

# Beyond Enchantment: The Multifaceted Literary Value of Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales

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## Abstract

Oscar Wilde's fairy tales, while enchanting in their own right, possess a literary value that extends far beyond their surface-level categorization as children's stories. Wilde's fairy tales delve into complex themes such as sacrifice, love, vanity, and the nature of true beauty. These themes resonate with readers of all ages, offering moral and philosophical reflections that transcend simple fairy tale narratives. Wilde's use of language is highly aesthetic and symbolic. His fairy tales are filled with lush descriptions, poetic imagery, and symbolic elements that create a rich, sensory experience. This use of language elevates the tales to a form of literary art, appealing to readers who appreciate the beauty of prose and the power of symbolism. The characters in Wilde's fairy tales often exhibit psychological depth and complexity. The emotional and psychological nuances present in the characters' experiences provide a layer of sophistication that invites readers to engage with the stories on a deeper emotional and intellectual level. This article aims to conclude the educational function and aesthetic meaning of Wilde's fairy tales.

## Keywords

Oscar Wilde; The Happy Prince; Fairy Tale; Adulthood.

## 1. Introduction

Wilde's sharp wit and critique of Victorian society are embedded in his fairy tales. This satirical layer adds a richness and depth, making the tales not just entertaining for children but also thought-provoking for adult readers. Wilde subtly incorporates social and political commentary into his fairy tales. The timeless nature of Wilde's fairy tales ensures their ongoing relevance. They address universal human experiences and emotions that continue to resonate across generations and cultures. This timeless quality contributes to their lasting literary value, as they can be appreciated by both historical and modern audiences. The literary value of Wilde's fairy tales lies in their ability to transcend the traditional boundaries of the genre. Through their complex themes, satirical elements, aesthetic language, psychological depth, social commentary and timeless appeal, Wilde's tales offer profound insights and multifaceted experiences that engage readers on multiple levels, ensuring their place as enduring works of literary art.

## 2. Values in Educational Function

Traditional fairy tales have been used as a means of educating and imparting moral values to children. Through cautionary tales and allegorical elements, these stories convey societal norms and expectations. The cultural memory aspect comes into play as each generation uses these tales to instill shared values and ethics in the younger members of the community.

Wu gave the comment that the setting of the fairy tale is imaginary, which can be applied to any era and any social background[2]. Wilde's fairy tale is a critique of Victorian English society, but

it will never look outdated in the present. Fairy tales are, of course, aimed at children, which gives the authors social ideas, worldviews, and outlooks on life to have the opportunity to reach future generations and thus have a profound impact.

As Jack discussed about the origins of the literary fairy tale for children in Europe, he went along with Denise Escarpit, who “has made it clear that the purpose of the tale from the beginning was to instruct and amuse; that is, to make moral lessons and social strictures palatable[1]”. Jack also agreed with that “it was a utilitarian moralism that taught how to ‘act in a proper way’; that is, to insert oneself into society docilely but astutely, without disrupting society and also without creating trouble for oneself[1]”.

### 2.1. Values in Cultural Aspect

Fairy tales served as a form of cultural memory, especially for oral tradition and folklore. Many fairy tales were originally passed down orally from generation to generation before being recorded in written form. The oral tradition allowed for the preservation of cultural values, beliefs, and historical experiences within a society. Fairy tales often carry elements of folklore that reflect the collective wisdom and experiences of a community.

Besides, fairy tales have a remarkable ability to adapt to different cultural contexts while retaining core elements. Various cultures might reinterpret or modify fairy tales to suit their own values, yet the underlying narratives often endure. This adaptability allows fairy tales to function as vessels for cultural memory while accommodating changes in societal perspectives. By retelling and preserving fairy tales, a culture maintains a sense of continuity and identity. The stories connect individuals across time and provide a link to their cultural heritage. The familiarity of certain narratives and motifs fosters a shared understanding of cultural identity among community members.

Moreover, fairy tales often tap into deep-seated psychological and symbolic realms. The characters, settings, and events in these stories can be seen as symbolic representations of the human psyche and collective experiences. Analyzing fairy tales from a psychological perspective can reveal insights into the cultural unconscious and shared symbols.

### 2.2. Values in General Aspect

Yang stated that Wilde is a unique master of fairy tales, he broke the traditional fairy tale mode of creation, writing fairy tales with new ideas and connotations[3]. Fairy tales often incorporate social commentary and reflections on the societal norms and values of the time in which they were created. They may encode messages about gender roles, morality, justice, and power dynamics. By analyzing fairy tales, one can gain insights into the cultural attitudes and concerns prevalent during specific historical periods.

What's more, fairy tales frequently contain archetypal characters, symbols, and themes that resonate across different cultures. These archetypes, such as the hero, the villain, or the wise old figure, tap into universal aspects of the human experience. As a result, fairy tales can be seen as a way to express and remember shared human struggles, triumphs, and moral lessons.

These supporting ideas collectively reinforce the notion that fairy tales function as repositories of cultural memory, encapsulating the values, beliefs, and experiences of a society.

## 3. Values in Aesthetical Meaning

No ideology can emerge without being rooted in the context of its time and society. Wu explained that Wilde's century was marked by the rapid industrial development in England, which led to the swift growth of cities and numerous changes[4]. Industrialization and urbanization introduced a new civilization that people found both inescapable and dissatisfying. Culturally, there was a widespread sense of a loss of beauty. A society solely focused on industry

without art would be barbaric, which is a notion by Wilde's mentor, Roggin. By the end of the century, the flourishing of industry and commerce led to a materialistic and profit-driven mindset in English society, where monetary values commodified everything, including art. This commodification displeased many talented writers and artists. Consequently, there arose a sense of bitterness, uncertainty, pessimism, decadence, and a defensive stance in art, with the idea of art as a sanctuary from mediocrity gaining popularity.

A central theme in Wilde's fairy tales is the exploration of beauty in various forms. Whether it's the beauty of art, love, or the natural world, Wilde delves into the nature of beauty and its transformative power. This exploration adds a philosophical dimension to the aesthetic experience, inviting readers to contemplate the nature of aesthetics and its impact on human existence.

Wilde's fairy tales are characterized by a remarkable elegance of language and style. "His poetry, fairy tales and early plays represent a florid style with strong impressionistic overtones.", as Zhou presented[5]. His prose is often rich, ornate, and infused with poetic beauty. The careful selection of words, clever use of dialogue, and vivid descriptions contribute to an aesthetic experience that goes beyond mere storytelling. The aesthetic appeal lies not only in the narratives themselves but also in the way Wilde crafts each sentence, elevating the language to an art form. The traditional fairy tales tend to use simple language, while Wilde makes up for the genre with his delicate language, rendering the genre more appealing and abundant, meanwhile offers the future generations of fairy tale writers inspirations.

### 3.1. Tragic Aesthetics

Oscar Wilde's fairy tales are not only renowned for their wit and humor but also for their exploration of tragic aesthetics. Wilde, known for his subversive views, infuses his fairy tales with elements of tragedy, adding depth and complexity to his exploration of beauty, morality, and the human experience.

Tragic aesthetics in Wilde's fairy tales often involve the embrace of paradoxical elements. He blends beauty with ugliness, pleasure with pain, and joy with sorrow. This deliberate juxtaposition of opposing forces creates a sense of complexity and ambiguity, challenging conventional notions of morality and aesthetics.

As Hu pointed out that the tragedy in Wilde's fairy tales is a weakening of the tragedy, "not to strengthen the cruelty of tragedy and sadness caused by a sense of fear and grief in the mind, but to show readers the characters of the tragic fate, but also weakened the tragedy to highlight a certain kind of goodness and nobility of the character[6]". Although children readers do not yet have the knowledge reserved to feel the aesthetics of tragedy, this does not prevent them from appreciating and understanding the most basic works.

Wilde's tragic aesthetics often introduce moral ambiguity, challenging readers to question conventional notions of right and wrong. The characters in his tales grapple with ethical dilemmas, and the resolution is not always clear-cut. "The Fisherman and His Soul" is a typical example. This ambiguity invites readers to reflect on the complexities of moral decision-making. Wilde aesthetically portrays suffering in a way that elevates it to an art form. The language, descriptions, and emotional nuances associated with tragic events contribute to an aestheticized portrayal of suffering. This approach challenges traditional perceptions of tragedy as solely bleak and emphasizes the transformative power of aesthetic expression.

Tragic aesthetics in Wilde's fairy tales often involve a recognition of life's impermanence. Characters grapple with the ephemeral nature of beauty, love, and happiness. This acknowledgment of life's transience adds a bittersweet quality to the tales, inviting readers to contemplate the fleeting nature of human experiences.

Wilde subverts traditional fairy-tale tropes by introducing tragic elements into narratives that often conclude with unexpected or unconventional endings. This departure from the typical “happily ever after” trope allows Wilde to engage with the darker aspects of human existence, infusing his tales with a sense of realism and nuance.

Tragic aesthetics in Wilde’s fairy tales involve a profound exploration of human flaws and vulnerabilities. Characters are often confronted with their own imperfections or societal expectations that lead to tragic outcomes. This exploration of the human condition adds a layer of depth and relatability to the stories.

There is cultural critique of society and morality in Wilde’s narratives. Through tragedy, Wilde critiques societal norms and moral values, addressing societal issues and challenging prevailing ideologies. He confronts the hypocrisy and rigidity of Victorian morality, using tragic elements to expose the flaws in conventional beliefs. This critique extends beyond individual character experiences to a broader commentary on the society of Wilde’s time. This critical stance adds a layer of intellectual depth to the aesthetic experience.

In a word, Oscar Wilde’s exploration of tragic aesthetics in his fairy tales adds a layer of complexity, depth, and philosophical inquiry to his literary works. Through the subversion of traditional tropes, the embrace of paradox, and the exploration of human flaws, Wilde challenges readers to engage with the complexities of existence and the multifaceted nature of beauty.

### 3.2. Ephemeral Beauty

Wilde’s fairy tales exhibit a clear preference for the delicate beauty of language, serving as a vehicle to explore the concept of ephemeral beauty. This concept encapsulates the fleeting nature of aesthetic pleasures and the transience of human existence. As a forerunner of the “art for art’s sake” movement, Wilde adeptly presents his claim within his tales. Zhou discussed the origin, development and evolution of the slogan “Art for art’s sake” and put forth that “The ideal of ‘art for art’s sake’ brought together a large number of talented writers, artists and critics and eventually made art, at least in the eyes of the aesthetes, a religion for the salvation of mankind[7].” Through his masterful use of language, he not only captures the ephemeral beauty of life’s moments but also underscores the intrinsic value of art itself. In doing so, Wilde invites readers to appreciate the richness of aesthetic experiences and to embrace the impermanence of beauty as an essential aspect of the human life.

Wilde thinks that the nature of beauty is temporal, Wilde’s tales frequently depict moments of exquisite beauty that are inherently fleeting, emphasizing the ephemeral nature of aesthetic experiences. Whether it be the bloom of a rose, the crash of the rose, the beauty of the “star child”, the glory of the statue “happy prince”, or the fleeting ecstasy of love, Wilde captures the transient beauty of life in vivid detail.

Through his exploration of ephemeral beauty, Wilde invites readers to contemplate the impermanence of existence and the inevitability of change. By acknowledging the temporality of beauty, Wilde underscores the need to savor and appreciate life’s fleeting moments, recognizing their inherent value despite their transitory nature.

The theme of ephemeral beauty serves as a reminder of mortality, prompting readers to confront the reality of death and the fragility of life. In doing so, Wilde encourages a deeper appreciation for the beauty that surrounds us, urging readers to seize the present moment and embrace the richness of existence before it slips away.

## 4. Sample Analysis--“The Young King”

In a random day, a goatherd receives a startling revelation that alters the course of his life. He learns that he is the sole heir, albeit illegitimate, to his royal grandfather, the king’s daughter.

As the impending death of his royal relative looms, the goatherd finds himself abruptly uprooted from his rustic life in nature and thrust into the bustling city and royal palace. The abrupt transition demands that he set aside his pastoral existence and assume the responsibilities of preparing for his coronation, following a necessary period of mourning.

However, the goatherd undergoes profound spiritual experiences. These illuminations serve as revelations that unveil the stark reality of the society he is about to rule. His newfound clarity enables him to perceive that the societal beauty touted by the ruling class is built upon the exploitation and mistreatment of the working class. Disturbed by this revelation, the young king decides to take a principled stand.

Rejecting the oppressive norms of his society, the young king resolves not to partake in the exploitation of workers that underpins the perceived beauty. Rather than conforming to the expectations of a lavish coronation, he makes a bold decision. Opting for authenticity and a rejection of the societal injustices, he chooses to attend his coronation dressed in his former attire as a goatherd. In a symbolic gesture, he adorns himself with a wild briar as his crown, a stark departure from the opulence associated with royalty.

This narrative reflects a powerful transformation as the goatherd-turned-king grapples with his newfound identity and the ethical implications of his role in a society marked by social inequalities. The story suggests a commitment to authenticity, social justice, and a rejection of societal norms that perpetuate exploitation, encapsulating a tale of personal and societal awakening.

Jack, points out that this story includes a subversion. Oscar Wilde employs a striking reversal of the traditional notion of "clothes make the people", transforming a satirical motif from Hans Christian Andersen's "The Emperor's Clothes" into a radical ideological statement in his own narrative[1]. In Wilde's tale, the king assumes the guise of a Christlike beggar, deliberately opposing established social conventions, the Church, and the nobility. This unconventional choice of attire serves as a symbolic rejection of societal norms and a challenge to the prevailing order.

When confronted by a priest attempting to dissuade him from his unorthodox actions, the king responds with a profound question: "Shall Joy wear what Grief has fashioned?" This rhetorical query encapsulates the king's commitment to embodying a counter-cultural stance, refusing to conform until society undergoes a transformative change. The king, becomes a symbol of resistance against the oppressive structures perpetuated by conventional authority.

In this narrative, the beggarly appearance assumed by the king is not a sign of degradation; instead, it is ennobled and radiates a distinct brilliance in the eyes of those who witness it. The onlookers, initially accustomed to societal norms, gradually recognize the transformative power of the king's unconventional choice. The beggarly guise, far from diminishing his stature, becomes a visual manifestation of the social essence of beauty. Wilde suggests that true beauty is not confined to external appearances or opulent attire but is deeply rooted in authentic actions and a commitment to challenging societal injustices.

The young king's beggar persona becomes a potent symbol of individual resistance against societal norms, an embodiment of the refusal to compromise on principles until a collective awakening occurs. Through this narrative, Wilde conveys a radical ideological message, urging readers to question established conventions, envision societal change, and recognize the profound beauty that emerges from authenticity and a commitment to justice.

The young king in the narrative points towards a utopian vision by exemplifying a model of behavior that he hopes will resonate with and be adopted by everyone. Essentially, he unveils the unsettling reality that the seemingly beautiful facade of the civilized world conceals a harsh and barbaric backdrop of working conditions. His symbolic rejection of the robe, crown, and

scepter extends beyond a mere renouncement of regal symbols; it is a profound rejection of private property, ostentatious ornamentation, and the unjust wielding of power.

In refusing the trappings of royalty, the young king rejects a parasitic existence and, by opting to dress in his original, unadorned clothes, he transforms into both an individual and an equal among his fellow men. This rejection serves as a powerful statement against the inequities associated with social hierarchy, symbolizing a departure from oppressive norms that perpetuate injustice.

The beauty inherent in the young king's action stems from a profound compassion for humanity. His gesture is rooted in the recognition that the alluring appearance of the civilized world often serves as a veil, concealing the suffering and exploitation of those toiling behind the scenes. The rejection of regal symbols becomes a powerful assertion of solidarity with the working class and a refusal to perpetuate an unjust system.

In essence, his rejection of the trappings of power is an assertion that genuine beauty and progress can only flourish in a society where the well-being and freedom of every individual are prioritized. In this way, the young king becomes a visionary figure, guiding others towards a utopian vision grounded in compassion, egalitarianism, and a profound acknowledgment of the interdependence of individual and collective freedom.

## 5. Conclusion

In terms of educational functions, the fairy tales possess the potential to adapt and evolve in different cultures, the ability to maintain continuity and identity for community to share common memories, the incorporation of social commentary and reflections of its time, and attach to psychological and symbolic significance, archetypes and universal themes. It also provides education and moral instruction.

In essence, Oscar Wilde's fairy tales are not only enchanting narratives but also intricate works of art that transcend the boundaries of traditional storytelling. The aesthetic richness, combined with Wilde's philosophical insights and satirical wit, ensures that his fairy tales continue to captivate readers and remain relevant in discussions of literature and aesthetics.

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