



The best books ever written

The Triumph of Wilde by Robert Mighall

Oscar Wilde died on November 30 1900, exactly a hundred years ago. He died in an obscure hotel in Paris of cerebral meningitis, a complication of an ear infection he had developed in prison where he had been serving a two-year sentence with hard labour. He was 46 years of age. He died bankrupt, in exile, and under an assumed name. He had not seen his two sons for five years and had no idea where they were. His wife's family refused him contact with them. At the time of his downfall in the spring of 1895 he was the most popular and celebrated dramatist in London. His name was blazoned across the hoardings of two West-End theatres, where *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband* were playing to packed houses. Five years later scarcely a dozen mourners followed his coffin to the small graveyard at Bagneux where he was initially buried with a plain stone. A journalist banged a final nail in that coffin when he declared that 'nothing he ever wrote has the strength to endure'.

A few days before he died Wilde declared that 'My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or other of us has to go'. The wallpaper won. But Wilde has eventually triumphed. You need only walk into your nearest large bookstore, or browse your favourite book site to see how far off the mark that journalist was. Wilde's works have been translated into just about every modern language; his plays are a staple of the English dramatic repertoire; his life and works have been the subject of countless books, films and TV shows. He is one of the most anthologised and quoted of all writers. If Shakespeare didn't say it Wilde probably did. The centenary of his death provides an opportunity to assess why Wilde is having the last and longest laugh over wallpaper and dismissive journalist alike.

The wallpaper quip is 'classic Wilde'. It conforms to the most popular and readily accepted image that has been handed down to us: the man of infinite jests, who would sacrifice anything for the sake of an epigram, even on his deathbed. There is much substance to this image. Memoir after memoir, anecdote upon anecdote testify to Wilde's ability to captivate any audience with his wit, and to entertain with his impromptu fancies. It is generally understood that his description of Lord Henry's performance, setting the table on a roar in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is an authentic self-portrait:

A laugh ran round the table. He played with the idea, and grew wilful; tossed it into the air and transformed it; let it escape and recaptured it; made it iridescent with fancy, and winged it with paradox. ... He was brilliant, fantastic, irresponsible. He charmed his listeners out of themselves, and they followed his pipe laughing.

Such performances formed the basis of his assault on London society, when he came down from Oxford in 1879 and set about making his name. He prepared a volume of poems, which he published in 1881, and started reviewing for the journals. But most importantly, he started 'networking' (as we would call it today), advertising himself to fashionable and literary London. Perhaps, after Byron, he was the first modern 'icon', identified through his style as much (and at this stage more) than his works. But whilst Byron was an aristocrat, and therefore born on the social stage, Wilde had to invent and publicise himself from scratch. He designed and wore to a reception where the artistic world would be gathered a special coat shaped like a cello; he wore his hair long, took to wearing velvet knee-breeches (when everyone else wore sober grey or black trousers); and walked down Piccadilly at the busiest time of the day in his 'aesthetic' garb carrying a large lily. But as he remarked: 'To have done it was nothing, but to make people think one had done it was a

triumph.' This occurrence, rumour, myth, made it into Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera *Patience* (1881), where the antics and mannerisms of Wilde, and a few other 'Aesthetic' notables, were gently satirised. But Wilde knew that worse than being talked about, was not being talked about. Instead of being insulted he capitalised on this attention, and agreed to conduct a series of lectures on Art to accompany *Patience* on its tour of America, wearing those strange clothes, speaking about 'beauty', and demonstrating to the new world what was being laughed at on the London stage. It was an opportunity to advertise himself to a new continent, to make contact with the most important American writers (Whitman, Longfellow, Holmes), and to spread his fame.

When Wilde embarked at New York in January 1882, he was asked by customs officials if he had anything to declare, and famously he answered: 'I have nothing to declare except my genius'. Until then his genius was largely in declaring - in talking, being seen, causing a sensation - but this built a platform and created an audience for the writings he now settled down to produce in earnest. This preparation held him in good stead, and had lasting effects. One reason why Wilde appeals, why he has become such a recognisable and saleable commodity (from T-shirts to bookmarks or screensavers), why he appears so 'modern', is this iconic status he attained and cultivated from the start. He carefully constructed a cult of personality; with his wit, with his style, with his eye for an opportunity, and an understanding of his public. But he also delivered on this promise. The fanciful inventiveness which charmed the dinner tables of Society, he channelled into his delightful children's stories and poems in prose; the witticisms and sparkling dialogues he perfected on the stage of social engagement, he turned into an art form which he brilliantly deployed in his Society comedies; even his attention to sartorial style and his eye for sensational effects contributed to his satirical dissection of the mannerisms of the social world he had invaded with his calling card of 'publicity', and then conquered again on the London stage. When he took a rapturous curtain call for his first really successful play *Lady Windermere's Fan* in 1892, he made a point of congratulating the audience for *its* performance, subtly suggesting that there was a fine line between the performances and rituals that had been enacted on the theatrical stage, and those that took place in the drawing-rooms, salons, and gentlemen's clubs of the upper-class world this Irishman had invaded. Perhaps this consummate social 'performer' understood this better than anyone in London.

Wilde the social satirist, the master of the comedy of manners is another easily recognisable image, and for many forms the basis of his real claim to genius. His success in this field came late in the day, was truly meteoric and tragically short-lived. Early efforts, such as *Vera; or, The Nihilists* (1883), were not a success, and he only really took up drama as a commercial art form with *Lady Windermere's Fan*, which opened in February 1892, after he had established his literary reputation in verse, fiction and literary criticism. It was followed by *A Woman of No Importance* a year later and *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* within months of each other early in 1895. The latter took London by storm. With its absurd but well-crafted plot, comic grotesques like Lady Bracknell, Dr Chasuble and Miss Prism, its rapier-sharp dialogue, and the almost effortless grace of its comic theatrical business, it is a work of unquestionable genius. It has rightly established itself as perhaps the most popular English play of all time, delighting amateur thespians and the theatre-going classes the length and breadth of the English-speaking world. For many, its formal engagements, comfortable idleness, calling cards, big hats and bustles, afternoon tea and cucumber sandwiches (or the promise of them at least) evoke a vanished age of elegance to be regretted elsewhere. It is principally *Earnest*, which was playing at the time of Wilde's disgrace and downfall, that has marked out a place for him in the 'heritage' shops, where anthologies of his *bon mots* and his image on tea towels attract those who would probably have been among those casting the first stones a hundred years ago. As a consequence Wilde might easily usurp Quentin Crisp's self-appointed title of England's first stately homo.

Wilde would hate this form of acceptance. 'Ah! Don't say that you agree with me. When people agree with me I always feel that I must be wrong', he once had a character say. Wilde 'lived in terror of not being misunderstood'. But this cosy 'respectability' is not his fault. For beneath the glittering surface of all his social comedies is a darker purpose, which may point to aspects of his

life that many would rather ignore. Both the plots and the paradoxes of these works can be read as testimony to his status as outsider, a subverter of the Society he both courted and exposed in his work. For a start, both his plots and *bon mots* exposed the shallowness and hypocrisy of upper-class society. This was ruled by custom and was concerned with opinion and appearance. Wilde's plays turned these values on their head, his words were a thorn in its side. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the disgraced woman is really the Good Woman, a moral exemplum whatever her social standing. Even the brilliant plot of *Ernest* - using subterfuge, double-dealing, and confused identities - reveals that hypocrisy is the norm rather than a comic contrivance. At the centre of the play is the recognition of how some degree of 'Bunburying' is absolutely essential in that society. In Act I Algernon explains to Jack (or Ernest when he is in town) the principles of that apparently widespread activity:

ALGERNON: *You have invented a very useful young brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down to the country whenever I choose. Bunbury is perfectly invaluable. ... Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury, and if you ever get married, which seems to me extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it.*

Wilde was married. From 1886 he had been a living a double-life of outward respectability and domesticity, and clandestine homosexual encounter. In hindsight the recurrence of the theme of the double life in so many of Wilde's works compels us to wonder whether being a 'friend of Bunbury' had a specific coded application. It may be suggested that this is the case in what is perhaps his most famous work after *Ernest*: his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890/91), which Penguin Classics is republishing in a new critical edition this month. In that novel the dandy Lord Henry (a partial self-portrait who speaks some of Wilde's best lines) observes that 'there are certain temperaments that marriage makes more complex. ... There are forced to have more than one life': perhaps one of the many coded references to Wilde's own experience in that brilliant and disturbing portrait of culture and corruption. In the introduction to this new edition I discuss the scandal that that book caused when it was first published in 1890, offering a foretaste of the treatment Wilde would receive five years later when the outlawed passions and 'unspeakable' tendencies some believed they had found represented in *Dorian Gray* were revealed to be part of its author's life. Indeed, passages from Wilde's novel, or at least from the more 'candid' version published in 1890, were used by opposing counsel in an attempt to prove that he was guilty of a 'certain tendency' represented or alluded to in *Dorian Gray*. Whether this is true or not, Wilde certainly modified or cut some of the passages which were later used as evidence when he revised the book for publication in 1891. The new Penguin edition reproduces this much fuller and funnier revised version. But it also allows readers to trace this process of revision and to restore some of what were believed to be the more 'explicit' passages excised from the original by consulting the new introduction and notes. See for yourself what all the fuss was about.

But Wilde's ability to disturb cannot be reduced to his status as the most famous gay icon, any more than his ability to charm or delight can be sanitised and commodified as Society jester or part of English literary 'heritage'. Wilde was an outsider, a rebel, in many capacities. He was Irish, but made his name in London, the colonial capital; he was middle-class, and worked hard for his position among his social superiors. He championed socialism and women's rights when both causes were considered dangerous. His downfall came not just because of his sexuality, but because he had bitten the hands that occasionally joined together in applauding him, and because his fatal love was a member of the English aristocracy. His role of outsider steeled his wit, and allowed him to better observe and dissect the world to which he performed. He once said 'an idea that is not dangerous is unworthy of being called an idea at all'. But it is to the rebels that we look for the enduring truths. Through his technique of the paradox Wilde turned conventional truth upside down, upsetting accepted pieties, and thus ensuring a more enduring and universal appeal. 'If one tells the truth, one is sure, sooner or later to be found out.' Modern readers can find these

truths in the editions of Wilde's works published by Penguin Classics.

Wilde is difficult to classify. 'Only the shallow know themselves'. His paradoxes are not just witty, but unsettling. The truths he offers are neither plain nor simple. He contradicts himself; his works and his image can contain multitudes: from Broadway or Broadstairs stage to Greenwich Village T-shirt.

It is a matter of debate among critics whether Wilde's *Dorian Gray* is a moral or an 'amoral' book. If it does have a moral it is perhaps one that can be applied to its author's literary legacy one hundred years after his ignominious death in exile. For at the centre of that novel is a beautiful work of art that is hidden away out of shame, corrupted and transformed by 'moral' meanings being imposed upon it. The artist is murdered, and an attempt is finally made to destroy the painting itself. But it survives all. The final sentences of the novel are given over to the contemplation of the portrait, 'in all the wonder of [its] exquisite youth and beauty'.