



**A Woman of No
Importance**

**And the Life of
Oscar Wilde**



Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was an extraordinary character, a coveted party guest whose witty, urbane, irreverent, wise, generous, and kind presence was sought by many.

Irish poet W.B. Yeats said, “the dinner table was Wilde’s event and made him the greatest talker of his time, and his plays and dialogues have what merit they possess from being an initiation, now a record, of his talk.”

BIOGRAPHY

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854 to notable parents. His father, Robert Wills Wilde, was a well-established surgeon (and womanizer) and his mother, Jane Francesca Elgee, wrote poetry under the name "Speranza."

In this learned, if somewhat eccentric environment, Wilde was exposed to culture, drama and *aesthetics*.

Aesthetics = The study of beauty and art.



An accomplished student, Wilde attended some of Dublin's finest educational institutions—the Protestant public school Portora Royal (1864) and Trinity College, to which he won a scholarship in 1871. He later attended Magdalen College, Oxford.

Oscar Wilde at Oxford



Under the tutelage of such eminent fine arts scholars as John Ruskin and Walter Pater, Wilde developed his particular sense of aestheticism. He affected a languishing air, wore eccentric clothes, grew his hair long, and often carried lilies or sunflowers.

How do you think Wilde was received by the public?

What modern-day celebrities have adopted a similar aesthetic?



EARLY CAREER

“It’s extraordinary how soon one gets known in London”

- ✦ Oscar Wilde’s first published works, the play *Vera; or, The Nihilists* and a collection of poetry called *Poems* received mixed reviews.
- ✦ In 1882, due to the growing popularity of Gilbert and Sullivan’s satirical opera, *Patience*, Wilde was invited to visit the United States on a lecture tour of the “decorative arts,” which was very successful.

PERSONAL LIFE

Wilde's income was meager and always short of his extravagant spending.

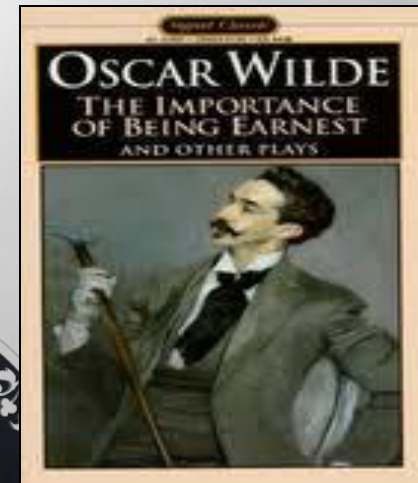
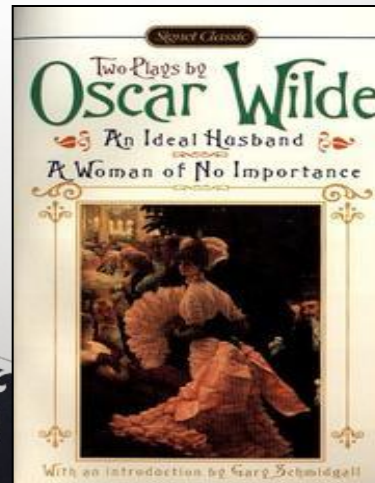
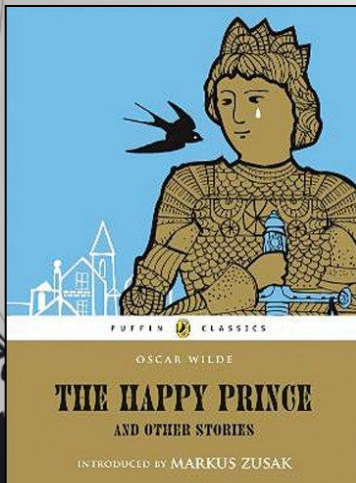
In 1884 he married Constance Lloyd, the beautiful young daughter of a Dublin barrister, whose small fortune helped to rectify his financial difficulties.



Of course, their marriage would not be his most celebrated romance...

FINDING SUCCESS

- * In 1887 Wilde became editor of *The Woman's World*, a progressive magazine, and held that position for two years.
- * Wilde garnered acclaim at first for his collections of stories and novels, and then for his great successes in theater. His final years were among his most prolific.






A SCANDALOUS AFFAIR

In 1891, Wilde was introduced to Lord Alfred Douglas, then a student at Oxford and a handsome and spoiled young man. The two quickly struck an intimate friendship and soon became lovers as well as literary collaborators.

Total ruin nipped at the heels of Oscar Wilde's most lauded success, *The Importance of Being Earnest*...

Alfred Douglas' father, the Marquess of Queensbury, outraged by his son's relationship with Wilde, went to the theater on opening night intending to embarrass the playwright by tossing rotten vegetables onstage. Wilde caught wind of the plan and denied Douglas entrance. Four days later the Marquess sent an insulting card to Wilde's club which read, "For Oscar Wilde, posing as somdomite [sic]."

What might be some of the social and professional implications of this event?

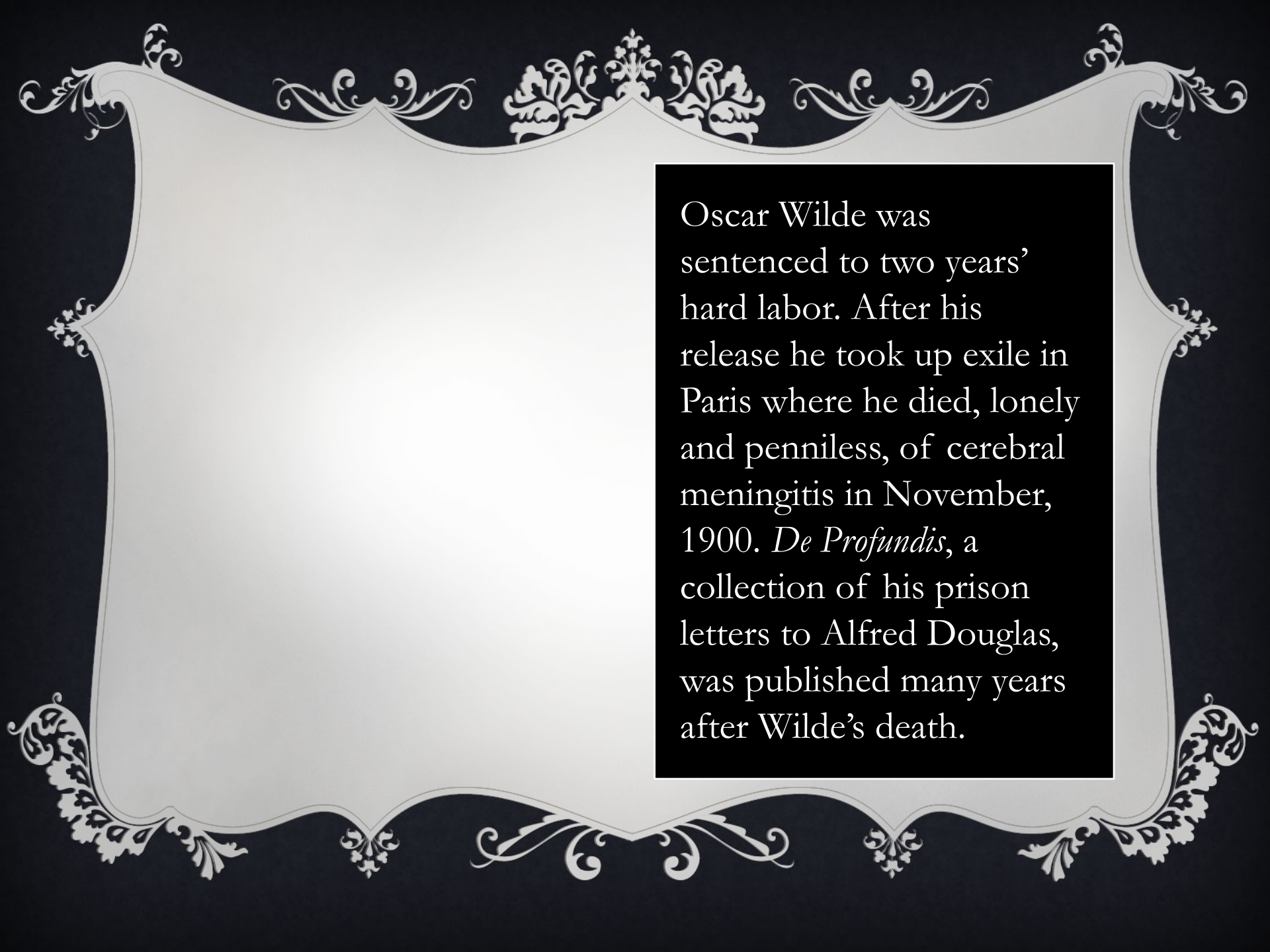


The Marquess' charge is serious.
How do you think Wilde responded?

Wilde's friends urged him to be prudent and leave the country for a while.

Wilde responded, "Prudent? How can I be that?
It would mean going backward. I must go as far as possible."

Wilde sued the Marquess for libel,
but during rigorous
cross-examination Wilde's
homosexuality was revealed. He
was arrested and convicted of
committing "gross indecency."



Oscar Wilde was sentenced to two years' hard labor. After his release he took up exile in Paris where he died, lonely and penniless, of cerebral meningitis in November, 1900. *De Profundis*, a collection of his prison letters to Alfred Douglas, was published many years after Wilde's death.

A Woman of No Importance

In this play, Wilde typically satirises the upper classes and their shallow views and outlooks.

He presents the character of a fallen woman whose past comes back to haunt her.