

# **Epigrams**

Oscar Wilde

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A N epigram is the sublimate of genius. It is a crystallization from the commonplace. In its earliest form, indeed, it was but a mere writing upon a wall, but the modern epigram is distinguished by its particular brilliancy. It embodies the very quintessence of the thoughts of the writer. The early Greek epigram did not aim at wit, or necessarily produce the feeling of surprise, which are essential characteristics of the modern one. The writer to-day who follows the Greek epigrammatist succeeds only in being dull.

Chief among our English epigrammatists of modern days is that picturesque figure, Oscar O'Flahertie Wills Wilde. The London Athenæum, indeed, spoke of him as one whose writings would soon be found only on the shelves of the collector of the merely curious. But the Athenæum, like the great public it represents, notoriously modifies its opinions. What Mr. Wilde wrote is subject, not now, but hereafter, to final judgment, when we have reached the right point from which to observe it. A literary work, like sculpture, needs a proper perspective.

Whatever may be thought of the writings of Oscar Wilde as a whole, it is certain that in his epigrams and aphorisms we have the very flower and blossom of his genius. Just as Rochefoucauld put together the best of his own ideas and adaptations of the thoughts of the ancients in his "Maxims"; as Franklin voiced the practical wisdom of his time in the sayings of "Poor Richard"; as Chateaubriand established for Joubert permanent fame in the "Pensées," so in this compilation the literary genius of Oscar Wilde is revealed as in no other way, and we may trace, through his writings, the gradual evolution from palpable insincerity and striving for effect, to conscious truth and literary expression for the sake of the idea conveyed rather than for the expression's sake. Flippancy, lightness of touch, dilettantism, were, after all, only masks worn for the time, although the wearer himself was conscious only of the impression created by the mask, forgetting there was, nevertheless, something behind the mask which gave it the appearance of life. Under the insouciance there was something real, something tangible — a message conveyed to those who were capable of receiving it, although in this strenuous life of the Twentieth Century, nine-tenths of the world receives its message sonly over the tape of the stock market.



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