



THE VICTORIAN LITERATURE POETRY

A link between Romantics and Modernists

The Victorian period literally describes the events in the age of Queen Victoria's reign. The term «Victorian» has connotations of repression and social conformity; however in poetry these labels are somewhat misplaced. The Victorian Age provided a significant development of poetic ideals, such as the increased use of the sonnet as a poetic form, which was to influence later modern authors. Poets in the Victorian period were to some extent influenced by the Romantic poets such as Blake, Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth. «Victorian poetry» was an important period in the history of literature, providing the link between the Romantic Movement and the Modernist Movement of the 20th century.

The Pre-Raphaelites

In the second half of the 19th century, a group of artists, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), John Everett Millais (1829-1896) and others founded the Pre-

Raphaelite Brotherhood to react against the conventional contemporary art and the classical academism. The Movement originally confined to painting, aimed at a return to nature, that is to say to an accurate and minute representation of reality.

The artists who belonged to the group admired the Middle Ages and primitive forms of art as they possessed the freshness, the immediacy and the authenticity of expression which had vanished with the advent of the High Renaissance. They took as their models the earlier Italian painters before Raphael, such as Giotto, Botticelli, Fra Angelico, and hence their name of «PreRaphaelites». They pursued an ideal of beauty against the ugly industrial world which was in sharp contrast with their aspirations. So they attacked the bad effects of the Industrial civilization and opposed to it the values of a more beautiful and authentic past.

The ideals of the Pre-Raphaelites were exposed in the periodical

«The Germ», which appeared for the first time on New Year's Day, in 1850. The Movement extended to poetry too, and took more and more the character of an anti-Victorian reaction. But what it really achieved was a new kind of classicism characterized by a highly intellectual artificial painting, particularly accurate in the rendering of details.

In poetry, though more successful than in painting, the Movement did not break with the past; Keats was their favourite model, and their experiments in metre and rhythm produced lines full of symbolism and of sensuous and decorative images. In their pursuit of beauty, the Pre-Raphaelites anticipated the Aesthetic Movement.

PROSE

The Oxford Movement

The Industrial Revolution had brought about deep changes in the economic and social life of the nation. The rise of big industrial towns had not only transformed the aspect of the English countryside, but also customs and ways of life which had existed for centuries. The old traditions and values were no longer consistent with the advent of a quite new world and did not conciliate with it. The scientific progress based on rational researches undermined and put into discussion all dogmas and principles of which no evident proof could be offered. Above all, the appearance of Darwin's The Origin of Species shook religious beliefs to their foundations. But the trend towards Rationalism was strongly opposed, especially by the Oxford Movement or Tractarian Movement, composed by a group of intellectuals, who tried to revive the ideals of early Christianity. The movement aimed to defend the Church of England as a divine institution with an independent spiritual status, and to revive the High Church traditions of the 17th century.

The Victorians, unlike their predecessors who had lived in the Enlightenment and in the Romantic period, could not rest on steady beliefs and were haunted by confusion and doubts.





The Aestheticism

The «English Aesthetic Movement» had its antecedents in the PreRaphaelite Brotherhood, in Swinburne's poetry and in Ruskin's ideal conception of beauty; but its remote origins can also be traced back to the Romantic poets, especially Keats.

The Movement began in the 1870s, as a reaction to the Utilitarianism and to the Victorian moral restraints and prejudices. It reached its highest peak in the last decade of the 19th century in the work of, among others, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Vincent Beardsley (1872-1898).

It was much more than a mere literary movement; it also reflected the signs of decadence and the crises of faith and morality affecting society, towards the turning of the century, and a restless search for new experiences.

Its supreme values laid on the cult of beauty and art as essential components of human life. The followers of the Aesthetic Movement refused to subordinate art to any other aim and proclaimed its independence from moral and didactic considerations. It had no other purpose than the pursuit of art as such.

Fiction

The dominant figure of the «Victorian novel» was the superproductive Charles Dickens, who combined elements of the Gothic – a genre made serious by the Brontë sisters – with an accurate account of the social institutions of Victorian England.

The distinctive features grew more and more defined and pronounced as Victorian authors, rather than investigate in abstract fields, turned to real aspects of life and devoted themselves to an objective study of the great problems of the time.

It was only in the 1840s that the novel again reached the popularity it had enjoyed in the 1740s; between 1847 and 1850 Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, Vanity Fair and David Copperfield appeared. In 1860 Dickens was still at his peak, Mrs. Gaskell and Anthony Trollope were going strong, George Eliot had begun to publish. The popularity of the realistic novels seems to go with the broadening of middle-class democracy.

Benjamin Disraeli, conservative Prime Minister, used fiction to advance a critique of contemporary society, a view later developed by John Ruskin. The novel was now so popular that it was also used to advance political thesis, religious thesis, or social reform, as by Dickens.

GREAT WRITERS Charles Dickens (1812-1870)

Charles Dickens was the son of a clerk in the Navy pay office. He was born in 1812 at Portsea, near Portsmouth, the second of eight children, who received little education. His father had no sense of money and was imprisoned for debts, so Charles was taken out of school and employed at the age of nine, in a blacking warehouse in London, where his job was to paste labels on bottles for six shillings a week. For two years he lived through an unforgettable, humiliating experience both at work and visiting his father in the Marshalsea prison on Sundays. This phase of his life was to leave a permanent mark on him, accounting for the melodramatic and sentimental vein that so many critics blame him for in situations which «only a heart of stone could fail to burst out laughing at» (as Oscar Wilde paradoxically put it). On the other hand the contact with London's underworld and its rich pattern of people and stories was certainly treasured by the sensitive, highly imaginative boy and inspired the gallery of true-to-life, exuberant characters his books teem with. In 1824 family affairs improved and he returned to school, but without receiving a regular education. He was a legal office boy at fifteen, and then a shorthand reporter of Parliamentary debates for the «Morning Chronicle». On a December evening in 1833 Charles Dickens was on his way to the House of Commons when he saw a new number of the «Monthly Magazine» in a Strand bookshop. Weeks before he had sent a story to its editor, but had heard nothing from him. He was supporting his entire family on his meagre salary and could hardly afford the halfcrown the magazine cost, but he bought it. Turning the pages he saw his name in print for the first time. His hands and knees shook, while he read his story before going to his evening's work. Encouraged by his first success he continued to write. He began his literary career by contributing these tales and sketches to magazines and newspapers. In the capacity of Parliamentary reporter or provincial correspondent, he was developing his genius for careful observation and caricature, his ear for people's verbal mannerism, his deep concern for social injustice, travelling all over England wherever an article was needed. In his free time he made up for the scanty education he had had by devouring books at the British Museum: Richardson, Fielding and Smollett were his favourite authors. His sketches on London life were gathered and published under the title of Sketches by «Boz» in 1836-1837.

His first novels were published in serial form and made him in a short time the most popular author in the world. He married Catherine Hogarth in 1837 and they had ten children. Dickens' life was entirely devoted to writing, editing, travelling, entertaining, acting and producing his own plays. In 1842 he and his wife visited America, where he was enthusiastically received.





The writer and his wife separated in 1858; he maintained a secret friendship with the young actress Ellen Ternan. He defied scandal, protesting his own innocence and distracting himself from domestic sorrow by throwing his restless energy into readings of his works. He revisited America in 1867-1868, delivering a series of readings there, and on his return continued to tour the provinces, displaying his theatrical talents. He knew that the end was near, and he wrote desperately trying to finish his last great novel, *Edwin Drood*, before death came. After putting in a full day's work at his home in Gads Hill, Kent, in 1870, he collapsed after dinner with his daughter, and died on the following day.

Works

Novels. Sketches by «Boz», *Illustrative of Every-Day Life*, and *EveryDay People* is a collection of sketches of life and manners, first published in various periodicals, and in book form in 1836-1837 (in one volume in 1839). He depicted in a lively and humorous way scenes of everyday life and typical London characters of his own time.

It was followed by the *Pickwick Papers* (*The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*), a novel first issued in twenty monthly parts from April 1836 to November 1837, and as a volume in 1837, of picaresque inspiration, whose novelty consists in the author's acute observation of the most bizarre aspects of contemporary social life.

Oliver Twist (1837-1838) is the first of the so-called Sentimental Novels: it tells the adventures of a foundling and exposes the evils of the contemporary society, such as the degradation of the workhouses and the horrors of the slums. The work appeared in monthly numbers in «*Bentley's Miscellany*», a new periodical of which Dickens was the first editor.

The series of Dickens' sentimental novels continue with *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-1839), also in monthly numbers. In 1840 he launched a new weekly, «*Master Humphrey's Clock*», in which appeared *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1841) and his early historical novel *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), set at the period of «*Gordon Riots*» of 1780.

The writer's first visit to the United States inspired his *American Notes* (1842) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-1844), in which he satirized some aspects of American life. They caused much offence in America.

A Christmas Carol was the first of a series of Christmas books.

In 1844 he went for a long visit to Italy and produced *Pictures from Italy*. During a visit to Switzerland in 1846 he started writing *Dombey and Son*, appeared in 1848, a tale of a father who has no love for his daughter, in which he returned to the description of contemporary England.

In 1850 he started the weekly periodical «*Household Words*», which was incorporated into «*All the Year Round*» in 1859; in this he published much of his later works.

David Copperfield, Dickens' most autobiographical work, appeared in monthly numbers in 1849-1850; *Bleak House* in 1852-1853; *A Child's History of England* appeared irregularly in 1851-1853; *Hard Times* was published in 1854; *Little Dorrit*, a story of a debtor imprisoned in Marshalsea prison and his devoted daughter Amy Dorrit, in 1855-1857; *A Tale of Two Cities*, in which Dickens abandoned the English subject to describe the events of the French Revolution, in 1859; *Great Expectations* in 1860-1861; and *Our Mutual Friend* in 1864-1865.

In Dickens' last works the sparkling humorous tone tends to be replaced by a sort of dramatic intensity. His clear-cut division between good and evil is veiled by a certain ambiguity reflecting the different mood of the late Victorian period.

Pickwick Papers. Mr. Samuel Pickwick, general chairman of the Pickwick Club which he founded, Mrs. Tracy Tupman, Augustus Snodgrass, and Nathaniel Winkle, members of the club, are constituted a Corresponding Society of the Club to report to it their journeys and adventures, observations of characters and manners. This is the basis on which the novel is constructed, and the club serves to link a series of detached incidents and changing characters, without elaborate plot.

It is important to reveal that the contraposition between calm and violent activity is at the heart of the novel: the «*Pickwickians*» are all calm and gentle men, the things that happen to them tend to be violent; the effect is comedy based on this differential structure. Other oppositions might be pointed out, for example, in the speech of servants (in Cockney dialect) which contrasts with the polite, rather concerned speech of Mr. Pickwick and his circle, and indeed in the contrast in behaviour between horses and men.

The use of long words is particularly effective in creating a high effect while describing a low comic moment, as in «the tall quadruped evinced a decided inclination to back into the coffee-room window». Mr. Pickwick's dignity is conveyed in the better-sounding words; and dignity brought low is one of the basic features of comedy.

This is a gentle comedy, however, with no social bite; though full of exaggerated characters and incidents, it shows a kind of humour which the British public liked.





David Copperfield. Dickens wrote in the preface to the 1869 edition: «Of all my books I like this the best. It will be easily believed that I am a fond parent to every child of my fancy, and that no one can ever love that family so dearly as I love them. But, like many fond parents, I have in my heart of hearts a favourite child. And his name is David Copperfield».

It was his masterpiece largely autobiographical. The novel describes the entire life and the development of personality of the orphan David, and is a denouncement of the cruel conditions of life in London in 19th century.

Dickens' most touching description of an oppressed child, like David Copperfield at the beginning of the book, sent to menial employment in London where he lives a life of misery and poverty, is based on his own sad experience.

The story usually told in Dickens' novels, as in David Copperfield, is a story of social reconciliation and reconstruction. The hero is usually an orphan, who moves from a state of deprivation and oppression towards being inside a middle-class circle of kindness and care. Success is associated with the bourgeois virtues of industriousness and honesty. It is as if Dickens' novel provided reassurance for his readers. David Copperfield, in particular, helped perhaps people in 19th century to make sense of their lives, to find a way to be followed to construct themselves in a changing world.

Bleak House. The narrative of the book is artful, the cast of characters engaging, the satire biting, the range of life wonderfully vast. A miracle of authorial creation, the book is constructed around three great themes: the abuses of the old High Court of Chancery, the delays and costs of which brought misery and ruin on its suitors (in particular the endless litigation of Jarndyce and Jarndyce symbolizes the murky institutional fog surrounding all England); the theme of misplaced children, setting whimsical, carefree Harold Skimpole in poignant contrast with sad, young, nameless Jo; and the mystery theme, a romantic tangle of trails followed by the three unforgettable sleuths, Guppy, Tulkinghorn, and Bucket, leading to the astonishing revelation of a certain lady's long-held secret.

Great Expectations. It is an example of the mid-Victorian novel of disappointment and disillusion, relating the development of the character of the narrator, Philip Pirrip, commonly known as «Pip», now middle-aged, lonely, full of memories and with a not particularly rewarding career «in the East», in some outpost of the British Empire. The title is an ironic reference to Pip's high hopes when he was younger, and from the earliest moments of the novel he is constantly disappointed in his «expectations». It is the ultimate Victorian expression of «education» in the sense of learning about life.

The ultimate note of the novel is one of resignation, of acceptance, very different from the tone of Dickens' earlier works but very much in keeping with the tone of the 1860s.

Dickens' art and style. Dickens knew Scott's novels very well, though his favourite models are to be found in the writers of the previous century. He took the picaresque adventure and the sentimental element from Fielding and Richardson respectively. However the most influential writer was undoubtedly Tobias Smollett; Dickens' language and humorous tone often recall Smollett's comic descriptions and chief characters.

As other Victorian writers, he devoted himself to social criticism, but his originality is based on the way he dealt with the matter. Dickens described realistic scenes with a sense of humour, introducing elements of pathos and a warm sense of humanity.

This notwithstanding, his art is not faultless. Spontaneity and immediacy were the best characteristics of Dickens' novels, but he did not possess the essential quality of balance and restraint, and the plots of his novels are not well constructed and often appear improbable. Not all are novels, if the novel has both to tell a coherent story and render social reality. The approach is sometimes too theatrically stylized to be realistic. He conformed to the picaresque tradition, and to capture the reader's attention he used popular sensational devices, such as murder or other extraordinary events. Moreover Dickens' characters lack a deeper inner life and appear rather as caricatures than as individuals. Another of Dickens' limits is a too clearcut distinction between good and evil: villains are too bad and the heroes too good to appear true, and the pathos which pervades his novels often degenerates into sentimentalism. But in spite of these defects and limits, his imagination succeeded in creating a whole world full of unforgettable characters and animated with the movement of life.

Dickens' fortune. The writer captured the popular imagination as no other novelist had done and, despite some murmurs against his sensationalism and sentimentality and his inability to portray women other than as innocents or grotesques, he was also held in high critical esteem; but it was not until this contemporary time that he began to attract serious academic attention.

Dickens' novels appeared originally not in book form but in illustrated monthly magazines, the 19th century equivalent of a television series. Many of the original illustrations were so closely associated in readers' minds with the characters and the story that they were almost an integral part of the novel.

Novels were read aloud in families, and Dickens himself gave readings enlarging his audience. His success in popular media continues nowadays, both with readers and with audiences, usually in different forms from their first incarnation, as has happened to Shakespeare and the greatest authors.





Dickens' name is perhaps the only one, after Shakespeare's, to be known all over the world and to be recognized also as an adjective: «Dickensian». The word describes a range of characters often recognizable by the one quality which epitomizes their personality: either good or bad they are a sort of black-and-white «humours» or types which crowd his pages. It also stands for a descriptive quality, a peculiar use of language to obtain certain humorous effects (by contrasting high-flown words and trivial subject matter), a comic touch, a way of handling dialogue, a certain melodramatic taste, and a deep social concern.

A social writer. Dickens was only nine when his father was put in prison for debt, and he was sent to earn his living in a ratinfested factory. He lived alone in poor London lodgings, and wandered the streets by night. The life of London slums, that he knew so well during these years, furnished much of the atmosphere and a vast gallery of characters in his books. His most touching descriptions of oppressed children, like David Copperfield, Oliver Twist or Nicholas Nickleby, are based on his own sad experiences. He never forgot the hardships of his own boyhood, and wanted everybody to live in a better and more humane way.

Dickens was not only a great novelist. Believing in social reform, he violently attacked the abuses of Victorian society, and the egoism of the rich were all mercilessly attacked in his books. He denounced the workhouse system, the rigours of the penal code, the incompetence and corruption of people in power, the slowness of justice, the neglect of children, the cruelty of schools and orphanages, and of private-school masters, the bad state of sanitation in the poorer quarters of cities, and the social indifference which marked the Victorian Age despite its pretence to philanthropy, welfare and reform. **George Eliot (1819-1880)**

Life

George Eliot was the pen-name of Mary Anne Evans, born in 1819, daughter of Robert Evans, agent for a Warwickshire estate, where she was to set most of her novels. She converted to Evangelicalism when she was at school, under the influence of Charles Bray, a freethinking Coventry manufacturer, and remained strongly influenced by religious concepts of love and duty. At twenty-one she lost the belief of the Evangelicalism which had characterized her childhood. She worked for many years as a translator and journalist in London, at the centre of the intellectual and literary life of her day. She helped to edit «The Westminster Review», a learned journal founded by J. S. Mill. She became emotionally attached to its publisher, John Chapman, and then to Herbert Spencer, the apostle of scientism. She turned to fiction relatively late, at the instigation of George Henry Lewes, biographer of Goethe and advocate of the Positivism of Comte, with whom she had a longlasting relationship. He was already married and as divorce was impossible, Mary Anne defied public opinion by openly living with him until his death arrived in 1878. Two years later she married the forty-year-old John Walter Cross, who had become her financial adviser. She died seven months later, in 1880.

Works

Production. As a result of the influence of Positivism and Rationalism Philosophies, she translated first the German book Life of Jesus by Strauss, which appeared without her name in 1846, and then Essence of Christianity (1854) by Feuerbach, radical new works reducing Christianity to history and psychology. She supported Feuerbach's view that religious belief is an imaginative necessity for man, a projection of his interest in his own species.

Lewes encouraged her to write and she was about forty when she attempted her first novel, Scenes of Clerical Life (1858), appeared in «Blackwood's Magazine» and composed by three short stories: The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton, Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story and Janet's Repentance. The success was immediate and she became famous under her pen-name of George Eliot.

Adam Bede (1859) was her first full-length novel, having as background the English rural life she knew very well, followed by The Mill on the Floss (1860), on the vicissitudes of a young woman and her struggle to come to terms with an oppressive environment, and Silas Marner (1861).

George Eliot attempted a historical novel with Romola, serialized in the «Cornhill Magazine» in 1862-1863 and set in Florence in the 1490s, at the time of Girolamo Savonarola; it was a key novel in Eliot's career, foreshadowing the serious concerns of her next works.

She returned to contemporary society with Felix Holt, the Radical (1866); Middlemarch, published in instalments in 1871-1872, considered as her masterpiece, depicting a society that was faced with changes at every level; and with Daniel Deronda, also in instalments in 1874-1876.





Felix Holt the Radical. This novel was written close to the time of the Second Reform Bill. The hero was so radical to go much further in his political views than Parliament did, hoping in the universal suffrage. Felix Holt is an idealist, and his speech reflects his views by applying the greatest image of industrialization (Steam Power) to society's understanding of human nature. He is a noble-minded reformer who deliberately chooses the life of a humble artisan in order to bring home to his fellow workers that their only hope of improvement lies in education and in the courage of their own opinions.

George Eliot's voice, through *Felix Holt the Radical*, continues the tone we found in Mrs. Gaskell's *North and South*, expression of disillusion together with rather abstract idealism.

Middlemarch, A study of Provincial

In that work, probably the finest English realistic novel, the scene is laid in the provincial manufacturing town of Middlemarch, Loamshire, during the years immediately after the First Reform Bill.

The plot is multiple and concerned with the ordinary problems of life: unhappy marriages, people's working lives, and their relationship with neighbours. Eliot acts as a teacher, as a moral tutor to the audience, guiding them, by generalizing on the significance of her characters' actions, on the right way of social morality. She represents in Middlemarch the moral codes and values of polite middle-class English society, but in the margins of the text we understand the limitations of the moral code and of social institutions such as marriage.

Mid-Victorian writer. The period in which George Eliot was writing was an era of huge prosperity; social conflicts and divisions, so evident in the Brontës and Dickens, were no longer so apparent. George Eliot seems to be writing about a different world from that described by them and seems to be the complete embodiment of the mid-Victorian period. All previous Victorian novels dealt with the relationship between the individual and society and revealed the evils of the social system, but Eliot emphasized the importance of duty and of a responsible attitude of the individual towards society.

Eliot's interest rather than in society and its institutions is concentrated in the role that a single individual exerts in public life; her main character begins thinking about his or her social commitment, being almost totally self-absorbed in a world created by shared values.

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)

Life

Oscar Fingall O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin, son of a famous surgeon, in 1854. He studied at Trinity College in Dublin, then at Magdalen College, Oxford, where in 1878 he won the Newdigate Prize for his poem *Ravenna*. Finishing his studies, in 1881 he went to London to publicize Aestheticism and himself. He was deeply influenced by Walter Pater's theories of «Art for Art's Sake». His dandyism and extravagant poses, such as walking in the streets or appearing in public meetings in velvet breeches and holding a carnation in his hand, contributed towards increasing his fame and making him into an admired figure of London's fashionable society. Wilde undertook a lecture tour to the United States in 1882, after the publication of his first volume of verses. In 1884 he married Constance Lloyd and they had two children. He worked as the editor of a women's magazine for some time, but gained his literary reputation with the publication of his famous short stories and with the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In 1891 he met Lord Alfred Douglas and with him developed a very profound friendship. Alfred's father, the marquis of Queensbury, disapproved of their relationship and publicly insulted Wilde. This started a chain of events which led to Wilde's imprisonment for homosexual offences in 1895. He spent two years in prison; when he left prison he was a broken man and bankrupt, and spent the last three years of his life in France. In exile he adopted the name Sebastian Melmoth, after the romance *Melmoth the Wanderer* by Charles Robert Maturin, one of the principal writers of Gothic novel. He died in Paris in 1900; France was indeed a sort of home country for him.

Works

Production. His first volume of verse *Poems* appeared in 1881. He gained his literary reputation with the publication of his famous short stories: *The Canterville Ghost* (1887); *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), written for his sons; *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime, and Other Stories*; and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891).

1891 was also the year of his famous novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a Gothic melodrama which was attacked as immoral, and of *Intentions*, a series of essays in support of «aesthetic theories» among which the most interesting was *The Critic as Artist*.





Shortly afterwards Wilde turned to the theatre and reached his best achievements. His comedies, such as *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and his masterpiece *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), were very successful, and recreated the atmosphere of the Comedy of Manners as they contain sparkling dialogues, witty epigrams and give a vivid picture of the contemporary upper class.

He wrote only one tragedy in 1893, *Salomé* (now known chiefly by Richard Strauss's opera), written in French, and published in 1894 in an English translation by Lord Alfred Douglas. It was performed for the first time in Paris in 1896, but it could not be performed in England until 1931 because of its sensual cruelty very much in the tradition of the fatal, demonlike women, «les belles dames sans merci», who seem to be such an interesting and constant presence in English literature.

The distress caused by his period in prison, made his art deeper and more mature. While in prison he wrote a long letter of bitter reproach to Lord Alfred, more an essay, *De Profundis* (1896), which was published in part in 1905. The *Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) was inspired by his prison experience.

The Picture of Dorian Gray. Wilde's Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, added to the original story after it had failed to please the critics, has been taken as a statement of intent of the «Aesthetic movement» of the 1880s and 1890s. The intention of the novel is to be provocative, to make readers react, to think about the paradoxes and contradictions expressed by Wilde, and ideas about art and culture, most of them were expanded and expressed aphoristically in an essay called *The Critic as Artist*.

When Wilde comments on morality and ethics, we can argue references to his own flamboyant style of life, termed «decadent» by his critics, and we can appreciate his conclusion that the sins which critics attributed to the enigmatic and Faustus-like hero of the novel, *Dorian Gray*, were in fact their own sins, in their own imaginations.

The author didn't intend to write a moral novel even if the main character was punished; he was suggesting the hypothesis that there may exist an individual who obeys only his own rules and can live in a harmonious combination of spirit and senses. *Dorian's* failure seems to consist of having overcome the division between senses and spirit, or body and soul, to become the victim of a new division between his «hedonistic self» and his «moral self».

His conscience, suffocated for a time, becomes his double, incarnates itself in the picture and lives its own life only to destroy him with the proof of his failure: the artist of life cannot but hate the ugliness he has created and ends by destroying it and himself.

The Importance of Being Earnest. This romantic comedy about polite society embodies «the triumph of style over substance». Scene by scene a kind of society that is at the same time appalling and absurd is revealed, and we can laugh without being threatened. Wilde himself says that he is «toying with that tiger, Life»; he jokes, using a witty dialogue, on such serious themes as money, social position, class, birth, identity, and marriage. It is a harmless, stylish, amusing work and, at a deeper level, a serious statement on the values and prejudices of contemporary society.

Art for Art's Sake. More than any other writer, Oscar Wilde experienced the changes of public opinion and the prejudices of society. He conceived the artist as an isolated figure different from the rest of mankind, who possessed a deeper insight and imagination, whose task was to create beauty and not to instruct; so he did not pursue any particular moral or political aim in his writings. His rebellious attitude and reaction against society did not aim at promoting reforms but were due to the fact that society, with its false conventions and prejudices, imposed such restraints on art as to prevent free artistic creation. Wilde's aim was not to communicate an ethical or useful message, but to offer a rare example of beauty. His attitude differed from that of writers such as Ruskin and Arnold.

His characteristic was that he never wrote seriously or conscious of a public role, but in most of his works he rejected seriousness and gravity because he considered them lacking in imagination. More than expressing ideas and thoughts he aimed at shocking and surprising his readers. He preferred to suggest opinions through his witty remarks and paradoxes which, while amusing people, also stirred their reflections.

Wilde conceived art as superior to life as art can be controlled and shaped to reach perfection, and the artist's role is not to represent life and its problems but to create a different reality.

