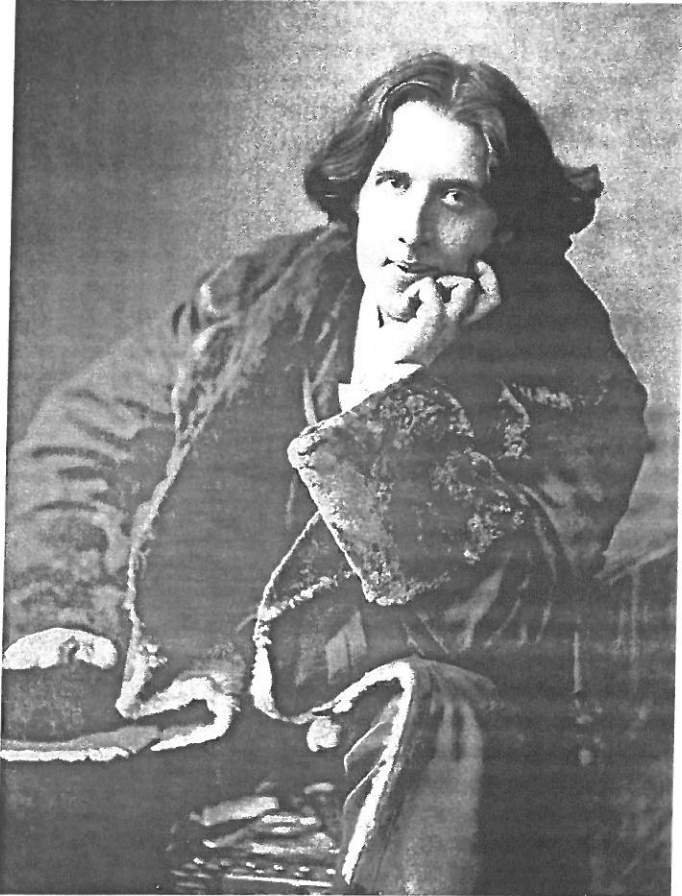


WILDE'S GENIUS



Irish-born playwright, novelist, poet, and essayist Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) is undoubtedly one of the most prominent personalities in the world's literary canon. He is as important for the sparkling wit and refinement of his unforgettable paradoxes, his stupendous imagination, and his exquisite command of the poetic power of the English language, as for his brilliant advocacy of "art for art's sake."

Long at the center of the aesthetic movement in London, Wilde enjoyed great acclaim as a dazzling champion of the ideals of artistic beauty. In his youth he became a celebrated dandy while he nimbly overcame his "outsider" condition, just like so many other major Irish authors who wrote in English. At the height of his career, however, he suffered a tragic fall from grace. Because of his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas ("Bosie"), during his famous trials he was charged with "gross indecency." Homosexuality was illegal in England under the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. Consequently and inescapably, Wilde's notoriety shaped him as a martyr. Sentenced to two years of hard labor, he was left penniless and infirm for the rest of his life, which he spent in Paris.

It seems uncannily prescient that in 1890 Oscar Wilde wrote: "It often happens that the real tragedies of life occur in such an inartistic manner that they hurt us by their crude violence, their absolute incoherence, their absurd want of meaning, their entire lack of style. They affect us just as vulgarity affects us. They give us an impression of sheer brute force, and we revolt against that. Sometimes, however, a tragedy that possesses artistic elements of beauty ... simply appeals to our sense of dramatic effect." (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*)

Wilde's genius marks him as one of the most quotable writers in the English language, particularly in comedy and epigram. His literary legacy comprises, besides the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, several insightful literary essays (such as *The Critic as Artist*), and nine plays, including *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *Salomé*, and *An Ideal Husband*. His comedic masterpiece, however, remains *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

One of the most vivid and inspired farces ever written, an impeccably absurd dissection of Victorian norms, values and conventions, Wilde's 1895 comedy has enjoyed countless revivals since its debut. Its far-reaching influence can be traced in the works of most important authors who made their mark in English dramatic literature after Oscar Wilde. A masterpiece of theatrical language, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is Wilde at his best: playful, satirical, audacious, and, above all, superbly witty.

A VICTORIAN PRIMER OF PROPER MANNERS

by Mrs. Humphry

EDITOR'S NOTE:

The following are excerpts from two books, *Manners for Women and Manners for Men*, written in 1897 by a Mrs. Humphry, known as "Madge" of "Truth." These guides to Victorian etiquette prescribe the proper behavior of well-bred upper middle class men and women in a variety of social and personal circumstances. Indirectly, Mrs. Humphry's advice to young men and women echoes and provides an insight into the rules of conduct governing the world described by Oscar Wilde's in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

MANNERS FOR WOMEN

The Really Nice Girl

Can anything in the world be nicer than a really nice girl?... [The typical English girl] is usually healthy-minded, and therefore not given unduly to introspection. She is far too well occupied in enjoying herself – riding her bicycle, punting herself about on the river, playing tennis or golf, and making sunshine in her home – to have much time for profitless self-analysis. She reads often enough that the sex she belongs to is a mystery, a problem, and she is content to leave herself unsolved, like a difficult conundrum. She is bright, frank, good-natured, merry, modest, and simple.

Learning to Laugh

There are many reasons why the careful culture of the laugh should be attended to. The theater is the very best place to study the matter when an amusing piece is being played. Look around at your neighbors in the stalls or dress circle, good friends, and see how many of them know how to indulge themselves in the expression of their mirth. For every one whose laughter is melodious there will be found a dozen who merely grin and half-a dozen whose sole relief is in physical contortion....

There is no greater ornament to conversation than the ripple of silvery notes that forms the perfect laugh. It makes the person who evokes it feel pleased with himself, and even invests what he has said with a charm of wit and humor which might not be otherwise observed.... The laugh is a test of good breeding and cultivation. It expresses refinement, or its absence, as clearly as the voice and intonation. The coarse "Haw-haw" of the uneducated tells us much. But it is music itself as compared with the horrid luscious laugh of the man who appreciates a nasty innuendo, the hateful *double-entendre* of the music hall. That is one of the most odious sounds in a world of dreary noises....

The Well-bred Girl

One can almost invariably distinguish the well-bred girl at the first glance, whether she is walking, shopping, in an omnibus, descending from a carriage or a cab, or sauntering up and down in the Park. Though the fashionable manner inclines to a rather marked decisiveness and the fashionable voice to loudness, even harshness, there is a quiet self-possession about the gentlewoman, whether young or old, that marks her out from women of a lower class, whose manner is fligid.

flappers
This is perhaps the best word to describe the lively gestures, the notice-attracting glance and the self-conscious air of the underbred, who continually appear to wish to impress their personality upon all they meet. Self-effacement is as much the rule of good manners in the street as it is in society. The well-bred woman goes quietly along, intent on her own business and regardless of the rest of the world, except in so far as to keep from intruding upon their personal rights.

How to Dress

Women dress irrationally. I admit it fully and completely. And though men – yes, men – have lectured about the irrationality of our dress, I can assure them that for every point they bring against it I could tell them four or five more. No one knows so well as women themselves how very inconvenient modern dress is. The only time that we don't grumble about it is when we see a sister-woman attired in "rational" costume. It is then that we hug our faults and follies to our breasts, and delight in our delinquencies. We compare those heel-less prunella shoes with our own neat patents – wicked things they are, though, with their pointed toes and narrow soles. We contrast their shapeless figures with our own smart outlines, and are so lost to a sense of our sartorial sins as to congratulate ourselves on our sumptuary superiority. The mood does not last long. We soon begin again to feel where the shoe pinches – perhaps the corset too – to suffer from the weight of our over-wide skirts, and to commiserate ourselves for difficulties with hats and hairpins. How truly fiendish a hairpin can be no mere man can ever know. When it presses against the skull and produces a local nerve-torture of an indescribably vicious nature, a man might imagine that the easy thing would be to pull it out. Only the rashest of women would venture upon such a course of action. Like Hamlet, we prefer to bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of. For if, in the withdrawal of that single pin, the whole bright coiffure should come tumbling down, ay! there's the rub! ...

And why do women dress irrationally? Well, in strictest confidence, I can give several good reasons. If we did not do so, we should be unpleasantly singular. The men who belong to us would call us dowdy, and would shirk escorting us to our pet restaurants, our favorite theaters, and even to church. Men are like that. They are really more sensitive to public opinion than women.... And yet another good reason for abstaining from the singular in dress is that the quality is an infectious one. An eccentric costume nourishes and develops eccentricity in the wearer...

The object of a fashionable woman in dressing, is to make herself distinctive without becoming conspicuous – to excel by her union of graceful outline and fidelity to the fashion of the moment (no easy task), and, while offering no striking contrast to those around her, so to individualize herself that she is one of the few who remain in the memory, when the crowd of well-dressed women is recalled only as an indistinguishable mass. There are half a dozen women in London society who succeed in thus accomplishing a task that bristles with contradictions.

Tact

Tact is both innate and acquired. The root of the thing must be born with the possessor, or the soil will prove uncongenial. Years of mingling in good society are necessary to its full development, and though a delicate sense of what is due to others is of the very essence of tact, it is never quite perfect without a knowledge of the gentle art of snubbing. This is an accomplishment which some women never acquire. They cannot firmly repress the unduly officious or the over-eager without adopting harsh measures or losing their temper. Where they should simply ignore, they administer the cut direct. When a phrase, well sharpened and skillfully aimed, would answer all purposes, even if uttered with the gentlest voice and with the politest intonation, they avail themselves of weapons that should not be found in any gentlewoman's armory. The "retort courteous" loses none of its point for being courteous, and how agreeably it compares with the bludgeon style of warfare of some fair warriors!

Addresses

A good address is among the desirable circumstances of our surroundings, and there is no harm whatever in describing our locality in the best possible fashion. But to hear some of the disagreeable remarks occasionally made in such cases, one might imagine it to be a piece of what is popularly known as "side." "I'm not going to do anything so idiotic as to address her at Something Street, Cavendish Square, when she really lives in a back street out of Marylebone High Street," is the sort of thing that ill-natured persons sometimes say. But ill-nature is always an enemy of good manners.

The Upper Middle Class

Our upper middle classes – those to which the great bulk of military and naval officers belong, physicians, barristers, clergymen, and men who enjoy independent fortunes sufficient to enable them to enjoy lives of comparative luxury and leisure – are much cleaner and wholesomer in their lives and manners than the great mass of the high aristocracy. It is in the houses of the upper middle classes that true refinement is found, combined with luxurious appointments, and that exquisite, dainty cleanliness which, again, is much oftener found in this class than in what the French call "le big life."

MANNERS FOR MEN

The Ideal Man

Like every other woman, I have my ideal of manhood. The difficulty is to describe it. First of all, he must be a gentleman; but that means so much that it, in its turn, requires explanation. Gentleness and moral strength combined must be the salient characteristics of the "gentleman," together with that polish that is never acquired but in one way: constant association with those so happily placed that they have enjoyed the influences of education and refinement all through their lives. He must be thoughtful for others, kind to women and children and all helpless things, tenderhearted to the old and the poor and the unhappy, but never foolishly weak in giving where gifts do harm instead of good – his brain must be as fine as his heart, in fact. There are few such men but they do exist....

If good manners are not practiced at home, but are allowed to lie by until occasion calls upon their wearer to assume them, they are sure to be a bad fit when donned. It may be a trifle of the smallest to acquire

a habit of saying "if you please" and "thank you" readily, but it is no trifling defect in a young man to fail to do so. If he does not jump up to open the door for his mother or sister, he may omit to do so some day when the neglect will tell against him in the estimation of those to please whom he would gladly give much....

The Company We Keep

Unfortunately, many a good fellow has been driven to seek companionship with those beneath him by the very difficulty he experiences in getting on in society.... He must find amusement somewhere. It is only natural to youth to crave it. At first his taste is jarred by those inferior to him, and his fastidiousness offended by their manners. But, such is the fatal adaptability of human nature to what is bad for it, he soon becomes accustomed to all that he at first objected to, and even forgets that he had ever found anything disagreeable in it. His dress and carriage deteriorate, and he is well on his way downhill in life long before he realizes that he has quitted his own level, probably for ever.

At a Ball

A man I knew was once introduced at a ball to a girl, with whom he danced two or three times. Before he met her again he heard that she had been actively concerned in circulating a slander about another girl whom circumstances had misrepresented. I happened to see the next meeting between the two. The girl bowed, smiled, and showed some sign of an intention to stop and talk. The man raised his hat, looked extremely solemn and unsociable, and passed on. It was enough. The girl understood that he did not wish to resume the ball-room acquaintanceship, and very probably guessed why. He did it beautifully.

Dining Out

Dinner stands alone as an institution sacred to the highest rites of hospitality. To be invited is an honor to the young man who is just beginning his social life. To absent himself would be a gross rudeness, unless he could plead circumstances of a pressing nature.... The hostess can with difficulty find a substitute at short notice, and the whole plan of her table is destroyed by the absence of one person. There are few people who would not feel offended at being invited to fill a gap of the kind, and this is what makes it so extremely discourteous to disappoint at the last moment, as it were....

When a young man is shown into the drawing-room, he at once goes up to his hostess, no matter whether there is any one he knows nearer to the door than the lady of the house. This is always a fixed rule, whether it be on the occasion of a call or visit, or on having been invited to a party of any kind. When he has been greeted by his hostess he looks round the room to see if there is anyone present whom he knows. If so, he goes up to the ladies first, if there are any of his acquaintance present, and afterwards greets the gentlemen. His host will probably have shaken hands with him immediately after his wife has done so. He will then be told what lady he is to take down to dinner, and be introduced to her, if he does not already know her. He must bow, not shake hands, and make small talk for her during the interval between his introduction and the announcement of dinner.

Here is his first real difficulty. To converse with a perfect stranger is always one of the initial social accomplishments to be learned, and it

is not at all an easy thing at first. It needs practice. Ninety men out of every hundred offer a remark upon the weather; but unless there has been something very extraordinary going on in the meteorological line, it is better to avoid this subject if possible....

By the way, a man must not at his very first dinner party expect to be given a pretty girl to take down. He may possibly be so fortunate, but those prizes are usually reserved for men of more experience in social life. The young man has probably been invited to make up the necessary number of men, and an unmarried lady of uncertain age or an elderly woman without much claim to consideration will probably fall to his share. However, there is this consolation, she will be excellent for practicing upon. He would not mind making small mistakes so much as if his partner were a young and charming girl.

Tea Time

Gentlemen are in great request at five o'clock tea. Their duties are rather onerous if there are but one or two men and the usual crowd of ladies. They have to carry teacups about, hand sugar, cream, and cakes or muffins, and keep up all the time a stream of small talk, as amusing as they can make it. They must rise every time a lady enters or leaves the room, opening the door for her exit if no one else is nearer to it, and, if the hostess requests them, they must see the lady downstairs to her carriage or cab.

At the Theater

Singers, actors, and actresses generally possess the sensitive, sympathetic, artistic temperament, and it is wounding to them to see members of the audience fidgeting, rustling about, chattering, laughing, and otherwise showing inattention when they are doing their best to entertain them. It is, therefore, uncivil to betray inattention. A little appreciation goes a long way with the members of the profession of music and the drama.

Engagement and Marriage

The old-fashioned rule that a man must approach the father of a girl before offering himself in marriage to her has now, to some extent, died out. At the same time it is considered dishonorable for any one to propose to a girl in the face of the decided disapprobation of her family. Clandestine courtship is also regarded as dishonorable, except in circumstances where the girl is unhappy or oppressed and needs a champion.... Should the lady accept the offer, the happy wooer must take the earliest opportunity of seeing her father, or, failing him, her nearest friend, and begging him to permit the engagement. Should he consent, all is well; but in the contrary case, his decision must be accepted. To allow a girl to engage herself against the wish of her family is to drag her into a false position....

Such trifles as wealth and ease may appear as naught to the mind of the youthful lover, not to be weighed for a moment in the balance with love and young romance. The girl, too, may be of the same way of thinking at the time, but it the more behooves the man, the stronger, to consider her and to remember that poverty is such a bitter and a cruel thing that it even kills love at times.

Dressing

It is absolutely true, though in a very limited sense, that the tailor makes the man. If a man does not dress well in society he cannot be a success.

If he commits flagrant errors in costume he will not be invited out very much, of that he may be certain. If he goes to a garden party in a frock-coat and straw hat, he is condemned more universally than if he had committed some crime. The evidence of the latter would not be upon him for all men to read, as the evidence of his ignorance in social forms is, in his mistaken notions of dress.

Tell Me No Lies

Occasionally it happens that a young man finds himself "dropped" by some family with whom he has been on terms of intimacy. He is debarred by the rules of polite society from asking for an explanation, it being a canon of good breeding never to ask questions that are embarrassing to reply to. This has been embodied in a very outspoken and unceremonious phrase "you ask me no questions, I tell you no lies." There is a deep truth in it, nevertheless, and even in family life it is well to observe it.

Polishing the Surface

In society the quality of the heart matters little, so long as the surface is, at the same time, genial and polished. Life is chiefly made up of small things, and if we learn to take an interest in the trifling incidents of our friends' lives, in the everyday occurrences in the existence of our acquaintances, we supply the sympathetic element that tells so largely in our favor. And very often the simulation of this interest induces the reality, and our own life is brightened by participating in the pleasures and the happiness of others, and deepened by sharing in their disappointments, and by doing so helping them to overcome them....

Were I asked to give a recipe for the formation of a good manner I should recommend an equal mixture of self-confidence and humility as the first essential, then a considerable desire to please, tempered by the self-respect which preserves from officiousness and that annoying air of "ingratiating" themselves that some men assume in society. There must be perfect self-possession, though in the very young this is scarcely expected, a little becoming shyness sitting very well upon them.... When self-possession has been acquired it is well to add on to it the saving grace of gentleness. This quality is much misunderstood by men. In women they adore it; in themselves and each other they undervalue it. But women love gentleness in men. It is a most telling piece of the necessary equipment for society. A gentle manner, a gentle voice, and the absence of all self-assertion that is at the root of the matter, have won more love than good looks.

Carlyle called the members of upper class society "amiable stoics," in reference to the equable serenity of countenance and calm self-possession of manner with which they accept those occasionally trying conditions of social life which necessitate self-denial in matters great and small. This placidity is the result of long training.... The man of "perfect manners" is he who is calmly courteous in all circumstances.... It is probably in imitation of this surface equanimity that the wooden stare has been adopted so universally by our golden youth. This is useful for wearing at one's club or in the stall of a theater, and it at once stamps the proprietor of the stare as being "in it."

From *Manners for Women & Manners for Men* by Mrs. Humphry. First published in England in 1897 (a reprint was issued by Webb & Bower Limited in 1979)