

The Resurrection of Oscar Wilde: A Cultural Afterlife.

Julia Wood. Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2007. 156pp.
ISBN: 978-0-7188-3071-7

Reading *The Resurrection of Oscar Wilde: A Cultural Afterlife*, I was struck by how much I had thought I knew about this prominent Victorian celebrity and how eye-opening this book actually was. One of Julia Wood's key themes in this work is highlighted in the title: she is concerned with how the various centenary events that commemorated both the trial and death of Oscar Wilde have contributed to resurrecting him not only as a literary celebrity but as a mythic figure. As Wood observes, "the emergence of the popular, mythic Wilde is only a problem for the scholar who wishes to focus exclusively upon Wilde's writings, because the man and the work cannot be divorced" (33). Therefore, Wood's study is as much about exploring one's emotional response to Oscar the man, as it is about critically negotiating his writings.

Just as the Victorian author "cross[ed] over to so many people" (118), Wood's work, too, appeals to a wide audience and has certainly been marketed as such. The cultural phenomenon that is 'Oscar Wilde' goes far beyond scholarly investigation and this is the pattern that Wood's study picks up on. More specifically it uncovers Oscar Wilde as a popular construct, something which Wilde himself was keenly aware of when he is said to have remarked that his name was 'destined to be in everybody's mouth'. *Resurrection* effectively explores the ways in which such a startling premonition of his legacy is relevant to the twentieth and twenty-first-century public.

Wood's opening chapter provides an overview of Wilde's trials and suffering and also documents the gay rights group, 'Outrage!', attempts to secure him a formal apology in 1995. While many would acquiesce with this sentiment, Woods explains how such a campaign was problematic because Wilde was undeniably guilty under Victorian law (26). While Wilde never received a Royal Pardon, his earlier 'admission' to the Poet's Corner in 1995, Wood argues, provides a similar apologetic gesture in this contemporary context. For Wood, the act of forgiveness transcends Wilde himself, in that "members of the public who have no ostensible connection with Wilde's sufferings come to see his sufferings as synonymous with their plights, so that the apology to Wilde becomes articulated on their behalf" (25). In subsequent chapters Wood focuses on other particular events from the Wilde centenaries and surveys the ways in which 'the cult of Wilde' affects various people, from personal through to intellectual perspectives.

The status of Oscar Wilde as a gay icon is explored in the second chapter with Wood detailing how, for members of the homosexual community, "Wilde's sufferings becom[e] a focal point through which the cause of gay rights could be articulated" (42). Chapter Three turns instead to Wilde scholars and their reading of his downfall in terms of a Jesus Christ narrative, an allusion which Wilde himself posited in *De Profundis*. The most remarkable thing about this chapter is that it repositions Bosie in this tragic narrative, arguing that he is not the villain that popular history has led us to believe. While Wood is not the first Wilde scholar to make such a claim, anyone who has read *De Profundis* must find it difficult to view Bosie in any other than a negative way. In challenging the common perception and historically documented notion of Wilde's lover, Wood proposes that Wilde himself could be viewed in "a far less flattering light" (66). Woods cites evidence ranging from Wilde's own letters to other scholarly sources in order to show that the story of Wilde and Douglas reads

less as a hero-and-villain narrative, than as a tragic love affair (66), a premise which the *Wilde* film of 1995 certainly endorses.

Whether or not one considers Oscar Wilde to be a ‘sinner’ or ‘saint’ (68), one cannot ignore his presence in the modern world both as a highly talented writer and remarkable figure of history. In Chapter Four Wood extends the concerns set up earlier by arguing that the ‘resurrection’ of Oscar Wilde was confirmed by Maggi Hambling’s monument in 1998, which depicts him effectively rising from the tomb. In its engagement with different historical contexts this chapter also gives quite a detailed depiction of Wilde’s ‘afterlife’ conversations (99), with Wood maintaining that “Wilde can...be imagined as bearing a relationship to the present time in which he is able to comment upon, and respond to, contemporary culture” (99).

One year on from the death of Michael Jackson the world still mourns this cultural icon. His death has brought to the fore such ideas as the cult of celebrity and popular redemption. Likewise the ‘cultural afterlife’ of Oscar Wilde, especially in the popular sense, offers a similar realm of investigation. In many ways the tragedy of Michael Jackson can be subjected to the same theoretical framework proposed by Woods. (Woods herself sets up such parameters in her final chapter where she draws comparisons between Wilde and Elvis Presley and Princess Diana). Both men were recognised for their unique abilities and soared to fame only to face public demise and posthumous rehabilitation within the popular realm. While the parallels between these two icons are too great to go into detail in the space of this review (Elaine Showalter, renowned for drawing parallels between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has already exposed some of these in “Is Jacko Our Wilde Man?”)¹ both men endure through the recirculation of their creative work as well as the memory of their infamous existence.

Julia Wood’s compact study is surprisingly comprehensive and insightful. It is intelligent in its engagement with theoretical concerns as well as various literary and biographical details. My one criticism would be that the execution of such an undertaking leads to some awkward transitions between the author’s voice and the numerous sources. Of course, this book is primarily aimed to re-address the discussion of ‘the cult of Oscar Wilde’ in the modern age and in this it succeeds admirably.

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¹ Showalter, Elaine. “Is Jacko Our Wilde Man?” *Los Angeles Times* 12 Jun 2005. <<http://articles.latimes.com/2005/jun/12/opinion/op-surreal12>>.