BEAUTY, UGLINESS, SUFFERING AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY AS THE MAIN MORAL ISSUES OF “THE YOUNG KING” BY OSCAR WILDE

Kliashko Daria Dmytrivna
postgraduate student (MA) of Faculty of Ukrainian and Foreign Philology and Study of Arts
Oles Honchar Dnipro National University, Ukraine

Summary. A great deal of recent studies have focused on the interpretations of aesthetic ideas in the whole collection of fairy tales A House of Pomegranates by Oscar Wilde, and less attention has been paid to each one individually. Hence, the aim of this paper is to study the moral issues, described in the first short story “The Young King” and the artistic value, embedded in the vicissitudes of the main characters. In order to provide necessary description and analysis of these moral instructions, the fairy-tale “The Young King”, several academic works and surveys from different authors will be used. This research has shown that the short story contains positive and negative aspects of Art and Beauty, and unsuccessful attempt to change the social hierarchy through self-sacrifice. Thus, these findings suggest that the moral problems of beauty and ugliness, pain and suffering, social inequality between the poor and the rich, private property are still relevant for humanity in the 21st century.

Key words: Oscar Wilde, “The Young King”, fairy-tale genre, moral issues, value.

Introduction. Many recent studies have focused on the continuous development of the fairy-tale genre because each writer of different literature period has both introduced specific conventions in the plot and modified the characters’ appearance, behaviour and actions. According to Auden (1974), “the fairy tale “is a dramatic projection in symbolic images of the life of the psyche”(p. 203). Of particular interest and complexity is A House of Pomegranates, the collection of fairy-tales written by Oscar Wilde in 1891. As a second collection for The Happy Prince and Other Tales (1888), A House of Pomegranates comprises four short stories: “The Young King”, “The Birthday of the Infanta”, “The Fisherman and his Soul” and lastly “The Star-Child”; they symbolize four seeds eaten by Persephone – the queen of the underworld.

Problem statement. The increasing interest in Oscar Wilde’s fairy-tales has heightened the need to investigate their complex plot twists and turns as well as clarify embedded ideas in the context of that time in order to understand “how and why a single fairy tale might simultaneously appeal to adults and to children” (Marsh, 2008, p. 73). Quintus (1977) believes that the moral directions of Wilde’s stories correspond to the moral views and principles typical in all his pieces of works from...
the early poetry to his De Profundis (1913). Zipes (2006) confirms the fact that Wilde has created “his own social concept of aesthetics and in some respects his own personality was symbolically most representative of this concept: Wilde was always bent on transforming himself into a work of art” (p. 119). It is also Hou (2014) that conducted literary investigations of the signs and symbols of aestheticism that were part of the experiment in Wilde's fairy tales to unearth the aesthetic ideas of each short story and prove their uniqueness.

Despite the fact that considerable research has been devoted to the interpretations of aesthetic ideas in the whole collection of fairy tales by Oscar Wilde, rather less attention has been paid to the moral issues, described in the collection A House of Pomegranates, especially in “The Young King”. The previous studies have emphasised some peculiar problem in the fairy-tales in general or in comparison with the main characters of different fairy-tales. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to see what moral instructions contains the first short story “The Young King” and what artistic value has the author embedded in the vicissitudes of the main characters. Besides, the aim of this research is to provide necessary description and analysis of the fairy-tale in the context of published research papers by McCormack (1997), Jones (2011) and Ekmekçıoğlu (2016).

Results and discussion. To start with, according with Jones (2011), in his fairy-tales Oscar Wilde depicts the connection between morality and art, as well as states that excessive luxury of life destroys real Art – everything should be in moderation. “The Young King” is the only short story of A House of Pomegranates, which proves that resistance to the severe reality and unfairness can probably save Beauty. From the very beginning of fairy-tale young King is standing as a person who naturally has aesthetic sense and his origin indicates this fact – his father was either a lute player or “an artist from Rimini” (Wilde, 1915, p. 1). Although his father’s origin is perhaps only a supposition, undoubtedly, this person possessed some outstanding artistic skills, which made the young Princess fall in love with him. Later, instinctively, from the very beginning the young King “had shown signs of that strange passion for beauty that was destined to have so great an influence over his life” (Wilde, 1915, p. 1), which outlines the passion of the main hero to the Beauty and at the same time gives a recipient some predictions for future plot collision. It was Joyeuse with “the great staircase, with its lions of gilt bronze and its steps of bright porphyry” (Wilde, 1915, p. 1) that the young King found a real paradise for himself. Surroundings with wonderful luxury and constant being self-isolated contributed him to the idea that “the secrets of art are best learned in secret, and that Beauty, like Wisdom, loves the lonely worshipper” (Wilde, 1915, p. 1). It is possible to assert extreme “presence of Paterian aesthetics” (Jones, 2011, p. 892), because “all rare and costly materials had certainly a great fascination” (Wilde, 1915, p. 1) for the young King, he tried to collect different jewellery from all over the world without thinking about the price.

Nevertheless, severe reality, described with the help of three dreams, which are in fact the sermons of the fairy-tale, has interrupted this entire ideal world. The first dream represents the process how “the robe for the coronation of the young King” (Wilde, 1915, p. 1) was being created, where the focus is on the physical ugliness and social inequality. The author appeals to reader’s senses, using dim light, grey colours and disgusting odour that was in the air, in order to show hard
conditions in which poor weavers, whose faces were lean because of famine, had to work to create splendid finery for the King: “pale, sickly-looking children were crouched on the huge crossbeams” (Wilde, 1915, p. 1). Although they realize that there is no force able to defend them against this social injustice, they have already reconciled with typical moral issues as following: “Through our sunless lanes creeps Poverty with her hungry eyes, and Sin with his sodden face follows close behind her. Misery wakes us in the morning, and Shame sits with us at night.” (Wilde, 1915, p. 1). There is no place for Beauty in such a situation, since both the young and the old have lost the hope for rescue; they have turned into slaves of the rich society.

At the same time in this dream raises a problem of social inequality of the rich and the poor. This episode is closely connected with author's biography, because for Oscar Wilde, whose family was of the modest wealth in Dublin, outrageous luxury of London “its conspicuous waste, could only provide a corrosive contrast to the extreme Wilde had seen in post-Famine Ireland” (McCormack, 1997, p. 104), especially during his visits to the western part in childhood. Wilde's parents have suffered the famine; therefore, they were displeased with political indifference of the starvation of the whole country and simultaneous open food export abroad. Wilde describes this episode of his life in the text: because of low wages people have to “work to live” (Wilde, 1915, p. 1); although they “toil for them [the rich] all day long, and they heap up gold in their coffers” (Wilde, 1915, p. 1), the rich do not have enough money. There is also a certain emphasis on the freedom of the land and its real owners: “we sow the corn, and our own board is empty” (Wilde, 1915, p. 1). At the end of this dream one of the weaver proclaims the main significant difference between the King and a simple person – “he wears fine clothes while I go in rags, and that while I am weak from hunger he suffers not a little from overfeeding” (Wilde, 1915, p. 1). A commonplace solace said by the young King that every person is free to use land area does not suit the weaver, as he answers, “[we] are slaves, though men call us free!” (Wilde, 1915, p. 1).

The moral issues of social inequality and the ugliness of death characterize the second dream, which is represented in a form of description where the slaves in “a ragged loin-cloth” (Wilde, 1915, p. 1), chained to each other got the beautiful pearls for young King's sceptre. It may seem that there is nothing special in this scene. The youngest of the slaves who has “filled his nostrils and his ears with wax, and tied a big stone round his waist” is diving into the depth in order to get the pearls for the galley master who is wearing a “crimson silk” (Wilde, 1915, p. 1) turban and silver earrings. However, Wilde focuses on the last and the most beautiful discovered moon-shaped pearl that was “fairer than all the pearls of Ormuz” and “whiter than the morning star” (Wilde, 1915, p. 1) because it takes a human life – the greatest value in the world. In this case, ugly death overcomes the Beauty: “the slave diver's hideous death overshadows the discovery of the fairest of all pearls” (Jones, 2011, p. 893).

In the final third dream Beauty (in this episode the beauty of the nature intertwines with pictures of human sufferings) contrasts with the “immoral indulgence at the expense of others” (Jones, 2011, p. 893) with the help of the dialogue between the young King and “a man habited as a pilgrim” (Wilde, 1915, p. 1). The first sentences depict King's wanderings through “a dim wood, hung with
strange fruits and with beautiful poisonous flowers” (Wilde, 1915, p. 1) and numerous strange creatures, sitting on the trees. Gradually, the beautiful picture transforms into the description of the hideous place full of beasts and exhausted people who were striving near the dried riverbed where Avarice and Death reign. Notably, the men here correlate with ants; using this comparison the author outlines insignificance of the person’s life for welfare of a prosperous man. Through the prism of pilgrim’s silver mirror, Wilde demonstrates the sermon of the all dreams, which will influence on further young King’s transformation. In spite of the main hero is innocent (he has done no damage to people) and the golden finery, pearls for the sceptre and rubes are not prohibited to possess, they are criticized as the main source of people’s pain and adversity (Jones, 2011). As a result, all this jewellery quits their aesthetic significance, so that the only way for the young King obtain the redemption is relinquishment of the excessive luxury as well as acquirement of the Christian restraint (Jones, 2011).

Besides, Ekmekcioğlu (2016) confirms, that in his fairy-tale “The Young King” Oscar Wilde proclaims “a certain utopia” (p. 104) which people should attempt to admit and change. “Basically, he demonstrates that the beautiful appearance of the civilized world merely serves to conceal barbaric working conditions” (Ekmekcioğlu, 2016, p. 104) and at the same time suggests review the system of the private property and unjust power. The young King’s rejection of the splendid robe, crown and sceptre with precious pearls and stones signifies the acceptance of two contradictive ideas – individualism and equality among people. Here suffering is described as the moral issue, which is able to conduct a person and transform the personality; feeling “a compassion for mankind” (Ekmekcioğlu, 2016, p. 104), the young King understands that “his own potential depends on whether people are truly free” (Ekmekcioğlu, 2016, p. 104). The notable fact is also that the main character is quite young as he is only sixteen years old, but after three sinister dreams just before the coronation ceremony, he realizes “that his royal status is only preserved at the cost of the suffering and death of many of his vassals” (Scheidt, 2010, p. 70). Nevertheless, although there is a development of the main character’s personality, the main problem is that society does not undergo any changes – “property relations and social characters are never altered” (Ekmekcioğlu, 2016, p. 104). Consequently, Wilde deprives, as it may seem, this typical childlike fairy-tale of a happy-end, describing only how hypocrisy as well as double standards define the existence of unfair rule in the society (Ekmekcioğlu, 2016).

Conclusion. In conclusion, the insights that emerged from this study have deepened the understanding of the moral issues, described in “The Young King”. Wilde has emphasised on both positive and negative aspects of Art and Beauty, which can be not only encouraging but also destructive at the same time. Wilde’s attempt to change the social hierarchy through the young King’s love, self-sacrifice and compassion does not succeed eventually, because young King’s rejection of the royal symbols of the power has mostly been a ceremonial event. Despite the fact that this fairy-tale belongs to late Victorian period, Oscar Wilde raises the moral problems of beauty and ugliness, person’s pain and suffering, social inequality between the poor and the rich, private property and men’s exploitation, which are quite relevant even for the 21st century society.
The criteria of morality that emerged from this study may be used as a basis for further research to discover new information about the complexity of Wilde's aesthetic philosophy. In the collections A House of Pomegranates (1891) as well as The Happy Prince and Other Tales (1888) it is also possible apply these data in the investigation of the writer's vision on how morality should influence the society. Moreover, further development requires certainly cases where discussed moral issues have close connection with the Christian values and vices both in context with the fairy-tales and Wilde's opinions in the essay “The Soul of Man under Socialism” (1900) and De Profundis (1913). As a result, these profound explorations would be able to provide more precise scientific and literary explanation of the cultural, historical, political and Wilde's own influence on the actions and character traits of his fairy-tales' heroes.

References: