

Oscar Wilde

'We live in an age when unnecessary things are our only necessities.'

'Whenever people agree with me I always feel I must be wrong.'

'I can resist anything but temptation.'

'It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious.'

'If you do not tell the truth about yourself you cannot tell it about other people'

Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde is considered the leading exponent of the English Aesthetic Movement, that spread in Paris in the second half of the Eighties.

Oscar Wilde was the son of a famous Irish eye surgeon and an Irish nationalist and writer of poetry. He was educated at home until the age of nine. After that, he went to the famous Trinity College in Dublin and later he studied in Oxford. There he was influenced by Ruskin and started to have an important role in Aesthetic and Decadent movement of the time. He was an excellent student and received awards and scholarships.

After university he moved to London, where he began teaching aesthetic values and became famous for his unconventional clothes and manners (he dressed in an eccentric way, walked up and down Piccadilly with a sunflower in his hands) and for his wit and humour, that soon turned him into one of the most famous personalities of the Victorian era (his personality, conversation, and behavior attracted public attention). He soon acquired a reputation, not only for his art, but also for his eccentricity, his Dandyish behavior, his poses and irony. When he started writing, he was immediately successful, and in 1882 he went to the USA and Canada where he gave lectures about Aestheticism.

Wilde applied to his works the main themes of the Aesthetic movement expressed by Walter Pater: life is only a series of experiences and the only way to give it meaning is to live those as intensely as possible. TO LIVE ONE'S LIFE AS A WORK OF ART meant living all kinds of sensations, giving the highest quality to every passing moment in the flowing of time. Art is the only way of stopping time. Wilde believed that art was superior to life because it could be controlled and made perfect and so satisfy man's need for perfection. Like all the Aesthetes he didn't accept middle-class morality and the sense of earnestness which dominated Victorian public values. He didn't want to be serious or to write seriously, because he believed that seriousness was boring and it was only an attitude adopted by people who had little imagination. So when he wrote or he spoke he tried to make people laugh, but also think. Wilde's irony is a sign of great wisdom, a kind of wisdom that through irony throws everything into doubts.

Today Oscar Wilde is considered one of the most successful playwrights of the second half of the 19th century (his most famous play is *The Importance of Being Earnest*), but he was also a writer, a poet and a great celebrity. He wrote some well-known children's stories and an extremely successful novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which was considered a milestone in the Aesthetic movement. It is the story of a handsome young gentleman who, at the beginning of the novel, is quite innocent and naïve. After meeting the decadent Lord Henry Wotton, who soon becomes his great friend, he gradually begins to lead an immoral and dissipated life. Basil Hallward, his best friend, paints a wonderful portrait of him, but Dorian suddenly kills him. As the years pass by, Dorian remains young and beautiful, whereas his portrait becomes

old and ugly, until he hates the picture so much that he decides to destroy it. Mysteriously the blow kills Dorian himself. The signs which had deformed the image return to Dorian's face and the portrait returns to its original purity. The meaning of the story is allegorical: the picture is the dark side of Dorian's personality, his 'conscience'.

In 1884 Oscar Wilde married Constance Lloyd and they had two sons. In 1895, while he was celebrating a series of great successes, he was suddenly arrested, imprisoned and condemned to two years' hard labour because of his homosexuality, which was considered a crime at that time. In prison he wrote a very long letter known as *De Profundis* to Lord Alfred Douglas, his lover. He also wrote a long, moving poem, the *Ballad of Reading Gaol*. They were both published after his death.

When he left prison two years later, he was very ill and had no friends, no money and no family. He was completely isolated from society and the artistic circles, so he decided to move to France. There he spent his last years in solitude. He died of meningitis at the end of 1900.

A1. Who were Oscar Wilde's parents?

A2. What do you know about his education?

A3. Was he a good student?

A4. What did he do after university?

A5. What did he write?

A6. What was he famous for?

A7. Was he successful?

A8. Why was art so important for him?

A9. Which did he prefer: irony or seriousness? Why?

A10. What does *The Picture of Dorian Gray* symbolise?
