Oscar Wilde

Queen Victoria’s England

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Every writer is marked by the age in which he lives and writes. Oscar Wilde (1854 1900) passed the whole of his short life in the reign of Queen Victoria. In his own unique way, he was as much affected by this fact as was Alfred Lord Tennyson, who is usually thought of as the supremely representative poet of Victoria’s world, or Rudyard Kipling, who is known as the spokesman for Victoria’s worldwide Empire, so farflung that the sun never set on it.

When Victoria became queen in 1837, the royal family was neither popular nor respected. George III, her grandfather, had suffered recurrent spells of insanity during his lengthy reign (1760 1820) and at last, in 1811, he became hopelessly incompetent; the Prince of Wales, the oldest of his ten sons, became Prince Regent. When his father died, he came to the throne as King George IV.

The new king had a history that did not inspire loyal affection. He was married to a Mrs. Fitzherbert in 1785, but the marriage, though blessed with many children, was not recognized officially because the lady was a Roman Catholic instead of a member of the Church of England. George’s endless extravagances landed him in hopeless debt. In 1795, he deserted Mrs. Fitzherbert to marry Princess Caroline of Brunswick on condition that his debts should be paid off.

He made no pretense of caring for the Princess; he first neglected, and then abandoned her. A furor was created when, in 1820, Caroline indicated that she expected to be crowned Queen alongside her husband. George tried to divorce her on the charge that she had committed adultery; the obvious opportunism of his behavior made him thoroughly unpopular. The scandalous situation was climaxed by a scene at the coronation when the Queen tried to enter Westminster Abbey for the ceremony and had the doors shut in her face.

George died without legitimate heirs in 1830. His brother, the Duke of Clarence, succeeded him as William IV. William’s outstanding characteristic was his boorishness. His uncouth behavior during his short reign did nothing to win back the respect lost by his father and his brother. It was not expected that young Victoria, who became Queen in 1837, would be able to retrieve the love of the English people which her grandfather and uncles had managed to alienate. In fact, many thinking people assumed that the time of the monarchy was running out. It was expected that Britain would get rid of her royal family, by revolution or by other means, and at last become a republic. It was a strange beginning for what ironically turned out to be the longest reign in English history, more than sixty three years.

Victoria’s father was the Duke of Kent, fourth son of George III. He was the oldest surviving son after King William IV, so that it was understood that his little daughter would eventually become Queen. The Duke died while she was a baby. Her German mother supervised her education with great strictness. This consisted of constant drilling in manners and duties, rather than intellectual training. Thus, though Victoria had considerable intelligence, she did not have the asset of a thorough education. This was to lead, later in life, to a narrow outlook, a serious lack of mental flexibility; even today, we think of this cast of mind as “Victorian.”

But in 1837, no misgivings about the Queen’s limitations troubled England. The people only knew that after a succession of elderly, unappealing kings, they now had a queen who was eighteen years of age, attractive, vivacious, and conscientious. A great wave of affection rose from her subjects, and with this there was mingled a protective instinct. The Queen was hardly more than a child. She had been chaperoned and protected; diligently, those in charge of her had shielded her innocence from contact with anything distressing or improper. Now her subjects began to shield her too. Statesmen, artists, and writers shared an impulse to avoid those subjects that might be unsuitable for the sheltered young queen.

Thus, the accident that the English crown was inherited by a girl colored the culture of an entire age. The effect was striking and not entirely desirable. What may be proper intellectual nourishment for a strictly raised eighteen year old girl is not necessarily appropriate for all the people in a country. Also, the result was the encouragement of respectability, not the rebirth of virtue. These are quite different things. If, inspired by the Queen, the British people had shown an impulse toward higher standards of conduct, the result would surely have been impressive. But as a whole they did not do this. Rather, they showed a greater interest in appearing respectable. The opinion of one’s neighbors became all important. As a result, hypocrisy became the most important virtue. The standard of conduct in Victoria’s time was extremely strict and the penalty for breaking the moral code was to be cast out from society but this meant in practice only that one was expected to avoid getting caught.

Thus, the Victorian era fostered a highly repressive atmosphere. What one could or could not do was carefully prescribed by society. And with this went an insincerity which came to be accepted as entirely natural, especially by the middle class.

Victoria’s later history did nothing to alter this. Married to her German cousin Albert, whom she adored, she became the mother of nine children. In 1861, Albert died suddenly, leaving the Queen an inconsolable widow. For the remaining forty years of her life, she wore mourning for him. Naturally, the domestic virtues were those most prized by the Queen. As she got older she became even surer that her own limited ideas were the only correct ones. As an example, for many years she refused to receive at court any woman who had been widowed and had later remarried. She expected all women to abide by her idea of how a widow should behave. She demanded that all women who hoped to take part in the life of the royal court live according to standards that were in excess of what any western religion required.

To summarize, the atmosphere of Victorian England was stuffy and hypocritical. It insisted on conformity. As a result, it produced a large number of people obedient to its standards but it also produced a crop of colorful eccentrics and rebels. Oscar Wilde was one of these.

## Science and Religion

In 1859, Charles Darwin published his book, On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, which presented the theory of evolution and touched off a violent controversy which has not subsided completely even today. However, we must not make the mistake of assuming that Darwin was the first person ever to have such ideas. Even in ancient Greece, certain philosophers had suggested that the forms of living things tended to change and develop as time passed. In the early nineteenth century, a French scientist, Baron Cuvier, observed in fossils simple forms of life which had once existed on the earth but were no longer to be found. Sir Charles Lyell explained the enormous extent of geological time in Principles of Geology (1833).

Darwin incorporated a lot of earlier material with his own observations to produce his theory. To put it simply, Darwin observed that most species of plants and animals produced far more young than ever grew into maturity. In the case of some of the simpler organisms, only a minute percentage of those produced could survive. He pointed out that if all the oysters produced in one year were to reach maturity and reproduce, great mountains of oysters would tower up out of the oceans.

What was it that determined which organisms out of the multitudes would be the survivors? Darwin answered that the huge numbers of organisms produced by a given species had a great variety of hereditary characteristics. Those who happened to have characteristics that helped them catch their food and avoid their enemies were the ones that lived. The others died, victims of their enemies, starvation, or other kinds of destruction. Among characteristics that might be helpful to survival were speed, strength, and protective coloration that helped the organism to blend with its surroundings and avoid being seen.

Darwin reasoned further that those creatures that survived were the ones that reproduced themselves; they passed their characteristics on to at least some of their offspring, who then could also survive and reproduce. Those creatures who did not last till maturity died out before they could reproduce themselves. In this way, those characteristics useful in the environment were perpetuated. Thus, the various species developed and changed their characteristics.

Darwin was convinced that this process had been in effect countless millions of years; he believed it had begun with a primitive unicellular sea creature that had been the first life on the earth. As a result of the constant operation of this process, different kinds of life had developed. Some kinds had died out and could now be seen only as fossils. Others became more and more differentiated and complex, until the various forms of plant and animal life known in the modern world came into being.

Naturally, not many people actually read through Darwin’s complex and technical explanations. But his ideas became known through newspapers, magazines and sermons. For the implications were clear. If life really had begun in a very simple form and slowly developed over vast stretches of time, then the account of creation in the Bible was seemingly contradicted for this was different from a world made with all its varied creatures within seven days by the hand of God. A famous Biblical scholar, Bishop Ussher, had, after careful study, dated the year of creation as 4004 B.C. He was even able to supply the very day and hour of the event. Now the concept of geological time made this absurd.

Thus it seemed to many that the very foundations of religious faith were being attacked. Yet, eventually, the various sects were able to assimilate Darwin’s ideas. Almost all religious groups have faced the contradictions between science and traditional interpretation of the Bible. Evolution is today taught in many religious seminaries. Darwin himself is buried in Westminster Abbey.

Yet Darwin’s thought did give a terrible shock to the time. Before him, most people lived in a cozy, understandable world. Man was the center of this world of course, for was he not made in God’s image? All of creation had been for the purpose of providing a home for him. The universe, the Earth, other living creatures, only mattered because they were necessary to man.

But with the new science, how cold and terrifying the universe became! How frightening it was to think of the earth as an insignificant speck in time and space, where a series of evolutionary accidents had produced the human race.

And worst of all were the methods by which evolution took place. The main instrument of it seemed to be death! Huge quantities of living creatures were produced, apparently with no other function but to die. They were linked with one another in a relationship of repeated cruelty and suffering. A creature might be a destroyer of many species, only to fall a victim at last to others more quick or powerful than itself.

How different is this world governed by waste, accident, and cruelty from that secure one where the benevolent Creator observed each sparrow’s fall! Many men who could face the idea that the account of creation in the Bible might not be strictly accurate were stricken to the heart by the senselessness and horror of this picture. Alfred Lord Tennyson, a very typical Victorian writer, speaks of Nature, “red in tooth and claw.” “How careful of the type she seems,/ How careless of the single life.” Nothing could better sum up the despair of the thoughtful man than these excerpts from Tennyson’s In Memoriam.

To summarize, the conflict between science and religion in the Victorian period produced an atmosphere of despair. Thoughtful men found the new world of science, so huge and indifferent to man, a bleak place to live. Some, like Tennyson, faced the problem and struggled to find some basis for faith and hope.

But others, equally aware of the new atmosphere, fought it by ignoring it. They also were troubled by the lonely new world in which they had to live. But they protected themselves by trying to escape. They tried to find a scale of values which would not be affected by these developments. Such men, no longer able to have confidence in the moral world, turned to the world of beauty. The worship of beauty became an end in itself. Beauty was safe, unaffected by outside events. In beauty one could place one’s faith and hope; it was changeless. Among those who turned to the worship of beauty were the poet Algernon Swinburne, the critic Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde.

## The Industrial Revolution

Beginning in the middle of the eighteenth century, the face of England was drastically changed by a huge series of events, which we usually call “The Industrial Revolution.” In the early eighteenth century, all Englishmen made their living from the land.

The term “Industrial Revolution” refers to the period in English history, approximately 1750 1850, in which major social and economic changes took place. With the invention of the spinning frame and power loom, England moved from an agricultural and commercial society to a modern industrial society. England became a world textile center. By the mid 1840s over half a million people were employed, 340,000 of them tending power driven machines in factories.

Economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo rejected contemporary doctrines. They developed the thesis that division of labor and free trade would necessarily benefit the bulk of the populace. But these new doctrines inherited the squalor of the past centuries and developed some new difficulties.

In 1764 a machine for spinning thread (known as the “spinning jenny”) was invented. A series of other inventions followed rapidly, including the steam locomotive in 1825. It became possible to produce cotton, wool, and iron at far lower cost than ever before. This was done by building power driven machines and assembling them in factories, where large numbers of workers came together to operate them. Most often, these factories were built in the north of England, near the coal mines which provided the fuel that would make steam to drive the machines. It was because of this that the industrial cities of England were built mainly in the north.

England’s cities grew monstrously in the years between 1800 and 1830. Thousands who could no longer live from the land came to the cities, where they had a better chance of survival. An entirely new class of people developed people who were, dependent on factory employment rather than on the whims of nature. As thousands poured into the urban settlements, tremendous new difficulties had to be overcome.

Not enough wealth had yet been produced to adequately provide for the newcomers. No housing had been planned to accommodate the hordes of workers. At first, they lived in abandoned houses in old sections of the cities. Eventually inexpensive housing was put up, built by the barest minimum of speculative capital. Among other things, sanitary conditions were woefully substandard (in relation to our present day standards) and this led to a severe epidemic of cholera during the 1830s.

The multitudes had come from abject poverty to conditions barely better. It was a brand new mode of living, but the system was yet too young to alleviate the horrors. English cities were hideous in a way that we of the twentieth century can scarcely imagine. In huddled groups of tumble down houses, mobs of people lived, sometimes several families in one room. Filth and horrible smells were everywhere. People were dressed in rags. Children were undernourished and deformed. In the mines, five year olds pulled carts of coal for twelve to fourteen hours a day and never saw the sunlight or the inside of a school.

Some writers tried to make the people of England conscious of the horrors all around them. For example, Elizabeth Barrett wrote “The Cry of the Children,” which described the conditions of child labor. But for others, the ugliness of industrial England made physical beauty seem more important than ever before. In reaction to what they saw, they regarded beauty as a supreme good. Oscar Wilde is one example of this. His writings show no trace of what we call “social consciousness.” He never indicates any concern for the evils of his time. Slums, child labor, disease, and poverty might not have existed for all the notice Wilde takes of them. Reading his plays, one gets the impression that England is made up entirely of Lords, Ladies, and a few others who do not have titles but are at least independently wealthy.

Nevertheless, in spite of the narrow focus and limited sympathy displayed in his work, one gets a strong impression that Wilde turns to elegance and beauty to some extent because the whole of reality is unacceptable to him. He escapes ugliness and doubt, and while he does so, he enables his audience to escape with him.

The Aesthetic Movement

Reaction against the conformity, hideousness, and doubt of nineteenth century England came to a spectacular climax in the 1890s. This rebellion featured a group of eccentric, self conscious young men, of whom Oscar Wilde was the most famous. But a stream of rebellion can be traced far back to the 1850s. In 1853, in The Stones of Venice, John Ruskin presented the theory that England’s lack of beauty was simply a visual sign that English life lacked moral good and inner joy; beauty and goodness were part of each other. Dante Gabriel Rossetti was convinced that the Middle Ages were far superior to nineteenth century England. He was a gifted painter and a fine poet; in both forms he celebrated the beauty and sincerity of medieval life.

William Morris (1834 1896) carried his dissatisfaction with industrialism and mass production even further. He found factory made objects ugly and worthless; he felt that the only way for the individual to create beauty was to devote himself to craftsmanship and painstaking handwork. In 1861, he formed a company to produce wallpaper, tiles, draperies, carpets, and furniture by old hand methods. The results showed beauty and artistic integrity. Indeed, by this work, Morris created a small revolution and founded the modern art of interior decoration. Morris was also a fine poet.

In Ruskin, Rossetti, and Morris, we find a deep concern with morality and virtue, as well as with beauty. In different ways, each of these men found a close connection between ugliness and evil, and between virtue and beauty. Their love of beauty was part of their devotion to what was good.

But as time went on, the idea of beauty no longer was firmly connected to the idea of goodness. The poet Algernon Swinburne was a violent hater of all authority, political and religious. He praised the joys of passion and the beauty of the pagan way of life. This brought down the wrath of conventional Victorians on his head; he was condemned for being indecent and irreligious. Poor Swinburne was an unstable person at best, and after years of alcoholism and other excesses, he broke down completely in 1879, at the age of forty two, while his respectable enemies enjoyed the opportunity to cry: “I told you so!” For the remaining thirty years of his life, he lived under the careful control of his friend, Theodore Watts Dunton. Eventually, he became able to write again though his great work was all done in the 1860s and 1870s.

Many ideas which can be seen in Swinburne’s passionate poetry were given formal expression by the influential essayist Walter Pater (1839 1894). As a student at Oxford, he had intended to become a clergyman, but he became skeptical toward religion. He became a fellow at Brasenose College, Oxford, where he influenced students for many years. Pater wrote extensively about the art of Italy and Greece. His essays showed much sympathy with pagan thought. Beauty was his great ideal. He praised “art for art’s sake.” That is, beauty was not for creating moral goodness; it was sufficient in itself. The perfect and complete enjoyment of something beautiful was the greatest happiness a man could know, Pater stated. He wrote that to each man only a limited number of moments is given; the best use a man can make of them is to fill each one with an exquisite sensation.

Pater was himself a mild little man; but he was worshiped by Oxford students who abandoned conventional behavior and tried to follow his instructions. They tried to live each moment to the fullest to “burn with a hard, gemlike flame,” as Pater recommended. Wilde was among the students who were influenced by him.

Thus, the serious moral rebellion against ugly Victorian materialism which we find in the 1850s and 1860s eventually alters until it loses its ethical side completely and becomes a delight in pleasurable sensations. By the 1880s, the “aesthetic movement” was in existence; Wilde was its best known disciple. Others were Arthur Symons and John Addington Symonds. “Aestheticism” may be defined as a philosophy which makes appreciation of beauty through man’s senses the chief aim of life. Ridiculing the Victorian conventions with his sophisticated wit, Wilde praised the free enjoyment of pleasure as an ideal of life.

He claimed that the pagan Greeks had lived in this way. However, in fact Wilde’s ideas were also much influenced by the French literature of his time. Among these influences were Emile Zola, who permitted himself, in his realistic novels, to discuss what had been impossible to mention before. The poet Baudelaire, author of Flowers of Evil, also was an important influence; he delighted in evil, which had a weird beauty for him. Also Flaubert, the author of Madame Bovary, showed the English aesthetes how one could polish and perfect one’s language as though it were sculpture.

To summarize, the aesthetes of the 1880s and 1890s formed a very sophisticated little group, scornful of conventions, proud of their moral daring, and most anxious to develop extraordinary skill in the use of words. They were obviously the result of a long rebellion against Victorian hypocrisy, scientific materialism, and ugly industrialism; however, they were the indirect product of these things.

## The Life Of Oscar Wilde (1854 1900)

### Early Life

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland, on October 16, 1854. At his christening, he was burdened with the lengthy name of Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde. His parents were both distinguished, though a little peculiar.

His father, Sir William Wilde, was an eye and ear surgeon of world wide fame. He wrote a textbook on the surgery of the ear that was one of the authorities in its field. Medical students came from all over to study with him. Among his many other interests were medical statistics, literature, and ancient civilizations.

Physically, Sir William Wilde was not very impressive; he was small, homely, and none too careful about cleanliness. All the same, he was constantly involved in love affairs, until one of them turned into a great scandal and injured his career.

Wilde’s mother, Jane Elgee, was a bookish woman; under the pen name “Speranza” she wrote many fiery articles in favor of Irish independence from England.

In their Dublin mansion, the famous doctor and his stately literary wife gave many parties and receptions, entertaining most of the famous people of their day. The conversation at these parties was stimulating and the household offered warm hospitality. Mrs. Wilde was apparently more interested in Irish independence than in housekeeping, however. Many stories have been told of her eccentric behavior. It is reported that she once scolded a servant for putting the plates in the coal scuttle; she ordered them to be put on a chair, where they belonged.

Wilde’s mother was devoted to him, though she had originally regretted that he was not a girl (for a time she even made the bad psychological mistake of dressing him in girl’s clothes). She stood by him in the difficult years of his later life.

As a boy, Oscar was sent first to Portora Royal School and then to Trinity College in Dublin. At both, he was unpopular because he absolutely loathed sports. However, he was large and powerful though clumsy; when it was necessary, he could more than hold his own in a fight. Oscar was a lazy student. He would not make any effort to learn subjects that did not interest him, such as mathematics and science. But he loved Greek literature. Since he had a powerful memory, he was able to remember what he read. And as he already was showing writing ability, he was able to write with skill in the Greek language. His performance in classical studies was good enough to win him scholarships, as well as a gold medal. In 1876, he entered Magdalen College of Oxford University.

Teaching at Oxford were the great writers John Ruskin and Walter Pater (see previous section). Wilde was impressed by Ruskin’s great sincerity as he preached about the horrors of factories and the beauty of honest labor. He was even more impressed by Pater’s elegant, musical prose and daring ideas. The thought of tasting life fully, of filling each moment with an experience of the senses, dazzled him. He was not troubled by the fact that this philosophy had no place for moral responsibility or service to one’s fellow men. Pater’s essays on the Renaissance inspired Wilde, but he never liked Pater himself. Nor did Pater, who was shy and somewhat cold, care for his eccentric student.

Wilde retained his hatred of sports at Oxford, but he was popular because of his good nature, his excellent parties, and his growing conversational ability. He could speak easily on any subject; his conversation was gay, sometimes preposterous, sometimes beautiful, but always entertaining.

Already, he showed a tendency to behave artificially in order to be the center of attention. It is said that once he pointed to a blue china vase in his room and said: “Would that I could live up to my blue china!” This remark had in it a germ of sincerity; it demonstrated Wilde’s growing conviction that the beauty of a physical object was a positive good in itself; this was part of the aesthetic creed. (See previous section.) But there is no doubt that he was purposely exaggerating; he was genuinely surprised to learn that some people were foolish enough to take him seriously.

During this Oxford period, Wilde took several important trips abroad. In 1875 and again in 1876 he went to Rome. There he was so moved by the majestic beauty of the Vatican and by an audience with the Pope, that he considered becoming a Catholic. He did not do so, however.

With an old professor of his from Trinity College, J. P. Mahaffy, Wilde visited Greece in 1877. To see the things he had studied and dreamed about for so long was an intoxicating experience. The beauty of Greece influenced him for the rest of his life.

Again at Oxford, Wilde did splendidly in his classical studies. He added another triumph to his academic career when he won the famous Newdigate Prize for poetry with his poem “Ravenna.” At the end of his university career he had a great reputation, but no definite plans for his future.

### London and America:

After Oxford, Wilde came to London in 1880. There he set out to make himself well known as quickly as possible. He took the pose of a highly aesthetic young man who devoted himself entirely to beautiful costumes. In the daytime he dressed like a fashionable dandy. But in the evening he blossomed in a costume of his own invention, which consisted of knee breeches, black silk stockings, a velvet coat, a silk shirt, and a large bow tie. In his buttonhole he wore a lily or a sunflower.

Because he was the friend of many aristocratic Oxford graduates, Oscar was made welcome by the great families of London. His eccentric pose, added to the real wit of his conversation, made him a colorful visitor. Soon his exploits and his amusing remarks were the talk of London. It was reported that he claimed to have sat up all night to care for a sick primrose. One story was that he had arrived at a certain house, gorgeously dressed, at dinner time, and said to the owner: “I have come to dine. I thought you would like to have me.” Not only had he not been invited, but the man had never set eyes on him before.

Soon the comic magazine Punch took up Wilde as a subject. He was caricatured with his knee breeches and his lilies. His eccentricities were reported and exaggerated, and when Punch ran out of real life absurdities, it invented more.

More important than this was his contact with Gilbert and Sullivan. In 1875, William S. Gilbert, the lyricist, and Arthur Sullivan, the composer, had begun to collaborate on comic operas. They had several successes, including Trial by Jury, H.M.S. Pinafore, and The Pirates of Penzance. Now Gilbert was looking around for a new subject, and he got the idea of writing a comic satire of the modern aesthetic poets. In 1881, Patience, or Bunthorne’s Bride, was ready. Bunthorne, the leading character, combined the most conspicuous traits Gilbert could find among the new poets. Probably he was meant to be more like Swinburne (see previous section) than anyone else. Bunthorne was known as “the fleshly poet,” which describes some of Swinburne’s poetry accurately. Also Gilbert’s drawings of Bunthorne (which can be found in most of Gilbert’s librettos) show a tiny man with a skinny neck and a great mop of hair. The resemblance to Swinburne, who was so little that he was almost a dwarf, and who had a conspicuous head of red hair, is marked. But the love of lilies and the aesthetic talk are taken from Wilde. Tactfully, the resemblance to Wilde was stressed in the production, for by then Swinburne was living under the care of his friend, ruined by his unbalanced excesses, and to make fun of him publicly would have been unthinkable.

Rupert D’Oyly Carte, the producer of Patience, wanted to be certain American audiences would understand the joke, so he formed the plan of sending Wilde to America to lecture on aesthetic ideas. It was surely a cruel thing to do, for Carte obviously hoped Wilde would be a laughing stock and thus insure the success of Patience.

Most likely, Wilde understood what Carte had in mind. But he had little money and could not sustain his life of elegant aesthetic idleness. He had published a book of poems in 1881, but it had not made much money. Carte’s offer was good, so Wilde accepted it in 1882.

In America, Wilde was a sensation. People were surprised at first that he did not wear his funny costumes in the street, and they were disappointed when they found that his lectures were not meant as jokes. But from the moment he left the ocean liner he delighted them each time he spoke. “Have you anything to declare?” the customs inspector asked. “I have nothing to declare except my genius,” Wilde replied. Reporters followed him everywhere and eagerly took down everything he said. Ladies appeared in strangely draped costumes which they fondly hoped were aesthetic. And Wilde was swept into a never ending cycle of balls, dinners, teas, and receptions.

The lectures were well attended. Americans found that Wilde, when he was not making highly affected remarks about flowers and wallpaper, was a most likeable man. He also had the fortunate ability to turn jokes on the jokers. For example, when he lectured at Boston, sixty Harvard students dressed in knee breeches and carrying lilies and sunflowers marched into the lecture hall and sat in the front rows. Wilde somehow found out about the joke ahead of time. He came out on the stage wearing beautiful evening clothes, a picture of conservative elegance in his black suit and white dress shirt. The Harvard men sat foolishly before him, as Wilde skillfully captured the sympathy of the audience.

Several attempts were made to embarrass Wilde by giving him too much to drink, but at Oxford he had developed the ability to out drink almost anybody. He was able to drink and eat until his hosts lay helpless under the table, a talent which earned him respect from miners and cattlemen when he toured the west.

Altogether, Wilde delivered over eighty lectures. He returned home successful and with a substantial sum of money.

### The Creative Years

In 1884, he married. His bride was Constance Lloyd, a very pretty girl with whom he was deeply in love. She in turn was devoted to him. His wife had a moderate income of her own, but the Wildes lived in an elaborate manner, and money continued to be a problem. The profits of the American tour had been spent long before. Wilde tried various ways of earning more. From 1887 to 1889 he was the editor of a woman’s magazine. Between 1885 and 1890 he had the less unlikely task of reviewing books for the Pall Mall Gazette. He published short stories, essays, and poems in various magazines. A collection of beautiful fairy tales, The Happy Prince and Other Tales, appeared in 1888. A collection of short stories and another book of fairy tales followed. [See Happy Prince: The Happy Prince.]

The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) was Wilde’s only novel. It was the story of a beautiful young man who remains untouched by his life of sin, while his portrait exhibits the ravaging of his soul. The morbid atmosphere which fills the book was a terrible shock to the critics, who condemned it violently. [See Dorian Gray: The Picture of Dorian Gray.]

Two melodramas by Oscar Wilde had been produced in New York Vera and The Duchess of Padua. They had little success; today’s readers do not find this surprising, since both plays are little better than third rate. But their author understood that a really popular play might earn a lot of money. He went to work seriously and within a few weeks had turned out Lady Windermere’s Fan (1892).[See Lady Windermere’s Fan: Lady Windermere’s Fan.] [See Revived Cards: I’m so glad Lady Windermere has revived cards.]

Both critics and public were delighted by this play. Wilde wrote two more plays that followed the same formula as Lady Windermere’s Fan; these were A Woman of No Importance (1893) and An Ideal Husband (1895). His method was simply to take a commonplace plot full of melodrama and sentimentality, and decorate it with his own brand of wit, which he usually put into the mouths of a few minor characters. Each of the plays, like most of this writer’s work, was dashed off in a spurt of spontaneous creation within a few weeks. [See Ideal Husband: When I was your age, sir, I had been an inconsolable widower for three months.] [See Woman Of No Importance: She was far too good looking to be in any respectable household.]

This series of successful plays was ended with The Importance of Being Earnest (1895), Wilde’s masterpiece and one of the delights of English literature. Within a few short weeks after it opened to the cheers of a fashionable London audience, Wilde’s life lay about him in ruins. From 1895 to 1900, the year of his death, his story is one of disaster. [See Being Earnest: The Importance of Being Earnest.]

### The Disastrous Years

One of Oscar Wilde’s closest companions was Lord Alfred Douglas. Douglas’ father, the Marquis of Queensberry (the same man who invented the Queensberry Rules for boxing), loudly expressed his disapproval of this friendship. At last, Queensberry became publicly insulting; Wilde felt that there was nothing for him to do except to sue Queensberry for libel. He was encouraged by Douglas, who had been on bad terms with his eccentric father since childhood. The fashionable world settled back happily; it expected a particularly juicy scandal at the libel trial, and it was not disappointed.

Wilde’s libel suit against Queensberry was suicidal. He was suing Queensberry for soiling his reputation with untrue accusations of homosexual behavior. But in fact these accusations were true; Queensberry’s lawyers were able to find evidence and witnesses easily. Wilde took the witness stand to testify. He was then cross examined by Queensberry’s lawyer, Sir Edward Carson. By the end of this extensive cross examination (which is a classic that is still studied in law schools), it was clear that Wilde was guilty of the charges Queensberry had made. Wilde’s lawyers withdrew the suit.

Wilde’s friends were sure that he would shortly be arrested; they begged him to flee the country. This he refused to do. Perhaps there is some truth to the explanation that he so loved being the center of attention that he could not bear to flee the spotlight. He was arrested, tried, and sentenced to two years in prison.

The treatment Wilde received from Victorian England fills the twentieth century reader with dismay. Not only was he imprisoned for what today is regarded as a sick condition, his destruction was received with glee by London society. The very people who had looked up to him, who had enjoyed his stories, jokes, and witty remarks, who had been proud to have him as a guest, now turned on him viciously. His friends deserted him in crowds. While he was free on bail, he was hounded from public places. He could not find any place to sleep at night. There was neither financial aid nor pity for his unhappy wife and little two boys. One actor who had appeared in his plays (and to whom Wilde had never done any harm that we know of) gave a dinner party to celebrate his conviction.

Two years of brutal imprisonment nearly killed Wilde. He was never the same afterward. One of the most pitiful effects was that he could never again sleep uninterruptedly through the night. In prison, he had to undergo inspection every morning, and if a single thing was not in its proper place, he would be harshly punished. He formed the habit of waking several times a night and feeling about him in the dark to make sure that all his possessions were in their proper place. Even after his release, he still did this.

From 1897 to 1900, Wilde lived outside of England, mostly in France, aided by a few faithful friends such as Robert Ross and Robert Sherard. He died, in great agony, of meningitis on November 30, 1900. Two days earlier he had finally become a convert to the Roman Catholic faith.

Almost entirely drained of creative energy, Wilde was sure he could never write again after he left prison. But he did produce The Ballad of Reading Gaol (1898), a moving poem about what happened in prison while a condemned man was hanged. It showed a depth and strength which were new in Wilde’s work. Prison almost destroyed him, but there seems no doubt that in some ways it also made him grow.

Oscar Wilde’s wife and career testify that Victorian England had little room for individuality. With a heavy hand it either forced the uncommon person into conformity or drove him into violent rebellion or unprofitable eccentricity. In a society which was often narrow, ugly, and cruel, Oscar Wilde did not have the wisdom and genius of a William Morris, who could lead a moral crusade against that society’s faults. His protest was less powerful, conscious, and direct. It was frittered away in foolishness and weakness. But it was not entirely unproductive.