

Glimpses of Aestheticism and Dimensions of Ethics in the Selected Short Stories of Oscar Wilde

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Abstract

Oscar Wilde, the high priest of the Aesthetic Movement has always been a central figure in the intellectual arena. He was one of the most successful and influential writers in the Victorian England. Being a major proponent of Art for art's Sake, he condemned the didactic purpose of art. Wilde declared that, the sole purpose of every form of art is to pursue beauty. Though he was indifferent to the social and moral purpose of art, a close scrutiny of his selected short stories reveal that his body of work is embedded with a strong undercurrent of ethical values. This research paper is an endeavor to analyze how Wilde catered such a unique and fine blend of Aestheticism and moral values in his short stories.

KEYWORDS: Art for Art's Sake, Aestheticism, Moral Values, Beauty

Oscar Wilde was perhaps the most versatile among the giants of literature. He was a distinguished poet, essayist, short story writer, novelist and playwright. He was a champion of the Aesthetic Movement in Victorian Era. Wilde's extraordinary gift of wit and genius found expression in his works. His fame rest on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Happy Prince and other Tales*, *Lord Arthur Saville's Crime* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

"The Happy Prince", "The Nightingale and the Rose" and "The Selfish Giant" are the celebrated short stories of Oscar Wilde. They serve as paramount example for his exceptional skill to create an exquisite blend of the essence of Aestheticism and moral values. They have the attributes of fairy-tales and serve as the mouthpiece of the author's view on art and artist. These stories are remarkable for the richness of symbols, sensuous imagery, highly suggestive language, synaesthetic effects and picturesqueness. They are widely recognized as the technical devices in Aestheticism.

"The Happy Prince" is a classic bed-time story. It is a tale of love, friendship and compassion. Wilde's admiration for beauty gets revealed in the description of the Happy Prince. "He was gilded all over with thin leaves of gold, for eyes he had two bright sapphires, and a large red ruby glowed on his sword-hilt. He was very much admired indeed. He is as beautiful as a weathercock" (7). The Happy Prince symbolizes Christ who sacrificed his very life for the redemption of mankind. He gives up each of his possessions to help the poor. The little Swallow is portrayed as the bosom friend of the Happy Prince. He is an embodiment of unconditional love and sacrifice. In Christian iconography swallow is the personification of Christ and his Resurrection. In Greek Mythology swallow belongs to Aphrodite, the goddess of sexual love, beauty and fertility. This exhibits Wilde's devotion to Hellenic culture and signifies the feminine quality of the Swallow. The relationship between both of them can be interpreted as homosexual for, the Prince insists the Swallow to kiss on his lips instead of hands. "... you must kiss me on the lips, for I love you" (15).

The depiction of the young man in the garret is highly sensual. "His hair is brown and crisp. And his lips are red as pomegranate, and he has large and dreamy eyes" (12). Pomegranate is suggestive of wild sensuality and sexuality. The seamstress who embroiders passion flowers on a satin gown is symbolic. The passion flower is associated with the crown of thorns worn by Jesus during the Crucifixion. It suggests the stark poverty and misery of the woman and her child. The Art Professor in the story is a representative of Wilde himself. When he sees the disheveled statue of the Prince, he says, "As he is no longer beautiful he is no more useful" (16).

"The Nightingale and the Rose" is the story of a lovelorn young Student and a Nightingale who is determined to realize his dream. The story is remarkable for the use of images that are symbolic in nature. In literature nightingale has been associated with suffering and sacrifice. Her song is said to have mournful notes. Wilde portrays the bird as an embodiment of compassion and self-sacrifice. When the Nightingale learnt that the only way to get a red rose is to sacrifice her own life to give lifeblood for the birth of a red rose, she accepted her fate with pleasure. She says, "Yet Love is better than life, and what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a man?" (21). Red rose is a recurring image in the stories of Oscar Wilde. It epitomizes romantic love and passion. In the story the entire romantic hopes of the young Student depend upon a single red rose. It serves as a symbol of his unreciprocated love for the Professor's daughter.

Synaesthesia is another technical device used in Aestheticism. Wilde employs synaesthesia in a number of sentences, which are appealing to our senses. The Nightingale describes love as follows. "Flame-coloured are his wings, and coloured like flame his body. His lips are sweet as honey, and his breath is like frankincense" (21). The author uses the young Student as his mouthpiece to express his theory of art. He says, "... everybody knows that the arts are selfish" (20). Here Wilde rejects the role of artist as the preacher of morality.

"The Selfish Giant" is another popular story written by Wilde. As the title suggests the protagonist is a selfish Giant. The story is filled with images selected from nature. They have symbolic value. The Giant himself is a symbol of people who are selfish, jealous and rude to others. The garden of the Giant represents their selfish minds preoccupied with their own wellbeing and happiness. Such men completely neglect the needs of others. The image of garden recurs very often in the stories of Wilde. It is a symbol of purity and innocence. The children playing in the Giant's garden symbolize innocence and happiness. Both these images are interrelated. Childlike innocence and selfless love bless the garden of our mind with divine happiness.

The images of Snow and Frost indicate the sterility and spiritual penury of modern man. While spring is eager to adorn other gardens with fruits and flowers, the Giant's garden remains as a barren land. "... the Snow covered up the grass with her great white cloak, the frost painted all the trees silver" (26). The story is remarkable for Wilde's masterly use of synaesthesia. He describes the lush green grass as "soft green grass". The garden in the winter season is portrayed as "cold white garden". The image of tree symbolizes life in the cosmos and the tree of redemption in Christianity. When the children return to the Giant's garden blossoms begin to adorn the trees.

The character of the Giant undergoes a noteworthy transition. The Giant who is selfish and rude during the beginning of the story gets transformed into an affectionate and selfless person endowed with a heart of gold. His repentance is so sincere. He says, “ How selfish I have been” (27). The life of the Giant teaches us the significance of repentance in the renewal of life. Thus the story has obvious relations with the Christian concept of sin, virtue and salvation.

Wilde’s short stories are unmistakably marvelous blending of the essence of Aestheticism and hidden The life of Giant moral messages. Being a master of language he embellished the stories with poetical language and images borrowed from nature and biblical tradition. He believed the ultimate aim of every form of art is to be beautiful. As Wilde remarks in his famous essay “The Decay of Lying”, “Art never expresses anything but itself, it has independent life, just as thought has, and develops purely on its own lines” (qtd. In Redman 54). His short stories are outstanding examples for his commitment to the creed Art for Art’s Sake. As an artist Wilde is absolutely adamant about enhancing the beauty of his literary works. Wilde’s literary works are offerings at the altar of Beauty. A detailed analysis of his short stories proves that they are embedded with strong moral messages. So Wilde unconsciously performed the social responsibility of an artist.

References

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