Oscar Wilde
1854 – 1900
“I love acting. It is so much more real than life.”
Ireland

- Ruled by the British
- Catholics had limited rights
- 1845-52 – Great Irish Potato Famine
  - Fungus in Potatoes
  - Good grain crops were sent to England while the Irish starved
Starvation and mass emigration

Many Irish went to America.
Strong literary influences at home

• Father - William Wilde, doctor, wrote books (on medicine, travel and Irish superstitions) and was knighted for his work as medical advisor to the censuses. He opened St. Mark's Ophthalmic Hospital at his own expense that provided medical care to the poor.

• Mother - Jane Francesca Elgee, wrote revolutionary poems under the pseudonym "Speranza"
Wilde was Irish Protestant

- Descendent of Colonel de Wilde, a Dutchman, who helped William of Orange (William III) fight the Irish
- Victory at Battle of the Boyne in 1690.
- Each year on July 12, thousands of Orangemen march to honor the 'glorious and immortal memory' of William III, Prince of Orange and King of England.
- Wilde’s Orange connection was something he was not proud of, tended to point out his mother was “pure Irish” and he took after her.
Education

• 1871 – received Royal School Scholarship to attend Trinity College in Dublin.

• Earned Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek and was awarded a scholarship to Magdalen College, Oxford University.

• Graduated with double honors from Oxford
Touring Lecturer

• 1881
  – published his first collection of poetry, received mixed reviews
  – Went to USA on lecture tour on aesthetics.
  – 1882 - his play, “Vera,” staged in New York
  – After America, he spent three months in Paris writing a blank-verse tragedy commissioned by the actress Mary Anderson (born in Sacramento) She ultimatly turned it down.
  – Went on to do a lecture tour of Britain and Ireland.
Wilde was a hit in America – this is a souvenir card from his tour

Lecture Topics

– 'Principles of Aestheticism'
– 'The English Renaissance'
– 'The House Beautiful'
– 'The Decorative Arts'
Love and Marriage

• Courted Florence Balcombe who went on to marry fellow Irishman, Bram Stoker (Dracula)

• Married Constance Lloyd
  – two sons - Cyril in 1885 and Vyvyan in 1886. (Cyril killed in WWI)
  – Lived in Chelsea
  – Wilde lived beyond means, continued to lecture and write
Great Conservationist

- Wilde was a dandy
- Wilde was know for his flamboyant dress
- Wore a floppy carnation in his buttonhole that the florist died green for him everyday.
Art for Art’s Sake

- Wilde studied with the critic Walter Pater at Oxford’s
- “Art for Art’s sake” or Aesthetic Movement
- worship Beauty simply because it is beautiful.
- Art did not need to be utilitarian
- Some argued art imitates life, Wilde might argue that life (should) imitate art.
Wilde Art

- “We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty”
- “Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter.”
- “Life imitates art far more than art imitates life.”
- “The critic has to educate the public; the artist has to educate the critic”

James Abbott McNeill Whistler
Arrangement in Grey and Black
Pre-Raphaelites, Whistler and image from film IBI. Pre-Raphaelites drew inspiration from Tennyson’s poem The Lady of Shalott
Influenced later abstract artists

Kandinsky  Abstract painting
No Country for Gay Men

- November 1887 Wilde appointed as editor of *The Lady's World*
- At 33, *Wilde began to explore his homosexuality* – seduced by 17 y.o Robert Ross, *later his literary executioner.*
- *1885 Criminal Amendments Act* – *Homosexuality banned between men. Did not include women because Queen Victory did not believe women would do such things*
- "An Act to make further provision for the Protection of Women and Girls, the suppression of brothels, and other purposes“

- Age of consent raised
- 12 to 16
- Indecency (homosexuality) and Sodomy (which could carry a life sentence) illegal in Britain until 1967
Wilde Life

• 1891- Wilde meets Lord Alfred 'Bosie' Douglas, the third son of the Marquis of Queensberry. They became lovers.

• April 1895, Oscar sued Bosie's father for libel as the Marquis had accused him of homosexuality.

• Wilde withdrew his case but was arrested and convicted under British Sodomy Laws Acts of “gross indecency”

• Sentenced to two years hard labor.
Ponce and Sodimite, Posing Sodimite or Posing as Sodimite – Marquis of Quensberry’s calling card
Important evidence in libel trial
Queensberry Rules
After Prison

• Left England for France, lived abroad the rest of his life staying with friends and in cheap hotels
• Reunited briefly with Lord Alfred
• Wilde lived in poverty and lost his inspiration. Did not write any more plays.
• Oscar Wilde died on November 30, 1900 of meningitis.
Wilde’s Epigrams

- **Epigram** is the term applied to any very short poem - whether amatory, elegiac, meditative, complimentary, anecdotal, or satiric - which is polished, terse, and pointed; often an epigram ends with a surprising or witty turn of thought.” Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 6th ed. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993.

- “a brief, clever, and usually memorable statement.” (Wikipedia)
  - “I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train.”
  - “I can resist everything except temptation.”
  - “To love oneself is the beginning of a life-long romance.”
  - “There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.”

Importance of Being Earnest is full of them, pick your favorite for the quiz.
Importance of Being Earnest

• Not realism or naturalism.
• Themes
  – Social Conventions (status, being fashionable, correct behavior, ancestry)
  – Truth and lies – Lies are more valued than the truth.
  – Coming of age
  – Marriage
  – Idle classes
Importance of Being Earnest

• Bunbury
• Earnest
• Food
• A play full of dandies.
• Reversing conventional wisdom
  – women flirting with their husband
  – Smoking as an occupation
  – “In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing.”