

The Commodified Happiness: The Only Established Source of Meaning in Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince* and *The Nightingale and the Rose*

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Oscar Wilde's fairy tales are not as well-recognised as his novel or his dramatic works. This paper circles around two of his tales, The Happy Prince and The Nightingale and the Rose. Through a postmodernist outlook, this study postulates the vigorous diatribe of Wilde against the consumer culture which was dominant within Victorian society. Wilde asserts that the Victorian mind-set claims that happiness is attainable through accumulating signs of affluence and he ironically mocks this notion of happiness which is entitled to commodified objects. To him, happiness is defined through a strict sense of Christian morality and Christ-like love and kindness. His aesthetic views are entangled with morality and he fails to celebrate art for art's sake. Moreover, this study asserts that Wilde is aware of the dominant language games, and his application of the technical language game for the Prince, the Nightingale, and the Swallow is in debt to his monolithic morality or his opportunistic character. At last, Wilde refuses to celebrate beauty if morality is absent and in this way, his aesthetic concerns become rather contradictory.

Keywords

Victorian Happiness; Oscar Wilde; *The Happy Prince*; *The Nightingale and the Rose*; Victorian Consumerist Society; Victorian Morality

Introduction

The late Victorian period was a time of consumerism; the fruit of industrialisation in capitalist England had given way to a new way of living in which consumerism prevailed as “a vital aspect of social existence” (Johnson 29). Britain in the 19th century went through rapid industrial changes, for instance,

London remained “a major centre of manufacturing industry” (Morus 406) during the 19th century and by 1900, it was the most populated city in the world with a population of over six million. Many of the notable Victorian authors reflected this consumer culture within their works. Mathew Arnold, for instance, abhorred the age of industry for distracting people from the true value of culture which was, according to him, “a study of perfection” (Arnold 34). Some Victorian novelists were concerned with the moral ramifications of the industrial era in which moral decline was experienced. Dickens, for instance, addressed “the moral bankruptcy of a culture that revolved around the acquisition of goods” (Gurney 230). The industrial era is also accountable for massive social and cultural divisions between different classes in which a particular English social class was wealthy while the rest of the population was relatively deprived.

One of the prominent Victorian literary figures and social critics is Oscar Wilde. Wilde’s socialist views are predominant within his works, yet his major critical work, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (1891) explicitly represents a utopic world in which the “sordid necessity of working for others” (Wilde, *De Profundis* 245) is abolished and man is equal to his peers. The religious emancipation that Wilde pictures is framed within socialism. As “a political, radical [and] Christian allegorist” (Montgomery 130), Wilde envisages a world in which poverty is entirely eradicated and humanist and religious discourses will prevail; these discourses also include “categories of class and age as well as gender with political implications” (O’Connor 412). Wilde’s Christian view does not only influence his utopian society, as a decadent writer, his ultimate purpose is also to “blend Christianity and the artistic life of aestheticism” (Nassaar 142). Certainly, his religious views have influenced his fairy tales which were partly derived from “European literary-folk tradition” (Thompson 196) which included didactic themes. In Wilde’s view, all social, cultural, and economic Victorian issues can be redeemed through a Christ-like love of humanity. Central to Wilde’s socialist views is this Christ-like love, and in fact, his socialist views stem from his dedication to religion.

Wilde is a vigilant critic of his society; he observes social circumstances meticulously through humanist lenses. A technique that Wilde utilises is to create stereotypical characters who conform to “class, race and gender values of the society” (Widyalkankara 52). He mocks these established values by illustrating their absurdity and futility. Wilde also vehemently castigates the hypocrisy of the uptight religious British people. As Hanson asserts,

Wilde “made a career of exposing the ironies and hypocrisies of the typical English puritan” (122). Wilde’s fairy tales elucidate a world which can be saved through Christ-like kindness. This is consistently needed in his fairy tales since they are “the very cynical and bitter accounts of man’s depravity that he actually encounters” (Monaghan 156) without such Christ-like sacrifices. In this sense, his fairy tales galvanise the religious mind to participate in such discourses. The publication of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* was not entirely for the aesthetic cause; however, by employing this genre, Wilde seeks to “construct his Irish identity” (Liang 144). Having in view that fairy tales are an inseparable part of Irish literary identity, Wilde emulates other Irish authors. Two of his highly admired tales, *The Happy Prince* and *The Nightingale and the Rose* portray a radical view of Victorian consumer culture. Wilde is aware of the poor state of Victorian life under capitalism. He is concerned with “the inequality of standards of living [which] prevent humans from realizing their own potentials” (Sumbul 163). In his two tales, Wilde illuminates a radical view of happiness and utility.

In this paper, I seek to demonstrate how both of these fairy tales serve Wilde as a strong means for denunciation of the Victorian value system in which “notions of standards and measurable outcomes” (Gomez 367) become the only possible way through which happiness is measured and commodified. Contradictory to Wilde’s view on aestheticism, these two tales fail to defend aestheticism which promotes the inherent value of art as opposed to the capitalist view which asserts that “a good life must be good for something more than itself” (Stanca and Veenhoven 93). The capitalist view, consequently, defines something good, virtuous, and beautiful only if it is efficient. In this sense, good art is that which is efficient. Failure to correspond to this capitalist definition provokes opposition towards art. Wilde fails to take firm ground to oppose this definition; however, in his two fairy tales, I argue, he ridicules the capitalist’s value system which is grounded on materialistic viewpoints. Accordingly, Wilde illuminates a view of happiness which is solely defined by commodification and consumerism. He reprimands this value system which does not correspond to religious and humanist discourses. Wilde depicts a Victorian society, I argue, in which the only source of meaning is commodification and consumerism. It is a society in which humanist and religious discourses have lost their values within this culture.

Happiness and commodified Victorian culture

As a result of the Industrial Revolution, the outlook of humanity changed towards itself and its needs. The primary needs of the earlier people were insignificant for the industrial man since new needs came into existence. These commodified objects which became the needs of Victorian people defined the relationship of individuals to society. In this sense, possession of particular objects brought social credibility for individuals. Some scholars claim that the Industrial Revolution reshaped human civilisation into a commodified or consumer civilisation; “meaning a civilization where demand for material goods and services is not justified by real needs, and... *consuming* is considered to be the most significant indicator for the quality of life of an individual, or even for their *happiness*” (Tomaszewska 275). The dominance of such a system which defines the happiness of the individuals comes at the expense of “the abandonment of traditional sources of meaning” (Carlisle and Hanlon 262). This society later normalised the needs of individuals as fundamental necessities of a decent life. Constructing these social norms were “to enable us to rank our needs” (Gaudillière 11). These needs, however, are always in some ways socially constructed.

The accumulation of goods in capitalist societies is parallel to a delusion of happiness. Within these societies, “possessing the latest versions of goods are often considered as one of the sources of happiness” (Debrececi 198). Such societies manipulate the definition of happiness by postulating the significance of commodity in attaining happiness. Commodification affects individuals dramatically; it defines “how people value things, practices, themselves, and others” (Sayer 344). Victorian society is not an exemption; on the contrary, Victorian society is a consumer society which survives by consumerism and commodification. By investigating two of Wilde’s fairy tales, I intend to illuminate the dominance of consumer culture and Wilde’s critique of such a society. This literary critique helps better define the commodification in Victorian society and the changing of the value systems. Victorian society was a society which took pride in consumerism and considered it a major pillar of modernisation. A significant criticism of capitalist society takes place within the realm of postmodernism.

As a postmodern critic of capitalist society, Jean Baudrillard criticises the absurd condition of human life within contemporary societies. Baudrillard was a media scholar, Postmodern critic, and cultural theorist who shifted his investigations from a Marxist point of view, when he found that the tradition of

Marxism was unable to fully investigate the tenets of Postmodern social life, as a result, “[h]e developed a broader and more analytical outlook toward society” (Habib 43). He is undoubtedly “a pioneer figure within the intellectual ranks of Continental Philosophy” (Markis 92), and he has contributed a great deal to the realm of cultural theory from the perspective of linguistics. Baudrillard’s notion of capitalist society is dark and desperate. In a sense, pre-capitalist societies were less materialistic and more humanistic than capitalist ones since technological advancement necessitated mass production and sequentially, mass consumption. As a result of the eradication of traditional, humanist, and religious value systems which were dominant prior to the emergence of capitalism, a void of meaning and value comes into existence which Baudrillard identifies as “the abyss of meaning” (*In the Shadow* 11). Baudrillard’s critique of capitalist society is concerned with the issue of value and need. He suggests, “for a long time capital only had to produce goods; consumption ran by itself. Today it is necessary to produce consumers” (*In the Shadow* 27). The production of goods was primarily based on the use-value. A person needed a very specific product only because he/she found it vital to his/her welfare. Later, however, “consumption of goods [increased] because of the lifestyle, social status, image and pride” (Stellarosa and Ikhsano 408). In this sense, sign-value becomes the dominant reason why individuals consume goods within society.

The use-value of objects is their primary function to the consumer. In contrast, the sign-value of objects does not serve individuals for their utility; they exist for the social meanings they possess within a capitalist society. Certain sign-values of certain commodified objects become dramatically dominant within certain societies in specific periods. This is because consumption is a cultural phenomenon and agents of consumption are entitled to engage with cultural activities through which a sense of selfhood comes into existence. England of the Victorian period stands as the pinnacle of consumerism in the 19th century and commodification of objects and assigning sign-value to these objects become ordinary in the period. Wilde is well-aware of the dominance of such materialist sign-values which haunt Victorian society. Propagating material values, the capitalist society redefined the value system in which the “value of being” (Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* 105) was abolished to preserve “economic values” (Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* 105). These economic values are defined, in Baudrillard’s view, as sign-value and use-value.

On the other hand, Lyotard, one of the most significant postmodern critics of the twentieth century, envisages the capitalist world enslaved by

certain language games which define the relationship of individuals to society and vice versa. Lyotard identifies three different language games which dominate the episteme of each era. The first language game he identifies is the “denotative game in which what is relevant is the true/false distinction” (Lyotard 46) while the second language game is the “prescriptive game in which the just/unjust distinction prevails” (Lyotard 46). The last language game, however, which is the dominant language game in capitalist societies is the “technical game in which the criterion is the efficient/inefficient distinction” (Lyotard 46). While consumption within society does not prevail based on the efficient/inefficient correlation within capitalist societies, this notion becomes the criterion through which human value can be measured and calculated. It is this view which refutes the aesthetic movement for it fails to find art efficient. Performativity becomes honourable and the capitalist societies seek to eradicate costly elements which are not efficient or which do not benefit this worldview.

The unhappy prince and the miserable nightingale: Wilde’s terror of Victorian consumer culture

Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and his humorous society plays overshadowed his shorter works, such as his tales. While *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) was published before his only novel, it failed to find recognition analogously. In his two tales, *The Happy Prince* and *The Nightingale and the Rose*, Wilde depicts a common Victorian viewpoint of happiness which is entitled to the accumulation of objects and signifiers. How the industrial revolution of the earlier period becomes the dominant zeitgeist of Victorian society, and how commodification becomes the only meaningful justification of life through reevaluating itself under capitalism are the major questions investigated. The turn of history for many philosophers and cultural critics is the industrial revolution. From the emergence of the industrial revolution to the end of the Victorian period is the age of “production [which] is the dominant scheme of the industrial era” (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 63). It is a milestone in the modification of the Victorian value system. The episteme of the period is so dominating that a collective object of desire comes into existence; that is commodified happiness.

The Happy Prince is the story of a statue which is embellished with gold leaf and jewellery and which seeks to assist the poor by sharing his gold and

precious stones. This Christ-like figure of the Happy Prince who sacrifices himself to help humanity is an old motif with the difference that this statue contributes to the lives of the people financially, rather than spiritually. The title of this story is a paradox. The Happy Prince is neither happy nor content with the state of affairs. Conversely, he is quite agitated to see the poverty around him and the way that the Happy Prince is seen does not accord to the way he is. "I am glad there is someone in the world who is quite happy" (Wilde, *Delphi* 1483). It appears that in the context of this short story, happiness is the only object of desire for everyone and it is measured and regulated. Thus, the contradiction occurs within the ways that happiness is defined. Baudrillard suggests that "affluence is in effect, merely the accumulation of the signs of happiness" (Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, 42). The Prince is "solid gold" (Wilde, *Delphi* 1486), accordingly, he represents happiness for all the gold and signifiers he possesses. In this sense, Wilde ironically condemns the capitalist viewpoint of happiness and displays that, despite the accumulation of the signs of affluence, the Prince is not happy. Another personified character who acts as the provider of the Prince's wishes is the Swallow. He falls in love with a reed and soon abandons her for "she has no money, and far too many relations" (Wilde, *Delphi* 1484). Money becomes the dominant criterion which holds together this society. It is a consumer society and in such society, "happiness... is the absolute reference...it is the strict equivalent of salvation" (Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* 83). The Swallow abandons its love in the hope of moving to Egypt where "on a great granite throne sits the God Memnon" (Wilde, *Delphi* 1490). Soon, the Prince asks him to help him by removing his gold leaf and precious stones and giving them to the poor. Reluctantly, he assists the Prince, and eventually, the Prince's objects and signifiers become limited. Since happiness is "measurable in terms of objects and signs" (Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* 83), the state of the Prince's happiness declines as he gives away his objects to the poor. He, in return, brings happiness to the poor people who receive these objects. Once again, Wilde mocks the materialistic view of happiness which is dominant within Victorian society.

This new-born system commodifies whatever in which it can find use-value or sign-value. Indeed, these objects should have "exchange value" (Baudrillard, *The Mirror of* 30) in order to be considered in this system. Tragically, the Prince's eyes are made of "rare sapphires" (Wilde, *Delphi* 1491), and he knows too well that to assist other people, he must let go of his eyes. The Prince's final objective is to eradicate poverty from the face of the city, nevertheless, little does he know that the needs of people are interminable since "the system of

needs is the product of the system of production” (Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* 141). All his contributions to the city soon become irrelevant since the system of needs and the false perception of individuals towards what they need outstrip the little help that the Prince can offer. This is because “the consumer society needs its object in order to be” (Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* 141). Consumption and destruction of objects is the only way in which this system can survive. Eventually, the objects and signs which have beautified the Prince and made him look happy are “picked off, till the Happy Prince looked quite dull and grey” (Wilde, *Delphi* 1494). The happiness of the Prince, in the people’s view, was due to possessing those signs of happiness which are now absent. The mayor of the city asserts that “the ruby has fallen out of his sword, his eyes are gone, and he is golden no longer... in fact, he is little better than a beggar” (Wilde, *Delphi* 1495). The body of the Prince is melted and replaced by the statue of the mayor which is once again embellished by jewellery and is made ironically happy.

The story of *The Nightingale and the Rose* allows us to deepen our knowledge of consumerism in Victorian society. The story begins with a young Student who falls in love with his professor’s daughter. “She said that she would dance with me if I brought her red roses” (Wilde, *Delphi* 1498). Red roses appear to be rare and thus worthy of sign value. The student encounters difficulty in finding red roses and in his garden “there is no red rose” (Wilde, *Delphi* 1498). There is a correlation between the availability of the girl’s object of desire and her worth and merit. The object must be rare; now a red rose has no use-value per se but the sign-value accompanied by its exchange value accounts for its desirability. The girl does not ask for a red rose on the basis of her needs, and it does not account for her survival and as Baudrillard points out “all production and expenditure beyond the needs of strict survival can be termed waste” (Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* 173). The sign-value of the red rose is what interests the professor’s daughter. The Nightingale who witnessed the story finds itself obliged to assist the young Student. She begins a quest in search of a red rose. Throughout the story, the unavailability of the red rose increases the worth of the professor’s daughter. Acquiring this object is very challenging and the Nightingale moves from one rose tree to another suggesting, “give me a red rose... and I will sing you my sweetest song” (Wilde, *Delphi* 1500). The first tree asserts that “my roses are white” (Wilde, *Delphi* 1500), the Nightingale moves to another place and finds a different tree. “My roses are yellow” (Wilde, *Delphi* 1500). Disappointed and bewildered, the

Nightingale searches for another rose tree, but the tree which is a red rose-tree is frozen and cannot produce any roses this year.

The quest for finding a red rose is harder than the Nightingale had thought. It is so rare that its sign-exchange value must be something dramatically significant, the Nightingale's heart and blood. "Death is a great price to pay for a red rose" (Wilde, *Delphi* 1501), but the Nightingale already knows that in order to obtain the red rose she must sacrifice her life. It can now be understood that even life can be a sign-value which can be exchanged. Life in itself is an enormously significant sign-value which is commodified and exchanged. Life as a commodified object must be destroyed since "it is in destruction that it acquires its meaning" (Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* 197). The value of human sacrifice, and the lives of humans, in this sense, can be measured and exchanged. To avoid the bitterness of the situation, Wilde personifies a Nightingale and offers its life a price. The question is if the life of a personified Nightingale is exchanged, can a human's life become a commodified measurable object in relation to its sign-value? The Nightingale eventually yields to the tree's request. "Be happy; you shall have your red rose" (Wilde, *Delphi* 1501). Through the painfully tragic process, the Nightingale loses her life, and the red rose is earned in exchange. "But the Nightingale made no answer, for she was lying dead in the long grass, with a thorn in her heart" (Wilde, *Delphi* 1504). The exchange value of the red rose was the life of the Nightingale.

In the same vein, the Nightingale has served its purpose properly. Her life has been commodified and destroyed in exchange for a red rose for the young Student. The young Student finds the red rose and rushes to give it to the professor's daughter. Reluctantly, she looks upon the red rose and rejects the young Student's offer. She states, "the Chamberlain's nephew has sent me some real jewels, and everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers" (Wilde, *Delphi* 1505). Once more, the issue of sign-value and sign-exchange value is at stake. It is now clear that these jewels and the flower, according to Baudrillard are waste. However, the sign-value of these objects is what interests these characters. The sign-value of a flower for which the life of a personified Nightingale was sacrificed is not equal to the sign-value of jewels. The happiness that jewellery can bring to the professor's daughter is much more than the happiness that a flower offers since the jewellery possesses a higher sign-value in comparison to the red rose. In this system of commodified objects and signifiers, "culture becomes an object of

consumption” (Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* 218). These two tales illustrate how the Industrial Revolution of the earlier period affects the mind-set of the Victorian people towards a commodified culture in which everything, even the lives of people can be priced and exchanged for another commodified signifier. They also illuminate the constant focus of the author on the practicality of *The Happy Prince* and the Nightingale in the context of these two tales in which both their lives are exchanged to serve human purposes.

Utility or morality: is Wilde a hypocrite?

The merit of every character is portrayed based on its efficiency. Industrialisation changed the course of the language games from what Lyotard entitled the “Denotative Game” (46) to what he later called the “Technical Game” (46). Through the industrial outlook, the characters do not contribute to the myth of humanity’s emancipation, they are no longer characterised by good or evil, but by their efficiency. In this system, good denotes that which is efficient, and evil is that which malfunctions. The Happy Prince and the Nightingale were two efficient pillars of people’s lives in these two tales. The question of practicality is at stake in the very beginning of the Happy Prince’s story, “people should think him unpractical, which he really was not” (Wilde, *Delphi* 1483), and the rest of the story is the excruciating effort of Wilde to illustrate that *the* Happy Prince is practical and efficient and consequently, good.

To satisfy the materialist point of view of Victorian individuals, Wilde needed more imagination to establish a value system with which aesthetic value could be included in his aesthetic discourse. Although “Wilde actively engages a discussion of aesthetic terms” (Shillinglaw, 223), he fails to celebrate the beautiful Nightingale or the Prince merely as ends within themselves and they are, therefore, valued as means to human ends. To elaborate, he combines aestheticism with utility. Illustrating the efficacy of his characters in these two fairy tales does not adhere to his long-standing belief in innate appreciation of beauty and art independent of their use-value. This is contradictory since both the Nightingale and the Prince epitomise practicality and beauty simultaneously, and “although the story is indeed tackling social problems” (Killeen 22), it fails to address the issue of aesthetic value with an intrinsic value which must be appreciated within itself. Wilde, however, looks for external reasons to appreciate and celebrate the beauty alongside the practicality of these two characters. A possible answer to this contradiction, I argue, is

the opportunistic motivations of Oscar Wilde. Fortunato, a contemporary Wildean critic asserts that his studies “reveal a Wilde who was extremely conscious of the media and who was learning that it was necessary to take advantage of the opportunities it offered to aspiring artists” (11). He gives many examples of how Wilde exploits bedlams he creates through the media to advertise his works. On the other hand, it must be noted that as Wilde’s characters fail to conform to aestheticism, they gain moral and aesthetic value through dematerialisation. This is a critique of the industrialisation which Wilde assiduously utilised. The Swallow and the Prince join in happiness in heaven, asserting that they were both rewarded for ignorance of the materials. Following this argument, these tales of Wilde function as double-edged swords which give him credit for criticising Victorian consumer culture and at the same time, condemn him for the capitalist view of utility.

The aesthetic views of Oscar Wilde are illustrated very clandestinely and they fail to justify the utility of the Swallow, the Nightingale, and the Prince; however, Wilde allegorises the commitment of all these characters to their cause. The infinite Christ-like love of these characters emulates that of Christ’s love for humanity. Indeed, Willoughby asserts that in the Nightingale’s case, “the ‘thorn-crown’ of her agony will blossom into a red rose, venerable symbol of love, beauty and perfection, which represents the art work in whose symmetry and formal coherence the martyrdom of its creator is incarnate” (110). For an artist to achieve artistic perfection, if that even imaginarily exists, one must dedicate oneself to one’s cause unconditionally. Moreover, aestheticism, for Wilde is always associated with monolithic morality. This stands clearly as opposed to the arbitrary definition of aestheticism, yet, many scholars like Quintus have argued that Wilde’s position is humanist and it is “a position which is arguably, despite Wilde’s flippancy and intellectual carelessness [is] moral” (560). Accordingly, it can be argued that Wilde’s efficacy of his characters might stem from his moral standing rather than an attachment to the capitalist cause. Similar to his novel which epitomises aesthetic moralism, his major characters in these fairy tales take an efficient part on the moral ground. Whether associating moralism with aestheticism or seizing an opportunity to promote his works within the capitalist framework, Wilde appears to be aggressively hostile to the consumerist culture which is dominant throughout the late Victorian period in these two tales. The efficiency of his characters can be justified within these two ways; however, it can be strongly argued that he is not trapped in the technical language game which has dominated Victorian society. He is well-aware of the dominant language

games, and he seeks to represent prescriptive or at times, denotative language games which are more concerned with morals.

Conclusion

Oscar Wilde's fairy tales are strongly concerned with social issues in late Victorian British society. In his *The Happy Prince* and *The Nightingale and the Rose*, Wilde accuses the consumer society of shallow materialistic viewpoints which deflected the society of moral, religious, and humanist causes and which gave way to a commodified sense of happiness that is attainable through accumulating the sign-values of objects. The ironic title of *The Happy Prince* serves Wilde to castigate this materialist outlook towards happiness. Wilde depicts the brutality of such capitalist and consumerist societies which commodify everything, even the life of a nightingale and the value of a red rose. Indeed, he depicts a Victorian society in which individuals find value within objects and have abandoned humanist, moral, and religious values which Wilde highly admires. On the other hand, Wilde depicts his characters as beings who are efficient in the lives of individuals. This, I argue, is either because of his opportunistic character to include himself within the capitalist framework to promote his works or his strong sense of moralism which is dominant in most of his works, or both of these causes simultaneously.

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