

**‘The Love that dare not speak its name’
In The works of Oscar Wilde**

By

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Submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements
For the degree of

Master of Arts

In the subject

English

At the

University of South Africa

Supervisor: Mrs S B Prozesky

November 2005

Summary

Victorian society had strict written and unwritten laws about what was permissible in terms of personal relationships. Anglican patriarchal church values governed behaviour between the classes and enforced codes of conduct on gender related boundaries of private individuals. Society subscribed to the traditional family of man, woman and children in the context of marriage. Homosexuality amongst men was punishable by prison. Government and religion preached Christian morality, yet the number of prostitutes had never been greater. This dissertation explores the problems of a pro-homosexual and anti-establishment Victorian author writing about human relationships forbidden by society. It exposes the consequences suffered by Oscar Wilde due to his investigative insights into the 'Other' in the context of individual rights of preference in regard to sexual orientation, as expressed in selected texts, and his resolution of conflict, in *De Profundis*.

Key Terms: Oscar Wilde. Homosexuality. Gay literary theory. Victorian society. Aestheticism. Religion. Capitalism. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. *De Profundis*. Conflict and conflict resolution.

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Introduction

The 'love that dare not speak its name' (Goodman 1989:114) in this dissertation concerns the Victorian author, Oscar Wilde, and his forbidden same-gender sexual orientation. This dissertation is greatly indebted to the works of R. Altick and J. Goodman, *Victorian People and Ideas*, and *The Oscar Wilde File*, respectively. My work is based on my readings of gay literary theory, New Historicism and hermeneutics. My eclectic approach also draws upon psychoanalysis in its consideration of narrative.

Chapter One of my dissertation poses some preliminary questions in regard to gay literary theory. This chapter examines the nature of 'the love that dare[d] not speak its name' (Goodman 1989:114). Homosexuality was criminalised in Victorian society. This had a direct effect on the writing of Wilde. According to the concept of hermeneutics it is useful to apprehend the connotation of (in the case of Wilde) 'being in the world' as 'other' in terms of homosexuality. Gay literary theory presents itself as conducive to the comprehension of 'deviance' and the anti-establishment construct of Wilde's texts. Historically, heterosexuality is viewed as being 'primary' and homosexuality as being 'other'. Oscar Wilde wrote about a form of sexuality that 'dare[d] not even speak its name' (Goodman 1989:114). Therefore society sought to silence him by means of imprisonment.

In Chapter Two, in accordance with a New Historicist approach, I treat Victorian society as a 'text' in the context of interrogating the discourse of the era in which Oscar Wilde wrote. I propose that in order to understand Wilde's narratives more fully it is important to determine the social climate in which he lived. I propose that it is possible to analyse literary texts in the context of the discursive ideology of the era which informed their creation. It is of course an inescapable truism that Victorian society no longer exists. Therefore, all knowledge concerning the nineteenth century can only originate from historically specific artifacts and texts, the latter being of relevance to this dissertation. I suggest that Victorian society was so effective in its monolithic ability to disempower the 'other' and to propagandise its own ideology that even today the canon of English literary works tends to privilege 'mainstream' narrative as primary. Many texts are still to some extent silenced or made invisible, in a sense, due to their non-conformist content in terms of the historically constructed voices of 'primary' and 'other'. I

suggest that Victorian society structured power through states of oppression. Homeostasis was maintained through the class system and rigid laws. Victorian society was panoptic in its control of power. Exile and prison were institutions structured to enforce repression of the 'other'.

Chapter Three of my dissertation examines some aspects of the novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which Wilde explores conflict of sexual orientation, and which was used to condemn Wilde as homosexual.

Chapter Four of my work considers the trials of Oscar Wilde in relation to his imprisonment and personal suffering. Wilde was sent to prison for two years and his career destroyed.

Chapter Five of my dissertation considers the text *De Profundis*, which Wilde wrote in prison, and in which he attempts conflict resolution. Wilde experienced conflict in terms of personal choice: he was homosexual in a heterosexual society; he desired to embrace Catholicism when Anglicism was the principal denomination; he transgressed class barriers in personal relationships; and his ideology was that of aestheticism in a utilitarian, capitalist era.

Chapter 1

Gay literary theory: What is ‘the love that dare not speak its name’?

Work written about homosexual sexuality does not necessarily presuppose that the author is homosexual. For example, in this dissertation, the primary source concerns the homosexual Victorian author Oscar Wilde, yet the writer of this dissertation is neither Victorian nor homosexual. In the book: *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Barry states that:

In lesbian/gay criticism, the defining feature is making sexual orientation ‘a fundamental category of analysis and understanding’. Like feminist criticism, then, it has social and political aims; in particular, ‘an oppositional design’ upon society, for it is ‘informed by resistance to homophobia [fear and prejudice against homosexuality] and heterosexism... [and to] the ideological and institutional practices of heterosexual privilege’ (Barry 1995: 140).

When writing about gay/lesbian literary theory it is interesting to note that these theories are only found in relatively recent books from the 1990s. Previous to this, in the 1980s, feminist theories had become a prominent discourse of the time. Two questions inherent in feminism are: firstly, whether feminism is gender oriented only, and, if so, then, secondly, how to categorise sexual rather than gender orientation within feminism.

The movement towards feminism originated among heterosexual women in oppositional reaction to men being regarded as ‘primary’ and women being regarded as ‘other’. In terms of a sexually orientated theory, feminists who are homosexual could possibly relate to male homosexuals as a group oppositional towards heterosexuals. Homosexual people could be considered ‘other’ in the context of societal acceptance of heterosexuality as ‘primary’ and as a consequence of homophobia. When writing about gay literary theory it is necessary to be historically specific. The concept of ‘gayness’ is not static but changes according to the perceived knowledge of what being homosexual means during a particular time-framework in history. Oscar Wilde was asked during his trial (at which he was accused of posing as being homosexual) to define the nature of ‘the love that dare not speak its name’ (Goodman 1989:114). This question was posed in the

1890s, which, it is interesting to note, is one hundred years previous to the explicit articulation of an English gay literary theory in the 1990s. Wilde's answer to the question was that:

The love that dare not speak its name in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you will find in the sonnets of Michael Angelo and Shakespeare – that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect, and dictates great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michael Angelo and these two letters of mine, such as they are, and which is in this century misunderstood - so misunderstood that on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, and it is the noblest form of affection. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man when the elder man has intellect and the younger man has all the joy, hope, and glamour of life. That it should be so the world does not understand. It mocks at it, and sometimes puts one into the pillory for it (Goodman 1989: 114).

Wilde is attempting to define a type of love that had no voice in nineteenth-century English society. Wilde specified the historic importance of the question of what homosexual love is because, although in Victorian England homosexual love was forbidden, in other times it may not have been or may not be. Behaviour which in one century might be a crime can be regarded as a basic human right in another. Societal acceptance or condemnation is critical in understanding so-called 'gay' literature. In a time when homosexual love is unlawful, it would take courage to write about the subject. It would be impossible to write a text for general publication about explicit acts of homosexual behaviour if to do so would be regarded as criminal. Society's laws, used to enforce silence about a particular form of love, would necessitate writers either avoiding the subject altogether or carefully using veiled suggestions about the subject in a way that would not result in a charge of having committed a criminal offence.

In a society in which homosexual love is acceptable, or even popular, the way in which such love is expressed in a text would be different from its expression in a time when it was unlawful. For example, it could possibly be expedient for an author to insert homosexual behaviour into a text merely to make the text more interesting to a reader in a time when homosexuality is favoured. On the other hand, the pressures of society in an anti-homosexual historical period might force an author to omit homosexual references. The reader could be led to believe that homosexuality did not exist in one historical time and that it was extremely prevalent in another. In reality,

homosexuality might have been equally prevalent amongst the population at all times but not equally written about.

Homosexuality as a sexual orientation is most likely statistically the same throughout history. The fact that in Victorian England it was a type of love that 'dare[d] not [even] speak its name' (Goodman1989:114) does not mean it did not exist. It was pushed underground, hidden and kept secret. On the surface, it could appear not to exist, but it existed below the surface. This would be a problem for Oscar Wilde as an author. How would he write about a type of love he knew existed but that he could not name? Sexuality in human relationships is difficult to explore because even in the most open society the act of sexual intercourse is not public. It is not now unlawful to be homosexual, but in public places the act of sexual intercourse of any kind is still a criminal offence.

If the act of sex is seen to occur in other species it is open and acceptable, but when this same act is viewed amongst humans we label it pornography if it is explicit, or, ironically, 'art' if it is partially concealed. Sexual orientation is perceived as an emotive moral and private issue but gender issues are public. In public places, we separate facilities for men and women. Public toilets, hospital wards, and prisons are all gender specific. We ignore the implications and discomfort this could cause. We do not provide for possible optional segregation for homosexual women or men.

Writing about homosexuality, which concerns issues which society considers to be moral or religious, can become problematic. If an author writes a text depicting homosexuality, does it follow that the author is then himself or herself homosexual? In this century, we would answer 'no'. In the century when Oscar Wilde wrote the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the answer was 'yes'. The novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was used in part to condemn Wilde as posing as a homosexual, which was a criminal offence. Concerning gay literary theory, Barry observes that: 'A solution may be to adopt an approach, which is historically specific... and to understand that gayness is not being defined as an inherent essential unchanging category' (Barry 1993: 146).

I believe we can go further than Barry in understanding homosexual texts. They are not only historically specific. Homosexual texts are also politically and religiously specific. I would not write about a gay literary theory in a country where I could be stoned or beheaded unless I believed writing about gay theories to be worth dying for. Oscar Wilde felt that his right to explore homosexuality was worth going to prison for. If an author is prepared to give up his/her freedom to be heard then what he or she is trying to say should at least be worth further investigation. In order to understand the works of Oscar Wilde more fully it is necessary to employ the theory of hermeneutics, according to which we suspend our understanding of what we perceive as normal *a priori* knowledge and incorporate the context of Victorian societal norms. The aim is to reach a *gestalt* where the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts and we explore author, text, and reader as historically and culturally different, though ultimately complementary. In the case of Oscar Wilde, I am interested in what the author was trying to say, and why he was attempting to communicate through the symbolic representation of English literature. Wilde himself claimed at his trial that everything he wrote was neither moral nor immoral but art (Maine 1948: 17). I am interested in examining what it was in the texts he wrote that caused enough conflict for him to be imprisoned. Did Wilde experience conflict resolution, and did the act of writing a text help Wilde to reach a form of self-actualisation?

It is relevant to consider the nature of the reader of a text:

What is the reader doing? What is being done to him? and to what end? Is reading an act, structured like a pseudo-conversation with a text? Is the reader a set of supra-personal codes? Or a set of symptoms? Or the locus of 'literary' competence? What frames of reference are brought by the reader to the text? Some of these questions are asked by the theorists ... in a phenomenological or hermeneutical framework (Jefferson & Robey: 1991).

Who were the readers of the texts of Oscar Wilde? Would Wilde's contemporaries have experienced the text differently because they were coming from the standpoint of English Victorian society? Is reading the texts of Wilde, which were written in another historical time, relevant to a reader from this century; and is it possible for a reader to understand what an author could not say openly, but could imply by means of allegory or metaphor?

I believe that to fully understand the importance of a text it is necessary to explore, as far as is possible, all aspects of the text historically, contextually and culturally. I am writing from the position of a New Historicist and I believe Victorian society was so effective in silencing a voice it did not want to hear, that even today the label of 'homosexual' (which Victorian society attached to Oscar Wilde) still exists as derogatory, and prejudices Wilde's works as 'other': 'The way in which any reader after 1895 responds to Wilde's work is radically altered by the knowledge of his homosexuality. For some, his writing became eclipsed by his life, and both became unmentionable' (Varty 1998: 28).

People outwardly profess that homosexuality has a place in our society yet many people associate the word homosexual with things which are inferior and deviant. I propose that prejudice can mislead readers into underestimating the strength of character needed for Wilde, as a Victorian author, to voice an opinion on a subject that 'dare[d] not [even] speak its name' (Goodman 1989: 114). I also suggest that a consequence of Wilde's being labelled homosexual has been that other important subjects in his texts have been overlooked and that the cathartic experience of Wilde's suffering, as expressed in his text *De Profundis*, is important and relevant to readers of today.

In February 1895, when Oscar Wilde went to his club, the Albemarle, he found waiting for him a card from the Marquis of Queensberry with the following words written on it: 'For Oscar Wilde Posing as a Sodomite' (Goodman: 1989). Wilde then filed charges under the 1843 Criminal Libel Act. Queensberry's defence was a 'Plea of Justification'. This meant that the libel was both 'true' and 'published for the public benefit'. Queensberry's lawyers did not need to prove that Wilde had actually committed acts of sodomy but that he was a person who behaved as though he was capable of so doing (Goodman: 1989).

Oscar Wilde was known as a 'man of letters' or a writer. Queensberry chose to use Wilde's own texts to attempt to ascribe to them meaning which would expose Wilde as posing as a homosexual. Queensberry made use of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to show that it was a homosexual book and that it was therefore written by a man who was himself posing as a

homosexual. Cohen writes in his book *Talk on the Wilde Side: toward a Genealogy of a Discourse on Male Sexualities* that:

Queensberry's plea of justification shifted its concern from Wilde's sexual to his literary practice...[The plea contended that] Wilde was a man of letters and a dramatist of prominence and notoriety and [therefore] a person who exercised considerable influence over young men...[The plea therefore implied that] Wilde was understood by the readers [of his works] to describe the relations, intimacies, and passions of certain persons of sodomitical and unnatural habits, tastes, and practices (Cohen 1993: 127-8).

Queensberry's lawyers were attempting to hold Wilde accountable as an author for the actions of the characters created in a work of fiction, as though by writing about the actions of a protagonist in fiction the author is thereby performing the actions he describes in his fiction. Here we see the intentionality of the author used as an argument. This argument pre-supposes that readers are unable to distinguish between a work of fact and a work of fiction and also that they are unable to separate the views of the author from the views of the persona in the book. It also implies that readers are mindless sponges and that they merely soak up everything they read and take action on it and that they therefore need to be protected from books. The logical conclusion of this argument would lead to the view that the banning of certain publications was necessary to protect the morals of readers.

The book *Modern Literary Theory* contains a text by Roland Barthes, on 'the Death of the Author'. Barthes uses the text of *Sarrasine*, in which Balzac is describing a castrato who disguises himself as a woman, to pose questions concerning authorship:

'This was woman, herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fussings and her delicious sensibility'. Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story bent on remaining ignorant of the castrato hidden beneath the woman? Is it Balzac the individual, furnished by his personal experience with a philosophy of woman? Is it Balzac the author professing 'literary' ideas on femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology? We shall never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice. Of every point of origin (Rice & Waugh 1998: 118).

Barthes appears to be suggesting that there should be seen to be no intentionality of the author and that there is no 'voice' and no 'origin'. If that is true then why would Barthes bother to write himself? Barthes is expressing his opinion as author. He has the intention of communicating

through his text to a reader. He is giving himself a 'voice' and the example in his text is his 'origin'. However, Barthes writes that:

Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature...we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author (Rice & Waugh 1998: 122).

The reader is not a '*tabula rasa*'. The reader brings his/her own philosophy, culture, and value system and imprints this reading onto a text. I believe we need to give author, text, and reader equal weight. I do not believe that if Oscar Wilde was writing about homosexuality in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that it follows that the readers would be influenced to become homosexual. I do not believe it is necessary to bury the author in order to give life to the reader. We need to integrate the expressions of the author through the text to inform the reader. Texts possibly confer enlightenment, they do not cause actions. The decision to act is always the responsibility of the reader. This is why it is important for a reader to be able to have access to many different texts. Foucault articulates the tyranny of censorship when he says that:

Repression operate[s] as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of non-existence, and, by implication, an admission that there [is] nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know...Puritanism...pose[s] its triple edict of taboo, nonexistence and silence (Foucault 1990: 4).

All texts should be openly available to the reader in order for him/her to be able to make informed choices. Banning or burning books has never caused humanity as a body of people to be better. Ignorance does not lead to purity, but education can lead to understanding. 'Outing' Wilde's texts as homosexual helped prove Queensberry's claim that his alleged libel was 'true', but even though in 1895 the condemning of such texts was found to be 'for the public benefit', we would not now (it is to be hoped, in Western literature) find a homosexually-oriented text to be 'dangerous to young men', and feel that these 'dangers' should be hidden in order to protect the reader. In accordance with my understanding of gay literary theory I believe that writing about homosexuality not only informs the reader but is a cathartic experience for the author. Writing about one's own thought is similar to speaking in psychoanalysis. Julia Kristeva, who was both a professor of linguistics and a trained psychologist, writes:

I don't believe one commits oneself to psychoanalysis without secret motivations... difficulties in living, a suffering which is unable to express itself...our identities in life are constantly called into question, brought to trial, over-ruled...what I call 'the semiotic' is a state of disintegration in which patterns appear but which do not have any stable identity: they are blurred and fluctuating...Freud calls this the primary processes of transfer...[becoming] capable of taking on the signs of language of articulation...I call that symbolic...we do nevertheless arrive at a certain type of stability. There are several steps which lead to this stability and one step which has been accentuated by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan is the specular identification which he calls the 'mirror phase'. In this phase one recognises one's image in a mirror as one's self image (Rice & Waugh 1998: 131-33).

Wilde is addressing the same issues as Kristeva when he writes in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that: 'those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope...All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors. Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital. When critics disagree the artist is in accord with himself' (Maine 1948:17). It is my opinion that people fear homosexuality, and therefore do not always understand texts written about it. Even in our society today, there are those who fear homosexual authors or texts. Are they afraid of seeing themselves in the mirror of these texts? If the reader is afraid, is it because our society still feels the need to 'shame' the 'other' in reference to same-gender sexual orientation? Many in our society do still fear association with the concept of gayness. This could suggest that we have not yet written enough.

Chapter 2

Victorian society and its views on homosexuality.

Although in today's society it would not be considered very important to investigate whether an artist or writer, for example, Oscar Wilde, was in fact sexually oriented as homosexual, in Victorian Society, it was critical. The law, in the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, prescribed two years hard labour as the penalty for any involvement with homosexuality:

Any male person who, in private or public commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission of any male person for, any acts of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanour, and, being convicted thereof, shall be liable, at the discretion of the court, to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years with or without hard labour (Ellman 1988: 386).

It is important to understand the views held by Victorian society because actions that we would not consider to be essentially homosexual, or even inappropriate at all today, were completely unacceptable in Victorian England. The crossing of sexual barriers was criminalised in the same way that the crossing of class barriers was forbidden. Wilde was considered guilty of doing both. He admitted to crossing class barriers, to having friendships with men of an inferior class, but did not concede to engaging in homosexual acts. However, in the Victorian mind there would be no reason for a man of Wilde's class to cross the barrier socially unless he was exploiting these men sexually. In the same way as a man would use a working-class woman for sex, it was assumed that Wilde would have no interest in working-class men except for sex.

Reformers, such as Bentham, who attempted to intervene concerning the harsh laws against homosexuality, were in danger of ruining their careers, and their reputations. They were possibly afraid of laying themselves open to accusations of homosexuality and any sympathy towards what was perceived to be deviance could 'have given Bentham's opponents a powerful weapon for discrediting his whole program of reforms' (Behrendt 1991: 11).

Victorian society structured itself on a rigid tripartite class system. Upper classes were born from within the aristocracy and marriages were arranged from within families of equal status to

maintain the quality of their 'houses': land, privilege and power were passed down from one generation to another.

Money and/or education were prerequisites for a position in the bourgeoisie of the great Victorian middle class. One of the consequences of the Industrial Revolution was that sufficient wealth could buy a suitably trained and 'finished' daughter into marriage with an impoverished son of gentility, but generally the classes married amongst themselves. As the wealth of the empire grew so did the wealth and status of the families of the middle-class factory owners, shopkeepers and consumers.

However, in the late nineteenth century poverty and unemployment was common. Though Britain was extremely wealthy the nation's affluence was enjoyed by relatively few people. This led to many social problems. In the book, *The Victorians: Conditions of England 1860 – 1900*, Professor A. L. Bowley estimates the national income at that time:

12.30 million wage earners in the country...would probably have received a total of £465 million. Of the rest, those with salaries and incomes amounting to less than £160 p.a. (1.85 million people) might be estimated to have been in receipt of a total of £530 million. On this calculation, then, about half the national income was being appropriated by rather less than 5 percent of the total population (Lerner 1978: 75).

The lower or working classes or proletariat, were doomed to be undereducated and exploited in order to enrich the higher classes. They were the workers and producers without which the entire system could not survive. Even the bodies of the lower classes were abused by inadequate, unsafe working conditions, and prostitution. Prostitution of women, (and probably boys), was entrenched by the ability of the rich to be able to purchase the bodies of the poor. Young upper-class women could remain virgins because upper-class males were able to make use of the bodies of the poverty-stricken lower classes of women who turned to prostitution for survival.

Victorian societal norms and ethics were entrenched by Anglican Church morality. Thus the structure of class was upheld by the alliance and confraternity of politics endorsed by religion. Homeostasis was maintained through constant manipulation and oppression. It follows that Wilde, who was presenting himself as anti-establishment, was endangering himself to the point

where society would remove him. Altick states in his book *Victorian People and Ideas* that the established church required that men and women

be married Anglican if the union were to be legal, and [that it was in the Anglican Church] in which their children had to be baptized if their birth were to be registered, and in whose graveyard they could be buried only in silence or with the Anglican rite (Altick 1973: 210).

In a country where the legality of birth, marriage and even death were all under the governance of the Church, it is important to understand the dangers of speaking or writing in opposition to this power. It was necessary to remain within the boundaries of Christian laws and dogma in order to become financially or politically successful. The Bible was considered to contain the entire 'truth'. In this social milieu, being homosexual or even writing about homosexuality was a crime punishable by law. Altick writes on religious movements that

they were an inextricable part of the cultural fabric; they engaged the attention of the general educated public, to whom they were issues of great moment; and they involved principles for which men of commitment willingly sacrificed careers and endured vilification (Altick 1973: 203).

Many great men in the Victorian era struggled intensely with thoughts of religious conflict. Catholicism was another significant denomination of the time, second only in social importance to Anglicanism. When Cardinal Newman, after much deep religious reflection, decided to defect to Catholicism there was widespread dismay:

After the stir over tract 90 and the protracted soul-searching Newman describes in his *Apologia pro Vita*, he went over to the Roman Catholic Church. The shock was tremendous...Even Peel's reversal of the Corn Laws the next year created no greater excitement (Altick 1973: 213).

Oscar Wilde, although being born Irish in Ireland, a predominantly Roman Catholic country, was baptised Anglican and instructed by his father Sir William Wilde to remain Anglican. Nevertheless Wilde often expressed a desire to embrace Catholicism and to visit Cardinal Newman:

I have dreams of a visit to Newman, of the holy sacrament in a new church, and of a quiet and peace afterwards in my soul...to go over to Rome would be to sacrifice and to give up my two great Gods; 'Money and Ambition' (Ellman 1969: 46-7).

Sir William Wilde was the private ocular surgeon to Queen Victoria. Queen Victoria's being the head of the Church of England therefore made it necessary for the Wilde family to espouse Anglicanism. However, they were not alone in their religious dilemma. Altick states that: "6,400,000 Catholics in Ireland were required to pay tithes to support the Anglican Church, which numbered 850,000" (Altick 1973: 210).

The fact that Victorian English society was able to force such a large group of dissenting Irish to pay tithes by law demonstrates the power the Anglican Church was able to wield not only in England but also over other people falling under its dominion. The dangers of writing in dissent of Christianity in the nineteenth century were real: Friedrich Nietzsche was forcibly placed in a mental asylum in 1889 a year after he wrote his treatise: *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ* and he remained there for 11 years until his death in 1900, ironically the same year as the death of Oscar Wilde. Some of Nietzsche's work explored the same problematic areas as did Wilde's:

Nietzsche's writing is full of what [was] just in the process of becoming, for people like Wilde, for their enemies, and for the institutions that regulated and defined them, the most pointed and contested signifiers of precisely a minoritized, taxonomic male homosexual identity (Sedgwick 1990: 133).

Nietzsche had been an ambulance orderly in the Franco-Prussian war and was a renowned author of philosophy. Nevertheless he could not escape the inevitable doom that awaited authors who appeared to endorse the 'other' as defined by prevailing societal norms in the *fin de siècle*. With Queen Victoria being supreme monarch of almost the entire known world and simultaneously head of the English Church, Church and State were an awesome combined power, and an intellectual stance that could be interpreted as being oppositional to them was frowned upon in the extreme:

Like Nietzsche, Wilde emphasized life as a process more than a product. For him and Nietzsche alike, art was synonymous with individualism... [A]n intense mode of individualism, art represented a disintegrating and disturbing force within society. In *The will to power*, Nietzsche echoed Wilde's general view of art as the counter-movement to the 'decadent' forms of religion, morality, and philosophy which he considered 'anti-life' (Foldy 1997: 105-6).

With the Capitalist system firmly entrenched by being taught in both churches and schools, Evangelical and Utilitarian principles could easily be linked and anything that challenged them tended to be viewed as being deviant or subversive. Nietzsche was put in a mental asylum, and left to die, and Wilde was imprisoned. I propose that Wilde was conflicted, in his attraction towards Catholicism, and in his simultaneous attraction to homosexuality. Self sacrifice, in the form of the Catholic ethic of martyrdom, posed a possibility for conflict resolution for Oscar Wilde.

In Victorian England, where a work ethic was valued as both Christian and capitalist, productivity and utilitarianism were sacrosanct. Even novels were expected to be useful in instructing morality. How would society perceive an author of poetry and plays? Wilde wrote only one novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The protagonist, Dorian, lives a life of decadence, exploring love, desire and pleasure, and producing nothing. Wilde did not confine his writing to dealing with love within marriage. Neither did he moralise on love outside marriage. He wrote about and explored the concept of love in all its forms, including same-sex love. He wrote about human emotions and human frailty and strength without prejudice, giving equal weight to good and bad in his characterisations. Victorian society believed that if a person worked hard, he would be capable of at least being able to feed and clothe his family. In reality there were never enough jobs for all the people. To be unemployed was seen as a moral problem because it was thought that only the lazy were unable to find jobs:

Of all the maxims in the sententious Victorian vocabulary, “Heaven helps those who help themselves” was among the most ubiquitous. Character building, with this the presiding motto, was a joint Evangelical – Utilitarian enterprise. The profitable ethic of work, combined with cultivation of all other relevant virtues was recommended by innumerable writers in the popular media (Altick 1973: 170).

Texts that promoted a religious or utilitarian ethic were encouraged. Popular Victorian novels contained a great deal of propaganda. They ‘sold well’ which made them perfect constructs to fulfil the ‘binary grasp’ of the greatest happiness principle of utilitarianism – simultaneously providing (morally correct) entertainment, and making money. Poetry posed a dilemma: although it was useful in stirring the emotions towards patriotism, (it was a necessary tool, in a time when England was constantly expanding its empire, at war, and using the working classes as ‘cannon-

fodder'), nevertheless the fact that it was able to provoke emotion was problematic. It appeared to be, in the minds of many, a 'useless' non-productive activity. The ability to be useful was calculated in quantities of tangible produce. Bentham, as quoted in *Victorian People and Ideas*, stated that "[a]ll poetry is misrepresentation. It deals with matters that are patently untrue hence, it corrupts the strict rationalism which ought always to govern men's minds" (Altick 1973: 269).

To the Utilitarian way of thinking, 'Keats's kind of truth which could be tested on one's pulse was unadulterated nonsense' (Altick 1973, 269), and Macaulay's dictum that 'as civilization advances, poetry almost necessarily declines' made irrefutable sense (Altick 1973: 269).

In this century, it is hard to believe that poetry in the Victorian era could be perceived to be subordinate to other forms of literature. Yet it is important to place it in the context of being at that time inferior, in order to understand the status of the poet. Altick quotes John Stewart Mill's view that:

A poet in our times is a semi barbarian in a civilized community. He lives in the days that are passed. His ideas, thoughts, feelings, associations are all with the barbarous manners, obsolete customs, and exploded superstitions. The march of his intellect is like that of a crab, backward. The brighter the light diffused around him by the progress of reason, the thicker is the darkness of antiquated barbarism in which he buries himself like a mole to throw up the barren hillocks of his simian labours... the real business of life is diametrically the reverse of that frame of mind which poetry inspires, or from which poetry can emanate (Altick 73: 270).

In a time when Poetry, as an art form, had possible connections to decadence and, by implication, immorality, it becomes easier to understand why an artist like Wilde, by association with his own work, would be in danger of being viewed as an immoral person.

Altick quotes from the 'Westminster Review':

Literature is a seducer; we had almost said a harlot. She may do to trifle with; but woe be to the state whose statesmen write verses, and whose lawyers read more in Tom Moore than in Brocton (Altick 1973: 271).

Elements in the Church were also hostile to the Arts:

...profitable activities [from the evangelical point of view, were] those which were entered in the celestial time sheet. Every available moment on earth should be devoted to preening one's soul for heaven...the indulgence of the unreligious imagination and of aesthetic propensities ... distracted one from that supreme endeavour...the seductive senses were given priority over the soul. This fear of sensuousness extended to all the arts – not poetry alone, but music, painting and drama. The only exception was made for religious poetry and hymnody (Altick 1973: 272).

It is a striking example of hypocrisy that Oscar Wilde's play *Salome* was not licensed in England because it had a religious theme and was therefore considered to be not suitable as a play for public production. Wilde was deemed frivolous for writing comedies, which were yet licensed, and condemned for writing a religious work, which was not licensed. So he wrote satire, which packed theatres, and secular works that could be sold. What choice did he have? If he was not allowed to produce a religious play on stage how could society censure him when he ceased to write religious plays? His early works had been financial failures: *The Duchess of Padua* and *Vera the Nihilist* had both been financially unsuccessful.

Was art in Victorian times unacceptable? It certainly was not. Victorian houses, where means allowed, were packed to overflowing with collections of art for display. We read of the 'moral aesthetic'. Buying art was good business and works such as Dickens' popular publications profitable as long as the laws of society were not broken and Victorian morality endorsed. Yet women were often portrayed as diminutive and weak – made little – in popular Victorian novels, as in *Little Nell* and *Little Dorrit*, whose titular heroines' great accomplishment was suffering. Even worse, we find the disabled made smaller to the point of literally becoming tiny as in *Tiny Tim*. In naming his characters, Dickens sometimes appears to be a purveyor of prejudice.

It is commonly said that Wilde commented, concerning Dickens, that only a man with a heart of stone could read of the death of Little Nell without laughing [my paraphrase]. Tens of thousands of middle-class Victorian readers were praying that in the next episode of the serialised publication of *Little Nell* she would not die, though they were quite happy to believe that it was God's plan for the working classes to die from poverty and the miserable working conditions of the Industrial Revolution in factory towns, to enrich the middle and upper classes of the Empire. Since the majority of the working class was illiterate they never had the chance themselves to read of the death of the working-class Little Nell. Thus even a cursory scrutiny of a Victorian attitude to a writer accorded iconic status, such as Dickens, reveals what could be labelled as at

least a morally suspect attitude, yet Wilde was mercilessly pilloried while other writers enjoyed unalloyed acclamation. Negative perceptions of the poor and working class emerge clearly in the following quotation:

In one of the best-known tracts of the 1880's, *How the poor live and Horrible London* G. R. Sims warned his readers, that 'this mighty mob of famished, diseased and filthy helots is getting dangerous, physically, morally, politically dangerous... its lawless armies may sally forth and give us a taste of the lesson the mob has tried to teach in Paris, where long years of neglect have done their work' (Lerner 1978: 77).

The nineteenth-century British class-system enforced behaviour as being class specific in the same way the apartheid era of twentieth-century South Africa structured behaviour to be race specific. Propagandised education and literature of limited scope was provided for the lower classes. Consumer fiction for the middle class and an elite upper class was perceived to uphold the moral ethic of the time and was used by its powerful owners to reinforce values of their choice.

Oscar Wilde's 'fatal errors' were that: he crossed the class barrier and had friends from the 'lower orders'; and he became entangled with the powerful Queensberry family. It would not necessarily have become problematic for Wilde to have loved Lord Alfred Douglas. Their relationship needed only to have been discreet. Wilde had a wife and two children and a house in Tite Street. It was acceptable practice for a man to entertain his male friends at his club. The difficulty was that Lord Queensberry insisted on publicly accusing Wilde of indecent behaviour with his son, Alfred Douglas. Queensberry's eldest son had shot himself due to a homosexual scandal with Lord Rosebery, who was a candidate for the next prime ministership, so further scandal impinging on the highly volatile and irascible Queensberry was to prove perilous in the extreme for Wilde (Goodman:1998).

The fact that Wilde espoused Aestheticism, with its notorious links to French culture, further endangered him. At Oxford Wilde had become a disciple of Ruskin. (Wilde as a young man had refused to play sport – believing that it was a waste of energy – and under the influence of Ruskin attempted to help the people of a nearby village, by building a road across a marsh, to improve the quality of their lives). This influence is important as it was possibly the first introduction for Wilde to Aestheticism, which doctrine he was to follow throughout his life.

Ruskin stated that “[t]he quality of man’s inner life was determined by the presence or absence of beauty in his everyday surrounding...[t]he presence of man-made beauty in whatever form, whether it be the apocalyptic windows in a cathedral or a dish in a humble worker’s cottage, is a requisite to human well-being” (Altick 1973: 281-2).

Wilde started his collection of blue and white china, which was later sold to pay creditors after his trial, while at Oxford. It was here that he won the prestigious Newdigate prize for Poetry with his poem ‘*Ravenna*’. In schools where only boys were permitted to live and study together it would seem inevitable that students would develop intra-emotional relationships, not only among themselves, but also possibly in idealisations of their teachers and professors who were male:

Cultural historians have traditionally blamed the initiation (or perhaps reinforcement of) homosexual practices at the English public schools on the rigid separation of the sexes and the system of ‘fagging’, which allowed older boys to prey on the younger ones. In the nineteenth century, such privileged institutions as Eton and Harrow were described as hotbeds of “vice” (for which read ‘homosexuality’) and scandals periodically required the hasty departure of a master or student or both (Beckson 1992: 195).

At Oxford, which was a closed, male, Anglican upper-class environment, indoctrination of its members was only to be expected. Wilde, while struggling to become an individual, could not but become a product of his environment. Altick writes of Wilde at Oxford saying:

Nothing better symbolized the spirit of revolt against the contemporary bourgeois spirit than the flamboyant costumes the publicity conscious Wilde set adopted as an outward sign of their defiance (Altick 1973: 296).

However, Altick fails to inform his readers that Wilde was always in financial trouble, and that wearing ‘flamboyant costumes’ was possibly to some extent also out of necessity. In 1886, when Wilde was admitted to the thirty-third degree of the Scottish Masonic Rite at Oxford University, he had only enough money to buy either the Mason’s costume or a new suit. Wilde chose to buy the Mason’s outfit, which was Regency in style with velvet knee breeches. He then wore this to other formal functions. Purchasing the Masonic outfit placed Wilde in debt. In the following letters concerning the money owed to his creditors Wilde can be seen to have been unable to pay:

Magdalen College Oxford November 1877. Dear Sir, I desire to have the enclosed bill taxed, as I consider it a most exorbitant claim. The Balance of the bill for which this tradesman summoned me was, I think, £5.10... I trust that this monstrous claim will not be allowed and remain your obedient servant. Oscar Wilde (Hart-Davies 1985: 26).

And

November 1879. Sir, the extremely unsettled state of Ireland, and the impossibility of getting rents even after the twenty-five percent reduction, render it really out of my power to settle your bill. I hope however to do so before the end of the year. Your obedient servant. Oscar Wilde (Hart-Davies 1985: 31-2).

When Wilde went to America he did at first wear a plain Victorian suit but this was not acceptable to those who had engaged him, and who wanted him to portray the perceived ideal of an 'aesthete'. As Wilde's primary goal in going to America was to earn money, he wore what was expected of him. In typical 'Wildean style' at one event where he discovered the audience would come wearing velvet knee breeches and carrying sunflowers and lilies, he was the only person to turn up in an ordinary suit. Wilde was not a thin, weak aesthete, neither was he a florid overfed decadent; he was a tall, young, strong Irishman, reminiscent of the Victorian ideal attributed to Matthew Arnold, and embodied in the so-called 'muscular Christian'.

Wilde returned to England with enough American dollars to marry and start a family. With his wife Constance and two sons he set up home in London and began writing successful plays. These finally earned him financial security and celebrity status and attracted a fan club, similar to that enjoyed by celebrities today. Amongst these 'fans' were young men who wanted to be helped in finding work as actors, aspiring playwrights and even blackmailers hoping to cash in on Wilde's success. Oscar Wilde was the toast of London. The Prince of Wales came to his plays. Wilde met and fell in love with Lord Alfred Douglas, who had failed to obtain his own degree at Oxford. Wilde could now afford to entertain his new friends (many of whom were introduced to Wilde by Douglas) in clubs for men only, and at private dinner parties. It appears that the relief of no longer being burdened by a lack of money and the heady opiate of success caused Wilde to forget caution. Inevitably, others became jealous of his fame, especially Douglas's own father, Lord Queensberry, who continued to harass Wilde publicly and who attempted to throw a bunch of vegetables onto the stage during a performance of Wilde's play. Possibly Wilde had become in some sense, and among other things, the father and mentor to Douglas that Queensberry was not.

Although Wilde was now writing plays that were popular and successful, he continued to use the subject matter of these plays for satire and subversion of Victorian society. Altick writes, in *Victorian People and Ideas*, that:

The Victorian writer did not look upon himself as a misfit or an outcast. Regardless of the extent to which he felt intellectually at odds with some facets of contemporary society, he still belonged to it and proposed to correct its errors from within (Altick 1973: 280).

In an earlier chapter Altick appears to contradict himself: ‘After a bishop announced he had burned his copy of *Jude the Obscure*, by Thomas Hardy, the powerful firm of W.H. Smith and Son, who had a virtual monopoly on the nation’s railroad bookstalls, withdrew the book from circulation – and ended Hardy’s career as a novelist’ (Altick 1973: 197). However the moral dilemma of the times is that both statements can probably be proved to be true.

At what cost would a Victorian writer ‘correct [societies] errors from within’? How is it possible that a writer ‘belonged’ to society and did not look upon himself as a ‘misfit or an outcast’, yet when he dared to contradict the position of the church on divorce and ‘correct its errors from within’, his career was ended? Altick also writes:

Only Matthew Arnold writing his melancholy lyrics in the late forties and early fifties conveys a sense of personal isolation comparable to Byron’s. The conventionality of most Victorian authors’ private lives testifies at least as much to their acceptance of the status quo as to the strength of conformist pressures (Altick 1973: 280).

This appears to imply that artists are, on some level, able to be classified as an homogenous group. I do not believe Altick is correct in confining and attributing these melancholy poetic emotions ‘only’ to Matthew Arnold. Victorian writing overflows with feelings of personal isolation. In Oscar Wilde’s *De Profundis* the entire work expresses the pain suffered due to personal isolation. ‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol’ is a poem by Wilde describing his personal suffering and isolation. There are countless examples of authors conveying suffering. I do not believe Altick has proved that ‘most Victorian author’s private lives were conventional’. What does ‘most’ Victorian authors mean? Inevitably, human emotions are prolific in poetry and literature. The expression and communication of human emotion is an integral part of literature.

The text, being a 'voice', must be able to speak. Feelings of personal isolation are among the building blocks of literature: reaction of the 'other' towards the 'primary', and rebellion of the 'new' against the 'old' come from within feelings of personal isolation. Gay literary theory itself is a reaction of same-sex isolation to being placed outside a heterosexually-based society.

Chapter 3

Conflict of love in the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

The Picture of Dorian Gray was first published in July 1890 in Lippincott's Monthly Magazine, New York. It received a great deal of negative reaction concerning its content, which was perceived as suggesting references to homosexuality. One of the many derogatory reviews was written by the editor of the *Scots Observer*, W. E. Henley. Oscar Wilde replied in a letter to the editor:

...If my work pleases the few, I am gratified. If it does not, it causes me no pain. As for the mob, I have no desire to be a popular novelist. It is far too easy...Each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray. What Dorian Gray's sins are no one knows. He who finds them has brought them (Goodman 1988: 14).

Wilde denies the 'intentionality' of the author. It is possible that he professed this in an attempt to protect himself from scandal, due to the presumption that he was writing about forbidden forms of sexuality in his text:

There appears in Lippincott's Magazine a one-volume novel of mine 50,000 words in length...I propose to publish it, with two new chapters, as a novel...I think it will make a sensation...But the novel is of course quite new (Hart-Davis 1985: 87-8).

Wilde later published the 1st edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a novel in 1891. The novel did make a sensation – mainly because of the controversial nature of its theme, in the context that it was possibly a work containing references to homosexual ideation. Rumours began to circulate that Wilde might himself be homosexual. This implies that in the minds of many Victorian readers, authors were morally responsible for the subject matter of their texts, even though the narrative was a work of fiction. The novel remained in print and the rumours died down. These rumours were revived by Queensberry in 1895, when the novel was used to facilitate Wilde's conviction for 'acts of gross indecency'. In the preface to the novel Wilde states his opinion on his own work:

There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book...The artist is the creator of beautiful things...It is the spectator, and not life that art really mirrors...Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art. The moral life of man forms part of the subject

matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium. No artist desires to prove anything. Even things that are true can be proved. No artist has ethical sympathies...all art is quite useless (Maine 1948: 7).

In the preface, Wilde is stating his intentions as the author: that he is not writing in the popular mode of the Victorian utilitarian ethic of art combined with morality. He states that he is writing in the style of the aesthetic school of thought, where all art is beautiful and the elegance of literature as art is important in itself. Wilde professes that he does not aim to promote any particular moral objectives through the actions of his protagonists. However the text does explore homoerotic variance and emotional conflict. When Wilde writes in the preface, as quoted above, that 'It is the spectator, and not life that art really mirrors' (Maine1948: 17) he is coming dangerously close to claiming that readers relate to Dorian in possible reaction to their own ambivalence towards issues concerning sexual orientation. It also implies that Victorian society was possibly able to portray itself as attractive because it kept its ugliness concealed from view in an 'attic'. Dorian kept his portrait hidden and locked away in his attic. The same metaphor is used in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* where the first wife of Rochester is the personification of something that he is afraid to reveal so she is consequently secreted in an attic.

The Picture of Dorian Gray investigates love across prohibited barriers of class and sexuality. Dorian, a gentleman, expresses love for the working-class actress Sybil Vane. Sybil is imitating life through her portrayal of love in the art form of drama. When Sybil experiences love for Dorian she finds that she is no longer able to simulate it on stage. It is ironic that the real love is not as beautiful as the artificial. Dorian is disappointed, he repudiates her, and Sybil kills herself. This leads to the tragic death of her brother in his attempt to bring Dorian to justice. The brother does find Dorian, but he is unable to recognise him, as Dorian remains, in outward appearance, a beautiful young man, an apparent embodiment of innocence. He is able to convince the brother that he could not be the literal embodiment of malevolence who destroyed Sybil.

The sin which Dorian commits is not able to inscribe itself onto his body – it is etched into the picture. The soul of Dorian grows old and ugly in corruption only in the representation of his body in the painting. The physical body of Dorian remains unchanged, and forever young and pure. Dorian can therefore never reach the maturity of manhood. This is interesting in the context

of Freud's largely discredited theory, still sometimes cited today, that moots the idea that immaturity leads to homosexuality:

...a study conducted by M. Biernbaum, an assistant professor of child development...in an effort to put to rest Freud's long-held premise that gays and lesbians are just immature heterosexuals...questioned 56 Seattle-area respondents, matching each non-straight participant with a straight peer. The study which appears in the May-June 2004 Journal of Homosexuality, found no noticeable difference in maturity levels...[though] some people still cite immaturity as evidence that gays are unfit for equality (Allen 2004: 36).

Basil Hallward, the artist, experiences feelings of adoration towards the beautiful, young body of Dorian. Does this imply that Hallward is a pederast? He is afraid that others will read into the picture he paints of Dorian the depth of his feelings, and for this reason he cannot risk exposing the portrait to public view:

"I know you will laugh at me" he replied, "but I really can't exhibit it. I have put too much of myself into it...there is a fatality about all physical and intellectual distinction, the sort of fatality that seems to dog through history the faltering steps of Kings. It is better not to be different from one's fellows...if they know nothing of victory, they are at least spared the knowledge of defeat...They neither bring ruin upon others, nor ever receive it from alien hands. Your rank and wealth, Harry; my brains, such as they are – my art, whatever it may be worth; Dorian Gray's good looks – we shall all suffer for what the gods have given us, suffer terribly" (Maine 1948: 19).

Although Wilde writes in his preface that '[a]ll art is quite useless', and '[n]o artist desires to prove anything' (Maine 1948: 17), yet the words of his protagonist, Basil Hallward, articulate the danger inherent in the overt expression of emotion: 'I grew afraid that others would know of my idolatry' (Maine 1948: 94). 'Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist; not the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter: it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas reveals himself. The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul' (Maine 1948: 21).

Here we explore the proposition that art is able to portray the soul of the artist which could then be analysed by the reader. Dorian comes to the realisation that Hallward has suffered through fear of revealing himself through his art: 'How much the strange confession explained to him! The painter's absurd fits of jealousy, his wild devotion, his extravagant panegyrics, his curious

reticences – he understood them all now’ (Maine 1948: 95). This does not mean that in the work of fiction, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde is speaking through the voice of Hallward. Wilde might not be expressing his own opinions. Yet the reader might suspect that these are the opinions of Wilde. According to a utilitarian Victorian moral ethic, where the author is generally speaking directly to the reader and preaching morality, it would be reasonable to assume that the Victorian reader in general would or could believe that Wilde was using the persona Hallward to suggest his own moral views.

Hallward says:

I suddenly became conscious that someone was looking at me. I turned half-way round and saw Dorian Gray for the first time. When our eyes met I felt that I was growing pale. A curious sensation of terror came over me. I knew that I had come face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself. I did not want any external influence in my life...I have always been my own master; had at least always been so, till I met Dorian Gray. Then – but I don’t know how to explain it to you, something seemed to tell me that I was on the verge of a terrible crisis in my life. I had a strange feeling that Fate had in store for me exquisite joys and exquisite sorrows. I grew afraid and turned to quit the room. It was not conscience that made me do so; it was a sort of cowardice (Maine 1948: 22).

If Wilde is not writing about his own views and experiences of homosexual love then he is at least exploring these concepts in terms of ‘the love that dare not speak its name’ (Goodman 1989:144), in the novel. He is writing about Hallward falling in love with Dorian and being afraid of that love. Hallward says:

“Suddenly I found myself face to face with the young man whose personality had so strangely stirred me. We were quite close, almost touching, our eyes met again, it was reckless of me, but I asked Lady Brandon to introduce me to him... it was simply inevitable... Dorian told me so afterwards. He too, felt that we were destined to know each other... I couldn’t be happy if I didn’t see him every day. He is absolutely necessary to me” (Maine1948: 22-23).

The persona of Lord Henry is also a man, but older and more mature than Dorian. Lord Henry takes on the task of mentor to the younger man. I suggest that in the concept of ‘older’ and ‘younger’ we can explore the relationship of ‘primary’ and ‘other’. The relationship of these concepts, which include ‘active’ and ‘passive’, are often used to define the relationships between

men and women, historically men taking the primary, active role. If Lord Henry is primary, or active, and Dorian passive, it is possible to perceive Dorian as taking on the 'type' of the feminine according to a heterosexual classification.

Lord Henry: As for being poisoned by a book, there is no such thing as that. Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile. The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame. That is all. But we won't discuss literature.

Dorian: Yet you poisoned me with a book once. I should not forgive that. Harry, promise me that you will never lend that book to anyone. It does harm (Maine 1948: 163).

According to some theories of psychoanalysis it is held that a person has the ability to sublimate emotion by redirecting it through, for example, listening to music or reading a book. Freud puts forward the theory of the 'id', the 'ego' and the 'super-ego': the 'id' is the part of our emotional self that is not under our conscious control; the 'ego' sets boundaries of acceptable behaviour; and the 'super-ego' transcends desire and sublimates its energy, transforming it into something better:

Quite late in his life [Freud] was influenced by the ambiguity of the term 'unconscious' and its many conflicting uses, he proposed a new structural account of the mind in which the uncoordinated instinctual trends were called the 'id'; the organized realistic part the 'ego'; and the critical and moralizing function the 'super-ego' (Strachey & Richards 1991: 21).

Lord Henry states that 'Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act'. Here we see the super-ego using art to prevent an action. For example, it can be argued that listening to beautiful music could help to soothe the emotions to a point where acting out emotional impulses would not be necessary. Or reading about immorality might prevent the need to commit actual acts of immorality. However, there is potential conflict in this argument in that a text might plant seeds of thought that did not previously exist. Dorian states: 'Yet you poisoned me with a book... It does harm'. I believe that a possible answer to this question lies in Lord Henry's words quoted above: 'the books that the world calls immoral are the books that show the world its own shame'. It does not follow that a person would change personality traits due to a book. A person could relate to new ideas, but as people we have the choice whether we take action in response to what we read or not. Reading or writing about homosexuality (which was

considered immoral in Victorian society) does not mean that the reader or writer would change sexual orientation, although it could cause a person to think about other sexual orientation. Experiencing emotions in the unconscious is not the same as acting on feelings. A book showing the world 'its own shame' is reflecting back to the reader thoughts and emotions that pre-exist but that might be denied or are subconscious. Immorality comes from the actions of the reader not from the text. In our society sexual orientation is considered a personal choice. It crosses the boundaries of the acceptable and becomes wrong when it is forced upon another unwilling person in any way. Dorian blamed a book for leading him towards a path of immorality. I believe Wilde was exploring the character of a conflicted person in this scene: Dorian is unwilling to take responsibility for his own actions. He is enabled to commit horrifying acts to the point of murdering his friend as he does not have to face the consequences of his actions. The consciousness of the 'super-ego' has been transposed and written on the picture. Dorian remains young and beautiful and the hidden picture of Dorian grows increasingly old and ugly:

'Ah! in what a monstrous moment of pride and passion he had prayed that the portrait should bear the burden of his days, and that he keep the unsullied splendour of eternal youth! All his failure had been due to that. Better for him that each sin of his life had brought its sure, swift penalty along with it. There was purification in punishment. Not "Forgive us our sins," but "Smite us for our iniquities," should be the prayer of a man to a most just God' (Maine 1948: 164-5).

Dorian is conflicted. He enjoys the pleasure of being able to act without paying the price for his crimes yet he feels anxiety about his action and blames a book. After the suicide of Sybil Vane Dorian does decide to attempt conflict resolution by sublimation through self-denial. He again crosses the class barrier with another young lady but this time 'gives her up' before he has 'spoiled her'. Yet this is not an act of altruism for the sake of the woman. It is merely to satisfy the need for Dorian to experience new sensations and the excitement of the unknown: 'Knowledge would be fatal. It is the uncertainty that charms one.' And: 'One could never pay too high a price for any sensation' (Maine 1948: 55). Dorian is unable to reach self-actualisation until his soul is reintegrated. He eventually destroys the image and accepts responsibility even though he must sacrifice his life in the process.

In the conflict Wilde experienced with his own dilemma of 'personal sexual orientation', a possible factor was that his mother dressed him as a girl until he was nine (Bloom 1985: 41).

Today this would surely be considered child abuse. If Wilde experienced himself, in his formative years, to be female in a male body, it is possible to extrapolate a theory of sexual identity crisis from within this proposition. It can be argued that the ‘feminine’ Wilde was in accord with heterosexual ideology that sees male/female intra-sexual relations as correct in his love for the male body of Lord Alfred Douglas. Yet Douglas was a younger man, and using the theory of ‘younger’ – ‘passive’, (historically ‘passive’ related to feminine), we are presented with a ‘feminine Wilde’ and a ‘feminine Douglas’, which constructs a lesbian, male–taxonomic, yet feminine-inter-psychic ‘homosexuality’:

If “all cultures are historically contingent and invented”, and if the social world and the categories that define it are permanently in flux, then the same must hold true for sexual categories and taxonomies. Therefore, the destabilization of social knowledge also results in “problematizing the heterosexual centre” by placing in doubt both heterosexuality as a universal norm and the general validity of the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy (*International journal of politics, culture and society* 8, 3. 1995: 381).

The transgressive fervour of queer theory is directed with special passion against the taxonomy of sexuality that is centred on the heterosexual/homosexual opposition, a polarity that queer theorists represent as an audacious conceit of the nineteenth century (ibid: 79).

In ‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol’, as in the *Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde explores forms of destructive behaviour caused by conflict in passion:

Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!

Some kill their love when they are young,
And some when they are old;
Some strangle with the hands of Lust,
Some with the hands of Gold:
The kindest use a knife, because
The dead so soon grow cold.

Some love too little, some too long,
Some sell, and others buy;
Some do the deed with many tears,
And some without a sigh:
For each man kills the thing he loves,

Yet each man does not die.

He does not die a death of shame
On a day of dark disgrace,
Nor have a noose about his neck,
Nor a cloth upon his face,
Nor drop feet foremost through the floor
Into an empty space
(Maine 1948: 823).

Dorian loved his friend and yet was able to stab him to death with a knife. 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', written later than *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and quoted in part above, contains the story of a soldier who murders his wife by stabbing her. The character of Dorian kills himself at the end of the novel by stabbing his body 'in representation', which is the picture. I propose that Wilde had gained greater maturity as a writer due to his imprisonment and that he shows in his later work, 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' that murder can be an act of passion, which, if it cannot be condoned, can at least be understood: 'Yet each man kills the thing he loves / The brave man with a sword!'. Where Wilde writes: 'The coward does it with a kiss' he is possibly referring to the betrayal of himself by the person he loved, Lord Alfred Douglas, and comparing it to the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, a disciple Jesus loved and trusted.

Although in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wilde writes that there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book, at his trial Wilde stated: 'As to Dorian Gray, the moral of that was that the man who tried to destroy his conscience destroys himself' (Goodman 1988: 50). According to Wilde a worse crime than killing the body of a friend (which was the crime committed by Dorian) is to destroy the soul of a friend through betrayal. In 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' we read that: "The kindest use a knife, because the dead so soon grow cold" (Maine 1948: 823).

Wilde is implying that the suffering of betrayal is worse than death. Lord Alfred Douglas left Wilde to suffer alone in gaol. Oscar Wilde had sacrificed everything for the man he loved and Douglas had suffered nothing: 'Some do the deed with many tears, / And some without a sigh'. Douglas falls within the latter category. When Wilde was imprisoned for posing as being homosexual, Douglas did not give himself up as equally at fault. Douglas was named as Wilde's lover by his own father, Lord Queensberry, yet Douglas was never charged. He did 'not die a

[metaphorical] death of shame on a day of dark disgrace'. Wilde was left destitute and in disgrace and Douglas was left to enjoy life unpunished. It is ironic that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is in fact a moral book. Dorian does pay the ultimate penalty for his crimes against morality with his own death. The ironic hypocrisy of Victorian society, so evident in the way that prostitutes were reviled while their clients escaped censure, can be seen also in the fact that acts of male homosexual indecency necessarily require perpetration by at least two men, yet in the case of Wilde and Douglas one was disgraced utterly and the other left free. The Queensberry family were powerful and wealthy enough to buy themselves out of trouble. Wilde's satirical comment is poignantly apposite in regard to his own experience: 'Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing' (Maine 1948: 48).

In *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* Wilde is again writing of love for one man by another. The story proposes that Shakespeare's sonnets are actually love letters written by the poet to his male lover who is also an actor in Shakespeare's plays. I propose that the reason Queensberry never used this work to condemn Wilde at his trial is because it was less well known, and Queensberry possibly never knew it existed. In the book *Aesthetic Criticism, Useless Art in Critical Essays on Oscar Wilde* we read:

The Portrait of Mr. W. H. is characteristic of Wilde's dialogues...between typical Wildean aesthetes...whose theory about the "real meaning" of Shakespeare's Sonnets is based on the discovery of the true identity of Mr. W. H., to whom the poems were dedicated...this [being] one Willie Hughes, a young actor...in a last-ditch effort to corroborate his theory Graham has a portrait of "Willie Hughes" painted... Thus the creation of the theory itself – and not the mastery of the real meaning of the sonnets – is what captures our interest (Gagnier 1991: 31-3).

Wilde in his text was proposing a theory – as an artist. For the reader of *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* the story is obviously not meant to be 'true', (in the same way the soul of Dorian becoming a picture is obviously not meant to be 'true'). Wilde said in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: 'No artist desires to prove anything. Even things that are true can be proved. No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy is an unpardonable mannerism of style' (Maine 1948: 17).

If Dorian and Basil are the products of the artifice of the creation of theoretical persona – it follows that the love they express is also theoretical. I propose that most Victorian readers understood the allegorical nature of the novel, that the ‘outing’ of this text as immoral was an act of cynical strategy used by Queensberry’s lawyers to incriminate Wilde. Wilde delivered a lecture to art students of the Royal Academy at their club in Westminster, 1883, and the following words are taken from a copy of his original manuscript:

Phidias was flung into prison and there, in the common gaol of Athens, died, the supreme artist of the old world. And do you think this was an exceptional case? The sign of a philistine age is the cry of immorality against art, and this cry was raised by the Athenian people against every great poet and thinker of their day – Aeschylus, Euripides, Socrates. It was the same with Florence in the thirteenth century. Good handicrafts are due to guilds not to people. The moment the guilds lost their power and the people rushed in, beauty and honesty of work died. And so never talk of an artistic people; there never has been such a thing...

Is not art difficult, you will say to me, in such surroundings as these? Of course it is difficult, but art was never easy; you yourselves would not wish it to be easy; and, besides, nothing is worth doing except what the world says is impossible (Jackson 1995: 126-7).

Wilde was attempting to construct a dangerous and difficult theory in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He, like Phidias, ‘was flung into prison’. The following chapter explores the criminalisation of Wilde. In writing a narrative concerning what is now called gay literary theory Wilde was (in the context of his times) attempting what ‘the world says is impossible’.

Chapter 4

The trials of Oscar Wilde, prison, punishment and his personal suffering.

By early in the year of 1895, Oscar Wilde had finally become a popular and financially successful playwright. From the following quotation in the widely read Victorian journal *Punch*, it can be seen that Wilde has achieved everything – yet a few short months later, in April 1895, Oscar Wilde was arrested as a homosexual. He was imprisoned and disgraced. He was bankrupted and his children taken away. His plays were closed and his writing banned. What happened at the trials of Oscar Wilde, and why was Wilde destroyed so utterly? The following extracts from *Punch* and *Vanity Fair* for spring 1895 offer an ironic and moving contrast to the notoriety that was soon to follow:

Among the early West End successes of the year... An Ideal Husband ... opened at The Haymarket on 3 January, in the presence of His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales. Oscar Wilde, author...is all of a sudden astoundingly successful: a revival of his *Lady Windermere's Fan* first produced... in 1892 – is in rehearsal for presentation at the Metropole, a theatre with more than 2,000 seats...A revival of his *A Woman of no Importance* – first produced...in 1893 is announced as a forth coming attraction at the vast Standard, and his 'trivial comedy for serious people', *The Importance of Being Earnest*, will be presented for the first time at the St. James's – on Saint Valentine's Day (Goodman 1988: 7).

And:

Oscar, the younger son of the late Sir William Wilde, archaeologist, traveller, and Queen's Surgeon in Ireland, won the Berkeley medal for Greek in Trinity College, Dublin, and a scholarship. Migrating to Magdalene College, Oxford, he took two 'Firsts' and 'the Newdigate' (the chief prize for poetry at the University). He went wandering in Greece, and, full of a Neo-Hellenic spirit, came back to invade social London. He invented the aesthetic movement. He presented the doctrine of possible culture in external things. He got brilliantly laughed at (Goodman 1988: 9).

The only previous financially profitable venture of Wilde's had been in 1882 when at the age of twenty seven he gave a lecture tour in America. At that time he was often depicted in caricature as thin, weak, and holding a lily or a sunflower. This was due to his aesthetic ideology and the prejudiced Victorian practice of portraying the aesthete as oppositional to the 'Arnoldian' man who was 'the strong, muscular Christian'. We see the same prejudice operating in the

stereotypical portrayal of the homosexual man as thin and effeminate and the heterosexual male ideal as strong, muscular and embodying 'maleness', yet the *New York Tribune* of 3rd January 1882 wrote about Wilde that:

The most striking thing about the poet's appearance is his height, which is several inches over six feet...When he laughs his lips part widely and show a shining row of upper teeth, which are superlatively white...His eyes are blue, or light grey, and instead of being 'dreamy', as some of his admirers have imagined them to be, they are bright and quick – not at all like those of one given to perpetual musing on the beautiful and true. Instead of having a small, delicate hand, only fit to caress a lily, his fingers are long and when doubled up would form a fist that would hit a hard knock, should an occasion arise for the owner to descend to that kind of argument (Goodman 1988: 11).

Wilde, who was always in financial need, had made money in America, and when he returned to England he then made money lecturing about America. According to Philip Collins in *The Oscar Wilde File*, Wilde was excited to see his name first displayed to the public:

Printed it is true in those primary colours against which I pass my life protesting, but it is still framed, and anything is better than virtuous obscurity, even one's own name in alternate colours of Albert blue and Magenta and six feet high... I feel I have not lived in vain (Goodman 1988: 12).

Wilde was a virile, adventurous young man in America: he rode on horseback across the country; he spoke on platforms otherwise used for hangings; he went down into silver mines and spoke to the miners. As usual Wilde was no respecter of class. He spoke in the east to the rich and in the west to the poorest. His life had been without real scandal until he met the Queensberry family:

The poet Lionel, a homosexual introduced Wilde to Lord Alfred Bruce Douglas, the third son of the Marquise of Queensberry. Lord Alfred – known to his family and friends as Bosie, a contraction of Boysie (Goodman 1988: 14).

Becoming a friend of the Queensberry family was a terrible mistake for Wilde. At the time of meeting Bosie, Wilde was married to the daughter of an Irish barrister. Constance and Wilde had been married for seven years and had two children, Cyril and Vyvyan. Although being married with two children does not eliminate the possibility of Wilde's being a homosexual, it should have made a difference to the attitude of Victorian society – to which outward appearance was supremely important. Affairs and indiscretions were acceptable, the prerequisite being that they were discreet and did not cause a public scandal. Edward Majori Banks wrote:

There have been it is true rumours concerning him [Wilde] for years. But so have there been, and so there will always be, of most men to whom the world gives fame and homage during their lives. Nor do the slanders come from very reputable people...Among those whose slanders of Oscar Wilde are well known and taken for granted is the Marquis of Queensberry...he has been divorced by his first wife...and his second marriage has been annulled...His eldest son, Lord Drumlanrig, who died young, was Lord Rosebery's private secretary (Goodman 1988: 18).

According to the *Collins English Dictionary*, Rosebery was the Earl of Rosebery, Liberal Prime Minister (1894—95). These are the years of Wilde's disgrace, trials, and imprisonment. It is important that the connection be made between the trouble caused for the associates of Lord Drumlanrig by his father Queensberry and the problems caused for Oscar Wilde when he befriended Queensberry's youngest son, Douglas. Phillip Jullian writes in his book *Oscar Wilde*:

Queensberry's eldest son, Lord Drumlanrig... was private secretary to Lord Rosebery...Queensberry began sending insulting letters to Rosebery for whom he felt an implacable hatred and also to Gladstone and the Queen. Lord Rosebery was taking the waters at Bad Homburg whither he was followed by Queensberry, who stalked him for several days, armed with a horse-whip; he was only induced to abandon his project by the personal intervention of the Prince of Wales (Jullian 1968: 230).

According to Richard Ellmann in his book *Oscar Wilde*:

Queensberry had begun to see homosexuals everywhere and suspected that Rosebery was influencing Drumlanrig in this direction...hearing that Rosebery was at Bad Homburg Queensberry followed him there in August 1893 with a dog whip. The Prince of Wales intervened and the police asked the Marquess to leave...On 1 November 1893 Queensberry married for the second time...She left immediately, and started proceedings for annulment, alleging 'malformation of the parts of generation' as well as 'frigidity and impotency'...On 8 November Wilde wrote a long letter about Douglas's disturbed state (Ellmann 1987: 381).

The scene was being set for Queensberry to libel Wilde for 'posing as a sodomite [sic]' with his son Bosie. Queensberry had accused his eldest son of homosexual acts with Lord Rosebery. He had written to Gladstone, Rosebery, the Prince of Wales and to Queen Victoria. There could be no higher personages than these that Queensberry was prepared to drag into an open scandal. The fact that the Prince of Wales himself had to intervene shows how dangerously close Queensberry's accusations came to involving the British throne in an unsavoury scandal. Queensberry's second wife annulled their marriage because of Queensberry's sexual problems:

on the 20th October 1894 Queensberry received the final decree of nullity of his second marriage. Two days earlier Lord Drumlanrig had died:

The newspapers reported a shooting accident, but suicide was generally suspected. Drumlanrig may have been afraid of blackmail over his relations with Lord Rosebery (Ellmann 1987: 402).

Queensberry had written insulting letters to Wilde. The police had prevented Queensberry from 'throwing a bunch of vegetables' onto the stage at Wilde's play. Queensberry insulted Wilde in his own house at Tite Street and finally on February 18 1895 Queensberry left his card at the Albermarle club where Wilde was a member and:

where both ladies and gentlemen were admitted. Mrs. Wilde was also a member of the club. On the night before last Mr. Oscar Wilde went to his club, and the hall porter presented him with a card, addressed to "Oscar Wilde, Esq.,"...The porter was astonished at what was written upon the card, and considered it of sufficient importance to add the date and hour when the card was left. He wrote: "4: 30, February 18, 1895". The words written upon the card were of such a character as to be unfit for publication (Goodman 1988: 35).

The first trial concerning the libel of the commission of homosexual acts finds Wilde prosecuting Queensberry. Ellman writes in *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*:

"All trials are trials for one's life" Wilde would declare after his trials were over and his destruction by them was complete. Still, it was a paradox after his own manner that the first trial should not be his own but the one forced upon Queensberry, whose life was in no such jeopardy... The ninth Marquess was a very rich man. He could have lost a dozen libel cases without flinching, and no doubt would have persisted in hounding Wilde whatever happened in court (Ellman 1987: 1).

Oscar Wilde and Alfred Douglas were appearing publicly together. For two years Queensberry had been threatening both Rosebery for being the homosexual consort of his elder son and Wilde for being that of his younger son. The elder son had committed suicide. According to Ellman: "Life with Douglas, including the publicity of their romantic passion, reflected his [Wilde's] intention to oblige a hypocritical age to take him as he was" (Ellman 1987: 2).

Wilde's plays were filled with irony and paradox towards society. I believe Wilde was also concerned that his plays (which were finally bringing him financial security) might be adversely

affected if he did not attempt to prevent Queensberry (by the use of the law and, he hoped, a restraining order from the court) from further libel and harassment, and from printing these letters in the newspapers. It was an error. Queensberry was arrested but claimed in court that what he had written was not libel because it was true. The newspapers would obviously take full advantage of the publicity of the trial and they did:

The *Evening News*, 9 March 1895. Oscar Wilde. Further hearing of the case against the Marquis ...scene in court. The complainant tells his story in the witness box...The crowd filled the precincts of the court all anxious to be present at the cause célébré of Oscar Wilde against the Marquis of Queensberry...The noticeable feature was the utter absence of the fashionable West-End element. References were made to the name of “exalted personages” that were mentioned in the letters, and Mr Humphrey suggested that these should not be mentioned (Goodman 1988: 39).

Oscar Wilde was effectively being silenced. The words written on the card were ‘unfit for publication’ and the public were left to imagine what they actually were, and letters and alleged witnesses could not be produced because they involved ‘exalted personages’. We now know that these personages were Lord Rosebery, who was then Prime Minister, Queen Victoria, to whom Queensberry had written, and the Prince of Wales, who had intervened in previous problems with Queensberry. The public reading the newspapers were not aware at that time of the identity of these ‘personages’. It was a cover-up of a possible scandal that might have adversely affected the British monarchy. The *Star*, of the 3rd of April, 1895, stated that: “The Aesthete [Wilde] gives characteristically cynical evidence” (Goodman 1988: 42).

Yet the newspaper did not actually tell the public in the story that followed anything that Wilde said. It appeared that Wilde was being tried in the newspapers. Again, what was actually written on the card was not stated:

He first read to the jury the card which Lord Queensberry left open with the porter... containing a very grave and serious allegation against Mr. Wilde’s character – and pointed out that it seemed to stop short of actually charging the plaintiff with the commission of one of the most serious offences. By the pleas which the defendant had put before the court a much graver issue was raised. He [Queensberry] said the statement was true, and that it was for the public benefit it was made (Goodman 1988: 43).

The irony is that the public reading the newspapers could receive no (doubtful) benefit as they had no idea what the charges were as they were never printed. If the newspapers had printed that

Mr Oscar Wilde was accused of posing as a homosexual would the public, after some initial excitement, have bothered to buy them again? I propose that it was in the newspapers' best interest to imply as ugly and heinous allegations as possible and so to keep their readership guessing – and buying.

The *Star*, 3rd April 1895, coyly reported that:

Sir Edward said he would not refer in detail to the accusations made against Mr. Wilde and mention the names...But two of the allegations were so strange that he was bound to notice them. The first that in July 1890 Mr. Wilde published a certain immoral and obscene work entitled *The Picture of Dorian Gray* designed and intended to describe the relations, intimacies, and passions of certain persons of unnatural habits, tastes, and practices. The second was that in December 1894 he published a certain other immoral and obscene work in the form of a magazine entitled 'The Chameleon' containing similar references and 'certain immoral maxims' entitled 'Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young' (Goodman 1988: 47).

Oscar Wilde found himself under attack for having written the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* five years earlier, and a more recent article in the magazine 'The Chameleon'. In this magazine Lord Alfred Douglas had written a poem, 'Two Loves'. When Wilde was asked if the two loves were male he answered 'yes'. The following line was then quoted to Wilde from Douglas's poem: 'I am the love that dare not speak its name'. Wilde did not write these words. Douglas wrote them. Yet Douglas was not called to explain them. It was possibly mistakenly believed that Wilde himself wrote the words, 'The love that dare not speak its name', yet he did not write them. He was questioned about them. He attempted to explain them in court in his famous speech beginning: 'The love that dare not speak its name is...'. When Wilde said to Queensberry in court: 'You accuse me of leading your son into vice', Lord Queensberry replied: 'I don't say you are it, but you look it and you pose as it' (Goodman 1988:50). Queensberry was acquitted. Wilde was arrested. Much was made of the fact that Wilde had friends from lower classes than himself and that he had given them small amounts of money or silver cigarette cases as gifts or dressed them in a higher standard in order for them to dine at the 'all male' clubs Wilde enjoyed. Yet his real problem was not whether or not he was homosexual or that he had homosexual friends. It was rather his involvement in a scandal that threatened to implicate Lord Rosebery. At Wilde's trial the jury could not agree whether or not he was guilty and when the prosecutor was begged

not to try Wilde again he answered: "I would not but for the abominable rumours against Rosebery" (Ellman 1987: 66).

Wilde was arrested again. This was the third and final trial. (At a second trial the jury had been reluctant to convict.) Douglas continued to write letters to Wilde:

"Now in anguish and pain, in grief and humiliation I feel that my love for you, your love for me...make all bitterness bearable". Wilde wrote to Douglas "My sweet rose. My delicate flower, my lily of lilies, it is perhaps in prison that I am going to test the power of love". Douglas wrote in his autobiography "The emotion of the great crisis fanned the waning fires of our devotion to each other" (Ellman 1987: 78-9).

Wilde could have escaped to France but did not. Douglas did. Wilde was arrested and sentenced to two years hard labour in prison. His plays were removed from the theatres. He was declared bankrupt. His wife divorced him and he lost custody of his two children. His mother fell ill and died. He had spoken of the love that dare not speak its name and in so doing had declared himself as homosexual and society punished him.

Discipline and regularity were the keywords of life at Pentonville, Wandsworth and Reading prisons, where Oscar Wilde was to spend the next two years. When not working or eating, prisoners were kept in their cells and were known only by the numbers on the doors, like animals they were worked hard, and fed and watered at regular times. No one was actually 'reformed', they were not there for that purpose: they were there to be punished...under its oppressive regime... Oscar's greatest punishment was to be shut away from the world, ignored and forgotten (Calloway & Colvin 1997: 93).

For Oscar Wilde, who loved beautiful things and beautiful people, it was an unimaginably severe punishment to be locked away in the cruelty and ugliness of a Victorian prison. The prisoners at Pentonville were allowed no books but the Bible, and were permitted one visitor every three months. Lord Alfred Douglas, whom Oscar loved and for whom he had sacrificed everything, never visited him. Wilde, who lived to read and write beautiful books was not, for the first year, permitted to do either. Neither were the prisoners allowed to talk to each other, silence had to be maintained. Wilde writes of men cracking under these conditions and becoming insane. The punishment for insane laughing was to be flogged. The prisoners were given purgative medicine and suffered from diarrhoea for which they used 'slop buckets' which overflowed in their cells.

They slept on plank beds which caused insomnia and worked all day on treadmills or picked oakum until their fingers bled.

Under the unsanitary conditions and brutalising regime Wilde fell seriously ill, and one morning found himself unable to get out of his plank bed. Threatened by the most draconian punishments for malingering he managed to raise himself but fainted at chapel, badly injuring his ear (Calloway & Colvin 1997: 94).

Oscar Wilde eventually died from this injury. He suffered many operations to his ear while in exile in France. When he was put in his coffin flowers were placed to cover that side of his face. He was buried in a suburban Parisian cemetery with a small marker and in the presence of a few remaining friends.

Chapter 5

Growth and conflict resolution in Oscar Wilde's text *De Profundis*.

De Profundis was written in Reading Gaol in 1897 and first published in 1905. I believe that Wilde reached self actualisation and conflict resolution through the writing of this narrative. However, as can be seen from the following text, others do not always agree. In the Journal, *Papers on Language & Literature*, (Winter 2001: 37), Foster describes how:

De Profundis occupies a precarious place in Oscar Wilde's canon and is often skirted by wary interpreters: it does not fit neatly into any single genre; it does not resemble any of the other works that made Wilde famous; it is full of irritating inconsistencies and contradictions; and it seems ambiguous...Why struggle with a reader-resistant text framed as a letter? Its handling in the recent *Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* (1997) illustrates this critical uneasiness. *De Profundis* is almost completely ignored in this collection of essays...Many readers disparage or dismiss *De Profundis*. It has been condemned as a 'venomous dossier' and 'obsessive piece of writing' (Jullian, 352), and it has been dismissed as the complaint of a very unhappy prisoner...Avrom Fleishman speaks of being 'unprepared – even after several readings, in my own case – to believe my eyes' at its shifts of tone and attitude (285-86). It suffers from a 'disjointed structure' (Foster 2001: 85).

I propose that *De Profundis* 'does not resemble any of the other works that made Wilde famous' because this text was not written for sale to the public, neither is it an aesthetic theory. It is the work of a man who has suffered deeply, and who is attempting to transcend pain through the cathartic and crisis resolution epistemology of the construct of writing. Wilde transcends conflict and learns pragmatism. In *De Profundis* he writes: 'One of the many lessons that one learns in prison is that things are what they are and will be what be what they will be' (Maine 1948: 853). The long years spent in prison had altered his ideology. The text is not similar to his previous work, because he had grown from his experiences. He writes:

A great river of life flows between me and a date so distant. Hardly, if at all, can you see across so wide a waste (Maine 1948: 853).

Foster, in his essay, 'The Ambiguous Profundis', mentions readers of Wilde who question why they should 'struggle with a reader-resistant text framed as a personal letter?' (Foster 2001:85). Wilde was not allowed to do creative writing in prison. However, he was at times permitted to write letters. I suggest that Wilde 'framed [his text] as a personal letter' for two reasons: Douglas

never visited Wilde in prison, and he wanted to purge himself of feelings of betrayal by writing Douglas a letter; and secondly, Wilde used the form of a letter in order to gain permission from the prison authorities to write.

It is important to 'struggle with a reader-resistant text' (although I do not experience the text as 'reader-resistant'). I propose that the text *De Profundis* could be experienced as difficult to read because it was not necessarily written for a reader, which supports my theory that it was written as a cathartic experience. It was possibly written to be therapeutic, according to psychoanalytic practice, in an attempt to find meaning in suffering, and to sublimate personal tragedy in the attainment of a higher state of consciousness. Wilde writes:

While there were times when I rejoiced in the idea that my sufferings were to be endless, I could not bear them to be without meaning. Now I find hidden somewhere away in my nature something that tells me that nothing in the whole world is meaningless, and suffering least of all. That something hidden away in my nature, like a treasure in a field is Humility...The last thing left in me and the best, the ultimate discovery at which I have arrived, the starting point for a fresh development. It has come to me right out of myself (Maine 1948: 858).

Foster describes in the article quoted above the way in which: '[i]n the recent Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde (1997)...*De Profundis* is almost completely ignored' (ibid). I propose that this indicates not that the text of *De Profundis* is meaningless, but that it is unpopular and misunderstood. This supports the stand point of this dissertation, being a text constructed according to the critical ideology of New Historicism, and it suggests that we cannot fully understand the text without understanding the context. In Eagleton's *Literary Theory* we read:

Hermeneutics sees history as a living dialogue between past, present and future, and seeks patiently to remove obstacles to this endless mutual communication. All understanding is *productive*; it is "understanding otherwise", realizing new potential...Our own 'horizon' of historical meanings and assumptions fuses with the 'horizon' of historical meanings and assumptions within which the work itself is placed. At such a moment we enter the alien world of the artefact, but at the same time gather it into our own realm, reaching a more complete understanding of ourselves (Eagleton 1997: 63).

We read that 'many readers disparage or dismiss *De Profundis*. It has been condemned as a "venomous dossier" and an obsessive piece of writing' (Foster 2001: 85). It appears naïve to

expect that Wilde would not become angry or obsessive in prison. Being able to express these emotions is part of the process of integration towards enlightenment.

I propose that an argument can indeed be made that Wilde's texts contain 'shifts of tone and attitude' (Foster 2001:85), but that this is understandable in the light of a theory of hermeneutics, according to which the fact that Wilde was writing in prison must be given its due significance. During the last months of his imprisonment Wilde was permitted to write this letter, one page at a time, and when he had written on one sheet of paper he had to wait to receive another. Each page was taken, leaving Wilde unable to correct, or amend previous drafts. I suggest that this text also yields meaning in terms of 'conflict resolution' whereby Wilde experiences inter-psychic struggles, and writes these into his text in his effort to maintain sanity, while he was imprisoned (mostly in solitary confinement). The text might be interpreted as being 'disjointed' (Foster 2001:85), but I propose all artists attempting to 'metamorphise', and integrate new insights into new experimentation in style, might experience disjointed style, but not necessarily, disorganised thought. Wilde writes in *De Profundis*:

I have got to make everything that has happened to me good for me. The plank bed, the loathsome food, the hard ropes shredded into oakum till one's finger-tips grow dull with pain, the menial offices with which each day begins and finishes, the harsh orders the routine seems to necessitate, the dreadful dress that makes sorrow grotesque to look at, the silence, the solitude, the shame – each and all of these things I have to transform into a spiritual experience. There is not a single degradation of the body which I must not try and make into a spiritualising of the soul... when first I was put into prison some people advised me to try and forget who I was. It was ruinous advice. It is only by realising what I am that I have found comfort of any kind. Now I am advised by others to try on my release to forget that I have ever been in prison at all. I know that would be equally as fatal... To regret one's own experiences is to arrest one's own development. To deny one's own experiences is to put a lie into the lips of one's own life. It is no less than a denial of the soul (Maine 1948: 860).

Victorian prison life was punishment. Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish* how prisons were built to hide the inflictions of society's torture on prisoners from the public. They were built to keep out sympathy for the prisoner. He writes of public acts of pain written on the body and of the removing of the punished body from out of human sight into the inside of walled enclosures. The prisoner is out of sight for the sake of the lawmakers to enable them to enact vengeance in secret and to save them from possible public intervention as they inflict destruction on the other (Foucault:1991). Wilde writes about the effect of institutionalisation:

It revolves. It seems to circle round one centre of pain. The paralysing immobility of a life every circumstance of which is regulated after an unchangeable pattern... according to the inflexible laws of an iron formula (Maine 1948: 853).

Wilde understands that life is about change and growth and yet for the institutionalised person this experience is denied:

For us there is only one season, the season of sorrow. The very sun and moon seem taken away... it is always twilight in one's cell as it is always twilight in one's heart. And in the sphere of thought, no less than in the sphere of time, motion is no more... [It] is happening to me now, and will happen to me again tomorrow. Remember this and you will be able to understand a little of why I am writing and in this manner writing (Maine 1948: 853).

Here Wilde is writing directly to his reader. He is telling us that he is trapped in a world of perpetual rigidity where he is denied the ability to improve or change anything except his own thoughts, and this through great difficulty as he is becoming immobilised in pain. He is writing to help himself and his possible future reader to realise the need to reach crisis resolution, to find a way to stop the downward spiral of despair, and to enable his soul to move out of his prison cell, not only out of the physical prison walls but out of the metaphysical prison enclosure that can blinker the mind and become the death of hope.

According to Wilde, his punishment by imprisonment at first caused him not to be repentant but to become rebellious:

For prison life with its endless privations and restrictions makes one rebellious. The most terrible thing about it is not that it breaks one's heart – hearts are made to be broken – but that it turns one's heart to stone... for in life as in art the mood of rebellion closes up the channels of the soul, and shuts out the airs of heaven (Maine 1948: 867).

In fact, Wilde became suicidal: 'While I was in Wandsworth prison I longed to die. It was my one desire...I was filled with rage. I determined to commit suicide on the very day on which I left prison' (Maine 1948: 863). Wilde later decided to live but to sublimate the pain through his writing of *De Profundis*. At first he considered speaking only in the voice of anger, to proclaim his misery to the world, and in this way to avenge his suffering by forcing society to see him in a destroyed state and to make them take the responsibility:

I made up my mind to live, but to wear gloom as a king wears purple; never to smile again... to teach them that melancholy is the true secret of life... to mar them with my own pain (Maine 1948: 863).

However, Wilde changed his mind as he realised that there were those of his friends who stood by him and visited him in prison, and that when he was being led through the crowds in disgrace a friend had honoured him by lifting his hat. I propose that Wilde, in remembrance of this incident, and other similar kind acts of his friends, inscribed this emotion into his letter, producing a cathartic effect in contrast to the isolation he suffered in prison. I suggest that writing about these memories helped cause the sublimation of self-destruction and a reorientation towards life. He writes: 'I must learn how to be cheerful and happy. The last two occasions on which I was allowed to see my friends here, I tried to be as cheerful as possible, and to show my cheerfulness, in order to make them some slight return for their trouble in coming all the way from town to see me. It is only a slight return, I know, but it is one, I feel certain, that pleases them most... And that in the news and ideas I am here shaping for myself... for the first time since my imprisonment I have a real desire for life' (Maine 1948: 863).

In fact, Wilde expresses a desire to reach out for greater artistic expression: 'There is before me so much to do that I would regard it as a terrible tragedy if I died before I was allowed to complete at any rate a little of it. I see new developments in art and life, each one of which is a fresh mode of perfection. I long to live so that I can explore what is no less than a new world to me' (Maine 1948: 836).

It was not to be. Wilde fell in prison and injured his ear and the side of his head. After many operations, for which he struggled to pay, he died in 1900 in France.

Conclusion

In this investigation of 'the love that dare not speak its name' in the works of Oscar Wilde, the use of the theories of New Historicism, hermeneutics and psychoanalysis have proved to be helpful in more fully comprehending and integrating information. I have come to believe through writing this dissertation, that placing the text in a social context is an aid to understanding, and that to gain as much knowledge as possible about the author helps in the analysis of the text. This leads to greater insight for the reader.

Writing *De Profundis* was important for Wilde's personal development, and I propose that through this therapeutic method, Wilde gained insight which led to a cathartic experience. The work tells us of a man not embittered towards others, but concerned for his friends and desperately trying to find a way to create beauty when surrounded by society's inflicted ugliness. After writing this document in the form of a letter, Wilde was released from prison and lived in exile in France.

All trials are trials for one's life, just as all sentences are sentences to death: and three times have I been tried... Society as we have constituted it will have no place for me, has none to offer; but Nature, whose sweet rains fall on the unjust as well as the just alike, will have clefts in the rock where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang the night with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt; she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole (Maine 1948: 888).

Wilde lost his family and career as a writer, but not all of his friends, his integrity, or his style of wit. It is reported by his friends that while on his death bed he drank a glass of wine and said 'I am dying beyond my means'. Wilde never recovered his health after his imprisonment. He died in poverty but not alone. Lord Alfred Douglas was not with him but other friends remained. His early death at the age of 46 is tragic because Britain had unthinkingly killed one whom I consider to be one of its own greatest literary artists. Society destroyed a man because of his alleged sexual orientation. If everything said of Wilde at his trial had been true then Wilde would, at most, have been guilty of being a male homosexual, and mixing in the company of other consenting adult male homosexuals while, possibly, posing as a heterosexual.

Prison, exile, and ruin were the probable consequence of being 'other' in terms of sexual orientation in Victorian society. Yet the name of Oscar Wilde has not been obliterated from the literary world. Wilde did achieve a type of martyrdom, and embraced Catholicism on his death bed. Through his exploration of the 'other' in his writing he added an important 'voice' to what has become gay literary theory.

I don't regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure. I did it to the full as one should do everything that one does...For the artistic life is simply self-development. Humility in the artist is his frank acceptance of all experiences, just as love in the artist is simply the sense of beauty that reveals to the world its body and its soul (Maine 1948: 866-7).

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