

**The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde
and
The Gain of Suffering**

**Durba Islam
Student ID: 07203006**

Department of English and Humanities

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and

The Gain of Suffering

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Durba Islam

ID: 07203006

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This paper is dedicated to,

Benjamin Said Dulal Telkamp

The fairy tales of Oscar Wilde would not have meant the same without you...

Life would not have been the same without you...

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Abstract

This thesis aims to study the fairy tales of Oscar Wilde and draw a conclusion as to why he incorporated so much pain, suffering, sadness and death in his stories. In other words, my aim was to study the “gain of suffering” in his fairy tales. It looks at whether Wilde merely wished to write different fairy tales than the traditional ones, or if he had a different purpose. The fairy tales that have been chosen are as follows- “The Star Child”, “The Happy Prince”, “The Nightingale and the Rose” and “The Devoted Friend”.

The thesis itself is divided into the introduction, four chapters, and finally the conclusion. In the first chapter I have given a summary of the origins and evolution of fairy tales in Europe, in the second chapter I have talked about the background of Oscar Wilde, his life and works. The third chapter looks at how his stories differ from those of the Grimm brothers and Hans Christian Andersen, and the fourth chapter focuses on the four fairy tales, their important structural elements and content.

Having studied the fairy tales and discussed the important elements in each, I have stated, according to my findings and interpretation, what Wilde’s intentions or purpose might have been- to depict how the modern society or life in the modern age could not be related to those depicted in traditional fairy tales, that the fairy tale could no longer serve the purpose it previously did in simpler societies, and how Wilde used the genre to fashion stories suited to not just his own times, but the future as well.

“There is no Mystery so great as Misery”

– Oscar Wilde (The Happy Prince)

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Introduction

Irish playwright Oscar Wilde is undoubtedly a well known name in the world of literature. Besides his plays and novels, he is also known for being the author of poems, short stories, and two collections of fairy tales, titled “The Happy Prince and Other Stories” and “The House of Pomegranates”, that have been the topic of discussion and research for scholars over the years. Oscar Wilde was not one of the conventional fairy tale authors who would adhere to traditional structures and elements, but rather, made use of those very traditional structural elements to create fairy tales that were quite unique. A close study will show that in his tales, Wilde appropriates and subverts the commonly recognized structural elements of folklore or fairy tales.

Fairy tales, not unlike fiction, have an interesting property that allows the author and readers to transcend real life limitations of time and space. “Once upon a time...” are four very powerful words, which can transport the reader instantly to a whole different world, beyond the limits of their physical existence. This negation of time and space allows authors to write about things without having to connect them to their own existence, which gives them some extent of freedom in terms of artistic and literary expression. Thus, it is not surprising that Oscar Wilde “found in fairy tales a congenial vehicle for displaying the flip side to his natural talent for inventive satire and coruscating wit” (Tatar Oscar Wilde 246). According to Wilde himself, “[t]he tales ... were an attempt to mirror modern life in a form remote from reality” (Tatar Oscar Wilde 247).

But as mentioned before, Wilde was not a conventional author of fairy tales, and neither were his fairy tales of the happily-ever-after sort. According to Maria Tatar, "Wilde ... may have begun some of his fairy tales with the phrase "Once upon a time," but he never ended them with "They lived happily ever after,"... [i]n fact, almost every story culminates in death" (Tatar Oscar Wilde 247). His stories are filled with characters who suffer and sometimes die in the name of their moral beliefs, or for the sake of virtue, but their suffering, sacrifices or death are not deemed valuable or meaningful by others.

According to the findings of Vladimir Propp, who structurally studied Russian folktales, there are 31 elements in the narrative structure of folktales (which can also be applied to fairy tales), but to summarize, "the single story which [he] finds at the basis of all folktales [and fairy tales] involves the hero's progression from a condition of lack to one of fulfillment" (Monaghan 157). This is precisely one thing that Wilde does not adhere to in his fairy tales. As mentioned before, most of his stories end in suffering or death, and in the words of Ellen Tremper,

"Wilde's stories ... are all lessons in the ironic hand of fate... [t]he stories are embittered by a kind of moral dissonance that makes the reader literally wince or grind his teeth as at the sound of a nail being dragged against a blackboard" (n. pag.).

One senses that Wilde somehow connects hopelessness and the lack of any sort of gain to altruistic behavior. His characters suffer in vain, are not able to gain anything or make any lasting changes.

Stanley Fish, one of the pioneers of the reader response theory, states that the reading process consists of a “sequence of anticipations, disappointments and revaluations on the part of the reader”, and that it is important to “concentrate not on what the works *mean* but what they *do*” (Booker 43). Similarly, according to Wolfgang Iser, one “should not explain a text *as an object* but its *effect on the reader*” (Guerin et al 355); thus, for both Fish and Iser, the text is a means that allows the reader to create meaning through individual interpretation. He also says that “by continually causing readers to examine their own assumptions and expectations, literary works can expand the consciousness of their readers” (Booker 46). If one considers the fairy tales of Wilde, his appropriation of the structural elements of the fairy tale genre creates a sort of expectation for the reader, that the story will end on a happy note for example, and that good deeds shall be rewarded while evil shall be punished. But upon reaching the end of the stories, the reader is disappointed because the story ends differently. That is when the disappointment occurs and causes the reader to re-evaluate their conceptions. By re-evaluating, readers will create new conceptions and ideas for themselves, and this process is triggered by the interaction between reader and text, but only if the reader is capable of and willing to go through the process.

Oscar Wilde’s fairy tales are not simple, didactic stories written for children, to educate them in the values of morals and virtues. They are complex, multi-layered, subversive texts that do not have one specific meaning in particular. For each reader, the focus might be different, and hence, meaning in these stories is created more by the reader upon

interaction with the text; it is not just stated bluntly in the tales by Wilde himself, and this is one of the reasons why the reader response theory seemed appropriate to study his fairy tales.

Every time I've read Wilde's fairy tales, I've been amazed at the amount of suffering portrayed within the stories. One finds characters suffering and making sacrifices, mostly for others; these sacrifices usually take the form of death. But these sufferings and sacrifices never lead to any gain, material, emotional or spiritual. Rather, the beauty and value of these sacrifices are juxtaposed by the indifference of others towards the sufferer. And this is how the phrase (or question) "the gain of suffering" came up, and that is precisely what I would like to explore in this paper.

Chapter 1

Fairy tales: Origin and evolution

The origin of folktales is very difficult to trace, given that each story can have a multitude of variations, and may be found all over the world, in different cultures and in different time spheres. No one single fairy tale can be said to belong to a particular place, society or culture, and no one single version can be labeled as the right or original version; rather, folktales and even fairy tales can be said to be universal. Each folktale consists of a basic structure which is the same for any culture, but then adjustments are made, that is, things are removed or added accordingly to each version that is, or was retold. Terri Windling notes that “[e]ach of [the] classic fairy tales is based upon themes that are universal”, and as an example, Windling mentions the well known story of Cinderella, “earliest known versions of [which], for instance, date back to 9th century China” and is “also f[ou]nd ... in the Middle East, India, Africa, and even in North America”(Old Wives Tales n. pag.). From this one may conclude that folktales and fairy tales are truly universal, and while “the flavor of each tale might change according to the culture, the times, and the teller, the core of the tale remains the same — because at their core these are stories that speak of the most basic elements of the human condition: fear, courage, greed, generosity, cruelty, compassion, failure, and triumph”, and hence their “themes are as relevant now as they’ve been for many centuries past” (Windling Old Wives Tales n. pag.).

Researchers and scholars differ on the topic of the origins of folktales or folklore. Kinga Varga-Dobai discusses this issue, and mentions a few names in relation to the claims they

have on this topic, for example, “Carl Wilhelm von Sydow claims that folktales are of Indo-European origin, other folklorists such as Will-Erich Peuckert ... trace them back to the civilization of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East”, but then, “[a]ccording to Otto Huth, folktales originate from the Stone Age” (25). Thus, one can see that the question of the origin of folktales is never really answered the same way by any two scholars, and is an issue that cannot be addressed fully within the scope of this paper. But, according to Varga, “[c]oncerning the relationship of folk and fairy tales, one of the prevailing theories associates folk tales with the peasant population who cultivated the stories through an oral tradition, and fairy tales with a written form mainly addressed to a higher, more educated social class” (25).

The oral tradition itself served as a means of self-expression for the story teller, besides being a way for people to deal with unexplained natural phenomenon, or a way to deal with the problems that they could not solve in real life. These oral stories originated in places all around the globe, and each was probably unique because of the geographical differences, and the “variety of cultural patterns” (Thompson 482); one can say that folklore originating in Europe would not be the same as those originating in Asia. Over time, these stories were transmitted through different cultures with the rise of trade and exploration, and each culture and era added its own variations, thus creating different versions of one main story. The problem with tracing the origins of the oral tradition of folktales and myths is that one can only study the available versions, and then come to some conclusion about the origin of a single tale.

Stith Thompson states that since people from different cultures, being human, will “have human needs”, thus “there will be similar acts and thoughts because of the limitation of possibilities in solving human problems...[t]he origins of myths and folktales over the world must be extremely diverse, so that it is not safe to posit any single origin even for those of a particular people” (482). It is equally problematic if one wishes to trace the origins of fairy tales belonging to the written tradition, for each story has so many variations, and are spread out over so many locations, that it is difficult to pinpoint one specific one as its origin. Many stories were also collected from storytellers and written down, thus even before the alterations within the written process, one would have to consider the alterations that had taken place when the stories were handed down orally. Considering the history of European fairy tales, the earliest folktales were all part of the oral tradition, and those stories were passed down through generations, by re-telling the stories over and over. With the process of re-telling, variations must have occurred as well. Changes must have been made, when deemed appropriate by the storyteller, or when made necessary by social, religious or cultural factors. Eventually, folklore made the transition from being orally transmitted to being written down. With this came a difference in the structure of the stories. When told orally, the stories would have to be simple enough in order to be remembered and retold. This would be achieved by the aid of elements such as rhymes, songs, repetition of events, relatively simple story structure, and so on. The main idea was to have stories that would not be forgotten easily. But when the transition was made to written folklore, the dynamics changed, because there was

now room to make the stories more complicated, both in structure and content. At the beginning written folktales would consist more of stories collected from other sources, than individual creations, or they would be based on stories that had already existed.

The earliest written collections of fairy tales that were found in Europe were by two Italian authors- "The Delectable Nights" by Giovan Francesco Straparola and "The Tale of Tales" by Giambattista Basile. These stories, unlike the fairy tales which are nowadays intended for children, were meant for adults, and were "sensual, bawdy, unflinchingly violent [and] morally complex" (Winding Old Wives Tales n. pag). Some of the stories that these collections contain are stories that appear to be written by the authors, and others are tales collected from storytellers of their times.

After the Italian writers one comes across the French "conte de fees", the term from which the English term "fairy tales" was derived. The French term was "coined for a group of 17th-century tales written for adults" (Winding Les Conte de Fees n. pag.).

These tales were also intended for an adult audience, namely the people who frequented the literary salons of Paris. In 17th and 18th century Paris, women of status would have their own salons, where they, in the company of other intellectuals would gather to discuss matters that they could not otherwise publicly address, such as politics, social or cultural matters. Literature was naturally of great interest to these people, and it was also customary for the host of a salon to create a new story, based on one which already existed. Some famous female authors arose out of the circle of these salonnières- Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, Catherine Bernard, Henriette Julie de Murat, Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier, to name a few, who would reinvent folktales and turn them into stories fit for

adults. These authors were “educated women with an unusual degree of social and artistic independence, and within their use of the fairy tale form one can find distinctly subversive, even feminist subtext” (Windling *Les Conte de Fees* n. pag.); they were also familiar with the earlier oral folktales and the fairy tales of Straparola and Basile. They also based their stories on stories they already knew or had heard before. Thus, one again finds the process of using a base structure or story to create a new story. Although the female French writers of this age outnumbered the male writers, it was Charles Perrault, who would eventually become famous because of his involvement with fairy tales, their publication and the world of children’s literature. The female authors pre-dated Charles Perrault, who was also a part of the ‘salonnière’ crowd, so he cannot possibly be credited to be one of the pioneers of the genre, but he “was one of the first to recognize that fairy tales have a special place in the world of children”. He also played a big role in bringing fairy tales intended for children into the limelight, by compiling the stories and having them published.

From the genre of fairy tales rose that of the original fairy tales. In the words of Jane Yolen, the “art or original fairy tale” is “a personal telling... invented whole cloth (or patchworked together from many disparate sources) into a single story” (n. pag.), unlike the folktales or retold stories. There are many authors who wrote fables or fairy tales, such as Aesop, Jean de La Fontaine, John Gay, A.E.Housman, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen and Oscar Wilde. While the Grimm brothers mainly collected stories from people they interviewed, and then published them, Andersen and Wilde were better known for writing original fairy tales- they based their stories on

earlier known versions of stories, and then added their own ideas to them. Wilde went even further and fashioned some of his stories after those of Grimm and Andersen.

Chapter 2

Oscar Wilde: Background

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, born on the 16th of October, 1854, was the son of Lady Jane Wilde and Sir William Wilde. His mother was a poet, journalist, nationalist and fighter for women's rights, who had her own salon, which was frequented by intellectuals of their times; his father was an eye and ear surgeon, an antiquarian and folklorist. Given his parents active involvement in the arts and literature, it is not surprising that Wilde's education began from a very early age, when he himself, his brother and sister were allowed to mingle freely with their parents guests. This involvement of his parents in "literary, artistic and political" (Yolen n. pag.) matters of their time naturally created an enriching, inspiring and influential environment for their children to grow up in.

Wilde had the opportunity of acquiring a rather excellent education, being able to attend the exclusive Portora Royal School at the age of 11. It was there that he developed his love for the classics, especially everything Greek. He was an excellent and bright student, and won a number of awards for his performance there. Having completed his education there, he joined the Magdalen College in Oxford, where he would meet three men who would be of major influence in his life-John Ruskin, Walter Pater and John Pentland Mahaffy. All three were his professors, and each introduced him to things that would shape his future literary career. Ruskin impressed upon him the importance of social

issues and concerns, and one can find the element of social critique in almost all of his works. Pater “encouraged his students to live with passion and for sensual pleasure, which possibly had an effect of Wilde’s involvement in the Aesthetic movement, and his way of presenting himself. It can be said that while Pater taught Wilde to love and devote himself to art, Ruskin showed him a way to use art for the betterment of society. Finally, Professor Mahaffy was the person with whom Wilde had the opportunity to travel to places like Italy and Greece.

After having completed his education at Oxford, Wilde travelled and tried his hand at writing, but those pieces were not great successes. He married in 1884, and had two sons- Cyril in June 1885 and Vyvyan in November 1886. Apart from his collection of fairy tales, Wilde wrote a number of plays, a novel and a number of poems. Among his best known plays are “The Importance of Being earnest” and “Lady Windermere’s Fan”, and the novel “The Picture of Dorian Gray” remains one of his best known works until today. While at the height of his success, Wilde began to frequent literary circles that were known to be frequented by homosexuals, and in 1891, he met Lord Alfred Douglas, also known as Bosie, with whom he would have a long relationship. Over time Wilde became more careless about his social engagements, and eventually, in 1895, Wilde was tried for acts of a homosexual nature, then termed as “acts of gross indecency”, and found guilty. He was sentenced to two years of jail and hard labor. This sentence was disastrous for him, because life in prison was very unhealthy for Wilde, both mentally and physically. This experience was too heavy for Wilde, and even when his sentence was over and he

was released from jail, he never fully recovered. He left England and settled in France with Bosie, but financially he was not well off. Finally, on the 30th of November, he died of “meningoencephalitis secondary to chronic right middle- ear disease” (Robins and Sellars 1841).

Wilde was heavily influenced by the aesthetic movement, and in Britain, was the person most closely connected to the decadent movement. The aesthetic movement denounced the strict moral and ethical values of the Victorian era, and instead, promoted the pursuit of beauty as the main aim of life and art, and “art for art’s sake”, that is, they argued that a piece of art should be appreciated for its own worth, and not in relation to the age it was created in, or be connected to worldly issues such as religion and politics for example; the decadent movement had a marked interest in artifice as well.

Although Oscar Wilde is best known as a playwright, his body of works includes novels, short stories, fairy tales, poems and essays. His works revolve around issues that are either social, political, religious or sexual commentaries, or combinations of these subjects. He also uses satire and humour to mask his critiques of social conventions and institutions. Being well acquainted with the classical literary works, Wilde had the options of using various traditional genres and a vast knowledge of references at his disposal, in order to create his own works. These, combined with his view on life, society and various other issues, gave rise to his distinct writings. The writings of Wilde did not only remain relevant to his times, but the issues he discussed remain relevant to the ages that have succeeded his existence, right up to our times. Wilde talks about life, love, pain,

suffering, social conventions, and other things are just as relevant now as they were in his days. That is what makes his works timeless, and not just restricted to one era or society.

The play “The Importance of Being Earnest” is a wonderful example of how Wilde critiques the social Victorian conventions of his time, such as people’s ideas of morality, honesty, respectability and virtue; in the play, hypocrisy is portrayed to be one of the most common values in people, and it is not only practiced but also celebrated. It shows the reader that Victorian society would talk about matters such as morality and virtue, while in reality the people were all hypocrite about one thing or another. It also touches on the matter of education for women, and that they could only be educated until a certain extent, which would mean that the larger female population would not be an intellectual threat to men, but rather just barely educated to be able to give the appearance of being well read and informed women.

“The Picture of Dorian Gray”, one of Wilde’s best known and celebrated novels, is a story of a beautiful and naïve young man, who is shown the ways of the world by a man called Lord Henry. Lord Henry introduces Dorian Grey to the social world of the elite Victorian society, and after Basil paints the portrait of Dorian, he (Dorian) is consumed with the fear of old age, decay and death. He makes a pact so that he remains young and the painting ages in his stead. While Dorian lives many years of a corrupt, hedonist life, his physical appearance is not altered, that is, he does not age or lose his beauty; the painting on the other hand does, and becomes a reminder to Dorian of all his evil deeds. He eventually falls in love and sees the impossibility of continuing his life. He comes to

view himself as a monster, and in the end, kills himself. This is a story which critics have studied for issues ranging from social commentary, to religious (Dorian's deal with the Devil) and homosexual (the relationship between Lord Henry and Dorian, and Basil's love for Dorian) elements. But it is also a story that explores the lives of the Victorian aristocracy, how opulent and materialist that generation was, and how they lived lives that did not reflect the prevalent moral and ethical beliefs of their times.

What distinguishes Wilde's works is that he makes use of not very serious genres, such as fairy tales, in order to portray thoughts and ideas that would have otherwise been difficult to portray. For many people, his fairy tales were considered to be merely unusual tales for children, since they do not adhere to the traditional and conventional rules of fairy tales, but upon closer inspection, it can be seen that under the guise of fairy tales, Wilde has created stories that are not only not just meant for children, but stories which contain many layers of meaning, and upon reading, may cause the reader to think that Wilde had a number of points to prove, or a number of different agendas in mind when he wrote these stories. In the fairy tales, Wilde has not only added his own moral message for the reader to decipher, but also made social, political, religious and also sexual commentaries, all of which are, sadly, too large for the scope of this paper to explore.

In Oscar Wilde's fairy tales the reader will find descriptions that are markedly sensuous and decadent, but also grotesque and absurd. This is somewhat of a contradiction, since here is "an apostle of art and artifice", also involved in "the celebration of the unsightly, bizarre, and grotesque", especially "in a genre directed at children" (Tatar 248). But it is

probably by juxtaposing the beautiful and the grotesque that Oscar Wilde is able to make his fairy tales more interesting and impressive, because as with all polarities, without one the other cannot possibly exist or even be comprehended. Since Wilde talks about the beautiful and the ugly things in life, his fairy tales give the reader a more wholesome or practical view of life and the human condition; it is also the reason why they are different from the didactic and idealized tales of authors like the Grimm and Andersen. It is this celebration of suffering and sacrifice in Wilde's tales that make his tales interesting and unique, and has made me, as a reader, question his motives behind writing such unique and sad fairy tales.

Chapter 3

Breaking traditional fairy tale structures

Hans Christian Andersen and the Grimm brothers are two other well known names in the world of fairy tales besides Oscar Wilde, but they wrote in different times, and gave their readers quite different experiences of fairy tales. But the tales of both Andersen and the Grimm brothers share some aspects in common- one being that in their tales, good always triumphs over evil. This is in accordance with (one of) the structural rules of traditional fairy tales, as defined by Vladimir Propp. Besides noticing the repetition of this message, the reader will also notice that characters who lead a pious and moral life are eventually awarded in some way or another, while the evil characters end up suffering as a consequence of their actions.

The Grimm brothers- Jacob and Wilhelm, mainly worked on collecting folktales, and then publishing them. The origins of their fairy tales were based mostly in the oral tradition of Germanic folklore, collected from people they interviewed. These tales were then published by the brothers, which somewhat helped to revive the tradition of Germanic folklore and to save the stories from being forgotten. In 1812, their first collection of fairy tales titled “Children’s and Household Tales” was published. Over time, as their stories also began to be read by children, they were edited and toned down, first by the brothers and later by other people (editors and publishers), in order to reduce

or even eliminate the sexual undertones and the presence of violence in the tales. The stories were adapted in order to be suitable reading material for children, and hence they also had to focus more on giving out messages such as the importance of morality and piety, instead of ending in the evil or bad characters being punished cruelly. For example, the original version of "Snow White" ends with the wicked stepmother being punished, and having to "put on ... red hot shoes, and dance until she dropped down dead." This is not an ending suitable for children, so over time, edited versions came into print, with endings that were less shocking, and happier.

Andersen, 19th century Danish writer, also wrote before the time of Oscar Wilde, and his stories are an "effort to celebrate the virtues of physical distress and spiritual anguish" (Tatar Hans Christian Andersen 212). His characters suffer in order to show readers the importance of being moral and hard working, or the consequences of being arrogant or proud; they are also a medium for portraying the innocence and purity of childhood. In many of his stories, like in the "Little Match Girl" for example, children die and go to heaven as a result of having led a pious life on earth. But Andersen's tales have also been subject to translation and adaptation; according to Terry Windling, "Andersen's fairy tales, when read in the original Danish (or in good, unabridged translations), are far more sophisticated and multi-layered than the simple children's fables they've become in all too many translated editions, retellings, and media adaptations" (Hans Christian Andersen n. pag.). Windling also mentions that while Andersen does use Danish folklore as a basis for his fairy tales, and also uses inspiration from works of the Grimm brothers, or other tales

such as “The Thousand and One Nights” and the conte de fees of 17th century French courts and salons, his stories remain works of fiction, or original fairy tales, like those of Oscar Wilde. His tales were revolutionary for his age, since his stories were different from the ones of those days. He made use of contemporary settings (Denmark of his time for example), unlike the tales of the Grimm, which are mostly set in magical forests, enchanted castles, or distant long forgotten lands; he also deviated from writing dull, didactic tales, and instead his tales are “remarkably earthy, anarchic, occasionally even amoral stories — comical, cynical, fatalistic by turns, rather than morally instructive” (Windling Hans Christian Andersen n.pag.).

Wilde’s tales, which are original fairy tales, and not retold versions of folklore, are quite different from those of other authors, and they simultaneously portray the beautiful and the grotesque aspects of human nature and lives. Wilde’s collections of fairy tales consist of two books, “The Happy Prince” (1888) and “The House of Pomegranates” (1891). It is said that the first is more suited for children while the latter is more for adults, but the reader will come across a lot of suffering in all the stories. In his tales, readers will come across a portrayal of human life which “touch on the human condition and touch the human heart” (Yolen n.pag.) in a way that most other fairy tales do not succeed in doing. With the use of various elements such as suffering, death, and an ironic sense of justice, Wilde presents the condition and degeneration of the values and morals of the individual and society as a whole, and yet, still retains a sort of beauty in the stories.

The main difference between the tales of the Grimm's collection, and those of Wilde's would be that the first is a collection of oral folktales and narratives, while the latter are original fairy tales inspired by other fairy tales or stories. Thus, Wilde's tales may be called more authentic, and they also follow the structural elements of folktales less than the Grimm's tales do. And while the characters of Andersen suffer, they are eventually rewarded in some way; the suffering of Wilde's characters on the other hand "is a repeated immersion in the bitter waters of worldly experience" (Tremper n. pag.), and the "tales are strikingly sad and graphic portrayals of expiation and renunciation, failure and death" (Goodenough n. pag.). In some of Wilde's tales one may notice the use of structural elements of traditional fairy tales, but instead of the usual "happily ever after ending", he usually has an unexpectedly sad ending. Although Wilde made use of "the motifs and character types of Grimm and Andersen fairy tales, he was not interested in the surrender of material possessions and capitulation to duty [that] those tales promoted", and he went further and "combined and subverted traditional Grimm and Andersen texts which were written for children" (Marsh 73). Sarah Marsh also points out that "Wilde's tales echo, allegorize, and satirize the Andersen tales" (73).

For example, one of Wilde's tales, "The Devoted Friend", can be compared to Andersen's "Little Klaus and Big Klaus". Both stories have two characters, one rich and one poor friend. In Andersen's story, the poor friend (Little Klaus) is exploited by the rich friend (Big Klaus), but with the aid of his wit and cunning, Little Klaus is able to punish his friend and become rich, showing readers that good always triumphs over evil.

On the other hand, in Wilde's story, the poor friend (Hans) is continually exploited by his rich friend (Hugh), but Hans only suffers and is never rewarded for his good behavior. In the end, he has to give up his life, when on an errand for his friend. Thus, in Wilde's tale, good does not necessarily always triumph over evil, and the good are not rewarded; unlike Andersen, Wilde "does not seem to find salvation, Christian or otherwise, in suffering" (Tatar 249). The selfless behavior of Wilde's characters might cost them much pain and suffering, and even their lives. This brings up the question of what Hans eventually gains from all his sacrifice and suffering, or if he gains anything at all. Somehow Wilde seems to be more realistic than Andersen because friendship is never really unconditional, or based on continual sacrifice and understanding, but is based on some form of equivalent exchange of things or favors. Thus, the reader experiences a reversal of the usual fairy tale motif, since the hero dies a sad death, while the villain remains alive and unpunished. This will most probably cause the reader to question the validity or truth behind the fairy tale structure of "happily ever after" endings, that usually seem to be detached from the harsh realities of life in the real world, where there is no higher power ensuring that good wins over evil every time. According to Maria Tatar, it is strange to find in a fairy tale the message that "there is something sacred about anguish, grief and distress", and while "Wilde may find suffering marvelous and charged with mystery...he...is not always willing to endow it with transcendent meaning" (249).

Unlike the Grimm brothers and Andersen, Oscar Wilde portrays life and society in an ironic manner. In the words of Ellen Tremper, "[w]hile there is unhappiness, suffering, or

even horror in some of Andersen's and Grimm's fairy tales, Wilde seems to take keen delight in pressing the thorns of consciousness ... into [the readers] brows", and "the ... difference in tone between [Wilde's] stories and theirs suggests the radical difference between their respective world views...[for] Wilde's stories issue from the imagination of man who has lost faith in the moral order" (n. pag.) of (Victorian) society.

Why then do his characters suffer? Since Wilde makes it clear that no religious redemption may come out of suffering and death, and in the words of Maria Tatar, "[t]he promise of redemption typically rings hollow in Wilde's tales" (249), why does he still make his characters suffer or die? Is there anything to be gained for these characters (or Wilde) from all their suffering, or is it some form of a higher code of life that one may choose to live by?

Chapter 4

The Wildean fairy tales

In the fairy tales of Oscar Wilde, suffering and sacrifice appear as common themes. In every story, one character, or more, are found to be suffering and making sacrifices. Keeping in mind the idea of suffering and sacrifices being rewarded or not, the following tales shall be considered: "The Young King", "The Happy Prince", "The Nightingale and the Rose" and "The Devoted Friend".

When reading these stories, one will notice that the Happy Prince gives up his jewels and gold, the Young King gives up the regal scepter and robe made for his coronation, the nightingale and Little Hans give their own lives, but none of them do it with the expectation of receiving something in return. In the words of Naomi Wood, "[i]n contrast with the traditional fairy -tale plot ending with a marriage, a kingdom , and "happily ever after", Wilde's fairy tales typically culminate in strikingly beautiful, albeit often painful, climaxes, with somberly ironic endings" (Wood 161).

The question that arises (again) from reading these stories is this- why do these characters suffer? Or why does Wilde make them suffer? Is it merely a way for him to show his readers that the futile acts of suffering and sacrifice are not rewarded by religion or humanity, or is it more than that? Or is this choice to suffer, made by the characters, proof of a higher moral code of living?

The Star Child

“The Star Child” follows the story of a young orphan, who is found and brought up by a Woodcutter and his wife. He grows up to be a beautiful but cruel and arrogant boy, with an aversion for everything that he does not find beautiful. He enjoys hurting animals and birds, and occasionally other human beings too. Upon discovering his real mother, a woman who appears to be a beggar, he rejects her love because he despises her ugly appearance. He is then robbed of his beauty and goes in search of his mother to redeem himself for his cruel behavior. He is sold as a slave to a Magician, who orders him to find three gold bars which are hidden in a forest. On the first day, the boy is unsuccessful, and on his way back, he happens to come across a Hare, whom he rescues from a hunters trap. The Hare helps him to find the first bar of gold. On the way back the boy comes across a leper and gives the gold bar to him. Once back, he is beaten by the Magician and not given any food. The same events occur on the second day. On the third day, however, after having given his gold to the leper, the Star Child, upon entering the city, is followed by many people who proclaim him as their king. When he looked into the shield of a soldier, he saw that his beauty has returned, and “he saw that in his eyes which he had not seen there before” (Wilde 322). He then found the beggar and the leper, who are revealed as his parents and the King and Queen. He then ruled as king, and “much justice and mercy did he show to all”, and “he [would not] suffer any to be cruel to bird or beast, but taught love and loving- kindness and charity, and to the poor he gave bread , and to the naked he gave raiment, and there was peace and plenty in the land”(Wilde 322). But

sadly, as with the tales of Wilde, he is not destined for a happy ending, for this is how the story ends:

Yet ruled he not long, so great had been his suffering, and so bitter the fire of his testing, for after the space of three years, he died. And he who came after him ruled evilly” (Wilde 323).

It is interesting to note that Wilde’s Star Child, even after undergoing the transformation from being a cruel and arrogant child, to one who is humble, kind, loving and compassionate, does not live happily ever after. Within the space of three years, he dies, and his successor turns out to be evil. He is thus not completely able to restore justice in his kingdom. He is partially rewarded for his suffering, but eventually, the toll the suffering takes on him causes his death. And it does not bring about any lasting (positive) effect on the society or any other aspect. According to David M. Monaghan, “for Wilde, although salvation is possible at an individual level, society cannot be freed of its basic villainy because the hero cannot communicate his lessons to others” (163). The Star Child is able to undergo a transformation himself, but he is not able to change all the others, even by setting a good example.

The Happy Prince

“The Happy Prince” is a story about a statue of a prince, who is befriended by chance by a swallow, who is on his way to Egypt. The Prince, having seen the suffering of his people, asks the swallow to deliver the jewels from his body to the suffering people. When the swallow decides to stay with the Prince, he helps distribute the gold that covers the statue

until the Prince is stripped of all his riches and glory. Then, one winter evening, the swallow dies at the feet of the Prince. When the Mayor and the Town Councilor's see the statue in that state, with a dead bird at its feet, they are repulsed by it, and have it pulled down and melted, since "he [was] no longer beautiful he [was] no longer useful" (Wilde 162), as stated by the Art Professor, whose view the Mayor and his officers seemed to share. For these people, the true value of the Prince lay in the former glory of his statue, with its jewels and gold; it did not matter to them that the Prince had parted with those in order to bring joy and hope to the lives of poor people who were suffering. His sacrifice, and also that of the swallows', meant nothing to them. The reader on the other hand, not quite unlike the Charity Children, who see the statue as that of an angel, will not be able to miss the beauty of the sacrifice made by the Prince and the swallow, but might be left questioning why they would do that at all. The statue is burnt, and the broken lead heart of the Prince, which refused to melt, is thrown in to a "dust-heap where the dead swallow was also lying" (Wilde 162).

Jerome Griswold, in an article titled "Sacrifice and Mercy in Wilde's 'The Happy Prince'", discusses Wilde's "rejection of sacrifice and his endorsement of mercy" (Griswold 104). He discusses the idea of "selfishness [being] attached to sacrifice and selflessness to mercy" (Griswold 104). The idea of sacrifice is connected to some form of reward, in Griswold's words, "sacrifice [is] a kind of self-discipline that provides for future rewards" (Griswold 103). But if one considers the Happy Prince's choice to give away his riches, it can be noticed that he does not do it as a strategic move in order to gain something for

himself in the future. He merely gives it all away, out of mercy and compassion. This distinction between sacrifice and mercy is important because it helps us understand Wilde's message better. The Prince is also fascinated by the idea of suffering, for he says to the swallow, "more marvelous than anything is the suffering of men and women ... [t]here is no Mystery as great as Misery" (Wilde 161). Thus, it is only by observing the suffering of others that the Prince is able to feel mercy for them.

In the case of the swallow, he starts off as a rather arrogant bird, but as he helps the Prince deliver the jewels and gold to the people, he begins to change. He finally stays with the Prince, even though he knows that he will not live through the winter. His love for the Prince's statue is greater than his instinct to survive. The swallow, one can say, gives up his life for love and friendship, but not in the hope of receiving anything in return.

But the interesting thing is the ending of the story, where God asks one of his angels to bring him "the two most precious things in the city" (Wilde 162), and the angel returns with the Prince's broken lead heart and the dead swallow, who are then both given a place in Heaven. This could be Wilde's way of saying that good deeds are indeed rewarded, but only if sacrifices are made selflessly, without any expectation of rewards. But that is not always the case, as can be seen in other stories, like "The Nightingale and the Rose" and "The Devoted Friend".

The Nightingale and the Rose

"The Nightingale and the Rose" is a story about a nightingale who gives her life in order to create a red rose for a young man who is in love, and requires a red rose to win the heart of the girl he loves. The nightingale thinks that "love is a wonderful thing" (Wilde 163), and that "love is wiser than Philosophy...and mightier than Power" (Wilde 165), thus she believes that the student's love is very valuable. In order to create a red rose, she has to sing all night, with a thorn pressed to her breast, and the rose only turns red when her heart is pierced by the thorn, which kills her. She believes that her life is worth less than the love of the student, so she makes this sacrifice. But when the student takes the rose to the girl he loves, she disregards it because she had already received fancy jewels from someone else, which she valued more. So the student "threw the rose onto the street, where it fell into the gutter, and a cart-wheel went over it" (Wilde 167). He then goes back to his books of logic and metaphysics, thus abandoning the search for true love, and not honoring or appreciating the sacrifice the nightingale had made for his sake. The nightingale gives up her life out of sympathy and compassion for the student's love, but also because of the idea she has of love itself, that (human) love is grand and beautiful, but as we, the readers see, it is not. Love is related to and affected greatly by material desires, as with the girl and her jewels, and the student's disregard for the rose after she rejects it.

According to Naomi Wood, "[w]hen the nightingale gives her life's blood to create a red rose for the superficial Student, all Nature recognizes the nature and beauty of the

sacrifice, but the student...throws the costly rose into the gutter", and "[b]eauty creates its own meaning, whether or not it is transmitted to others" (Wood 161). The other animals and the Oak-tree are very much aware of the value of the rose, created out of the nightingales' blood and life, and so are the readers, but not the student or the Professor's daughter. Their treatment of the rose is reminiscent of the Mayor and his Councilors reaction upon seeing the statue of the prince and the dead bird; they place value on the material aspect or appearance of the things in question, but not the true value of their sacrifice, and definitely not the reason behind it. And the reader is aware of this lack, of not being able to see the true value of the sacrifices of others.

The Devoted Friend

"The Devoted Friend" is a story about the friendship between a poor man called Little Hans, and Hugh the miller, a rich man. Hugh the miller promises to give Little Hans his old wheelbarrow, and in exchange for that, he makes Hans perform a number of tasks for him. Finally, Hans has to go and call the doctor because Hugh's son was ill, and on his way back, he gets lost in the moor and drowns. In the end, he does not receive the wheelbarrow, and worse, gives up his own life for Hugh, who does not give him anything in return for all his hard work. The story is an excellent example of the fact that friendship is very rarely based on an unconditional understanding between two people. It is more common that in the name of friendship (or other relationships), people tend to exploit others who are weaker than themselves, emotionally and in Hans's case, economically. Although Hugh is the rich friend, he does not pay Hans for his flowers, or

for any of the other tasks he performs. He does not visit him once during the long cold winter, when Hans barely has enough to eat. Hugh tells his wife that “when people are in trouble they should be left alone, and not be bothered by visitors” (Wilde 175). He also adds that “that at least is [his] idea about friendship, and [he is] sure [he is] right” (Wilde 175). Hugh is clearly full of lofty ideas about friendship, but does not know what friendship really is, and what it demands of people. He tells Hans that “at present [he has] only the practice of friendship...someday [he] have the theory also” (Wilde 180). Hugh, as one can see, has a very selfish theoretical knowledge of friendship, and that is exactly what he applies in real life, and according to Sarah Marsh, “Hugh’s abuse of Hans systematically reveal[s] Hugh’s greed, egotism, and unreasonable nature” (75). Hans, on the other hand, has a very altruistic idea of friendship; he is unwilling to refuse Hugh anything, even if it means giving up his work, and eventually his own life.

Wilde modeled this specific story after one of the Grimm’s, called “Hans in Luck”. But in the Grimm’s story, Hans is rewarded for his deeds, while in Wilde’s version “little Hans’s loss of earthly possessions to Hugh leaves him not with a sense of greater contentment, but dead on the lonely moor” (Marsh 76). In this story, Hans’s good deeds, of giving Hugh his plank of wood, of mending his barn roof and performing a number of other tasks, are not rewarded in any way. Instead, “the loss of his possessions steadily leads [him] to the loss of his life” (Marsh 76). What conclusion does one draw from this ending? That unconditional altruistic behavior is eventually nothing more than self-destruction? That is not the conventional idea people have of friendship, because we are

instructed or expected to be altruistic, when in reality we are selfish, each to his or her own degree. The conventional idea of friendship is nothing more than an idealized notion that one never comes across in real life. Wilde seems to be able to capture that aspect of friendship in this story that most people do not even think about, or choose to deny.

Conclusion

In each reading of Wilde's fairy tales, sacrifice, suffering and death stand out as very common elements. But why would a writer incorporate such cruelty and harshness in his fairy tales, and why were his "tales [such] strikingly sad and graphic portrayals of expiation and renunciation, failure and death" (Goodenough n. pag.). One possibility could be that Wilde was just using the fairy tale genre "as a medium through which to express his personal vision" (Monaghan 161), and one can only assume, keeping his own words in mind, that Wilde's audience or readers were meant to be adults, as well as children.

When reading of the suffering and fate of the Star Child, the Happy Prince and the swallow, the nightingale and little Hans, it appears that through suffering, Wilde is attempting to make a statement about modern life, the values attached to altruistic behavior, and its effects on the individual and society. In the words of David Monaghan, "he succeeds in placing the problem of alienation in the nineteenth century in its proper perspective" (163); he further states that:

"[m]yth can no longer provide the very direct sense of security that it once did in societies in which all the members were united in their sharing of a small number of relevant structures and thus felt an intimate link between the fate of the individual and that of the group" (163).

In modern societies, people are not united in the manner that the older societies used to be. Modern life has created a sense of alienation between the individual and greater society, which had led to the angst that is portrayed in many works of literature of the post-Industrial revolution periods. Given this gap between individual and society, “while the modern individual can achieve transcendence, he is incapable of completing the heroic cycle possible in simpler, more harmonious communities, by communicating this lesson to his society” (Monaghan 166), as can be seen in the case of the Star Child, who rules justly but then dies within three years, and is followed by a cruel ruler.

In the fairy tales of Oscar Wilde, his “usually satiric impulse is subordinated to a profound sense of the gap that exists between the communal optimism expressed by the myth and the fairy tale, and the desperate and lonely struggle that faces the individual in the modern world” (Monaghan 166). While he does critique society, politics and other issues, the main theme in all his tales have to do with the futility of altruistic behavior in the modern age, because although one can go through some sort of transition which results in some sort of gain, it is not enough to change society, for in the modern age, instead of wicked magicians, stepmothers or witches, it could be said that the individual is faced with a greater threat. Society in itself, with its conventions and norms, has become the antagonist. While “Wilde retains his faith in the individual’s ability to” transform, he does not seem to believe or state that that can change the world. For Wilde, “[w]hatever sacred moments of sacrificial love arise amidst the world’s cruelty thus come

as fleeting miracles” (Goodenough n. pag.), such as the prince and swallows heart being taken to God by his angel.

But then, being a romantic, maybe it is not so hopeless to believe that change can happen, and if it does, it will be through the sacrifices of individuals like the Star Child, the nightingale, little Hans or the Happy Prince. An individual may not be able to create lasting change, but his or her actions will leave a mark in the minds of people, and that may very be the beginning of a transition for the greater society. While the suffering and sacrifices of Wilde’s characters may seem futile at first, as a reader, one realizes the impact it has on oneself, morally, ethically, emotionally, esthetically, and so on, and that effect that Wilde has been able to achieve in his readers make his works special and timeless. Maybe a hundred years from now, in societies far advanced than ours, Wilde’s works may have as much importance as it does for us because he speaks of human experiences, and “depicts the “terrible beauty” of human potential with darker irony” (Goodenough n. pag.).

According to Elizabeth Goodenough, Wilde “celebrated interpretations that are in their own way “more creative than creation,” likening the highest criticism to “the purest form of personal impression” (n. pag.). Thus, in light of the reader response theories of Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser, Wilde’s tales seem to be texts that don’t just give the reader one specific message, but lets the reader create meaning out of their own interpretations. In other words, as John Paul Riquelme says, “the act of reading is not an act of

understanding something contained and given in advance by the text ... instead, it generates a new perspective and mental object out of textual elements" (8).

Reading the fairy tales of Oscar Wilde, both as a child and an adult, has always been an experience that I have connected to the incident of the fisherman's soul, looking into the Mirror of Wisdom. But Wilde's stories are not just the mirror of wisdom, but a mirror for oneself, and the mirror of life, as it truly is. These are stories that I have read to my nieces and nephews, and hope to someday read to my own children, because Wilde's tales portray life in a way that leaves a lasting impression and gives one much to think about in terms of the meaning of life, our actions and those of others.

And in the end, it makes sense that the Happy prince tells the swallow that "more marvelous than anything is the suffering of men and women" (Wilde 161); for it is through suffering, or the suffering of others, that one learns the profound lessons of life.

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