

The Wilde Path To Immortality

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Oscar Wilde died in the first year of the last century, after months of living under an assumed name as an exile in France. He died from meningitis which had spread, in those pre-antibiotic days, from an abscess of the ear. This in its turn had been caused by a wound from a fall in prison, which the prison doctor had dismissed as trivial and refused to dress: thus it may fairly be said that Wilde's death was directly and literally the consequence of his imprisonment. His funeral was joined by a smattering of French writers and actors. Few English people attended, and they came with the cloak of anonymity: two women who came were veiled and would not give their names.

The majority of his work had been completed in the six years before his trial. Although his plays had brought universal triumph and acclaim and he was undoubtedly the most exciting British writer to appear since Sheridan, the British press obituaries suggested that now he would be forgotten. That Wilde has not been forgotten is a truism; his life has continued to stimulate the imagination of countless people and has formed the subject of many recent productions treating him as hero.

What hold does Wilde exert on us that his downfall can still excite our sympathy, and fire our prejudices for or against the man? Partly it is the myth of the down-trodden and ill-used man which invites the natural English love for the underdog. But there is also the paradoxical element of the voyeur: to both admire a man for the arrogance of his superior intellect and wit, while despising his weaknesses and follies. We enjoy the thrill of seeing a mighty man fall, as long as we are shielded in our armchairs from the realities of either greatness or deprivation.

Paradox is the key to Wilde's achievements. His many readily quoted sayings suggest an easy superficiality; but if the duty of an artist is to query the mores of his age and turn accepted norms on their head to seek new vantage, then in this he remained consistent and was the supreme artist. Throughout his writings he emphasised that "style, not sincerity, is the essential"; but by that very style and the consistency with which he questioned the value of his own work, he showed a depth of understanding which elevated him beyond the nugatory or commonplace.

Oscar Wilde was born in 1854 in Dublin, the son of Sir William Wilde, a notorious, weak and filthy Irish Surgeon, and a dominant society beauty who towered above her husband as much in character and integrity as she did physically. It is probable that Wilde's homosexuality grew out of this background. As he later wrote: "Mothers are all right... But fathers bother a chap and never pay his bills."

He attended Portora Royal School, which he left with a gold medal in classics. (It is to this school's shame that, after his trial, Wilde's name was erased from the honours' board, and was only restored after some years.) He then went to Trinity College, Dublin, where he took the Gold Medal for Greek; in later years, this medal was to find its way into the pawn shops during difficult moments of his life. On leaving Dublin for Magdalen College, Oxford, Wilde was to leave a conventional, if lustrous, life for the life of legend; the fantastically dressed student poet who could floor bullying sportsmen with a witty epigram set a style which became famous for generations of students.

We may never know with certainty whether he really did all the things attributed to him, but as Martin Fido says in his life of Wilde, "He made the world believe that he did - a far more difficult matter." *Punch* began to lampoon him as the limpid poet figure, carrying a lily as he walked through the streets of London, and Wilde began to live up to his new reputation, sometimes inspiring the cartoons, sometimes imitating them, but determined always to impress the world with his presence. He let his hair grow long, and took to wearing breeches and velvet jackets. One testy man remarked as he passed: "there goes that fool, Oscar Wilde." Wilde himself was delighted just to be known and wrote: "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about."

Though Wilde was beginning to attract some whispers of sexual irregularities, his mode of attracting attention to himself, with its languor and flamboyance and a supercilious disregard for crude masculine virility, was not then regarded as particularly blame-worthy. Indeed, it is an ironic debt to his fame that has debased this style of dress and mannerism into our present attitude of associating what we now call 'high camp' with the homosexual. Until Wilde's trial, the drawling camp style was commonly practiced by a variety of dandies, protesting at uncouth masculinity. Perhaps its finest exponent before Wilde was the young Disraeli, who was exclusively heterosexual.

Wilde was a successful, but minor, poet; as *Punch* triumphantly sneered in one review: “The poet is Wilde, but the poetry’s tame.” Yet it was just because he was such an ideal and readily identifiable character that Wilde first achieved international fame, through the opera by Gilbert and Sullivan: *Patience*. This was based on the aesthetic poet of *Punch*, and Oscar Wilde went to the first night in 1881 and thoroughly enjoyed the joke against himself. However, the ‘Aesthetic Poet’ as a character was unknown in America and D’Oyly Carte ingeniously arranged for Wilde to give a lecture tour in America for its publicity: a tour which proved a brilliant success for the opera and for Wilde. He met several of the leading poets of America, being particularly impressed and charmed by the doyen of American style, Walt Whitman. Later in the years of his exile, Wilde was to reflect on the differing consequences of their homosexuality.

After returning to London, Wilde obtained a job as editor of *Woman’s World*. Under his guidance, he took it away from a dull succession of fashion plates which he thought made it look more like a clothing catalogue, and began to introduce full or double page lithographs by young artists and painters who were to become leaders of the Art Nouveau. Wilde succeeded in getting many prominent society women to contribute to the magazine, but though he earned his living by journalism for a number of years, he never was at home amongst journalists and wrote: “...writing (for) newspapers has a deteriorating influence on style...when they enter that journalistic arena, the race is always to the noisiest.”

In 1884 Wilde married Constance Lloyd, a quiet daughter of an Irish barrister whom he had met on a lecture tour in Dublin the year before. The wedding was described as “quietly private”, though a large crowd of uninvited guests came to watch the show, such was Wilde’s growing reputation. Constance was a woman of limited ability, whose only interest to Oscar was as an object of Grecian beauty to adorn his new London home. With her first pregnancy, her swelling form lost even that attraction and he began to live socially without her.

He continued as editor of *Woman’s World* until 1889, by which time both the penance of a ban on smoking in the office and the drudgery of what had become a routine job became intolerable to him, and he decided to begin publishing his own efforts, beginning with a collection of fairy stories, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*. These stories are remarkable for the insight they give us into a character Wilde took so much trouble to conceal. Wilde

uses the Prince to review the social miseries of his day: only through death was he able to see beyond the palace walls to the poor seamstress with bleeding hands, preparing a gown for a girl who doesn't know even love; a match girl, frightened to go home and face a beating unless she obtains money; a struggling artist.

The Nightingale and the Rose illustrates the ideal of life sacrificed for love by the artist. Here the artist takes the form of a musician (the nightingale) who is compared to the Philistine (student) who criticises her: "she...thinks merely of music". The Philistine's creed is: "She has some beautiful notes. What a pity they do not mean anything or do any practical good". Yet the Philistine could not hear the message behind the notes, a message which - in prose - contains some of Wilde's most marvellous poetry:

"She sang of the Love that is perfected by Death,
of the Love that dies not in the tomb."

The Nightingale gave her life that the red rose might bloom to feed love in the student; but the student could think only of its long Latin name, and threw the rose away in disgust.

Then in 1890 came literary triumph with the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The book was heavily criticised for its supposed immorality, but objectively the consequences of moral degeneration are displayed vividly through the decaying picture, and here we read the first insidious suggestion of "curing the soul by the senses" which may give some clue to Wilde's own intoxication with rent boys. "Ugliness was the one reality," Wilde wrote, "...the crude violence of disordered life, the very vileness of thief and outcast, were more vivid than all the gracious shapes of Art, the dreary shadows of Song." Surely here is the first intimation of motive for the tragedy leading to his imprisonment, for he also wrote: "The criminal classes are so close to us that even the policeman can see them. They are so far away from us that only the poet can understand them." Perhaps it was this confusing admixture of "curing the soul", of seeking ugly reality through illegal sensuality while justifying it all with the poet's claim to search for understanding, which finally led to his death. As in the earlier stories, there is again a vivid quietus as Dorian experiences the ultimate physical sensation of death through suicide and, by this act, a presentient reversion of the soul to its former purity.

Wilde was a hero flawed by weakness. His relationship with Lord Alfred (Bosie) Douglas degenerated through betrayal and expiation to vacillation and ambivalence; his sexual offences against boys remain an immoral and illegal act in our own age. But we cannot tell what drives a man of genius. Perfection exists only in the imaginations of the religious and the scientist; great art succeeds in presenting the imperfect in as perfect a way as possible - that which Wilde called "style"; deprived of weakness, there is no tragedy - nor is there greatness.

To speculate on Wilde's ultimate reputation had he poetically blossomed is impossible, but we may be certain that Wilde himself considered death essential for artistic eternity. As early as Oxford he said: "Let us emulate John The Baptist's life...", a theme which culminated in *Salome* some eighteen years later. His prose poem, *The Master*, portrays a young man complaining that he too has worked miracles, "...yet they have not crucified me," and thus he lay, naked and ignored while Christ was carried to death and eternal honour.

He made his life a paradox, and invoked contradiction as the god of art: "A truth in art is that whose contradiction is also true." The beauty of Wilde's life was in the giving away. He gave his life away, as the statue in *The Happy Prince* gave away his gold clothes and emerald eyes, until a Professor of Art could only deride: "Without his beauty, he is now nothing." But for Wilde, the beauty was not in the trappings of external show, but the giving away itself: literally, by helping struggling young artists with money and influence; sexually through his fatal loyalty to Bosie; spiritually as he gave the world his art to further spiritual love in others, only to see it trampled on by critics and public alike; and physically as he sought to destroy his own achievements and reputation in the drunken company of diseased male prostitutes, which was finally responsible for his death through imprisonment and exile.

In *De Profundis* he states: "All trials are for one's life, as all sentences are sentences of death." If we accept that, for the artist, the survival of his work beyond the grave is eternity or paradise, then like the Selfish Giant, Wilde died to enter paradise, and we revere his death and the events leading up to it more than his life.

Although Wilde's sufferings in prison were terrible, the pattern that emerges is of a goodly man wronged by society. He equated himself equally with his fellow prisoners, while empathising with the warders who were the product of a corrupt system. Wilde had great pity

for the suffering he witnessed, such as the whipping of an insane man accused of malingering, and the tearfulness of starving children locked in dark cells for twenty three hours each day. It was partly because of Wilde's entreaties on behalf of one young child that a warder was instantly dismissed for giving him a biscuit; later, Wilde was to write influentially of these experiences and the corrupting influence of prison in destroying character.

In Wilde's terms, he may be said to have 'died' when he entered prison, and the two *post mortem* works which sprang from this time, *The Ballad of Reading Goal* and *De Profundis*, carry a stark, ethereal simplicity which was absent from the former light comedies and the disturbing *Dorian Gray*, and suggest a change of perspective.

The dichotomy of his life becomes more understandable as we delve further into his works and sayings. The man who wrote: "All art is quite useless" also said: "Art for art's sake", which is but a different perspective into his own insight into his art. To invent a Wildean epigram, "The important things in life never add up. In a good marriage, one and one make one and a half; in a bad marriage, they make three." This may sum up Wilde's life: nothing quite added up. The dandy who wished the world to see him as a poet wrote mostly unmemorable poetry; the plays his world tried to dismiss remain endearing to a fresh audience; the man whom his own generation thought would be forgotten at his death continues to haunt modern writers through his literary influence and his life.

Wilde died a lonely, exiled figure, left with his memories and guilt, but still with his dream of "Art for art's sake". This dream continues as we ponder the man and his legacy. To a person of genius life never adds up, but his influence and presence will be with us for as long as mankind loves literature and art.