



# Oscar Wilde as: A Trail Blazer Dramatist

CHANDRAVADIYA DEVASI M.

Assistant teacher,  
Sri Sapda Primary School  
Tq. & Dist. Jamnagar  
Gujarat (India)

## 1. Introduction

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born on October 16, 1854 in Dublin, Ireland. His father, William Wilde, was an acclaimed doctor who was knighted for his work as medical advisor for the Irish censuses. William Wilde later founded St. Mark's Ophthalmic Hospital, entirely at his own personal expense, to treat the city's poor. Oscar Wilde's mother, Jane Francesca Elgee, was a poet who was closely associated with the Young Irelander Rebellion of 1848, a skilled linguist whose acclaimed English translation of Pomeranian novelist Wilhelm Meinhold's *Sidonia the Sorceress* had a deep influence on her son's later writing.

Wilde was a bright and bookish child. He attended the Portora Royal School at Enniskillen where he fell in love with Greek and Roman studies. He won the school's prize for the top classics student in each of his last two years, as well as second prize in drawing during his final year. Upon graduating in 1871, Wilde was awarded the Royal School Scholarship to attend Trinity College in Dublin. At the end of his first year at Trinity, in 1872, he placed first in the school's classics examination and received the college's Foundation Scholarship, the highest honor awarded to undergraduates.

Upon his graduation in 1874, Wilde received the Berkeley Gold Medal as Trinity's best student in Greek, as well as the Demyship scholarship for further study at Magdalen College in Oxford. At Oxford, Wilde continued to excel academically, receiving first class marks from his examiners in both classics and classical moderations. It was also at Oxford that Wilde made his first sustained attempts at creative writing. In 1878, the year of his graduation, his poem "Ravenna" won the Newdigate Prize for the best English verse composition by an Oxford undergraduate.

Upon graduating from Oxford, Wilde moved to London to live with his friend, Frank Miles, a popular portraitist among London's high society. There, he continued to focus on writing poetry, publishing his first collection, *Poems*, in 1881. While the book received only modest critical praise, it nevertheless established Wilde as an up-and-coming writer. The next year, in 1882, Wilde traveled from London to New York City to embark on an American lecture tour, for which he delivered a staggering 140 lectures in just nine months.

While not lecturing, he managed to meet with some of the leading American scholars and literary figures of the day, including Henry Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Walt Whitman. Wilde especially admired Whitman. "There is no one in this wide great world of America whom I love and honor so much," he later wrote to his idol.

Upon the conclusion of his American tour, Wilde returned home and immediately commenced another lecture circuit of England and Ireland that lasted until the middle of 1884. Through his lectures, as well as his early poetry, Wilde established himself as a leading proponent of the

aesthetic movement, a theory of art and literature that emphasized the pursuit of beauty for its own sake, rather than to promote any political or social viewpoint.

All his great plays: *Salome* (1891) *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of no Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Performed 1895, Published 1898) these are supreme literary work. Most of the moral themes have to do with gender roles, and even have a touch of Victorian approval behind them: the definition of a "good" and "bad" woman (*Lady Windermere's Fan*), women and men commit a sin together but only the woman pays (*A Woman of No Importance*), a woman should not interfere in her husband's career (*An Ideal Husband*). I had had in my mind that Wilde was a revolutionary writer, but this is not the case at all.

## 2. Characterization

His plays are very traditionally structured. I would say that the reason why his plays endure is the personal wit that Wilde was able to dose them with. His characters are masters of conversation. Experiencing and watching their light lives and listening to their quick and light language is simply enjoyable. *The Importance of Being Ernest*, in this play a ridiculous plot to go along with the ridiculous language: *The Importance of Being Ernest* goes off the deep end into the ridiculous and amazingly floats. I can imagine it is one of the most enjoyable plays to act in. The conversation between Cecily and Gwendolen is classic.

Oscar Wilde's *Salome* is a verse piece with a very strong seductive rhythm. His words are gorgeous, sumptuous and descriptive of decadence, reflecting the court of Herod where in the play is set. All of this needs a production that can play with the rhythm and really make eternal charm of the words.

## 3. Wilde as Colorful Story Composer

On the other hand, Wilde's story is so fascinating that it makes a colorful epic in itself and Oscar Wilde is an utterly engrossing film. There are plenty of inside jokes for fans and Wilde scholars, but the film is also an entertaining introduction to Wilde's life and works. It was a pleasure to listen to the youthful first night crowd's reactions of hilarity, shock and horror as the story progressed from comedy to stark tragedy. *The Importance of Being Earnest* was one of his the most celebrated works. This play received the least criticism but as per the views of C.E. Montague, Bernard Shaw has offered his criticism. "All of this comedy is instantly amusing; you laugh of at least your mental interior beams at almost every speech. Mr. Shaw says it wastes your time because it does not touch you as well as amuse."(Montague 9) However many critics appreciated his witty remarks in the plays and for evoking his own style of writing the dramas.

*Salome* is more impressionistic and abstract: the treatment seems more amenable to the opera it later became. But that promising start to their meeting is one of only a few moments where the performers' speech and physicality inform each other, where there is more going on than words spoken with a naturalistic style that does not allow the lyrical poetry and huge passions to soar, grunt, howl and whisper as they really should. Herod and Salome, while clear in delivery and engaging in private thought, do not give themselves over to the extremes and quick changes expressed by their characters, and a particularly slow scene gained its only interest from a forced sexual act that makes little sense of Herod's continued please and final surrender to Salome. (Though this may have worked with different playing).

In *A Woman of No importance* applying a satiric tone, Oscar Wilde has attempted to elevate his social position by amusing the people. David Packer's opinion in *A Woman of No Importance*,

“The characters have a strictly practical attitude to the relationship between statements and actually.”(179) Gerald is the best suited character to the above mentioned fact. “Lord Illingworth is successful man. He is a fashionable man. He is a man who lives in the world of his own. Well, I would give anything to be just like Lord Illingworth.” Here, Gerald shows keen eagerness to embrace Lord Illingworth’s dazzling corrupt world. Mrs. Arbuthnot in her effort to dissuade him tells him the story of a ruined maiden.

However Gerald places the heavy of blame on the young maiden, and refuses to believe such stories about Illingworth. Quite rightly he is unwilling to risk his career because of Illingworth’s possible past sexual adventures. David Packer’s argument proves here true.

*Lady Windermere's Fan*: Leaving the beneficiary of a sacrifice ignorant is somehow more graceful. *Salome*: Very strange. It felt like a play from a different time, and a different author. The others (at least so far) have been plays of manners, with a hidden examination of morality and hypocrisy.

*Salome* is more impressionistic and abstract; the treatment seems more amenable to the opera it later became. *A Woman of No Importance* Far too preachy, it seemed much more amateurish than *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Entire pages devoted to overwrought monologue, and others devoted to one sided dialogues, where one character acts the straight man for the other's constant stream of aphorisms and quips, which in the end signify nothing.

*An Ideal Husband* Curious how almost all of Wilde's plays deal with infidelity. This one has a femme fatale, but it is about a fallen man, not a fallen woman. Good and possibly better crafted, but therefore not as juicy. *The Importance of Being Earnest*: When absorbed after the forgoing, this play is that much more impressive. It is certainly more enjoyable of brilliant cleverness but it also is remarkably different.

#### 4. Realistic Touch

Attempting to categorize, analyze, or even describe Oscar Wilde's lyrical drama *Salome* is a problematic issue and a source of contention amongst critics. Too many, Wilde's willingness to appropriate themes and treatments of the *Salome* legend from other authors of the period is a shortcoming; Wilde's play is labeled as a mere imitation. For others, it is precisely this fusion of different sources which gives strength to the drama, and Wilde is hailed as creative, innovative, and modern. The fact is that the *Salome* legend was a logical choice for Wilde: one writer acknowledges that "the *Salome*, Herodias figure was almost as popular among nineteenth-century artists as the Virgin Mary was among medieval artists."

But seeking justification for Wilde's 'originality' in his creative use of sources is, I believe, misguided. Certainly Wilde adapted his material, and drew on many different settings of the legend most of them; however, stemmed from the school of Symbolism, with whose poetic belief Wilde felt a strong affinity. It is, then, vitally important to regard the Symbolist and Decadent aspects of *Salome* as well as the drama's literary historical background, since it is in the subversive treatment of symbolic representation that Wilde's drama reveals itself to be unique. Besides this, of Wilde's plays deal, to some extent, with the transgression of social norms, and specifically with disgrace. They are also all more dramatic. Even those that are arguably comedies have a tension borne of the fear of disgrace.

In *Earnest*, the tension is completely absent. It would be difficult to imagine a more innocuous play or one so charmingly silly. How and why Wilde came up with the forename "Earnest" as the

target surname is quite miraculous. I suppose in 1895 the name might have actually been quite popular. The first three plays had this light and nonsensical language mixed with more serious themes, but in *Importance of Being Ernest*, the fluffy repartee even has a ridiculous plot to go along with the ridiculous language: *The Importance of Being Ernest* goes off the deep end into the ridiculous and amazingly floats. They switch on each other two or three times. You try to figure them out but realize that it is only the light, easy, witty conversation that remains in the end that's the point.

Oscar Wilde draws the perfect picture of the Victorian era and how the class distinction came into existence. The study projects the growth of scientific invention as well as the flourished industrialism. It talks about how the nation was progressing and the other hand because of the individualism and freedom, the youth was distracted as well as the masters used to oppress the workers. The upper class of the Victorians used to give the vital importance to the manners and behaviors.

### **5. Superficiality of the Aristocratic class**

In the presence of the society people know, how one should show off particularly, superficiality, hypocrisy, to get rid of one's moral as well as social duties and responsibilities, to lead the entire life of comfort and luxury etc., Thus, Oscar Wilde projects the shallow picture of the upper class society. He has attempted to point that one is free keeping his duties aside to enjoy life merely because he is from upper class. The laws must be one for the whole society. Thus, he has sought the attention of the society not being unfair to the others. It reveals bad activities, immoral acts that degraded the Victorian society and damaged the upper strata in particular.

The reading of Oscar Wilde play is sort of like life being perfect. The structure of the work is faultless; the dialogue is clever and fantastic. What's wrong with Wilde? Nothing. He's perfect. I can't imagine any writer who wrote so beautifully in his native language. There are some people who are born with it and Wilde is one of them. Of course for someone so perfect he would have to get involved in some nasty social business via his decade.

### **6. Conclusion**

But when you look back at Wilde, one realizes that he is someone from the 19th Century who is saying goodbye to the Victorian era and culture. It's like he couldn't wait to jump into the 20th Century. Which makes it sad that we didn't accept Wilde with our open arms? We killed the thing that was so beautiful and right.

### **References**

1. Wilde, Oscar *Salome*, (2000).New Delhi: Rupa Paperback. Reprint
2. Wilde, Oscar. *An Ideal Husband*, (1996).London: Penguin Popular Classics Reprint.
3. Wilde, Oscar. (2000). *Importance of Being Earnest and other Plays*, New Delhi: Rupa Publication India Pvt. Ltd. Paperback. Reprint.
4. Harris, Frank. (1938).*Life and confessions of Oscar Wilde*. Newyork: Princeton University, Print.