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The Picture of Dorian Gray and Other Writings by Oscar Wilde





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Edited with an Introduction by
Richard Ellmann

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THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY AND OTHER WRITINGS
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OSCAR WILDE

was born into a socially prominent Anglo-Irish family in Dublin in 1854. His father, later Sir William Wilde, was a surgeon and his mother a writer. Wilde was a gifted student of the classics and won scholarships to Trinity College, Dublin, and to Magdalen College, Oxford, which he entered in 1874. At Oxford he fell under the aesthetic influence of Walter Pater and John Ruskin. He was sufficiently well known as a dandy, wit, and man-about-town to be satirized in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience* in 1881, though he had yet to achieve any literary success.

Wilde made a memorable lecture tour of the United States in 1882, married in 1884, and in 1887 became editor of a women's magazine which published his stories, reviews, and poems. His novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, was published in 1891, as was his essay, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, but it was the theater that was to bring him both popular success and critical esteem. Each of his four comedies was a popular triumph: *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). At one time, three of his plays were running simultaneously on the London stage.

Wilde's fall from the good graces of Victorian society was swift and final. In 1895 the Marquess of Queensberry sought to end the close relationship between his son, Lord Alfred Douglas, and Wilde. He referred to Wilde publicly as a homosexual; Wilde sued him for libel and lost the case. Under England's harsh penal code of the time, he was arrested and served two years at hard labor at Reading and Pentonville Prisons. His wife sought a legal separation and most of his friends deserted him. Released in 1897, he immediately left England for good and took up residence under an assumed name in France. He finished "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" and traveled to Italy with Lord Alfred Douglas. Oscar Wilde died suddenly in Paris in November of 1900.

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Oscar Wilde

The Picture of Dorian Gray and Other Writings

Introduction by Richard Ellmann

The name of Oscar Wilde buoys up the heart and rouses instant expectations that what will be quoted in his name will make the language dance. Few authors in English are cited more frequently than he. Historians of literature would if they could dismiss him as minor, but readers, and playgoers, know better. His best writings, like his best utterances, survive him, and after almost a century receive and deserve admiration.

Of all his works *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the most famous. It is Wilde's version of the Faust legend, the bartering of a soul for eternal youth and gratification. In Sibyl Vane it has its Gretchen, and in Lord Henry Wotton its Mephistopheles. The novel has survived, in part because of its inadequacies. Wilde had the raconteur's impatience with details; when the publisher wanted more pages, he composed them at once, adding whole chapters in unexpected places. Yet the result vindicates him. The padding has the effect of making the book elegantly casual, as if writing a novel were a diversion rather than a struggle. No one could mistake it for a workmanlike job; our hacks can do that for us. And it gathers momentum, the interpolated materials increasing rather than lowering suspense. The underlying legend arouses deep and criminal yearnings; the contrast of these with the polish of English civilization at its verbal peak makes for an unexpected conjunction.

Wilde's intention in the novel has sometimes been misunderstood, because its bad characters talk like him, and its good characters talk like you and me. But he had no need to flatter himself. The book is his parable of the impossibility of leading a life on aesthetic terms. Dorian, because of his demonic pact, imagines himself free of conscience and duty. He never is. Self-indulgence leads him eventually to vandalize his own portrait, but this act proves to be a sacrifice to himself, excess pushed to the point where it is inverted. By suicide Dorian becomes aestheticism's first martyr. The text:

Live exclusively on the surface, and you will certainly drown in the depths.

Yet Dorian, though an exemplum of decay, is often likable. He even retains a certain innocence. His worst deeds have the virtue of being committed on the spur of the moment, and never without remorse. Though in one mood he stabs his friend in the back, in another he cannot bear to shoot a rabbit. Lord Henry Wotton, addicted to evil words rather than evil deeds, is also not without charm. His wicked promptings to Dorian, many of them borrowed from Walter Pater, are expressed in a style so openly self-preening that it distracts attention from their vicious tenor. To some extent readers, pleased by his polish, become his accomplices, and similarly neglect substance for manner. They too are seduced like Dorian, though more briefly.

Against the new evangelist Wotton and his disciple Dorian is Sibyl Vane. Sibyl loses her power to play Juliet when she falls in love with Dorian. To be a bad actress is to be a good person, just as clichés are better than epigrams. Contrariwise, to be a good pretender like Dorian or Lord Henry is to be a bad man. It is a sobering conclusion. Wilde criticizes aestheticism and deprives it of its authority, though not altogether of its glamour. But then, Milton's Satan has that glamour too. Both must be worsted. Dorian's death constitutes a form of atonement, and his portrait returns to its old beauty, as if his innocence were now restored and art were allowed to rescue what life had ruined.

The Picture of Dorian Gray has many sections devoted to dialogue. These remind us that Wilde's principal talent lay not in the novel but in the play. Though he did not achieve success as a playwright until *Lady Windermere's Fan*, produced the year after *Dorian Gray* was published, drama attracted him first and last. In the 1870s, as a student of classics at Trinity College, Dublin, and then at Oxford, he came to know the Greek and Roman drama well. At Trinity he translated some of Aristophanes, at Oxford he persuaded some theatre-minded friends to stage Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* in Greek.

Then at twenty-six Wilde composed his first play, *Vera, or The Nihilists*. Set vaguely in nineteenth-century Russia, it is at once a political drama about assassination and a love tragedy. The old czar is killed, his successor (who secretly sympathizes with the Nihilists) takes the throne. Vera has vowed to

assassinate him, but they are in love. Riven by contrary emotions, she sacrifices herself to save his life and thereby, she says, to save Russia. Love, not terrorism, is the answer. *Vera* was produced in New York in 1883. The leading actress was inclined to rant and Wilde's lines did nothing to discourage her. The play was taken off in a week.

Meanwhile he wrote a second play, this one in blank verse, *The Duchess of Padua*. Like *Vera*, it had an operatic plot. Guido, son of the late duke, comes to Padua to revenge himself upon the man who has betrayed his father and succeeded to his title. But the young man falls in love with the duchess, like Vera with the future czar, and again like Vera, when the moment comes, he cannot bring himself to assassinate the perfidious duke. The duchess, however, who returns Guido's love, takes it upon herself to assassinate her husband for him. The crime revolts Guido instead of pleasing him. She indignantly calls the guards and accuses him of the murder. He offers no defense and awaits execution in his prison cell. The duchess relents, and tries to persuade him to escape. He declines. They die instead, in loving, serial suicide. *The Duchess of Padua*, with its passions torn to tatters, was better written but otherwise on the level of melodramas of the time. No producer would risk it until seven years later, in January 1891, when Lawrence Barrett changed its title, removed the name of the already notorious playwright, and had a creditable run with it in New York.

Wilde had yet to find his way. During the years from 1884 to 1890 when he wrote no plays, he enwound his life with the stage. Scarcely a first night passed without his six-foot-three presence dominating the stalls. He knew the producers, the playwrights, he cherished the leading actresses such as Sarah Bernhardt and Ellen Terry, and he knew all the others, men and women, down to those who played the bit parts. But his writings during this time were in other modes, fiction and nonfiction. His closest approach to a play was the composition of two brilliant essays in dialogue form.

Then George Alexander opened the St. James's Theatre in London with the announced intention of producing plays by English—or at any rate British—writers as opposed to continental or Scandinavian ones. He would not undertake *The Duchess of Padua*, because what he wanted was a modern play. He offered Wilde fifty pounds on account to write one,

and Wilde started on *Lady Windermere's Fan*. At moments he became discouraged, even offering to return the advance to Alexander, who wisely urged him on. Toward the end of 1891 it was finished. Alexander was delighted and offered Wilde a thousand pounds on the spot for all rights. Wilde needed the money badly, but he replied: "A thousand pounds! My dear Alec, I have so much confidence in your judgment that I will take a royalty instead." His caution would be rewarded by upwards of five times the proffered sum. The first performance, on 20 February 1892, aroused immense enthusiasm. To the audience cries of "Author! Author!" Wilde responded by appearing, as no playwright had ever done before on an English stage, smoking a cigarette. His speech did not diminish his effrontery: "Ladies and gentlemen, I have enjoyed this evening immensely," he began, and went on to congratulate the audience for having almost as high an opinion of the play as he had himself.

The success of *Lady Windermere's Fan* determined that Wilde should write plays, and plays alone, during the next four years. In his late thirties, he was seen at last to be a born dramatist. For him this meant not merely entertaining his audience, but instilling his work with a distinct theme and point of view. That he set his scene in high society misled some critics into assuming he was snobbish, but the reason was rather that his wonderful talent for dialogue required a milieu of leisured people accustomed to treat conversation as a form of action. His favored characters are as likely to be "classless" Americans or illegitimate sons as to be titled persons born properly in wedlock. Society glitters but reveals its shortcomings. Partly because he was himself leading a secret life as a homosexual, while pretending to be a proper Victorian husband, Wilde was keenly alive to the disparity between semblance and reality. He saw hypocrisy in various forms around him, as well as in himself, and particularly scorned those who pretended to piety and morality because they were socially acceptable. One had, he thought, a duty to oneself as well as to others: the duty of self-discovery and self-expression. This duty made necessary, among other things, the loss of innocence, for innocence too long maintained could be as dangerous as guilt.

Lady Windermere is unaware that as an infant she was abandoned by her mother, who ran away from her husband with another man, only to be herself abandoned shortly after.

She has been reared by an aunt as a Puritan, and proudly tells Lord Darlington: "She taught me what the world is forgetting, the difference that there is between what is right and what is wrong. She allowed of no compromise. I allow of none." When Lord Darlington, who is in love with her, ventures to say, "I think life too complex a thing to be settled by these hard and fast rules," she responds firmly, "If we had 'these hard and fast rules,' we should find life much more simple." Are there to be no exceptions? he wonders. None, she replies. But by the play's end much has been revealed to her, and she outdoes her husband in tolerance by saying: "There is the same world for all of us, and good and evil, sin and innocence, go through it hand in hand. To shut one's eyes to half of life that we may live securely is as though one blinded oneself that one might walk with more safety in a land of pit and precipice." Her permissiveness may sound prim, but we must not ask too much of her.

Her eyes, if no longer shut, are only half open. She has perceived that she herself is not so good, nor Mrs. Erlynne so bad, as she had once assumed. But she is prevented from seeing that Mrs. Erlynne is her mother, for Lord Windermere is sure that the shame of this revelation would kill her. For her part, Lady Windermere does not altogether open her husband's eyes either. She does not tell him, and he is never to discover, that she had been on the brink of running off with Lord Darlington and was only dissuaded by Mrs. Erlynne. Neither husband nor wife is capable of knowing the whole truth.

Only Mrs. Erlynne is prepared to face up to human weakness, and she alone is allowed to sacrifice herself. At the end, in the general benignity, her sacrifice is lessened. Darlington had said earlier, "Oh, anything is better than being sacrificed," and Wilde himself in other writings explicitly rejected sacrifice as part of the old worship of pain. But his works implicitly recognize that we prove ourselves as much in sacrifice as in other forms of self-discovery. What also appears to be recognized is that secrets are indispensable to living, and that Lord and Lady Windermere are well-advised to shun total disclosure. The play ends then in wise compromise after having begun in foolish obduracy. The Windermeres are happy, in part because of what they will never know.

After *Lady Windermere's Fan* Wilde might have been expected to write another comedy of manners. His next play

was, however, of a very different kind. He had always been interested in "improving" the Bible, and used to regale his friends with stories under the cover-all title of "Early Church." In each of them a Christian event or parable was given an altogether new inflection. Now he revamped the Biblical narrative of Salome and John the Baptist. He wrote his play *Salome* in French, partly as a language more suited to a decadent theme, partly to challenge comparison with Mallarmé, who had begun but not completed a play on the same subject.

In treating the ancient story, Wilde was cavalier with the Biblical materials. His Salome wants the head of Iokanaan (Greek for John) on her own account, not her mother's, and out of uncontrollable love, not whim or hatred. The tetrarch Herod is much more complex and imposing than in the Bible; Wilde telescopes three people of that name into one, and gives him an aesthetic, paradoxical temperament not unlike his own. Wilde's Herod is torn between Cyrenaic surrender and Christian renunciation, as between lust for his step-daughter Salome and terror of the strange prophet. He yields first to sexual desire and orders Iokanaan's death so that Salome will consent to dance for him, and then he yields to fear as he orders her execution in turn. Wilde at one time proposed to call the play "The Decapitation of Salome," as if to emphasize the equal fates of dancer and Baptist.

Since the play is often misunderstood as being about the dastardliness of a *femme fatale*, it must be said that Salome is no more fatal than Herod. If she causes Iokanaan's death, Herod causes hers. Wilde displayed rather, in a series of instances, the uncontrollability of passion. The pageboy is in love with the Syrian captain of the guard, the captain (like Herod) with Salome; she, in her turn, loves Iokanaan, who loves Jesus. As if to balance the scales, Wilde makes Iokanaan as excessive in hatred as Salome in love. Her behavior causes the captain to commit suicide, and Iokanaan to lose his head, to confirm the grim reminder in Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, "each man kills the thing he loves." Herod's order that Salome be killed is another case in kind. Homosexual or heterosexual, carnal or celestial, love shapes its terrifying way.

Wilde showed this play to Sarah Bernhardt, then in London for a season, and she immediately decided to stage it and to play the leading role. But plays on Biblical themes were at that time forbidden in England, and the Lord Chancellor

refused permission. Wilde was furious and threatened to cross the Channel and take up French citizenship. He had to content himself with publishing it in French and in an English translation, with Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations. It would not be staged until 1896, and then by Lugné-Poë in Paris, as part of the sympathetic response to Wilde's having been imprisoned for a homosexual offense. Although it is not often played in its own right, *Salome* in German translation provided Richard Strauss with the libretto for his opera of that name. The influence of the play was wider than that, for some of W. B. Yeats's dance plays owe almost as much to it as to the Japanese sources which he openly acknowledged. Properly performed, *Salome* is powerful and moving.

His Biblical sources being subject to censorship, Wilde reverted to modern comedy. His next play was *A Woman of No Importance*, staged on 19 April 1893 by Beerbohm Tree at the Haymarket Theatre in London. It explored themes similar to those of *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Lady Windermere did not know that her mother was alive, Gerald Arbuthnot does not know that his mother was never married. He has yet to find out who, and how base, his father is, in counterpart to Lady Windermere's discovery not of who, but of how good, her mother is. The earlier play was as sympathetic to Mrs. Erlynne as a woman of the world as the later play is unsympathetic to Mrs. Allenby in the same role. In almost all Wilde's plays there is a dandy, but he receives different treatment in each. Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan* was witty and kind, Lord Illingworth in *A Woman of No Importance* is witty and cruel.

Wilde renews here his anatomizing of conventional moral standards. The American Puritan, Hester Worsley, is firmly convinced at first that anyone who sins, man or woman, should be punished, and Gerald Arbuthnot primly concurs that "no nice girl" would misbehave. Both (like Lady Windermere) are obliged to renounce this easy rejection as they learn about Gerald's mother's history. Lord Illingworth, who long ago had abandoned her, now offers to marry her. She has no intention of having him make her an honest woman. In the end Gerald and Hester are to marry, and Mrs. Arbuthnot will live with them. Society is wrong and she is right.

In this play, and in his next one, Wilde was moving toward a more startling independence of the world's judgments. *An Ideal Husband* was produced at the Haymarket on 3 January

1895. In it the idolizing of a husband by his wife is shown to be pernicious. Sir Robert Chiltern is not ideal; at the outset of his political career he sold a state secret and so laid the basis for his fortune. Now he is being blackmailed for it. He might be expected to register only shame, but one of the play's high points comes when he defends what he has done: "Weak! Do you really think . . . that it is weakness that yields to temptation? I tell you that there are terrible temptations that it requires strength, strength and courage, to yield to. To stake all one's life on a single moment, to risk everything on one throw, whether the stake be power or pleasure, I care not—there is no weakness in that. There is a horrible, a terrible courage." His wife must learn that guilt and forgiveness are as essential to life as once her husband's ideal character had seemed to be. As Lord Goring, most attractive of all Wilde's dandies, sums up the higher ethics: "Nobody is incapable of doing a foolish thing. Nobody is incapable of doing a wrong thing." Chiltern, freed from the threat of blackmail, is ready to give up his political career, but his wife, now better tutored in human frailty, helps to persuade him to accept a cabinet post instead. In a fallen world, it is best to make do with what we have.

Neither of these plays was Wilde at his best, yet they both exhibit his ability to cut across accepted ideas. Their dialogue is taut, the scenes are expertly managed, and besides the interest of the problems raised, the plays offer much gratuitous amusement in the minor characters, such as the Australian Mr. Hopper in *A Woman of No Importance* or Lady Hunstanton, from the same play, who of two alternatives can never quite remember which. But Wilde was already, in the later stages of *An Ideal Husband*, embarked upon his finest comedy.

The Importance of Being Earnest, first produced on 14 February 1895, has few rivals in the language. Bernard Shaw, who learned a great deal from Wilde's earlier plays and praised them, found this one to be heartless. In fact, it shows a joyful affection for human beings. However insouciant, the play is of a piece with Wilde's other work. The themes are the same, only presented with obliquity. All the Victorian virtues, including virtue itself, are paraded and then fusilladed. Earnestness, to begin with: to be earnest is, by an irreverent pun, made into just being "Ernest." The ethic of work is not to stand up for long either: Jack, respond-

ing to Lady Bracknell's questioning, admits that he smokes. "I am glad of it," she comments, "a young man should always have an occupation of some kind." On the great problem of good and evil, this play continues the revaluation that had been begun in the preceding plays. So Miss Prism, in describing her lost novel, explains to Cecily: "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means." Cecily herself goes further when she says to Algernon, posing as Jack's wicked younger brother: "I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy."

Wilde is equally subversive in his attitude to sincerity and truth-telling. "In matters of grave importance style, not sincerity, is the vital thing," Jack declares. His invention of a wicked brother to cover his returns to the city, like Algernon's of an invalid named Bunbury to serve as pretexts for visits to the country, is not to be condemned. Artful dodging, at least up to the time of marriage, is a subject for amusement rather than reproach. Gwendolen and Cecily have had less opportunity to playact in life, but they have made up for it in fantasy, as their diaries bear witness.

The questions of illegitimacy and parental abandonment were solemn enough in Wilde's earlier plays. They recur again here, in a lighter tone. Jack is a foundling, and has no idea of the identity of either of his parents. Lady Bracknell is severe: "To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune. To lose both looks like carelessness." When Jack learns that the handbag in which he was found as an infant belonged to Miss Prism, he embraces her and calls her "mother." "I am unmarried," she says. He is ready at once to forgive her, and to argue that there should not be one law for men and another for women. But, to make the situation even more absurd, Miss Prism is not his mother at all. He is drably legitimate.

Wilde is equally mocking toward the Church, with Canon Chasuble as its doddering representative, and toward education, with Cecily's remarkable curriculum of German and political economy. He laughs at arranged marriages, and all the prudential considerations entailed by them. Even love does not escape unscathed, as Cecily has fallen in love with Jack's wicked brother not at first sight, but months before. Most reassuring platitudes come in for their thumps.

What seems clear is that Wilde has turned here from direct

onslaughts upon conventional morality to a more olympian amusement. He allows his characters the same detachment he allows himself. Where wit is so pervasive, no one can be overwrought. Gwendolen and Cecily survey the obviously impenitent Jack and Algernon and say, "They are eating muffins. That looks like repentance." What comes through is the pleasure of life—everything else is for the moment kept off the stage.

Perhaps the greatest triumph is Lady Bracknell, the wittiest of all the characters. She has been characterized as a goddess, as Queen Victoria, as Society, as the one person in the play who has no fun. These estimates are mistaken. Her wit is enhanced by her unsmiling demeanor. While she has all the necessary practicalities as a mother, she recognizes how arbitrary they are. She alone has no need of playacting. The rules are ridiculous, as she knows; enforcing them is her game. She rules the table where the feast of language which is the play is being served. Eventually all the conventions seem to fit the characters' needs, and the needs the conventions. Jack really is Ernest. The liars were telling the truth. Imagination conquers reality.

"A truth in Art," said Wilde in one of his essays, "is that whose contrary also is true." Reality is not always conquered. Wilde had to recognize this contrary when he was at the peak of his fame, in the spring of 1895. He had two plays at once on the London stage, and at *The Importance of Being Earnest*, especially, every night was a triumph. Then came his fall. The Marquess of Queensberry, ostensibly to defend his indefensible son Lord Alfred Douglas from corruption, accused Wilde of homosexuality. Wilde, feeling hounded, decided to sue for libel. He assumed that the Marquess would find no witnesses, or that if he found them, they would be male prostitutes and blackmailers to whom no jury could lend any credence. But the witnesses were found and were believed. Wilde dropped his case against the Marquess, and was then prosecuted himself. The first jury was hung, the second found him guilty. The judge cruelly sentenced him to two years in prison, at hard labor.

But during his imprisonment at Reading a rare event took place—a hanging. The doomed man, whom Wilde saw constantly over several weeks, was a trooper who had slit his wife's throat with a razor. Not a propitious subject, but it became in Wilde's mind an illustration of the way we are all

malefactors, all in need of forgiveness. The greater the crime, the more necessary the charity. Wilde's poem, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, like *Dorian Gray*, has weak patches, and yet sticks in the mind. His final vision of the world is not one of frivolity, as in his last great play, but one of suffering. He had known the whole range of what Joyce called "laughtears." There were three years left for him to live, but he wrote no more.