

OSCAR WILDE : TWO SHORT STORIES

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Introduction

In 1887 Oscar Wilde wrote four successful short stories; their order of publication is as follows:

1. *The Canterville Ghost*, 'a light-hearted transatlantic tale' in the words of Sheridan Morley¹, appeared serially starting on February 23, 1887, in *The Court and Society Review*.
2. *Lady Alroy* appeared in *The World* on April 25, 1887. Later its title was changed to *The Sphinx without a Secret*.
3. *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* appeared serially in *The Court and Society Review* starting on May 11, 1887.
4. *The Model Millionaire* appeared on June 22, 1887, in *The World*.

These four short stories were assembled and published in 1891 with the title *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* by James R. Osgood & Co. Ltd.

In 1888, he published *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, including *The Happy Prince*, *The Nightingale and the Rose*, *The Selfish Giant*, *The Devoted Friend*, and *The Remarkable Rocket*. Three years later in 1891, *The Young King*, *The Birthday of the Infanta*, *The Fisherman and His Soul*, and *The Star-Child* were published with a general title *The House of Pomegranates*. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* written in the same year has already been discussed.²

¹ *Oscar Wilde* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1976), p. 63.

² Cf. Akiko Higuchi: 'Oscar Wilde: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—A Defence of His Ethics and Art' in *Gakushuin Girls' High School Bulletin*, vol. III (pub. July, 1978).

In this short essay, I have tried to point out a few conspicuous points in Oscar Wilde's short stories. My discussion mainly concerns *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* and *The Canterville Ghost*. They form a sort of "spiritual scenery" of the author's happy days, and they attract one's attention if the atmospheres of these stories are compared with the psychological situation of his later days when he wrote the nine fairy tales and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

I. *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*

The hero, Lord Arthur, a good-natured, carefree young aristocrat, is told by a cheiromantist, or a chiromancer, Septimus Podgers, that he will experience "the terrible mystery of Destiny, the awful meaning of Doom"¹, the murdering of some one. He is engaged to Sybil Merton, a naïve, lovely girl:

He felt that to marry her, with the doom of murder hanging over his head, would be a betrayal like that of Judas, a sin worse than any the Borgia had ever dreamed of.²

What he should now do is to fulfill his duty:

Ardently though he loved the girl, and the mere touch of her fingers, when they sat together, made each nerve of his body thrill with exquisite joy, he recognised none the less clearly where his duty lay, and was fully conscious of the fact that he had no right to marry until he had committed the murder. This done, he could stand before the altar with Sybil Merton, and give his life into her hands without terror of wrongdoings.³

Feeling "no hesitation about doing his duty"⁴, and that "any delay would be unfair to Sybil"⁴, as "Life to him meant action, rather than thought."⁴ He justifies his motive from two viewpoints. One is that his murder "is

¹ *The Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Spring Books, 1963), Ch. i, p. 360. All quotations from the short stories and "The Star-Child" are from this edition.

² *ibid.*, Ch. iii, p. 363.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 364.

not a sin, but a sacrifice; his reason reminded him that there was no other course open.”¹ The other is his sense of duty, or, rather, the sense of a mission.

He had to choose between living for himself and living for others, and terrible though the task laid upon him undoubtedly was, yet he knew that he must not suffer selfishness to triumph over love.²

He felt that this was not the time for the gratification of any personal pique or dislike, the mission in which he was engaged being one of great and grave solemnity.³

After his two attempts at murder, which are rather comical, both proving failures, he kills the chiromancer himself in order to be relieved of the burden of “Doom”. The finale is a very happy one, Lord Arthur, Sybil and two children living a happy family life.

What troubles the mind of the reader is the fact that the hero never regrets murdering his victims. Being informed of Lady Clementina’s death, he finds “the consciousness that he had done his duty gave him peace and comfort”⁴ and that “He had almost entirely forgotten what he had done.”⁴ Utterly ridiculous and irrational, their wedding service was conducted by the Dean of Chichester whom Arthur had once plotted to blow to pieces.

Throwing Mr. Podgers into the Thames, “at last he seemed to have realised the decree of his destiny.”⁵ As soon as Lord Arthur reads about Podgers’ “suicide” in an evening paper, he is convinced that he can now marry Sybil. The happy young family seems to be the ideal family Wilde himself had wanted to have :

Never for a single moment did Lord Arthur regret all that he had suffered for Sybil’s sake, while she, on her side, gave him the best thing a woman can give to any man—worship, tenderness, and love.⁶

1 *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, Ch. iii, p. 363.

2 *ibid.*, pp. 363-364.

3 *ibid.*, p. 364.

4 *ibid.*, Ch. iv, p. 368.

5 *ibid.*, Ch. v, p. 374.

6 *ibid.*, Ch. vi, p. 375.

Why was he not accused of the chiromancer's murder? In the *fin de siècle* of London, chiromancy was prevailing among the fashionable. To have the ability to see into someone's future, that is to say, to be capable of foreseeing destiny, means that one has more power than a normal human being. If one dares to foresee the future, it means one trespasses on the precincts of God's domain. Destiny is only for God to know, and to manage. Man should only follow. So a chiromancer is one who acts blasphemously and profanely, and he is to be punished. Just as Dorian Gray is punished for overstepping the boundary of modesty that any human being must not step across, so must Mr. Podgers be punished.

Podgers, who plays the part of a seducer for Lord Arthur, can be compared with Lord Henry who seduces and degenerates Dorian. In the case of Henry, he dominates Dorian who dominates Basil. Basil is murdered by the seducer. In the case of Lord Arthur, he is not murdered by the seducer; on the contrary, he murders the seducer and is never tormented by a guilty conscience. Wilde wants to be logically consistent, so it will not be unnatural for the reader to understand why Lord Arthur should not suffer from his crime. It is not a sin, "but a sacrifice",¹ a "self-sacrifice".²

Lord Arthur explains his behaviour as follows. First he follows the dictates of his own Destiny. Because it *is* his destiny imprinted permanently in his palm. No one can change his fortune. Secondly, he merely fulfilled his duty to meet the demand of his destiny. He performed it out of a sheer sense of duty, not from hatred, nor for money. Executing his obligation was not only a duty for his Destiny, but also a duty he had to achieve before he married Sybil. As it was an obligation and even a self-sacrifice and not a sin, "the consciousness that he had done his duty gave him peace and comfort."³ In fact, "He had almost entirely forgotten what he had done,"⁴ means that Lord Arthur was quite uncon-

¹ *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, Ch. iii, p. 363.

² *ibid.*, p. 364.

³ *ibid.*, Ch. iv, p. 368.

⁴ *ibid.*

scious and not even slightly conscience-stricken of what he had done at all. This is totally different from Dorian who is very conscious of his sin, feeling strong pangs of conscience.

In the real world, such a man as Lord Arthur cannot exist. If one murders some one, he will be accused, or at least suffer from conscience. Remember that Lord Arthur is blessed by the Dean of Chichester, his uncle, whom he once plotted to blow up, and that he is bequeathed a house by will of Lady Clementina, his aunt, whom he once tried to poison to death. As we know, Wilde dislikes realism, so Lord Arthur does not live in a realistic world. Because Lord Arthur is a character in a fairy tale, I dare say, the reader envies his carefree self-centredness, artless innocence and his clear serenity.

Lord Arthur's self-centredness will pass on to *The Devoted Friend*, *The Remarkable Rocket*, *The Nightingale and the Rose*, *The Birthday of Infanta*, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The heroes of these fictions exploit for their own desires not only their adversaries or those whom they hate, but also those with whom they are supposed to be friends. This phase, I should assert, is an ironical challenge by the author against the Victorian decorum at the end of the nineteenth century.

Let me add one thing about Sybil. As we see it, she has all the "tender purity of girlhood"³ with a touch of Grecian grace in her pose and attitude.³ She was to him "a symbol of all that is good and noble,"³ giving Arthur, her husband, "the best thing a woman can give to any man — worship, tenderness, and love."² The reader cannot help comparing the tragic handling of Sibyl Vane, the heroine of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with happy Sybil.

II. *The Canterville Ghost*

Life, Love and Death: the most important subjects concerning human beings are related in this story with a humorous touch in the beginning and pathos in the end.

¹ *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, Ch. iii, p. 363.

² *ibid.*, Ch. v, p. 374.

This is a story in which a ghost who had murdered his wife in the Elizabethan age of England of the Old World faces a modern family of an American minister from the New World. The reader enjoys the humorous Henry Jamesian contrast between the old-fashioned Sir Simon and "the gross materialism"¹ of the Otises. It is "a mixture of social satire, burlesque and romantic sentiment."² Although the story is filled with gothic materials and situations, it is nothing but a romantic comedy; for what seemed to be terror turn into a farce. "A skeleton seated in an armchair by the fire reading her [old Madame de Tremouillac's] diary"³ and "a green hand tapping at the window pane,"⁴ do not frighten the family of the American minister. Rather they rouse a boundless curiosity that brings about a cheerful mood of the story. The ghost, Sir Simon, is old and in his dotage. We may see an inverted projection of the author's idea of old age professed later in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. For example: One Sunday night, the family found out that:

a large suit of old armour had become detached from its stand, and had fallen on the stone floor, while, seated in a high-backed chair, was the Canterville ghost, rubbing his knees with an expression of acute agony on his face.⁵

Certainly this must be a comical parody of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Poor Sir Simon is tricked by the Etonian twins: they throw a pillow at him (Ch. ii, p. 332); they shot two pellets at him from their pea-shooters (Ch. iv, p. 334); they stretched strings across the corridor (Ch. iv, p. 337); and they constructed a butter-slide for him. Sir Simon's persistent repetition of the blood-strain merely grieved Virginia, the minister's fifteen-year-old daughter and heroine, arousing the ambition of Washington's ingenuity. The ghost has many horrible alliterated, in some cases rhymed, disguises for his applauded repertoire collection such

1 *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, "The Canterville Ghost", Ch. iii, p. 334.

2 Morley, *Oscar Wilde*, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

3 *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, *op. cit.*, Ch. ii, p. 333.

4 *ibid.*

5 *ibid.*, p. 334.

as "Red Ruben, or the Strangled Babe,"¹ "Gaunt Gibeon, the Blood-sucker of Bexley Moor,"² "Dumb Daniel, or the Suicide Skeleton,"³ "Martin the Maniac, or the Masked Mystery,"⁴ "Black Isaac, or the Huntsman of Hogley Woods,"⁵ "Reckless Rupert, or the Headless Earl."⁶

Sir Simon, who has not slept for three hundred years, finds an occasion to tell Virginia about the Garden of Death :

Far away beyond the pine-woods, ... there is a little garden. There the grass grows long and deep, there are the great white stars of the hemlock flower, there the nightingale sings all night long. All night long he sings, and the cold, crystal moon looks down, and the yew-tree spreads out its giant arms over the sleepers.

About death he describes as follows :

Death must be so beautiful. To lie in the soft brown earth, with the grasses waving above one's head, and listen to silence. To have no yesterday, and no tomorrow. To forget time, to forgive life, to be at peace. You can help me. You can open for me the portals of Death's house, for Love is always with you, and Love is stronger than Death is.⁸

This corresponds with Virginia's answer to Lord Cecil's question : "He made me see what Life is, and what Death signifies, and why Love is stronger than both."⁹ When writing this, a similar cadence of the Song of Solon, VIII, 6,¹⁰ might have been resonant in the mind of the author. What the ghost seeks is written in an old prophecy on the library window :

When a golden girl can win

¹ *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, Ch. ii, p. 333.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*, Ch. iii, p. 335.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*, Ch. iv, p. 337.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*, Ch. v, p. 341.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*, Ch. vii, p. 346.

¹⁰ Set me a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm : for love is strong as death ; jealousy is cruel as the grave : the coals thereof *are* coals of fire,

Prayer from out the lips of sin,
When the barren almond bears,
And a little child gives away its tears,
Then shall all the house be still
And peace come to Canterville.¹

The ghost unriddles the above prophecy thus :

“They mean……that you must weep with me for my sins, because I have no tears, and pray with me for my soul, because I have no faith, and then, if you have always been sweet, and good, and gentle, the Angels of Death will have mercy on me.”²

Here little Virginia plays the role of Christ, the Messiah, just as the little boy underneath a tree covered with lovely white blossoms, with golden branches and silver fruit, in the Giant’s garden in *The Selfish Giant*, being willing to weep with the earth-bound spirit for his sins, and to pray with him for his soul, and “against the purity of a little child the powers of Hell cannot prevail.”³ Some analogical coincidence may be found with the salvation of Richard Wagner’s haunting captain of the Flying Dutchman in *Der Fliegende Hollaender* by Senta’s love. Virginia Otis and the Canterville Ghost are the principal figures in bringing a happy conclusion to Chapter V.

Conclusion

After a reading of Oscar Wilde’s four short stories, we find that each one of these four has a happy ending in the main. In *Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime*, the hero and the heroine get married, and enjoy a happy married life with two lovely children, a boy and a girl. In *The Canterville Ghost*, Virginia Otis and the young Duke of Cheshire get married, happily expecting a baby. In *The Model Millionaire*, Hugie, a needy youth, is presented ten thousand pounds to marry his fiancée. *The Sphinx*

which hath a most vehement flame.

1 *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, Ch. v, p. 341.

2 *ibid.*

3 *ibid.*

Without a Secret is slightly exceptional, for the heroine dies before she becomes happy. However, I pronounce it is a story that had been disrupted in the middle of the process. There is no decisive catastrophe between Lord Murchison and Lady Alroy. Just a chance of misfortune and a misunderstanding prevented her from becoming happy. Therefore, though the ending is not a happy one, it cannot be said to be too satirical, nor tragic. Rather I declare that the author's emphasis has been placed on the personality and manners peculiar to the heroine.

Except for *The Sphinx Without a Secret*, the heroes and the heroines of the short stories enjoy happy marriages. Now the conclusions of Wilde's fairy tales will be considered in comparison. The Happy Prince and the Swallow, the Nightingale and the Rose, the Selfish Giant, little Hans in *The Devoted Friend*, the little Dwarf in *The Birthday of the Infanta*, the Fisherman and the Mermaid, the Remarkable Rocket, all are destined to die. *The Young King* is also full of misery, though he himself improves spiritually and morally in the end. Even the Star-Child cannot be completely happy, since he reigns only for three years after three years of tribulations. Moreover the author delineates that "he who came after him ruled evilly,"¹ suggesting an unhappy, ironical ending.

Having examined the four short stories, nine fairy tales and a novel, the present writer ventures to offer a bold conjecture. It is very likely that in 1887 Wilde was in a romantic, happy, sentimental mood, having got married to Constance Mary Lloyed in 1884, and having had Cyril in 1885 and Vivian in 1886. After 1889, however, it seems that he became more satiric and realistic, emancipating himself from romanticism, which is convincingly seen in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Is it exorbitant to surmise that the appearance of Robert Baldwin Ross in 1886 had caused him to make the particular psychological transfiguration?²

Oscar Wilde who was innocent until 1886, when he was aged 32, experienced the dark, evil side of life through Robert Ross first, and Alfred

1 *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, "The Star-Child," p. 559.

2 Cf. Christopher S. Nassaar, *Into the Demon Universe*, (New Haven and London : Yale University Press, 1974).

Douglas next. After that he had to solve the problem of his sin-conscious self, and attain higher innocence, as Lord Arthur Savile and Virginia Otis did, though the latter did not experience a fall herself.

I have seen how his fall from innocence is enigmatically revealed in his prose writings, that is, four short stories, nine fairy tales and a novel. We cannot but perceive that the transition of the stories from light-touched ones to cynical and desperate ones began to take place in and after 1886 owing to his seriously stained experiences. My next task is to search for signs of his salvation, if it should exist, in his works as a reflection of his life.

Wilde seems to have undergone a basic change, both psychologically and as an artist, after his first homosexual experience in 1886, and his best work really dates from then. His literary productions in 1886 and after, moreover, constitute a new beginning, for he definitely regarded homosexual contact as evil and now wrote in full awareness of a demonic impulse within himself.

(p. xiii.)

1886—in that year Oscar Wilde died and born anew...Richard Ellmann rightly treats this event as pivotal both for Wilde the man and Wilde the artist.

(*ibid.*, p. 1.)