Oscar Wilde Study Guide

Oscar Wilde by Richard Ellmann

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Richard Ellmann tells the story of Oscar Wilde, and uses extensive notes to document his findings. Ellmann pieces together the man, the genius, the artist, the aesthetic, and the infamy that the world of the 19th century comes to know as Oscar Wilde.

Wilde (October 16, 1854--November 30, 1900) grows up in Ireland and displays a knack, even a genius, for learning. He is not very athletic, and he leads his life by his own rules. He graduates from Oxford, but not without clashing with the authorities about time limitations and examinations. Genius cannot be concerned with these petty matters, or so Wilde seems to think, but the University authorities have different ideas about his philosophy. Eventually, Oscar leaves college with two things: a degree and a case of syphilis.

Oscar enters the working world ready to make his way. As many new college graduates discover, this is not very easy. He struggles to find paying work, and whether by the Fates or by a lack of options, Wilde decides to become a playwright. To accomplish his goal, he must first become famous. Lady Wilde lends a hand in this matter after she moves to London, and taking a lecture first developed there, Oscar tours America and earns a small measure of success. Through persistence, luck, and the development of his playwriting abilities, some of Oscar's creations go into production.

He marries and starts a family, partly to bring in money and partly to establish the respectability he shunned during his college years as the anti-authority type. After fathering two boys, Wilde discovers that he is homosexual. As his career gains momentum, he follows his sexual orientation in ways that he thinks are discrete enough, but eyes and ears cause tongues to wag about town. What society does not know for sure is fleshed out in gossip, and as is often the case, Constance Wilde, Oscar's wife, is one of the last to know.

A destructive love affair enters Oscar's life with Lord Alfred Douglas, spoiled young son of the Marquis of Queensberry, a man who becomes enraged with the relationship. Douglas costs Oscar his career, his money, his family, and two years of his life in prison. After prison, Wilde writes a successfully published poem, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, his last significant work of art before his death. He dies of the tertiary complications that accompany syphilis, a broken and humiliated man, yet respected and honored both in life and death.

Chapter 1, Toil of Growing Up

Chapter 1, Toil of Growing Up Summary

Oscar Wilde comes into this world on October 16, 1854. His mother is a tall woman who is an ardent supporter of Irish nationalism, which calls for the creation of an Irish nation separate from England. She changes her name from Jane Elgee to Speranza Francesca Wilde after marrying Oscar's father, William Robert Wilde. Oscar's mother loves to create a sensation with her flashy clothing, sharp wit, and extravagant ways. His father is an eye doctor who achieves very much in his field, and in effect creates the medical discipline. He shares his wife's interest for an independent Ireland.

Oscar's early childhood involves an incident in which he breaks his arm during play. Later on in school, he breaks his arm again. Whether this is the reason or not, Oscar cares little for sporting games and takes to calmer activities such as fishing. Early on in his school years, Oscar demonstrates an astounding ability to read quickly. He claims to be able to read two facing pages at once and can demonstrate a grasp of a novel's intricacies in 3 minutes. His success in school carries on to where he wins a Demyship (scholarship) and entrance into Oxford University, London.

Baptized Protestant, Oscar plays with the idea of converting to Catholicism, something his mother also considers, and in an apparent attempt to hedge risk, she has the very young Oscar baptized Catholic as well. His father is against Catholicism, and when the opportunity to study away from Ireland arises, William Robert Wilde has no objections. Meanwhile, Oscar's scholastic interests turn toward the Greeks and the Hellenic aestheticism, a pre-Alexander-the-Great civilization that held beauty to be the greatest of virtues. He develops a singular and sharp wit like his mother's, a disdain for conventional morality and a story-telling ability based on humorous exaggeration.

Chapter 1, Toil of Growing Up Analysis

Oscar Wilde grows up as part of the privileged but hard-working class in 19th century Ireland. The beginnings of Irish nationalism that will lead to many years of conflict are incubating, but Oscar cares little for politics. He sees the world differently than most people, choosing instead to follow aesthetics, which can be understood as having a deep appreciation for what is beautiful and seeking deeper understanding of the beautiful. His genius is apparent when he demonstrates his outlandishly fast reading, along with his ability to carry on a conversation while reading. This is but the tip of the iceberg as Oscar demonstrates ever more scholarly achievement, leading him to Oxford University.

His early years are not without conflict and pain. Oscar is homosexual, but at this stage of his life, he is not aware of his sexual orientation. He develops a flamboyant way, a sharp wit and a great appreciation for aesthetics. When his younger sister dies at age 9,

the event deeply affects Oscar to the point that he writes a touching, dark poem for her. In school, he is derided for his lack of interest in competitive sports, but his great wit and high intellectualism are also respected.

Oscar's mother exerts a powerful influence on him, and some scholars speculate that this might be the reason for his homosexuality. The author detracts from this conclusion effectively. However, the influence of his mother does come through with Oscar's similar personality and wit. They share little inside jokes, such as using green notepaper to irritate a unionist relative because unionists want Ireland to remain under English rule. This reflects the green/orange split in Ireland, where green represents the largely Catholic republicans and orange represents the largely Protestant unionists. Both Oscar and his mother hold the view that Ireland should be a sovereign nation, and both play with the idea of converting from Protestant to Catholic. More fundamental than this, the two personalities are unconventional on most counts, and they demonstrate this through their clever repartee.

Chapter 2, Wilde at Oxford

Chapter 2, Wilde at Oxford Summary

Oscar matriculates at Oxford on October 17, 1874. This begins his academic career in the venerated learning institution, where he finds that his earlier studies had more than prepared him for the first year. The greatest challenges he faces are to drop his Irish accent, correct his lisp, and become more English than his classmates. Oscar succeeds in all these areas to the point where his perfect sentences seem rehearsed. He keeps to his disdain of outdoor sports.

He joins the Masons on February 23, 1875, by special dispensation because he is under the minimum age of 21. He ascends through the ranks to become a Master Mason on May 25. Oscar does not neglect his studies, but rather finds most of them boring. He turns to reading in other fields, including the modern philosophers, dwelling on the conflicts between progress and authority and taking the side of those who resist conforming to established conventions. Oscar develops an epigrammatic style, which becomes one of his hallmarks.

Two intellectuals become very important in Oscar's life, and the tensions between these two, Ruskin and Pater, have a great influence. "Though both Ruskin and Pater welcomed beauty, for Ruskin it had to be allied with good, for Pater it might have just a touch of evil. . . . Ruskin spoke of faith, Pater of mysticism . . . . Ruskin appealed to conscience, Pater to imagination. Ruskin invoked disciplined restraint, Pater allowed for a pleasant drift. What Ruskin reviled as vice, Pater caressed as wantonness." (pp. 48-49) Not surprisingly, Ruskin is Pater's elder and superior in the University. Wilde turns to Ruskin for spiritual guidance, but Pater has the more interesting, on a sensuous level, set of ideas. Wilde also helps Ruskin with a road-building and beautifying project, which leads Oscar to the belief that art can improve society. Eventually, Wilde outgrows both men.

Chapter 2, Wilde at Oxford Analysis

Wilde demonstrates that he is not intimidated by Oxford and that he indeed can rise above the norm. He remakes himself into the perfect English gentleman/student or perhaps exaggerates his mannerisms to the point that he is making subtle fun of the English by the way he dresses and behaves. University athletes do not like him and attempt to give him difficulties, but Oscar is a large young man, nearly impossible to dominate by force and certainly far beyond the average University student's intellectual fitness.

Finding his first-year studies to be largely repetitions of what he has already accomplished, Wilde uses his time wisely by reading in the fields of philosophy, science, and literature. He explores the ideas of beauty, spirituality, and youthful hedonistic

tendencies. Internally, he develops a few intellectual habits that follow him throughout life, such as the ability to condense complex situations and ideas into a single statement. He makes friends and engages in typical collegiate high jinks, not so much in the slapstick physical expression as the intellectual. However, he handles physical scuffles as well.

Chapter 3, Rome and Greece

Chapter 3, Rome and Greece Summary

The influence of Rome, in respect to Catholicism, impacts Wilde through his good friend, David Hunter Blair. Blair converts in March 1875 and brings his enthusiasm to Oxford in April, urging Wilde and others to follow his lead. Wilde is reluctant to follow because of his father's attitude about Papists and the risk of being taken out of his father's will. Still, Wilde decorates his Oxford room with pictures of the Pope and Bishop Manning, a firm supporter of papal infallibility.

During the summer vacation of 1875, Wilde visits Rome with inflexible Protestant companions, possibly to keep him from the temptation to convert. He writes a poem that, with some revisions, is published in the *Dublin University Magazine*, March 1876. This delights his parents. For the rest of the summer, Wilde engages in secular pleasures and meets women who would play roles throughout his bachelor days. The first primary interest is 17-year-old Florence Balcombe, followed by Fidelia and Eva. Florence becomes a marriage interest, but Wilde shies away because he is still a student.

When Wilde returns to Oxford in the fall of 1875, he has religion and love on his mind. Blair castigates him for not converting, and Wilde writes that he is still attracted to women. However, others detect a feminine quality about the way he walks and a general air about him. A certain homosexual trend is ongoing at Oxford, and this raises a certain amount of scandal. Wilde composes a poem about a boy, which is published in *Kottabos* (his early Irish school paper) in 1877. Four years later, Wilde revises the poem to be about a girl for his book of poems.

The spring of 1876 finds Wilde studying hard for the Honour Moderations to save his chances for gaining a fellowship in classics. His father dies on April 19, and there is not much left of the estate for Wilde's inheritance. This causes him to regret his pushing away of Catholicism and to worry about his financial future. He fails to pass his examination on Divinity but does well on classical and other literature examinations. He earns first place in the Honour Moderations.

In October 1876, Wilde returns to Oxford with a chip on his shoulder toward the University authorities and a growing interest in Masonic activities. He tries to win a scholarship, fails, and by spring vacation, he is feeling the financial crunch. Blair funds a trip to Rome for Wilde in a last-ditch attempt at conversion. Instead, Wilde uses the money for a trip to Greece. He does plan to visit Rome on the return trip, where Blair arranges for a meeting with the Pope. These two visits, one to Rome and one to Greece, represent Wilde's split between Catholic and pagan thought. He is neither one nor the other, but prefers to remain open to both sides.

Wilde's poetry becomes published regularly from 1876 to 1878 in two Catholic magazines in Dublin, the *Irish Monthly* and the *Illustrated Monitor*. From 1876 to 1879, more poetry is published in *Kottabos* and the *Dublin University Magazine*.

Chapter 3, Rome and Greece Analysis

During his second and third years at Oxford, Wilde deals with external and internal forces. Spirituality continues to tug at him, while a growing interest in women and pagan thought pulls him another way. In the background, he must keep from converting to Catholicism so as not to alienate his father and be written out of the will. By his third year at the University, this becomes a moot point because his father dies and does not leave much inheritance.

The death of Wilde's father leaves Oscar face to face with two realities. The first is that he will be having financial difficulties for the next few years, if not throughout his life. The second is that he has to perform at school to prepare for a lifetime of making his own fortune. Wilde develops a third reality, one of arrogance toward authority and the taking of the middle path between extreme positions. The arrogance can be understood as a natural outgrowth of his successful completion of the Honour Moderations, but the seeking of middle ground has a greater meaning. He desires not to go all one way or the other, desiring instead the ability to visit both and absorb the worthwhile qualities that each offers. This philosophical stance also seems to be extending into sexuality, where Wilde expresses a femininity that disturbs his friends.

Chapter 4, An Incomplete Aesthete

Chapter 4, An Incomplete Aesthete Summary

Upon returning from his travels late for the start of his Easter term in April 1877, Wilde loses University Demyship support for half a year. In addition, he must follow his tutor's instructions to the letter to be admitted later for his October term. Oscar takes to London, the theater, and art exhibitions. He develops a taste for art criticism, seeing this as a possible career direction, along with writing poetry. He sends out query letters to publishers with little success, although he does make his name known in his immediate world.

Wilde's primary challenge in his fourth year at Oxford is to pass the Schools Examinations, although money problems mar the first part of the year. He spends money lavishly and goes into debt. Meanwhile, Wilde writes poetry that attempts to reveal the split between aesthetic and ethical man, or more personally, between Pater and Ruskin. Later in the school year, Wilde becomes ill and bedridden, possibly with syphilis, but he recovers enough to take the Schools Examinations in June 1878. He earns a first place, plus the Newdigate Prize in the same month. The University is ecstatic with Wilde and extends his Demyship a fifth year so he can pass the Divinity examination.

Chapter 4, An Incomplete Aesthete Analysis

Oxford University attempts to knock Wilde down a few notches with its exercise of authority over him. Seemingly undaunted, Oscar decides to use his time away from his University studies to explore the worlds of theater and art and to consider his future. He decides to become an art critic and a poet. However, first he must finish his college career with a splash, and this he accomplishes. The attitude of Oxford toward Wilde changes from the strict authoritarian to the fawning admirer as the University enjoys the prestige that accompanies the Newdigate prize.

Catholicism becomes an expensive sideline as Wilde struggles with consoling his monetary income with his lavish spending style. Yet his lavish style is part of his public character, and this draws attention. To make money as a critic and poet, Oscar needs to attract attention. He will be a writer, but a writer needs an audience, exactly as an actor or musician. Wilde builds what in today's show business world is called *buzz*. He needs to give people something to talk about. Regarding the philosophical split as personified by Pater and Ruskin, Wilde decides to remain neutral, perhaps more toward the aesthetic than the ethical, but apart enough to attempt a reconciliation of the two world views.

Chapter 5, Setting Sail

Chapter 5, Setting Sail Summary

Oscar Wilde graduates Oxford on November 28, 1878. He tries to find a job, and as is often the case with today's college graduates, he has a difficult time. Missing the college atmosphere, he naturally tries to find a position with Oxford but with no success. He tries other projects that do not go anywhere, and he ends up editing Volumes X and XI of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. He does win acceptance in London with his talking wit and began living with Frank Miles, an artist known for doing complimentary female portraits.

Lillie Langtry becomes one of Wilde's female friends and a subject for his admiration and poetry. He encourages her to become an actress while his own interest in writing for the theater increases. He befriends other actresses, hoping to someday write for them. His first play is *Vera*, and its themes address aristocratic socialism, nihilism, and the passions involved with political change. The setting is Czarist Russia.

Oscar's mother moves to London where she hosts afternoon tea parties for which she becomes well known. Lady Wilde publishes two volumes of Irish folklore that her husband collected in lieu of payment for his medical services, along with other works, which leads to her becoming a charter member of the Irish Literary Society. However, she also brings to London Oscar's brother, Willie. Willie Wilde does not share his brother's wit and is actually uncouth at times. Since the brothers resemble each other closely, Willie wears a beard, possibly at Oscar's insistence.

By 1880, Oscar achieves fame, if not fortune. He befriends James McNeill Whistler, an artist of significant fame. The two enjoy each other's company in a competitive way, often working off each other to the entertainment of those observing. Although Wilde accepts Whistler's cruel jibes with kindness, Whistler cuts the relationship off, as is his usual method, trying to make an enemy of a former friend. This leaves Wilde astounded since he does not understand that some people are cruel by nature.

Wilde's fame becomes the target of parody in the theater. His personality fits well into parody, because he purposefully exaggerates flamboyance and cultivates a distinct way of being and talking. The early attempts at parody are not remarkable in their obvious digs at Wilde, but Gilbert and Sullivan capture the true Wilde character better in *Patience*. The libretto uses caricatures drawn from *Punch*, including a series of works by the artist George du Maurier that target both Whistler and Wilde, but mostly Wilde.

In the spring of 1881, Wilde publishes his first book of poetry. His initial intent is to distribute the book among his associates and critics to further his name, but the book *Poems* goes into two subsequent printings. However worthy the book is in its literary value, the poem "Charmides" brings trouble to Wilde. The poem strikes at the moral sensibilities of the time. Wilde donates a copy to Oxford, but the University rejects it as

being plagiarized. This appears to be punishment for Wilde's behavior while at Oxford. Miles, at his father's urging, kicks Oscar out of the house. However, Wilde is not overly upset, other than his initial outrage. "He knew perfectly well that his ideas were shocking to the English, provincial in their conventionality, piety, and conservatism, as he, an Irishman, was not. He had no intention of changing. They must change." (p. 149)

Chapter 5, Setting Sail Analysis

For anyone who graduates college during difficult economic times, Wilde's job-hunting misfortunes ring true. No matter what he tries, it seems that the doors will never open for him. Even his alternative plans fall apart or refuse to gel, but to his saving grace, his mother comes to London and begins to work her magic that transforms previously unknown people to various levels of fame. She publishes worthy literary works that raise her esteem among London's society and provides a place for Irish writers to break into public view.

Oscar's relationship with Lillie Langtry further pushes his ambition to be a playwright, and his first attempt garners some interest. If nothing else, *Vera* helps define Wilde in his approach to politics as well as aestheticism. His relationship with Whistler serves to keep his wit sharp, as well as to boost his social visibility. Whistler does not deserve Oscar's kindness, but as often happens in relationships, one side plays the giver and the other the taker.

Fame always brings with it an amount of contempt that is expressed in various ways. Sometimes books are banned or plays highly criticized. For Oscar, he becomes the object of parody, ridicule, and scorn. Foolish as a fox, Wilde takes it with good humor. He knows that all publicity is good publicity, and with his eternally burning wit, he knows that eventually his detractors will get their just deserts. When Oxford rejects his book of poetry as being plagiarized, Oscar replies with his characteristic tone of refined sarcasm.

"My chief regret indeed being that there should still be at Oxford such a large number of young men who are ready to accept their own ignorance as an index, and their own conceit as a criterion of any imaginative and beautiful work." (p. 147)

While Oscar's fame blooms and the foundations are laid for his future great works, the smaller personalities fly away from him like pigeons spooked from a Greek statue. Unworthy of his company and undeserving of his respect, they declare their moral superiority even as he chuckles to himself. Wilde knows exactly what is going on and who is winning the fame game.

Chapter 6, Declaring His Genius

Chapter 6, Declaring His Genius Summary

After Wilde departs Frank Mile's house, he moves to smaller rooms, and money is again a problem. He hopes that Mrs. Bernard Beere's upcoming performance in *Vera* will help his finances. While waiting for the production of the play, Wilde receives a cablegram from Richard D'Oyly Carte in New York that invites him to lecture in the United States on the subject of aestheticism.

The opening of *Vera* never happens because of two assassinations, Czar Alexander II and President Garfield. The primary theme of *Vera* is anti-royalty, and it includes an assassination attempt. Although the attempt is thwarted on stage, powerful people oppose the production. This setback gives further reason for Oscar to lecture in the United States.

Although Wilde has no innate talent for oratory, he succeeds in making splashes in other ways. While English society attacks Wilde from various perspectives, he leaves the ship that brought him across the Atlantic, the *Arizona*, with a distinctive flair that puzzles the Americans, but intrigues them as well. He arrives with many letters of introduction and proceeds to socialize with people of influence. The press attempts to nail down his definition of beauty, but Oscar avoids the questions with grace.

Wilde tries to have *Vera* produced in the United States, but nothing comes of his efforts. Instead, he must give his lectures, and he starts on January 9, 1882, at Chickering Hall. The venue is sold out, and gate receipts amount to $1,211, a handsome sum for the 19th century. Wild's performance, though boring to some, brings warm applause. He wins over the Americans by addressing large matters rather than the specific and ends the lecture with a statement that the secret of life is art.

His next lecture is in Philadelphia on January 17, where he visits with Walt Whitman before the lecture. The meeting is pleasurable for both, and both subsequently praise each other. However, this mutual respect fades over time and is replaced with criticism.

Chapter 6, Declaring His Genius Analysis

Oscar Wilde demonstrates his knack of charming people with his ways and wit while irritating or disturbing others both in London and in the United States. Bad luck kills the production of his play in London, and he hopes that the United States will be more interested in an anti-royalty production. Unfortunately his luck does not turn. However, his lectures are a success, and he is a big hit with most of American society. This serves to expand his audience and circle of influential friends, something that might be termed *networking* today in the context of building a career.

Wilde keeps the answer to aesthetics close to his chest until the final part of his first lecture. He then equates art with the secret of life, establishing this as the core of his aestheticism, yet he remains enigmatic enough to retain a sense of mystery around his public personality. This ensures that public attention will remain on his works, his offhand remarks, and the future offerings he will make to the world.

Chapter 7, Indoctrinating America

Chapter 7, Indoctrinating America Summary

Continuing his lecture tour, Oscar encounters an attitude that he is not prepared to confront or control in the form of Archibald Forbes, a journalist who has covered wars and enjoys recounting his own heroism. Forbes attacks Wilde mercilessly, and instead of fighting back with his formidable arsenal of witty replies, Oscar decides to avoid his Baltimore engagement and stays on the train through to Washington. The attacks keep coming regardless of Wilde's attempts to dispel them, with newspapers picking up the bludgeon as well. Henry James finds Wilde especially contemptuous, probably because of James's own latent homosexuality, but in a manner that has become typical of the man, Wilde fails to sense the hostility in James.

For his lecture in Boston, 60 Harvard students attempt to mock Oscar's style, but this fails as he skillfully snatches away their lampooning points. He goes on to successfully finish his lecture, and for the students, " 'as they put their head in the lion's mouth, I thought they deserved a little bite.'" (p. 183) Oscar moves onward in his lecture tour, moving from the East Coast to the West, and then back again with stops between. A memorable and humorous stop at Leadville in Colorado brings Wilde into a mineshaft where he has dinner with the miners. All the courses of the dinner consist of drinking whiskey.

As his fame grows, Wilde develops two other lectures in addition to his primary one on aestheticism and furthers the careers of several artists and writers. He finishes his tour with certain successes in countering the materialism of the United States and building his name to the point where his detractors need to think twice about attacking him. He also lingers for two-and-a-half months after the tour and pursues his interests in the theater.

Chapter 7, Indoctrinating America Analysis

Reminiscent of a modern age rock band tour, Oscar Wilde takes the United States and Canada by storm. When things seem to be going badly for him, the end result serves to further his fame and popularity. Even when the 60 Harvard students attempt to mock him, the facts are that sixty tickets are sold, and Wilde finishes his lecture not only successfully, but with notable chastisement of the students. He fancies women whom he meets along the way, and without the pushing of his tour manager, he might have followed a few romantic tangents. His experiences in Leadville, Colorado, are the makings of many good and humorous stories, as are the brushes with the law. He reaches out to other artists and writers, helping in ways in which he is not fully aware, much as popular rock bands on tour influence and inspire future musicians.

The end result of his tour is a resounding success. He has managed to make and spend an enormous amount of money while making his name a household word in the United States, Canada, and the British Isles. Furthermore, Wilde brings substance to the idea of aestheticism, where the beautiful extends to all parts of life. "Perhaps the aesthete might, rather, be the type of the only entire man, for to be an artist was to add constantly to one's image of oneself, and not to be an artist was to be merely a creature of habit. . . . in art lay not only life's secret but also life's future, discovering and satisfying fresh needs and pleasures, initiating a new civilization." (p. 211) Wilde develops his big hits, his "Top Forty" themes on this tour and strikes chords with all who attend his lectures. That he threatens many others with his style and thoughts testifies to his impact on everyone, both his fans and his detractors.

Chapter 8, Countering the Renaissance

Chapter 8, Countering the Renaissance Summary

When Wilde returns to London, his wallet is fat with his American lecture tour earnings, and his mind is full of interesting stories to tell. Whistler has taken on Rennell Rodd as his favorite over Wilde, which is awkward because of Oscar's treatment of Rodd's book when it went to publication. He had written the introduction, basically usurping the book as his own. At the end of January 1883, Wilde goes to Paris with the intent of finishing his play, *The Duchess of Padua*.

At home with French literature and the writers of the day who made Paris their home, Wilde takes up with a young, but doltish, Englishman named Robert Harborough Sherard. Sherard is to become Oscar's biographer, albeit not a good one. At first Sherard does not like Wilde, thinking of him as an imposter, but he later comes to appreciate the talents and brilliance of the man. Wilde tolerates Sherard's inadequacies and finishes his play, although a few weeks late as per his contract with the publisher.

The play is not produced, which is a major setback. Wilde moves onward with the production of *Vera*, a play that he has rewritten on the request of the actress, Marie Prescott, with the final rehearsal scheduled for August. As Oscar waits, he engages in the Paris social scene and discovers that aestheticism takes on a sinister aspect as the French practice the theories. From aestheticism comes decadence. As his money from the American tour runs out, Wilde returns to London in May.

Chapter 8, Countering the Renaissance Analysis

The return to London and the time spent in Paris give Wilde a true perspective on how his ideas about aestheticism hold up in the real world. It might be fine to surround oneself with beautiful things, but life has its messy parts that demand to be confronted, addressed, or in some manner acknowledged. The relationship with Sherard reflects the problem of association with intellects far removed from the lofty ideals that Wilde promotes and the somewhat insulated life that he lives. His cavalier treatment of money would not last long in the typical French household, and Wilde has never experienced marriage. He thinks of marriage in negative terms and wants nothing to do with it.

As a further dose of reality, *The Duchess of Padua* is rejected for production. Finishing this play was the reason for going to Paris in the first place, and Wilde must feel that his mission is a failure. The aesthetic movement has already run its course, and he falls back on the production of *Vera*. Still, Wilde gains from his experience. "Three months in Paris stopped him from speaking so glibly about a renaissance, but perhaps - and this was a slowly acquired intimation - it would go down with a dash of decadence. Such a blend had been foreshadowed, but forsaken, by Pater. Wilde had more courage." (pp. 230-231)

The mark of a good writer is art, but the mark of a great writer is the courage to face reality head-on and to express reality honestly. After his adventures and misadventures in Paris, Wilde is ready to move from being a good writer to a great one, and this is revealed through his courage to face the decadence that comes from the aesthetic school of thought.

Chapter 9, Two Kinds of Stage

Chapter 9, Two Kinds of Stage Summary

Marriage becomes a goal for Wilde when his mother encourages him to find a wife with money. He explores various prospects and settles on Constance Lloyd. After a period of courtship, he proposes marriage to her on November 25, 1883, and on May 29, 1884, he marries her. However, the wealth that Constance brings to the Wilde family is less than a fortune, and the marriage itself begins with significant debt because of Oscar's rich tastes and extravagance.

During this time of courtship and marriage, Wilde makes a modest amount of money with lecture tours across the British Isles. He does two versions, one on his travels in America, "Personal Impressions of America," and the other entitled "The House Beautiful." His courtship of Constance encounters rough spots that he successfully smoothes over, but she knows that she thinks more about him than he thinks about her. Another significant parallel event is the opening of *Vera* in New York, which Wilde attends. The play opens on August 13 and closes on August 28, a very short and disappointing run.

During the couple's honeymoon, Wilde displays a touch of arrogance mixed with humor and serious reflection. He grants an interview in which he speaks at length about Sarah Bernhardt and her treatment of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. He speaks of approaching marriage in a unique way, assuming that this way will be successful, and he complains that he has entered into a marriage without realizing much money.

Chapter 9, Two Kinds of Stage Analysis

Oscar Wilde sets out on a mercenary quest to find a wife, but not just any wife. He wants someone beautiful and rich. What he finds is someone beautiful and fairly well-off, but not rich by any means. His own efforts at bringing in money fall short of his and his family's spending habits, and this motivates him to pursue Constance. The failure of *Vera* adds to a sense of need for the marriage, one that starts in debt and with an imbalance of affections.

In the background, Wilde has not told Constance of his syphilis because he believes himself cured, but he does bring up his early sexual experiences. He does not admit to his homosexuality, though, and his interest in the book, *A Rebours*, by Joris-Karl Huysmans, develops. This book excites Wilde's interest in how aesthetics lead to decadence and how the two movements might be reconciled. He may be influenced by the homosexual part of the book.

Wilde's marriage is not getting off to a solid start. The debt promises to linger, the disappointments will be hard to bear, and his sexual ambivalence threatens to

undermine his wife's adulation. The marriage goes on with typical Wilde flair and a sense of celebration, but what tragedies are to follow?

Chapter 10, Mr. and Mrs. Wilde

Chapter 10, Mr. and Mrs. Wilde Summary

As it turns out, the Wildes do well enough with their marriage. Oscar still spends money on seemingly foolish items. Nevertheless, between Constance's income and Oscar's income as a lecturer and critic, they manage to make ends meet, decorate their house, entertain, and engage in social functions. Wilde receives the automatic respectability he expected, Constance gives birth to two children, and all seems to go well until Oscar starts expressing his latent homosexuality as actual homosexuality.

Wilde meets Robert Ross in 1886, and by 1887, the two become homosexual lovers. This leads to a rift in the Wildes' sex life, but Oscar does not want to give up his two sons, Cyril, born June 5, 1885, and Vyvyan, born November 5, 1886. Constance either pretends nothing is wrong or accepts the facts and preserves at least the appearance of a happy marriage.

Chapter 10, Mr. and Mrs. Wilde Analysis

While Oscar Wilde plays his parts as husband and father, he engages in lecturing and writing art criticisms. His critical style is to make his subjects more entertaining through his wit than the subjects deserve. His lecturing expands on his original subjects and takes on renewed interest. Whistler and Wilde engage in intellectual sparring sessions, with Whistler constantly going for the throat and Wilde gladly presenting it to him. This battle of the intellects and wills eventually becomes part of one of Oscar's literary works, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which Gray murders a painter.

The marriage moves ahead as well as can be expected, but the truth that must be accepted or ignored is Oscar's homosexual love affair with Robert Ross. This becomes a family secret, one to be avoided and ignored. Wilde's ambiguous sexuality has finally surfaced in an unquestionable manner, and this certainly impacts the marriage but does not destroy it. Constance has her two children, and she holds her own in social gatherings. As for Oscar, he will not leave his marriage for the sake of a homosexual lover, nor does he try to sabotage the marriage.

Chapter 11, Disciple to Master

Chapter 11, Disciple to Master Summary

Wilde abandons lecturing in favor of journalism to supplement Constance's income. He writes reviews for the *Pall Mall Gazette* from 1886 to 1888, with most of them produced from 1887 to 1888. Bernard Shaw remarks on the quality of Oscar's journalism. Oscar's interests move in several directions, including socialism and women's issues of the period, and he edits *The Women's World* in 1887. Until October 1889 he contributes to the magazine under the heading "Literary and Other Notes."

He develops further as a writer during this period, possibly stimulated by feelings of freedom with homosexual relationships. The attraction among men and boys becomes a theme in his writing, along with the betrayal that happens in relationships. Oscar expounds more on the way life and art interact, mostly taking the view that life comes from art and that art answers questions that have yet to be asked.

Chapter 11, Disciple to Master Analysis

The period from 1886 to 1889 brings Wilde squarely into the writing profession. He earns his way through his compositions and by editing a new magazine that targets the growing feminist movement of the 19th century, although his indolent ways keep him from putting in full days at the office. Oscar shows up for only a brief time each day, sometimes for just an hour. However, his writing quality and sense for making the magazine a success justify his weekly salary.

With his reputation established, Wilde creates some of his best work to date. He explores vanity and betrayal, Shakespeare and a possible attraction of the bard to boys, and through a dialog work, he becomes associated with William Butler Yeats. The dialog, entitled "The Decay of Lying," is a highly important piece. Yeats' association with Wilde leaves the young poet highly impressed with the nature of life and art.

Chapter 12, The Age of Dorian

Chapter 12, The Age of Dorian Summary

Oscar Wilde has his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published in the magazine *Lippincott's* on June 20, 1890. It is later published in book form in April 1891. This is not only Wilde's only novel; it is a work that shakes the literary world. Covert homosexuality raises charges of the book's being immoral, and others criticize its artistic and technical merits. Wilde argues back in support of the novel and takes the stance that he did it more for his own pleasure than to garner the acceptance of others. Regardless, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* becomes one of the great works of English literature.

The plot of the novel involves a deal with some kind of metaphysical force that allows a human, Dorian Gray, to live life without aging, while his portrait reflects all the punishment that age and sin bring to his soul. Gray murders a man, and the picture becomes very ugly. Finally, Gray inadvertently kills himself. The plot is not very complex, nor is it original. Theme plays a stronger role in the novel.

Primary to the central theme, the relationship between art and life is revealed as Wilde envisions it, and he envisions it as few others have. Herein lies the originality of the story. Taking pleasure in life is considered a form of art, and if pleasure means homosexual relationships, then they are as important as any other form of art. A secondary and frightening theme is that art brings new ideas to the world, and new ideas are dangerous. The novel ends in tragedy, an expected result of living the aesthetic life. The greater impact of literature over pictures is another strong theme.

Oscar accomplishes quite a bit in the early 1890s. Besides *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he publishes three other books, two volumes of short stories, and one volume of critical essays. Two landmark essays of his are published, "The Critic as Artist" in 1890 and "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" in 1891. His play, *The Duchess of Padua*, finally gets produced under a new name, *Guido Ferranti*, but anonymously. Wilde then writes *Lady Windermere's Fan*, which goes into a successful 1892 run and earns him not only fame as a playwright, but 7,000 pounds the first year.

Chapter 12, The Age of Dorian Analysis

Although Wilde outwardly treats the writing of *The Life of Dorian Gray* as an amusing sport, his involvement with the story is obvious. The primary characters reflect different sides of the author, what he has become, what he could become, and what he wants to become. The themes reflect deep conflicts that he has pondered over the years and reveal his relatively recently discovered homosexuality. At the time of the writing, he had been a practicing homosexual for 4 years. Had he been homosexual all along? This is an important question in the author's mind.

Oscar Wilde severs ties to old conflicts as well through his writing during this period. He no longer concerns himself with Whistler and the painter's annoying ways. He synthesizes his own take on art and life outside of Pater's influences, yet not completely abandoning them. He confronts his critics with convincing counter-arguments and redefines the role of critic as one who adds to art rather than simply describing it. Wilde takes the upper hand in society, and his long efforts at becoming a successful playwright finally bear the sweet fruit of lucrative profit, signifying society's acceptance of his art and efforts.

Outwardly, Oscar still seems lazy and too concerned about appearances, but inwardly he is industrious to the extreme. His industry occurs in the mind, not through the body. He is busy all the time, and if his mind were to jump out of his head and dance on the street, the spectacle would be impressive, even awe-inspiring. His courage is different, too. It is not the courage of the warrior in battle, but the courage of the mind to embrace and study new ideas, which are the dangers that come from all true art. His success lies in his ability to bring this courage to others, leading them by the hand through brilliant writing.

Chapter 13, Hellenizing Paris

Chapter 13, Hellenizing Paris Summary

During 1891, Oscar Wilde takes on Paris as only Oscar Wilde could. He participates in Parisian society, as is his usual way, and Whistler tries to discount Wilde's impact. The efforts of Whistler have little success. Wilde becomes interested in the story of Salome and begins writing a play of the same name. By the time he leaves Paris, the play is nearly finished, and Oscar is pleased with how it is turning out. After much thought, he makes Herod the central character because of his stability through the physical and spiritual violence that is central to the story.

The people of Paris tend to either accept him as a genius or reject him as an insufferable Englishman. Either way, the Parisians must pay attention to the man. To Wilde, "The point was that there are no disciples . . . . People are suns, not moons." (p. 357) Wilde approaches a popular subject of the period, Christ and Christianity, with a paradoxical manner that is typical of Wilde. He says that Christ's life is the most wonderful of poems. At the end of his nearly year-long visit, Wilde's *Salome* is almost finished, but plans to produce it in Paris never materialize. However, *Lady Windermere's Fan* is to be staged soon.

Chapter 13, Hellenizing Paris Analysis

Oscar Wilde further internationalizes his fame by visiting Paris and spending time with Parisian social and literary circles. He gains credibility with some, loses it with others, but he undergoes intense scrutiny from everyone. He continues to ponder the relation of art to life and makes many noteworthy aphorisms on the subject during his socializing. The idea of writing *Salome* as a play occurs to him during this time because a poem or novel cannot fully capture the paradoxes and conflicts of the story, not to mention the imagery of the beheadings.

Since Oscar seems to have as good a time as he can while he is aging, Whistler attempts to draw him into the old rivalries and fights, but Oscar does not respond. That time of his life is over, and now it is time to bring the French out of their decadence and into the light of true art. One of the saving paradoxes seems to be that one work of art destroys or contradicts previous works of art. His parable about the sculptor who must destroy his statue of sadness to create the statue of joy best illustrates the paradox. He makes other striking points, such as referring to Christ's life as the most wonderful of poems. As he leaves Paris, Oscar realizes his effect on the French, a successful and rewarding victory over the decadence that must, by necessity, spring from aestheticism.

Chapter 14, A Good Woman, and Others

Chapter 14, A Good Woman, and Others Summary

When Wilde returns to England in time to celebrate Christmas with his family, he finishes *Salome* and prepares *Lady Windermere's Fan* for production. The latter play opens to a full house on February 20, 1892. The audience loves it, most of the critics pan it, but Oscar takes it upon himself to comment after the performance in a way that alienates the audience. Even with this arrogance, the public continues to attend *Lady Windermere's Fan* from February until July. The production of *Salome* is destined for disappointment when the play is censored. By English law of the time, Biblical stories cannot be presented on stage. Disgusted with this ruling, Oscar protests but does not win a concession. He ends up publishing the play in February 1893, but a play conveys only a tiny percentage of its art when it appears only in print.

Taking a rest cure at Bad Homburg starting on July 3, 1892, Wilde develops another play, *A Woman of No Importance*. The play is accepted for production on October 14, 1892, and opens on April 19, 1893. Although this is his weakest attempt for the period, the play brings in 100 pounds per week to its author, and Wilde is very pleased with this outcome, as are the critics who are supportive of the performances.

Chapter 14, A Good Woman, and Others Analysis

Oscar Wilde has a knack for offending people. He seems to make fun of their very serious lives and displays the socially incorrect act of self-congratulation in public. Those who know his tactics are not surprised. Some take offense and some offer congratulations, reactions that Wilde finds either amusing or complimentary to his wit. The terribly maddening thing for his detractors is that he actually is worthy of his own praise.

The plays that he writes during this period are all good, and most are excellent. The theaters make money, the actors gain fame and fortune, and the author receives his fair share of both. That *Salome* is censored by the government takes its toll on Oscar's health, and the doctors insist he do things that are common to this day, which are to diet and stop smoking. One can imagine Wilde's distaste for these cures, but he carries on with his playwright activities and produces yet another success. Meanwhile, his brother Willie sinks into obscurity and earns Oscar's disdain by doing parodies of his greater brother. Oscar has demonstrated his brilliance as a playwright and has no need of sibling jealousy.

Chapter 15, A Late Victorian Love Affair

Chapter 15, A Late Victorian Love Affair Summary

Lord Alfred Douglas becomes Wilde's primary homosexual lover from the summer of 1892 into 1893. This is not to say that Wilde or Douglas were faithful to one another, as their sexual activity involves multiple partners, including young male street prostitutes. Social gatherings abound, consisting of mostly young men, Wilde, and his homosexual contemporaries. For a time, Oscar takes to hotels to allow for his carnal appetites, thus waving his sexual activities in the face of general society, which tries to look away. The parents of Douglas come to know about the affair and consider pressing charges, but because the son would also be required to serve prison time, they drop the case.

Chapter 15, A Late Victorian Love Affair Analysis

Oscar Wilde unleashes his sexuality with gusto during this period. He might be experiencing what is known today as midlife crisis, or he might have a sexual addiction, but whatever the stimulus, his desires seem to know of few boundaries. That he has little trouble in finding willing partners speaks to the commonness of homosexuality in nineteenth-century London, but he does not seem to understand that he should be very discreet to save himself from the punishments that society could bring upon him. Up until this time, Wilde's behavior has been unclear, leaving people with the impression that he might be homosexual or bisexual, but his behavior during this period leaves no doubt. He is not only a practicing homosexual, but highly promiscuous and disturbingly open about it. He is also not fully aware of how close he has come to being prosecuted for homosexuality, which is still a crime under nineteenth-century English law and punishable by time in prison.

Chapter 16, Sailing into the Wind

Chapter 16, Sailing into the Wind Summary

The relationship between Wilde and Douglas continues, although Oscar tries to break it off several times. Douglas exhibits extreme behavior to manipulate himself back into Wilde's life several times, going so far as to follow him to Paris. Meanwhile, Douglas' father, the Marquis of Queensberry, expresses his disgust for Wilde and the homosexual relationship.

While Douglas is not interfering in his life, Wilde continues to write plays. During August and September of 1894, he works on his best play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The writing goes smoothly and quickly, with the themes coming out of Wilde's imagination after much development that started in 1889. The play opens in London on February 14, 1895, and receives positive reviews, perhaps surprisingly so to Wilde. Paralleling this success, the conflicts among Wilde and Douglas, Douglas and his father, and London authorities and homosexuality approach the boiling point.

Chapter 16, Sailing into the Wind Analysis

Oscar Wilde is a complex man, displaying great generosity and empathy for others while engaging in a destructive relationship with Douglas. Oscar cannot bring himself simply to abandon the somewhat insane and highly manipulative Douglas, although attempts are made. This is setting the stage for Wilde's downfall to come by enraging Douglas' father and bringing on the disdain of London society. The concurrent attempts of some Oxford students to bring legitimacy to homosexuality serve only to fan the flames of outrage toward homosexuals and especially toward Wilde. Legally, the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 supports what will surely come, the imprisonment of Oscar Wilde.

Despite the emotional storms around him, Wilde continues to write and produces his best and last play. He displays the ability to feel compassion while working out his themes and language, the emotions being expressed without interfering with his intellectualism. Those around him are often cruel and petty, especially Douglas, but Wilde parries the blows with his impenetrable wit and sense of irony that work like thick armor. He can protect himself well enough from society. He will not have a strong enough defense against the legal system that is about to entrap him.

Chapter 17, 'I Am the Prosecutor in This Case'

Chapter 17, 'I Am the Prosecutor in This Case' Summary

The first of Wilde's trials is ironic in that Wilde brings it on himself. He sues Lord Queensbury, Douglas' father, for libel. Unfortunately for Wilde, Queensbury's position allows him to turn the tables, where the trial becomes an examination of Oscar's homosexuality and his behavior in this mode. Even if Queensbury loses, he wins the point that Oscar Wilde is homosexual and probably the victory over his son and Wilde that he truly wants, which is to kill their relationship.

Shortly before the trial, Wilde considers fleeing to Paris because he realizes that nothing good can come of this for him. Douglas performs a manipulation stunt in which he sheds tears, and this has a dramatic affect on Oscar. He decides not to take the Paris route.

Wilde handles the cross-examination well, but the prosecutor wins the points that Queensbury wants to make. Oscar comes across as an elitist when he expresses his contempt for ordinary people. The judge instructs the jury to rule for Queensbury in the libel part of the case, but it still stands that Wilde is exposed as a homosexual.

Chapter 17, 'I Am the Prosecutor in This Case' Analysis

Long before the trial, Queensbury goes after Wilde with a vengeance. Whether or not he is aware of how well he set the trap for Wilde is irrelevant. The trap springs when Wilde brings the libel suit, and no amount of clever or witty maneuvers can extract him. Oscar has three character traits that bring him to this point. He is pompous and indecipherable to average people, he refuses to take voluntary exile, and he gives in to the manipulations of Douglas. These traits can be summarized as having too much pride, being too stubborn and lacking the willpower to stand down Douglas. Not only can love be blind, but it can also be terribly irrational.

At the end of the trial, the observers cheer heartily. Finally, Oscar Wilde is cornered into admitting his homosexuality. One can see parallels with the recent falls from grace for certain public figures and the public's reactions. Some people maintain that the public figure is being subjected to injustice, others express joy that the public figure finally receives his due, and others wonder what just happened. For Oscar Wilde's situation, he has flaunted his risky behavior for too long. Most people rejoice at his fall.

Chapter 18, Doomed Deferred

Chapter 18, Doomed Deferred Summary

Wilde's journey through the English legal system is not over. Because he admitted to breaking the law, a warrant is made out for his arrest, and he is brought to prison to await his trial. The judge sets no bail, because the English attitude places sodomy one step below murder. English society treats Oscar Wilde severely, more severely than the alleged crimes deserve because they are misdemeanors with a maximum sentence of 2 years. Wilde has several opportunities to leave London for Paris, but he refuses to run away from the society that he has so much criticized.

The first trial ends without a verdict, but Wilde has a moment of brilliance. He explains to the court what the "love that dare not speak its name" is, and his explanation rouses a burst of applause. It is not that he uses his sharp sense of wit, but that he speaks well of the love between old men and young boys. He wisely avoids any reference to sexuality and keeps the meaning at a transcendental level far above the physical. A second trial is set for May 22, 1895, and this time bail is set. Oscar is released from prison on May 7, 1895, after posting the bail raised by his friends. He first lives with his brother and mother, a very uncomfortable situation. Later he takes refuge with agreeable friends, the Leversons.

The second trial ends with the conviction of Wilde. He is to be put to hard labor for 2 years. As he awaits his last trial, the friends of Wilde try desperately to convince him that going to Paris is his best course of action, but he refuses.

Chapter 18, Doomed Deferred Analysis

Oscar Wilde reveals his "stubbornness, his courage, and his gallantry" (p. 456) as he endures his two trials and his time in prison while awaiting them. The trials bring no new evidence to light, although the arguments of the defense are better prepared. There is no solid evidence of sodomy, but the mood of England calls for his conviction in a hypocritical way. The first trial reveals that an unprejudiced jury cannot bring conviction. For the second trial, conviction is attained, but not without severely prejudicial treatment in the press, the courtroom, and in society as a whole. Former acquaintances leave Oscar. His plays are shut down. His belongings are sold in a bankruptcy auction, and perhaps the most difficult situation for him is to live under his brother Willie's condemning and jealous and enraged stare for a time.

Nevertheless, Wilde's brilliance continues on. He eloquently explains the "love that dare not speak its name" during the first trial, prompting an outpouring of applause. If one substitutes the word "woman" for "boy," the brief speech does talk to the love that transcends the physical. Sex has nothing to do with this love, and it is misunderstood. When Mrs. Leverson sympathizes with Oscar's wife in her attempt to save him from

prison, Oscar rejects her view that his life had been a series of triumphs until now. "There had been his broken engagement to Florence Balcombe, his removal from Frank Miles's [sic] house, the failure of his early plays, his troubled American lecture tour, years of not having enough money, and the chaotic affair with Douglas." (p. 470) Wilde tumbles down further than he ever imagined possible with this conviction, whether it is just or not. He now faces 2 years in prison. How much further down is rock bottom?

Chapter 19, Pentonville, Wandsworth, and Reading

Chapter 19, Pentonville, Wandsworth, and Reading Summary

Rock bottom presents itself to Wilde in prison, but not right away. He spends a short time in Holloway, starting in early June, where he receives his drab prison clothing, hears the rules, and eats his first prison meal. His next stop is Pentonville. Oscar's health deteriorates rapidly in the harsh prison environment. R.B. Haldane, an earlier acquaintance of Wilde's and a member of the Home Office committee that investigates prisons, arranges for a transfer from Pentonville to Wandsworth on July 4, 1895. This prison is slightly better, but still full of suffering. Wilde continues to deteriorate and worries about his mental stability. Harding again arranges for a transfer, this time to Reading prison on November 21, a step upward for Oscar, but still harsh.

While imprisoned Wilde hears of his mother's death and funeral, which he could not attend, and the attempts of Douglas to publish portions of his letters and to dedicate a book of poems to Wilde. Oscar has finally realized what Douglas is doing to him. "That the Queensberry family consisted not of two totally different beings, but of two very similar ones, both determined to expose him, one out of purportedly love and one out of evident hate, suddenly became clear." (pp. 490-491) Both the father and the son want to destroy Wilde. He forbids Douglas to publish anything that has to do with Oscar Wilde, and he stops Douglas from interfering in a possible reconciliation with his wife, Constance.

Chapter 19, Pentonville, Wandsworth, and Reading Analysis

Prison is not easy for anyone, but for Wilde it is deadly. Where people of common births deal with harsh conditions daily outside of prison, Wilde has lived the privileged life, relatively speaking. Granted, he has struggled to gain his reputation and status, and it was by his own doing that he nearly lost everything, but prison proves to be a place beyond his comprehension and his survival abilities. Wittiness is not a virtue to be rewarded or even tolerated in prison. Silence is the code to follow, and hard work with meager rations is the daily routine. Oscar's health deteriorates rapidly, and the rule that no writing is allowed must contribute to the horror of prison for him.

Rock bottom comes clearly in sight, even as his hearing and vision fade away. It is insanity that Wilde faces. The price that Wilde pays for his crimes is far higher than spending two years under lock and key and far greater than the simple loss of freedom. Prison is taking his body and his mind away, and his conditions bring support from

others and lead to reductions in the price. At Reading, the authorities allow Oscar to work the gardens and the library, where at least he can handle books. He is also allowed to read books of his selection, although writing is still not allowed. Rather than spending hours in the infirmary, he spends days.

Prison does not stop Wilde from fighting back. He has enough friends on the outside that he successfully stops the efforts of Douglas to further destroy what is left of Oscar Wilde. Despite his claims of affection for Wilde, Douglas behaves in ways that demonstrate a burning hatred, more intense than the hatred of Douglas' father. Perhaps the line between love and hate is very thin and fragile.

Chapter 20, Escape from Reading

Chapter 20, Escape from Reading Summary

Wilde's stay in prison lasts until his official release on May 19, 1897, and conditions improve for him as the months move forward toward his release. The strict disciplinarian, Colonel Issacson, the man who torments Wilde as often as he can, is reassigned. The more sympathetic Major J. O. Nelson takes Issacson's place, a man whom Wilde comes to like very much. Oscar is allowed to order books for the prison library, and he is given writing materials. He writes a lengthy letter to Douglas that is published later as *De Profundis*. Wilde's theme about life changes in prison. He once announced that the secret of life is art, but now he thinks that the secret of life is suffering.

Just before leaving prison, Wilde witnesses two disturbing incidents. In one, a former soldier goes insane after a flogging. In the other, three children are brought to prison for the crime of snaring rabbits illegally and not being able to pay their fines. Wilde tries to obtain the names of these people so he can help in some manner, such as paying the fines for the children.

Upon leaving Reading, Wilde goes back to writing, although he has no overall plan for his life. He does plan to be a playwright again and composes a story that reveals his wife's kindness to him. He names the play *Constance*.

Chapter 20, Escape from Reading Analysis

Wilde experiences a tremendous turn of luck in Reading when the warden is reassigned and Nelson takes over. This reflects a general mood of prison reform in England which results in the 1898 Prison Act. Unfortunately, Wilde's prison time is up in 1897, a year too early to benefit from the act itself. Still, his final prison months are more bearable because he is given books and writing materials, and he is spared from Issacson's constant harassment.

Prison changes Oscar Wilde from the aesthetic who values art above all else to the aesthetic who values suffering above all else. Suffering becomes art as well, and Wilde uses the opportunity to promote one of his earlier ideas. As his prison release approaches, Wilde shows himself to be changed, but not so much that his ideas do not follow the same general lines. He is the aesthetic first and foremost.

The incidents regarding the insane prisoner and the children arriving at prison affect Wilde deeply. In the first, he must see in the insane prisoner's face what he could have become if not for his friends' and wife's interventions, forgiveness, and help. With the second incident, he must see innocence going to the slaughter of spirit that he endured well enough as a middle-aged adult but that these children have no hope of surviving. Prison has not taken away Oscar's natural compassion for people, nor his brilliance, nor

his ability to write. The experiences of prison have given him a deeper understanding of the human condition to the point where he knows that the various life situations we experience are all like prisons because of the limitations placed upon us.

Chapter 21, Prisoner at Large

Chapter 21, Prisoner at Large Summary

Oscar's official release from prison brings him back to English society, but he does not stay long. He takes a ship across the English Channel to Dieppe, France, and stays there until he moves to Bernaval, a quiet village five miles away, on May 26, about a week after his prison release. The rejections and snubs that Wilde experiences from the English in Dieppe provoke this move away from their retribution.

From June 8 to June 20, Wilde writes a long and overly ornamented poem about the prison experience, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. When this poem finally appears in print, it is highly edited. His other attempts at writing never leave the ground, but he does busy himself with a flurry of letters regarding Douglas' and Wilde's desire to reunite. Oscar is often lonesome and bored in his safe but uninteresting surroundings. He might be able to embrace the roles of husband and father after prison, but conditions are such that this is impossible. The only person left who might bring Wilde out of his artistic doldrums is Douglas, no matter how destructive the relationship is.

Chapter 21, Prisoner at Large Analysis

After his prison release, Oscar displays curious ways of dealing with his misfortune. He speaks of his prison experiences in terms of a fairytale land, and he accepts misfortune as being necessary for a happy life. Additionally, he refuses to write about his own experiences, concentrating instead on the entire concept of prison. He seems to be distancing himself from the ugly realities by using art as a separating ocean. His experiences in Dieppe hurt him greatly, enough to drive him from that town to the village of Burnaval in the hope of regaining his writing ability.

This turns out to be a failed attempt. Oscar Wilde needs constant stimuli to bring out his art, experiences that produce a joyous power that his art depends upon. He seeks this out with his wife and friends, but to no avail. The only person who might possibly have this power to rejuvenate Wilde's joy is Douglas, and with this determination, Oscar eventually achieves the meeting with Douglas that everyone else involved is against.

Chapter 22, The Leftover Years

Chapter 22, The Leftover Years Summary

Toward the end of Oscar Wilde's life, he reunites with Douglas and attempts to live under the same roof in Naples. This causes Wilde to lose his allowance from Constance, along with generating enough friction that the two split apart again. Robert Ross works to help regain Oscar's allowance after the split, and he is successful for this and for Constance to include the money arrangement in her will. She dies on April 7, 1898. By this time, Wilde returns to Paris.

Writing becomes impossible for Wilde as his finances and health decline, but *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is published on February 9, 1898. This turns out to be a very good seller, his last good run for a published work. Still, Wilde declines further, becoming homeless and a beggar for handouts from friends and acquaintances. His brother Willie dies on March 13, 1899, as do other friends by 1900. His old nemesis Queensberry dies on January 31, 1900, leaving a large inheritance to Douglas who begins to squander it. Wilde becomes bedridden in September 1900, suffering from the late infections that come with his exposure to syphilis in his earlier years at Oxford. Oscar Wilde leaves this world on November 30, 1900.

Chapter 22, The Leftover Years Analysis

The life of Oscar Wilde is similar to some of his artistic works. It is difficult to watch, and it ends in tragedy. This speaks to two of his themes, that life imitates art and that suffering is the secret to life. He earns fame and a degree of fortune, suffers for his indiscretions and tries to regain what he has lost, only to fail at the end. Nevertheless, he leaves us with his writings and pithy aphorisms, widely and often quoted. His funeral is well attended, and his burial place becomes a monument in Pere Lachaise Cemetery, Paris, France.

However we interpret the life of Oscar Wilde, whether he wasted a good portion of his time on Earth or used it for the greatest return and contribution, the judgments of him during the second part of the nineteenth century were certainly harsh by today's standards. To his credit we can offer the evidence of great writing that promotes ideas, still dangerous to this day, with an everlasting freshness that only great writing can accomplish. The man might have aged and grown ugly like the picture of Dorian Gray, but his art remains beautiful. If any of Oscar's themes hold for all time, this one does.

Characters

Oscar Wilde

Lady Wilde

Walter Pater

John Ruskin

Sir William Wilde

Florence Balcombe

James McNeill Whistler

Constance Wilde

Robert Ross

Lord Alfred Douglas

Marquis of Queensberry

Frank Harris

Objects/Places

Oxford University

Oxford University is Oscar Wilde's alma mater. He graduates with honors and awards, returning in later years as well.

London

London is where Wilde's career begins. He makes London his home until his time in prison is over. He then moves to France.

America

America is where Wilde takes his lecture tour with some amount of success. He uses this experience to develop another successful lecture.

Paris

Paris is where Wilde often goes and where he eventually dies. He discovers in Paris that his ideas about aestheticism are incomplete without including decadence. Later in life, Oscar finds that suffering, as a secret to life, reconciles the paradox.

Greece

Greece is where Wilde goes to learn classical art and literature first hand by visiting the places that he studied about at Oxford. Oscar's pagan ideas come from ancient Greece.

Rome

Rome is where Wilde goes to touch Catholicism. He has a meeting with the Pope in Rome.

Vera

Vera is Wilde's first play.

The Importance of Being Earnest

The Importance of Being Earnest is Wilde's greatest play.

The Ballad of Reading Gaol

The Ballad of Reading Gaol is Wilde's most successful published work during his life, and his last.

The Picture of Dorian Gray

The Picture of Dorian Gray is Wilde's only novel, but its importance in English literature survives him to this day.

Themes

Aestheticism

Aestheticism is Oscar Wilde's overall theme that beauty is the secret to life, later to become that suffering is the secret to life. His attraction to this theme begins while he is at Oxford University and stems from the conflict between Pater and Ruskin, where Pater is the aesthetic and Ruskin is the moralist. The prime difference between the two world views is that aestheticism requires little discipline, and in fact rejects discipline, where a moralistic view requires discipline, thus elevating discipline to a virtue in and of itself.

Another way to look at this is that the ancient Greeks before Alexander's time practiced aestheticism, where beautiful literature, statuary, architecture, philosophies, and other arts were developed. Not to be ignored, homosexuality was a common and accepted practice, even among men and boys. Ruskin's moralistic view comes from a later time in history, Catholicism and Protestantism. Still another take on the two conflicting views is youth and age. Young people tend toward aestheticism naturally, and older adults tend toward the moralistic view. Still, young people can take the moralistic way if older adults take the aesthetic way. One can point to numerous examples of both happening today, and the conflicts remain about the same as they were in Oscar Wilde's time.

As Wilde's life progresses, the striking observation that he makes about Jesus Christ's life being a wonderful poem brings the two world views together. Christ preached discipline, as in turning the other cheek. He also stressed morality through his many parables. He certainly did not spend money lavishly as did Wilde, and by most accounts, save a few currently popular speculations, he was asexual, not needing the love of man or woman, but loving in a divine way that transcends sex. Wilde claims to have this love as an aesthetic, but not the discipline to reign in his sexual appetites. To Oscar this is perfectly well and good, since morality is not a concern for an aesthetic.

Homosexuality

Wilde reveals homosexual tendencies in his public persona during the early part of his career, but fully embraces this sexual orientation in his later life. The English legal system sentences him to 2 years' hard labor for the infraction, and English society castigates him without mercy. Homosexuality, specifically sodomy, is considered a crime almost as heinous as murder in the nineteenth century.

In today's world, the theme of homosexuality has at least two major camps. Many homosexuals have pronounced their sexual orientation without shame or guilt, and in numbers that disturb the other major camp, with pride. The other major camp sees homosexuality as sin, perhaps not so much in being so, but in the practice of sodomy. The gentlest way the sin camp expresses the idea is to love the sinner, but not the sin. It is safe to say that the nineteenth-century attitudes toward homosexuality have become

less punitive in that homosexuality is no longer considered a crime in most developed nations, but the negative views persist. Without pronouncing judgment on either side, the theme of homosexuality is to this day, and might be forever, a difficult one to address.

Oscar Wilde addresses homosexuality regularly in his greatest works and tries to elevate the love among men to a universal love that transcends sexual orientation. Had he access to today's psychological studies, he could also add that sexual orientation might occur in degrees, where some people are totally homosexual and some totally heterosexual, and that many have orientations somewhere between. On the other hand, he might see this as being too cautious about the matter and tackle the theme straight on, as a great writer must.

Self-Promotion

Wilde, with the help of his mother, gains recognition in Europe and America through the use of self-promotion. He publishes his own works and pushes for production of his plays, all the while being witty, entertaining, and as visible as possible. Then as now, fame usually does not come with the condition of birth, unless one is born into a famous family, and even with this, self-promotion is still necessary. Wilde's mother and father achieve their own level of fame through hard work and luck, and this is how almost everyone accomplishes the goal.

Whistler criticizes Wilde for his self-promotional activities, especially for his aphorisms borrowed from others. The self-promotions are obvious to Whistler, and he holds nothing back when pointing them out in public and in publications. Is Whistler being an overbearing and hypocritical artist when he does this, or is he simply trying to promote himself? Perhaps he wants to catch a free ride on Wilde's coattails. Either way, the self-promotion continues, and both parties benefit.

One of the hardest things to accomplish in self-promotion is to keep audiences interested. This can be accomplished through great works of art or through tremendous lapses in judgment. Intentional lapses of judgment are called *publicity stunts* in today's parlance, and Wilde seems to have gained a level of artistry in how he carries these out during his life. Without doubt, he knows how to make the best of a bad situation, such as when the 60 students tried to mock him in America during his lecture tour. At another time he takes his punishment and turns the table by basing his most successful published work on the experiences, or rather, the essence of the experiences.

Cruelty

Wilde's prison experience is cruel, but his humiliation afterward is perhaps more so. The two sources of cruelty, authority and society, have different motivations. Authority tries to punish and hopes to achieve an obedient subject. Society has no other purpose to its cruelty than to punish. After 2 years Wilde's prison time is up, but his time in society does not end until his death.

While healthy and youthful, Wilde handles the cruelties directed his way with efficient and intelligent defenses. He often turns the attack around on the attacker, or, as with Whistler, his intellectual armor renders the attacks ineffective. In later life, his defenses are weakened through his exposure in the courts, the physical conditions in prison, and his impoverishment after release.

Oscar demonstrates his own ability to be cruel to others by making fun of people in ways that are sometimes direct attacks and sometimes indirect, such as when he claims the work of another author as his own. To raise himself above the masses, he must diminish those around him, and although he tries to do this with humor, the end result remains the same. Cruelty is a life condition that cannot be avoided, only managed. Wilde tries to manage cruelty directed his way and his own cruelty through skillfully applied humor, which serves to soften the room ambiance, if not the contents.

Destructive Relationship

Wilde's relationship with Douglas is destructive, yet as many destructive relationships work, Wilde is too much in love to let go. Douglas claims to love Wilde in return, but the behavior of Douglas refutes this claim. His manipulative ways are usually effective, and although Oscar tries to break it off, he fails time and again. Homosexual relationships have no exclusive rights to destruction, and Wilde expresses this when he writes that we tend to kill the thing we love.

Paradoxically, Wilde needs Douglas to feel the joy that he requires to create art. Life without Douglas becomes intolerably dull, hinting at how other destructive relationships continue. Something of worth has to come out of the relationship, however impoverished this return seems to others. For Wilde, the price he pays takes the forms of money, autonomy, reputation, and career. He nearly loses the kindness of Constance, without which he might not have survived prison. Nevertheless, he still seeks Douglas as a companion.

Oscar also writes that all of life's situations are, in a way, prisons because of the limitations that they entail. He seems to resign himself to his lot in life as the consequences of earlier choices develop. Is this due to the Fates as he speculates or from the necessary results of free-will decisions? Either way, he is stuck in a destructive relationship that he cannot leave without losing something of great value.

Genius

Wilde declares his own genius, which might be misconstrued as egotistical until his artistic accomplishments and the longevity of his work are considered. Claiming genius without supporting the claim is an expression of insecurity, and Wilde might have done this in his early days. He is aware of his academic prowess and overly confident at times, where what he expects and what is delivered are two different things. Despite his setbacks, he continues to promote the production of his plays and the publishing of his other works, eventually gaining the support for his claim.

Genius in one area often brings out the insipid in others. For Oscar Wilde, his primary weakness is personal economics. He is always spending too much, saving too little, and counting on future successes to bring him through. During his later life, he becomes homeless and a beggar. To his credit, he succeeds in negotiating favorable deals for his theater works and produces published works that go into multiple printings. Had he remained faithful to his wife, her influence could have kept his personal finances more secure, but despite his genius for writing, he follows what proves to be a foolish course that further drains his finances. Genius is not necessarily accompanied by common sense.

However, being common is never a goal for Oscar Wilde. What he lacks is offset by his other qualities, including his understanding of fame. He seems to expect fortune to follow, and sometimes it does. Other times it does not, but he manages to produce two great pieces of literature, one play and one novel, and his life ends from illness rather than suicide, as opposed to some of the characters in his stories. His genius finds expression despite the flawed man.

Style

Points of View

The biographer presents the reader with mostly Oscar Wilde's point of view. When he expounds on others' points of view, he does so in the context of Wilde's life. One of the more important points of view is that of society, both in Europe and America. Oscar Wilde consists of two people, his public persona and his personal character. Society sees mostly the public persona, while his close friends know the person better.

Setting

The physical settings in this biography are less important than the settings in Oscar Wilde's mind. He projects his imagination onto reality, turning the ugly beautiful and the beautiful mundane, or more beautiful, depending on his mood. Wilde controls his reality with his imagination, so far as this can go. In Ireland, he makes himself into a strong academic. At Oxford, he molds himself to be more English than the English. In America, he sees beauty in the Leadville miner more than anything else. In Paris, he detects the ugliness of the decadence that must come out of aesthetics.

A setting for Oscar's mind is the page upon which he writes. He creates plays, poems, dialogs, and letters that take on lives of their own. For the plays, the theater is a primary setting. A play that is not produced in a theater is simply a script, not a story or piece of art. The page upon which he writes is extended to the audience in the theater and to the reader of Wilde's published works. The art must exist both in the artist's mind and in the audience's minds.

Language and Meaning

This biography is difficult to read. It was copyrighted in 1984, and one can assume that a number of years or decades of research were involved before the actual writing was done. Possibly as a result of this, the biographer employs a vocabulary that is not commonly used today. Reading without access to an unabridged dictionary can leave gaps in the meaning wide enough for the biographer's intent to drop out. Examples include "aegis," "insouciantly," "profligacy," "sartorial," "proscenium," "apostate," "elegiacally," "captious," "oblation," and "archly (looking this up brings an interesting surprise)."

On the positive side, the biography brings the reader into the fullness of what is Oscar Wilde. He is not simply a great English writer. He is not simply one of the most tragic characters of the nineteenth century. He is not simply a timeless wit. He is not simple at all. Wilde is a man who lives in contradiction with himself, and while admitting to his own contradictions, he also pursues his own destruction worse than a moth drawn to a flame. The moth is not aware of its behavior and its consequences, but Wilde is aware

of his behavior although he is often unrealistic about consequences. The biographer brings out the characteristics of a highly complex person very well through direct quotations and disciplined analysis of situations. If the evidence is thin, he says so.

Structure

This biography is structured chronologically from Wilde's birth to his death. The book consists of three sections, chapters within the sections, and subheadings within the chapters. The chronology is sometimes interrupted, but never without justification. As an aid to the reader, the years covered by each chapter are given in the page headings, as are the relative ages of Oscar Wilde. Of special interest are the photographs provided of Wilde and other important people in his life, special touches that further flesh out the man and his time.

Quotes

" 'The soul is born old, but grows young. That is the comedy of life. The body is born young and grows old. That is life's tragedy.' " Chapter 1, p. 3

" 'To be Greek one should have no clothes: to be mediaeval one should have no body: to be modern one should have no soul.' " Chapter 3, p. 69

" 'Agitators are a set of interfering, meddling people, who come down to some perfectly contented class of the community and sow the seeds of discontent among them. That is the reason why agitators are so absolutely necessary.' " Chapter 5, p. 120

" 'To be either a Puritan, a prig or a preacher is a bad thing. To be all three at once reminds me of the worst excesses of the French Revolution.' " Chapter 7, p. 180

" 'It is only the shallow people who do not judge by appearances.' " Chapter 10, p. 261

" 'If we lived long enough to see the results of our actions it may be that those who call themselves good would be sickened with a dull remorse, and those whom the world calls evil stirred by a noble joy.' " Chapter 12, p. 325

" 'What a silly thing love is! It is not half as useful as logic, for it does not prove anything and it is always telling one things that are not going to happen, and making one believe things that are not true.' " Chapter 15, p. 384

" 'It often happens that the real tragedies of life occur in such an inarticulate manner that they hurt one by their crude violence, their absolute incoherence, their absurd want of meaning, their entire lack of style.' " Chapter 18, p. 435

" 'A community is infinitely more brutalized by the habitual employment of punishment than it is by the occasional occurrence of crime.' " Chapter 19, p. 495

" 'Why is it that one runs to one's ruin? Why has destruction such a fascination?' " Chapter 22, p. 562

Topics for Discussion

Select any set of photographs or illustrations from the biography and write an essay on your personal impressions after reading the entire book.

Why is Oscar Wilde a great man? Why is he a pathetic man?

Compare and contrast Oscar Wilde with James McNeil Whistler.

Why would you like Oscar Wilde as a friend? Why would you dislike him?

Discuss genius and madness. Do the two necessarily go together, or does Wilde put too much of himself into this observation?

How much effect might syphilis have had on Wilde's artistic expressions?

Describe why Oscar Wilde is quoted to this day.

List the characteristics of Oscar Wilde that are displayed by currently popular personalities. Does Wilde inspire these characteristics?

How does the biography of Oscar Wilde change your perceptions of Oxford, London, Paris, and America of the nineteenth century?

How does Lady Wilde influence the development of Oscar Wilde from childhood through to his greatest fame and his eventual fall?

Why does Oscar Wilde want to convert to Catholicism? Do his feelings for Catholicism have any parallels with his love for Douglas?

Describe Oscar Wilde's vision of Jesus Christ.