The Importance of Being Earnest

Oscar Wilde

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BY OSCAR WILDE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

OSCAR WILDE

Oscar Wilde is one of the most widely recognized names in British literature. An accomplished journalist, poet, storyteller and playwright, Wilde is also well known as the leader of the *Fin de siècle* (end of the century) aesthetic movement that helped shape modern Britain. But Wilde's legacy is not merely about his aesthetic, as his dramatic personal life has sometimes overshadowed his literary accomplishments. He published widely, often to critical acclaim, before his life combusted in a controversial trial for indecent homosexual activity – a trial that saw the ruin of Wilde's personal and professional success. Often, Wilde's art imitates his life, both are complex and insistently demand the audience's attention, and undoubtedly this dramatic demand is what fuels Wilde's legacy today. Since his death in 1900, interest in Wilde's private life, particularly his sexuality, his criminal offences and his imprisonment, have never waned. One critic sums up Wilde's life by saying, "His story is like a vivid Victorian soap opera with shocking twists and turns in plot lines, taking in on the way love, hate, sex, treachery, fame, success, conspiracy, blackmail, dramatic courtroom scenes, prison, redemption and finally death" (Marshall).

Born in Dublin, Ireland in 1854 Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was the second son of the eccentric Sir William and Lady Jane Wilde. Sir William Wilde was a renowned philanthropist and surgeon, Lady Jane was a poet and fierce supporter of the Irish Nationalist Movement. In the mid 1860's, Lady Jane published a series of poems denouncing the Irish potato famine, dedicating the collection to her two sons, Willie and Oscar. Lady Jane had always wanted a daughter, so following popular practice of the time she dressed Oscar solely in girls' clothing for the first few years of his life. Wilde lived a quiet family life, marred only by the unexpectedly tragic death of his younger sister at the age of nine. He moved to Trinity College to study the classics at the age of 20. From there, Wilde went to study at Oxford, dropping his unfashionable Irish accent in favor of a stately English tone, and took a keen interest in fashion, particularly formalwear. He joined the Freemasons, as his father had done before him, and established himself as a dramatic aesthetician brimming with bitingly sarcastic wit.

Wilde thrived in London's superficial, artistic circles. While his literary work was not well received, Wilde was in high demand at dinner parties due to his sparkling wit. Wilde later reflected that during this period of his life he strove to

honor the Pater quote, "To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life" (Black). He strove to maintain its message in even the most mundane daily activities, which he desired to make beautiful. For the majority of his life, Wilde surrounded himself with elements of beauty, of art, and arguably, of surface vanity. He wore his hair long, decorated his home with peacock feathers and the frivolities of lilies and sunflowers alongside imported blue china. At the time, British culture did not like to be seen taking art seriously, and liked even less an artist who took himself seriously, as Wilde clearly did. Many critics of the aesthetic movement found interest in interior design, fashion, and art to be vacuous, and their arguments were only strengthened when Wilde made comments like, "I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china" (Cohen). Despite the critics' arguments, Wilde toured through Britain and then America lecturing on the value of aesthetics, beauty, and art. He earned a fair sum and returned to England with the hopes of propelling his future with literary works that would challenge the hypocrisy of society and embrace the delicate intricacies of artistic beauty.

Upon returning home, Wilde married an acquaintance, Constance Lloyd, and fathered two sons: Cyril and Vyvyan. Wilde adored his children and was a doting father to them, loving nothing better than conjuring up fairy tales to send them to sleep. After becoming editor of *Woman's World Magazine* (for which he wrote a plethora of reviews and journalistic essays), Wilde published a variety of short stories and novels, including *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, and later, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*

On the surface, Wilde seemed to have it all: a successful job, a beautiful wife, two charming children. But underneath, his life was beginning to fray. After years spent lecturing aestheticism to the masses, Wilde's home was expected to be at the cutting edge of fashion. But true fashion never comes cheap. Despite Constance's generous £250 annual allowance (equivalent to £19,300 today) in addition to Wilde's lectureship fees, the family struggled financially. Wilde lost interest in "playing husband" to Constance, and his homosexual predilections circled as scandalous rumors throughout his social circles. In 1888, Wilde met the seventeen-year-old student Robert Ross and, despite their sixteen-year-age-difference, engaged in a romantic relationship with him. As Wilde gave in to his homosexual desires, throngs of young men, whom historians have said needed only be "young, handsome, and in awe of Oscar's wit and wisdom," gathered to make his acquaintance (Marshall). Remarkably, Constance appeared to have no knowledge of her husband's homosexual dalliances.

In 1891, Wilde released the theatrical success, *A Play About a Good Woman* to such critical acclaim that he quickly became the most sought-after artist in all

of Britain. This same year, Wilde met Lord Alfred Douglas (known as "Bosie" to his family) – the lover who would lead to his downfall. Bosie, who was known to be promiscuously homosexual, quickly introduced Wilde to the rough trade "rent boys" who would do almost anything for a quick buck. Many of these trade boys were seasoned blackmailers, and Wilde seemed to embrace the imminent threat of being discovered. Of his relationships with the prostitutes, Wilde famously said, "It's like feasting with panthers. The danger is half the excitement" (Hyde). Many of Wilde's close friends were alarmed by his seeming recklessness in the public sphere, and by the toxic influence Bosie had on Wilde's existence, both private and professional. Bosie frequently erupted in childlike tantrums, rife with jealously over Wilde's success, but the two always reconciled despite the urgings from both sides to end the relationship. Bosie's father, the Marquees of Queensberry, was outspoken, even brutish, regarding Wilde's relationship with his son. In June 1894, the Marquees confronted Wilde saying, "I do not say that you are it, but you look it, and pose at it, which is just as bad. And if I catch you and my son again in any public restaurant I will thrash you" (Redman).

In 1895, Wilde enjoyed the success of two simultaneous West End smashes, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest* – plays noted for their excesses and indiscretions – which were, of course, mirrored in the playwright's life. In an ominous foreshadowing of his own fate, frequent themes in Wilde's work were the uncovering of a hidden secret and the subsequent disgrace of the "guilty" individual. In the same year of Wilde's West End success, the Marquees' threats were realized and Wilde's homosexual trysts came to legal light. Wilde was found guilty of gross indecency in homosexual acts and was sentenced to two years imprisonment with hard labor. A prison chaplain wrote of Wilde, "*As soon as the excitement aroused by the trial subsided and he had to encounter the daily routine of prison life his fortitude began to give way and rapidly collapsed altogether. He is now quite crushed and broken … I need hardly tell you that he is a man of decidedly morbid disposition … In fact some of our most experienced officers openly say that they don't think he will be able to go through the two years"* (Ellman).

Wilde was released from prison in 1897, socially disgraced and financially bankrupt. He moved to France and attempted to reestablish himself as a writer publishing the poem, *The Ballad of Reading Goal* under the pseudonym C33 – his prison identification number. It is widely regarded as his best poem. Despite the success of *The Ballad of Reading Goal*, Wilde made little money from its publications and he never fully recovered from the effects of his treatment in prison. In an echoing of his mother's published poems, themes of inequality and

poor treatment – particularly of children and the mentally disabled in English prisons – were tantamount in Wilde's letters and editorials published after his release. After the public humiliation of his trials and imprisonment, the decorative luxuries of Wilde's existence were stripped away, forcing him to reflect on the true drama and metaphor of his existence. Wilde's whole life was arguably a conscious process of self-expression. He saw his role of artist as a vocation, impossible to reconcile with the social conventions of an English gentleman. To Wilde, an artist must be a profoundly public and active role, in which his voice and presence were as integral to art as his written words.

Many critics have analyzed Wilde's work through a homosexual lens, searching out themes in such works as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest.* However, homosexuality provides too narrow a lens to fully explore the nuances of Wilde's work, which is noted more broadly for its themes of guilty secrets and suppressed confusion. The trouble is that it creates a darkly unbalanced legacy of Wilde as little more than a notorious homosexual character, even scapegoat, at the end of the 19th century. Despite this legacy, Wilde is also well remembered for his sharp wit, used to attack the subjects of hypocrisy, absolute morality, uniformity, and other distorted social conventions he believed perpetuated "Anglo-Saxon stupidity" in the late 19th century. Generally thought to be politically advanced for his time, Wilde's work often sympathized with feminism and highlighted the dramatic inequalities – poverty, oppression, and hunger – of Victorian England. Shifting between the vernacular of a comedic conversationalist, literary connoisseur, and academic lecturer, Wilde demonstrated his keen audience awareness, whether in a private or public context.

Wilde, who was noted for having an encyclopedic memory, often made nuanced literary and mythological references in his work that, without notated supplement, may be lost on modern readers who therefore miss out on the full lilt of Wilde's commentary. In fact, Wilde made so many references, and some so thinly veiled, that he was frequently accused of plagiarizing the works of William Shakespeare, Phillip Sydney, John Donne, Lord Byron, William Morris, among many others. Modern critics have claimed that to accuse Wilde of plagiarism is to miss the point of his work: because Wilde was acutely aware of the artistic value of his writing, and because "plagiarized" lines have never been linked back to single sources, it is believed that he set out to include his contributions in the resonant tradition of writers he admired. Wilde drew widely on literary tradition to expand and underscore the intended impact of art. Literary historians have often found the speaking voices of Wilde's characters to

be veiled orations of Wilde himself as the storyteller.

Just before the public trials that would forever haunt his legacy as a writer, Wilde ominously said in an interview, "I have put my genius into my life, and only my talent into my work" (Miller). Shortly after his release from prison, Wilde began experiencing increasingly severe headaches and was diagnosed with cerebral meningitis. He spent what little income he earned on alcohol, further addling his thoughts when mixed with prescribed morphine. After a series of embarrassing encounters with artists he had known during his life's success further darkened Wilde's mood, he sequestered himself in his hotel stating, "My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One of us has got to go" (Ellman). Wilde died on November 30, 1900, at the age of 46.

AMY HOLWERDA
2011

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THE PERSONS IN THE PLAY

John Worthing, J.P.
Algernon Moncrieff
Rev. Canon Chasuble, D.D.
Merriman (Butler)
Lane (Manservant)
Lady Bracknell
Hon. Gwendolen Fairfax
Cecily Cardew
Miss Prism (Governess)

THE SCENES OF THE PLAY

ACT I. Algernon Moncrieff's Flat in Half-Moon Street, W.
ACT II. The Garden at the Manor House, Woolton.
ACT III. Drawing-Room at the Manor House, Woolton.

TIME: The Present. PLACE: London.

ACT I

SCENE. Morning-room in Algernon's flat in Half-Moon Street. The room is luxuriously and artistically furnished. The sound of a piano is heard in the adjoining room. [LANE is arranging afternoon tea on the table, and after the music has ceased, ALGERNON enters.]

ALGERNON. Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

LANE. I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.

ALGERNON. I'm sorry for that, for your sake. I don't play accurately—any one can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life.

LANE. Yes, sir.

ALGERNON. And, speaking of the science of Life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?

LANE. Yes, sir. [Hands them on a salver.]

ALGERNON. [Inspects them, takes two, and sits down on the sofa.] Oh!... by the way, Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreman and Mr. Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.

LANE. Yes, sir; eight bottles

and a pint.

ALGERNON. Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.

LANE. I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

ALGERNON. Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralising as that?

LANE. I believe it *is* a very pleasant state, sir. I have had very little

experien
of it
myself
up to
the
present.
I have
only
been
married
once.
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