. Many homosexuals see Wilde as a hero of the cause, while others also see the humor in his overt homosexuality, which can be seen in the character of Oscar Wildcat on the Showtime cartoon Queer Duck. By looking at these examples, the closing chapter discusses the many ways that Oscar Wilde has influenced popular culture.

Our world has changed tremendously since the age of Wilde, yet his writings and his biography live on through the renewed interest as found in plays, books, film, and popular culture. People all over the world are being introduced or even reintroduced to Wilde daily and are sparked with a newfound interest. The goal of this thesis is to share with theatre, English and even history scholars the importance of Oscar Wilde through the recent interest found in works published, performed, and available via the World Wide Web. I also want to show these scholars, along with the general public, that no matter how much time has passed there are as many devoted to Oscar as ever and are still Wilde after all these years.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *The Man*

Over a century has passed since Oscar Wilde engrossed Victorian audiences with his witty conversation and entertaining works. Wilde, as a public speaker and a playwright, had the ability to fill an audience. His works published in popular magazines of the era, such as Punch and Lippincott's, sold out at London newsstands. Wilde lived life to the fullest and is often considered to be the first celebrity. Due to his crimes of “gross indecency,” Wilde lost his celebrity status with the Victorian public. Yet, Oscar Wilde is as popular today as he was in the late 1800s. His popularity remains, in part, due to his interesting biography.

Oscar Finegal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde was born on October 16, 1854 in Dublin, Ireland. Wilde was born into a prominent family, and was the middle of three children. His father, Sir William Robert Wilde, was a well-respected surgeon throughout the United Kingdom. He was appointed Surgeon Oculist to the Queen in Ireland, and was knighted in 1863. Oscar Wilde’s mother, Lady Jane Francesca Wilde, was a well-known speaker and rhetorist. She wrote several poems and political essays under the pen name of “Speranza.”

There is little known about Wilde’s childhood, except that he was well-educated and intelligent. He told a friend in 1889:

When I was a boy at school, I was looked upon as a prodigy by my associates because, quite frequently, I would, for a wager, read a three-volume novel in half an hour so closely as to be able to give an accurate

resume of the plot of the story; by one hour's reading I was enabled to give a fair narrative of the incidental scenes and the most pertinent dialogue. (Ellmann, Oscar Wilde 21)

Wilde attended Portora Royal School, Enniskillen, a prominent school for boys, and proved a very successful student. He became interested in Greek studies and won the Carpenter prize for Greek Testament in 1870. His superior scholarship earned him one of three Royal School scholarships to Trinity College, Dublin.

While at Trinity College, Wilde continued his Greek studies and looked further into classics. He also took interest in a popular art movement called aesthetics.

Aestheticism is a philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty, art and preference to the creation and appreciation of beauty. Wilde would later delve into aesthetics during his study at Oxford.

Wilde continued to succeed while at Trinity. He received a Foundation Scholarship in 1873 and a Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek in 1874. Yet all this success was not enough to keep Wilde at Trinity. In June 1874, he was awarded a scholarship in Classics to Oxford University. By October of that year, he had moved to England to attend Magdalen College, Oxford.

Oscar Wilde's career as a scholar and writer came into bloom while at Oxford. Wilde studied under such scholars as John Ruskin and Walter Pater, and gained first in class in Classical Moderations and Litterae Humaniores (Greats) as well as earning the Newdigate Prize for his poem "Ravenna" (1878).

In 1875, while at Oxford, his mentor from Trinity College Dr. J.P. Mahaffy invited Wilde to accompany him to Italy for a summer course. Wilde was obsessed with

Roman Catholicism and used this trip to further his faith. He also spent his time in museums and viewed the works his professors had discussed in their lectures. It was during this first trip to Italy that Wilde took an interest in writing and wrote several poems, letters, and short stories about the beauty he saw while there.

He returned to Oxford from the trip more obsessed with Roman Catholicism. He wore an oval amethyst ring on the third finger of his right hand because the Pope did. This interest in Catholicism helped him through one of the first tragedies of his life, his father's death on April 19, 1876. After this tragic event, Wilde began writing more to deal with his emotions. He continued his studies and thrived at Oxford, despite the pain of his loss.

About a year after Sir William's death, Oscar set off on another trip with Mahaffy. This time Wilde visited the place he had studied so long, Greece. Wilde immersed himself with Greek culture and continued to study and write about all he had seen. By finally visiting Greece, he not only lived out a life-long dream, but became an aesthete.

Wilde had been interested in aestheticism since his studies at Trinity, and now he began to write theories based on the movement. But by the time he reached Oxford, he began to live his life as an aesthete. He began to dress in an aesthetic manner, wearing knee breeches with silk stockings instead of a full-length suit like most students. He decorated his room with imported blue willow china and fresh lilies instead of only books. Wilde's eccentric behavior, coupled with his intelligent and witty conversational skills, made him very popular at Oxford.

Despite his fantastical nature and ways, by the time Wilde received his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1878 he had no job offers and no money. His lifestyle had cost him quite a lot of money and Wilde was unsure what to do next. His mother convinced him that the only way he could write and have money was to marry an heiress, so she urged him to go to London and find one (Ellmann, Oscar Wilde 94).

In the spring of 1879, Oscar Wilde moved to London. It did not take long before everyone in London knew who Wilde was. His tall stature, six foot three inches, along with his long curly hair made people in the streets take notice. He was also a brilliant speaker whose booming voice and Irish tale-telling ways made him popular at many parties.

Before long, he was included in the social circle of many of the famous figures of the time, such as A.G. Swinburne, William Morris, and Gilbert and Sullivan. Wilde was even used as the basis for a character in Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta Patience (1881), mocking his aesthetic nature and his carrying a patience lily throughout London.

Wilde did not take his mother's advice in finding an heiress upon his arrival in the city. He was enthralled by London's West End and the actresses on its stages. He befriended and courted some of the most famous actresses of the Victorian era including Ellen Terry, Lillie Langtry, and the great Sarah Bernhardt. Wilde even had a short love affair with Florence Balcombe, who cast him off for another, author Bram Stoker.

When it did not conflict with his social calendar, Wilde continued to write. In 1880, he wrote and published his first play Vera or The Nihilist (1880). Though the play was not a success, he continued writing. His first edition of Poems was published in 1881, and he had several short stories and essays published in high-society magazines.

His big break came in association with Gilbert and Sullivan's Patience opening in New York in 1881. Audiences were enthralled by the Wilde-type character, and producer Richard D'Oyly Carte smelled money. He offered to send Wilde to America to accompany the operetta with a lecture. After some serious consideration, Wilde accepted D'Oyly Carte's offer. At a bon voyage party in his honor, Wilde met the woman who was to become his wife, Constance Lloyd. Upon their first meeting Wilde told his mother, "By the by, Mama, I think of marrying that girl" (Ellmann, Oscar Wilde 221). He set out for New York on Christmas Eve 1881, and took with him memories of the young girl who stole his heart.

Wilde's physical appearance and outrageous stories made him a hit in New York. Many Americans had never encountered someone quite like Oscar Wilde before, and he was asked to take his lectures across the states and Canada. He arrived in New York harbor on January 2, 1882, and when asked in customs if he had any goods to declare, Wilde responded wittily, "I have nothing to declare except my genius" (Belford 93). He toured across North America, for over a year, speaking on qualities such as the "House Beautiful", fashion, and aestheticism. All classes and walks of life were as fascinated with Wilde as much as they were his lectures. In New York City, "street urchins" or poor children followed Wilde around the city copying his every move (Blanchard 17). Wilde's aesthetic dress of knee breeches and hosiery fascinated his American audience members, especially the simple pioneers in the west. Wilde remarked of his outfit, "Strange that a pair of silk stockings should so upset a nation" (Calloway 32). When he finally returned to England, Oscar Wilde found himself much richer, and his fame was now known on both sides of the Atlantic.

After a month back in London, Wilde went to Paris trying to achieve the fame there that he had received in England and America. He spent days in conversation with Emile Zola and Victor Hugo, and dined with Hilaire Germain Edgar Degas and Camille Pissarro. At a dinner party with Wilde as guest of honor, Zola was having trouble understanding Wilde's wit due to his use of the "barbarous language" of English (Holland, Oscar Wilde 43). Wilde apologized to Zola and replied in French that, "I am Irish by birth and English by adoption so that I am condemned, as Monsieur Zola says, to speak in the language of Shakespeare (Holland, Oscar Wilde 43). Despite this instance, Wilde soaked up the French and their culture and began to only speak and write in their language.

Wilde commented that France was superior to England because, "in France every bourgeois wants to be an artist, whereas in England every artist wants to be a bourgeois" (Calloway 36). This could be said of Wilde who changed his aesthetic sense of fashion to that of a dandy, wearing skin-tight trousers popular some fifty-years prior in Europe and wore his hair cut and curled similar to Nero.

Inspired by what he saw and heard in Paris, Wilde returned to writing. He spent his first three months there working on his next play, The Duchess of Padua (1883). After having trouble getting it produced, he returned to London in July 1883. At a welcome home party in London, Wilde was reintroduced to Constance Lloyd. From that moment on, the two were inseparable.

Constance and Oscar had a fast and passionate courtship. Constance was very intellectual for a woman of that era, and her intelligence attracted Wilde as much as her beauty. She had attended art school and was, like Wilde, an aesthete. They spent much

time together going to museums and dinner parties and talking of Dante and the Greeks. After a six month courtship, Oscar and Constance were engaged on November 26, 1883. The two were married on May 29 the following year.

After a two month honeymoon throughout France, the Wildes moved into their own "House Beautiful" at 16 Tite Street, Chelsea. Oscar continued to write and lecture and Constance remained an upper-class housewife. In June 1885, their first son Cyril was born, and by November the next year a second son, Vyvyan, was born. By this time, the Wildes were happy and thriving as a family.

In 1886, Wilde met someone who was to change his life forever. Robert "Robbie" Ross was a fellow Oxonian whom Wilde befriended. Ross, upon his graduation from Oxford, moved into Tite Street with the Wildes. Ross, a homosexual, had very strong feelings for Oscar and felt sure that the feelings were reciprocated. He seduced Wilde into the idea of homosexuality, and Wilde took the bait. Ellmann writes, "First as a lover and then as a friend, Ross was to keep a permanent place in Wilde's life" (Oscar Wilde 259). Ross remained Wilde's life-long friend and became his literary executor after his death.

Wilde's writing career flourished in London. He published children's stories in several prominent magazines. Yet his big success came on June 20, 1890 with the publication of The Picture of Dorian Gray in Lippincott's Magazine. The theory that controversy brings popularity proved true for Wilde, as the novel caused a scandal throughout London society due to its idea of an older man being fascinated with a younger man. Despite the controversy, Wilde received critical acclaim for his writing as well as great monetary success.

Though he was happy with his loving and supportive family and a secret lover on the side, it still was not enough for Wilde. After the publication of The Picture of Dorian Gray into novel form (1891), Wilde accepted fans of the story into his home for a small celebration. It was at this party that he met the person and scandal with which his life is most associated, Lord Alfred “Bosie” Douglas.

Douglas, a fellow Oxonian, was obsessed with Wilde’s writing and longed to know him. He was thrilled to be introduced to Wilde and honored to meet him in his own home. Wilde was fascinated with Douglas’s beauty and intelligence and offered to tutor him in the Greats. From this moment, Wilde’s life was to change forever.

In the years that followed, Wilde published what are known as his greatest works: Salome (1891), The Critic as Artist (1891), An Ideal Husband (1893), and The Importance of Being Earnest (1894), often hailed as one of the greatest comedic plays of all time. Success was sweet, yet Wilde’s personal life was crumbling. Wilde continued to be a loving husband and father, but was not a constant in the family due to his unstable relationship with Douglas.

Wilde has been called the first modern man and lived his life as many do in modern times. Similar to many married people in today’s society, Wilde had a spouse along with a lover on the side. He spent less and less time with his wife Constance and sons Cyril and Vyvyan, to spend more time with his beloved Bosie. Wilde was, in a sense, having the best of both worlds. Adam Gopnik wrote, “He (Wilde) didn’t just want to have his cake and eat it. He wanted to have his cake, eat it, franchise a bakery chain with his name on it, defend the cause of pure pastry, and somehow get credit for both abstinence and Epicureanism. Just like the rest of us” (80).

Wilde was also considered as a modern man for this homosexual relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas. Despite the strict moral code of the Victorian era, the behavior of men was less strict than modern society. Brian Gilbert argued, "Men could be much more affectionate and could be seen to be more affectionate, without causing suspicion or innuendo... It is an interesting cultural question whether, before the Wilde scandal, there was any notion at all of a 'gay man'" (Wilde...Modern). Many of Wilde's closest friends did not believe that he was homosexual until he personally confirmed it.

The story of the first modern man has found interest in the present. Recent audiences are attracted to Wilde. It seems that his life was no different than many other classic or even modern social figure: prominent family, proper upbringing, a scholar at a major university, traveled the world, married a good woman and started a family, and dabbled with sins of the flesh on the side. Yet, today's society can relate easier to Wilde and his story than some other historical figures from that era because Wilde's troubles and issues exist in current times. As these people continue their fascination with Wilde's brilliant and witty writings, the scandal that brought about his end intrigues even more.

Oscar Wilde always had a rocky relationship with Bosie's father John Sholto Douglas, ninth Marquess of Queensberry. Queensberry is best known for his creation of boxing rules, adopted in both England and America known simply as "The Queensberry Rules." Yet in Wilde's biography, he is known for much more. He was a brutish Scotsman who bullied and disowned his two wives and his children, whom also disowned him. Yet, within high society he was respected for his wealth and title.

Queensberry knew of his youngest son's association with Wilde, but was disgusted by the rumors of homosexuality heard within his social group. He wrote Bosie

a letter on April 1, 1894 urging him to end his “intimacy with this man Wilde” (Ellmann, Oscar Wilde 394). Queensberry finished this letter saying:

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 at sight. These Christian English cowards and men, as they call themselves, want waking up. Your disgusted so-called father, Queensberry. (Ellmann, Oscar Wilde 394)

The letter did nothing but enrage Bosie, who in turn, went to Wilde for consolation. On June 30<sup>th</sup> of that same year, Queensberry decided to see if he could appeal to Wilde. Queensberry threatened him at Tite Street, leaving Wilde shaken but still attached to Bosie.

As Bosie and Wilde’s relationship flourished, Queensberry decided actions spoke louder than words in expressing his disapproval of their love. One such action was set around the London opening of The Importance of Being Earnest on February 14, 1895. Queensberry had bought a ticket to the production, but, wanting to avoid a confrontation, management cancelled his reservation. Police heavily guarded the entrances into the St. James Theatre to prevent any disturbance. Queensberry arrived, “with a ‘bouquet’ made of carrots and turnips, which he intended to throw on the stage if author was called for at the end of the performance” (Holland, Oscar Wilde 100). His plan was foiled, and Queensberry left angered, throwing his bouquet at the stage door. Four days later,

however, Queensberry's next action would begin the chain of events that would end of Wilde's career and reputation.

On February 18, 1895, Queensberry left a libelous card for Wilde at his gentleman's club, The Albemarle. The card which Oscar described as having "hideous words on it" read: "To Oscar Wilde posing as a sodomite [sic]" (Wilde, Letters 634). Queensberry and his son never had a very healthy father/son relationship, but Douglas's relationship with Wilde really set him over the edge. Queensberry thought that if he could shame Wilde or publicly humiliate him, Wilde's relationship with Douglas would end. The opposite happened. Upon Bosie's coaxing, Wilde sued Queensberry for libel the next day. The Marquess was arrested and jailed until the trial opened on April 3.

The trial was meant to show that Queensberry had overreacted and libeled the good name of popular Wilde. Fellow Irish writer and friend William Butler Yeats wrote of the first trial: "I considered him [Wilde] a man of action, that he was writer by perversity and accident, and would have been more important as a soldier or politician; and I was certain that, guilty or not guilty, he would prove himself a man" (10). Instead, the trial revealed that Wilde was indeed homosexual and that there was no case for the prosecution. On April 5, 1895, Queensberry was acquitted on the grounds that he called Wilde "a sodomite in the public interest" (Ellmann, Oscar Wilde 425). Wilde was arrested for his acts of sodomy, but was granted until sundown to conveniently leave the country and flee from trial. Wilde refused to leave London because his mother advised him the Irish are not a cowardly people, and Bosie convinced Wilde he could win. Wilde was arrested at sundown April 5<sup>th</sup> in the Cadogan Hotel, charged with sodomy at Bow

Street, and was held without bail. He was taken to Holloway Prison to be held until the trial date April 26<sup>th</sup>.

News of the mighty falling travels fast, and people who were once Wilde's friends fell away from view even faster. The cost of the first trial almost broke Wilde, but the second trial would ruin him financially. In order to pay for damages from the first trial, Queensberry forced the sheriff to sell all of Wilde's possessions from his home. On April 24<sup>th</sup>, Wilde lost all of his precious belongings including personalized manuscripts from Victor Hugo and Walt Whitman, one of a kind paintings by James McNeill Whistler, expensive china, and his own hand-written manuscripts of his works.

Wilde also lost his family. Constance took Cyril and Vyvyan to Switzerland to keep them away from the media circus and changed their surnames to Holland. Vyvyan (Wilde) Holland later wrote of a time not long after their exile asking Constance: " 'Where is father?' ... 'Why don't we ever see him now?' I suppose this was the question my mother had been dreading for months. She replied: 'He has not been very well. He has had a great deal of trouble.' I was afraid to ask anymore" (Son 86). Wilde's sons would never see their father again.

The trial opened on April 26<sup>th</sup> and would end only a few days later. It was the first time in England that a trial was so publicly covered and followed. Oscar Wilde's name was well known throughout London, and the world for that matter, and the crimes charged against him were very serious. Bosie wanted to testify for Wilde, yet Oscar's attorney's advised against his testifying. Bosie's explosive temper and blunt nature would hurt Wilde's case more than help it. The trial ended a few days later on May 1<sup>st</sup> with a hung jury. Though Wilde was released on bail and felt fairly confident that he would be

found innocent of the charges, the evidence that was released caused enough concern for another trial. The fact that Wilde wrote and spoke about “the love that dares not speak its name” made the public wonder just exactly what that was; the judge order a new trial to resolve the matter.

As time passed between trials, Wilde was sure that his fate was to be sealed with this third trial. He began to feel very pessimistic about the results, though Bosie tried to convince him otherwise. Yet before the third trial, Bosie fled to France, like many other homosexual Englishmen, to be safe from any charges that might be placed upon him.

Writers and artists throughout London, however, were amazed by Wilde’s strength throughout such an ordeal. Yeats remarked, “Everywhere one met writers and artists who praised his wit and eloquence in the witness-box, or repeated some private saying” (13). Regardless of whether they viewed him as guilty or innocent, they appreciated Wilde’s composure despite the serious charges against him.

The third trial opened on May 20, 1895 at the Old Bailey in London. Though no new evidence was released in this trial, more thorough background was added to the previous evidence. The media had been influencing the public for weeks, and the prosecution had upped their research and brought in two young male prostitutes to testify against Wilde. Yet the final judgment rested on whether Wilde and Douglas’s relationship was sexual or merely of scholarly admiration and friendship. The judge ultimately decided that their relationship was of a sexual nature, and Wilde was charged with the crime of gross indecency and sentenced to two years hard labor:

A cry of ‘Shame’ was heard in the court. Wilde blanched and his discomposd face worked with pain. ‘My God, my God!’ he said. He

struggled to speak, and may have managed to say (though witnesses differ), 'And I? May I say nothing, my lord?' But the judge merely waved his hand to the warders, who took hold of Wilde just as he swayed and seemed about to fall to the ground. (Ellmann, Oscar Wilde 449)

Wilde had lost his fame, fortune, family and friends due to love. Before the second trial, his name was taken off the marquee of his plays in the West End. Not long after that, those plays closed. By November 12, 1895, just six months after he was convicted, Wilde had declared bankruptcy. His wife and children were in Switzerland with different identities, Bosie had fled England, and several people once known as his friends denied even knowing Oscar. Wilde described his fall by telling about his humiliating trip to prison:

From two o'clock till half-past two on that day I had to stand on the centre platform of Clapham Junction in convict dress and handcuffed, for the world to look at...Of all possible objects I was the most grotesque. When people saw me they laughed. Each train as it came up swelled the audience. Nothing could exceed their amusement. That was of course before they knew who I was. As soon as they had been informed, they laughed still more. For half an hour I stood there in the grey November rain surrounded by a jeering mob. For a year after that was done to me I wept every day at the same hour and for the same space of time. (Priestley 218-219)

The rest of Oscar Wilde's life was one of sorrow. From May 25, 1895 until May 19, 1897, he was housed in three prisons. For a while he was not allowed to read or to

write, but as he befriended some jailers he was given special privileges as a “gentleman.” It was through these friendships that he was able to write his last works: a letter to Bosie entitled “De Profundis” and an emotional poem about an English prisoner “The Ballad of Reading Gaol”. He also sustained an injury to his ear while in prison, and it affected his health for the rest of his life. His mother, Lady Wilde, died while he was in prison in 1896, and his wife Constance died in 1898 after an operation. When he was released, he fled to France and spent the rest of his days there. Wilde went under the carefully chosen alias Sebastian Melmoth: “Sebastian was for the martyred Saint, and Melmoth for the Wanderer from the gothic novel by Charles Maturin, from whom his mother was descended” (Calloway 99). Wilde traveled from time to time, meeting up with Bosie in Rome twice after his release, but mostly could not afford to leave Paris. He died in his hotel room in Paris on November 30, 1900 at the age of forty-six.

In 1898, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” was published anonymously, and in 1899, both The Importance of Being Earnest and An Ideal Husband were released for sale. Then in 1905, “De Profundis” was released in expurgated form. By 1906, Wilde’s estate was discharged from bankruptcy. It was during this time that more of his works were published and rights to perform his plays became available. Audiences were reintroducing themselves to Oscar Wilde, and new audiences were reading his works. In 1908, his first collected complete works was released by Methuen Publishers of London. Throughout the years, publishers have continued releasing Wilde’s works and they are considered classics.

The year 2000 marked the 100th anniversary of Oscar Wilde’s death. Centennial editions of his writings were for sale in bookstores. This renewed interest in Oscar Wilde

was not ignored by the scholarly community. Many scholars reevaluated Wilde's writings and his biography. Critical commentaries of his works in the form of essays, books, and bibliographies were being published frequently. Yet none have yet to take notice of the abundant interest in the Irishman in our contemporary world. Modern society needs to be aware that a man who lived a century ago is still as popular today as he was in his time due to renewed interest in his writings, life, and personality. Why is modern society still wild about Wilde?

Oscar Wilde's life was full of universalities with which current audiences can relate. The ideas that love, instead of hate, could bring a person's demise, and that a person could go from success to extreme failure in an instant are relevant to today's society. George Wilson-Knight commented on this connection between Wilde and current times: "The shame may be of the essence; at least it shatters all the pseudo-dignities and masks of our lying civilization" (295). Hollywood is full of celebrities with stories similar to Wilde's that can be seen in People Magazine every month. These stories appeal to the general public and the similarities between Wilde, a celebrity during his time, and modern celebrities are plentiful.

Homosexuality in an oppressed era is another issue of Wilde's life that enthralls people. Though many Victorian men were openly affectionate with one another, it did not necessarily mean they were gay. Victorian high society often challenged the strict moral code established by the Queen through their extravagant lifestyle. Their extravagance was even present in their sexual lives, and homosexuality blossomed during the era. Adam Gopnik wrote: "Wilde was among the most popular middle-class entertainers of the day, and earned the dislike of the social radicals for his conformity. He loved bourgeois

respectability so much that he went to court to defend it. His trouble came not from his sexual practices but from his denial of them” (80). Despite any differing moral opinions on the subject, the fact that homosexuality was a crime may seem shocking today. That Wilde was sentenced to two years in prison for sodomy and homosexuality is hard to fathom in modern society.

Despite Wilde’s fall from popularity and society in the 1890s, he has risen like a phoenix from the flames a century later. Wilde’s friends were hesitant of his staying in England to face the serious allegations against him, but his family urged him to stay and take responsibility no matter the consequences. Yeats visited Wilde and his brother before the second trial and said:

While I was there, some woman who had just seen him – Willie Wilde’s wife, I think – came in, and threw herself in a chair, and said in an exhausted voice, ‘It is all right now, he has made up his mind to go to prison if necessary’ ...I have never doubted, even for an instant, that he made the right decision, and that he owes to that decision half of his renown. (12)

Wilde lived only three years after his release from prison and died at the age of forty-six. Despite his short life, Wilde left an extraordinary life story to be told. Modern writers and filmmakers have taken to this task, and their audiences have developed a newfound appreciation for Wilde. From this interest, these people then turn to the greatest achievement that he left behind, his complete works. Wilde’s works remain his legacy and through their release in print, film or on stage continue to introduce and reintroduce Wilde to current spectators. As new audiences have been exposed to Wilde’s

biography and writings, a resurgence of Wilde has taken place. Oscar Wilde rose from the ashes created by his society, and has, posthumously, experienced success and popularity that continues today.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *The Author*

Oscar Wilde received critical and commercial success during his life for his writing. His complete works contain fifteen stories, nine plays, ninety-nine poems, and various essays, articles, lectures and letters. Wilde's writings are as popular today as they were in his time, but he has now gained the reputation as a literary genius.

Yet, Wilde did not always have this status. When one looks back upon the list of the fifty most produced plays in London in the 1890s, Wilde's Lady Windermere's Fan was fourth behind works by the playwrights Henry Arthur Jones and Arthur Wing Pinero (Powell 1). As far as one-hundred most popular plays of that decade, Wilde's highest ranking, Lady Windermere's Fan was thirty-third, followed far behind by A Woman of No Importance, seventy-second, and An Ideal Husband, ninety-third; The Importance of Being Earnest was not even ranked (Powell 1). Though Pinero and Jones were leaders in Victorian drama as it happened, Wilde remains its legacy. Adam Gopnik wrote: "One reason for Wilde's longevity has to do with his literary generation. All his cohorts...are still alive on the page...Wilde was the most famous because he was the funniest and his wisecracks were the best" (78).

Many modern writers have now turned the focus of their works on Wilde. There has been a variety of scholarly writings on Wilde focusing on his life and works. Peter Raby, Principal Lecturer and Head of English and Drama at Homerton College, Cambridge University, is one of the foremost scholars on Oscar Wilde. Raby has worked with Oscar's son, Vyvyan, and grandson, Merlin, on his works and conferences about

Wilde. Raby leads the scholarly works on Wilde with his book of essays entitled Oscar Wilde (1988) and The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde (1997), for which he served as editor.

For those readers interested more in Wildean history, there are such books as Oscar Wilde's America by Mary Warner Blanchard, Oscar Wilde's Last Stand by Philip Hoare, and Victorian Prison Lives by Philip Priestley. These three books look into various events in Wilde's life with a historical perspective instead of a critical one. The first book deals with Wilde's visit to America early in his career to make lectures on "The House Beautiful." The latter two deal with Wilde's trip through the Victorian criminal justice system from trial to sentence.

Various biographies and stories about Wilde's life have also found their way into bookstores. The most accurate writings come from Wilde's son and grandson, Vyvyan and Merlin Holland. Vyvyan Holland has published two books about his father, the biography Oscar Wilde and an autobiography entitled Son of Oscar Wilde. Merlin Holland writes essays about his famous grandfather for magazines, books, and the official Oscar Wilde website. The most famous of the Wilde biographies, however, was not written by a relative. Richard Ellmann had penned many books on Wilde and his life, but his biography entitled Oscar Wilde stands as his masterpiece. The book mixes the chronology of Wilde's life with wit and compassion, and despite the near 600 page length, is an easy read. Ellmann's biography has reprinted several times and inspired the biographical film Wilde which will be further discussed in the next chapter.

There has also been a revisiting of Wilde's works that have led to revisions of his works. These include various editions of The Wicked Wit of Oscar Wilde and the

adaptation of The Importance of Being Earnest into novel form by Charles Osborne. The first book contains numerous Wildean quotes separated into various topics and subject matter with reference to the work in which they are found. For instance, in the chapter “Civilized Society” there is a quote from The Critic as Artist stating, “Yes the public is wonderfully tolerant. It forgives everything except genius” (27). Charles Osborne had the arduous task of adapting a Wilde work. Osborne took Wilde’s most famous writing and turned it into a novel because, “I cannot think of a single work for the dramatic stage, outside Shakespeare’s canon, which is the source of so many helpful and felicitous quotations as this play. Now readers will be able to relish *The Importance* in the comfort of their own homes and at their own pace” (xii).

This recent interest in Wilde and his writings has led to a reevaluation of Wilde in performance. As more of Wilde’s literature was being published, an interest in reproducing Wilde’s works on the stage has occurred. Besides reviving Wilde’s plays, many modern playwrights have written plays featuring his characters or himself as a character.

Wilde’s works first appeared on the Broadway stage in 1891 with an anonymous production of The Duchess of Padua, and in the West End in 1892 with Lady Windermere’s Fan. Throughout the years several productions of these works have been produced in both New York and London, but their universality has allowed them to be produced at a variety of theatres in a variety of ways. Versions of The Importance of Being Earnest have been set in different decades, such as Hardin-Simmons University’s version set in 1920s’ New York and the University of Michigan’s version set in 1960s’ New York. The Wild At Last Theatre Company in New York City also produced a

critically acclaimed all-male version of the play for the 1998 New York International Fringe Festival. The ADC Theatre in Cambridge made their own interpretation of Salome by having Oscar Wilde as a character in the play. Wilde sat on stage and watched the action of the play progress, then in between scenes spoke some of his famous quips in relation to the action in the play.

Yet it is not just amateur actors who have taken a stab at re-interpreting Wilde on stage. In 1988, English dramatist Steven Berkoff directed and acted in a version of Salome. The production premiered at Dublin's Gate Theatre, but later moved to The National Theatre in London. Berkoff, along with other directors who challenge themselves to present a Wilde piece on stage, felt that there was a special approach to staging Wilde's language. As director, he "sought to focus attention upon the physicality of Wilde's words" (Kaplan 267). Berkoff felt that "the weight of Wilde's language had to be carried slowly as if it were a fragile and precious cargo capable of being shattered by anything less than the most careful handling" (165).

In the past four years, two of Wilde's plays have been revived on London's West End by noted director Sir Peter Hall. An Ideal Husband (1999) follows the story of successful politician Sir Robert Chiltern. A mysterious lady named Mrs. Cheveley attempts to ruin Sir Robert's career by producing incriminating evidence about his past. However, Cheveley has not reckoned on the faithfulness and good memory of his devoted wife, Gertrude. This production ran at the Lyric Theatre in London from November 3, 1998 – March 6, 1999. It was staged by the former Royal Shakespeare Company executive director Sir Peter Hall. With the exception of the modern lighting and sound, this production was traditional Victorian in nature, as well as very historical.

Hall wanted to bring the audience to this Victorian society, yet still remind them they were at the modern theatre. As the audience entered the theatre, they saw a shiny silver English pound with the image of Queen Victoria on it hanging from the fly. This pound was enormous and almost covered the area from the stage floor to the top of the proscenium to both sides of the wings. Lights shone upon the Pound giving an abstract view to begin the play with, as well as a symbol in response to the decadence of the era and of the play. This performance was not just entertaining to audiences, but via period costuming and sets it was like watching Victorian theatre history come to life in front of contemporary eyes.

The second Wildean revival by Hall was Lady Windermere's Fan (2002). On the morning of his wife's twenty-first birthday, Lord Windermere gives her, as a token of his love, a beautiful present -- a fan. However, she is to find out that her love is not as secure as she once believed. A stranger named Mrs. Erlynne arrives, and Lady Windermere learns that her husband is in some way involved with her. As she fears an adulterous relationship between Mrs. Erlynne and Lord Windermere, Lady Windermere contemplates having an affair with the caddish Lord Darlington. In twenty-four hours, the happiness of Lord and Lady Windermere teeters on the precipice of scandal and disaster. The show had an all-star cast that included Joely Richardson as Lady Windermere and Vanessa Redgrave as Mrs. Erlynne. An interesting revelation occurs in the end of the play proclaiming Mrs. Erlynne as Lady Windermere's long lost mother. This makes the casting choice of Richardson and Redgrave seems perfect, as they are mother and daughter in real life. Hall deployed a similar technique to open the show as he did in An Ideal Husband. A giant, delicate lace fan hung from the rafters in the beginning showing

symbolism of how people hide their secrets as Victorian women would hide behind their fans. Benedict Nightingale wrote, “Even before Peter Hall’s production begins we’re so aware that it’s about upper-class secrecy and hypocrisy that it seems unnecessary for him to stage Oscar Wilde’s play at all” (“Lady,” par. 2). Despite any negative reviews of the play, Lady Windermere’s Fan ran for a limited engagement of four months (February 13 – June 8, 2002) to full houses at the Haymarket, Theatre Royal, proving Wilde’s popularity on the stage.

There was another West End revival of a Wilde play that should be briefly noted. His most famous play, The Importance of Being Earnest, ran from January 17 – April 14, 2001 at the Savoy Theatre. The comedy of mistaken identities was directed by Christopher Morahan and starred Patricia Routledge as Lady Bracknell, best known for her role as Hyacinth Bucket on the British comedy Keeping Up Appearances. Darren Dalglish called the show, “A very entertaining two and a half hours, a pure theatrical delight” (“Earnest,” par. 6). This production first opened at the Haymarket, Theatre Royal in 1999, but between these West End productions, The Importance of Being Earnest toured across the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand.

New York has also seen a revival of a Wildean work via Al Pacino’s staged reading of Salome (2002-2003). The play tells the story of the princess Salome who is lusted after by her stepfather King Herod, while she lusts after the prophet John the Baptist. In 1992, Pacino played Herod Antipas in the Circle in the Square production of the show. In this current production, Pacino will revive his role as Herod opposite Marisa Tomei’s Salome and Dianne Wiest’s Herodias. This production had a limited run from November 12 to December 22 of last year at St. Ann’s Warehouse in Brooklyn. The

staged reading, directed by Estelle Parsons, featured original musical accompaniment by Yukio Tsuji (Gans). This experiment proved successful, and Salome is moving to Broadway for a limited engagement at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. The play goes into previews April 12<sup>th</sup>, and runs from April 30<sup>th</sup> to June 7<sup>th</sup>, just in time for Tony nominations. Talks of Pacino returning to Broadway are creating a buzz throughout New York (Hofler). This type of publicity, along with a move to Broadway and possible Tony nominations will give added and new exposure to Wilde and his work.

The West End productions of An Ideal Husband and Lady Windermere's Fan were historical in their staging of the works and showed the decadence of Victorian society. In contrast, the New York production of Salome, as a staged reading, took a more modern approach to the text. No matter how these works are staged, Wilde's writing has a universality that can appeal to even contemporary audiences. Richard Allen Cave wrote, "Wilde sustains between the Victorian and the innovatory" (220). These facets of Wilde's plays are what have made them canonical and frequently produced.

Playwrights throughout the years have taken characters from other stories, myths or plays and used them as characters in their own works. A few playwrights have even used Wildean characters in their own works; these works include plays such as Travesties by Tom Stoppard, and The Picture of Dorian Gray adapted by John Osborne.

Travesties follows the memories of Henry Carr. Carr was once cast by author James Joyce in the role of Algernon in The Importance of Being Earnest. As Wilde himself mixed politics and theatre in works such as An Ideal Husband, Stoppard uses similar treatment by including Vladimir Lenin as a character in the play. As Carr recalls his past, he merges The Importance of Being Earnest along with stories of

Joyce, Lenin, and Dada founder Tristan Tzara. Stoppard's separation of art and life throughout the play then comes together to parody Wilde's classic comedy. Christopher Innes wrote: "The relevance of Wilde to Stoppard's drama becomes clear in *Travesties*, where a performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is superimposed on historical events...Stoppard's pastiche illustrates Wilde's principle that 'Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life'" (333). Besides the historic connection between Carr and Wilde's play, Stoppard borrows the characters Gwendolyn and Cecily from The Importance of Being Earnest and places them in Carr's memory of 1917. These "non-fictional" ladies from Carr's stories have the same traits as their fictional counterparts in Wilde's play. Stoppard also gives Wildean traits to the remainder of his characters as the traditional Joyce is likened to Lady Bracknell, Tzara and the young Carr woo the ladies under pseudonym just as Jack and Algernon did, and Lenin as the fictional Ernest:

Lenin contemplates disguising himself as a Swedish deaf-mute to leave for Russia – an instance of historical fact being more absurd than any fiction. He also stands for the missing Ernest of Wilde's comedy (being both puritanical and significant: i.e. 'serious' in the political sense), since he is still unknown and using a different name, Ulyanov: as Carr protests, 'don't forget, he wasn't Lenin then! I mean who was he! as it were'.

(Innes 333-334)

Despite Innes's view of Lenin as Ernest, Stoppard's revised edition of the play in 1993 compared Lenin to the characters of Dr. Chausible and Miss Prism. The use of Wildean characters outside of their plays, as seen in Travesties, serves as analogy in these new plays and the plot (Fleming 105-106).

The Picture of Dorian Gray was originally a novel written by Wilde that appeared in Lippincott's Magazine on June 20, 1890. The story about a man who wishes to stay young forever no matter what the cost was considered scandalous by Victorian readers. As word of mouth of Wilde's shocking story made its way around London, people became intrigued by the story and gave Wilde great commercial success. The writing was so dramatic that adaptations for stage and screen began to take place as early as 1910. In adapting his version of Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray, John Osborne believed that the themes in the novel were ever present and relative to today's audiences. Osborne felt that "the parallels with the historical consciousness of the last 100 years are, in fact, endless" (14). Osborne has not compromised Wilde's writing by changing its form, but instead has translated it into a medium which Wilde himself favored. Seeing the events unfold on stage, instead of on the page, the story seems real instead of fictional. The themes of good and evil, love and hate, and murder and good deeds are as present in modern society as they were in Victorian society.

Wildean works as reference in both Tom Stoppard's Travesties and John Osborne's The Picture of Dorian Gray show modern audiences how much Wilde has influenced contemporary playwrights and theatre. These plays also show the relevance that the subject matter and plots of Wilde's play have in modern society.

Recently, there has been an interest in Wilde as a character. This is not the first time that Wilde has been on the stage in person, instead of in words. Margaret D. Stetz wrote, "Less considered today, however, as these new 'Wildes' proliferate, is an earlier moment, when there was a similar convergence of "Oscar Wildes appearing and speaking out simultaneously in stage performances and on the screen" (93). Throughout the 1960s,

there was an interest in re-creating Wilde's life for audiences. Michael MacLiammoir first staged The Importance of Being Oscar in 1960, and in that same year the film The Trials of Oscar Wilde, also known as The Green Carnation, was screened. Wilde on film has been attempted recently, and will be discussed in an upcoming chapter.

In theatre, however, a variety of contemporary playwrights have placed Wilde, the man, on the stage. William A. Cohen wrote:

In spite of the frequency with which it has been told, the story of Oscar Wilde's downfall one hundred years ago has lost none of its capacity to shock, amaze, and distress audiences. Like some mythical hero destined for tragedy, Wilde fell from his pinnacle as the most celebrated playwright, socialite, and spokesman for Aestheticism in London's fin de siecle. (529)

This idea of retelling Wilde's story can be seen in works such as The Judas Kiss by David Hare, The Invention of Love by Tom Stoppard, In Extremis by Neil Bartlett, and Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde by Moises Kaufman.

The Judas Kiss is the story of Wilde's turbulent love affair with Lord Alfred Douglas and two critical decisions that sealed his fate. Daghish explains, "The story concentrates on two incidents of Wilde's life in which not much is factually known and thus Hare suggests what may have been said" ("Judas", par.3). This fictional account of the day before Wilde's arrest and the weeks after his release from prison showed how Wilde's life was affected by his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas. The play's successful runs in London and New York starring Liam Neeson as Wilde shaped a series

of Wildean-themed plays in these cities. Hare's work dealt with how love can affect choices that shape one's future.

That same theme is also found in Stoppard's The Invention of Love, but the story revolves around writer A.E. Housman, a Victorian classical scholar and poet. The play examines Housman's life and uses Wilde as a mirror in which one can assess Housman's choices. Housman, like Wilde, was homosexual, but unlike Wilde had no serious lover. Though Wilde and Housman never met, Stoppard uses Wilde as a symbol in the end of the play of what could happen, and creates a conversation between them discussing their choices and their fates. Though they lived in the same era, Wilde's fame and failure happened before Housman had achieved his success. Yet the fictional account that Stoppard created, highlighted similarities between both men. John Fleming wrote, "The contrast between how Housman and Wilde both lived and loved is a central thematic point of the play" (226). Carrie Ryan, dramaturg for La Jolla Playhouse's production of the play, stated:

As the play draws to a close, AEH (the elder version of Housman) meets Oscar Wilde, and these two figures – both gay, Classically-educated, Victorian-era poets – compare their life choices. Wilde chose to pursue his love for Lord Alfred Douglas and ended his life alone, destitute, and broken. Housman, without an outlet for his love, became a revered poet and scholar, with a chair at Cambridge and a volume of poems that was carried in almost every English soldier's breast pocket during World War I. (198)

Though their outcomes were different, Housman lived in Wilde's shadow but thrived in Victorian society. The Invention of Love reiterates the weight that choices have on one's fate.

In Extremis by Neil Bartlett was written for the centenary of Wilde's death in 2000. The Royal National Theatre, in association with Wilde's grandson Merlin Holland, wanted to stage a celebration of Wilde's life. Bartlett had previously written another play including Wilde called Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde (1988), as well as an adaptation of The Picture of Dorian Gray (1994). Richard Allen Cave wrote, "Wilde exists as a necessary *presence* in all Bartlett's performance-texts" (240). In Extremis ran at the Cottesloe Theatre from November 3 – December 16, 2000, with a special performance on November 30<sup>th</sup>, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Wilde's death. Historical evidence shows that on the night of March 24, 1895, the night before Wilde was arrested, he visited a society palm-reader named Mrs. Robinson to tell his future. This historical event was turned into a fictional account of their conversation that night: "In Extremis reveals the strange turmoil of that night, as a man at the height of his fame turns to a complete stranger for advice about a potentially life-changing decision" ("Extremis," par.1). The one-act play was staged by the acclaimed English director Trevor Nunn, and was performed in tandem with a staged reading of Wilde's "De Profundis". Corin Redgrave starred as Wilde in both pieces, and Sheila Hancock portrayed Mrs. Robinson.

The aforementioned plays use non-fictional facts and make fictional speculations of events and conversations that may have taken place in those contexts. Adam Gopnik wrote: "The story of Wilde's trials and his suffering has been told so many times that, like the Kennedy assassination, it seems likely to be turned over again and again until

some deeper, and presumably final, explanation can be found for what happened” (85). The latest attempt is Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde by Moises Kaufman. It is the most historically accurate of the plays with Wilde as character. The play deals with Wilde’s experience with the Victorian criminal justice system along with witnesses at these trials. Though many of those witnesses had different views of what happened in the trials, Kaufman shaped written records of their stories together, along with trial press, and created a historical, theatrical event: “it is almost as though Kaufman had stolen the index cards from a prototypical Wilde scholar’s desk, shuffled, and then staged them” (Salamensky 576). In writing the play, Kaufman wanted, “to tell the story – a story – of these trials. And second, I was interested in using this story to continue to explore theatrical language and form. Specifically, how can theater reconstruct history?” (xiv). Kaufman’s work makes something wonderful out of a horrible experience in someone’s life. Mark Zimmermann wrote: “Gross Indecency, like its subject, is important on many levels – the play is clear and intelligent, a sophisticated comedy of the profound. There is an art of the community; it should be the standard of reflection, yet it seems so often to settle for mere entertainment. Kaufman’s work is all the more ‘gracious’ for its stunning entertainment value” (46). Kaufman’s play proved that despite Wilde’s dramatic downfall, there continues to be such an interest in Wilde, the man. Tony Kushner, in the afterward to Kaufman’s play, wrote: “Look at the legacy that Wilde’s industry has left behind, from which so much has descended, including this beautiful play” (143). Wilde’s story will continue to inspire playwrights for years, just as it did Moises Kaufman.

Oscar Wilde has been a part of theatre history for over a century. From the staging of his works to the staging of works about him, Wilde has continued to captivate and fascinate modern theatre audiences. Richard Ellmann wrote: “Wilde presents himself in his writings with a high polish which has been the envy of young people since” (Four 4). As long as directors continue to stage his plays and playwrights continue to write about Wilde and his work, Wilde will continue to be a mainstay in the theatre.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *The Movie Star*

Throughout the late 1800s, Oscar Wilde entertained Victorian society with his witty remarks and writings. After his arrest, Wilde seemed to be non-existent. His name was taken off the marquee at the theatres where his plays were housed, and with his friends denying knowing him, his place in Victorian England vanished. Yet with the invention of the motion picture around 1891, it was only a matter of time before Wilde's extravagant life and witty writings were captured on celluloid.

According to a recent search on the Internet Movie Database (IMDB), over eighty-eight films have been made in the past ninety-five years with a connection to Oscar Wilde. Margaret D. Stetz wrote: "The number of British, American, and Irish novels, poems, plays, performance pieces, TV productions, and films in which Wilde has appeared as a central or peripheral presence is nothing short of astonishing" (90).

In 1908, J. Stuart Blackton directed Florence Lawrence in a film version of Salome. This black-and-white, silent movie was the first time Wilde's name was connected to a film. Within the next decade, eight more films were made based upon Wilde's works, and six of those eight were versions of The Picture of Dorian Gray.

Wilde's plays were the first of his works to be made into movies, and at present, eight out of nine of his plays have been put to film. One of the most memorable film adaptations includes the 1952 version of The Importance of Being Earnest starring Michael Redgrave as Jack. Directed by Anthony Asquith, this version stands out due to its talented cast. Redgrave opposite Edith Evans's memorable portrayal of Lady

Bracknell. Before this film, Lady Bracknell was not considered as such an important character in the work. Her vocal work breathed new life into Wilde's words: "Edith Evans's delivery of 'hand-bag' must make it the most memorably inflected single word in British stage history" (Kaplan 270). Her performance made Lady Bracknell more than the antagonist of the play, but also a comic interpretation of Victorian society. Joel Kaplan wrote that Evans "helped to create for Lady Bracknell a centrality she has enjoyed ever since" (262). At the centenary of Wilde's death in 2000, this version of Wilde's masterpiece was released on DVD for the first time in the United States.

The British Broadcasting Company (BBC) has a strong reputation for televising stage works to the English public. BBC 2 regularly schedules a variety of filmed theatre performances or adaptations in its lineup. Their productions of Oscar Wilde's works, filmed throughout the years, were recently released along with the centenary of Wilde's death in 2000. The classic televised productions of The Importance of Being Earnest (1988), An Ideal Husband (1969), Lady Windermere's Fan (1985), and The Picture of Dorian Gray (1976) with John Gielgud, along with a feature biography of Wilde's life, were compiled together as "The Oscar Wilde Collection" available on both VHS and DVD.

In 1998, independent filmmaker Lawrence Brose used Wilde's prison letter to Bosie, "De Profundis", as the basis for a movie. The film is separated into three sections: the first part is fragmented images varying from 1950s home movies to early gay pornography set to Wilde quotes; the second and longest part is a reading of the letter with musical underscoring; and the final part is a mixture of the first segment's clips of home movies and pornography along with media interpretation of the letter (Licata 15).

De Profundis gave the director's idea of the events leading up to and before the letter in the first and last segments of the film, showing the spiraled destruction of Wilde's life and career. The effects of this downfall, shown in Brose's abstract and creative interpretation, force the audience to "accept paradox" in both the good and bad, typical and ironic (Licata 15). De Profundis was a limited release production, but was shown at festivals throughout 1998, including several cities in Germany, Hong Kong, London, Los Angeles, and Vancouver.

Film adaptations of Wilde's plays were mostly presented as televised specials or art house film classics. In 1999, Miramax Films tried to take Wilde to more of a mainstream audience with their film version of An Ideal Husband. They assembled an all-star cast that included Cate Blanchett (Gertrude), Minnie Driver (Mabel), Jeremy Northam (Robert), Julianne Moore (Mrs. Cheveley), and Rupert Everett (Lord Goring). The film, directed and adapted by Oliver Parker, showed the extravagance of high Victorian society and showcased Wilde's witty writing.

Though George Bernard Shaw once commented that he felt An Ideal Husband Wilde's best play, one critic felt that it was not the best for film. The National Review stated that, "aside from wit, what distinguishes Wilde's plays is their intense theatricality, the precise virtue most unsuited to film" (59).

The plot, though dealing with modern film elements of scandal, romance, and politics, seems dated. Robert, a well-respected member of Parliament, is being blackmailed for a political scandal in his past. He finds himself in a moral dilemma of doing what is right for himself and his career, or doing what his blackmailer wishes and continue keeping his secret hidden from his wife. This plotline would seem effective in

late 1890s society, but at the time this movie was released in 1999, modern society had long since distrusted their politicians. James Bowman wrote, “a century on we may allow ourselves the thought that Wilde’s own well-known moral lapses may have made him just a bit too eager to celebrate what was almost a Clintonian confession *avant la lettre* – one, that is, which carries with it its own absolution and which is something rather to be proud than ashamed of” (68). In other words, to modern audiences this scandal of which Robert is so ashamed is trivial compared to what we read in our daily newspapers.

Despite any negative comments, overall An Ideal Husband was well-received by critics and audiences alike. Parker successfully brought a Wilde play to screen and directed, as put by *The New Republic*, “skillfully, deploying both wit and drama” (30). The film proved to be a minor success for Miramax financially, but a huge success in proving that Wilde could have some box office success.

Last summer, Miramax, Oliver Parker, and Rupert Everett teamed up again to bring another Wilde play to screen. Entertainment Weekly’s Tom Russo wrote: “For an upstanding British gentleman of good reputation, Oliver Parker does things frightfully out-of-order. First, he brings a relatively obscure Oscar Wilde play – An Ideal Husband – to the big screen. Then he goes after the playwright’s most celebrated work. Has he learned nothing from those who film Jane Austen novels?” (42). An updated version of Wilde’s masterpiece The Importance of Being Earnest (2002) was fifty years overdue. The last successful film version was the 1952 adaptation previously mentioned.

Everett once again took a leading role in a Wilde film playing the lovable Algernon Moncrieff opposite Colin Firth’s Jack Worthing in the tale of mistaken identities, self-discovery, and romance. Parker assembled yet another all-star cast pairing

up Everett with Hollywood's current sweetheart Reese Witherspoon as Cecily, and Firth with Francis O'Connor. Rounding out the cast was Tom Wilkinson, Anna Massey, and Dame Judi Dench as the vivacious Lady Bracknell. Richard A. Blake wrote, "The entire cast has fun with the film, and their excitement is contagious" (15).

Parker took risks in putting this Wilde work on screen. He mixed eras and ideas, which received mixed responses from some critics. Blake described, "It's Masterpiece Theater as presented by Monty Python" (15). Camera angles go from narrative point-of-view to fantasy dream sequences to flashbacks. Then images found in today's society, such as tattoos and women smoking, also made their way into proper Victorian society. These are just some examples of Parker's creativity in the film.

One interesting addition to the story comes in the scene in which Jack and Algernon try to win back the affections of Gwendolyn and Cecily after an argument. Firth and Everett take to piano and banjo and sing a song entitled "Lady Come Down." The song as it is shown in the film, was Oscar Wilde's poem "Serenade" put to music:

The western wind is blowing fair/ Across the dark Aegean sea,/ And at the  
secret marble stair/ My Tyrian galley waits for thee./ Come down! The  
purple sail is spread,/ The watchman sleeps within the town,/ O leave they  
lily-flowered bed,/ O Lady mine come down, come down!

She will not come, I know her well,/ Of lover's vows she hath no care,/ And  
little good a man can tell/ Of one so cruel and so fair./ True love is but a  
woman's toy,/ They never know the lover's pain,/ And I who loved as  
loves a boy/ Must love in vain, must love in vain. (1.2.1-16)

The poem does not naturally appear in the play, but instead was an added bonus by Parker to the story.

The Importance of Being Earnest was more critically and publicly acclaimed than its predecessor, An Ideal Husband. Wilde's masterpiece held up its comedic reputation and was well-received by modern audiences thanks to Parker's unique vision:

Few movies these days stake much of claim to 'fun'. As I watched this one, I realized that perhaps those Masterpiece Theatre miniseries and the Merchant-Ivory style have begun to grow stale simply because they lost their sense of fun. In stressing "quality," they risk treating their material with too much respect. Oliver Parker brings us into his grandmother's house to admire her Belleek china tea set, but he lets us slide down her banister too. ( Blake 15)

With the help of Oliver Parker's two Wilde plays-turned-films, Wilde's works have found another venue in which to thrive. Though his works have been on screen for almost a century, these two works, An Ideal Husband and The Importance of Being Earnest, lead the way for the future of Wilde's writings to film.

Throughout the decades, film adaptations of Wilde's works were made, but it was not until 1960 that subject matter switched from Wilde's characters to Wilde as a character. Margaret D. Stetz wrote, "No fictional creation of the British fin de siecle – no character out of any play, novel or narrative poem of the nineteenth century – has proved so useful or durable a mask as the figure of Oscar Wilde himself" (90). The first Oscar Wilde, also known as Forbidden Passion (1960), starred Robert Morely as Wilde. This film downplayed his wit, and skirted the issue of Wilde's homosexuality. The Trials of

Oscar Wilde or The Green Carnation (1960) with Peter Finch as Wilde was the better of the two films, yet still evaded the issue of homosexuality due to the naïveté and high moral code of early 1960s society. This high moral code made creating a film with Wilde as subject difficult because of the issue of homosexuality that would need to be present in the storyline.

In the 1970s, two more films were made about Wilde, Oscar Wilde (1971) and Forbidden Passion: Oscar Wilde (1976). Though these films were more open about Wilde's homosexuality, they were still very limited about what they could discuss because they were made for television. However, in 1997, a film based on Wilde's life finally gave a more accurate representation of his homosexuality.

Brian Gilbert's Wilde (1997) concurs with earlier thinking that Wilde was a man ahead of his time, aesthetically and morally. Gilbert could deal with the homosexuality issue easier than previous directors of "Wilde" films since it is more widely accepted in modern society. Stanley Kauffmann wrote: "Among the signs of this great change are the scenes of homosexuality intimacy, which would have been impossible in those 1960s films" (24). Gilbert did not downplay the severity of Wilde's crimes of passion or portray them as conventional, instead, he gave honesty to Wilde's story for its contemporary audience as well as a glimpse into Victorian society and its morals; or as Richard Porton described it as "a sort of Wilde for Beginners" (8).

Julian Mitchell's screenplay was loosely based on the Richard Ellmann biography of Oscar Wilde. Wilde shows "the most volatile years of his life, from his coming out and his destructive affair with the much younger Lord Alfred Douglas to his arrest for homosexuality and release from prison in 1897" (Greenberg 126).

The movie begins with Wilde on his lecture tour in America in 1882, showing his beginnings as a celebrity. He returns to London after his tour and soon after marries Constance Lloyd. Kauffmann wrote: “The rest of the film could be called the results of that marriage” (24). Though Wilde is emotionally devoted to his wife and two sons, he is physically and intellectually stimulated by a string of young boys who come into his life, starting with Robert Ross and ending with Lord Alfred “Bosie” Douglas. These incidents lead to arguments with Douglas’s father, the Marquess of Queensberry, about their relationship, and eventually, they lead to Wilde’s downfall.

Mitchell’s writing shapes Ellmann’s biography into a vivid screenplay, not making speculations or fictional accounts for entertainment’s sake, but instead tries to be accurate with non-fictional and historical events that affected Wilde’s life. Mitchell also blends some of Wilde’s own words into the story as quotes, as well as his short story The Selfish Giant intermingled in the scenes with his family. John Simon wrote, “as the story records the giant’s coming to love the children he at first hated, these prose-poetic passages put a sentimental sheen on Wilde’s treatment of Cyril and Vyvyan. Oscar, other than superficially, remained a selfish giant” (57).

The role of Oscar Wilde is played by actor/writer/comedian Stephen Fry; “Many critics observed that Oscar Wilde was a part that Fry was born to play, and the actor’s erudition – he is something of an amateur Wilde scholar himself – certainly contributed to his empathetic portrayal” (Porton 8). Kauffmann wrote: “Wilde stands or falls, primarily, on the performance of the title role, and Stephen Fry is splendid” (24). Fry carries the weight of the movie on his shoulders and portrays the tragic hero over a fifteen-year time frame and a series of ups and downs.

Simon compared Fry's similarities to Wilde saying, "Fry is an interesting actor, who does manage to look rather like Wilde. But whereas Oscar was not exactly good-looking, neither was he as funny-faced as Fry...Still, he is of the right large size, moves well, and delivers his lines stylishly" (57). Fry even spoke of his own similarities to Wilde in an interview with Robert Porton:

[T]he only tools I had were language and wit. Hence, I borrowed the image – and iconographical world – of Wilde. It's not who you are but just a shell you borrow in order to cope. In that sense, Wilde's always important to me, and for most creative people, Wilde is a figure to be encountered. He's had such a massive impact, for both good and ill. He's a symbol of the fear one has growing up that society will wreak its revenge on you for daring to be different, for daring to be gay. But he's still a giant and one's on giant's shoulders when one associates himself with Wilde.

(10)

The most poignant part of Fry's portrayal of Wilde comes in his vocal work. James Greenberg complimented Fry's performance in his review saying, "George Bernard Shaw called Wilde the finest talker of his time, and Stephen Fry's lively performance does him justice. Bons mots roll off his tongue like honey off a spoon" (126). Even more praise for Fry's vocal performance came from Kauffmann who said:

It is full without a trace of plumminess, a "normal" speaking voice yet with an always available richness just below it. His first three words in the film are "How very kind," and when I heard the word "kind" dropped in,

differently resonant, after the first two words, I suspected that this performance was going to be a treat. Which it is. (24)

Fry's quality of voice reincarnated Wilde, and brought him back to life for modern audiences instead of being just a historical character.

Fry is surrounded by a strong supporting cast in the film. Jude Law "is the ideal Bosie," playing opposite Fry as Lord Alfred Douglas "the snarling, petulant and self-absorbed nobleman who is destined to break Wilde's heart several times over" (Kauffmann 25, Greenberg 126). The role of Constance Wilde is played by Jennifer Ehle who "brings a wounded vulnerability to her portrayal of Wilde's bewildered wife" (Greenberg 126). The star-filled cast is rounded out by Tom Wilkinson as Queensberry, Zoe Wanamaker as Ada Leverson, Michael Sheen as Robbie Ross, and Academy Award winner Vanessa Redgrave as Wilde's mother, Speranza.

Wilde was released for the first time on DVD in 2002. Besides the typical director's commentary, the DVD contains special features giving added background on the film. In the featurette Simply Wilde, Stephen Fry discusses Wilde's life intermingled with corresponding clips from the film giving added information from the Ellmann biography that did not make it to film. The second featurette, Still Wild About Wilde, interviews director Brian Gilbert, screenwriter Julian Mitchell, Stephen Fry, and other cast and crew members about the importance of making the film, making accurate portrayals of Wilde and his story, and re-introducing modern audiences to Oscar Wilde. Fry stated: "When you make a film of this kind, there's nothing to be embarrassed about in assuming that no one's ever heard of him" (Porton 9).

Wilde may not be the most accurate in its representation of the Irishman, but has several redeeming qualities despite that flaw. Wilde was shown very homosexual and aloof to his family, which far from the truth. Throughout his affair with Bosie, Wilde was very passionate toward his wife and children, though absent from them. Wilde, though a British-made movie, proved that for the first time bigger markets, such as Hollywood, considered Oscar's life film-worthy, "Oscar Wilde is the kind of vivid personality who is always a joy to meet on film. But what makes this movie more than another pretty period piece is its frank sexuality and the sheer force of Wilde's presence" (Greenberg 126). This force also renewed interest in Oscar Wilde and his works for the previously mentioned films, An Ideal Husband (1999) and The Importance of Being Earnest (2002). Greenberg described Wilde as "both extreme and accessible," extreme in its honest depictions of Wilde's homosexuality and downfall, and accessible in its humanization of Wilde, the tragic hero (126).

Looking back at almost a century of Wilde on film, there is a long line of movies connected to Oscar in one way or another. As numerous versions of his works have been put on screen, only a few about the man and his life have been tackled. Despite the difference in numbers, one must wonder what the future will hold for Wilde and this marriage to film. One theory came from Stephen Fry who said:

I'm sure that Wilde will be played again and again. Just as Cleopatra says in the Shakespeare play: 'Some squeaking Cleopatra will buoy my greatness in the posture of a whore.' That's an ironic thing, because it would have been a boy actor who would have said that. We'll see yet unformed Oscars and Bosies in virtual reality and holograms, in 'touch,

smell, taste' TV and whatever forms we'll have until the crack of doom.

(Porton 9)

Whatever happens, Oscar Wilde is sure to reappear on film due to his timeless appeal.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *The Icon*

As the year 2000 marked the centenary of Oscar Wilde's death, several literary works were published in honor of the celebration and Wildean merchandise popped up everywhere. Just a few years later in 2003, many London museums or theatre gift shops continue to have Oscar Wilde products for sale. In recent years, Oscar Wilde has become a popular culture icon.

Wilde was more than just a brilliant writer and scholar; he was a fantastical person who could be considered the first celebrity. In his prime, people flocked to hear him speak or just to get a glimpse of the man. His outrageous style and outrageous wit made light of the serious Victorian socialites. The reputation he created for himself, both the good and the bad, has made him memorable, as well as a popular culture icon.

Though Wilde has been called the first celebrity and the first modern man, he has also been categorized as the first pop star, making Bosie, as Margaret D. Stetz concluded, "the ultimate groupie" (91). Stetz also wrote that Wilde was the inventor of gay male style and culture which trickled down into the attitudes and rebellious nature as seen in pop stars, especially those associated with 1970s glam(our) rock (91). Karen Alkalay-Gut further described the connection between Wilde and glam rock:

And the flamboyant character of Oscar Wilde, with his outrageous costumes, extreme and flagrant sexuality, devotion to art, and sacrifice by society for the sake of sensation is ubiquitous as the role model for

countless Glam Rock stars, particularly David Bowie. In Glam Rock, flamboyant costuming and cosmetics were combined with music that was a clear blend of Victorian attitude and contemporary sound (39).

This connection can be seen in the 1998 film Velvet Goldmine starring Ewan McGregor and Jonathan Rhys-Meyers. The movie begins with a starry night in Dublin in 1854, the year of Wilde's birth. The narrator comments: "Histories like ancient ruins are the fictions of empires; while everything forgotten hangs in the dark dreams of the past ever threatening to return." A shooting star falls from the sky, and then "A spaceship delivers Wilde to Dublin from the heavenly potential – the star-studded infinity" (Frueh 88). The story progresses to eight years later where the schoolboy Wilde, along with his fellow classmates, announces what they want to be when they grow up. In answer to this question, the boy Wilde states, "I want to be a pop idol." The movie further shows how Wilde has influenced modern society, in this case the 1974 London glam rock scene, through his sense of style and culture, writings and sexual freedom. Velvet Goldmine alludes to Wilde's icon status throughout the film. Yet, by looking at modern society, one can see that Oscar Wilde has become a pop idol.

His witticisms can be found everywhere. Bennigan's, an Irish restaurant and tavern chain, has recently published the Wilde quote "I can resist everything except temptation" on their dessert menus. His reputation as a wit and an intellect, coupled with an interesting biography, have made Wilde a marketing darling.

Oscar Wilde has also become a symbol of Victorian extravagance. His elaborate lifestyle and cutting wit have made him as popular today as in his time. Oftentimes, he represents the Victorian era for several retail stores. Stores such as Past Times and

Victorian Trading Company, which sell “fine gifts inspired by the past”, have merchandise with Wildean images and quotes on them (Past Times). They also sell his literary collection, cinematic interpretations of his works, and items inspired by his works and style. Past Times has a teddy bear dressed as the character Ernest Worthing from Wilde’s play The Importance of Being Earnest.

The tourist industry has taken Oscar Wilde’s marketing appeal to the next level. London, Dublin, and Paris were all very influential places in his life and have lured visitors interested in Wilde into their cities.

London, England has the most to offer as far as Wilde sites are concerned. Wilde lived most of his life here, and there is a lot to see: 16 Tite Street (his home which was named a landmark by the London City Council in 1954), St. James Theatre (where The Importance of Being Earnest opened and the scene of Queensberry’s vegetable attack), and the Savoy Hotel (one of Wilde’s favorite haunts) (Holland, Oscar 128). There is a walking tour company that takes visitors to these and many other Wilde areas in London. The tour is inexpensive and gives people the opportunity to walk in Wilde’s footsteps, literally. The guide is dressed as Oscar Wilde and tells stories about the areas being visited. Though the tour makes for great entertainment, it is not totally accurate in much of the history relayed to tour members. One may have a more in-depth look by using Choral Pepper’s book Walking Tours in Oscar Wilde’s London. This book has self-guided tours to these places, with a detailed map, directions, and information. This book is also less expensive and more detailed than the tourist company’s walking tour.

Popular tourist traps also offer a small dose of Wilde as well. Madame Tussaud’s has a realistic wax figure of Wilde on display; The Victoria and Albert Museum, The

National Portrait Gallery, and The Theatre Museum often contain Wilde-related exhibits; and Westminster Abbey honored Wilde in 1995 in its historic Poet's Corner with a stained glass window (Calloway 108). All of these places also have some type of Oscar Wilde merchandise in their gift shops.

Wilde was born and reared in Dublin, Ireland, and there are some places reminiscent of his youth to visit. His birthplace at 21 Westland Row is not open to visitors, but a plaque hangs on the outside structure as a reminder of his birth home. In 1987, the home became the Oscar Wilde Center for Irish Writing, through the School of English at Trinity College. His childhood home at 1 Merrion Square is still standing, and is now the headquarters to the American College in Dublin. Though the college does not allow visitors or tourists inside, they do allow pictures of the outside and the historical marker. Across the street from the house is a newly erected statue of Wilde. The multi-colored marble artwork depicts Wilde lounging on a rock with a flower. Around this statue are other statues with some of his most famous sayings on them. A few blocks from these former homes of Wilde stands Trinity College. Though most visitors to the college come to see The Book of Kells, others come to see where Oscar Wilde started his academic career. The college even dedicated a creative writing program in honor of their aesthetic alumnae.

When Wilde moved to England and withdrew from the Irish people and culture, his fellow countrymen turned their backs on him. All of this happened long before Wilde's friends and associates began to do the same after the trials. The Irish, though, were able to recognize their mistake, and, since his death, have erected several memorials

to their native son. In Dublin, St. Patrick's Cathedral, Trinity College, and even some parks have memorials to Wilde.

Though Paris was one of Oscar Wilde's favorite getaways to have fun and live the highlife, visiting Paris for Wilde tourism places is rather morbid. The two places to visit in Paris are the place of his death and his final resting place. Wilde died on November 30, 1900 at the Hotel d'Alsace. Today, the hotel is still open and allows the public to visit the room of Wilde's death seemingly unchanged from that day. In his final days, Wilde said to a friend: "My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or the other of us has to go" (Ellmann, *Oscar* 546). Due to his bankruptcy, Wilde was originally buried in suburban Bagneux Cemetery. It took nine years after his death for enough funds to give Oscar Wilde a proper burial and monument. His body was exhumed and moved to Pere-LaChaise Cemetery in Paris. In 1912, the monument was finally carved and put into place. The tomb was sculpted by Jacob Epstein and has the image of a naked prince with wings upon the front. It was not allowed to be viewed by the public for another decade:

When the tomb was erected in 1912, French officialdom stepped in and banned public viewing because of the figure's prominent genitalia, which were subsequently covered in plaster, and the entire work was hidden under a tarpaulin. Epstein (the sculptor) refused to modify the carving or hide its sexuality with a fig leaf. It remained wrapped until the outbreak of World War I. (Belford 309-310)

The back of the monument is engraved with words from Wilde's poem "The Ballad of Reading Gaol", "And alien tears will fill for him/Pity's long-broken urn/For his mourners will be outcast men,/And outcasts always mourn" (4.4.64-66). The cemetery is open year-

round to visitors, but in order to pay respects to Wilde, an admission fee must be paid first.

There are various other places important to Wilde's life worth visiting. Magdalen College at Oxford University, England was Wilde's first English home and helped establish his reputation as a scholar and individual; in Dieppe, France Oscar spent the first months after his prison release; and Enniskillen in Ireland was Oscar's first school. All of these places have embraced Oscar Wilde's popular culture status, and use it to their commercial gain.

Yet it is not just for business gain or good marketing strategy that companies and individuals have taken interest in Oscar Wilde again. Wilde has influenced people culturally and creatively.

With the rise of technology, Wildean-themed websites are everywhere. A March 2003 search of "Oscar Wilde" on the search engine Google pulled up 355,000 results in .02 seconds; on March 25, 2003 the online auction site eBay had over 155 items to bid on that were Wilde related; and Amazon.com had over 3,462 Wilde items on their website for sale.

There continues to be a wide variety of websites devoted to Wilde. Functional sites, such as [The World Wilde Web](#), a site devoted to resources and related Wilde links, and "Oscar Wilde: An Overview" on [Victorian Web](#) which discusses everything from themes in Wilde's works to aestheticism. There are also entertaining sites like [FindAGrave.com](#) which allows you to visit Wilde's grave without traveling to Paris, or hearing his "voice" from a 1962 séance with medium Leslie Flint at [Oscar Wilde Returns](#).

An interesting web resource on Wilde is [Oscariana](#). This site is dedicated to “the life and times of Oscar Wilde,” and is a visual and textual biography of Wilde using photographs, letters and newspaper articles chronicling his life ([Oscariana](#)). The site is not a primary source of Wilde information, but is a colorful and entertaining journal of his life. [Oscariana](#) is carefully thought out and well-researched.

One of the best online resources for Wilde-related material was set up by the Holland (Wilde) Family. [The Oscar Wilde Home Page](#) was set up by Merlin Holland, Wilde’s grandson, in 1997. The site features a list of accomplishments, quotes, a biography, and an album of the family’s favorite Wilde photos. What makes this site stand out from others is the introduction written by Holland. It is not necessarily a welcome to the site, but mostly a reminder that there are not a lot of Wilde’s personal items on the web, or anywhere for that matter, due to the bankruptcy sale during the trials. This letter points out that as scholars and fans search to know more about Wilde, so does his family. Holland wrote in 1997:

There was something Greek and inevitable about his downfall, and from it has come an extraordinary voyage of discovery for me lasting thirty years, finding the grandfather I never knew, first through words and now through images. In the caricatures you glimpse a little of how his contemporaries saw him; in the studio photographs something of the way he wanted the world to see him; and I hope, like me, you are able to hear faint echoes of that voice 'the texture of brown velvet and played like a cello' in the quotes from his letters. ([Wilde Homepage](#)).

In the Oscar Wilde Homepage, Merlin Holland has comprised what information is available about this grandfather and shares it with those interested.

Dan Pearce and Bill Hunter of Pearce Hunter Multimedia have created one of the funniest and most unique Wilde web sites. Their site, Oscar Wilde Comics, speculates how Wilde would act and react if he was in today's prison system. Still a work in progress, the eleven chapters entitled "Oscar: The Second Coming" in Pearce and Hunter's comics show Oscar kidnapped by aliens in the 1800s and accidentally placed in modern times. While in prison this time, Wilde appears in excellent health - no syphilis or ear pain - goes through another trial and loses... again, and finally, gives lectures on "The Cell Beautiful" to fellow inmates. In their introduction to the comic strip Pearce and Hunter write: "We are all about to celebrate the centenary of Oscar Wilde's death - and would like to hope that the world will once again take pleasure in his genius" (Oscar Wilde Comics).

Even Wilde's name has affected popular culture. In 1996, a five-piece band from Dublin, Ireland burst on the music scene called the Wilde Oscars. One of the most popular clubs and restaurants in Toronto, Canada is also known as Wilde Oscars. The club even has an upstairs lounge area known as "Bosie's Lounge." The most interesting affiliation to Oscar Wilde is the adult film star who calls himself Wilde Oscar. It seems that Wilde's name is universal, though it is most often connected to his roots in Ireland or his homosexual lifestyle.

Wilde is often seen as a homosexual martyr due to his imprisonment for his crimes of sodomy and homosexuality. His status as a gay icon has made homosexuals all over the world embrace him as a hero of the cause.

Many homosexuals see Wilde as a martyr, while others also see the humor in his overt homosexuality, which can be seen in the character of Oscar Wildcat on the Showtime cartoon Queer Duck. Rick Whitaker wrote: "Oscar Wilde invented gay culture...The underlying principle of Wilde's creation of gay culture was that 'Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style'"(37). Queer Duck creator Mike Reiss has played with Wilde's invention of gay culture with the character of Oscar Wildcat. He wears a smoking jacket, lies about his age, drinks heavily, and loves his mother...just as Wilde did. Oscar Wildcat's signature line, "If I came out, it would kill mother," is ironic as well due to Wilde's close relationship with his mother (Queer Duck). The irony and cleverness of Queer Duck has reincarnated Wilde as a homosexual wildcat for modern audiences who recognize him as a popular culture and gay icon.

One of Wilde's biggest influences on popular culture is through his words. Wilde's quotes pop up not only on merchandise, but many other things and places. Ralph Keyes wrote: "Like a good stand-up comedian, he continually recycled good lines. Wilde's sayings moved freely from conversation to essay to fiction to drama" (9). Today, contemporary artists and writers recycle his lines too and use them in a variety of mediums.

Modern music has embraced Wilde's words, and recently it is the dance and techno music scene that have seen his influence. In December 2001, English DJ Fatboy Slim released a CD entitled "Halfway Between the Gutter and the Stars" loosely based on Wilde's quote from Lady Windermere's Fan: "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars" (Wilde, Collins Classic 451). Techno musician Moby also used that quote for a single he released in April 2002 entitled "We Are All Made of Stars."

Some of Wilde's sayings have become a part of our everyday language, and it takes a true Wilde fan or scholar to link the phrase to its owner. For example, "the love that dare not speak its name" was written by Wilde in The Portrait of Dorian Gray and discussed in several of his essays and letters. This quote is often used in reference to Wilde's homosexual affair to Lord Alfred Douglas, and was even used as evidence against him in the trials of gross indecency. On the syndicated FOX comedy series That 70's Show, the quote was used in the episode "Buddy" to suggest to Eric that his male lab partner was gay: "I think he speaks the love that dare not speak its name."

That 70's Show was not the first television program to reference Wilde. Almost thirty years before, Monty Python's Flying Circus created the "Oscar Wilde Sketch." This skit played with the idea that "Wilde kept carefully crafted quips in his pocket, waiting for the proper moment to launch them into conversation. He couldn't always wait, however, and was notorious for setting conversational traps in which to spring a new epigram" (Keyes 5). Wilde's reputation for witty remarks was mocked by the Monty Python players through lines such as:

JAMES McNEILL WHISTLER: There is only one thing in the world worse than being witty, and that is not being witty.

OSCAR WILDE: I wish I had said that Whistler.

JAMES McNEILL WHISTLER: Ah, you will, Oscar. You will.

This skit between Wilde, Whistler, George Bernard Shaw and The Prince of Wales was one of the first to characterize Wilde and his wit on television.

In his final years, Wilde remarked to a friend, "It would really be more than the English could stand if another century began and I were still alive" (Wicked viii). Though

Wilde died early into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he is still very much alive in this century. Wilde's popularity can be seen, and in some cases heard, throughout the world in a wide variety of means pointed out in this chapter. Wilde once said, "We live in an age when unnecessary things are our only necessities," and the same sentiment rings true today (Wicked 28). So as society eases into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as well as the new millennium, one can do so lying on an Oscar Wilde pillow in an Oscar Wilde t-shirt sipping tea out of an Oscar Wilde mug and watching an Oscar Wilde cartoons on the internet or on television.

## CONCLUSION

Over a century has past since Oscar Wilde graced this earth with his presence. As discussed throughout this thesis, there has been a resurgence of Wilde within the past three decades. This resurgence has been seen in literature, film, theatre and popular culture. Society has become responsive to Wilde again, and he is as popular today as he was in the Victorian period. Once again, though, the question needs to be asked, why? Why is modern society still wild about Wilde, and why has he experienced a second coming?

There are a variety of answers to this question, but to begin, one must first compare Wilde's society with our own. Wilde said, "The public has always, and in every age, been badly brought up" (Wicked 30). As viewed through modern eyes, the Victorian era was very strict in societal rules. There was a definite separation of the classes, a high moral code, and strict punishments for those who broke the designated rules of society and government. These elements are basically extinct or non-existent in contemporary society. Wilde wrote, "The security of Society lies in custom and unconscious instinct, and the basis of the stability of Society, as a healthy organism, is the complete absence of any intelligence among its members" (Wicked 31). Despite Wilde's sarcastic view on society, there are universalities that existed over one hundred years ago that remain in 2003. In this respect, Barbara Belford wrote that she views Wilde "as one of the creators of the twentieth century" (345).

No matter what period of time researched, the fundamentals of love, hate, misunderstanding, success and failure all exist within the social order. These elements,

then, can connect the audience with the research, in this case Oscar Wilde. From Wilde exists the idea that love, instead of hate, can bring about a person's demise. Wilde's love for Bosie and love for attention were used against him by Queensberry, who hated their relationship and the negative attention it generated. This clash of love and hate, and Wilde versus Queensberry brought the end of Wilde's career, and ultimately, his life.

Wilde became an unknowing conspirator in his own end through his art. One of the key issues of his trials was "the love that dare not speak its name," as discussed in his work The Picture of Dorian Gray. At the first trial, prosecutor Charles Gill asked Wilde his definition of the phrase to which Wilde responded:

'The love that dare not speak its name' in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man...It is a deep, spiritual affection that is pure as it is perfect...It is in this century misunderstood that it may be described as the 'Love that dare not speak its name,' and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope, and glamour of life before him. That it should be so the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it. (Keyes 157-158)

Wilde was essentially imprisoned for Victorian society's interpretation of his hypothesis. Similarly, today's media proves an example of how misunderstanding or misappropriation of a subject can bring damaging results to innocent parties.

Modern society is full of success stories. Yet with every positive tale, there is the opposite, a story of failure and/or disgrace. A person going from instant success to

extreme failure is seen throughout today's society. George Wilson-Knight commented on a connection between Wilde and current times: "The shame may be of the essence; at least it shatters all the pseudo-dignities and masks of our lying civilization" (295). Wilde once said, "I love scandals about other people, but scandals about myself don't interest me. They have not got the charm of novelty" (Wicked 34). Yet Wilde's greatest scandal would impact him more than he could have ever imagined. Wilde achieved fame from his early days in London, but the pinnacle of his success was not reached until the early 1890s. By the time of the first trial, Wilde had three plays showing in the West End. He was famous within various groups of society, from the rich to the intellectual. Yet after the failure of the first trial and the urging of a second, Wilde began to fall from grace. Within a month he was isolated by society and seemed forgotten. Hollywood is full of celebrities with stories similar to Wilde's that can be seen at newsstands every month. These stories appeal to the general public and the similarities between Wilde, a celebrity during his time, and modern celebrities are plenty.

Through Wilde's rise and fall, there was a change of thought in terms of his writing. When one goes through a tragic event, there is a tendency to re-evaluate oneself and the type of life led before the tragedy. Before his imprisonment, Wilde's writing was light and witty. His works were beautiful and artistic, and he lived his life the same. Peter Raby wrote that Wilde's "desire was that everything should make a beautiful statement...Nothing that came after in Wilde's life could be described as aesthetic" (2). During his stay in prison, Wilde continued to write. These writings, however, took on a different look than his previous works. Being stripped of everything that was extravagant in his life, Wilde began to look inward on the events that had placed him there. Raby

inferred, “Deprived of the decorative, he chose now to reflect on his life in terms of drama, an appropriate metaphor for him to adopt since he had achieved his greatest public recognition as a dramatist, and since it was arguably the form which he understood most instinctively and acutely” (2). In these prison writings, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” and “De Profundis”, he “explores this decision to perceive his own life as drama” (Raby 3). These works could be a precursor to the contemporary television programs True Hollywood Story or Behind the Music, in which a modern celebrity’s life tragedies are shown as entertainment. Many people are intrigued by watching someone famous go through similar or worse troubles than their own. These works are also similar to Greek drama in which the gods were given human-like qualities so the mortal audience could easier relate to the story. Wilde made the connection of life as drama from the Greek perspective, “Those whom the gods hate die old. Those whom the gods love grow young” (Keyes 37). Richard Pine wrote:

Wilde as a storyteller lived a fictive life which was capable of traveling imaginatively between the Greek tragedies of emotion and the Restoration comedy of manners and producing from their forms and forces a hybrid drama encompassing melodrama, social commentary and symbolism with equal success and disregard. (237).

Despite Wilde’s variance in writing and lifestyle, he showed that he could conquer any type of drama, be it in writing or in existence.

Wilde also played an important role in gay history. Modern society is enthralled that Wilde survived as a homosexual in a morally oppressive era. He has been regarded as the leader of the homosexual movement for being imprisoned for his sexual beliefs.

Many Victorian men were openly affectionate with one another, yet it did not mean they were gay. Victorian high society often challenged the strict moral code established by the Queen through their extravagant lifestyle. Their extravagance often overlapped with their sexual lives, and homosexuality blossomed during the era. Adam Gopnik wrote: "Wilde was among the most popular middle-class entertainers of the day, and earned the dislike of the social radicals for his conformity. He loved bourgeois respectability so much that he went to court to defend it. His trouble came not from his sexual practices but from his denial of them" (80). Despite any differing moral opinions on the subject today, the fact that homosexuality was a crime may seem unbelievable. Wilde being sentenced to two years in prison for performing homosexual acts and living the lifestyle is hard to fathom in modern society.

Contemporary society is led by a very youth-oriented culture. Britney Spears tops the music charts, a cast of mostly under twenty-five year-olds comprise television programs such as That 70's Show, and movies such as She's All That top the box office. Just as this society is fixated on youth and beauty, Wilde was a one man leader for the cause in his era. He wrote, "The old believe everything; the middle-aged suspect everything; the young know everything" (Keyes 37). Wilde surrounded himself around with youthful men, not just for homosexual reasons, but to feel fresh, renewed and young again. Wilde believed that not only were the youth the future, but they were the present: "It's absurd to talk of the ignorance of youth. The only people to whose opinions I listen now with any respect are persons much younger than myself. They seem in front of me. Life has revealed to them her latest wonder" (Keyes 37). Wilde's hero worship of the young continues today wherein youth is a prize, and age is nothing but a hindrance.

While current cultural trends seem to be youth-driven, The History Channel and The Biography Channel capitalize on an older generation's desire to recollect the past. Our society is one of nostalgia, and as one hundred years have past since Wilde lived, civilization likes to look back upon the man, the myth, the legend. As Wilde said, "I am always thinking about myself, and I expect everybody else to do the same" (Keyes 17). With the millennium approaching along with the centenary of Wilde's death, more and more people began to think of Wilde. At the turn of this century, civilization was looking back at the past and rediscovering people, places, and things long forgot. Yet, Wilde was not forgotten, but instead just pushed aside.

Wilde once said, "Society often forgives the criminal; it never forgives the dreamer" (Wicked 28). Though with Wilde, he is both forgiven and not forgotten. He appeals to modern audiences with his witty remarks, classic writings, and strong personality. Belford wrote:

It is insulting to call him Oscar in print. But so many writers do. We want him as a friend, a fellow rebel and non-conformist. So he becomes our 'Oscar' not our Wilde...We would not call Shakespeare 'Willie,' although we are far more familiar with his works. But Shakespeare did not stand trial for his beliefs. Wilde, like so many extraordinary men who win public adoration, came to believe his genius made him invincible. (335)

Wilde has also gained a mythical status among recent generations. Gopnik wrote of this "kitsch-Wilde myth" saying, "He was, we are to think, a daring homosexual who invented a deliberately amoral and challenging style, deliberately provoking and scandalizing the establishment and bourgeois culture, until at last he went too far, and

they brought him down” (78). With this myth, the truth has been hidden. Wilde was not exactly all of those things. First and foremost he was an author, and as Raby concluded, “Wilde’s unusual status, as both cult and taboo figure, has deflected attention away from his writing” (143-144).

Though Wilde may be considered mythical, his overall appeal is legendary. Despite his fall from the public eye in the 1890s, he has risen like the phoenix more than a century later. Richard Ellmann wrote, “Oscar Wilde: we have only to hear the great name to anticipate that what will be quoted as his will surprise and delight us” (Oscar Wilde xiii). Despite his relatively short life, Wilde left an extraordinary biography. In recent years, authors and directors have sought to tell Wilde’s story. They have given audiences a newfound appreciation for Wilde. These people then turn to his legacy, his canon of works. Wilde’s works remain his greatest achievement and released in print, film or on stage continually introduce and reintroduce Wilde to modern audiences. Ellmann wrote: “He is not one of those writers who as the centuries change lose their relevance. Wilde is one of us. His wit is an agent of renewal, as pertinent now as a hundred years ago” (Oscar Wilde xiv). As new generations have been exposed to Wilde’s biography and writings, a resurgence of Wilde has taken place. Oscar Wilde has risen from the ashes created by Victorian society, and continues to experience success and popularity at present.

Oscar Wilde once said of society, “Where will it all end? Half the world does not believe in God, and the other half does not believe in me” (Keyes 17). By looking at the past thirty years, the world definitely believes in Wilde. To say that he has had

resurgence in society is almost a contradiction. Wilde has faded in and out of the spotlight through the years, but has remained a constant just as he hoped:

If we lived long enough to see the results of our actions it may be that those who call themselves good would be sickened with a dull remorse, and those whom the world calls evil stirred by a noble joy. Each little thing that we do passes into the great machine of life which may grind our virtues to powder and make them worthless, or transform our sins into elements of a new civilization, more marvelous and more splendid than any that has gone before. ("Critic" 360)

Wilde wanted a legacy to affect future generations, and he has just that.

Modern culture has embraced Wilde and welcomed him back to society, and for good reason. Ellmann wrote:

His work survived as he claimed it would. We inherit his struggle to achieve supreme fictions in art, to associate art with social change, to bring together individual and social impulse, to save what is eccentric and singular from being sanitized and standardized, to replace a morality of severity by one of sympathy. He belongs to our world more than Victoria's. Now, beyond the reach of scandal, his best writings validated by time, he comes before us still, a towering figure, laughing and weeping, with parables and paradoxes, so generous, so amusing, and so right. (553-554)

Wilde is as relevant today as he was a century ago, in both his writings and his life.

Oscar Wilde has been a part of civilization for over a century. From his biography to his works, he has left people wanting more. This need has been met in the past thirty years by the variety of plays, films, and books that bring Wilde into our homes, minds, and hearts. Wilde once said, "The more one analyses people, the more all reasons for analysis disappear" (Wicked 34). With this being said, one cannot help but briefly reflect upon Wilde's statement that "All art is quite useless" ("Preface" 236). If that is the case, in a very Wildean manner, this analysis will end with no merit. Yet its value remains within Wilde's idea that, "We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely" ("Preface" 236). It is for these witty contradictions that modern society is still wild about Wilde.

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## VITA

Melissa Diane Green was born in Gatesville, Texas, on February 23, 1978 to Mike and Sue Robinson. At the age of two, she started telling her family that when she grew up she wanted to be a “star.” Melissa took dance, acting, and modeling lessons for years and had a cameo in Bonnie and Clyde: The True Story (1992). In 1996, she graduated Valedictorian of Jonesboro High School, Jonesboro, Texas, and began her college career at Hardin-Simmons University, Abilene, Texas. Green spent her junior year abroad in England studying at Cambridge University before returning to Hardin-Simmons to graduate with a B.A. in Theatre and Journalism in May 2000. Three months later on August 12, 2000, Melissa married Beau Green of Abilene. Melissa enjoys working on all facets of theatre. She had directed several one-act plays, as well as studio productions of The Star-Spangled Girl by Neil Simon and The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde. She has worked in technical theatre as a graduate assistant in the SWT Scene Shop for two years, and worked in the HSU Scene Shop during her undergraduate work. Her recent passion is dramaturgy, and she worked on the SWT production of The Lonesome West by Martin McDonagh. Her research and scholarly interests include Irish and English theatre and drama, and Oscar Wilde. Melissa was named SWT School of Fine Arts and Communication Outstanding Graduate Student for 2003.

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