A Legacy Restored: A Study of Oscar Wilde’s Public Perception Over Time

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SIRP- NCHC Conference 2011
“For I have come, not from obscurity into the momentary notoriety of crime, but from a sort of eternity of fame to a sort of eternity of infamy...”¹ These words were written by Oscar Wilde while serving his two year sentence in jail. They define the direction in which his life took after his notorious trials. In the nineteenth century, Wilde had become a world renowned writer; most famous for his plays and as a notable member of the aesthetic movement. One fateful decision in 1895, however, threatened to change his legacy forever. Despite the treatment of him in the years immediately following his trial, Oscar Wilde’s fate wasn’t forever sealed in infamy. In the years subsequent to Wilde’s death in 1900, his legacy slowly began to rebuild itself until he was once again respected for his literary contributions and not his personal scandal. The modern public’s responses and opinion regarding the trial of Oscar Wilde have changed drastically since the trial’s aftermath in 1895.

Despite having a wife and two children, Oscar Wilde had developed a very close friendship with Lord Alfred Douglas. Douglas’ father, Lord Queensberry, disproved greatly of their relationship; he feared that Wilde was manipulating Douglas’ character and that their relationship was inappropriate and had quickly moved beyond friendship.² Lord Queensberry began harassing Wilde in an attempt to make him cease his relationship with his son. This harassment culminated on February 18, 1895, when Queensberry left a card at the Albemarle Club that Wilde frequented with the fateful words, “For Oscar Wilde, posing as a sodomite.”³ An accusation of this nature at the time was dangerous because sodomy was considered a severe criminal act. With the encouragement of Douglas and other friends, Wilde brought charges against Queensberry for criminal libel.⁴ This first trial began on March 2, 1895. This trial’s spotlight quickly shifted from Queensberry’s horrible accusation to the private life of Mr. Wilde.

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⁴ Ibid, 4.
In an effort to clear his name, Queensberry and his legal team brought to the public’s attention Wilde’s life behind closed doors. Queensberry’s lawyers said that Wilde had paid off blackmailers in exchange for letters sent between him and Douglas, and had affiliations with perceived male prostitutes, homosexual brothels and even cross-dressers. Queensberry and his lawyers produced multiple young men as witnesses who claimed that they had personal relations with Wilde. They were trying to prove that Wilde was acting in an immoral manner and the claim that Queensberry made was for the public good and was, in fact, true. Queensberry was found not guilty of libel and the court made an additional verdict that the accusations brought against Wilde were true.5 Following the trial, Wilde was arrested for “gross indecency.”6 Gross indecency with another male was deemed illegal under Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act.7 This arrest was followed by two trials in which Oscar Wilde, along with Alfred Taylor, were being tried for their criminal acts. Finally on May 25, 1895, following his third trial, Wilde was convicted of gross indecency and sentenced to the maximum time of two years in jail with hard labor.8

Oscar Wilde had defied Victorian era codes of morality and conduct. People at this time shunned away from expressing emotions or sexual feelings. Homosexuality was considered absolutely shameful and was punished severely. As in every aspect of life, all humans generally have different opinions on events. For his third trial, I have analyzed the opinions of four groups; the thoughts of the public, the reactions of the newspapers, those who were involved with the trial and those who knew him personally, including his own thoughts, to gauge a general response to Wilde’s trial. According to Victorian era values and ideals, the people of the late 19th century considered the trial of Oscar Wilde to be just.

6 Hyde, Trials, 34.
8 Hyde, Trials, 337.
The final trial of Oscar Wilde left the public appalled and outraged at the crime that such a prominent man was able to commit. When the verdict was announced in the courtroom cries of joy and celebratory dancing commenced by the public in attendance. Their response tended to be a collective belief of his guilt and that justice was handed to him. During the trial, one of the biggest things that bothered the people was the fact that many of the men that were put on the stand and were said to have been with Wilde were servants and valets who were below him in class.

Wilde was a prominent public figure of the upper class thanks in part to his successful writing career. Most of the young men were of the lower class with no interest in the arts; therefore, there was no plausible reason as to why he would want to associate with such men. They couldn’t believe that he had stooped so far beneath himself. Also, the public was overjoyed by the sentencing because they believed that Wilde was corrupting the youth. At this time it was believed that homosexuality was a learned act. All of the men that Wilde had been associated with were considerably younger than his forty-one years of age; most were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three. He was known for his flamboyancy of dress and an air of effeminacy that he seemed to exude.

A lifestyle such as this was not something that the public wanted their young men exposed to. Most of the men testified during the trial that they had never had a homosexual encounter before being introduced to Wilde. Their apparent lack of prior experience made the public draw the conclusions that it was because of his persuasion and influence that the men had agreed to participate in such hideous acts. Someone that had this sort of influence over the

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10 *New York Times*, "Imprisoned."
11 Sherard, Unhappy Friendship, 40.
12 Holland, Real Trial, 35.
13 *New York Times*, "Imprisoned."
14 Sherard, Unhappy Friendship, 42.
15 Hyde, Trials, 225.
young men of London certainly deserved to be locked up in their eyes. His conviction of gross indecency also affected their views on his literary works. He had two of his famous plays in production at the time of the trial, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband*, which suffered because of the abominable acts.\(^\text{16}\) Due to shrinking crowd sizes, the managers of the theatres showing the plays were forced to remove his name from the playbill, posters and any other advertisements.\(^\text{17}\) Detaching the plays from his scorned name allowed them to stay in production and to continue to be somewhat successful, though they were never as thriving as they had been before the trial. Similarly, the sales of his book, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and his other works also suffered. People began to question the content of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; they also questioned his writings in the magazine, *The Chameleon*, as immoral. They had been on the shelves for some time, but they now believed that they displayed obscene sodomite behaviors. The public was so disturbed by the findings in the trial that they began shunning his works that they had once loved. The outraged response that the trial created also helped to negatively shift public views on homosexuality. His trial aided growing aversion and hatred of homosexuals; this was connected with their thoughts that he was corrupting the young men in the society. All of this leads me to believe that the public definitely thought the verdict of the trial was just.

Most of the newspaper articles I read tried to maintain a professional, nonbiased account of the trials and their effects. However, shades of disgust and justice were able to peek out between the lines. The language used to describe the trial and its outcome often had negative connotations. The reporters constantly described the trial as a horrible, offensive crime. The

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\(^{16}\) *New York Times*, “Imprisoned.”

\(^{17}\) *New York Times*, “Imprisoned.”
London Times described it as “the gravest of offences” and “a disgusting scandal.”18 One article that was in the New York Times didn’t shy away from opinion stating, “It was a just verdict, and must be held to include with Wilde the tendency of his peculiar career.”19 I sensed that most of the reporters also agreed that the trial was just. I found one specific journalist who believed that the whole basis of the charges was preposterous, an opinion that was ahead of its time. W.T. Stead believed that if Wilde did any of the things that he was accused of to a woman, no one in society would’ve cared. Wilde wouldn’t be hated by everyone and he would still be a celebrated artist.20 Stead pointed out the double standard that existed because the actions that Wilde committed were with people of the same sex. In his own way, he was expressing his unpopular idea that Wilde’s trial and the aftermath caused by it were unjust. All in all, I found that from most responses it seemed that most journalists sided with the public and believed that the trial was just.

The judge presiding over Wilde’s final trial, Justice Wills, had one of the harshest and most telling responses to the events. In his sentencing, he referred to the crime as so horrible that he had to restrain himself when he was forced to talk about it. He pronounced, “People who can do these things must be dead to all sense of shame … It is the worst case I have ever tried.”21 This spoke loudly about the opinion of homosexuality in that time. Justice Wills had presided over murder cases and probably other horrible crimes, but he felt that this one was absolutely the most atrocious. He also echoed the public’s fears that Wilde had demoralized the young men.22 If it had been possible he would have given Wilde a much harsher punishment; but two years

20 Hyde, Trials, 358.
21 Hyde, Trials, 339
22 Ibid.
with hard labor was all that the law would allow. Justice Wills’ response to the Wilde trial showed that he also found the verdict to be justified.

After Wilde was convicted, many of his friends betrayed him and most never came to see him.\textsuperscript{23} He did have a few close friends that stood by him through his public shaming; they advocated for him and his reputation. One, Robert Sherard, even wrote in his book praising how great of a person Wilde truly was. Lord Alfred Douglas, his supposed lover, at least defended him. In response to an article written about the trial, he angrily expressed that Wilde didn’t seduce or hurt any persons.\textsuperscript{24} Douglas expressed the perspective that Wilde was a good person; if anyone was monstrous, it was his dad, Lord Queensberry, for inflicting this pain on Wilde.\textsuperscript{25} These opinions however were few and far between at this time. His own wife didn’t even want anything to do with him.\textsuperscript{26} She never allowed him to see his two sons, Cyril and Vyvyan, again.

Wilde himself admitted, “Of course there are many things of which I was convicted that I had not done, but then there are many things of which I was convicted that I had done, and a still greater number of things in my life for which I was never indicted at all.”\textsuperscript{27} Although Wilde believed that the trial and the laws under which he was convicted were wrong and unjust, he admitted to being guilty of many of the things they accused him of. Despite the fact that those around him advised him to do so, Wilde did not deny or forget about the charges. The response from Wilde himself shows that the conviction was just. Although a few of those close to Mr. Wilde defended him and the unjustness of his accusations, the responses of the majority of those that knew him lead one to conclude that they also believed the trial was just.

\textsuperscript{23} Sherard, Unhappy Friendship, 61.
\textsuperscript{24} Hyde, Trials, 361.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Sherard, Unhappy Friendship, 95.
\textsuperscript{27} Wilde, De Profundis.
Oscar Wilde lost almost everything in his life; his name, position, happiness, freedom and wealth all because of his conviction.\textsuperscript{28} Based on their responses to the trial, most of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century population in London agreed that it was just. Wilde felt the hatred that the public spewed towards him after the trial and imprisonment were over. While in prison he wrote, “Society, as we have constituted it, will have no place for me, has none to offer; but Nature, whose rains fall on unjust and just alike, will have…rocks where I may hide, and …weep undisturbed.”\textsuperscript{29} The isolation and disdain that the public showed in response to his trial was unfortunate, but a sign of the judgmental times that they lived in.

As time advanced however, opinions changed and minds opened. Homosexuality is not as taboo of a topic as it was at the end of the Nineteenth Century. Countless more people are open about their sexuality and criminal punishment is no longer a concern. Many attribute this shift in society’s views on homosexuality partly to Oscar Wilde. Wilde is no longer shunned for his personal life; but once again loved and revered for his genius literary works.

Oscar Wilde is a name that is recognized by almost every person today. His name is no longer said in distaste, but in respect. Following the trial, the sales of Wilde’s writings severely dwindled and his name was removed from the playbills of his plays in production in an effort to maintain an audience. This public shunning of his work soon changed, beginning as few as five years after his death in 1900. Today, he is revered as a classic author whose works are celebrated and widely read throughout the world. Wilde is first and foremost a witty writer. The public in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} Century seemed to forget this and allowed his talent to be pushed to the backburner in the wake of what was a horrible scandal. It took many years for his works to be rehabilitated, but his death in 1900 may have been a concealed blessing to his deteriorating

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} Wilde, \textit{De Profundis}. 
career. The rejuvenation began as little as five years after his death. In 1905, Robert Ross, who devoted himself to repairing the legacy of his dear friend Wilde by paying off his bankruptcy and publishing his works, published Oscar’s prison letter *De Profundis*. Also in this year, Robert Strauss opened an opera, *Salome*, based on one of Wilde’s plays. Both of these works were well received by the public and assured that his legacy and image would not vanish. His death allowed his works to be considered harmless classics which allowed the populations to read him more freely. In 1909, George Alexander put the play, *Importance of Being Earnest* back into production. This time, however, instead of removing all traces of Oscar Wilde’s influence as had been done in the past, he was able to put Wilde’s name on the playbills and publicity cards. His works have been able to maintain relevance as centuries change and have had the ability to surpass his trial’s scandal in importance.

Society has progressed tremendously since the end of the 19th Century, especially in its treatment towards homosexuals. Homosexuality is no longer a convictable crime and people are much more open about their sexuality. Many point towards Oscar Wilde as having played a large part in this shift of attitudes and acceptance; he is often considered a martyr for homosexual rights and a saint in the gay community in modern culture. Because of his trial, Oscar Wilde has always been seen as a homosexual in the eyes of most people in today’s public. The struggles that he was forced to endure in a much harsher and homophobic environment have led to his emergence as a gay icon, a sort of hero. He was one of the first famous, prominent men to

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32 Kaplan, *Dandy and Dowager*, 318.

33 Bristow, *Modern Culture*, 111.
be outed as a homosexual; therefore in today’s society instead of being ridiculed and shunned for whom he loved, he is celebrated as a martyr who paved the way for others to be truthful about their sexuality in the future. Wilde reached a heightened status in the 1980s and 1990s, especially in regards to the gay community. In this time period, an influx of writings erupted in which explored his impact on identity and sexual subjectivity. Many gay men in this twenty year time period were compelled by Oscar Wilde’s life and story; they related to his experiences of being treated harshly and unjustly. Immense changes have occurred in both social and legal opinion since Wilde was convicted of gross indecency. His notoriety and fame brought about a bigger awareness of homosexuality in the late 19th century; through his exile and public anguish Wilde became a modern martyr for the homosexual cause.

In the Victorian era, gender and sexuality roles were confined to certain stipulations. In modern times, thanks in part to Oscar Wilde, these gender and sexuality roles have widened and the strict lines have now become blurred. Wilde was known for his flamboyancy and effeminacy well before he was tried for gross indecency. Once convicted, these traits were what the general public began to associate with all male homosexuals, creating “the homosexual.” Men were supposed to fit inside a perfect little box of manliness in the Victorian era; if you didn’t fit these standards you were essentially shunned or typecast. In today’s society these gender roles aren’t as concrete. A man can be flamboyant or effeminate without being homosexual, and vice versa. Oscar Wilde inadvertently had a hand in breaking down these barriers that once existed in

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34 Bristow, Modern Culture, 286.
gender and sexuality.\textsuperscript{38} In modern times people are freer to act a certain way without being fatefully labeled. It is the majority of the public’s opinion today that Wilde’s trials occurred in a hostile environment; one that was extremely homophobic and heterosexist.\textsuperscript{39} This caused an underserved punishment and forced such a literary genius into exile and shame. Modern homosexuals admire Wilde for paving the way for them to be themselves without the fear of the type of punishment that he had to endure.

The perceptions of Oscar Wilde’s trial have changed extensively. While the people in 1895 believed that Wilde’s charges were absolutely horrible and vile, making the trial just; modern opinion shows that the outcome of Wilde’s trial was absurd and unjust, a sign of the complete homophobic times that he lived in. Even Sir Travers Humphreys, a judge who served as a Counsel on Wilde’s trial admitted in 1953, “The fact is beyond plain argument; the prosecution of Oscar Wilde should never have been brought.”\textsuperscript{40} Wilde’s legacy was destroyed due to the way that the public perceived his trials and conviction at the time. Oscar Wilde, his tumultuous life and many celebrated works are a subject of fascination and allure for people throughout modern times. Countless biographies on the man have been recorded. In 1914, a bibliography containing all the works of Oscar Wilde was released by Stuart Mason; it was a very important step in his being accepted back into society.\textsuperscript{41} On Wilde’s 100\textsuperscript{th} birthday, a memorial plaque was dedicated by the London County Council to the “wit and dramatist” at the home he occupied in 1894 and 1895. In 1990, the Oscar Wilde Society was founded in order to


\textsuperscript{39} Foldy, \textit{Deviance}, 67.

\textsuperscript{40} Whittington-Egan, \textit{Twentieth Century}, 97.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, 94.
promote the study of Wilde and his works.\textsuperscript{42} Thousands of people flock to Wilde’s grave every year in order to pay their respects to one of the most famous and favorite authors of all time. This is certainly a turnaround from how Wilde was treated as though he was a horrible monster after his trials. If times and minds hadn’t evolved and changed, the world could have been kept from such an amazing mind.

On his deathbed Wilde proclaimed, “I will never outlive this century, the English people would not stand for it.”\textsuperscript{43} Not even he could have predicted the way that his legacy would be resurrected after his death due to the drastic change in the perception of his trial. Oscar helped to change the public’s view on homosexuality. His suffering, though traumatic, eventually had a hand in progressing society’s acceptance of homosexuals. Wilde may have died in shameful, impoverished obscurity, but he has lived on for over a century through his timeless works.

\textsuperscript{42} Whittington-Egan, \textit{Twentieth Century}, 98.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 89.
Annotated Bibliography


Joseph Bristow holds a PhD in English and is a professor of English at UCLA, with a specialization in 19th and 20th Century British literature and sexuality studies. His book revealed that while Oscar Wilde died in obscurity and shame, beginning just five years after his death and continuing into today’s society, Wilde’s name has been revived and he is once again considered an influential writer. To support his thesis, Bristow told of the gradual steps it took for Oscar Wilde’s name to regain its prestige and positive recognition. One event that he pointed to was the success of Richard Strauss’ opera based on Oscar’s play Salome in 1905. Strauss also tells that while Oscar was condemned for his homosexuality before his death, he is now placed into the role of a homosexual saint and martyr for the rights of homosexuals.


Ed Cohen is a strategic leader with experience in cooperate learning and organization development, and has earned a Master’s of Science in Education. The thesis for this book was that the trials of Oscar Wilde and their coverage formed a new type of sexual category. Cohen writes that Wilde became the known example of the homosexual, being one of the only and certainly most famous publicly known homosexuals in the morally strict Victorian society; his presence helped to change the perception of sexuality amongst Victorians. Also, by challenging the Victorian predetermined gender identity restraints, he has influenced and changed modern male sexualities, allowing the spectrum to widen and to now be represented in a new, more open light.

Michael Foldy is a renowned historian who spent many years researching and analyzing the documents surrounding Oscar Wilde and his trials. In his book, he studied the documents and reactions surrounding Wilde’s notorious trial, and analyzes how Wilde and his charges were perceived in the context of that time period compared to how they are perceived in the present time. Foldy thought that one of the reasons why Wilde was condemned so harshly in the late 19th century was the fact that he challenged traditional gender roles and sexual identities; something that has become more accepted in modern times. Foldy believes that the trial was unjust, especially by today’s standards; his sentence resulted from an extremely intolerant and homophobic society.


Frank Harris was a renowned author, editor, journalist, and publisher. This book aimed to tell the entire story of Oscar Wilde; his life, his trial, the aftermath, and his death. It details how his reputation plummeted after being convicted of gross indecency in his trial.


Merlin Holland is a biographer and editor; he is the grandson of Oscar Wilde. This book provided a full transcript from all three of Oscar Wilde’s trials, including some previously unreleased transcripts. Along with providing the information about what occurred verbatim in the trial, Holland inserts some tidbits and information about his grandfather and his life at the time and following the trials.
H. Montgomery Hyde was a biographer, author, and politician who by campaigning for homosexual law reform cost him his seat in the House of Commons. Hyde’s book provided the first complete transcript of Wilde’s trial, including every detail recorded in the courtroom to capture this high-stakes case. It also provided conclusive background information and details on the consequences of the fateful outcome.


Joel Kaplan is a professor of Drama and Theatre Arts at the University of Birmingham, who has several publications under his belt. Sheila Stowell is a Senior Research Fellow in Drama at the University of Birmingham, who had previously authored her own book. Their article’s thesis was that Oscar Wilde’s legacy was restored after his death, based mainly on society’s changing attitudes. According to their expertise, during Oscar Wilde’s lifetime he tended to offend society’s sexual attitudes, but these confined attitudes began to change in the years after his death and his works were considered historical. The subject of his works, the stage interpretations of his plays, and the fact that his writing were now thought of as historical allowed the public to forget about his shady past and focus solely on his gift of writing.

The London Times is a daily newspaper that has been composed in London since 1785. This article does not cite an author. It thoroughly detailed the entire trial and the events surrounding it.


The New York Times is a daily newspaper that has been published in New York City since 1851. The newspaper has won over 100 Pulitzer Prizes. This article covers Oscar Wilde’s testimony during his trial. Its aim was to tell that they thought the speech that he gave may have saved him from getting a guilty verdict or at least lesser charges.


The New York Times is a daily newspaper that has been published in New York City since 1851. The newspaper has won over 100 Pulitzer Prizes. This article gives a detailed account of the trial. It aims to tell readers about the ways the Wilde was affected after the trial, for example it told about Wilde’s name being removed from his plays that were in production at the time of the trial.


David Schulz earned his PhD from the University of Washington, and has had works published in *TDR* and *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia*. The thesis for this article he has written was that the trials of Oscar Wilde are where the idea of the Homosexual as a social subject first emerged. In order to back up his claim he states that because of the social and moral restraints that existed in Victorian society, Wilde became the modern
representative of homosexuality in a homophobic society. With his flamboyant dress and effeminate qualities, Schulz also believed that Wilde helped to form the stereotypical gay man of today’s society.


Robert Sherard was a writer and journalist. He was a close friend of Oscar Wilde and authored the first biography about his friend. This was the first of many biographies that have been written about Oscar Wilde. In this book, Sherard attempted to defend his friend whose reputation has been severely tarnished as a result of his trials and conviction. Sherard wrote about how great of a person and friend that Wilde truly was.


Richard Whittington-Egan is a writer and criminologist, and is a member of the Medico-Legal Society, The Crime Writers Association, and the Society for Psychical Research. The thesis for this article was that through the efforts of many, including his friend Robbie Ross, Oscar Wilde was able to eventually regain his fame and respect in the literary world. According to Egan, public distaste of Wilde started to ease up thanks to Robbie Ross who paid off all of Wilde’s debts and published his prison letter, *De Profundis*, which received a good public reception five years after Wilde’s death. The forgiveness of Wilde was gradual as times and minds changed, and today he is more famous and respected than ever. Egan cited that societies in his name, statues, and his acceptance as a member of the Literary Establishment show that today Wilde is thought first and foremost for his genius writing abilities rather than his personal life and scandal.

Oscar Wilde was a world renowned author, playwright, and poet. His life was brought to shame and demise following an indictment for gross indecency. This piece was written while Wilde was serving his two year jail sentence. It was addressed to his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, and was reflective on the things he had learned and the circumstances that landed him in jail.