

# OSCAR WILDE

(16 October 1854–30 November 1900)

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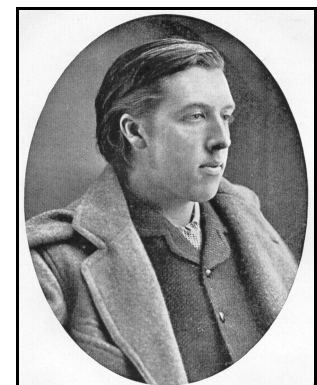
Oscar Wilde was probably at once the most lionized and the most vilified writer in nineteenth-century Britain, and he was certainly one of the most versatile. Wilde is today the subject of more scholarly enquiry and commentary than any other wholly late-Victorian writer, confirming perhaps the assessment of his biographer Richard Ellmann: “Now, beyond the reach of scandal, his best writings validated by time, he comes before us still, a towering figure, laughing and weeping, with parables and paradoxes, so generous, so amusing, and so right.”

He was born in Dublin, Ireland, to very distinguished and colorful parents. His father, Sir William Robert Wills Wilde (1815–76), was a renowned eye and ear surgeon and a noteworthy statistician and archaeologist, who was awarded knighthood in 1864 in recognition of his contributions to medicine. He was also the father of three illegitimate children, all of whom he acknowledged and whose education he paid for, although they were raised by other relatives, and he was accused of drugging and seducing Mary Travers, a long-term patient and daughter of a colleague, an episode she crudely and very publicly portrayed in a scandalous parodic pamphlet. Oscar’s almost equally famous mother, Jane Francesca Agnes Elgee (1821–96), conducted research in philology and ethnology, hosted a prestigious salon for the *literati*, and (anonymously) wrote inflammatory poetry and prose for the Irish nationalist movement under the pen name “Speranza” (which translates as “Hope” in Italian). She was also the object of a notorious libel suit brought by the Travers woman her husband allegedly raped (Lady Wilde lost the lawsuit but was fined only a farthing [roughly equivalent to a penny] and was also awarded £2000 in court costs). The Wildes were indeed a most famous and colorful Irish family and tended to reinforce many British prejudices about their neighbor island (the British had for centuries looked down upon by the Irish, not least perhaps because the latter often failed to keep their “dirty laundry” as discretely private as the former powerfully sought to do).

Oscar Wilde attended Trinity College, Dublin, then upon being awarded a scholarship in 1874, studied for four years at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he was heavily influenced by Victorian icons John Ruskin and Walter Pater and became something of a celebrity in his own right, the subject of countless amusing anecdotes (a few of which may perhaps have been apocryphal, invented by Wilde). After winning the prestigious Newdigate Prize for poetry in 1878, he toured Greece before settling in London, where he quickly became the most famous (or

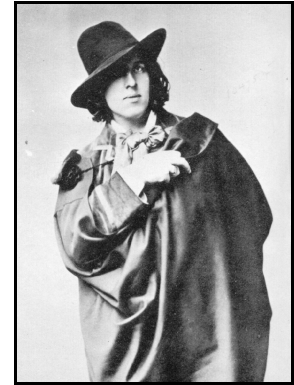


Oscar Wilde c.1894



Oscar Wilde 1878

notorious) representative of the Aesthetic Movement, so well-known as an aesthete and dandy that he was often parodied; he was, for example, easily recognized as the lampooned figure Reginald Bunthorne in Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera *Patience* (1881). Wilde capitalized on his fame in 1882 by embarking on a legendary lecture tour in the USA and Canada, creating headlines almost daily with his witty epigrams and controversial statements on the function of art. He married the beauty Constance Lloyd in 1884 and quickly had two sons. He entered into a homosexual affair with friend Robert Ross in 1886 and thereafter began living a somewhat reckless "double life." He fell in love with Lord Alfred Douglas in 1891, and later when Douglas's father, the notorious Marquis of Queensberry (of the Queensberry boxing rules), provoked a public lawsuit in 1895, accusing him officially of "posing as a sodomite [*sic*]," Wilde endured a series of highly publicized trials, which resulted in his being sentenced to two years hard labor for "gross indecency." After his release from prison, his health broken, he was forced to roam abroad in shamed exile. He died in Paris in 1900, bankrupt and penniless, at age 46.



Oscar Wilde 1882

Wilde's literary fame began with the publication in 1881 of his somewhat derivative but widely popular *Poems*. After his lecture tour and marriage, he took over the editorship of the magazine *Lady's World* (whose name he changed to *Woman's World*). Then, even though Douglas and others were a constant and distracting drain on his energies, there ensued an enormously productive creative period of nearly a decade, before he was destroyed by his criminal conviction. In the late 1880s and early 90s, he published landmark critical essays, such as "The Decay of Lying," "The Critic As Artist," and "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," as well as three brilliant collections of short stories (most of them ostensibly for children), *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), and *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* (1891). In 1890–91, Wilde wrote his sensational play *Salomé* (in French), which was banned for a time before being published in English in 1894, with stunning pictures by Aubrey Beardsley. During this same period, he brought out his notorious novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, at first serially in *Blackwood's Magazine* and then in book form. Shifting genres yet again, there followed, before his downfall, four spectacularly successful social comedies, *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1894–95), and *The Importance of Being Ernest* (1895). While in prison, he produced a remarkable *apologia*—a book-length letter to Douglas later published as *De Profundis*—and the moving, long poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

The frequent claim that Wilde was a champion of "art for art's sake" is highly overstated and misleading. While he clearly valued luxurious sensuality and sought to privilege the world of Art (and the role of the artist) over the natural crudities of Life, his rhetorical masks reveal an underlying concern for the ethical dimensions of human self-development and the need to transcend dispiriting materialism. Ironically, for one who was castigated as immoral, his writings are almost uniformly characterized by a deep moral consciousness and hope for the ultimate victory of Christlike love and human

charity. The poignant moral lessons in his “fairy tales” repeatedly expose and implicitly condemn human selfishness and inhumanity. Moreover, for all the presumed immorality of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ironically Wilde thought that the flaw in the work was its overtly moralistic themes. Certainly, the novel attempts to expose the hypocrisy and duplicity of the age, illustrating the narrator’s observation that “Death and vulgarity are the only two facts in the nineteenth century that one cannot explain away.” Likewise, in many respects *Salomé* comes off as almost as much morality play as tragedy. The social comedies, while employing stylized epigrammatic dialogue to accentuate the paradoxes of truth and “sincerity,” also critique with unusual acuity the hypocrisy and ironies of supposedly “respectable” Victorian social mores.

Wilde’s critical reputation has grown enormously over the past half century: he has gone from being considered an amusing intellectual lightweight and minor writer to achieving canonical status as a figure of true intellectual significance and one of the great Victorian writers. For all of the infamy Wilde acquired, few now deny the genius he exhibited, in both his writings and his speech. Despite his frequent affectation of indolence, from an early age he read widely across diverse disciplines and seriously pondered the controversies dominating late nineteenth-century European intellectual life. Moreover, he apparently read and absorbed material at an astonishing speed, often able to remember long passages from memory and to speak extemporaneously in perfect paragraphs graced with brilliant epigrams. Even such gifted wits as George Bernard Shaw and Noel Coward, who were not inclined to lavish praise on rivals, judged that Wilde may have been the “greatest talker” who ever lived. In recent years, a stained-glass window commemorating him was installed in Westminster Abbey, and a statue of him was placed near Trafalgar Square and the Strand, in the heart of London. Another statue of Wilde now also graces the corner of a public park, across the street from his childhood home at No. 1 Merrion Square, Dublin.



Oscar Wilde c. 1894