

Judges' Commentary for "On Oscar Wilde, Posing as a Sodomite"

by

Amy Scarbrough

"On Oscar Wilde, Posing as a Sodomite" shared first prize in the University of Pittsburgh's 2007/08 Composition Program Writing Contest

Amy Scarbrough's essay "On Oscar Wilde, Posing as a Sodomite" presents a series of six vignettes—each one framed by a theme (on celebrity, on sin, on society, on hope)—to dramatically render the Victorian era author's 1895 indictment, trials, and incarceration. This imaginative approach to an assignment requiring an essay developed through a list that characterizes a well-known public figure displays Scarbrough's abilities to envision setting, character, and dialogue. At each stage, her descriptions offer revealing glimpses of Wilde and his social milieu. Her opening scene's salient details, for example—one fellow's "pursed smile," another's "chortle"—invite readers to sit at the table next to eccentric wits as they exchange quips about the mundanity of marriage. Her cinematic pace next thrusts readers from this sophisticated conversation into a scene portraying Wilde's inner turmoil and passion, as he conveys fury to his lover, Bosie, at the ruinous sodomite charges brought against him by Bosie's father: "A selfish hatred has come upon me, and with vile words I lash outwards and rail against him. . . . I repeat my vile words, and our volumes heighten until we both are breathless, barking in the darkening street like curs."

The essay's dialogic nature (its shift, for example, from Wilde's erudite register to the vernacular of a shopkeeper who witnesses Wilde's arrest with satisfaction) enriches the narrative. Throughout the unfolding action, Scarbrough touches on intriguing ideas implied by the words of Oscar Wilde and the voices of his compatriots-turned-traitors. Her essay laments the perversion of his art when distorted by his enemies, but its closing focus is his affirmation of self-knowledge gained through suffering and hope in Nature's power to console and restore: "She will hang with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track

me to my hurt: she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole.”

To read the full text of Amy Scarbrough’s essay, [click here](#)