

The life and works of Oscar Wilde Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) was a brilliant author, playwright, and wit. After a highly publicised trial in which Wilde was ridiculed and humiliated, he was found guilty of "gross, indecent acts". He was sentenced to two years hard labour, and ended up in Reading Gaol, where the almost inhumane conditions severely damaged his health. While in prison, Wilde wrote *De Profundis* (1905), an essay written in the form of a letter to his long-time lover, Bosie, in which he described his time leading up to his imprisonment. His wife Constance was forced to flee the country with their children, and to change the family name, though she still hoped that Oscar would renounce his lover and return to his family on his release from prison. However, despite his attempts to comply with his wife's wishes, Wilde was unable to resist temptation. He returned to Bosie, thereby sealing his own fate. After leaving jail, Wilde, now a ruined man, emigrated to France, where he lived the last three years of his life under an assumed name. Before his departure from England he had been divorced and declared a bankrupt, and in France he had to rely on the few friends he had left for financial support. It was during this period that he wrote his final masterpiece, *The Ballade of Reading Gaol*, an elegy for an executed man, Charles Woollidge, a guardsman who killed his wife in a fit of jealousy. Executions were not common events at Reading Gaol, and the poem was Wilde's humane and sensitive response to this man's plight and to the inhumane conditions of Victorian prisons. Wilde's health deteriorated during this period, and he eventually died at the age of 46, penniless and alone in a cheap Paris hotel room, in November 1900. He was buried in a Paris. Last Years Wilde's last years were spent in several towns in Europe. He settled in the small village of Berneval-sur-Mer near Dieppe, France, and sent letters to newspapers on prison reform while writing his greatest poem, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." On the floor lies a dead man, "a withered, wrinkled, and loathsome man" with a knife in his heart. In his attempt to kill his conscience, Dorian Gray had killed himself. Through Dorian's tragic fate, Wilde portrayed what could happen to someone who cannot control his evil impulses. However, the press at the time attacked the novel for being blatantly immoral. Wilde then decided to tell basically the same story, only this time in the guise of a comedy. The play, *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), proved to be much more palatable to his Victorian public, and the play was a success. The Importance of Being Earnest Of the four stage comedies by Wilde, his last, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is generally regarded as his masterpiece. It was first staged in 1895, and was an immediate success. Although written as a farce, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is actually an attack on Victorian society, in particular on its social and moral hypocrisy, the social class system, the attitude of marriage as a social tool, and the triviality of aristocratic life. One may wonder how it could be that Victorian audiences could laugh at a play that satirised them and their values. The answer lies in Wilde's genius in the genres of wit and farce. The trademark of farce is that the situations and the characters' attitudes, reactions, and customs are improbable and exaggerated, and cannot be explained by reason. The fact that the characters and the situations are so ridiculous creates a distance between the story and the audience, enabling the audience to laugh at them. Another reason for the success of the play was Wilde's genius for epigrams, which Wilde uses to challenge and question the conventional values and expectations of Victorian society. Here are some of the epigrams that appear in the play: o Divorces are made in heaven This epigram pokes fun at the popular phrase "A marriage made in heaven". Though somewhat one-sided, the term "Victorian" is also associated with

negative qualities such as narrow-mindedness, double standards, hypocrisy, sexual repression and extreme class-consciousness. Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1854. He was the son of Sir William Wilde, a distinguished surgeon, and the writer and poet Jane Francesca Elgee (who wrote under the name of Speranza). Oscar Wilde left Ireland at the age of 20 to study at Oxford University in England, where he achieved a brilliant academic record. Already as a young man he gained a reputation as a dandy, as well as for being a master of witty conversation. Wilde despised sport and violence. After writing in different forms throughout the 1880s, he became one of the most popular playwrights in London in the early 1890s. He is best remembered for his epigrams and plays, his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the circumstances of his criminal conviction for gross indecency for consensual homosexual acts in "one of the first celebrity trials", imprisonment, and early death from meningitis at the age of 46. Wilde had been married for several years and was the father of two children at the time of his meeting (in 1891) with the handsome young poet Lord Alfred Douglas (Wilde called him "Bosie"), with whom he established a homosexual relationship that was to have disastrous consequences for him. This fact outraged Victorian society and which was to become a major factor in his eventual public humiliation and downfall. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Throughout the course of his literary career, Wilde excelled in a variety of literary genres, his work often reflecting a close connection between his art and his own life. Early in his career he wrote fairy tales in which, as in all good fairy tales, the good and pure always triumphed in the end. They differed, however, in one important aspect. Rather than depicting evil as an external force, Wilde chose to reveal the evil within human beings. Written for "children from eight to eighty", the tales can be read as a representation of Oscar Wilde's own inner battle against the evil forces within himself, and of his wish to remain in a world of childlike innocence. Now Wilde is often classified as a literary figure whose sensibilities, witticisms, and theatrical staging reflected the social commentary of the nineteenth century and influenced the theatre of the twentieth century. The novel's implied homosexual theme was considered immoral by Victorian society, a society in which homosexuality was considered not only immoral and unnatural, but was also a serious criminal offence punishable by imprisonment. Son of an eminent surgeon, Wilde attended Trinity College, Dublin, and later Oxford University, becoming widely known for his wit while still an undergraduate. In modern times, Victorian society is generally remembered as one that was puritanical, repressive, obsessed with the appearance of respectability, strict discipline and high morals. His only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), combines gothic elements with mockery of bourgeois morality. His macabre play *Salome* (1893) was later adapted as the libretto of Richard Strauss's opera; his other plays, all successes, include *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1893), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), and *An Ideal Husband* (1895). Accused by Queensberry of being a sodomite, Wilde sued for libel and lost, then was arrested for sodomy and convicted in a trial that became internationally notorious. Not long after, he discovers that his wish has come true; the more corrupt and immoral Dorian becomes, the older and uglier the figure in the portrait appears, while Dorian himself retains his beautiful and youthful appearance. Surgery for an acute and life-threatening infection, which had moved into the mastoid, was allegedly performed on October 10, 1900, and was documented in Wilde's letters. The quality of earnestness became a typical Victorian value, and was applied to all areas of Victorian life, especially in

religion, literature and social conduct. Oscar Wilde died Nov. 30, 1900, Paris, France, Irish poet and dramatist. A spokesman for Aestheticism, in the early 1880s he gave a lecture tour in the U.S. and established himself in London circles by his wit and flamboyance. His greatest work was the comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1899), a satire of Victorian social hypocrisy. Imprisoned at Reading Gaol (1895–97), he wrote a recriminatory letter to his lover that was edited and published as *De Profundis* (1905).

- o The truth is rarely pure and never simple This epigram attacks the truth of the popular phrase "The pure and simple truth".
- o In marriage, three is company, two is none Here Wilde has taken the popular saying "Two is company, three is a crowd" and adapted it to suit his own purpose. However, a November 2000 article in the British journal, *Lancet*, blames meningoencephalitis, complicated by a chronic right middle-ear disease (see Resource Center for the article). Some of Oscar Wilde quotes "Rich bachelors should be heavily taxed. It is not fair that some men should be happier than others." Two critical dialogues, "The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist," are admired as equally brilliant. One of Wilde's best-known novels, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, created a public outcry when it was published in 1891. The novel tells the story of Dorian Gray, an extremely handsome young man, and his selfish pursuit of sensual pleasures. He and Bosie moved to Naples, Switzerland, and Paris, but Wilde's health was fading. Just prior to his death in Paris on November 30, 1900, at the age of 46, Wilde converted to Roman Catholicism. Over the last century and a half, many people have believed that Wilde died of cerebral meningitis, complicated by syphilis, and many have seen it as proof of his depravity. Wilde's death did not end the public's appreciation of his marvelous wit and staging. The original producer, George Alexander, willed the copyright of the play to Wilde's son, Vyvyan. After Wilde's death, many friends and acquaintances destroyed his letters for fear that their own reputations would be tainted by his scandal. Most popular and academic writing about Wilde, since his death, has been about the scandal and speculation concerning his private life. Though happily married, in 1891 he began an intimate relationship with the young Lord Alfred Douglas, son of the marquess of Queensberry. When his friend Basil Hallward paints his portrait, Gray expresses his wish that he could forever stay as young and as charming as the portrait: "I would give everything. I would give my soul for that!"

**The Final Years** In 1895, Lord Alfred's father, an aristocrat, accused Wilde of homosexuality. He and Bosie reunited, and Constance died in April 1898. His son, Vyvyan, ironically underwent a similar operation for mastoid infection less than two months after his father died. During this period in English history, the country was undergoing many radical changes, all of which contributed to the way in which the people who lived during this period lived and thought. After his release, he moved to Paris; his only later work was *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), on inhumane prison conditions. Wilde sued for libel, lost the case, and was then arrested and charged with the same crime. His wife Constance had settled in Italy with the boys, changing their name to Holland because of the scandal. Wilde was treated before and during his imprisonment for a chronic ear infection. He suffered a relapse in November of that year and fell into a coma, never to awaken. *The Importance of Being Earnest* returned to the West End with revivals in 1902, 1909, 1911, and 1913. His writing was largely ignored or devalued until the 1960s and 1970s. He was born in the middle of the Victorian age--the period of English history during which Queen Victoria reigned, from 1837–1901. He died suddenly of acute meningitis. After many years of leading such an

immoral life, Dorian finds himself alone with his bad conscience for all the suffering he had caused others. No longer able to bear looking at the portrait, which reminded him of the life he has led, Dorian decides to destroy it by stabbing it with a knife. Wilde wanted to see her and the children, but she refused because he would not give up Douglas. There was no more writing; Wilde drank heavily and begged money from friends. During his time in prison, he had found an admiration for Jesus Christ and had written about his religious convictions. Even letters to Constance during his imprisonment were destroyed. When his house servants rush to find out what has happened, they find the figure in the portrait exactly as it had been painted all those years ago. "One should always be in love. This is the reason one should never marry."