

The life and works of Oscar Wilde

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Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was a brilliant author, playwright, and wit. He was born in the middle of the Victorian age—the period of English history during which Queen Victoria reigned, from 1837-1901. During this period in English history, the country was undergoing many radical changes, all of which contributed to the way in which the people who lived during this period lived and thought. In modern times, Victorian society is generally remembered as one that was puritanical, repressive, obsessed with the appearance of respectability, strict discipline and high morals. The quality of earnestness became a typical Victorian value, and was applied to all areas of Victorian life, especially in religion, literature and social conduct. Though somewhat one-sided, the term "Victorian" is also associated with negative qualities such as narrow-mindedness, double standards, hypocrisy, sexual repression and extreme class-consciousness.

Wilde the wit

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1854. He was the son of Sir William Wilde, a distinguished surgeon, and the writer and poet Jane Francesca Elgee (who wrote under the name of *Speranza*).

Oscar Wilde left Ireland at the age of 20 to study at Oxford University in England, where he achieved a brilliant academic record. Already as a young man he gained a reputation as a dandy, as well as for being a master of witty conversation.

Wilde despised sport and violence, and summed up his feelings about both activities in the following remark, taken from his play *A Woman of No Importance* (1893): "The English country gentleman galloping after a fox: the unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable."

The homosexual Wilde

Wilde had been married for several years and was the father of two children at the time of his meeting (in 1891) with the handsome young poet *Lord Alfred Douglas* (Wilde called him "Bosie"), with whom he established a homosexual relationship that was to have disastrous consequences for him. Many of his works contained homosexual undertones, a fact that outraged Victorian society and which was to become a major factor in his eventual public humiliation and downfall.

The picture of Dorian Gray

Throughout the course of his literary career, Wilde excelled in a variety of literary genres, his work often reflecting a close connection between his art and his own life. Early in his career he wrote fairy tales in which, as in all good fairy tales, the good and pure always triumphed in the end. They differed, however, in one important aspect. Rather than depicting evil as an external force, Wilde chose to reveal the evil within human beings. Written for "children from

eight to eighty", the tales can be read as a representation of Oscar Wilde's own inner battle against the evil forces within himself, and of his wish to remain in a world of childlike innocence.

One of Wilde's best-known novels, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, created a public outcry when it was published in 1891. The novel's implied homosexual theme was considered immoral by Victorian society, a society in which homosexuality was considered not only immoral and unnatural, but was also a serious criminal offence punishable by imprisonment.

The novel tells the story of Dorian Gray, an extremely handsome young man, and his selfish pursuit of sensual pleasures. When his friend Basil Hallward paints his portrait, Gray expresses his wish that he could forever stay as young and as charming as the portrait: "I would give everything. I would give my soul for that!" Not long after, he discovers that his wish has come true; the more corrupt and immoral Dorian becomes, the older and uglier the figure in the portrait appears, while Dorian himself retains his beautiful and youthful appearance.

After many years of leading such an immoral life, Dorian finds himself alone with his bad conscience for all the suffering he had caused others. No longer able to bear looking at the portrait, which reminded him of the life he has led, Dorian decides to destroy it by stabbing it with a knife. When his house servants rush to find out what has happened, they find the figure in the portrait exactly as it had been painted all those years ago. On the floor lies a dead man, "a withered, wrinkled, and loathsome man" with a knife in his heart. In his attempt to kill his conscience, Dorian Gray had killed himself.

Through Dorian's tragic fate, Wilde portrayed what could happen to someone who cannot control his evil impulses. However, the press at the time attacked the novel for being blatantly immoral. Wilde then decided to tell basically the same story, only this time in the guise of a comedy. The play, *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), proved to be much more palatable to his Victorian public, and the play was a success.

The Importance of Being Earnest

Of the four stage comedies by Wilde, his last, *The Importance of Being Earnest* [*Earnest* er et guttenavn som også betyr «alvorlig» og «oppriktig»; jfr. det tilsvarende

More Oscar Wilde quotes

"Rich bachelors should be heavily taxed. It is not fair that some men should be happier than others."

"Every good man nowadays has his disciples, and it is always Judas who writes the biography."

"One should always be in love. This is the reason one should never marry."

"I can resist anything except temptation."

"We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."

"There is no sin except stupidity."

"To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness."

"Ideals are dangerous things. Realities are better."

"One can always be kind to people about whom one cares nothing."

"Illusion is the first of all pleasures."

"In all matters of opinion, our adversaries are insane."

"Bad manners make a journalist."

"It is a very sad thing that nowadays there is so little useless information."

"One should always play fairly when one has the winning cards."

"Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live."

"The English public take no interest in a work of art until it is told that the work in question is obscene."

"Genius is born, not paid."

navnet *Ernst* på norsk], is generally regarded as his masterpiece. It was first staged in 1895, and was an immediate success. Although written as a farce, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is actually an attack on Victorian society, in particular on its social and moral hypocrisy, the social class system, the attitude of marriage as a social tool, and the triviality of aristocratic life.

continued...

"Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people whom we generally dislike."

"A well-tied tie is the first serious step in life."

One may wonder how it could be that Victorian audiences could laugh at a play that satirised them and their values. The answer lies in Wilde's genius in the genres of wit and farce. The trademark of farce is that the situations and the characters' attitudes, reactions, and customs are improbable and exaggerated, and cannot be explained by reason. The fact that the characters and the situations are so ridiculous creates a distance between the story and the audience, enabling the audience to laugh at them.

Another reason for the success of the play was Wilde's genius for epigrams, which Wilde uses to challenge and question the conventional values and expectations of Victorian society. Here are some of the epigrams that appear in the play:

- *Divorces are made in heaven*
This epigram pokes fun at the popular phrase "A marriage made in heaven".
- *The truth is rarely pure and never simple*
This epigram attacks the truth of the popular phrase "The pure and simple truth".
- *In marriage, three is company, two is none*
Here Wilde has taken the popular saying "Two is company, three is a crowd" and adapted it to suit his own purpose.

The final years

In 1895, Lord Alfred's father, an aristocrat, accused Wilde of homosexuality. Wilde sued for libel, lost the case, and was then arrested and charged with the same crime. After a highly publicised trial in which Wilde was ridiculed and humiliated, he was found guilty of "grove, indecent acts". He was sentenced to two years hard labour, and ended up in Reading Gaol, where the almost inhumane conditions severely damaged his health.

While in prison, Wilde wrote *De Profundis* (1905), an essay written in the form of a letter to his long-time lover, Bosie, in which he described his time leading up to his imprisonment.

His wife Constance was forced to flee the country with their children, and to change the family name, though she still hoped that Oscar would renounce his lover and return to his family on his release from prison. However, despite his attempts to comply with his wife's wishes, Wilde was unable to resist temptation. He returned to Bosie, thereby sealing his own fate.

After leaving jail, Wilde, now a ruined man, emigrated to France, where he lived the last three years of his life under an assumed name. Before his departure from England he had been divorced and declared a bankrupt, and in France he had to rely on the few friends he had left for financial support. It was during this period that he wrote his final masterpiece, *The*

Ballade of Reading Gaol, an elegy for an executed man, Charles Woolleridge, a guardsman who killed his wife in a fit of jealousy. Executions were not common events at Reading Gaol, and the poem was Wilde's humane and sensitive response to this man's plight and to the inhumane conditions of Victorian prisons.

Wilde's health deteriorated during this period, and he eventually died at the age of 46, penniless and alone in a cheap Paris hotel room, in November 1900. He was buried in a Paris graveyard.

Suggested topics for philosophical discussion

1. Is it necessary to feel pain and suffering in order to be a creative artist? Or is it rather the other way round: one has to be happy and glad in order to create excellent works of art? Is it possible to feel joy and pain at the same time? Do you think Wilde felt he was doing a good thing when he wrote about the evil of man?
2. There are different kinds of pain and suffering. You can suffer physical pain when, for example, somebody hits you with a spade. You can suffer injustice when, for example, you have to pay for damage caused by others. Or you can suffer emotional pain when, for example, you are in love with a person that does not love you back. Can you think of other kinds of suffering? What kind of pain do you think Oscar Wilde suffered? What, in your opinion, is the worst kind of suffering?
3. Innocence was an important theme for Wilde. He thought that the reason why many people are so unhappy was because they had lost the innocence of their childhood. Does this mean that all children are happy? Or that all adults are unhappy? Do you think of yourself as an innocent person? What, in your opinion, are the characteristics of an innocent person:
 - no memory of the past?
 - no plans about the future?
 - no feelings of guilt or shame?
 - no compassion for other people?
 - no desire to be accepted by other people?
 - no desire to impress other people?
 - no suspicion towards other people?
 - no wish to do evil?
 - no wish to do good?
 - no wish to do evil or good?
 - no longing for pleasure or success?
 - kindness?
 - helpfulness?
 - naiveté?
 - a firm belief in supernatural things, for example fairies and demons, gods and spirits?
 - happiness?
4. Because he lived in a society that systematically suppressed deviating thoughts and opinions, it was very important for Wilde to express his views about sexuality. But if the society in which he lived had been more tolerant, perhaps Wilde would have been less critical? Do you think we live in a tolerant society today? If yes, then is there no need for critical thought and/or rebellious artists today? If no, then in what way is today's society intolerant? Is it possible, or desirable, to create a society where everybody and everything is tolerated? Should we also tolerate evil, crime and injustice? Do you think there would be no more evil, crime or injustice if everything were tolerated?