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The Role of the Helper: Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales

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I

Two collections of fairy tales written by Oscar Wilde: *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* and *A House of Pomegranates* have not been appreciated compared with his other works such as comedies. Many critics think that his fairy tales are not worth studying and make only a few comments on them. "No area of Wilde's work has been more consistently slighted than his fairy tales ..." (Robert Keith Miller 91). And most of the critics even doubt whether Wilde's fairy tales are really suitable for the children. Jerusha McCormack writes, "All [Wilde's fairy tales], while posing as innocent, were dangerous" (102), and therefore, "[H]as anyone ever read Wilde's fairy-tales to children?" says John Ervine, "If anyone has, did the children listen? They are full of sentimental pessimism and disappointment and cynical despair of people" (124). This comment may be too severe, but it is common opinion too. In fact, according to the classification by Jack Zipes, Wilde's fairy tales belong to "improper" fairy tales, if the proper fairy tale is defined as "the wholesome tale for children" (Zipes 5). Why Wilde's tales are suspected of the status of the "fairy tales"? And what is the "fairy tale"?

"The fairy tale simplifies all situations," says Bruno Bettelheim, "Its figures are clearly drawn; and details, unless very important, are eliminated. All characters are typical rather than unique" (8). He also writes about the ending of it,

"[T]he fairy tale reassures, gives hope for the future, and holds out the promise of a happy ending" (26). To put his remarks briefly, perfect fairy tales have simple plots and characters, and must finish with happy endings.

Some of Wilde's fairy tales can be considered as perfect fairy tales, for example, "The Happy Prince". Michael Patrick Gillespie writes about this story, "'The Happy Prince,' which ends with the unselfish Prince and the devoted Swallow rewarded in heaven by God, offers an absolute form of closure that typifies the genre" (29). This remark shows that "The Happy Prince" is the representative and complete fairy tale. Some other tales, however, can not be regarded as perfect fairy tales. First, we will begin by investigating the difference between perfect fairy tales and imperfect fairy tales.

II

In "The Happy Prince", the Prince used to be literally happy in the Palace of Sans-Souci, but after his death, he becomes a statue on a tall column in a square. By this change of place, he can see the misery of his city and worries about it, though he is nothing but one statue without power now. One day, a Swallow flies to the Prince and is deeply moved by the crying Prince who should be happy.

[T]he Happy Prince looked so sad that the little Swallow was sorry. "It is very cold here," he said; "but I will stay with you for one night, and be your messenger." ("The Happy Prince" 14)

The Swallow makes up his mind to carry jewels and gold from the Prince's body to poor people instead of the Prince. The Important thing in this point is the role of the Swallow. Guy Willoughby states:

The arrival of the self-absorbed Swallow ... enables the Happy Prince to involve himself in the life of his subjects in a manner never possible in his life time ... the Swallow becomes the *agent* of the Prince's far-reaching altruism.

(24 emphasis added)

The word "agent" in this extract is worthy of notice. It means that the Swallow acts at the Prince's command, in other words, the Swallow is the indispensable character in order for the Prince to accomplish his mission of saving the people. The Swallow helps the Prince to fulfill his duty and finally to go to Heaven. It is not wrong to say that the word "agent" can be replaced by the word "helper". The "helper" which is the important word in this paper is based on the term used in *Morphology of the Folktale* written by Vladimir Propp. In this work, he classifies the *dramatis personae* by their functions in the story, such as the "hero", the "villain" and the "donor". The word "helper" which is true of the Swallow in "The Happy Prince" is one of them. And Propp defines the action of the helper in the following way: "the spatial transference of the hero; liquidation of misfortune or lack; rescue from pursuit; the solution of difficult tasks; transfiguration of the hero" (Propp 79). However, in "The Happy Prince", the Swallow never helps the Prince to transfer from the Palace to the tall column, because the spatial transference of the hero is caused by the death of the Prince. If Propp's definition applied to the Swallow, the Swallow may hold for the fourth action: the solution of difficult tasks. The Swallow solves the difficult problem of the Prince who can not move any more by flying to the poor in place of the Prince. But, the purpose of this paper is not to examine the characters of Wilde's fairy tales according to Propp's classification. At present, we had better define the role of the helper just as helping the protagonist to change his

mind and to go to Heaven.

Well, we will move to Wilde's next fairy tale, "The Selfish Giant" which is "his [Wilde's] most famous and successful story" (Kimberley Reynolds 21). In this story, Wilde reverses the prototype of the giant. Iona and Peter Opie say, "That stories about giants, and man-eating giants in particular, were rife around British hearths in days of old is apparent enough" (47). Although the giant is generally considered as eating a man, Wilde creates the Giant who is helped by the man, and that a little child.

At the beginning of the story, the Giant is too selfish to allow the children to play in his large garden. "So he built a high wall all round it, and put up a notice-board. "Trespassers will be Prosecuted"" ("The Selfish Giant" 34). The word "trespassers" and "prosecuted" used in the notice-board are legal terms, and it may be too difficult for the children. But anyway it entirely overpowers them. The Giant succeeds in excluding them from his garden by this notice-board. In this respect, he seems to declare that he has "no need of others" (Price 57). But here, we should notice the following passage from "The Selfish Giant". "One day the Giant came back. He had been to visit his friend the Cornish ogre, and had stayed with him for seven years" (33). The Giant surely has the friend who lives together for so many years. It is probable that he really wants to have more friends, but he does not the courage to make friends with men, much less the little children. And then, the Giant comes to need the existence of the helper.

He never realizes the reason why winter continues only in his garden. If he were generous to the children, the birds would sing and the flowers would blossom again. Yet the Giant only says, "I cannot understand why the Spring is so late in coming" ("The Selfish Giant" 35), and does not notice

the true cause. Then, the little child appears as the helper to the Giant.

One morning, the Giant finds Spring finally coming back to his garden. Many children who enter it through a little hole in the wall climb the trees in blossom, but the tree in the corner of the garden is still covered with frost and snow, and in front of it, a crying boy stands, because he is too small to climb up the tree.

And the Giant's heart melted as he looked out. "How selfish I have been!" he said; "now I know why the Spring would not come here. I will put that poor little boy on the top of the tree, and then I will knock down the wall..."
("The Selfish Giant" 36)

Needless to say, when the Giant knocks down the wall of the garden, he also breaks the wall of his selfish heart. The existence of the little child leads the Giant to repent his selfishness and finally to go to Heaven. This boy turns out to be Christ at the end of the story, which emphasizes his role of the helper. As Christ leads the sinner to Heaven, so this little child leads the Selfish Giant.

These two stories: "The Happy Prince" and "The Selfish Giant" belong to the category of perfect fairy tales, because they have typical characters whose dispositions are not so complicated and simple plots which must end happily. As a matter of fact, these two stories are most widely read among Wilde's fairy tales and popular with children. Other stories in *The Happy Prince and Other tales*, on the other hand, do not belong to this category. We shall now look into one of them: "The Nightingale and the Rose".

III

"The Nightingale . . . has been celebrated throughout European literature for the power and quality of its song" (Willoughby 27) and is also the representative character in fairy tales. Following this convention, Wilde deals with the Nightingale in this story.

In "The Nightingale and the Rose", the Nightingale has been looking for a true lover and finally she finds him.

"Here at last is a true lover," said the Nightingale.

"Night after night have I sung of him, *though I knew him not*: night after night have I told his story to the stars, and *now I see him*. (23 emphases added)

The important point in this excerpt is that the Nightingale has been dreaming of the true lover, though she does not know what the true lover is, and moreover the Nightingale takes the student for the true lover without doubt as soon as she finds him. "In a sense," says Willoughby about this point, "the student seems to be the Nightingale's creation . . ." (28). The Nightingale never realizes what the young Student is like.

The Nightingale decides to produce a red rose made of her blood, because she wants the Student to dance with a girl who needs the red rose in compensation for the dance. The Nightingale cries, "Yet Love is better than Life, and what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a man?" ("The Nightingale and the Rose" 27). Here, she insists that the heart of a man should be more precious than the heart of a bird. However, we can not help doubting this opinion when the student throws the red rose and says, "What a silly thing Love is" ("The Nightingale and the Rose" 31). Perhaps, the heart of the bird which can die for love is more valuable than the heart of

the student who completely abuses love as soon as he is refused by the girl.

At the conclusion of this story, the red rose is thrown into the gutter by the Student, and he turns out to be the very cruel and trivial man by no means the true lover. And moreover, relief in Heaven which is given to the Happy Prince and the Selfish Giant is never acquired by the Nightingale. Although the Nightingale tries to help the love of the Student at the sacrifice of her own life, the role of the Nightingale as the helper to the Student completely fails. After all, the young Student will never understand the true love, and the world of this story remains poor and shallow. Why does not the Nightingale act well as the helper in this story? It may be possible that the cause of the failure results from the Nightingale herself.

“‘Be happy,’ cried the Nightingale, ‘be happy; you shall have your red rose’” (“The Nightingale and the Rose” 27). The thought of the Nightingale in this passage resembles that of the Happy Prince in the next passage: “‘I am covered with fine gold,’ said the Prince, ‘you must take it off, leaf by leaf, and give it to my poor; *the living always think that gold can make them happy*’” (“The Happy Prince” 19 emphasis added). On one hand, the Nightingale thinks that the Student shall be happy if only he gets the red rose. And on the other hand, the Prince says that people shall be happy if only they get gold. Yet, there is a big difference between them. The Happy Prince realizes that plenty of gold does not necessarily assure happiness to the living. The life of the Golden Palace which the Prince led during his lifetime can be no longer true happiness for him, because he notices that love is more important than gold now.

By the way, the Swallow in “The Happy Prince” can go to

Heaven with the Prince, because he repents of his past arrogant attitude and decides to save the poor when he meets the Prince. That is to say, the Swallow is the helper to the Prince, but at the same time, the Prince is the helper to the Swallow. The Happy Prince also helps the Swallow to reform himself and gain the entrance of Heaven.

In contrast with this friendly relation between the Happy Prince and the Swallow, the relation between the young Student and the Nightingale in "The Nightingale and the Rose" is a complete rupture. "The Student looked up from the grass, and listened, but he could not understand what the Nightingale was saying to him, for he only knew the things that are written down in books" ("The Nightingale and the Rose" 27). In this extract, no communication is established between them. At first sight, the Nightingale seems to fulfill the role of the helper, but in fact, her act of the helper is only her self-satisfaction.

We have seen that the role of the helper like the Swallow and the little boy functions well in each story: "The Happy Prince" and "The Selfish Giant", while in "The Nightingale and the Rose", the role of the helper fails and the story does not end happily. In "The Nightingale and the Rose", the perfect form of the fairy tale has already begun to collapse.

Well, we will turn to the next tale "The Birthday of the Infanta" in Wilde's second collection of fairy tales: *A House of Pomegranates*.

IV

"The Birthday of the Infanta" begins on the twelfth birthday of the Infanta in the Spanish palace which is filled with the evil atmosphere, judging from the description of a garden. The description is so long that it is impossible to quote all parts,

but we will look at the former part.

The purple butterflies fluttered about with gold dust on their wings, visiting each flower in turn; the little lizards crept out of the crevices of the wall, and lay basking in the white glare; and the pomegranates split and cracked with the heat, and showed their bleeding red hearts. ("The Birthday of the Infanta" 99-100)

If we imagine the garden according to this description, it may be too gaudy. There are too many colors in this garden, and consequently it produces the chaotic atmosphere. It is not to be denied that "there is something almost sinful about this garden" (Miller 109).

In celebration of the Infanta's birthday, many entertainments are held and the most interesting attraction among them is a dancing of a little Dwarf. Of course, his dancing itself is very funny, but "Perhaps the most amusing thing about him was his complete unconsciousness of his own grotesque appearance" ("The Birthday of the Infanta" 110). What the passage makes clear is that how cruel the Infanta and her companions are, because they enjoy his foolishness rather than enjoy his dancing.

The little Dwarf, however, takes it for granted that the Infanta is pleased by him, and he entirely falls in love with her. He comes to the palace again in order to declare his love of her. The next extract clearly shows his struggle to find the Infanta.

He wandered all round looking for some place through which he might gain an entrance, and at last he caught sight of a little private door that was lying open. He slipped through, and found himself in *a splendid hall*.... At the end of the hall hung a richly embroidered curtain....

So he stole quietly across, and drew it aside. No; there was only *another room*.... Perhaps she [the Infanta] was in the room beyond.

He ran across the soft Moorish carpets, and opened the door. No! She was not here either. *The room* was quite empty.... and he passed into *the next room*. (119-123 emphases added)

Until the Little Dwarf gets to the last room, he has passed many rooms surrounded with gloomy air. Certainly he has a strong will to meet her again. It may be interesting, here, to note a similar description from "Sleeping Beauty" originally written by Charles Perrault.

He [The Prince] then crossed a court paved with marble, went up the stairs, and came into the guard chamber ... After that, he went through several rooms ... At last, he came into a chamber all gilt with gold ... (88)

The Prince who tries to help a sleeping Princess has passed many rooms by himself as well as the Dwarf. And moreover, "The whole palace" in "The Birthday of the Infanta" "seemed asleep, and even where the shutters had not been closed, heavy curtains had been drawn across the windows to keep out the glare" ("The Birthday of the Infanta" 119). Now it is clear that the palace in "The Birthday of the Infanta" looks like the palace in "Sleeping Beauty" where all people fall asleep.

Let us return to the story of the little Dwarf. In the last room, he finally finds a little figure who appears to be a monster.

What is it? He thought for a moment, and looked round at the rest of the room. It was strange, but everything seemed to have its double in *this invisible wall of clear*

water... (“The Birthday of the Infanta” 124 emphasis added)

The little Dwarf for the first time realizes his ugly feature and misshapen body by “this invisible wall of clear water”, that is, the mirror, and besides, he notices the fact that the Infanta just laughs at his ugliness and never loves him. The Dwarf instantly dies of shock. Although the Infanta is immediately informed of the Dwarf’s death, her attitude toward him is very cold.

And the Infanta frowned, and her dainty rose-leaf lips curled in pretty disdain. “For the future let those who come to play with me have no hearts,” she cried, and she ran out into the garden. (“The Birthday of the Infanta” 127)

What is apparent in this extract is that the death of the Dwarf has no influence on the Infanta, in contrast to the Prince in “Sleeping Beauty” who awakes the Princess from a deep sleep and saves the whole palace. The Infanta remains to be cruel from beginning to end in this story. And maybe the people living in the palace will remain cruel forever in the evil atmosphere, too. Why does not the Dwarf endure the shock and declare his love of her? He should have overcome the shock, taught the importance of love to the Infanta and broken the evil atmosphere in the palace. He could have been the helper to the Infanta and maybe to the whole palace. Until he meets the mirror, he is about to accomplish the role of the helper. What is the cause of the failure in attaining his role?

Here, we shall give attention to means of realizing the new reality. It is not useless to mention that the King in Wilde’s another fairy tale “The Young King” realizes the miseries of people by means of dreams and gives up his extravagant life.

Bettelheim says important things about dreams.

To a considerable degree, dreams are the result of inner pressures which have found no relief, of problems which beset a person to which he knows no solution and to which the dream finds none. (36)

While the Young King opens his eye to the new reality by dreams which essentially exist in his own mind, the Dwarf realizes the truth by the mirror which he encounters by chance. Because the new fact suddenly exposed by the mirror is totally inconceivable for him, he can not afford to accept it. The Prince in "Sleeping Beauty", by the way, surely becomes the helper to the Princess, and it is the important point that he has his own helper also. When the Prince feels a little afraid seeing the people as if they were dead, he remembers the information that "they were only asleep" "by the ruby faces and pimpled noses of the beef-eaters" ("Sleeping Beauty" 88). The beef-eaters play the role of the helper to the Prince.

Finally in this chapter, it may be worth noticing what John Albert writes:

In this tale a dwarf discovers his ugliness and the reason for the laughter of the Royal Court; all along he had thought they laughed in delight at his playing for them. Here we find an expression of the great sadness at the heart of the Oscar Wilde, and perhaps some indication of a fundamental inferiority complex that was at the root of his homosexual self-identity. (245)

Maybe, all along Wilde had thought he loved only his wife and children. When the narrator cries "Why had they not left him [the Dwarf] in the forest, where there was no mirror to tell him how loathsome he was?" ("The Birthday of the

Infanta" 125), Wilde also cries "Why had they not left him [Wilde] in the heterosexual world, where there was no mirror to tell him his inclination toward homosexuality?" The Dwarf completely fails to help the Infanta to reform herself, and in compensation for it, he kills himself.

V

We have examined Wilde's four stories, what is called "fairy tales" in general, and now one fact is revealed: All the stories do not necessarily finish with complete happy ending, on the contrary, half of them end in gloomy atmosphere. The happy life in this world or even in Heaven is never given to many characters. "Almost invariably, the character with whom we have been encouraged to sympathize is eventually dispatched by the author's pen" (Miller 113). It is obvious that such endings do not please children.

Why are Wilde's tales much different from general fairy tales? What is the cause of this? Here, we will look into the citation from *Structural Semantics* by A. J. Greimas about the narrative:

[T]he existing order is considered as imperfect, man is considered as alienated, the situation as intolerable. The schema of the narrative is projected then as an archetype of mediation, as a promise of salvation; man, the individual, has to take upon himself the fate of the world, which he transforms by a succession of contests and tests. (246)

In other words, the hero, at any rate, must transform the narrative world in order to reform the intolerable situation, bring unity to it and save the people living there. It can be said that the story generally begins with the undesirable event and ends with the solution of the difficult problem. Maybe one

important factor in the story is the transformation of the world. However, when we consider Wilde's tales, the transformation does not always occur. The narrative world often remains the same situation as it begins. For instance, the characters and the situation of the narrative world remain ignorant in "The Nightingale and the Rose", or remain evil in "The Birthday of the Infanta". The lack of the transformation can be thought the cause of the question whether Wilde's fairy tales are really acknowledged as such.

It seems to be natural that the hero should assume full charge of transforming the world. But if it is completely right, why the Nightingale fails to teach the student the meaning of the true love, though she makes a sacrifice of her own life, or why the Dwarf vainly dies before he declares himself to the Infanta despite his hard efforts? The difference between successful characters and unsuccessful characters in transforming the world depends on whether they can meet good helpers or not. The Happy Prince can save the people in his town by the help of the Swallow, and the Giant can repent his selfishness and go to Heaven with the little child. There is no doubt that the Swallow and the little child are very able helpers to the heroes, while the Nightingale reveals her inability as the helper after all, or the Dwarf who should have been the helper can not be helped by anyone when he himself can not endure the new reality. Now it is clear that the role of the helper has a great influence on the transformation of the world. The hero's effort is not enough to change it. Thus, heroes who can not acquire good helpers fail to attain their purposes. It is the role of the helper that motivates the hero to transform the narrative world.

In the world of fairy tales, it often happens that the hero's name itself becomes the title of the story, and we tend to give

attention to only the hero's character and action. But as we have seen, the fate of the narrative world also depends on the existence of the helper and its ability. It is not too much to say that the helper plays the most important role in the fairy tales.

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