Background Notes

‘A work of art is useless as a flower is useless. A flower blossoms for its own joy. We gain a moment of joy by looking at it.’

‘Art for Art’s sake.’

The Aesthetic movement, sparked by the philosophy of John Ruskin and Walter Pater, challenged utilitarian notions that there is a natural contract between the audience and the artist i.e. manufacturer and market relationship.

Wilde’s preface to his novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, claims: ‘There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book’ implying that being well written was the keystone to aesthetic success. The poet Tennyson countered with the angry response that this would mean: ‘The filthiest of all paintings painted well/ Is mightier than the purest painted ill!’

Wilde reacted against these ideas in Victorian society:

• Industrialisation
• Hypocrisy/ complacency/ artificiality
• The Romantic view of Nature (he saw it as crude, unshaped)
• The People- the Artist was to be isolated and perhaps persecuted for his genius
• What Matthew Arnold defined as ‘Barbarians’- the aristocracy; and ‘Philistines’- the affluent middle classes
• Melodrama- where characters may be seen as talking ‘directly from life’

Influences:

• The ‘well-made play’- a fashion from France and the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen, where the mechanism of the play depends on a ‘time bomb’ from the past, leading to an explosion then some reassemblance of the accepted social order. Much use of coincidence, and question and answer to provide background.
• Roman dramatists such as Terence or Plautus with tales of separated siblings
• Shakespeare e.g. ‘The Comedy of Errors’ which features separated siblings
• Oliver Goldsmith’s play where a suitor adopts an assumed identity: ‘She Stoops to Conquer’