

"I'll be a poet, a writer, a dramatist. Somehow or other I'll be famous, and if not famous, I'll be notorious."

Oscar Wilde (1854–1900)

As it turned out, both fame and infamy befriended Oscar Wilde from the second he flirted with fashionable Victorian society. This Irishman, who was adopted by the English, was at first fêted solely for his overt, flamboyant nature and the scintillating, quick banter with which he regaled his audience – leaving the writer beneath the frills and gaiety too often forgotten. His genius as a raconteur and coiner of epigrams alternately rocked and shocked London's literary luminaries, long before he found success as a poet and writer. Then, at the peak of his career, Wilde's private life came under intense scrutiny, and the society that had adored and courted this remarkable man, tragically, turned against him.

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde began his life in Dublin on 16th October, 1854. He was the second of three children born to Sir William Ralph Wills Wilde, a prominent eye surgeon, scholar and noted archaeologist; and Lady Jane Wilde (née Elgee), celebrated contributor of fiery nationalistic articles for the radical newspaper, *The Nation*, hostess of an influential Dublin salon and an ardent feminist. Oscar was blessed by a happy, laid-back childhood. Pampered and loved by both his talented, albeit eccentric, parents, it was his mother whom he worshipped and who was to nurture his creativity as he grew into adulthood.

Educated in Portora Royal, a public school near Enniskillen, Oscar had a natural affinity for the classics and excelled in his Greek studies. He went on to earn himself the Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek at Trinity College, Dublin, and he won a scholarship to Magdalen College in Oxford shortly after his twentieth birthday. Wilde declared "I was the happiest man in the world when I entered Magdalen for the first time." It was throughout his four year idyll at Oxford that Oscar took his first sips from the cup of notoriety, as word spread rapidly from don to don that in their midst stood a gifted conversationalist but an eccentric dresser.

Wilde left Oxford in 1878 boasting a double first and the coveted Newdigate Prize for English poetry, for his poem *Ravenna*. London was calling and so this brilliant young scholar and dandy wasted no time in flinging himself unashamedly into its limelight. Oscar became the most quoted man in London and quickly earned himself a reputation amongst the literati for his ascerbic wit, intellect and audacity.

Wilde was not renowned for being a handsome man, rather he was bulky and overgrown in stature at six feet, three inches. Indeed, one Lady Colin Campbell, who despised him, referred to him rather unkindly as "the great white caterpillar." Various described as slack-jowled, thick-lipped and colourless with his hair either lank or coiffed into an excessive mass of curls atop his head, perhaps this explained Oscar's penchant for dressing to shock. He donned "frothy" clothes unbefitting a Victorian gentleman's wardrobe – Byronesque shirts, rich velvet coats and knee-breeches, stockings, floppy neckties and buckled shoes. This fascinating man gained social acclaim in record time, receiving countless invitations from the most influential members of society. His epigrams and mannerisms soon became the subject of savage satire in *Punch* magazine and a play entitled *The Colonel*, but it was through Gilbert and Sullivan's comic operetta, *Patience*, that Oscar was most derisively characterised. Wilde, though, remained impassive, in fact his ego was boosted even further by the widespread notoriety he gained.

Luckily for Wilde, the play's success saved him from penury, and when the producers chose to take the production across the Atlantic, Oscar was invited to explain *The Principles of Aestheticism* to the American classes. On Christmas Eve 1881, he duly set sail for the New World. On his arrival on 2nd January, 1882, a customs official asked Oscar, "Have you anything to declare?" "I have nothing to declare except my genius!" was Wilde's prompt riposte. It was this quick wit which netted Oscar a great deal of publicity, turning the lecture tour into a phenomenal success. Over fifty personal appearances and twelve months later, Wilde had become both a household name across the United States and financially secure.

Oscar returned to London for a short time before moving to Paris – his first love and third home – where he wrote his commissioned play, *The Duchess of Padua*. When the American actress Mary Anderson turned it down, Wilde joked to his friend Robert Sherard, "Pity, my dear Robert, we shan't be dining with the Duchess tonight!" This unsuccessful play was one of just a few works penned by Wilde in Paris. Whilst the city did nothing to inspire a prolific writing spree, it did help Oscar forge important acquaintances with Parisian Bohemians such as Victor Hugo, André Gide, Edgar Degas and Emile Zola.

Back in London in May 1883, Wilde's poor finances once again forced him, begrudgingly, to continue his lecture tour. For five and a half months he preached to the English about *The House Beautiful*, *The Value of Art in Modern Life*, and *Personal Impressions of America*, endearing his audience with his unsurpassed humour.

November in Dublin is where Oscar met and fell for the stunning Constance Mary Lloyd who attended his lectures frequently. They married on 29th May, 1884, had two sons, Cyril and Vyvyan, and set up home in Tite Street, in Chelsea, in a house known as "The House Beautiful" filled with exquisite works of art. Once more, Wilde's financial situation forced him to tour and thereafter to become the book reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette*. In June of 1887, Oscar became the editor of *The Lady's World*, retitling the publication *The Woman's World*. Soon bored with his new post, he retired in 1889. He became irked, too, by family life and disillusioned with marriage.

Wilde's reputation as a prominent writer is due to the wide-ranging works he produced around this era, between 1888 and 1895. They included *The Happy Prince*, one of many enchanting fairy tales, his only novel – the shocking and satirical *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the theatrical masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. By 1895, Oscar saw two of his plays running in the West End of London and his bank balance increasing with dramatic effect. He had reached the pinnacle of his career.

Unfortunately for Oscar, misfortune lurked just around the corner. His close relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, or "Bosie" as he was affectionately known, led to his ruin in the Wilde versus Queensberry case and subsequent two-year imprisonment in Pentonville and Reading Jails. The horror and depravity of life behind bars broke Oscar's spirit and spurred him to write a personal and intensely moving letter, *De Profundis* ("from the depths"), to Lord Alfred; laying the blame of his downfall on his "dear boy".

Upon his release from Reading Jail a century ago on 19th May, 1897, Wilde sailed for Dieppe, France, never to return to his adopted homeland. He lived out the remainder of his life in exile, sick, broken-hearted and ruined. Even Constance wanted nothing more to do with him; she had divorced him, changed her name and refused him access to his sons. Ironically, it was whilst he was in France that Oscar wrote his last and finest poem, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. But heavy drinking and crippling illness soon got the better of him.

"I put all my genius into my life", he had once quipped, "I only put my talent into my writings." Similarly, to the paper on the wall of his bedroom in a little hotel in the Rue des Beaux-Arts, he delivered his final epigram, "It is killing me. One of us *has* to go." And go he did, dying from cerebral meningitis on 30th November, 1900, aged forty six. He is buried at Bagneux in France.

Love him or loathe him, beneath his many guises Oscar Wilde was undoubtedly a brilliant raconteur, a storehouse of repartee and a literary genius whose notoriety, he'd be pleased to learn, will be making lasting impressions on future generations for a long time to come

A Bit About Victorian England

Wilde was around in the late 1800s, often termed the Victorian Era, or at least the end thereof.

From *Century Readings in English Literature*, (which completely ignored Wilde, btw):

The term 'Victorian' was often used in the first quarter of the twentieth century as an adjective of depreciation to signify anything out of fashion and therefore to be despised. As a matter of fact, the period is characterized by a steady and rapid growth on fundamental questions of politics, economics, natural science, ethics, and religious belief. Its weakest points were prudery as to matters of sex and intolerance of points of view diverging from the established conventions. At the beginning of the period the power of 'Mrs. Grundy,' resting upon middle class prejudice, and supported by the all-pervading influence of the squire and the parson, was supreme, and writers like Thackeray groaned over the conventional and sometimes hypocritical restrictions by which their artistic freedom was curtailed; but at the end of the period, with the admission of women to higher education and the learned professions, even more perhaps their use of the bicycle and the tennis racket, conventional restriction had already started on its way to the growing laxity of the twentieth century.

The Victorian era, from the coronation of Queen Victoria in 1837 until her death in 1901, was an era of several unsettling social developments such as the growth of English democracy, the education of the masses, the progress of industrial enterprise and the consequent rise of a materialistic philosophy, and the plight of the newly industrialized worker. In addition, the unsettling of religious belief by new advances in science, particularly the theory of evolution and the historical study of the Bible, drew other writers away from the immemorial subjects of literature into considerations of problems of faith and truth. When William IV was succeeded by his 18-year-old niece Victoria in 1837, she and her husband Albert came to symbolize a close-knit family life, a sense of public duty, integrity, and respectability. This period saw a trend toward free trade continued, aided by the 1849 repeal of the Navigation Acts, and a system of administrative regulation was gradually established. Women and children were barred from underground work in mines and limited to 10-hour working days in factories. Regulations were also imposed on urban sanitation facilities and passenger-carrying railroads, and commissions were set up to oversee prisons, insane asylums, merchant shipping, and private charities. Attempts to subsidize elementary education, however, were hampered by conflict over the church's role in running schools.

From the late 1840s until the late 1860s, Britons were less concerned with domestic conflict than with an economic boom occasionally affected by wars and threats of war on the Continent and overseas. The Great Exhibition of 1851 in London symbolized Britain's industrial supremacy. The 10,600-km (6600-mi) railroad network of 1850 more than doubled during the mid-Victorian years, and the telegraph provided instant communication. Inexpensive steel was made possible by Henry Bessemer's process and a boom in steamship building began in the 1860s. In 1857 and 1858, the Sepoy Mutiny was suppressed, and Britain abolished the East India Company, making British India a crown colony. Hong Kong and Singapore served as centers of British trade and influence in China and the South Pacific and the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869 led to a British protectorate over Egypt in 1882. The policies of Joseph Chamberlain contributed to the outbreak of the Boer War in 1899. Britain suffered initial reverses in that war but then captured Johannesburg and Pretoria in 1900. Only after protracted guerrilla warfare, however, was the conflict brought to an end in 1902. By then Queen Victoria was dead.

The Picture of Dorian Gray

Summary

The Picture of Dorian Gray was arch-aesthete Oscar Wilde's only novel, although he wrote a number of poems and children's stories before it was published in 1890 (in *Lippincott's Magazine*) and became a very successful playwright in the 1890s themselves. Like much of his work and life, the Gothic melodrama *Dorian Gray* was controversial. In his preface to the book he famously wrote that, "There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all". The novel is a brilliant portrait of vanity and depravity tinged with sadness. The picture of the title is a splendid work painted by Basil Hallward

of the orphaned boy Dorian Gray who is the heir to a great fortune. Lord Henry and Hallward discuss the boy and the remarkable painting. Dorian enters and declares that he would give his soul if he were always to be young and the painting instead would grow old. As the story pans out, Dorian leaves his fiancée – the actress Sibyl Vane – because through a single bad performance he claims that she has 'killed' his love. She kills herself with poison and Dorian is unaffected. So begins the tale of the boy's descent into low society in London while still giving dinners and musicals for high society. He is inspired by two things: the book Lord Henry sends him that seems to predict his own life in dissecting every virtue and every sin from the past; and secondly the picture of himself which grows steadily older and more vicious looking compared to his own mirror image which remains young. Fanatical about the portrait, he is driven to murder and deception. As others are drawn into this web of evil Dorian himself longs to return to innocence but his method is horrific and tragic.