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**A GAME OF APPEARANCES:  
THE MASKS OF OSCAR WILDE**

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**A GAME OF APPEARANCES:  
THE MASKS OF OSCAR WILDE**

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**Essa dissertação é dedicada à minha irmã, Lilis, pelo seu amor incondicional, por sempre estar ao meu lado, por acreditar em mim e nunca me deixar desistir.**

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"Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand."

Albert Einstein, The Saturday Evening Post

## RESUMO

Esta dissertação examina as formas como três instâncias se embaraçam na arte de Oscar Wilde: a pessoa, o autor e a obra. O objetivo da pesquisa é compreender como se dá o processo criativo desse escritor, cujas peças levitam entre o irreverente e o polêmico. O humor refinado e a sagacidade na análise do trato social, traços marcantes no estilo de Wilde, são aqui aproximados à habilidade demonstrada tanto pelo autor quanto por seus personagens de se adaptarem a diferentes circunstâncias através do uso de máscaras, ou personas, que lhes possibilitam contornar situações intrincadas. Apoio-me no pensamento de Carl Gustav Jung para as teorizações sobre o conceito de máscara. O trabalho se constrói em três capítulos, nos quais são analisados aspectos e circunstâncias da vida do autor que contribuem para forjar seu estilo único, e que se refletem nas obras por ele criadas. O primeiro capítulo trata sobre a pessoa de Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, e os movimentos que empreendeu para que sua personalidade forte e o rígido ambiente vitoriano em que vivia pudessem aos poucos se harmonizar. Abordo as formas como a sociedade em que cresceu o afetou, apontando aspectos em que ele também a influenciou em retrospecto. Ao longo desse processo, Wilde criou as máscaras que utilizaria, durante a vida, para transitar da maneira desejada entre os diversos grupos com que se relacionou. O segundo e o terceiro capítulos apresentam o autor Oscar Wilde e a sequência de diferentes tipos de obras por ele criadas, avaliando de que formas as circunstâncias da vida da pessoa se consolidaram formando o estilo do autor. Além da estética de Wilde, também é considerada a recepção de sua obra pelo público contemporâneo a ele. No segundo capítulo apresento os conceitos de máscara e de sombra, e como se refletem em sua obra e em sua vida pessoal. Ali são examinadas as primeiras tragédias e, a seguir, as obras que o tornaram um autor polêmico na Inglaterra Vitoriana: "The Portrait of Mr. W. H" e The Picture of Dorian Gray. No terceiro capítulo comento seu momento mais prestigiado, o da produção das comédias sociais, bem como o momento mais sombrio, o das obras escritas durante os anos de prisão, nos últimos anos de sua vida. Ainda discuto, no terceiro capítulo, o legado deixado por Wilde, comentando como as mudanças sociais levaram a uma nova recepção de suas obras, e como essas obras continuam relevantes tendo-se passado um século de sua criação. Nas considerações finais, reitero o propósito da pesquisa, que é contribuir com uma leitura sobre o estilo do grande escritor, com base na análise das relações que se deram entre esse irlandês excêntrico e a inclemente sociedade Vitoriana em que viveu.

**Palavras-chave:** 1 Literaturas de Língua Inglesa. 2 Oscar Wilde. 3 Máscara Social. 4 Crítica literária.

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how three strings tangle together in Oscar Wilde's art: the person, the author and his literary works. The goal of this research is to understand the creative process of this author, whose plays go from irreverent to polemic. The polished humor and wit applied in his analysis of social behavior, trademarks in Wilde's writing style, approximate the ability shown by the author, as well as by his characters, to adapt to different circumstances through the use of masks, or personas, that enable them to escape intricate situations. The concept of mask is supported on Carl Gustav Jung's theory. This paper is constructed in three chapters, in which it is analyzed aspects and circumstances of the author's life that contributed to his unique writing style and is reflected on his literary works. The first chapter deals with the person Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, and the movements that he partook in so that his strong personality and the strict Victorian environment could harmonize themselves in his life. This paper approaches the ways the society he was brought up into affected him, pointing out aspects in which he affected this society in return. Throughout this process Wilde created many masks that he would use his whole life to be able to navigate through different groups he was related to however he wished. The second and third chapters present the author Oscar Wilde and the sequence of different literary works written by him, evaluating how the circumstances in his personal life shaped him, creating the author's writing style. Not only this paper considers the Aesthete in Wilde, but also the reception of his works by the public that was contemporary to him. In the second chapter it is presented the concepts of mask and shadow, and how they reflect on Wilde's work and personal life. It is also examined his first tragedies and the literary works that made him become a polemic author in Victorian England: "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In the third chapter it is mentioned the brightest moments in his career, his comedies of society, as well as his soberest, with the work he wrote in prison and in the last few years of his life. Still in the third chapter, it is discussed the legacy left by Wilde, commenting on the social changes that led to a new reception of his works, as they continue to be relevant even a century after their creation. On my final considerations, I reiterate the goal of this research, which is to contribute with a reading on the style of this great writer, based on the analysis of the relation between this eccentric Irish man and the unmerciful Victorian society that he lived in.

**Keywords:** 1 Anglo-Irish Literature. 2 Oscar Wilde. 3 Mask. 4 Literary Criticism.



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## INTRODUCTION

The necessity to adapt to constant change has always been part of human nature. Through time, the human species has slowly learned to live in organized societies. As living organisms, we have to evolve to survive; nonetheless, as parts of a group, we have to adapt, to be equal, to be the same, so as to be accepted. Things have always been like that, in a complex play that involves changing and remaining the same. This is the mark of our civilizations, which are constantly growing and evolving; the mark of the individuals who live in them; and the mark of the cultures they have produced, always trying to be more, to be better. In order to improve, or to be accepted, we may willingly change our appearance, adjust our personality, learn and adapt.

The focus of our concern in this work is Oscar Wilde, a person and an author, who lived and created in a historical moment when Britain was the most powerful state in the world; when Ireland was undergoing one of its most extreme endeavors to become an independent nation; when England was experiencing the Victorian Age: a conservative, illiberal moment, morally strict, politically aggressive, and economically progressive. In a time like that, it might be even more difficult to play this game of changing and remaining the same. Industrialization and modernization were drastically changing the way people lived; the accommodation among the old and new social classes<sup>1</sup> influenced moral and ethical patterns; the conflict between

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<sup>1</sup> By “new classes” I mean the working classes (‘blue collars’, ‘white collars’, coal miners, etc.) and the middle classes (plant owners, tradesmen, businessmen, stock holders, etc.) that, as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution, grew in number and importance, joining the rural gentry and the aristocracy (the “old classes”) in a number of decisions that involved the policy and the courses to be taken by the Empire. As the scope of my research does not allow a further development of this discussion, I refer the reader who would like to be better informed in this respect to the chapters written by Walter Allen (1980) and George Macaulay Trevelyan (1985) on the subject.

stern religious principles and romantic revolutionary ideals disturbed the organization of the world people lived in.

In an attempt to be accepted, people usually try to fit in, to be like everyone else and become somewhat invisible among all the other faceless people around them. Yet, there are some who are more reckless, who insist (or cannot help) to be different, who do not want, or fail, to be equal. These atypical people make their own path instead of following the ones that have already been opened. This is what we see when we consider the life and work of Oscar Wilde, with his wish to be different — or his hopelessness to be equal; maybe the best way to put it is: his strife to be himself. If one wants to be authentic, but lives within a group where authenticity would be received as offence, and one is intelligent, one develops strategies to survive within that group. Let us start, then, by considering three facts about Oscar Wilde, a man who was born within the working classes, whose father received a courtesy title and was knighted for being the ophthalmologist of Queen Victoria. Wilde is therefore the son of a “Sir;” his mother is a “Lady”, but they do not belong in the nobility. He has a homosexual disposition in a time when homosexuality could put you in jail and destroy your reputation and your life. As an Anglo-Irish, he is too English to be Irish, and too Irish to be English. As a personality in London, he is the Irishman who specializes in provoking the English to laugh about their own flaws. All those circumstances introduce us to a man accustomed to tread on delicate grounds.

The idea in this thesis is to establish a connection between the life and circumstances of the person Oscar Wilde that gave birth to the author Oscar Wilde. The thesis of my thesis is that some of the trademarks in Wilde’s style develop from the survival strategies he developed so as to be accepted without having either to give himself in, or to lie. As a consequence, Wilde grew into the insurmountable master of wit, puns, innuendoes and double meanings that he is.

As I was introduced into the world of literature, I learned to appreciate many authors, for different reasons, but none called to me so strongly as Oscar Wilde. His sense of humor, and wit, were charming and exciting at the same time. I was intrigued with the recurrence in his plays of characters pretending to be someone else, or something they were not, always provoking the most delightful confusions and misunderstandings. Sometimes I think that the reason why I loved that so much has to do with my own development as a person. It took me long to know something about who I am, to disentangle my expectations from other many expectations put on me, and plunging into Wilde's world — apparently so shallow and light, in depth so abysmal — offered me a welcome relief. I believe I am not the only one to feel that way about the fiction of Oscar Wilde.

In this endless search to be accepted, we struggle (sometimes with, sometimes against) in an attempt to suffice and fit in, so others can see us the way we want to be seen by them. Unfortunately, more often than not, in our struggle to be someone better we end up trying to be someone else. In the attempt to improve, to show our best qualities, we enter a game of appearance where meaning does not matter so much, as long as the words are beautiful. Our need to blend in among our peers is so intense that we even acquire the "appropriate" debauched attitude, such as being a snob. We try so hard to impress, that we may end up forgetting the reason why we want to impress.

Whether or not we admit it, we all need to belong in a group, and it was not different with Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, who reinvented himself like a chameleon in order to be accepted into the higher social ranks of English society, which he seems to admire and loathe in the same proportion. Even though Wilde was not wealthy (or because of that), his beloved blue China was always exposed in his college dorm (ELLMANN, 1988, p. 44). He was a walking contradiction, at the

same time highlighting the importance of beauty and criticizing the emptiness of high society.

So as to understand this man, whose need to be accepted matched his need to challenge, it is necessary to take in consideration not only his extravagant personality but also the context that modeled it. To actually understand someone we need to know about their background, their work, the important people in their lives, and their motivations. In the case of Oscar Wilde, examining the circumstances of the person means examining the elements that helped create the author he became. Not only is Oscar Wilde a product of his time, but, mostly, the art he created helped to change his time as well. His participation in movements such as The Aesthetes, The Decadents, Art For Art's Sake and The Dress Reform opened the way to Modernism and to the current aesthetic patterns of our present time.

The constant play of contrasts in Wilde's life, style and work is fascinating. The clash starts with the differences between the simplicity of his private life and the flamboyance of his public life. The pedantic airs and dandy clothes, the careless attitude that showed his disregard to everyone's opinion somehow failed to hide the fact that he yearned to be loved and applauded by his audience. Wilde could not help questioning, mocking and putting effort to have the upper hand in any discussion, his need for attention was unparalleled, as one of his best known quotes shows from the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "There is only one thing in the world that is worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about." (WILDE, 2011, electronic information, location 139).

In Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* a painter, Basil Howard, creates a masterpiece. The resulting product, the portrait, consists of the blending of three elements: what the model has to offer; what the eye and the dexterity of the painter can extract from that raw material; and the energy exchanged between the two parts involved. In a similar way, the discussion held in this thesis also aims at painting an

image of Oscar Wilde. My portrait of Wilde consists of an argumentative discussion about the points of intersection that connect the person, the author, and the work, making reference to his works whenever necessary.

The circumstances involving the life of Oscar Wilde are so dramatic and intense that make him at least as interesting a character to be studied as any of the great characters he has created. This can be a problem, because we are under the risk of thinking and talking more about the creator than about the creature. This is a circumstance shared by Wilde and several other great British authors, such as Lord Byron, Mary Shelley, Jane Austen, the Brontës, only to name a few. In order to prevent disproportion in the blending of colors to the painting of this portrait, biographical and contextual information will be dealt with only to the extent that they prove really relevant to the aim pursued, that is an answer to the question “What is an author like Oscar Wilde made of?” Therefore, the light shed on a few aspects of Wilde’s life presented in Chapter One means an effort to better understand what triggers the development of such a peculiar writer, what causes the person to choose to wear masks, and then to strip the masks and find what lies beneath, what makes Wilde be Wilde, and how the game of appearances he insists on playing influences his life and work.

The discussion held in this thesis will be carried in three chapters. The first offers an investigation about the person and his time, aiming at highlighting elements pertinent to the development of the author. The factual elements referred to in this section are shaped after the biography written by Richard Ellmann. They talk about the boy that during his childhood was dressed like a girl, after a fashion of that time, and sent to a boarding school at the age of ten; the Irish student who went to Oxford and became a poet; his relatively modest background that was flourished by the title that his father received for being the queen’s ophthalmologist. The man who became an aesthete and an aesthete who became an author. A man who lived the life

society expected of him and at the same time secretly experimented every pleasure life could offer; and how some of these experiences led him to his demise.

The second and third chapters analyze the author, his mask and shadow and how he played with them to be accepted into society while still being himself. It also discusses how Wilde's life and experiences influenced his work, just as his work influenced his personal life, lacing one with the other, and also telling how Wilde's life and work effected Victorian society. In the second chapter it will be defined the concept of "mask" and "shadow" according to Jung, pointing out how they worked in Wilde's life, as he chose to protect or expose himself at different moments of his life. It will also explore Wilde's main works in chronological order, talking about his first tragedies and the turning point in his career as he approached taboo topics in a short story and his only novel.

The third chapter will start by focusing on the remaining plays written by Wilde - Salomé and four comedies-, which brought him critical success, fame and money. Then it will explore Wilde's fall from grace by examining works that were written after he was convicted of "gross indecency", during his time in prison and his self-imposed exile. Finally, it will consider how Wilde not only changed Victorian literature but also left a legacy to society in general with timeless stories that continue to be adapted in different medias, all over the world, over a hundred years after the author's death.

# **1 PERSON: “Be yourself: everyone else is taken”**

## **1.1 IRELAND AND OXFORD: “Every saint has a past, every sinner has a future”**

To understand who an author is, it is useful to understand their background, and how it influenced them. Aspects of their environment, and the people in their lives, affect them in a way or another, shaping them as a person and, in consequence, as an author. In Wilde’s case, aspects of his childhood in Ireland, and of his upbringing in Portora Royal School, Trinity College, and finally in Oxford, are important factors in the shaping of his personality and style. His London life, marriage, and concealed male lovers, on the other hand, define the strategies he conceives to establish the ways in which he is seen by that society.

Wilde was born on October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1854, a couple of years after the start of the Great Famine, which killed about one million people and drove another million to emigrate to Great Britain, America and Canada. In this context, it is no surprise that Wilde’s family was not exactly rich. Yet, they had enough money to live comfortably, throwing parties on occasion and sending their two sons to a good boarding school. Still, they would always attempt to seem wealthier than they were, showing their best clothes and jewelry whenever they could.



Still, Wilde's parents were not only concerned with appearances; they were also committed to intellect and ideology<sup>2</sup>. The Wilde family might not be very wealthy, but they were certainly culturally rich. Around the time Wilde was welcomed into the world, the Irish nationalist movement was rising as the main ideology among the Irish. Both his parents adhered to the movement, specially his mother, who would often write on the subject. The nationalist in Wilde lived on throughout his whole life, and though he did not write about the subject, he would occasionally talk about his beloved Ireland and its supremacy to his friends.

Oscar was the middle child in this intellectual family that would stimulate the genius of their children. His father, William Wilde, was an ophthalmologist, considered the best in the field; he was so respected that he became Queen Victoria's doctor and, as a consequence, was knighted, and became Sir William Wilde, while his wife became Lady Wilde (see Annexes, p. 106). Sir William published books on medicine, archeology and folklore. This yearn to recognition, success and appreciation, therefore, belonged in the Wilde family even before Oscar was born, as well as the desire to be appreciated in high society. Even though Sir William had been honored with the title, the entire family was well aware that they did not have either fortune or blue blood.

Although Sir William might have everything to become a model to his sons, Oscar got his inspiration mostly from his mother, the artistic Jane Francesca Wilde. He shared with her the love of literature and the belief that he was destined to greatness, as she believed she also was. Like her son, Lady Wilde was loud and extravagant in everything she did. She would throw parties, where she would wear her most fashionable clothes, while taking her children to a corner, instructing them to remain quiet and pay attention to the great minds in the room.

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<sup>2</sup> Except when otherwise indicated, the facts and data displayed in this chapter have their origin in Richard Ellmann's authoritative biography of Oscar Wilde.

Lady Wilde's convictions were strong. Under the pen name "Speranza" she would write poetry, folklore or about her thoughts on nationalism. Oscar, in his turn, would tell his peers that one day he would be so famous he would simply be called "The Wilde" or "The Oscar", unaware of the fact that there would come a dark day, in the future, when he would be called "C. 3.3", the number of his cell in Reading.<sup>3</sup>

Wilde's closeness to his mother was uncommon, and her dedication to him was so obvious that it would not be farfetched to believe he was her favorite son. Besides their natural affinities, this connection might have been reinforced by the fact that Sir William had extramarital affairs, and also by the sorrow caused by the untimely death of Wilde's youngest sister, Isola Francesca, before she reached the age of ten. After a fashion of the times, Francesca would dress Wilde as a girl in his early years, and as he grew up and went to school she would comment on his geniality to her friends, saying he would be someone important one day.

Throughout his life Wilde kept in close touch with his mother, visiting her periodically and inviting her to publish some of her articles in the magazine *Women's World*, of which he was the editor from 1887 to 1889. Their relationship was very special. Lady Wilde was by Wilde's side until her very end, encouraging him to fight in court against the accusations made by the Marquess of Queensberry, instead of running away as most of his friends had advised him to. Though there was nothing left to fight for, he still cherished her support and strength.

In one of his latest works, *De Profundis*, Wilde's feelings for his mother are shown through sadness and shame,

Three more months go over and my mother dies. No one knew how deeply I loved and honoured her. Her death was terrible to me; but I, once a lord of language, have no words in which to express my anguish and

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<sup>3</sup> After that, in his exile in Paris, Oscar would adopt a pen name, "Sebastian Melmoth". At that point he would write to a lower class magazine, explaining that "it circulates widely among the criminal classes – to which I now belong – for once I will be read by my peers – a new experience for me". (KIBERD, 200, p. 336)

my shame. She and my father had bequeathed me a name they had made noble and honoured, not merely in literature, art, archeology, and science, but in the public history of my own country, in its evolution as a nation. I had disgraced that name eternally. (WILDE, 2009, electronic information, location 1751)

Aside from his younger sister, Isola, Wilde also had an older brother, William, named after their father. There were also the three legitimated children Sir Wilde had outside marriage. The fact was no secret to the family, and one of the children was even adopted by the author's uncle. This subject of illegitimate children develops into a recurrent theme in Oscar Wilde's plays.

At age ten, Oscar and his brother Willie were sent to the prestigious Portora Royal School, an all-boy boarding school about a hundred miles from Dublin. The relationship between Oscar and his brother was never very close, and there is not much information on the subject. As expected, the boys were competitive while growing up in the same boarding school, being constantly compared. Willie, two years older than Oscar, was the first to call the attention of his peers, being considered a bright, good-humored boy, who was well liked by all, while Oscar started in the shadows of his brother.

That is probably when Wilde created his first mask, and showed his classmates and teachers a new side of him, through the use of his sharp tongue, academic prowess and extremely witty retorts. Needless to say that his situation in school changed dramatically; he quickly became the most popular child in school, and surely the best known of the two brothers. The staff in the school finally noticed what was right under their noses, and Wilde was delighted with the attention he received, pushing his insecurities into the shadows.

Until that moment Wilde's life revolved mostly around his mother and whatever she taught him, so Oscar did not need to create a mask to the world when

he was at home. However, once he moved to Portora, all bets were off and he needed to gain the attention that had been freely given to him until that point. His wit, humor and intelligence made it possible for him to play the role of a bright, sophisticated young man, with a charming yet slightly edgy personality. This was how he presented himself to his peers at least for the following fifteen years, during his whole education, until he graduated from Oxford.

By the end of Wilde's studies at Portora, he was awarded a scholarship to Trinity College because of his academic success, which he accepted as the next obvious step on his education. His life at Trinity College was like an extension from his time in Portora, in many ways. Portora was not only a prestigious Irish school, but also a preparatory school to Trinity College, which led Oscar to meet most of his old classmates again. His academic prowess continued, making him not only the first in his class in the first year at Trinity, but also win a scholarship to Magdalen College in Oxford.

The most important contribution to Wilde's education at Trinity was certainly his introduction to Aestheticism, a literary movement he would join and partake in for the rest of his life. In his studies at Trinity, Wilde read works by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and Algernon Charles Swinburne, who was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature numerous times. Their influence upon Wilde's style turned him into one of the leading figures of the Decadent movement, as well as the Aestheticism, in England, when he was proud to say he only cared about what was beautiful.

The Decadent Movement is the first movement to introduce the concept of "art for art's sake", which started in France in the second half of the 19th century and soon found followers in England, having as one of its pioneers no other than Wilde. This movement was often confused with the Aesthetic Movement, that had also

started in France around the same time and later also adopted the idea of “art for art’s sake”. The difference between these is here explained by Phillip Cohen:

The purest Aesthetic poems are not really “about” anything; form, sound, image, and mood dominate to the extent that little or no room remains for ideas. (...) The Decadent, in contrast, wages a guerilla war against the dominant culture. He defines himself through conflict and contrast. Having erected, or accepted, the same barriers against life as the Aesthete, he then attacks. Through his efforts *épater le bourgeois*, he expresses his contempt for prevailing values and sensibilities and asserts his sense of superiority and the amorality of art. (COHEN, 2013, electronic information)

Even though there is a difference between the movements, Wilde joined both. While in Oxford, Wilde was influenced by Walter Pater and John Ruskin, two well known writers and art critics who were part of the Aesthetic Movement. They inspired not only Wilde’s writing but also his behavior and style.

After graduating from Trinity, Wilde moved to England to study at Oxford, where he seemed to finally feel at home. Although he loved Ireland dearly, his experience at his homeland was not very challenging or exciting. His time at his parents’ Anglo-Irish home was short, for he was sent to Portora when he was ten years old. Although he enjoyed his time both at Portora and Trinity College, Wilde never had to try very hard to be one of the best in his classes, even though he was the youngest student in most of them. This opportunity to go to England and study in one of the best universities in the world was certainly a turning point in Wilde’s life.

Oxford was a magical place for Wilde, one which he would visit long after he graduated. There he made friends that he considered his equals in intellect and talent, and found the closest thing to an academic challenge, even if he enjoyed correcting his tutors every once in a while. By that time he already had a unique style. He decorated his room with peacock feathers, wore colorful clothes, read on

the most varied subjects, and spent his time drinking tea in china porcelain, which was considered extremely sophisticated by his colleagues.

Wilde's peculiar behavior was not universally accepted. He was considered a freak by some classmates, especially among the athletes. His extravagant way of dressing and his flamboyant attitude were not unanimously appreciated. However, Oscar never attempted to disguise his unique nature, rejoicing in the attention he got, even when it was negative. In one of his best known quotes in the future, he wrote: "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about." (WILDE, 1998, p. 44) He really seemed to believe so.

On the other hand, the more intellectual types perceived Wilde as someone forward and cultured. His dandy style, even though criticized by many, was also regarded as innovative and sophisticated, which made him famous in the place. His concern with being surrounded by beauty was somewhat in fashion at the start of the Aesthetic Movement, and Wilde took the concept seriously, from the way he dressed to the way he wrote. At the time, he would mostly write poetry, even winning an Oxford award.

Wilde considered himself a man of the world, who loved to travel and showed this in his works. A couple of years after moving to Oxford to study the Classics, he travelled to Greece and Rome with a few other students. During the trip, while some of his classmates felt homesick, he would proudly affirm that he belonged in the world and therefore had no reason to feel homesick. Although he enjoyed his time in Greece, his trip to Rome made him question his Agnosticism, inherited from his father, and consider Catholicism, not for the first time.

Wilde spent most of his life flirting with the Catholic Church, but never acted on it, maybe because he was still financially dependent on his father, and felt that he had to live in a way that was acceptable to his family. However, his fascination with

Catholic rites and ways shows in his works, especially in *Salomé*, his second play and only tragedy, written after the death of his father.

The presence of religion can be also felt in Wilde's comedies. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for example, both Algernon and Jack want to be baptized (although this time in the Church of England) so as to be named Earnest and be accepted by their beloved Gwendolen and Cecily. In *A Woman of No Importance* the remorse for having a child out of wedlock led the main female character to lock herself in a life of isolation and devotion to God. The importance of marriage is present both in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*, in which the wives are expected to blindly trust their husbands simply because they are the men in the family.

It seems as if the concept of marriage was sacred to Wilde. In his comedies, even when there was reason to doubt the husbands' fidelity, or morality, the outcome of the stories always showed that those husbands cared deeply about their wives and families. In his personal life, Wilde's perception of marriage appears to be the same. In spite of his father's infidelities, his parents seemed to keep a stable marriage. His own marriage followed the same pattern. Although Wilde would spend weeks away from home, eventually cheating on Constance with male lovers who were a decade younger than him, what would be a shocking fact to Victorian society, he still seemed to care deeply for his family life, strange as this may seem. Were it not for his ill-fated relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas ("Bosie"), his escapades would be overlooked as so many practices held in the shade of the Victorian social panorama. But Wilde got pressed between the attacks Bosie and his father, the Marquess of Queensberry, cast upon each other. Also the fact that both Wilde and Bosie had strong tempers contributed to the scandals that constantly involved them. One of their most epic fights involves the play *Salomé*, about the Biblical princess who requested John the Baptist's head on a silver platter. The plot was inspired by the gospels of Mark and Matthew, in the New Testament. The play

was first written in French, to be then translated into English by Wilde himself. But Bosie – whose French was scarce – offered to do the translation. As expected, the translation was poor, and Wilde had to interfere. Bosie’s pride made it difficult for him to receive criticism. As for Wilde, he was a perfectionist who would not accept anything but the best when it came to his work. It was obvious that they could not work together. Their battle about the translation took months to settle down. It grew to a point that the editor had to interfere and work as a mediator between them. The translation of the tragedy drove them apart to the point that they broke up for a short period of time. In the end, Oscar corrected Bosie’s version of the play but let him have most of the credit.

The contradictory aspects in Wilde’s personality allowed him to feel a respectable man of family in spite of his extra marital excursions; or to flirt with the flourishing rites Catholicism while performing Anglican practices. But it was only after his stay in hell, when he went through his stay in prison that he found a real connection to religiosity. In *De Profundis* he writes about his views on Christ and the way God would perceive the world. Wilde’s God is bigger and better than worldly Victorian prejudice, and would accept him in the Kingdom of Heaven. Not only did Oscar feel that he would be welcomed by Christ, he also felt that Christ was much like him in his individualism and the way sins were perceived. In a quote from *De Profundis* we have, “Christ, had he been asked, would have said – I feel quite certain about it – that the moment the prodigal son fell on his knees and wept, he made his having wasted his substance with harlots, his swine – herding and hungering for the husks they ate, beautiful and holy moments in his life.” (WILDE, 2009, electronic information, location 2269.)

However, Wilde’s views on religion would not suffice for him to be accepted into the Catholic Church. After two years of forced labor and isolation in prison, after he fell into disgrace and his family fled the country and changed surname not to be recognized as sharing his shame, Wilde, looking for solace, wrote a letter to the



Jesuits, asking for a six-month retreat, in an attempt to rekindle his broken soul. But his request was denied. According to Wilde's friend Ava Lederson, he wept upon receiving the letter that repudiated his appeal. Wilde might have found redemption in Christ, but he certainly could not get it from institutionalized religion. After that, he went to France in a self-inflicted exile, and adopted first the pen name Sebastian Melmoth, later Saint Sebastian. This was the closest he got to the Catholic Church, until his poor health turned critical and it became obvious that he had just a few days left. Only in his deathbed, by decision of his lifelong friend Robert Ross, a priest baptized and anointed Wilde before absolving him from his sins.

## **1.2 AESTHETES, USA, FAMILY: "I have the simplest tastes. I'm always satisfied with the best."**

The death of Wilde's father in 1876 was experienced as a tragedy, and caused the whole family to move to London. The biggest loss to Wilde, however, was the end of his monthly income. At that moment Wilde considered dropping out of school to look for a job and support himself. Even though he had a scholarship at Oxford he thought the allowance his mother sent him monthly would not be enough to keep his expensive lifestyle. But in the end he decided it was better to live in debt than to try to lessen his expenses or drop out of Oxford. He would wait until he graduated to, hopefully, find a solution to his financial problems.

Although he was ultimately a middle-classed Irish man, as Bosie would often remind him, Wilde saw himself as an extraordinarily talented writer with an

impeccable taste, who deserved only the best. His opinion on how money should be spent is stated very clearly in all his comedies. Wilde's first comedy, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, is mostly set in a house in a posh address in London, which is described as beautiful, with a spacious ballroom and terrace. This is the same kind of setting we have in *An Ideal Husband*, with the beautiful house of Lady Chiltern. Here the place is described in more detail, with the chandelier with wax light, the eighteen-century French tapestry and the Louis XVI sofa. In *A Woman of No Importance* we meet country luxury in Hunstanton Chase, a fashionable estate at the time.

Finally, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde outdoes himself. In his last and most famous play, characters go to great lengths to show how well off they are. The main character frequently travels from his manor in the country to London just to indulge in a life in which he does not have to have any responsibilities. He has a considerable staff to keep his country home running, as well as a tutor for his niece. Algernon, in turn, seems to have a house with modern traits such as an electric doorbell, as well as a butler at his disposal. Finally, Miss Fairfax and her mother, Lady Bracknell, could not be more sophisticated in their fashionable dresses and the pretentious attitude that could only be attributed to the elite.

A couple of years before Wilde graduated from Oxford he visited Ireland briefly to see his family. During his time in Dublin he met his childhood friend Florence Balcombe, who he also considered his first love. She was interesting and refreshing, with her beauty and talent as an actress, qualities of a worthy woman in Wilde's eyes. Their friendship rekindled and soon became a romance; however it did not last long. Although Wilde considered marrying her for a brief moment, that was not really a possibility at the time. Wilde was just about to graduate, had no income of his own, and it was obvious that he would need time to establish himself as a successful writer. Before his return to Oxford, he wrote to Florence showing how he cherished their time together,

As I shall be going back to England, probably for good, in a few days, I should like to bring with me the little gold cross I gave you one Christmas morning long ago. I need hardly say that I would not ask it from you if it was anything you valued, but worthless though the trinket be, to me it serves as a memory of two sweet years – the sweetest of all the years of my youth – and I should like to have it always with me. (WILDE, 2009, electronic information, location 783)

The end of their romance was inevitable and heartbreaking to Wilde, especially when, a little later, she married Bram Stoker, who would later write the classic novel *Dracula*. Still, his temperament would not allow him to be bitter about that, and he wished her all the best in a letter, saying, “Though you have not thought it worthwhile to let me know of your marriage, still I cannot leave Ireland without sending you my wishes that you may be happy; whatever happens I at least cannot be indifferent to your welfare: the currents of our lives flowed too long beside one another for that.” (Idem, location 788) Wilde would always try to remain friends with all his lovers after their relationship had ended. His friendship with Robert Ross became even stronger after their affair was over. He was also generous with prostitutes, and even when his marriage to Constance became somewhat of a façade, he still treated her with gentleness and affection.

The beginning of Wilde’s career was difficult, and he had no choice but to share a house with a friend while asking for loans and looking for a job. At that time, he would accept practically any job to pay the bills. In 1880, he wrote his first play, *Vera*, a tragedy that had very few copies published. Although Wilde intended to have it produced in Britain that same year, that never happened. In 1883 he tried another tragedy, *The Duchess of Padua*. The play was written with actress Mary Anderson in mind, but she refused to play the role. Anyway, at that time Wilde was more concerned about money than anything else. His payment for both plays was much less than what he considered fair, but he had no option other than to accept it.

Wilde's tragedies were not making any success in Britain, actually they were not even being produced in England. Nevertheless, he became somewhat famous for his attention to beauty, especially in art. He was considered the first aesthete in Britain, and was invited to lecture on the subject on a tour through the United States (see Annexes, p. 107). Americans wished to partake in the new trend that the French had started, and Wilde was more than happy to make a good amount of money while traveling abroad and being received almost as a celebrity.

I take this as his second mask, presenting himself to the Americans as a celebrity, full of knowledge and talent, someone who should be appreciated by everyone. He was certainly a man of the world, as he later wrote in *De Profundis*, "I remember when I was at Oxford saying to one of my friends as we were strolling round Magdalen's narrow bird-haunted walks one morning in the year before I took my degree, that I wanted to eat of the fruit of all the trees in the garden of the world, and that going out into the world with that passion in my soul. And so, indeed, I went out, and so I lived." (idem, location 2007)

After lecturing through the United States for a year, Wilde returned to London. He was then twenty nine and he felt the time had come for him to marry. He knew that was the expected thing to do, another mask society demanded that he wore, the right thing to do. While he lectured in London in 1883, he quietly looked for a potential wife. Unsurprisingly, it was his mother who reacquainted him with Constance Lloyd (see Annexes, p. 111), whom he had first met in 1881. Lady Wilde invited both Constance and Wilde for tea, and let him appreciate not only Constance's beauty but also her intelligence, a combination he considered essential. By May 1884 they were happily married, and Oscar attempted earnestly to become the best husband he could be.

Their marriage was a success for the first couple of years. They shared the same views in art, marriage and life in general. Constance was a writer who

published a book of fairy tales and numerous articles to the magazine *Women's World*, of which Wilde was the editor. Constance was a member of the Dress Reform Movement, which aimed at creating more comfortable and practical clothes for women. The movement did not influence man's clothes that much, because most of them were already comfortable. The movement projected clothes for riding bicycles and horses, as well as swimming suits and clothes for pregnant women.

As expected at the time, less than a year after their wedding Constance got pregnant with their first child, Cyril (see Annexes, p. 112). Her pregnancy was welcomed by the whole family, and Wilde could not be happier with their marriage and child, at the time. He cared deeply for his wife. Franny Moyle, the author to Constance's biography, comments that, "Once the baby arrived, his tone changed from considerateness and caution to jubilation and enthusiasm. 'The baby is wonderful,' [Wilde] wrote to his friend the actor and dramatist Norman Forbes-Robertson. 'Constance is doing capitally and is in excellent spirits... you must get married at once!'" (MOYLE, 2011, p. 107)

However, their happiness, as well as his view of marriage, did not last long. Ironically, it was the birth of their second son that, instead of bringing them together, started to drive them apart. Vyvyan's birth was not nearly as celebrated as Cyril's had been (see Annexes, p. 113). According to Moyle,

When Vyvyan grew up, he acknowledged the fact that he was something of a disappointment. He adored Constance, he said, but noted that: 'I was always conscious that both my father and my mother really preferred my brother to myself; it seems to be an instinct in parents to prefer their first born... I was not as strong as my brother, and I had more than my share of childish complaints, which probably offended my father's aesthetic sense... And most of all, both my parents had hoped for a girl'. (Idem, p. 116)

For some reason, Wilde seemed to feel sexually appalled by his wife after Vyvyan's birth. That was the time when he met Robert Ross ("Robbie") (see Annexes, p. 114), who became not only a lifelong friend, but also his first male lover. From that point his sex life with Constance stopped, and their marriage turned into a friendship, even though this happened against her will. Once Wilde started having affairs with men their marriage sunk. His sarcastic comments and quotes on marriage became famous, and they were not flattering to the institution at all: "One should always be in love. That is the reason one should never marry." (WILDE, 1998, p. 18)

Wilde's comedies would often show what marriage was supposed to be like, according to society. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the Duchess of Berwick delivers this cruel speech: "Yes, dear, these wicked women get our husbands away from us, but they always come back, slightly damaged, of course." (WILDE, 2003, p.109) The truth is that Wilde's marriage was more than slightly damaged, when Bosie could be considered "the wicked woman" in respect to Constance. Wilde rarely went back home, spending most of his time with Bosie in hotels all around London, to the point that he would say he had forgotten where his home was.

In another passage of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the main couple argues about trust in marriage,

LORD WINDERMERE: Ah, Margaret! only trust me! A wife should trust her husband!

LADY WINDERMERE: London is full of women who trust their husbands. One can always recognize them. They look so thoroughly unhappy. I am not going to be one of them. (Idem, p.120)

Regrettably, Constance probably trusted Wilde more than she should, supporting him blindly during his entire life, even if that would make her miserable. Victorian times were so filled with silence and taboos, that it is possible that Constance only realized Wilde's homosexual bend after his conviction for "gross indecency". Still, she visited him in prison to tell him his mother had died, and helped him financially after he was released, on the condition that he cut all ties with Bosie.

In his third comedy, *An Ideal Husband*, the irony is visible from the title. The comedy is about the idolization that Lady Chiltern has of her husband, in her certitude that he could do no wrong. She eventually learns about their true character, and their faults, until finally what was supposed to drive them apart brings them closer. However, in this case fiction was no parallel to Wilde's reality. His disbelief in marriage is shown in one of his most famous quotes, "Men marry because they are tired; women because they are curious; both are disappointed." (WILDE, 2011, electronic source, location 1107) Wilde was definitely no ideal husband, and Constance had learned that she would never be able to change him.

Wilde's heart was divided between art, men, and his children. While he still cared for Constance, he loved his children deeply. During his time of fame and fortune, when he wrote his comedies, he would spend most of his time with Bosie or, sporadically, with other male lovers, living either in hotels or in the countryside. But whenever he was home he spent his whole time with his children, attempting to be the best father he could. His dedication to his sons can be also found in his writing, as he would write and read fairy tales to them. In his essay "The Decay of Lying", Wilde offers a dialogue between his children that could be considered a show of reverence to his sons, in which Cyril and Vyvyan talk about Aestheticism.

Constance was kind to Wilde even after his conviction. However, she was now the only one to provide for their children, and she felt she had to do what was best

for them. Therefore, she asked Wilde to relinquish his parental rights, which he did. Pederasty was considered such a horrible practice at that time, that once a man fell into disgrace the best thing he could do for his family was to vanish from the world. The separation from his children broke him completely. This appears in *De Profundis*, the essay in which he refers to himself in the past tense, as if he no longer existed,

I had lost my name, my position, my happiness, my freedom, my wealth. I was a prisoner and a pauper. But I still had my children left. Suddenly they were taken away from me by the law. It was a blow so appalling that I did not know what to do, so I flung myself on my knees, and bowed my head, and wept, and said, 'The body of a child is as the body of the Lord: I am not worthy of either.' (WILDE, 2009, electronic information, location 2099)

### **1.3 TRIAL AND EXILE: “No man is rich enough to buy back his past.”**

It is undeniable that Oscar Wilde always followed his heart's desires to the fullest. From his Oxford days until his arrest he lived for pleasure, indulging himself in everything that was beautiful and joyful, no matter the cost or the consequences. His dandy character could be considered sophisticated and his aesthete soul would not accept anything ugly to be associated to him. While in Oxford, he would write poetry and talk about his precious blue china; afterwards, during his time as a lecturer in the USA and London he became even more involved with the Aesthete



movement. He chose a beautiful bride to himself and a beautiful home to his family. Then, in 1886, after meeting Robert Ross, he started having sex with beautiful young men. Although Ross was fifteen years younger than Wilde, it was Ross who seduced him, not the other way around. Ross was aware of his own sexuality when he met Wilde, and became his first male lover. Their relationship started as a sexual one, but soon Oscar became interested in other young men, and they remained good friends. There was no jealousy between them as Robert introduced Oscar to other young men and their circle of friends, in which Wilde later met some very important figures in his life, such as Lord Alfred Douglas.

Wilde found in the beauty and youth of these men something that he had longed for all his life without knowing he wanted it. Until he started having sexual relations with men, Wilde's works were sporadic and not quite successful. In the eight years from his graduation at Oxford to his introduction to Ross, Wilde had only published a book of poems and written two plays: *Vera, or The Nihilists* and *The Duchess of Padua*. Both were tragedies, and neither was produced in Britain at the time they were written. Also, although Wilde won an award for his poetry in Oxford, and his book of poems was well received by the critics, it did not sell greatly and was not influential as a source of income.

However, once he started having affairs, the quality of his works and his drive for writing improved considerably, and he soon gained recognition as a writer. Three years after meeting Ross he wrote his first provocative piece, "The portrait of Mr. W. H.", a homo-erotic story that was received with controversy, and attracted the attention of many critics. A year later he wrote his masterpiece and only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a work about the search for pleasure in all forms, regardless of what is socially or morally acceptable. Another point brought to discussion was the adoration of the beauty and youth in men, hinting on a more sexual appreciation from older male characters towards the young and beautiful character.

What we see in these two stories mirrors the new perceptions that Wilde was adhering to at the time. His worship of beauty in art was expanding into an appreciation of the beauty of a young male body. His fascination with the Greek culture and love that had started during his travel to Greece in his college days made itself known again, and the concept of a relationship between a younger and an older man, that mimicked the relationship of a pupil and his tutor, seemed exciting to Wilde. He therefore surrounded himself with beautiful young men, usually between ten and fifteen years younger than himself, and started visiting Oxford periodically, getting in touch with its new students.

Until that moment, Oscar Wilde always wore a mask that could be accepted and appreciated by society, presenting himself as a bright, talented, witty, sophisticated married respectable man, pushing his insecurities and any “ugly” qualities into the shadows. He tried so hard to seem the perfect man that he may even have fooled himself for a while. However, from the moment he began having concrete sexual relationships, he found in himself an appreciation for something that was forbidden, that he desired greatly and in no time. What he had hidden for so long in his shadow was now being exposed to the world in his writing. Suddenly, while the man was wearing the mask, the author was happily declaring the secrets in his shadow.

Wilde’s passionate fascination with youth and beauty showed in his personal life as well as in his works. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, we read, “(...) youth is the one thing worth having”, (WILDE, 2011, electronic information, location 686) In his social comedies most characters can be analyzed according to their ages. The younger characters are presented as interesting and irreverent, while the older ones are authoritative and sinful. Wilde seemed to perceive the people in his life in a similar way, spending most of his time with younger men and considering them of more importance than people his own age.

In the comedies the younger characters are described as modern and sophisticated, yet they still fit perfectly in high society. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the protagonist is very forward when she defends equal responsibilities to men and women, but at the same time she condemns women who do not abide to what is morally expected by society:

LORD DARLINGTON: Do you think women who have committed what the world calls a fault should never be forgiven?

LADY WINDERMERE: I think they should never be forgiven.

LORD DARLINGTON: And men? Do you think there should be the same laws for men as there are for women?

LADY WINDERMERE: Certainly!" (WILDE, 2003, p.103)

On the other hand, the older characters are jaded, and always have a secret in their past, that, in most cases, could destroy their reputation. These characters' lives revolve around appearances and they behave according to what is socially expected of them. This can be seen later in the same scene, when the Duchess of Berwick tells Lady Windermere that her husband is being unfaithful, and afterwards gives the young woman what she considered great advice:

LADY WINDERMERE: Windermere and I married for love.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK: Yes, we begin like that. It was only Berwick's brutal and incessant threats of suicide that made me accept him at all, and before the year was out, he was running after all kinds of petticoats, every colour,

every shape, every material. In fact, before the honeymoon was over, I caught him winking at my maid, a most pretty girl. I dismissed her at once without a character. – No, I remember I passed her on to my sister; poor dear Sir George is so short-sighted, I thought it wouldn't matter. But it did, though – it was most unfortunate. And now, my dear child, I must go, as we are dining out. And mind you don't take this little aberration of Windermere's too much to heart. Just take him abroad, and he'll come back to you all right.

LADY WINDERMERE: Come back to me?

DUCHESS OF BERWICK: Yes, dear, these wicked women get our husbands away from us, but they always come back, slightly damaged, of course. And don't make a scene, men hate them!" (Idem, p.108)

Wilde seemed to have a desire not to grow old. He therefore surrounded himself with beautiful young men who inspired him to write more, and better. Between the years of 1886 and 1889 Wilde had many male lovers, most of them artists of some kind. His short affair with Ross made him bolder in showing interest towards the same sex. One of these men was John Gray (see Annexes, p. 114), a handsome and talented writer, twelve years his junior, whom he met in 1890. Although the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was written before he met John, it is still associated with this young man, and many considered the use of the last name in the title a tribute to his lover. It is true that eventually Oscar and John became lovers.

Although John Gray was handsome and talented, it did not take long for someone else to catch Wilde's attention. One year later he met the most important man in his life, Lord Alfred Douglas, better known as Bosie (see Annexes, p. 115), who was spoiled, beautiful and controversial, characteristics that were irresistible to Wilde. In Constance's biography Bosie is described thus,

slight, blond and clean-shaven, he was an Oxford student and a Wilde fanatic. A practicing homosexual who was

himself exploring homoerotic themes in his own writing, he had become passionate about *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. When he had the good fortune to meet the author of this work, his admiration for Oscar, combined with his stunning looks, presented Oscar with the ideal formula for a new acolyte and lover. (MOYLE, 2011, p. 194)

Wilde and Bosie's relationship started as a friendship with deep admiration on each part; Wilde was enthralled with Bosie's beauty and youth, and Bosie fascinated with Wilde's talent and personality. Their friendship soon turned into a sexual relationship that introduced Wilde into a new lifestyle, which included other men, mostly prostitutes. Wilde would pay for everything, including expensive gifts for his sporadic lovers. Bosie, himself a wealthy aristocrat, did not seem to realize that Wilde's expenses exceeded his means. Wilde was intensely in love, and could not help but abide by Bosie's every whim.

At that point, Wilde started writing comedies and achieved great success, both with critics and the public. His first play, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, was produced a year after he was introduced to Bosie. From that moment on his literary success would only increase. He continued to write plays, using wit and wordplay to make his writing unique. The production of his comedies was very successful and quickly made him into a rich man. He would still sporadically write essays and poetry. Wilde had always been recognized as an accomplished writer, critically acclaimed by his poetry and lectures. But after he released himself sexually he diversified his works, becoming a journalist and editor, and writing fairy tales, stories, essays, plays, and even his novel.

Wilde's success as a playwright brought him financial stability and made him accepted into the high society that he had wished so long to be a part of. During his ascension his affair with Bosie became more serious and volatile. The couple had ups and downs and broke up numerous times for different reasons. Mostly, Bosie would

get bored, make scenes, accuse Wilde of being uninteresting, and leaving him to entertain himself with other men. However, Bosie would always go back to Wilde, begging for his forgiveness and asking him for another chance. Their unhealthy relationship reminds me of Sid and Nancy's, from the famous punk band Sex Pistols<sup>4</sup>. Though Bosie did not kill Wilde, he might be considered responsible for his ruin, decay and death just the same.

The couple's thoughtless behavior attracted the attention of many people in society, including Bosie's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, who would complain that Wilde was taking advantage of his son. Exactly at the time Wilde's most famous and acclaimed play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, was being produced, the Marquess sent a note to Wilde, in a gentlemen's club, accusing him of sodomy, the greatest offense in Victorian England. Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, approved ten years before, considered it a crime of "gross indecency", although it did not clearly specify what exactly "gross indecency" meant.

Victorian England's morality was too delicate to be explicit about the word, but it was clear that they referred to homosexual relations between two men, to sodomy, as gross indecency. As the penalty for that crime was life imprisonment, prosecutions based on that crime were very rare. Taking in consideration that, if that was a crime, Wilde was actually guilty, and that the Marquess had not gone to court with the accusation, Wilde's best attitude should be to remain silent on the subject. Bosie, however, considered the accusation an affront, and demanded that Wilde went to court against his father – with whom he himself had some serious issues. Bosie's encouragement that Oscar went to court against the Marquess had probably more to do with his selfish vengeance than with the affront against his lover.

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<sup>4</sup> Sid Vicious (1957-1979), vocalist in the famous punk band Sex Pistols (1976-1978), had a disturbing relationship with his girlfriend and manager Nancy Spungen. In 1978 he was arrested for murder after waking up in a hotel room to find Spungen stabbed to death in the bathroom. Vicious claimed the couple had been high on heroin the night before, so he could not remember what had happened. Vicious died of heroin overdose less than four months after Spungen. Their self-destructive relationship was made into a film titled *Sid and Nancy: Love Kills* (1986).

That was the most delicate moment in Wilde's life. *The Importance of Being Earnest* had premiered only a few months before, and here he was now, prosecuting Bosie's father, alleging that the Marquess had defamed him by accusing him of being a sodomite. He himself took the case to trial, and what he believed to be a simple and easy win actually turned into a nightmare. Wilde's (not so hidden) secrets were brought into light to become public knowledge, and his image and reputation went to the gutter overnight. By the time he realized the mistake he had made going after the Marquess it was too late. The machine had started its work and no one now could stop it.

The moment that changed everything was when Wilde was asked to explain what "the love that dare not speak its name" was, which Bosie had written about in one of his poems. Wilde's answer was practically a confession, as he said, "It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him. That it should be so the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it"<sup>5</sup>. After such an answer, there was nothing the judge could do, and Wilde was bound to suffer the consequences of his speech. Suddenly, in this unpredictable move, not only did Wilde lose his prosecution against the Marquess, but he became the prosecuted one for "gross indecency". His trial was exhausting, and even though he tried his best to defend himself, the proof against him was massive, and the questions directed to him were very specific. No matter how much he tried to spin the situation, at the end of the day he could not change the facts. By the time the trial had ended and Oscar waited for his sentence, most of his friends, including Ross, begged him to run away, as they were doing themselves. His mother, on the other hand, encouraged him to stay and defend himself until the end.

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<sup>5</sup> Transcript of Wilde's trial taken from the University of Missouri-Kansas City website

Nevertheless, what the outcome would be was more than obvious, and Oscar was convicted to two years of hard labor for the crime of gross indecency. From one moment to the next, the celebrated author at the peak of his fame, who was a symbol of sophistication, used not only to laugh at the odds, but also at an audience that applauded him, found himself in hell. There was nothing to laugh about in the fact that he was being convicted for one of the most repulsive crimes imaginable, in what the very judge called "The worst case I have ever tried"<sup>6</sup>. Wilde was banished from the society he had so hardly struggled to fit, he had disgraced his whole family, driving his wife and sons to run away to Switzerland where they changed their last name to hide the shame of being related to him.

The deep shame he felt, and the two years in prison broke Wilde's spirit in such a way that he never recovered. A spirit who fed on everything that was beautiful could not endure to live in suffering and ugliness. He could not feel but desolate when everything he ever cherished was taken from him in a moment. Wilde's philosophy could be well expressed in the words of American writer Charles Bukowski, who says, "We are here to laugh at the odds and live our lives so well that death will tremble to take us." (FRIEND, 1991) Unfortunately, the inconsequent way he lived his life, and the false sense of security fame granted him for a while, led Wilde to become too careless towards his reputation in a society that was still morally greatly oppressive.

Wilde seemed to accept his fate as well as he could, "I don't regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure. I did it to the full, as one should do everything that one does. There was no pleasure I did not experience." (WILDE, 2009, electronic information, location 2013) After two years of hard labor in a prison that destroyed his health and broke his spirit, that kept him away from everything that was beautiful, that turned him into just one more among a number of criminals, Oscar Wilde was finally released. After being rejected by the Jesuits, he went back to the

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<sup>6</sup> Transcript of Wilde's trial taken from the University of Missouri-Kansas City website



man who ruined him. Bosie was waiting for Wilde as he had promised, and they moved in together. At first, the couple was supported by allowances they received from Constance and the Marquess of Queensberry. However, when they found out that Wilde and Bosie were again together, both stopped sending money. Bosie had never worked in his life, and Wilde was an outcast now, so that neither had a source of income. They only stayed together as long as their money lasted. When it was over, they broke up for good.

Wilde had nowhere and no one to go to. As he was not welcome either in England or in Ireland, he found his self-imposed exile in Paris. After Constance's death, Wilde found a home in a lonely hotel and tried to write again, now under pen names. However, his writing was not lucrative as he could only publish on a few lower class magazines. The only profit he made came from the publication of "The Ballad of Reading Gaol", a poem he had written when still in prison. Fortunately, Wilde had a real friend in Robert Ross, who helped him as best as he could, both financially and emotionally.

Wilde once wrote, "To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all". However, he never ran the risk of "only existing". Wilde's story is full of life, pleasure, beauty, controversy, scandal, sophistication, humor, tragedy, and love. Unfortunately, every story has to come to an end, and Wilde did not find a reason to stay alive after so much tragedy. He spent his last few days in bed, sick and high on morphine. Finally, on November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1900, Oscar passed away in the hotel room he had lived in for the last three years, with only his lifelong friend Ross by his side (see Annexes, p. 126).

## **2 AUTHOR: “A mask tells us more than a face”**

### **2.1 THE MASK & THE SHADOW: “It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. They are either charming or tedious.”**

The terms “mask” and “shadow” were frequently mentioned in Chapter I, in reference to Wilde’s personality, and to the way he was seen by Victorian society, with no further explanation. Now it is time for these terms to be defined according to analytical psychology, which will allow us to have a clear understanding of the way Wilde and his works are perceived in this thesis. According to Jungian psychology, a person’s personality is composed of several other sub-personalities. Two of these sub-personalities are what Jung calls the “mask” (or persona) and the “shadow” (JUNG, 1976).

According to Jung, the persona is "a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual" (JUNG, 1972, p. 190), while the shadow "personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself and represents a tight passage, a narrow door, whose painful constriction no one is spared who goes down to the deep well" (JUNG, 1971, p. 384).

This definition tells us what we all know in some degree; that we behave accordingly to how we wish to be perceived by the world, showing the others our best image when it is convenient, while hiding what we considered undesirable. Most people try their best to show their brightest and shiniest mask as they hide their shadow, and so does Wilde for the first part of his life.

To create a mask that is at the same time sophisticated, daring and pleasing to the eye, Wilde hides behind art and partakes in the motto of “art for art’s sake”. It is important to keep in mind that the idea of “art for art’s sake” was not something completely apart of Wilde’s true self just because it was a mask, since all masks have some portion of a person’s self, only differing on how big or small that portion is.

The idea of living for art and everything that was beautiful, focusing on form instead of matter seemed ideal to Wilde. Although he was not one of the most dedicated students at Oxford, apparently everything that involved literature came easily to him. His poem “Ravenna”, for which he won the Newdigate Prize at Oxford, shows that. The poem reveals Wilde as a true aesthete and a decadent, focusing on the dramatics over everything else, as we can see in this passage:

O how my heart with boyish passion burned, When far  
away across the sedge and mere  
I saw that Holy City rising clear,  
Crowned with her crown of towers!--On and on I  
galloped, racing with the setting sun,  
And ere the crimson after-glow was passed,  
I stood within Ravenna's walls at last!<sup>7</sup>  
(WILDE, 2009, electronic information, location 15005)

Wilde’s aesthetic streak stayed with him for the rest of his life, presenting himself in different manners. He had always dressed in a fashionable way, due to his mother’s extravagant dressing style. However, he took that to a whole new level while in Oxford, wearing plaid suits, hats and the eventual flower on his jacket’s lapel. He dressed in such a flamboyant way that he was mocked during the American Tour in which, ironically, he lectured exactly about Aestheticism. A few newspapers went as far as to publish caricatures of Wilde as a sunflower (see Annexes, p. 109). In spite of that, the tour was a success and, even though its positive

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<sup>7</sup> Prose poetry is a poem written in prose. This form of poetry originated in nineteenth century France and Germany and was adopted by the Decadent Movement. Wilde was one of the first British writers to adhere to prose poetry, going as far as to write a book in this style of poetry titled *Poems in Prose* (1894)

outcome had much more to do with the fact that Wilde was the first aesthete in North America than with the quality of his lectures, he profited out of the experience.

Soon after his return to England, Wilde got married to Constance Lloyd, who was as interested in changing society as Wilde. Wilde saw Constance as the perfect wife; not only did she help him accomplish the social duty of getting married, he was also enamoured with her, as we can see in this letter he wrote to his friend, Lillie Langtry,

I am going to be married to a beautiful young girl called Constance Lloyd, a grave, slight, violet-eyed little Artemis, with great coils of heavy brown hair which make her flower-like head droop like a flower, and wonderful ivory hands which draw music from the piano so sweet that the birds stop singing to listen to her. (WILDE, 2007, electronic information, location 1554).

Wilde wore his best mask until the age of thirty two, just as he did with clothes, showing the world a bright sophisticated man who was at the same time daring and considerably socially acceptable. He yearned to fit in London's high society, to be recognised for his work and, hopefully, to become rich enough to indulge in every little pleasure he wished. However, that far his writings were limited to poetry and tragedies, and none of them were very successful. Wilde had not yet fully found his voice as an author; his desire to be accepted misguidedly led him to pretend to be someone else and present himself just in the way his mask would allow him to.

However, around the time his marriage fell apart, Wilde found that being an aesthete was not enough, and decided to follow the steps of the renowned writer and decadent Algernon Charles Swinburne, with whom he had exchanged letters while at Oxford, and he became a decadent as well. It was then that he decided to plunge

radically into action, and started having sexual relations with other men. In spite of the extremely drastic legislation in Britain – which could lead into death penalty for pederasty – by becoming a decadent Wilde finally found the courage to present his shadow to the world. His participation in the movement led him to approach taboo subjects, such as homosexuality, in his works “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” and later The Portrait of Dorian Gray. Although both works dealt with his theme subject indirectly, they (especially the latter) praised immorality in such an open way that they could not possibly be accepted by the Victorian society. Wilde defended himself in the preface when the story was published as a book: “There is no such a thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are either well written, or badly written. That is all” (WILDE, 2011, electronic information, location 332). The Preface, as expected, did not lower the number of harsh criticism towards the book.

In these two works Wilde presents his shadow for the first time, showing a dark side that was not welcome. In Stein’s terms, “(...) the shadow has an immoral or at least disreputable quality, containing features of a person’s nature that are contrary to the customs and moral conventions of society.” (STEIN, 2003, p.106). Later, he adds, “The shadow can be thought of as a subpersonality who wants what the persona [mask] will not allow.” (Idem, p.110).

Interestingly enough, it was only after showing his shadow that Wilde grew as a writer. His previous poems and tragedies were so self-restrained that they never managed to become a critical or financial success. Now he suddenly began to diversify his work, writing from fairy tales to essay, short stories, comedies, and his novel, not to mention his work as journalist and editor. His writing style becomes more defined, especially for its characteristic wit, polished dialogues and powerful quotes, which are his trade marks.

Things are always difficult when we deal with the interaction of mask and shadow, especially when what your shadow hides could very well send you to

death. We can see the mask and the shadow like the two sides of the same coin. The more repressive the society we live in, the more complex this interaction of mask and shadow becomes. This reminds me of that characteristic Victorian construct, the novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In Stevenson's story, we have the schizophrenic division of one scientist into two opposing personalities, Dr. Jekyll, the good philanthropist, and Mr. Hyde, the grotesque and evil criminal.

Though Dr. Jekyll misguidedly tries to separate himself from his darker side, he finds out that is impossible. No one is completely good or bad, every coin has two sides, and so have people. By trying to become completely good and pure, like the mask he presents to the world, Dr. Jekyll creates a monster in himself that he cannot control, and ends up ruining his life and killing him. This struggle can also be seen in more current plots, such as the novel *Fight Club* and the film *The Black Swan*. This story is not that different from what happens to Wilde. In the times when he tried to show only his mask, not allowing his shadow to express itself, Wilde managed to control his life, but could not open up as an artist. When he turned a decadent and allowed his shadow to come out, it took hold of his life. From that point onwards Wilde became a great artist, but exposed himself too much, not considering the consequences, even if they led him to his own ruin.

Still according to Stein:

The problem of integrating the shadow is a moral and psychological problem of the most thorny sort. If a person completely shuns the shadow, life is proper but it is terribly incomplete. By opening up to the shadow experience, however, a person becomes tainted with immorality but attains a greater degree of wholeness. This is truly a devil's bargain. (STEIN, 2003, p. 110)

This seems to be the perfect quote to Wilde's personality, as he has struggled to find a balance between mask and shadow during his whole life, always weighing

too much on either one or the other side. This is also clearly depicted in his works, as we will subsequently analyze.

## **2.2 THE CLIMBING YEARS: “Experience, the name men give to their mistakes”**

Wilde’s first experience as a writer starts in 1881, with his first tragedy. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it was difficult to have his first play, *Vera*, staged. This happened probably due to the facts that Wilde had never written a play in his life, did not know the right people to address in the field, and was not yet sure about who he was as a writer. The following year, however, after his successful lecture tour in the United States, he was finally invited to have *Vera* produced in New York, which happened in August 1883. *Vera* was a heroine loosely based on the revolutionary Russian historical figure Vera Ivanovna Zasluch. In the play, *Vera* comes from a lower class. After learning that her brother was arrested for being a revolutionary, trying to free the people from the Czar’s dictatorship, she tries to avenge his imprisonment by joining his cause. However, she falls in love with one of her fellow revolutionaries, who turns out to be the Czar’s son. *Vera* becomes torn between her cause and her feelings for that man, which leads the story to a tragic end.

Unfortunately, the play was a failure on Broadway and the reviews were negative. The New York Times review of the play the following day to its premiere described the nihilists as: “(...) a stupid and tiresome element of the work. These rapid fellows who talk like lunatics, swear the most preposterous oaths, and act like children give no dramatic force to the play.” (BECKSON, p. 55) And furthermore,

affirms that, "the monotony of the second and fourth acts of Vera is simply depressing." (Idem) The New York Daily Tribune's review of the play was not any better, depicting the play as: "(...) a display of several queer scenes, picturesque at points, but mostly ugly, and be the exposition of a fanciful, foolish, highly peppered story of love, intrigue and politics, invested with the Russian accessories of fur and dark-lanterns, and overlaid with bantam gabble about freedom and the people." (Idem, p. 57) The play closed only a week after its premiere. In spite of the bad experience on Broadway, by the time Wilde was back in England, he already had another play in mind. Actress Mary Anderson asked him to write a play for her to produce. With the profit of his American tour, as well as the money he expected to receive from Anderson, Wilde travelled to Paris, where he wrote his second tragedy, *The Duchess of Padua*. In this tragedy, the main character, Guido, looking for revenge after his father's death, gets close to his father's killer, the Duke of Padua. However, he falls in love with the Duke's wife. Again, divided between fulfilling his revenge or staying with the woman he loves, he can find no path to lead him away from his predicaments. After many disagreements between Wilde and Anderson's manager, he finally managed to deliver the play two weeks after his deadline. Anderson was displeased with the play and turned it down. Ellmann quotes Anderson's letter of rejection to Wilde a few days after he sent her the final manuscript, "(...) the play in its present form, I fear, would no more please the public of today than would *Venice Preserved*, or *Lucretia Borgia*. Neither of us can afford failure now, and your *Duchess* in my hands would not succeed, as the part does not fit me. (...)" (ELLMANN, 1988, p.224). *The Duchess of Padua* therefore had the same destiny of *Vera*, and had its first production in New York a few years after being written. American actor Lawrence Barrett showed interest in producing the play on Broadway, however, he had a few requests such as that the play changed its title to *Guido Ferranti* and Wilde was not publicized as its author, so it would not be related to *Vera's* failure a few years back. Unfortunately, the plays were too similar not only



in plot but also their destiny. The newspapers criticized *The Duchess of Padua* for the same reasons they had criticized *Vera* and the play closed only three weeks after its premiere.

Wilde's first tragedies are alike in several respects. Not only were they turned down in London only to be produced two years later on Broadway but they also reveal some stages in the development of Wilde as the author he would eventually become, such as the use of polished dialogues, wit and humor in the plays. Possibly one of the reasons why his first plays met with an unresponsive audience lies in the fact that the witty insertions and comic devices were in disproportion to what would then be expected in a tragedy, undermining the author's intention to follow the Aristotelian principles, taught in *Poetics*, about evoking the feelings of pity and fear in the audience, and focusing on the plot above all else. A second reason could lie in the fact that, in his attempt to be taken seriously, Wilde was so much involved in showing a mask that could be socially accepted that he did not allow himself to plunge deep into the themes that really interested him. In the two cases the protagonists' feelings blunder their conscious projects of revenge. In structure, *Vera* has a prologue and a time gap. Both plays take place in the time span of some weeks, perhaps even some months. This innovation, along with the complicated plots, may have been an attempt at sophistication, as they dare break with the Aristotelian norms that Wilde will eventually return to, later, in his comedies (all of which take place within twenty-four hours).

Another curious point is that Wilde sets his tragedies in cities from foreign countries – *Vera* is set in Moscow and *The Duchess of Padua* of course in Padua – two places the author had never visited, while his comedies will take place in England, most of them in London. Wilde's passion for travelling might have influenced his decision to set his first plays in foreign countries, since he had visited Greece and Italy two years previously, while still in college. Another possibility is

that Wilde was inspired by Shakespeare, who also set all his plays in foreign countries, such as Italy (*Romeo and Juliet*), Denmark (*Hamlet*) and Scotland (*Macbeth*). His comedies, on the other hand, were meant to make the audience feel closer to home, as Wilde went as far to give addresses to where the scenes took place.

Both tragedies are similar at their core structure, and seem to be conceived so as to please the audience. Wilde used topics that were not only considered timeless but were also tuned with people's values concerning family, love, revenge and sacrifice. The thematic relates to figures of power and authority, such as the Czar of Russia and an Italian Duke, and their unfairness towards the people they rule. Wilde writes about political issues in a somber way, siding with the lower classes, and he uses his unique wit to raise the discussion. These are the only plays in which the lower classes interact with the elite in a tone of equality. Although it is clear that Vera is an important figure in the revolutionary party, it is also obvious that her significance does not compare to the value of Alexis, the Czar's son, who rules the whole country. Still, the possibility of a romantic relationship between the two makes them equals in the play. The same happens in *The Duchess of Padua*, in which after killing her husband, the Duchess becomes the most important figure in the city; and yet she tries to trade places in prison with her beloved Guido so he would not be executed.

Even at this early stage, some marks of Wilde's commitment with word craftsmanship can already be perceived, as in the now famous quotes such as, "Experience, the name men give to their mistakes" (WILDE, 2009, electronic information, location 40165) or "Life is much too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it" (Idem, location 40229). Sometimes there are games with words and also poetic insertions, as in *The Duchess of Padua*:

Love is the sacrament of life; it sets

Virtue where virtue was not; cleanses men  
Of all the vile pollutions of this world;  
It is the fire which purges gold from dross,  
It is the fan which winnows wheat from chaff,  
It is the spring which in some wintry soil  
Makes innocence to blossom like a rose.  
The days are over when God walked with men,  
But Love, which in his image, holds his place.  
When a man loves a woman, then he knows  
God's secret, and the secret of the world.  
There is no house so lowly or so mean,  
Which, if their hearts be pure who live in it,  
Love will not enter; but if bloody murder  
Knock at the Palace gate and is let in,  
Love like a wounded thing creeps out and dies.  
This is the punishment God set on sin.  
The wicked cannot love. (WILDE, 2009, electronic  
information, location 3470)

Wilde's treatment of love in this play comes at a time in which his personal experience on the subject was restricted to one single significant romantic relationship with Florence Balcombe, in 1878. Florence was his first love, and through this brief relationship she should serve as the muse to his tragedies. Or maybe the depiction of this devastating love that led to tragedy could relate to the idea of Greek love that fascinated him so much after his visit to Greece.

And yet, there are other passages where the mixture of serious subject and comic form sound awkward, such as this one found only a few pages after the definition of love showed above:

DUCHESS: When who awakes?  
GUIDO: Why, the Duke.  
DUCHESS: He will not wake again.  
GUIDO: What, is he dead?  
DUCHESS: Ay! he is dead.  
GUIDO: O God! how wonderful  
Are all thy secret ways! Who would have said  
That on this very night, when I had yielded  
Into thy hands the vengeance that is there,  
Thou with thy fingers wouldst have touched the man,

And bade him come before thy judgment seat.  
DUCHESS: I have just killed him.  
GUIDO: Oh! (Idem, location 3554)

In *Vera* the conflict involving love versus ideology is present throughout the whole play, showcasing a battle between emotion and rationality. Vera's love for her brother is translated into a political manifest in which only logic can persevere; nonetheless, she is confronted with a man with the same ideology, but who wears his heart on his sleeve. The same happens in *The Duchess of Padua*, where Guido's revenge against his father's murderer becomes a cause to him, as he prioritizes it from the very beginning, ending his relationship with his lifelong best friend so he can be successful in his retaliation.

This conflict involving family love versus romantic love is common to the two tragedies. Vera has to choose between her love for her brother, Dimitri, who is the reason why she joined the Nihilists, and her love for Alexis, the Czar's son. This situation is complex, as she loves the son of the man who destroyed her brother. Even though at the end Alexis becomes the Czar and is willing to change Russia the way he had promised, Vera's choices lead her to take her own life.

In Wilde's second tragedy, Guido's love for the father he never met makes him seek revenge against his death. Guido goes as far as to cut himself from all ties from his past so he can join the court of the Duke of Padua, his father's murderer. However, when he meets the Duchess he is torn between his cause and his love for her. As happens in *Vera*, the Duchess is a kind and caring woman who tries to help her people, while her husband is evil and cruel.

In both plays, the thirst to avenge the wrongs that were done to their beloved ones throws Vera and Guido into a long-term path of retaliation, that leads them to meeting and falling in love with their nemesis. This unexpected newfound love is completely pure and good in their eyes, and causes the main characters to question

their pursuit for revenge. Even though Vera and Guido crave to choose for the people they love, their morals prevent them from doing so. In this case, Wilde is playing with the idea of mask and shadow, and what the world should want to see.

After *The Duchess of Padua*, in 1883, Wilde went on a hiatus that lasted five years, until he wrote a fairy tale book to his children titled “*The Happy Prince and other Stories*”. Between 1883 and 1888, two things marked Wilde’s life: he got married to Constance Lloyd (1884) and his two sons were born (Cyril in Vyvyan in 1886). During this time, Wilde worked as an art critic in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1885-1887) and then as an editor in the magazine *Woman’s World* (1887-1889). As an editor he not only changed the name of the magazine, which until then was called *The Lady’s World*, but also brought it to a new level. The magazine still published articles about fashion and social events, but it also started to publish articles on culture, politics and literature. Wilde often invited the two constant women in his life whom he deeply admired, his beloved mother and his wife, to write articles for the magazine. He also asked many actresses and writers who were his friends to contribute with articles to enrich the magazine, which became a success until 1889, when Wilde got bored and quit.

Apparently, Wilde needed new inspiration to start writing again, and his children gave it to him. A year after he wrote “*The Happy Prince and other Stories*”, Wilde made homage to his sons in his essay “*The Decay of Lying*”. The essay is a dialogue between Cyril and Vyvyan, discussing one of Wilde’s favorite topics: aestheticism, the idea of “art for art’s sake”. Although Wilde was an absent father, spending most of his time with other men and living mostly in hotels, usually with Bosie, he was still a loving father. A few years later, in 1891, he wrote another fairy tale book to his children, titled “*A House of Pomegranates*”. Despite the fact that Wilde wrote fairy tales might not seem something worth mentioning, it is important to notice that it was actually the first work in which he does not have the goal of

being taken seriously. Up to that point, he had only written poetry and tragedies in hopes to be acknowledged as a writer and get good reviews. While writing books of fairy tales, he knew he would not get reviews about those books, still, he chose to write them either way, without worrying about what people would think of him or what was expected of him.

In the late 1880s, Wilde was an editor at a woman's magazine, married to Constance Lloyd and had his two small children. Then he met Robert Ross. Apparently, Ross was his first lover, and quickly became his closest friend, the one who introduced him to his future affairs. By 1890, Wilde had written his first novella, *The Picture of Dorian Grey*.

### **2.3 TURNING POINT: "I can resist everything except temptation"**

Meeting Robert Ross, a man who was fifteen years his junior, changed Wilde's life forever. Much like Lord Darlington, Wilde could "resist everything except temptation" (WILDE, 2003, p.104). Although Wilde was the older man, and therefore was supposed to be the more experienced, he was seduced by Ross in a way he had not considered until then. At that time, Constance had just given birth to their second son, Vyvyan, and the thought of having sex with a mother was becoming less and less attractive to her husband. Wilde and Ross – who was a journalist and literary critic – had a brief affair, which then turned into a lifelong relation of friendship.

After his initiation with Ross, Wilde started to explore his sexuality with other men, most of them younger writers or some kind of artists, often introduced to

hem by Ross. In the first years, Wilde still tried to keep his family life separate from his extra conjugal affairs. He tried to be a good husband and father, but it eventually became obvious that he was distancing himself from them, especially from Constance. Still, they managed to keep the appearances. Constance kept the roles of perfect wife and mother, housewife and sporadically writer, even though Wilde was farther and farther away from the role of an ideal husband.

One thing was unquestionable, though: the affairs with other men did not only affect Wilde's personal life, they also drastically changed him as an author. This new route of behavior unleashed Wilde's shadow, so that he tapped into his true voice, and looser style. His ironic and humorous streams increased, the witty remarks excelled, the care with the sophisticated constructions increased. The more he opened himself, the better he developed as a writer, the more he shone, the better he was recognized as a talent. On the other hand, the more exposed he became as a person. In the first stage of this new phase, Wilde tried different things, starting as an art critic and a magazine editor, writing fairy tales, until he reached a point where he was comfortable writing prose. After writing some short stories, a huge change was perceptible in his writing style, as it became more sophisticated and polished. His dialogues became more interactive and in general shorter, his use of wit, humor and sarcasm became trademarks and his subjects became more daring.

The year of 1889 was a turning point in Wilde's life. That is the year in which he dared boldly display his shadow to Victorian London, when the short story "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." was published in Blackwood Magazine, divided in three chapters. This short story shows a discussion between the narrator and his friend, Erskine, about the theory that Shakespeare would have written his sonnets to an actor, Willie Hughes – Mr. W. H. in the title –, casting tinges of homosexuality into the image of the English canon author. This theory is discussed throughout the story, focusing on what was supposed to be the picture of Shakespeare's male lover, which in reality was ordered by Erskine to prove that his own theory was true. This

polemic theme triggered harsh reviews. Although the story does not have any explicit mention of homosexuality, only a veiled suggestion, it was referred to by some as being homo-erotic<sup>8</sup>. This was Wilde's first open display of his shadow as a writer, in a bold approach to a subject that was not only taboo, but also against the law at the time. Wilde knew how risky it was to write about such a subject, and he defended himself even before publishing the story. The very first paragraph of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." reads,

We had no right to quarrel with an artist for the conditions under which he chooses to present his work; and that all Art being to a certain degree a mode of acting, an attempt to realise one's own personality on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammelling accidents and limitations of real life, to censure an artist for a forgery was to confuse an ethical with an aesthetical problem. (WILDE, 2012, p. 05)

The topic of a male artist, finding his muse in a beautiful young man was repeated a year later, when Wilde published a multi-chaptered story in the Lippincott's Monthly Magazine, titled *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, about the beautiful young man mentioned in the title, who is having his portrait painted. An aesthete friend of the artist warns Dorian that his beauty and youth will one day perish, and proclaims his belief that the only things worth living for are beauty and pleasure. Dorian feels he would rather have his portrait aging while he remained young and beautiful and might spend his life living for pleasure, having no thoughts for the consequences of his actions. As time goes by, he realizes that his wish came true. Eventually, Dorian tries to do a good deed to make the picture lose its ugliness but, as his motive is selfish, the picture only gets uglier. In the end, Dorian decides to destroy the picture, tearing it apart. As a consequence to that, his servants find him dead, aged and ugly like the picture, stabbed to the chest with the knife he used to tear the painting, whereas the portrait was restored to its original image.

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Beckson, in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (pp. 107-110) develops on this subject.



Like in the previously mentioned novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, here we have another case of one personality split into opposing/symmetrical doubles. This kind of literature is common in very strict societies that repress and reject some aspects of people's personalities that are considered unwelcome or undesired. This conflict between natural impulses and social prohibition is unsolvable. The two possible ways out are the development of either a schizophrenia or a hypocrisy line of behavior. Wilde refused to follow either route, and created a third possibility: the alternate display of mask and shadow. In his fiction, he used irony, double meanings, wit and puns to reveal the truth through puzzles, while playing with words. As, for different reasons, the great majority of the population was suffering from the same disease, Wilde's works were widely accepted, acclaimed and consumed. At least at the first stage of this process, which culminated, some years later, when the same society turned against him and used him as a scapegoat, possibly to hide and erase their own shame and horror at their personal deviations from the expected route of moral behavior.

When the first edition of the novel was published by Lippincott's Monthly Magazine, it was edited, and about 500 words were suppressed, in order to water the passages that alluded to homosexuality. Even so, as expected, *Dorian Gray* still received many harsh reviews, in which critics expressed their concern about the provocative theme. Some went as far as to say the novel should be banned<sup>9</sup>. Wilde stood for his novel passionately, raising the Aesthetes' and Decadents' flags, stating that his story was a work of art, and therefore should not oblige to social norm, only to beauty.

In 1891, when the novel was finally published as a book (and the original 500 words were restored), Wilde wrote the famous Preface, that is seen today as the manifest for the Art for Art's Sake movement. He says,

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<sup>9</sup> Instances of this sort of criticism are presented by Karl Beckson in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 67-83.

The artist is the creator of beautiful things. To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim. The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things. The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography. Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault. (WILDE, 2011, electronic information, location 332)

The wish of the character Dorian Gray to “trade places” reveals his desire – not to be someone else, but to be himself without suffering the consequences that would entail. Gray wishes to be free to do whatever he wants with no repercussions, letting go of social and moral boundaries. It is not so much pretending to be someone else as really turning into something else. In this novel, Wilde gives us the first taste of boundless freedom, represented by the deeds of this reckless young man whose shallow perception of life and inconsequential behavior turn his soul into an ugly picture, which at the end becomes his doom. Regardless of how bold the topic of this novel may be, its ending recoils into the traditional boundaries of morality, when the transgressor is punished for his sins and the Aristotelian principle that crime does not pay is maintained. This shows that Wilde, the god and creator of his own fictional universe, is undermining his own plight and revealing that – even if unconsciously – he does not believe that his strategy of pulling and pushing the mask, showing and hiding the shadow, is really a viable one.

It seems that “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” was a first attempt to capture what Dorian Gray would become. It is possible to see a similarity even in the description of the artist's muse in both stories. The narrator in “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” describes Mr. W. H. in the portrait as:

(...) a young man in late sixteenth-century costume, standing by a table, with his right hand resting on an open book. He seemed about seventeen years of age, and was of quite extraordinary personal beauty, though evidently somewhat effeminate. Indeed, had it not been for the dress and the

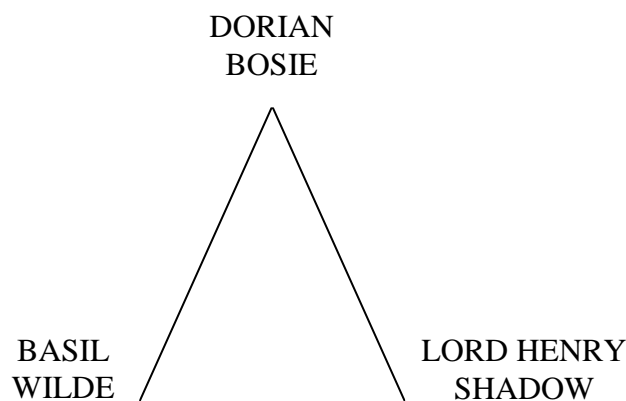
closely cropped hair, one would have said that the face with its dreamy wistful eyes, and its delicate scarlet lips, was the face of a girl. (WILDE, 2012, p. 08)

The attraction that the narrator has for the model comparing his beauty to the delicacy of a girl, is obvious. The description of Dorian Gray was not very different,

Lord Henry looked at him. Yes, he was certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair. There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candour of youth was there, as well as all youth's passionate purity. One felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world. No wonder Basil Hallward worshipped him. (WILDE, 2011, electronic information, location 588)

We can easily sense the narrative voice putting itself in the position of the artists - Shakespeare and Basil Hallward – in these two pieces of work, describing great talented artists who found inspiration to their art in beautiful young men. Not only does Wilde expose facets of his own shadow here, but he also, by indirectly comparing himself to Shakespeare, reveals his ambition to be recognized as a great writer. The male muses in these stories – Mr. W. H. and Dorian Gray – are described in their physical appearance. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the description is deepened into a study of Gray's personality. It is as if the soul of Wilde is separated into three characters, the aesthete, the artist, and the model. Dorian is shaped according to Wilde's deepest desire: at one time, he has been Dorian, when younger; now he longs to find someone as beautiful, young, spoiled and shallow as Dorian is. In Wilde's personal life, for better and worse, it looks like his wish came true in the form of Bosie, and as life imitates art, just like Dorian was Basil's demise, Bosie was doomed to be Wilde's.

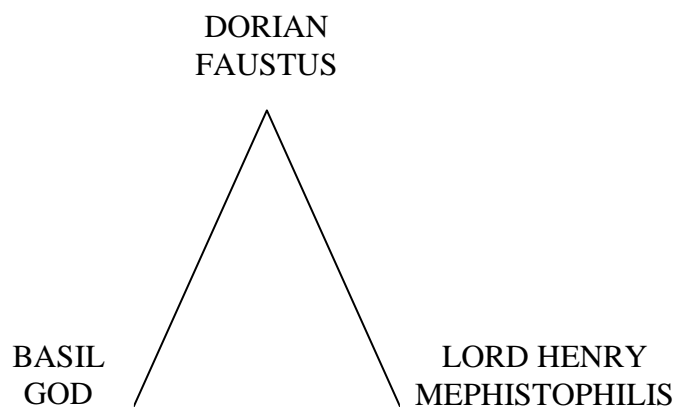
Both Basil Hallward in fiction, and Oscar Wilde in life, wish to reach immortality – as Shakespeare did – by creating their masterpieces. As the poet, in Shakespeare’s sonnets, prevents youth to fade by immortalizing the object of appreciation into a timeless object of art, Hallward and Wilde aim to reach immortality by immortalizing their muses. His movement to look for youth so as to recover one’s own lost youth evokes another early post-Victorian construct, J. M. Barrie’s Peter Pan (1903), a play set on a land where people never grow old. Peter Pan remains young because he lives in the magical Neverland, whereas Dorian does not age because all marks of time and of his misdeeds are absorbed by the picture. The same idea can be found in Dracula, a vampire novel in which the main character feeds on human blood to remain young. Wilde, in his turn, fed off the beautiful young men he surrounded himself with, finding his Dorian in Bosie, allows himself to experiment every pleasure life can offer. Wilde, as Basil and Lord Henry, creaved for what Dorian had, “Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins - he was to have all these things. The portrait was to bear the burden of his shame, that was all.” (Idem, location 2061).



Coincidentally or not, the moment when Wilde grows more and more reckless is the moment in which he becomes acclaimed and respected as a writer. Following his intent of turning his shadow into his mask, Wilde goes after polemic topics without much thought about the repercussion they would have in society,

challenging moral taboos not only in his fiction, but also in his moves through London society. For a moment, he forgot he did not belong. He moved among British nobility, after all his father had a title; and so he forgot the title was honorary and that he did not belong into the Aristocracy. He was author to the major comedies of manners of the time, the master of making the English upper class laugh at itself; so he forgot he was not in fact English, but the Irish outsider. When Dorian Gray decides to drop his mask of a philanthropic nice youth he turned to his shadow, giving in to the temptation of the forbidden and living a questionable lifestyle, pushing his sins into his painting.

The same paradigm can be seen in the myth of Doctor Faustus (MARLOWE, 2005) when Mephistophilis and God make a bet that Faust, God's favorite human, would deviate from the right path and search for pleasure in sin if tempted too. Much like in Dorian Gray, Mephistopheles is successful as he proposes that he would grant whatever wish Faustus had while on Earth. But when he felt a moment in which he would wish to stay that way forever, he would die and serve Mephistopheles in hell for eternity. The similarities between the stories are obvious: the bargain for pleasure and some kind of immortality, the main character progressively turning into his own shadow; and the punishment at the end. A similar triangle can also be found here:



The Picture of Dorian Gray is not only Wilde's first novel, but also his masterpiece. In spite of that, its author only achieved social and critical prestige, as well as wealth, through his comedies. Even though it would be a stretch to say Wilde's talent was anchored by it, it has to be acknowledged that Wilde started writing comedies soon after he met Bosie. Ironically, the couple's literary relationship followed the Latin proverb, "Quod me nutri, me destruit"<sup>10</sup>. Bosie at one time inspired Wilde and got in the way of his writing process, always complaining that the writer would rather work than spend time with him. As it is possible to see, there is a close connection between what happens to the characters in Wilde's fiction, and to his life as a person. This attempt to use the shadow as a mask was a turning point both to the stories Wilde wrote and to the way he would lead the movements of his social life.

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<sup>10</sup> Latin proverb that can be translated as "That which nourishes me, also destroys me." (translation mine)

### **3 RISE AND FALL: “Life is a stage but the play is badly cast”**

#### **3.1 THE GOLDEN YEARS: “If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh, otherwise they will kill you”**

The year of 1891 was a very busy one to Wilde. After publishing *The Picture of Dorian Gray* early that year, Wilde continued to experiment as he tried his hand one last time on writing a tragedy. While traveling from Paris to London, Wilde decided to write a one act tragedy in French, *Salomé*. The story told the biblical tale of Salomé, daughter of Herodias, who after dancing to the king, her step-father, asked him to give her the head of John the Baptist. It was also the first time that Wilde approached a religious theme in his work. It is obvious that Wilde wanted to try out different things, as he admits in an interview for the *Pall Mall Magazine* in June, 19, 1892:

I have one instrument that I know I can command, and that is the English language. There was another instrument to which I had listened all my life, and I wanted once to touch this new instrument to see whether I could make any beautiful thing out of it. [...] Of course, there are modes of expression that a Frenchman of letters would not have used, but they give a certain relief or color to the play. A great deal of the curious effect that Maeterlinck produces comes from the fact that he, a Flamand by grace, writes in an alien language. The same thing is true of Rossetti, who, though he wrote in English, was essentially Latin in temperament. (WILDE, 2012, p.23)

The play was supposed to be produced in 1892, however, its production was censored soon after rehearsals begun, since it was illegal to depict Biblical characters

on stage in England at the time. A year later the tragedy was published in its French version and in the following year Wilde invited Bosie to translate it to English but their different views on the play got in the way in their relationship as well as delayed its publication, as it was mentioned earlier<sup>11</sup>.

Salomé was completely different from the tragedies Wilde had written so far. The short play did not have themes such as self-sacrifice, romance or ideology. Salomé's request to have John the Baptist's head was just a whim of a spoiled girl, after hearing the man talking about her mother. There was no romance or ideology involved as Wilde described Salomé as a slightly shallow femme fatale. The only topic that can be considered similar to the ones found in Wilde's previous tragedies is the sense of revenge, as Salomé wants to avenge her mother, who had been badmouthed by John the Baptist.

It was only in 1896, while Wilde was in Reading Gaol prison, that the tragedy was produced in Paris. On another note, it was around the same time that Wilde found comfort in religion after being sentenced to prison for the crime of "gross indecency", as it can be seen in a letter he wrote to Bosie that was later published with the title *De Profundis*, as it will be discussed later in this chapter.

In October of 1891, Wilde tried to innovate himself yet again by writing his first comedy, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, which premiered in February of 1892. The play is about Lady Windermere's suspicion that her husband is being unfaithful, having an affair with a woman with a hidden past, Mrs. Erlynne. In the midst of this, Lord Darlington professes his love to Lady Windermere, urging her to run away with him. The plot thickens as the audience learns that, in truth, Lord Windermere is not being unfaithful, he is actually being blackmailed by Mrs. Erlynne, who is in fact Lady Windermere's supposedly dead mother who had run away with a lover decades ago.

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<sup>11</sup> Chapter 1.1, page 24.



Much like in his tragedies, Wilde's comedies have a pattern that is set from his first comedy. Wilde's famous humor and wit that were already hinted on in his previous works come forth in his comedies with the use of wordplay and puns, such as: "Whenever people agree with me, I feel I must be wrong" (WILDE, 2003, p. 141), "Questions are never indiscreet. Answers sometimes are" (idem, p. 245) and "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means" (idem, p. 34).

Another recurring theme in his comedies is the game of secrets. The main characters of all his plays keep secrets from their loved ones to keep their relationship intact. Wilde applies this same principle to his marriage to Constance, as he obviously does not tell her he is homosexual, not admitting it even after being arrested. This game of secrets is also a game of mask versus shadow. It is always more comfortable to pretend everything is fine than to face the ugly truth. By trying to keep Lady Windermere's image of her beloved - supposed dead - mother intact, Lord Windermere lies to his wife, makes others believe that he is being unfaithful to her, which leads her distancing herself from him. Lady Windermere, in turn, feels rejected and vengeful, deciding to go to Lord Darlington to accept his offer to run away together.

As it is possible to see, Wilde finally felt at home writing comedies as he found a place in which he could at the same time be himself and be appreciated for his work. He was so sure of his success as a comedy playwright that instead of selling *Lady Windermere's Fan* as it would be expected, he asked for a percentage of its earnings; on the first year alone he earned seven times what was offered to him for the play (ELLMANN, 1988).

In his comedies, Wilde also found a place where he could open himself up, showing parts of true self in some of the characters. His mixed feelings about showing his mask and/or shadow to the world can be found, for example, in *Lady Windermere's Fan* when he writes: "But there are moments when one has to choose

between living one's own life, fully, entirely, completely - or dragging out some false, shallow, degrading existence that the world in its hypocrisy demands" (WILDE, 2003, p. 125).

In April 1893, Wilde's second comedy, *A Woman of No Importance*, was produced at the St. James Theatre. Although the play was not a complete failure, it is considered Wilde's weakest comedy (BECKSON, 2001). The story followed the same pattern from *Lady Windermere's Fan* as it criticized society's hypocrisies. In this comedy Gerald Arbuthnot is an inexperienced and naive young man who yearns to be introduced to high society. He meets Lord Illingworth, a man who is part of the society he wishes to become a part of, and who offers Gerald a job as his secretary. However, Mrs. Arbuthnot, Gerald's mother, implores him to reject the offer, not giving a reason since she is too ashamed to tell him that Lord Illingworth is actually Gerald's father.

As it can be seen, yet again the plot revolves around the subject of lying to a loved one and parenthood. Mrs. Arbuthnot has lied to her son his whole life, telling him his father is deceased, and pretending to be what would be considered a righteous woman at the time. Nevertheless, someone comes back from the past - Mrs. Erlynne and Lord Illingworth -, forcing these characters to face their sins. Although the concept of "bastard" children is used in both plays, and the fact that bastard children were very common at the time, Wilde never had any children outside his marriage, most probably because his affairs were limited to men. However, it was common knowledge that his father, Sir. Wilde, had had bastard children, going as far as to have one of them raised by his brother.

It is obvious the mask and the shadow that both Mrs. Arbuthnot and Lord Illington use. On the hand we have Mrs. Arbuthnot, who tries to hide the shame of having had a child out of wedlock, keeping the secret in her past and pretending that the father of her child has died, she attempts to compensate by living a modest life, away from high society, doing charity work and going to church. On the other hand

we have Lord Illingworth, who wears the mask of a respectful society man who behaves in an acceptable way, though he does not try to hide his shadow very hard, showing glimpses of a witty careless man at times. Wilde also showed a side of himself in this play, as he said at the time that he saw himself in the character of Lord Illingworth (ELLMANN, 1988), and it is easy to understand why:

LORD ILLINGWORTH: The soul is born old but grows young. That is the comedy of life.

MRS ALLONBY: And the body is born young and grows old. That is life's tragedy. (WILDE, 2003, p. 180)

Wilde's personality shines in the play, as it is very easy to see flashes of him in Lord Illingworth:

LORD ILLINGWORTH: What do you think she'd do if I kissed her?

MRS ALLONBY: Either marry you, or strike you across the face with her glove. What would you do if she struck you across the face with her glove?

LORD ILLINGWORTH: Fall in love with her, probably.

MRS ALLONBY: But don't you think one can be happy when one is married?

LORD ILLINGWORTH: Perfectly happy. But the happiness of a married man, my dear Gerald, depends on the people he has not married.

MRS ALLONBY: But if one is in love?

LORD ILLINGWORTH: One should always be in love. That is the reason one should never marry. (Idem, p. 179)

As well as Wilde's view on love and marriage:

GERALD: But don't you think one can be happy when one is married?

LORD ILLINGWORTH: Perfectly happy. But the happiness of a married man, my dear Gerald, depends on the people he has not married.

GERALD: But if one is in love?

LORD ILLINGWORTH: One should always be in love. That is the reason one should never marry. (Idem, p. 205)

Later that same year, Wilde wrote *An Ideal Husband*, and in 1894 he wrote *The Importance of Being Earnest*, however, the plays were only produced in 1895, having their premieres respectively in January and February of that year in the Haymarket Theatre and the St. James Theatre. Both comedies continued the same pattern established by Wilde, talking about family, lies, high society hypocrisies, secrets and the mask and the shadow of the characters.

*An Ideal Husband's* plot revolved around Sir Robert Chiltern, a man idolized by his wife who believes she has "an ideal husband". However, Lord Chiltern is being blackmailed by Mrs. Cheveley into supporting a fraudulent scheme, otherwise she will tell everyone a secret from his past. As the story develops it is noticeable that the couple's relationship is based on the masks they wear, as they lie about who they really are in an attempt to pretend that their relationship is perfect, not realizing that their masks are actually destroying their relationship:

The error all women commit. Why can't you women love us, faults and all? Why do you place us on monstrous pedestals? We have all feet of clay, women as well as men; but when we men love women, we love them knowing their weaknesses, their follies, their imperfections, love them all the more, it may be, for that reason. It is not the perfect, but the imperfect, who have need of love. It is when we are wounded by our own hands, or by the hands of others, that love should come to cure us – else what use is love at all? All sins, except a sin against itself, Love should forgive. All lives, save loveless lives, true Love should pardon. A man's love is like that. It is wider, larger, more human than a woman's. Women think that they are making ideals of men. What they are making of us are false idols merely. You made your false idol of me, and I had not the courage to come down, show you my wounds, tell you my weaknesses. I was afraid that I might lose your love, as I have lost it now. (Idem, p. 291)

Wilde's bitter view of marriage had little to do with his wife as a person and a lot to do about how he felt about being trapped in a marriage to someone he thought he was in love with when he did not even know himself. Similarly to Lady Chiltern, Constance adored Wilde, believing in him blindly even when it was obvious she

should not do so. However, there was nothing either of them could do; Wilde would never divorce Constance, not only because it would be frowned upon by society, raising question that were better left alone, but also because he cared for her, and Constance still loved Wilde, even though he would never love her the same way.

Finally, in 1894 Wilde writes his last and most famous comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (see Annexes, p. 121). The play premiered in February 1895, only a month after *An Ideal Husband*, in the prestigious the St. James Theatre. This comedy, just as his previous ones, continues to talk about the mask and the shadow, how one is supposed to behave, the secrets people keep to appease others and the hypocrisies of high society. In this comedy, Wilde tells the story of Jack Worthing, who lives a double life: Jack is a respectable young man and guardian of his niece, Cecily, in the country, while in the city he calls himself Earnest, an alter-ego that lets go of his inhibitions and lives life in a way Jack would not approve of.

Although the play's premiere was a success, it was always a difficult one. On the day of the premiere the Marquis of Queensberry - Bosie's father - decided to deliver a bouquet of rotten vegetables at the theatre, to mock congratulate Wilde. Fortunately, Wilde found out before it could happen and the Marquis was not allowed into the theatre. In Wilde's most acclaimed comedy, Jack's alter-ego frees him to be whoever he wants, which makes his friend, Algernon, curious, as the later decides to go to Jack's estate pretending to be his "black sheep" brother, Earnest. The game of masks and lies that both characters play turn their relationship with others difficult, as it makes it hard to separate the truth from the lies.

It is not the first time Wilde plays with the idea of "truth" and how dangerous it can be, as he used it in all his previous plays. He also experienced it first hand as he hid the truth of his relationship with other man, especially Bosie, as well as his views on society's character flaws and false morality. Despite his eccentric behavior that called people's attention at times, as Wilde himself with surrounded with men a decade younger than him and lived in hotels - usually with Bosie - more

than at his own home from the years of 1891 to 1895, he would still deny anything that could be considered morally unacceptable. It did not matter if he wanted to be open about his sexual life or not, he certainly did not want to commit social suicide. Ironically, the truth about his sexuality was exposed to the whole city at the same time the play was being performed, with quotes such as:

The truth is rarely pure and never simple. (idem, p.13)

In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing. (idem, p. 76)

Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me? (idem, p.93)

The contrast between Jack and his alter-ego, Earnest, is very easy to notice, as they are simply complete opposite to one another:

Jack	Earnest
↓	↓
country	London
↓	↓
mask	shadow
↓	↓
behaves as society expect	behave however he wants

The constant game of masks and all the lies that are told, not only in Wilde's plays but also in his life, are nothing more than an effort to fit into Victorian society (see Appendix B, p. 99). Wilde can clearly see that he is not the only one who yearns to belong to that society and not be considered just an outsider; and it is possible to see in his comedies that by pointing out society's flaws, he is mocking everyone who tries to fit into it, even though it means he is also mocking himself. The need to

belong – or at least seem to belong – is something everyone can identify with, especially in a time that being different was frowned upon as a rule. In a moment like this, it is very easy to understand what Wilde means when he says in *The Importance of Being Earnest* that: “To be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up” (idem, p. 87).

### **3.2 THE FALL: “The heart was made to be broken”**

Only a couple of months after reaching his highest moment as a writer with the production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde was publicly disgraced on a trial that not only took his fame, fortune and family, but also a part of his soul. No one expected that Wilde would be seriously persecuted when the accusation of sodomy was made, much less that he would be convicted, so it was especially difficult to hand Wilde a sentence when the crime was of “gross indecency”.

After a quick though very public trial (see Annexes, p. 124), Wilde was sentenced to two years of hard labor. At first, Wilde was sent to Wandsworth Prison, in London (ELLMANN, 1988), however, the harsh prison did not work well with his delicate nature and it took a toll on his health very quickly. Soon after arriving at Wandsworth, Wilde fainted and spent almost two months in the infirmary before being transferred to Reading Gaol, a prison situated in Reading, Berkshire (see Annexes, p. 125), where he served the rest of his sentence.

The extravagant author, who was proud to be called Wilde, was reduced to a cell number: C 3. 3. (block C, landing 3, cell 3). Probably the worst part to cope with, for him, was to be surrounded by ugliness. Very few friends visited him, and he had a limited time to use a pen and paper to write. That was possibly the worst situation

that someone so lively and sensitive as Wilde could find themselves in. From the month of January to March of 1897, Wilde wrote a letter to Bosie in which he shows a glimpse of his broken soul, as it reflects in this passage:

For a year after that was done to me I wept every day at the same hour and for the same space of time. That is not such a tragic thing as possibly it sounds to you. To those who are in prison tears are a part of every day's experience. A day in prison on which one does not weep is a day on which one's heart is hard, not a day on which one's heart is happy. (WILDE, 2009, electronic information, location 1859).

In this letter, Wilde writes about redemption, sorrow and religion, as he looks back at his life and sins. Although the letter was meant to Bosie, Wilde gave it to Ross, asking him to make a copy of the letter and to keep it because Bosie, temperamental as he was, would quite possibly tear it apart before even reading it (ELLMANN, 1988). Ross did as Wilde asked him to and kept a copy of the letter, which he published an edited version of, five years after Wilde's death; only in 1962 was the letter published in its entirety. The title *De Profundis* was chosen by Ross and was inspired in the Psalm 130, that says:



<b>De profundis</b> clamavi ad te, Domine; Domine, exaudi vocem meam. Fiant aures tuæ intendentes in vocem deprecationis meæ.	<b>From the depths</b> , I have cried out to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication.
Si iniquitates observaveris, Domine, Domine, quis sustinebit?	If you, Lord, were to mark iniquities, who, O Lord, shall stand?
Quia apud te propitiatio est; et propter legem tuam sustinui te, Domine.	For with you is forgiveness; and because of your law, I stood by you, Lord.
Sustinuit anima mea in verbo ejus:	My soul has stood by his word.
Speravit anima mea in Domino.	My soul has hoped in the Lord.
A custodia matutina usque ad noctem, speret Israël in Domino.	From the morning watch, even until night, let Israel hope in the Lord.
Quia apud Dominum misericordia, et copiosa apud eum redemptio.	For with the Lord there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption.
Et ipse redimet Israël ex omnibus iniquitatibus ejus.	And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

Psalm 130 is one of the seven “penitential psalms” or “psalms of confession” in the Holy Bible, which fits perfectly the intent of the letter. In *De Profundis* Wilde opens his heart wearing no masks – there is no reason to anymore – and confesses his sins with honesty, pondering them and how he felt with no intention of either excuse himself:

Of course there are many things of which I was convicted that I had not done, but then there are many things of which I was convicted that I had done, and a still greater number of things in my life for which I was never indicted at all. (Idem, location 1793)

The gods had given me almost everything. But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease. I amused myself with being a FLANEUR, a dandy, a man of fashion. I surrounded myself with the smaller natures and the meaner minds. I became the spendthrift of my own genius, and to waste an eternal youth gave me a curious joy. Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in the search for new sensation. What the paradox

was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion. Desire, at the end, was a malady, or a madness, or both. I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber one has some Day to cry aloud on the housetop. I ceased to be lord over myself. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace. There is only one thing for me now, absolute humility. (Idem, location 1785)

In that moment of Wilde's life he wished to feel whole again, after he had been destroyed by society. It was obvious that he could not count on his peers to help him lift himself up again, so he looked for support in God. In *De Profundis* he talks about Christ and tentatively wishes to reach Him. Similar to *Dorian Gray*, Wilde seems to try to repent to hopefully make up for his wrongs; however, differently from the novel, he attempts to find spiritual relief in the simplest things as he searches for redemption:

The plank bed, the loathsome food, the hard ropes shredded into oakum till one's finger-tips grow dull with pain, the menial offices with which each day begins and finishes, the harsh orders that routine seems to necessitate, the dreadful dress that makes sorrow grotesque to look at, the silence, the solitude, the shame - each and all of these things I have to transform into a spiritual experience. There is not a single degradation of the body which I must not try and make into a spiritualising of the soul. (Idem, location 1793)

Unfortunately, after being released from Reading prison, Wilde tried to join the Jesuits, but was turned down, which left him desolated. Brokenhearted, Wilde wrote his last work, the poem "The Ballad of Reading Gaol", that showed how wistful prison really was and how it had affected him. The poem was inspired in the hanging of a fellow inmate – Charles Thosmas Wooldridge - who was sentenced to

death after killing his own wife (ELLMANN, 1988). The man was only thirty years old when he was hung, while Wilde was forty-two. In a sense, that was a reality check to Wilde, who had never seen someone being sentenced to death.

Reading prison affected Wilde deeply, in its ugliness, loneliness, lack of comfort, lack of art. All broke Wilde's soul, but watching another inmate being hung was especially hard to him and it shows in the poem:

Dear Christ! the very prison walls  
Suddenly seemed to reel,  
And the sky above my head became  
Like a casque of scorching steel;  
And, though I was a soul in pain,  
My pain I could not feel.  
  
I only knew what haunted thought  
Quickened his step, and why  
He looked upon the garish day  
With such a wistful eye;  
The man had killed the thing he loved,  
And so he had to die. (Idem, location 19532)

Through the poem it is possible to see the desolation that Wilde felt, as it seemed to materialize in his description of the hostility jail emitted to all the convicted. "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" is almost a continuation of *De Profundis*, as it keeps the same melancholic depressed tone that shows a hint of desperation. Wilde, who until his trial had tried to fit in society was suddenly thrust into a prison with the lower class that he never had identified himself with, but soon realized he found himself in the same position as them. In this passage he puts himself as an equal to all the other inmates, talking about the experience of being in Reading Gaol in a dejected way:

I know not whether Laws be right,  
Or whether Laws be wrong;  
All that we know who lie in gaol  
Is that the wall is strong;

And that each day is like a year,  
A year whose days are long. (Idem, location 21037)

Finally, it seems that Wilde was able to capture in one of the most famous passages of the poem what he had already expressed in his other works; that love and self-destruction can walk hand in hand. Characters such as Lord Windermere (*Lady Windermere's Fan*) and Sir Robert Chiltern (*An Ideal Husband*) try to protect the women they love by lying to them and jeopardizing their relationships (see Appendix C, p. 100/101). Oscar, in turn, kept an unhealthy on and off relationship with Bosie, trying to fulfill the young man's every little wish, while he hid his affairs from Constance. The one thing that certainly cannot be denied is that love can very well destroy what it is supposed to cherish. In this passage, Wilde predicts:

Yet each man kills the thing he loves,  
By each let this be heard,  
Some do it with a bitter look,  
Some with a flattering word,  
The coward does it with a kiss,  
The brave man with a sword! (WILDE, 2009, electronic  
information, location 19532)

### **3.3 LEGACY: "More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read"**

Wilde was an extraordinary writer and extravagant man, but there are always two sides to every coin, and Wilde's attitude was no different: on the one

hand he was viewed as a sophisticated talented man by many, on the other, he was considered too scandalous by others. That is usually the risk everyone has to deal with when they dare to be themselves. Wilde was a unique character that left a great legacy to the future, as his work and reputation were tainted on his own time (see Appendix A, p. 94/98). Being yourself at that time and place could very well lead you to prison, as the oppressing morals thrust upon the population did not leave much space for people to have their own opinions. Obviously, a society with those characteristics was not able to accept someone like Wilde and the author was judged by a law on principles of morality, something Wilde did not believe in since he found morality pointless, as it can be seen in this passage of *De Profundis*:

Morality does not help me. I am a born antinomian. I am one of those who are made for exceptions, not for laws. But while I see that there is nothing wrong in what one does, I see that there is something wrong in what one becomes. It is well to have learned that. (WILDE, 2009, electronic information, location 1753)

Wilde was convicted of “gross indecency” in one of the most public trials of that time, on a law that had passed only ten years before. In that he was lucky, because the previous law, called the Buggery Act in 1533, punished acts of sodomy by death. However, in 1885 it was created a new law, Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, which was focused on protecting young women from sexual offenses and inhibiting prostitution and, almost as an afterthought, punishing “gross indecency”, though it did not define what that actually meant. Wilde’s trial shocked Victorian society, which had never approached the topic in such a public way, much less with a celebrity as centerpiece.

This situation affected so much English society that there has never been a case for this crime with such a harsh punishment as Wilde’s. Of course, not many were willing to risk their reputation as well as their freedom to raise a flag for homosexuality. A few years after Wilde’s trial there was a second case involving a

female English author, belonging to a very rich family, named Radclyffe Hall. She dressed herself as a man and had no problem about showing her sexual preference, or in writing about homosexuality either, as she approached the subject head on in her novel, *The Well of Loneliness*. Her attempt to have the novel published was a great social affront, and a trial was set up again. But, this time – still under the influence of the traumatic experience that Wilde’s trial and conviction had been to all involved – they prosecuted the book, not the author. The publication was forbidden, but Radclyffe Hall was not arrested. This is another way in which Wilde ended up counter influencing London society, and to this day he is one of the first authors we think of when we talk about gender and sexual orientation issues.

It was only after the Wolfenden Report, from 1957, that the idea of homosexuality as something that did not concern the Law was introduced, as the report considered “homosexual behaviour between consenting adults in private should no longer be a criminal offence”<sup>12</sup> and “the law’s function is to preserve public order and decency, to protect the citizen from what is offensive or injurious, and to provide sufficient safeguards against exploitation and corruption of others... It is not, in our view, the function of the law to intervene in the private life of citizens, or to seek to enforce any particular pattern of behaviour”<sup>13</sup>. Still, it took another decade for the Sexual Offences Act 1967 to pass, which decriminalized homosexual acts between two consenting men, over the age of twenty-one, in private. This accomplishment was a result of the hard work of organization for homosexual rights, but it was cases like Wilde’s that actually raised the issue and enabled a social change.

Wilde’s legacy is so strong that even though his reputation, and therefore his works, was tainted after the humiliating trial he went through, only a few years after his death adaptations of his works started being made. Wilde was a very talented

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<sup>12</sup> Wolfenden Report taken from the Washington and Lee University website

<sup>13</sup> Wolfenden Report taken from the Washington and Lee University website

writer who was able to capture themes that were not only timeless but also touched the very nature of human behaviour. In his masterpiece and only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the author approached subjects such as the risk of giving in to temptation and its consequences, the duality of good and evil, right and wrong, the wish to remain eternal while everything else perishes and the egocentrism of the human being. The novel's first adaptation into movie was made in 1916 by director Fred W. Durrant, in England. In the next year, Richard Oswald made a German adaptation of the novel, and in the following year it was Alfréd Deésy's turn to make a Hungarian adaptation, all with the same title as the novel. There were many other adaptations throughout the years, mostly in movies or on TV, some operas as well, and almost a century after its first adaptation, *Dorian Gray* was made into yet another film in 2009 (see Appendix D, p. 102).

It was no different with Wilde's plays, as all of his comedies were adapted into films. The plots are slightly different but they all have some aspects in common that call to the human and flawed part of ourselves, talking about society's hypocrisies and the yearn to be accepted by others. Wilde's plays that were at one time criticized by who their author was, are now played in films by notorious actors and actresses such as Scarlet Johansson and Helen Hunt (*A Good Woman*, 2004, adaptation of *Lady Windermere's Fan*) (see Annexes, p. 118), Rupert Everett (*An Ideal Husband*, 1999, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 2002), and Academy Awarded Winners Reese Witherspoon (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 2002) and Colin Firth (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 2002, and *Dorian Gray*, 2009), just to mention a few (see Appendix D, p. 103/105). Some directors also found in Wilde their inspiration, looking for perfection in their adaptations of his works, especially Oliver Parker, who made three recent adaptations of Wilde's classics: *An Ideal Husband*, 1999 (see Annexes, p. 120), *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 2002 (see Annexes, p. 122) and *Dorian Gray*, 2009 (see Annexes, p. 117).

Wilde went through all the stages a writer can possibly go through, from the beginning of his career, when he was still struggling to find his writing style as well as success, to a hiatus in which he finally found himself as a writer; he experimented in different types of writing, different subjects, different languages, different styles, it was simply Wilde being wild in literature; finally, he had his golden years when he was appreciated by both critics and the public, making a small fortune with his plays; finally, he fell in disgrace, ending his brilliant career sooner than expected. Wilde's choices as both a person and an author led him through an amazing journey that brought him to great success and even greater disgrace. One thing is undeniable though, Wilde was an incredible and talented artist as he continued to influence other artists long after he was gone. He was true to himself, he innovated and challenged society in both its norms and art and although he defended the concept of "art for art's sake", his work is meaningful. Wilde was a real artist because the work of an artist is not only to entertain but also to inspire others, and in this he was very successful, as his art lived on through the works of others.



## CONCLUSION

I still remember the first time I was introduced to the story of Doctor Faustus. I was about seven years old, spending an idle afternoon at home alone when I decided to turn on the TV to watch one of my favorite programs at the time, Chapulin<sup>14</sup>. There I had the surprise of watching an adaptation of Doctor Faustus, and just like that my love for literature started. I had no idea that was what I was watching at the time, but the story undoubtedly got my interest.

A few years later, as a teenager I had developed a great appreciation for puns and meaningful quotes, and I had many favorites, such as: “To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all” (WILDE, 2009, electronic information, location 29350), “We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars” (WILDE, 2003, p. 142) and “Life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about” (idem, p. 105). That is when I learned Wilde was a famous writer, though it would still take me a few years to read his books. That happened after I started studying Letters at UFRGS, in one of Prof. Claudio Zanini’s English Literature classes that I was assigned to read *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, the first work I read by Wilde. I will be forever grateful to Prof. Claudio for that assignment. When I read Wilde’s first comedy I noticed his unique writing style, in a story full of wit and puns. To find a Victorian author with these characteristics came as a great surprise to me and made me wonder what an author such as Oscar Wilde was made of.

As I read about Wilde’s life and work and developed a platonic friendship with the deceased author, I came to the conclusion that Wilde played an important

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<sup>14</sup> A Mexican television series (1972-1981) widely broadcast in Brazil. The Spanish title to the series is *El Chapulin Colorado*, translated into English as *The Red Grasshopper*.

role in a changing society. He was involved with The Aesthetes & Decadents, he forgot the concept of “Art for Art’s Sake”, subscribed to Prose Poetry, posed as a model, contributed to the fashion reform which proposed more comfortable clothes for women, which granted them more freedom to move and think. Wilde had contact with so many people who were changing their world, and he made a difference in the process, delivering a message that said: “it is okay to be different”. Not only did Wilde think it was acceptable to be different but he wished to be so. He experimented on different things in all aspects of his life, trying to find himself and his voice as an author, so he could truly become acknowledged as unique.

Wilde eventually found his voice, but it was only after he crossed a moral and social interdicted space and started having sex with other men. It was then that he finally understood who he was as a person and as a writer. He expressed himself too much in his works – “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and that transgression was not well received by society. Wilde still yearned to be accepted and admired in London’s high society, but at the same time he was not willing to conform anymore, he fancied he could be appreciated for what he was. Wilde achieved the success he dreamed of through his comedies, in which he could at the same time tell all the ugly truth about society, criticizing the elite that applauded him, as he inserted himself in that same society he criticized, while using humor as a shield.

Wilde’s extreme success among his peers was due to many factors, but especially to his creativity. When the author decided to be true to himself, he would not go back to writing the same tragedies he wrote in the beginning of his career, when he would say what he believed others wanted to hear. Wilde decided to actually write what got his interest; however, he knew he would never be accepted among the elite by only showing the ugly truth that society tried to hide, so he masked these topics in a luxurious setting, with humor and a light tone.

The author soon became a celebrity in London, as his plays became famous, bringing him some wealth. By then, he dared to allow glimpses of his shadow to show through his mask. He portrayed himself in a style that was at the same time daring and flamboyant, leading many to consider him sophisticated. Unfortunately, his behavior was like the two sides of a coin, and while many considered sophisticated, others found him something akin to an abnormal deviation from the expected pattern. But Wilde would not feel trouble by that, not now that he reached the summit of fame and recognition. He loved being the center of the attention; and if he was considered peculiar for being himself, so much the better.

After Wilde found his voice as an author, his career became a tremendous success and his works started to affect Victorian society. Eventually, this process got to a point that he was not only affecting society, but society's reception, as well as his books were affecting Wilde's personal life in return. The richer he became with his comedies, the more generous he was with his lovers, and more distant from his family he grew. Wilde became also more and more careless in his relationship with Bosie. It was as if being finally accepted by London's high society made Wilde feel invincible. He fell prey to the false impression that just because he got "in", he could never be thrown "out". In his golden years, from 1892 to 1895, Wilde painted the town red and did it with style. The mask of the prestigious writer he put on to appease high society empowered him to be even more daring both in his personal life - as he let his eccentricity become even more public - and also in his work - as he openly criticized society's hypocrisies with humor; as one of his famous quotes, "If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh, otherwise they will kill you" (WILDE, 2009, electronic information, location 47319).

And Wilde did make them laugh as he questioned how truthful one could be in such an oppressing society. His comedies subtly asked: "Would the truth be acceptable in society? Would truth suffice? Or are masks really necessary?" These questions can also be applied to Wilde: "Would his true self be ever accepted by

society? Would he still be so respected author if he was open about who he was, instead of just hinting on it in his puns?" The answer is the obviously one, in both cases.

In Wilde's case, the answer was very loud and public, as he was sentenced to prison for acts of "gross indecency", a metaphor for his being a homosexual. Going to trial for such a crime was the greatest humiliating possible. The trial culminated with the judge considering the case the worst he had ever had to judge (ELLMANN, 1988). That was nothing less than cruel. It was quite obvious that Victorian London was not ready for someone like Wilde, someone who did not live by the norms, and saw bending the rules almost as a hobby.

Ironically, only a couple of months before his trial, Wilde's most successful comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, had premiered in one of the most respectable theatres of the city. The curious paradox is that the play raised exactly the issue of how true one can be about himself and the importance of pretending to be someone else. It was nothing less than poetic that Wilde's inability to convince others as he pretended to be just an average straight man was the fact that caused him to be punished so harshly.

The same elements that molded Wilde into the cannon writer he is are the elements that provoked the downfall and the breaking of the person he was. Before prison, it was easy to spot Wilde's humor and wit that reflected so easily in his play; however, after his time at Reading, his voice turned into silence. That is what happens when a bird is caged. This explains the word "gaol" – which means simultaneously "jail" and "cage" – in the title of the poem "The Ballad of Reading Gaol". Wilde could not sing his poetry anymore. *De Profundis* is written in the past tense, as if the person who is writing the letter – at the moment the letter is being written – does not exist anymore. When Wilde left prison he was a shadow of his previous self, a walking shadow with no masks to raise to his face. He had no place to hide anymore. The whole world knew about his sins, he had been judged and

condemned for them. There was no one there to pick up the pieces, so he just remained broken. His death was sad but not unexpected as he said a few days before passing away, "My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to death. One of us has to go" (ELLMANN, 1988, p. 681); he finally could rest in peace.

Wilde won a place in my list of favorite authors by being unique in his writing style, using some of my favorite elements in his writings, word play and puns. His polished writing, polemic topics, witty humor and creativity got me addicted to his writing style and stimulated me to read even more. The more I read, the more I admired the author; however, what I did not expect was that Wilde would also find a place in my life as he captivated me so deeply that I could talk for years about his life and work. As I mentioned early, I believe an artist is only an artist if he inspires others. Wilde inspires me with his art, his liveliness, his wildness.

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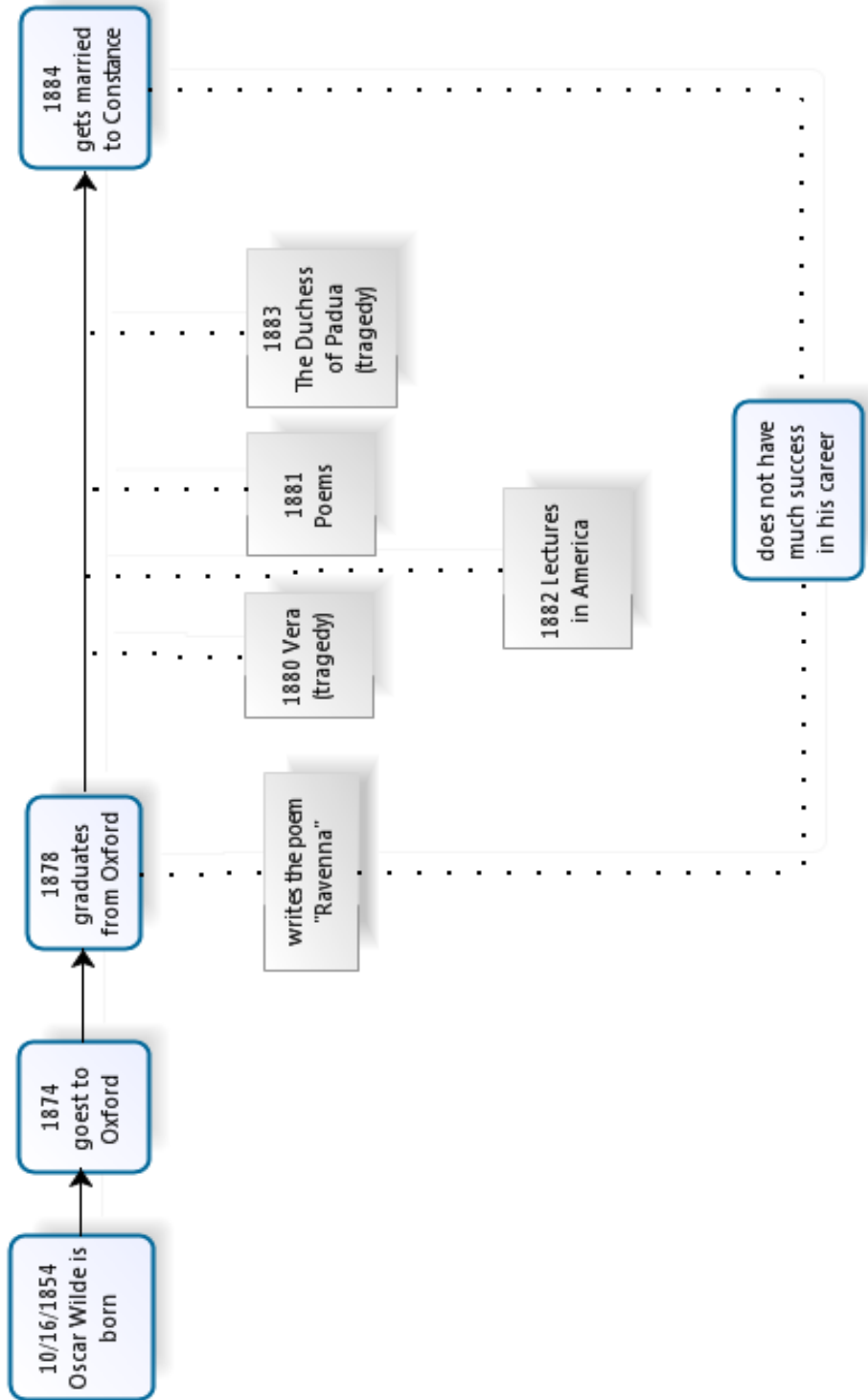
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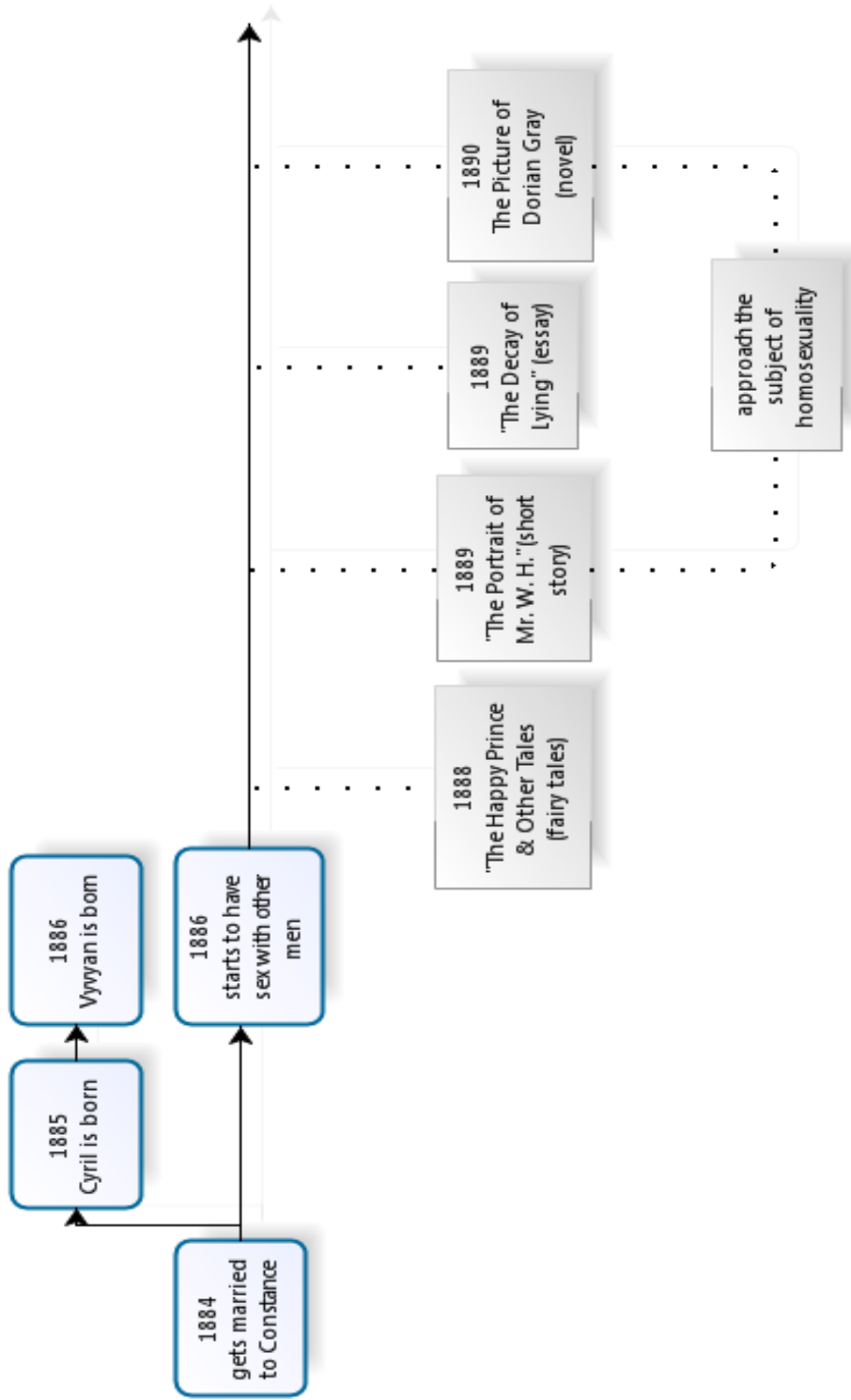
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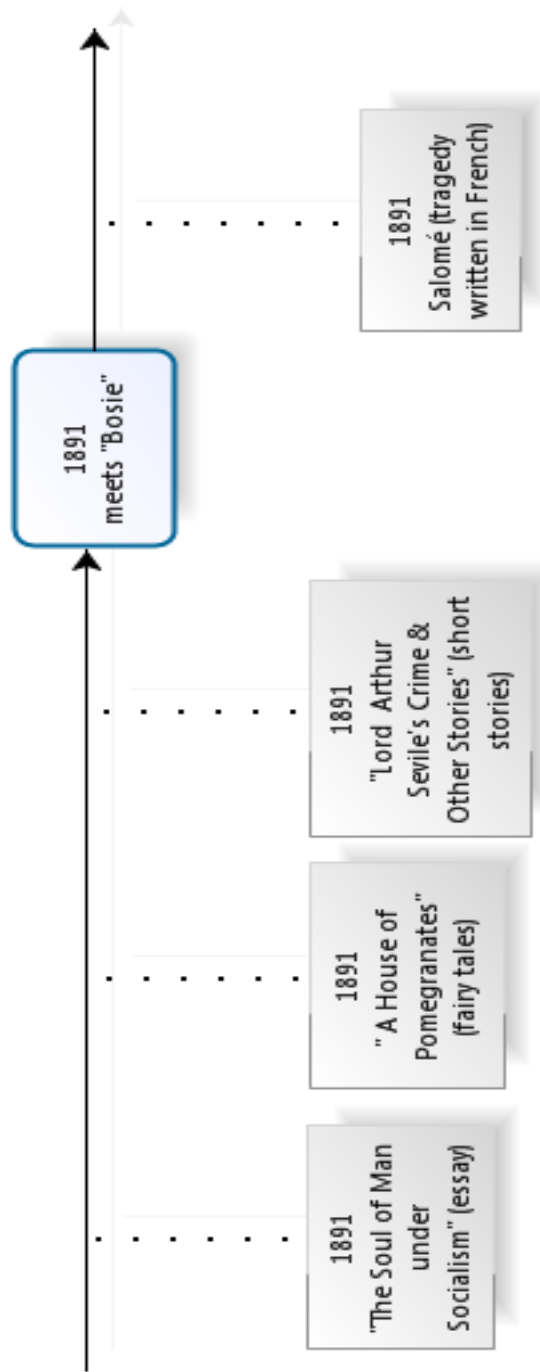
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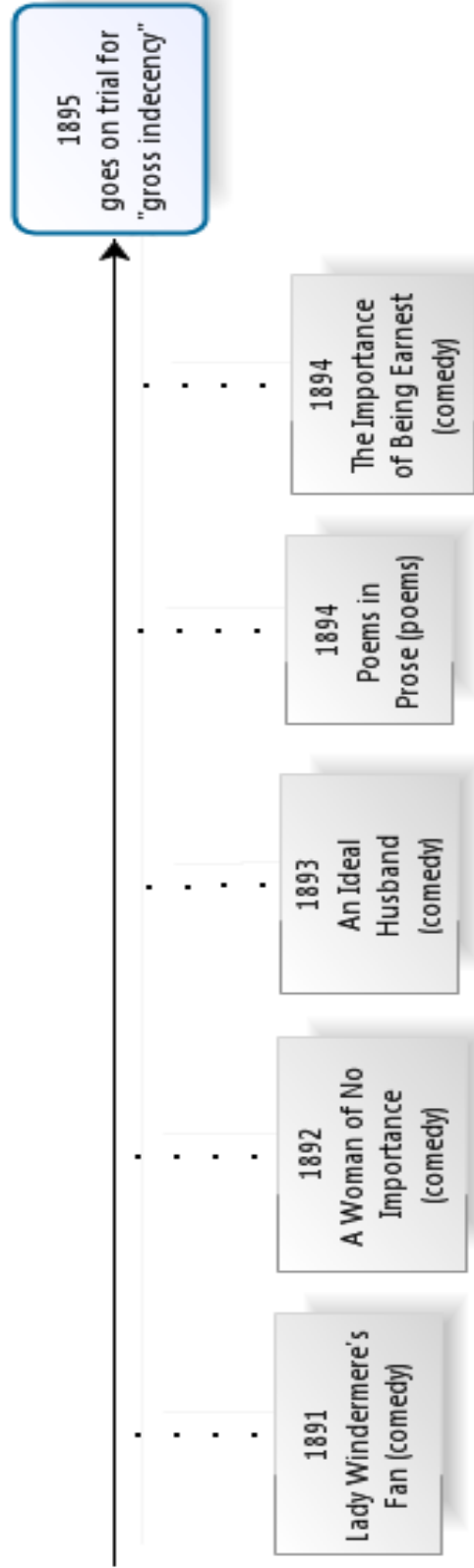
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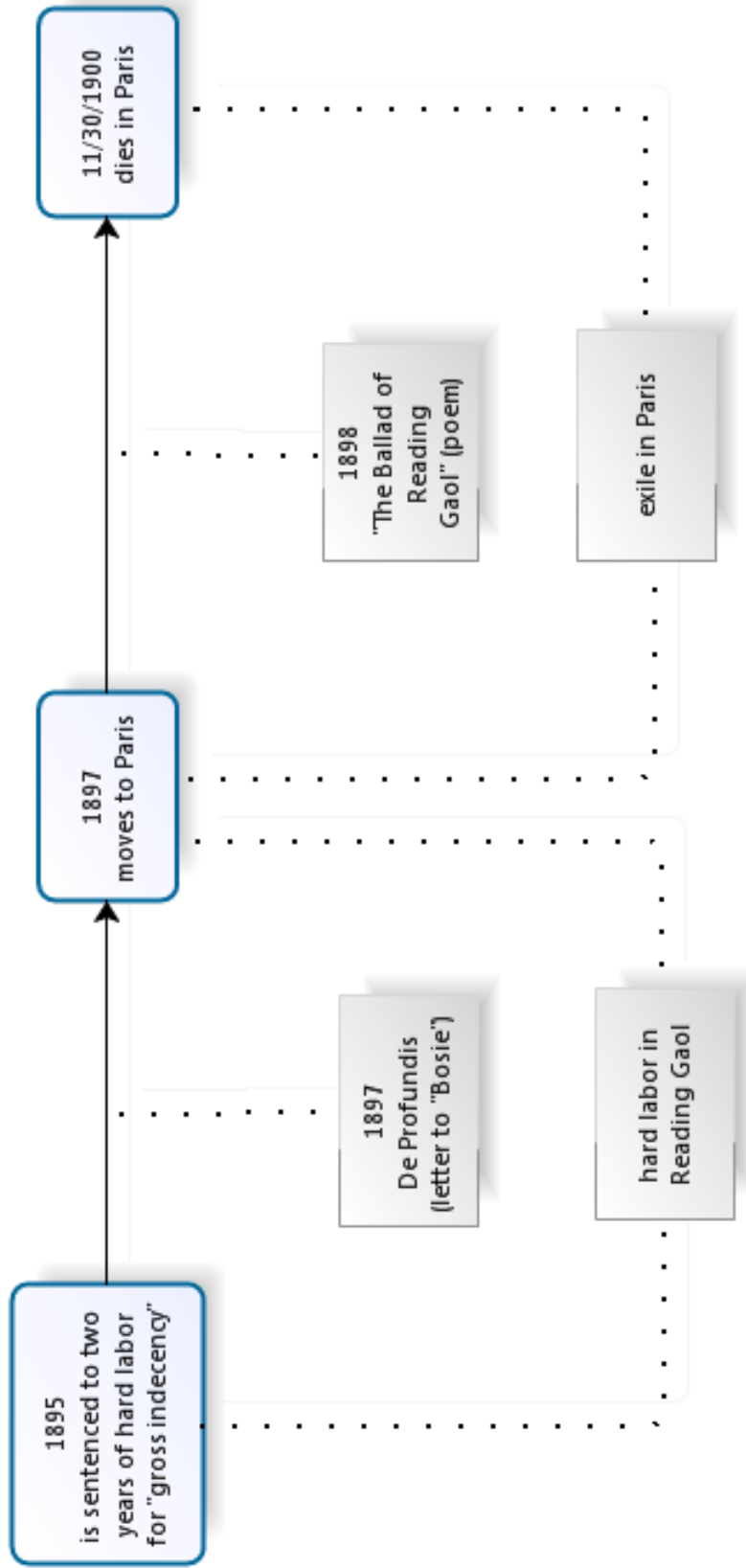
# APPENDIX A











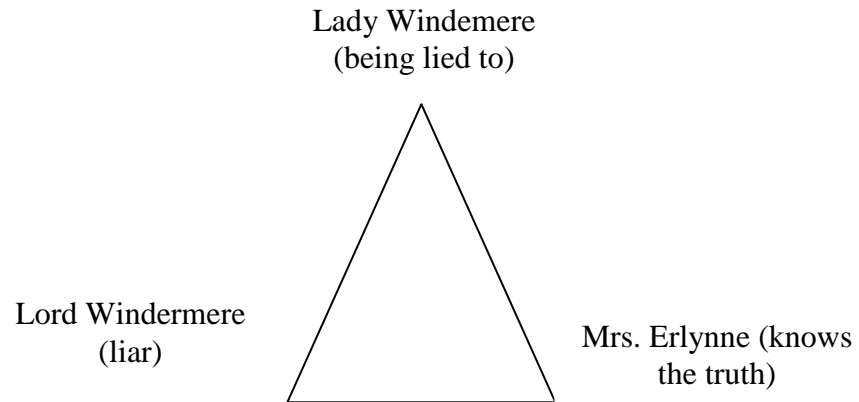
## APPENDIX B

<b>The Importance of Being Earnest</b>	Mask 1: Jack introduces himself as Earnest to Miss Fairfax Mask 2: Algernon introduces himself as Earnest to Cecily	Who they really are as Earnest	The duality of their true identity and the way they wish to be seen	They tell Miss Fairfax and Cecily the truth; Jack finds out he is actually called Earnest
<b>An Ideal Husband</b>	Mr. Chiltern as a respectable man and an ideal husband	Mr. Chiltern was part of a corrupt scheme in the beginning of his career that made him rich	Mrs. Cheveley blackmails Mr. Chiltern to participate in a fraudulent scheme otherwise she will Lady Chiltern the truth about his past	Mr. Chiltern tells Lady Chiltern the truth and does not participate in the fraudulent scheme
<b>A Woman of No Importance</b>	Mrs. Arbuthnot as a modest respectable widow	Mrs. Arbuthnot has never been married and had her child, Gerald, out of wedlock	Mrs. Arbuthnot begs Gerald not to accept a great job offer because his employer would be his father	Mrs. Arbuthnot tells Gerald the truth about his father
<b>Lady Windermere's Fan</b>	Mrs. Erlynne as a respectable woman	Mrs. Erlynne is Lady Windermere's mother, who ran away when she was still a baby	Lord Windermere is blackmailed by Mrs. Erlynne; either he gives her money and introduces her to society or she will tell Lady Windermere the truth	The secret is not revealed and Mrs. Erlynne leaves the city to get married
	<b>Mask</b>	<b>Shadow</b>	<b>Secret</b>	<b>Ending</b>

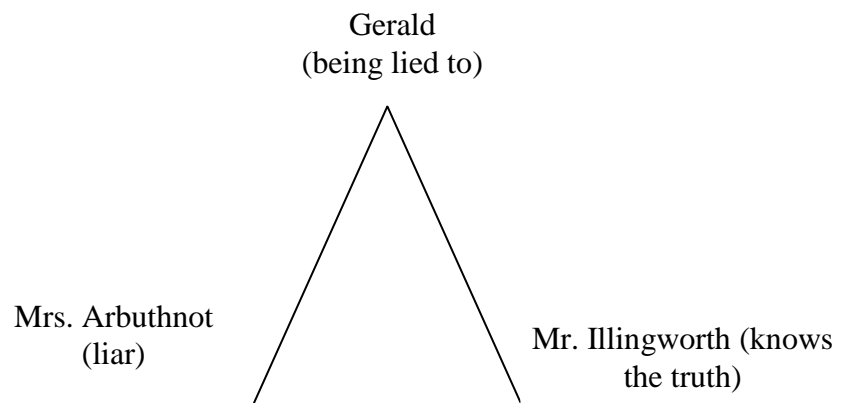


## APPENDIX C

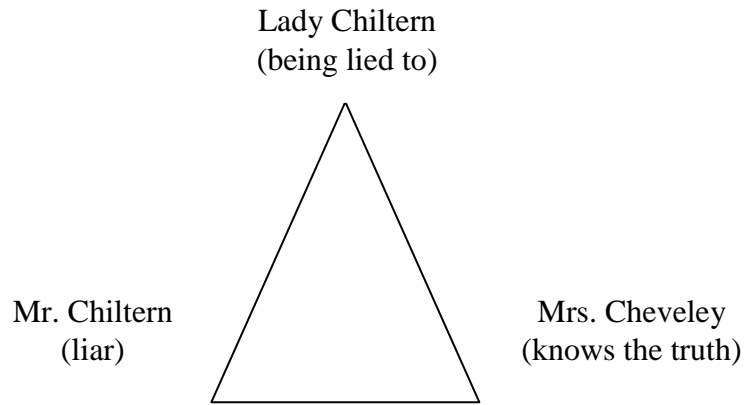
### LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN



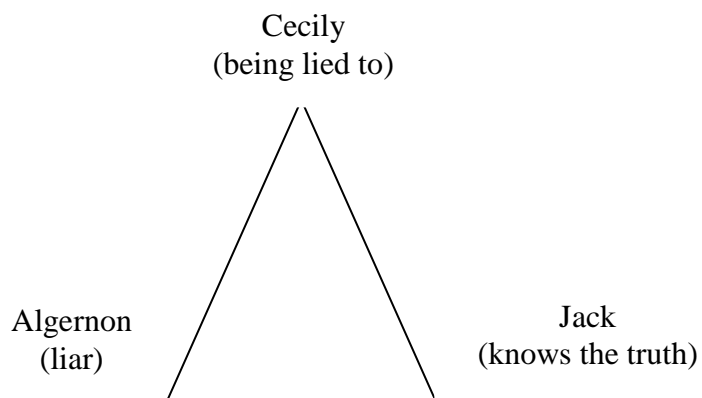
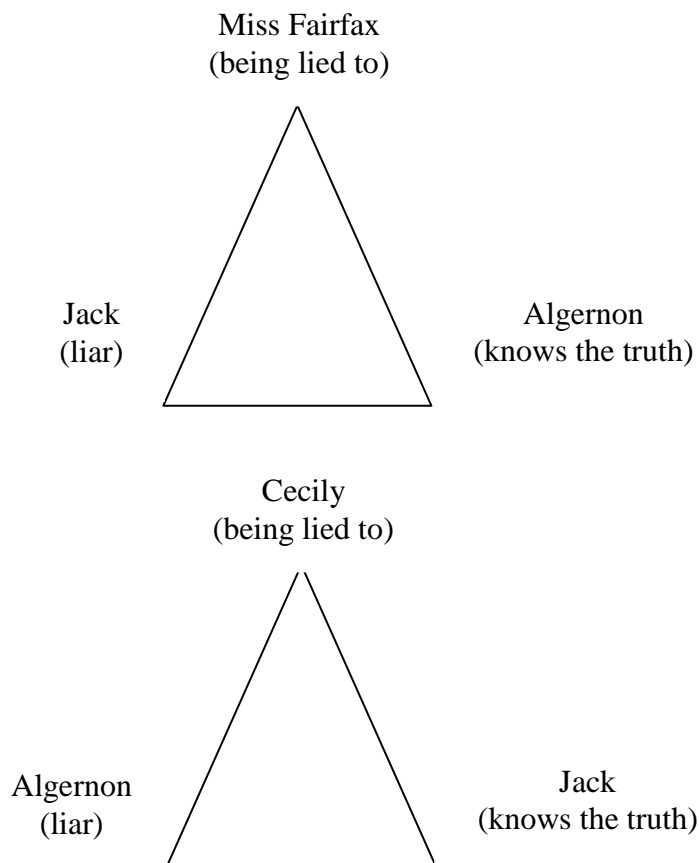
### A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE



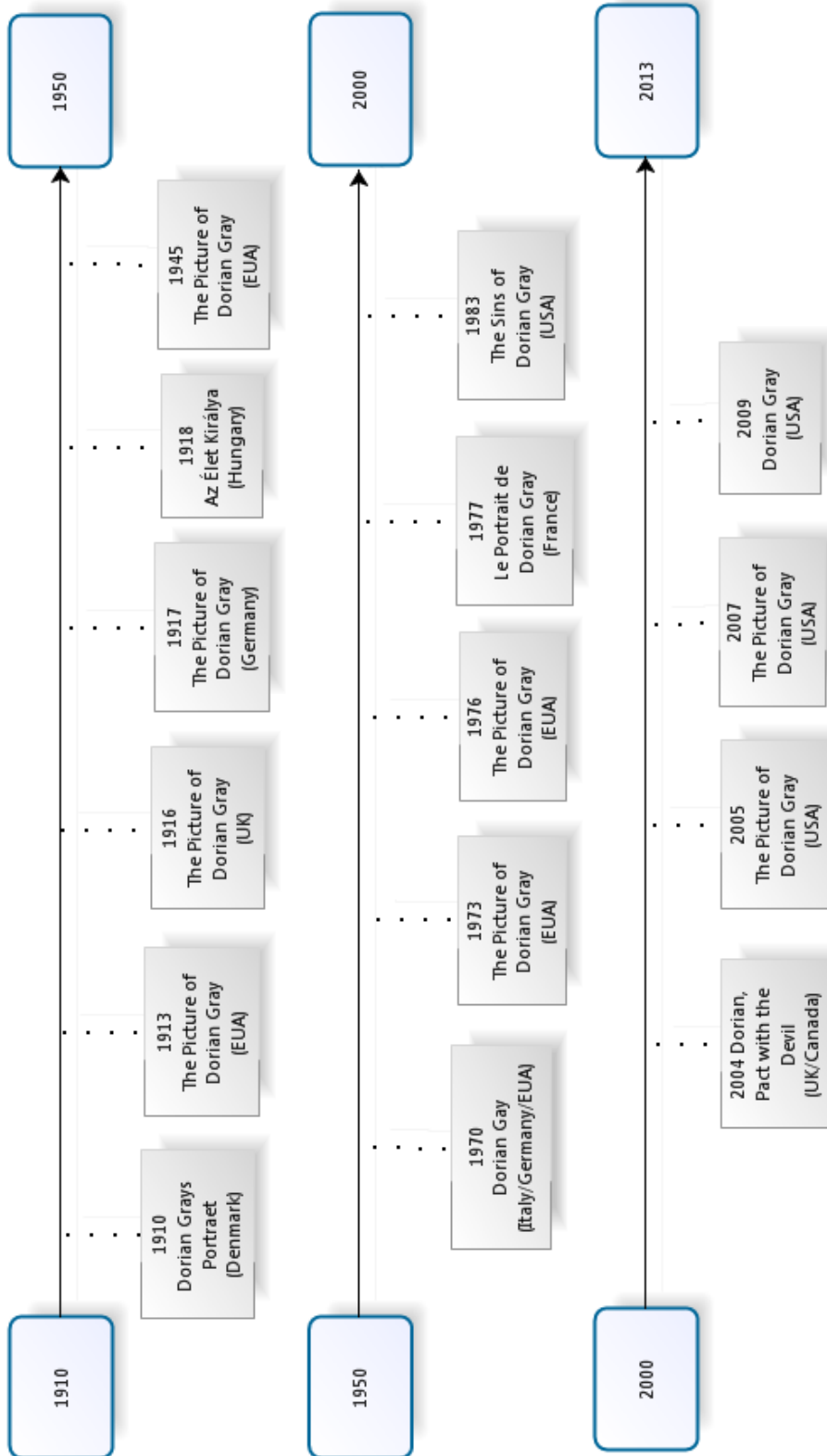
## AN IDEAL HUSBAND

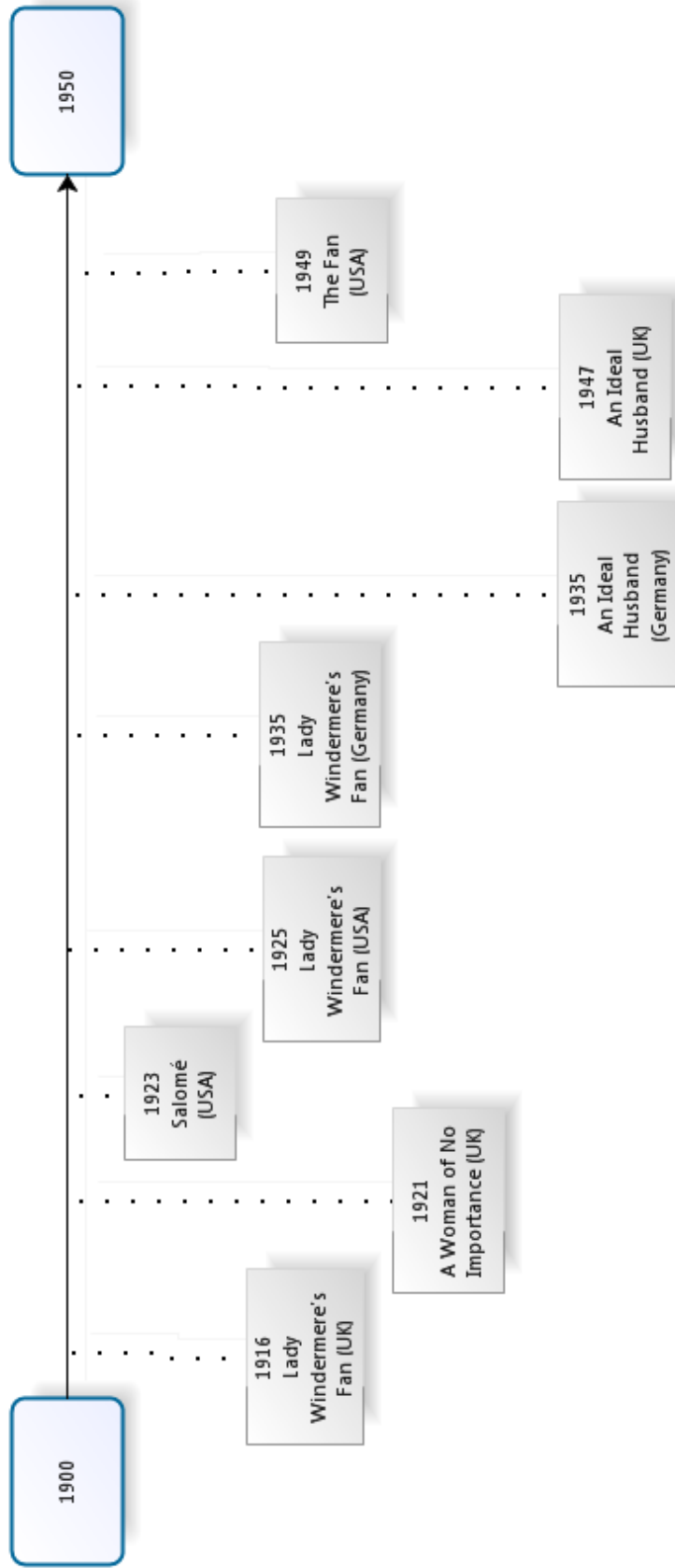


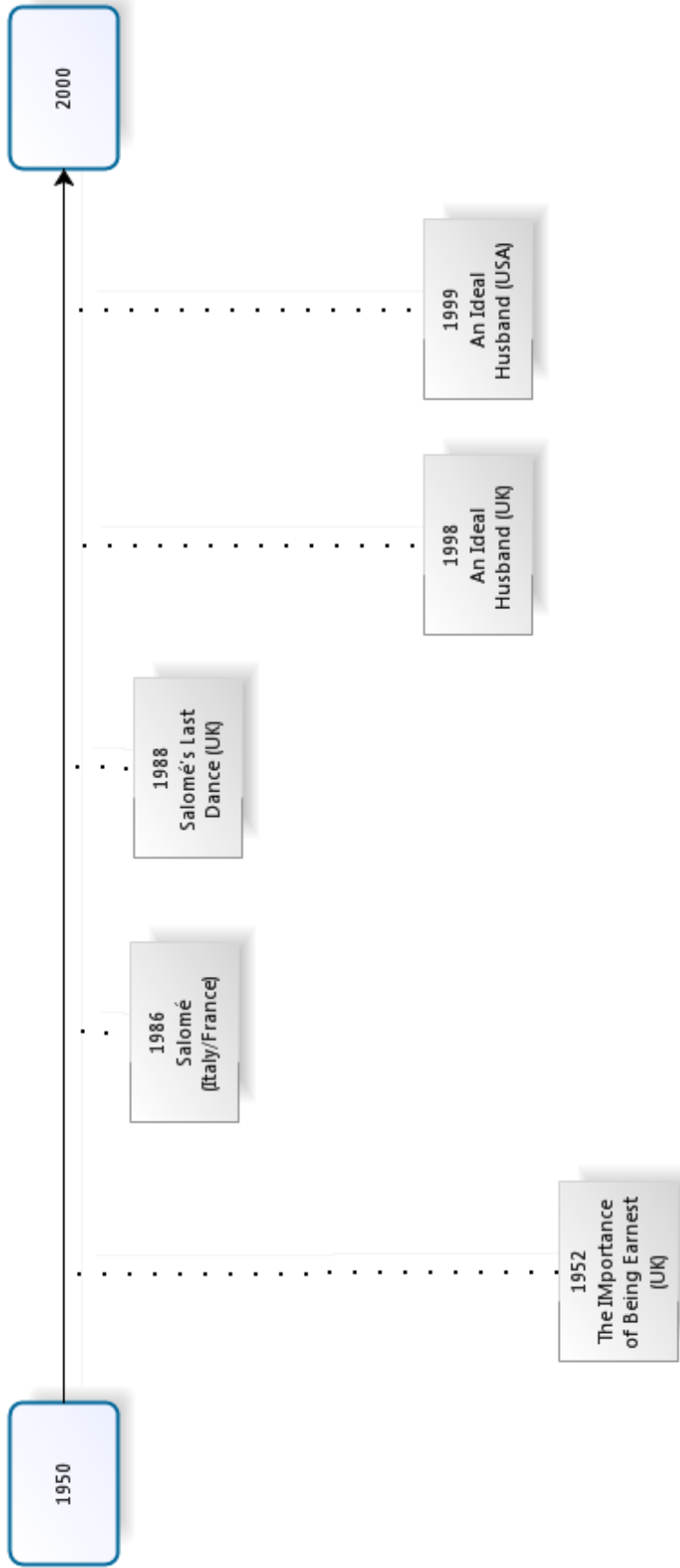
## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

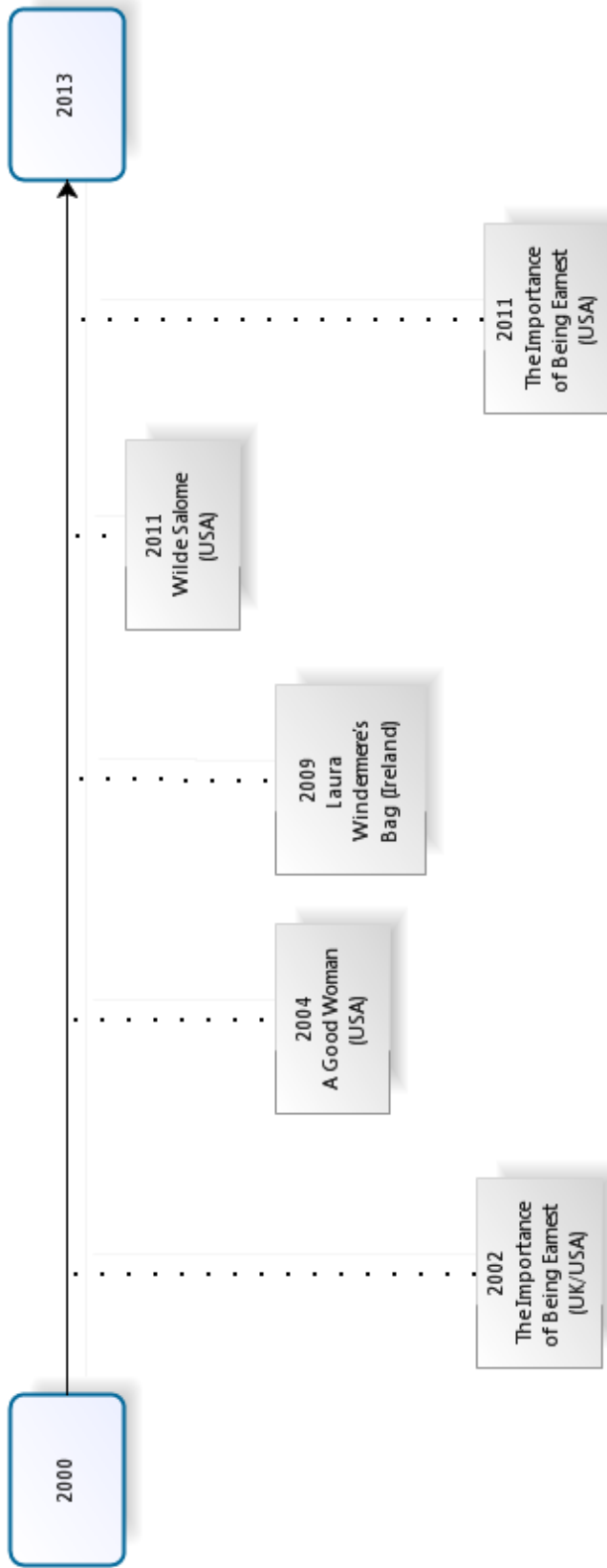


## APPENDIX D









## ANNEXES



On the left Oscar Wilde's father, Sir William Wilde

Available at : <[http://lowres-picturecabinet.com.s3-eu-west-](http://lowres-picturecabinet.com.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/173/main/32/587790.jpg)

[1.amazonaws.com/173/main/32/587790.jpg](http://lowres-picturecabinet.com.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/173/main/32/587790.jpg)> Accessed on: March 30, 2013.

On the right Oscar Wilde's mother, Jane Francesca "Speranza" Wilde

Available at : <[http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-](http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=pv&GRid=21626&PIpi=4873051)

[bin/fg.cgi?page=pv&GRid=21626&PIpi=4873051](http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=pv&GRid=21626&PIpi=4873051)> Accessed on: March 30, 2013.



Above, Oscar Wilde during a photo session in New York, during his North American Tour, in 1882. Available at: <http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/constance%20wilde>. Accessed on: March 23, 2013.



On the left, Oscar Wilde during a photo session in New York, during his North American Tour, in 1882. Available at: <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2006/04/25/gay-love-poem-to-oscar-wilde-among-literary-treasures-donated-to-university/>. Accessed on: March 23, 2013.





Oscar Wilde's at Lady Windermere's premiere in 1892. Available at: [http://www.anglonautes.com/art\\_books/art\\_books\\_19\\_century/art\\_books\\_19\\_century.htm](http://www.anglonautes.com/art_books/art_books_19_century/art_books_19_century.htm) Accessed on: March 23, 2013.



Caricature in an American paper, related to Wilde's poetry, during his North American Tour, in 1882. Available at: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/21/Punch\\_-\\_Oscar\\_Wilde.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/21/Punch_-_Oscar_Wilde.png) Accessed on: March 23, 2013.



Caricature in an American paper, related to Wilde's extravagant and eccentric style, during his North American Tour, in 1882. Available at: [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2f/Wasp\\_cartoon\\_on\\_Oscar\\_Wilde.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2f/Wasp_cartoon_on_Oscar_Wilde.jpg) Accessed on: March 23, 2013.



Wilde's house at 34 Tite Street, London, England. Available at:  
<<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6e/Wildehouse.JPG>> Accessed  
on: April 11, 2013.



Picture of Constance Mary Lloyd Wilde, Oscar Wilde's wife, in 1892.

Available at:

<<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fd/Constancelloyd.jpg>>

Accessed on: April 11, 2013.



Picture of Constance holding her firstborn, Cyril, in 1889. Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/books/article-2009960/Heartbreak-betrayal-unimportance-Mrs-Oscar-Wilde-CONSTANCE-THE-TRAGIC-AND-SCANDALOUS-LIFE-OF-MRS-OSCAR-WILDE-BY-FRANNY-MOYLE.html>  
Accessed on: April 15, 2013.



On the left, a picture of Vyvyan Cyril, Wilde's sons, in 1891.

Available at: <<http://www.mr-oscar-wilde.de/words/harris/home.htm>> Accessed on: March 30, 2013.



On the right, another picture of Vyvyan and Cyril, Wilde's sons, in 1891. Not sure who the elderly man is.

Available at: <<http://histclo.com/bio/w/wilde/bw-kids.html>> Accessed on: March 30, 2013.



On the left, picture of Robert Ross, Canadian journalist and art critic, Wilde's lifelong friend and first male lover. Available at:

<[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/52/Robert\\_Ross\\_at\\_24.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/52/Robert_Ross_at_24.jpg)>

Accessed on: April 11, 2013.



On the right, John Gray, English poet and one of Wilde's male lovers, introduced to him by Robert Ross.

Available at:

<<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1b/John2gray.JPG>>

Accessed on: April 16, 2013.

On the right, picture of Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas, also known as "Bosie", in 1893.

Available at:

<<http://www.famoushotels.org/article/1189>> Accessed on: March 23, 2013.



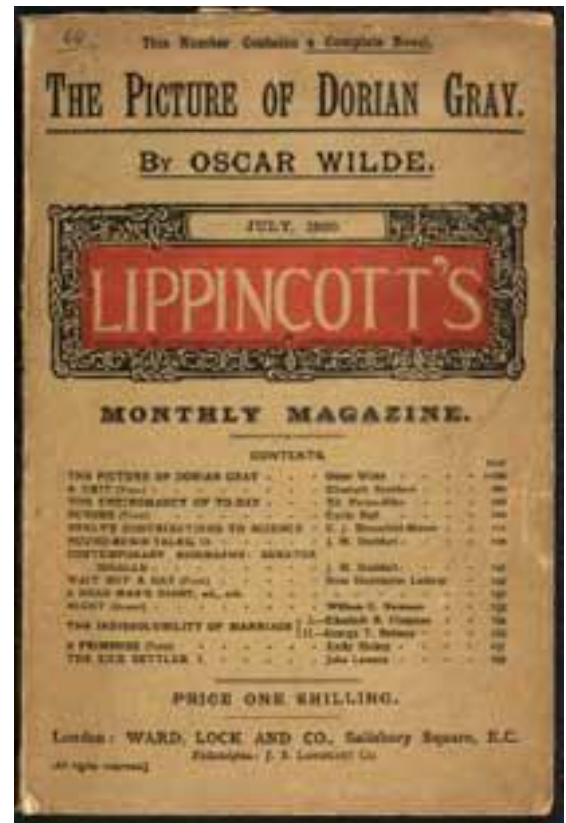
On the right, picture of Wilde and Bosie, in 1893.

Available at:

<<http://www.csulb.edu/~csnider/wilde.queer.addict.html>> Accessed on: March 23, 2013.







Picture of a chapter of Wilde's novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, when it first published in Lippincott's Magazine, in 1890. Available at: <http://harvardpress.typepad.com/.a/6a00d8341d17e553ef014e5f63cd2d970c-pi> Accessed on: April 25, 2013.



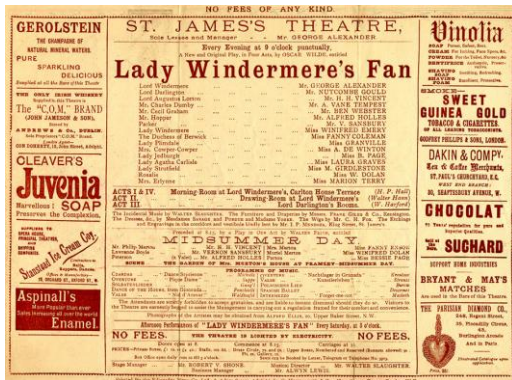
Picture of the 1945 film adaptation of The Picture of Dorian Gray. Available at: <http://www.timswineblog.com/2007/11/aged-to-perfection,-or-dorian-grey> Accessed on: April 25, 2013.



Picture of the Dorian Gray soon after his painting is finished., in the 2009 film adaptation of The Picture of Dorian Gray, titled Dorian Gray. Available at: <http://picturesofdoriangray.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/dorian-gray-ben-barnes.jpg> Accessed on: April 25, 2013



Picture of Dorian Gray's painting after his sins, in the 2009 film adaptation of The Picture of Dorian Gray, titled Dorian Gray. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2009/sep/03/dorian-gray-oscar-wilde-british-library-classics> Accessed on: April 25, 2013.



Theatre program of Lady Windermere's Fan first presentation at St. James Theatre, in London, in 1892. Available at: <<http://oscarwildeworks.blogspot.com.br/2011/01/oscar-wildes-production.html>> Accessed on: April 25, 2013.

Picture of the 1925 film adaptation of Lady Windermere's Fan. Available at: <<http://mubi.com/films/lady-windermere-fan>> Accessed on: April 25, 2013.



Below, a picture of the 2004 film adaptation of Lady Windermere's Fan, titled A Good Woman. Available at: <<http://teainateacup.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/lady-windermere-fan1.jpg>> Accessed on: April 25, 2013.



Below, a picture of a 1954 presentation of *A Woman of No Importance*, at Kyveli's Theatre, in Athens, Greece. Available at: [http://www.mcf.gr/en/micheal\\_cacoyannis/Directing/Theatre/?ev=mia\\_cinaika\\_horis\\_simasia](http://www.mcf.gr/en/micheal_cacoyannis/Directing/Theatre/?ev=mia_cinaika_horis_simasia) Accessed on: March 30, 2013.



Below, a picture of a 2008 presentation of *A Woman of No Importance*, at Yale Repertory Theatre, in New Haven, USA. Available at: <http://www.geordiejohnson.com/woman.html> Accessed on: March 30, 2013.





Picture of the 1947 film adaptation of An Ideal Husband. Available at:  
< <http://mubi.com/films/lady-windermere-fan> > Accessed on: April 25, 2013



Picture of the 1999 film adaptation of An Ideal Husband. Available at:  
< <http://movie.kapook.com/An%20Ideal%20Husband> > Accessed on: April 25, 2013



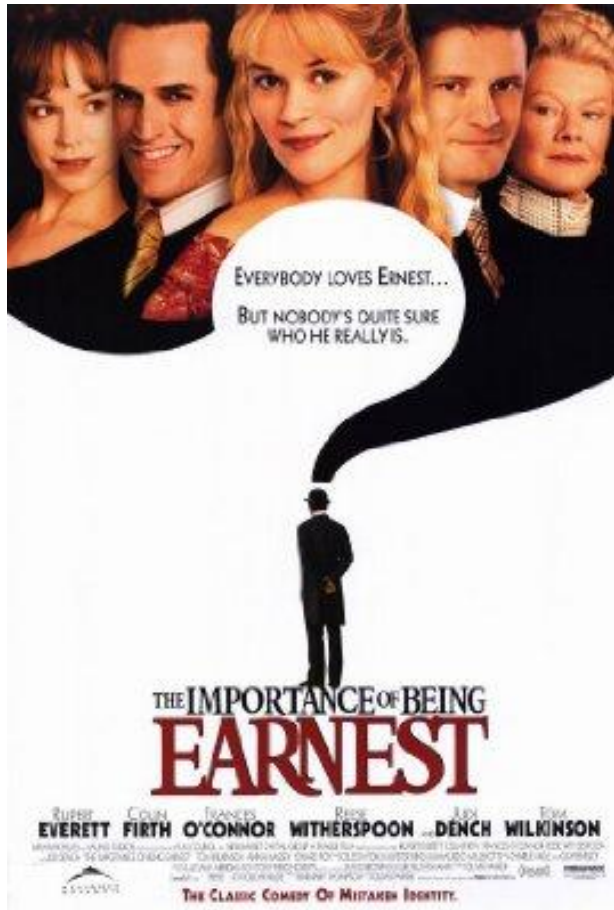
On the left, picture of the 1895 premiere of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, at St. James Theatre, in London.

On bottom, picture of St. James Theatre, in London, in 1895. Both pictures available at:

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/the-importance-of-being-earnest-first-stage-production/> Accessed on: April 30, 2013.



Pictures of the 2002 film adaptation of The Importance of Being Earnest. Both available at: < <http://eatpraylovmovies.blogspot.com.br/2010/07/importance-of-being-earnest-2002.html>> Accessed on: April 25, 2013



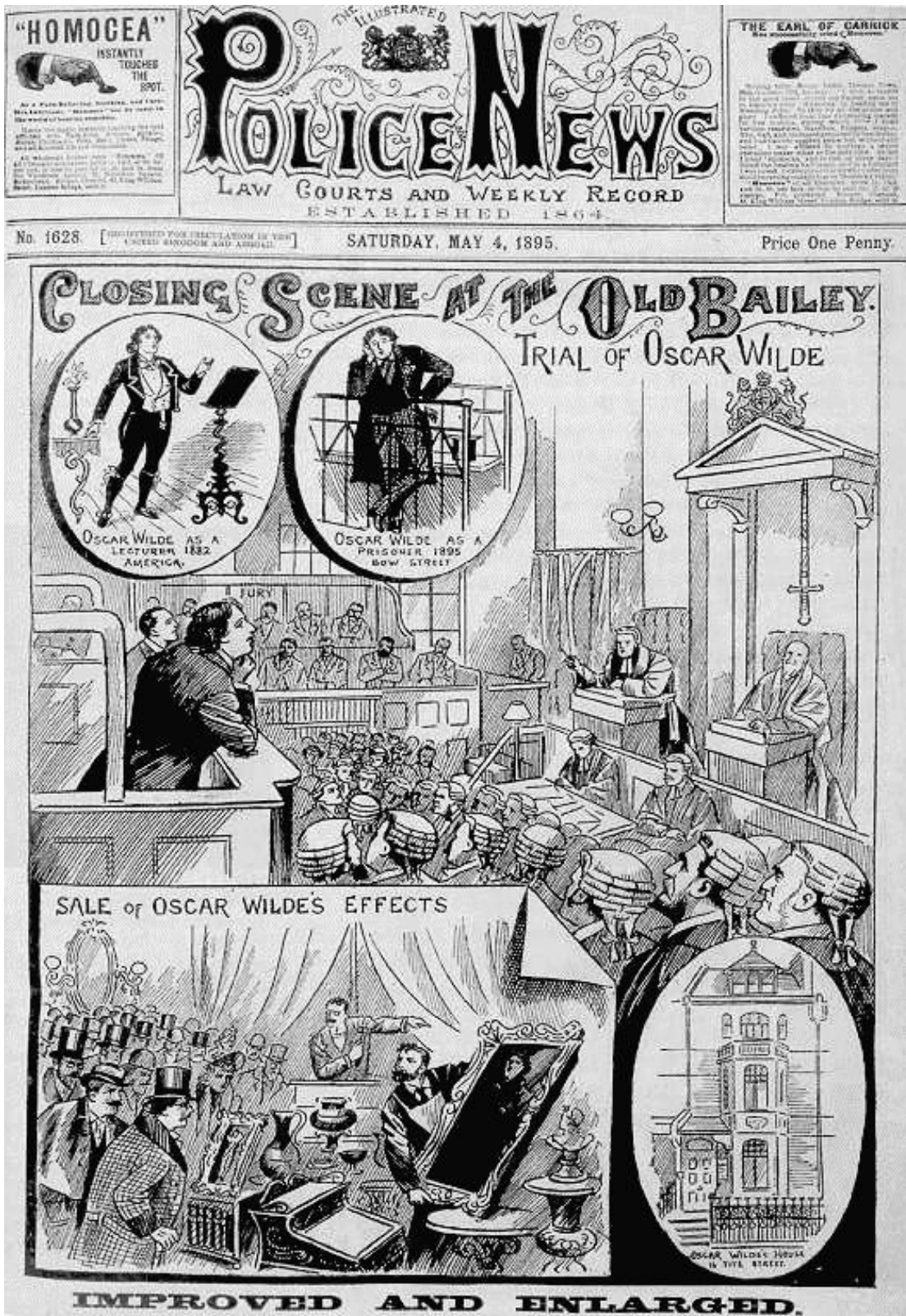
Pictures of a 2011 presentation of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, on Broadway, in New York, USA. Picture on top available at:

<<http://www.newsday.com/entertainment/theater/lady-s-good-in-importance-of-being-earnest-1.2609837>> and picture at the bottom available at:

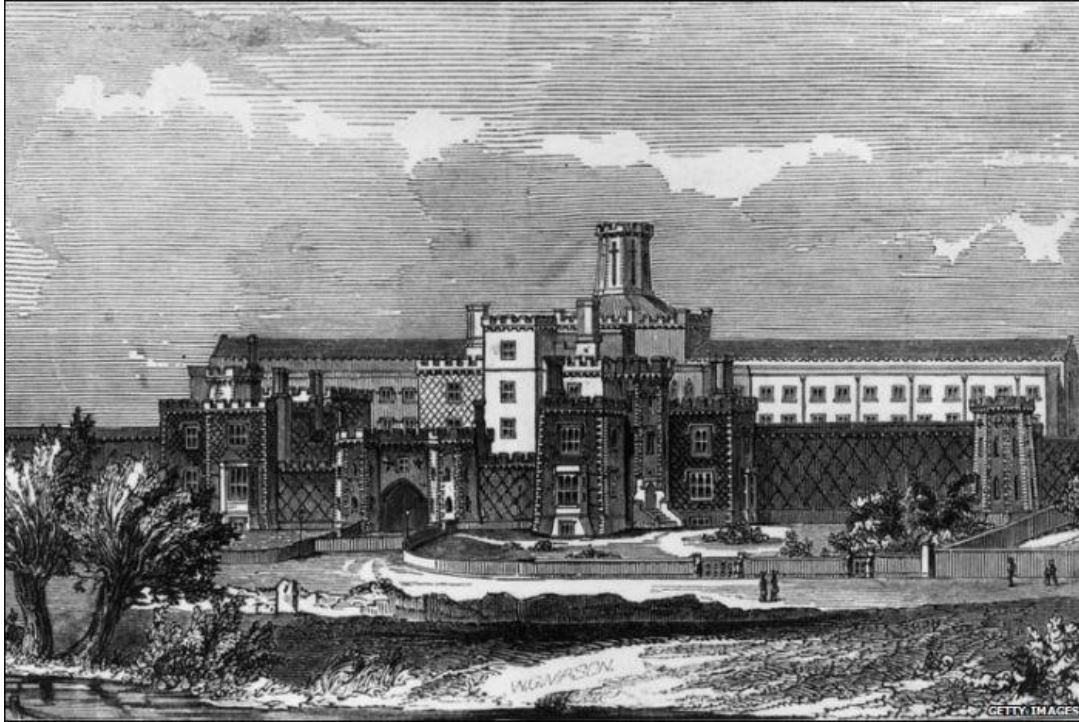
<[http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20364394\\_20457470,00.html](http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20364394_20457470,00.html)> Accessed on: March 30, 2013.







Cover of a Police News paper with a sketch of Wilde's trial on May 04, 1895. Available at: <<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/wilde/closingscene.jpg>> Accessed on: April 30, 2013.



On top, drawing of Reading Gaol prison in 1895. Available at:  
<<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/creativeinstinct/reading-gaol/3933114>> Accessed on: April 30, 2013.

At bottom, picture of Reading Gaol prison nowadays. Available at:  
<<http://protopoetica.blogspot.com.br/2011/06/oscar-wilde-ballad-of-reading-gaol-iii.html>> Accessed on: April 30, 2013.





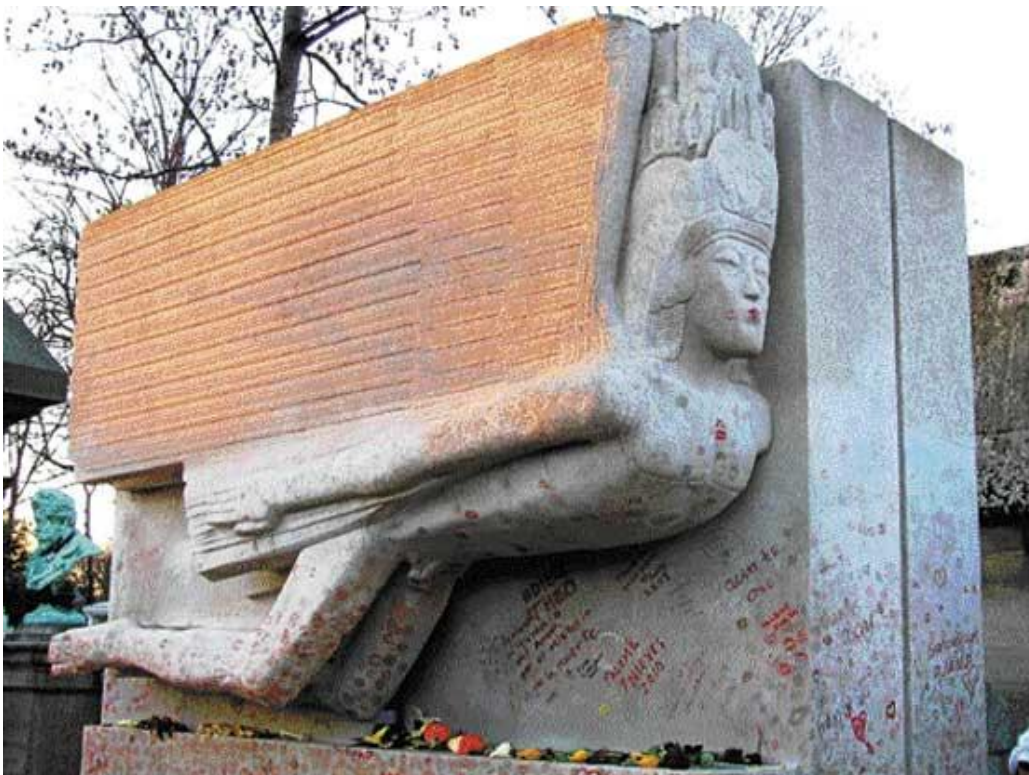
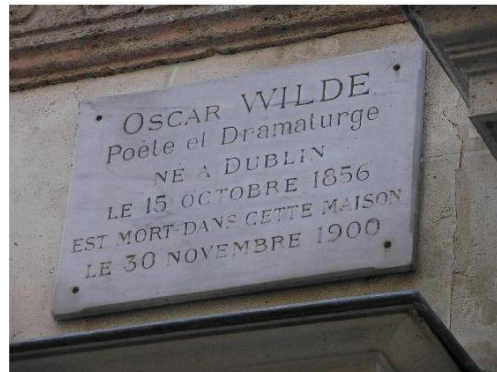
On the left, picture of L'Hotel, in Paris, where Wilde lived the last few years of his life. Available at:

<<http://www.parisprovencevangogh.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/LHotel-Front.jpg>> Accessed on: March 14, 2013.

On the right, picture of a plaque on the L'Hotel façade, in Paris, where Wilde lived the last few years of his life.

Available at:

<<http://members.virtualtourist.com/m/p/m/1b47bd/>> Accessed on: March 14, 2013.



Picture of Wilde's grave, at cemetery Père Lachaise, in Paris. Available at:

<<http://www.heritagedaily.com/2011/11/a-death-by-a-thousand-kisses-the-grave-of-oscar-wilde-is-saved/>> Accessed on: March 11, 2013.