

The Writing Art of Wilde's Fairy Tales: the Reshaping of Love and Kindness Under the Cloak of Aestheticism Taking "The Happy Prince" as an Example

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ABSTRACT

Oscar Wilde, the controversial and tragic aesthete who had been tragically ruined for nearly a century, wore his carefully woven "art for the sake of art" aesthetic coat, and cultivated a fantasy fairy tale garden — beneath the aesthete's wild appearance, what is hard to conceal is a pure love for the best, and a heart that is never extinguished. Taking "The Happy Prince" as an example, the author tried to analyze Wilde's fairy tale writing art from three aspects: "the beauty of the appearance replaces the good of the bones", "the beauty of the environment shapes the evil in the world", and "the beauty of death reflects the love of life": The love and goodness in morals seem to be regarded as worthless things, but in fact, through fairy tales, they have achieved a sad and beautiful return and reshaping.

Keywords: *Wilde's fairy tales, The Happy Prince, aestheticism, morality*

I. INTRODUCTION

When it comes to the word "aestheticism", it seems that it should be repelled from morality. In the late 19th century, the aestheticism that swept Europe in a rebellious attitude broke through the thick film of "artistic heteronomy": from the Kant aesthetics of "pure beauty" and "aesthetic harmlessness" to Gautier's "art is not utilitarian", and then to Pater's clear state that "artistic beauty is divorced from social reality, isolated and unique, it is pure beauty"¹, gradually stripping morality from the art world, and setting the ultimate goal of artistic creation as the free pursuit of beauty.

Wilde, who claimed to be a "Professor of Aestheticism", was even more practical about this. His early theories and behaviors were all living benchmarks of aestheticism, and even almost extreme. He bluntly said: "Life is the poison that destroys art, and the enemy that destroys the palace of art."² The pursuit of art should be above all standards. "There are no moral books or immoral books." "The artist has no ethical sympathy. The artist's ethical sympathy is an unforgivable maneuver of style."³ In terms of behavior,

he is even more ostentatious. Not only is his clothes a daily conversation of Europeans and Americans,⁴ but even when he was questioned by court and secular because of his homosexuality, he openly compared himself to Shakespeare and Verlaine and embarked on the road of being abandoned by traditional morality.

However, looking at his works, the term "morality" does not completely contradict Wilde's aestheticism. The so-called staying outside of morality does not deny all moral values. This is a manifestation of Wilde's artistic tension. And his claim that art and morality were in violation should also be analyzed in a specific social and historical environment: in the Victorian period of England, moral constraints were already distorted and deformed under extreme emphasis. "Before Michelangelo's famous mural 'The Last Judgment', some people only paid attention to the drawings of the slutty priests, and even hid their faces and shouted." "Some people know very little about reading Rodriguez's love songs, and are more familiar with the passage about snakes. In paintings or books, where there are portraits of naked women, they will rush to the past like a pig seeing the smelly mud, ignoring the blooming flowers and the golden fruits

¹ Wu Lifu, *Modern Western Literary Theory* [C]. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 1983.

² Oscar Wilde, *The Decline of Lies* [M]. Nanjing: Jiangsu Education Press, 2004.

³ (Ireland) Oscar Wilde, *A Portrait of Dorian Gray* [M]. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2015, p35.

⁴ (Ireland) Oscar Wilde, *The Nightingale and the Rose* [M]. Tang Yingzhou, trans. Hangzhou: Zhejiang Literature & Art Publishing House, 2015, p43.

hanging on the branches."⁵ This kind of "combined worship of morality is very absurd and even disgusting", "the degree of attention to integrity has reached its peak, reaching an unimaginable state."⁶ In this regard, Wilde tried to sweep these popular, pretentious, and imprisoning traditional morals out of art, and to welcome true love and kindness. However, when scholars pondered this point, they always used the purpose of exploring the contradictions of the aestheticist thoughts to prove that Wilde was just struggling in contradictions throughout his life, and gradually made concessions and compromises in his creation. They don't know that the true "love and kindness" in morality is originally a unique embodiment of Wilde's pursuit of aestheticism. "The moral life of human beings is an integral part of the artist's theme. However, the morality of art includes the perfect use of imperfect means."⁷ Art is born for beauty, and there is no lack of a stronghold in the mortal dust that touches the relatively weak in people's hearts. These bits of warmth have turned into Wilde's keen senses, turned into sincere emotions under the aesthetic form, and became the hidden theme under his aestheticism — always reminding the world that love and kindness cannot be ignored. This is particularly prominent in his fairy tales. His fairy tales often described frivolous aesthetics that were attracted by the compassionate moralists or moved by the affection that the world can't ask for, and were struggling for them. These are also the touching warmth in his fairy tales.

II. THE BEAUTY OF THE APPEARANCE REPLACES THE GOOD OF THE BONES

"The Happy Prince" was the first of Wilde's fairy tales. At the beginning of the story, the author described the appearance of the Happy Prince: full of gold, sapphire eyes, and ruby sword hilt, an angel symbolizing bliss. But when the swallow was resting at his feet, it was wet with his tears of sadness. It turned out that the prince who enjoyed bliss during his lifetime became a sculpture in the heights of the city. After being advertised as a synonym for happiness and enjoyment, he witnessed all the ugliness and pain in the city day and night, but was fixed on the pedestal with nothing he could do.

In the article, the gorgeous appearance of the Happy Prince and his greedy and entertaining behavior during his lifetime seemed to be a portrayal of the aestheticians themselves. Aestheticism's pursuit of perfection was reflected in personal life. One was the unconventional

⁵ (France) Théophile Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* [M]. Ai Min, trans. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2008, p2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, page 4.

⁷ Oscar Wilde. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* [M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1991.

clothing; the second was a wild and unrestrained attitude towards life. They do not resist desire and temptation, and even actively seek it. Indulgence is also a mode of experiencing art. But in the story, the Happy Prince who was studded with gold leaves, had sapphire eyes and a ruby sword hilt, because of compassion, had completely bid farewell to happiness, with tears in his eyes again and again, watching the suffering beings around him. He repeatedly begged the outlier swallow to distribute their decorations to the struggling civilians in the world. The gems were stripped little by little, the sick children recovered, and the poor playwrights could continue to create without being strangled by hunger and cold, and the little match girl would not be brutally beaten by her father...When he could not see, the tragic situation in the world was described through the mouth of the little swallow. The prince further cut his own beauty and used gold leaves wrapped around his body to rescue the working people. In the end he was knocked down in the ugly criticizing meeting organized by the mayor and the senator.

It can be seen that in "The Happy Prince", pain always seems to be more real and sensible than beauty and happiness, and the prince's decay and disintegration step by step are also more concrete and real than the original noble and gorgeous. Correspondingly, suffering and compassion have gradually deepened. Under the fragmentation of the beautiful cloak, what is highlighted is the innocent kindness of the Happy Prince towards the world and the compassion for the disadvantaged. This process of reshaping goodwill to the world is not only a process of witnessing and saving the world's ugliness, but also a process of the prince gradually dissolving his gorgeous appearance. The beauty of the appearance and the good of the bones are finally completely replaced, just like Wilde's other fairy tales "A Boy King" and "The Star-child", ushering in the ultimate human care.

III. THE BEAUTY OF THE ENVIRONMENT SHAPES THE EVIL IN THE WORLD

Creation is the process of the writer's main voice, and there is no form of creation without a subject. Therefore, the writer's works cannot avoid the projection of reality, and so does Wilde. His writing was extremely beautiful. In addition to the exquisite appearance of the characters, the magnificent environment in the fairy tale also demonstrated this characteristic, but at the same time, as if the bones and muscles were connected, the dark, evil, and impoverished scenes also followed.

The swallow in "The Happy Prince" was an aesthetic, he was a connoisseur of life and loved beautiful and novel things by nature. He gave up the journey of migrating to Egypt with his companions only because he was infatuated with the beautiful waist of a

reed along the way. After meeting the Happy Prince, he liked to tell the prince what he saw and heard in Egypt. Many of the stories in the story laid out the beauty of the exotic East, which also formed the aestheticism of this fairy tale. In fact, the oriental and exotic beauty has always attracted Wilde, just as he described it through the mouth of a swallow: There, "hippos lay lazily among the papyrus, Memnon sits in front of a magnificent building made of granite, staring at the stars all night." "The warm sun shines on the emerald palm trees, and crocodiles lie down, looking around lazily in the mud."⁸ There are sphinxes as old as this world in the desert. The merchant walking by the camel holds amber rosary in his hand, the green snake sleeping on the palm tree is fed by twenty monks, and the little dwarf sails on the lake on the big, flat leaves, fighting with butterflies...The foreign land that Wilde yearned for, and everything there was right in the time, being three-dimensional and vivid in the swallow's narrative.

However, the Happy Prince said after hearing these: "What you told me are incredible things, but more incredible than all is the pain of men and women. There is nothing more mysterious than suffering."⁹ These exotic customs were in sharp contrast with the place where the story took place — the terrible winter of "Northern Europe", which was cold, bleak, and lack of color life. "To write sorrow with joy, it will multiply its sorrows." The poverty and pain in Western Victorian urban life were the default gray background in Wilde's fairy tales. "During war, the strong let the weak become slaves; in peace, the rich let the poor become slaves."¹⁰ Poverty with a pair of hungry eyes quietly walked through the alleys where the common people could not get the sun, and crime followed closely behind the people with a drunk face. The indifferent attitude of the upper class towards the people at the bottom also reflected the "social Darwinism" prevailing in the UK at that time. As written in the fairy tale "A Boy King", sick children, thin weavers, and naked and imprisoned black slaves, their blood sacrificed to the king's robe, crown, and scepter, never saw the sun. The available resources of their lives were even repeatedly squeezed.

The delicate and perceptual moral thinking and care shown in fairy tales were the artistic techniques used by Wilde. With a pair of wise eyes and sensitive kindness, he wrote the beauty in the fairy tale environment and the evil in the world into the text. He didn't like to use beautiful filtered life as his writing material, nor did he use beauty to cover up evil. He used these two sets of

consistent pen and ink to write fairy tales, and continued to fall in love with the generosity and prosperity of life, even though the reality was deceived by mean and barrenness.

IV. THE BEAUTY OF DEATH REFLECTS THE LOVE OF LIFE

Death occupies a unique position in literature. In historical changes, due to its unpredictability, unknowability, and the physical and psychological fears that can trigger the existence of human nature, it has given birth to unlimited reveries in literature. However, Wilde's fairy tales were contrary to the happy ending of punishing evil and promoting good in traditional fairy tales. The "death" of the key character had become an important plot in his fairy tales. With the pursuit of "beauty", he exerted his power of thinking beyond imagination, and used literary colors to re-arrange and decode the real death in reality, which not only broke away from the immortality of the protagonist in traditional fairy tales, but also cut death and horror artistically, thereby shortening the distance between fairy tales and reality, intertwining with reality, and illusion and truth, giving the work a unique aesthetic feeling.

In his works, death was presented in the form of artistic beauty, among which the beauty embodied in consecrated death was deeply moving. Consecrated death is the initiative to give up life for a certain pursuit. In Wilde's fairy tales, beauty and sublime were united in the self-destruction of ideal pursuit, and the courage of self-destruction was attracted by beauty. "The Happy Prince", "The Nightingale and the Rose", "The Fisherman and His Soul", etc. can all be classified as this type. In "Happy Prince", the swallow was hungry and cold, but because he loved the prince too much, he didn't want to leave. He flied on the prince's shoulder with his remaining strength and whispered: "Will you let me kiss your hand?" After getting what he wanted, he fell to the prince's feet and died. In "The Nightingale and the Rose", the whole process of thorns penetrating the nightingale's heart was divided into three times: The first time, the extremely light pain was like a kiss from a young boy; the second time, it was like the heat of a blind date, accompanied by the rose thorns holding the flesh and blood; the third time, the flower thorns were like daggers, and the roses were dyed bright red. Nightingale's body was stiff, and she practiced the phrase "love is more precious than life" with blood.¹¹

In the ending of these fairy tales, only the Happy Prince and the swallow were rewarded by God. The bloody rose of Nightingale lost its fate in a battle with wealth, and caused poor students to throw it away and was crushed under the wheel. But it can still be seen

⁸ (Ireland) Oscar Wilde, *The Nightingale and the Rose* [M]. Tang Yingzhou, trans. Hangzhou: Zhejiang Literature & Art Publishing House, 2015, p12. All the fairy tales quoted in this article are from this book unless otherwise noted.

⁹ Ibid., page 13.

¹⁰ Ibid., page 56.

¹¹ Ibid., page 27.

that the swallow and the nightingale had pure joy or wishful persistence in their willingness to sacrifice their love for the prince and young students, but there was no lack of compassion and great love willing to atone for his suffering, so as to achieve a unity of beauty and religious themes. Louis wrote in "The Problem of Pain": "Love, death, and pain are internally unified." This kind of sacrificial love in Wilde's pen was to a certain extent detached from the unwillingness of simply dying for love, and added fraternity for the suffering of the poor people in the world and the students who loved parting. As the "Bible" says: "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve people, and give up his life as a ransom for the public." It was because of his love for all living beings that during the journey, Jesus performed miracles everywhere to help the poor, and finally suffered the cross to redeem the sins of the world. Likewise, even though Nightingale was petite and didn't know the students, she was willing to give her life for them. Just as Christ symbolically used wine and bread to represent his own blood and flesh for the disciples in the Last Supper, little swallow gave the body of the Happy Prince to the citizens piece by piece, and finally died with passion and contented love.

V. CONCLUSION

"Mostly mind and temperament, like one but two, like two but one, here is the most understanding."¹² As an aestheticist who was at the forefront of trends in his youth, a pioneer of decadent that was tragically ruined, his heart's hope, love and good will for the world were so pure. The heart was the most important thing for Wilde. It meant love and sympathy, spontaneous morality and sincere love and kindness. For this reason, he wrapped his profound moral worries under the cloak of aestheticism, seemingly deviant, but in fact pure and true, in an attempt to establish a utopia of the art world and welcome love and kindness back to the temple. Although Wilde's perfect moral conception and efforts were like a pen in his hand and they were ultimately broken by the hypocritical and cold blow of reality, through reading him and touching his clear soul, thousands of people in later generations became more and more convinced: "We are all in the gutter, but there are still people looking up at the stars."

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