The influence of oscar wilde’s sexuality | english literature dissertation

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Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was a writer whose homoerotic texts pushed the social boundaries of the Victorian era. Born to a family of unabashed Irish agnostics, the self-proclaimed " dandy" valued art, fashion, and all things physically beautiful. After receiving a comprehensive education from Oxford, Wilde made a name for himself in London first as a novelist, penning the now famous The Picture of Dorian Gray.

A string of successful plays followed, among them " The Importance of Being Earnest" and " An Ideal Husband". Wilde also published a variety of short stories and essays, but is acclaimed by historians for his pioneering influence over the aesthetic movement, aprogression that opposed the accepted Victorian take on art in everyway, shape, and form. Wilde postulated that art existed solely foritself, only for the sake of being art. His play " The Decay of Lying" exemplified this tenet best, personifying his distaste for society's proclivities through a conversation between two people in a park. Though he fathered two sons, Wilde's marriage fizzled as his personallife continuously hinted at homosexuality. Wilde's inability to keephis private life secret proved to be his downfall; a love affair with aprominent nobleman resulted in Wilde's imprisonment and expulsion from British social circles. Victorian Britain became increasingly morally rigid, its period marking a time when Britain was experiencing a growthin imperialism and conservative thought. While serving his term for homosexual acts, Wilde wrote the deeply spiritual De Profund is, inwhich he discussed his aspirations of individuality and freedom from the proprietary values that bound late Victorian society.

An avant-garde writer and raconteur, Wilde's sexuality had a profound effect on his works, influencing imagery and the nature of his characters in both

The Picture of Dorian Gray and " The Importance of Being Earnest". Wilde's sexuality and effeminate nature shaped his relations to aestheticism, which in turn manifested itself in his works' moral implications. Wilde frequently employed thinly disguised doubles, representing himself in his work in order to juxtapose anaesthete and a traditionally Victorian society. Wilde's aesthetics arestrangely connected to his obsession with Jesus Christ. It is peculiarthat such an unorthodox figure such as Wilde would find so much solaceand inspiration from such a religious source. In De Profundis, Wilde's admiration for and comparison with Jesus takes on many levels. Helikens his persecution to Jesus' crucifixion, a notion that evokeshubris, especially given Wilde's naturally flamboyant disposition. Though not entirely humble, Wilde's comparisons are based more on parallels drawn between Wilde's persecution and the events leading to Jesus' martyrdom. Many speculate Wilde's eventual baptism and acceptance of Catholicism was a manifestation of imminent death's madness as the famed author was too radical to accept religion withinthe boundaries of sanity. However, there are critics who contend that Wilde " was very much in the mainstream of the intellectual currents of his time, a man clearly aware of what he was trying to achieve in terms of his life and art"; in the end, he was willing to accept his newfoundstatus as a pariah, provided he could still create plays and prose.

Considered by many to be " the most outrageous trial of the century", Wilde's fall from grace was so indicative of his progression and the significance of his unique works set in a time " between the Victorianera and the modern age" (Hoare 4). Wilde's persecution reflected aclash of morals

and ideals not unlike those faced by the protagonists of his novels. Wilde’s trial mimicked his imaginative fiction:

“…it was a clash of opposites: of good versus evil, of heterosexualand homosexual, of masculine and feminine, of the safe and thedangerous, of what was seen as morally right or morally wrong” (Hoare4).

Homosexuality’s Influence in The Picture of Dorian Gray and “ The Importance of Being Earnest”

Wilde’s homosexuality had a profound influence over his work. His own experiences and relationships are projected into The Picture of Dorian Gray, and it is widely speculated that the characters Basil, Lord Henry, and Dorian are different aspects of Wilde himself. Wilde wrotethat “ Basil is how I see myself, Lord Henry how the world sees me, and Dorian how I would like to be” (Ericksen 101). The controversy behind The Picture of Dorian Gray was based in the extreme homoeroticism ofthe characters’ interaction; it is easy to see how Wilde’s writing elicited such a reaction. The male relationships are surely suggestiveenough to stir even the most open-minded in the Victorian era. Wilde’ssexuality affected the structure of the relationships as well, opening the book with the making of a homosexual love triangle involving Basil, Dorian, and Lord Henry. Basil’s painting is intimately connected with his adulation of Dorian’s physical beauty. Dorian, in turn, adores LordHenry, a man of stature who introduces him into a new coterie. LordHenry, in turn, adores Dorian’s physical beauty but also his relativeinnocence and the opportunity to mold him into the type of Victoriansocialite everyone will adore.

The novel opens with Basil's overstated obsession with Dorian's goodlooks. Basil's sentiments, however, are undeniably romantic. As he paints his masterpiece, Basil is described as looking wistfully at the canvas, " a smile of pleasure" passing across his face as he lingersover the image he created (Wilde 1962, 20). In the case Basil's day dreaming was too speculative a conclusion to make, Wilde provided his readers with interaction between Basil and Lord Henry sufficient enough to establish a romantic attraction for Dorian inside Basil. WhenLord Henry walks into Basil's studio, Basil plans on keeping hissubject's identity a secret out of jealousy. Basil " immensely likes" Dorian, and has " grown to love secrecy" as it ensures that he will nothave to share Dorian with Lord Henry (Wilde 1962, 22). Though it islater discovered that Basil is concerned that Lord Henry will corruptDorian with his cynicism and overdeveloped penchant for amorality, Basil is extremely protective of a man who he has befriended solely onthe basis of his physical appearance. He describes to Lord Henry how upon seeing Dorian for the first time his " face grew pale", knowing hemet someone " whose mere personality was so fascinating that [it could]absorb" him if he allowed it (Wilde 1962, 24).

Wilde's homosexuality is significantly influential not just over thecourse of the plot, but also in the development of characterrelationships. Lord Henry's attraction to Dorian Gray is multi-tiered. Half the attraction to Dorian is on account of his youth, a possiblereflection of Wilde's relationship with younger men. The other half o fLord Henry's attraction to Dorian is his ability to mold Dorian into alike-minded socialite, a member of his " New Hedonist" group. However, Lord Henry's attraction, like Basil's is undeniably romantic in

nature. Though Lord Henry finds Dorian attractive, Dorian’s hold over LordHenry does not fully take root until after Basil rambles on and onabout his “ curious idolatry” he has developed, and how he “ couldn’t behappy” if he “ didn’t see Dorian everyday”; Lord Henry takes seriousnotice of Dorian after Basil confides that he finds the young man to be” absolutely necessary” to Basil’s life (Wilde 1962, 27). Wilde developsLord Henry in this way to stress his association with society at large; most people are not loved by everyone unless they are first loved by afew. Society, Wilde argues, will love whom it is deemed fashionable tolove. Following Basil’s affirmations and affections, Lord Henryobserves the “ young Adonis [made out of] ivory” as “ wonderfullyhandsome, with his finely curved, scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair”; it comes to no wonder why “ Basil worshipped him”(Wilde 1962, 33). The love triangle develops past Basil’s death; evenDorian finds himself attracted to Lord Henry. A peculiar observation isDorian’s loss of composure after observing Lord Henry’s “ romantic, olive-colored face and warm expression”; Wilde writes that Dorian is indisbelief at his trepidation upon meeting Lord Henry (Wilde 1962, 38). After all, Dorian is “ not a schoolboy or a girl” (Wilde 1962, 39).

As Wilde’s homosexuality became more apparent, he began leading doublelives. One of his lives was socially acceptable, as society perceived him as a married man with two sons. His other life was one spent amongmale prostitutes, renting houses outside London in which he would haveextramarital, homosexual affairs. The incredible restriction Wildefaced was more because of his homosexuality than his maritalinfidelity. In leading his double lives, Wilde designed four charactersin “ The Importance of Being

Earnest” to exude differing degrees ofduality. The multiple personas were a reflection of the masks Wildeused as a “ means of personal adjustment,” a prevailing theme among thefour characters (Ericksen 151). The first character is Jack Worthing, aresponsible man typical of the Victorian era. The legal guardian of ayoung woman, Jack finds it to be increasingly difficult to enjoyhimself through the minor indiscretions that provide the average youngman with such entertainment. As a result of his guarded nature, Jackcreates his double, an alter ego he claims as his younger brother, whomhe names Ernest. When Jack leaves the country and his responsibilities, he becomes Ernest, a mischievous character in contrast to the composed, model citizen Jack. The second character is Algernon Moncrieff, friendto Jack Worthing and first cousin to the woman Jack intends to wed. Algernon also leads a double life, though his double life involves an” imaginary friend” of sort, a man whom he names Bunbury. The thirdcharacter Wilde incorporates is Gwendolen Fairfax, the object of Jack’saffection. Though she accedes to her mother’s will in public, Gwendolenrebels in private, pursuing “ Ernest” without her mother’s consent. After Jack plans to wed Gwendolen, she mentions she cannot marry a manwhose name is not Ernest; this creates quite the dilemma for Jack, ashe had originally planned to “ kill” Ernest with another fabrication. The final character, Cecily Cardew, is a ward under her guardian, JackWorthing. Tutored in the country, Cecily longs for a life outside hercountry estate, falling in love with the deviant Algernon.

The doubles are a forward testament to Wilde’s life as a homosexual inVictorian London. As a “ Jack” among his peers and “ Ernest” among

hislovers, Wilde is best personified in Algernon, though is present inboth Jack and Algernon as they are " constructed on similar principlesand ideas" (Ericksen 151). Both Jack and Algernon lead double lives, hence the similar principles and ideas. However, where Jack andAlgernon differ is the nature of their double lives. Jack's alter ego, Ernest, is someone whom he actually becomes upon entering town. Algernon, on the other hand, claims to be visiting Bunbury, hisimaginary ego. Algernon remains the same; the only thing that changesis his behavior. While " both Algernon and Jack are sophisticated men ofthe world," only Jack finds the need to change his identity and life ashe shifts social circles (Ericksen 152).

Like the socially accepted individuals in Victorian society, Jack isrigid, morally sound, and never deviant. Initially known to Algernon asErnest, Jack's transformation is almost instant as Algernon reveals hisknowledge of Ernest/Jack's deviance with names. Ernest is wistful andmadly in love with Gwendolen until his true ego, Jack, is revealed. Assoon as Algernon shows Jack/Ernest the cigarette case, Jack showshimself, pointing out how " ungentlemanly [a thing it is] to read aprivate cigarette case" (Wilde 2005, 12). Algernon, now Jack's foilfollowing Ernest's departure, retorts with an epigram truly reminiscentof a dandy, stating the "[absurdity in] having hard and fast rules"(Wilde 2005, 12). The two characters play off each other from the verybeginning, revealing their intentions. Algernon remains the deviant, bored with his surroundings and endless cucumber sandwiches (Wilde2005, 4). Jack leaves to indulge in the sort of behavior from which heis restricted as he is responsible for Cecily. Like Wilde, who has afamily of his own, Jack cannot overindulge without risking social harmto his family. Ernest, then, is a

double play on words; in indulgingone's " earnest," or true self, one escapes the constrictive Victoriansociety of moral and social obligations. Wilde's aim here is to escapethe Victorian moral code, returning to the Hellenistic antiquity ofmale relationships.

Strangely, most everyone except Jack longs to see or meet Ernest. Algernon himself assumes the identity of Earnest in his quest to meetCecily. Much to Jack's chagrin, Algernon decides to assume the identityof Algernon simply out of curiosity. Algernon has no ulterior motives; he wants to be Ernest just to be Ernest, a reflection of Wilde'spredisposition toward universal simplicity. Cecily also longs to meetErnest, as she has heard of his antics and looks forward to a relativeseveral degrees less rigid than her estranged guardian. Gwendolen ismadly in love with Ernest partly due to her empathy for Jack'supbringing, and partly because of her obsession with his name. ThroughErnest, Wilde reveals his wishes of acceptance; he wants people todesire his homosexual identity and accept him not in spite of it, butbecause of it.

Victorian values were imposed on every part of culture. Because of thegreat successes and advances felt by the 1860s, it was assumed that thethrone had arrived at something new and worth keeping. An increasinglyprudish era, the Victorian, puritanical movement required that all arthave purpose. Whether to emulate a person, place, or event, art neededa reason to exist. It could be veneration of the object, veneration ofthe genre, or even veneration of the artist, but all art, including thewritten word, was subject to the Victorian standard if it was to beaccepted by the general public. Like so

many other movements, theVictorians were faced with the concept that art existed for art, thatits sole end is itself and nothing more.

While many mistakenly attribute this movement to Wilde, he in fact didnot create aestheticism, " he was merely its vehicle" (Gaunt 119). As anIrishman, it was only natural that Wilde would be the catalyst for sucha movement. Ireland was still relatively free of the imperialistexpansion, allowing for a medium of trade most of England could notmatch. Wilde, after all, was not from the industrial wastelands ofLiverpool, Manchester, or London. He was from " the dingy magnificence" of Dublin (Gaunt 119).

Wilde's aesthetics are rooted in his education, primarily hispreoccupation with Hellenistic Greece and the old texts involving malerelationships. When searching for the concept of beauty, he might have" gotten his ideas from the great 6th century Hellas", where Wildeperceived " the triumph of Greece and great civilization was itscreation and representation of a supreme form of beauty" (Gaunt 120). The ancient Greeks may have appealed most to Wilde because of the highpremium they put on male-male relationships. Viewed as the most pure ofall loves, homosexual male love was venerated by great leaders as wellas scholars. The king of the gods and Mount Olympus, Zeus, was known tohave a male lover, a young shepherd by the name of Ganymede.

Contrary to the Victorians, " who had inherited a set of religiousbeliefs based on faith rather than reason," Wilde had no concretereligious beliefs at all (Ericksen 19). The " Aesthetic Movement, ofwhich Wilde was soon to become the representative figure, wasessentially a reaction against the ascendance

of “ Philistinism in artand life” (Ericksen 19). Wilde was determined to “ cultivate his ownindividual impressions of the world (Ericksen 19). Though he quicklybecame the most prominent aesthete, Wilde’s views were not unique. Hehad previously traveled to France, where he met with names such as deGoncourt, Flaubert, and Huysman, who showed him the depth of sufferingas beauty. After Wilde settled in London in the 80s, he began toshowcase his aestheticism, sporting garb such as “ plum-coloredvelveteen knickerbockers with perhaps a soft loose shirt and a wideturned-down collar” (Ericksen 21).

Wilde advocated art as having intrinsic, immeasurable value. Unlike theVictorian stance, art did not have to feature a moral code, teach alesson, or exist as a monument to an ideal supporting morals. Art isart, and exists only to exist for itself. For example, paintings of theLast Supper, though beautiful, existed to be a testament to Jesus orChristianity. Wilde’s Aestheticism would interpret the Last Supper toexist solely for the purpose of being a beautiful painting. The colors, shapes, and figures would be the central focus as they would representbeauty; the connotation behind twelve disciples sitting around asolitary figure would be dismissible. Wilde’s sexuality ties indirectlyto the concept of art; one of the reasons Wilde advocated theaforementioned moral system was his relation of the system toantiquity. Homosexual union was not a defiled perversion; Wilde arguedthat it was a sign of progress, like aestheticism. Aestheticism andhomosexuality would be placed in the same context as other time periodssuch as Hellenistic Greece, Classical Italy (Michelangelo), andShakespearean England. The aforementioned periods involve

theperfection of the male form; Wilde believed himself to be in line withthe traditions of old because of his Oxford rearing. Hellenisticaesthetic coincided with Wilde’s sexuality and his aesthetic movementin the shared view that the male form was the most beautiful. Homosexual relationships were therefore considered an act of beauty, the most revered form of affection possible.

Wilde’s “ The Decay of Lying” is a multi-page testament to his belief inart’s greater purpose as having no such purpose. Essentially anextended metaphor for the ill consequences of turning art into amathematical measure, “ The Decay of Lying” describes lying “ and poetryas arts” (Wilde 1997, 7). The metaphor continues, equating art with anexaggeration of reality. True art, Wilde argues through theprotagonists Cyril and Vivian, is so abstract that the real “ becomesunreadable” (Wilde 1997, 13). The nature of art and beauty is soabstract that nature and life are meant to imitate it.

The dangers of regarding art as a moral calculus are detailed in ThePicture of Dorian Gray. The strange stasis in which Dorian findshimself—the state where his self-portrait shows his aging and thenegative effects of his actions—is a wonderful example of Wilde’saesthetics in motion. The story unfolds as Dorian is sitting in frontof Basil; Basil is seen pondering the sheer physical beauty of thescene in front of him. The true aesthetic, Basil seeks out thebeautiful solely because it is beautiful. He becomes enamored withDorian only because of his beauty. On the other hand, Lord Henry findsDorian irresistible because of the potential socialite he sees in amind that has yet to be molded. Basil the aesthete warns Lord Henry, imploring him not to make a cynic out of something beautiful; in thiscase, Basil is ultimately requesting

Lord Henry to take caution in hisapproach to Dorian. Basil wants to preserve Dorian the way he isbecause he finds him beautiful, where Lord Henry wants access toDorian's private time so he can mold something new and different. Dorian becomes a work of art, manipulated by Lord Henry, killing Basil, the aesthete.

Later in the novel, Lord Henry gives Dorian a yellow book, one with notitle that is presumably about art and philosophy (Ericksen 115). Dorian becomes obsessed, using it as a Bible with which he leads hiswhole life. In the end, Dorian dies, having gone mad. This is anunequivocal warning from Wilde to those who would pervert the course ofart (Victorians). Wilde shows the reader what happens when art is takenout of context and into a completely inappropriate light. Moreover, itshows how damaging the Victorian approach is; Dorian is unable tochange his ways. Shortly after his inhuman treatment of Sibyl, heattempts to reform, only to find the painting smirking back at him. This is a reflection of the unyielding nature of Victorian society; itis a reflection of Wilde's suffocation and inability to move freely, creatively, or inspirationally in the context of British society at theclose of the 19th century. Just like Dorian, Wilde cannot expresshimself freely; though he had a chance in the beginning of the novel, Dorian did not follow the poor artist Basil. He instead opted toconform to the higher-ranking Lord Henry, whose coterie led Dorian tohis death. Once in the clutches of Lord Henry, Dorian was fullysupplicated to the mercy of his manipulator. Lord Henry almostimmediately changes in his affections for Dorian, the extremedifferences being Dorian's perception as an " Adonis" in the

beginningand as an unrecognizable, withered, man who is unidentifiable untilthey “ check his rings”.

Wilde’s third play, “ An Ideal Husband” makes use of the witty banterknown as “ epigrams” to reveal the darker side of Victorian values in a” tongue-and-cheek” fashion. The whole play is an epigram of sorts, exemplifying the imperfections of the Victorian bourgeois by mockinglyportraying the inefficacy of their incorporation into Wilde’s idealsociety. The traditional Victorian values Wilde mocks in “ An IdealHusband” are devotion, forgiveness, sacrifice, loyalty, moralintegrity, and a composed disposition, all traits that Wilde subvertsin his character portrayals. Though Sir Robert, the “ ideal husband”, finds himself at the disadvantageous end of blackmail, his past doesnot warrant Wilde to present him as vile or duplicitous, as Lord Goringpostulates to Lady Chiltern that every man of “ every nature [has]elements of weakness” (Wilde 2004, 27). The play, however, becomes” centered around a conflict caused by [Lady Chiltern’s] unyieldingmoral rigidity” (Ericksen 142). Sir Robert faces a moral dilemma in hiscoping with Mrs. Cheveley’s blackmail. Wilde makes a useful point inthe Sir Robert’s circumstances; on one hand, Sir Robert is faced withmaking public his dark and relatively shameful past, thereineffectively nullifying Mrs. Cheveley’s threats. On the other, he mustdeal with a Puritanical wife “ who cannot forgive anyone who has done awicked or shameful deed,” including Sir Robert’s possible complicity(Ericksen 141). Would an ideal husband accede to the blackmail, thereindenying his wife’s request to challenge Mrs. Cheveley? In either event, Sir Robert’s relationship is put in jeopardy. He can either lie to hiswife, giving in to Mrs. Cheveley and compromising his

marriage, or hecan make his past public domain, marring the perfect public image hiswife so treasures. Ironically, the couple’s social coterie perceivesSir Robert as the ideal mate, a man who, until his blackmail, was knownfor his impeccable reputation. Even his private life with Lady Chilternwas blissfully free of blemishes. Sir Robert’s reputation andrelationship with his wife, however, could have been saved by a simplelie. Had he never revealed the truth to his wife and given in to Mrs. Cheveley, giving in to her will, Lady Chiltern wouldn’t have been oneto know the better. An ideal husband in this case would therefore lie; for Wilde, the Victorian moral impetus lies not with adhering to thetraditional values, but rather in maintaining the facade of keepingvalues in general. Ironically, Lady Chiltern “ learns of her husband’spast” all the same, “[castigating] him and [rejecting] his please forforgiveness” (Ericksen 141). No amount of marital maneuvering can spareSir Robert. In the end, it is Lord Goring who confronts Mrs. Cheveleyabout Sir Robert’s blackmail; he is the only empowered character as hespeaks and acts under no false pretenses. While he is far from perfect, chastised by his father for “ dancing until four o’clock in themorning”, Lord Goring is Wilde’s idealist—he is an art lover, whosewitty repartee is surpassed only by his willingness to fight Mrs. Cheveley.

One of Wilde’s most effective comic devices is his employment ofepigrams, and more comical still is his utilization of Vicomte deNanjac’s malapropisms. The French Attaché in London, Nanjac representsWilde’s interpretation of those not fortunate enough to be born elite; Nanjac is easily recognized by his adoration of society and “ hisAnglomania” (Wilde 2004, 4). His malapropisms are a reflection of thesad attempts of many to engage in

epigramic banter, the object of LordGoring’s successful use of epigram. A ridiculing character, Wilde’sNanjac is one whose blind aspiration to join a society hampers hisvision and taste, therein earning him the scorn of the more capableLord Goring.

Wilde’s assault on the Victorian bourgeois is personified best by theduality of his characters. Sir Robert, for example, “ presents a publicmask of absolute personal integrity but has actually built his fortuneand career upon a deception” (Ericksen 144). An almost hero, Sir Robertis a manifestation of Wilde’s implications regarding a relativelyinnocent man’s subjugation under society. Lord Arnheim, Sir Robert’sformer co-conspirator, first seduces Sir Robert with his “ doctrine ofwealth”, elucidating his view that controlling others is life’sgreatest attribute (Ericksen 142). Mrs. Cheveley displays this best as” Lord Arnheim’s theoretical protégée”; the two are almost Machiavellianin their manipulation (Ericksen 145). Where Lord Arnheim seduced SirRobert by playing to the discrepancy between his noble birth and modestfinancial holdings, Mrs. Cheveley is absolutely ruthless in herwillingness to wreak havoc on all aspects of Sir Robert’s married lifein order to secure her investments. In his surrender to the wills ofthe two manipulators, Sir Robert becomes an ideal human, one whoseproclivity to err alienates him from society. By succumbing to the twoprominent materialists, Sir Robert embodies Wilde’s disdain for thefinancial drive of Victorian social coteries; contrary to theart-collecting Sir Robert, the female villain has no pleasures outsidecontrol and exploitation.

Wilde addresses the lack of humanity in Victorian society, personifiedby the promulgation of perfection among the social elite. In the firstAct, Mrs.

Marchmont and Lady Basildon discuss their unfortunate maritalsituation. Lord Goring notes they are married to " the most admirablehusbands in London", to which Mrs. Marchmont responds that theirhusbands' perfection " is exactly what [they can't stand]"; " there isnot the smallest element of excitement in knowing [them]" (Wilde 2004, 10). In this sense, the true Sir Robert, the one susceptible tosuggestion and whose past compromises his future, becomes the idealhusband. Wilde suggests all Victorians wear masks, alternate identitiesthat shield them from being human and enjoying existence. The idealmarriage is manifested best by the speculative union of Mabel Chilternand Lord Goring, who at the play's close reject the common Victorianroles and morals previously discussed.

Wilde's Victorian surroundings were instrumental in his development ofaesthetics, but were unfortunately not tolerant of his private life. Acontroversial figure, Wilde was homosexual, and had an ongoing affairwith a younger nobleman by the name of Lord Alfred Douglas. LordDouglas' father, enraged at his son's homosexual relationship withWilde, accused Wilde of being a sodomite, a grave offense in GreatBritain at the time. Though acquitted in his first of two trials, Wildewas later sentenced to serve two years' hard labor on theaforementioned charges. First imprisoned in London's Wandsworth prison, Wilde was denied pen and paper until his transfer to Reading Gaol, where he eventually wrote De Profundis. While " Wilde revealed hisfascination with the figure of Christ [throughout] his literary career, only in De Profundis did he actually make [Christ] a part of hisaesthetic system" (Ericksen 156). A dramatic monologue on spiritualityand society, De Profundis features several metaphors likening

Wilde toChrist. Wilde felt his unjust imprisonment made him a martyr; uponinitial circulation of rumors regarding his sexuality, Wilde could haveleft London for France, therein spared persecution. Unlike “ Hamlet, whobecame a spectator to his own tragedy”, Wilde the Christ-figureactively sought out what he perceived as his end (Wilde 2003, 28). Where Christ accepted his fate for the benefit of mankind, Wilde was aself-convinced saint and martyr for art and what he perceived to be thethreatened aesthetic movement. Having “ passed through every mode ofsuffering,” Wilde was convinced that his redemption would be realizedthrough his incarceration and subsequent release, upon which his newfound humility would help him “ rise again” (Wilde 2003, 4). Just asmankind would redeem itself through the trial and crucifixion of Jesus, Wilde felt society would be redeemed through his incarceration. Hecontinued, developing his incarceration to salvation, likeninggreatness to requisite sorrow. Wilde admired Jesus for having realizedhis calling as being “ completed,” reaching “ fulfillment” upon its end(Wilde 2003, 19). Marveling at his situation, Wilde mused on theincredulity of “ a young Galilean peasant imagining that he could bearon his shoulders the weight of the world,” including all the world’spast sins as well as what “ had yet to be done and suffered” (Wilde2003, 13). Jesus’ death and resurrection was that toward which Wildeaspired, conceding that imprisonment was most likely an act ofretribution for the fanciful and carefree life he led previously. Incarceration, then, was Wilde’s means of atoning for the errant lifehe might possibly have led upon his release. He hoped his relationshipwith Lord Douglas would be forgiven, and longed for society’sacceptance. Wilde could “ claim on [his] side that if [he realized] what[he had] suffered, society should realize what it [had]” in turninflicted;

with a mutual cognizance shared between Wilde and society, he hoped there would be “ no bitterness or hate on either side” (Wilde2003, 7). Just as Jesus attempted to win over his captors andaggressors through his death and resurrection, Wilde hoped to pacifysociety’s enmity by paying his social dues in prison. Wilde evenlikened the course of his life’s events to those leading up to Jesus’martyrdom. For example, Jesus was given direction by God the Father andcondemned by Man. Wilde, in turn, ascribes “ the two great turningpoints in [his] life” as when his “ father sent [him] to Oxford, andwhen society sent [him] to jail” (Wilde 2003, 6). Wilde’s foreknowledgeof an impending criminal proceeding did not dissuade him, just as thedisciples could not sway Jesus’ acceptance and willingness to die onthe cross. Neither Wilde nor Jesus could ignore their calling, nomatter the grisly end. As a sinner, Wilde conceded that he had toaccept the fact that martyrs were equally persecuted “ for the good aswell as for the evil” committed (Wilde 2003, 7).

However similar to Jesus Wilde would assert himself to be, there weredefinite discrepancies in De Profundis that could testify to Wilde asan admirer of Jesus rather than his attempted emulator. Wildepostulated that Jesus saw Man in the same fashion as the aestheticmovement saw art; Man existed simply to exist. Wilde wrote that Christ” regarded sin and suffering as being [beautiful]” in and of themselves, that such a notion was the “ dangerous idea” that led Christ to hisdemise (Ericksen 157). Just like Christ, Wilde’s own “ dangerous idea” that ran against the Victorian grain was what led to his downfall. Wilde also saw his imprisonment as a period of transition. Hisindictment of the Greek gods as deities emulating humans indicatedhislife

prior to imprisonment; Wilde labeled the Olympian gods as ableto “ reach greater heights” (Wilde 2003, 17). Each Olympian representeddifferent aspects of humanity that, when indulged by Wilde, resulted inincarceration. In his simile, Wilde indirectly likens himself to eachgod’s moral flaws. He lauds Zeus for not being able to “ resist mortalman’s daughters” and Hera for her pride and “ peacocks”, a catharticevaluation of the Victorian bourgeois who imprisoned him (Wilde 2003, 17). Wilde also attributes his former peers to Apollo and Athena, eachof whom failed to forgive. Apollo slaughtered the mortal Niobe’s sons,” leaving Niobe childless” for her hubris in claiming her childrenrivaled the offspring of Leto (the mother of Apollo and Artemis); Athena turned Arachne into a spider for having claimed to be moreskilled with the loom than the goddess of wisdom and crafts (Wilde2003, 17). In describing the society that bore him, Wilde becomesimperfect, as his reformation requires penance as a medium of change. By attributing himself and his society to the Greek gods, Wildedifferentiates himself from Jesus. Jesus never required crucifixion toattain perfection—he was born perfect and lived without sin. Wilde, onthe other hand, is punished not on behalf of another (though it can besurmised that his imprisonment kept the young, impressionable LordDouglas out of jail), but for his own social transgressions. Wilde alsoheld great contempt for Lord Douglas, as De Profundis was more ascathing letter from a jilted lover than a philosophical testament toWilde’s self-improvement. Wilde often lamented his situation, spitefulthat “ for him, the beautiful world of color and motion [had] been takenaway, while Bosie (Lord Douglas) walked free among the flowers”(Gardiner 145). De Profundis becomes conciliatory towards its end, however, as Wilde follows through with his original

assessment that” terrible was what the world did to [him],” but worse still was “ what[he] did to [himself]” (Wilde 2003, 3). Unlike Jesus, Wilde is somewhatself-hating, embittered by his social persecution despite his greatcontributions in the aesthetic movement. His imprisonment wasultimately brought on by his own charges; following his falling outwith the Marquess of Queensbury (Lord Douglas’ father), Wilde pressedlibel charges and lost, opening himself up to legal scrutiny. In theend, it was his own defense that cost him his freedom, unlike Jesus wholived to die, fully cognizant of an inescapable fate. Though heexperienced a form of martyrdom, Wilde’s self-comparisons to Jesus arelimited, and he shifts from indirectly likening his life and its recentevents to those of Jesus to aspiring to become Jesus-like (in essence, more Christian). Rather than claim to follow in Jesus’ footsteps, Wildepurports that he has suffered just as Jesus suffered, and in doing sobecame a better man just as Jesus did. Wilde claims “ to have become adeeper man is the privilege of those who have suffered” (Wilde 2003, 21). Despite Wilde’s De Profundis presentation of himself as Jesus, there are a great number of instances that involve his own supplicationbefore and admiration of Jesus as opposed to his presumption ofequality with Jesus. Wilde admires Christ for his refusal to stone MaryMagdalene, bringing shame on her persecutorsin his statement suggesting that those without sin cast the stones tocondemn her. In his tirade against the Victorian bourgeois, Wilde alsovenerates Christ for advocating the poor; Wilde described prison as” something that earns sympathy” from the poor and earns the rich thestatus of “ pariah” (Wilde 2003, 2). The poor, Wilde argued, were asimpler people who were closer to perfection. Jesus, after all, was notborn rich, but the son of a poor carpenter.

In the waning years of hisimprisonment, Wilde began to consider his incarcerated state as areturn to simplicity, and in simplicity becoming closer to perfection.

Wilde's comparison to Christ was perhaps overtaken by the method inwhich he transformed Christ, reinterpreting him as an " artisticpersonality" (Ericksen 156). It is odd that Wilde would place Jesus onsuch a pedestal, as he remained an avowed agnostic until the twilightof his life. In fact, Wilde goes out of his way to denigrate theChristian faithful to a degree, describing his faith as somethingsuperior because it is tangible, that his " gods dwell in temples madewith hands"; Wilde asserts that only " within [actual] experience is[his] life complete" (Wilde 2003, 5). Wilde's adulation could also beconstrued as a comparison of himself with Christ as a purely literaryfigure; his assertions were not hubris, but merely the lamentations ofa writer recognizing a universally acclaimed protagonist in the world'smost renowned tragedy. By placing Jesus in the context of a literaryfigure rather than reading Wilde's comparisons from a religiousperspective, the reader is further able to understand the context inwhich Wilde worked. Wilde never deified himself, though he did perceivehimself as " a defiant artist intensely conscious of his cultural roleas an innovator of art" (Erickson 13). De Profundis waivers between theveneration of Christ and the open advocating of agnostics, with Wildeoften professing that agnosticism " has its martyrs and should reap itssaints" just as Christianity has (Wilde 2003, 5). In this respect, Wilde transcends the figure of Jesus in his simplicity; Jesus' deathand the events of his life were a leap of faith, whereas Wilde's beliefsystem and his life, cultural contributions, scandals, and downfallwere

historically documented. His " actual experiences" previouslydiscussed were in themselves defined as real in their sorrow. For a manwhose " fop" and " dandy" were all encompassing, Wilde's redemption wouldnot be nearly as invigorating as that of Christ (Gardiner 15). WhereChrist was promised a seat at the right hand of God Himself, Wilde'sfuture upon release was one of almost guaranteed estrangement.

Wilde's homoerotic imagery and context are unique; they served as aneffective device in the establishment of Dorian as both an evilcharacter and one manipulated by another. The homoeroticism, forexample, first serves to establish Dorian in a protective love affairwith Basil, where Dorian is portrayed as innocent, his face bright withthe naïveté that can only be attributed to youth. That Dorian is drawnto Lord Henry in a sexual manner makes his fall from grace all the moredecadent, giving the reader the impression that Dorian was " stolen" away from the clutches of youthful exuberance. Without the homoeroticsubtext, there would be no logical explanation for Lord Henry'sattraction to Dorian, or Dorian's willingness to follow Lord Henry. Though Dorian could be portrayed as having left Basil behind so as toaspire to greater social heights, the manner in which Wilde useshomosexual tensions prompts the reader to make different conclusions, ones that are steeped in suspicion and communicated in whispers. Thetaboo of same-sex relationships is cast aside with the introduction ofSybil, but it remains in the back of the reader's mind, solidified byseveral characters' effeminate preoccupation with physical beauty. Wilde's own sexuality manifests itself in three stages among the threemale characters; first, the image of Basil, the affirmed homosexual wholives a detached life. Second is

the image of Lord Henry, the privatehomosexual who is an irrevocable face in the local coterie. Third isthe image of Dorian, who begins innocently, but upon realization of hishomosexuality and his attempt to become assimilated into societyperishes against his own will. Wilde’s sexuality is thereforeinstrumental in The Picture of Dorian Gray.

“ The Importance of Being Earnest” is a reflection of Wilde’s duality; contrary to Dorian, who cannot exist detached from or assimilated intosociety, Jack is an amalgamation of Basil and Lord Henry. His dual lifeis revealed, but only by another who also wishes to take part in socialduplicity. In “ The Importance of Being Earnest”, Wilde communicates theimpetus of self-truth as a panacea for unhappiness. Both Algernon andJack are happiest as Ernest as they are free to act as they wish. Unhampered by the Victorian society that constricts them, the twoerstwhile-Ernests move, speak, and do as they please. The elaboratelengths to which Jack resorts is a reflection of the life Wilde musthave led behind his family’s back; when Jack assumes the role ofErnest, he risks crossing his stories, getting his two livesintertwined in the form of Cecily and Gwendolen meeting. Here, Wilde’ssexuality affects both Algernon, the representation of the dandy andfop, and Jack, whose secret life is a metaphor for homosexualityrepressed. Both are hampered by Victorian restrictions; Algernon facedthe shirking of his familial duties, whereas Jack had to remain a modelindividual for his supposedly sheltered ward to follow. Only Jack is inperil of being discovered, however; Wilde attempts to communicate theimportance of being true to one’s self, as Jack is the only characterof the two men to assume an entirely new identity. As Algernon uses hisfabricated person as an excuse to leave his surroundings, he is

neverput into the same dilemmas as Jack. In the case of " The Importance of Being Earnest", Wilde's sexual constraint was an important factor inanalyzing the play.

Wilde's aestheticism was highly influenced by his sexuality. Heapproached aestheticism the same way he approached his male relations, perceiving art simply to observe beauty. Beauty to Wilde is exactlywhat Dorian was to Basil; beauty was a necessity, something Wilde couldnot do without. In his attempts to articulate aesthetics, Wilde mayhave gotten lost in his purpose. Victorian thought was the standardagainst which to rebel, begging the question of Wilde's motives. Washis aesthetic perspective a manifestation of a new dimension of hisanti-Victorian sentiment? Wilde often satirized other aesthetics, claiming that he would only " attack the unmanly oddities whichmasquerade in its likeness" (Gardiner 43). The irony behind Wilde'ssatirizing contention is that determining those who are " unmanlyoddities" requires the same logical selection process as mandated byVictorian interpretation. For example, a Victorian observing art wouldemploy criterion to evaluate the piece as a decent work of art. Similarly, Wilde's decision as to what constitutes aesthetic thoughtwould require criterion to evaluate the thought or work purported to bepart of the aesthetic movement. While Wilde's sexuality was onlyeffectively used to correlate Hellenistic antiquity, it still wasuseful in understanding the shift in perception. Whether or not Wildecame to the conclusion that the Victorian system was inferior, subsequently adopting aestheticism is a different instance than Wildeadopting aestheticism solely to oppose the Victorian system.

Moral implications are much more concrete than art interpretation; in" An Ideal Husband", Wilde does not attempt to spoon-feed his audiencehomoerotic suggestion. Instead, Wilde focuses on Victorian society as awhole, portraying it in the superficial light he felt appropriate. ThePuritanical attitudes relayed by Lady Chiltern are portrayed asimpossible standards. The " ideal husband" is then the imperfect, unpredictable man who concedes to his own weaknesses. This is bestevidenced by Wilde's warmer tone toward Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont, an almost sympathetic tone to their plight of drab husbandsand " perfect" marriages. Wilde's sexuality does not traditionally comeinto play. However, when perceiving homosexuality as an imperfectionPuritan society shuns, Wilde's sexuality fits well but lacks thecreative outlet to fully present itself as a viable factor. Thoughsexuality was an important part of Wilde's works, it was notinstrumental in the proprietary " An Ideal Husband". However, Wilde didsuccessfully present himself in the form of Lord Goring, the dandy ofthe play. Moral implications in " An Ideal Husband" had little do withsexuality, but had everything to do with Wilde's disdain of theVictorian bourgeois social circles.

Wilde as a Christ figure is a notion that draws several conclusions. First, it is not Wilde's sexuality that likens him to Jesus. Wilde'ssexuality comes into play only as the factor of his persona that earnedhim persecution and eventual prison time. Simultaneously, Wilde as aChrist figure was a feasible notion only in his martyrdom for art; where Christ was nailed to a cross, died, and was reborn, Wilde wasimprisoned, was released, and reborn. Wilde's speculation on his newlifestyle post prison-release was one of humility, much

in the samemanner as Jesus' humility throughout the history of his encounters withhis disciples. A somewhat wanton display of hubris, Wilde's Christcomparisons are a bit lofty and overly ambitious. Wilde perceivesChrist from an agnostic point of view, evidenced by his relativeflexibility in putting himself in the same contact as the Son of God. However, both Jesus and Wilde shared parallels, such as the eventsleading up to their incarcerations.

Oscar Wilde's homoerotic texts, aesthetics, Christ comparisons andmoral implications were largely the result of his sexuality, though itcan be argued equally as effectively that Wilde's writing was affectedby anti-Victorian sentiment. Had he been alive now, in an age wherehomosexuality is often as accepted as racial differences, it isunlikely that he would have gained the notoriety that he did while inprison and following his release. Though he died a pauper, Wilde'sworks were revolutionary in their latent content, the dandy style, andthe fact that they addressed issues such as homosexuality in a timewhere society was becoming steadily more conservative. As with anyauthor, Wilde's works are best understood when taking intoconsideration his biography and history, including his sexuality.

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