

OSCAR WILDE

10/16/1854 – 11/30/1900

“Society exists only as a mental concept; in the real world, there are only individuals.”

Oscar Wilde gloried in flaunting his individuality during the Victorian Era, a period synonymous with social conformity and sexual repression.

Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin to a mother who was a noted poet and Irish nationalist, and a father who was an eye surgeon. Wilde showed brilliance from an early age, winning prizes at school and university. At Magdalen College, Oxford, Wilde adopted his signature flowing hair and flamboyant style of dress, openly scorned “manly sports,” and decorated his rooms with peacock feathers and beautiful objects.

Oscar Wilde is one of the greatest playwrights in the English-speaking world.

Wilde first became a public figure as a spokesman for the Aesthetic Movement, whose motto was “art for art’s sake.” After a lecture tour through the United States where he met poet Walt Whitman, Wilde said, “America is the only country that went from barbarism to decadence without civilization in between.”

In 1892, the debut of his first play, “Lady Windermere’s Fan,” introduced London theatergoers to such Wildean trademark witticisms as “My own business always bores me to death; I prefer other people’s” and “I can resist anything but temptation.” Wilde’s plays sparkle with satirical wit fueled by keen observations that punctured the stuffy pretenses of Victorian society.

His life reached a turning point in 1891, when Wilde, who was married and the father of two children, began an affair with Lord Alfred Douglas, known as “Bosie,” son of the Marquess of Queensbury. Infuriated by his son’s involvement with Wilde, the Marquess instigated legal actions that ended with Wilde’s conviction on a charge of gross indecency for “a love that dare not speak its name.”

In April 1895, the night he was arrested for “indecent acts,” Wilde’s name was removed from the playbills outside theatres in London and New York where his hit plays “The Importance of Being Earnest” and “An Ideal Husband” were playing.

Wilde was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment at hard labor. He spent the last three years of his life in poverty and self-imposed exile. He died in Paris in 1900 at the age of 46, his life undoubtedly shortened by the rigors of incarceration.

The continued popularity of Wilde’s plays and his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as well as numerous films and books about his life, have made him an icon of popular culture. His grave in Pere Lachaise Cemetery in Paris has become a pilgrimage site.

