

## 'WILDE' TIMES: A MARXIST READING OF OSCAR WILDE'S "THE HAPPY PRINCE"

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### Abstract

The aim of this article is to display the socially conscious stance of Oscar Wilde in the capitalist Victorian society with a deeper vision of it in his children's stories, especially "The Happy Prince". It is an indisputable fact that Wilde has always been associated with the aesthetic movement of 'Art for Art's Sake', which supported the irresponsibility of the artist towards the reader or audience and defiance of moral obligations. However, Wilde's major fairy tales seem to be contradicting with this claim with their deep moral code and veiled criticism of the present situation of the society.

Oscar Wilde's "The Happy Prince" tells, on the surface level, the romantic story of a golden statue of a prince and a little swallow in their struggle for helping the poor and the suppressed in their city. On a deeper level, the story takes a much more critical vision and functions as a Marxist criticism of the capitalist western ideologies. In this respect, the famous irresponsible aesthete of his time may be regarded as an employer of Marxist thinking with a moral purpose.

**Key Words:** *Wilde, Marxism, Capitalism, Class Distinction, Criticism.*

## ZOR ZAMANLAR: OSCAR WILDE'İN "MUTLU PRENS" ADLI MASALINA MARXİST BİR BAKIŞ

### Özet

Bu makalenin amacı, Oscar Wilde'ın, kapitalist Viktoria toplumunda gösterdiği sosyal bilince sahip duruşunu onun çocuk hikayelerinden "Mutlu Prens" bağlamında sergilemektir. Wilde'ın günümüze kadar her alanda 'Sanat Sanat İçindir' parolasını savunan ve sanatçının okuyucuya karşı yükümsüz olduğunu, aynı zamanda da ahlâkî açıdan bir zorunluluğu olamayacağını ileri süren estetik akımla özdeşleştirildiği su götürmez bir gerçektir. Ancak, Wilde'ın başlıca masalları, daha derin bir ahlâkî yükümlülük ve örtülü bir eleştiri boyutu ile bu iddiayla çelişir gibi görünmektedir.

Oscar Wilde'ın "Mutlu Prens" adlı masalı görünürde, bir prensin altın heykeli ile bir küçük kırlangıcın, şehirlerinde yaşayan fakirlere ve ezilenlere yardım etme çabalarının romantik öyküsünü anlatır. Ancak, daha derin bir inceleme göstermektedir ki bu öykü batılı kapitalist ideolojilere karşı çok daha etkin bir eleştirel Marxist bakışa sahiptir. Bu bağlamda, zamanının sosyal konulardan uzak, ünlü estetik sanatçısı Wilde, ahlâkî amaçlar güden, Marxist düşüncenin bir savunucusu olarak da değerlendirilebilecektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Wilde, Marxizm, Kapitalizm, Sınıfsal Ayırım, Eleştiri.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

*"More marvelous than anything is the suffering of men*

*and of women. There is no mastery so great as misery" (Wilde, 1909: 14).*

Having been acknowledged as one of the precursors of 19<sup>th</sup> century literary aesthetics, Oscar Wilde leads a highly productive career with various plays, short stories and poems in the Victorian Britain. Although the public during Victorian Age in Britain demands and respects the novelists with their social realism as they find their own lives depicted in them, Wilde and the other aesthetes escape from the harsh realities of the industrialization into a world of aesthetics and they try to revive those aesthetic qualities. Ellis (1918: 191) describes Wilde as *"an exotic product of a commercial age ... a protest against current ugliness and smugness, a fine -frenzy set against average ideals and commonplace platitudes"*. His outstanding marginal stature is characterized with his sexual preferences as well, as he is imprisoned with hard labor upon a set of assumed homosexual affairs, and later he flees away from Britain to Paris to lead a freer artistic and social life. Until his death in Paris in 1900, Wilde is the leading figure of aesthetics associated with 'art for art's sake' movement.

One characteristic of his major literary productions is the portrayal of an air of tragedy with his distinctive intellect and mastery of imagery. Out of the harsh living conditions of the first industrialized city on earth, Wilde also manages to take the readers to a journey far from daily reality of his society into a world of fantasy with his children's tales. Despite his marginal posture against the socially responsible artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century England like Dickens and Hardy, Wilde seems to have still preserved a hidden social consciousness in his morally suggestive endings of his novel and some stories. Felski (qtd. in Waldrep, 1996: 1) argues that *"Wilde had to work within the subgeneric confines of some specific variation on the theme of realism"*. This realistic aspect of his works gives way to socialist criticism concerning Wilde's artistic creations and his tales even reveal a deeper layer of feeling of

social responsibility in his heart. His children's stories have become a highly controversial issue and attracted scholars' attentions with their not-that-childish themes and deep social criticism beneath the surface. Wood (2002: 156-70) states in relation to Wilde's children's stories that *"children do not care for satire, and the dominant spirit of these stories is satire—a bitter satire differing widely from that of Hans Andersen, whom Mr. Wilde's literary manner so constantly recalls to us"*. In their essence, Wilde's short stories possess socialist tendencies like in "The Young King" and "The Happy Prince" or moral messages like in "The Nightingale and the Rose" and "The Fisherman and His Soul".

In a deeper vision, Wilde's social satire verges on a socialist criticism against the capitalized upper classes and their enterprises on the working class. For example, the young king's rejection of the rich clothes after dreaming of how hard they were made and embellished in the hands of the working classes reflects a deeper social consciousness of both the characters and the author himself (Wilde, 1909: 45-76). In his account concerning Wilde's fairy tales, Ruddick (qtd. in Smith, 2010: 99-101) displays how these stories are *"unlikely to be much enjoyed by children today [with their] critique of utilitarian and capitalist logic"* especially at the core of "The Happy Prince". Wilde's socialist vision deepens in the happy prince's struggle to help the lower class people out of their miserable condition in a society in which the money-holders feed on the toil of the working class. His vivid descriptions of the poor through the eyes of the little swallow, possibly representing the author himself, pose as a moral, even religious viewpoint in search of a more effective and idealistic social structure. The collected short stories introduce the reader with *"Wilde's vision of social disintegration by giving his tales a quasi-Christian, fundamentally socialist utopian aim"* (Jones, 2011: 138).

Highly contradictory to the aesthetic values he holds, Oscar Wilde may be said to have followed the footsteps of some Marxist critics in his depiction of Victorian society as a socially-responsible writer. More or less a contemporary of Marx himself, Wilde may supposedly have been a reader of him

throughout his writing career. Additionally, Wilde's political essays, especially his "The Soul of Man Under Socialism", reinforce such an argument that Wilde is on the same line with Marxist thinking in terms of social equity, the necessity of the abolishment of private property and the need for equal labor and wealth division. Thus, in this article, it will be argued that Oscar Wilde's "The Happy Prince" has strong Marxist tendencies in terms of its themes and point of view to satirize the social and economic inequalities of its author's time.

## **2. MARXIST LITERARY CRITICISM and WILDE'S VIEWS on SOCIALISM**

Marxist Criticism has been popular in western literary circles since the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the influence of Karl Marx's dialectic and social criticism concerning the rising capitalism in the western societies. It examines the cultural, ideological, historical and institutional bases upon which a literary text may be structured. Marxist perspective towards a literary text requires a number of different approaches either from the author's or the dominant social group's or the reader's point of view. Marxist criticism encourages readers "to see the unhappy truths about material/historical reality, for whether or not authors intend it they are bound to represent socioeconomic inequities and ideological contradictions" (Tyson, 2006: 66). A Marxist literary critic usually tends to evaluate a literary text in terms of its being true to life and verisimilar descriptions of the situation in a given society. That is why realistic novels have always been the primary focus point of Marxist literary critics. Another option is that the critic may try to analyze the text in relation to its author's potential political and social subjectivity and its reflections on the process of creation of the text. A third way of analysis depends on the possible ideological impositions of the politically or economically dominant groups on the reader via the author through the text. The question at this point is that the author may have aimed to propagandize some specific individuals' or group's ideologies as the accepted ones. However, essentially, Marxist criticism, as Barry (2009: 152) argues, generally "talks about conflicts between social classes, and clashes of large historical forces" as the major influence

on the creation of political ideologies in a society.

To evaluate Wilde's literary products from a socialist perspective may sound weird, as the aesthetic movement which is pioneered by Wilde and his contemporaries support a deliberate social standoff in that they believe art is not responsible for giving a moral message on the purpose of educating or elevating human beings. However, Wilde is also known for his political essays in which he criticizes the capitalist system dominating the western world and offers solutions to the social inefficiencies. For instance, in his 1891 essay titled "The Soul of Man under Socialism", Wilde defends socialism as an ideal form of rule in the modern industrial societies. What Wilde proposes as a proper life style is based on a socialist regime in which people will no live or work for others any more. For him, the present state of British society is one of 'poverty, ugliness and starvation'. Still, he argues that "the majority of people spoil their lives by an unhealthy and exaggerated altruism" (2001: 127). He also criticizes the precautions of the government about the poor suffering on the streets. He states that the government and social institutions "try to solve the problem of poverty, for instance, by keeping the poor alive; or, in the case of a very advanced school, by amusing the poor" (127). Wilde's views regarding a socialist regime is accompanied by his argument that private property must be abolished; which certainly echoes Marx's criticism of it: "It is immoral to use private property in order to alleviate the horrible evils that result from the institution of private property. It is both immoral and unfair" (128).

As a solution to the social and economic inequality and injustice, Wilde views socialism as the ideal policy to ensure that every single human being will take his share from the 'general prosperity and happiness'. Wilde also echoes Mill's ideas on individualism and tyranny of the majority. For him, the existent system of private property reduces human beings to selfless masses and sucks their individual potentials out. Everybody must be given the chance to choose whichever job he will do or however long he will work a day according to Wilde's socialist view. He gives

poets like Byron, Shelley and Browning as an example to the productivity of individuals unless suppressed by everyday struggles. This is only possible with the abolition of private property and equal distribution of wealth. A healthy individualism will cure modern society; and thus, *"nobody will waste his life in accumulating things, and the symbols for things. One will live. To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all"* (133).

Wilde seems concerned most with the soul of man in the present time, as the inequality of standards of living prevent humans from realizing their own potentials; and society is so much preoccupied with their material development that they lack the will to direct the poor towards enlightenment. Wilde refers to Jesus Christ as a symbol of pure individualism which, in the long run, leads to a public order and welfare. Although the image of socialist government in Wilde's mind appears as one of artistic utopia, it is still arguable that Wilde has been influenced by the dominant political philosophy of his age, especially concerning private property, individualism and division of wealth and labor.

### 3. WILDE'S "THE HAPPY PRINCE" at a MARXIST GLANCE

On the surface, Wilde's "The Happy Prince" takes the struggle of the golden statue of the happy prince embellished with jewels and a little swallow on its way to warmer climates in helping the poor and unhappy in the city as the subject matter. "The Happy Prince" is basically about:

two examples of sacrifice: the statue of the Happy Prince, who gives away the ruby on his sword-hilt, his sapphire eyes and his gold-leaf in order to alleviate the distress and poverty he sees in the city below, and whose leaden heart finally snaps in two; and the Swallow, who stays behind in the north to carry out the Prince's wishes and dies of cold (Raby, 1988:57).

The story opens with the vivid description of the statue of the happy prince and the reflections of the citizens over this highly ornamented beauty. The glorification of the statue goes the round in every corner of the city with a strong emphasis on its engravings

with fine gold, sapphire and red ruby. With the introduction of the Swallow to the scene, the reader realizes that the Prince is actually alive, yearning for helping the hard-ups of the city and crying for the triviality of his old days in pursuit of daily pleasures. As he cannot move himself, the Prince wants the Swallow not to go away presently to the warm places, but to help him make the poor happy by giving the jewel on his body to them piece by piece. This story of sacrifices ends with the destruction of still-sensitive inhuman characters in a society deprived of humanly emotions and values.

Beneath the surface, "The Happy Prince" is interwoven with a deep satire concerning the materialistic nature of the modern people as a critique of capitalist Victorian England. Even at the very beginning of the story, the third-person narrator's vivid depiction of the statue of the Happy Prince puts special emphasis on its monetary value and admiration of the people due to its being *"gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold; for eyes [having] two bright sapphires, and a large red ruby glowed on his sword-hilt"* (1). The reflections of the citizens over the beauty of the statue go on in the same direction with deep astonishment, but accompanied by a slight tone of sadness as the people on the streets seem to be obviously unhappy muttering *"I am glad there is someone in the world who is quite happy"* (1). The society described through the eyes of the narrator is one of charity which does not approve of children even dreaming.

With the first introduction of the Swallow to the scene, the reduction of human relations to a materialistic degree in this industrialized society reveals itself once again, especially in his attempts of romance with the Reed. The reactions of the other swallows on his romantic interest in the Reed rest upon the possible monetary advantages he may get from such an attachment: *"It is a ridiculous attachment, (...) she has no money, and far too many relations"* (2-3). The Swallow's stance against this materialization of intimacy proves itself false when he swerves away from his love as *"she has no conversation (...) and she is a coquette, for she is always flirting with the wind"* (3). The Swallow faces the real conditions of the society and what sacrifice means when he

meets the Happy Prince in the city where the generic representatives of a capitalist society live. All the inhabitants of this city like *"the Mayor, the town Councillors, the Mathematical Master, the Watchman – are picked off with dry economy and precision"* (Raby, 1988: 57). Among this pile of materialistic individuals from the bourgeois, the Happy Prince stands as a beacon high above the city, teaching the Swallow the true meaning of intimacy, sacrifice and the real face of industrial growth. From his own account of his past, the reader learns that the Happy Prince himself led a highly materialistic life, on trivial pursuits like leading the dance or playing in the garden and never asking what lay beyond the walls of the palace. The present situation, yet, proves to be more realistic and miserable to the eyes of now-dead prince: *"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"* (5). At this very point in the story, the heart of the Swallow begins to soften to the reality of the lower class people in the society and he opens his eyes to their misery.

The working class depicted in the story by Wilde seems to be dependent on the little income provided for them in return for their labor which they inexpensively sell to the money-holders. As Marx, in his *Capital*, puts it *"profit seems to be determined ... by direct exploitation of labor, in so far as the latter permits the capitalist to realize a profit deviating from the average profit at the regulating market-prices, which apparently prevail independent of such exploitation"* (1906: 828-9). As mentioned above, the exploitation of the labor force, the working class, is an essential part of the profit-making process of capitalist circles. In Wilde's story, the miserable condition of the seamstress is brought to the light with the prince's descriptions of her as: *"her face is thin and worn, and she has coarse red hands, all pricked by the needle ... embroidering passion-flowers on a satin gown for the loveliest of the Queen's maids-of-honor to wear at the next Court-ball"* (6). The struggle of the seamstress for the benefit of the upper classes just to be able to buy oranges for her son lying ill due to a fever and crying due to the dirty river water his mother gives him reveals this exploitation to the readers' eyes. This situation obviously

contradicts with Wilde's socialist ideals and his argument that *"each member of the society [should] share in the general prosperity and happiness of the society"* (2001: 128) Upon this account, the Swallow still seems undisturbed, finding excuses to fly away from the city to beautiful Egypt with expensive yellow linen, spices and pale green jade, that is material beauty. However, Kohl considers that the depictions are far too inadequate to reflect such deep inequalities in the British society:

the scenes depicted by the narrator are only small selections of the truth, such as the seamstress and her diseased son in *"The Happy Prince,"* and do not realistically depict the problems of an entire class, nor do they indicate a critical strategy to propagate social change through making these isolated cases into examples (1980: 93).

Still, the case gives the reader some clues regarding the general situation of the two poles in the social ladder through the eyes of an artist. Wilde's Swallow, most probably standing for himself in the story, accepts staying in the city for another night only to see the reality and understand the spiritual fulfillment being bigger than material desires upon seeing that the prince gets sad after his response. On his way to the seamstress's poor house with the great ruby from the prince's sword in his beak, the Swallow functions as another line of vision to the other face of human reality in the industrialized society. The Swallow detects just the opposite situation of the poor while flying over the palace, as the only serious concern of the upper classes seems to be their dancing, the romantic atmosphere with the stars above and the approaching Court-ball. The lady there turns out to be the Queen's maid of honor for whom the seamstress is embroidering the flowers, and she cold-heartedly criticizes and does not appreciate the value of the labor the seamstress pays to her struggle. Wilde describes such exploitation of the labor of the working classes as 'economic tyranny' in which *"nobody would be able to have any freedom at all"* (2001: 131). In his utopian socialism, money holders should not suppress the poor and force them to work in favor of the rich. In the story, the working class, as Marx (2000: 86) himself states, seem to be

reduced to “only one economical capacity, that of owners of commodities, a capacity in which they appropriate the produce of the labor of others”. Every single human affair in the society depicted seems to depend on the circulation of money, as clearly be seen even in the Ghetto, where “the old Jews [are] bargaining with each other, and weighing out money in copper scales” (8). Only when he helps the poor mother and her ill son, can the Swallow feel the warmth in his heart and accept staying in the city for a little more.

The contradiction between the Swallow’s romantic aspirations for the future and the misery of the present situation is revealed again when the Swallow wants to bid farewell to the Happy Prince for his long journey to materialistically beautiful Egypt with granite thrones, and green beryls. On the other side of the medallion, the value attached on the work of a student is so low that hunger makes him faint in a poor house with no fire in the grate. The Happy Prince readily gives away one of his sapphire eyes for the good of the poor again. Even the poor student gets boastful thinking that the sapphire is a return for his great creations, as the value of a production can only be determined by monetary means in a capitalist society. That’s why “the recipients of the Happy Prince’s gifts remain unaware of his generosity and behave in a realistically ungrateful manner” (Raby, 1988: 57). The dark condition of the poor does not make the Swallow stay there and go on helping them forever either. Furthermore, he offers to bring the Happy Prince beautiful jewels as a compensation for his sacrifices, “rubies redder than a red rose, and the sapphire ... as blue as the great sea” (12). The situation of the match-girl is no different from the other working class people, and she is forced to work in the gutter to take some money to her father; or else he beats her. This incident may be regarded as a direct allusion to the problem of child labor in Victorian England which was brought into question by works like Dickens’ novel *Oliver Twist* and Blake’s poem “The Chimney Sweeper”. From this point on in the story, the Swallow altruistically stays with the now-blind Happy Prince and speaks from the mouth of the socially responsible author. All the next days, the Swallow sits on the prince’s

shoulder and tells him what he has seen in his experiences far away, and at this point, the sharp contradiction between the present situation of the city and those far-away places becomes clear. Wilde’s descriptions of Egypt and other places reflect his longing for an idealized, even utopian place to live in away from the highly industrialized and mechanized England. Lesjak (2000: 183) places Wilde within “a particular strand of Marxism, a utopianism whose basis lies not in valorizing labor (as in much Socialist thought) but in a liberation from labor”. However, the suffering of men in the present situation of the society brings the bitter realism back on the stage as the Swallow flies over the city to report the prince the actual happenings around. What the Swallow sees is the summary of what has been discussed so far, for he saw:

the rich making merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars were sitting at the gates. He flew into dark lanes, and saw the white faces of starving children looking out listlessly at the black streets. Under the archway of a bridge two little boys were lying in one another’s arms to try and keep themselves warm. “How hungry we are!” they said. “You must not lie here,” shouted the Watchman, and they wandered out into the rain (14).

The situation here reminds one of Wilde’s views about socialism which he proposes as a moral and just system in modern societies. For him, under a socialist regime, “there will be no people living in fetid dens and fetid rags, and bringing up unhealthy, hunger-pinched children in the midst of impossible and absolutely repulsive surroundings” (2001: 128). The abovementioned report of what the Swallow has seen flying over the city takes the prince to his final sacrifice for the beloved people of the city and he orders the Swallow to take off every piece of gold leaf by leaf from his body and to give it to the poor people, as in a capitalist society “the living always think that gold can make them happy” (15). It is actually this excessive fondness towards private property that enslaves the poor to the whips of the money-holders. At this point, Wilde successfully manages to reveal “the measure of value by material things; the lack of free and joyful development of the individual; and the consequent crushing on all fronts of truly

human needs and values" (Lesjak, 2000: 196-7) in capitalist societies. In these societies, the rate of exploitation increases so sharply that the poor are made contented with the least of everything like having bread to eat. Obviously Wilde himself is against the dependence of the people of his time on private property, as he views it as the source of evils in society and a crippling element on the productivity and creativity of individuals as a result of the inequality of opportunities. (1987: 1019).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

With the metaphorical death of the Happy Prince for the second time along with the Swallow, the hopes for a better future for the society also fade away. The hard frost that makes the leaden heart of the prince snap into two and the Swallow die metaphorically stands for the loss of warmth in the human side of social life leaving its place to cold materialism. Without the gold and the jewels on it, the statue of the Happy Prince is now worthless to the capital-holders like the Mayor and the Town Councillors who resemble it to a beggar. Even the art professor who is expected to value the inner beauty of objects notes that the statue is no longer beautiful, thus no longer useful. While the town council, still trying to make use of it, is quarrelling over the fate of the metal left from the statue, the reader is introduced with God for the first time in the story. For Raby, the sudden introduction of God to the scene changes the direction of the story towards parable especially because the materialist world has "utterly failed to perceive the significance of the Happy Prince's transformation (...) The brisk insensitivity of human characters- or at least the powerful or and learned among them- gives 'The Happy Prince' a tone of skepticism" (Raby,

1988: 57). The presence of God and his angels in a children's tale seems necessary for the moral message to reach its destination with a deeper level of influence. However, from another point of view, Wilde may be trying to teach the reader of his times the necessity to be contented with what they have, as they are certainly to be rewarded in God's paradise. Reading these lines in a more skeptical way, it is possible to note that the author is critical about the dogmatic teaching of the religious institutions to the poor that the eternal justice will come in the end and they are to be merry forever. Religion, in Marxist thinking, is "an ideology that helps to keep the faithful poor satisfied with their lot in life, or at least tolerant of it" (Tyson, 2006: 59). In either way, it is an indisputable fact that the ultimate aesthete has taken the role of the social realist or even a satirist to criticize the wrongdoings in the present system of social order.

Oscar Wilde's stance as a socially conscious artist of his time proves true after a detailed reading of his so-called children's stories with serious themes such as the misery of the poor or the sharp class distinctions in the society. "The Happy Prince" critically analyzes such themes with a longing for a socialist utopia. The target of this satire is probably the notables of the capitalist ruling classes in the Victorian England. The two protagonists of the story being either inhuman or dead clearly points out that the situation of the overly-industrialized society is beyond hope of recovery, as the individuals seem to be sunk into materialist passions with no place for humanistic conscience. Paradoxically enough, death is apparently the only way for survival in a society in which exploitation of human values has been made the ongoing rule.

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