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 collided 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
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