Hidden and Open Communications: The Case of Oscar Wilde in a Society that Criminalized Homosexuality

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Historical Research Paper

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In my World History class this year, we studied the trials of Oscar Wilde. After learning about his trials and the reasons he was sent to jail, I realized he specifically utilized his writings to communicate and convey his homosexuality in both open and hidden ways in the years prior to his conviction on charges of “gross indecency.” While researching this topic, I became aware that he used communications in more ways than one. While focusing on this year’s National History Day’s theme, I was able to categorize his communications into two sub-categories evident within his works: Wilde’s open communications about his homosexuality, and Wilde’s hidden communications related to his sexual orientation.

I conducted research for my History Day Paper, by finding the original writings created by Oscar Wilde and reading some of his personal letters, parts of his novels and plays, and selections from his other works. I also found articles that specifically highlighted how he communicated his sexuality through his writings and I read about the laws against homosexuality during his lifetime. From my research, I wrote about which type of communication, hidden or open, he used in his various writings.

The historical argument of my paper is that the laws in place during Oscar Wilde’s life had a significant impact on the way he expressed himself as a writer. Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 made homosexual acts illegal, punishable by imprisonment. As a result of these harsh laws, Wilde chose to communicate about homosexuality in different ways through his writings. In his public writings such as plays and stories, he made subtle, hidden references to his sexuality, while in his private letters he was open about his sexuality. His imprisonment caused him to change what and how he communicated through his writing; he became more open about his homosexuality and more profound in his subject matter.
The trials of Oscar Wilde are significant because they deal with the intersection between law and literature. This topic shows how the laws in effect during a writer’s life can have a significant impact on how even a celebrated author communicates. Oscar Wilde’s fate is significant in another way because it served as a rallying point for the Gay Right’s Movement decades after his death.
“How narrow, and mean, and inadequate to its burdens is this century of ours! It can give to Success its palace … but for Sorrow and Shame it does not keep even a wattled house in which they may dwell….”¹ With these words, written just before his release from prison, Oscar Wilde reflected on the dramatic and devastating impact that England’s criminalization of homosexuality had on his writing and on his life. Homosexuality was illegal in late-19th Century England: Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 made acts of “gross indecency” between males, whether committed in public or in private, a misdemeanor with a penalty of up to two years’ hard labor in prison.² Irish author Oscar Wilde was tried twice, convicted, sentenced, and sent to prison in 1895 under Section 11. Before the trials, Wilde was best known for his acclaimed works including *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, as well as his brilliant wit and flamboyant style. The trials and imprisonment altered how and what Wilde communicated through his writing. Wilde’s writing before, during, and after his trials and imprisonment show significant change in the author’s openness in communicating about his homosexuality. Pre-trials, he was openly homosexual in his private letters, while his published and performed works, praised by the press and public, communicated clever and hidden allusions to his sexual orientation; the trials and their coverage in the news media, however, destroyed the barrier between public and private communication for Wilde, with the result that he communicated more openly about his sexual orientation and became more profound in his subject matter. The press responded harshly, communicating Wilde’s sexual orientation throughout the world, effectively criminalizing Wilde for the remainder of his life.


Playwright, novelist, and poet Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland on October 16th, 1854. Wilde married Constance Lloyd in 1884, and they quickly became a celebrity couple. Newspapers referred to her simply as “Mrs. Oscar.” The Wildes were happy early in their marriage, with Wilde describing to one friend the “rapture of sleeping with Constance,” and, in 1884, to another, “we are of course desperately in love.” It was after the birth of their second son that Wilde’s sexual orientation apparently changed. Wilde endured three trials during his life. The first was brought to court by Wilde, himself, who sued the Marquis of Queensberry, the father of Wilde’s lover, Lord Alfred “Bosie” Douglas, for libel. Libel is a written false statement that is damaging to a person’s reputation. Wilde brought suit after Queensberry left a card at Wilde’s private club addressed “To Oscar Wilde posing as a sodomite.” Wilde wrote to his friend Robert Ross: “Bosie’s father has left a card at my club with hideous words on it. I don’t see anything now but a criminal prosecution. My whole life seems ruined by this man.” Wilde anticipated ruin because he knew that Queensberry would use his power to end the relationship with Bosie. During the trial, however, enough evidence of Wilde’s relationships with young men surfaced that Wilde withdrew the libel charge and Scotland Yard sought Wilde’s arrest for gross indecency. The trial with Wilde as defendant started on April 26, 1895, and ended with a hung jury which, in England, meant that a second

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4 Ibid.


8 Ibid.
prosecution could be brought. Wilde was ultimately convicted of eleven counts of gross indecency and sentenced to two years in prison.

Before his trials, Wilde’s published writing communicated his homosexuality in clever and subtle ways. In his play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (which opened in London in February 1895, within days of Queensberry’s leaving the note at Wilde’s club) Wilde incorporated hidden references to homosexuality and his own double life. The character John Worthing goes by the name Jack in the country, and Ernest in London. A conversation between Jack and his friend, Algernon Moncrieff, exposes Jack’s dual identity:

> ALGERNON: … Besides, your name isn’t Jack at all; it is Ernest.
> JACK: It isn’t Ernest; it’s Jack.
> ALGERNON: You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to everyone as Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life…
> JACK: Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country….⁹

Wilde, too, was leading a double life. He had a wife and children, while also having relationships with younger men. The name “Ernest” was a clever play on the word “earnest,” meaning sincere. “Earnest” was also a Victorian euphemism for homosexual, and was a catch-phrase for being gay.¹⁰ ¹¹ Another allusion to homosexuality is the name of the character Cecily: in Wilde’s time, Cecily was a popular reference to young male prostitutes.¹² Incorporating the name Cecily hinted at Wilde’s own relationships with younger men without being obvious to the public.

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¹² Ibid.
Thus, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde communicated about gay topics, making veiled reference to his own double life through plays on words and plot twists that were likely obvious only to other gay men. Wilde scholars believe he was writing for two audiences: an upper-middle class heterosexual audience and members of an underground gay audience.\(^\text{13}\) That the allusions to homosexuality were lost on the general audience is clear from the public’s response to the play. William Archer, in a review of the play shortly after its opening, called it “an absolutely wilful expression of an irrepressibly witty personality.”\(^\text{14}\) Similarly, Allan Aynesworth, who played Algernon Moncrieff in the premiere, said, “I never remember a greater triumph, the audience rose . . . and cheered and cheered again.”\(^\text{15}\)

Wilde was not alone in communicating about homosexuality by using coded language. Perhaps afraid of suffering a fate similar to Wilde’s, England’s late-19th Century homosexual community developed a secret language called Polari.\(^\text{16}\) Polari allowed gay men to communicate safely, even in heterosexual company.\(^\text{17}\) It allowed homosexuals to speak openly, undetected by “a sharpy,” -- a policeman.\(^\text{18}\) There was a standard term in Polari for a gay man, “omee-palone,”

\(^{13}\) Ibid.


\(^{15}\) Online Museum Victoria and Albert Museum, “The First Stage Production of 'The Importance of Being Earnest', 1895,” 'The Importance of Being Earnest': The first stage production, 1895 (Victoria and Albert Museum, Cromwell Road, South Kensington, London SW7 2RL, January 31, 2013), http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/the-importance-of-being-earnest-first-stage-production/.


and words such as “camp,” “butch,” and “ogle” are examples of Polari that provided protection and are still used today.\(^\text{19}\)

In his 1890 novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde also communicated references to homosexuality; however, the harsh critical response caused Wilde to edit the work significantly and write a post-publication Preface defending it. *Dorian Gray* is about an artist, Basil Hallward, who paints the portrait of a handsome young man, Dorian Gray. As Gray lives a profligate life, the Dorian Gray in Hallward’s portrait turns old and decrepit, while its subject remains young. Basil admits to a friend he has been enchanted by his subject: Hallward says, “I see everything in him”\(^\text{20}\) and “As long as I live, the personality of Dorian Gray will dominate me.” However, Wilde’s original text was altered in the version of the story one reads today. Wilde’s editor, concerned about public response to obvious homosexual references in the story, had Wilde edit it significantly. In the original text Hallward tells Dorian, “It is quite true I have worshipped you with far more romance of feeling than a man should ever give to a friend. Somehow I have never loved a woman.” The edited version reads: “From the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me.”\(^\text{21}\) Wilde might have thought the edited homoerotic references were subtle, but critics were scathing. The *Scots Observer* stated that although “Dorian Gray” was a work of literary quality, it dealt with “matters only fitted for the Criminal Investigation Department,” of interest to “outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph boys.”\(^\text{22}\) In

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response, Wilde wrote in the Preface, “those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming.”

In contrast to the hidden references of his published works, Wilde’s pre-trial private letters communicate his sexual orientation clearly. Wilde wrote with open affection to Douglas in January 1893, for example, “My Own Boy, Your sonnet is quite lovely, and it is a marvel that those red rose-leaf lips of yours should have been made no less for music of song than for madness of kisses. Your slim gilt soul walks between passion and poetry.” Similarly, in March 1893, Wilde wrote to Douglas, “I must see you soon -- you are the divine thing I want,” and in August 1894, “you are the atmosphere of beauty through which I see life; you are the incarnation of all lovely things.”

The trials of Oscar Wilde broke down any barrier between his public and private communications. During his first trial, Wilde’s published works, including *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, were used as examples of his homosexuality. In his testimony during cross-examination, Wilde tried to use wit and cleverness to sidestep any clear admission of homosexuality. Edward Carson, Queenberry's defense attorney, questioned Wilde about his relationship with a young man:

Carson--Did you ever kiss him?
W--Oh, dear no. He was a peculiarly plain boy. He was, unfortunately, extremely ugly. I pitied him for it.
C--Was that the reason why you did not kiss him?
...
C--Why, sir, did you mention that this boy was extremely ugly?

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W---For this reason. If I were asked why I did not kiss a door-mat, I should say because I do not like to kiss door-mats.

... 

W--It is ridiculous to imagine that any such thing could have occurred under any circumstances. 27

Wilde’s testimony shows his attempt to avoid admission of his homosexuality and win over the judge and jurors with wit. During cross-examination, prosecutor C. F. Gill asked Wilde to explain the phrase “the love that dare not speak its name,” the last line of the poem “Two Loves,” written by Lord Douglas. Wilde explained it not as homosexuality, but as the most idealistic form of affection between two people:

‘The Love that dare not speak its name’ in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man ... such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy...It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo, and those two letters of mine, such as they are. It is in this century misunderstood... There is nothing unnatural about it. 28

When Wilde’s letters were read aloud during his trials, heard by jurors, press, and public spectators, the barrier between Wilde’s private and public communication was further destroyed. The prosecution used his communications to prove his guilt for acts of indecency. The letter of March 1893, in which Wilde referred to Douglas as “the divine thing I want” was read aloud by Carson, after Wilde had refused to read it aloud himself. 29 This was no longer a private communication of his love for Douglas. It was made public, for the world to hear. The world did, in fact, learn about every aspect of the trials. The Wilde Trials International News Archive lists

27 “Testimony of Oscar Wilde on Cross Examination,” (Factual Part) 1895.

28 “The Testimony of Oscar Wilde,” 1895.

29 Ibid.
almost 2,000 articles. Press not only in England, but also in France, Germany, the USA, Algeria, Egypt, and Jamaica communicated information about the details of Wilde’s private life.³⁰

Wilde communicated sorrow and hopelessness, as well as his own admission of his homosexuality, through his writings during and after his imprisonment. He no longer made the hidden allusions to homosexuality of his pre-trial writing. His letter of November 10, 1896, to the Home Secretary from HM Prison, Reading, petitioned for early release “on the grounds chiefly of mental health.” In the petition, Wilde speaks openly about his relationship with Douglas: “Of all modes of insanity -- and the petitioner is fully conscious now...that his whole life, for the two years preceding his ruin, was the prey of absolute madness -- the insanity of perverted sensual instinct is the one most dominant in its action on the brain.”³¹ In 1897, while in prison, Wilde wrote a letter to Douglas which was published after Wilde’s death as De Profundis. Here, Wilde openly expressed his feelings toward Douglas and society’s views of him. At first, he accuses Douglas of distracting him from his art and then turns to his own actions and the fate he brought upon himself.³² The humorous cleverness of The Importance of Being Earnest and the author on the witness stand is replaced in De Profundis by sadness and spirituality. Wilde writes, “...behind all this Beauty, satisfying though it be, there is some Spirit hidden of which the painted forms and shapes are but modes of manifestation, and it is with this Spirit that I desire to become in harmony.”³³

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Oscar Wilde spent the last three years of his life poor and exiled in France, where he experienced the full impact of society’s criminalization of homosexuality and the vicious communications of the press. He wrote of the harassment of the once-friendly news media to Robert Ross on 19 June, 1897, saying, “I have now put off Bosie indefinitely. I have been so harassed, and indeed frightened, at the thought of a possible scandal or trouble. The French papers describe me ... with Bosie at horse-races: So that must suffice for evil tongues.”34 In exile he wrote “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,”35 his last great work written before his death in 1900. In this poem, Wilde engages with themes of loss and emotional turbulence. The main focus of this poem was how men inevitably destroy what they love, much as Wilde and Douglas’ relationship destroyed their lives. By writing about topics that greatly affected him, including love, Wilde openly shared his views, even to a society that had lost respect for him.

Reviewing Wilde’s writing from before, during, and after his trials, shows that England’s criminalization of homosexuality and the resulting trials and imprisonment changed how and what Wilde communicated. Before his trials he was witty and clever in hiding references to his sexual orientation in published works, while being openly gay in private letters. The trials and their news coverage destroyed the barrier between public and private communication for Wilde, who became more open about his homosexuality and profound in his subject matter in his few post-prison works. They also paved the way for gay rights and freedom of expression in the arts. England repealed its anti-homosexuality legislation more than 70 years after Wilde’s imprisonment, in 1967, and voices like Wilde’s provide comfort and hope in the face of injustice.


and hatred.\textsuperscript{36, 37} No longer needed as a language of protected communication, Polari fell out of use.\textsuperscript{38} In 1967, gay rights activist, Craig Rodwell, named New York’s Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop, after “the most prominent person … identifiable as homosexual,” sold “books by queer authors that redefined the meaning of homosexuality,” and came to “symbolize the promise of gay liberation ... throughout the world.”\textsuperscript{39} Gay authors now write openly in Britain: in 2009, Carol Ann Duffy became Poet Laureate, the first woman and openly lesbian poet to hold the position in its 300-year history.\textsuperscript{40} The trials of Oscar Wilde have ultimately become one the of the many important milestones in the gay rights movement.\textsuperscript{41}


Annotated Bibliography

**Primary Sources**

“Testimony of Oscar Wilde on Cross Examination,” 1895. (Factual Part) [https://www.famous-trials.com/wilde/344-factualpart](https://www.famous-trials.com/wilde/344-factualpart). This testimony was used to prove Oscar Wilde’s wit throughout his trial.

“The Testimony of Oscar Wilde,” 1895. [https://www.famous-trials.com/wilde/342-wildetestimony](https://www.famous-trials.com/wilde/342-wildetestimony). This is the testimony of Oscar Wilde that was used to prove the type of communication he used when he defined, “the love that dare not speak its name.”

“The Wilde Scandal A True Bill Found.” *Australian Star*: Newspaper. April 24, 1895. This newspaper article helped me understand how the news was covered during the trials of Oscar Wilde.


The preface written by Oscar Wilde is in this book containing all of his works. His preface is used to explain himself to the critics, and to prove them wrong as well.

**Secondary Sources**


This website taught me about Carol Ann Duffy, and her career as a poet who is open about her sexual orientation.


This article is a review of one of Oscar Wilde’s plays written shortly after the play’s premiere.


This is an analysis of the main points of Oscar Wilde’s “The Ballad of Reading Gaol.”


This article gives information about the history and development of LGBT rights and follows the history of laws that impact the LGBT community in Britain.
https://www.history.com/topics/gay-rights.

This website gave a brief explanation of the gay rights movement, which I used in my paper to craft a connection between Oscar Wilde and current-day LGBT rights.


From this article, the main take-away was that Wilde’s life and demise were important milestones for gay rights in Britain.


From this article, I learned about Craig Rodwell and his bookstore called the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookstore.


This article was used to learn about the 19th century England’s secret language created by homosexual men, called Polari.

https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2001/jun/05/theatre.artsfeatures.

This article talked about hidden references to homosexuality in one of his most famous works, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

From this article I learned more about the origin of the code language, Polari.


This source gave great information and background about his life, including details about his schools, family, works, and relations.


This article provided important biographical information about Oscar Wilde’s wife and their marriage.


This article provides information about words and phrases used in The Importance of Being Earnest that would have been obvious references for gay people in Wilde’s time, yet not obvious to heterosexuals at that time.


This site gives links to summaries of contemporaneous news reports from all over the world about Oscar Wilde’s trials.

Online Museum Victoria and Albert Museum, “The First Stage Production of 'The Importance of Being Earnest', 1895,” 'The Importance of Being Earnest': The first stage production, 1895 (Victoria and Albert Museum, Cromwell Road, South Kensington, London SW7 2RL, January 31, 2013), http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/the-importance-of-being-earnest-first-stage-production/.
This article gives another first hand account of the success of The Importance of Being Earnest from one of the principal actors.


This article talked about the criticism Wilde received about his work, The Picture of Dorian Gray, which later was the reason for his writing of the preface.


This publication provides interesting information about the public’s reception of The Picture of Dorian Gray, as well as an analysis of Wilde’s own edits of the story that diminished homosexual references in the work.


This is an article that summarizes the part of Wilde’s testimony where he talks about “the love that dare not speak its name.”


This article reveals the edits made to Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray, due to the original text containing too many homoerotic details.