



OSCAR WILDE (1854 - 1900)

HIS LIFE AND WORKS

OSCAR WILDE (1854 -1900)

- **Oscar Wilde** (16 October 1854 – 30 November 1900) was an Irish author, playwright and poet.
- He became one of London's most popular playwrights in the early 1890s. Today he is remembered for his epigrams, his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his plays, as well as the circumstances of his infamous imprisonment for being gay and early death.



WILDE'S BACKGROUND

- Wilde's parents were successful Anglo-Irish Dublin intellectuals. Their son became fluent in French and German early in life. He attended universities in Dublin and Oxford. After university, Wilde moved to London into fashionable cultural and social circles. Known for his biting wit, flamboyant dress and glittering conversation, Wilde became one of the best-known personalities of his day.



WILDE'S PARENTS

- Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born on October 16, 1854 in Dublin, Ireland. **His father, William Wilde, was an acclaimed doctor** who was later knighted for his work.
- Oscar **Wilde's mother**, Jane Francesca Elgee, **was a poet.**



WILDE'S CHILDHOOD AND SCHOOLING

- Wilde was a bright and bookish child. In school he fell in love with Greek and Roman studies. He won the school's prize for the top classics student in each of his last two years, as well as second prize in drawing during his final year. Upon graduating in 1871, Wilde was awarded the Royal School Scholarship to attend Trinity College in Dublin.



HIS COLLEGE YEARS

- Upon his graduation in 1874, Wilde was the best student in Greek. At Oxford, Wilde continued to excel academically, receiving first class marks from his examiners in both classics and classical moderations. It was also at Oxford that Wilde made his first sustained attempts at creative writing.
- Upon graduating from Oxford, Wilde moved to London to live with his friend, Frank Miles. There, he continued to focus on writing poetry, publishing his first collection, *Poems*, in 1881.



AMERICAN TOUR

- The next year, in 1882, Wilde travelled from London to New York City to embark on an American lecture tour.
- Upon the conclusion of his American tour, Wilde returned home and immediately commenced another lecture circuit of England and Ireland that lasted until the middle of 1884. Through his lectures, as well as his early poetry, Wilde established himself as a leading proponent of the aesthetic movement, a theory of art and literature that emphasized the pursuit of beauty for its own sake, rather than to promote any political or social viewpoint.



MARRIAGE & CHILDREN

- On May 29, 1884, Wilde married a wealthy Englishwoman named Constance Lloyd. They had two sons: Cyril, born in 1885, and Vyvyan, born in 1886.



HIS SUCCESSFUL YEARS

- Beginning in 1888, while he was still serving as the editor of the magazine *Lady's World*, (which he help made successful again) Wilde entered a seven-year period of furious creativity, during which he produced nearly all of his great literary works. In 1888, seven years after he wrote *Poems*, Wilde published ***The Happy Prince and Other Tales***, a collection of children's stories. In 1891, he published *Intentions*, an essay collection arguing the tenets of aestheticism, and that same year, he published his first and only novel, ***The Picture of Dorian Gray***. The novel is a cautionary tale about a beautiful young man, Dorian Gray, who wishes (and receives his wish) that his portrait ages while he remains youthful and lives a life of sin and pleasure.



HIS ACCLAIMED WORKS

THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

- Though the novel is now revered as a great and classic work, at the time critics were outraged by the book's apparent lack of morality. Wilde vehemently defended himself in a preface to the novel, considered one of the great testaments to aestheticism, in which he wrote, "an ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style" and "vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art."



HIS ACCLAIMED PLAYS

- Wilde's first play, ***Lady Windermere's Fan***, opened in February 1892 to widespread popularity and critical acclaim, encouraging Wilde to adopt playwriting as his primary literary form. Over the next few years, Wilde produced several great plays—witty, highly satirical comedies of manners that nevertheless contained dark and serious undertones. His most notable plays were ***A Woman of No Importance* (1893)**, ***An Ideal Husband* (1895)** and ***The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)**, his most famous play.



PERSONAL LIFE AND PRISON SENTENCE

- Around the same time that he was enjoying his greatest literary success, Wilde commenced an affair with a young man named Lord Alfred Douglas. On February 18, 1895, Douglas's father, the Marquis of Queensberry, who had learnt of the affair, left a calling card at Wilde's home addressed to "Oscar Wilde: Posing Somdomite," a misspelling of sodomite. Although Wilde's homosexuality was something of an open secret, he was so outraged by Queensberry's note that he sued him for libel. The decision ruined his life.



THE TRIAL

- When the trial began in March, Queensberry and his lawyers presented evidence of Wilde's homosexuality—homoerotic passages from his literary works, as well as his love letters to Douglas—that quickly resulted in the dismissal of Wilde's libel case and his arrest on charges of "gross indecency." Wilde was convicted on May 25, 1895 and sentenced to two years in prison.



THE IMPRISONMENT

- Wilde emerged from prison in 1897, physically depleted, emotionally exhausted and flat broke. He went into exile in France, where, living in cheap hotels and friends' apartments, he briefly reunited with Douglas. Wilde wrote very little during these last years; his only notable work was a poem he completed in 1898 about his experiences in prison, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol."



DEATH AND HIS LEGACY

- Wilde died of meningitis on November 30, 1900 at the age of 46.
- More than a century after his death, Wilde is still better remembered for his personal life—his exuberant personality, consummate wit and infamous imprisonment for homosexuality—than for his literary accomplishments. Nevertheless, his witty, imaginative and undeniably beautiful works, in particular his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and his play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, are considered among the great literary masterpieces of the late Victorian period.



AN IDEAL HUSBAND (1894)

- Oscar Wilde started drafting ***An Ideal Husband*** in 1893, pretty distracted by his lover Lord Alfred Douglas. That romance and the scandal surrounding it landed Wilde in jail two years later – the same year his plays ***An Ideal Husband*** and ***The Importance of Being Earnest*** opened in London. It is very probable that the complexity of Wilde's own relationships (he was also married with two children) affected the play's philosophies. Could he have been writing about himself and his family, or about himself and Lord Alfred?

In ***An Ideal Husband***, Sir Robert Chiltern is faced with public ruin – and the abandonment of his idealistic wife, Lady Chiltern – when a secret from the past emerges. Lady Chiltern goes to her friend Lord Goring for advice. Goring is a dandy – an upper-class man concerned with being fashionable – and stylish wit. He also happens to be a fictional dead-ringer for Wilde, complete with the cape and cane.



COMPARISON TO REAL LIFE

- *An Ideal Husband* is most definitely a comedy. It's funny, it's silly, and everyone's overdressed. Remove the ruffles and bows, though, and the play is pretty darn serious. It's about how to live with other people. How do we, with our very different personalities and expectations, understand each other? How do we keep from judging others? Should we keep from judging others, or do our judgments give us important information about how we want to conduct our own lives?

These questions are always present in our lives – in how we deal with our friends, how we handle our parents, even in how we vote and decide political issues.



THEMES OF THE PLAY

- **THEME OF MARRIAGE**
- **THEME OF COMPASSION AND FORGIVENESS**
- **THEME OF POLITICS**
- **THEME OF RESPECT AND REPUTATION**
- **THEME OF MORALITY AND ETHICS**
- **THEME OF POWER**



THEME OF MARRIAGE

- Marriage was a popular topic for plays in Oscar Wilde's time. It's still popular in ours. In *An Ideal Husband*, marriage seems to be a generally desirable institution. Only the villain stays single.
- The marriage of Lord Goring and Mabel at the end of *An Ideal Husband* is a contrivance put in to please the audience



THEME OF COMPASSION AND REPUTATION

- In *An Ideal Husband*, compassion and forgiveness are the holy grail of marriage, and the only way marriage can possibly work. In this play, both the men and the women are forever messing up and inadvertently hurting each other. That seems to be inevitable when it comes romantic relationship. What is preventable is the stalemate that happens in the middle of the play, when each side denies the other any communication. According to Lord Goring, husbands and wives need to step back, let go of anger, try to step into the shoes of their spouses, and forgive. And Lord Goring gets the other characters to do just that.



THEME OF POLITICS

- Politics serve a number of purposes in *An Ideal Husband*. They start the show with a party, lend weight to the protagonist's crisis, and give occasion for many, many witticisms. The public nature of work in politics gives the protagonist higher stakes. To paraphrase the villainess: scandals don't just hurt a politician, they crush him. Pitted against the equally high-stakes game of love, politics lend an exciting background to this comedy.



THEME OF RESPECT AND REPUTATION

- Respect and reputation are extremely important in the polite Victorian society of *An Ideal Husband*. The respect of your peers gets you an invitation to dinner and a potential opening for what it is you *really* want: a promotion, a husband, more invitations to dinner, etc.



THEME OF MORALITY AND ETHICS

- In *An Ideal Husband*, morality and ethics are inextricably bound to respect and reputation. As most characters shrewdly scale the social skyscraper, ethical behavior is valuable in gaining credibility with others – not necessarily valuable in itself. Good deeds are rewarded with respect and power; bad deeds get you kicked off the island. Those with no part in the rat race are a little freer to define their own ethical code. They may even play with social expectations, doing good while acting badly in order to ease the strictures.



THEME OF POWER

- Characters in *An Ideal Husband* have two kinds of power. In a play with a political setting, the first is naturally public power, the ability to make decisions on a grand scale. Speeches made, votes taken, meetings and reports – at this level of government, one man can affect thousands of people. But this one man is at the mercy of the second kind of power, one individual's control over another person. And it's not just the villain he has to fear. All of the characters in this play try controlling each other, whether as blackmailers, tastemakers, armchair judges, or spouses. Even the "good" characters work hard to get what they want.

