

Walt and Wilde

A Purely Fictional Encounter, Though with Many Details
Procured from Both History and Biography

by Adam Nakama

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3800 words

Dedicated to Professor Patrick J. Quinn, who gave me my love for Wilde, as well as the inimitable femme fatale.

Cast of Characters

Walt Whitman - The legendary American free verse poet and notorious hedonist, he praises masculinity at every turn.

Oscar Wilde - Renowned British playwright and Aesthete touring America at the close of the nineteenth century. He is well-known for his wit, charm, and epigrams; he loves absurdity and believes in art for art's sake.

Jimbo, Bobbo, Billy, and other Cowboys - Various cowboys who reside in the town where we set our scene.

Barkeep - The person running the saloon where most of our action happens.

Stranger - A strange menacing gunslinger from out of town.

Sheriff - The local sheriff in town.

INTERIOR

It is evening in a small town somewhere out West in America in the late nineteenth century, and in this small saloon/inn a group of cowboys have gathered, surrounding WALT WHITMAN as he holds forth about all elements of life over alcohol. He is a rugged individualist, a "man's man" and it shows in his manner of dress and the way he holds forth.

WALT

There is nothing more important than being an individual, that I'll tell you freely.

JIMBO

Any kind of individual, Mr. Whitman sir?

WALT

Are you stupid, boy? A man! Nothing is more important than being a man!

BILLY

What kind of a man, Mr. Whitman sir?

WALT

(he roars)

A man's man! A bold man, a hero, a captain, a wrestler, who with his mighty tree trunk arms can fell any cowardly miser who challenges his manhood.

The collected cowboys give a cheering roar of approval. WALT stands up, and their raucous noise dies down. WALT begins to recite a section of a poem.

WALT

The wrestle of wrestlers, two
apprentice-boys, quite grown, lusty,
good-natured, native-born, out on the
vacant lot at sundown after work,
The coats and caps thrown down, the
embrace of love and resistance,
The upper-hold and under-hold, the hair
rumped over the blinding the eyes;
The march of firemen in their own
costumes, the play of masculine muscle

through clean-setting trowsers and
waist-straps,
The slow return from the fire, the pause
when the bell strikes suddenly again,
and the listening on the alert,
The natural, perfect, varied attitudes,
the bent head, the curv'd neck and the
counting;
Such-like I love -- I loosen myself,
pass freely, am at the mother's breast
with the little child,
Swim with the swimmers, wrestle with
wrestlers, march in line with the
firemen, and pause, listen, count.

The cowboys cheer again, and then another one runs in all
excited like.

BOBBO

Hey hey hey! Listen up! Oscar Wilde is
here! He's finally here!

Another cheer, though WALT looks thoroughly unamused, and
with a grand sweeping entrance, in strides WILDE. He is a
large man, but elegantly dressed in a long coat of a color
that would seem absurd on anybody else -- but Wilde wears
it with consummate style. Prominently displayed in the
breast pocket is a lily. He moves with languorous-yet-
graceful veneer and an almost-bored expression, but his
eyes keenly observe everything around him and belie the
amusement with which notes the world around. When he
speaks, it's with a posh British accent.

WILDE

Good evening, gentlemen. It's a
distinct honor to be here.

(to the BARKEEP)

Checking in, please. And a glass of
your best wine, or whatever passes for
it around here.

BARKEEP

How about some beer, sir? We have real
good beer.

WILDE

No thank you. I don't drink. Abhorrent

habit; it breeds drunkenness.

Ah, it looks like a crowd has already gathered to welcome me to this establishment. I do so love a pleasant salutation of any sort waiting upon my arrival.

The cowboys whoop and holler. JIMBO runs up to greet WILDE, thrusting out his hand boldly for a handshake. BILLY follows him.

JIMBO

Hello, sir! My name's Jimbo, and I'm sure glad to finally make yer 'quantance, if I can rightly say so.

He grabs WILDE's hand and pumps it vigorously. WILDE accepts the manhandling with grace, delicate and limp as he lets JIMBO dictate the handshake.

BILLY

That's right, me too sir! Name's Billy.

He also grabs and shakes WILDE's hand in much the same fashion. When it's done, WILDE surveys the room and notices WALT alternately glaring at him when he thinks WILDE isn't looking, or pointedly ignoring him. This clearly amuses WILDE, so he pulls up a chair to WALT's table, and has a seat, crossing his legs knee-over-knee and leaning back and staring at WALT.

WALT

And who the hell are you?

WILDE

I? Who am I? Sir, I am the consummate gentleman, the scholar and artist, the inestimable Oscar Wilde.

WALT

You're that Wilde fellow, eh?

WILDE

The pleasure is all yours, I'm sure.

WALT

Oh, sure, I'm amused. Never thought I'd see the burlesque of a woman pretending to be a man.

WILDE

Ah, burlesque! Women disrobing in such a tantalizing manner. Now that's an art you Americans have perfected nonpareil, as my holiday through the Yankee West has shown me.

The BARKEEP approaches WILDE, somewhat nervous and awed. He is holding a dirty glass full near to the brim of wine in one hand and an envelope in the other.

BARKEEP

Here's your wine, sir.

WILDE takes it and regards it with an obviously bemused expression.

WILDE

Ah, you rugged cowboys. Your cups ever runneth overfull.

He raises his glass to them, and the cowboys cheer as he takes a sip.

BARKEEP

And you've got a letter waiting for you, sir.

WILDE

A letter? How fantastic! Fanmail already waiting for me.

WALT

Who the hell would bother to write you a letter and send it all the way out here?

WILDE

A gentleman and a scholar, I'm sure.

He opens it, and begins to read.

WILDE

To that savant without equal, the
esteemed Mr. Oscar Wilde.

(he pauses and remarks to
the gathered group)

Clearly a man with impeccable taste, it
seems, and an eye for men.

(back to reading)

I've looked forward to your visit to
this humble town since time immemorial.
Your unmatched talent for an epigram,
your fetching style of exquisite dress,
your incredible wit and indefatigable
charm: all these things and more I
admire in you, you beau ideal, you body
perfect, you paragon of man *sans peur et
sans reproche...*

As he has been reading, WALT has been reacting more and
more strongly until finally he tears the letter from
WILDE's hands.

WALT

This is nonsense! Who the hell here
would write this garbage?

(he peruses the letter)

"With the sincerest esteem, your most
ardent admirer, Oscar Wilde."

(he pauses)

What!?

(beat)

What!?

Explain the meaning of this, you
dandified loon!

WILDE

It's simple, my dear simple man. I told
you that I adore a good reception
wheresoever I go, and what better way to
assure that than to ensure a letter from
my most ardent admirer is waiting for me
at my next stop?

WALT

You wrote this, you horse's ass!

WILDE

Who else could admire me better than me?
But let me reassure you that there is
enough to admire that you can have your
own special aspect to worship as you
will.

WALT

You... You're mad!

WILDE

Only the most boring of madmen claim
that of me.

WALT

You're an idiot! Paragon of man *sans
peur et sans reproach?*

(he pronounces the French
flawlessly)

You're about the farthest thing from a
man as a person could get barring a womb
and a pleasant stink. Look at you!
You're wearing flowers, for God's sake.

WILDE

Oh, don't invoke that name. He always
gets jealous when He glances in my
direction.

(he yawns)

Ah, these trivialities bore me.
Barkeep, show me to my room. I have a
letter to write so that I may post it to
the next town before I leave.

BARKEEP

Yes sir, right away sir.

WILDE stands and with an air of indolence tosses the lily
onto the table, then follows the BARKEEP offstage.

WALT

(to the cowboys)

This? This is the man you were cheering
for?

BILLY

Well, yeah, Mr. Whitman. It's Mr. Oscar

Wilde, and he knows what's what when it comes to us folk out here in the West.

WALT

He doesn't know a damn thing but flowers and fancy frocks and parlors.

JIMBO

But he speaks to us, Mr. Whitman, sir. He's one of the few men that can speak to a prairie sunset, or the loneliness out there rustlin' cattle. He knows about manly affection in the way that only cowboys can. Ain't nobody but a man can understand a man, and I know you know that, Mr. Whitman.

WALT

There's no man to understand in that frilled up body of his.

A STRANGER enters. He walks slowly and heavily and with an air of menace; he is wearing clearly displayed six-shooters -- no mistaking that he's some sort of desperado. The BARKEEP returns about this time.

BARKEEP

Can I help you, sir?

STRANGER

I'm looking for a man.

BARKEEP

Any man in particular, sir? Or just some *body*.

The STRANGER appears confused for a moment, then shakes his head.

STRANGER

I'm lookin' for a man named Wilde. Oscar Wilde.

JIMBO

You just missed 'im, stranger.

STRANGER

But he's in town?

JIMBO

Yup.

STRANGER

He gonna be here long?

JIMBO

Couple days.

STRANGER

All right then. I can wait. Thanks
mighty for your help, boy.

STRANGER exits, with as much menace as he entered. As soon as he leaves, the cowboys chatter animatedly for a moment, before BILLY shouts them all down.

BILLY

Hold on, boys. I want to make a toast.
To Oscar Wilde!

COWBOYS

TO WILDE!

They toast and cheer, and sitting quietly at the table, absorbing the scent of the lily left behind, is WALT.

EXTERIOR

The cowboys are congregated as WILDE addresses them as a crowd. He has clearly been speaking for a while, but the cowboys are all listening with rapt attention as he moves to the end of his speech.

WILDE

Ars gratia artis. That's high-falutin'
tongue, as you lovely fellows are liable
to say, for "Art for arts' sake." And
that, dear friends, is the maxim by
which to live --

From offstage, we hear a boom and a crash. And then WALT begins to roar, still offstage:

WALT

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks;
rage, blow!

WILDE pauses for a moment, then continues nonplussed.

WILDE

...and by that, I mean you must maximize
the pleasure your life can have. For
what is more important than the absolute
pursuit of the absolutely beautiful?

WALT tumbles onstage naked, holding a bottle and swaying
back and forth, obviously drunk. He raises the bottle
towards WILDE and begins to shout again.

WALT

You cataracts and hurricaneos, spout
Till you have drench'd our steeples,
drown'd the cocks.
You sulph'rous and thought-executing
fires,
Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunder-
bolts,
Singe my white head!

WILDE

Sir, what precisely do you think you're
doing?

WALT

What does it look like I'm doing? I'm
drunk, naked, and shouting Shakespeare!
(he takes a swig from the
bottle)
I am the merry wanderer of the night,
I jest to Oberon, and make him smile
When I a fat and bean-fed horse beguile.

WILDE

I'd expect no less, sir, but could I
kindly request that you not interrupt my
keynote that these fine gentleman have
congregated to be enlightened by? Or
shall I have to ask that you leave?

WALT

Nay, then,
Do what thou canst, I will not go to-
day;
No, nor to-morrow, not till I please
myself.

He makes a masturbatory gesture, at which WILDE gets visibly flustered.

WILDE

Now, look, sir...

WALT

I wonder that you will still be talking,
Signior Benedick; nobody marks you.

WILDE

Don't make me come down there. I'll
quiet your tongue for you.

WALT

A bird of my tongue is better than a
beast of yours.

WILDE

All right, then.

WILDE steps down and marches towards WALT, who extravagantly bites his thumb in WILDE's direction. At this, WILDE gets absolutely livid, and roars out:

WILDE

Do you bite your thumb at me, sir?

WALT

I do bite my thumb, sir.

WILDE

Do you bite your thumb at me, sir?

WALT

(obviously playing up the
crowd)

No, sir, I do not bite my thumb at you,
sir, but I bite my thumb, sir.

WILDE

(taking off his jacket and
rolling up his sleeves)
Do you quarrel, sir?

WALT

Quarrel, sir! No, sir.

The cowboys start to cheer and stomp.

WILDE

But if you do, sir...
(and here he tackles WALT
and shouts)
...I am for you!

The two of them brawl and wrestle. Soon, the SHERIFF
arrives and breaks the two men up.

SHERIFF

All right, you rascals. Am I going to
have to throw you varmints in the
hoosegow for disturbing the peace?
(he observes the sprawled
naked form of WALT and
sighs)
Whitman again, eh? What am I going to
do with you? Put on a shirt!

One of the cowboys tosses WALT a covering of some sort,
which he fumbles on throughout the conversation.

WALT

(mumbling)
Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow...

SHERIFF

(sees WILDE, is surprised)
Mr. Wilde? What are you doing brawling
with this drunken varmint?

Here, the STRANGER enters quietly and stops when he sees
the SHERIFF, and only watches on the periphery.

WILDE

He was disrupting my keynote address to
these fine gentlemen with his besotted

Shakespearean ramblings. Somebody had to put a stop to it.

SHERIFF

Is this true, Whitman?

WALT

Believe me, king of shadows, I mistook.

SHERIFF

All right, whatever that means. I order you to stay at least 10 yards from Mr. Wilde the rest of the time he's in town, or I'll lock you up for good. You hear me?

WALT

(sullen)

I hear you...

SHERIFF

Does that settle it for you, Mr. Wilde?

WILDE

It's perfectly copacetic, sir.

SHERIFF

(scratches his head, trying to puzzle out the meaning of "copacetic")

Okay then. It's settled. He ain't gonna bother you for the rest of your trip, sir, I give you my personal guarantee.

WILDE

Excellent. I put my trust entirely in your abilities, good sir.

INTERIOR

It is inside WILDE's room at the inn. WILDE and WALT are sitting together; WILDE is caressing WALT's forehead tenderly.

WILDE

You absolute moron. What in all the

world would possess you to provoke me
like that?

WALT

Just the devil in me, I guess.

WILDE

Look, you devil-fool man. I'm one of
the biggest celebrities in the American
West right now.

WALT

And I was writing verse when you were
still suckling on your mother's teats.

WILDE

Are you asking for me to roll you again?
I'll be more than happy to drum you
right out that window there.

WALT

With those woman arms? I doubt you
could lift me, much less last a minute
in a round of fisticuffs.

WILDE

All right, old man... You're pushing
it. I could have you thrown in jail
just for being here.

WALT pushes WILDE, who gets visibly angry.

WALT

Go ahead then, Mr. Lily Loving Frock
Wearing Fancy-pants British Man! I'll
knock your teeth out before you can
finish crying for your mother's milk.

WALT and WILDE lock together in a tense, aggressive stance.

WILDE

I'll split your hare lip, you daft old
fool!

WALT

Try it, little...

WILDE cuts him off, darting in for a deep, passionate kiss. They begin to tear at each others' clothes when the sound of loud, even footsteps can be heard nearby. It is the STRANGER's hollow tread.

WALT

What's that?

WILDE

I don't give a damn...

WALT

You're not the one who'll be thrown in jail here...

STRANGER enters. WILDE stands, surprised, to confront him.

WILDE

Excuse me, sir, but you must be under a mistaken impression. This is my private room, and I'd appreciate it if you treated it as such.

STRANGER

You Oscar Wilde?

WILDE

You have the honor of addressing him, yes.

STRANGER

No mistake then.
(he spits)
I'm callin' you out, Wilde.

WALT

What?

WILDE

What's the meaning of this, sir?

STRANGER

Don't recognize me?

WILDE

I can't say that I do.

STRANGER

You should. I bear a mighty strong
resemblance to my daughter.

WALT goes pale at this.

WILDE

I don't have the foggiest idea as to
what you're talking about, sir, but if
you don't leave my private chambers, I
shall have to alert the keeper of the
premises as well as the Sheriff.

STRANGER

My daughter's with child, you bastard.
She's got a right round belly, and
you're the only rascal who's shown her
the light of day. You was in town, and
I know it was you. She done said so
herself.

WALT

What town is that, mister?

STRANGER

Lubbock.

WILDE

That is a clearly ludicrous charge, sir.
I was in Lubbock not a week ago, and yet
you claim your beloved daughter is
showing her delicate condition.

(he pauses for dramatic
effect)

Are you thoroughly ignorant of maths, or
the female anatomy, sir? I admit that I
highly suspect both right now.

STRANGER

Shut your pie hole, you fancy-talkin'...
British man!

He pulls his gun out and points it Wilde.

WALT

All right! No need to get shooty here.

WILDE

(looks at WALT pointedly)
Shooty?

WALT

I'm improvising! And trying to save
your damn hide, you thankless bastard.

WILDE

Such filthy language! You kiss with
that mouth?

STRANGER

Shut up, both of you! I'm callin' you
out, Wilde, and if you ain't got a gun
then so much the better, 'cause I'm
gonna get what's mine for what you did
to my daughter.

WILDE

Sir, there's no need to be...

WALT

(shouting at the top of his
lungs)
Oscar Wilde, you dirty dog, I oughta
knock you from here to El Dorado, you
gutless spawn of Hermaphrodite!

STRANGER

What the hell are you doing, you crazy
bastard?

WALT is now running around the room as fast as he can and
making obscene amounts of noise, waving his arms and
shouting.

WALT

Your poetry murdered what was left of
the English language after your plays
started the job! Your epigrams have all
the wit and charm of a toothless
schoolboy!

The sound of alarum and thumping feet can be heard all
around.

STRANGER

Stop it, or I'll shoot you too, you damn loony!

WALT

And you *smell* funny!

A gaggle of people burst into the room and stare at the scene before them, completely confused.

WILDE

(pointing to the STRANGER)

Take that man!

There is a brief struggle, but the STRANGER is disarmed and held fast by the crowd. At this point, the SHERIFF enters.

SHERIFF

Whitman? What did I say about getting near Mr. Wilde!

WILDE

Actually, sir, the culprit is right there.

(points to the STRANGER)

That man burst into my room and tried to shoot me for an absurd reason. Mr. Whitman here saved my life.

STRANGER

That man got my daughter in the family way. I'm due some revenge.

SHERIFF

Is this true?

WILDE

A cursory examination of the facts will show that man's story to be ludicrous, and I'll be happy to lay them out for you in the morning. But as for right now, I'd like to get some rest without fear of being shot if you don't mind.

SHERIFF

All right, then. We'll lock him up overnight, but you come down first thing

so we can get this mess straightened
away.

WILDE

Certainly, sir.

SHERIFF

(points to WALT)

Oh, and do you want me to throw him in
the clink too?

WILDE

No, that's quite all right. I don't
think we'll have any more problems from
Mr. Whitman here.

SHERIFF

Okay then.

(gestures to the STRANGER)

Let's take him away, boys.

The crowd pulls the STRANGER away, who shouts as he is
dragged off stage, leaving WALT and WILDE alone in his
room.

WILDE

Well, wasn't that bracing, then?

WALT

I could do without getting shot at.
I've about had enough of that in my
lifetime already.

WILDE

Oh, man up. Aren't you the one who
expounds upon the virtues of being
ultra-masculine?

WALT

Um, about that...

WILDE

What? Come over to my way of thinking,
then? I'll go get you a frock; I'm
never without half a dozen in my
luggage.

WALT

Uh, that's not quite it. It's just,
uh...

WILDE

All right. Out with it then.

WALT

You see, about five months ago, I just
happened to be passing through
Lubbock...

Beat.

WILDE

What!?

EXTERIOR

The cowboys have assembled to see WILDE off. Amongst them
is WALT, who stands displaying a strange mix of bashfulness
and belligerence.

WILDE

My dearest fellows and gentlemen
nonpareil, it pains me to have to take
my leave of you on such a lovely day,
but another frontier town awaits me.

The cowboys cheer.

WILDE

I pray that you'll take my lessons to
heart, and live your lives fully,
drinking deeply of all the beauty the
world has to offer. It's everywhere: in
the noise and bustle of the saloon after
supper time, in the loneliness of the
twilight sky out on the plains, but --
most of all -- beauty is in the hands
and hearts of our dearest companions.

The cowboys cheer again. WILDE moves into the crowd and
begins to shake their hands as they cheer and stomp.

WILDE

It was wonderful to meet you, Billy.

And you, Jimbo. And you as well, Bobbo.

He comes to WALT, who remains standing there semi-sullenly.

WILDE

Mr. Whitman. I can truly say that it was an honor, sir.

He extends his hand somewhat hesitantly, half-smiling. WALT stares at it for a moment. Then he moves quickly to hug him. WILDE quickly puts up his arms in a boxers' stance, causing WALT to pause and the two stare at one another. Then WALT embraces him, and the two laugh.

WALT

Be good, you frock-wearing hermaphrodite.

They disengage, and then WILDE turns to the crowd, giving them one last wave before he leaves to their cheers and whistles and stomping. After the crowd settles down and begins to dissipate, JIMBO turns to WALT.

JIMBO

See? He wasn't that bad, was he, Mr. Whitman?

WALT

Well, you were right about one thing, Jimbo.

JIMBO

What's that?

WALT

Ain't nobody but a man can understand a man.

END