

The late 19th century was an exceptional time for literature in both Europe and the Americas. Arguably, some of the greatest minds in the history of Western literature actively published during this period. Twain, Melville, Dickens, Verne, Wilde and many others were widely circulated among both literary factions and laypersons. Through their fiction, their collective reach was enormous. For most of these writers, their fictive works have eclipsed their personal lives. Until recently, historians have focused only on these writers' contributions to literature, rather than their intriguing personal histories as a whole. With the emergence of new types of historical inquiry, the study of literary figures has begun a paradigm shift toward examining the impact of their entire lives, rather than simply their works. In following that trend, this study will shine a unique light on not only the works, but also the life of one of the 19th century's most controversial authors: Oscar Wilde.

Wilde saw himself as a brilliant Aesthetic artist, proclaiming during his 1882 American book tour, "I have nothing to declare but my genius."¹ Early in his career the Victorian public viewed Wilde as an eccentric Aesthete whose plays delighted but often left the public feeling somewhat left out. Later, as Wilde's now infamous trial approached, the public formed new ideas about homosexuality and began to develop tropes out of the mannerisms and dress of the Aesthetic movement to which Wilde belonged. The ways in which Oscar Wilde envisioned himself ran counter to the expectations of Victorian England; the mantle of homosexuality was thrust upon Wilde based on the narrow ideas of the society in which he lived – the public was simply ill-

¹ Wilde, Oscar. *The plays of Oscar Wilde*. Random House Digital, Inc., 1988. Page 1.

equipped to view his lifestyle in anything but black and white – homosexual and heterosexual -- terms. It is for this reason that even today we fail to see the complexity of Wilde's choices; that the truth is "rarely pure and never simple."²

In the spirit of the above quoted passage from Wilde's iconographic play "*The Importance of being Earnest*," this study will seek to complicate the popularly held conceptions of Wilde's sexuality through closely examining his life within the socio-cultural framework of the Victorian era. It will address many of the commonly held misconceptions surrounding the public and private behaviors of Victorians. Most importantly, this study will attempt to resituate the popularly held view of Wilde's sexuality into terms of an indefinable Victorian sexual fluidity and complex expression of desire that was both mistakenly and narrowly cast into the binding dichotomy of uninformed sexually terminology. As a secondary goal, this study will address the ramifications of Wilde's 1895 trial on widely repeated homosexual tropes that have solidified since the late 19th century as an indirect result of the publicity of the scandal.

Before addressing this study's aforementioned argument, it is necessary to set up an abbreviated version of the accepted chronology of Wilde's life for those who are unacquainted with the subject – one that will be delved into in greater depth and detail throughout this study. By setting up an abbreviated chronology, it will also be possible, and indeed necessary to explore the pervasive methodologies and the accepted historical argumentation held within the works of contemporary scholarship on Oscar Wilde. By doing so, a greater need will appear to recast our interpretations; examining

² Wilde, Oscar. *The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*. L. Smithers, 1899. page 15.

the current academic material will show in great detail the necessity for embarking on this study, the failings of various strains of academic and literary interpretations of Wilde's life, and the purposed direction of future inquiry into the subject.

Oscar Wilde was born in Ireland in mid October of 1854. In 1874 he began studying at Oxford University, where he quickly won praise for his poetry and prose.³ He continued to publish widely and travel into the 1880's. Wilde married Constance Lloyd in the summer of 1884, despite his growing internal desire for homosexual companionship.⁴ Throughout the 1880's Wilde began living a double life, maintaining sexual relationships with various male and female partners. He was a successful, well-received writer during this period. His books were best sellers. Wilde traveled on speaking tours to America and across Europe. During the 1890's, Wilde continued to release plays and novels. Some of his most notable works were published during this time -- such as the now iconic works, "*The Importance of Being Earnest*" and "*The Picture of Dorian Gray*." Suddenly, in April of 1895, Wilde's life took an unanticipated turn; his secret life came crashing headlong into his public veneer. He was formally charged with the crime of sodomy by the English courts in April of 1895.⁵ The ensuing proceedings were a public spectacle. Wilde was found guilty of the charges, and lost everything. His wife, Constance Lloyd, immediately sought divorce and he was forced into prison as a sodomite and debtor.⁶ Upon his release from prison, Wilde completed an introspective

³ McKenna, Neil. *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*. New York: Basic Books, 2005. Page 12.

⁴ McKenna. *The Secret*. Page 52.

⁵ "At Bow-Street, On Saturday, Oscar Wilde." *The Times*, April 8, 1895. Edition 34545.

⁶ McKenna. *The Secret*. Pages 398-419

and embittered final book entitled *De Profundis*, formally addressing his past homosexual tendencies in terms of a sickness to be overcome.⁷ In 1900, Wilde died poor and alone, a deathbed convert to Catholicism.⁸ He left behind him a legacy that continues to arouse the interests of leisure readers and academics alike.

In order to posit a persuasive argument about Wilde's intricate personal history, this study will form a synthesis of the opinions of contemporary historians of Oscar Wilde's life -- historians such as Neil McKenna, Richard Ellman, and John Sloan.⁹ In doing so, it will establish a new voice in the scholarship about Wilde, one which focuses largely on the failings of presently held conceptions surrounding Wilde's infamous sexuality. Although this study will not seek to break new ground in the area of literary studies, by integrating the ideas of other historians, it will form a new and more dynamic argument about the life of Oscar Wilde.

Most modern historians have published linear, one-dimensional histories about Oscar Wilde; they argue one of three points: that his life was little more than the account of a stridently homosexual author, that he was a struggling self-identified "straight man" conflicted and wrought with demons, or that he was an unfortunate aberrant product of Victorian-era excess.¹⁰ These authors often times overlook the multiplicity of character in all human beings; no man can be typified by only one aspect of his life or age. This study will incorporate that notion. By doing so, it intends to show

⁷ Wilde, Oscar. *De Profundis*. Unexpurgated [ed.]. New York: Vintage Books, 1964.

⁸ Pearce, Joseph. *The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004. Page 395-396

⁹ Neil McKenna author of "*The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*" and Joseph Pearce author of "*The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde*."

¹⁰ McKenna, Neil. *The Secret*. Page xi - xii

that the accepted schools of thought are unfitting of the complex history of Oscar Wilde. By incorporating pieces from all of the major schools of thought, a clearer image of Wilde's personality will appear. This study culls ideas from the main tenants of Wilde scholarship; the argument that Wilde's homosexuality encompassed a the major portion of his life, as well as the idea that he struggled to come to terms with his role as a straight man in the Victorian world. Ultimately, this study explores the idea that Wilde lived two lives simultaneously within the context of the Victorian era. Consequently, it examines the notion that Oscar Wilde's life was a struggle between these two distinct, yet intertwined Victorian sexual identities. This study will show that Wilde's life and work were a constant interplay between his desires to maintain the public existence of a straight man and his will to live privately as a sexually ambiguous artist.

There is a conspicuous absence in the literature of the type of multifaceted analysis this study purposes. Inexplicably, it has been almost entirely overlooked in the contemporary scholarship available to students of the Victorian era. The importance of adjusting such gross oversimplifications in historical interpretation cannot be overstated. To view the life of Oscar Wilde in such a limited scope is akin to studying Benjamin Franklin only in terms of his love of philandering. It is a fact that Wilde engaged in homosexual activity, it is also a fact that Benjamin Franklin was a philanderer, but that does not define them entirely. By opening the floor to a broader examination of the life of Oscar Wilde, historians and students alike will be better suited to appreciate the complexities of one of the 19th centuries most misunderstood authors.

The generally accepted historiographic timeline of Oscar Wilde's life focuses almost entirely on a step-by-step inquiry into the major events of his career. Many historians have been satisfied with simply looking at Wilde as a widely known, controversial aesthetic writer and poet. Few arguments have been posited that expand our view of the arch-aesthete. Like many other authors, Oscar Wilde's personal life has been left largely out of the historical equation. Fortunately for both scholars and casual fans of Oscar Wilde's writing this trend has recently begun to reverse. There is now a growing body of intellectual literature purporting to examine the full history of Wilde's unique life. Today, those interested in Wilde can find a wealth of books ranging from biographical works, full histories of the Aesthetic movement, and books of contextual histories of Wilde's life and writing, though the majority still lack the requisite examination needed to draw a full picture of Wilde's sexuality within the context of Victorian understanding.

Within the modern histories written about Oscar Wilde, there are two generally held schools of intellectual interpretation that pervade the majority of the literature: those that look at Wilde's life through themes of his sexual orientation, and those that examine his life in terms of the Victorian era's social constructs. Although historians employ several methods of examination – literary, biographical, social – these two modern interpretive schemas are found within a myriad of histories that profess to understand the life of Oscar Wilde. Both interpretations attempt to impart an argumentation to Wilde's unique life and grant insight into his thoughts and actions. They form the basis of most modern scholars' attitudes toward Wilde's personal, and

literary history. Both of these schools of study fail to recognize that it is necessary to join in order to form a greater understanding of Wilde's complex life. This study binds these divergent concepts into one, noting that without one the other would be entirely incomplete.

Of the literature available that examines Wilde's life and writing in terms of his sexuality, historian Neil McKenna's book *"The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde"* does so most exhaustively. McKenna's argument centers on the notion that each event of Wilde's life was a result of, and thereby an extension of, his sexuality. In McKenna's view, by writing *"The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde,"* he was attempting to re-work the longstanding notion that Wilde was a conflicted heterosexual who eventually succumbed to homosexuality only near the end of his life.¹¹ McKenna states that while "researching and writing [The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde], [he] wanted to go beyond the mythology and the misapprehensions about Oscar's Sexuality, and seek to present a coherent and psychologically convincing account of [Wilde's] sexual journey."¹²

In a chapter entitled "Against Nature," McKenna utterly abolishes the line of believability; while discussing Wilde's honeymoon with his new bride, Constance Lloyd, McKenna states, "[Oscar Wilde] realized that whatever marriage may or may not bring in terms of stability ... it had not and would not extinguish his burning desire for

¹¹ Ibid. Page xi "...Accounts of Oscar's life present him as predominantly heterosexual, a man whose later love of men was at best some sort of aberration, a temporary madness and, at worst, a slow-growing cancer, a terrible sexual addiction, which slowly destroyed his mind. "

¹² Ibid. Page xi.

sex with young men.”¹³ McKenna cites no sources for these and various other claims that could possibly verify the personal thoughts of Oscar Wilde regarding his marriage at the time of his honeymoon. As a result, his ideas come across as artificial and speculative throughout much of his argument. Of course, McKenna’s enormous presuppositions and forced argumentation is a history that could potentially be true, but more likely than not is somewhat less than a half-truth. It is for these reasons that this study seeks to expand on McKenna’s shortcomings by mixing in elements of other author’s ideas to formulate a better-rounded idea.

Richard Ellmann, author of the definitive Oscar Wilde biography falls into several of the same trappings that McKenna stumbles upon. Although Ellmann’s book is beautifully written and quite possibly the apex – as it is one of the first – of Wilde biographical scholarship, he argues the orthodox narrative of Wilde’s life in terms of his homosexuality instead of interpreting the context of the society and considering the complexity of the man about whom his work is directed. Ellmann writes that in connection with becoming an aesthete during the 1880’s that Wilde was seen by his peers as, “a euphemism for homosexual.”¹⁴ Ellmann careers this theme throughout his biography.

Other authors, while still focusing on Wilde’s sexual preference, take a different approach to his life. Ed Cohen – a man who is very important to this study’s interpretation of Wilde’s literary works – discusses the undertones of homosexuality in

¹³ Ibid Page 59: McKenna goes on to argue that Wilde’s marriage to Constance would only “... magnify and inflame his homoerotic desires.”

¹⁴ Ellmann, Richard. *Oscar Wilde*. New York: Vintage Books, 1988. Page 80.

Wilde's literary works as a relevant window into the history of Wilde's growth as a sexually conflicted author. In an article entitled "*Writing Gone Wilde: Homoerotic Desire in the Closet of Representation*," Cohen writes:

[Wilde] narrates the development of male identity within the milieu that actively subverts the traditional bourgeois representations of appropriate male behavior. While [he] portrays a sphere of art and leisure in which male friendships assume primary emotional importance and in which traditional male values are abjured in favor of aesthetic, in makes no explicit disjunction between these two models of masculinity; rather, it formally opposes an aesthetic representation of the male body and the material, emotional, and sexual male body itself.¹⁵

What Cohen means by this is that through Wilde's writing, we glimpse the ways in which he simultaneously challenged roles of masculinity in Victorian life, and viewed the male form as a sexual outlet. Unlike McKenna, Cohen believes that the confused sexual undertones of Wilde's work are simply tools to help understand his "ideological representation of an already existing reality."¹⁶ That is, the Victorian era's shady sexual predispositions. Instead of attempting to speculate as to Wilde's innermost thoughts, Cohen seats his argument in Wilde's literary catalogue. The consequence of this is a series of articles that offer a more accessible interpretation of Wilde's sexuality than McKenna's.

Author Patricia Flanagan Behrendt carries on the theme of Cohen in her book *Oscar Wilde: Eros and Aesthetics*. She examines Wilde's literary works in terms of his

¹⁵ Cohen, Ed. "*Writing Gone Wilde: Homoerotic Desire in the Closet of Representation*." *PMLA* 102.5 (1987): 801-813. Page 805. Cohen's formed his argument by interpreting Oscar Wilde's novel "The Picture of Dorian Gray." In addition to a serialized work, on which Wilde served as editor, entitled, "Teleny."

¹⁶ Cohen. "Writing Gone Wilde" Page 810.

sexuality as well as the social context in which they were written in an attempt to gain greater understanding of his writing. She writes in the introduction to her book that her study into Wilde's life "began with the ambivalent realization that, even in the midst of [her] own enjoyment of [Wilde's] works, [she] felt the nagging sensation that [she] had been both drawn into the content and yet profoundly left out."¹⁷ She goes on to discuss the works of others in the same vein, saying she "read the thoughts of those who have written about Wilde and his works, [noting] a similar theme of ambivalence both in the popular and scholarly response to his style..."¹⁸ Behrendt sees the need for a multifaceted approach to the study of Wilde's life as a form of literary art, and she succeeds in delivering a cohesive account of his works.

However, both Cohen and Behrendt's arguments are limited because they focus predominantly on Wilde's literary works. They do not take into consideration the broad array of events occurring in Wilde's personal life. Nonetheless, both of these authors are useful to help develop an understanding of how Wilde's sexuality played out in his work. This study integrates Cohen and Behrendt's ideas into the argument as a means to help formulate a growing understanding of Wilde's literary works as well as his sexuality.

This study has thus far examined two types of historical argumentation based on Oscar Wilde's sexuality. It now turns to the second historiographic school of thought: Wilde in the context of the Victorian era. This type of historiographic material largely

¹⁷ Behrendt, Patricia Flanagan. *Oscar Wilde: Eros and Aesthetics*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991. Page XII

¹⁸ Ibid Page XII.

lists the raw facts of Wilde's life, within the broader context of Victorian society. This view is by its very nature more encompassing than the previous, but often neglects the subtleties of interpretation that the former conveys. A book by William Andrews, et al entitled *Wilde's Writings: Contextual Conditions* is the prototypical model of this type of historiographic interpretation.

Wilde's Writing is a sectionalized inquiry into Wilde's life beginning around the 1880's and continuing until his death in 1900; a different scholar of Oscar Wilde's life examines each period. In the introduction, contributor Joseph Bristow explains the intentions of the book best when he says, "[This book] aims to provide an accurate account of some previously unexplored contextual conditions in which Wilde forged his varied, rather uneven career."¹⁹ Continuing this theme, contributor John Stokes invokes the central thesis of the book by positing that the events of Wilde's life are strictly the product of their context. In his chapter, Stokes argues that the proper context for looking at Wilde is his time with the theater during the 1890's. According to Stokes, "[Wilde] had his tastes molded in the 1880's..." which directly contributed to his views and affected the events of his life.²⁰ Other contributors to the book add to this argument by stating that it is the context of the Victorian era that molded Wilde into the artist he would become – a sentiment with which this study agrees, but expands upon. Stephen Arata states that, "...context can help illuminate the vexed question of Wilde's

¹⁹ William Andrews, Clark Memorial Library, and University of California Los Angeles. *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions*. Toronto: Published by the University of Toronto Press in association with the UCLA Center for Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Studies and the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 2003. Page 4.

²⁰ Andrews, William, et al. *Wilde Writings*. Page 56.

motivations in writing..." and explain "Wilde's insistence on specificity of his situation and his desire to generalize his experiences..."²¹

Historian John Sloan's recent work *Authors in Context: Oscar Wilde* examines Wilde's life in terms of the Victorian era's social context, but falters as it mirrors the ideas of both McKenna and Ellmann. Unlike McKenna, Sloan focuses far less on interpretation of Wilde's innermost thoughts, but still holds to the orthodoxy that Ellmann initiated in the late 1980's – delineating fact in the framework of Wilde's homosexuality. However, Sloan comes closer than his predecessors in attempting to integrate social contexts fully into his social historiography. By doing so, Sloan is able to generate a more balanced view of Wilde's complex sexual history than had either McKenna or Ellmann. Unfortunately, because Sloan caters to the strict notion of Wilde's stringent homosexuality his book limits possible interpretations and closes the door to consideration of a complex sexual identity.

Unlike arguments about Wilde's sexuality, the contextual model is grounded in the facts of Wilde's life and the society in which he thrived. A properly set context provides the foundation on top of which a thorough argumentation can be grounded. It does not contain highly speculative thoughts about Wilde's inner workings. Instead, the context of the Victorian era is an extremely useful backdrop for interpreting Wilde's bare history. However, without formulating a comprehensive argument atop this context, it suffers from a kind of impersonal coldness; it is little more than sterile

²¹ Andrews, William, et al. *Wilde Writings*. Page 268.

recitation of fact without deeper consideration. For the reasons mentioned above, this study's argument is set against the backdrop of the Victorian era's contextual settings to help develop a more credible foundation from which to launch the central thesis of Wilde's complex sexual nature and legacy.

This study seeks to avoid the trappings of one-dimensionality by incorporating aspects of each of the interpretive methods discussed above into its argumentation. It will not bring new evidence and source material into the discussion. However, it will interpret the existing data in a new way; looking at Wilde's life with all of the tools granted to it by the current scholarship. In doing so, this paper will form a synthesis that has not yet been fully examined. Using a mixture of the approaches of modern scholarship, it will illustrate the ways in which Wilde's life and work became a constant interplay between his desires to maintain the public guise of a Victorian straight man, his will to live privately as a sexually indiscriminant man, and the value judgments cast on him by the ever watchful eye of popular Victorian morality.

Oscar Wilde lived the life of an eccentric and prolific genius – consistently subsisting far beyond his means. Well acquainted with scandal and vice during his lifetime, Wilde embodied the overtly indulgent Victorian literary caricature to the very marrow of his being. During his career, Wilde skated a precarious line within the public eye; from the 1880's onward, Wilde strolled intrepidly between the image of Byronic hero and depraved sexual deviant – the latter taking precedence in the popular

imagination after his 1895 criminal trials for sodomy.²² One of Wilde's harsher American critics wrote of his character that he was little more than a "pretentious aesthete" who engaged in "infamous vice," and was "only one degree less abhorrent than that of [a] maw worm."²³ Meanwhile, Wilde's literary supporters were as emphatic in their reverence toward his personage; one champion of an early book of poems compiled by Wilde during his years at Oxford remarked that he was "fired with more than the single passion of love," possessed by "talent if not genius" and that, though "the school to which [Oscar Wilde belonged was] evident, his traits [lifted] him above it."²⁴ After his death in 1900, the schism between popular images of Wilde's literary genius and his tortured homosexual deviancy solidified -- developing an undue emphasis on his now popularly acknowledged homosexuality.

When discussing the intricacies of Oscar Wilde's complex personal history with individuals who have not yet been exposed to his life and works, one is often greeted in disheartening reply with, "He was the homosexual playwright, correct?" It appears difficult for some individuals to reconcile the popularly held narrative of Wilde's decadence with the essence of his personal complexities and contribution to the fields of literature and theater. This occurs largely as a result of the continuation of Victorian ideas about Wilde's sexuality and the misinterpretations of Wilde's life that sprang forth from these ideas. This misinformation, or narrow Victorian interpretation has been taught to generations of readers. Sadly, this has been the case for nearly a century. Since

²² Pearce, Joseph. *The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004. Page 328.

²³ "Article 2 -- No Title." *New York Evangelist* 66, no. 16 (April 18, 1895): 17.

²⁴ "Oscar Wildes Poems." *The Literary World; a Monthly Review of Current Literature* 12, no. 16 (July 30, 1881): 261.

the trails of 1895, this reductionist image has become pervasive in both popular cultural ideas, as well as much of the academic literature surrounding Wilde's life.²⁵ Thus, the significance of Wilde's peculiar history has been largely overshadowed in academia by a trend toward focusing on his presupposed homosexuality, the charges of sodomy, and the subsequent media circus during his 1895 trial.

Compounding the issue of this attenuated approach to the study of Wilde's life is the subtly accentuated inclination of academics who seem at all costs to avoid discussing his sexuality in terms of a bisexual dichotomy; for them, Wilde was either a homosexual or he was a tortured and confused heterosexual. In the view of these schools of thought, there appears to be little room in which to develop a synthesis of ideas. However, by loosely applying Hegel's concept of dialectics to the principle of history and marrying these two seemingly irreconcilable arguments, a rounded, advantageous, and profoundly "human" image of Oscar Wilde begins to emerge. What this means is that by combining the notion that Wilde was both a homosexual, and a heterosexual, and applying his bisexuality to the context of the Victorian era, a synthesis of both interpretations is developed. Lending itself to a broader view of the complexities of Wilde's existence.

Wilde's history – like all histories – is one of the time in which he lived. He is a product of the Victorian era; he embodies both the vice and virtue of the time, as well as the conflict between the two. He was neither the distressed heterosexual, nor the

²⁵ Authors such as Joseph Pearce, Neil McKenna, and Merlin Holland have written extensively on the import of Oscar Wilde's homosexuality on his historical significance.

deviant homosexual; instead Wilde was an amalgam of these two sexual identities. Oscar Wilde displayed a sexual fluidity that has often been ignored but was common during the era – he participated in the “well-known secret” of the Victorian literary scene: sexual flexibility and moralistic ambiguity.²⁶

In order to begin to understand the fluidity of sexuality that characterized Wilde’s life, one must first delve into the historical contexts in which he lived and worked. As all men are, Wilde was the product of his time – it is impossible to divorce an individual from his context without losing the deeper meaning of his life. Wilde lived during a period of convoluted, divergent, and often contradictory values. Certainly, sexual fluidity and bisexuality flung in the face of the conventional standards of Victorian England. However, it must be noted that much like the dual nature of Wilde’s own sexuality, Victorian England was engaged in a long standing struggle between vice and virtue; on one side, Victorian society expressed a positive and moralistic struggle for cultural betterment. On the other, more nefarious side, the Victorian era appears to have sanctioned or utterly ignored many of the loosely hidden secret acts of debauchery that the population of Victorian London endured as a direct or indirect result of by governmental indifference, and inaction.²⁷

Upon a cursory study of the period, the Victorian Era appears wholesome; it has been largely heralded as a time of high moral austerity. One must view the life of Oscar Wilde within these contexts. He was an Irish immigrant and son of a physician studying

²⁶ Behrendt, Patricia Flanagan. *Oscar Wilde: Eros and Aesthetics*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991. Page 1-5.

²⁷ Adut, Ari. “A Theory of Scandal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the fall of Oscar Wilde.” *The American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 1 (July 2005): Page 213-248.

in relative comfort within the intellectual and physical confines of Trinity College and Oxford University, thus he would have been held accountable to the same standards of others within the educated class.²⁸ Wilde, like all men of the leisure-class during the period, was expected to be gentlemanly; looking back, the whole of society might appear picturesque. Indeed, the shiny veneer of Victorian moral development is sometimes lauded as the pinnacle of English cultural success. It was through the coupling together of rapid growth in moral standards during the Victorian era and the exponential rise and development of the second wave of industrialization in England that the Victorian era must be studied. During this time, as industrialization increased, so too did the gap between rich and poor. From this, a strongly homogenized system of working-class and upper-class cultures solidified – existing both together and apart from one another. Neither leisure, nor working-class groups were left out of the dominant moralizing trend in culture of the late Victorian era.²⁹

Both the leisure class – to which Oscar Wilde himself belonged – and working class, as a coupling of coexisting and interdependent cultures, formulated their own staunch standards of moral acceptability. For the leisure class, morality was based around the concept of social decency; men and women were expected to be chaste, sober, and demure. Through the possession of these traits, morality would have been relatively easy for a person of the leisure class to attain and communicate through the

²⁸ Pearce, Joseph. *The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004. Page 46 and 54.

²⁹ Koven, Seth. *Slumming: sexual and social politics in Victorian London*. Princeton University Press, 2004. Page 9.

aid of proper dress and standardized displays of social etiquette.³⁰ Conversely, the working class tended toward a somewhat more utilitarian form of morality. Keeping out of trouble, not scrapping, and scrupulously saving small portions of their meager wages constituted a form of morality for the working class.³¹ For them, juggling long hours and the responsibilities of hard work, while all the while attempting to rear a family, was sometimes at odds with the sobering requirements of Victorian moral propriety; many from the working class tended to drink and engage in myriad other forms of sordid and lascivious behavior, thus placing them perpetually at odds with the overarching morality of the day.³² Despite this gleaming lapse in agreement between the normative standards of the working class and leisure class moralities, both groups attempted to put into practice a moral standard which sought consciously – albeit idealistically – to labor toward the overall protection and maintenance of the status quo through adherence to a strict and scrupulous moral code. Men and women of both the working and leisure classes were expected to live publically respectable lives no matter their family status or personal means.³³ Rules were developed and enforced for all manner of human interaction during the Victorian era. Business, familial, and – most importantly in the case of Oscar Wilde – romantic relationships all developed their own paradigms and virtues to which both classes were, in principle, supposed to conform.

³⁰ Himmelfarb, Gertrude. *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values*. 1st ed. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1995.

³¹ Houghton, Walter E. *The Victorian frame of mind, 1830-1870*. Yale University Press, 1957. Page 172.

³² Walkowitz, Judith R. *City of dreadful delight: narratives of sexual danger in late-Victorian London*. University of Chicago Press, 1992. Page XI, 113, 159,

³³ Koven, *Slumming*. Page 116.

Like the overarching cultural trend toward moralistic ideals, choices in the realm of romantic relationships within both leisure and working class society were dictated largely by a strong sense of obligation to sexual chastity and propriety – reputable women’s dress was physically confining and typically unrevealing in nature; the dress of the day was designed in a conscious attempt to mitigate the ever-sexual gaze of the lustful Victorian male.³⁴ Honorable Victorian men sought connections with respectable women through a system of platonic relationships and long-term courting. Chaperoned meetings between couples, rather than ruckus dances and unescorted picnics, were an important part of the average dating life. Life in Victorian England, it seemed, was desexualized in an attempt to propagate moral values. Even the period’s inanimate objects – items such as the legs of dinning tables – felt the effects of Victorian abhorrence to sexual allusion and the physical form.³⁵ However, this moral high ground was little more than a thin surface veneer by which society attempted to communicate normative values to its citizenry. The reality of life in Victorian England – London in particular – was somewhat less morally innocent than it would appear at first glance; on the contrary, Victorians were strikingly more debauched and sexualized than the public image contrived to have the average onlooker believe; prostitution, chattel slavery, sexual abuse of children, and drunken licentiousness was commonplace among many

³⁴ Himmelfarb, Gertrude. *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values*. 1st ed. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1995.

³⁵ Ibid.

Victorian's of both the working and leisure class. Just beneath the surfaces and in every corner of London existed every imaginable dangerous and untold vice.³⁶

It was in this atmosphere that Oscar Wilde spent the majority of his time living and working. The argument that Wilde's sexuality was not confined to homosexual or heterosexual orientation, but rather maintained a sexual fluidity must be examined against the context of the sometimes-seedy underbelly of London's literary scene; a scene prone to the excesses of the age, excesses which Victorian era moralists strived – in vain – to stamp out.³⁷ Despite protestations to the contrary, vice and depravity were all the rage in London's literary movements long before Oscar Wilde had dreamt of writing a single verse; bisexuality, homosexuality, pederasty, pedophilia, and rampant drug use had been loosely kept secrets of the Victorian literary and theatrical movement for decades.³⁸ Popular authors such as Lewis Carroll – writing some twenty years before Wilde began his own rise to fame – are well known to have engaged in frequent fantasies about young girls; Carroll's now indelible contributions to the field of Victorian literature – indeed to western literature as a whole – *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* are known to be two of “the best known expressions” of “the cult of the little girl.”³⁹ Both of Carroll's most well known books were written for a little girl toward whom Carroll had pedophilic sexual desires. Lewis

³⁶ Adut, Ari. “A Theory of Scandal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the fall of Oscar Wilde.” *The American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 1 (July 2005): 213-248.

³⁷ Walkowitz, Judith R. *City of dreadful delight: narratives of sexual danger in late-Victorian London*. University of Chicago Press, 1992. Pg. 125

³⁸ Behrendt, Patricia Flanagan. *Oscar Wilde: Eros and Aesthetics*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.

³⁹ Von Eckardt, Wolf. *Oscar Wilde's London: A Scrapbook of Vices and Virtues, 1880-1900*. 1st ed. Garden City, N.Y: Anchor Press, 1987. Pg 248

Carroll's pedophilia was only one of the myriad perversions which had become commonplace among the century's writers; London's creative elite had long been endowed with what many Victorians perceived as corruption and depravity. This resulted from the idea that the bohemian and literary elites were often eccentrics who acted contrary to the moral code of the era as an expression of their artistic sensibilities. As has been addressed, Wilde was not the first to introduce scandal and sin into London.⁴⁰

Scandal in Victorian England occurred frequently among both the working and leisure-classes. The media would latch onto a controversial idea or individual and publish inflammatory stories designed to rouse the interest of the reader; Judith Walkowitz discusses in her book *City of Dreadful Delight* one such unfortunate woman living in the slums of London whose public concern for the safety of her family and the nature of prostitution left her scandalized through media attention and the judging eyes of her neighbors:

Although press commentary generally treated social relations in the Charles street slum as "incomprehensible" and comic, Mrs. Armstrong's own testimony presented the neighborhood norms as coherent and preemptory. Mrs. Armstrong could talk back to "learned counsel" but when she was stopped by neighbors who accused her of selling "my child" this woman "with a bold face" trembled in her boots. "I had go the scandal of the neighbors in the street" a scandal that jeopardized her standing in the community and threatened to isolate her from her safety net.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ibid, Page 32

⁴¹ Walkowitz. *City of dreadful delight*. Page 108

Once acknowledged by the people, vice would not be publically tolerated by chaste Victorians. Scandals threatened to cut individuals off from their respective communities in Victorian England – a trend that forced Oscar Wilde to immigrate to France under the assumed name Sebastian Melmoth after his release from prison.⁴²

Often times, scandals were pushed onto the populous by the media in such a frenzied manner as to overshadow the original event; the social implications of the outrage meant more than the event itself. Without the media to popularize controversial events, public scandals in Victorian England would likely have remained localized events. Seth Koven illustrates this point when he argues in his book *Slumming* that, “although journalists did not create the abuses in metropolitan work houses, they did invent them as a public scandal.”⁴³ Politicians and social organizations looked toward scandals that “served their own particular agendas” in an attempt to polarize the public toward their individual causes.⁴⁴ Oscar Wilde would suffer the skewing effect of media saturation during the trials of 1895. One contemporary journalist wrote

Oscar Wilde, who for twenty years has, after one fashion or another, attracted to himself the attention of the cultivated world of both England and America, and who posed by turns as languorous aesthete, a caustic cynic, and a producer of brilliant epigrams and witty paradoxes, is to-night the occupant of a Bow street police court cell on a charge which, in the eyes of most honest men, is more odious than even that of murder.⁴⁵

⁴² Ellmann. *Oscar Wilde*. Page 523.

⁴³ Koven. *Slumming*. Page 51

⁴⁴ Ibid. Page 63.

⁴⁵ “OSCAR WILDE IN A CELL.” *The Washington Post*. Washington, D.C., April 6, 1895.

The above quote demonstrates both the inability of Victorians to accept behaviors beyond the pale of their outwardly chaste lives, as well as supports Koven's assertions that the media enforced and shaped public opinion regarding a given scandal.

Despite the watchful eye of the media, several of Oscar Wilde's forerunners – as well as many of his contemporaries – were able to carefully navigate the aforementioned vices of the Victorian era without ramifications by dumb luck alone. Authors such as Lewis Carroll were known to have unusual and pedophilic perversions, yet they managed to survive the Victorian era's moralistic bent relatively unscathed despite an outcrop of laws against chattel slavery and the sexual abuse of minors.⁴⁶ While these authors stumbled haphazardly through the minefield of conventional morality, other artists, poets, and playwrights from multitudinous Victorian literary movements – those such as the German born aesthetic poet George Ives – survived the era unmolested only by consciously obscuring their sexual and social deviances and remaining in the shadows. Individuals who were unable to remain in the shadows due to ill-advised self-incrimination, murmured whispers, or public outing – those such as Oscar Wilde – found themselves in a grave position. The options available to those who lived at odds with Victorian morality were simple: face trial in England, or flee to France. Wilde chose to live his life only partially in the shadows, and when caught refused to flee his beloved England.

In discussing Wildes flagrant disregard for social norms, George Ives – himself a known homosexual and outspoken member of the aesthetics movement who fled

⁴⁶ Von Eckard. *Oscar Wilde's London*. Page 248.

prosecution by immigrating to France – wrote sometime before Oscar Wilde’s death in 1900 that Wilde and long time lover Lord Alfred “Boise” Douglas had been prosecuted largely due to the recklessness and openness of their relationship; in a letter written to Mina and Biscoe Wortham, Ives stated, “I believe that I had warned Lord A. more than once that he was indulging in homosexuality to a reckless and highly dangerous degree. For, tho’ I had no objection to the thing itself, we were all afraid he would get arrested any day.”⁴⁷ Ives – although a widely known behind-the-scenes advocate for homosexual rights – appears to suggest by this seemingly innocuous statement that secrecy and confidentiality were the safest choices for those who engaged in any form of socially aberrant behavior during the Victorian era. In addition, the statement goes on to imply that those who would not conform to the accepted standards of morality in London would have to fear retribution from the state apparatus. The trial and subsequent imprisonment of Oscar Wilde in 1895 for charges of sodomy seem to indicate that George Ives’ statements were correct. Prior to Wilde’s imprisonment, however, it is important to recognize that London was a hotbed for Victorian intellectual dissidents and writers.

Indeed, London boasted one of the largest collections of socially dissident writers and artists in late Victorian England. These artists were members of what would later become a notorious organization of educated rabble rousers and social deviants; the name of the group that has since become known as one of the most notorious of the Victorian era’s artistic and literary movements – a group which Oscar Wilde eventually

⁴⁷ Quoted in McKenna, Neil. *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*. New York: Basic Books, 2005. Pg 268

seized control of and became famous for as the movement's public face in the eyes of the popular media – was dubbed the Aesthetic movement by its practitioners. As a literary and artistic trend, the Aesthetic movement became fashionable in England during the late-Victorian era between the years of 1870 and the late 1890's. However many of Wilde's contemporaries saw both the socially dissident Aesthetic movement, as well as Wilde himself as little more than a social trifle before his trial. As early as the 1880's one journalist criticized

Fortunately there is nothing in Mr. Oscar Wilde's dentifrice. The trappings of his profession as a charlatan are all there is to see. He cannot possibly imagine that it is his poetry that has attracted people to see him. He has written one good poem, though by no means a great one – "Ave, Imperatrix," and he has produced considerable quantities of very middling, feeble, and imitative verse, which recalls Shelley's description of Echo as "the shadow of all sounds." But such persons as have bought and read his verses have been induced to do so by his special reputation.⁴⁸

Though the English journalists attempted to discredit the Aesthetic movement and Wilde himself, Wilde would often use the media as a mode to retort with quips such as, "the opinions of English Critics... [have] of course, little, or no interest for me."⁴⁹

In England, this new and dissident form of literary and poetic creation was heralded and popularized almost exclusively by pupils from Trinity College and Oxford University. Oxford's young Aesthetes were well educated, creative, and fashionable; classical conceptions of beauty led to their philosophical development. The Aesthetic movement was inspired entirely by the belief that raw – often subjective –

⁴⁸ "A Stale Joke." *Harp Week*. London, England, July 22, 1882.

⁴⁹ Oscar Wilde. "Mr. Oscar Wilde on 'Salome.'" *The Times*. London, England, March 2, 1893, sec. col C.

beauty contained the key to any and all forms of artistic creative action; whether that action be writing poetry, prose, theatrical plays, or painting a landscape, beauty was believed always to be the driving force behind all artistic creation and expression.⁵⁰

Followers of the Aesthetic movement coming out of Oxford University in England were generally referred to as Dandies. Aestheticism and Dandyism were virtually the same creative movement. Dandyism is an outward expression of the creative themes and philosophical dictums of the Aesthetic movement; physical beauty reigned in the eyes of the Dandy as much as poetic beauty reigned for the aesthetic poet. These Dandies maintained a propensity toward a high level of dress, which set them apart from the average Londoner; suits, bowties, fashionable dress, and – in the case of Oscar Wilde – an occasional flower in their suit’s jacket pocket placed the Dandy at odds with conventional normative values of masculinity. As a result, their contemporaries often looked upon Dandies as an utterly feminized form masculine expression. Oscar Wilde, as the leading Aesthetic writer and Dandy personified the movement.

However, as Aestheticism grew into a powerful and influential literary force, people became more aware of the garb and behavior differences between the average Londoner and Aesthetic artist. As a result, the Aesthetic movement had several critics. On the rapid growth of the movement’s stock of contemporary followers, one journalist wrote a scathing review of the organization, suggesting that anti-Christian sentiments abounded in the ranks of the Aesthetic elite; the author charged that the Aesthetic

⁵⁰ Lambourne, Lionel. *The Aesthetic Movement*. Phaidon, 1996. Page 10.

movement had been “inclined to reject the idea of an immortal existence after death because it would destroy the beauty of pathos.”⁵¹ The same author further described Aestheticism as a “cult” whose method of departure could have occurred only through, “neglect.”⁵² Finally, the author states that the Aesthetic movement would never have been capable of garnering such widespread popularity on its own but rather owed a great deal of its, “luxuriance to the very critics who [had] labored most diligently to expose [aestheticisms] absurdity” as it had inadvertently had the reverse effect.⁵³ Such insidious reviews of the Aesthetic movement did not dissuade its rise to worldwide acclaim between the years 1880 until 1895. Indeed, it would not be until the highly publicized trials of Oscar Wilde that Aestheticism and its offshoot Dandyism would begin to wane in popularity.⁵⁴ Like Julian Hawthorne, contemporary critics of the Aesthetic movement were not difficult to spot in the papers of England and America. Papers across the globe shared the view of Wilde’s gross cynicism and eccentric personality running at odds with the social norms of the society in which he lived.⁵⁵

Oscar Wilde was a prolific writer living within the context of the aforementioned enforced virtues and deplored vices of the Victorian age. He was perhaps the best known of the Aestheticists and Dandies – as he would become the movement’s figurehead throughout the 1880’s and 1890’s.⁵⁶ His views were utterly at odds with the

⁵¹ Hawthorne, Julian. “The Aesthetes.” *Harper’s Bazaar* 14, no. 25 (June 18, 1881): 386.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Ellmann, Richard. *Oscar Wilde*. New York: Vintage Books, 1988. Page 548.

⁵⁵ “OSCAR WILDE’S CYNICISM: THE APOSTLE OF THE LILY SAYS SOME REAL CUTTING THINGS ABOUT LIFE.” *The Washington Post*. Washington, D.C., August 10, 1890, sec. 2.

⁵⁶ Hawthorne, Julian. “The Aesthetes.” *Harper’s Bazaar* 14, no. 25 (June 18, 1881): 386.

times. Wilde wrote in the play "*A Woman of No Importance*" that, "One can survive everything nowadays, except death, and live down everything except a good reputation."⁵⁷ His works were of a highly sexualized nature; his poetry and plays struck a dissonant note within England's contrived morally self-righteous and utterly desexualized society. Wilde had anything but a good reputation during his career, and his sexual exploits and orientation remain debated to this day. Wilde's sexual fluidity is the focus of this study, but it cannot be examined in a vacuum; the context matters as much as the subject. In the pages that proceeded, the context of Wilde's life has been sketched. From this point on, the study will focus primarily on Wilde himself.

Before beginning to discuss Wilde's life, it is important to remember that for many studying the outward moral, religious, and sexual context of late Victorian England, the period in which Wilde lived and worked – an externally desexualized society whose contrived moralistic concerns toward existence were believed to be all-encompassing – it would be easy for readers to dismiss Wilde's sexually unencumbered behavior as an uncommon cultural aberration drawing little influence from the normative values of the day. However, as has previously been discussed within this paper, the context of Victorian England is more correctly seen as two interconnecting, yet utterly distinct cultural strands that dubiously intertwined during the era: that of the idealistic outward cultural framework, in which society's moral predilections were held to be the ultimate goal of life in Victorian England, and that of the grimy England,

⁵⁷ Wilde, Oscar. *Lady Windermere's Fan; Salome; A Woman of No Importance; An Ideal Husband; The Importance of Being Earnest*. Oxford world's classics (Oxford University Press). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

in which a large portion of the citizenry – from both the leisure and working classes -- engaged in myriad vices ranging from illicit drug and alcohol usage, to child prostitution, sexual violence, and homosexuality.

The former of the aforementioned contextual frameworks should be properly understood as the way in which English society truly wished to view itself, --moralistic, pious, and chaste – while the latter contextual framework should be properly understood as the way in which society actually behaved. These two conflicting cultural strains frequently became embattled in the public eye through various political, social, and religious scandals and intrigue; scandals such as the Casual Ward Scandal of 1865-66⁵⁸ and the media scandal caused by W.T. Stead's exposé discussing white slavery and child prostitution in London in 1885.⁵⁹ Wilde successfully navigated both of these precariously joined social and cultural contexts with surprising grace until the year 1895 when he was ultimately branded by the majority of England as an amoral homosexual and deviant. Fortunately for the posterity of Oscar Wilde, his literary celebrity has caused him to become one of the most visible and important homosexual scapegoats from the Victorian period; with his vices, Wilde became -- after 1895 -- the late-Victorian poster child for the tortured homosexual in England. In addition, Wilde became the victim of the ways in which the English imagined themselves – moral, chaste, sexually modest. It is the conflict between these two cultural contexts that makes Wilde's life and legacy an important matter even into the 21st century; over the 111 years since the death

⁵⁸ Koven. *Slumming*. Page 61-63.

⁵⁹ Walkowitz. *City of dreadful delight* Page 136.

of Irish Playwright Oscar Wilde, his life has become a prime example of the conflict between the ways in which societies wish to view themselves and the everyday reality of the world around them.

In order to bridge the gap between the social contexts of Wilde's life, the bare factual material, and the implications of combining the two into a socio-cultural understanding of the importance of Wilde's legacy on popularly held sexual concepts and the influence of conflicts between ideal cultural conception and cultural reality on a society's citizenry, it is necessary to this study to give a short biographical background on the subject. As many students of the Victorian era know, one often easily finds oneself lost in the voluminous catalogue of academic material relaying the biographical information of the life of any important public figure -- Oscar Wilde is no exception to this rule. One of the most commonly cited, authoritative, and exhaustively researched of the biographical materials available on Oscar Wilde is the influential 1987 tome *Oscar Wilde* written by author Richard Ellmann. Since its release, Ellmann's biography on the life of Oscar Wilde has grown to be considered by many historians as having attained, "the status of definitive biography."⁶⁰ Largely because the biographical material has been published extensively and is widely available to the general public through Ellmann's *Oscar Wilde*, and other biographers' subsequent works, this study will not delve too deeply into the minutiae of a standard biographical text. Instead, what follows is a condensed chronology of the pertinent events and details that shaped the life and

⁶⁰ Behrendt. *Eros and Aesthetics*. Pg 2.

ideas of Oscar Wilde, which ultimately led to his now infamous position as one of histories most notorious and narrowly understood playwrights.

Where it is possible, and relevant to this study, the personal feelings written by Oscar Wilde -- in the form of letters, memoirs, and critiques -- during and about the events of his life will be referenced in order to paint a picture of the ways in which Wilde envisioned himself, later to be contrasted by how society envisioned him. In addition, the feelings of Wilde's closest friends and lovers will be used to fill in the emotional blanks of biographic and factual information. Literary critics, both contemporaneous during Wilde's lifetime and present critics will also be consulted within this section in order to address the interpretations of Wilde's personal philosophy, ideology, and works insofar as it pertains to his internal and external struggles with bi-curious sexual desires and the ways in which society has viewed him in both the past and the present.

Oscar Wilde was born in the year 1854 on October 16th to the surgeon, William Robert Willis Wilde, and the poet and Irish nationalist, Jane Francesca née Elgee; his given name was Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Willis Wilde -- so named, according to his mother, for pre-Norman kings. Much of Wilde's youth was spent in study. He -- along with his older brother William -- was educated at the Portora Royal School in Northern Ireland.⁶¹ While there, Wilde wrote -- in his earliest surviving letter -- to his mother in 1868 that his experiences were, "... very jolly" and he expressed, "... many thanks for

⁶¹ Ellmann. *Oscar Wilde*. Pages 3, 15, 16.

letting [him] paint.”⁶² Even in his youth, Wilde stood out among his colleagues in the arts; in 1869, at the age of 15, he won accolades for his ability as a sculptor at the Portora Royal School.⁶³ One year later, Wilde’s rapidly growing prestige within the school would increase as he won the Portora prize for Greek Testament; American Biographer Richard Ellmann argues that, “Wilde’s showing at Portora in 1870 and 1871 [had been] triumphant.”⁶⁴ Wilde’s early youth in Ireland, by most accounts was a quiet time spent in studious contemplation and propagation of artistic pursuits: By age 17, Wilde’s budding intellectual abilities had set him apart from his peers; he was one of three pupils at Portora Royal School to have won a scholarship to Trinity College, Dublin. Once there, Wilde spent 3 years under the tutelage of Reverend John Mhaffy, professor of ancient history.⁶⁵ In his adult life, Wilde wrote with great affection to Mhaffy, praising him as, “...one to whom [Wilde owed] so much personally, [as Wilde’s] first and best teacher, from the scholar who showed [Wilde] how to love Greek things.”⁶⁶ The effects of Wilde’s years at Portora Royal School and Trinity College, Dublin, are significant to the man Wilde would become in the public eye. His time at both schools instilled in him an unwavering love of aesthetics, poetry, and ancient art; the importance of which cannot be understated, as they shaped Wilde’s ideas and contributed immensely to the cultivation of his public persona, as well as his poetical and theatrical writings.

⁶² Wilde, Oscar. *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*. 1st ed. New York: Henry Holt, 2000. Pg 4.

⁶³ Page, Norman. *An Oscar Wilde Chronology*. Boston, Mass: G. K. Hall, 1991. Pg 3.

⁶⁴ Ellmann. *Oscar Wilde*. Pg 25.

⁶⁵ Ibid. pgs. 26-27

⁶⁶ Wilde. *The Complete Letters*. Pg 562.

During October of 1874, by age 20, Wilde had finished his studies at Trinity College, Dublin and emigrated from Ireland to England in order to continue his studies at Oxford University. While there, Oscar Wilde pursued an education in classics. During his time at Oxford, Wilde was lauded for his intellect and often celebrated as a poet.⁶⁷ It was during this period in Wilde's life when he began to experience feelings of confused, or -- as this study seeks to convey -- fluidity of sexual expression; literary critic Patricia Flanagan Behrendt concurs with the idea of Wilde's early fluid sexual expression through the vehicle of his writings, beginning as early as his years at Oxford. Behrendt writes that,

The complex theme of self-centered sexual passion which exists prior to the selection of a love object outside oneself – themes which reflect both hetero-erotic and homoerotic passion centered in the individual psyche – is basic to Oscar Wilde's works and to his aesthetic outlook.⁶⁸

She argues that this theme "forms a core conflict in Wilde's writings from the earliest poetry to the social comedies."⁶⁹

Indeed, by 1876, Wilde's desire for sexual male companionship had begun to manifest in his poetry. That year Wilde composed an erotized poem entitled "Choirboy," which Author Neil McKenna argues to be, "a remarkably homoerotic poem."⁷⁰ In an early stanza Wilde writes, "And there came on with eyes of fire, and a throat as a singing dove, and he looked on me with desire, and I know that his name

⁶⁷ "OSCAR WILDE'S POEMS." *The Literary World; a Monthly Review of Current Literature* 12, no. 16 (July 30, 1881): 261.

⁶⁸ Behrendt. *Eros and Aesthetics*. Pg 20.

⁶⁹ Ibid. Pg 20.

⁷⁰ McKenna, Neil. *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*. New York: Basic Books, 2005. Pg 7.

was love.” In the following stanza Wilde continues his homoerotic lusting after the young choirboy of his affections when he writes, “see what I found in the street, a man child lusty and fair, with little white limbs and little feet, a glory of golden yellow hair.”⁷¹ Although some such as McKenna would interpret this as a clear indication of Wilde’s homosexual bent, it is important to note that during the same period in which Wilde was composing homoerotic poetry, he was also pursuing a romantic relationship with the then 17-year-old Florence Balcombe. Wilde, at the same time that he was professing sexual desires toward nondescript choirboys in his poetry, was simultaneously penning letters to friend Reginald “Kitten” Harding about Florence, he describes her as, “exquisitely pretty... the most perfectly beautiful face [Wilde] had ever saw...”⁷² In a letter composed some months later written to the same recipient, Wilde’s affections for Florence remained; he wrote of her that she was, “more lovely than ever.”⁷³ Wilde’s romance to Balcombe culminated in the autumn of 1878 when she became engaged to another man – Irish writer Bram Stoker.⁷⁴ Wilde had been intermittently seeing men during the duration of their relationship.⁷⁵

The importance of Wilde’s years at Oxford cannot be reduced only to the development of his fluid sexual feelings toward members of both sexes. His time at Oxford was also the period in which he had been first introduced to the concepts of Aestheticism and Dandyism. The concept of Aestheticism as a form of emotional and

⁷¹ Quoted in McKenna. *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*. Pg. 7

⁷² Wilde. *The Complete Letters*. Pg 29.

⁷³ Ibid. Pg 47

⁷⁴ Ibid. Pg 72.

⁷⁵ McKenna. *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*. Pgs 11-13.

intellectual philosophy began during the 1850's after philosopher Baumgartner had coined the term in order to describe an effeminate form of poetry, but the tenants of Oxford Aestheticism were not fully developed until adapted and transmuted by Oscar Wilde during the late 1870's; Ellmann argues that,

Oxford Aestheticism, as developed by Wilde, proved to be of a peculiarly knowing kind. Self-parody was coeval with advocacy. Wilde could see by the time he reached Oxford that the movement was going out as much as it was coming in. Though he adopted some of its interests, such as tints and textures, he did so always with something of his mother's high-spiritedness, poking fun at his own excess.⁷⁶

He goes on to argue that Wilde -- despite having adopted the belief that beauty was the highest form of creative impulse -- believed, "... that Aestheticism was limited."⁷⁷ In earlier conceptions of the movement, Aestheticism was gravely serious, and focused on the effects of beauty on the soul, rather than the creative and whimsical force behind beauty. Once Wilde adopted the moniker, he injected a sense of humor and wit into and otherwise stale movement. Many contemporary critics of aestheticism would likely have concurred with the belief that it was limited; as the movement became increasingly popularized among Oxford students and slowly began to spread across England, it drew the ire of satirist magazines such as *Punch*.⁷⁸ *Punch* frequently turned Oscar Wilde's personage into an aesthetic caricature whose mode of dress and

⁷⁶ Ellmann. *Oscar Wilde*. Pgs 85, 86

⁷⁷ Ellmann. *Oscar Wilde*. Pgs 85, 86.

⁷⁸ McKenna. *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*. Pgs 17-18.

mannerisms were feminine and dramatically poetical.⁷⁹ One of Wilde's contemporaries, a journalist by the name of Julian Hawthorne wrote of Oscar Wilde that, "...it may be admissible to say that this gentlemen is considered to be largely responsible for many of the aesthetic episodes and for much of the aesthetic jargon which *Punch* has commemorated." He goes on to state that, "it is difficult however to give an accurate estimate of his beliefs, because he believes in the beauty of impulse and emotion, and impulse and emotion sometimes lead him as well as others in contradictory directions."⁸⁰ This later phase at Oxford is important to who Wilde would become during the 1880's and 90's; however, the true importance of this time period to this study is illustrated by the conflict between Wilde's developing flamboyant Aesthetic philosophical and creative ideologies and the public perception of the movements countercultural implications. Wilde's social eccentricities were seen by the media as a "Stale joke"⁸¹ whose draw was little more than his "fantastic, grotesque, unintelligible for the most part, and when intelligible, repulsive" work; calling Wilde's attempts at times a "very poor joke."⁸²

Having graduated from Oxford in 1878, Wilde returned to Dublin, Ireland for a short time, where he began his career in theater as a playwright. The 1880's were a time in which Oscar Wilde's personal and professional lives began to grow and mature in ways that they had not while at Oxford. Wilde's early plays opened successfully in

⁷⁹ Drawings found in Von Eckardt, Wolf. *Oscar Wilde's London: A Scrapbook of Vices and Virtues, 1880-1900*. 1st ed. Garden City, N.Y: Anchor Press, 1987. Pg. 15,16,

⁸⁰ Hawthorne, Julian. "The Aesthetes." *Harper's Bazaar* 14, no. 25 (June 18, 1881): 386.

⁸¹ "A Stale Joke." *Harp Week*. London, England, July 22, 1882.

⁸² "We Noticed Mr. Oscar Wilde's 'Salome'." *The Times*. London, England, March 8, 1894, 34206 edition, sec. Col B.

theater houses across the country. Similarly, his personal life was rapidly developing, as his sexual fluidity became a commonplace to him, he engaged more openly in interpersonal relationships; during which period Wilde began several tenuous relationships with both males and females – all of which ended as abruptly as they began due to Wilde’s peculiar fancy. Upon his return to Dublin, he became engaged in one of the most important and influential of the relationships he would have with a female; Wilde was introduced to Constance Lloyd in May of 1881. The budding young couple shared deep interests in art, literature, music, and conversation. Having met and fallen in love with Constance Lloyd – amid the very real fear that Wilde may be exposed to the public as a sodomite – Wilde purposed to Lloyd in autumn of 1883. They immediately became engaged to wed.

The couple wed in the year 1884 on the heels of Wilde’s first successful speaking tour to the United States two years prior.⁸³ At this period in their relationship, the couple was extremely happy together; Wilde wrote to Lloyd expressing his love for her, “The air is full of the music of your voice. My soul and body seem no longer mine. But mingled in some exquisite ecstasy with your. I feel incomplete without you.” Lloyd would mirror Wilde’s enthusiasm in her own letters; in a correspondence to friend Otho Holland, Lloyd wrote of her engagement, “I am engaged to Oscar Wilde and perfectly and insanely happy... Everyone in this house is quite charmed.”⁸⁴ The two spent their honeymoon in Paris, where within days Wilde and friend Robert Sherard had pursued

⁸³ Ellmann. *Oscar Wilde*. Pg 221-222, 239, 176.

⁸⁴ Wilde. *The Complete Letters*. Pg 241-242, 222.

the companionship of several male suitors.⁸⁵ While Wilde was slumming in Paris with Sherard, Constance Lloyd remained in the hotel; while on their honeymoon she wrote of the experience of marriage that, “the wedding seems to me to have gone off very well and Paris is charming. ...I need not tell you that I am very happy, enjoying my liberty enormously.”⁸⁶ The marriage of Wilde and Lloyd produced two sons -- the first born in 1885 and the second in 1886.⁸⁷ Wilde’s marriage to Constance Lloyd would eventually crumble under the strain of public inquiry during the trials of Oscar Wilde’s sex scandals of 1895, though they would never officially divorced; the two separated before the public scandal of Wildes trials. Constance Lloyd Wilde died at age forty in the year 1898 from complications due to spinal surgery.⁸⁸

By 1890, Wilde had seen commercial success in both his poetical and theatrical endeavors, but he found it increasingly difficult to separate his homosexual and heterosexual interests. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – first released as a serialized story in Lippincott’s monthly magazine in 1890 and later as an expanded novel in 1891 – is often regarded as an outcropping of Wilde’s conflicted sexual state; literary critic Bruce Bashford argues that the novels conflicting sexual overtones were, “Axiomatic...” he goes on to state that,

The great difficulty with reading [the Picture of Dorian Gary] is knowing just what judgments we are going to make. What remains uncertain is the scope of the point

⁸⁵ McKenna. *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*. Pg 55.

⁸⁶ Wilde. *The Complete Letters*. Pg 229-231.

⁸⁷ Page. *Chronology*. Pg 31, 33.

⁸⁸ Ellmann. *Oscar Wilde*. Pg 532.

... to what extent are we to see the novel as a whole drawing out consequences of departing from [the established sexual] ideal?⁸⁹

The consequences that Bashford discusses were played out not only in Wilde's most famous book, they were also played out in Wilde's personal life in the form of his increasingly serious forays into homosexuality and relatively open relationships with men.

During the same year *the Picture of Dorian Gray* was released as a novel, 1891, Wilde met the man who would ultimately lead to his social downfall: Lord Alfred "Boise" Douglas. Oscar Wilde and Douglas began a clandestine homosexual relationship known only by members of the London literary scene until the shortly before the release of *The Importance of Being Earnest* in 1895.⁹⁰ What would result from the public gaining knowledge of Wilde's affairs with members of his same sex was one of the most scrutinized media trails of the late Victorian era. Oscar Wilde was found guilty of homosexuality and sentenced to two years in prison. In one letter sent from prison, Wilde wrote to Douglas of their scattered relationship,

Our ill-fated and most lamentable friendship has ended in ruin and public infamy for me, ye the memory of our ancient affection is often with me, and the thought that loathing, bitterness and contempt should for ever take that place in my heart once held by love is very sad to me: and you yourself will, I think, feel in your heart to write to me...⁹¹

⁸⁹ Bashford, Bruce. "Review: When Critics Disagree: Recent Approaches to Oscar Wilde." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 30, no. 2 (2002): 613-625. Pg 614 - 615.

⁹⁰ Eckardt. *Vices and Virtues*. Pg 72 - 73.

⁹¹ Wilde. *The Complete Letters*. Pg 684.

The trial had crushed Wilde's marriage, ruined his career and left him nearly destitute after his release from prison. From the point of Wilde's trial until his death in 1900, he would never again return to the levels of fame afforded to him by his writing; his image had been utterly demolished in the public eye. Perceptions of Wilde's narrowly acquired homosexual moniker shocked and delighted the public. The trial had left the English people with fresh questions about what it meant to be a homosexual. How pervasive was homosexuality? How did homosexuals maintain themselves publically? In what ways was the homosexual different from the "normal" Victorian? But most importantly was there some outward tell that the people could turn to as indicative of one's sexual preference? To help answer these difficult questions, Wilde's contemporaries wrote articles covering the trial. Although no clear answers could be found in the popular media of the day, these questions remain important. Many of the journalists who attempted to address these questions settled with characterizing Wilde as sad man against whom the evidence of sexual deviance would be his downfall.⁹² At the end of his life, Wilde himself viewed his homosexuality as causing him to "bear the intolerable burden of misery and remorse..."⁹³

Earlier this study briefly touched on the popular stereotypes surrounding homosexuality that resulted from the unfortunate trial of Oscar Wilde, although how and why these stereotypes developed was never expanded upon. Instead, to this point the study has focused entirely on complicating the generally accepted ideas about

⁹² "OSCAR WILDE ON TRIAL." *The Washington Post*. Washington, D.C., April 7, 1895, sec. General.

⁹³ Wilde, Oscar. *De Profundis*. Unexpurgated [ed.]. New York: Vintage Books, 1964. Page 41.

Wilde's sexuality in terms of the perceptions of Victorian society based on the socio-cultural ideals of the age. This study has done so by looking first at the context and then the chronology of Wilde's life. The paper has not yet fulfilled, or truly addressed the secondary purpose of the study: examining the long-term ramifications of Wilde's public trial on the future perceptions of homosexuality. Turning toward this important – yet often ignored – aspect of Wilde's legacy, this study will address the way in which many popularly held stereotypes about homosexuality developed as an indirect result of Wilde's trail.

Wilde's effeminate dress, flamboyant mannerisms, and egoistic character would have at one point set him apart as a member of the leisure class – as a gentlemen of means and taste. Dandyism was as nondescript among the upper class as dirty clothing was among the working class. However, after the public scandal of 1895, previously innocuous fashion choices and character traits of the Aesthetic movement -- as popularized by Oscar Wilde -- contributed to the polarization of the public toward new stereotypical ideas about homosexuality. The English public, seeking to understand within their cultural framework what it meant to be a homosexual, latched onto potential outward manifestations of the deviant behavior based on the appearance of Oscar Wilde: feminine hair styles, clothing, and speech, as well as flamboyance and a regard for poetic beauty became symbols of homosexuality. Due in large part to the publicity his trial garnered in England and abroad, Wilde helped to create a host of stereotypes that pervade to this day. According to author John Sloan,

...Before Wilde's Trial and conviction, the manifestly camp and effeminate were not inevitably read as masks or signs of homosexuality. Effeminacy and dandyism differentiated the dissolute leisured aristocracy and the earnest, middle-class ideal of manliness. The exposure of Wilde, the aesthete as homosexual, provided a stereotype of queerness that until that time had remained vague and unformed. [Before Wilde's trial] the Victorians, in other words, did not identify homosexuality in the way the twentieth century came to recognize it...⁹⁴

Victorian sensibilities were unable to understand homosexuality, let alone condone the behavior at the time of Wilde's conviction. As a result of the increased general awareness of homosexuality, the public sought a scapegoat upon which to cast the image of homosexuality; the people needed a representation to turn to in order to sate their curiosities. As the most widely known and recently convicted homosexual, Wilde's public persona was amalgamated into the concept of homosexuality.

Indeed more broadly, Dandyism and homosexuality became inseparably and integrally linked within the eyes of many in England and abroad after Wilde's trial. In the eyes of the Victorian world, the group associated with Wilde was seen as a homosexual hotbed. Literary Critic Ed Cohen argues that,

[Wilde's] case was already so well known that it has significantly altered the shape of the Victorian sexual imagination, ... for, by the time of his conviction, not only had Wilde been confirmed as a sexual deviant for the late nineteenth century, but he had become the paradigmatic example of an emerging public definition of a new "type" of male sexual actor: the "homosexual."⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Sloan, John. *Oscar Wilde*. Oxford University Press US, 2003. Pg 172.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Nunokawa, Jeff, and Amy Sickels. *Oscar Wilde*. Infobase Publishing, 2005. Pg 109

Wilde and members of the dandy and aesthetic movement became the stereotypical face of generations of homosexuals as a result of the confused interpretation of Victorians in need of an archetypal image of homosexuality – even after their influence on England’s literary scene faded, the images of Victorian homosexuality solidified and lived on into the 20th century.

The importance of Wilde’s life and legacy are often overshadowed by his immense literary contributions and sudden public downfall. He contributed to the fields of poetry, literature, and theater, but he was so much more than the artistic fountainhead of the aesthetic movement. It is unfortunate that Wilde is remembered only as an influential writer whose characters are beloved – and sometimes hated – by generations. However true this view may be, it lacks depth. This stance neglects the intricacies that position Wilde as one of the most prolific characters of the Victorian period.

As this study has shown, often it is overlooked that Oscar Wilde is an integral part of our understanding of not only Victorian literature and theater, but also to our understanding of Victorian sexuality as well as the development and ramifications of early homosexual stereotypes. The popular memory of Oscar Wilde should not – indeed cannot -- be remembered simply in terms of his literature if we wish to understand the society in which he lived and worked. This study shows the complexity of a man who requires a re-imagining by fresh eyes.

Old ideas are no longer suitable for such a task. Wilde was complex and his memory defies simple classifications. It is for that reason that the concept of Wilde's sexuality must be readjusted into terms of fluidity versus the rigid Victorian ideas of concrete homosexuality. It is for this reason that this study has been undertaken. Wilde must be talked about, discussed, re-imagined, and understood in terms of his time. As this study suggests however, he must also be viewed in terms of his fluid and often contradictory sexuality, struggles, successes, and failures for he was a man far before his time who has had a profound effect on the present through his literary works and his often misunderstood sexual legacy. As Lord Henry says in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about."⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1908. Pg 9.