Biography of Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), Irish dramatist, poet, and author wrote the darkly sardonic Faustian themed *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).

Ever the aesthete, Wilde himself was profoundly affected by beauty and lived and dressed flamboyantly compared to the typical Victorian styles and mores of the time. He was often publicly caricatured and the target of much moral outrage in Europe and America. His writings such as *Dorian Gray* with homoerotic themes also brought much controversy for him but he was part of the ever-growing movement of 'decadents' who advocated pacifism, social reform, and libertarianism. While many vilified him, he was making his mark with style and wit and enjoyed much success with many of his plays. Wilde was lauded by and acquainted with many influential figures of the day including fellow playwright George Bernard Shaw, American poets Walt Whitman and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and English author and social critic John Ruskin. His works have inspired countless fellow authors, have been translated to numerous languages, and
have been adapted to the stage and screen many times over. Fiction by Wilde includes *The Canterville Ghost* (1887), *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* (1889), *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* (1891), and *Intentions* (essays, 1891). His plays include *Vera, or the Nihilists* (1880), *The Duchess of Padua* (1883), *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Florentine Tragedy* (*La Sainte Courtisane* 1893), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *Salomé* (1894), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895).

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born on 16 October 1854, in Dublin, Ireland, the second of three children born to writer Jane Francesca Agnes née Elgee (1821-1896) and surgeon Sir William Robert Wills Wilde (1815-1876). Wilde's mother was a prominent poet and nationalist; his father a successful ear and eye surgeon and noted philanthropist, knighted in 1864. Oscar had an older brother named William and a younger sister, Isola. After his initial years of schooling at home, in 1871 he entered Trinity College, Dublin, then went on to study the classics at Magdalen College, Oxford, England from 1874-1878. It was here that he came under the influence of writer and critic Walter Pater (1839-1894) and helped found the Aesthetic Movement, "art for art's sake". Wilde excelled in his studies, winning many prizes and awards including Oxford's Newdigate Prize for his poem "Ravenna" (1878).

After school Wilde settled in London and continued to write poetry; his first collection simply titled *Poems* was published in 1881. That same year he set off on a long tour of America and Canada to deliver lectures on aestheticism. He arrived back in Europe in 1883 and while not further lecturing lived in Paris, France. In 1884 Wilde married Constance Mary Lloyd (1858-1898) with whom he would have two sons; Cyril (1885-1915), who was killed during World War I, and Vyvyan (1886-1976), who would become an author, penning his memoir *Son of Oscar Wilde* (1954) and publishing *Oscar Wilde: A Pictorial Biography* in 1960. The Wildes settled in Chelsea, London where Oscar continued to write and work for such magazines as the *Pall Mall Gazette* and became editor of *Woman's World* in 1887.
In 1891 Wilde met English poet Lord Alfred Douglas "Bosie" (1870-1945), son of John Douglas, 9th Marquess of Queensberry (1844-1900). It was the beginning of a tumultuous relationship that would cause many problems for Oscar and eventually lead to his downfall. Alfred had a tempestuous relationship with his father which did not help matters. He disapproved of his son's lifestyle and when he learned of his openly living with Wilde, he set out to defame Wilde. For the opening performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest* in 1895 at St. James's Theatre in London the Marquess planned to publicly expose and humiliate Wilde. Oscar took legal steps to protect himself against the 'brute' but he ultimately won a case whereby Wilde was charged with "gross indecency" for homosexual acts. The outcome of the sensational trial was a sentence of two years hard labour which Wilde served most of at the Reading Gaol outside of London. After Wilde was imprisoned Constance had her and her sons' last names changed to Holland. Now prisoner C. 3.3, Wilde turned to his pen and wrote many essays, poems, and letters including one to Alfred, "De Profundis" (a heavily edited version was first published in 1905; the complete version in 1962). After his release from prison in May of 1897, Wilde wrote "Ballad of Reading Gaol" (1898) about the injustice of the death penalty and the hanging of Charles Thomas Wooldridge.

Adopting the name Sebastian Melmoth, Wilde went to Paris, penniless, and is said to have reunited with his friend and lover of many years, Canadian journalist Robert Baldwin "Robbie" Ross (1869-1918), who was also executor of Wilde's estate. He took up residence in the Hôtel d'Alsace on rue des Beaux-Arts. On his deathbed, Ross by his side, Wilde was baptised into the Roman Catholic Church and received Extreme Unction. Oscar Wilde died of meningitis on 30 November 1900. He now rests in Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris; Ross' ashes were added to the angel-adorned tomb in 1950 (Merriman, 2008).
Oscar Wilde’s Short Story “The Nightingale and the Rose”

"She said that she would dance with me if I brought her red roses," cried the young Student; "but in all my garden there is no red rose."

From her nest in the holm-oak tree the Nightingale heard him, and she looked out through the leaves, and wondered.

"No red rose in all my garden!" he cried, and his beautiful eyes filled with tears. "Ah, on what little things does happiness depend! I have read all that the wise men have written, and all the secrets of philosophy are mine, yet for want of a red rose is my life made wretched."

"Here at last is a true lover," said the Nightingale. "Night after night have I sung of him, though I knew him not: night after night have I told his story to the stars, and now I see him. His hair is dark as the hyacinth-blossom, and his lips are red as the rose of his desire; but passion has made his face like pale ivory, and sorrow has set her seal upon his brow."

"The Prince gives a ball to-morrow night," murmured the young Student, "and my love will be of the company. If I bring her a red rose she will dance with me till dawn. If I bring her a red rose, I shall hold her in my arms, and she will lean her head upon my shoulder, and her hand will be clasped in mine. But there is no red rose in my garden, so I shall sit lonely, and she will pass me by. She will have no heed of me, and my heart will break."

"Here indeed is the true lover," said the Nightingale. "What I sing of, he suffers - what is joy to me, to him is pain. Surely Love is a wonderful thing. It is more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals. Pearls and pomegranates cannot buy it, nor is it set forth in the marketplace. It may not be purchased of the merchants, nor can it be weighed out in the balance for gold."

"The musicians will sit in their gallery," said the young Student, "and play upon their stringed instruments, and my love will dance to the sound of the harp and the violin. She will dance so lightly that her feet will not touch the floor, and the courtiers in their gay dresses will throng round her. But with me she will not dance, for I have no red rose to give her"; and he flung himself down on the grass, and buried his face in his hands, and wept.

"Why is he weeping?" asked a little Green Lizard, as he ran past him with his tail in the air.

"Why, indeed?" said a Butterfly, who was fluttering about after a sunbeam.

"Why, indeed?" whispered a Daisy to his neighbour, in a soft, low voice.
"He is weeping for a red rose," said the Nightingale.

"For a red rose?" they cried; "how very ridiculous!" and the little Lizard, who was something of a cynic, laughed outright.

But the Nightingale understood the secret of the Student's sorrow, and she sat silent in the oak-tree, and thought about the mystery of Love.

Suddenly she spread her brown wings for flight, and soared into the air. She passed through the grove like a shadow, and like a shadow she sailed across the garden.

In the centre of the grass-plot was standing a beautiful Rose-tree, and when she saw it she flew over to it, and lit upon a spray.

"Give me a red rose," she cried, "and I will sing you my sweetest song."

But the Tree shook its head.

"My roses are white," it answered; "as white as the foam of the sea, and whiter than the snow upon the mountain. But go to my brother who grows round the old sun-dial, and perhaps he will give you what you want."

So the Nightingale flew over to the Rose-tree that was growing round the old sundial.

"Give me a red rose," she cried, "and I will sing you my sweetest song."

But the Tree shook its head.

"My roses are yellow," it answered; "as yellow as the hair of the mermaid who sits upon an amber throne, and yellower than the daffodil that blooms in the meadow before the mower comes with his scythe. But go to my brother who grows beneath the Student's window, and perhaps he will give you what you want."

So the Nightingale flew over to the Rose-tree that was growing beneath the Student's window.

"Give me a red rose," she cried, "and I will sing you my sweetest song."

But the Tree shook its head.

"My roses are red," it answered, "as red as the feet of the dove, and redder than the great fans of coral that wave and wave in the ocean-cavern. But the winter has chilled my veins, and the frost has nipped my buds, and the storm has broken my branches, and I shall have no roses at all this year."
"One red rose is all I want," cried the Nightingale, "only one red rose! Is there no way by which I can get it?"

"There is away," answered the Tree; "but it is so terrible that I dare not tell it to you."

"Tell it to me," said the Nightingale, "I am not afraid."

"If you want a red rose," said the Tree, "you must build it out of music by moonlight, and stain it with your own heart's-blood. You must sing to me with your breast against a thorn. All night long you must sing to me, and the thorn must pierce your heart, and your life-blood must flow into my veins, and become mine."

"Death is a great price to pay for a red rose," cried the Nightingale, "and Life is very dear to all. It is pleasant to sit in the green wood, and to watch the Sun in his chariot of gold, and the Moon in her chariot of pearl. Sweet is the scent of the hawthorn, and sweet are the bluebells that hide in the valley, and the heather that blows on the hill. Yet Love is better than Life, and what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a man?"

So she spread her brown wings for flight, and soared into the air. She swept over the garden like a shadow, and like a shadow she sailed through the grove.

The young Student was still lying on the grass, where she had left him, and the tears were not yet dry in his beautiful eyes.

"Be happy," cried the Nightingale, "be happy; you shall have your red rose. I will build it out of music by moonlight, and stain it with my own heart's-blood. All that I ask of you in return is that you will be a true lover, for Love is wiser than Philosophy, though she is wise, and mightier than Power, though he is mighty. Flame-coloured are his wings, and coloured like flame is his body. His lips are sweet as honey, and his breath is like frankincense."

The Student looked up from the grass, and listened, but he could not understand what the Nightingale was saying to him, for he only knew the things that are written down in books.

But the Oak-tree understood, and felt sad, for he was very fond of the little Nightingale who had built her nest in his branches.

"Sing me one last song," he whispered; "I shall feel very lonely when you are gone."

So the Nightingale sang to the Oak-tree, and her voice was like water bubbling from a silver jar.
When she had finished her song the Student got up, and pulled a note-book and a lead-pencil out of his pocket.

"She has form," he said to himself, as he walked away through the grove - "that cannot be denied to her; but has she got feeling? I am afraid not. In fact, she is like most artists; she is all style, without any sincerity. She would not sacrifice herself for others. She thinks merely of music, and everybody knows that the arts are selfish. Still, it must be admitted that she has some beautiful notes in her voice. What a pity it is that they do not mean anything, or do any practical good." And he went into his room, and lay down on his little pallet-bed, and began to think of his love; and, after a time, he fell asleep.

And when the Moon shone in the heavens the Nightingale flew to the Rose-tree, and set her breast against the thorn. All night long she sang with her breast against the thorn, and the cold crystal Moon leaned down and listened. All night long she sang, and the thorn went deeper and deeper into her breast, and her life-blood ebbed away from her.

She sang first of the birth of love in the heart of a boy and a girl. And on the topmost spray of the Rose-tree there blossomed a marvellous rose, petal following petal, as song followed song. Pale was it, at first, as the mist that hangs over the river - pale as the feet of the morning, and silver as the wings of the dawn. As the shadow of a rose in a mirror of silver, as the shadow of a rose in a water-pool, so was the rose that blossomed on the topmost spray of the Tree.

But the Tree cried to the Nightingale to press closer against the thorn. "Press closer, little Nightingale," cried the Tree, "or the Day will come before the rose is finished."

So the Nightingale pressed closer against the thorn, and louder and louder grew her song, for she sang of the birth of passion in the soul of a man and a maid.

And a delicate flush of pink came into the leaves of the rose, like the flush in the face of the bridgroom when he kisses the lips of the bride. But the thorn had not yet reached her heart, so the rose's heart remained white, for only a Nightingale's heart's-blood can crimson the heart of a rose.

And the Tree cried to the Nightingale to press closer against the thorn. "Press closer, little Nightingale," cried the Tree, "or the Day will come before the rose is finished."

So the Nightingale pressed closer against the thorn, and the thorn touched her heart, and a fierce pang of pain shot through her. Bitter, bitter was the pain, and wilder and wilder grew her song, for she sang of the Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb.
And the marvellous rose became crimson, like the rose of the eastern sky. Crimson was the girdle of petals, and crimson as a ruby was the heart.

But the Nightingale's voice grew fainter, and her little wings began to beat, and a film came over her eyes. Fainter and fainter grew her song, and she felt something choking her in her throat.

Then she gave one last burst of music. The white Moon heard it, and she forgot the dawn, and lingered on in the sky. The red rose heard it, and it trembled all over with ecstasy, and opened its petals to the cold morning air. Echo bore it to her purple cavern in the hills, and woke the sleeping shepherds from their dreams. It floated through the reeds of the river, and they carried its message to the sea.

"Look, look!" cried the Tree, "the rose is finished now"; but the Nightingale made no answer, for she was lying dead in the long grass, with the thorn in her heart.

And at noon the Student opened his window and looked out.

"Why, what a wonderful piece of luck!" he cried; "here is a red rose! I have never seen any rose like it in all my life. It is so beautiful that I am sure it has a long Latin name"; and he leaned down and plucked it.

Then he put on his hat, and ran up to the Professor's house with the rose in his hand.

The daughter of the Professor was sitting in the doorway winding blue silk on a reel, and her little dog was lying at her feet.

"You said that you would dance with me if I brought you a red rose," cried the Student. "Here is the reddest rose in all the world. You will wear it to-night next your heart, and as we dance together it will tell you how I love you."

But the girl frowned.

"I am afraid it will not go with my dress," she answered; "and, besides, the Chamberlain's nephew has sent me some real jewels, and everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers."

"Well, upon my word, you are very ungrateful," said the Student angrily; and he threw the rose into the street, where it fell into the gutter, and a cart-wheel went over it.

"Ungrateful!" said the girl. "I tell you what, you are very rude; and, after all, who are you? Only a Student. Why, I don't believe you have even got silver buckles to your shoes as the Chamberlain's nephew has"; and she got up from her chair and went into the house.