

Revisiting Oscar Wilde's Case: Silence and Power Discourse in Neo-Victorian Biofiction *The Master* (2004) and *The New Life* (2023)

¹Paramita Ayuningtyas, ²Shuri Mariasih Gietty Tambunan, ³and Asri Saraswati

¹Bina Nusantara University

1paramita@binus.ac.id

²Universitas Indonesia

2shuri.mariasih@ui.ac.id

³Universitas Indonesia

3asri-s@ui.ac.id

KEYWORDS

biographical
fiction; discourse;
homosexuality;
narrative strategy.

ABSTRACT

In 1895, the famous playwright Oscar Wilde was convicted for homosexuality and sentenced to two years imprisonment and hard labour. His trial has become a pivotal moment in LGBTQ history because it sparked conversations about a topic deemed taboo and even illegal in Victorian England. This article aims to further investigate the portrayal of Oscar Wilde's case in two neo-Victorian biographical novels *The Master* (2004) by Colm Tóibín and *The New Life* (2023) by Tom Crewe. The focus is on the representation of the case (Oscar Wilde's conviction) and other related narrative aspects, particularly the impacts on the protagonists and plot development. The texts are interpreted in reference to Michel Foucault's concept of power and Eve Kosofsky's Sedgwick closet metaphor. Research findings show that 'silence' is an important aspect of Victorian discourse formation about homosexuality, and the two novels (re)construct Oscar Wilde's case as part of the narrative strategy to resist this mainstream discourse. The study's findings support the idea that neo-Victorian biofiction is more than just a sort of nostalgia. It has become a powerful tool for criticising the past and bringing forth the historically silenced voice.

INTRODUCTION

In 1895, the famous playwright Oscar Wilde was convicted for homosexuality and sentenced to two years imprisonment and hard labour. His trial has become a pivotal moment in LGBTQ history because it sparked conversations about a topic deemed taboo and even illegal in Victorian England (1837-1901). The moral standards during Victorian England were determined by the middle class, a group of society with its own set of values and lifestyles that eventually suppressed desires and identities that did not meet their standards. For the Victorian middle class, family became a symbol of stability, social order, and progress, and marriage served as the foundation for family and morality (Lemmer, 2007). Because morality became the crucial component of society, culture, and politics, from the modern perspective, the Victorian age was viewed as conservative. Xiao argued that this great concern for morality was caused by the rise of material wealth accompanied by the decline of spiritual life (Xiao, 2015). When it comes to sexuality, the value encouraged in Victorian society was sexual purity. Sexuality was a forbidden subject in public, which resulted in the suppression of sexual desires either in mass media or literature. Extramarital sex was viewed as a sign of moral decay and the only morally acceptable sexual relationship was in a marriage context. Furthermore, the Victorian era also had a distinct view of female sexuality. Virginity became the benchmark of women's morality, and it is women's responsibility to maintain their virginity before marriage (Gunduz, 2019). Thus, the morally good Victorian women are 'the angels in the house', in contrast with 'the fallen women', a term referring to women who committed extramarital sex (Siuli, 2015).

Even though conservative values were dominant, social contradictions and resistance were also part of Victorian society (Koven, 2006; Lukács, 2022; Siuli, 2015). The paradox of the age was the increase of slum areas in London, despite the technological advance and material wealth. Koven (2006) stated that slum areas were associated with sexual perversion (including prostitution, which was a major problem in London in the nineteenth century). 'Slumming' became a common practice by the middle class as they visited slum areas for charity purposes and moral preaching. Meanwhile, Lukács (2022) studied the Decadence as a form of social resistance against Victorian dogmatic values. As an art and literature movement inspired by the classic Greek culture, the Decadence's goals were to oppose conventionality and to confront subjects that had always been considered taboo. The Decadent artists lived a flamboyant lifestyle, as portrayed by Wilde in his only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This novel was then deemed as a literary work that accurately reflected the Decadent values. From the conservative perspective, the book was viewed as immoral and even used as proof to highlight Wilde's perversion during his infamous trial in 1895.

The paradoxical qualities of Victorian society intrigue many authors to revisit and reconstruct the past through their writings. Known as neo-Victorian, these writings portray the lives of individuals in nineteenth century society with all its complexity. Kohlke specifically explored neo-Victorian as a sub-genre of historical fiction, which is defined as a story located in historical settings but with fictional characters and events (Kohlke, 2013). She observed how, when combined with the genre biographical fiction (a story that fictionalises the life of real historical figures), neo-Victorian fiction can reimagine actual historical figures' lives and perceive them from another perspective, free from the constraints of traditional biographies. As a transcultural site of dialogues between the past and the present, neo-Victorian biofiction also has the potential to amplify the voices of historically marginalised people, including homosexual individuals.

This paper will discuss two neo-Victorian novels that represent issues of homosexuality in Victorian England with two homosexual authors as the protagonist characters. *The Master* (2004) by Colm Tóibín explores the mind and emotions of Henry James, an American author who gained fame in Victorian Britain for his novels such as *The Portrait of The Lady* and *The Europeans*. The plot only focuses on four years of James' life (1895-1899), but these four years are crucial since they show James as a complex character who attempted to survive amid significant changes in his life and in Victorian society. Meanwhile, *The New Life* (2023) written by Tom Crewe was inspired by the struggle of Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds, the authors of *Sexual Inversion*, the first English medical textbook about homosexuality. Ellis and Symonds collaborated on *Sexual Inversion* with a purpose to change the homophobic laws and values of the Victorian era. The plot of *The New Life* starts in June 1894 and ends in March 1896, dealing with the process of writing and the uproar happening after the publication of *Sexual Inversions*.

Because homosexuality was illegal in the Victorian era, both Henry James and John Addington Symonds preferred to conceal their sexual identity from the law and society. Both *The Master* and *The New Life* depict the dilemmatic situation experienced by the two authors when Oscar Wilde was trialed for homosexuality. The media coverage of the trial caused them anxiety and fear that they might be the next victims of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885. This paper aims to investigate further the portrayal of Wilde's case in the two novels in connection with Victorian discourse about homosexuality. Thus, the key question of this paper is: how is Oscar Wilde's case represented in both *The Master* and *The New Life*? To answer the problem formulation, the narrative aspects of the novels will be analysed and then discussed by using significant concepts from Queer theory, highlighting the issues of sexual identity, discourse, and power. The result of the analysis could contribute to the understanding of neo-Victorian biofiction's potential as a site of critically restropective conversations.

METHOD

The data of this research were collected from *The Master* and *The New Life* by using a close reading technique. With the study's aim in mind, the close reading focused solely on related narrative aspects, such as characters and characterizations, plot, dialogues, and narration strategies. These narrative aspects were then discussed qualitatively by using concepts of Queer theory, particularly Michel Foucault's power and discourse and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's closet metaphor.

In *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (1990), Foucault argued that sexuality is shaped and conditioned by external conditions of human bodies, such as culture, politics, and even economy. Using Victorian society to elaborate his point, he stated that the discourse on homosexuality was affected by the development of capitalism in nineteenth-century England. Although the practice itself is as old as time, the formation of homosexuality as a sexual identity was influenced by the advancement of medical science and psychology. Treated as a form of inversion, homosexual bodies in the Victorian era then need to be regulated and the desires be repressed. Homosexuality was also seen as an imminent threat to the capitalist system that needs reproductive population as its labours (Foucault, 1990).

Meanwhile, to interpret and discuss the sexual identity issues in the novels, the research referred to the closet metaphor concept by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. The book *Epistemology of The Closet* proposes that the binary opposition of heterosexuality/homosexuality has shaped the production of knowledge and understandings in Western culture (Sedgwick, 1990). The term 'closet' is used to refer to the concealment and the denial of homosexual identity. It is an important term in Queer studies as it reveals the oppressive power exercised by homophobia and heteronormativity. Furthermore, 'closetedness' is also interpreted as a form of performativity initiated by the speech act of silence (Sedgwick, 2007). The act of hiding one's sexual orientation or gender identity, also known as "being in the closet," can have the same significance as an actual action.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following section examines how Oscar Wilde's infamous trial is used as a narrative device in both *The Master* and *The New Life* to critique Victorian discourse about homosexuality. Wilde was arrested and convicted in April 1895 for 'gross indecency', a term used in the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 to refer to homosexual activities. This case began in February 1895, when the Marquess of Queensberry accused Wilde of sodomy. Although Wilde initially sued the Marquess of Queensberry for defamation, it was Wilde who was eventually arrested for his immoral conduct. Because of his celebrity status, his incarceration received extensive coverage in newspapers and magazines. One publication, *The National Police Gazette*, covered the case from trial to conviction. In his book *Sexual Psychopathy: A Clinical-Forensic Study* (1886), Richard von Krafft-Ebing provided an alternative discourse about homosexuality, but Victorian society maintained heteronormative norms that viewed homosexuality as a form of deviance and a criminal act.

The Complex Manifestation of Closet in *The Master*

The first novel that will be discussed in this paper is *The Master* by Colm Tóibín. This poetic novel begins with the protagonist Henry waking up from a disturbing nightmare. He often dreamed about the death of the people that he loved. This first chapter establishes a melancholy atmosphere that pervades the rest of the story and foreshadows Henry's internal struggles, particularly his sexual identity conflict. Henry, a closeted homosexual, had kept his identity hidden, but Oscar Wilde's infamous trial has disturbed this silence.

In *The Master*, Wilde's trial became a significant moment that highlighted the Victorian attitudes toward homosexual activities. The protagonist Henry learned about Wilde's detention from his two writers, Jonathan Sturges and Edmund Gosse, when they visited his house. Gosse, in particular, was deeply committed to the case and provided Henry with regular updates on its progress. By employing a third person limited point of view that focuses on Henry's feelings and thoughts, *The Master* describes how Henry was actually interested in Wilde's news, but he attempted to conceal his enthusiasm from his friends. As a closeted homosexual, Henry tried to calmly respond to updates about Wilde's case. The narrator described that Henry "watched them calmly", "listened carefully", and "held his breath and moved about the room in silence".

Before the arrest, Henry had been impressed by Wilde's glamorous and decadent persona, which contrasted his own humble and quiet lifestyle. After learning that Wilde had been convicted of homosexual conduct, he did not find it shocking since he believed Wilde's personality suggested "deep levels and layers of hiddenness" (p. 66). It is interesting to note that, as a protagonist, Henry was also portrayed as a multifaceted character who kept many things from others around him, including his sexual orientation. In his letter to his brother William, Henry strongly criticised Wilde's action and insisted on not showing any respect to Wilde. This letter can be interpreted as Henry attempting to conceal his own sexual orientation by creating distance between him and Wilde. He preferred to stay inside 'the closet' so that he would not have the same fate as Wilde.

In *The History of Sexuality* (1990), Foucault argued that silence is an important strategy in the construction of sexuality discourse. The silence is about who has the right to talk and what topics should or should not be discussed. In *The Master*, Henry silenced Gosse when his friend enquired about his status on the court's registry of homosexual men "I wondered if you, if perhaps ..." Gosse began. "No." Henry turned sharply. "You do not wonder. There is nothing to wonder about." (p. 72). Before Gosse even finished with his question, Henry already cut him by saying "there is nothing to wonder about". The conservative Victorian values suppressed discussion about sexuality, especially homosexuality. Even though both Henry and Gosse did not explicitly mention it, they knew what topic they were referring to and chose not to explore it any further. The dominant Victorian discourse on homosexuality was not just evident in court or public spaces, but it had also permeated the private sphere, controlling which topics that could be discussed openly and which should be silenced. It can be concluded that Henry constructs his closet by committing two seemingly opposite acts: saying (by writing a letter to his brother) and being silent (by not discussing it further with Gosse). This shows the complexity of manifesting the closet in Victorian era.

The Suppression of Desire in *The New Life*

In the afterword of *The New Life*, Tom Crewe specifically claimed that his book is a work of fiction. Instead of stating that the novel is about the two Victorian authors Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds, he explained that the characters and the events in the book have historical analogues only. Lackey considers the use of actual names to be an essential element of biographical fiction conventions (Lackey, 2016), but some other scholars have taken a more flexible position by arguing that biographical fiction can experiment with various imaginative forms as long as it remains based on the life of a historical person (Novak, 2017; Rensen & Wiley, 2020). Despite a slight renaming of the characters (Havelock Ellis into Henry Ellis, and John Addington Symonds into John Addington), *The New Life* still captures the essence of the real historical figures' lives and struggles. To emphasise the conflict, Crewe even altered the plot's timeline. The major departure is that the real Addington Symonds died in 1893, whereas the novel begins in 1894, with John Addington still living. It is worth noting that this timeline modification has a significant impact on the plot: that John was still alive during Wilde's trial adds more intrigues to the story.

Wilde's trial was portrayed in *The New Life* as an obstruction for the publication of *Sexual Inversions*. Same as Henry in *The Master*, John Addington also closely watched the progress of the case. The case's worsening updates had made John concerned for both the book and his own sexual orientation. In chapter XXI, John's anxiety was revealed through the technique of internal focalization, which appeared in the form of the prosecutor's relentless questioning to Wilde. Taking the real questions from Wilde's trials in 1895, Crewe presents them in a non-linear way, emphasizing the commotion inside both the court and John's mind. The chapter ends with Wilde's own question that represents Wilde's desperate effort to voice his perspective about the case, "And I? May I say nothing, my lord?" (p. 226). This particular chapter shows how John was imagining the stressful situation during the trial. He was frightened if his relationship with a working-class man was revealed, he would be put on trial as well. His reputation as a respectable middle-class author with a happy marriage would suffer.

While his co-author Henry Ellis became hesitant and afraid that they would be arrested, John insisted on publishing the book because he believed *Sexual Inversions* would contribute to a good cause. When the book was finally published, it did not create a stir until one bookseller was arrested for selling a copy of *Sexual Inversion* to a gentleman who was a policeman in disguise. Mr. Higgs the bookseller was charged for selling an obscene reading material that "represents a danger to public morals" (p. 293). For John, this is what he had been anticipating: the feeling of waiting for the curtain to go up (p. 292). The stage metaphor used here signifies the performative moment of hiding out from the concealment, in other words 'coming out'. John was prepared to defend Mr. Higgs in court and to present his argument about homosexuality.

If *The Master* uses Wilde's case as a strategy to build characterization (by contrasting Wilde's fate with Henry's closeted identity), *The New Life* reconstructs the trial as a pivotal moment that heightens the plot tension. It also depicts the Victorian legal discourse on homosexuality, which was referred to as "gross indecency". The law also forced homosexuals to lie about their sexual orientation, and in John's words, "it is how the country is allowed to pretend, most of the time, that we do not exist" (p. 299). This depicts the articulation of power by defining certain identities that should not exist in society. The repression toward homosexuals in the Victorian era is also evident in the phrases in *The New Life*: When everything secret, hidden, whispered, was shouted, pasted, printed. When what was unmentionable was warmed in every maudlin, moral mouth. When what was nameless has become nothing but names (p. 220). The adjectives 'secret', 'hidden', 'unmentionable' and 'nameless' show how John had internalized heteronormative ideals that suppressed other types of sexual orientations. He resolved to obey the heteronormative values by marrying Catherine: marriage functions as a closet for John. John admitted himself that he used Catherine as a shield if he ever got caught and accused as a homosexual.

CONCLUSION

As Neo-Victorian novels, both *The Master* and *The New Life* examined the life of Victorian society from the twenty-first century perspective. The two novels, which centre on the lives of two closeted figures, portray a pivotal moment in British LGBTQ history as a part of narrative strategy to criticize the Victorian prevailing discourse on homosexuality. Oscar Wilde's case has convinced Henry James, the protagonist of *The Master*, to remain discreet about his sexual identity. As a respectable author, he did not dare to risk his reputation. Thus, he chose to live a celibate life as a form of closet. Meanwhile, in *The New Life*, Wilde's succession of trials serves as a barrier for the publication of *Sexual Inversion*. John was willing to continue the publication, but the ramifications for the people around him would be too severe. *The New Life* also depicts the contesting discourses on homosexuality. The book that Ellis and John co-wrote was intended to provide a new understanding about homosexuality, as opposed to the legal perspective that sees it as moral depravity and criminal conduct. At the end of both novels, neither Henry nor John openly discussed their sexual orientation. They both realised that the implications of coming out are still too much for them to bear.

The analysis on *The Master* and *The New Life* reveals that silencing is part of the strategy for constructing homosexuality discourse in the Victorian era. It addresses not only the subjects considered appropriate for public conversation but also who has the authority to speak about them. Through their biographical novels, Colm Tóibín and Tom Crewe have portrayed the hidden sides of two homosexual Victorian authors. The narrative strategy employed in the two novels gives voices to these silenced figures, illustrating their struggles and concern of being misfits in the Victorian era. However, it should be noted that 'the voices' of Henry James and John Addington Symonds can emerge on the surface due to the privilege they possessed. Despite facing oppression because of their sexual orientation, they owned other elements of identity that had been advantageous to them. They were white, middle-class, and educated authors with numerous biographies and other forms of historical documentation written about them. The historical others who did not have the same privilege also had their own versions of stories, but these stories may never be recorded and recovered. Thus, the critical questions about who has been silenced and who has the power to speak must be addressed and examined constantly.

REFERENCES

- Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality: Volume 1*. Penguin History.
- Gunduz, E. I. (2019). Tipping The Velvet: Specularised Sexualities in the Victorian Era. *Pamukkale University Journal of Social Sciences Institute*, 35, 83–91. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.30794/pausbed.407636>
- Kohlke, M. (2013). Neo-Victorian Biofiction and the Special / Spectral Case of Barbara Chase-Riboud 's Hottentot Venus. *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*, 18(3), 4–21.
- Koven, S. (2006). *Slumming: Sexual and social politics in Victorian London*. Princeton University Press.
- Lackey, M. (2016). Locating and Defining the Bio in Biofiction. *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 31(1), 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2016.1095583>
- Lemmer, C. (2007). *Victorian respectability: The gendering of domestic space*. University of Pretoria.
- Lukács, S. (2022). *Decadence and repression in Henry James and Oscar Wilde*. Cambridge Scholar Publishing.
- Novak, J. (2017). Experiments in Life Writing: Introduction. In L. Boldrini & J. Novak (Eds.), *Experiments in Life Writing: Intersection of Auto/Biography and Fiction* (pp. 1–25). Springer International Publishing.
- Rensen, M., & Wiley, C. (2020). Writing Artists' Lives Across Nations and Cultures: Biography, Biofiction and Transnationality. In M. Rensen & C. Wiley (Eds.), *Transnational Perspectives on Artists' Lives* (pp. 1–24). Palgrave Macmillan Cham.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of The Closet*. University of California Press.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (2007). Axiomatic. In S. During (Ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader* (3rd ed., pp. 320–339). Routledge.
- Siuli, S. (2015). A paramount justification of Victorian sex and sexuality and the concept of prostitution of 19th century London. *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*, 3(9), 508–

516.

Xiao, B. (2015). Morality in Victorian Period. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 5(9), 1815.
<https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0509.07>