



Be Oscar Wilde

Read about life and work of the playwright and decide what you would do.

Early Life and University Years

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin on 16 October 1854. His father, Sir William Wilde was a successful ear and eye surgeon, amateur writer and archeologist as well as a philanthropist. Oscar's mother Jane Francesca Wilde was an Irish nationalist, translator of German literature, and also, a poet. Until the age of nine, young Oscar was educated at home. In 1871 Oscar began studying classics at Trinity College in Dublin and later at Magdalen College in Oxford. He soon became notorious for his involvement in the *Aesthetic* and *Decadent* movement as well as his extravagance (he wore long hair and funny clothes). When he was asked to leave the university for one term because of his attitude, he decided to...



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- move and finish his studies in Cambridge.
- go on a voyage to Greece with one of his professors. When he came back, Oscar graduated from Oxford with an honours degree in two fields of study.
- leave university and start a writing career in Dublin where he was offered a job as a journalist.
- write a play about university and teachers. As a result, Oscar Wilde was expelled from Oxford.

Marriage and Most Prolific Years

When he returned to Dublin in 1878, Oscar Wilde found out that his childhood friend and love Florence Balcombe had been engaged to Bram Stoker (the author of *Dracula*). With the money left from the sale of his father's house, he went to London. At 27 he published his first poems. The book initially sold well, but was later accused of plagiarism. In 1882, a beaten man, Oscar Wilde decided to...



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- go with a series of lectures to America. The tour was hugely popular and continued for over a year.
- go to court to prove his poems had been written by himself. Oscar won the case after just six months.



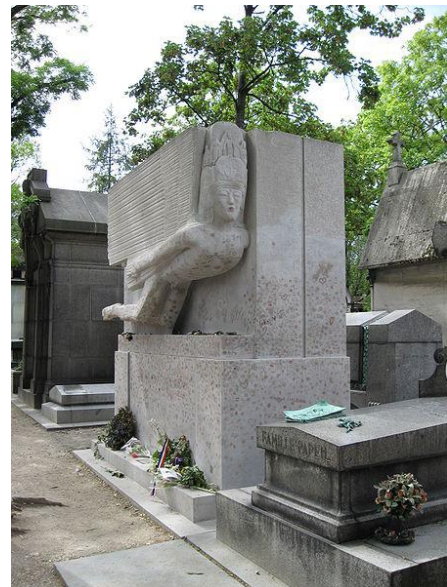
- c) defend his case in a poem entitled "Ravenna", which won him Newdigate Prize.
- d) go on a voyage around the world.

Then, he married Constance Lloyd, daughter of a wealthy lawyer. The couple had two sons Cyril and Vyvyan. Wilde became a prolific journalist interested in many topics: parenting, culture, politics, fashion and arts. Tired of journalism, he began to see his future in prose and writing, not journalism. He started publishing essays and dialogues. In 1890 he published his first and only novel "The Picture of Dorian Gray". Then he wrote "Salome", "Lady Windermere's Fan", "A Woman of No Importance", "An Ideal Husband", and finally, his masterpiece "The Importance of Being Earnest". The play was an acute satire of Victorian society, and was hugely successful until Oscar Wilde's imprisonment.

Heyday and Fall

In 1891 Oscar Wilde fell in love with Alfred Douglas, whose father, Marquess of Queensberry, opposed this relationship and publicly offended Oscar Wilde. Against the advice of many friends, the playwright went to court. The case became famous, but it was a case Oscar Wilde could not win in Victorian England. As homosexuality was a serious crime at the time, Oscar Wilde was sentenced to two years of hard labour. By the time Oscar Wilde was free again, he was bankrupt. His wife had changed her and their children's name to Holland and fled to Switzerland. His most important play had closed after just 86 performances. At this point Oscar Wilde decided to...

- a) join the army and go to the Crimean War, where he was fatally wounded. He died after four months in a veteran's hospital in Paris.
- b) go to Switzerland to join his wife and children. When his family refused to meet him, Oscar went to Paris and committed suicide.
- c) change his name to Sebastian Melmoth and to go to Paris. He lived in great poverty until his death three years later.
- d) move to Paris, where he wrote a yet another play, but was stabbed to death in front of the theatre on the opening night.



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His body is now buried at the Pere-Lachaise Cemetery.



Teacher's Notes and Answer key

Depending on the level of your students, you may need to pre-teach some vocabulary and explain the meaning of: playwright, an honours degree, heyday, prolific, *Aestheticism* and *Decadence* (as movements which paved the way for modernism).

Ask your students to read about the life and work of Oscar Wilde and to think what they would do if they were him? Then, tell them what the playwright chose to do. Discuss with your students whether (and why) Oscar Wilde's decisions were right or wrong? The material is ideal to revise modals in the past.

Answers:

Early Life and University Years: b
Marriage and Most Prolific Years: a
Heyday and Fall: c

Homework:

Oscar Wilde's life is probably as notorious as his works were in Victorian England. Ask your students to look on the Internet for more information about Oscar Wilde, his sons Cyril and Vyvyan or, with adult students, on the trials.