



THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING WILDE

Oscar Wilde and his art

Oscar Wilde, born in Ireland in 1854, was one of the most famous, and controversial, writers of his time. He liked to shock his audience and his witty sayings are often quoted. As he said: “An idea that is not dangerous is unworthy of being called an idea at all.” He was a member of the Aestheticism art movement, which believed that art is important only when it is beautiful, and his work explored the relationship between truth and beauty.

Wilde used the theme of beauty and decadence in his most famous novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It tells the strange story of a handsome young man who swaps (trades) his soul with his own painting. As the painting gets older and uglier every day, the man stays young, beautiful and eventually becomes immoral (bad).

However, Wilde wasn't only famous for novels; he also wrote poetry, plays and fairy tales. His best plays are comedies about manners. He believed that behaving like other people was ridiculous; as he put it: “everything popular is wrong”.

Switching identities in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is used as a way to make fun of the need to be proper (socially correct). At the beginning the two main characters reveal that they both have a made-up ‘friend’ or ‘brother’, someone who they pretend to be when they want to behave badly – and the rest of the play is about sorting out the confusion of their double identities! Another of Wilde's works, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, is about the secrets that can exist in a seemingly perfect marriage.

Wilde also wrote fairy tales. They often contain a clearer moral message than his other works. One of his lesser known stories is *The Fisherman and His Soul*, about a conflict between a man's love and his soul.

A young fisherman falls in love with a beautiful mermaid (woman with a fish's tail instead of legs) who will live with him in the ocean only if he gets rid of his soul. So one night he cuts it out.

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Living without a body or heart, the soul becomes evil and cruel. Every year it tries to tempt (persuade) the fisherman out of the ocean. The fisherman resists offers of riches and wisdom but not his desire to see dancing women... *When the young Fisherman heard the words of his Soul, he remembered that the little Mermaid had no feet and could not dance. And a great desire came over him, and he said to himself, 'It is only a one day journey, and I can return to my love,' and he laughed, and stood up in the shallow water, and walked towards the shore.*

As soon as he leaves the sea, the soul jumps back inside him. Soon the fisherman wants to get rid of his cruel soul but discovers that it is forbidden to cut out a soul more than once. Now he can never go back to his mermaid and is forced to live alone, with a heartless soul. He lives on the edge of the sea and every day calls to his mermaid, but she never comes. One day the dead body of the little mermaid is washed onto shore... *He kissed with mad lips the cold lips of the Mermaid, and the heart that was within him broke. The Soul found an entrance into the heart and entered in, and was one with him as before. And the sea covered the young Fisherman with its waves.*

Joanna Coleman (UK)

(The excerpts have been simplified.)

OSCAR WILDE'S QUOTES

“A grand passion is the privilege of people who have nothing to do.”

“Life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about.”

“I can believe anything, provided that it is quite incredible.”

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