Being Wilde: Social representation of the public image of Oscar Wilde

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Abstract

This article focuses on the news reporting on Oscar Wilde during the 1895 trials in which he was accused of sodomy and gross indecency. We discuss the positive and negative labelling associated with Wilde during and after the trials. Our data are drawn from the *British Library Newspapers*, consisting of over 1,500 articles from a variety of both rural and metropolitan British newspapers. Our results demonstrate that during the course of the trials, the reference to Wilde shows not only variation, but also change: his public persona changes from a well-known author to an accused criminal.

1 Introduction

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At the clubs it has been found necessary to impose a fine of “drinks round” or some equivalent punishment for any one who mentions the name of Oscar Wilde. It is curious, by the way, how, since his cross-examination at the Old Bailey trial, he has lost the prefix “Mr.” Until then, nearly all the newspapers described him as Mr. Wilde or Mr. Oscar Wilde. But he is now “Wilde,” or “Oscar Wilde,” or “the man Wilde.” (*The Lichfield Mercury*, 2 April 1895)

Already in the nineteenth century the popular press had information contents which were often mixed with entertaining characteristics (Conboy 2010: 80). The press generally used melodramatic, fiction-like text in presenting the darker sides of social life including rudimentary psychological analyses and a fascination with shocking detail (Conboy 2010: 87; see also Diamond 2003; Mayr & Machin 2012). Newspapers feasted on such topics as the corruption of the upper classes and famous people. One such person, Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), was involved in three major trials during 1895 for sodomy and gross indecency. Wilde was a well-known Irish playwright and poet, who was at the height of his popularity in the 1890s (for his life and career, see e.g. Ellmann 1987). As a consequence of the trials Wilde’s representation in the media changed, and as the above excerpt from the time of the trials shows, this change also extended to the manner he was referred to in the newspapers. We chose Wilde as the subject of this study because he forms a contrast to the common criminals studied

earlier (see e.g. Nevala 2016). Unlike most people accused of crimes, Wilde was already famous at the beginning of the trials.

In this study, we focus on labelling: what are the positive and negative attributes and descriptions associated with Wilde during and after the trials, and how was his public image changed in the process? Labelling means creating and maintaining impressions by using labels which, when being negative, give a less favourable, and often false, image of the target. It can often be used as a strategy to imply that people considered ‘normal’ do not have the capacity to behave badly and immorally, as Wilde was considered to have done. Such linguistic evaluation carries an element of moral judgment, since when expressing, for example, our reluctance to be associated with a particular person or group, we simultaneously assess the characteristics of them as negative (Martin & White 2005). Labelling has not been widely studied in historical material, particularly not in the Late Modern English period when the popular press became a medium for public image construction and social representation (see e.g. Conboy 2010: 73, 77, 91).

Our data are drawn from the *British Library Newspapers*, thus consisting of news reports from a wide variety of both rural and metropolitan British newspapers. We focus on mentions of Wilde within the timespan 3 April–31 May 1895, which covers the time of the three trials concerning the so-called Queensberry case. The data consist of over 1,500 articles, including news reports from 1–2 lines to several columns in length.

We begin by introducing the concepts of social representation and labelling, then present a brief overview of the three trials of Wilde. After a more detailed description of the data, we show how Wilde was labelled both negatively and positively in the news reports.

2 Social representation and labelling

The notion of social representation has its origins in social psychology. It means those values, ideas, metaphors, beliefs, and practices that are shared by the members of groups and communities (cf. Moscovici 1984). In critical discourse analysis, moral evaluation is “linked to specific discourses of moral value” (van Leeuwen 2008: 110). Representation of a particular individual or a group can manifest itself by the use of adjectives such as *healthy*, *normal*, or *natural*. This is what van Leeuwen (2008: 109) calls “moral legitimization”: it consists of the processes of evaluation, abstraction, and comparison. People are categorized on the basis of positive and negative values into different sociocultural groups.

Language can indeed be used to reinforce or undermine categorical differences (Hogg and Abrams 1988: 212). The most typical way of manifesting public images, identities and intergroup relations is in so-called in-group and out-group discourse. Wodak (2008: 61), in her study of discursive exclusion and inclusion strategies, notes that the reference of *we*

varies according to prevailing ideologies and power relations: sometimes *we* means ‘all of us reasonable people’ and, at other times, clearly defined and restricted groups. As van Dijk (2009: 141) states, giving attributes to the self and others is related to interactional and societal contexts. This means that defining the self and others is not only governed by macro-level norms or shared knowledge, but is also dependent of micro-level interactions and situations. Ochs (1993: 289) sees the process of building an identity, and thus also representation, as something usually not explicitly encoded in language use, but rather “a social meaning” inferred in act and stance meanings. It can be seen to evolve and vary in social interaction in response to the acts and stances of other interlocutors, but also according to the speaker’s own attitude towards each interactional situation (Ochs 1993: 298).

Similarly to Wodak, van Leeuwen (2008: 147) has found various strategies that can be used to refer to people as ‘others’. In public discourse, people can, for example, be excluded in contexts where, in reality, they are present. They can be depicted as inferior, deviant, criminal, or even evil, or shown to be members of homogeneous groups and, in this way, denied their individual characteristics and differences (i.e. meaning, ‘they are all the same’). Other exclusion tactics include the strategy of negative cultural connotations and the strategy of negative stereotyping.

Often the values and norms of a particular group are manifested in the labelling practices used about other groups or members of those groups.

This means creating and maintaining – mostly – negative impressions, which can be aided or achieved through the use of “labels of primary potency” (Allport 1986: 264). Consequently, certain characteristics, like male/female, white/black, or law-abiding/criminal, carry more perceptual potency than others, and signal difference from what is considered mainstream. In this study, for instance, characterising Oscar Wilde as an “indecent” homosexual might not only make characteristics such as being a good writer or a celebrated author seem secondary, but also emphasise Wilde’s social identity and representation at the time as a deviant and a criminal. Example (1) is an excerpt from a news report during the second Wilde trial, by the time of which it was clear to everyone that Wilde had been guilty of “indecent” and “intimacy” with another man. Labelling is done here more by implicit than explicit means: Wilde is explicitly referred to by his name or by the term *prisoner*, but the close context reveals the negative impression of Wilde, presented by the prosecution, that the writer wants to convey to the readers. Wilde is described with negative attributes, such as “ill and anxious” and as having “continued the intimacy” and “flaunted Lord Alfred at hotels”, against Lord Alfred’s father’s, Lord Queensberry’s, wishes.

- (1) The trial of **Oscar Wilde** on charges of indecency was resumed at the Old Bailey, London, to-day, before Mr Justice Wills. **Prisoner**, who looked ill and anxious, having entered the dock, the Solicitor-

General resumed his speech in reply for the prosecution. He asked what was the relationship of **prisoner** with Lord Alfred Douglas, and said though Lord Queensberry resented the intimacy between **prisoner** and Lord Alfred, **prisoner** continued the intimacy, and flaunted Lord Alfred at hotels in London and the country.

(*Edinburgh Evening News*, 25 May 1895)²

According to Perdue et al. (1990: 476; see also Hogg & Abrams 1988), terms referring to in-group categorisation, such as the pronoun *we*, may over time accumulate connotations that are primarily positive, whereas out-group-referent words (such as *they*) are more likely to have less favourable, even negative connotations. Similarly, nominal reference terms may be used for the purposes of implying positive or negative characteristics: it is naturally considered preferable, for example, to be a *pious virgin* compared with being a *rotten thief*. Actual terms and expressions used about the members of an in-group or an out-group can thus be based on certain general concepts and stereotypes that exist in society at large.

The division between what could be called neutral, positive, and negative labelling then clearly reflects a prevalent, societal attitude either in favour of or against particular groups and group members, as e.g. in the case

² In all examples, direct nominal reference to Wilde is in bold and contextual reference underlined. We have not studied pronominal reference to Wilde in this study.

of criminals and law-abiding citizens. By creating and using negative terms and attributes, 'respectable' people place criminals in a 'detestable' out-group. Studies have shown that there are, for example, specific naming strategies for criminals (Mayr and Machin 2012: 57). Clark (1992: 224) calls this process of extreme negative labelling "fiend naming": when criminals are referred to as monsters, they are depicted as so evil and alien that they cannot fit into humankind and society. Negative labelling then becomes a strategy based on the notion that no 'normal' person would be capable of such a 'monstrous' crime. In comparison, victims are often labelled positively with what could be called 'angel naming', respectively (cf. Nevala 2016). Tabbert (2015: 152) has found that, in the press, victims are often described in terms of their social network and environment, as well as their character. For example, a victim whose identity is constructed as being loved and cared for by others evokes more empathy and concern, because readers think they must be a good person (2015: 104). The more people are affected, the more the impact of the crime gets emphasised.

As already stated, labelling can manifest itself in actual labels and attributes, such as personal pronouns (*we, you, those/them*) and terms of reference (*Mr. Jones, the prisoner, the old man*). In addition, there is a variety of other discursive ways in which interlocutors' social images are encoded. The juxtaposition of different groups and their members can occur through speech acts of criticism and praise (*they worked wonders, they did not know what they were doing*), or by variation in stance-taking by modal

verbs (*he should have known*) and evaluative expressions (*he is a monster/the angel*), or otherwise. In this study, we have concentrated on nominal reference terms (including evaluative labels and expressions) and their immediate textual context, which together contribute as to what we understand as social representation.

3 The trials of Oscar Wilde

In April–May 1895, Oscar Wilde participated in three trials at the Central Criminal Court in London. The first trial, in which Wilde sued the Marquess of Queensberry for libel, opened on 3 April and lasted until 5 April, when Wilde withdrew the prosecution as Queensberry had presented damning evidence against Wilde. On 5 April, with remarkable speed, Wilde was arrested (Bristow 2016: 44) and the following day he and Alfred Taylor were jointly charged “with offences under Criminal Law Amendment Act” for committing acts of gross indecency (Hyde 1948: 103). The second trial, where Wilde and Taylor stood accused, began on 26 April and lasted until 1 May, when the jury announced that they could not agree on a verdict. Wilde was released on bail on 7 May and the re-trial of the case began on 21 May. The judge ordered Wilde and Taylor to be tried separately. Taylor was found guilty the following day and Wilde on 25 May. On that day Wilde

and Taylor were sentenced “to two years’ imprisonment with hard labour” (Hyde 1948: 104).

All three trials dealt with the homosexuality of Wilde and Taylor. This had been criminalised in Britain only a year earlier. Coste (2014: 4) argues that the main point of contention was Wilde’s lifestyle in a larger sense, “promotion of the beautiful, and the emphasis on artistic form, [...] including works, practices and persons with a different (dissident?) relationship to mercantile society”. Not only were Wilde’s actions with men the matter before the court, but also his works were cited as proof of his decadence and discussed at length (Bristow 2016: 43). Wilde “contested Victorian norms”, including respectability, education and capitalism and promoted individualism (Coste 2014: 17).

While Wilde was standing trial for sodomy and gross indecency, Bristow (2016: 48) argues that the terms were never sufficiently defined to the juries “that had in any case expressed confusion about the nature of the charges”. The witnesses – many of whom received compensation from the pocket of Queensberry – confessed their guilt in the same acts as Wilde and in many cases blackmail, but they were not charged with either. During the second trial the foreman of the jury asked whether a warrant was issued against Queensberry’s son Lord Alfred Douglas, indicating that they felt Douglas should have stood trial as well. Justice Wills claimed ignorance of Douglas’s actions and any proceedings against him. Bristow (2016) sums up

many contemporary legal critics' views which argue that Wilde did not in fact receive a fair trial.

There are apparently no surviving court transcripts of the trial, only newspaper accounts, which were “highly mediated stories whose narrative structures organized and gave meaningful shapes to the events they purported to accurately represent” (Cohen 1993: 4). The evidence of the newspapers is therefore not only evidence of the public treatment of Wilde but also the only surviving evidence of the trial itself.

4 Data and methods

The data for the study were collected from the *British Library Newspapers*. The search term used was simply “Wilde”, and references to other persons with that name were excluded. The timespan of our data collection was from the beginning of the first trial, i.e. 3 April 1895 to the end of May 1895. The actual reporting of the trial started on the first day of the trial. The end date for data collection was decided so that we could catch not only reports of the trial but also some reactions to the final verdict on 26 May 1895.³

³ According to Cohen (1993: 210) the end of the third trial marked a notable decline in newspaper stories concerning Wilde.

All in all the data collected comprise 1,526 news items. In length they vary from 1–2 lines to several columns and discuss not only Wilde’s trials but also some related matters. Stories related to Wilde’s trial alone number 1,255, and this count includes reporting and editorials. Other topics include gossip about Wilde’s person, his dress, his health, his whereabouts and his life in prison (162 items), often under headlines such as “Personal Gossip”, “Chit Chat”, “Our London Letter” or simply “Oscar Wilde”. One notable side event was the so-called “Queensberry Fracas”, a fistfight on 22 May 1895 between the Marquess of Queensberry and his son, Lord Douglas (48 items). The reporting of this fight was explicitly connected to the Wilde trials in these stories, but as our focus was on Wilde we did not look for fracas stories without this link. The fracas stories in our data were often placed adjacent to reporting of the Wilde trials, increasing the implied connection between the two news stories. Our search brought up episodes only tenuously linked to the trial but pertinent to Wilde’s public image, such as the case of a dock labourer, who reportedly “while laughing in the Crown Public-house, Commercial-street, on Tuesday night, at a joke in connection with the Wilde case, suddenly fell down and expired” (*The Hampshire Advertiser*, 27 April 1895). In order to gain an overview of the type and amount of data collected, we have classified each item by length and content type. We give an overview of these features in sections 4.1 and 4.2.

4.1 Length of news items

We have classified our data into four length categories: brief (1–2 lines), short (1–2 paragraphs), medium (3 paragraphs to one column) and long (more than one column). Some of the problems included in this evaluation are obviously paragraphs of varying lengths (very short paragraphs of 1–3 lines were not counted as individual paragraphs), the newspapers’ tendency to publish several small items related to the Wilde trial consecutively (these were counted as one news item regardless of possibly having separate headlines) and the division of stories on several pages. The divided stories were treated as separate items, because even though the front-page item was continued on a later page, there was a separate headline and often a different angle. Because of retrieval problems, we were also not able to make sure we have all such continuous pairs. As a whole, we believe this way of classification gives us a fairly robust measure of the length of news stories related to Wilde’s trials.

In order to track the representation of the trials in the press, we have divided the news stories into news cycles. The first cycle is 3–6 April, i.e. the first trial. We include the day after the trial, because that was when the news of the “sensational ending” was reported. The second cycle is 26 April–2 May, the second trial with again the day after the trial included. The third cycle is 22–27 May, which covers the third trial with its aftermath. In addition to these, there are the two interim periods: 7–25 April and 3–21 May and the post-trial period 28–31 May, when there were stories related to the preparation for the trials, bail hearings, Wilde’s prison experience and

other matters. Figure 1 (and Table 1 in the Appendix) gives an overview of these patterns. It is very clear that the first trial was reported at greater length than the other trials. The second trial received the lowest percentage of long reports, perhaps because many of the details presented at court were assumed to have been familiar to readers already. By the time of the third trial, possibly because of the length of time that had passed after the first one or because it could be estimated, particularly after Taylor's conviction, that the trial was final, the data again show a rise in the proportion of long stories. Brief and short stories are commonest between trials as could be expected, but particularly during the break between the second and third trials there seems to have been very little of substance to write about.

Figure 1. The length of news items reporting on Oscar Wilde during his trials

4.2 *Content of news items*

In terms of content, we assigned four main categories. The category called Details refers to news items reporting either details of courtroom incidents or Wilde's actions. In the category Summary, the news is reported without a great deal of detail. Different papers might report the same event in these two different styles. There might also be a Summary item in an earlier edition and a report containing Details later that day or the following day. The third category is Editorial. This contains the opinions of the paper itself, quotes from the editorials of other papers, one letter to the editor and occasional columns by London or society correspondents. We have already mentioned Gossip, which centred on matters such as Wilde's whereabouts between the second and third trials and his life in prison.⁴ We include in this category reporting of the Queensberry fracas and all the other incidents tenuously linked with the trials, whether duels in Paris or laughing dock labourers. The different types of content were usually of different lengths: summaries and gossip items were typically short while reporting on details

⁴ There were many rumours concerning Wilde's location from Torquay to Guernsey, but apparently he spent most of the time at his friends' the Leversons' house in London (Ellmann 1987: 440–443).

could range from short to long. In some cases a news story contained elements from several types. In those cases the most salient content type was recorded.

When we look at the types of stories during these different phases of the period studied, we can see in Figure 2 (and Table 2 in the Appendix), unsurprisingly, that detailed reporting of the proceedings and Wilde's behaviour are most frequent during the trials themselves. Summaries are more common between the trials, particularly between the second and third ones. Editorials seem particularly common after the third trial, which is perhaps unsurprising, as before that there was no final verdict. The amount of gossip seems to increase as the process drags on. Speculation on Wilde's health, whereabouts and life in prison is common during the second and third trials and after the third trial, and the reporting of the Queensberry fracas bulks the numbers during the third trial. The reports on other episodes, such as a donkey named Oscar Wilde or the Glasgow political heckler who yelled "Oscar Wilde" during a campaign event are also more frequent during periods when there are no actual facts to report.

Figure 2. The type of news items reporting on Oscar Wilde during his trials

5 The representation of Oscar Wilde

5.1 *Previous studies on Wilde in the press home and abroad*

The trials were widely reported in the British press, and previous studies indicate that “many newspapers exaggerated Wilde’s demeanour in court” (Bristow 2016: 47; see also Cohen 1993: 173–209). By the time of the third trial the press had mostly settled on a condemning tone and after it they “lived up to Wilde’s expectations by almost universally praising the verdict

of the jury” although there were differing voices such as *Reynolds News*, which on 20 May “refused ‘to gloat over the ruin of the unhappy man’” (Ellmann 1987: 446, 450). There is also some evidence of reporting elsewhere. Before the trials Wilde was called “the brilliant Irishman” outside the British Empire, but after that his ethnicity was reframed as the “Anglais”, “Englander” or “Britisher” (Sullivan 1972: 3).

The severity of the crime was commented on in the French press, as they noted “with some bewilderment, [that] in England sodomy ranked only one step below murder” (Ellmann 1987: 431). Canovas (2015) shows that on the surface the French journals supported Wilde unanimously, but there were differences between papers. Wilde’s actions were framed not as crimes, but as a sin (2015: 74). Many defended Wilde because he was such an exceptional writer and artist, and claimed that laws should not be applied to a man of such genius (2015: 76–77). Wan (2006: 51) argues that the French press created a discursive “journalistic prosecution”, i.e. a textual courtroom, allowing the reading public to be the judge and jury. Particular attention was paid to Wilde’s appearance and dress, which portrayed him as effeminate and decadent (2006: 56). There was also a clear tendency to report on Wilde’s declining health during the process (2006: 61). Cohen (1993: 207) identifies a similar trend in the English press.

In the North-American press, Wilde’s trial was also covered, as he had been a well-known literary figure since his 1881 lecturing tour of the United States and Canada (Robinson 2015). In the New York press aimed at the

middle class, the nature of the offences was never clearly mentioned, although code words were used allowing the reader in the know to understand what was being described. The popular press in New York “contained rather more free discussion of the more delicate (or lurid) portions of trial testimony” (Robinson 2015: 10).⁵ According to Robinson (2015) the popular paper *New York Sun* referred to Wilde as a “pampered exquisite” and a “poor creature” who “had not sufficient pluck to blow out his brains”, arguably evoking dislike and empathy at the same time.

In Montreal the English-language press followed the New York press while the francophone papers approached matters more in line with the French press, condemning the English double standard and hypocrisy (Robinson 2015; Wan 2006). Robinson (2015: 16) sums up the reportage in North America by saying the “attitudes towards Wilde reflected class, social, and national prejudices as well as moral ideals”.

5.2 *Labelling in the British press*

As stated in the introductory example, the contemporaries of Oscar Wilde already noticed the way in which reference to him changed in the course of the three trials. Similarly, our data include variation in labelling practices from what could be interpreted as positive towards negatively connotative

⁵ The publication has no pagination. This is the page number of the pdf file.

ones. At the time of the first trial, and particularly before, Wilde seems to have been publicly seen as a great author and wit. He is often referred to in headlines and copy by *Mr (Oscar) Wilde*, or *Oscar Wilde*. Other positive labels also appear, as in example (2). Although referring to “acts of gross indecency”, thus repeating the cause for the charges, the reporter reminds the readers of Wilde being “the brilliant man of letters”. Also, at this time, expressions like “alleged” and “the guilt ... is either proved or disproved” still appear, as well as a reminder to readers not to judge Wilde (“it behoves the public to suspend judgment”).

Example (3) is from the end of the third trial, when Wilde was sentenced to hard labour. The overall attitude in the report appears to be sympathetic to Wilde, and he is directly referred to with labels *the distraught man*, *the brilliant wit*, *the man of fashion*, *the voluptuary*, and *the poet*. He is seen as someone to be pitied, further emphasised by contextual cues like “the despair ... was terrible to see”, and “the maddening torture of two years’ hard labour”, which both also show the writer’s melodramatic style.

- (2) **Oscar Wilde** and his alleged accomplice in acts of gross indecency have had their trial at the Central Criminal Court, and on Wednesday evening the jury could not come to an agreement, so that a fresh trial is to take place. Until the guilt of the brilliant man of letters, whose private career is open to such grave

accusations, is either proved or disproved it behoves the public to suspend judgment. (*Northampton Mercury*, 3 May 1895)

- (3) When **Wilde** heard his sentence the despair depicted in his shrinking face, as the crowded court rose and leaned towards him, was terrible to see. “May I say nothing, my lord?” asked **the distraught man**, his brain reeling and his great intellect deserting him. “No!” was the stern rebuff. No! **the brilliant wit** was doomed to the silence of solitary imprisonment, **the man of fashion** was condemned to shorn locks and the convict’s garb, **the voluptuary** to the labour of the treadmill, **the poet** to the maddening torture of two years’ hard labour. (*Western Mail*, 28 May 1895)

Despite a few sympathetic approaches, we can see a development towards a more negative evaluation and construction of Wilde’s public image. In examples (4)–(9), Wilde is, for example, referred to as (*Mr.*) *Oscar Wilde, the man (Wilde)*, or *the great offender*. Example (4) reports Queensberry’s defence attorney, Edward Carson, referring to Wilde being “tolerated” and having “disgusting audacity”.

- (4) Mr Carson remarked, with much emphasis, that it was a wonder the man Wilde had been tolerated in London society so long. He regretted to have to call the young man Parker, because he had

joined the service of his country, and now bore an excellent character. The learned counsel characterised **Wilde's** behaviour to a Worthing fisher boy as an instance of his disgusting audacity.
(*Northern Echo*, 6 April 1895)

The most negative labelling is often used in editorials that discuss the trials and Wilde's character from the point of view of societal judgment. An example of such labelling can be seen in (5), where Wilde is referred to with nominal labels such as *this unclean creature* and *not a man, but a horror that one shudders to approach*. The moral condemnation is further emphasised by the phrases "our loathing and our contempt" and "simple abuse", which are both used to describe the harmful things Wilde has inflicted on respectable people. Wilde is depicted as someone who should have been seen as a common enemy from the beginning.

Certain themes that appear in the Wilde reporting are similar to those used in other nineteenth-century crime news. Previous studies (e.g. Nevala 2016, 2017) have found that crime and criminals are often associated with, for example, fiends, monsters and other unhuman creatures, animals and vermin, infection and contamination, as well as evil and obscene behaviour. Here also the report in (5) tells us of Wilde's influence being "a contamination", as well as him dragging "others down into that awful pit of obscenity" and infecting us with his contempt for Victorian morals and conventions.

(5) And of **this unclean creature, Oscar Wilde**, what shall or can we say that would be adequate? Words fail us to express our loathing and our contempt, and simple abuse, even were it called for, would be wasted. **Oscar Wilde is not a man, but a horror that one shudders to approach.** His influence has been a contamination, and he has dragged others down into that awful pit of obscenity where few eyes dare to peer. (*The Bury and Norwich Post, and Suffolk Standard*, 9 April 1895)

One of the difficulties in analysing the construction of Wilde's image in the newspapers has been the heterogeneous nature of the labelling practices. Some news reports contain both positive and negative description, and even the most negative ones may show Wilde as a simultaneously pitiful and disgraceful character. Accounts such as that in (6) are common in the data. The report tells us that Wilde arrived at the Holloway prison, where he will be waiting for the trial. At first glance, the reader might interpret the passage as a positive one, since it says that Wilde has been "conveyed to one of the better-class cells", and other prisoners will take care of his "menial duties" for him. The list of privileges is, however, quite lengthy, and the contrast between them and the only thing he is not allowed to do, smoking, is noticeable. Telling the audience of all the things an

offender is allowed to have instead of those he is not is a clever means of making the readers think about whether Wilde deserves them.

- (6) The Press Association states that when **Mr. Oscar Wilde** arrived at Holloway Gaol on Saturday, after the proceedings at Bow Street, he was conveyed to one of the better-class cells, the occupation of which is provided for by the prison regulations on the payment of about a shilling a day. It has been arranged that one of the prisoners at present at Holloway shall perform the menial duties which every prisoner is bound himself to perform unless prepared to pay for a substitute. His meals will be supplied by a local caterer, and he will be allowed to receive a daily visit from a friend. He will, however, be obliged to forego cigarette smoking, and to attend the parade of prisoners at the gaol awaiting trial. (*Evening Telegraph and Star and Sheffield Daily Times*, 8 April 1895)

Example (7) shows another instance of reporting containing both positive and negative labelling. Wilde is referred to as “a man who occupies a prominent and distinguished position and who is regarded by his fellow-country men and women as a very apostle of art and culture and all that is ideal and elevating”. At the same time, he is negatively described as conducting “atrocious, abominable, and inhuman practices”.

- (7) The verdict of the jury, if it be in accordance with truth and fact, warns the whole country, not only that atrocious, abominable, and inhuman practices exist in our midst, but that these practices may be carried on by **a man** who occupies a prominent and distinguished position and who is regarded by his fellow-country men and women as a very apostle of art and culture and all that is ideal and elevating.
(*Northern Echo*, 27 May 1895)

One thing that is usually expected of criminals is being ashamed of what they have done. The fact that Wilde did not particularly show remorse, or beg for forgiveness, was often noted in the news reports during the trials. Also, after the sentence was given, Wilde was described as not being “overcome with shame at the dreadful ignominy of his position” (example 8). In (9), moral judgment of such lack of remorse is shown by extreme negativity: Wilde, “a gross offender”, has had “a corrupting influence” on an entire society, and “the spectacle ... of his shame and degradation, and of the utter ruin” should be taken as a warning example first and foremost to those of “the same class”, but, in reality, to everyone.

- (8) The general impression he conveyed was of a man filled with a vague hopeless terror, not of one overcome with shame at the dreadful ignominy of his position. (*Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 27 May 1895)

- (9) Of this, however, there can be no doubt, that he has not only been a **gross offender** himself, but has exercised a corrupting influence the extent of which can hardly be measured. In view of the mischief that **such a man** does, the sentence he has received compares but lightly with those almost every day awarded for infinitely less pernicious crimes. The spectacle, however, of his shame and degradation, and of the utter ruin that has overtaken him when at the zenith of his fame and popularity should at least serve as a wholesome warning to others of the same class who still remain at large. (*Evening Telegraph and Star and Sheffield Daily Times*, 29 May 1895)

In general, attributes such as *obscene*, *atrocious*, *abominable*, *inhuman*, *dreadful*, and *corrupting*, as well as nouns like *disgrace*, *terror*, *mischief*, *shame*, and *degradation* are all commonly used of criminals and their condemnable character and immoral behaviour (see e.g. Nevala & Hintikka 2009; Nevala 2016, 2017). Such conduct was seen as condemnable and unforgivable in Victorian society.

6 Concluding remarks

The trials of Oscar Wilde were covered in great detail in the British press, and much of the court proceedings was reported verbatim. The reports did not contain only neutral reporting, however, as quotations were interspersed with reporters' and editors' own views, painting a picture of Wilde, his appearance and behaviour. In addition to trial reports, Wilde's actions between trials and many related events were noted in the press, adding to a complex picture of condemning and often ridiculing the well-known author standing trial.

The data offer an opportunity to peruse the treatment of a socially high ranking offender in the press, and allow us to consider how the role of previous celebrity and social standing affect the use of labelling. Unlike in the case of common criminals, the reading public already had a perception of Wilde as an author, wit and man about town. Wilde's reputation appears to have changed as the trials proceeded: from initial positive labelling and support for the allegedly wronged party to a more neutral attitude and finally to extreme negative labelling. These trends were not consistent: there was some strongly negative labelling quite early but also positive and neutral – or mixed – labelling even during the final trial. At least some contemporaries were aware of the changing labelling practices.

The negative labelling of Wilde follows the trends established in the study of common criminals. Just as they were discussed through images of contamination and lack of human characteristics, so was Wilde painted as a representative of illness and falling below human beings. Unlike average

murderers, however, Wilde also received some empathy from commentators, often in mixed commentary combining pity and disdain. Even this show of seeming sympathy can to some extent be seen as negative: as an object of pity Wilde has fallen from his previous position as an admired and celebrated author. Wilde's lack of remorse was taken as evidence of his corrupt nature, although it was also a manifestation of his earlier privileged life.

This study has given rise to some further questions we were not able to cover in this paper. One avenue worth pursuing would be the consistency or inconsistency of various newspapers in their labelling practices. While one and the same newspaper, even in one and the same issue, could engage in both positive and negative labelling, it is our overall view that some papers were more consistently negative. There seems to be some indication that Wilde was associated with a "London" lifestyle which the more wholesome rural readership of some papers could wholeheartedly disapprove of. Another question is the distinction between more explicit and implicit practices of labelling, which can be seen in the examples included in this paper, but could not be pursued for reasons of space. Finally, the differences between story type and length in labelling practices are likely to provide a fruitful course of enquiry.

We do know the reputation Wilde gained during the trials lived on, as Woodcock (1989: x–xi) reports: "in a small English provincial town at the end of the 1920s [...] his very name still carried a connotation of evil in

large sections of English society. [...] [H]e had become a kind of monster figure in folk mythology, the hero of smutty verses and bar-room legends.”

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Appendix

Table 1. Number of stories /subperiod

	Trial 1	Interim 1	Trial 2	Interim 2	Trial 3	Post	Total
long	65	24	11	6	30	3	139
medium	61	69	106	64	204	24	528
short	49	107	106	250	135	39	686
brief	17	18	26	78	26	8	173
Total	192	218	249	398	395	74	1526
per day	48.0	11.5	35.6	22.1	49.4	18.5	

Table 2. Types of stories / subperiod

	Trial 1	Interim 1	Trial 2	Interim 2	Trial 3	Post	Total
details	127	96	136	90	199	12	660
summary	34	79	76	188	106	11	494
gossip	13	33	25	100	70	27	268
editorial	18	10	12	20	20	24	104
Total	192	218	249	398	395	74	1526