

The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde

Joseph Pearce

SYNOPSIS

Vilified by fellow Victorians for his sexuality and his dandyism, Oscar Wilde, the great poet, satirist and playwright, is hailed today, in some circles, as a ‘progressive’ sexual liberator. But this is not how Wilde saw himself. His actions and pretensions did not bring him happiness and fulfilment. This study of Wilde's brilliant and tragic life goes beyond the mistakes that brought him notoriety in order to explore this emotional and spiritual search.

Unlike any other biography of Wilde, it strips away these pretensions to show the real man, his aspirations and desires. It uncovers how he was broken by his two-year prison sentence ; it probes the deeper thinking behind masterpieces such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Salome*, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and *De Profundis* ; and it traces his fascination with Catholicism through to his eleventh-hour conversion.

Published on the 150th anniversary of his birth, this biography removes the masks which have confused previous biographers and reveals the real Wilde. Once again, Joseph Pearce has written a profound, original and wide-ranging study on a great literary figure.

“*The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde* is a brilliant interpretive biography of a wit, bon vivant, and literary genius who still delights us a century after his death. In Joseph Pearce’s sympathetic appraisal we never forget that Wilde was not just an entertainer but a soul that found himself only after ignominy, loss, and desolation. I have read many of the other books on Wilde, and this is my favourite.”

Ron Hansen, NYT Bestselling Author of *Mariette in Ecstasy*

“Joseph Pearce has done it again ! Chesterton, Belloc, Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and now Oscar Wilde have all been coaxed out of their graves for us by this grave-robber named Pearce. Oscar proves to be a very lively ghost.”

Peter Kreeft, Author of *Love is Stronger Than Death*

“Pearce reveals a great deal more than a mere account of the facts. Here is the journey of a soul, one who frequently teetered on the brink of damnation, and at times courted it. Beautifully written, and in its own right a work of wit and wisdom.”

Michael O’Brien, Author of *Father Elijah*

“Oscar Wilde looms larger now than ever before, not merely for his wit and rackets life, but, increasingly, for his work. Joseph Pearce has taken on Wilde’s most eminent biographers and critics, and has, with his bravura prose, turned our attention away from the prurient, and on to Wilde’s achievement. This is a major work.”

Thomas Howard, Author of *On Being Catholic*

“Oscar Wilde has been used by the pagans and abused by the puritans, but both have dealt dishonestly with him. Joseph Pearce not only reveals Wilde as we have never seen him, but reveals himself as a master of biography.”

Dale Ahlquist, Author of *G.K. Chesterton: The Apostle of Common Sense*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Twenty years ago he was a radical activist, a skinhead, and the editor of two hate-filled, extremist magazines. Today, Joseph Pearce is the author of several critically acclaimed, best-selling biographies of great nineteenth and twentieth century Christian authors. He talks to IgnatiusInsight.com about his most recent book for Ignatius Press, *The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde*, the challenge of writing biographies, and his dramatic conversion in an English prison.

INTERVIEW OF THE AUTHOR

Interviewer : In the Preface to *The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde*, you write that he “*died a pariah*” and “*was scorned by the world.*” But today is “*the adored and idolized icon of a growing cult.*” How has that transformation come about ?

Joseph Pearce : Basically it goes to show the summersaults that modern culture has made in

the last century. Victorian society tended to be prudish and so Wilde, after his fall from favour, was looked upon as a pariah and his works stopped being read. He ended up being looked upon in such a bad way by his contemporaries.

Today the same mistake is being made : **Wilde's work is being judged by the man, not the man by his work**. All the things he was detested for in Victorian society — **homosexuality, debauchery, and hedonism** — have become the things that he is idolized for in our day. He has become a 'gay icon'.

It is unfair because Wilde had a lifelong love affair with the Catholic Church. His art is always overtly moral and the morality is overtly Catholic in nature. He is a timeless Christian writer. As a man he never came out of the closet and throughout his life he experienced much guilt about his homosexuality ; he always felt that was his bad side. This was the case in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which shows that when you kill your conscience, you kill your soul. Wilde was such a religious man that when he enters the Church on his deathbed, it really is the logical end and culmination of his life.

The Interviewer : Although *The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde* is a biography, you make it clear that one of your intentions is to set the record straight about Wilde's life and to respond to some recent biographies, including Richard Ellmann's 1987 biography. What errors do you address and how influenced by ideology and contemporary fads are the errors that you encountered ?

Joseph Pearce : One influence was the gross ignorance displayed in many of the works written on Wilde's life. People today think that Wilde was persecuted for his homosexuality. No, he was not ! It was almost unheard of for people to be charged with sodomy in Victorian England. Wilde was having a homosexual relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, whose father, the Marquess of Queensberry become enraged, left a card for Wilde : '*To Oscar Wilde, posing as a Sodomite.*' Infuriated, Wilde had Queensberry arrested and charged with criminal libel. It was a huge mistake. Wilde failed in his libel case and the evidence brought forward by Queensberry about Wilde's homosexual activities essentially forced the government to prosecute Wilde. So Wilde was brought down by his own stupidity, not because he was unjustly persecuted. There's the moral of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* : **Kill your conscience, kill your soul**. Wilde, in fact, called his homosexuality his 'pathology', his sickness.

I'm very much motivated by the provocations of errors in recent biographies of Wilde. Ellmann's biography, *Oscar Wilde* (1988) was considered, blithely, the definite biography of Wilde. Lots of research has gone into it. But Ellmann gets all the facts and then mixes them up in such a way as to not clarity, but to muddy the waters. His is a postmodern biography. **Wilde is presented as a relativist with no sense of good and evil.** On the contrary, Wilde's art shows a consistency of objective morality. The other key thing about Ellmann is that he bases his whole approach to Wilde on the supposition that Wilde contracted syphilis while at Oxford. He states that this conviction "*is central to my conception of Wilde's character and my interpretation of many things in his later life.*" But I show pretty conclusively, through the evidence of Wilde's doctors, that Wilde never had the disease. That means, by Ellmann's admission, that his biographical house of cards collapses.

There are three kinds of biography. There is hagiography, which covers up all the subject's warts. Then there is what I call '*hackography*', which hacks to pieces the subject and is written by hacks. But the true biographer approaches the subject with humility and is at the service of objective truth — not his personal agenda. He lets the facts speak for themselves so people can see for themselves and check his facts.

The Interviewer : In researching and writing this book, what surprised you the most about Oscar Wilde ?

Joseph Pearce : The first thing is exactly how true my instincts were ; they far exceeded my expectations. Before beginning my research I knew only one or two of Wilde's works well. While reading his work, my eyebrows raised because of the obvious morality in his work compared to his reputation for hedonism and homosexuality. And then there is that fact that he entered the Catholic Church on his deathbed. I was surprised that his love affair with the Catholic Church was a lifelong one. Wilde nearly converted as a 19 old, and then in his early twenties. But he would have been disinherited if he had, so he didn't risk becoming Catholic. Years later he told a reporter that if his father hadn't kept him from becoming Catholic, he would have entered the Church earlier and spared himself his descent into homosexuality.

Wilde's wife, Constance described Wilde as "*My poor misguided husband, who is weak rather than wicked*" and it's an apt description. Some of his poetry is profoundly Catholic. The surprise to be found in Oscar Wilde is someone who loved the Catholic Church, but for

various reasons was unable to sacrifice himself to his beliefs. As a result he had a disastrous downfall in 1895. He had an inner war with his moral battles and often lost. He later gained an inner peace, but could never deal with being very poor and being in exile. He learned a very hard lesson. As he wrote in his 1898 poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* : **“How else but through a broken heart may Lord Christ enter in ?”**

The Interviewer : You had a dramatic conversion to Catholicism from agnosticism as a young man. How has that experience of conversion influenced and shaped your writing, especially when writing about converts such as Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, and Wilde?

Joseph Pearce : Very, very greatly. I became enthralled and enamoured with other stories of conversion. I read Cardinal Newman’s *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Ronald Knox’s *A Spiritual Aeneid* and a series called *The Road to Damascus*, published in the 1950s. I’ve always remained enthralled by how people come to Christ. Chesterton was a saint, so writing about him was easy. But because of my background, having been to prison twice as a young skinhead in East London, I’ve found it moving and edifying to get inside the head of Oscar Wilde, a more enigmatic character. It’s more satisfying in some ways. **It’s the Mary Magdalene path to Christ** and I’m attracted to it because it’s the path I came on. The fact that Wilde finally came to conversion in prison is something that is very powerful to me, because that is what happened to me. It was while I was in prison that I finally converted. It’s where I first began to pray, to say the Rosary, to go to Mass, and to think of myself as Catholic. So there is a connection.

The Interviewer : Many of the biographies you have written are about men whose works are being read today, many decades after their deaths : Wilde, Chesterton, Tolkien, and Lewis. What qualities do the works of those men possess that make them so enduring?

Joseph Pearce : What we see in these people are **great writers who are writing about great truths**. If that is the case with an author, his work will speak across the generations. Their work is part of tradition, what Chesterton calls a *‘living history’*. And tradition is the one thing that keeps a man from being a slave to his time. Their message is just as relevant as it was then. The perennial is permanent, by definition.

The Interviewer : Which author do you wish people would read more of today ? Why ?

Joseph Pearce : I think that person is the poet **Roy Campbell**. I've written a book, *Unafraid of Virginia Woolf : The Friends and Enemies of Roy Campbell* (2004) about Roy Campbell and he is a bit like Wilde. He had a dark and complex personality. During the 1920s Campbell was considered a major force and the most important poet after T. S. Eliot. What went wrong is that he became 'politically incorrect'. He came out against the famous Bloomsbury Group and attacked their decadent, depraved lifestyle, describing them as '*intellectuals without intellect*' and '*sexless folk whose sexes intersect*'.

That group, led by Virginia Woolf, made certain that Campbell was ignored or talked about in derogatory terms and in the 1930s he became mostly despised. He moved to Spain in 1934 and he and his family were received into the Catholic Church in 1935. He defended the Nationalists because Franco defended Catholicism against Communism. However, in England the left wing supported the Communists and so Campbell was considered a fascist. Campbell responded by attacking the left wing poets as hypocrites. He really is one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century.

The Interviewer : Some critics have attacked your biographies because you often share, without apology, the beliefs of your subjects. How do you respond to those criticisms ?

Joseph Pearce : This gets back to what I was saying earlier about writing a biography. The key thing is that I believe in the existence of objective truth, that it can be found and discovered. Most modern writers are relativists and post-modernist deconstructionists. For them truth is a fiction and their subject is a fiction. So you subject your subject to your subjective agenda. As a Christian and a biographer, I approach my subject with objectivity and ask : '*Who was he ?*' not : '*Who do I think or feel he was ?*'

The Interviewer : Do you currently have any books in the works for us ?

Joseph Pearce : Yes, a couple of books. One is *Literary Giants, Literary Catholics*, a collection of essays I have written on Dante, Shakespeare, Tolkien and many others.

[The Conflict Between Aestheticism and Morality](#) in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*