



# The Goodness in Sin: A Protest against Utilitarianism in Short Stories by Oscar Wilde

Thampy, Chitra Susan

(Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Kristu Jayanti College, Bengaluru)

## **ABSTRACT:**

Fairy tales have a pivotal part to play in a child's psyche. The ethos and notions created by these tales remain entrenched in a person's mind eternally. This paper attempts an analysis of Oscar Wilde's collection *The Happy Prince and other Stories* to establish Wilde's fairy tales as a protest against Utilitarianism rampant during the Victorian eon. The protagonists in the short stories are not perfect; they have all sinned by choosing "happiness" over "sacrifice". Their journey from ignorance to redemption through the discovery of selfless love and sacrifice conveys the message that being a sinner is part of being human. If sins can lead to redemption, then there is goodness in sin after all. Wilde was pointing out the flaws in the moral temperament of the Victorian age that chose to remain "happy" by being ignorant of the needs of the poor and the needy. The objective of the paper is to reveal the morals entrenched in the fairy tales with a view to developing the idea that though superficially Wilde disliked acknowledging his fairy tales to be moralistic, his aim was mainly targeted at the reading public during his time, pointing out their iniquities and ways to correct it- all captured within innocent fairy tales for children. The fairy tales of Oscar Wilde that have been taken into consideration are 'The Happy Prince', 'The Nightingale and The Rose', 'The Selfish Giant', 'The Devoted Friend' and 'The Remarkable Rocket.

**Keywords:** Fairy tales, Utilitarianism, Morality, Sin, Protest, Hypocrisy.

## **INTRODUCTION**

"If we reread some of the fairy tales with history in mind, it becomes apparent that the real "enchantment" emanates from the dramatic conflicts whose resolutions allow us to glean the possibility of shaping the world in accord with our needs and desires (Zipes 116).

Fairy tales have the freedom to be "untrue" in its nature through the portrayals of speaking birds and flowers and other inanimate objects, and its impossible plot twists set by strange and sudden changes that provide uncanny yet satisfying "returns" to something both deeply known and unknown. Apart from this characteristic, the truth portrayed through fairy tales is more candid than *verismo* because they admit to their fictitiousness. Moreover, this

“truth” takes the form of defiance to convention, a deviational swerve of expectations: “truth” as a social protest and as dreams come true.

Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde mirrored the moral hypocrisies of the Victorian society in his works, especially, his short story collection *The Happy Prince and Other Stories* (1888). The various characters in the stories were puppets in the hands of Wilde to help sow seeds of repentance and morality in the minds of readers. His fairy tales were a protest against immorality prevalent in the Victorian society. He possessed a vision that was much ahead of his time, however, his talented works were not accepted by the Victorian reading public. He was famous for advocating the importance of style in life, and art, and of satirizing Victorian morality, hypocrisy, sentimentality and narrow mindedness with a flashing wit and humour. Since his works usually ridiculed the iniquities of the Victorian society, the people overlooked the moralistic contents of his works and instead scorned Wilde for his dandyism, Hellenism and homosexuality.

On many occasions, Wilde let friends and admirers know that he wanted to be reminisced for the quality and scope of his art. But instead of his art, his current fame rests largely on his great wit and especially as one who dared to exhibit his homosexuality in the face of repressed Victorian England. Through it all, what has been overlooked is the essential Wilde, the Wilde whose novel, plays, and outstanding stories all carry very strong -- and very conventional -- moral messages. And it is this morality that is crucial to Wilde's vision of the world, not his flamboyance.

Wilde did not intend his fairy tales to be exclusively for children, but he employed a form that would appeal to them, nevertheless. They appeal to grown-ups as well, especially when they are read aloud. Oscar himself recognized this, “They are meant partly for children,” he said, “and partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy” (Holland Introduction, 6). A fairy tale was no mere fantasy story in the hands of Oscar Wilde. The caption to *The Happy Prince and other Stories*- ‘for children from eight to eighty’- expunges the separation between children and adults; thereby taking these stories to a level beyond merely fairy tales for children.

Wilde, in his short stories, clearly critiques the ideology of Utilitarianism which was a tradition stemming from the late 18th- and 19th-century English philosophers and economists Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. It envisaged that an action is right if it tends to encourage happiness and wrong if it tends to generate the reverse of happiness. The Principle of Utilitarianism operates on reducing harming and increasing happiness which, in a way, is fundamentally flawed. The reason being that since the system operates on the net gain of happiness in the society, it overlooks the rights of an individual leading to the justification of making one citizen miserable in service of the rest. This remains unjust to the basic rights of the individual. This protest against the Utilitarian principles might have stemmed from the various criticisms that Wilde had to face due to the high moral standards of the Victorian society that looked down at homosexuality. Wilde’s talents were overlooked, and his works were not considered as ones that could carry a moral for the readers. Wilde, therefore, uses his short stories to critique the Utilitarian ideology to opine that as an individual of the society he has the right to be known for the worth of his art and not how the Victorian society conceives Wilde as a person. This thought is subtly entwined and underlies the larger picture of the moral aspect of repentance and sacrifice to find the way back to goodness from sin.

In the short story “The Happy Prince”, the statue of the Prince attains redemption by giving away all the jewels on his body to the poor and needy of the society. He admits that once he was like any other human being- he had sinned by being ignorant of the poor of the society, because it kept him “happy”,

“When I was alive and had a human heart...I did not know what tears were, for I lived in the Palace of Sans-Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter... I never cared to ask what lay beyond it, everything about me was so beautiful. My courtiers called me the Happy Prince, and happy indeed I was, if pleasure be happiness. So I lived, and so I died. And now that I am dead, they have set me up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot chose but weep (Wilde 10).”

The sin that the prince committed was that he chose to remain happy and turned a blind eye to the sadness of the world. But later, he is chosen as the most precious jewel on earth by God as he attains redemption by giving to the poor. Here, Wilde shows that there is in fact goodness in sin if sin leads to redemption and change of heart. Utilitarianism is a running away from sadness in life because one looks forward to keeping himself/herself happy. According to Oscar Wilde, this is selfishness which leads to a piling up of sin without redemption as you choose to remain happy. This “utilitarian” aspect is found in the aristocrats (Town councillors and Mayor) when they plan to take down the statue of the Prince as it no longer looks beautiful with all its jewels gone, ““How shabby indeed!” cried the Town Councillors, who always agreed with the Mayor; and they went up to look at it... So they pulled down the statue of the Happy Prince. “As he is no longer beautiful he is no longer useful,” said the Art Professor at the University (27).”

The Victorians were great moralisers- they supported hard work, decorum, chastity and respectability. Wilde was looked down upon by the society for his homosexuality- not his value as an artist but only at his “flaws”. Wilde expresses through his stories that sin is part of being human. Redemption can only be attained by humans because we understand sin and we commit sins. But, if these sins help an individual to repent and to redeem himself and see and do goodness then the sins committed in this life will not be a barrier to attain a heavenly life.

The wicked and selfish Giant, in the story *The Selfish Giant*, who scares away the children from his garden and puts up the sign board that read “Trespassers will be prosecuted” also sins by being selfish enough to not share his belongings with others. Yet, God accepts him to Paradise when he attains redemption from his sin and understands that there is much more beyond one’s personal happiness, “...but more marvellous than anything is the suffering of men and of women. There is no Mystery so great as Misery (Wilde, *The Happy Prince* 23).”

Oscar Wilde believes in the morals of the individual person. He believes that the capability to feel sin is a privilege that should not be taken casually. "In the common world of fact, the wicked were not punished, nor the good rewarded" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 227). Oscar Wilde believes that the remorse caused by sin on the soul can be a useful tool to avert hypocrisy, vanity, and the temptation of dangerous senses.

Wilde was deeply affected by the double standards of the English upper classes and the Church. Wilde developed a poetical style evoking the rhythm and language of the Bible to expose the narrow-mindedness of the Church. Wilde’s fairy tales’ function as admonitions to selfishness and egotism. Beauty and spiritual

awakening are the rewards that come from suffering and sacrifice. The Selfish Giant learns to share his garden with the children and is rewarded with Paradise. Little Hans gallantly sacrifices himself to the egotistical, self-deceptive Miller in 'The Devoted Friend'. Both the Happy Prince and the Swallow achieve perfect beauty in the sacrifice of themselves for others by being rewarded Paradise.

## CONCLUSION

Wilde's parables, developed in his stories, are certainly one of his desired literary devices; he asserted in a letter to a friend that his stories were "an attempt to mirror modern life in a form remote from reality-to deal with modern problems in a mode that is ideal and not imitative" (Murray 9). In other words, he wanted the stories to deal with clear-cut moral problems, rather than with any form of murky imitation. "There is also no doubt that, ever since he, at the age of 20, participated in Ruskin's 1874 road building project, he believed that one of the functions of art was to improve society" (Ellmann 48). Thus, Wilde tried effectively to moralize in his stories, combining aspects of allegory and the necessity to change the Utilitarian society, without appearing heavy-handed or obvious. He is, Ellmann claims, "a moralist in a school where Blake, Nietzsche, and even Freud were his fellows" (96). This is feasibly the reason that his stories have communicated to so many persons in the last hundred and twelve years.

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