

Aesthetic Pursuit and Religious Complex in Wilde's Fairy Tales

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Abstract: Oscar Wilde, a famous playwright, novelist, poet and critic, is the chief advocate of the aesthetic movement in the late 19th century. His fairy tales show his aesthetic ideas—the “art for art’s sake” viewpoint, emphasizing the pure beauty detached from real life, opposing utilitarianism in artistic pursuit. At the same time, they contain grumous religious color, reflecting strong Christian brotherhood and humanistic care. This paper is intended to probe into Oscar Wilde’s religious complex in his fairy tales.

1. Brief introduction

1.1. Oscar Wilde’s life story

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin on 16 October 1854. He was educated at Portora Royal School from 1864 to 1871, and Trinity College, Dublin from 1871 to 1874, and Magdalen College, Oxford from 1874 to 1878. While at Oxford, he was influenced by the aesthetic perception of both Walter Pater and John Ruskin and was exposed to Hegelianism, Darwinian theory and Pre-Raphaelite paintings, which paved the way for him to later become the leading writer and the representative figure in the aesthetic movement. Oscar Wilde was a productive writer with typical examples like the comic plays “An Ideal Husband”, “The Importance of Being Earnest”, the novel “The Picture of Dorian Gray”, and two collections of fairy tales “Happy Prince and Other Tales” and “A House of Pomegranates”. Aesthetic ideas were vividly embodied in whatever form of his writings, among which “The Nightingale and the Rose” was the most typical. The age in which Wilde lived and wrote (1856-1900) happened to be at the Victoria Era, when the fast-developing capitalist system greatly pushed forward the progress of material civilization but at the same time destroyed the foundations of traditional conceptions. Under these circumstances, many perplexed intellectuals found themselves in a serious ideological crisis, thus trying to seek consolation from new idea inspirations. In spite of this, the deeply-rooted Christian world outlook is still the foundation of the moral and system consciousness. This paper is intended to make an analysis of influence of Oscar Wilde’s aestheticism on his religious complex in his fairy tales.

1.2. Wilde’s Aestheticism

Oscar Wilde was the true representative of aestheticism and an advocate of aesthetic theory. The Aesthetic movement was a loosely organized movement that emerged in the late 19th century in the

field of British art and literature. In the 1830s, the French poet and novelist Ophir Gautier was the first to coin the phrase "art for art's sake" and claimed that there was no connection between art and morality. At the end of the nineteenth century, when Europe had lost its universally accepted cultural standards and commonly accepted ideas of what it meant to be human and to live, the call for artistic and cultural purity gradually became an undercurrent in the development of modern Western culture. In this historical and cultural context, Wilde developed the idea of preserving the autonomy of art and the aesthetic literary concept of 'art for art's sake'. As far as the relationship between art and reality is concerned, Wilde believed that art should transcend reality and wander away from life. His aesthetic ideas were demonstrated as follows: All events of reality are the enemies of art. The badness of all art arises from the real. To be natural is to understand, and to understand is not art and all poor art arises from a return to natural depiction and an objective description of life. Therefore, any art that thinks it is "back to life and nature" is bad, and the further away from reality and beyond it, the better. The only thing that is beautiful is the thing that has nothing to do with us. As for the role of art in life, Wilde believed that it is not art that reproduces life, but life that imitates art. Art is not a mirror of human social life; life is merely a student of art, which reigns supreme. Some argue that this fundamentally rejects the historical materialist view that social existence determines social consciousness. Others argue that Wilde did not reject the idea that social existence determines social consciousness in its entirety, but that social consciousness is only relatively independent. It is possible for social consciousness to change and develop before social existence, and that art, as an advanced social consciousness, has a dynamic and countervailing effect on social existence and contributes positively to social development. Wilde's aesthetic literary theory of "art for art's sake" has a double meaning, as it reveals the essence of Wilde's theoretical views and also contains positive elements of thought to safeguard the independence and purity of art.

1.3. Wilde's religious complex

Born into a Protestant family and influenced by his mother, Wilde showed an interest in Catholicism from an early age, aspiring to Catholicism. He envied the Christian promise of divine salvation, but had no intention of seeking it at the cost of his entire existence. He confronted the precepts of Christian culture with an aesthetic hedonism rooted in the spirit of Greek culture, but could never escape his deep-seated sense of sin. Infatuated with Catholicism at a young age and influenced by his aesthetic pursuit, in the novel *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, he attributed the hero's love for Roman Catholicism to the routine consecration, which was more solemn than any sacrifice and possessed primitive rusticity and eternal magnificence of human tragedies. What attracted him was its emphasis on form and air of mystery. Just because of his infatuation with Catholicism and its mysterious ceremonies there were frequent uses of religious images and Bible allusions in his fairy tales. In the age of declining religious belief and flooding materialism, aesthetes' slogan "art for art's sake" had religious implication and 'aesthetic religion' became the psychic shelter of some cultural elites. Religion is the highest form of beauty, for Oscar Wilde, a pious religious believer, who created a holy and surrealistic aesthetic world by combining religion with art. In Western society, Christianity, the foundation of cultural thought, has long been deeply rooted in people's hearts and minds, and the image and meaning of Christ is almost universally known, but even in his understanding of Christ, Wilde shows himself to be a remarkable man, unlike the superficial understanding of the common man. In his fairy tales, 'beauty' was elevated to 'love', a kind of religious love and praise for beauty. The biography of Oscar Wilde shows his great infatuation with Jesus Christ's personality and increasing concentration on Jesus Christ. As Wilson Night said, Christianity is the key to unlocking the door of Wilde's mysterious life.

2. Manifestation of Wilde's religious complex

2.1. In characterization

2.1.1. The self-sacrificing type

In the fairy tale *Happy Prince* [1], Wilde tells a story of self-sacrifice for the sake of saving others. At first, the prince, just like other big shots in the city, lived a leisurely life, not knowing the miseries of the common people, even not knowing what tears were. Only when he became a statue with a cold lead heart did he get to know the misfortunes of the common people and sacrificed his life to save them. Just as Jesus Christ suffered a lot in order to save the common people and was crucified on the crucifix. What the prince did went ignored and unknown the same way in which Jesus Christ was misunderstood and met with hostility in the Bible. At the end of the story God assigned the angel to bring the most precious thing of the city and take away the broken lead heart of the prince and the dead swallow to heaven just as Jesus Christ was transfigured after his resurrection. In *The Nightingale and the Rose* [1], in order to help the young student to get a bloomy red rose in winter, the nightingale chose to sacrifice herself with no hesitation by pricking her heart into the thorn and singing for the sweet love until she shed the last drop of blood and got the reddest rose for the student. The death of the nightingale was also similar to that of Jesus Christ and has strong overtones of the martyrdom of Christ. Jesus was crucified and shed his red sacrificial blood, completing his own sacrifice for the salvation of the world. The nightingale, too, was nailed to a rose tree with its thorns, turning the white rose crimson with its blood as a sacrifice of love and devotion to beauty and love. Wilde once asserted that Christ was 'the true forerunner of the Romantic movement in life'. Clearly, in Wilde's eyes, the nightingale has become one with Jesus Christ, an aestheticist who sacrifices his life for 'aesthetic salvation'. In this way, the sublime beauty of the nightingale's death is further sublimated. This redemption of beauty is also a refutation of aestheticism as a useless science. What is conveyed by this image coincides with the doctrine of Christianity, which advocates universal love. Just like the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the love of the nightingale became eternal in spite of the destruction of her flesh.

2.1.2. The self-redemption type

In the *Young King* [4], the young king was first obsessed with everything beautiful and valuable. He ordered his men to look for all rare treasures just for his robe of the coronation ceremony, which was the beginning of the corruption of his soul. The dreams he had in the night before his coronation made him realize the sufferings brought by his obsession with luxuries. So he decided to abandon his greed, selfishness and cold-bloodedness and refused the robe, the scepter and the crown. Instead he was crowned in the garments of the shepherd. The young king's change from vice to virtue was just his soul's redemption from death to resurrection. In *The Fisherman and His Soul* [2], in order to stay together with the mermaid, the fisherman tried every mean to send away his soul, who later came every year to tempt him with the mirror of wisdom, the ring of wealth and the girl's feet. The fisherman couldn't resist the temptation of the girl's feet which the mermaid didn't have, so he came ashore and his soul returned to him, which made him unable to be together with the mermaid forever. When he learned the mermaid died, his heart was broken because of full of love for the mermaid. The fisherman's death was the redemption of love. In *The Star Child* [3], the star child was punished by God and became ugly because he was proud of his beauty and didn't accept his mother as a beggar. After being a slave to cruel old man and suffered a lot, he learned to take care of others and understood what was love. When he met his beggar mother again, he immediately ran to his mother and knelt down to kiss her wounded feet and watered them with his tears, weeping like a broken-hearted person.

Thus the star child was redeemed and restored to his beauty, even more beautiful, hence he fulfilled his self-redemption in the test of love and good. The scene of kissing his mother's feet was borrowed from the Bible, in which the prostitute Mary Magdalene watered Jesus Christ's feet with her tears and was forgiven. This exactly reflects what Christianity advocates: All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

2.1.3. The others-redemption type

In *The Selfish Giant*, the giant has a big beautiful garden, but he drives away all the children who come in to play, so that spring never comes again, his garden is deserted and his heart is just as cold. Later, when the giant is inspired by a little boy to abandon his selfishness and open his heart and garden to the children, the whole garden blooms and the children rejoice that spring has finally returned. Here Wilde has created a unique image of Jesus---a sweet and miraculous little boy. "His miracle is just as sweet and natural as the coming of spring" [2]. He dissolves the selfishness of the giant's nature with a gentle kiss, a symbol of selflessness and love, and then leaves quietly, causing the giant to pine endlessly. When the giant finally sees the boy, he bears the stigmata of love on his hands: two nail marks appear on the palms of the boy's two hands, and two nail marks on the backs of his two little feet. The boy, although his hands and feet are covered with wounds, symbolizes the suffering Christ, but he does not forget the giant and comes in time to overwhelm his soul. The giant goes from indifference and selfishness to repentance for his actions, and greets his children with genuine love, and his garden goes from desolation to full blossom. At last the giant lies under the tree, covered with white flowers, and he dies. The little boy, the embodiment of Jesus, leads the giant to the garden of Paradise, where he is finally saved and redeemed by God.

2.2. In numbers

Because of Christianity's Trinity, the number three is a religious and holy number. In *The Nightingale and the Rose*, there were three objecting voices: the lizard, the butterfly and the daisy; the nightingale went to three places: the white rose tree in the center of the grassplot, the yellow rose tree beside the sundial and the red rose tree beneath the student's window; the nightingale pressed her heart against the thorn three times until death. In *The Young King and Other Stories*, the king had three dreams before his coronation. In *The Fisherman and His Soul*, the fisherman sent away his soul three times, asked for help three times from the priest, the merchant and the witch, and was faced with three temptations. In *The Star Child*, he refused to accept his mother three times, was punished to look for his mother with three years, helped the lepers three times and died after being the king. There are many more examples to reflect the author's religious complex.

3. Conclusion

All of Wilde's fairy tales have exquisite compositions, with interesting plots and beautiful scenes. None of them is drawn from Christianity scriptures or myths and there is no trace of moral preaching, but there are many religious images who made the characters holy and refined. Christian universal love permeates between the lines, which combines with Wilde's aestheticism of pursuing the ultimate beauty out of ultimate love. It is his keen religious complex that enables Wilde to create the fairy tales with profound religious and moral implications, which also provides a new angle to interpret his fairy tales.

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