

LIFE AND BACKGROUND OF THE PLAYWRIGHT

The following abbreviated biography of Oscar Wilde is provided so that you might become more familiar with his life and the historical times that possibly influenced his writing. Read this Life and Background of the Playwright section and recall it when reading Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, thinking of any thematic relationship between Wilde's play and his life.

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Wilde's Early Years

Oscar Wilde's unconventional life began with an equally unconventional family. He was born Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde on October 16, 1854, at 21 Westland Row, Dublin, Ireland. His father, Sir William Wilde, was an eminent Victorian and a doctor of aural surgery.

Wilde's mother, Jane Francesca Elgee (or Lady Wilde), saw herself as a revolutionary and liked to trace her family through the Italian line of Alighieris, including Dante. An Irish nationalist, she wrote under the pen name Speranza. She attracted artists like herself and established a literary salon devoted to intellectual and artistic conversations of the day, through which Lady Wilde brought literature, an interest in art and culture, and an elegance and appreciation for wit into the lives of her children.

Wilde had two siblings: an older brother named Willie, born in 1852, and a sister, Isola, born in 1856, but who died at the age of 10. These offspring would not experience a standard, conventional childhood. Through their home passed intellectuals, artists, and internationally known doctors—and the children were not left to a governess or nanny. Allowed to mingle and eat with the guests, they learned to value intellectual and witty conversation, an influence that would have profound and long-lasting effects on young Oscar Wilde.

Education, Travel, and Celebrity

Wilde was given the advantage of a superior education. At age 11, he entered the exclusive Portora Royal School and began to assert the scholarship and intellect that would bring him both great celebrity and great sadness. His long interest in all things Greek began at Portora. Winning several prizes, he was already a first-rate classics scholar and ready to pursue serious studies.

Wilde went on to Trinity College where he extended his interest in the classics and his long list of intellectual accomplishments. He won an additional scholarship, made first class in examinations, received a composition prize for Greek verse, and the Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek. In 1874 he received a scholarship to Magdalen College in Oxford. His lifelong love of the classics would continue through his university career and immensely influence his subsequent writing. Little did he know

what turns and twists his life would take when he entered Oxford and came under the influence of three very powerful professors.

Wilde's four years at Oxford (1874–1878) were dizzy, personality-changing times. By graduation he was firmly committed to the pursuit of pleasure and the careful devising of a public persona, which included unconventional clothing and the pose of a dandy. Wilde's direction in life changed because of the influence of three professors—Ruskin, Pater, and Mahaffy.

The magnetism of Professor John Ruskin, author of *Modern Painters* and *The Stones of Venice*, attracted Wilde's imagination. Ruskin believed civilizations could be judged by their art, which must consider and reflect moral values. Ruskin also stirred Wilde's aristocratic soul with social concerns in his insistence that his students identify with the working class and do manual labor. His influence on Wilde's social conscience is undeniable, and it permeates Wilde's plays and his essay, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism." Wilde did not, however, agree with Ruskin on the moral purposes of art. Influenced by Keats and his ideas of truth and beauty, he believed art should be loved and appreciated for its own sake.

Yet another Oxford influence was Professor Walter Pater, author of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* and *Marius the Epicurian*. His prose style influenced young Wilde, and his ideas seemed to fit Wilde's new-found proclivities. Pater emphasized art for art's sake and urged his students to live with passion and for sensual pleasure, testing new ideas and not conforming to the orthodoxy. Pater was planting seeds in fertile ground. The Aesthetic Movement, an avant-garde philosophy of the 1870s, was in full bloom, and its advocates were critical of the heavy, moralistic Victorian taste. They wanted to pursue forms of beauty in opposition to the art and architecture of the day. Wilde could not agree more. He went overboard into aesthetics, adopting extravagant clothing styles, which continued when he left Oxford for London in 1878. He thought of himself as an aesthete, poet, writer, and nonconformist—and he wanted to be famous or at least infamous.

A third influence on Wilde at Oxford was Mahaffy, an Oxford professor of ancient history. Professor Mahaffy took him along on trips to Italy and Greece.

By 1878, when Wilde completed his degree at Oxford, he had won the coveted Newdigate Prize for his poem "Ravenna." Leaving Oxford, Wilde was now ready to take on the world with a classical education and

an unequivocal inclination toward the unconventional. Wilde proved to be a master of public relations. Virtually unknown and unpublished, he single-handedly created his own celebrity. While his travels and lectures increased his fame both in England and abroad, his early writings were not critical successes.

London in the 1870s provided Wilde the opportunity to build a public persona and test the limits of what society would tolerate. He dressed in strange clothes and often sported flowers such as lilies and sunflowers. He built a reputation as a minor luminary by courting celebrities. In 1880, he privately printed his first play, *Vera*, and the following year published his first book of poems. The poems were a modest success, but the play died a quick death.

In April 1881, Gilbert and Sullivan opened a play titled *Patience* in which a primary character, Bunthorne, was assumed to be based on Wilde. This false assumption was promoted by Wilde through early attendance—in outrageous clothes—at the play. When the play moved on to New York in December 1881, Richard D'Oyly Carte, the producer, hired Wilde to do a series of lectures to introduce the play to American audiences. The press was alerted and ready for his arrival, and Wilde played to them by proclaiming at customs that he had nothing to declare but his genius.

What began as a modest tour ripened into a six-month nationwide tour. He spoke in New York, Chicago, Boston, Fort Wayne (Indiana), Omaha (Nebraska), Philadelphia, and Washington. He even lectured in the mining town of Leadville, Colorado, where his ability to hold his liquor brought him a silver drill and the good-humored admiration of the miners. America seemed intrigued by Wilde's odd character, and he, in turn, admired many things American, including the democratic insistence on universal education. While in America, Wilde's lectures included "The English Renaissance of Art," "The House Beautiful," and "Decorative Art in America." As a celebrity, he dined with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Charles Eliot Norton (the famous Harvard professor), and Walt Whitman. He also had audiences with Lincoln's son, Robert, and Jefferson Davis.

Following his triumphant tour, Wilde had enough money to spend three months in Paris. There he finished a forgettable play titled *The Duchess of Padua*. He was befriended once again by celebrities; this time they were Europeans: Zola, Hugo, Verlaine, Gide, Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas, and Pissarro. Obviously, early training at his mother's salon had paid off.

He returned to London looking for backers to produce his play. In an attempt to garner backing, he cut his hair short and dressed more conservatively. When he was unsuccessful in finding producers, he arranged for a production in New York for \$1,000. The play was not successful, closing in less than a week. So, Wilde went back to England, arranging a lecture tour of Great Britain and Ireland, where he encountered a previous acquaintance, Constance Lloyd, who would become his wife—for better or for worse.

Marriage and Commercial Success

During the seven years between his wedding to Constance and his first introduction to a young man who would become part of his downfall—Lord Alfred Douglas—Wilde settled down to a life of domestic respectability as a husband and father. By all accounts the Wildes' marriage was happy, producing two sons: Cyril in June 1885 and Vyvyan in November 1886. Wilde played often with his children and loved them immensely. To support them he wrote book reviews for newspapers and magazines, including the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Dramatic Review*. Occasionally, he lectured. *The Lady's World* magazine named him its editor in 1887, and he converted it from a fashion magazine to *The Woman's World* with essays about women's viewpoints on art, music, literature, and modern life. He wrote essays that took women seriously as creative and intelligent human beings. When he was an editor, Wilde's life was financially more secure. In 1888 he wrote a book of fairy tales titled *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, and in 1889 he wrote an essay titled "The Decay of Lying." He left the magazine in July 1889 to begin his greatest period of playwriting.

A Playwright with a Secret Life

Within six months of leaving *The Woman's World*, Wilde had published the commercially successful novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, about a man with a secret life. This novel was quickly followed by *Intentions*, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories*, and *A House of Pomegranates*. In the period from 1891 to 1892, he produced *Salome*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, and an essay, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism." He amused his audiences, and in return they offered standing ovations at his plays.

One would think all this good luck, publicity, and commercial success would be enough for a respectable married man with two sons,

who finally was receiving acceptance from British aristocracy. However, during this amazingly prolific period, Wilde was beginning to frequent literary circles that were often homosexual. In 1886, he is said to have had his first homosexual affair with a Canadian named Robert Ross. He was also introduced to Alfred Taylor, who lived in Bloomsbury and often had male prostitutes at his home. One of these young men was the unemployed Charles Parker. Wilde became involved with several of these young men, who later testified against him at trial.

In 1891, Oscar Wilde met the young man who would change his life forever. Lord Alfred Douglas (known as Bosie) was the 21-year-old son of the Marquis of Queensberry. A very controversial figure, Douglas was often described as femininely beautiful, aristocratic, rich, homosexual, and poetic. His hold on Wilde has often been a subject of conjecture, but most writers believe that Wilde, 14 years Bosie's senior, was infatuated, obsessed, and besotted. By 1892, the two were together constantly. They traveled to France, Italy, and Algiers. Wilde rented homes for them outside London, and when they were apart he wrote letters and was careless with their whereabouts.

Wilde enjoyed unprecedented success in the London theatres from 1893 to 1895. He had two plays running simultaneously in the West End: *A Woman of No Importance* opened at the Royal Theatre, Haymarket, in January 1893, and *Lady Windermere's Fan* began in November of that same year. From August through September 1894, he wrote *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the seaside resort of Worthing, Sussex, his wife and children enjoying the holiday with him. By 1895, he had the acclaim of all London for his witty society plays. However, he was also increasingly indiscreet about his personal life. The year 1895 marked the beginning of the end of his public acceptance and the privacy of his secret life.

Disaster and Ruin

Rumors about Wilde's secret life were already circulating in 1895, but he was still very amusing, and as long as his indiscretions were kept quiet, society did not care. *The Importance of Being Earnest* opened on February 14 at St. James' Theatre, beginning a run of 86 performances to standing ovations. On February 28, the Marquis of Queensberry left a card for Wilde at his club, the Albemarle Club. It read: "To Oscar Wilde, posing as a sodomite." (Actually, sodomite was misspelled.) Estranged from his father and hating him, Douglas encouraged Wilde

to sue the Marquis for libel. Convinced he could triumph in court, Wilde declared to his lawyers that he was innocent and wanted to press the lawsuit. His friends, knowing he had been too indiscreet, urged him to go abroad with his wife until it all blew over, but Wilde intended to carry through with the case. The Marquis hired detectives and, using Alfred Taylor and his young prostitutes, Queensberry effectively put Wilde on trial for homosexuality.

The libel trial was disastrous. When the prosecution threatened to bring in male prostitutes to testify, Wilde dropped the case and left in disgrace. But tragedy was not over for Oscar Wilde. In 1885, Parliament had passed the Criminal Law Amendment Act. It was used to try acts of “gross indecency” between men and sometimes could result in hanging. Being a homosexual was not a crime; the sexual act itself was. When the first trial ended, Queensberry’s lawyers sent a transcript of the trial to public prosecutors. Home Secretary Herbert Asquith decided to arrest, imprison, and try Wilde, but he delayed the warrant long enough for Wilde to leave on the last boat-train to France. Wilde, for various reasons, remained in England and was arrested. A new trial would take place, indicting Wilde.

The press had a heyday, viciously attacking Wilde and holding up Queensberry—hardly a model citizen. They pictured Wilde as a deviant but could not print the crime with which he was charged. Unflattering cartoons and caricatures appeared in magazines such as *Punch*, and Wilde was pictured in unmanly clothes with flowers in his lapel. The court found Wilde guilty and sentenced him to two years at hard labor.

Today, transcripts of the trials can be read in H. Montgomery Hyde’s *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (The Notable Trials Library by Gryphon Editions, Inc., 1989). Just as Wilde’s plays noted the huge gulf between the rich and the working class, the trials themselves displayed the disparity. Lord Alfred Douglas, protected by his powerful family name, was never charged, even though the jury inquired about this because he had committed the same crime. The names of upper-class people associated with the case could not be mentioned in court; in fact, some witnesses were instructed to write a name rather than say it aloud. The names of working class people, however, were readily identified aloud.

The immediate aftermath of the trial was a total disgrace for Wilde. He was abandoned by his friends, his book sales ended, his plays were closed down, and his belongings were sold at auction at low prices. He

began his sentence in Newgate Prison but was moved to different prisons over the next two years.

Oscar Wilde was not a man well equipped to face such solitary adversity. His world was normally one of social calendars and lots of people. He was moved to Pentonville Prison where he spent 23 hours a day in poorly ventilated cells and 1 hour exercising without speaking to anyone. His cell was unsanitary, and his bed was nothing more than wooden boards. The food was unspeakable, and he could only read the *Bible*, a prayer book, and a hymn book. Wilde was not allowed photos of his wife or children or allowed to write or receive more than one letter in three months. In February 1896, his mother dying, Wilde requested leave to go to her. His request was denied; Constance visited the prison on February 19 to tell him in person of his mother's death. It was their last meeting.

By now Wilde had lost 30 pounds, and was not doing well physically or emotionally. He was transferred to Wandsworth Prison. A parliamentary committee looking into prison conditions took up his case and, because he was destitute, transferred him to Reading Gaol—a debtors' prison—for the remainder of his time. While he was there, Wilde wrote a famous letter to Douglas justifying his life and position, which was later published as “De Profundis.” When he left this prison on May 19, 1897, he was in decent health and departed immediately for France, never to return to England.

Wilde's 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.” His wife Constance had settled in Italy with the boys, changing their name to Holland because of the scandal. Wilde wanted to see her and the children, but she refused because he would not give up Douglas. He and Bosie reunited, and Constance died in April 1898. There was no more writing; Wilde drank heavily and begged money from friends. He and Bosie moved to Naples, Switzerland, and Paris, but Wilde's health was fading. During his time in prison, he had found an admiration for Jesus Christ and had written about his religious convictions. 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. 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). Wilde was treated before and during his imprisonment for a chronic ear infection. 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. He suffered a relapse in November of that year and fell into a coma, never to awaken. His son, Vyvyan, ironically underwent a similar operation for mastoid infection less than two months after his father died.

Wilde's death did not end the public's appreciation of his marvelous wit and staging. *The Importance of Being Earnest* returned to the West End with revivals in 1902, 1909, 1911, and 1913. 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. Even letters to Constance during his imprisonment were destroyed. Most popular and academic writing about Wilde, since his death, has been about the scandal and speculation concerning his private life. His writing was largely ignored or devalued until the 1960s and 1970s. 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.