

Oscar Wilde

The author and his work



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Oscar Wilde, the Irish playwright, novelist, poet, and critic, was born in Dublin on October 16th, 1854. At that time Ireland belonged to, and was ruled by, Britain. Wilde's parents were part of the Protestant ruling class in Ireland, rather than the mostly Catholic 'native' Irish people. Oscar's father was an important doctor in Dublin and his mother was a well-known literary hostess – she was famous for giving parties for the writers and artists of the city.

Oscar – his full name was Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde – was educated at Portora Royal School, Enniskillen, then at Trinity College, Dublin, and finally at Oxford University. At Oxford he studied 'classics' – the languages and literature of the Ancient Greeks and Romans.

Oscar started writing poetry at Oxford, and soon he started to write plays, though his first two plays, *Vera* and *The Duchess of Padua*, were not very successful. But at this time Oscar also began writing and lecturing about 'taste' – what people should wear and how they should decorate their houses. Many people wanted to listen to his thoughts about fashion, and he gave lectures in the USA as well as in Britain.

In 1884, Oscar married a rich Irish woman called Constance Lloyd, and the couple had two sons. After this, Oscar edited a popular magazine called *Women's World* for two years. But he gradually lost interest in being a professional adviser on fashion. After 1888, he spent nearly all his time writing the works for which we now remember him. He wrote two books of fairy stories for his children, *The Happy Prince* and *A House of Pomegranates*, and then a book of short stories – *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*. He also wrote a famous novel called *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is about a wicked man whose face remains young and beautiful while the face of his portrait, hidden in his house, gets older and uglier with each wicked thing he does. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was first serialised in a popular magazine. When it was later published as a book, in 1891, Oscar had added some new chapters and a revenge subplot. Though he probably did this simply to extend the book's length to that of a normal novel, some critics believed that these extra chapters had weakened the story. Most readers, however, preferred to argue over the book's morality. Suddenly, many people wanted to believe that Oscar was as wicked as his character.

Between 1892 and 1895, Oscar returned to writing plays. One of these, *Salomé*, from the Old Testament story of St John the Baptist, was written in French and was intended for the famous actress, Sarah Bernhardt. The other four plays, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, are comedies. They are very witty plays, full of short, memorable sentences. All these plays were very successful in London, but in the year that *The Importance of Being Earnest* was first produced, Oscar suddenly fell from public favour.

Although he was a married man, with two children he loved, Oscar had always preferred men to women. He was a homosexual, or, to use the more modern word, 'gay' – a man who has sexual relationships with other men. Homosexuality was illegal in England at this time.

Oscar's closest companion was a young man named Lord Alfred Douglas, or 'Bosie', as his friends called him. Bosie's father, Lord Queensberry, was angry about his son's friendship with Wilde. He made public statements which identified Oscar as gay. Although this was true, it was not good for Oscar's public reputation, and he took Queensberry to court for 'libel' – for telling lies about him. Bosie, who hated his father, encouraged Oscar to do this. But things went wrong for Oscar in court and it soon became clear that he would be arrested for having gay relationships.

Oscar was given a little time to leave the country – many gay English people at that time went to live in France, where the laws were more relaxed. But Oscar did not leave England. He was arrested, tried, and sent to prison for two years.

Prison life in Victorian England was very difficult. The prisoners had to do hard, physical work every day, and Oscar was not used to this. Life became dreadful for him. His two years in prison – mostly in Reading Goal – ruined his health. While he was in prison, Oscar wrote a long letter to Bosie which was full of blame and

self-pity. It was published as *De Profundis* (From the Depths). Shortly after he left prison, in 1897, Oscar wrote a long poem about his experiences called *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, which described the horror of prison life and its terrible effect on prisoners.

Oscar Wilde went to France after he left prison, but he was in very poor health. He used the name Sebastian Melmoth and lived simply because he had very little money left. He met Bosie again, but the two men had a difficult relationship. They were not happy apart, but they were not happy together either. Oscar Wilde died in Paris on November 30th, 1900.

Today, Oscar is probably best remembered as a social commentator. His novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is still read and admired. Many of his stories and plays are also still greatly enjoyed. But of all his work, it is his last play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which remains a masterpiece of nineteenth century theatre. Like his earlier plays, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is full of witty and clever sayings, but everything in the middle class society it describes is mocked. It is wonderfully funny and touchingly close to the real life-story of this brilliant, but tragic, writer.

A selection of works by Oscar Wilde

Fiction

- 1888 *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*
- 1891 *A House of Pomegranates*
- 1891 *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories*
- 1891 *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Plays

- 1892 *Lady Windermere's Fan*
- 1892 *Salomé*
- 1893 *A Woman of No Importance*
- 1895 *An Ideal Husband*
- 1895 *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Poems

- 1878 *Ravenna*
- 1881 *Poems*
- 1898 *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*

(For a list of Oscar Wilde's stories that have been simplified for the Macmillan Guided Readers Series, see a copy of the current Readers catalogue.)