Kirsten Lybarger
Oscar Wilde
Professor Hale
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Bristow, Joseph. "'A Complex Multiform Creature': Wilde's Sexual Identities." *The Cambridge*

> *Companion to Oscar Wilde*. Peter Raby. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
>
> 195-218. Print.

This article by Joseph Bristow focuses on how people who analyze Wilde's works may

analyze them in terms of "homosexuality" instead of a "male-male relationship" which, he states,

are two different things. He asserts using the term "homosexuality" when talking about Wilde's

sexual preference is incorrect and people do this error when analyzing his work today. Bristow

feels that these interpretations could harm Wilde's style of writing and ruin the overall meaning

of his works. Bristow rejects the term homosexuality because during the 1800's, this term was

not yet used and even if it was, Wilde did not consider himself to be a homosexual. In the

Victorian period Bristow says people had seen sodomy only as a "sexual act, not a style of sexual

being". The idea of labeling sexual acts into a category was just starting to occur and the term

"sexual invert" was used. This meant that a male soul could live in a female, making her lesbian,

and a female soul could live in a male, making him gay. The idea of the sexual invert label

repulsed Wilde because he did not want to be labeled in such a way. Wilde only saw his

connection with other men in terms of a relationship that Socrates described which was sharing a

connection on an educational, spiritual, and eventually a passionate level.

In the beginning of the article, Bristow mentions the increase of people becoming more

open to analyzing Wilde's works began around the 1980's in relation to the increase of gay

studies. People were using the modern term of homosexual to describe Wilde instead of the

Socratic male-male relationship Wilde used. People felt that Wilde would write in a "homosexual way" which caused them to twist his writings to fit their thinking of a modern example of a homosexual. An example of this is in *The Imporance of Being Earnest*. Christopher Craft says that Algernon's made up friend Bunbury could be a pseudonym "for the erotic oscillatin within the male subject, his fundamental waffling between Jack and Ernest". Craft also said the running pun of Ernest throughout the play could be a code name for the homosexual desire.

One writer, who looked at Wilde's works in the form of having just a male-male relationship and not in terms of homosexuality, was Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. She instead said that to analyze his works, they need to be looked at in terms of how Plato or Socrates defined a male-male relationship because that is how Wilde seen his own relationships. This was to look at the relationship with respect, and as a way to "lead to higher forms of love." The younger male looks up to the older male on an intellectual level and eventually the attraction of beauty brings the two together.

In the next section of Bristow's essay, he talks about some interpretations of the novels *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* and *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*. *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* is about the mystery behind who Shakespeare wrote his sonnets to. In the novel, there was a theory they were written to a Willie Hughes and throughout the novel the characters become infatuated with this theory, almost to the point where they feel they were the ones who Shakespeare was writing too. In one case, one of the men even kills himself when the theory of Willie Hughes was found to be fake. Bristow writes about different interpretations of the novel, one being from a Lawrence Danson. Danson saw the novel as Wilde not wanting to conform to society's pressure, such as being in a traditional nuclear family. He saw it as Wilde wanting to be able to have a relationship

with another man without being incriminated. This would have been more of a homosexual interpretation. Another interpretation was by Linda Dowling who disagreed with Danson. She saw the novel as a way for Wilde to show that a male-male relationship could occur, in the terms of Shakespeare writing sonnets to a man, but it was caustic, by some men killing themselves. He says "In showing how such loving relationships are unrepresentable, fantastic and 'fatal', the narrative is hardly assuring us that the Socratic ethos survives admirably intact in the late-Victorian period".

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, interpretations have been made that Dorian's picture reflects his hidden sin of homosexual desire. By him repressing the desires, it is causing his portrait to degrade. Also, the interpretations claim that at the root of his crimes and immorality, is his homosexuality and he committed them because the hurt it caused him to suppress his feelings. In the end Dorian kills himself to escape the torture. This also parallels with *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* because of the deathly effects that a male-male relationship has on the characters. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was also used against Wilde while he was on trial for sodomy. When he was asked about the desires of Basil for Dorian, he described the connection between them as a male-male relationship where others seen a potentially "homosexual" relationship.

Some interpretations of his plays were also included in this article and how a Socratic relationship between people of the same sex is shot down. In his plays like *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Importance of Being Ernest*, married life is elevated and "promises to harmonize the soul and body." This is done by the engagements at the end and Algernon's almost immorality as a bachelor in the beginning of the play.

The main points to Bristow's article were to show that Wilde did not believe he was a homosexual and that analysis into Wilde's works in the form of him being a homosexual takes away from the true meaning of his works. Wilde wished to show that his relationships were more than just pleasure but also based in intellect and education. His writings reflect how he strove to make connections with other males but society only seen that as a scandal a way to send him to jail.