

Eleanor Dobson

The Ghost of Oscar Wilde: Fictional Representations

Abstract: A century after the death of Oscar Wilde, literature, films, cartoons and comic books provide fictional spaces in which his ghost can rematerialise. This essay examines a number of these representations of Wilde in phantasmal form, analysing the ways in which they conform to the figure of Wilde as he endures in the cultural consciousness: as the epitome of visual dandyism and the paragon of aphoristic wit. While the ghost of Wilde imitates these most celebrated qualities, confirming the perpetual recycling of the Wildean stereotype, his impact upon the contemporary worlds in which he is reimagined reveals his persisting influence upon and relevance to modern culture. Across media, his power is shown to have a magical potency, which, fairytale-esque, contributes to harmonious conclusions for those he encounters.¹

Oscar Wilde [...] did not respond. He inclined his head to sniff the green carnation in his lapel and smiled to himself. (Bailey 134)

The purpose of this chapter is to explore a niche within the body of fictional representations of Oscar Wilde across a variety of media: the depiction of his ghost. Considering films, cartoons and comic books as well as literature, it argues that the reappearances of Wilde's specter in contemporary culture conform to a single particular facet of Wilde's complex and changing identity – the elegant, dandified Wilde, endlessly issuing witty aphorisms. As Laurence Dumortier has recently observed, the photographic images of Wilde which proliferate are most often the portraits taken by Napoleon Sarony, images characterised by a kind of *effete* languor, in which Wilde, decked out in capes, velvet waistcoats and silken knee breeches, poses with an expression of exquisite *ennui*. This, Dumortier claims, is to the detriment of Wilde scholarship, which consistently seeks to comment upon Wilde in this guise, to the exclusion of aspects of the multiple and varied personas that he embodied, adopted and performed throughout his life.² Depic-

-
- 1 I am indebted to Jennie Challinor for her thoughtful comments and suggestions.
 - 2 Specifically, Dumortier suggests that this is as a result of both scholarly and popular interest in Wilde's sexuality. C. Robert Holloway's *The Unauthorized Letters of Oscar Wilde* (Barnstead: Xlibris, 1997) and David Levithan's *Hold Me Closer: The Tiny Cooper Story* (London: Penguin, 2015) both utilise the ghost of Wilde as a character who contributes to the protagonists' celebration of their homosexuality. On 23 May 2015, the

Maria Fleischhack and Elmar Schenkel - 9783631665664

Downloaded from PubFactory at 08/25/2019 05:55:51AM

via free access

tions of Wilde's ghost, as I shall demonstrate, conform to this trend: the Wilde who we wish to invoke in the present day is Wilde as he has been consistently celebrated and glamorised. Yet even in this form, arguably one which, through its enforcement of the Wildean stereotype, is fairly hackneyed and restricted, Wilde's ghost proves his continuing energy and relevance in the modern world. Across a variety of contemporary sources, he is shown to influence and comment upon the fictional universes in which he is resurrected; even if, on the surface, he appears and acts in accordance with our expectations and tastes, his influence from beyond the grave still has the power to surprise.

Accompanying the visual conformity of Wilde's ghost to the style of aestheticism is an insistence on the reproduction of his characteristic epigrammatic wit, an aspect of Wilde which delights modern audiences. Indeed, Wilde's death-bed quip is often cited as reassuring evidence of his continuing flippancy up until his final breath: "This wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. Either it goes or I do." As Kirby Joris records, modern fictions of Wilde often "incorporate [his] well-known witticisms [...] echoing postmodern techniques of pastiche and intertextuality" (23). Joris states that "[b]y putting his own words into a fictionalised mouth, these biofictions represent a most topical example of what it signifies to (re-)tell of a life in retrospect: everything is memory-bound" (32). This is certainly one of the most significant features of Wilde as he appears in fiction; it transpires that Wilde, as he is reimagined, can say very little new, often quoting himself *ad nauseam*, although this technique is frequently put to comic effect and to novel ends. Wilde's ghost, however, twists this concept of the endless repetition of the Wildean stereotype. Reintroduced into modern worlds, his words take on new meanings, prove pertinent to a variety of contemporary situations, and impress themselves upon individuals in need of guidance or advice. Ultimately, the reappearance of Wilde's ghost in fiction symbolises his continuing importance and relevance in the modern world, rather than a mere banal recycling of Wilde's existing writing and remarks. Indeed, as this chapter demonstrates, when Wilde's ghost returns, he acts as a benevolent magical force, wielding a kindly supernatural control over events.

Wilde's ghost makes an unexpected appearance in "Père-Lachaise" directed by Wes Craven, a short segment within the anthology film *Paris, je t'aime* (2006).³

actor Stephen Fry who played the eponymous role in the 1997 biopic *Wilde*, tweeted in response to the Republic of Ireland's vote to legalise same-sex marriage: "Oscar smiles in his grave." Wilde's ghost continues to be invoked as a gay icon.

3 Jim Yates's novel, *Oh! Père Lachaise: Oscar Wilde's Purgatory* (2007), imagines a whole host of spirits in limbo at the Père Lachaise Cemetery: Jim Morrison, Georges Seu-

With his hair long and cigarette in hand, this specter (played by Alexander Payne) is Wilde in his most familiar semblance, sporting a velvet jacket and wearing his coat on his shoulders as if it were a cape. Wilde's voice echoes faintly, causing it to sound distant and otherworldly. Yet his words are characteristically aphoristic: "death of the heart is the ugliest death there is." William, the romantic hero (Rufus Sewell), follows Wilde's advice to avoid this fate: he and his fiancée, Frances (Emily Mortimer), have been quarreling, and he rushes after her in a bid to save their crumbling relationship. Having seen Wilde's ghost, William quotes an epigram attributed to Wilde – "friends stab you in the front" – and paraphrases another – "how could you ever be happy with a man who insists on treating you as though you were a perfectly normal human being?" "Those are two of my favorite things he ever said," Frances replies, startled by William's sudden channeling of her literary idol. William is as astonished as his fiancée. Catching one final glimpse of Wilde's ghost as it fades from view, it is clear that it is the specter who has transplanted these witticisms into the hero's mouth, perhaps gesturing towards the Victorian vogue for spiritualism, which frequently saw the channeling of the words of the dead via a spirit medium.

John Wooley states that this "swift and smart little vignette [...] thematically illustrates the benefits of including the arts and literature in your life" (228). Certainly, it is through the quotation of Wildean aphorisms that Frances and William are reconciled. William proves himself willing to engage with his fiancée's interests, whereas before the encounter with Wilde's ghost, he has seemed apathetic and unresponsive. Specifically, Frances wants William to make her laugh, and it is the recitation of Wilde's lines that satisfies this desire. Yet the transposition of some of Wilde's most famous quotations into this setting, so self-consciously post-mortem and in the very cemetery in which Wilde is buried, highlights his continuing agency in the modern world, and his ability to influence present events. His epigrams are showcased as comic and relevant, the immediate solution to a contemporary romantic problem.

The cause of this visitation is initially implied to be a blow to the head upon the iconic sculpture by Jacob Epstein that marks Wilde's tomb, which is located in the titular cemetery. Indeed, critics have identified the ambiguity of the

rat, Frédéric Chopin, Édith Piaf, Marcel Proust, Eugène Delacroix and Honoré de Balzac are among Wilde's spectral companions. Of the famed individuals buried at Père Lachaise, Craven originally proposed Morrison and Piaf for the phantom cameo, but he was refused by their estates. See John Wooley, *Wes Craven: The Man and His Nightmares* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2011), 228.

ghost's reality as one of the most intriguing aspects of this section of the film. Kendall R. Phillips questions:

Is this the actual spirit of Oscar Wilde come from the grave [...], or is this some neurological side effect of the recent blow to [William's] head? Such ambiguity plays a crucial role in the development of gothic narratives. Not only are we made aware of the unreliability of the narrator – are we seeing a real ghost or just a delusion generated by the protagonist's imagination? – but we, like the disoriented young man, must seek to puzzle out the nature of this suddenly appearing spirit. (74)

The other segments of *Paris je t'aime* complicate our understanding of these events. In "Place des Victoires" directed by Nobuhiro Suwa, a woman's faith in God is restored after a magical cowboy allows her to see her dead son one final time. As in "Père-Lachaise," supernatural agents and ghosts appear solid and life-like. Furthermore, the segment which directly precedes "Père-Lachaise," "Quartier de la Madeleine" directed by Vincenzo Natali, focuses upon vampirism. In these segments, supernatural encounters are presented as entirely and indisputably real.

The implication is, therefore, that the appearance of Wilde's ghost is more than a hallucination; there is something more magical at work. Like many of Wilde's devotees, Frances kisses the plinth that marks his grave, adding the print of her lips to the thousands of others with which the sculpture is tinted.⁴ It is after this act of admiration that William hits his head and Wilde's ghost is invoked. Through moments of physical contact with his shrine, Wilde's spirit is summoned: one, a performance of love and veneration, and the other, a violent, if accidental, blow. Like components of a spell, these instances in which Wilde's tomb is touched, thematically reflect the supernatural assistance that Wilde will provide. Smoothing over the turbulence and aggression in their relationship, Wilde's ghost directs the couple to a more serene, gentle love. Of course, the involvement of a kiss not only anticipates the kiss at the couple's reconciliation, but also that at the culmination of the marriage ceremony which Frances and William plan to undertake (and, through Wilde's involvement, becomes far more likely to take place). In addition, the kiss, as an integral component in the process of Wilde's awakening, recalls the fairytale trope of the rousing kiss that summons the sleeper from a death-like state.

A magical summons also takes place in the *Jennifer Wilde* comic books (2013). Set in 1921, the comics follow the protagonist Jennifer Chevalier, who is accompanied and aided in her investigations by the ghost of Wilde. In the first issue, holding a locket belonging to her late father with her own photograph in one half

4 A glass barrier was erected around the sculpture in 2011 to prevent pilgrims to Wilde's tomb from leaving lipstick prints.

and one of Wilde in the other, and standing within the hotel in which Wilde died and her father had been subsequently living (the Hôtel d'Alsace), Jennifer asks "Papa, what happened to you?" At this, the ghost of Wilde materialises, like a genie from within a lamp. "My dear, you called, and I appeared," he declares, eager to help Jennifer solve the mystery behind her father's death (Curley, McHugh and Downey 1: 10/5; 11/3).⁵ The locket becomes an amuletic object in this moment. Through this item of jewelry, images of Jennifer and Wilde are united, as their names are combined in the title of the series. This magic, as in "Père-Lachaise," is intricately entwined with notions of love. It transpires that Wilde and Jennifer's father had been romantically involved. The locket thus unites – both figuratively and literally – the individuals whom he loved the most.

This Wilde, too, is visually familiar. Throughout the series of comics he wears either a suit with a carnation in his buttonhole, or his famous fur coat, reproducing Wilde as the long-haired dandy whose photographic image is captured and immortalised within the locket. This nod to the Sarony portraits draws upon Wilde as he exists in popular culture: the Wilde we most easily recognise is Wilde as he appears in these photographs. Mirroring this portrayal, the ghost who is summoned reflects the depiction of Wilde in the locket. His ghostliness is signified through his stark whiteness and sketchy outline, edged with a spectral glow. Both he and his attire are colorless, but those who are familiar with his iconography can fill in the details for themselves – his carnation is, most likely, green. The speech bubbles which contain Wilde's words also share this spectral appearance. Unlike the speech of living characters, they have no dark outline, but rather dissolve into the image itself.⁶ This not only extends the visual evidence of Wilde's ethereality from his form to his words, but indicates that he can only be heard by those upon whom the supernatural ability of receiving the speech of ghosts is conferred.

Although the visual appearance of Wilde's ghost conforms to the tendency to depict him with this haircut and in these items of clothing, the comics react against portrayals of Wilde that merely harness and reuse the most familiar textual material. The writer of the comics, Maura McHugh, uses Jennifer as a

5 A crime-solving Wilde, albeit in living form, is the central figure in a series of six novels by Gyles Brandreth. The first book in the series, *Oscar Wilde and the Candlelight Murders* (2007), was published in America under the alternative title *Oscar Wilde and a Death of No Importance*.

6 There is a third kind of speech bubble in the *Jennifer Wilde* comics. When Jennifer speaks to Wilde's ghost, the outline around her speech bubbles is translucent, a midpoint between the defined black outlines of living-to-living speech, and Wilde's spectral speech bubbles that have no outline.

mouthpiece to mock the trend that sees Wilde parrot his own famous phrases, which occurs both in retellings of Wilde's life and more specifically, in depictions of his ghost. Jennifer asks, "were you always so convinced of your talents?" Wilde responds with a well-known aphorism, "to love oneself is the beginning of a life-long romance," to which she retorts, "to quote oneself is the beginning of banality" (Curley, McHugh and Downey 3: 5/4). Although sharp, Wilde does not always rely upon his famous wit; elsewhere, he is presented as emotionally sensitive and thoughtful, casting aside the amusing veneer when his characteristic levity would not be appropriate. Yet nor would a total absence of epigrams be suitable either: without them, Wilde would not be recognisable as the aphoristic enchanter that witnesses to his afterlife have come to expect.

Wilde also appears, like so many celebrities, in an episode of the longest-running American sitcom and animated program, *The Simpsons* (1989–). In "Father Knows Worst" (2009), Homer Simpson, falling asleep whilst building a model of Westminster Abbey, encounters a number of ghosts, including that of Wilde (voiced by Hank Azaria), each conforming to a floating, blue, translucent appearance, and whose entrances are marked by the eerie glissandos of a theremin. As is the case in "Père-Lachaise" and the *Jennifer Wilde* comics, Wilde appears within surroundings either associated with his death or subsequent commemoration. Rather than the site of his death, or his place of burial, however, Westminster Abbey is the location of a cenotaphic panel dedicated to Wilde within the larger Edward Hubbard memorial stained glass window in Poets' Corner.⁷ Perched nonchalantly next to this panel, the years of his birth and death emblazoned across the center, this Wilde too is one of flowing hair and dreamy eyes, flower in buttonhole. Comically, the ghost appears unable – or, rather, unwilling – to speak in anything other than the familiar vocabulary of his famous quips, much to Homer's frustration:

OSCAR WILDE. Homer, there are only two tragedies in life. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it.

HOMER SIMPSON. But that makes no sense.

OSCAR WILDE. Experience is simply the name we give to our mistakes.

HOMER SIMPSON. Shut up!

OSCAR WILDE. These days, man knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.

HOMER SIMPSON. Whatever happened to 'boo'?

7 This tribute to Wilde was unveiled in 1995. The panel beneath Wilde's in the memorial window – dedicated to Christopher Marlowe – is visible but deliberately unreadable in "Father Knows Worst," presumably in order to avoid detracting attention from Wilde's own name.

On this occasion, Wilde's witticisms do not initially appear to be relevant to the episode's plot; Wilde's ghost seems to relish reciting some of his most memorable lines, at the expense of being able to engage in a coherent exchange.⁸ As in "Père-Lachaise," there is some uncertainty as to whether encounters with Wilde's ghost really take place. Yet Bart Simpson, we later learn, has seen the ghost of Wilde in his own dream, which suggests that, rather than a coincidental shared vision of Wilde's visitation, his appearance was a genuine supernatural occurrence. Towards the episode's conclusion Bart repeats one of Wilde's lines – "experience is simply the name we give to our mistakes" – revealing that the witticisms spouted in Homer's dream were not random and nonsensical after all. Bart has learned to take responsibility for his own work, and is able to do what Homer cannot – to draw a thread of coherency out of the seeming chaos of Wilde's remarks.

At the end of the episode, immediately before the credits, Wilde's ghost appears from within a pink-lit Westminster Abbey in a parody of the Walt Disney Pictures introduction logo in which the fairy Tinker Bell emerges from a castle and casts a shower of fairy dust from her magic wand. Wilde brandishes his own magic wand, casting glittering spells in the direction of the viewer to the accompaniment of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's "Dance of the Reed Flutes" from *The Nutcracker Suite* (1892), returning him to his contemporary culture, that of the *fin de siècle*. Although this pastiche is typical of *The Simpsons*, it removes Wilde from the containment of the dream narrative, and suggests his actuality in the waking world. It also constructs Wilde as a mischievous weaver of magic, an influence drawing upon the tradition of the fairy godmother, in which he casts a supervisory eye over proceedings and encourages the moral epiphany and the conclusory happy ending that characterises the sit-com genre.⁹

8 One of Wilde's most famous quotations forms the basis of another joke in a later episode of *The Simpsons*. Raphael, the character from whom Homer purchases the materials with which to make the model of the Abbey in "Father Knows Worst," quotes Wilde in "Luca\$." After Principal Seymour Skinner's car rolls down a hill into the garage at which Raphael is now working, the following exchange takes place:

RAPHAEL. Would you like a quote?

SKINNER. Uh, yes.

RAPHAEL. Some cause happiness wherever they go; others, whenever they go.
Oscar Wilde.

Pleasingly, Raphael, like the ghost of Wilde in "Father Knows Worst," is voiced by Hank Azaria.

9 Of course, this also plays upon notions of Wilde's sexuality, and specifically alludes to the word "fairy" as a slang term for an effeminate or homosexual man. It may also nod

Having explored the representation of Wilde's specter across fictional forms it is clear that, compliant with Dumortier's observation of Wilde's limited iconography, his ghost must resemble Wilde in dandified guise. One sentimental explanation for this, perhaps, is the desire to remember the dead not as they were immediately before their passing, but how they were at the height of their success and happiness. As in Lord Alfred Douglas's sonnet, "The Dead Poet" (1901), in which Douglas experiences the return of his former lover in a dream shortly after his death on November 30, 1900, Wilde appears "All radiant and unshadowed of distress," as he was when he was most celebrated, before the scandals of his trials. Furthermore, Douglas imagines Wilde's "golden voice" "as of old, in music measureless" able to "conjure wonder out of emptiness" until "all the world was an enchanted place." As with these modern incarnations of Wilde's ghost, his words are significant. He must speak in witty epigrams which weave their own kind of generative and captivating charm. Unlike the sonnet's volta, however, which sees Douglas's dream transform into a mournful lament of what Wilde might have written had he lived, the fictional forms in which Wilde's ghost is resurrected see him not only reissuing his most famous quips but producing aphoristic witticisms appropriate for the contemporary worlds in which he appears. Wilde is far from ineffectual and obsolete in spectral form: his ghost forges new relationships with the living. He, erudite and avuncular, aids and guides individuals in securing fulfilling outcomes.

As Wooley pragmatically observes, we can conjure Wilde's ghost precisely because "he [has] been dead long enough to be in the public domain" (228). He is sufficiently temporally distanced from us to be depicted without fear of legal battles, yet close enough to our own culture to remain significant, and also so famous as to be instantly recognisable, both visually and verbally. Resultantly, Wilde is the perfect celebrity ghost. He does not appear as a fleeting apparition in the dark, silently melting away into the shadows, nor does he "haunt" in the traditional sense of the word. Rather, he appears in much the way we celebrate him: proud, foppish and loquacious, as opposed to mute or doleful. Most comfortably, however, Wilde's ghost does not wander the earth because his soul has been unable to find peace: Wilde has no unfinished business.¹⁰ Instead, con-

to Wilde's engagement with the fairy tale genre, resulting in two collections of stories, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891).

10 There are some occasions in which Wilde's spirit can be found in purgatory, although it is important to note that the outcome of a period in limbo is (usually) the eventual ascent to heaven. The purgatory in Yates's *Oh! Père Lachaise* is "a pink-tinted Parisian kind" (3). Although the epilogue hints that the entire narrative was simply a dream,

temporary culture pays tribute to a Wilde free from the stigma that he suffered in life, a specter as much of our time as his own.

Works Cited

- Bailey, Paul. *Chapman's Odyssey*. London: Bloomsbury, 2011.
- Béraud Marie-Laure. *Dialogues outre-ciel*. Paris: Manuella Éditions, 2010.
- Brandreth, Gyles. *Oscar Wilde and the Candlelight Murders*. London: John Murray, 2007.
- Curley, Robert, Maura McHugh and Stephen Downey. "Unlikely Revolutionaries." *Jennifer Wilde* #1 (Apr 2013), Atomic Diner / Sub City Ltd.
- . "Unlikely Revolutionaries." *Jennifer Wilde* #3 (Jul 2013), Atomic Diner / Sub City Ltd.
- Douglas, Alfred Bruce. "The Dead Poet." *The Collected Poems of Lord Alfred Douglas*. London: Martin Secker, 1919. 88.
- Dumortier, Laurence. "Oscar Wilde's Multitudes: Against Limiting His Photographic Iconography." *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920* 58.2 (2015): 147–63.
- Fry, Stephen. "Here at #HayFestival – almost no signal but news in that Ireland's Yes Campaign has carried the day. So so happy. Oscar smiles in his grave." 23 May 2015, 1:58 p.m. Tweet.
- Holloway, C. Robert. *The Unauthorized Letters of Oscar Wilde*. Barnstead: Xlibris, 1997.
- Joris, Kirby. "From Wilde to Oscar: A Study in Person in Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), C. Robert Holloway's *The Unauthorized Letters of Oscar Wilde* (1997) and Merlin Holland's *Coffee with Oscar Wilde* (2007)." *Wilde's Wiles: Studies on the Influences on Oscar Wilde and His Enduring Influences in the Twenty-First Century*. Ed. Annette M. Magid. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013. 19–34.
- Levithan, David. *Hold Me Closer: The Tiny Cooper Story*. London: Penguin, 2015.

there is a suggestion that Wilde's spirit has indeed entered paradise. In Marie-Laure Béraud's *Dialogues outre-ciel* (2010), the author imagines conversations between deceased celebrities. The final exchange is between Wilde and the French singer Barbara, in which Wilde is described as "*planté dans le blanc des limbes*." But the blank whiteness of limbo is enlivened by Wilde's apparel: "*ses vêtements ressortaient magnifiquement, dormant un peu de gaieté au décor*" (91). Wilde's lover Lord Alfred Douglas, in contrast, "*grille en enfer*" (99).

- Phillips, Kendall R. *Dark Directions: Romero, Craven, Carpenter, and the Modern Horror Film*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*. London: David Nutt, 1888.
- . *A House of Pomegranates*. London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1891.
- Wooley, John. *Wes Craven: The Man and His Nightmares*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2011.
- Yates, Jim. *Oh! Père Lachaise: Oscar Wilde's Purgatory*. Dublin: Édition d'Amélie, 2007.

Filmography

- "Father Knows Worst." *The Simpsons*. Fox. April 26, 2009.
- "Luca\$." *The Simpsons*. Fox. April 6, 2014.
- "Père-Lachaise." Dir. Wes Craven. *Paris, je t'aime*. Dir. Olivier Assayas, Frédéric Auburtin, Emmanuel Benbihy et al. First Look International, 2006.
- "Place des Victoires." Dir. Nobuhiro Suwa. *Paris, je t'aime*. Dir. Olivier Assayas, Frédéric Auburtin, Emmanuel Benbihy et al. First Look International, 2006.
- "Quartier de la Madeleine." Dir Vincenzo Natali. *Paris, je t'aime*. Dir. Olivier Assayas, Frédéric Auburtin, Emmanuel Benbihy et al. First Look International, 2006.
- Wilde*. Dir. Brian Gilbert. PolyGram Filmed Entertainment, 1997.