

On Oscar Wilde, Posing as a Sodomite

Oscar Wilde was one of the late nineteenth century's most distinguished writers and its most outspoken celebrity. Famous for his superb wit, his extravagant dress, and the hedonistic sexuality which he considered to be along the lines of the Greek ideal, he upheld the belief that all life is art, and therefore is meant to be pleasurable above all things. He was unconvinced by morality, stating that "to be good... merely requires a certain amount of sordid terror, a certain lack of imaginative thought, and a certain low passion for middle-class respectability." At forty years of age, he fell into a homoerotic relationship with the twenty-four year old Lord Alfred Douglas, nicknamed Bosie, whose father accused Wilde of sodomy and had him arrested. The trials of 1895 changed his life irrevocably. Following a verdict of "gross indecency," Wilde was sent to prison and forced into two years of hard labor from which he never recovered. He died alone in abject poverty and misery three years later.

1. On Celebrity:

"The man who can dominate a London dinner-table can dominate the world."

The four men throw their heads back and laugh, pulling with upturned lips at their cigars, gesturing grandly in demonstration of extravagance. Their dress is extraordinary: each man is laden with his share of furs, feathers, and draping satins. They jest, and each exudes fortune and wit. Beyond their circle there is only silence, as all around them wait, breath bated, to hear some tiny parcel of conversation that they might carry away to their neighbors or friends. They are hushed as if under the glory of God.

The four men ignore their awestruck company as if to show that it is always present. "Marriage," one suggests, and there are general laughs around the table. They seem to be playing a sort of game, and they cry out responses in tandem. "One at a time," another says, and gestures to the man next to him. "Shaw, you first."

Shaw chortles, his bulk shaking, and responds. "One might liken marriage to the afterlife, for it is as unending and incurable as Hell itself. Thus I say it will never change." His words are answered by an appreciative laugh from the man in the top hat and an unexpected frown from the delicate younger man to his right. The fourth man says nothing but offers his companion a pursed smile. The man beside the first speaker

raises his hands outward in a gesture of defeat. "I've no further response. Shaw has spoken it all. What say you, Bosie?" The table turns to the gentle, unhappy looking man.

"I disagree, I think it will change. The state of marriage is only in place to dictate what one must not do and whose company one must not enjoy. It is God's doing that men are born with passions – to deny them, save for only one woman, is in itself a sin. So I say marriage will change, for eventually man must realize his full nature." The response is good enough, but the harsh insistence of his voice sobers the men around the table. There is a moment of uncomfortable silence. Beside him, the fourth man extends his long, jeweled fingers and gently brushes them across arch of his friend's hand. "You now, Wilde," Shaw says.

The fourth man flicks the ashes from his cigar and leans backward. Long hair haloes his face, tumbling to broad shoulders, framing delicate features and emphasizing a knowing smile. Above all others, this is the man the other diners strive most to see, and wood creaks around him as club-goers lean sideways in their chairs to hear his response.

"Mankind will eternally be in love with the idea of marriage. Follow me, if you will. One hears that America is the grandest hope for the future of mankind. One hears also that in America the Niagara Falls is the most impressive sight a man might ever see. I visited it, and here lies my verdict: the Niagara Falls is simply a vast amount of water going the wrong way over some unnecessary rocks. The sight of that waterfall must be one of the earliest and keenest disappointments in American married life." Appreciative laughter and applause announce that this is the winning response.

Amidst the merriment, a waiter approaches. He edges nearer to the fourth man, and the laughter halts. The waiter passes him a card. "To you, sir, from the Marquess de Queensberry."

"My father?" soft-spoken Bosie exclaims, but the fourth man takes the card with a comforting gesture. He glances downward at the writing upon its back. His face transforms slowly, his teeth clenching in wild rage. "Gentlemen, I must part your company. Bosie, walk with me."

And with no further words, Oscar Wilde strides from the Albemarle Club into the night air, leaving his companions shocked and entirely at a loss for words.

2. *On Sin:*

"Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attraction of others."

"Please stop, Oscar, you are enraged."

'Enraged' is a bitterly poor definition of my fury. In spite of my need for his company, I turn and cry out against Bosie. I am maddened with fear, with pain, and with disgust.

"What does my father say?" Bosie asks. He throws me frightened looks and stays a good distance from me, but I do not want to soothe him. A selfish hatred has come upon me, and with vile words I lash outwards and rail against him. I am brutal in my treatment. I tell him that he is no more than a stupid child enamored with genius, that he has overstayed his part. Bosie does not respond to my rage, and he only demands, again and again, damned interminably, to know what is written upon the card. I repeat my vile words, and our volumes heighten until we both are breathless, barking in the darkening street like curs. "What does it say?" he cries again. I drop my voice to a near whisper, as if to deny my own response.

"It says, 'For Oscar Wilde'," I hiss. "Posing as a sodomite."

He stares. His horror is a reflection of my own. "No."

I feel my rage sharpen and focus upon its true mark. In truth it feels wonderful to hate one man so much. "Let your father come. Let him stand before me and dare to say the same. If I shoot him, the law will back me."

"Oscar, no! The law will do you nothing if he can prove his charge. *He will ruin you.*"

My laughter is bitter. Rage rises up my throat, and my voice coarsens with it. "He cannot prove anything. You will not let me touch you." In sudden frustration with my lover, I seize his wrist and twist hard, pressing his back against the brick façade of a building alongside the obscure backstreet. I press my body hard against his.

Bosie throws his palms outwards to keep me distant, and I am surprised by his sudden strength.

"Enough, Oscar. He knows we have loved." I can never understand Bosie's kindness, but it is suddenly there in his eyes and in his hands, which run along my neck and chest and tangle themselves in my hair soothingly. This love is a more powerful thing than my hate.

"Very well. Let them say love is a sin." He kisses me deeply, but I step away, my mind bent to

darker matters. “Then I will take him to trial. Tomorrow I speak with the police,” I say, and I leave my boy alone in the street.

3. *On Society:*

“Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.”

I tell you, I don’t understand people most days. They’re as keen as can be for spying on another man’s business. You wouldn’t believe the fuss they were making yesterday over that playwright. I make a good business working the shop down on Warrick’s, and I swear to God if I don’t walk by that dandy’s house yesterday after closing it up and see a bloody mob armed to the teeth with a right load of nonsense – old wood boards and rocks and the like. So I ask one of the boys that looks less wild than the rest of them what the mess is for. Turns out the fellow got himself in good with the law – he tried to take the Marquess to trial for libel, but the old man threw it back in his teeth. He came up with a whole list of prostitutes – rent boys they call ‘em – that were willing to talk all about the godless things they’d done for that man’s pleasure, an’ that right under the eyes of the Almighty himself.

Now I’m not out to judge any man, but that makes me mad. But now the lawmen are coming, and right well they should be if that man’s been walking around the same city as my boys. They knock on his door, an’ he opens it soon enough too, but then he sees us, all armed and looking damn right angry, and he sees the lawmen and slams the door like he’s got no manners at all.

But the lawmen block his way and pull him down onto the grass. They tie his hands up behind his back, with him growling and twisting all the while. Then he just lays limp – I swear just like a dead fish on a slab – and they pull him up and drag him away. We all start cheering and screaming.

Then his poor wife comes out of the house, carrying his two boys. We pity her well enough – it’s not right a man treats his woman that way. She just looks us all over like we’re worms in her garden, and she turns right back into the house.

4. On the Nature of Truth:

“No great artist ever sees things as they really are. If he did, he would cease to be an artist.”

Two weeks past I would say that I was shaken, yet by now I am not so surprised. Charlie is the last of many taking the stand; each has sided against me. He swears by the book, yet now I believe him to be even less in God’s graces than I, and surely less concerned by it. He slouches in the box, facing the court, and stares at me. For a brief moment I hope to see an apology in the upward tilt of his brows, the shape of his eyes.

But instead his look is strange, and I am unsettled. Fear pierces me, a swift an unexpected thrust, but it is again my sorrow that blankets me, that weighs me with lead and calls me a pleasure-blinded fool. It begins again, and beside me my beloved Edward, my hopeful counsel, spares me a moment’s sympathetic glance before returning his deductive faculties and all those rational tendencies of his profession back towards the proceedings. Oh, how I hate this court logic, this scientific truth, which takes so vilely from the beauty of individual truth, and condemns men for a villainy that cannot be defined or understood.

They ask Charlie his age, and he tells them he is twenty-one. So young, they whisper in the crowds behind my bench. Two years ago, he says, he was approached by a gentleman in a bar. That gentleman, I know, was Taylor, who, sharing my interests in sexual matters and exceeding my interest in money and fineries, was always willing to act as my resource in these matters. Taylor charmed him and, after several drinks and light conversation, broached the subject of male sexuality. Charlie, who says he was hard of money, took easily enough to the suggestion of pursuing less regular pleasures for a respectable price. He sums up our meeting over dinner, my extravagant spending on his account, and our affairs in my sitting room later that evening, where he states only, in reference to my crime, “He committed the act of sodomy upon me.” In simple, cold summary he outlines our subsequent meetings, the drinks we shared and the pounds which I paid him at night’s end.

His plain words mock my kinder intentions. They hold none of the soft love or passionate acts that I knew as God’s truth of our deeds, those temptations to which even my needful Bosie will not surrender. I see Charlie in my mind’s eye, approaching me after our dinner, after our first charmed conversation. His youthful features seem ecstatic and fearful of my genius and of the nature of our act. I cannot resist his beauty or his youthful spirit, and they call me away from my thoughts and my reason. I kiss him, and it is only a surprised

moment before he offers in full what I have already offered.

In memory, I hear my name, Oscar, on his full and smiling lips, but now it is only Wilde to whom he refers. Two weeks past I did not know this Wilde, this vile contagion that they describe, this man that throws his rent boy money and strides away, secure in his fame and needless of other men. I bow my head to Charlie before he leaves his stage. He played his part very well indeed.

5. On Love and Shame:

“Do you really think it is weakness that yields to temptation? I tell you that there are terrible temptations which it requires strength, strength and courage, to yield to.”

It is vulgar, sinful, to hear my words – words written in love and in shame, and all for you – uttered by a lawyer. You always said the destruction of art is the destruction of life, and they have taken your life from you. Your self-possession and passions are gone. Oscar, I would stop your hands from shaking, and would that my words could not betray you, even though my soul is damned for admitting it.

“Sweet youth, “ (The lawyer reads)
 “Tell me why, sad and sighing, thou dost rove
 These pleasant realms? I pray thee speak me sooth
 What is thy name?” He said, ‘My name is Love.’
 Then straight the first did turn himself to me
 And cried, ‘He lieth, for his name is Shame,
 But I am Love, and I was wont to be
 Alone in this fair garden, till he came
 Unasked by night; I am true Love, I fill
 The hearts of boy and girl with mutual flame.’
 Then sighing, said the other, ‘Have thy will,
 I am the love that dare not speak its name.”

The lawyer addresses you with contempt. “What is the love that dare not speak its name?” I watch your head lift. They have stolen your wit, and you now show yourself to be a man I barely know, a man of sorrow and perception. “The love that dare not speak its name is, in this century, such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It is in this century misunderstood, so much 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 beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. That it should be so

the world does not understand. The world mocks it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it.”

I have heard you speak these words before. To me they seemed always beautiful, always true. Now to me they read by rote, as if their power lies upon your tongue but not your heart. Around you, applause begins, strong and certain. Among the applause, hisses of anger are heard. But you only hear the applause, could only ever be bothered to hear the applause, and your eyes lift upward, and, sensing hope, I see you smile again.

6. On hope:

“A dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world.”

I have been writing now for many days. It brings me the kind of peace I had once, before I entered Wandsworth prison, though I do not expect my words to ever again be read by others. My time in prison has made of me a pariah, and in this fact I find myself both entirely without means and entirely homeless. But perhaps this is well enough. I know myself more greatly now that I have walked amongst the trees at the shadowed side of this garden; I knew the others too well. Pleasure and Fame were my favored fruits of old. But my fear of Sorrow and Pain kept me away from the understanding of life and art that has been the sole virtuous pursuance of my life.

In prison I longed to die. But I find now that where love is sought it can always be found. And where it cannot, I may walk in Nature and in her embrace I will be healed. She will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt: she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole.

Note:

The following quotes by Oscar Wilde were not marked as such in the piece (This was done for effect and was allowed by the rules of the assignment):

Page 2: “The Niagara Falls is simply a vast amount of water going the wrong way over some unnecessary rocks. The sight of that waterfall must be one of the earliest and keenest disappointments in American married life.”

Page 6-7: “The love that dare not speak its name is, in this century, such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It is in this century misunderstood, so much 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 beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. That it should be so the world does not understand. The world mocks it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it.”

Page 7: (On Nature) “She will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt: she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole.”

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