



OSCAR WILDE (1854-1900)



W. & D. Downey. *Mr. Oscar Wilde*. 1889. Photograph. The Clark Library, UCLA, Los Angeles.

Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin on 16 October 1854 to one of Ireland’s most distinguished professional, nationalist families of Protestant descent. His father was William Robert Wills Wilde (1815-1876), an eminent eye doctor, travel writer, and amateur ethnographer. He became Surgeon-Oculist-in-Ordinary to Queen Victoria in 1863 and was knighted a year later. Wilde’s mother, best known by the pseudonym “Speranza” (‘Hope’) (1821-1896), came to prominence in the late 1840s, when her inflammatory political poetry and letters, published in the *Nation*, affiliated her with the Young Ireland movement.

At Trinity College Dublin, Wilde studied Classics with John Pentland Mahaffy (1839-1919), whose *Social Life in Greece from Homer to Menander* (1874) took a surprisingly liberal view of homosexuality in ancient Greece. Wilde won a Demyship in Classics to Magdalen College, Oxford, where he excelled in Literæ Humaniores (“Greats”), graduating with a Double First in 1878. At Magdalen, he made several important contacts, including Lord

Ronald Sutherland-Gower (1845-1916), who most probably introduced Wilde to the homosexual subcultures of Oxford and London. During this period, Wilde's interests were oriented toward Roman Catholicism, particularly through his friend, David Hunter-Blair (1853-1939), a recent convert to Rome. In 1877, he travelled with Mahaffy to Greece. On his return through Italy, Wilde was granted an audience with Pope Pius IX at the Vatican.

At Oxford Wilde became deeply acquainted with the writings by John Ruskin (1819-1900), who served as Slade Professor of Art at the university from 1869 to 1879, as well as Walter Pater's (1839-1894) *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) and John Addington Symonds's (1840-1893) *Studies of the Greek Poets* (2 vols. 1873, 1876) and *Renaissance in Italy* (7 vols. 1875-1886). Wilde's earliest poetry registered his interest in English poets, such as Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909), who were responsible for mediating Théophile Gautier's radical ideas about "art for art's sake" and the anti-moralistic nature of aesthetics.

Several of Wilde's poems from the 1870s contain phrasal echoes of Swinburne's polemical *Poems and Ballads* (1866). Furthermore, *Poems* (1870) by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), which became embroiled in a heated critical debate about its "fleshly" nature, also supplied Wilde with poetic models to emulate. These Pre-Raphaelite influences were recognized in Wilde's first volume, *Poems* (1881, revised 1882), which was denounced in *Punch* as "Swinburne and water!" Nevertheless, commentators were impressed by the volume's elaborate gilt-stamped binding. The title page, which Wilde designed, reflects his conflicted allegiances, featuring an emblem that juxtaposes a papal tiara with a pagan rose, linked with Freemasonry. The design also marks the beginning of Wilde's interest in making his books into beautiful objects in their own right.

In 1877, while still an Oxford undergraduate, Wilde made his debut as a self-styled "Professor of Aesthetics" at the opening of the avant-garde Grosvenor Gallery (1877-1890), where he appeared in a coat cut in the shape of a cello. In London society, where he donned outré attire, featuring ostentatious sunflowers and lilies as buttonholes, he courted the attention of actresses such as Sarah Bernhardt (c.1844-1923), Lillie Langtry

(1853-1929), and Ellen Terry (1847-1928). He became a staple figure in Edmund Yates's recently established society magazine, *The World: A Journal for Men and Women* (1874-1920).

Although he graduated with highest honours, Wilde was unsuccessful in his attempt to gain a professional position as either an Oxford don or an archeologist. At the end of 1878, Wilde moved to London, where he soon resided at the home of the wealthy homosexual painter, Frank Miles (1852-1891), on Tite Street, Chelsea. The friendship with Miles was broken off after Miles's father, an Anglican rector, expressed his deep offense at the more sensual works in *Poems*.

By 1881, the press was filled with satires of not only Wilde's poetry but also his personage. Wilde's flamboyant image partly influenced the creation of the protagonist, Bunthorne, in the comic opera, *Patience* (1881) by Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900) and W.S. Gilbert (1836-1911). Gilbert and Sullivan's manager, Richard D'Oyly Carte (1844-1901), hired Wilde to undertake a year-long lecture tour of the United States and Canada in order to draw attention to the American production of *Patience*.

In August 1883, the American production of his first play, *Vera*, which Wilde saw in New York, lasted just one week. Earlier in that year, the American actress Mary Anderson (1859-1940) turned down the final version of his drama, *The Duchess of Padua*. Faced with these failures, Wilde depended mainly for his living in Britain on giving lectures about artistic topics and his American travels. In 1883, Wilde married Constance Lloyd (1858-1898), with whom he had two sons, Cyril (1885-1915) and Vyvyan (1886-1967). The interior of their home on Tite Street, not far from Miles's residence, was decorated by architectural innovator, E.W. Godwin (1833-1886).

In 1885, Wilde became a regular contributor to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and until the late 1880s he produced a large body of journalism, which appeared in several periodicals, including the *Dramatic Review*. Wilde expanded his skills as an astute editor, transforming the mainly conservative *Lady's World* into the largely feminist *Woman's World*, in which his "Literary Notes" reveal his deep acquaintance with modern writing. Before he left his editorship in 1889, Wilde published the first of his two volumes of fairy tales, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, in a finely printed edition issued by David

Nutt. The second, *A House of Pomegranates*, with ambitious designs by two young artists—the partners Charles Ricketts (1866-1931) and Charles Haslewood Shannon (1863-1937)—appeared in 1891.

By the close of the 1880s Wilde started to make his mark as a serious writer. His witty novella, “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.,” published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, takes clever aim at earlier critical accounts of the identity of the beautiful young man in the love triangle dramatized in Shakespeare’s sonnets. At the same time, the first of his major critical essays in dialogue form, “The Decay of Lying,” which engages carefully with the influential work of Walter Pater and Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), appeared in the prestigious periodical, the *Nineteenth Century* (1877-1972).

The early 1890s witnessed Wilde’s extraordinary literary productivity, when his fame—if not a fair measure of notoriety—was on the rise. In late June 1890, one of the respected transatlantic monthlies, *Lippincott’s*, published *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890; revised 1891). Although most reviewers found little that was objectionable in the story, several vocal critics in London were quick to condemn what they deemed to be its indefensible homoerotic content. (No such objections had been raised against the equally evident interest in male same-sex love found in “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.”) W.H. Smith, a major vendor of *Lippincott’s*, quickly removed the offending issue from its shelves. Wilde remained, however, convinced about the value of his story. In 1891 he issued a considerably lengthened version of his novel, which contained a polemical “Preface” that attacked his hostile critics’ belief that literary art should be governed by morality. Wilde also published a fine collection of short fictions, *Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime and Other Stories* (1891), designed once again by Ricketts.

Wilde’s first society comedy, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, enjoyed immense success when it opened at the fashionable St. James’s Theatre, under the direction of actor-manager George Alexander (1858-1918), on February 1892. Soon afterward, Wilde finished work on his French-language tragedy, *Salomé*, which drew on works by Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) and Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898). Wilde’s ambition to see this tragedy performed at the Palace Theatre, London, with Bernhardt in the leading role, was thwarted when the Examiner of Plays censored it on the grounds that the work was

“half-biblical, half-pornographic.” A French edition, which included a design by Belgian artist, Félicien Rops (1833-1898), whose illustrations to Baudelaire’s poetry had previously been banned in France, appeared in Paris in 1893.

It was in June 1891 that Wilde most probably met Lord Alfred Douglas (1870-1945), an attractive young aristocrat and poet studying at Oxford, with whom he developed an intimate but often volatile relationship. Douglas’ involvement with two Oxford literary magazines, *The Chameleon* and *The Spirit Lamp*, provided Wilde with opportunities to participate in an increasingly visible homosexual literary culture. That summer, Wilde’s next successful society comedy, *A Woman of No Importance*, opened, at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, under the direction of Herbert Beerbohm Tree (1852-1917).

In 1894, the decision by his publishers, Elkin Mathews and John Lane, to hire the brilliant young Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898) to illustrate the English-language volume of *Salome* (without the accent) made Wilde look, quite literally, a fool. Beardsley depicted Wilde in several unflattering poses, including the jester’s cap-and-bells. When Beardsley became art editor of *The Yellow Book*, he stressed that Wilde should be excluded from participation in this periodical. Conflict with Mathews and Lane arose in September 1894, when they refused to proceed with the publication of the revised and expanded version of “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” Mathews’ misgivings about Wilde’s intimacy with the firm’s young clerk, Edward Shelley (1874-1951), most probably accounted for their strained relations with the author. The full text of the “Portrait” did not appear until 1921. *A Woman of No Importance* (October 1893) and the long poem, *The Sphinx* (June 1894), which was designed and illustrated by Ricketts, were the last volumes of Wilde’s that Mathews and Lane issued.

1895 proved to be the year of Wilde’s glory and shame. On 1 January, *An Ideal Husband* opened at the Haymarket to an audience that included the Prince of Wales. Six weeks later, *The Importance of Being Earnest* enjoyed a successful premiere at the St. James’s Theatre. In February, while living with Douglas at the Avondale Hotel, Wilde received at one of his clubs an insulting visiting-card from Douglas’s bullying father, the 9th Marquess of Queensberry (1844-1900). The offending document read (in an infamous

spelling): “To Oscar Wilde, posing as Somdomite.” Incensed, Wilde embarked, at Douglas’s urging, on a hazardous libel suit against the Marquess.

At the libel trial, which began on 3 April 1895, lawyer Edward Carson (1854-1935) sought to discover whether Wilde was “sodomitical” on the basis of the first edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as well as other inculpatory works. Moreover, Carson startled Wilde by producing evidence that insinuated that the author was sexually involved with several young men, including the brothel-keeper, Alfred Taylor (b.1862). As a result, Wilde’s barrister asked the court’s permission to withdraw the prosecution, and Justice Collins accordingly upheld Queensberry’s plea of justification. The substantial costs of the trial led to Wilde’s bankruptcy.

Very quickly, Wilde’s wife and sons deserted their home. Sometime before Wilde’s household effects were sold off on 24 April 1895, Robert Ross (1869-1918) ensured that Wilde’s papers were put in safekeeping. Although Wilde’s closest friends urged him to flee the country, he was arrested at the Cadogan Hotel in the evening after he left the court. The following day Wilde was charged jointly with Taylor for committing acts of “gross indecency” with other men. The second trial ended with the jury unable to agree on the judge’s questions, and a further trial was ordered. Although supporters put up bail, Wilde found that no hotel would accept him. He was finally taken in by his friend Ada Leverson (1862-1933), whose husband had assisted Wilde with legal fees. On 25 May 1895, Wilde, together with Taylor, was sent down for two years in solitary confinement with hard labour. His spouse and children fled to Europe and changed their family name to Holland. Wilde never saw his sons again.

In his final months of imprisonment at Reading, Wilde finished the work that he called “*Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis*” (“Letter: In Prison and in Chains”), which ostensibly takes the form of a 55,000-word letter to Douglas. This document opens with many recriminatory remarks on Wilde’s intimacy with his lover. Later sections of this work focus on the meaning of suffering, particularly in relation to Arnold’s and Spinoza’s understandings of the meaning of “sorrow.” Wilde entrusted the manuscript of his “*Epistola*” to Ross, whom he also appointed as his literary executor. In 1905, when he was trying to put Wilde’s debt-ridden estate in order, Ross published a heavily edited

version of “Epistola” under the title, *De Profundis* (‘Out of the Depths’), which comes from Psalm 130. This edition, which omits any reference to Douglas, was by and large read as a work of atonement and became an immediate success.

In the months immediately after leaving jail, Wilde finished the first draft of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898). This poem, which parodies the jingoistic use of the ballad form by Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) and W.E. Henley (1849-1903), was accepted by Leonard Smithers (1861-1907), a not entirely reputable publisher who had established his business with a list of pornographic titles. Smithers also brought out the first editions of *An Ideal Husband* (1899) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1899). Like the *Ballad*, these editions did not appear under Wilde’s name. The *Ballad* came out as the work of “C.3.3.” (the number of Wilde’s cell at Reading). Critics, however, immediately knew that the poem was Wilde’s, and when the volume had passed into seven editions, “Oscar Wilde” appeared at last on the title page.

After the *Ballad*, however, Wilde found it difficult to advance his literary career. He tried but failed to complete *A Florentine Tragedy*, which he began in 1895. Pressed for funds, he sold the scenario for a new play to several producers and actors, as well as his onetime editor Frank Harris (1856-1931), who sorted out the rights and developed the manuscript into a full-length drama, *Mr. and Mrs. Daventry*, which was well-received when it opened at the Royalty Theatre, London, in October 1900. At this juncture, Wilde’s health had gone into serious decline. He spent much of his final weeks in a shabby room at the Hôtel d’Alsace in the Latin Quarter of Paris. As his health deteriorated, Wilde’s most loyal friends—Robert Ross and Reginald Turner (1869-1938)—took turns caring for him. Ross, himself a Catholic, arranged for a priest to officiate at Wilde’s deathbed conversion to Rome. Wilde died, at the age of 46, on 30 November 1900. A modest funeral, attended by close associates including Douglas, took place at the suburban cemetery at Bagneaux.

Most scholars agree Wilde died of a secondary infection through meningitis, although Ross, Harris, and Richard Ellmann (1918-1987) have suggested that the cause was some form of syphilis. In 1912 at Père Lachaise Cemetery, Paris, a monument to Wilde --

designed by Jacob Epstein (1880-1959) and featuring a flying sphinx with exposed testicles -- was unveiled, and then promptly covered over by the authorities, in 1912.

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Joseph Bristow is Professor of English at the University of California, Los Angeles. His publications on the career of Oscar Wilde include the variorum edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (2005), and three collections of essays: *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions* (2003), *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend* (2008), and *The Wilde Archive: Traditions, Histories, Resources* (2011).

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