



*«To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all»*

# Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde in a photo by Napoleon Sarony.

**ZANICHELLI**

Only Connect... New Directions  
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# 1. Life

- Born in **Dublin** in **1854**.
- He became a disciple of **Walter Pater**, the theorist of aestheticism.
- He became a fashionable **dandy**.



*Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas in the 1890s*

# 1. Life

- He was one of the most successful **playwrights** of late Victorian London and one of the greatest **celebrities** of his days.
- He suffered a **dramatic downfall** and was imprisoned after been convicted of “gross indecency” for **homosexual acts**.
- He died in **Paris** in **1900**.



*Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas in the 1890s*

# 1. Life

Some famous quotations of Wilde's:

- «I have nothing to declare except **my genius**».
- «**Experience** is simply the name we give our **mistakes**».
- «A man can be happy with **any woman** as long as he **does not love her**».



Oscar Wilde, 1889

# 1. Life

Some famous quotations of Wilde's:

- «One should **always** be in love. That is the reason why one should **never** marry».
- «Art is the most intense form of **individualism** that the world has known».



Oscar Wilde, 1889

## 2. Works

- **Poetry:**            *Poems*, 1891  
                              *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, 1898
- **Fairy tales:**    *The Happy Prince and other Tales*, 1888  
                              *The House of Pomegranates*, 1891
- **Novel:**            *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1891
- **Plays:**            *Lady Windermere's Fan*, 1892  
                              *A Woman of no Importance*, 1893  
                              *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 1895  
                              *Salomé*, 1893

# 3. Wilde's aestheticism

- Oscar Wilde adopted the **aesthetical ideal**: he affirmed *“my life is like a work of art”*.
- His **aestheticism** clashed with the **didacticism** of Victorian novels.
- The artist = the creator of **beautiful things**.



PENGUIN CLASSICS

OSCAR WILDE

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*

A contemporary edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

# 3. Wilde's aestheticism

- Art □ used only to celebrate **beauty** and the **sensorial pleasures**.
- Virtue and vice □ employed by the artist as raw material in his art: ***“No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style”***. (“The Preface” to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*).



PENGUIN CLASSICS

OSCAR WILDE

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*A contemporary edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

# 4. *The picture of Dorian Gray*

- **1890** □ first appeared in a magazine.
- **1891** □ revised and extended.
- It reflects Oscar Wilde's personality.
- It was considered immoral by the Victorian public



A scene from Oliver Parker's *Dorian Gray* (2009).

# 5. *Dorian Gray*: plot

- Set in **London** at the end of the 19th century.
- The painter Basil Hallward makes a **portrait** of a handsome young man, Dorian Gray.



Poster for film *Wilde*, directed by Brian Gilbert (UK, 1997).

# 5. *Dorian Gray*: plot

- Dorian's desires of **eternal youth** are satisfied.
- **Experience** and **vices** appear on the portrait.



Poster for film *Wilde*, directed by Brian Gilbert (UK, 1997).

# 5. *Dorian Gray*: plot

- Dorian lives only for **pleasures**.
- The painter discovers Dorian's secret and he is **killed** by the young man.



Ben Barnes in Oliver Parker's *Dorian Gray* (2009).

# 5. *Dorian Gray*: plot

- Later Dorian wants to get **free** from the portrait; he stabs it but in so doing **he kills himself**.
- At the very moment of death the portrait returns to its original purity and Dorian turns into a **withered, wrinkled** and **loathsome** man.



Ben Barnes in Oliver Parker's *Dorian Gray* (2009).

## 6. *Dorian Gray*: a modern version of Dr. Faust

- A **temptation** is placed before Dorian: a potential **ageless beauty**.
- Lord Henry's **cynical attitude** is in keeping with the devil's role in Dr Faust.
- Lord Henry acts as the “**Devil advocate**”.
- The picture stands for the **dark side** of Dorian's personality.



Mephistopheles appearing before Faust in the 1865 edition of *Faust* by Johann Wolfgang Goethe.

## 7. *Dorian Gray*: the moral of the novel

- Every **excess** must be **punished** and reality cannot be escaped.
- When Dorian destroys the picture, he cannot avoid the **punishment** for all his sins □ **death**.
- The horrible, corrupting picture could be seen as a symbol of the **immorality** and **bad conscience** of the Victorian middle class.
- The picture, restored to its original beauty, illustrates Wilde's theories of art: **art survives people, art is eternal**.

# 8. *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Wilde's **most enduringly popular** play.



Sir John Gielgud, E. Evans and M. Leighton in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, UK, 1952.

# 9. *The Importance of Being Earnest*: plot

- Jack has invented an **alter ego**, a younger brother called Ernest who lives in the City.
- **Humour** comes from the characters' **false identities**.
- **Witty dialogues** and **satire** of Victorian **hypocrisy**.

# 10. *The Importance of Being Earnest*: characters

- Set in England during the late Victorian era.
- The protagonists: two young aristocratic men, **Ernest Worthing**, and **Algernon Moncrieff**.
- Ernest, actually called **Jack**, was adopted at an early age by a Mr **Thomas Cardew**.

# 10. *The Importance of Being Earnest*: characters

- They belong to **aristocratic society**.
- They are typical Victorian **snobs**.
- They are **arrogant**, **formal** and **concerned with money**.



A 2002 performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, directed by Frank B. Moorman.

# 10. *The Importance of Being Earnest*: characters

- They are interested only in a **materialistic world**.
- **Lady Bracknell** embodies the **stereotype** of the Victorian English aristocrat woman.



A 2002 performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, directed by Frank B. Moorman.

# 11. *The Importance of Being Earnest*: Wilde's new comedy of manners

- This comedy was a mirror of the **fashionable and corrupted world** of the Victorian **fashionable audiences.**

Alana Brophy and Luke Barats in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, April 2005



# 12. *The Importance of Being Earnest*: the nature of marriage

- **Marriage** is one of the main concerns of the characters in the play.
- Wilde **makes fun** of the institution of marriage.
- Marriage is seen as a **hypocritical** and **absurd** practice, a tool for achieving **social stature**.



Ida Vernon, William Faversham, Viola Allen, E. Y. Backus, Henry Miller in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895).

# 13. *The Importance of Being Earnest*: irony and Victorian morality

- The play central plot – the man who is both and isn't Ernest/earnest – presents a **moral paradox**.
- **Earnest**, misspelling for “**Ernest**”, means sincere, honest.
- **None** of the characters are really **truthful**.
- Characters are used to criticize **Victorian prudery** ( the Victorians’ attitude to get easily shocked by things related to sex).
- What Wilde wants us to see as truly moral is really the opposite of **earnestness: irreverence**.

# 14. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*

- The author's name □ **C33**, Wilde's prison reference number.
- Plot: the dramatic story of an **outcast**.
- Poetic form: a **ballad**.
- Themes: the **alienating** life in prison, **death penalty**, the problem of **collective and**



Reading Gaol in 2007