

Analysis of the Tragedy in Wilde's Fairy Tales and Its Compatibility with Children's Education

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Abstract: Wilde is a famous representative writer of aestheticism in the 19th century, and his fairy tales are particularly eye-catching. Wilde's fairy tales are quite romantic, but some are full of tragedy, such as *The Nightingale and the Rose* and *The Happy Prince*, and the selfless, helpful characters end up in tragic ends, which make people feel compassion. Meanwhile, fairy tales have always had great significance in educating children. According to this, it can be explored whether these tragic plots need to appear in children's literature, the characteristics and causes of tragedy in Wilde's fairy tales by analysing multiple documents and thinking about related subject knowledge, and analysing the tragedy of fairy tales and the compatibility of children's education, so that there can be better explanations of the role of tragic stories on children's education, thus recognising the necessity of tragedy in fairy tales. At the same time, research based on limitations looks forward to future in-depth exploration, encourages more in-depth and comprehensive thinking on related topics, better recognises and uses tragic colours in the educational value of fairy tales, and makes fairy tales, a genre of children's literature, better contribute to children's learning and development.

Keywords: fairy tales, tragic, Oscar Wilde, children's education

1. Introduction

Oscar Wilde, a prominent British writer and poet of the 19th century, is renowned as both a literary figure and a representative of aestheticism. His extensive work includes numerous poems and novels, with a notable focus on fairy tales such as *The Nightingale and the Rose* and *The Happy Prince*. These fairy tales, marked by intricate plots and emotional resonance, evoke feelings of both sadness and compassion among readers. Notably appreciated for their creative narratives and profound themes, Wilde's fairy tales captivate a wide audience, exhibiting an aesthetic allure that is engaging, accessible, and particularly appealing to young readers.

The educational and ideological significance of Wilde's fairy tales has garnered considerable attention. In contemporary times, scholars and researchers have extensively examined Wilde's literary contributions, specifically emphasising the educational implications of his fairy tales. With its pivotal role in shaping children's education and worldview, this genre celebrates the best aspects of human nature, encouraging resilience in the face of challenges and instilling a sense of warmth and wonder about the world. Comparable examples from other renowned fairy tales, such as *The Old Man Can Do No Wrong* from Hans Christian Andersen's collection [1] and Ye Shengtao's *The Earth* [2],

underscore the themes of care, respect, hard work, and helpfulness that children can derive from these narratives.

While the realm of fairy tales often embraces narratives of optimism and hope, it also encompasses stories with poignant and even tragic elements. Wilde's fairy tales distinctly embody a romantic and emotive quality, intertwining moments of beauty and tragedy. For instance, *The Nightingale and the Rose* recounts a tale of sacrificial love, while *The Happy Prince* portrays the altruistic efforts of the prince and the swallow to aid the world, despite their ultimate failure and demise. The prevalence of such tragic endings, especially for characters characterised by selflessness and benevolence, elicits a sense of compassion among readers.

This raises pertinent questions about including tragic elements in children's literature. The juxtaposition of poignant stories against the backdrop of childhood innocence prompts an exploration of whether these tragic motifs are essential to the genre and whether their impact on young readers is predominantly positive or negative. Through an analysis of the nature and significance of fairy tales, the distinctive features of Wilde's contributions, the emergence and rationale behind tragic elements, and a thorough review of related literature, this paper aims to examine the intricate interplay between tragedy and fairy tales. By delving into the impact of "tragedy" within Wilde's fairy tales, this study seeks to unravel its influence on children's emotional experiences, worldviews, and ideological development. This investigation will aspire to understand the educational value of tragic narratives better, ultimately enhancing the potential of fairy tales as a genre of children's literature for learning and personal growth.

2. The Tragic Embodiment of Wilde's Fairy Tales

2.1. Tragic Course of the Story

In *The Nightingale and the Rose*, the death of the nightingale stands out as a poignant moment. The nightingale willingly sacrifices its life, dying to create a red rose with its own blood, not driven by self-interest but rather in the hope of selflessly perfecting the love of others. It willingly aids the young boy in his quest for a red rose [3]. Tragically, this hard-earned rose proves futile in the end as it is callously discarded. This poignant sequence of events serves to emphasize the tragic beauty of the nightingale's demise.

2.2. Tragedy as a Common Denominator

Several of Wilde's fairy tales conclude with tragedy. In *The Nightingale and the Rose*, the nightingale gives the boy a rose dyed red with his own blood to confess his love to the girl, but in the end, the confession is unsuccessful, and the rose, which the nightingale has sacrificed for, is also thrown away. In *The Happy Prince*, the Happy Prince tries to save the people, but in the end, his statue is pushed into the furnace by the people. These stories end with a sense of melancholy and resignation, and their tragic overtones are so powerful that they fill one's heart with complex feelings [4].

2.3. The Tragic Plight of Positive Protagonists

The tragedies within Wilde's tales often stem from the tragic status quo of the virtuous protagonists. The nightingale's selflessness would not be rewarded with effective results, and the prince has a good heart to save the world, but in the end, he is still not understood by people. In many people's minds, the protagonist symbolises the positive light, should have a better ending, the final tragic situation is very regrettable and heartbreaking. In *The Happy Prince*, the prince wants to try to save everyone in the world, but in the end, because his statue becomes ugly, he is pushed into the furnace, and the only

swallow who relies on him to help him save the world also dies at his feet. The deaths of two well-intentioned protagonists give a strong sense of tragedy.

2.4. Eliciting Empathy in Children

Wilde's fairy tales, while aesthetically beautiful in their storytelling, are imbued with a pervasive sense of sorrow that makes them challenging for children to digest. The beautifully woven plots are, paradoxically, a source of deep sadness. Consequently, children reading these tales cannot help but empathize with the sorrowful situations depicted within them. The strikingly tragic themes of Wilde's fairy tales stand out prominently and are likely to leave a lasting impact on young readers.

3. Wilde's Fairy Tales Embody the Reasons for the "Tragic"

3.1. Social Factors

During the Victorian era in Britain, Oscar Wilde penned *The Happy Prince*, a tale that bore witness to the rapid development of industrial capitalism. This period marked the transition from feudal aristocracy to the ascent of the middle class, whose utilitarian moral values gained widespread acceptance. Consequently, people began to prioritize worldly pleasures and the alleviation of suffering. In Wilde's fairy tale, goodness is equated with the act of "bringing wealth and pleasure to mankind," thereby casting poverty as a form of suffering [5]. This narrative also underscores the notion that extreme happiness hinges on a substantial material foundation. For instance, in *The Nightingale and the Rose*, the professor's daughter prioritizes fine jewelry gifted by the nephew of the Minister of the Crown over a red rose, ultimately thwarting the boy's romantic advances. This narrative insightfully highlights how material possessions exert influence over destiny and human characteristics.

Wilde's writings also reflect the influence of utilitarianism and the pursuit of worldly pleasures on Christianity, giving rise to a phenomenon known as "evangelicalism," which places a heightened emphasis on personal interests [5]. *The Happy Prince* exemplifies this as the titular character willingly shares his wealth with the poor, thus benefiting society as a whole. The story's portrayal of "happiness" is inherently altruistic [6]. Similarly, in *The Selfish Giant*, the giant's refusal to permit children into his garden to play and partake in his joy results in a cold, desolate winter in his garden. This narrative underscores Wilde's central theme of a desire to "share goodness and bounty with those less fortunate in society"[6].

Moreover, the Victorian era was marked by external colonial incursions and internal reinforcement of dynastic rule, which exacerbated the wealth gap between the affluent and the impoverished. It was in this market-oriented context that a profound sense of spiritual emptiness began to pervade society [7]. Wilde's advocacy for "goodness" and "beauty" encapsulates his disdain for corruption, utilitarianism, and the hardships spawned by this materialistic society. Simultaneously, he expresses an urgent yearning for a glimmer of benevolence to rescue suffering humanity from this pedantic materialism. Even in these trying times, the most resolute and optimistic spirits often find themselves succumbing to tragedy and failure [8]. For example, in *The Devoted Friend*, the miller repeatedly professes his fidelity to Hans but only seeks help from him rather than offering it in return. Tragically, Hans meets his end while trying to help the miller's son, drowning in a swamp on his way back to the miller's house with the doctor. This tragic conclusion serves as a reflection of Wilde's aversion to hypocrisy, selfishness, and indifference, as well as his yearning for genuine friendship, sincerity, and loyalty in the world. Ultimately, the tragedies within Wilde's fairy tales also mirror his sense of despair and resignation in the face of the world's state.

3.2. Social Factors

3.2.1. Christian Influence on Authors

Wilde's personal admiration for Christianity's ecumenical and benevolent nature profoundly impacted his worldview, fostering a belief in powerful redemption and universal fraternity. This Christian ideology also left an indelible mark on the stylistic characteristics of the tragic content within Wilde's fairy tales.

In *The Nightingale and the Rose*, the nightingale's sacrifice, which tints a white rose red with its own blood, parallels the crucifixion of Jesus and the transformation of a white rose into a red one through his blood. Similarly, in *The Happy Prince*, the prince gives his body for the benefit of the people, yet his statue is callously thrown into a furnace. Nevertheless, his selfless act moves people, akin to the Christian notion that Jesus, despite facing punishment, willingly endured crucifixion to pray for mankind's salvation. The suffering endured becomes secondary to the overarching theme of love and world redemption [9]. This portrayal of positive characters making tragic sacrifices inevitably elicits feelings of pity.

3.2.2. The Author's Personal Emotional Experience

Wilde's personal emotional experiences significantly informed his writing. His identity as a homosexual subtly surfaces in *The Happy Prince*, where the prince and the swallows share a deep friendship and connection, akin to friends and lovers [5], offering each other companionship and understanding. Furthermore, his tumultuous emotional journey contributed to the melancholic undertones present in his literary works.

3.2.3. The Author's Inner Quest

Wilde's pursuit to reconcile his inner deficiencies and his relentless advocacy for goodness and benevolence contributed to the poignant impact of the "tragic plot"[10]. In tales like *The Devoted Friend*, where Hans seeks friendship, or *The Young King*, where the protagonist seeks recognition, one might infer that Wilde was also searching for love, understanding from the world, and the purest emotions, with the intention of spreading fraternity to those less fortunate [5]. He aspired to discover an infinite wellspring of goodness and salvation for the entire world [11]. However, these aspirations often seemed elusive in the face of his personal tragedy, leading him to channel his despair into his fairy tales, many of which concluded in tragedy.

3.2.4. Wilde's Personal Aestheticism Writing Style

Wilde's distinctive writing style, rooted in his personal aestheticism, significantly influences the tragic plots within his fairy tales [12]. As a prominent advocate of aestheticism, his literary creations exude an air of decadence and exquisite romanticism. Within his fairy tales, Wilde masterfully underscores the conclusion with a profound sadness that is remarkably potent. He imparts an otherworldly beauty that transcends reality and revolves around art itself through the portrayal of each tragic plot.

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4. The Compatibility Between the "Tragedy" of Wilde's Fairy Tales and Children's Education

Tragic stories can be sad, but they can also be educational. There are many stories in children's books that have happy endings and positive characters get their due, for example, the ugly duckling becomes a white swan in Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale, and the poor but kindly cobbler in Grimm's fairy tale is helped by an angel and his business flourishes in the end. All these will bring positive inspiration to people, and it is believed that maintaining the right values will definitely bring excellent results. However, it does not necessarily follow that a tragic ending simply brings despair to children without other positive effects.

4.1. Tragedy Offers Insight into Reality

Firstly, tragedy can make children realise what the world is like in advance and accept the cruel side of real life. Fairy tales, characterized by their simplistic narratives and child-friendly language, distill the complexities of society. In doing so, they provide children with a comprehensible lens through which to understand the world. These stories encourage young readers to adopt positive and rational approaches when confronted with challenges [13]. Consequently, children gain a precocious understanding of human society within this microcosm. *The Nightingale and the Rose* poignantly illustrates that relentless dedication and sacrifice do not always culminate in emotional perfection, while *The Happy Prince* underscores that acts of benevolence may go unnoticed by people. These tales serve as a reminder that the world is not always as gratifying as many conventional fairy tales suggest.

4.2. Tragedy Inspires Hope

The tragic colour will bring people a sense of sublimity, which makes people face up to the objective existence of suffering in life, and have a strong spirit of trying to go beyond suffering and see hope[14]. *The Happy Prince* in the destruction of the prince sculpture for children to see a piece of enthusiasm is ultimately meaningless, but it can also inspire children in the future to do good, to help the world is not necessarily not rewarded. The heartbreaking demise of the prince's benevolence might resonate with children on a human level, evoking profound regret. This may impel them to contemplate the power of selfless dedication and idealistic pursuits in the context of reality, thus inspiring a deeper commitment to striving for a happy ending.

4.3. Tragic Colours Purify Children's Hearts

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4.4. Aesthetic Education for Children

Finally, the existence of tragedy can educate children to appreciate "beauty" and cultivate aesthetic value[16]. Sad stories can produce a sense of aesthetic pleasure, that is, "tragic pleasure", and the pleasure nature adapts to the most basic hedonistic nature of human nature[13]. Children will

experience the pain of the body and mind of the characters in the exaggerated depiction, feel the special aesthetic interest of tragedy, and have a deep sense of identification with the fairy tale characters. They develop a profound sense of empathy with the characters in these tales, who, despite the cruelty of the world, embody tenderness and warmth [17]. The nightingale's sacrifice, dyeing a rose red with her own blood, and the subsequent absence of acknowledgment from the boy, and the prince's selfless act culminating in the melting of his statue—all these tragedies emanate from a place of tenderness.

5. The Future Prospects and Recommendations

The exploration of the tragic elements within Wilde's fairy tales opens the door to a deeper and more comprehensive investigation. This endeavor can be extended to encompass a broader array of Wilde's fairy tales, facilitating an analysis of the emotional experiences and enlightenments that tragic plots offer to children. Examining tragic colors in fairy tales also equips us to offer valuable guidance for crafting such narratives. It is imperative that these tales strike a balance - they must not veer into excessive bloodshed or cruelty, nor should they adopt a relentlessly dark and gloomy tone. This careful calibration ensures that children do not succumb to undue desolation and despair.

Furthermore, these narratives should be crafted with a tone and language that resonate with children, enabling them to connect with the emotions of the characters even if they do not fully grasp the intricacies of the plot. This connection fosters empathy, an essential facet of the storytelling experience. To create impactful tales, descriptions of tragedy should be seamlessly woven into real-life situations, embellished with literary modifications and additions. The causes and mechanisms behind these tragic events must be rational, whether they are attributed to fate or character traits. Moreover, it is essential to identify which aspects of the story inspire children, infusing the narrative with educational significance.

In tandem with this, it is crucial to strike a delicate balance between drama and tragedy within fairy tales. This equilibrium ensures that children can perceive the optimistic and positive facets of life while simultaneously learning to confront the harshness of reality. This duality imparts profound lessons, enriching their souls, character, understanding, and moral compass.

In conclusion, delving deeper into the tragic elements of Wilde's fairy tales and broadening the scope of our research offers invaluable insights. By maintaining a careful balance in tone, language, and the portrayal of tragedy, we can enhance the educational and emotional impact of these tales on young readers. The judicious combination of drama and tragedy ensures a holistic learning experience that equips children to navigate the complexities of life with resilience and empathy.

6. Conclusions

The tragedy of Wilde's fairy tales is reflected in many aspects such as process, result, and feelings to the reader, and the reason for its tragic color also depends on the specific social environment and personal religious beliefs, emotional experiences, writing styles and personalities of the time. Tragedy is necessary in fairy tales, and it serves a lot of purposes. Although fairy tales can not completely and comprehensively reflect the real world, they can give children insight into the face of the world from some simple stories, so the tragic plot of the story is also conveyed in a way that children are willing to accept, and helps children better understand the cruel side of the world, see the existence of hope on the basis of accepting reality, and obtain enlightenment for personality shaping and character cultivation. Sad stories also educate children about the beauty of tragedy. There are more in-depth topics to study the characteristics of "tragedy" in fairy tales and its educational significance, and these explorations and analyses can promote tragic stories to play a more important role in the beautification of literary works and the educational inspiration of children.

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