Oscar Wilde

Writer(1854–1900)

**His Biography**

Born on October 16, 1854 in Dublin, author, playwright and poet Oscar Wilde was a popular literary figure in late Victorian England, known for his brilliant wit, flamboyant style and infamous imprisonment for homosexuality. After graduating from Oxford University, he lectured as a poet, art critic and a leading proponent of the principles of aestheticism.

In 1891, he published *The Picture of Dorian Gray,*his only novel which was panned as immoral by Victorian critics, but is now considered one of his most notable works. As a dramatist, many of Wilde’s plays were well received including his satirical comedies*Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband*(1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest*(1895), his most famous play.

Unconventional in his writing and life, Wilde’s affair with a young man led to his arrest on charges of "gross indecency" in 1895. He was imprisoned for two years and died in poverty three years after his release at the age of 46.

Wilde established himself as a leading proponent of the aesthetic movement, a theory of art and literature that emphasized the pursuit of beauty for its own sake, rather than to promote any political or social viewpoint.

On May 29, 1884, Wilde married a wealthy Englishwoman named Constance Lloyd. They had two sons: Cyril, born in 1885, and Vyvyan, born in 1886. A year after his wedding, Wilde was hired to run *Lady's World*, a once-popular English magazine that had recently fallen out of fashion. During his two years editing *Lady's World*, Wilde revitalized the magazine by expanding its coverage to "deal not merely with what women wear, but with what they think and what they feel. The *Lady's World*," wrote Wilde, "should be made the recognized organ for the expression of women's opinions on all subjects of literature, art and modern life, and yet it should be a magazine that men could read with pleasure."

**Works**

Beginning in 1888, while he was still serving as editor of *Lady's World*, Wilde entered a seven-year period of furious creativity, during which he produced nearly all of his great literary works. In 1888, seven years after he wrote *Poems*, Wilde published *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, a collection of children's stories. In 1891, he published *Intentions*, an essay collection arguing the tenets of aestheticism, and that same year, he published his first and only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The novel is a cautionary tale about a beautiful young man, Dorian Gray, who wishes (and receives his wish) that his portrait ages while he remains youthful and lives a life of sin and pleasure.

Though the novel is now revered as a great and classic work, at the time critics were outraged by the book's apparent lack of morality. Wilde vehemently defended himself in a preface to the novel, considered one of the great testaments to aestheticism, in which he wrote, "an ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style" and "vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art."

Wilde's first play, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, opened in February 1892 to widespread popularity and critical acclaim, encouraging Wilde to adopt playwriting as his primary literary form. Over the next few years, Wilde produced several great plays—witty, highly satirical comedies of manners that nevertheless contained dark and serious undertones. His most notable plays were *A Woman of No Importance*(1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), his most famous play.

**Personal Life and Prison Sentence**

Around the same time that he was enjoying his greatest literary success, Wilde commenced an affair with a young man named Lord Alfred Douglas. On February 18, 1895, Douglas's father, the Marquis of Queensberry, who had gotten wind of the affair, left a calling card at Wilde's home addressed to "Oscar Wilde: Posing Somdomite," a misspelling of sodomite. Although Wilde's homosexuality was something of an open secret, he was so outraged by Queensberry's note that he sued him for libel. The decision ruined his life.

When the trial began in March, Queensberry and his lawyers presented evidence of Wilde's homosexuality—homoerotic passages from his literary works, as well as his love letters to Douglas—that quickly resulted in the dismissal of Wilde's libel case and his arrest on charges of "gross indecency." Wilde was convicted on May 25, 1895 and sentenced to two years in prison.

Wilde emerged from prison in 1897, physically depleted, emotionally exhausted and flat broke. He went into exile in France, where, living in cheap hotels and friends' apartments, he briefly reunited with Douglas. Wilde wrote very little during these last years; his only notable work was a poem he completed in 1898 about his experiences in prison, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol."

**Death and Legacy**

Wilde died of meningitis on November 30, 1900 at the age of 46.

More than a century after his death, Wilde is still better remembered for his personal life—his exuberant personality, consummate wit and infamous imprisonment for homosexuality—than for his literary accomplishments. Nevertheless, his witty, imaginative and undeniably beautiful works, in particular his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and his play*The Importance of Being Earnest*, are considered among the great literary masterpieces of the late Victorian period.

Throughout his entire life, Wilde remained deeply committed to the principles of aestheticism, principles that he expounded through his lectures and demonstrated through his works as well as anyone of his era. "All art is at once surface and symbol," Wilde wrote in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. "Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors. Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex and vital."