

# It's Time For The Left To Stop Idolizing Oscar Wilde. He's A Pervert

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*Warning: this article contains explicit content.*

I've always been a fan of Oscar Wilde. As well as being a great servant of the English language, he was iconoclastic, flamboyant, and brave. In the 21st century, he is just as well known for **his** famous witticisms as he is for **his famous works**, including "The Picture of Dorian Gray" and "The Importance of Being Earnest."

Most people are generally aware that Wilde fell in love with the young undergraduate Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas, and that the pair maintained a relationship until Wilde's trial and eventual imprisonment for homosexual offences. What most people don't know about is Wilde's pattern of sexual behavior in middle age.

This icon, at the height of his fame, took advantage of his wealth and status to solicit, groom, and harass young men and teenage boys, whose willingness as sexual partners was ambiguous at best. In the age of the Me Too movement, and with the dust having settled after the downfall of Kevin Spacey, Wilde is overdue for a re-evaluation.

## We're Re-Evaluating Everyone, and It's Oscar Wilde's Turn

To a great extent, Wilde has been shielded from criticism. He has often, quite fairly, been judged a victim of Victorian hypocrisy. Some make a historical relativist argument, cautioning against taking things out of context and judging Wilde's actions by our own standards.

Since homosexuality scarcely existed in Wilde's time as a category to be reviled, they argue, there were no rules or legal standards of behavior for consent. LGBT culture was unfixed and undefined, and therefore Wilde should be given a little more leeway in how we assess his behavior. Bosie's father, Lord Queensbury, was a brute, a two-dimensional antagonist, whose escalating harassment of Wilde and Bosie renders them easily sympathetic. Wilde's shocking downfall is often viewed as more than enough suffering, and casts him as a martyr for his sexuality.

In jail, Wilde wrote "De Profundis" (translated as "From the Depths"), a confessional work in which he castigates himself for his decadent behavior, and for squandering much of his talent. In the wake of his fall from grace, this seemed like sufficient self-reflection and an atonement of sorts.

Perhaps most importantly, Wilde has, for several generations, been a *necessary* icon for LGBT people: too significant, too ideal, regarded too reverentially for his reputation to face any serious challenge. But the culture has changed in two significant ways, which necessitate a far more negative assessment of Wilde, to the point we can still appreciate him as an artist, but with far less warmth and admiration for him as a person.

In the second half of the 20th century, when LGBT as a category was fighting for recognition, there were not many clear LGBT cultural icons to draw on for a sense of empowerment, so Wilde was of profound importance. But in our more tolerant age, when a large number of historical figures have been revealed as queer, and modern popular culture is full of openly gay celebrities and intellectuals, the weight of reliance on Wilde is far less, and there is greater license to examine him more critically.

Secondly, in the wake of the Me Too movement, particularly Spacey's downfall, Wilde looks distinctly dubious—by the standards of decency and behavior both *in our* age, and in *his own*.

## What Oscar Wilde Did Was Reprehensible

The object of Wilde's first homosexual liaison was Robbie Ross. Ross moved in

with Wilde and his wife, Constance, while he was cramming to get into Cambridge. The situation was not uncommon in the world the Wildes inhabited. What was, and is, contentious, is that Wilde's sexual **relationship with Ross** began when Wilde was a 33-year-old man, and Ross was a 17-year-old school boy.

“Bosie” Douglass also **introduced Wilde to young male sex workers**: tough youngsters around Piccadilly Circus, and a circle of “renters.” Wilde didn't exclusively seek teenagers, but his pattern indicates he preferred them to grown men when he had the choice.

Many of these renters were later witnesses in Wilde's trial for indecency. In many published accounts of the Wilde trials, the rent boys have been dismissed as rough trade whose statements are unreliable. But three boys gave statements who were not prostitutes—Walter Grainger, Edward Shelley, and Alphonse Conway—and their stories make uncomfortable reading.

Grainger was a 16-year-old servant in the house where Wilde stayed during his visits to Oxford. During Wilde's trial, **Grainger testified** that Wilde “placed his penis between my legs and satisfied himself.” Grainger went on to testify that while he was sleeping one night, Wilde woke him and “worked me up with his hand and made me spend into his mouth.” Wilde then told Grainger he would be in “very serious trouble” if anyone found out about their private liaisons.

Defense attorney Edward Carson asked Wilde if he had ever kissed Grainger, and Wilde replied, “Oh, no, never in my life... he was a peculiarly plain boy... his appearance was so very unfortunately—very ugly—I mean—I pitied him for it.” Given how Wilde had used Grainger, his flippant answer seems especially cruel. It was the turning point of the whole libel case since it implied that if Grainger were handsome, Wilde would happily have kissed him.

Wilde was 39 when he **met and seduced Conway**, a boy of 16, during a six-week family holiday to Worthing. When Queensberry's detectives tracked Conway down the following year, he gave a statement saying that Wilde had **touched him inappropriately**, and taken him into his bedroom two or three times, where the pair had stripped and lain in bed together; that Wilde had masturbated him on

a walk; and, finally, on a trip to Brighton, “used his mouth” on him.

Wilde additionally attempted to court Fred Atkins, a (comparatively older) 20-year-old. Wilde invited Atkins to Paris to serve as his secretary, but Atkins said the job only entailed “writing out... half a page of a manuscript, which took about 10 minutes.” Atkins said Wilde spent the rest of their time together “making improper proposals.”

Around this time, Wilde became involved with another 16-year-old, who had been brought into London from Bruges to be installed in the Albermarle Hotel.

According to Oscar Browning, a contemporary of Wilde, “On Saturday, the boy slept with Douglas; on Sunday he slept with Oscar. On Monday he slept with a woman at Douglas’s expense.”

The Albermarle Hotel was also where Wilde invited another boy, 18-year-old Edward Shelley, to dine with him. Shelley later testified: “I had whisky and soda and smoked cigarettes in Mr. Wilde’s sitting room. Mr. Wilde said, ‘Will you come into my bedroom?’ I did not know what he meant. As I went into the room Mr. Wilde kissed me. He also put his arms round me. I had been taking a lot of wine. I felt insulted, degraded, and objected vigorously.”

## This Behavior Caused Kevin Spacey’s Fall from Grace

How dissimilar is this pattern of behavior from Spacey’s? For instance, of the 15 accusers who came out against him, one told the **BBC’s Victoria Derbyshire** that Spacey tried to seduce him at his New York apartment when he was 17. The complainant said Spacey asked him to share his bed, but he slept on the sofa, then woke up with the actor’s arms around him: “I was uncomfortable at best, traumatized at worst.”

Another accuser, a 16-year-old theater usher when Spacey was appearing in a play, said Spacey invited him and a male friend to his apartment to watch a movie. Instead, Spacey allegedly gave them cocktails and played pornography on the TV. “He knew that I

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was in high school. It was pretty clear,” the young man said. “It’s not like I was pretending to be an older, cooler person.”

Wilde has the moral fig-leaf of financial transactions sometimes, but in many of the other instances, the teenagers convey, in their testimony, a similar sense of discomfit and disillusionment at being taken advantage of.

One of Spacey’s accusers alleges that he was 14 when he and Spacey first entered sexual relations. Margaret Cotta, a chambermaid at the Savoy Hotel, **testified at Wilde’s trial** that while Wilde’s lover Alfred Douglas was visiting, she discovered a 14-year-old boy in Wilde’s bed.

Cotta said Wilde’s sheets “were always in a most disgusting state...with traces of Vaseline, soil and semen.” Cotta later revised her testimony, suggesting the boy may have been slightly older, but this impression of a young teen in then middle-aged Wilde’s hotel suite is not a pleasant one.

## Oh, and Oscar Wilde Was Also a Sex Tourist

Wilde and Bosie traveled abroad, to countries like Italy and Algeria, where homosexual liaisons between English speakers and local youth were known to flourish. It’s what others have called the seduction of the Orient and the Mediterranean, and what these days is referred to, rather less eloquently, as international sex tourism. In effect, these countries were the South East Asia of their time, where affluent Westerners would solicit deprived or uneducated youngsters in seedy, unregulated contexts.

In Algiers in 1895, Wilde procured for fellow writer Andre Gide a flute-playing Arab boy, primarily to amuse himself and Lord Alfred Douglas. As Gide climbed into a carriage with the boy, fidgeting and procrastinating, **Wilde looked on, triumphant.**

According to “**Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde**,” the nearly 46-year-old playwright had an affair with a 15-year-old while he lived in Sicily during the last seven

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months of his life. Wilde wrote a letter detailing his relationship with Giuseppe Loverde. He said of the boy, “Fifteen and most sweet... He said he never would [forget me]: and indeed, I don’t think he will, for every day I kissed him behind the high altar.” Bosie and Wilde shared most of their “lovers,” and Oscar, during this time, wrote of Bosie being devoted to “a dreadful little ruffian aged 14.”

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Even Wilde’s celebrated defense of “the love that dare not speak its name” as “a great affection of an elder for a younger man” now strikes us as skewed and pretentious. Wilde takes the Hellenic ideal of elder mentors aesthetically appreciating younger men in ancient Greece, and equates it with sordid pickups of teenagers. His were superficial liaisons with no intellectual or mentoring aspects, adolescents to be enjoyed and discarded.

Declaring his “love that dare not speak its name” in the hope that posterity, a more enlightened age, will see him proven right isn’t an act of noble martyrdom. The modern age should see through this vainglorious rhetoric, and sympathize with the teenage boys whose circumstances, and experiences with Wilde, may not have been as “greatly affectionate” nor a re-enactment of the noble practices of the classical age as Wilde would have us believe.

I’ll always appreciate Wilde as an artist. I’ve seen “The Importance of Being Earnest” half-a-dozen times, and I’ll probably see it at least that many again. But Wilde as a person? Nope.