Oscar Wilde (1854 – 1900)

The Victorian Period

Historical Background
Queen Victoria, daughter of the Duke of Kent (1767-1820) came to the throne of England at the age of eighteen (1837) and succeeded in restoring the image of the monarchy with her wisdom, gaining the respect of her subjects with her private life: an adored husband, Prince Albert, and nine children. Her pattern of life was ruled by sobriety and hard work, in a word, by "respectability". As a consequence the Victorian Period was based more on exteriority than on spiritual values, on conformism and, often, on hypocrisy.

As to political and social life, England lived a period full of changes and extensions in every field. Queen Victoria died in 1902. Her son Edward came to the English throne trying to follow his mother’s steps.

Social Achievements
The Parliament had to face the problems of the workers with a series of Acts (The Factory Act, The Ten Hours' Act; The Mines Act; The Public Health Act) to improve the working conditions, limit the hours of work and the exploitation of the children and women.

In 1884 the Third Reform Bill enlarged the suffrage to all male workers.

Foreign Policy
- Ireland found his leader In C. Parnell that demanded the Home Rule in 1880, but it was not approved till after the First World War
- In 1887 Queen Victoria became Empress of India and the Empire enlarged its dominions to Australia, New Zealand, Ceylon, Canada, Singapore, Hong Kong, Gibraltar, Malta, Cyprus and parts of Africa.
- In 1899-1902 the Boer War burst out in Orange and Transval
- In 1854-56 the dispute on the borders between Russia and Turkey originated the Crimean War, during which Florence Nightingale founded the Red Cross.

Literary Background
Under the reign of Queen Victoria, literature developed thanks to the improved ways of communication and a new printing system; it became a means to confute ideas and reveal thoughts. This period can be divided into three stages:

Early Victorians
Fiction: the writers identified themselves with their own age; they wrote long books published in serial instalments and structured every episode as a plot. They tried to attract the masses with suspense and the appeal to the sensational. Their motto was to make them (the readers) wait, cry and laugh.

Main authors: C. Dickens ; W. Thackerey; The Brönte Sisters.

Poetry: The poets at first followed the Romantic way of writing, but soon they reflected a sense of uneasiness. They developed the Dramatic Monologue in which a persona reveals his thoughts and feeling unconsciously to a silent listener.

Main authors: Lord A. Tennyson and R. Browning.

Mid Victorians (or Anti Victorian Reaction)
Fiction: a sense of dissatisfaction and rebellion, caused by new scientific and philosophic theories (Darwin's Origin of the Species) pervades this period. The realism of the works mirrors the clash between man and environment, illusion and reality, leading to Naturalism: man is no longer responsible for his actions since they are determined by forces beyond his control. The writer's task is to record events objectively, without comments.

Main Authors: George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans ) and Thomas Hardy.
Poetry: The writers followed J. Ruskin's theories (1819-1900) against the massification and the materialism of the society; The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood proclaimed a return to simplicity and nature as an escape from this world, idealising and beautifying the reality.

Main authors: D. G. Rossetti and his sister Cristina.

Late Victorians

Fiction: The writers searched for an escape "travelling" in their self and putting in evidence the contrasts between classes and races and the contradictions of colonialism.

Aestheticism brought to the extreme every attempt to escape from the real world supplying a way to avoid frustrations and uncertainties, reacting against Utilitarianism and moral restrictions, and breaking the social conventions by means of free imagination.

Main authors: R. L. Stevenson. (wrote about the duality of man); R. Kipling (dealt with the problem of colonialism) and O. Wilde (was the mouthpiece of Aestheticism)

Poetry: Aestheticism was fervent among the poets followers of the Rossettis, but the most original voice was the one of an isolated poet, G. M. Hopkins, who combined lyric passion with his true religious faith and used a musical and sensuous language, identifying matter and form.

Drama: The stage had suffered a long period of sterility due to the lack of new ideas and to the audience's requests. The public, in fact, demanded amusing comedies, great effects and famous stars. The rebirth of the 1890s occurred thanks to the influence of French and Russian playwrights that focussed their attention on the psychological study of the characters, in particular, of women. From Norway, instead, came the new form of drama written by H. Ibsen that analysed the social world and used the retrospective method.

Main authors: O. Wilde and G. B. Shaw.

Oscar Wilde

Life and works

1854    Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin of a wealthy family (his father was a surgeon, his mother a novelist).
1874    He studies at the Magdalen College in Oxford.
1881    His first work appears "Poems"
1882    He performs a series of lectures in the U.S.A. dealing with aestheticism and pre-raphaelitism. Then Wilde settles in Paris where he brings to an end the romantic drama "The Duchess of Padua"
1884    He marries Constance Lloyd and has two children.
1887-89 The writer takes care of The woman's World, a periodical that publishes some poems named "Fantasies Decoratives". Meanwhile "Lord Saville's Crime" and "The Canterville Ghost" are published on several magazines.
1888    A collection of illustrated fables full of musicality "The Happy Prince and other Tales" is edited
1889    Oscar Wilde publishes critical essays like "The Decay of Lying ", "Pencil and Poison" and "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.", a fanciful reconstruction of Shakespeare's personality.
1890    "The Soul of Man under Socialism" is published: Oscar Wilde writes abou his theory that considers Socialism as a means to reach individualism.
1891    He writes "The House of Pomegrates", another series of fairy tales.
1892    His first novel "The Picture of Dorian Gray" is published.
1892    Wilde starts his fortunate series of comedies influenced by the elegance of the Restauration theatre and the contemporary French drama with "Lady Windermere's Fan"
1893    Other two comedies are successfully performed, "A Woman of No Importance" and "An Ideal Husband" while the author does not obtain the permission to bring on the stage "Salomè" written in French for Sarah Bernhardt and later represented in Paris.
1895  “The Importance of Being Earnest”, a perfect fusion of subject and style
In the same year, the catastrophe falls on him: the Marquise of Queensberry
( father of Lord Alfred Douglas, whose nickname was Bosie),
accuses him of homosexual practices: Wilde loses and is condemned to two
years' imprisonment.
In the jail of Reading he writes "De Profundis"
1898  He writes the poem "The Ballad of the Reading Jail" about his period in prison
In it Wilde shows an intimate sympathy for the outcasts.
1900  He dies in Paris.

The importance of Being Ernest (1895)

Summary
Act I: the scene opens at Algernon Moncrieff’s house, Here arrives Jack Worthing, who want to
propose to Gwendolen Fairfax, Algernon’s cousin. Jack reveals Algy that he is known under the
name of Ernest in the city: to leave the country whenever he wants, he has invented a wicked
brother, Ernest, who lives in London and often needs his help. It turns out that Algernon too leads a
double life: he has an imaginary friend in the country who is often ill and needs his help, so Algy
can go on pleasant trips in the country whenever he wants. They are soon joined by Lady Bracknell
and her daughter Gwendolen. Taking advantage of a moment of privacy, Jack confesses Gwendolen
his love. With surprise he discovers that she too is in love with him as she thinks that his name is
Ernest. When Lady Bracknell comes back, finds Jack still on his knees and decides to ask him some
question about his social position. Jack must admit that he was found in a bag by a Mr. Thomas
Cardew in Victorian Station. He does not know who his parents are and so Mr. Cardew gave him
the name of Worthing because he had a train ticket to Worthing in his pocket. Lady Bracknell is
shocked and says that he cannot permit the marriage till she knows who Jack’s parents are.
Gwendolen, on the contrary, fells fascinated and asks to know Jack’s country address. Algernon
overhears: he decides to go on a “Bunbury” there to meet Cecily Cardew.
Act II: the scene opens in Jack’s garden in the country. Cecily is arguing with Miss Prism who
wants her more concentrated on her studies. The butler announces the arrival of Ernest Worthing.
As a mater of fact, it is Algernon that comes under the assumed name of his friend into meet
Cecily. They meet and enter the house. Meantime Jack arrives and announces that his brother has
died in Paris. The situation is embracing when Cecily, back in the garden, tells Jack that his brother
is in the dining room. Algy appears and Cecily insists on a reconciliation between the two. Left
alone, Jacks order Algy to go back to London, but his friend confesses his love for Cecily. Who
returns his affection because she feels attracted by the name of Ernest.
The butler announces a new arrival: Miss Gwendolen Fairfax, come to meet Ernest Worthing. She
is received by Cecily and the two girls soon discovers they are both engaged with the same ma:
Ernest Worthing. When Jack and Algernon come back, the truth is revealed.
Act III: The scene opens in Jack’s country house where the two couples are trying to find a
reconciliation. The two men announce that they are going to be rechristened by Dr. ChChasuble.
The final obstacle is still Lady Bracknell who accepts the marriage between Cecily and Algernon
when she hears that Cecily has about £130,000 in the Funds. But Jack says that he will oppose the
weddings till Lady Bracknell permits him to marry her daughter. Even this obstacle is removed by
the arrival of Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism. Hearing the name of this woman, in fact, Lady
Bracknell tells that twenty years before a Miss Prism was the governess of her sister’s son, and she
had lost him at Victoria Station. She had put the baby in a black handbag and the novel she was
writing into the pram. Jack shows the handbag where he had been found and Miss Prism recognises
it. Jack is Algernon’s elder brother, son of Lady Bracknell’s sister and of General Ernest
Moncrieff. And his name is that of his father, Ernest. The play ends with three embraces:
Gwendolen and Ernest, Cecily and Algy and Miss Prism with Dr. Chasuble.
Oscar Wilde started writing for the stage because he thought to make a lot of money out of it. He had no creative motivations or new dramatic theories, he was not interested in introducing innovations and his purpose was writing popular plays.

Oscar Wilde developed gradually this play: the characters and dialogues are already present in his earlier plays and here they assume the function of caricatures. Before Wilde there was no other author who wrote plays of this kind. At the end of the 17th century, a group of playwrights, the Restoration dramatists, wrote light artificial comedies. Among them the most famous were W. Congreve with *Love for Love* (1695) and *The Way of the World* (1700) written in a style similar to Wilde’s.

The English stage was dominated by the melodramas that addressed to lower classes and asked the stage to give them emotions fun and entertainment. They were simple, with short and fast scenes rich in music and sounds effects and the characters were plain and without a psychological introspection.

Other popular plays were derived from the French drama: they were based on complex plots cleared up at the end with an happy solution for those who deserved. The characters were superficially portrayed. The most important exponent of this sort of theatre was Eugene Scribe whose main purpose was to entertain people and made a diagram to show the various situations in the play. Another writer was Victorien Sardou who wrote mainly melodramas based on effective scenes. On the other side, writers such as Henrik Ibsen and Strindberg were demonstrating the importance of a theatre based on human problems and had a follower like G. B. Shaw that was starting his dramatic career in England.

In *Ghosts*, Ibsen examines the problem of a woman married to a dissolute man and she feels miserable. For the Norwegian writer, the marriage should be broken up because a son in such situation would suffer. The woman should go away with the man she loves. Reading this play it is possible to perceive a new dimension of the drama, a deeper human insight. The Theatre was turning into a vehicles for his ideas.

Wilde’s answer to these new forms was a Theatre full of intrigues, giving the impression to analyse a problem in each play without really criticising or changing the old way of making theatre and without shocking his upper-middle class audience. Simply, he wrote plays that made fun of themselves with satirical elements as they deal with the foibles of society.

Comment: In *The Importance of Being Ernest* Oscar Wilde created a frivolous world inhabited by unreal people that converse in a witty and absurd way. They express their thoughts with paradoxes, upside-down statements, nonsense’s and strange logic. Wilde was able to use commonplace materials efficiently and this frivolous portrait of his society that has so little relation to real life, suggests a sort of despair. It succeed in conveying the idea that Man tries to escape, to rebel against the conformist hypocrite Victorian life. The double life his characters lead in the play offers a perfect example of Wilde’s opinion about his times: people would like to escape the oppressive way of living the Victorian rules are imposing on them without loosing that respectability that permit them to maintain their privileges. Here is the reason why they live in an imaginary world and invent their counterparts to feel free from social conventions. This dualism does not hide secret perversions or mysterious affairs: it only permits them to live outside the conventions, in a way more consonous to their real personalities and to their instinctual behaviours.

Wilde’s development as a dramatist was strong and brilliant. He eliminated from his plays good women, adventurerness, moral dilemmas, intrigues and mysterious secrets. The situations appear absurd as the conversation are put upside-down by means of paradoxes, nonsense, puns and light satire. But these devices have the function to conceal a witty social criticism; the caricatures of mothers looking for proper husbands for their daughters; the marriages considered as a way to raise at a social position.

The play seems to be a comic-opera and becomes a satire on popular comedies and operettas, in fashion at Wilde’s times an a satire against mass literature. Novel writing is possible for everybody in a world where culture and education have lost their true value. And Wilde openly criticises also the British school system, unable to extirpate that beautiful and rare flower that is ignorance.
Also the choice of the name reveals Wilde’s sarcastic vein: Miss Prism suggest a school-teacherish of putting the lips, Mr Chasuble has a double meaning (to chase = to be looked for; chause = a sacred paramount) and the title itself, built on the pun between Ernest, the name, and Earnest that means honest.

Setting
It is a world in which there is much to do about very little. The places where the few actions, better, the dialogues take place, are typical of upper-middle class society: elegant, accurate in the details, fashionable.
The people presented embody the emptiness of the period and of their way of living. They too are
elegant, dandish, but without the strength to rebel against the rules imposed on them by the
mentality of the Victorian tastes and dictates.
In the countryside, the characters show more witticism than in town, probably they feel more free to
show their real personality. The country represents a sort of escape, the place where Man, far from
the social conventions, can express this feelings and his real identity.
Even literature is criticised as the product of London society and behaviours: novels are considered
a secondary product and writing has become a fashion that can involve and that can be practised by
everybody, despite their culture and education.

Characters
Oscar Wilde interest in men is rather superficial: his characters do not reveal their insight.
Nevertheless the writers differentiates them with peculiar and destructive characteristics. They act
more like cartoons than human beings and so do not increase our sympathy.
What is really peculiar, is that Wilde’s characters always appear in pairs. Jack and Algernoon,
Gwendolyn and Cecily are alike and show common basic characteristics; Miss Prism and dr.
Chausable are both serious and sexually shy. These counterparts have the function of sharpening the
identification of the characters as they usually underline the opposition between gayety and
seriousness.

Lane: he is Algernon’s servant with a humorous relationship with his master because they
understand one another.

Meriman: He is Jack’s butler. He has a very formal behaviour towards his master, but shows
loyalty and understanding for him in various dangerous occasions.

Lord Bracknell: He is a strange figure of a husband in a Victorian society. He never appears, but
he is often mentioned by his wife, Lady Bracknell. He is quiet absent, ineffectual, managed by his
wife and ignored by his daughter. Probably he represents the futility of men’s position in Wilde’s
times, notwithstanding their apparent important role in the social affairs.

John (Jack) Worthing: Serious and always worried, Jack is a 29 year-old man. At first he does not
act, he is quite passive. Only in the third act he starts blackmailing Lady Bracknell arising the
reader’s interest in him. He has a double identity: in the country he is a respectable young guardian
of Cecily Cardew, in London he assumes the name of Ernest and follows his tendency to pleasure,
an harmless pleasure. He says that Ernest is his wicked brother and that he often has to rescue him.
O. Wilde points out his childish behaviour: playing these two roles Jack tries to imitate the world of
the adults around him. His world of childlike innocence and purity is far from being harmful.
This mood is expressed by his nonsensical speeches and by the dialogues he is used to listening to.
At a deeper reading, Jack seems to be a parody of Dorian Gray, protagonist of the only Wilde’s
novel The Picture of Dorian Gray. Dorian is wicked, if he exposed his sins he would be neglected
and condemned by the members of his class; his double life is sinister and he is forced to commit a
crime killing the painter of his evil portrait. Jack’s only crime is the “murder” of his imaginary
brother.
Algernon (Algy) Moncrieff: Algy too leads a double life: always controlled by his highly respectable Aunt Augusta (Lady Bracknell) he escapes this world inventing a permanent invalid friend, Bunbury, that lives in the country. Whenever he wants to enjoy himself he says that Bunbury is ill and he must go in his help. In the play he goes Bunburying under the name of Ernest Worthing. Like Jack Worthing, he is a child who pretends, or better, plays the role of an adult. He lives in an innocent, pure, childish world where he is always hungry and the only sin he commits in his double life is eating cucumber sandwiches and muffins. Algernon’s character generates the nonsensical atmosphere of the play and gives examples of “playing with words”, the style for which the Irish author became famous.

Gwendolyn Fairfax: She is Lady Bracknell’s sophisticated daughter, the essence of superficiality. Her only care is to follow the dictate of fashion, as her mother has taught her. In fact she never objects her mother’s orders, she is not rebellious. For this reason Gwendolyn appears to be another grown-up baby. She too lives in an innocent childish world and acts like a Romantic Heroine of the novels she reads, but only when this is convenient to her. Gwendolyn’s speeches supply a very humorous example of nonsensical language that shows the lack of education and culture despite the class she belongs to, the aristocracy. Social class is no longer a perfect equation with good breeding and knowledge. Her most absurd statement concerns her love for Jack: at the end of the play Gwendolyn discovers that Jack has been a liar, leading a double life and he turns out to be a pleasure-seeker. This does not worry Gwendolyn: the real obstacle for their marriage is the name and he must be re-christened Ernest.

Cecily Cardew: Cecily is 18 years old, she is Jack’s ward and her tutor is Miss Prism. She is secretly in love with Jack invented brother Ernest because of his name. So when Algernon appears under the assumed personality of Ernest, she sees him as her future husband. Even if she is the youngest in the play, the child, she is the wittiest, the only one who can “challenge” Algy in the play of creating nonsensical statement. Cecily is very similar to Gwendolyn: at the end of the play her main concern is about Algernon’s name and her most important pastimes in her diary that, according to the fashion of the period, could be published.

Lady Bracknell: She is Gwendolyn’s mother and Algernon’s aunt. Lady Bracknell, or Aunt Augusta, is very self-confident and proud of her social position. She is a member of the British aristocracy. For this reason she desires a good marriage for Gwendolyn and opposes of marrying Jack Worthing. Also this character is playing her role, that of a child who pretends to be an elderly British aristocrat. Around Aunt Augusta there is an atmosphere of innocence: she uses witty nonsensical sentences to show her logic and the reasons for her behaviour, snobbish and over-pompous. Lady Bracknell opposes the private property but not because of her despise of the class system. Just the contrary: she wants to preserve her privileges. She supports that private property is a bother, but instead of advocating for socialism, she says that the best solution is to invest money not to buy land. Like Lord Henry in The Picture of Dorian Gray, she acts like a satanic monster that tries to keep apart Jack and Gwendolyn, but unlike Lord Henry, she does not succeeds in doing it and her tricks are quite harmless.

Miss Prism: She is Cecily’s governess. Miss Prism is an unattractive middle-aged woman who represents the Victorian middle-class code of morality and duties. She condemns Cecily’s behaviour and would like her to study subjects that could improve her knowledge and breeding. Of course this stiff woman cannot but disapprove Jack’s immoral behaviour. Miss Prism contrasts Wilde’s opinion about literature: for her novels should teach morality, whereas the writers hardly condemns this point of view. She is also guilty of having written a very long
novel, during her free time, and while she was reading it she forgot Jack and abandoned him in a bag.

So, despite her moral preaches and ideas, Miss prism’s behaviour betrays her real tendencies. She is too involved in the long novel she is writing that forgets the baby she had been entrusted with, and who is Jack, and her tongue often reveals the passions she feels for Dr. Chausable. Miss prism always hides her sexual attraction, but she constantly proposes the rector to marry her and her slips of the tongue show her instinct.

At the end she succeeds and gets married to the man she loves.

**Reverend Canon Dr. Chasuble**: He is the rector of Jack’s parish. He follows the rules of the primitive Church and for this reason he is not married. Nevertheless the reverend feels a physical attraction for Miss Prism, a passion he represses, but that his tongue reveals. Dr. Chasuble is conscientious and expresses sentiments for every occasions in the play. He is not a fascinating preacher: he adjusts the same sermons for various occasions, but people do not care and everybody sights when he tells them.

He Christen both Jack and Algernon.

Even in the reverend there is a duality: irrepressible as a minister of god, he feels a sexual passion for the plain Miss. Prism. The name itself reveals this duality. It can be pronounced Chaz-able which refers to a vestment for Mass and can be said Chase-able which suggests that he can be chased by women (and Miss Prism is an example).

At the end Dr Chasuble admits his love and embraces harmlessly and innocently Miss Prism.

**Notes:**

**The Aesthetic Movement**: It appeared like a response to some of the ugly or depressing aspects of the life in the 19th century. These factors were:

- The industrial revolution that brought to the development of the cities, but as there was not a place for the growth of the towns. The result was the accumulation of people in slums without sanitary system.
- Science changed the world with Charles Darwin’s theory of the evolutionary development that worked out the principle of *The Survival of the Fittest*.
- John Ruskin in *The Stones of Venice* (1853) pointed out the relationship between degrading working conditions and poorly made products.
- Dante Gabriel Rossetti celebrated the fine arts and beauty of the Middle Ages in contrast with the art of the 19th century.
- William Morries (1834-96) stressed the ugliness of mass-produced objects and devoted himself to the creation of handmade wallpapers and draperies.

In all these artists ugliness was connected with evil and beauty with good. This idea was then taken to the extremes and the poet Algernon Swinburne went on praising the joy of passion and of a pagan way of life, far from the schemes of the Victorian morality.

Many of his ideas were followed by Walter Pater (1839-94) that praised “art for art’s sake” that means that beauty is not for creating a moral goodness, but it is sufficient in itself. He was followed by a group of Oxford students that tried to live each moment at the fullest. By the 1880’s the Aesthetic movement was in existence, but it had partially lost the value of serious moral rebellion of the period between 1850’s and 60’s even if they were still the product of the struggle against the Victorian hypocrisy with their scorn for the conventions and their moral daring.