



## OSCAR WILDE ~ BIOGRAPHY

Oscar O'Flahertie Fingal Wills Wilde was born on October 16, 1854 in Dublin, Ireland. He was born into an interesting and somewhat eccentric family, which would prove to be a very appropriate backdrop for the man Wilde would become.

His mother, Lady Jane Francesca Elgee Wilde (1820-96), was a journalist and poet. She published revolutionary poetry under the pseudonym "Speranza"; Lady Jane gained attention as a poetess in 1846 when her work appeared in the Irish newspaper *The Nation*.

Wilde's father, Sir William Wilde was an accomplished physician who specialized in diseases of the eyes and ears. He published two books by age twenty-eight and was named medical advisor to the Irish Census of 1841. This was ground-breaking for the time, and William was knighted for his diligent work. Sir William also did good works for the city. In 1844, he founded and financed St. Mark's Ophthalmic Hospital. Before his marriage, Sir William fathered three illegitimate children, all for whom he cared financially. They were raised by his brother.

Oscar had a brother William born in 1852 and a sister Isola Emily Francesca born in 1857. Tragically, his sister died of fever at age ten. Oscar was profoundly affected by his sister's death and for the rest of his life, kept a lock of her hair.

Oscar excelled in academic life. He attended Trinity College, Dublin, where he majored in classical studies. He then went to Oxford on an academic scholarship. At Oxford, Wilde continued to be a celebrated scholar, winning the Newdigate prize for his poem *Ravenna* and "First In Greats."

Upon graduation, Wilde moved to London and published (in 1881) his first collection of poetry, *Poems*. This first volume was satirized in a Gilbert and Sullivan comic opera, *Patience*. During this time Wilde also established himself as an advocate of the philosophical movement aestheticism, "art for art's sake." Wilde was known as a flamboyant character-usually seen wearing velvet knee britches and a green carnation in his button hole.

In 1882 he was propelled by an accumulation debt to embark on a one hundred and forty lecture tour in the United States, during which he met Henry Longfellow,

Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Walt Whitman. He returned from America and lived in Paris for a short while before continuing his lecture tour in Britain and Ireland.

In May of 1884, Wilde married Constance Lloyd, a rich, intelligent, Irishwoman. She was well-educated and somewhat shy. They had two sons: Cyril in 1885 and Vyvyan in 1886. Wilde took a job editing *Woman's World* magazine. He stayed at this position for only two years (1887-1889), until he left and focused his efforts whole-heartedly on his own work. Wilde published *The Happy Prince And Other Tales* in 1888 and *The House Of Pomegranates* in 1892, which were based on Irish folklore. In 1890 Wilde met success with his play *Dorian Gray*, which he was later able to convert into a masterpiece novel. His accomplishments continued with plays: *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *Salome* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895).

In sharp contrast to his public achievements, were his private tragedies. In 1891, Wilde met Lord Alfred Douglas, "Bosie." Bosie was an aspiring poet and undergraduate student at Oxford. Wilde and Bosie began a homosexual relationship, which was not well hidden. In 1895 Bosie's father, the marquis of Queensbury, accused Wilde of being a homosexual. Infuriated, Wilde had Queensberry arrested and charged with criminal libel. It was a huge mistake.

In the marquis's defense, his lawyer presented vast evidence of Wilde's homosexuality in court. Homosexuality was a crime in Victorian England; thus, Wilde was arrested and sentenced to two years of hard labor for this crime.

Wilde called his homosexuality his "pathology," his sickness. Wilde's wife, Constance described Wilde as "My poor misguided husband, who is weak rather than wicked . . ." and it's an apt description. Wilde had nearly converted to Catholicism as a nineteen-year old, and then in his early twenties. He even met with Pope Pius IX in 1877. But his father disapproved of any form of Christianity, and Wilde would have been disinherited if he had converted. So he didn't risk becoming Catholic. Years later he told a reporter that if his father hadn't kept him from becoming Catholic, he would have entered the Church earlier and spared himself his descent into homosexuality.

Wilde left prison a dejected man. He moved from England, where his wife had divorced him and he was bankrupted, to France. He produced two more works: *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) and *De Profundis* (1905), which were much more somber than his earlier pieces.

He later gained an inner peace, but could never deal with being very poor and being in exile. He had learned a very hard lesson. As he wrote in his 1898 poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, "How else but through a broken heart may Lord Christ enter in?"

Wilde's story has a happy ending. He was received into the Church on his deathbed. On November 30, 1900 Oscar Wilde died of meningitis in a Paris hotel room.

Oscar Wilde "died a pariah" and "was scorned by the world." But today he is "the adored and idolized icon of a growing cult." All the things he was detested for in Victorian society—homosexuality, debauchery, and hedonism—have become the things that he is idolized for in our day. He has become a "gay icon."

This is unfair because Wilde had a lifelong love affair with the Catholic Church. His art is overtly moral and the morality is overtly Catholic in nature. Throughout his life he experienced much guilt about his homosexuality; he always felt that was his bad side. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he shows that when you kill your conscience, you kill your soul. "Wilde was such a religious man that when he enters the Church on his deathbed, it really is the logical end and culmination of his life." (Pearce, 2004)

Sources:

- "Oscar Wilde's Biography"  
<http://cmgww.com/historic/wilde/index.html>
- Pearce, Joseph. *The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde* "Oscar Wilde". Ignatius Press, 2004.
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# THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

## Literary Elements

### Title

*The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy For Serious People*

### Setting

The play is set in England in the 1890s. Act I is in London and Acts II & III take place in the country (Hertfordshire).

### Genre

Social Comedy; farce.

### Protagonist

Jack Worthing, the main character. He is known as "Ernest" by his acquaintances in London.

### Antagonist

Lady Bracknell (Gwendolen's mother).

### Mood

Satirical; comical; light.

### Point of View / Tense

First person; present tense

### Exposition:

The exposition of the play, Act I, introduces the main character, John Worthing - "Ernest" - and presents the major conflict: he wants to marry aristocratic Gwendolen but her mother does not approve. Furthermore, Gwendolen loves him because of his name.

### Rising Action

In Act II Algernon complicates the conflict because he arrives at Jack's country house and calls himself "Ernest."

### Climax

The climactic moment is when Cecily and Gwendolen confront the men about what they have discovered - the men cannot both be Ernest Worthing. The men confess and the women retreat.

### Themes

Satire of the upper classes; Triviality of Marriage; Victorian Manners; Importance of Wealth & Life of Leisure

### Mood

The mood of the Importance of Being Earnest is largely satirical. This is because Wilde is seeking to mock the triviality of the upper class society of London. Wilde's satire is characterized by wit and is, throughout, lighthearted. He often portrays lines that characters deliver as quite normal e.g., when Gwendolen tells Ernest that she loves him because of his name. This, however, is quite ridiculous-making Gwendolen appear so by association. Wilde is also writing from an aesthetic perspective. This movement in literature saw that art be celebrated for art's sake, and not concern itself with the political issues of the outside world. Therefore, much of what Wilde writes is, simply, humorous.

# THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

## Quotations

### **1. Algernon: "I don't play accurately-anyone can play accurately-but I play with wonderful expression." Act I**

One can take this as an example of Wilde's support of the Aesthetic movement, which valued art for art's sake. This philosophy did not require art to instruct or handle political issues. Unconcerned with the accuracy of his music, and in appreciation of its artistic value, Algernon can, here, be viewed as an aesthete.

### **2. Algernon: "Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them?" Act I**

Algernon says this after he and his servant, Lane, have a discussion about marriage during which Lane seems relaxed about the subject. Algernon questions what is the use of the lower classes if they are not setting a good example for the upper classes. He states that the lower classes have no sense of moral responsibility.

This quote is intended to be humorous. Algernon is being serious, but Wilde is commenting on the absurdity of the upper class and their lack of moral responsibility. It is ironic because in the 19th century England, the upper class was supposed to be the respectable class, setting an example for everyone else.

### **3. Algernon: "My dear fellow, the way you flirt with Gwendolen is perfectly disgraceful. It is almost as bad as the way Gwendolen flirts with you." Act I**

This is another unintentionally humorous quote on the behalf of Algernon. Its tone mocks the stuffiness and hypocrisy of dating among the upper classes.

### **4. Miss Prism: "No married man is ever attractive, except to his wife." Act II**

This is an example of the Marriage theme.

### **5. Algernon: "What a fearful liar you are, Jack. I have not been called back to town" Act II**

This is an example of an ironic statement. Algernon calls Jack a liar; yet, he has come to Jack's county house under an assumed identity.

### **6. Cecily says to Algernon: "It is always painful to part from people whom one has known for a very brief space of time. The absence of old friends, one can endure with equanimity." Act II**

This is another example of the epigrams used throughout the entire play, which render it hilarious.

### **7. Cecily says to Algernon: "Well, I know, of course, how important it is not to keep a business engagement." Act II.**

This is humorous, because to Victorians-as well as to ourselves-it is important to keep business engagements. Yet, this statement is not amusing to the characters in the play.

### **8. Gwendolen: "Something tells me that we are going to be great friends. I like you already more than I can say." Act II**

This is an example of Victorian Manners. Gwendolen says this to Cecily within moments of meeting her. This statement becomes even more humorous when examine in light of the disagreement they have only a short while later.

### **9. Lady Bracknell to Algernon, regarding his pending christening: "Lord Bracknell would be highly displeased if he learned that that was the way in which you wasted your time and money." Act III**

This is an example of Lady Bracknell's characterization: she is primarily concerned with money. This is an excellent example of the wealthy's appreciation of money over morality.

### **10. Jack: "I've finally realized for the first time in my life, the vital Importance of Being Earnest," Act III**

This is an excellent closing line for the play because it encompasses all of the irony with which this plot is laden.