

## BACKGROUND

## OSCAR WILDE'S LIFE AND WORKS

The events of Oscar Wilde's life are relatively well-known. His is a story that has been popular with biographers because it has the shape of a Greek tragedy: a rapid rise to fame, followed by swift and sudden disgrace and ruin. This narrative shape makes a good tale. Whilst only one of his works (his prison letter *De Profundis*, 1905) is directly autobiographical and there is seldom any simple connection between his life and his writing, responses to Oscar Wilde's works have been directly related to responses to the story of his life. Oscar Wilde himself said to the French novelist André Gide: 'Do you want to know the great drama of my life? It's that I have put my genius into my life; all I've put into my works is my talent.' With the exception of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and occasionally of Oscar Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), critics have tended to agree with that judgement. Oscar Wilde was a deliberate self-publicist. He saw his personality as an intrinsic part of his work, and posterity has colluded with Oscar Wilde's own judgement. So whilst no writer's life directly 'explains' his/her work, in the case of Oscar Wilde, some sense of his biographical context is indispensable to the student of his writings.

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (he quipped that this was not so much a name as a sentence) was born in Dublin in 1854 to an upper-middle-class Protestant family. He was the second son of Sir William Wilde, an eminent eye surgeon, and of Jane Wilde, usually known as Francesca, who wrote Irish Nationalist poetry under the name of Speranza (Italian for hope).

The Wilde family were at the centre of Dublin's intellectual life in the 1850s and 1860s, with Lady Wilde hosting regular soirées for poets, writers and politicians. Both of Oscar Wilde's parents were interested in Irish politics, and both were involved in recovering native Irish culture, in particular the folk-tales and fairy stories of the Irish peasantry. They were comfortably off, but they also provided their children (Oscar and his elder brother Willie) with a rich cultural background.

Oscar was educated first at the Portora Royal School in Enniskillen, and then at Trinity College, Dublin, where he achieved a first in Classics. Following this academic triumph, he was awarded a scholarship to Magdalen College, Oxford, to study Literae Humaniores (Greek and Roman philosophy and literature, also sometimes known as the 'Greats' syllabus), which he took up in 1874. From then on, he spent the majority of his life in England, and he regarded coming to England as one of the turning points of his life.

At Oxford, Oscar Wilde proved again to be a brilliant scholar, though he was also often in trouble with the college authorities for small acts of disobedience. Nonetheless, he achieved a double first in his degree course, and when he left Oxford in 1878, he had also won the Newdigate prize for poetry for his poem 'Ravenna'. He hoped that all the world would soon be at his feet, though it actually took him a considerable time to become established as a writer and critic.

From Oxford he went to London, where he lived off the rents of some of the Irish property that his father had left him (Sir William had died in 1876); and he set about becoming famous in the capital. In 1881, he published his first volume of *Poems*, works which are not much read today, and which were not especially well received at the time; reviewers felt that they were derivative. All the same, *Poems* had one important effect. They brought to Oscar Wilde an invitation to go on a lecture tour to the United States in 1882, which he did, declaring to American customs officers on his arrival that he had nothing to declare but his genius. The lecture-tour came about at the instigation of the opera impresario, Richard D'Oyly Carte, who promoted the works of Gilbert and Sullivan. In 1881, Gilbert and Sullivan had produced a satiric operetta entitled *Patience; or, Bunthorne's Bride*, which mocked the pretensions of the **Aesthetic Movement** in England. The aesthetes, under the influence of the Pre-Raphaelite poets and painters, of the critic Walter Pater, and of the Arts and Crafts Movement of William Morris, professed that art and beauty were the most important values in a society. D'Oyly Carte was worried that Americans would not understand the **satire** in *Patience* because they had no aesthetic movement of their own. He therefore commissioned Oscar Wilde to lecture on 'The English Aesthetic Movement', 'The House Beautiful' and 'Aesthetic Dress' as



CHECK THE NET

A short version of Wilde's biography, along with a chronology of the major events of his life and the dates of his writings can be found on the Victorian Web site. Go to <http://www.victorianweb.org> to access this information.



CHECK THE BOOK

Wilde's best – and most comprehensive – biographer is Richard Ellmann in *Oscar Wilde* (1987). Many other versions of his life exist, some of which are marred by inconsistency and inaccuracy. Those interested in psycho-biographical approaches to his life could consider Melissa Knox's *Oscar Wilde: A Long and Lovely Suicide* as a supplement to Ellmann's magisterial tome.

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**World events**

**1845** Famine in Ireland

**1848** Revolutions in Paris; armed rebellion in Ireland fails

**1849** Bedford College for Women founded in London

**1851** Great Exhibition held at Crystal Palace

**1857** Indian Mutiny

**1861** Beginning of American Civil War

**1867** Second Reform Bill; Fenian rising in Ireland

**1868** Gladstone becomes Liberal Prime Minister

**Oscar Wilde's life**

**1854** Born in Dublin

**Literary events**

**1847** Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*; Anne Brontë, *Agnes Grey*; Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*; William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*

**1848** Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*

**1854** Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*

**1857** Anthony Trollope, *Barchester Towers*

**1860** George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*

**1861** Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

**1863** John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*

**1865** Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*

**1866** Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads*

**World events**

**1870** Gladstone passes First Irish Land Act; First Married Women's Property Act

**1871** Paris Commune suppressed; in Britain Trade Union Act gives unions legal status

**1874** Disraeli becomes Conservative Prime Minister

**1880** Gladstone becomes Prime Minister again; civil disturbances in Ireland

**1881** Gladstone passes Second Irish Land Act

**1882** Second Married Women's Property Act

**1883** Irish terrorist bombings in London

**Oscar Wilde's life**

**1874** Moves to Oxford

**1876** His father, Sir William Wilde, dies

**1878** Leaves Oxford having won Newdigate Prize for Poetry

**1881** *Poems* is published

**1882** Goes on lecture tour of USA; *Vera or the Nihilists*

**Literary events**

**1871** John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*

**1873** Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*

**1874** First Impressionist Exhibition in Paris; Thomas Hardy, *Far From the Madding Crowd*

**1875** Anthony Trollope, *The Way We Live Now*

**1878** William Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, *HMS Pinafore*

**1879** Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*

**1881** William Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, *Patience*; Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts*; Arthur Wing Pinero, *The Money Spinner*