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AFORISMI GENIALI

William Shakespeare

HISTORY OF ENGLAND AND LITERARY NOTES FROM THE ORIGIN TO CROMWELL, FROM 2000 B.C. to 1674 A.D.

The first inhabitants of Britain were the Iberians, they had settled in the country between 3000 and 2000 B.C. About 2000 B.C. a new race of Alpine stock, coming from the Low Countries reached Britain. They blended with the Iberians and achieved a good standard of civilization, they are known as the Beaker Folk.

Among the first waves of Celtic tribes that invaded Britain there were the Gaels, who were followed by the Brythons in 500 B.C. and by the Belgae in 100 B.C. They blended peacefully with the Iberians and imposed them their tribal organization.

Julius Caesar's expeditions to Britain in 55 and 54 B.C. were not due to a definite plan of conquest but to the exigency of preventing the Celts interference in Gaul, as they used to help and encourage the Gaulish rebels. Once obtained the formal promise of no further intervention in Gaul, Julius Caesar considered his mission ended and left the country.

During the Roman rule, the outward aspect of Britain changed remarkably: forests were opened up, new towns and networks of roads were built. In spite of this, Britain was never completely romanized, only the upper classes followed Roman patterns, the rest of the population was slightly influenced and their tribal organization was never seriously interfered with.

The conquest of the country was brought to a conclusion in 613, from this time onwards the Anglo-Saxons tried to impose the so called "Heptarchy". Britain was divided into seven kingdoms: Essex, Wessex, Sussex, Kent, East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria. Every kingdom was ruled by a king elected by the Witan, a council composed of the dignitaries of the State and the Church. The national unity was preserved by the institution of a "bretwalda" that acted as overlord over the kingdoms and its kings.

King Alfred of Wessex, the greatest king of the period, succeeded in checking the Danish advance (878) and to confine them to the Danelow. But in the tenth century, during the reign of Ethelred, new bands, of Danes began to raid the country, king Ethelred paid them the "Danegeld" to keep them off, but this did not save the country from Sweyn's invasion in 994.

The "scops" as the Anglo-Saxon poets were called, composed their verses exalting heroic deeds and recited them as entertainment. Their poems were handed down orally, and no written original has reached us.

Anglo-Saxon poetry together with the celebration of bravery and heroism expressed more intimate moods such as meditations on human life, pervaded with the sense of melancholy caused by the northern gloomy landscape and the struggle against a primitive and dangerous existence. This gave their poetry a touch of sadness and pessimism.

The change invested the aims and the contents of poetry, while the poetical metre and the vocabulary remained the same. The touch of melancholy and pessimism persisted, the most warlike themes and pagan elements were replaced by religious subjects and the new aim of poetry was to instruct people by offering them edifying examples.

Prose developed during the reign of king Alfred (849-899), who did much to improve the education of his people. From Alfred's time also dates the start of the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" (890), the most representative prose-work of the time, consisting in a chronological report of the events in England from the Christian era, to the middle of the twelfth century.

The Normans came originally from Scandinavia. Like the Danish, they belonged to the stock of Scandinavian people. A part of this people had settled in France, in the region which after them was called Normandy, and had rapidly assimilated French language and civilization.

William of Normandy landed in Britain, with his army, to claim his right to the throne, for King Edward the Confessor, his distant cousin had promised him to recognize him as his lawful successor. But the Witan, ignoring Edward's promise had proclaimed king Harold of Wessex.

The Norman conquest put an end to a long series of invasions and laid the bases for a new and stable national unity. The Normans also introduced new laws and gave England the political asset which favoured the growth of Feudalism.

The main aim of William's successors was to create a steady central power to prevent every kind of opposition from the Barons and the Church. It led to the improvement of the State machinery to assure order and efficiency all over the country. Henry II, the most capable of William's successor established the "Curia Regis" and the Council and carried on financial and judicial reforms.

Richard's need of money to equip his army induced him to extend the selling of Charter to towns. This favoured the process of "commutation" already in act, which consisted in replacing the old duties in kind and services with the payment in money. The towns, through the payment of a sum of money freed themselves from their feudal obligations.

John Lackland, who in 1199 had succeeded his brother Richard, committed every sort of abuses in the first years of his reign with the result of the complete isolation of the Crown. Involved in a dispute with Pop Innocent III he was excommunicated and the kings of France and Scotland, persuaded by the Pope made war on him. When he was defeated at Bouvines (1214), the Barons seized the opportunity to reduce the king's powers and compelled him to accept the principles embodied in the "Magna Charta Libertatum" (1215).

Henry III did not observe the provisions of the "Magna Charta" and the barons revolted against him. Simone de Montfort, the leader of the barons defeated the king at Lewes in 1264. In the next year, Simon de Montfort summoned the first Parliament. Besides the normal members of the Council it included representatives of the shires cities and boroughs.

The Norman invasion caused a split in the linguistic unity of the country. The Norman ruling class imposed French as the official language, while Anglo-Saxon remained confined to the illiterate people. Latin kept its role as the language of the Church and the scholars. "Old English", influenced by French, underwent a slow and gradual change.

The Norman invasion caused a series of changes and upheavals which did not favour literary activity. Moreover the split in the linguistic unity deprived literature of an adequate means of expression. For a while no valuable and significative work was produced, but a new literature emerged from this period of transition, in which Anglo-Saxon themes were gradually replaced by French models.

It was Layamon's "Brut" to introduce the Arthurian legend in English literature. The Celtic

legends had been spread in Europe by Geoffrey of Monmouth in 1137 in his "Historia Regum Britanniae". The work was later translated into French by the Norman poet Wace and entitled "Le Roman de Brut". This poem inspired Layamon who wrote his "Brut" in alliterative lines.

The Hundred Years' War, unlike the previous wars in Wales and Scotland, did not aim at the conquest of new territories. It was caused by a complex conflict of interests which reflected the new trends of the time. The commercial expansion had made Flanders and Gascony increasingly important in the national trade. The claim of Edward III to the throne of France was only a pretext to conceal the real object of keeping Flanders and Gascony under a unified control.

The Black Death reduced the number of labourers considerably and brought about the total disorganization of agriculture. The surviving labourers demanded and obtained higher wages.

The Lollard Heresy attacked not only the abuses and corruption of the Church, but went even further by spreading ideas which undermined the basic principles on which authority rested. As followers of Wyclif's theories, the Lollards believed that every man could judge on religion and on the righteousness of authority after his own conscience, and corrupted priests and wicked kings could not exert any power over the people.

The immediate cause of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 was the imposition of the poll tax. But the peasants also suffered from the oppressive measures due to the landlords' attempts to recover the privileges lost in the period of the Black Death, and they were influenced by the preaching of the Lollards.

Richard II's reign was marked by the inevitable conflicts between the middle class and the nobles. The king was able to exploit their rivalries and from 1389 onwards he exerted an almost absolute power. But his refusal to resume the war against France broke definitively the unreliable system of alliance on which his power had rested. The merchants and the nobles who were more interested in the war, deprived the king of their support. When Henry Bolingbroke landed in England to claim his forfeited estate, Richard II lost the rest of his supporters and was deposed by Parliament in 1399.

William Langland, in his work "Piers Plowman", did not draw his inspiration from the idealized world of romance, but he expressed reality. The main character, Piers, is not a hero, but a common man confronted with the most trivial problems of existence. His humble social condition makes him much more exposed to injustice and corruption. His only force rests on his religious faith and in the belief that honest and good-willing men, like him, will change the situation. The poem, in alliterative verses, contains a series of allegorical visions, though the form is not original, the poem expresses a new genuine content reflecting other aspects of the society.

In spite of his evident debt to France, the poems that Chaucer wrote during the so-called French period, show an astonishing originality, both in form and in contents. He went beyond a mere imitation, he penetrated deeper into the spirit of the French culture and expressed the beauties of French poetry in a new original language.

Chaucer not only expressed the English culture, but the whole European culture. His travels abroad favoured his contacts with the most relevant European movements and he drew the best from every movement. Moreover the poet revealed a deep knowledge of human nature and he reached in his works values of universal significance.

Chaucer perfected his craft admirably and from foreign influences he drew a new original style to give a proper form and expression to the English thought.

"The Travels of Sir John Mandeville" by Jean de Bourgogne is an interesting report of an imaginary travel, containing lively pictures of Asia and Africa. But it was not the only

relevant prose-work of the time John Wyclif translated the New Testament and part of the Old Testament. He abandoned Latin in favour of English and his work became soon popular and exerted a widespread influence on the intellectual life.

In the last phase of the Hundred Years' War England won a brilliant victory at Agincourt in 1415. The victory enabled Henry V to secure by the Treaty of Troyes the recognition of his claims to the throne of France.

The War of the Roses broke out in 1455 for a dynastic question between the followers of the Lancastrian line and the Yorkists. The most backward feudal nobility supported the House of Lancaster, while the progressive Southern countries supported the House of York. The war was so called, after the emblems of the two rival houses; the red rose for the Lancastrians and the white rose for the Yorkists.

The War of the Roses came to an end in 1485. Henry Tudor, who descended from the Lancaster House, defeated Richard III in the battle of Bosworth Field, and became king as Henry VII. Henry's marriage to Elizabeth of York, Edward IV's daughter, united the Yorkist and Lancastrian claims and pacified the country.

At the beginning of his reign, Henry VII was confronted with the disorders and upheavals following the civil war and the persistent opposition of the nobles. But he found a compensating advantage in the support of the arising middle class, the progressive forces of the country and this enabled him to adopt a series of measures to reduce the power of nobles and to lay the basis of a steady monarchy.

The period is called the "Barren Age", because for about a century and half no outstanding literary work was produced and Chaucer's advent stands up as an astonishing and isolated phenomenon. A cause of this can be seen in the social and political disturbances of the time, rebellions and Civil wars did not favour the growth of literature. The Renaissance whose effects were spreading all over Europe had not yet affected England. But the Barren Age can also be considered as a period of transition containing the germs of future developments.

A poet that cannot be considered as an imitator of Chaucer, is John Skelton. He wrote satirical poems and attacked the corruption of the Court and the clergy. In all his works, Skelton showed an eccentric and original personality and he cannot be classified as a Chaucerian, but as a peculiar and characteristic figure in medieval literature.

Alexander Barclay (1475-1552) in his work the "Eclogues" introduced the Pastoral in English literature.

"Le Mort d'Arthur" by Sir Thomas Malory, a collection of tales about the Arthurian legend is not considered as the most important prose work of the English literature; it can be considered as a very remarkable prose-work of the 15th century. It was also one of the first books printed by William Caxton.

The ballads were anonymous narrative songs, handed down orally from generation to generation. They flourished alongside learned poetry and represented a popular and primitive form of art.

The origins of the English Medieval Drama rests on Religion. The first specimens which date back to the 14th century, grew out from the liturgy of the Church services. At the beginning drama was performed inside the Churches on particular religious festivities and monks themselves were responsible of the organization. Later drama moved to market-squares and underwent further developments.

Henry VIII continued the policy of his predecessor. Like his father, he aimed at the

establishment of a steady monarchy and adopted a series of measures to improve the administrative system and to concentrate the power in his hands. Henry VIII, too, relied on the support of the middle class to check opposition and to make little use of Parliament.

Besides the Pope's refusal, other factors contributed to make the Reformation well accepted in England, though it was not without opposition. The Church of Rome had become increasingly unpopular: the English people, heavily taxed for centuries by the agents of the Papacy, resented that a large part of the national wealth was sent to Rome and that a clergy depending upon the Pope's authority could exert their influence on English questions.

Edward VI's reign was too short, the king had no time to exert a real power. His uncle, the Duke of Somerset, appointed "Protector of the Realm" governed the country during his minority. In this period the Prayer Book was issued and the Reformation was pushed towards Protestantism.

As soon as she became queen of England, Mary restored Catholicism and reconciled with Rome. Led only by her religious faith, she did not realize the dangerous effects that a sudden reverse of policy could produce on the country. The revival of the old laws for the burning of heretics gave rise to a series of ill directed persecutions. Prominent Protestants such as Latimer, Archbishop Cranmer and a great number of obscure victims lost their lives. This gained the Queen the nickname of "Bloody Mary".

Above all the Renaissance exalted the free activity of mind as a reaction against the strict boundaries imposed by the medieval beliefs. A free activity of mind and a new conception of man, contemplating both the spiritual and the active sides of life, promoted a wider and deeper investigation in the scientific, philosophic and political fields. In literature the clear and harmonious Classical world was regarded as the most suitable source of inspiration.

In comparison with other European countries, the Renaissance developed later in England. The spreading of the new ideals was delayed by the contrasting trends set up by the Reformation.

Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, undertook the task of adapting Italian models to English poetry. Wyatt introduced the Petrarchan sonnet in England and gave it an English form, a form which was revised-and perfected by Surrey.

Erasmus, born at Rotterdam, was the most famous humanist of the time. In his work "Encomium Moriae" he satirized the vices and the shortcomings of the contemporary society.

More's "Utopia" marks a kind of society to which all men aspire, where the natural goodness and wisdom of men triumph over the evils that spoil society. The principles on which it is based are those of an elementary Communism. But political concepts and implications are replaced by an appeal to good sense and best human qualities. The work expressed the spirit of the Renaissance and exerted a wide influence.

English prose received a new impulse from the translation of the Bible started by Williams Tyndale and completed by Miles Coverdale

The greatest event of Elizabeth's reign was the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. There were various reasons of friction between England and Spain; the different religion and their rivalry in trade expansion. After years of tension between the two nations the war became inevitable. Philip II armed a powerful fleet; the "Invincible Armada". The fleet sailed from Cadiz in July 1588 to invade England. The battle in the Channel was won by the English whose ships were lighter and faster than the Spanish galleons. A storm helped the English to disperse the Spanish fleet.

In the sixteenth century prices were rising throughout Europe and the Crown's revenues had become insufficient for the complex organization of the State. This was the primary cause of the king's difficulties in balancing his budget, but this cause was not generally understood and, combined with James's extravagances and the bad influence of his Court, made the responsibility entirely attributed to his misgovernment.

Spenser was defined by his contemporaries as "the new poet of the English Renaissance". His merit was to give a new form and new contents to the English poetry and to rise it from the languor in which it had fallen. Spenser drew his inspiration from the past and the best contemporary models, but he went beyond imitation, he gave an admirable unity to the different influences operating in the English poetry and expressed them in an excellent original style.

Elizabethan Drama was truly national and popular in character not subjected to foreign fashion and influences. It was also a point of contact between humanistic culture and popular tastes.

Like Thomas Kyd, Marlowe may be considered as a pioneer. He drew from the Classical Senecan models and from the old English tradition of the Morality Plays. His fantasy and his dramatic talent produced the great original characters involved in extraordinary actions that fascinated the Elizabethan audience, Marlowe also endowed the blank verse with a new artistic value.

Shakespeare cannot be regarded as a reformer of the English theatre, as he never attempted to reform it, but he conformed to the accepted tastes.

Shakespeare represented life in an empiric way, taking into account only real events. His characters justify in themselves the complexity of their motivations; and the circumstances depicted possess a philosophy of their own, without any claim to a superior or abstract philosophy.

In creating his characters Jonson followed the medieval theory of the fluids of human body. He did not strictly follow the theory, but he was inspired by it to represent a series of amusing characters whose sound and objective vision of life is spoilt by the defects of their own temper.

The author of "The Duchess of Malfi" (1614) is John Webster

Donne's poetical production reflects the remarkable change affecting Elizabethan poetry. He broke with the conventions of the past and created a new poetry by intermingling feeling with wit in a new connection between sense and spirit and expressing a wider range of experience. He also created a new poetical style resembling spoken language.

Parliament put forward the "The petition of Rights" in 1628 in order to limit the royal prerogatives and to put an end to the most frequent abuses, such as the imposition of taxes without parliamentary consent and the exercise of justice outside the limits of the "Common Laws". It, also demanded the abolition of the army in time of peace.

The Great Remonstrance was issued by the House of Commons, that had become more powerful than the House of Lords, during the session of the Parliament called "the long Parliament". The great Remonstrance condemned the King's tyranny and asked for a radical reform of the Church. Backed by the most intransigent Puritans it divided the members of Parliament that proved to be far from unanimous opinions on religious questions.

The followers of Parliament represented the most progressive forces of the country, mostly concentrated in the south-eastern counties. They included the city of London and the

population of the largest towns and part of the country gentry.

Once defeated the king, parliamentary forces were confronted with the problem of finding a way to pacify the country and how to restore Charles to the throne under proper conditions to prevent him from exerting any real power. But Charles's stubborn refusal to submit to any condition limiting his royal prerogatives, and his continuous intrigues, made the situation precipitate at the end, and he was condemned to death.

After Charles's death England was proclaimed a Commonwealth or Republic, governed according to a written Constitution provided by the "Agreement of the People".

The triumph of Puritanism caused the decline of the most frivolous and wordly themes of the Elizabethan age. A new stern vision of life impressed a deeper intellectual and critical content on the literary production.

The Metaphysical poets stood aloof from the disorders and the disturbances of the Civil War and devoted themselves to the investigation of the greatest problems confronting man. They experienced a spiritual and poetical crisis very similar to that of Donne and followed his example. Their poetry was characterized by a fusion of thought and feeling.

Milton drew his inspiration from the resources of European literary tradition, he followed medieval and Renaissance patterns, he employed both classical and biblical themes and used mythology to serve a Christian purpose.

Milton took an active share to the political events of his time, not only did he advocate the Puritan cause, but he made his voice heard in the greatest question of the time. All Milton public activities ended with the advent of the Restoration (1660), then he retired to private life and reverted to poetry. In this period he composed his best poetical works.

The author of "Religio Medici" is Thomas Browne, a doctor of medicine. He exposed in his work his opinions concerning his medical profession and his religious faith.

HISTORY OF ENGLAND AND LITERARY NOTES FROM CARL II (1660) TO THE VICTORIAN AGE (1833)

The Crown and the Church were restored in the possession of their lands, and as a consequence the landowners freed themselves from the last remainder of feudal dues. It is in this respect, that the Restoration may be considered rather as a completion of the English Revolution.

James II, did not show any great political skill. Instead of adopting a cautious policy, he favoured the Catholics openly and appointed them to the most important offices. It was this defiant conduct that culminated in the " Declaration of Indulgence" to increase dissensions and to cause the Glorious or Bloodless Revolution.

Th "Bill of Rights" of 1689, was a turning point in the history of England. It ratified the joint accession of William and Mary to the throne of England. It marked the end of the "Divine Right of Kings" and based the principle of sovereignty on the agreement of the people.

The Restoration brought about a change in the customs and ways of thinking. The King and his courtiers brought with them new fashions from their French exile. The flourishing French literature provided, new models, to English authors. This combined with the decline of both the ideals of the Renaissance and the stern Puritan belief, gave start to a new literature.

Though a gifted and versatile artist, who attempted various literary genres, Dryden never produced a work which expressed the utmost of his possibilities or of everlasting significance. His misfortune was to be too closely bound to his period and to circumstances which have lost interest and relevance with the passing of the time.

It is Butler's "Hudibras" which is somewhat reminiscent of "Don Quixote" by Cervantes. In this work the author ridicules the Puritan Religious fanaticism and hypocrisy. The technique is very similar to that used by Cervantes in ridiculing the outworn institution of chivalry.

The "Comedy of Manners" reflects the most frivolous and cynical aspects of the time. It didn't aim at instructing people, its purpose was to amuse a limited section of the public: the courtiers and a group of pleasure-seekers. The rest of the population was still influenced by the stern Puritan conceptions, and disdained this genre and deserted the theatres.

Alongside with the Comedy of Manners, a new genre, the heroic play, inspired to French models, developed. Also the traditional tragedy continued to be represented, but no outstanding work was produced in the time.

Bunyan "The Pilgrims Progress" deals with the journey of the Christian pilgrim, from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. This journey symbolizes human life and the hard and constant struggle of every true Christian to reach salvation.

The author of "Essay Concerning Human Understanding" is John Locke, the most representative philosopher of the time. The work is a study on the nature of human mind, and its faculties of gaining knowledge from the outward world.

England intervened in the War of the Spanish Succession in order to prevent the union of the two monarchies of Spain and France which would have represented a threat to the European stability.

Robert Walpole who exerted a greater power than his predecessors, adopted a financial policy in line with the trends of the time. In order to promote the expansion of trade, he tried as far as possible to remove taxes from the merchants and manufacturers leaving them on goods consumed by the masses and on landowners. Walpole also pursued a peaceful foreign policy in avoiding wars, as he regarded them dangerous to the development of English trade.

During George II's reign, Robert Walpole was chief minister from 1721 to 1742. He was followed by another great and competent chief minister, William Pitt.

Among the wars of the 18th century, the War of the Spanish Succession (1702) and the Seven Years' War (1756) proved the most successful because they gained England new colonial possessions. In the War of the Spanish Succession, England gained Gibraltar and Minorca in Europe, and Nova Scotia and the Hudson Bay Territory in America. In the Seven Years' war England obtained Canada and the control of India.

The Age of Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason was characterized by a new rational spirit which affected the political and social fields as well as the philosophical and literary fields. The Movement confined to literature was defined as the Age of Classicism. The most relevant feature was the confidence in reason, and an objective and detached, view of life replaced the appeal to imagination and feelings. The model that inspired writers was the harmonious and well ordered classical world.

The Age of Classicism extends approximately from 1702 to 1770. The first phase which lasted till about the years 1740-1745 is usually called the Augustan Age. The second phase,

from 1740-45 to 1770, was in the whole very similar in forms and contents to the previous one; a difference lies in the loss of vigour and confidence in the power of reason and the appearance of the first elements in direction of the Pre-Romantic Movement.

Pope was the most representative poet of the Age. He devoted himself to the task of perfecting the English poetical form. His greatest merit was to give a more refined expression to the Augustan ideas.

Pope's famous work "The Rape of the Lock" was modelled both on the mock-heroic Italian poem "La Secchia Rapita", by Tassoni, and on the French work "Le Lutrin" by Boileau. Pope followed the same technique of the two foreign authors. He reached a great effect using the high style of the great epic to describe futile and trivial matters.

Pope represented his age as a stable and a well ordered Society, though not without the vices and defects that he criticized in his works. Above all he ridiculed the vanities and the foibles of the contemporary society. But the poet's aim rather than instruct his readers was to offer them a rare example of beauty and formal perfection.

Swift as a convinced moralist used irony to criticize human vices and weaknesses. But very seldom, and only in some works of his youth we can find a sense of gaiety. As life disappointed him, he lost every confidence in the good qualities of men and he turned in a bitter and severe critic.

The Tatler and The Spectator attracted a large public, because they suited the tastes and the needs of the middle classes that had become much more interested in matters of politics and literature, and above all they desired to be informed about the relevant events and figures of the time.

The same cause which favoured the rise of journalism also contributed to the development of the novel. The great political changes and social advancements had made the middle classes much more aware of their rights and place in society. So they felt the need to improve their standard of education and to refine their manners. The novel appeared to them as the most suitable genre as it dealt with situations resembling everyday life and was written in a simple language.

The writer who deserved the title of "Father of the English Novel" was Daniel Defoe. He produced the first valuable examples of fiction and gave origin to a tradition which was followed by other writers.

Samuel Richardson enriched the English novel with a new dimension. He introduced the introspective and psychological analysis by insisting in the description of his characters' moods.

Though his technique was not a subtle or refined one, he set an example which was later resumed and improved.

The difference between Laurence Sterne and his contemporary novelists lies on the fact that he stood completely apart. He broke completely with the traditional narrative structure in his novels there are no plots, the episodes are connected together by a subtle link of feeling or thought.

Oliver Goldsmith did not introduce the seafaring life and the picaresque adventure in the English fiction. The former was introduced by Tobias Smollet and the latter by Henry Fielding. Oliver Goldsmith contributed to fiction with only one novel: "The Vicar of Wakefield" in which he introduced the new theme of domestic life.

The other literary forms which developed alongside with the essay and the novel in the Age of Classicism, were criticism and biography. One of the most relevant works in literary criticism was the "Lives of the Poets" by Samuel Johnson and in biography the

most outstanding figure was James Boswell.

The most famous literary critic of the time was Samuel Johnson. He began his literary career as a journalist then he devoted himself to criticism.

The decline of the "Comedy of Manners" was in the largest part due to the continuous attacks on the licentiousness of the theatre. The public of the "Comedy of Manners" had remained confined to courtiers and a group of libertines. Theatrical performances had never attracted the widest section of the population, who influenced by Puritan severe rule, despised them for their frivolity. The loss of the favour of the Court, during the reigns of Queen Anne and the Hanoverian Kings, who were not interested in theatrical performances, made its decline inevitable.

The "Sentimental Comedy" did not produce any valuable work and soon degenerated into excess of sentimentalism. A reaction came in 1772 from Oliver Goldsmith who in his "Essay on the Theatre or, a Comparison Between Laughing and Sentimental Comedy" complained that humour had departed from the stage.

The Wars of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years' War had exhausted the English finance. The Government decided to tax the colonies, and the Stamp Act provoked the strong opposition of the American colonies, which till then had enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy. The conflict between the two opposite sides lasted about ten years before the breaking out of the war in 1775.

The Congress of the thirteen American colonies issued the Declaration of Independence on July 4th, 1776 and the American nation was officially born. The "Boston Tea-Party" took place in 1773 in the course of the conflict between the colonies and the mother country. The Bostonians refused to pay the duty imposed by the English Government and as a protest they drew a cargo of tea into the harbour.

The American colonies won at Saratoga and this victory brought France and Spain and later Holland to support the American colonies against England.

With the disintegration of the ideals of the Enlightenment, the confidence in the power of reason declined and was gradually replaced by Imagination. The main trend of Pre-Romanticism was to persist and to develop later in the Romantic movement. Alongside with the cult of imagination other aspects characterized the pre-romantic period: the return to Nature, the exaltation of primitive life, the cult of sensibility and melancholy, a deep interest in the strange, exotic, and the sublime and in a remote and barbarous past.

Thomas Gray is generally regarded as the most representative figure of the "Graveyard School". A very learned poet, he pursued an ideal of high artistic refinement and expressed the pre-romantic themes in an admirable way. Above all he avoided all the excesses and the extravagances of the other poets of the Graveyard School, who often indulged in macabre descriptions and horrific details.

In his poem "The Task" William Cowper broke with all past traditions. The work has no formal structure and the poet deals with simple themes of everyday life previously considered unworthy of poetry. Another trend towards Romanticism is that the poet expresses his personal opinions and feelings.

The deep interest that poets and men of letters of the time showed in ancient poetry can be considered as a reaction against the effects of civilization. They thought that ancient poetry possessed primitive and genuine qualities, and they felt the exigency to recover the clear vision of life that the advent of civilization had spoilt.

The Gothic Tale reflects more than other literary genres the trends of the time, as it aimed

at stirring sensational effects. Alongside with the Gothic Tale the Sentimental Novel, based on feelings and the Novel of Manners, based on simple situations of everyday life, developed but in none of these genres we can find a true masterpiece.

Robert Burns used the Scottish dialect in his poems, but this is not the only astonishing novelty. He broke completely with conventions and expressed his personality in a way previously unknown in literature. He revealed his feelings, his secrets and the troubles and the joys of the peasant life in an usual frankness.

Blake exposed his bold and advanced ideas particularly in his prophetic works. He was against all kinds of tyranny, he attacked the institutions of the time, but above all he condemned the moral slavery imposed by the established Church limiting the natural instincts of man and spoiling his best genuine qualities.

The Industrial Revolution brought about the disappearance of domestic industry and gave rise to a huge army of unemployed composed of small farmers and artisans. Only later they were absorbed by the growing industry.

The English Glorious Revolution aimed at the establishment of a Constitutional Monarchy and preserved the old order and institutions. On the contrary the principles animating the French Revolution tended to overthrow the old order. Those who championed the cause of the French Revolution hailed it as the advent of a new era of justice and freedom.

The Treaty of Amiens of 1802 brought the war against France, began in 1793, to a conclusion. In this war England had joined other European nations in the first coalition against France.

During the reign of George IV (1820-1830), the aftermath of Napoleonic wars and the unsolved problems caused by the Industrial Revolution, which had altered the old balance existing between social classes, gave rise to a troubled period of widespread discontent and disorders. People asked for political and social reforms, for a huge section of them could not make their voice heard in Parliament. Riots took place frequently and claims of the lower classes gave origin to the Radical Party.

William IV promoted a series of important reforms which the country had long been asking for. The first was the Catholic Emancipation Act (1829) granting political equality to Catholics. It was followed by the Reform Bill (1832) by which industrial towns gained seats in Parliament. In 1833 the "Abolition of Slavery Act" was passed abolishing slavery in the British colonies. In the same year the "Factory Act" was passed, prohibiting the employment of children under nine years of age, and limiting the working day for children to forty-eight hours a week. The introduction of a system of National Education took place in 1834.

In the Romantic period, poetry was conceived not only as creative, but it acquired a high cognitive function. Poetry was the means to reach superior truths and to reveal and spread them.

The "Lyrical Ballads", jointly produced by Wordsworth and Coleridge, appeared in 1798, and this can be considered as the most important date of the English Romanticism. The preface to the "Lyrical Ballad" contains the Romantic theories and aims and is regarded as the Manifesto of the Romantic Movement.

Coleridge was not concerned with the problems or criticism of the contemporary society. He was not absorbed in the present but his field laid in the abstract and in the supernatural.

Byron, better than other Romantic poets who devoted themselves to more private philosophies, embodied the feelings of the time; he deeply felt unrest and uneasiness

caused by the decline of the ideals of the French Revolution and the oppressive reaction of the Holy Alliance. Byron's defiant and rebellious attitude against conventions and his romantic and adventurous life created a myth around his figure. He represented the anxiety, the sufferings of an entire generation and their aspiration to a better society.

In 1818, Shelley left England for Italy, and in the period he spent there he produced his best poetry. In this phase he abandoned himself to the impulse of his great motives and expressed a new magic world.

FROM THE VICTORIAN AGE (1833) UP TO THE MODERN AGE

The earlier years of the Victorian age were marked by the social conflicts and economic upheavals caused by the Industrial Revolution.

The Chartist Movement, originated in 1837, gave rise to a long series of riots and disorders which greatly alarmed the authorities. After 1848, the Movement declined because of its weakness in leadership and lack of tactics, but it paved the way to future Trade Union Organization.

The Russian aimed at extending their control over the Black Sea and invaded the Turkish Empire. England was involved in the Crimean War to prevent the Russian expansion and to preserve a balance of power in Europe.

The last years of the Victorian period are usually referred to as the Age of Imperialism. England had acquired the widest colonial empire and had become the centre of big economic interests.

During the Victorian period the novel which had flourished in the previous century, underwent further developments and became the most popular literary form.

Tennyson was the most representative poet of the Victorian age, his works reflect the greatest aspirations of the time, the sense of triumph for the results achieved in the political and economic fields, but they also reflect the contrasts and inner conflicts, due to the decline of old beliefs and the problems confronting modern man.

R. Browning spent many years in Italy, and more than be absorbed in English questions, he was attracted by the everlasting problems confronting man. He deeply investigated into the various aspects of human life and expressed the inner motivations of his characters, without being concerned with any particular historical period.

G.M. Hopkins broke with traditions and brought a touch of novelty in English poetry by adopting the "sprung rhythm", a particular poetical metre, consisting in scanning by accents, without any account of the number of the syllables.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was composed by a group of artists, who complained of the bad effects produced by the industrial civilization in destroying the natural landscape. They pursued an ideal of beauty and reacted against those aspects of industrialism, which were in contrast with their aspirations, and to them opposed the values of a more beautiful and authentic past.

Swinburne's work "Poems and Ballads" was bitterly attacked by the critics of the time, because of the boldness of the subjects and its defiant attitude against the Victorian moral standard.

The most influential writer of the past was undoubtedly Tobias Smollet; Dickens took from

him his humorous tone, the description of comic scenes and the delineation of the most bizarre and eccentric characters.

Dickens's social criticism was not based on a steady political and social vision, he was mainly moved by his personal experience and his sympathy for the weak and the poor. In the majority of his works he opposed his optimism and faith in mankind to the social injustices of the time. However, Dickens exerted a very important role; in denouncing the evils of the society he greatly contributed to awake the conscience of his readers.

Thackeray's novels do not deal with fantastic and emotional elements as he rejected the Romantic spirit which still pervaded fiction. The writer represented real scenes and his heroes are mainly anti-heroes reflecting the vices of the society in which they live.

The Brontes' works rather than reflect the influence of the Victorian writers and trends go back to the great Romantic themes as they contain fantastic elements and emphasize intimate personal feelings.

George Eliot's works do not express the social problems of the time. Unlike her contemporary writers she did not aim at revealing the evils of a social system, but in her novels, she emphasized the role that every single individual exerts in social life and the importance of duty and a responsible conduct in creating the most favourable conditions.

T.B. Macaulay was an enthusiastic supporter of the industrial development and considered the Victorian period as one of the most splendid and glorious in the English history. On the contrary, Carlyle attacked Victorian institutions and ways of life and because of his bitter criticism he was called "the censor of the age".

Arnold's theory on the function of criticism was not limited to the literary field. According to his opinion, criticism played a relevant role in the social and political life in forming the minds of the people and in guiding towards the noblest ideals.

"Imaginary Portraits", "Marius the Epicurean" and "The Picture of Dorian Gray", can be considered as the most significant works of the English Aesthetic Movement.

Wilde's comedies recreate the atmosphere of the "Comedy of Manners" because of their sparkling dialogues and witty epigrams and they also give a brilliant and humorous picture of the upper classes.

Meredith's prose style is often obscure and tortuous as he avoided simple straight-forward expressions to achieve particular effects.

The discontent of the working classes gave rise to labour organizations and Trade Unions. Among them the Social Democratic Federation (1884) and the Fabian Society played an important role and in 1900 a committee to support the election of Labour members to Parliament was created; this committee was to grow in the Labour Party in 1906.

Britain entered the First World War on August 4th 1914 after Germany's violation of Belgium neutrality.

G.B. Shaw brought important innovations in English drama, breaking with the Romantic conventions which tended to give a comfortable and idealized picture of contemporary world. He attacked the injustices and the abuses of the time and used the theatre as a means to spread new ideas, aiming at transforming society. His plays are satirical comedies, which while amusing, also make the audience aware of their problems and the distortions of the society in which they live.

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Georgian poets did not achieve valuable artistic results. Deeply rooted in the past, they never attempted to renew poetical forms and contents. Their poems express a nostalgic regret for an imaginary idealized world. Rather than to come to terms with the problems confronting, modern man, they sought escape from a disappointing reality in a return to nature and in the exercise imagination.

W.B.Yeats never dealt with the social and political questions of the time in a direct and straightforward way. In his early poems he depicted a suggestive dream-like world permeated with Celtic mysticism and inspired to Irish tales and legends. In the second phase of his literary career he devoted himself to the theatrical production and took an active share in promoting a new Irish culture, based on Ireland past and traditions. He drew most of his subjects from the Irish folklore and history, but his true aim was the search for truth. Yeats deeply investigated into the natural world, in astrology in magic and in mystic philosophies such as Platonism, Alchemism and Rosicrucianism to discover a system of ideas which could provide a valuable interpretation of human experience.

In his early poems, Eliot depicted a limited and monotonous world crowded by empty and inanimate figures, life is reduced to a repetition of actions and to formal intercourses without any sparkle of authentic feeling. The emptiness and the decadence of modern life is also represented and emphasized by the use of myth and legends.

James changed the method of presenting in the novel by shifting the centre of gravity from action and exterior circumstances to inward events. He was interested in depicting the inner life on his characters.

In following the working of the mind of his characters, Joyce gives an objective picture of man and never indulges in any kind of idealization; he is always conscious of human weakness and limits and his pessimistic view extends to society too.

Virginia Woolf was more interested in thought and in representing a subtler reality than in linguistic and stylistic innovations. Her main concern was to represent the contrast between exterior reality and inner life.

Lawrence's familiar background and childhood profoundly affected his attitude to life. He used the novel, as a means to propagate new ideas directed to change the, existing society and ways of life.

His contribution to modern fiction rather than resting on the experimentation of new techniques consists in a new kind of inspiration.

After his invasion of Czechoslovakia, Hitler broke all his promises and began to menace Poland. Britain, though unprepared to face a war, honoured the guarantee given to the country and declared war on Germany.

The first phase of the World War II was called the "phoney war" because apart from skirmishes on the Maginot Line and the fall of Poland, it did not cause excessive hardships and dramatic events on both sides. But it was only the lull before a storm, the offensive opened in the West in April 1940 and brought about immense reverses.

In December 1941, the Japanese launched an attack against the American base at Pearl Harbour, without a previous declaration of war. The unexpected event greatly alarmed the nation and the United States Government decided to enter the war.

A new poetical movement originated in the forties and was called "New Apocalypse" or "New Romanticism". It was characterized by a rediscovery of the importance of the emotions in man and in poetry, against the excessive intellectualism of poets such as Eliot and Auden and his school.

The verse of the young poets collected in the anthology "New Lines" gave origin to the Movement which reacted both against the political commitment of the poets of the thirties and the difficulty and obscurity of the poets of the "New Apocalypse". The leading figures were Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis and Thom Gunn.

Lawrence Durrell's Alexandria Quartet, consisting of four novels: Justine, Balthazar, Mountolive and Clea, deal with the same story, but the interpretation of events and characters differ from book to book. The author tries to show that no objectiveness is possible in human affairs, everything is dominated by relateness and whatever happens depends on time, place and circumstances and change as they change.

In his novel "Lord of the Flies" Golding relates the story of a group of boys, who living in isolation from society, give vent to their most savage instincts. The author expresses a pessimistic outlook on human nature and modern civilization; once free from the binding of conventions men revert to the most primitive instincts.

The writers belonging to the group of the "Angry Young Men", deeply dissatisfied with contemporary society assumed a rebellious and an anti-conformist attitude. They depicted the sense of uneasiness of the younger generations in a world dominated by false values and their protest, not based upon well identified political theories, took the form of a bitter satire against acquiescence, opportunism, contemporary culture and traditions.

Osborne's "Look Back in Anger" represented at the Royal Court Theatre in London in May 1956 achieved a wide fame by dealing with the vicissitudes of a frustrated hero, unable to overcome his crisis in a world without ideals or good causes worth struggling for, expressed the mood of a whole generation and captured the generale interest.

The leading figure of the theatre of the Absurd is Samuel Beckett, a playwright as well as a novelist who born in Dublin in 1906, has lived mainly in Paris, writing both in French and in English. He first made a reputation in France with his play "En Attendant Godot" (1952), which waqs later represented in England as "Waiting for Godot" (1955). Its characteristic consists in a combi9nation of absurd and illogical situations with a realistic language. What happens in the play is not arranged in a plot or in a chronological sequence, the characters spend their time in talking about a certain Godot, they all wait for him, but nobody knows Godot quite well and the reason why they are waiting for him. More than in telling a story, Beckett is interested in showing the meaninglessness and absurdity of human behaviour. He depicts a gloomy and incoherent world without ideals, in which there is nothing worth struggling for. This play attracted a large public and achieved a wide renown.

His mmost famous novels are "Murphy" (1938), "Watt" (1942), "Molloy" and "Malon Dies" (1951) and "The Unnameable" (1953). Like his plays, they express a pessimistic view of life; men have very few possibilities to escpae their destiny, they have an incomplete and fragmentary vision of reality and imprisoned in their own self, can only

survive, waiting for something that never comes.

Harold Pinter did not follow the trends of the Theatre of Protest and Denunciation and the Realistic or Naturalistic Theatre. He has nothing in common either with Osborne or Wesker. Though he drew his inspiration from Beckett and the Theatre of the Absurd, he cannot be regarded as an exponent of this genre and his works also reflect the influence of foreign authors such as Kafka in depicting a suffocating and menacing atmosphere, and schizophrenic characters.

OSCAR WILDE AND THE VICTORIAN PERIOD.

Victoria (24 May 1819 – 22 January 1901) was from 20 June 1837 the Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and from 1 May 1876 the first Empress of India until her death. Her reign as Queen lasted 63 years and seven months, longer than that of any other British monarch to date. The period centered on her reign is known as the Victorian era.

The Victorian era represented the height of the Industrial Revolution, a period of significant social, economic, and technological progress in the United Kingdom. Victoria's reign was marked by a great expansion of the British Empire; during this period it reached its zenith, becoming the foremost global power of the time.

Philosophical currents

- Jeremy Bentham – Utilitarianism: only what is useful is good.
- Charles Darwin's theories. Man descended from apes and the law of natural selection: strong survives and weak perishes.
- Karl Marx – new social organization and a new distribution of wealth.
- Arthur Schopenhauer – God, free will and the soul are human illusions.

Victorian compromise: progress and poverty; corruption and moralism.

DANDY

- The word dandy first appears in a Scottish ballad about 1780.
- A dandy is a man who places particular importance upon physical appearance, refined language, and leisurely (comodo/tranquillo) hobbies. He is no more than "a clothes-wearing man"- (Thomas Carlyle)
- For the perfect dandy, these things are no more than the symbol of the aristocratic superiority of his mind. The dandy must live and sleep before a mirror. He must aspire to be sublime without interruption – (Charles Baudelaire).
- It can be seen as a political protest against the rise of "egalitarian principles" toward pre-industrial values of the "perfect gentleman". The dandy strove to imitate an aristocratic style of life despite coming from a middle-class background.

Victorian Upper-classes

....AT HOME

- The woman planned lunch and evening meals (the largest one)
- She had a cook that did the work for her.
- They ate 5-6 courses when they were alone; 12-13 when there were guests.
- "Supper" is the Victorian mid-night snack

Afternoon tea: to show off the lady's finest silver, china and linen.

Example of menu

- Soup • Roast Turkey with dressing or • Roast Pork with potatoes or • Chicken Fricassee served with rice
- Two vegetable side dishes • Citrus ice • Jam, jellies and sweet pickles • Cake and preserved fruit
- Coffee, hot punch and water

Victorian middle class

- The Victorian middle-class family has become a synonym for a strict, repressive upbringing.
- For nearly the whole of the century, married women were simply regarded as part of their husband's property.
- Discipline was severe, beatings common and incredibly harsh conditions prevailed in the boarding schools of the time.
- Parents were typically distant and unemotional, and the family home was a very closed environment, with little chance for women and children to have contact outside their immediate family circle.
- Sex and other "taboo" subjects were rigidly avoided.

Middle-classes at table

- During Victorian times the diet of most people began to improve: the invention of steam ship and of refrigeration meant that meat, fish and fruit could be imported!!!
- They can eat shellfish, poultry, game, cheeses but also exotic fruit (peaches, pineapples, etc.).
- Food preservation: the first "canned food" like dried soups and chemical to preserve food (Pasteur's theories).
- The cooks were especially prized for their dessert-making skills-puddings, cakes,...

Wine is served at the end of each course. Madeira and sherry after.

Breakfast with scones, fruits, omelettes, bacon and more.

.....Food and Meals in the Literature of the period

- Complicated nutrition as a research for sensual experiences: the decadent character is spoiled by the finest china, silver cutlery and linen as well as by "elegant" food.
- All five senses were moved and stimulated.
- Food becomes a passion and intense experience.
- Food and meals as a way to remember the childhood or past and melancholic events.

"I grandi piaceri della vita o sono immorali o sono illegali o fanno ingrassare"

OSCAR WILDE

He was born in Dublin on October 16, 1854. His mother was a fervent nationalist and eccentric woman. His father was a well-known eye-and-ear surgeon. He attended Trinity College. He won a Gold Medal for Greek and a scholarship for Magdalene College. Having inherited from his father he settled in London...(at 24) and his way of dressing and behaving began to be known: knee-breeches, black silk stockings, velvet coat, exotic flowers in the buttonhole...Lectures in the United States (at 28).

At 30 he married Constance Lloyd who bore him two children. He had to work and became a book-reviewer (at 31).

Great success and scandalous plays: "The Picture of Dorian Gray", "Canterville Ghost", "The Happy Prince", "An Ideal Husband", "The Importance of Being Earnest", "De

Profundis”, “Lord Savile’s Crime”, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol”...

From “The Picture of Dorian Gray’s preface”:

- The artist is the creator of beautiful things...
- The critic is he who can translate this...
- There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That’s all.
- The artist can express everything...
- Vice and virtue are to the artist material for an art...

...but the wheel of fortune was about to turn...

(At 41) The Marquis of Queensbury accused him of a homosexual relationship with his son Lord Alfred Douglas.

Two years’ hard labour in Reading Gaol.

...and all men kill the thing they love,
By all let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!

19 May 1897 (at 43) he went to Dieppe, a small fishing port on the coast of Normandy under the pseudonym of Sebastian Melmoth. He died of meningoencephalitis from an ear infection in a room of Hotel d’Alsace, 13 rue des beaux arts, Paris. His last words...

Looking at the dreadful wallpaper in his cheap lodgings he said: “Well, one of us had to go!”

The Aesthetes broke with the convention of the time and gave freedom to imagination and fantasy by taking their theories and attitude to extremes: a life spent in the pursuit of sensation and devoted to the cult of beauty.

OSCAR WILDE BIOGRAPHY

Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde (1854-1900) was born into a Dublin family. His father, Sir William Wilde, was a successful eye and ear specialist, who boasted an array of important people among his clients, including Queen Victoria and the King of Sweden. His career was severely damaged in middle-age when he was found guilty of raping a patient under chloroform.

His Mother, Jane Francesca Eidgee was an eccentric woman, a prominent member of Dublin literary society. She claimed descent from Dante, wrote poetry and translated Dumas and Lamartine into English, under the pen name of Speranza. When Oscar was sent to boarding school at Portora he was a precocious, self-confident and singularly unorthodox child. Outstanding academically, he found the conventions of public-school life puerile and was far too courageous to be bullied into conformity.

In 1871 Wilde entered Trinity College, Dublin, where he distinguished himself as scholar-wit, though he took little interest in some subjects. His conspicuous quirks and eccentricities made him a national figure before he had written anything of significance, though he had won the Newdigate Prize for verse with his poem Ravenna.

From Trinity College, he went to Oxford, where he became the living embodiment of the currently fashionable philosophy of aesthetics - belief in Beauty as the absolute Good. In Magdalene College he developed a reputation as a wit, which turned to fame after a sensational lecture tour of the United States on Pre-Raphaelitism and Aestheticism in 1882. At the customs in New York, he said: "I have nothing to declare but my genius ". He had famous teachers such as J. Ruskin and W. Pater, who were at the height of their fame. The latter in particular is considered the indisputable leading figure of the English aesthetic

movement of the 1880s. His dandyism, postures, he used to show up and down Piccadilly with a sunflower or a lily in his hands, and dress in a very bohemian fashion ridicule Victorian men's sober dress.

After a while spent in France, where the fashionable world was a little more reticent in its reception, he decided to settle down, and in 1884 married Constance Lloyd. The choice was disastrous for both. Constance did not appreciate her husband's genius, nor did she perceive his moral weaknesses until disastrously too late. Wilde's love for her inevitably cooled, and although she bore him two sons of which he was dearly fond, domestically soon wearied him.

In London he accepted the editorship of the fashionable magazine, «Lady's World», even as he was writing his own works. His first volume of verse Poems was unanimously attacked by critics as a dull work, derivative from Rossetti and Swinburne. Then he gave the press a volume of tales, *The Canterville Ghost* and *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, a volume of children's fairy tales very much in the melancholy and poetic style of the Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen. His delightful children's stories were a great success and he became the toast of high society, regarded as the best conversationalist who had ever lived. Wilde lived during an exciting and significant literary era.

He kept company with Gide, Zola, Whistler, Shaw and Yeats. But his friendships were not always easy, as the bellicose, outspoken Wilde loved to tease and provoke the vanities of his friends. (Victorian Age 1830-1901)

In 1891, along with Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories, he published his only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It is a Gothic melodrama, which first appeared in instalments in an American magazine. It was hailed with enthusiasm, though some critics deemed it highly immoral. It marked the starting point of his successful literary career. In it, Wilde expressed all his hedonistic conception of art, epitomised in the formula "Art for Art's sake", which must be ascribed to Walter Pater, who in his turn borrowed it from Thèophile Gautier and the French Parnassian poets. Wilde's claims of the enjoyment of beauty as the only purpose of literature are a challenge to the Victorian principles of moral seriousness and the edifying, didactic purpose of art.

The years between 1890 and 1895 were the most prolific for Wilde as a playwright and saw great achievements such as *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of no Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. They are called "Society plays". These four plays are an holistic, scathing critique of aristocratic, Victorian society where reputations are easily ruined and non-conforming men and women outcast forever from respectable circles. Wilde seemed set for a charmed life until, in 1886, he realised that he was homosexual.

For the next nine years he led a double life, indulging his sexual inclinations, more and more and neglecting his family, but keeping his place in society. Just as he reached the pinnacle of his literary success, he met Lord Alfred Douglas whose father provoked him into a lawsuit that led to his social and financial ruin and two years' hard labour in Reading Gaol. In Prison he adopted the name of Sebastian Melmoth and wrote *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, in which, through his personal prison experience, he denounced the barbaric treatment of the convicts and the cruelty of the death penalty.

Released from prison in 1897, Wilde went into exile; bankrupt, a pauper and a broken man. Another work was *De Profundis*, which is highly autobiographical and contains search for a religious solution to all earthly problems.

Forgotten by everyone, he spent his last years in Paris, addicted to drink right up to its untimely death of meningitis. Shortly before dying he converted to Catholicism.

Why is Oscar Wilde studied?

He is deservedly considered as an innovative modern playwright gifted with wit, humour, creative ability, lucidity and elegance of style, and acute analytical powers. As a follower of the Aesthetic Movement, his plays are full of sparkling wit, entertaining situations and brilliant paradoxical epigrammatic dialogues.

Wilde chose his characters from the social elite and depicts a lifestyle of privilege, wealth, influence and affluence. He locates them at prestigious London addresses which audiences

would have associated with titled aristocrats, diplomats and ambassadors. On the surface, it appears to be a glittering, flighty world of dinner parties, afternoon tea and formal balls, but the lesser characters who gossip, judge and condemn indicate that this is a harsh world where any divergence from the social norm is swiftly chastised and the sinner ostracised. Therefore, the plays contain strong elements of serious feeling in their attack on materialism and hypocritical intolerance of contemporary society - a new form of communication for the stage. Although Wilde is primarily associated with drama, he was also a great prose writer. Apart from his interesting critical writings, written in a refined style and numerous captivating short stories, his enduring literary reputation is due mostly to De Profundis, a tragic "letter" concerning his personal confession and reminiscence, written in prison and addressed to Lord Douglas, and to The Picture of Dorian Gray, in which, as the apostle of aestheticism, he expounds the cult of beauty at length.

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