Oscar Wilde

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

Oscar Wilde in a photo by Napoleon Sarony.
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 being convicted of “gross indecency” for homosexual acts.

- He died in Paris in 1900.
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». 
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». 
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**.

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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).

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.
Dorian’s desires of eternal youth are satisfied.

Experience and vices appear on the portrait.
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.

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**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.

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.
11. The Importance of Being Earnest: Wilde’s new comedy of manners

- A new sort of the Restoration comedy of Manners.
- The problems of Wilde’s age are reflected in witty remarks.
- 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
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.
The play central plot – the man who is both and isn't Ernest/earnest – presents a moral paradox.

Earnest, misspelling for “Ernest”, means earnest, honest.

None of the characters are really truthful.

Characters are used to criticize Victorian prudery.

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 social guilt.