

Oscar Wilde Trial

Oscar Wilde Trial : 5-6 minutes

Oscar Wilde was a playwright, novelist, poet and celebrity in late nineteenth century London. His flamboyant dress, cutting wit and eccentric lifestyle often put him at odds with the social norms of Victorian England. Wilde, a homosexual, was put on trial for gross indecency in 1895 after the details of his affair with a British aristocrat were made public. Homosexuality was a criminal offense at this time in England.

[Oscar Wilde](#) began publishing poems as a college student at Dublin's [Trinity University](#) in the 1870s. He later moved from Ireland to England and studied at Oxford.

By the early 1890s he had become one of London's most popular playwrights. His most acclaimed plays include *Salome* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, though he is perhaps best known today for his 1890 novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Oscar Wilde was a proponent of the Aesthetic Movement in art and literature, which suggested these forms should focus on beauty rather than trying to convey a moral or political message. He bucked tight-laced Victorian fashion by wearing colorful velvets and silks and keeping his hair long.

Lord Alfred Douglas

Wilde kept his homosexuality a secret. He married and had two sons. But in 1891, Wilde began an affair with Lord Alfred Douglas, a young British poet and aristocrat 16 years his junior.

Douglas' father, the Marquess of Queensberry, was outraged by the relationship and sought to expose Wilde. He left a calling card for Wilde with the porter at the private Albemarle Club in London. The card read: "For Oscar Wilde, posing somdomite [sic]."

This caused a public relations nightmare for Wilde. Homosexual acts were a criminal offense in England at the time and remained illegal there until the 1960s.

Friends who knew of Wilde's sexual orientation urged him to flee to France until the storm subsided. (France had decriminalized homosexuality in 1791 during the [French Revolution](#).)

Against their counsel, Wilde decided to sue the Marquess for defamation. He took the Marquess to court for criminal libel.

Libel Case Against the Marquess of Queensberry

Amid a frenzy of newspaper coverage, the libel case against the Marquess of Queensberry opened on April 3, 1895, at the Central Criminal Court of England and Wales, commonly known as Old Bailey.

The trial went poorly for Oscar Wilde. His main problem was that Queensberry's allegations about his homosexuality were true, and therefore couldn't be judged defamatory.

During the trial, Queensberry's defense accused Wilde of soliciting 12 other young men to commit sodomy. The defense also questioned Wilde about the premise of his controversial 1890 novel *The Picture of*

Dorian Gray, suggesting that Wilde had used the novel's homoerotic themes to seduce Lord Alfred. In the novel, an older artist is attracted to the beauty of a younger man whose portrait he paints.

After three days of court proceedings, Wilde's lawyer withdrew the lawsuit. The authorities saw this as a sign of implied guilt and issued a warrant for Wilde's arrest on indecency charges.

Britain's Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 had criminalized all sex acts between men as "gross indecency." (Sex acts between women were never made illegal in England.)

Friends again urged Wilde to flee to France, but he decided to stay and stand trial. Oscar Wilde was tried for homosexuality on April 26, 1895.

He pleaded not guilty on 25 counts of gross indecency.

At a preliminary bail hearing, hotel chambermaids and a housekeeper had testified that they had seen young men in Wilde's bed and found fecal stains on his sheets.

During the trial, Wilde was questioned extensively about "the love that dare not speak its name," a phrase from Lord Alfred Douglas' poem "Two Loves," published in 1894, that many interpreted as a euphemism for homosexuality.

The trial ended with the jury unable to reach a verdict. Three weeks later, Wilde was retried. This time, Wilde was convicted of gross indecency and received two years of hard labor, the maximum sentence allowed for the crime.

Prison Sentence

On May 25, 1895, Oscar Wilde was taken to prison. He spent the first several months at London's Pentonville Prison, where he was put to work picking oakum. Oakum was a substance used to seal gaps in shipbuilding. Prisoners spent hours untwisting and teasing apart recycled ropes to obtain the fibers used in making oakum.

Wilde was later transferred to London's Reading Gaol, where he remained until his release in 1897. Wilde's health suffered in prison and continued to decline after his release.

He spent the last three years of his life living in exile in France, where he composed his last work *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, about an execution that took place while he was imprisoned there.

Oscar Wilde died on November 30, 1900, at the age of 46. He was buried in Paris.

Sources

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900); [BBC](#).

The blackmailer and the sodomite: Oscar Wilde on trial; [Feminist Theory](#).