

## **Marxist Interpretation of Oscar Wilde's Short Stories: The Happy Prince and The Star Child**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines Oscar Wilde's two stories - The Happy Prince and The Star Child – from Marxist point of view. Oscar Wilde was the Victorian writer primarily known for his witty plays, stories and aesthetic philosophy. In all, he wrote fourteen short stories. Though on the surface, his stories look like the children's fiction at the deeper level they reflect the socio-economic conditions of his time. On the one hand, he propounded the 'arts for art's sake' movement and on the other headed to the Marxist vision in terms of his concern for the poor and the downtrodden. In the first story, the statue and the bird donate everything for the human welfare while in the latter the arrogant child humiliates people around him until he suffers and discovers a true attitude to life.*

**Key words:** socio-economic, vision, concern, donate, welfare

**Marxist Theory:** The bottom-line proposition of the Marxist theory is that we can locate the literary work in the economic condition of the time. It has been propounded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the German thinkers and whose thoughts later came to be known as Marxism. It has also been applied to literature with a view to understand the work in a wider and deeper economic perspective. This theory asks a few pertinent questions to the literary work. It holds that there are social, historical, political and cultural backdrops in a work of literature. So in a Marxist sense, literature is not the expression of the author's self; it is the expression of the class struggle that goes on in the society. 'In its distinctively Marxist use, the reigning ideology in any era is conceived to be, ultimately, the product of its economic structure and the resulting class relations and class-interests.' (Abrams: 204) In short according to this approach the economic aspect is the base while literature, law, government, social conditions etc. are the superstructure. While applying Marxist theory to the three short stories of Oscar Wilde, I asked the following questions and tried to find their answers.

How does the text mirror the social, political and economic values?

What is the nature of base and superstructure in the stories?

- How do the stories express the aspirations of the ruling classes?
- How does the stories challenge the social norms?
- What is the nature of the 'class history' and 'class struggle' in the stories?
- Which social class does the author belong to?
- What social classes do the characters represent?
- Which values does the stories reinforce and criticize?
- Can we classify the characters in various social classes that they represent?
- How do the characters interact and fight in the stories?

**The Happy Prince:** In this story, the Swallow on his journey to Egypt, arrived in the city for a night halt. In fact, he lagged behind as he had fallen in love with a beautiful Reed and all his friends had flown towards Egypt. His companions viewed this attachment with the Reed as ridiculous because the latter had no money and too many relations. One evening, having arrived in the city, the bird perched between the feet of the statue of the Happy Prince. While conversing with the bird the Happy Prince regretted that when he was alive and had a human heart and in spite of that he could not understand the sorrow of the poor because he lived in the palace and led a life of ease and comfort. He did not know tears at all.

'I did not know what tears were, for I lived in the palace of Sans-Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter. In the daytime I played with my companions in the garden, and in the evening I led the dance in the Great Hall' (Wilde: 08)

These lines are very suggestive as no sorrow was ever allowed to cross the lofty walls. So inside the walls there was a life of abundance, pleasure, merriment and entertainment. The walls that ran around the palace obstructed his view of the poor and destitute that lived outside the palace. After his death, the king built a memorial. So a statue was installed in the heart of the city on a tall pedestal and now he was able to see all the ugliness and all the misery of the city. The bird saw the King lying in his painted coffin. He was wrapped in yellow linen, and embalmed with spices. There was a chain of pale green jade round his neck. The cathedral tower was sculptured with white marble angels. The young in the palace were making love and dancing merrily while the beggars were sitting at the gates. In the Ghetto, the merchants were bargaining with each other and weighing out money in copper scales. In the dark lanes there were starving children looking out lifelessly. Under the bridge two little hungry boys were lying in one another's arms trying to keep warm. But the watchman arrived and drove them into the rain.

The city projected here also serves as a prototype of the industrial world with two extreme scenarios. The artisans, artists and the proletariat class toiled day and night but the wealth they created was utilized by elite bourgeois class who did not work but had control on the means of production and the political power. In spite of the hard work, the poor working class could

notfulfil their basic needs viz. food, shelter clothing. Oscar Wilde implies that the fortune of the rich depends on the toil of the poor. The seamstress had her hands pricked because she had been busy embroidering a gown for the maid of honor in the place. She would wear that gown in the upcoming ball. So there were large number of problems in the city and the rich regularly had the balls and other forms of entertainment. They were pretty apathetic to the lot of the multitude subject to hunger and poverty. But was the price of her labour? She could not afford to buy oranges for her sick son. Similar was the plight of the young playwright. He had no motivation and physical power to give the last touches to the play he was writing because he is hungry and had no provisions to keep warm in winter. Oscar Wilde, being an artist himself, argues that in order to produce a good work of art, the artist must have a fine environment otherwise a very great artist may languish in a state of embarrassment. The artist in this story, having received a sapphire, got motivated and decided to finish the play. Wilde tells us that in a bourgeois society, the workers' labour is not valued and appreciated. It is due to this sense of 'distance' that they always feel demotivated. Wilde also deliberates on the socio-economic upheaval in the industrial Victorian society and which also figured up the novels of writers like Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell and Benjamin Disraeli. The poor match girl is an exemplar of the ugly side of the Victorian world. She was hungry and bare head and her parents forced her sell matches.

Again the character study from the Marxist approach is an important exercise. Amidst wretchedness, poverty and filth, the statue stood 'high above the city', gilded with leaves of gold and having bright sapphires as eyes and a red ruby on the top of the sword. Every now and then people thronged around the statue on account of their workaday routine and praised it in the superlative terms. The town councillor admired its beauty only to gain reputation and criticized it in order to look practical. Of course, there were some sensible mothers who considered the statue as a role model for their children and asked them not to be dreamy. The Mathematical master took the children to task for they called him 'an angel' which they had never seen. The seamstress had a thin and worn face and coarse and red hands all pricked by needles because she had been busy embroidering passion flowers on the satin gown of the Queen's maid-of-honor. The sick child had a craving for oranges due to high fever and had to drink only water. The young playwright was very talented but had no food in his stomach and fire in his grate. In the square, there was a little match girl whose matches had fallen into the gutter and got spoilt and it was sure that her father would beat her.

We also gather from the bird's account that similar state of affairs prevailed in other parts of the world. The Swallow told the Happy Prince stories of the strange lands that he had visited. They were the stories ibises catching gold fishes in the Nile and of the oldest Sphinx and of merchants carrying amber beads and of the King of the Mountain of the Moon. But these

stories did not amuse the Happy Prince who was preoccupied with the thought of the poor people around him and was moved by the plight of his subjects.

‘Dear little Swallow, you tell me of marvellous things, but more marvellous than anything is the suffering of men and of women. There is no mystery so great as misery.’ (Wilde: 16)

Wilde puts his socialist concern in the mouth of the Happy Prince who believes that there is concentration of wealth in the hands of a limited number of people while majority of the masses lead a difficult life. This leads us to probe into the values cherished by these two classes. The rich led a life of abundance while the poor struggled for food, shelter and clothing. It was a pity that there was no equitable distribution of wealth in that society. Those who toiled often went hungry. This is why the socially conscious statue did away with his wealth making the poor happy. Wilde is of the view that the rich must share their wealth with the poor. Having given away his sapphires and rubies, he finally asked the bird to take the leaves of gold too. But is this the viable solution to the problem? We have a somewhat contradictory account in Wilde’s own essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* in which he said:

‘They try to solve the problem of poverty, for instance, by keeping the poor alive; or, in the case of a very advanced school, by amusing the poor. But this is not a solution: it is an aggravation of the difficulty. The proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible.’ (Wilde: 05)

There seems to be a great deal of ambivalence with regard to Wilde’s views about socialism and personal private property. He is a bit perplexed with regard to the solution he hazards. He abhors the abolition of the private property for the sake of socialism. He talks at length about the aim of human life in his seminal essay and concludes that knowing the real man within is the ultimate aim of human life. That is the individualism in a true sense.

‘The material needs of Man were great and very permanent, but that the spiritual needs of Man were greater still, and that in one divine moment, and by selecting its own mode of expression, a personality might make itself perfect.’ (Wilde: 13)

One could also read the story from yet another angle which again has a strong bearing on the Marxist vision. Here, Peter Kropotkin comes to our rescue. Wilde owes a much to this anarchist. In his 1991 essay *The Soul of Man under Socialism* Wilde criticizes altruism. In the present story the Prince loses all his fortune in order to help the poor. However, he could not bring about any structural change in the society. He helped a seamstress, the playwright and the matchgirl but could not improve the status of the multitude living in abject poverty. So on the one hand, we see somewhat glorification of the altruistic gestures in the story, but upon careful scrutiny we discern a sense of ambivalence.

**The Star Child:** Wilde projects a harrowing life of the woodcutters who trudged the icy winter road. As their village became visible, they were happy, but the thought of poverty made them unhappy again. One of them said to his friend that they should not merry because the life is actually meant for the rich, and that it is always better that they die of cold or some beast fall on them and slay them. They are so disinterested in life. His companion replies that there is unequal distribution of wealth in the world. This is partiality and only in matters of sorrow there is absolute fair play.

‘...much is given to some, and little is given to others. Injustice has parcelled out the world, nor is there equal division of aught save of sorrow.’ (Wilde: 147)

Even the animals and birds had a difficult time due to intense cold. The Wolf held it that the government had to look in to the situation. The Woodpecker who was a born philosopher did not believe in the atomic theory and straightaway accepted the present as a reality. But a few species did enjoy the harsh cold; the owls had stiff feathers.

As the star fell from the sky they said a crock of gold must have fallen. Oscar Wilde makes a good use of the myth rampant ancient times. It is considered to be a good omen. A treasure is believed to be falling from the sky. Instead, they found that there was a star child wrapped in the gold cloak with a chain of amber round its neck. Indeed there was no gold, no silver but a child wrapped in a cloth. That was the end of their hopes. They were upset because they were looking for gold. They were so poor that they are not able to feed their own children. One of them decided to pick the baby up. He admitted that he had many mouths to feed and had only a little pot. He lived in a bare house that needed many things. His comrades laughed at his foolishness and soft heartedness. As they came to the village, his comrade took charge of the cloth as a part of the sharing deal. Back home, his wife too takes him to task:

‘Our children lack bread, and shall we feed the child of another? Who is there who careth for us? And who giveth us food?’ (Wilde: 149)

He said that the strange manner of the child’s finding had made him act that way. He said that the God cares even for the sparrows. His wife was an atheist who retorted that they should not bother the death of sparrows in winter. As the child grew up, he hated the other children saying that he comes from the heaven and so is the natural master and they were his servants. He had no pity for the poor. The beauty means superiority. He became proud of his heavenly parentage and envied the children of the woodcutters for their low parentage. After all he was a star child and his playmates had black faces. So he said he was their master and they were his servants.

‘And wherever the Star-Child led them they followed, and whatever the Star-Child bade them do, that did they.’ (Wilde: 150)

He had no pity for the poor and helpless people and at times he even hurled stones at them. He often bullied them and made them beg elsewhere. He despised and mocked the ugly people around him. He enjoyed certain privileges too.

‘...in summer, when the winds were still, he would lie by the well in the priest’s orchard and look down at the marvel of his own face, and laugh for the pleasure he had in his fairness.’ (Wilde: 150)

The woodcutter and his wife too scolded him and wondered how he could be so arrogant and insensitive to the desolate and helpless people. The priest gave him lessons on brotherhood and equality. He counselled him that all that is around him is made by the God and he should not eliminate them for fun. He spoiled his playmates too. The way he mocked the old woman resting under the tree, shows his apathy towards the poor and the old. He troubled the innocent animals and people just for the sake of fun.

‘And when he pierced with a sharp reed the dim eyes of the mole, they laughed, and when he cast stones at the leper they laughed also. And in all things he ruled them, and they became hard of heart, even as he was.’ (Wilde: 150)

Over the years he became ruder and once he replied his mother that she was not his mother and so she should not try to mend his manners. The old woman whom he misbehaved turned out to be his mother who had lost the baby some years ago. But he did not accept her as his mother for she was a beggar, ugly and in rags. He told her that he was a star child and not son of any beggar woman and that accepting her as mother would bring shame to him.

Wilde talks about the values of the world. He holds that physical beauty is valued in the world. When the star child had beauty, he was adored by everyone. As he insulted his mother, he miraculously had adder-like skin and toad-like face. So the playmates mocked him and no more recognized him as their leader. Full of remorse, he set out to search his mother. En route he requested the mole, the squirrel and the linnet to help him locate his mother, but they refused to do so because in the past he had caused them trouble. At last, he arrived at a long-walled city. The sentinels drove him away. But there arrived a Magician who bought him for a bowl of sweet wine. The man imprisoned him in a dungeon fastening him with an iron chain. He deployed him to get a piece of white gold from the wood and having failed to procure he punished him with hundred stripes. In the wood he saw a hare trapped in the net laid by hunters. He set him free. Being helpless and in difficulty, he had sympathy for him. He took hold of the white gold and walked towards the city happily. He saw a hungry leper sitting at the gate of the city who prayed him to give him the gold. So once again we have a city like the one in the Happy Prince a prototype of a feudal cities where tyranny, disease, hunger, injustice and slavery reigned. The Magician’s lust is representative of the Victorian craving for wealth and power. The star child was starved for he failed to bring the piece of

white gold to his master. He was given an empty trencher to eat and an empty cup to drink. This happened for three times: he got a piece of gold and gave it to the hungry leper and got punished. But when he entered the city gates empty-handed, the sentinels bowed to him in respect because he looked a real Star Child. They recognized that he is their new Kind, the successor. Even the priests and the high officers knelt down to him in respect. He found his mother in the crowd; went to her and tendered his apology, regretted for his misbehaviour. The leper turned out to be his father and the king of the city; the beggar woman, his mother and the Queen. They brought him into the palace and clothed him in fair raiment, and set the crown upon his head, and the sceptre in his hand.

**Conclusion:** The study of Oscar Wilde's short stories using the Marxist theories proves very rewarding. He was a socially conscious writer who looks upon his literary works as a mission and therefore had a vision towards the society. This is why the Happy Prince feels happy while getting stripped and ugly. The Star Child tells us about the people who considered themselves superior and born leaders. However, this is a misconception. In the real world, how you look is not as important as what you do and how you live in society. Meanwhile, in putting things in perspective, Oscar Wilde's essay *The Soul of Man under Socialism* was also examined.

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