

**Wilde, Oscar [Fingal O'Flahertie Wills]** (1854-1900), aesthete, wit, and dramatist; born at 21 Westland Row, Dublin, the second son of Sir William \*Wilde and Jane Francesca \*Wilde ('Speranza'), he was brought up in a mansion at 1 Merrion Square in an atmosphere of upper middle-class comfort, culture, and social scandal (due to his mother's pronounced nationalist leanings and his father's much-publicized affair with a female patient). Oscar followed his elder brother William to school at Portora at Enniskillen Co. Fermanagh, and proceeded to TCD in 1872. There his academic and literary talents were cultivated by the Anglo-Irish classicist and Kant scholar John Pentland \*Mahaffy, whose *Social Life in Greece* (1874), containing the first frank discussion of Greek homosexuality in English, appeared with a preface acknowledging Wilde's help throughout. The two men were later to make a journey to Greece together in 1877. In his second college year Wilde won the Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek and, deciding to continue his studies at Oxford, matriculated at Magdalen with a classical scholarship in 1874. In 1878 he won the Newdigate Prize for Poetry with 'Ravenna' and graduated with a double first, narrowly missing a college Fellowship in 1879. At Oxford his chief mentor was Walter Pater, whose *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) served as a gospel for the aesthetic movement. Strongly influenced by John Ruskin, and imbued with the thinking of Matthew \*Arnold and Cardinal \*Newman also, Wilde passed his Oxford years in an atmosphere where his intellectual and aesthetic interests and the conflicting claims of homo- and heterosexuality, freemasonry, and Catholicism, competed for his attention. In this climate he came to regard himself as putting into action Pater's enthusiastic doctrine ('to burn always with this hard gemlike flame') while adopting an unconventional lifestyle that seemed to court social disgrace as a form of artistic martyrdom. Just such an intoxicating mixture of ecstasy and abasement characterizes his first book, *Poems* (1881), which though stylistically saturated with the mood of fin de siecle aestheticism hints already at the themes of homosexuality, individualism, and republican indifference to authority that were to suffuse all of his later works in varying proportions.

In 1879 Wilde set up in London as a self-styled 'Professor of Aesthetics' intent on a crusade to civilize the Philistine English through lectures and essays on the reform of English dress and on house-decoration, but also by the example of his own deportment. So considerable was the impact of his self-promotion that he was engaged to undertake a lengthy lecture tour of North America during 1882. His well-advertised itinerary was planned to cross paths with the company touring Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*, an operatic satire on the aesthetic movement, to the financial benefit of both. In his main lecture, 'The English Renaissance in Art', Wilde

articulated the principles of the movement. A visit to San Francisco provided an opportunity to eulogize ‘Speranza’ among ‘The Irish Poets of ‘48’, and to compare his love for the Irish patriotic heroes to ‘the reverence of a Catholic child [for] the saints of the calendar’. Although Wilde camped up his public image considerably in this period (‘I have nothing to declare but my genius’), it was also a time when he consolidated the ideas which were to underpin the critique of late Victorian social and political conventions in his best satirical writings, soon to follow.

Returning from America, he settled down to the career of a man of letters and — while actively seeking appointment as a Schools Inspector — contributed a substantial body of reviews, articles, and stories to magazines and journals such as *The Dramatic Review* in 1885-86, *The Pall Mall Gazette* in 1885-90, and *The Court and Society Review* in 1887. For eighteen months he edited *The Woman’s World* (in 1887-1889), soliciting contributions from society ladies including his mother and his wife Constance Lloyd, a Dubliner whom he had married in 1884 and with whom he had two sons, Cyril and Vyvyan, born in 1885 and 1886. Together they made their Chelsea home at 16 Tite St. into the ‘House Beautiful’ with the help of artist friends such as James McNeill Whistler. Wilde’s unsatisfactory Russian melodrama *\*Vera, or the Nihilists* was produced in New York in 1883 and flopped immediately. His next play, *The Duchess of Padua*, did not find a taker until 1891, though written in 1882/3. His literary fortunes only began to rise in 1890 with the appearance of his novel *The \*Picture of Dorian Gray* in *Lippincott’s Magazine*, and this was followed by the publication of his collected essays and dialogues (including ‘The \*Decay of Lying’, ‘The \*Critic as Artist’, and ‘The Truth of Masks’) under the title of *Intentions* in 1891.

From 1886 Wilde had been having sexual relationships with men, beginning with Robert Ross, a Cambridge undergraduate who was to remain a faithful friend and ultimately to become his literary executor. In 1891 he met Lord Alfred Douglas, a petulant and beautiful young man sixteen years his junior, who temporarily displaced Ross as his lover. In their company Wilde ventured with increasing recklessness into the London world of boy-prostitution. At the same time, his writing began to deal more explicitly with homosexual themes — notably with the suggestion that paedophilia had inspired the sonnets of Shakespeare, in ‘The Portrait of Mr. W. H.’ (1889), an essay which did not however attract suspicion about his own proclivities. Wilde’s liberationist outlook was further developed in *The \*Soul of Man Under Socialism* (1891), an aesthete’s version of the Marxist gospel in which he predicted that the utopia sought in vain by the ancient Greeks and the Renaissance, would be available to all as the ‘new individualism’ or ‘new Hellenism’ after a revolution against the capitalist institutions of property and marriage.

In 1891 and 1892, besides publishing *Dorian Gray* in book-form, Wilde issued *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other stories* (1891) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1892), both volumes of tales for a more adult audience than *The Happy Prince* (1888), which had originated in his children's nursery. In 1891 he also wrote *\*Lady Windermere's Fan*, inaugurating the drama of epigrammatic dandyism and moral paradox, on which his lasting fame is based. The performance of this play in the following year greatly increased his notoriety but also provided him the considerable income from the theatre which he was to enjoy for the remaining four years of his freedom. Thereafter Wilde concentrated on three matters: the perpetuation of his stage success with *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An \*Ideal Husband*, and *The \*Importance of Being Earnest* (both produced in 1895); a life of self-indulgence in London, Paris, Monte Carlo, and at the English and French resorts, principally in company with Douglas; and a series of melodramatic works of a quasi-religious nature which include notably his decadent play *\*Salomé* (in French 1893; in English 1894), as well as *A Florentine Tragedy* and *La Sainte Courtisane*, but also 'Constance', which appeared in 1900 as *Mr. and Mrs. Daventry* over the name of Frank \*Harris, to whom in desperate straits he had sold it. In all his writings of the 1890s, Wilde was preoccupied with emotional and psychic themes that seem to reflect childhood anxieties: parents who have lost their children, children who have lost their parents, people who are not what they seem; the inevitability of tragedy; the inherent difference between 'good women' and aberrant men; puritanism, philanthropy, and hypocrisy; and the artist's impetus towards self-discovery with sin and guilt as the unavoidable concomitant of experience.

In 1895, as Wilde was enjoying the success of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, he allowed himself to be lured into instigating an action for criminal libel against Douglas's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, who had objected strenuously to their relationship and had left a card in the Albemarle Club inscribed 'To Oscar Wilde posing sodomite [sic]'. Forced to abandon the prosecution under cross-examination by Edward \*Carson, Wilde in turn was charged with gross indecency under the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1886), convicted by jury on 25 May 1895, and sentenced to two years penal servitude with hard labour. Though his life in the 1890s — a decade which he claimed to have 'invented' — had been flagrantly unconventional, the 'sexual insanity' to which he confessed after his imprisonment had been successfully camouflaged by his artistic persona until his denunciation by Lord Queensberry. The plays for which he was most applauded at the height of his career were those in which he most relentlessly mocked the morals and behaviour of the English upper classes.

Towards the end of his imprisonment at Reading, Wilde wrote an account of his

relationship with Alfred Douglas in the form of a self-exculpatory letter addressed to him, and first published by Ross in abridged form as *\*De Profundis* (1905). After his release in 1897, Wilde immediately left England and, bankrupt and homeless, drifted aimlessly around France and Italy, sometimes with Douglas, sometimes with Ross, using the pseudonym ‘Sebastian Melmoth’. Writing nothing other than ‘The *\*Ballad of Reading Gaol*’, he indulged heavily in drink and sex. Wilde died at the Hotel d’Alsace in Paris on 30 November, 1900, most likely of meningitis, and was buried in the cemetery of Bagneux. Later his body was reinterred at Pere Lachaise cemetery in Paris under a large monument by Jacob Epstein.

A dramatist in the tradition of the Anglo-Irish comedy of manners, where his predecessors were Congreve, *\*Farquhar*, and R. B. *\*Sheridan*, Wilde’s literary influence has been pervasive, while the outrageous temper of his life and the irreverence of his writing have inspired sexual and social revolutionaries in the twentieth century. Wilde’s *Works* were edited by Robert Ross (1908; rep. 1969), his *Letters* by Rupert Hart-Davis (1962), his critical writings by Richard Ellmann (1969), and his shorter fiction by Ian Murray (1979). A bibliography of his writings has been compiled by Stuart Mason (new ed. 1967). Dramatic performances based on his life and art include Michael *\*MacLiammoir*, *The Importance of Being Oscar* (1963), and Terry Eagleton, *Saint Oscar* (1989). Besides memories of Wilde in books by W. B. Yeats, Katharine *\*Tynan*, Wilfred Scawen *\*Blunt*, and André Gide, accounts of him by contemporaries and near-contemporaries include those of Arthur Ransome (1912) and Frank *\*Harris* (1918), Arthur Symons (1930), and Alfred Douglas (1914, 1945) — the second-named containing a letter on Wilde from G. B. *\*Shaw*. Vyvyan Holland gives a personal account of family life before and after the scandal in *Son of Oscar Wilde* (1954); see also Anne Clerk Amor, *Mrs. Oscar Wilde: A Woman of Some Importance* (1983). The standard biography is by Richard Ellmann (1987). See also Hesketh Pearson, *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Wit* (1946); St. John Ervine, *Oscar Wilde: A Present Time Appraisal* (1951); Philippe Julian, *Oscar Wilde* (1969); Karl Beckson, ed., *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (1970); Christopher Nassaar, *In the Demon Universe: A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde* (1974); H. Montgomery *\*Hyde*, *Oscar Wilde* (1976); Alan Bird, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde* (1977); Katherine Worth, *Oscar Wilde* (1983); Richard Pine, *Oscar Wilde and Irishness* (1993); and Davis Coakley, *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Irish* (1994).

***Importance of Being Earnest, The*** (1895), a play by Oscar *\*Wilde*, subtitled ‘a trivial comedy for serious people’. Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff, two young men with private

incomes, both pretend to be called Ernest in order to secure the affections of Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecily Cardew. The girls are first led to think they are engaged to the same man, and then that neither of them is really Ernest. The ensuing confusions are resolved when it is discovered that Jack was indeed so named before being mislaid in the cloakroom of a London station by Miss Prism, a forgetful governess, and then adopted by Cecily's father. In spite of the farcical plot (which Wilde acknowledged), the play derives great force from a brilliant fabric of epigram and paradox which barely masks a more rebarbative attitude towards the conventions of the Victorian social order. The dominant personality of the play is the sphinx-like Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen's mother, who extols the mating habits of the upper classes.

*Picture of Dorian Gray, The* (1891), Oscar Wilde's only novel, first issued in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in 1890, it gives a melodramatic account of a beautiful youth who keeps his good looks while his portrait changes to reflect its subject's every vice and profligacy. Encouraged to live purely for sensation by the amoralist Lord Henry Wotton, Dorian misuses Sibyl Vane, who kills herself, and later murders Basil Hallward, the painter of the portrait. When he tries to destroy the malignant painting, he himself dies of the stab wound he inflicts on it. The novel is thematically related to R. L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and the decadent style of writing is modelled on J. K. Huysmans' *A Rebours* (1884). While ostensibly preaching self-control, the text consistently undermines sympathy for Dorian's victims by heartless epigrams; and though the crimes are hardly specified, the atmosphere of evil is treated with some relish. Following Wilde's first meeting with Lord Alfred Douglas it was reissued in book-form with six extra chapters and extensive rewriting incorporating allusions to Douglas's beauty, as well as a preface which contains some of Wilde's best-known epigrams.

*Soul of Man under Socialism, The* (1891), an aphoristic essay by Oscar Wilde, first published in *Fortnightly Review*, it combines his preoccupation with aestheticism with a thesis about the utopian form of society which he sees emerging when capitalist property relations and bourgeois democracy are overthrown. Owing more to anarchism than to the Marx, it treats existing institutions as symbols only. While endorsing Thoreau's prescription of civil disobedience, Wilde defines the new individualism as a disturbing and disintegrating force, representing Jesus as an exemplary figure for the artist, a theme resumed in 'De Profundis'.

**'Ballad of Reading Gaol, The'**, a prison poem written by Oscar Wilde in 1897-98, after his release and during his self-imposed exile in France and Italy. Partly narrating the execution of a murderer, the poem also relates Wilde's own reaction to his prison experience (more explicitly stated in letters to *The Daily Chronicle*). The ballad was published anonymously in 1898 over Wilde's prison number, C 3 3. Its sympathetic attitude towards prisoners influenced Brendan Behan's play *The Quare Fellow*. Lines from the ballad were used on Wilde's monument in Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris: 'his mourners will be outcast men,/And outcasts always mourn.'