

## Oscar Wilde, the sad happy Aesthete

**1 Search the web to read about the fascinating but tragic life and personality of Oscar Wilde, a late Victorian author who wrote plays, short stories and the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.**

**Answer the questions**

**What kind of man was Oscar Wilde? What life did he live?**

**2 Read what was said of him.**

Richard Ellmann's biography of Wilde, which won the Pulitzer Prize for non-fiction, revealed the complexity of a man that went from stars to rags, from being on everyone's lips to being invisible.

"Wilde had to live his life twice over, first in slow motion, then at top speed. During the first period he was a scapegrace, during the second a scapegoat. For the three and a half years he lived after his release from prison, he saw pass before him, mostly in dumb show, a multitude of people he had known earlier, who evaded him."

Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (1987)

**Answer the questions**

1 What key aspect does Ellmann underline about Wilde's life?

2 Wilde's contemporaries found him fascinating but then most abandoned him when he fell in disgrace. Do you know of any other celebrities that had a similar destiny?

**3 The dandy**

**Look at these men in smart clothes.-**



George Bryan 'Beau' Brummell (1778-1840) in the 'sporting costume' that he devised for the English nobility promenading through London's arcades: a top hat, tails in sober tones, linen cravats, boots and breeches.



Oscar Wilde; he is holding a walking stick, a distinctive trait of his style.

### 1 Answer the questions

1 Look at the two dandies and their sartorial style. What elements of style do you think are still valid today? Which are no longer worn but are still associated with elegance?

2 In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the artist dandy style was not only elegance but transgression after Charles Baudelaire (1821-67), the French bohemian poet, positioned him as a rebel conveying a spiritual message that opposed the vulgarities of the everyday world. What style do you think has the same provocative force today?

### 4 Biopics can help you understand Wilde better, together with his own stories.

#### *The Happy Prince* (2018 )

*The Happy Prince* (Wilde's own story)

The statue of the Happy Prince is made of lead but covered with gold and adorned with jewels. He lived a life of privileges but now he can see the misery of all those who are poor and suffer. He persuades a little Swallow to help him give out all his jewels, even the sapphires which are his eyes, and finally the gold that covers his body, to help people in need. The Swallow dies kissing the Prince because it does not fly south and the cold kills it, and the city administrators bring down the statue, now made ugly, to melt it. God takes the heart of lead of the Prince, which would not melt, and the Sparrow, to heaven.

Wilde (1998)

The Selfish Giant

The children play in the Giant's beautiful garden every afternoon after school; the trees bear rich fruit and the birds sing sweetly. After seven years, the Giant returns and sends the children away. He builds a wall around the garden, and spring does not come any more. One day the children enter the garden through a hole in the wall, and spring returns but for a corner where a small child cries because he can't climb up the tree to make it bloom. The Giant helps the child

to climb the tree, and after that he plays with the children over the years in the garden, but that child disappears. One winter day the giant sees a corner in blossom and the child is there; he has wounds in his hands, but when the giant says that he will kill the man that hurt the child, he replies that these are the wounds of love and invites the giant to his garden, The next day, the children find the giant dead.

### **Answer the questions.**

1 Search the web for the trailers of both biopics. Which one shows Wilde most truthfully in your opinion?

2 What common theme do the short stories *The Happy Prince* and *The Selfish Giant* have?

3 Do the stories have a similar ending, too?

4 Both biopics *The Happy Prince* and *Wilde* parallel Wilde's life with one of his most popular short stories. What aspect of the artist's personality and vicissitudes do you think that the directors want to underline?

5 Do you find the stories moving? Imagine you are either the Happy prince, or the Selfish Giant. Find an image that best evokes how you feel being one of them, and a short text about how you feel about your life and yourself.

Does this help you to feel closer to Wilde himself?

6 Imagine that you can speak with Wilde about his life and choices, and ask him a few questions. Write your interview with him, or make a podcast about it.

Does this help you feel closer to Wilde himself?