



The Happy Prince: A Paradoxical Aesthetic Tale and a Dual Critique of Victorian Times

Quentin Caizergues

Faculty of Education
Independent essay project in English Literature, 15 credits.
Spring term 2020

Quentin Caizergues

Author

Quentin Caizergues

Swedish title

Den Lycklige Prinsen: En paradoxal estetisk berättelse och en dubbel kritik av den viktorianska tiden

English title

The Happy Prince: A Paradoxical Aesthetic Tale and a Dual Critique of Victorian Times

Supervisor

Lena Ahlin

Abstract

This essay highlights *The Happy Prince*'s advantageous use of conventions of the fairy tale genre to stress critical issues of the Victorian period: the challenge of the established Christian socio-moral order, the rising of the bourgeois industrial society, and the advent of aestheticism as a response. Using the close reading technique supported by the Victorian socio-historical background, the analysis establishes that the criticism proceeds by double associations. Firstly, the clear structure of the tale, enriched by a plethora of aesthetical features and suitable narrative processes, is propitious for children's access to a message calling for more human generosity. Meanwhile, subtle analogies to the Christian imagery appear blurred by paradoxical elements. This prevents a definite religious interpretation from adults to which those messages are intended. Secondly, in connection with aestheticism, a social and moral criticism takes the form of a satire of the utilitarian vision of the bourgeoisie and a questioning of the common Victorian beliefs: the link between beauty and moral integrity, as well as the moral code of femininity. Finally, the utilitarian discourse and the disapproval of the research for pleasure from beauty merging with a hedonist vision, advocate an "art for art's sake" free of these respective considerations.

Key words

Oscar Wilde, *The Happy Prince*, fairy tale, aestheticism, moral standards, social satire, Victorian society, Christian values

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Born in Dublin in 1854, Oscar Wilde is one of the most well-known writers of the Victorian Era. From his very beginnings, he was famous for his striking personality, notably due to his idiosyncratic and voluntarily exuberant appearance, as well as for his taste for art and aesthetic insight. Published in 1888, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* is the first of two collections of tales written by Wilde, and his first literary success. This work was praised by the critics, notably among these by Walter Pater, renowned literature and art critic whose ideas and lectures at Oxford deeply influenced Wilde. Among the four other tales of this first story collection, *The Happy Prince* seems to occupy a special place. Firstly, due to its presence in the book title but also due to an attested pre-existing oral version (Aquién 9) giving evidence for the special attention paid to its elaboration and writing. This tale recounts the deeds of a magnificent fine-art statue, the Happy Prince, and a little swallow that he will convince to help him in giving his jewels to the neediest of his city, finally leading to the death of the two characters.

The Victorian era was a period of domination and expansion for the British Empire but also a troubled period because of changes brought by the emerging industrial society and new lines of thoughts, some owing much to Darwin's evolution theory. Hence, moral and social issues were at the centre of the Victorian debates along with the place of beauty and art, as a need to counterbalance the harsh industrial living conditions. Oscar Wilde was deeply concerned by these questions, so that his original and strong positions made him one of the main writers and art figure of his time. Therefore, many previous studies about Wilde's work deal with moral, aesthetical or biographical perspectives across a varied selection of his works. For instance, Justin T. Jones and John A. Quintus have noted the importance of morality in Wilde's fairy tales. Notably, Jones establishes Wilde's preference to subvert the traditional codes of Victorian morality in his tales, while Quintus points out Wilde's tendency to deliver his deepest preoccupations with the problems of society. The work of Wilde as well as his life can also be analysed through the prism of aestheticism. Christopher S. Nassaar reveals in one of his articles that from the fairy tales of Wilde transpire an aesthetic concern, while Beibein Guan stresses that Wilde had been influenced in his whole being by the dandyism movement whose aestheticism and unconventional manner challenged the established society, especially the "bourgeois industrial society" (Guan 24).

This essay focuses specifically on Wilde's *The Happy Prince* to propose an in-depth novel analysis highlighting how the concerns of the Victorian society appear in this tale through connections and oppositions. Using the close reading technique in association with Victorian background insights, it will be established that this tale is a fierce satire of the Victorian era which performs its critique along two dichotomised reading directions: a different level of perception of Christian messages between children and adults, and a socio-moral critique where the aesthetic perspective is used to challenge hedonism and the class society. At first, through an analysis relying on the respective capacity of children and adults to understand Christian messages, it will be highlighted that the clarity of the tale's structure accesses to of a lesson of moral, highly comprehensible, which advocates for more humanity and generosity in human relationships. The presence of subtle paradoxes in Christian allusions contributes, however, to cast some doubt on adults' religious interpretations, leading to a questioning of the role of God. Secondly, the central contribution of aesthetic elements in the challenge of Victorian standards will be revealed, leading to denounce the widespread association between beauty and moral righteousness as well as the moral code applying to women. These aesthetical elements participate also in the caricature of the social class especially the bourgeoisie and its attempts to use art for its own gain.

The Key Elements of the Victorian Era

The Victorian era, which took place in the United Kingdom during the second half of the nineteenth century, was a turbulent time. The British society, in all its spheres, was undergoing radical changes started a century earlier with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. From the latter emerged the "bourgeois industrial society" (Guan 24) in which the bourgeoisie held the means of production and the financial resources. According to Tyson's review of Marxist criticism, one of the most insidious and vicious effects of this capitalist ideology resides in the fact that the usefulness of an object (or a human) is no more considered depending on its function, but on its capacity to be traded, or to procure to its owner a surplus social value (Tyson 62). These two criteria are called respectively, the exchange value and the sign-exchange value. Within this system, the labour class whose hard work keeps this capitalism alive is, at the same time, its greatest manpower and threat. In the ideas of Marx, the labour class will eventually free themselves from their lack of financial security by "a violent revolution against their

oppressors [thus] creat[ing] a classless society” (Tyson 54), because they need something to hope for (Tyson 58). This revolutionary emancipation is what the bourgeoisie fears the most; therefore, they rely on the gruelling labour to indoctrinate the labour class to be obedient and to avoid such a situation happening. According to the Marxist criticism, the prime essence of an ideology is to keep the majority under its control and guidance, allowing those in power and subscribing to this ideology to maintain their status (Tyson 57).

Besides the bourgeois capitalism, the Victorian society owed its unstable context to additional reasons. One of the major reasons was the emergence of Darwin’s evolutionary theory. Up till then, the Christian tenets had formed the moral code of British society. According to Michel Foucault, the moral code is one of the three concepts hiding behind the ambiguous word ‘moral’ and consists of a variety of (behavioural) rules, dictated by manifold institutions ranging from private spheres, like the family to the most public spheres, such as the state. Christianity had influenced social behaviour such as marriage, the sexual act, and relationships between men and women. For instance, the union between a man and a woman was only allowed by the clearance of God via marriage. Additionally, the sexual act before marriage and for other purposes than reproduction was regarded as sinful and immoral. As notes Marty Gould in his article, marriage acted as a restrictive institution of sexual energy (275). The position of women in Victorian society was strongly influenced by this religious inheritance. Since the late twentieth century, this particular vision of femininity is frequently called “the angel in the house”, especially by feminists, in reference to Coventry Patmore’s book with the same name (Moore 1). As explained by Elisabetta Marino, a self-righteous woman had to be obedient to her husband and to her family duties, such as the education of children, and should also be in charge of the domestic labour (Marino 1-2). To ensure her honour and her social respectability, she should be pure and “immune to carnal impulses” (Marino 2). For this purpose, she had to look like a child to incarnate the sexual innocence of youth, and the resulting appearance would show her beauty.

With the arrival of Darwinian ideas, man could no longer be seen as the offspring of God but rather as the result of a natural and selective process, just like all animals on earth. Consequently, man would also be subject to primal impulses, notably the sexual one, because the search for pleasure ensued from the sexual act would allow the proper functioning of the

perpetuation of species. The implications of these perspectives were severe, threatening the bedrock of the Victorian society by questioning the existence of God, the sense of human life, etc. In order to protect itself, the Victorian society began to reconsider even the smallest social issues as a question of morality. One of the best examples of this defensive reaction was, according to Gould, the attempt by the Victorian press to codify flirtation, in order to associate with it a unique human behaviour, social in its essence, rather than with a natural animal-like behaviour, as Darwin's ideas suggested (275).

To chase away the moroseness of both the industrial society and the Victorian morality, a group of artists started a new movement named aestheticism whose doctrine "art for art's sake" is attributed to the French author Théophile Gautier. Initially, this movement aspired to free the art from "any moral, religious, political, or educational purpose" (Guan 25). Consequently, aestheticism objected to the Victorian custom which infers a person's moral rectitude from his beauty. For instance, in fairy tales, the righteousness of a character was implicitly reflected in his physical beauty, and conversely his immorality was deduced from his ugliness. Walter Pater was one of the most fervent supporters of aestheticism, going as far as blending aestheticism with hedonism. Abhorring the existential suffering, he advocated searching for happiness through every pleasure that life can provide. Hedonism is a philosophy of life that states: "the pleasure is not simply good, but is, in fact, the good" (Weiss 214). In the conclusion of his book *The Renaissance*, Pater advises that because of the mortal nature of the humankind, the wisest men should spend their lifetime enjoying the pleasures of art, that is, "the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake" (Pater and Donald 190). Meanwhile, Oscar Wilde also contributed to the aesthetic movement, but with two distinct and contradictory approaches. Indeed, Nassaar notes that fairy tales written by Wilde can be divided in two categories: on the one hand, those that agree with Pater's *Marius* and therefore "blend Christianity and the artistic life or aestheticism" (Nassaar 142) and on the other hand, those that reject Pater's piece of advice written in *The Renaissance*.

A Classic Frame

The well-identifiable and characteristic narrative structure of *The Happy Prince* makes the tale attractive to children. This narrative structure owes its clarity to the respect of very general pattern rules, but also to conventions more specific to the genre of the tale stemming

from the story, that is the chronological course of events, or from the plot, “the causal links between the different events, on the way character, action, and theme are woven together” (Grellet 72). According to Gustav Freytag, “the best source of technical rules is the plays of great poets, which still to-day, exercise their charm alike on reader and spectator, especially the Greek tragedies” (7). In *Freytag’s Technique of the Drama* he uses this observation to infer a recurrent pattern in the drama’s plot which can be schematised by a pyramidal illustration. The plot begins with the exposition scene which presents the very first moment of the narrative, the most essential characters and the key issues around which the course of events will gravitate. The conflict is one of these key issues and consists of an opposition, struggle between hero(s) and antagonist(s). An antagonist might as well be a person as other counterforces such as “fate, society, nature or [hero's own self]” (Grellet 72). The conflict is also a sine qua non of the inciting moment which “sets the action in movement or triggers it off” (Grellet 74). The successive events that arise from the inciting moment form a coherent set of actions, where each action is interrelated and dependent on another: it is the rising action. Ultimately, the course of events reaches a climax, that is the “most intense event in the narrative” (Griffith 53). The rest of the narrative till its end will irreversibly be affected by what happened during this apex: it marks a turning point in the plot. Afterwards, the chain of actions leads towards the end of the plot at a much slower pace: it is the falling action. Finally, in the phase called dénouement, the unstable situation of origin at last gives way to a stable one. According to Griffith, Freytag’s pyramid applies “to many, perhaps most, works of fiction” (52). Nonetheless, Vladimir Propp stresses in *Morphology of the folktale* the special importance of the exposition scene in most tales to introduce the hero, giving his/her name, status and motivation (25).

In *The Happy Prince*, the exposition starts as follows: “High above the city, on a tall column, stood the statue of the Happy Prince. He was gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold, for eyes he had two bright sapphires, and a large red ruby glowed on his sword-hilt” (Wilde 279). This physical description introduces the singular nature of the eponymous hero who is a great and refined statue. The next paragraphs establish the hero in the context of the city where the tale’s story takes place. The Happy Prince appears to be loved and admired by each inhabitant, each for their own reason, and all of them, by common consent, seem to presume his happiness: “‘I am glad there is some one in the world who is quite happy,’ muttered

a disappointed man as he gazed at the wonderful statue” (279). The portrayal of the hero ends here for the moment and no additional information about him transpire from the tale such as his personality, thoughts, or goals, which cast some doubt in the future role of the Happy Prince in the story. The second key character is introduced during this exposition scene, namely a little swallow whose motivations and deeds are quickly revealed: “One night there flew over the city a little Swallow. His friends had gone away to Egypt six weeks before, but he had stayed behind, for he was in love with the most beautiful Reed” (Wilde 279). This masculine character is mobile and endowed with speech: “Shall I love you?” (Wilde 279) in contrast with the static Prince. At this stage, the equal treatment between the two characters in the attention paid to their introductions is a subsidiary hint for their future importance in the tale.

The elements of conflict are hidden during the exposition and only revealed at its very end, when the main characters meet: ““Who are you?” he said. ‘I am the Happy Prince.’ ‘Why are you weeping then?’ asked the Swallow” (Wilde 280). Hence, the postulate that the Prince was happy as suggested by his sobriquet proves to be wrong; on the contrary, he is extremely sad: “And now that I am dead they have set me up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep” (Wilde 280). The reason of the Prince’s woe is that he has become a powerless witness of human misery. He cannot help because his feet are henceforth fastened to a pedestal. As is often the case in tales, the hero is struggling with forces that go beyond his power and forbid him to pursue a quest. To shed light on the issues at stake, Propp emphasises that the study of tales should depend primarily on the analysis of the functions of the actions undertaken by the dramatis personae, since “the names of the dramatis personae change (as well as the attributes of each), but neither their actions nor functions change” (20). Referring to Propp's *Morphology of the folktale*, the Swallow in *The Happy Prince* has a triple function. Faced with an inextricable situation, it is a general rule to give the hero assistance, the magical agent (Propp 45), which will allow him to overcome the difficulty on his path. Nonetheless, this help, which can take different forms such as a new companion, a magic artefact of great power, or an animal, will only be granted if the hero can prove his value. Thus, the worthiness of the hero will be judged in the aftermath of a combat, a test, a question, while the help will stem from a donor (Propp 47). Hence, the swallow is a tester since his questions have of an indirect test for the hero (Propp 40); he is also a donor as being in capacity to provide him help; and finally he will

be the magical agent, that is, the help itself placed at the disposal of the hero (Propp 45). The Happy Prince fulfils also a banished hero function, which is also identifiable by children: “I lived in the Palace of Sans-Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter. [...] So I lived, and so I died. And now that I am dead they have set me up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city,” (280) however the reasons for this exile from “Sans-Souci” are not truly perceptible to children. Indeed, the literary game with “so high that” may indicate both an explanation for his large line of sight as well as the reason for this displacement. This hides what Propp calls “an act of villainy” (31) that the Prince committed while ignoring the misery.

Thereby, this encounter between the hero, namely the Happy Prince, and the tester, donor, and helper in the 'person' of the Swallow tallies with the inciting moment of the tale. From this instant, the hero will be able to pursue his quest, in this case helping the destitute persons. The rising of action which follows is composed of three episodes with the same pattern of actions, which ease children's understanding. Every time the swallow announces his departure for “Egypt” to the Prince, the latter keeps back the Swallow by the melancholic tone of his voice: “Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow” (281) in order to collect one of his jewels and bring it to a poor person in need. An additional episode follows where a change of tone can be observed after the Happy Prince donated his two sapphires, namely his eyes, therefore becoming blind. Here, the formula “Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow” is no more employed as the swallow decides to definitively stay: “Then the Swallow came back to the Prince. ‘You are blind now,’ he said, ‘so I will stay with you always.’ said the Swallow” (Wilde 283). This change in the process as well as the progressive loss of all of the Prince's jewels is also accompanied by a progressive rise of intensity in the lexical field relating to cold: “‘It is very cold here,’ he said; ‘but I will stay with you for one night, and be your messenger.’ [...] ‘but he is too cold to write anymore.’ [...] ‘It is winter,’ answered the Swallow, ‘and the chill snow will soon be here’” (Wilde 281-283). Each night alongside the Happy Prince is one step closer to the cold of winter, thus symbolising the future death of the Swallow, unable to cope with low temperature. The decision taken by the Swallow is the catalyst for the climax which arises on page 284. Condemned, the bird musters his last strength to kiss the Prince before dying. Immediately afterwards, the lead heart of the Happy Prince splits in half: “The fact is that the leaden heart had snapped right in two. It certainly was a dreadfully hard frost” (Wilde 284). Finally, the dénouement is the ascension to heaven for the Swallow and the Happy Prince, after having been

chosen by an angel of God as being “the two most precious things in the city” (Wilde 285). In fairy tales, the dénouement turns out to be a lesson of moral: in *The Happy Prince*, God's mercy which grants the ascent to Heaven of the Prince and the Swallow for their actions informs Children of the moral goodness of both characters.

Beyond the plot structure and the functions of characters, numerous narrative elements contribute to arouse and keep children's interest. First, the aesthetic elements are omnipresent all over the course of the tale, and especially in the four references made by the Swallow to Egypt, such as the second passage: “the large lotus-flowers. [...] sleep in the tomb of the great King. The King is there himself in his painted coffin. He is wrapped in yellow linen, and embalmed with spices. Round his neck is a chain of pale green jade, and his hands are like withered leaves” (Wilde 281). A rich imagery rises up from these allusions to colours, smells, and magnificence, participating in the fascination of young people for the tale by appealing to their imagination. Moreover, as stated by J. Zipes, the literary fairy tale is not “an independent genre” since its substance springs out from manifold influences and loans to other genres such as “the oral tales as well as to the legend, novella, novel, and other literary fairy tales” (XV). Several of these genres can be found in the processes used by Wilde all through *The Happy Prince*. First, it is not uncommon that tales personify objects and animals, endowing them with speech and human thoughts, which is the case here with the two main characters. The animal tale genre is perceptible in the human expressions of the Swallow: “I love travelling, and my wife, consequently, should love travelling also,” (279) and even more with the use of its usually accompanying humorous and ingenuous tone: “All day long he flew, and at night-time he arrived at the city. ‘Where shall I put up?’ he said; ‘I hope the town has made preparations’” (280). The tale turns to the fable genre when the Swallow tone becomes impertinent and ironic: “‘What is the use of a statue if it cannot keep the rain off?’ he said; ‘I must look for a good chimney-pot’” (280). Finally, the bed song accompanying the Prince incantation “Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow” (281) is perfectly adapted to raise the interest and catch the attention of the youngest.

A Christian Tale

Heretofore, it has been established that *The Happy Prince* follows the lines of a classical tale, particularly appreciated at the Victorian time. Wilde's tale adds to its morphology a strong

spiritual symbolism. Besides the fact that the Happy Prince plays the function of hero, he possesses another attribution: the moral centre of the tale. According to Griffith, the moral centre is “the one person whom the author vests with right action and right thought” (44). The moral goodness of the Happy Prince transpires from a remarkable resemblance between him and the divine figure of Christ. Nonetheless, the elements of comparison with the Bible are out of their original context, thus they are less perceptible to children, especially to the youngest ones.

In the book of Genesis, the fall of man tallies with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden as a result of the original sin. Although God had forbidden them, Eve then Adam, after being tempted by a snake, ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. According to the Christian belief, man and woman at that moment lost their innocence and their immortality, therefore they were condemned to live a mortal life punctuated by pain and suffering. Following the example of Adam and Eve, the Happy Prince is also banished from his Garden of Eden, his palace: “I lived in the Palace of Sans-Souci, [...] In the daytime I played with my companions in the garden, [...] Round the garden ran a very lofty wall, but I never cared to ask what lay beyond it, everything about me was so beautiful” (Wilde 280). The Happy Prince in his memories of this lost paradise mentions twice the garden, suggesting a special attachment for this delightful place. This tangible melancholia of the Prince for his garden reinforces the parallel with the Garden of Eden. Like Adam and Eve, in “Sans-Souci” the protagonist did not know what sadness was because sorrow was not allowed to enter there, and he was also unaware of the notion of Good and Evil, because his entire life was driven by beauty. The sin of the Happy Prince has been, while he was alive and still human, to falsely believe that happiness was the pleasure of beauty.

Nonetheless, the fallen Prince will regain the right to enter Heaven, the true one, by becoming a good Christian, and his new exemplarity can be deduced from commonalities between him and Christ Himself, and this on several occasions. Firstly, the most visible comparative element is the analogy with the crucifixion, which is the strongest symbol of the Christianity. In the Bible, Christ was nailed on a cross suffering his martyrdom both physically and mentally as he is slowly dying. Similarly, the Happy Prince is tied up in incapacitating posture: “My feet are fastened to this pedestal and I cannot move” (281). His posture, “High above the city, on a tall column,” (279) is also a clear allusion to the crucifixion of Christ. Like

the Lord, the Prince is also weeping at the sight of human misery, and therefore undergoes a psychological torment. Finally, he will also undergo physical harm: “So he plucked out the Prince’s other eye,” (283) as he asks the Swallow to dismount the sapphires that acts as his eyes in order to give them to the poor.

Secondly, in line with Christian teaching, the Happy Prince successively faces three temptations by the Swallow who recounts to him the splendours of Egypt, echoing the three temptations of Christ: “At noon the yellow lions come down to the water’s edge to drink. They have eyes like green beryls” (282). Egypt is depicted by the Swallow in a very aesthetical manner and has a great appeal for the Prince; for instance, the simile between greenness of lions’ eyes and precious gems echoes with hero’s lost paradise, his taste for art, and his own sapphire eyes. In the Bible, it is written that Christ fasted in the desert during forty days, during which the Devil came to see Him and tried to tempt Him; however, the son of God always refused. This episode in the life of Christ is a parable of the spiritual fight and devotion to God that a believer has to endeavour during life on earth. Once more, the Happy Prince, like Christ, remains untouched by the calls of his ‘daemon’, continuing to give the jewels and gold covering his body to the poor, which symbolised the beauty and its pleasures.

Further, apart from being incorruptible vis-à-vis the Swallow, the Happy Prince even succeeds in guiding him on the path of virtue by making him his apostle after the passage of the three temptations: “‘You are blind now,’ he said, ‘so I will stay with you always.’ ‘No, little Swallow,’ said the poor Prince, ‘you must go away to Egypt.’ ‘I will stay with you always,’ said the Swallow, and he slept at the Prince’s feet” (Wilde 283). Indeed, the bird himself now refuses the temptation represented by Egypt, which is moreover symbolised by its position at the Prince’s feet, as well as in the change in the Prince’s name, as “poor” (283). In connection, the following act of generosity from the Happy Prince can also be correlated with the Last supper of Christ with his apostles in which He shared bread and wine, which represented, in his own words, his body and blood. In the tale, after having successively donated the ruby of his sword-hilt and his two eyes made of sapphires, the Prince has nothing more to offer to “his poor” than the leaves of the finest gold which cover his entire body, therefore he asks to the Swallow:

“I am covered with fine gold... take it off, leaf by leaf, and give it to my poor” [...] Leaf after leaf of the fine gold [...] and the children’s faces grew rosier, and they laughed and played games in the street. “We have bread now!” they cried.

(Wilde 284)

This notion of food given from a body is the apotheosis in the parallel between the Happy Prince and Christ, materialised in the Prince's case by the leaves of gold which can be considered his flesh. Finally, the cause of death for both the Happy Prince and the Christ is more or less subsequent to a kiss. According to the Christian belief, Judas, one of the favourite apostles of Christ, denounced Him to the Romans by kissing Him shortly after the Last Supper on the Mount of Olives. The betrayal of Judas embodied in a kiss will lead to Christ' crucifixion and Judas, full of remorse, follows Christ in death by taking his own life. In contrast, the end of the Happy Prince is provoked by the love he shared with the Swallow rather than cupidity, and they both die following a kiss: "And he kissed the Happy Prince on the lips, and fell down dead at his feet. At that moment a curious crack sounded inside the statue, as if something had broken. The fact is that the leaden heart had snapped right in two" (Wilde 284). While he was a human and had a heart made of flesh, the Happy Prince spent his whole life behind the protective walls of his palace, ignorant of what sorrow was but also unaware of love, blinded by beauty that surrounded him. The thematic of love is also represented in the tale via several allusions to the feet which have a special connotation in the Christian imagery. In the Bible, the Washing of the Feet refers to the moment when Christ humbly step down from his divine status in order to wash the feet of his apostles to teach them humility and thus, like the symbol of the cross, the feet are associated to self-sacrificing in Christianity.

In the very end of the tale, the Christian behaviour of the Happy Prince and his apostle receives the final approval of God Himself:

"Bring me the two most precious things in the city," said God to one of His Angels; and the Angel brought Him the leaden heart and the dead bird.

"You have rightly chosen," said God, "for in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me."

(Wilde 285)

Thus, the two heroes are chosen to ascend to Heaven, as being the two most precious things in the city, while they are in the deepest misery of their existence: dead "on a dust-heap" (285). This, is an acknowledgement of the Christian faith: in Paradise only the virtuous are welcome. Therefore, the Happy Prince and the Swallow are both endowed with great moral values and identified as good in their nature from the Christian doctrine point of view.

A Wildean Paradox

Despite the numerous Christian messages disseminated throughout the tale, according to John Allen Quintus, the tales of Wilde are not “designed to encourage faith or advocate Christianity. Rather, in simple terms, they propose decency and generosity in human relations” (Quintus 710). Quintus’ claim reflects the observation that the entirety of Christian messages in *The Happy Prince* is tainted with paradoxical elements that blur the corresponding religious teaching.

For example, the parallel with the banishment of Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden is qualified by the Prince’s own words: “Round the garden ran a very lofty wall, but I never cared to ask what lay beyond it, everything about me was so beautiful” (280). The Prince, contrary to Eve is not guilty for curiosity and remains uncorrupted. His Christian deeds of generosity are also challenged by himself: “the living always think that gold can make them happy,” (284) implying that this act of compassion is illusory. This fact is corroborated by each donation of the Prince through the Swallow. For example, in the first event, the fever of a boy is not treated thanks to the brought jewel, but rather anecdotally through the flight of the Swallow: ““Then he flew gently round the bed, fanning the boy’s forehead with his wings. ‘How cool I feel!’ said the boy, ‘I must be getting better’” (281). The dangerous appeal of the Egyptian temptation for the Swallow is also questioned, first by the inversion in the respective roles between the Swallow and the Prince after the latter became blind: ““No, little Swallow,’ said the poor Prince, ‘you must go away to Egypt’” (283). Here, the Prince stands as the tempter. Secondly, this temptation is not directly blamed, in fact it is placed in perspective with a pillar of Christianity, that is, the Mystery of the faith: ““Dear little Swallow,’ said the Prince, ‘you tell me of marvellous things, but more marvellous than anything is the suffering of men and women’” (Wilde 284). The Prince definitely admits the attractiveness of the beauties reported by the Swallow.

In addition to this hindering of Christian messages, the general frame of the tale and some of the elements used do not follow the religious doctrine. For example, there is a reference to a pagan God in the text: “on a great granite throne sits the God Memnon. All night long he watches the stars, and when the morning star shines he utters one cry of joy” (282). Paradoxically, the pagan god gives the impression to be alive, therefore he would coexist

alongside with Christ, monotheist divinity who should be the one and only to be viewed as a God. Moreover, Ancient Greek myths are also extensively referred to in the tale, in particular, the myth of Prometheus, fastened to a rock at the top of the Caucasus. According to the legend, Prometheus “will have his endlessly self-regenerating liver torn to shreds daily by an eagle” (Woodard 191). The similarity with the pagan myth is striking in *The Happy Prince*, first by the location of the statue, furthermore since the Swallow takes off with his beak one after the other the jewels constituting the hero’s body. Another Greek myth can also be identified: the Er return from inferno. In this case, the analogy would result from the Prince’s body appearance, which would be a testimony for his past wrong deeds as a human, echoing particularly well with the Prince’s former taste for magnificence. In addition, the pagan process of metamorphosis plays a central role in the tale. In fact, it is made clear that the statue and the dead Prince are the same person: “When I was alive and had a human heart [...] And now that I am dead they have set me up here so high [...] and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep” (280). Thus, the statue appears to have organs and being able to cry, moreover, the transformation seems to have occurred at the Prince’s death and has been accompanied by a punishment, as in many pagan tales.

This tragic ending is on par with the greatest Greek tragedies and is accentuated by the questionable deeds of God towards the hero and the Swallow. Indeed, the Happy Prince feels love for the Swallow, and ends up by asking the bird to kiss him on the lips, which the Swallow does. So, their love is shared: “‘you have stayed too long here; but you must kiss me on the lips, for I love you.’ [...] ‘It is not to Egypt that I am going,’ said the Swallow. [...] And he kissed the Happy Prince on the lips, and fell down dead at his feet” (Wilde 284). Yet, God decides to split the two lovers in separate places of Heaven: “in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me” (Wilde 285). Moreover, despite the granted eternity, the monotonic task given to each character lead to a disillusioned tone about the afterlife.

Another incoherence with the Christian belief follows from the ascent of the bodies, “the leaden heart and the dead bird,” (285) of the two heroes rather than their immortal souls. In addition, God’s mercy seems improper: the suffering endured by the characters is hardly rewarded, and the “city of gold” (285) where God sends the Happy Prince reminds the treasures

for which the Prince was blamed. Thereby, God Himself could be fallible or unfair, blurring the message of Christian virtue. However, the general generosity message remains, as the Prince's donations are always followed by people's joy. Paradoxically, children for whom these Christian messages are not so perceptible, may be less perturbed in their interpretation; the general message they infer is a substantial defence for more human generosity and kindness.

A Questioning of Moral Codes and Social Class

Besides a moral teaching, advocating human goodness, *The Happy Prince* also contains a subversive tone, addressed to the Victorian moral standards and various social groups. One of the standards rejected by *The Happy Prince* is the one that connects the pleasure of art and its beauty with happiness. This combination recalls the specific interpretation of the aestheticism made by Pater in his book *The Renaissance*. Faced with their irrevocable mortality, Pater suggests that wise men should find their happiness in the enjoyment of the best pleasures of art (191). In Pater's view, the art takes multiple forms such as poetry, songs,... having in common a desired beauty (191). Similarly, the Happy Prince spent his life enjoying artistic pleasures, such as the dance which he led in the Great Hall each night: "In the daytime I played with my companions in the garden, and in the evening I led the dance in the Great Hall [...] everything about me was so beautiful" (Wilde 280). The life of the Prince was clearly modelled on this hedonistic aestheticism: the search for man's happiness in a perpetual enjoyment of the best pleasures of art, from which emanates a hegemonic beauty that prevents anyone from perceiving the sad reality.

During his life, the Prince succeeded in ignoring any pain; however, this pain was ironically imposed upon him when he died as a retribution for having been self-centred. While he had a heart made of flesh, the Prince could not cry because he did not know what sadness was, but after he died while having a heart made of lead, he could not help weeping at the sight of all the misery. Moreover, during his first dialogue with the Swallow, the Prince challenges his former life: "My courtiers called me the Happy Prince, and happy indeed I was, if pleasure be happiness" (Wilde 280). This mistake confessed by the Prince is also mirrored by his use of a conditional clause. Another sign of the Prince's misguidance is the analogy which can be drawn between the myth of Er and the Prince's post mortem suffering. At the very end of his book, *The Republic*, Plato tells the story of Er, who experienced the journey of souls after death

and who was authorised to return amongst the living by gods. In the other world, the sinful souls have to “bore the symbols of their deeds [...] fastened on their backs” (Plato 382). In the same manner, the Happy Prince wears on his body gold and jewels, which are the symbol of his ignorance and blindness caused by a life driven by a hedonistic aestheticism.

By merging the exterior beauty of the Prince with a guilty inside, and later on, an external ugliness with an absolved interior, *The Happy Prince* also intends to spurn the standard that linked morality and beauty during the Victorian period. As noted by Jones, the Victorian society and notably its literature, nearly systematically combined the beauty of a character with his/her righteousness, and conversely the immorality of a character with his/her ugliness (883). To defy this standard, the tale also associates with it the traditional vision of femininity. The beauty of woman resulted from their assumed purity, that is, the innocence of youth. That is why, the Victorian woman hid her feminine attributes in a corset, to imitate the physical appearance of young and prepubescent girls. Consequently, the Victorian society repudiated the idea that women could revendicate any carnal envies. Contrarily to the norm, *The Happy Prince* depicts the sensuality of woman as beautiful and attractive. The Swallow falls in love for the first time in the tale because of the “slender waist” of the “most beautiful Reed” (279). In addition, despite her beauty, the behaviours of the Reed are far from being considered as good by the Victorian moral code. Indeed, she is also insensible and possessing an uninhibited sexuality. Although the Swallow is her lover, the Reed “is a coquette, for she is always flirting with the wind” (Wilde 279). Moreover, while the Swallow stays as long as possible with her whereas his peers already left for Africa, she refuses to follow him when the time has come for the Swallow to leave as well: “but the Reed shook her head, she was so attached to her home” (280). Ironically, the love of the Reed for her home coincides with one of the qualities expected from the Victorian women: to be a perfect housewife. The moral beauty is also discredited in the tale by depicting the pretty woman as a shallow and venal person. For instance, the Reed “has no conversation” (279) and “the loveliest of the Queen’s maids-of-honour” shows an intense, superficial and materialist interest while ignoring the declaration of love from her man: “‘How wonderful the stars are,’ he said to her, ‘and how wonderful is the power of love!’ ‘I hope my dress will be ready in time for the State-ball,’ she answered” (281). Despite this, ‘maid-of-honour’ is qualified by the adjective ‘loveliest’ she does not benefit from other descriptive

language techniques to strengthen her portrayal. Consequently, the reader cannot create an empathic bond with her due to her lack of characterisation. On the contrary, it is the destitute persons that benefit from aesthetical descriptions like for example the portrait of a seamstress: “Her face is thin and worn, and she has coarse, red hands, all pricked by the needle, for she is a seamstress” (280). The physical repercussions provoked by the woman's life of toil on her face and her hands, allows the reader to empathise with her.

In addition to the questioning of moral standards by *The Happy Prince*, the tale proposes a satire that targets the principal members of the Victorian society. It mocks the bourgeois, notably for their obsession to give anything a value. According to the Marxist criticism, the value in a capitalist view is either an exchange or a sign-exchange value. In *The Happy Prince*, one of the Town councillors attempts to extract a benefit from the art symbolised by the Prince: “‘He is as beautiful as a weathercock,’ remarked one of the Town Councillors who wished to gain a reputation for having artistic tastes; ‘only not quite so useful,’ he added, fearing lest people should think him unpractical, which he really was not” (Wilde 279). Hence, a first value this bourgeois intends to benefit from, is the sign-exchange value. By valuing the statue, he hopes to gain a certain prestige associated to the arts, which was historically also reserved to the aristocracy. Nonetheless, the Town Councillor is mocked for his evident lack of artistic taste, since he compares the refinement of the Prince with the triviality of a weathercock. Further, according to his own words, the Town Councillor would even be inclined to exchange the statue of the Happy Prince for the weathercock since the latter is more useful referring undoubtedly to the exchange value.

The bourgeois is also blamed for his pre-eminent position in society via the dialogue between a mother and her son who is “crying for the moon” (Wilde 279). To tame the desire of her son, the mother asks him to follow the idyllic example of the Happy Prince “who never dreams of crying for anything” (Wilde 279). Nonetheless, the Prince is dead, and therefore he has nothing more to expect from life, contrary to the poor labour class who only have their dreams to survive and keep on hoping. Thus, the mother's discourse is used to embody the bourgeois' industrial society and their exploitation of the labour class, dominating them via the subjugating effect of their toil thus preventing them to hope.

Finally, the bourgeoisie is being mocked due to their hypocrisy and lack of intelligence: “‘Dear me! How shabby the Happy Prince looks!’ he said. ‘How shabby, indeed!’ cried the Town Councillors, who always agreed with the Mayor” (Wilde 285). Thus, to get into the Mayor’s favour, all the Town Councillors are repeating each of his words without thinking. Ironically, this mechanical behaviour will turn into an endless conflict of egos when they have to decide who will be the model of the next statue: “‘We must have another statue, of course,’ he said, ‘and it shall be a statue of myself.’ ‘Of myself,’ said each of the Town Councillors, and they quarrelled. When I last heard of them they were quarrelling still” (Wilde 285). The Town Councillors, while pursuing their habits, makes the Mayor angry because he believes that they desire to take his position. The lack of intelligence of the bourgeoisie is also described in their decision-making, for example in their eagerness to legislate everything: “We must really issue a proclamation that birds are not to be allowed to die here.” (285) It is risible to think that birds can respect this law or that anyone chooses his death.

The Men of Knowledge are mocked as well, in the persons of a mathematician, an ornithologist, and an art professor. All three of them lack wisdom. The first cannot bear to see children dreaming: “The Mathematical Master frowned and looked very severe, for he did not approve of children dreaming” (280). The Mathematical Master is ridiculed for wanting to control the liberty of thoughts, even the most intimate. The second tries to share his observations and conclusions about the Swallow seen at winter time with unintelligible language while he ignores the real reason for the Swallow’s presence. And the last, but not the least, disdains the ugliness of the Prince: “‘As he is no longer beautiful he is no longer useful,’ said the Art Professor at the University” (285). In doing so, the Art Professor imitates the bourgeoisie by trying to find a value in art or in this case beauty. The bourgeoisie and the Professors are also characterised with very few details, which contribute to create readers’ inimical feelings about them. In contrast, the poor benefit from characterisation techniques based on aesthetic, descriptive, and figurative language filling the reader with empathy for those poor people.

Finally, the Happy Prince takes up the cudgels for the poor, or at least, he reveals their harsh living-conditions. They are described as innocent, because into the words of the Prince, they ignore the real happiness: “you must take it off, leaf by leaf, and give it to the poor; the living always think that gold can make them happy.” (284). Thereby, what makes the poor

better than the bourgeois, is their misery, which is considered the most marvellous thing in the words of the eponymous character, probably also in reference to the misery of Christ.

Conclusion

In the course of this essay it has been demonstrated that *The Happy Prince* is a significant piece of work among Oscar Wilde's writings. Above all, it is a beautiful tale, which offers its youngest readers numerous aesthetic elements, described appealingly and supported by a well-readable narrative structure. Although the story is punctuated with references to Christian figures and standards, the used implicit formulations restrict these references to grown-ups only. Moreover, the allusions are undermined by paradoxical elements that blur the religious messages. Hence, though children and adults access a different understanding they are drawn to the same conclusion: a general appeal to more human solidarity. This moral echoes with the issues of the Victorian times, and is further reinforced in the tale throughout criticisms of established social and moral orders. Thus, the Patmore's *Angel in the House* code of femininity is challenged by an appealing and amoral character while the vacuity of the distinguished women is exposed. The satire of the capitalist bourgeoisie is central, and relies on the Marxist criticism, particularly, using the distinction between sign-exchange and exchange values to blame the utilitarianism for trying to give everything a value. Besides supporting children's understanding and the social criticism, the aesthetic perspective is also associated to the tale's moral teaching to question the Victorian moral code linking together beauty and morality, and to reject the hedonistic interpretation of "art for art's sake" associating beauty with the quest for pleasure. Accordingly, it could be of interest for future research related to the work of Wilde to study a plausible evolution of Wilde's intentions through his work and how his life experiences modelled his writings based on an autobiographical perspective associated to a social background.

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