



The Portrait of Mr W.H.

Oscar Wilde , Peter Ackroyd (Foreword)

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In 1609, the first edition of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* was published, featuring the mysterious dedication: "To Mr W.H." Ever since, the identity of Mr W.H. has been the subject of a series of fascinating theories—but none quite so ingenious as that of Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Mr W.H.* Cambridge scholar Cyril Graham spent his days performing in Shakespeare's plays, and, being somewhat effeminate in nature, he was cast in the female roles. And then he made a rather startling discovery—the "Mr W.H." to whom Shakespeare dedicated his *Sonnets* could be none other than Will Hughes, the boy-actor of Shakespeare's plays! But when no one shares his conviction, he resolves to find another way to convince them.

The Portrait of Mr W.H. Details

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From Reader Review The Portrait of Mr W.H. for online ebook

kasia says

Great fun

Thomas says

Wilde was so enamored of his theory about Shakespeare's love of a boy actor (which was, in theory, Shakespeare's inspiration for the sonnets) that he wrote this story to frame it. After it was published it raised a furor, so naturally Wilde had to expand it. The enlarged version adds corroboration for the theory and is more philosophical, but it doesn't improve the original story. It's like a chocolate covered carrot. Unless you're a carrot-loving Shakespeare scholar, you'll say "more chocolate, less carrot."

Valorie says

This is a strange little short story, and the only reason it's clearly by Oscar Wilde is from the great witty dialogue. From the mysterious inscription "To Mr. W.H." in Shakespeare's sonnets, Wilde imagines a story of a young man who thinks he's unlocked the clue to W.H.'s real identity, and becomes obsessed with proving it. He dies for his theory, and another young man takes it up, and so does another.

The theory itself is interesting, and Wilde presents it almost as a research treatise. We are never really distracted from the story he's telling, but the serial notations of evidence cited from the Sonnets have an almost academic air to them. It would not be a huge leap to think Wilde might have actually believed this theory, and used three other characters to thinly and safely veil it in fiction.

The narrative arc is a bit weak, and the ending a bit abrupt, but this story will stick with you. Don't be surprised if you spend a lot of time wondering who Shakespeare really meant.

Christina says

Has anyone else the feeling that Wilde dealt with his own theories in this work and simply pictured them as the idea of a fictional character so that no one could criticise him directly or is it just me?

Chad Schimke says

The Portrait of Mr. W.H. by Oscar Wilde is a great compact little book. It's not really a book, but more like a novelette. Longer than a short story, shorter than a novella. There are two pieces contained within. FIRST - The Portrait of Mr. WH. It advances the idea that Shakespeare's Sonnets are dedicated to Willie Hughes (Mr. WH). The intrigue centers on a purported portrait of an effeminate male actor depicted in female roles. Not

unusual in Shakespeare's days, since only males were allowed to perform on stage of the Globe Theatre in Elizabethan England. SECOND - The Ballad of Reading Gaol. It's very dark, apparently the last work completed prior to his death. The poem is organized in six sections with images of trials, prisons, wardens, guards and the hangman's gallows. There is conflicting information as to whether the poem's genesis was his imprisonment for A. moral reasons or B. loss of a libel case. Nonetheless, the mood is severe, reinforced by the poem's melodic structure. Wilde's quotations are brilliant short witticisms, his plays are societal intrigues constructed of effervescent dialogue and his involvement in the aesthetic movement promoted gilding the lily, in other words, art for art's sake.

Elizabeth says

Great little academic mystery peppered with Wildean wit. Recommended for anyone suffering a passionate love/hate relationship with literary criticism. Also, you will experience these lines in context:

"Martyrdom was to me merely a tragic form of scepticism, an attempt to realise by fire what one had failed to do by faith. No man dies for what he knows to be true. Men die for what they want to be true, for what some terror in their hearts tells them is not true."

"Or was there no permanence in personality? Did things come and go through the brain silently, swiftly, and without footprints, like shadows through a mirror? Were we at the mercy of such impressions as art or life chose to give us? It seemed to me to be so."

"The great events of life often leave one unmoved; they pass out of consciousness, and, when one thinks of them, become unreal. Even the scarlet flowers of passion seem to grow in the same meadow as the poppies of oblivion. ... But the little things, the things of no moment, remain with us."

??????? ?????????? says

"????????? ?? ?????? ?." ? ?????, ????? ????? ????? ?????????? ?? ????? ?????????? ?????, ?? ?????????? ??????. ?????, ?? ?????????, ?? ????? ? ?????????? ??????, ? ?????????, ?? ??? ?? ?????????? ??????. ??????? ?? ??? ? ? ????????? ? ????????? ????? ????????? ? ?????????????? ?? ??? ????? ? ? ?.

Ana Rînceanu says

A wonderful tale about falling in and out of love with a literary interpretation. Is it worth dying for?

Erskine is telling the tale of his friend Cyril Graham who tried to uncover the identity of Mr. W. H., the enigmatic dedicatee of Shakespeare's Sonnets. Based on an assumption that the sonnets were addressed to one Willie Hughes, a boy actor who specialized in playing women in Shakespeare's company, this theory depends on the assumption that the dedicatee is also the Fair Youth who is the subject of most of the poems.

Angela says

2 1/2 this isn't a short story as much as it is a very well-developed and eloquently articulated conspiracy theory. kind of gay, too, if you ask me.

Michael says

The fact that William Shakespeare's Sonnets are dedicated to one Mr W.H. has been the source of much speculation. Eighteenth century critic Thomas Tyrwhitt suggests that the sonnets are written for a person known as William Hughes. He bases this theory on his interpretation of the Sonnets, lines like "A man in hue, all Hues in his controlling" (the 20th sonnet) where the word 'Hue' is capitalised and italicised and the multiple puns on the name 'Will' found in the sonnets.

The Portrait of Mr. W.H. is a short story by Oscar Wilde; it only took me about twenty minutes so I don't think I'll say much about it but it was a story I wanted to review. Yes, it was required reading for university but it was an interesting enough piece that getting my thoughts down seemed like a good idea. I remember reading The Picture of Dorian Gray a long time ago and not getting on with it; maybe I wasn't for me or maybe I just hadn't had the literary knowledge to get something out of it. In any case, I'm curious enough that maybe Dorian Gray will be a reread in the future.

I want to compare The Portrait of Mr. W.H. with My Life as a Fake because they both seem to talk about a similar topic. While My Life as a Fake covered a literary hoax, The Portrait of Mr. W.H. looks at a piece of literary criticism that has been around for a long time and is often talked about. I don't agree with this theory and it is important to know that Oscar Wilde didn't either, although by the end he almost did. What I really liked about this story is the fact that Wilde took a differing view of the Sonnets and tried to explore it. This is an excellent example of literary criticism because it got me looking at the Sonnets in another way, even if I didn't agree with it.

The fact that Oscar Wilde managed to write this literary criticism in a form of a story was equally impressive. The whole story has this real gothic feel about it and the character of Willie Hughes showed vampiric characteristics in the way he destroyed lives, in particular Cyril's. Yet another similarity to My Life as a Fake is the whole idea that literature or the author can be portrayed as a monster.

I read this story as social criticism, looking at the homo-eroticism of Shakespeare's Sonnets and question if a particular piece of text has any effect on the value of the art form. I don't know many people complaining about the homoerotic nature of Shakespeare but I've heard complaints about it when referring to Oscar Wilde. Wilde was a big believer in celebrating art as being art and not letting the opinion of the artist affect it. This means The Portrait of Mr. W.H. is a satirical look at the art, where you have to take a more literal approach and explore the life of William Shakespeare as an artist and its connection to the Sonnets.

Oscar Wilde tantalises the reader with his literary and social criticism, mix in the satirical nature of this story and the wit of the author and you have a compelling read. One thing I've been thinking about is the connection between this story and The Picture of Dorian Gray which I would like to leave you with. They both share very similar titles but in Dorian Gray you have a portrait that ages and the reader see the truth, of Gray and all his sins. While in The Portrait of Mr. W.H. the picture of Willie Hughes is a lie and I have to wonder the meaning behind this imagery when comparing the two.

This review originally appeared on my blog; <http://literary-exploration.com/2014/...>

Gabriela Silva says

I had no idea what it was about. I really liked, it was a good time.

Louis says

This one deals with a theory surrounding Shakespeare's Sonnets. I love the Sonnets, so this was easy to like. Didn't really get the point of the story (except maybe to guard your beliefs with everything you have) but the appreciation of literary works that seems to be the main theme delighted me.

Luís C. says

From the mysterious dedication of Shakespeare's sonnets, Oscar Wilde imagine a forger of history. Anecdotal but original enough to be read without trouble.

Mark Hiser says

An enjoyable story in which Wilde brings to fiction the theory that Shakespeare's sonnets were addressed to a Willie Hughes, a young male actor in Shakespeare's company.

The theory was actually first presented by Thomas Tyrwhitt in the an English scholar living in the 18th century. In his theory, however, William Hughes may have been a musician for the Earl of Essex as there is no evidence of a William Hughes in list of actors found in the First Folio of the plays.

Though we may never know the identity of Mr. W.H., the young man the poet so passionately addresses in the Sonnets, Wilde's version is an enjoyable literary mystery story as well as an exploration of the Artistic Muse, and of obsession to an idea.

The FrankenPod says

I swear the end gets me everytime. I know it's not that well thought of compared to his other work but I simply love it. It is a story to read over and over again, get lost in the theory and finally realise that it is nothing but lovingly crafted nonsense.

Sarah says

This story has an interesting topic: the mysterious male subject (Mr. W. H.) of Shakespeare's love sonnets. This is made even more interesting if the sonnets in question are read for good measure to give more of a context to the whole things. However, there are plenty of the typical Wildeisms to go around as well as many allusions to the Bard.

I have seen a few reviews on here that have classified Wilde's short stories as more of an explanation of an idea rather than a plot-based story. This is a completely valid way to look at it, and I agree with this even though there actually is a story present that is as engaging as I expect from Wilde. The topic explored is what really makes this story good. While I can get into the characters created to some degree, the mystery of Shakespeare is always interesting to read about. I was very pleased when I found out that good old Oscar wrote a story about it!

Just a wonderfully witty, engaging little story that is easily paired with the Shakespearean sonnets as a companion piece.

Rao Javed says

One thing I hate and love about Oscar Wilde is that he makes the start and the end beautiful but what I hate about him is that he makes story uselessly long with arguments and debates.

This was also great from start boring in between but brilliant in the end. The story was written well, the concept was around the mystery of Mr. W.H of Shakespeare sonnets. The story line went fine not that great but fine. The best thing about the story was that it showed how obsession is a young man's game and how it can kill. There is nothing with dying for but trust...nothing is true at all not even you.

Teresa says

As with much of Wilde's fiction, this is less a story than an exploration of an idea. Here, the exploration has to do with obsession; the fallacy in much literary theory when someone wants to prove the point of their obsession; and how that obsession can disappear as quickly as it came once the idea has been shared with someone else. Perhaps others might find the ending sad or even tragic; I thought it was funny in its absurdity, which I venture to say is what Wilde was probably going for.

The long poem, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" is also included in this very slim volume. I'd read it once before and found it just as affecting this time.

Shyam says

— *The most brilliant story of all is that story of Wilde's, Mr Best said, lifting his brilliant notebook. That Portrait of Mr W. H. where he proves that the sonnets were written by a Willie Hughes, a man all hues.*

— *For Willie Hughes, is it not? the quaker librarian asked.*

Or Hughie Wills. Mr William Himself. W. H : who am I?

— *I mean, for Willie Hughes, Mr Best said, amending his gloss easily. Of course it's all a paradox, don't you know, Hughes and hews and hues the colour, but it's so typical the way he works it out. It's the very essence of Wilde, don't you know. The light touch.*

His glance touched their faces lightly as he smiled, a blond ephebe. Tame essence of Wilde.

—*Ulysses, Scylla and Charybdis (1922, 190)*

Once you have read Shakespeare's Sonnets, I would highly recommend reading this great story by Mr. [W]ilde shortly after. The story is very entertaining, and although I didn't enjoy Olde Will's Sonnets all that much, I'm beginning to think I could read, with pleasure, *this* Mr. W., on almost anything.

By the by, as the title suggests, a certain Portrait plays a key role in this story, and I think there are some definite allusions/comparisons which could be made with the role of the famous Portrait in Wilde's other story, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Something to keep in mind if revisiting the latter.

N.B.

This story seems to be included in collections (such as the Oxford World's Classics and Everyman's Library collections) in the abridged form of 3 chapters, which was the version released during Wilde's lifetime. To be sure, the full version contains 5 chapters of ~60+ pp., and was only published in this form after Wilde's death. As well as this Hesperus Press edition, the full version can be readily obtained in Penguin's Selection of Wilde's Critical Writings.

Read from *The Works of Oscar Wilde*

'My dear fellow,' he said, 'let me advise you not to waste your time over the Sonnets. I am quite serious. After all, what do they tell us about Shakespeare? Simply that he was the slave of beauty.'

'Well, that is the condition of being an Artist!' I replied.

Art, even the art of fullest scope and widest vision, can never really show us the external world. All that it shows us is our own soul, the one world of which we have any real cognizance. And the soul itself, the soul of each one of us, is to each one of us a mystery. It hides in the dark and broods, and consciousness cannot tell us of its workings. Consciousness, indeed, is quite inadequate to explain the contents of personality. It is Art, and Art only, that reveals us to ourselves.

. . . it seemed to me that I was deciphering the story of a life that had once been mine, unrolling the record of a romance that, without my knowing it, had coloured the very texture of my nature, had dyed it with strange and subtle dyes. Art, as so often happens, had taken the place of personal experience.

But he always set an absurdly high value on personal appearance, and once read a paper before our debating society to prove that it was better to be good-looking than to be good. He certainly was wonderfully handsome. People who did not like him, Philistines and college tutors, and young men reading for the Church, used to say that he was merely pretty; but there was a great deal more in his face than mere

prettiness. I think he was the most splendid creature I ever saw, and nothing could exceed the grace of his movements, the charm of his manner. He fascinated everybody who was worth fascinating, and a great many people who were not. He was often wilful and petulant, and I used to think him dreadfully insincere. It was due, I think, chiefly to his inordinate desire to please. Poor Cyril! I told him once that he was contented with very cheap triumphs, but he only laughed. He was horribly spoiled. All charming people, I fancy, are spoiled. It is the secret of their attraction.

Irina Yankulova says

It is not surprising that The Portrait of Mr. W. H., written shortly before The Picture of Dorian Gray, caused a scandal when first published. Although only 88 pages long, in this "part work of fiction, part literary criticism", Wilde argues in an incredibly witty, elegant and above all - convincing way (none of this is a surprise, of course) that Shakespeare's Sonnets are in fact dedicated to an unknown Elizabethan boy-actor called Willie Hughes.

According to the theory, Hughes was in fact Shakespeare's biggest (if not, only) Muse and the two of them had a long and passionate relationship, disrupted only by the Dark Lady and Hughes' artistic vanity. The theory itself is presented in a very convincing fashion and the story that surrounds it is wonderfully written, moving and engaging.

What I personally found really hard to accept was the misogynistic claim in chapter three:

"(...)it is because Shakespeare was writing for Willie Hughes that Rosalind dons Doublet and hose, and calls herself Ganymede; that Violet and Julia put on pages' dress; (...) To say that only a woman can portray the passions of a woman, and that therefore no boy can play Rosalind, is to rob the art of acting of all claim to objectivity, and to assign to the mere accident of sex what properly belongs to imaginative insight and creative energy. Indeed, if sex be an element in artistic expression, it might rather be urged that the delightful combination of wit and romance which characterizes so many of Shakespeare's heroines was at least occasioned if it was not actually caused by the fact that the players of these parts were lads and young men whose passionate purity, quick mobile fancy, and healthy freedom from sentimentality can hardly fail to have suggested a new and delightful type of girlhood or of womanhood. "

It is my personal belief that no boy or man, no matter how talented he may be, can truly understand what it means to be a woman and therefore portray one on stage. Shakespeare's heroines do not need a boy performing them to become the strong, witty, courageous and passionate characters they are. (If anyone wishes to read further on the matter of women and theater, I strongly recommend Women in European Theatre.)

In conclusion, I enjoyed the book and was once again enchanted by Wilde's writing. I would recommend it to anyone interested in either his work or the mystery of Shakespeare's sonnets.
