

Walk on the Wilde Side: Oscar Wilde as a Symbol in *The Master*  
and *The Invention of Love*  
Literature  
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## 1. Introduction

Oscar Wilde was not originally meant to play a significant role in this paper. When I started out, I was writing about A.E. Housman and Henry James and the effect their sexuality had on both their work and their modern reputations. Of course, one cannot write anything about homosexuality in Victorian England without at least a cursory mention of Wilde. My mistake was in believing I could keep it to a mention. Almost immediately, Wilde stepped in, in some sections becoming the focus of my writing, occasionally pushing Housman and James to the background.

This is the sort of effect Wilde had in his lifetime – and, to a surprising degree, still has today. There is a considerable amount of literary criticism and fiction written about the relationship between Wilde and Housman, or Wilde and James. In many of these works, especially in literary criticism, Wilde is deliberately used as a symbol, a sort of cultural shorthand for someone who entirely embodies a “to thine own self be true”-spirit, especially in regard to love. Housman and James, on the other hand, are sometimes completely overshadowed by Wilde in criticism, and are presented as cowardly or morally in the wrong for being less open about their sexuality in their life and their work. Alternative portrayals of James and Wilde are more often presented in drama or fiction – specifically, in *The Invention of Love*, a play about Housman by Tom Stoppard, and *The Master*, a novel about James by Colm Tóibín, both of which advance a more balanced and sympathetic perspective on the relationship between Wilde and Housman or James. In this paper, through an analysis of these two works, while incorporating historical and other literary perspectives, I will explain this particular use of Wilde as a symbol or character, its evolution from Wilde’s time to ours, and examine its effects on current perceptions of James and Housman. Additionally, I will make clear the reasons Stoppard

and Tóibín's fictional explorations of the relationship between the three writers, and more broadly of gay identity and literature in Victorian England, are more successful than most criticism written on the same subjects.

## **2. Wilde as a Character (in Life and in Fiction)**

Oscar Wilde's life was, in some important ways, a performance. Therefore, it is entirely unsurprising that he is featured prominently and often as a character in fiction – this is, after all, the man who was quoted in 1895 as having said that he “put all [his] genius into [his] life” (qtd. in Raby *Oscar Wilde* 7), making his life a self-proclaimed part of his artistic output. Any public figure with such an outsized personality opens him or herself to literary portrayals, homages, and caricatures. But because Wilde did not draw a line between his life and his fiction and the two blended together, he started showing up in the novels and short stories of others.

During Wilde's lifetime, authors began co-opting him to serve their own purposes in their fiction. Angela Kingston carefully catalogs over thirty of these fictional Wildes in her book *Oscar Wilde as a Character in Victorian Fiction*, arguing that from 1877 to 1900, the portrayals of Wilde fell into three categories that “correspond with distinct phases in Wilde's public life” – the “Aesthete,” the “Decadent,” and the “Pariah” (3). However, fictional portrayals of Wilde did not end with his death in 1900. In 1914, author Edmund Lester Pearson wondered “how long it will be before the fad [of writing about Wilde] dies out” (374). In the hundred years since, there has been no sign that the “fad” has any intention of doing so. Kingston's book includes an appendix that lists only some of the novels and plays featuring Wilde that were published between 1900 and 2007 (233-246). If the hundred or so works listed are any indication, Oscar Wilde as a fictional character is here to stay.

Kingston's Aesthete, Decadent, and Pariah, however, are insufficient to cover the post-1900s Wildes that appear in fiction. As the times have changed, so have the uses of Wilde as a character. In current works, Wilde often appears as a tragic figure, similar to Kingston's Pariah, but one who functions primarily as a hero, as someone who was on the right side of history when it came to society's views on sexuality. Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as homosexuality became more accepted and being true to oneself (especially in regard to one's sexuality) began to be considered a virtue, Wilde moved from being seen as morally bankrupt to morally upright. This shift was inevitable as the contemporary morality changed, of course, but it is so far removed from the disdain Wilde was subject to for his sexuality during his lifetime that this change in conventional views is certainly worth examining.

One gets the impression that Wilde would not be unhappy about this change in his reception, and not only because people began to view him in a more positive light. "To be suggestive for fiction is to be of more importance than a fact," he said, and did not specify that he would only accept any one type of fiction, with one particular social message, implying that this "suggestive[ness]" was an end in and of itself (qtd. in Kingston 1). However, no matter Wilde's opinions, this interpretation brings up interesting new questions. If Wilde died for our sins, while everyone else in a position to do so just went about their lives, then he inherently overshadows anyone who shares the page with him, especially if, theoretically, they could have fulfilled the same role. How fair or accurate is this comparison? Can (or should) it be avoided?

### **3. Housman, James, and Wilde in Life**

Although the focus of this paper is on *The Master* and *The Invention of Love*, comparisons between Wilde and Housman or James certainly did not originate with those two

works, so it is worthwhile to examine the writers' relationships outside of fiction as well, and the scholarship that likely influenced their portrayals in the novel and the play.

### 3.1 Housman and Wilde

As far as anyone knows, A.E. Housman and Oscar Wilde never actually met. They were not the type to run in the same social circles – “You did *have* friends?” a fictionalized Wilde asks Housman in *The Invention of Love*, after going through a long list of names that Housman might recognize (IL 94). They just missed each other once in Italy (Editors of LCT Review 5), they had poems in the same magazine (Broderson, Clyde, and Warner 70), and they were at Oxford together for a year. Housman's brother Laurence was a friend of Wilde, and wrote his book *Echo de Paris* about their last conversation. These near misses and almost-meetings are important because they show that while the two were never close, their circumstances were incredibly similar and therefore the obvious differences between the two are all the more striking.

A more important connection between the two was made through their art. When Wilde was imprisoned in Reading Gaol, Robert Ross was said to have recited poems to him from Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*. As Wilde's visitors were not permitted to bring books to him, Ross must have memorized these poems, showing that he felt they would definitely appeal to Wilde (Graves 113). It seems as though Ross was correct. In her article “‘A very curious construction': masculinity and the poetry of A. E. Housman and Oscar Wilde,” researcher of late Victorian literature Ruth Robbins notes that multiple scholars have identified Housman's poem *A Shropshire Lad IX*, which tells of prisoners about to be hanged “in Shrewsbury jail,” as an influence on Wilde's “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” as the two poems are metrically identical and thematically similar (152-53). Housman also found poetic inspiration through Wilde, specifically Wilde's trial. Housman's poem “Oh who is that young sinner” is, for Housman, a

surprisingly angry allegorical indictment of the injustice of Wilde's conviction: "[H]anging isn't bad enough and flaying would be fair / For the nameless and abominable colour of his hair" (*Collected Poems* 217).

However, these glimmers of similarity, for the most part, are often used by literary scholars to make a point about how different Wilde and Housman really were. Robbins' purpose in bringing up the parallels between *A Shropshire Lad* IX and "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" is to state that even though the former was an influence on the latter, Wilde did not imitate Housman's characteristic "restraint" (154). "Housman is never 'guilty' of...Wilde's 'poetic diction,'" states Robbins – the implication is, then, that Housman was much less likely to be convicted under the Criminal Law Amendment Act than Wilde was, and that his poetry, unlike Wilde's, can be "read 'straight'" (154, 151). Additionally, the consistently negative tone Robbins adopts when describing this aspect of Housman's poetry, his seeming inability to "call a spade a spade" (152), betrays her disapproval. Like many others, she believes Housman was untrue to himself, and that he was the opposite of Wilde in this respect. This is an unsympathetic moment in an otherwise very perceptive article, made all the more unfortunate because this article was one of the first "serious, if limited, consideration[s] of the homosexuality underlying Housman's poetry," and therefore a significant influence on others who wished to write about the same topic (Efrati 28). Robbins was writing in 1995, right after the advent of queer theory as a respected field in the study of literature – a time when a gay poet could write more openly about his or her sexuality. She seems to think that should have been the case in Housman's time as well, which is a reasonable thing to wish. In doing so, however, she conflates a societal position with a personal one – she believes society should be tolerant of homosexuality, and that it was admirable of Wilde to be openly gay in the late 1800s. But that does not mean each gay person living in an

intolerant society is individually responsible for making the world a better place, potentially at the cost of his or her life. Each personal act is political, but it is unfair to take a gay poet to task for being closeted during the Victorian era, where Housman or any other writer could get two years hard labor for "call[ing] a spade a spade."

### 3.2 *James and Wilde*

James and Wilde's relationship was only slightly more substantial than that of Housman and Wilde, but connections made between them by authors and critics are used to achieve the same goal – to illustrate the differences between the two, rather than any similarities that might exist. The writers met at a party in Washington, DC in January of 1882, after which James wrote to Isabella Stewart Gardner about his encounter with the “repulsive and fatuous Oscar Wilde, whom, [James was] pleased to say, no one was looking at” (James 179). (Since this was during Wilde's wildly successful tour of America, it is safe to guess that James might have been overstating the extent to which Wilde was ignored.) Years later, Wilde returned the favor, stating in his essay “The Decay of Lying” that “Henry James writes fiction as if it were a painful duty” (973). Despite this mild antagonism, however, Wilde and James were able to find artistic inspiration from each other just as Wilde and Housman did. In James' *The Tragic Muse*, the character Gabriel Nash is based on Wilde, and might represent “an attempt by [James] to come to terms with his mixed feelings about Wilde” (Kingston 66). Additionally, many scholars believe that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was inspired by *The Tragic Muse*, as both novels “have an aesthete, an artist, and an actress as central characters,” as well as a “portrait that supernaturally change[s] to reflect the sitter's fate (Kingston 71-2).

Another interesting connection between Wilde and James is the *Guy Domville* incident, the story of which is quite well known: on the opening night of his verbose and rather old-

fashioned play *Guy Domville* at St. James' Theater in London, James was too nervous to attend and sought refuge at Wilde's popular play *Lady Windermere's Fan*, which he left just in time to arrive back at St. James' to be booed by the hostile audience. Just about a month later, *Guy Domville* closed and was replaced by *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which proved an even greater success for Wilde (Edel 78-80). This is almost too good to be true for Wilde and James scholars alike, because one could not invent a better character-establishing moment for either party. In *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, three separate authors contributing articles referenced the incident for exactly that purpose. Interestingly, none of those articles had much to do with James beyond *Guy Domville*, but they do contribute to the increasing association between James and Wilde in contemporary scholarship (Raby 143, 162-3, 252).

Despite these similarities and connections, Wilde and James, like Wilde and Housman, are often seen as polar opposites. In the case of *Guy Domville*, the contrast is obvious – at that particular moment, Wilde was successful and popular, while James was neither. However, some manage to read the shared elements in their work, as pointed out by Kingston and others, as further evidence of their dissimilarity. In her book on the relationship between Wilde and James, Oxford professor Michele Mendelssohn notes that “influential” scholars such as Richard Ellman, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Hugh Stevens have contributed to the cultural perception of James as “a supreme connoisseur of pain who knows virtually nothing of pleasure,” especially in comparison to Wilde (8, 12). Additionally, in her article “Sexuality, the Public, and the Art World,” University of Exeter professor Regenia Gagnier takes a similar view that also portrays the two writers as opposites. While discussing a band of critics who disapproved of Aesthetic writers in the late 1800s, Gagnier writes of a Henry James story, “The Death of the Lion,” that contains “all the elements of decadence” (read: homosexuality) but still was not targeted by these

critics. Although James' story exhibited Wildean influences, due to his "subtle[ty]" and "discre[tion]" he was "above suspicion" (Gagnier 36-7). Gagnier's implication, like Robbins' regarding Housman, is that James also could be "read straight," and because of this quality of his writing, he too was being less true to himself than Wilde. Again, this conflation of morality with self-expression is quite harsh when considering the political situation in the Victorian era.

### *3.3 Current views of Housman and James*

Another issue with Housman's poetry as conducive to being "read straight" as per Robbins, or James's short stories as "unsuspicious" as per Gagnier, is that those statements might have been true around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but surely are not today. Robbins acknowledges this, saying that it wasn't until "after Housman's death" that his sexuality became "widely 'known'" (148), but it could be argued that today, he is primarily known for his personal life rather than his poetry or scholarship. The most famous (and most interesting) writings on Housman focus on what is widely seen as his head/heart division – "on one hand, a poet of wounded boys and doomed vegetation, on the other, a venomous textual critic" (Carson 12) – and more broadly on his personal life as a whole. There is W.H. Auden's sonnet "A.E. Housman" ("heart-injured in North London, he became / The Latin scholar of his generation" (126)) as well as Auden's terrifically mean article "Jehovah Housman and Satan Housman," which attempts to explain what many see as the two sides of Housman's personality ("Jehovah Housman lived the virginal life of a don; Satan Housman thought a good deal about stolen waters and the bed" (16)). There is Edmund Wilson's essay on Housman ("There is an element of perversity, or self-mortification, in Housman's career all along." (65)). In these works, the focus is on Housman's life, and specifically his repressed sexuality, rather than his work. Therefore, it makes no sense to argue that his poetry is still seen as "more straight" than Wilde's.

This is less the case with James, primarily because he is not as widely seen as a gay author as Housman is seen as a gay poet. There are still arguments over his sexuality. Take, for example, the three most prominent James biographers fighting it out in *Slate Magazine* specifically over whether James ever slept with Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., but more broadly over how to view James and his work in a changing world where homosexuality is a subject actually spoken of in an academic setting (Edel, Novick, and Kaplan). Despite the disagreements among scholars, however, these arguments prove that James is in no way completely “above suspicion” today.

The point being: Housman and James are increasingly being recognized as gay writers – more importantly, as very different kinds of gay writers than Wilde. Therefore, these comparisons involving Wilde certainly have merit as a way to examine gay identity and literature in the Victorian era. However, much of the scholarship cited above does not serve that purpose particularly well, due to its insistence that in differing from Wilde, Housman and James were morally in the wrong. This brings us, finally, to *The Master* and *The Invention of Love*, two works which deal with many of the same ideas first advanced in scholarship, but which are ultimately more balanced and sympathetic explorations of the questions of Victorian sexuality and literature brought up earlier.

#### **4. *The Master* and *The Invention of Love***

The similarities between these two works are substantial – both are meticulously researched narratives that blend biography and historical fiction, and both feature a closeted writer working and living under the shadow of Oscar Wilde, who presents an option for a way to live one’s life that the writers absolutely do not take. In this section, through analysis of *The Master* and *The Invention of Love*, I will show how these works epitomize a more sympathetic

view of all three writers, and explain why Stoppard and Tóibín might have been interested in advancing such a viewpoint.

#### 4.1 *Wilde and Housman in The Invention of Love*

To briefly summarize, *The Invention of Love* begins with Housman being ferried across the River Styx, possibly dreaming, possibly dead, and reflecting on his life. The action comprises a fairly straightforward retelling of A.E. Housman's biography, touching on his scholarship and his poetry, with a focus on his unrequited love for his friend and classmate Moses Jackson. Stoppard takes some liberties with the absolute biographical facts, inventing a minor character or two and making up some dialogue. Also, the play's central conceit, which involves two actors playing Housman, one on his deathbed and the other in his twenties, is obviously not true to life. But where Stoppard takes the most liberty is with Oscar Wilde – he makes sure the reader is aware of Wilde from early on in the play, even when Housman might not have been, and the narrative peak is an imagined conversation between Housman and Wilde. It is, of course, impossible to know how much Wilde mattered to the real-life Housman – it is not unreasonable to guess that he mattered quite a bit, given their interactions described earlier. But in *The Invention of Love*, the play's very structure places Wilde almost at the center, as a foil to Housman, making him an incredibly important part of the latter's life and therefore both playing off and contributing to the cultural perception that Housman can easily be linked to Wilde.

Wilde first appears only 15 pages into *The Invention of Love*, but only if one is looking for him – he is the not-mentioned-by-name “Irish exquisite...with white hands and long poetical hair” that Ruskin, an Oxford don, employed in an ultimately unsuccessful road-building project in 1874. One has to be aware of this obscure bit of trivia (that Wilde was involved in a road-building project) to completely catch the allusion, which is a distinctly (and somewhat

frustratingly) Stoppardian thing to do to one's audience, and just subtle enough that it leads directly into the next mention of Wilde without seeming completely overdone or heavy-handed.

On the same page, Housman himself mentions Wilde for the first time:

**Pollard** Ruskin said, when he's at Paddington he feels he is in hell – and this man Oscar Wilde said, 'Ah, but—'

**Housman** '—when he's in hell he'll think he's only at Paddington.' It'll be a pity if inversion is all he is known for. (*IL* 15)

This merits some thought. The joke, of course, is that “inversion” can be taken to mean reversing the order of words, which Wilde does with the Paddington remark, but is also an antiquated term for homosexuality. The question is whether Housman, in the play, is aware of this double meaning – if he is, it means he somehow knows something about Wilde's sexuality that, at this point, the world as a whole does not (this would have been 1877-78, when Housman and Wilde were both at Oxford), and he is comfortable enough with his friend Pollard (or confident enough that it will go over Pollard's head) to refer to it jokingly. If Housman does not know, which is historically more likely but rather uncharacteristic, this joke is purely for the audience. The point is, however, that in *The Invention of Love*, discussion of Wilde invariably prompts reflection on Housman's relationship with his homosexuality, and sets up Wilde as a foil.

There are far too many allusions to Wilde in *The Invention of Love* to list them all here. But they are important because, in addition to prompting thought about Housman's sexuality, they work to set up an implicit contrast between Housman and Wilde, as many previous writers have done. For example, it is ridiculous to imagine the reticent Housman saying that Moses Jackson's “left leg is a poem” (*IL* 18), even if he did agree with the sentiment, as Wilde says in the play (a remark he actually made about a different student-athlete during his time at Oxford

(Robinson 211-12)). However, other (and possibly more important) allusions are included in the play to make the audience understand that the two are not so different after all. At one point, Housman is, dangerously, mistaken for Wilde by an Oxford don (*IL* 22). Later, Victorian writers Jerome K. Jerome and Frank Harris, along with a character invented by Stoppard, row a boat past Reading Gaol, while talking about Housman's poetry and making insinuations regarding his sexuality:

**[George] Chamberlain** He's a Latin prof.

**Jerome** But of the Greek persuasion, would you say, George?...Uranian persuasion, I mean. (*IL* 86)

Since the audience is unsure whether Housman is dreaming the events of the play or they really "happened," these scenes could be a reflection of Housman's anxieties about meeting the same fate as Wilde, or they could be straightforward depictions of societal homophobia in the Victorian era. Either way, they point out that both writers' experiences were affected by this homophobia – an interpretation that is more sympathetic towards Housman, and one that does not blame him for being less openly gay in an intolerant time.

The continued allusions build up to a final scene that feels inevitable by the time it happens: Housman and Wilde, meeting on the banks of the River Styx, have their first and only conversation. It is at this point that Stoppard makes the most significant comparison between the two:

**Wilde** ...before Plato could describe love, the loved one had to be invented. We would never love anybody if we could see past our invention. Bosie is my creation, my poem. In the mirror of invention, love discovered itself. (*IL* 95)

It is no accident that just a few lines later, Housman mentions his edition of the poetry of

Manilius, “which [he] dedicated to [his] comrade Moses Jackson” (*IL* 95) with a poem in Latin – a language Jackson did not know, used by Housman to write about emotions Jackson did not understand. Stoppard implicitly presents an (as far as I can tell) unprecedented comparison between Wilde’s love for Bosie and Housman’s for Jackson – Housman’s dedication does the same work as Wilde’s “invention” of Bosie, both creating and monumentalizing the author’s beloved as well as portraying the emotions that the author felt. In this way, Stoppard forces the audience to confront the possibility that despite the differences between Wilde and Housman’s public relationship with their sexuality, in their art, they ultimately viewed love the same way.

Even considering the aforementioned scenes, Stoppard does not entirely depart from the tradition of portraying Housman and Wilde as polar opposites. One of the funniest moments in this final Housman-Wilde confrontation could be taken directly from one of the more unsympathetic articles cited earlier:

**Wilde** I had genius, brilliancy, daring, I took charge of my own myth...I lived at the turning point of the world where everything was new – the New Drama, the New Novel, New Journalism, New Hedonism, New Paganism, even the New Woman. Where were you when all this was happening?

**Housman** At home. (*IL* 96-7)

But the reason this exchange works is that the audience understands that it isn’t entirely true. For a few hours, audience members have been privy to Housman’s inner life and have watched the drama that unfolded there, realizing that tragedy and love do not have to be public to be important. Stoppard is able to make this joke and get away with it because it is not the thesis of the play – *The Invention of Love* provides a much more balanced look at the relationship between Housman and Wilde than any scholarship mentioned in previous sections. Stoppard recognizes

the similarities between their careers, the regard in which Wilde held Housman's poetry, and the degree to which they were both defined and harmed by the intolerance present in their society. Stoppard writes Wilde as an innovator and a hero, but does not forget that Housman, despite his comparative reserve, was also an important figure in the history of gay literature, as well as an interesting character to write about – therefore providing a more successful alternative to the more unsympathetic view of Housman and Wilde's relationship espoused by many of the critics cited earlier.

#### 4.2 *Wilde and James in The Master*

*The Master* is also mostly straightforward biographical fiction. It begins in 1895 and follows Henry James through the end of 1899, sticking closely to the facts and only introducing a few entirely fictional characters. Tóibín deals with James's creative process during those years, but focuses mostly on the innermost thoughts and emotions of a writer who, in life, was very unwilling to express those thoughts (except on the page of a work of fiction). This is where he takes the most artistic liberty – in writing about James's sexuality, and in using Wilde as a means to comment on James's life and work. The structure of *The Master*, in regard to Wilde, is almost the exact reverse of that of *The Invention of Love*. Whereas Stoppard builds up to Wilde's appearance in his final scene, Wilde appears in Tóibín's first chapter, is mentioned briefly in his second and third, then appears again in his fourth, and disappears for the rest of the novel. However, these appearances (and his long absence) serve the same purpose as Stoppard's use of Wilde in regard to Housman: Tóibín comments upon the common view of Wilde and James as two men who could not be more different, while simultaneously pointing out similarities and using Wilde to comment upon James's sexuality. His comments, however, are on the whole much more sympathetic and therefore more successful than those of many critics cited earlier.

*The Master* does not quite begin with the introduction of Henry James, even though he is the main character. It begins with Wilde, who is introduced first to the reader. Though James narrates the novel from the beginning, his full name is not mentioned until he is referred to as “Mr. James” not quite halfway through the second chapter (*M* 26). Wilde, in contrast, appears and is mentioned by name about halfway through the first chapter, as a player in James’s *Guy Domville* fiasco (*M* 13). If a reader is unfamiliar with the history of James’s failure in the theater (as most likely are), it is entirely possible to read *The Master* and have Wilde be the first famous writer introduced, ensuring that the reader will remember him throughout the book.

But even though Wilde first appears during the failure of *Guy Domville*, the reader gets the sense that the scene is not really about Wilde, as literary critics previously cited have made it out to be. Tóibín concentrates on James’s personal anguish – although James is “jealous” of Wilde (*M* 15), he does not blame Wilde for writing a more successful play, instead “more than anything blaming himself” (*M* 17). The contrast between the two is implicit but is not the focus of the scene, therefore departing from previous accounts like that of Leon Edel’s biography of James, the biography Tóibín “trust[s]” the most (*All a Novelist Needs* 87), which spends a good three pages on Wilde’s “infallible sense of his audience, which [James] lacked” (Edel 45). Tóibín’s interpretation of James and Wilde’s relationship on the night of *Guy Domville*’s failure establishes *The Master* as a novel in which Tóibín wishes to give a more balanced perspective on that relationship than is seen in much of the scholarship previously cited.

In addition to establishing this perspective, Tóibín’s first reference to Wilde sets up Wilde’s appearance in the next chapter. Having traveled to Ireland to escape any possible discussion of his play’s failure, James is again confronted with that failure in the form of a reference to Wilde’s play’s “success” by Webster, a character staying at the same house as

James and who seems to exist only to antagonize him (*M* 40). This reference to Wilde, however, is more significant than previous ones, due to the fact that it seems to be prompted by discussion or thought about James's sexuality. The reader gets the sense that if this were just about Guy Domville, James would not be so shaken up about it. Instead, James notes Webster's "hideous glee" in bringing up Wilde (*M* 40), and is not bothered enough to respond until a number of direct comparisons are made between the two writers. James was previously discomfited by Webster's seemingly derogatory mention of his family's origins in County Cavan, Ireland (*M* 35), and is now similarly made uncomfortable by Webster's pronouncement that "all the Irish are natural writers," therefore linking Wilde and James (*M* 40). James, after hearing this, wishes to escape the conversation, but Webster "clearly had more to say" (*M* 41):

"Mr. Wilde is having trouble with his wife. It's a difficult time for him, as I'm sure you understand. Lady Wolseley tells me you have no wife. That might be one solution...Being a bachelor must leave you open to all sorts of...how shall I put it? All sorts of sympathy." (*M* 41).

Tóibín so deftly captures James's anxiety in the face of these insinuations about his sexuality that this scene is, frankly, difficult to read. In particular, his manipulation of the language of power – Webster holds all the cards, "mak[ing] sure" that James could not "take his leave," indicating that James "could [finally] walk down the stairs" and away from the conversation only when Webster had finished (*M* 40-41) – makes it clear just how dangerous it was to be gay during this time period. By means of this comparison between James and Wilde, Tóibín makes sure the reader understands that James was by no means taking the easy way out by remaining closeted, while still presenting Wilde as brave for being more openly gay in an intolerant time. His unwillingness in *The Master* to present one writer as more morally upright than the other shows

his sympathy for both.

Other references to Wilde in *The Master* primarily serve to make the same point – in the fourth chapter, which mainly focuses on James’s reaction and proximity to Wilde’s trial, two of James’s friends, Edmund Gosse and Jonathan Sturges, are continually appearing to bring news of the trial, news that they obviously feel would be of interest to James. More comparisons are made between Wilde and James: Gosse, speaks of a list that may or may not be going around of those who, like Wilde, are, euphemistically, “under suspicion” (*M* 71), and who might be escaping to France to avoid prosecution under the Criminal Law Amendment Act.

“I wondered if you, perhaps...” Gosse began.

“No.” Henry turned sharply. “You do not wonder. There is nothing to wonder about.” (*M* 72)

Throughout all of *The Master*, there is very little that James does “sharply,” and he is even less often as “direct” or “hostile” as he is in the face of this question from Gosse (*M* 72). Through this manipulation of language, Tóibín once again shows how dangerous the topic of Wilde is for James to talk about, and also how easily James could have met the same fate.

After the chapter dealing with Wilde’s trial, he is never explicitly mentioned again. This does not stop the reader from thinking about him, however, partially due to his importance early on, but also because other characters from the first few chapters who were linked with James’s sexuality begin to reappear – a servant, Hammond, with whom a friend of James’s seemed to be trying to set him up, appears in the second chapter and again in the last. James thinks back on his relationship (or rather, lack thereof) with his former friend Paul Joukowsky in the first chapter and again in the second to last. Because Wilde also appeared early in the novel, the reader might, by the end, be waiting for him to show up once more. Tóibín writes Wilde into *The Master* as a

constant presence, a model for being gay in Victorian England whose example James might have taken. Still, it is clear that Tóibín thinks no less of James for not having taken Wilde's example – and after having been inside James's head for hundreds of pages, having understood the combination of courage and foolhardiness it would take to be openly gay in the 1890s, the reader finds it very difficult to fault James for this either. Tóibín's sympathy helps the reader engage with James, and therefore makes *The Master* all the more successful.

#### *4.4 Stoppard and Tóibín's Intentions and Influences*

Both *The Master* and *The Invention of Love* are extraordinarily well-researched, so well-researched that it is likely that Stoppard and Tóibín combined have read every article and book cited in this paper. The question that must be answered, then, is why they chose to differ from many of the scholars cited earlier in their portrayals of the relationship between Wilde and Housman or James. It would have been easier to write them as opposites, as that would help to establish characterizations more quickly, and also has much precedent to fall back on. The answer, I believe, lies in Stoppard and Tóibín's previous works and personal interests in their subjects. Just like the authors I mentioned earlier, they cannot help but project their own views onto their projects. It just so happens, however, that their views are more conducive to the writing of sympathetic explorations of what it meant to be a gay writer in the Victorian era.

Tom Stoppard has never in his life written a play in which any one character is entirely morally in the right, and he was not about to start with *The Invention of Love*. His sympathy for both Wilde and Housman is entirely typical of his oeuvre – “over the years [he has] many times written a dialogue between two people who are arguing against each other,” and has always tried “to give both sides a decent argument” (Editors of LCT Review 6). Stoppard is also consistently interested in themes of Classicism vs. Romanticism, head vs. heart, etc., and is similarly

unwilling to take a side on the issue. “I don’t want your ‘mind’ . . . Don’t bring it to my funeral. I want your grieving soul or nothing,” says a character in his play *Rock ‘n’ Roll* (51), while a character in *Arcadia* disparagingly describes the Romantic period as “the decline from thinking to feeling” (43). Housman, who embodies that conflict within himself, is an incredibly Stoppardian “hero” (to use Stoppard’s own term) (Editors of LCT Review 6) – and as a hero, Housman cannot be presented as morally inferior in comparison to Wilde in *The Invention of Love*.

Colm Tóibín’s “favorite novelist of all time” is Henry James, “for the range of his sympathy and . . . for his insisting on nuance, half-light and suggestion” (“By the Book” 5) – which is exactly how he treats James in *The Master*. Tóibín has written a great deal about James, and about James’s place in the history of gay literature, and has stated part of his interest in James and others like him comes from being a gay writer himself (*Love in a Dark Time* 5-8). It makes sense, then, that he would work to put these qualities of James’s writing, and his personal interest in James, into his own novel, producing a book in which James occasionally comes across as cruel or unsociable, but never unsympathetic. Tóibín has also obviously thought a lot about “the idea that gay writing has a tendency to deal in the tragic and the unfulfilled, a tendency that [E.M.] Forster and writers after Stonewall sought to counteract” (*Love in a Dark Time* 28), and has written a novel that is very much in conversation with that idea, while not entirely playing into it. James, in *The Master*, is certainly unhappy a great deal of the time, but Tóibín seems determined to avoid writing James as ridiculously tragic, keeping him human and above all maintaining the audience’s sympathy for him.

## **5. Conclusion**

In many of the academic articles I read about Housman and James, there appeared to be

precious little room for sympathy. It seems as though a scholar must above all advance a strong argument that can occasionally overlook context or nuance in order to make a point. It is much easier, in a novel or a play, to give equal considerations to all sides of an argument, as an author is not usually seeking only to advance one viewpoint. However, this question of medium and audience cannot be turned into an excuse. *The Master* and *The Invention of Love* are so successful at telling the whole story (and most scholarly articles cited earlier are so unsuccessful in comparison) because of the sympathy they have for Housman and Wilde, and because they do not seek to pass moral judgments upon people living in a different time under very different societal pressures. That is not impossible to do in a work of literary criticism. An author should be sympathetic toward his or her subjects – not necessarily kind to them, and not necessarily fond of them. Only sympathy is essential, but it is what elevates an argument from “persuasive” to “true,” and it is an essential quality of the best literature and criticism alike.

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