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# 'The Great White Caterpillar': Oscar Wilde and the Objectification of the Male Body during the Eighteen Nineties

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**Abstract**

Oscar Wilde's life was a challenge to the Victorian ways of manhood – a challenge with all a man's body, mind and soul against the Victorian projection of a monolithic ideal manhood. Being a celebrity dramatist, a fashion-icon, a living genius in the body of a dandy, Oscar Wilde's life questioned the superficiality of the myths of masculine propriety and male ethos by playing with and performing bodily subversions in the Late Victorian context. This article intends to read how Wilde's contemporaries – his acquaintances, critics and the popular culture of caricature – constructed Wilde, the man, as a visual-icon, around the binary of beauty/bestiality, in terms of his body. In turn, the paper establishes that body stands as a dynamic and problematic site where physicality, sexuality and genitality coexist in their multiple organisations of coherence and discontinuities. The body acquires meaning through fashion and the choice of fashion is in turn a reflection of the body's preferred codes of performances within the socio-cultural permissibility of its existence. Thus, in deconstructing the heteronormative norm, Wilde's body was constructed and objectified variously by his onlookers. Wilde's body adorns a flux of performative/bodily masculinity/femininity where definitive identity is a mad man's dream.

**Keywords:** body, Aestheticism, Dandyism, caricature, visual, objectification

'Wise kings wear Shabby clothes, and leave the gold lace to the drum major.'[2]

– George Bernard Shaw

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), the celebrity dramatist and writer of the late Victorian era, is one of the first ever visual-icons and embodiment of hedonistic fashion in British popular culture. His masculinities set gender as a free-floating combination of unstable, performative codes. His forms of masculine self-fashioning, both in life and literature, defies the universal axes of gender difference and they choose to be men by performing the codes of gender from and beyond convention. Consequently, the gendered cultural subject emerges as an image of subversion, threatening establishment. His adherence to the ideas of Aestheticism during the eighteen eighties and the consequent pursuit of pleasure, beauty and art, and his redefining the cult of Dandyism during the nineties, were marked by London society as 'being the latest fashionable reincarnation of the effeminate dandy' (*Oscar* 171). Wilde was never dubious to indulge in ideas that put hedonism over British seriousness.

Being a celebrity dramatist, a fashion-icon, a living genius in the body of a dandy, Oscar Wilde's life questioned the superficiality of the myths of masculine propriety and male ethos by playing with and performing superficiality itself. Wilde took every possible relief from conventionality and used various props to escape from the clutches of social expectations. When P. Martino observes that, 'In Wilde, art and life are not confronted in abstract terms, but in their

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

fascinating dialogue they compose what we might define "a theatre of everyday life," life as an unpredictable process of self-writing.' (16), he positions Wilde somewhere in between his real and crafted selves. Through performing his masculinities in visually meaningful ways that constantly pointed to the multiplicity and fluidity of identity, Wilde raised the necessary questions about masculinisation and objectification of the male body. In both he became victorious in emerging as a 'living play'(79). Wilde's life and theatre were a play within a play that added to the multiplicity of the performances, denying any easily affordable truth about gender or masculinity. Wilde, being much ahead of his time, anticipated Judith Butler's theories that destabilize the fundamental linearity of sex, gender, identity and performative construction of identity. It is through his life that he subverted the myths of propriety, put up the challenge against conventional masculinity, and shattered the sexual morality of late Victorian masculinist culture.

Wilde's conscious subversion of the binaries – serious/trivial, theatre/life, masculine/feminine, real/artificial – is one of his most whetted weapons to play with the concepts of identity. This paper attempts to trace the operation of the beauty/bestiality binary as one of the fundamental constructions in the creation of the persona of Oscar Wilde. As the author himself 'revelled in blurring the lines' between fact and fiction, it seems impossible 'to reduce the enigmatic Wilde to a simple, 'solid fact' (Kingston 226). Wilde states this clearly in *De Profundis*: 'I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me…' (46). Taking this scope to the farthest, Wilde's contemporaries, his ever-widening circle of friends and foes, admirers and adversaries, created an objectified image of Wilde, much beyond the control of the person. To think through the ideas of David Haldane Lawrence:

> It could also be argued that 'masculine self-fashioning', and the necessity for display to an audience gaze, is taken to its extreme in the world of entertainment, where men appear on stage, in costume, wearing make-up, and acting out aspects of masculinity often alien to their own personae. (44)

The extent of theatricality in Wilde's life, which made London society its 'legitimate stage' (44), actually, 'confronted the gaze of both sex' (44), either in praise or in condemnation. In the process, Wilde became an example of the 'objectification of masculine glamour' (45). However, Wilde's distinction lies in epitomizing the un-masculine in the effeminate essence of a male body, later reviled by the hegemonic culture of masculinity for its variance from normative sexuality.

Being an 'aesthetic poseur', 'a resplendent dandy', 'effeminate' (Mikhail 133-136), and a homosexual were not permissible attributes for being an ideal man during the Victorian times. Thus, it can be argued that Wilde did not participate in the 'masquerade of naturalness, which perplexes popular discussions of gender' (Gardiner 8). He could see beyond the 'myth of masculine sameness'(12) and compose his characters accordingly. Wilde's stance towards the queer has a different dimension, as Campbell writes: 'But for Wilde the male queer is neither an essential woman nor a compromise between the two sexes. It is not the body that is masculine (*corpore virili*); rather, the flesh is strongly associated with the feminine… In Wide's implied mythology, Psyche is a boy.' (Campbell 94). The alleged effeminacy of Wilde's body/soul had also been a target of Wilde's contemporary caricaturist to construct the deviant nature of his self.

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

The claim for visibility is the primary corollary for a performance. The existence of a performer presupposes the presence of some audience. In case of Wilde, audience was his most necessary prerequisite for performing at all. Wilde's performance thrived on publicity and he could hardly foresee the negative impact that his variance from normativity cast on the orthodox British morality. James Eli Adams evokes:

> No author in the history of literature in English has been more prominent as a visual icon, both in life and afterwards, than Oscar Wilde. That visibility is both a testament to and a source of Wilde's power, almost from his first appearance in Egland, to startle and unsettle…Wilde rejuvenated the stance of the dandy, which had long vexed the middle-class imagination as an emblem of idle, unproductive existence, and thus of effeminacy. But Wilde's dandyism also elicited a more unsettling prospect: that masculine identity might not be a stable ground for secure moral judgement, but instead might be a mode of performance, a set of social scripts to be perpetually enacted and revised.' (220)

In case of Wilde, the gaze that he attracted, can be divided in two distinct temporal phases. The eighties mark his rise as a proponent of aestheticism while the nineties saw him as a practitioner of dandyism; both of which gained simultaneous admiration and antagonism. How the codes of attack on the artist shifted from mere exaggeration of the props and exhibits that he exhibited to the demonisation of the body of the deviant brings to note the prevalent cultural strictures that actively suppressed threats towards the heteronormatively organised norms of sexuality. It can be argued that the visual exaggeration, mostly in forms of caricatures, created and circulated a magnified image of deviancy that culminated in the notorious downfall of the celebrity artist.

Dominic Janes, in his milestone work on the role of British caricature in the construction and representation of 'queer fashioning', observes how the rise and fall of Oscar Wilde, the celebrity aesthetic and dandy was preordained by the culture of lampooning, even present as early as the 1870s, when Wilde was identified as 'the possessor of the Aesthetic Medal' and was consequently 'picked for the US tour'(*Oscar* 176). The proliferation of such culture of critiquing the deviant not only worked in amplifying the visibility of the person involved, but eventually concretized the image of the person in the mind of the orthodox consumer, for whom the practice of aestheticism, art, theatre, dandyism and homosexuality were but interchangeable terms. Janes recounts:

> With the decline of print shops after the 1820s, satirical caricatures found a new home in the form of cartoon illustrations of comic periodicals, of which the most famous was *Punch*, which had been founded in 1841. It was, to begin with, a mildly radical publication, but it rapidly became more genteel and politically conservative. This meant that, paradoxically, the more hostile it became to the artistic avant-garde, the more coded its attack on sexual deviance had to be in order to avoid accusations of impropriety from its mainly middle-class readership. (176)

Thus, the mainstream consumer was provided with an image of the aesthete and dandy as someone who was beyond the conventional codes of masculinity. The visual image was always in circulation, often as a parallel, sometimes even supplanting the entity.

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

Wilde, during his early days as an aesthete, was celebrated as 'an Apostle of the new cult of Aestheticism' (Mikhail 203), across the Atlantic. Among the craze surrounding Wilde's presence, the newspapers were thronged with caricatures that mocked Wilde's obsession with sunflowers, or lilies as an adornment of his buttonhole, or as mere part of his extraordinary appearance. Mrs. Thomas Bailey Aldrich, wife of Mr. Aldrich, the editor of the 'Atlantic' quotes Mr. Stedman's opinion about the sensation that Wilde created during his lecture in Boston on 31st January 1882:

> This Philistine town [New York] is making a fool of itself over Oscar Wilde, who is lecturing on Art Subjects, appearing in public in an extraordinary dress – a loose shirt with a turn-down collar, a flowing tie of uncommon shade, velvet coat, knee-breeches – and often he is seen in public carrying a lily, or a sunflower, in his hand… A number of Harvard students dressed up in a burlesque of the aesthetic costume. The masqueraders waited until Oscar Wilde had stepped upon the platform, and then trooped in, in single file, each assuming a demeanor more absurd than that of the man who preceded him… all were dressed in swallow-tail coats, knee-breeches, flowing wigs and green ties. They all wore large lilies in their buttonholes, and each man carried a huge sunflower as he limped along. (48-49)

Such an extravagant performance only aided in magnifying the visual awkwardness of Wilde's excess that earned him the epithet of 'Jumbo Aesthetic', as portrayed in a contemporary caricature. However, among Wilde's circle of admirers, his magnetic personality was unavoidable. Actress Lillie Langtry reminisced about Wilde, 'When he wore a daisy in his buttonhole, thousands of young men did likewise. When he proclaimed the sunflower 'adorable', it was to be found adorning every drawing-room' (258). Lord Goring's obsession with buttonholes resembles Wilde's: 'I am the only person of the smallest importance in London at present who wears a buttonhole.' (*The Ideal Husband* 232). It was Wilde's buttonholes that never escaped the attention of his society helping them in objectifying the prop not as part of the person's accessory, but as amounting to the person himself.

Thus, 'the Sunflower Poet' (Mikhail 59), was revered or rebuked through verbal and pictorial representations that were loaded with images of the person's appearance in contemporary magazines and newspapers. *The Daily Examiner*, published an article, 'Oscar Wilde: An Interview with the Apostle of Aestheticism' in 27th March, 1882, where the visual appeal of Wilde's body and the extraordinary style that he flaunted, occupies primary significance:

> …a tall, well built, clean-shaven, eccentrically-dressed young man with remarkable features, a somber, melancholy face… Wherever he moved the crowd, guided by a large, wide-brimmed, white slouch hat he wore, followed, not obtrusively, but quietly and respectfully. Mr Wilde was dressed in a style that would attract general attention anywhere outside of an artist's studio or chambers, and there was no need for any one to point in order to identify him. (59-60)

What is noteworthy here is that, Wilde was celebrated for displaying masculinity that was far removed from the stereotypical image of an ideal man in the nineteenth century context. The masculinist subject in the Western context tended to promote imperial vigour, physical prowess

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

and virility, none of which had a place in the Wildean masculine identity construction. Yet, his non-conformist gender performance always attracted spectators who were Wilde's ardent admirers.

The visual potency of Wilde, as a man, is unmatched in a literary artist in the history of literature prior to him, or perhaps even after. This very power to appeal through non-conformist styling of the masculine body makes Wilde all the more vulnerable as a dissident. According to David Haldane Lawrence, 'With the post-Wildean decline in Aestheticism the heterosexual appeal of the leading man intensified' (56). It is obvious for an audience to denounce a dissident ideal from a public platform like theatre which was supposed to promote propriety:

> To be seen to be espousing an unpopular cause, such as that of Oscar Wilde, could mean the loss of his position in a theatre largely supported by high society audiences only too ready to condemn any deviation from the norm. (56)

When Dominic Janes discusses 'the development of the sexualization of male consumer culture' (*Oscar* 188), he establishes the link between the proliferation of mass marketing and the consequent objectification of the male body. He also points out:

> Wilde achieved notoriety precisely by going beyond commercially sanctioned sartorial norms. Yet the power of the new mass market, and its interests in visual desirability, gave his innovations in fashion wider significance. (188)

Interestingly enough, the Wilde who was accused of sodomitical excess was not the Wilde who practiced extravagance in style, but the one who left behind the peculiarities of Aesthetic styling for the subtleties of Dandyism. It can be argued that, Wilde's contemporary champion of same-sex love, Edward Carpenter (1844- 1929), was not renounced by the same hypocrite Victorian culture, because he did not disturb the stereotypical organization of the gender norms visually.

One of Wilde's close acquaintances, Anna, Comtesse de Bremont, recounts Wilde's change in appearance during the days of his marriage with Constance Lloyd:

> It was Oscar Wilde – but how changed!... I noted the up-to-date elegance of his attire – the short, crisp locks of hair, with just a suspicion of the old-time wave, brushed back from the high brow, the indefinable air of the dandy that hung around him. He was no longer the aesthetic poseur, but a resplendent dandy, from the pale pink carnation in the lapel of his frock-coat to the exquisite tint of the gloves and the cut of the low shoes of the latest mode. (Mikhail 133).

Even if he entered heteronormative marriage, his homosexual inclinations never subsided. In case of Wilde, as Dominic Janes notes, 'such gossip was eclipsed but never quite extinguished as a result of marriage to Constance Mary Lloyd (1859-98) in 1884.' (*Oscar* 186). Janes has also noted that 'mature Wilde attempted to move away from public intimations of effeminacy through his adoption of more discreet styles of dandyism' (208).

Whatever be the contradiction between the perception that Wilde consciously created around his persona, it was highly determined by his appearance, the visual being, his idiosyncratic self - fashioning. The admiration/antagonism binary around which Wilde's visual being as an emblem of deviancy flourished from an aesthete to a dandy, and finally subsided in the image of a homosexual, confirms the penultimate paradox that he found himself into. The pose/practice

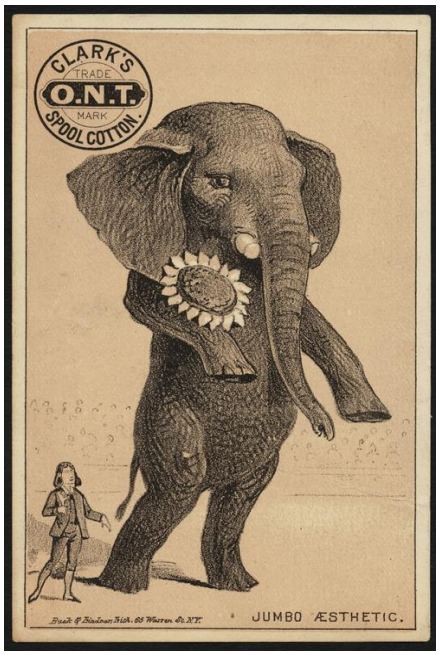
ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

paradigm, that brought his doom, is highly dependent on this criterion of visually projecting something to such an extent as to be amounting to practicing something. When Wilde was accused of sodomy by Marquess of Queensbury, this pose/practice dichotomy was harped on the very question of Wilde's appearance whose apparent notoriety was publicised as non-conformist by his contemporaries:

> Wilde: … I than said to him, "Lord Queensbury do you seriously accuse your son and me of sodomy?" He said, "I do not say you are it, but you look it *(laughter)*…
> Wilde: – but you look it and you pose as it, which is just as bad." (1)

The term pose, mostly associated with Wilde after his infamous trial in 1895, best suits his design to deliberately complicate his sexual inclination. According to P. Martino "those who do not perform their masculinity in culturally approved manner are liable to be ostracized, even punished. For example, in the nineteenth century avant-garde artists and bohemians like Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley contradicted euginistic definitions of masculinity."' (8).

Figure-1 Oscar Wilde as Jumbo Elephant Aesthetic




© Digital Commonwealth

Figure-2 '*Pick Me Up' Oscar Wilde* by Max Beerbohm


© Dominic Janes, *Oscar Wilde Prefigured*

That Wilde's sexual identity perplexed the London society of the 1890s, was part of an organized programme of the celebrity dramatist. Wilde was 'an artist divided between irreconcilable identities' (Knox 95). The 'alleged connections between aestheticism and both gender and sexual transgression' was testified by Wilde's being 'often seen amid a bevy of slim youths' (*Oscar* 200). Following the 1890s Decadence Wilde had become the icon of abnormal and immoral sexual and pederastic practices and attracted suspicion for his notoriety. Parallelly, 'the

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

role of the theatre as the locale in which Wilde learned the possibilities of linguistic play and of posing and playing roles' (208) remains indicative in Wilde's 'sexual dissidence' (208). However, in the wake of the disreputable trial of Wilde 'it was essential for a completely moral, heterosexual, or 'manly' image to be maintained, particularly in the years following the downfall of Oscar Wilde in 1895'(Lawrence 51). The need for such propagandist marketing of the heteronormative, muscular male body, prior to and during the years of World War I, necessitated the elimination, or at least gross vilification, of unorthodox bodies like Wilde's the history of masculinity.

When Evelyn Waugh declared, "Let Us Return to the Nineties, but not to Oscar Wilde"[3], the repulsion for the excess that Wilde projected was not only culturally justified but politically motivated. As Roy has pointed out:

> In the post Victorian era culture where overdressing had immediate association with Oscar Wilde and his sexuality, Evelyn Waugh's resentment for the decadents and effeminates is justifiably directed to the undisputed champion of hedonism and dandyism as a form of masculine self-fashioning. In the wake of the notorious trial of Oscar Wilde in 1895, it became necessary to erase him from the cultural consciousness of England as his image could result in decentering the ideal heteronormative masculine subject in the western context. (46)

Therefore, contrary to the effeminate, non-conformist demeanour, 'the combination of a handsome physiognomy, physical prowess, a business sense and an underlying intelligence, was a major factor in their promotion to a god-like status' (Lawrence 58).

It was during the mid-nineties that Wilde's physical excess became synonymous with monstrosity not only for his pose as a dandy but for his non-conformist sexual practices. The body of the aesthetic was ripped off its primary obsession, i. e ideal beauty and slender youth, and was made to represent the insatiable desire in the form of bodily excess. We must note here that by the mid-nineties Wilde had gained excessive weight which rendered him more vulnerable towards the attack of his critics. His fellow dramatist George Bernard Shaw opines, 'I have always maintained that Oscar was a giant in the pathological sense, and that this explains a good deal of his weakness' (289). Thus, Wilde's bodily excess was equated with his dissident sexual orientation, alternatively his 'weakness'. Interestingly, during the early years of Aestheticism, Wilde's body was ridiculed and objectified for the idiosyncratic overabundance of props and accessories that decked him. On the contrary, during the late years of his Dandyism, it was Wilde's body itself that stood for the excess, either of weight or of sexual immorality. The shift of objectification or sexualization of the male body from objects to the subject himself, calls for critical reflection.

The portraiture of Wilde in contemporary caricature reflects this shift of attention from profusion of style to the demonization of the body. As Janes marks, 'In his own lifetime, Oscar Wilde had been drawn either as a wasp-wristed aesthete or as a bloated profligate' (*Freak* 177), and how he 'appeared in contemporary cartoons as a man of affectation and physical excess' (176). Thus, bodily acts and sartorial practices merge with the performative and bodily existence of a dandified male body in determining masculine self-fashioning as part of a gendered person's identity construction in both subjective and objective domains. Ironically, it is Wilde, the creator

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of Dorian in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), who suffers and wanes like the picture of Dorian in the novel. Wilde, perhaps, could envision the interchangeability of visual and actual existence in terms of gendering and sexualizing the male body in its highly performative context.

Notes:

1. In his 'pen portrait' of Wilde, in a letter to Frank Harris, George Bernard Shaw pointed out to the physical appearance of Wilde in terms which is indicative of the apathy that his image provoked; 'Now Oscar was an overgrown man, with something not quite normal about his bigness: something that made Lady Colin Campbell, who hated him, describe him as "the great white caterpillar." You yourself describe the disagreeable impression he made on you physically, in spite of his fine eyes and style.' *Pen Portraits*, p- 289.
2. Highly critical of Wildean or any form of hedonism, George Bernard Shaw opined that 'Now Wilde was so in love with style that he never realized the danger of biting off more than he could chew: in other words, of putting up more style than his matter would carry.' Ibid, p-292.
3. Quoted in Dominic Janes, *Freak to Chic* from Evelyn Waugh's essay "Let Us Return to the Nineties, but Not to Oscar Wilde", *Harper's Bazaar* 3, no.2, November 1930, p. 51.

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