



# TREATMENT OF GENDER, SEXUALITY AND IDENTITY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF OSCAR WILDE'S THE HAPPY PRINCE AND OTHER TALES AND VIRGINIA WOOLF'S JACOB'S ROOM

- 
1. Dr. Anshu, Assistant Prof., Department of English, D.J.College, Baraut.
  2. Mini Rana, Research Scholar, Department of English, D.J.College, Baraut.
- 

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The Happy Prince and Other Tales and A House of Pomegranates were published independently by Oscar Wilde, although they are sometimes collected together as The Fairytales of Oscar Wilde. For Tattersall, it's problematic and "contradictory" that the two novels are randomly grouped together with such a broad title. According to her, Wilde would have disagreed with this because he considered the works to be "miniature works of art," and critics should reevaluate their literary merit for this reason. Wilde calls his writings "fairytales" just three times. In his descriptions, he mostly uses the terms "stories," "fairy stories," and twice as "studies in prose," all of which imply an experimental nature. This shows that Wilde doubted if the stories were really fairy tales (Tattersall 135).

Both the entertainment appeal and literary excellence of The Happy Prince and Other Tales were praised triumphantly. After selling 1,000 copies in its first run, it was reprinted the following year (Beckson 7). "The gift of writing fairytales is rare, and Mr. Oscar Wilde shows that he possesses it in a rare degree," said an anonymous 1888 notice in "The Athenaeum." The notice went on to compare Wilde to Hans Christian Andersen and claim that they could not offer him higher praise (qtd. in Ellmann 299). One of Wilde's aesthetic mentors, Walter Pater, praised his writing as "pure English" (qtd. in Beckson 53).

Galt, Alexander This collection of fairy stories is reviewed by Ross in 1888, who wonders if it is appropriate for youngsters. Fairy tales, he says, were Wilde's "excellent choice" because they appeal to a niche audience that can appreciate the stories' "delicate humour" and "artistic literary manner." Nonetheless, according to Ross, this audience will not include youngsters. He claims that no youngster will feel sorry for Mr. Wilde's Happy Prince when the Mayor and Corporation decide to ruin him because, according to a university art professor's dictum, "he is no longer beautiful, he is no longer useful." Even though children dislike satire, it is the overarching theme of these stories. The satire is biting, far different from the Hans Andersen satire that Mr. Wilde's writing style so often brings to mind.

Even Wilde himself has questioned who exactly should read her fairy tales. "The Happy Prince and Other Tales are meant partly for children, and partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy, and who find in simplicity a subtle strangeness" (Ellmann 219), Wilde said in a June 1888 letter to G. H. Kersley. While he first thought the stories were "slight and fanciful, and written, not for children, but for childlike people from eighteen to eighty!" in a January 1889 letter to American writer Amelie Rives Chanler, he appears to have changed his mind. number 237. Everyone above the age of eighteen is required to read the stories, and the last comment explicitly states as much. This makes it very clear that Wilde has some reservations about the topic matter.

His background is the source of his inspiration for composing fairytales. His father, Sir William Wilde, and mother, Lady Jane Wilde (who went under the pseudonym Speranza), were both involved in the collection and editing of Irish folklore. Additionally, in 1889 and 1892, respectively, Wilde's wife Constance released two children's book volumes, There Was Once and A Long Time Ago. It is often believed that Wilde lived

during the most glorious period of children's literature. Furthermore, it is evident that his Irish heritage played a significant role in shaping him, as he expresses to Gladstone his desire to "present A House of Pomegranates] to one whom I, and all who have Celtic blood in their veins, must ever honor and revere" (LOW 218). The obvious reason he wrote was to entertain his two sons. A father's job is to write fairytales for his children, according to Wilde in a letter she wrote to Richard Le Gallienne (Pearson 107). Wilde took the business decision to write for a wider audience, choosing the fairytale genre because of its tremendous popularity at the time, because he was conscious that supporting a family of four required a greater income (Shillinglaw 82).

## 1.2 The Paterian Aesthetic

The presence of homosexual themes in fairy tales is improbable. Knowing Wilde's and his contemporaries' depictions of male love—including Walter Pater, Lord Tennyson, Samuel Butler, and Edward FitzGerald—it's easy to see how these ideas make it into the fairy tale (Duffy 327).

Wilde owes a great deal to Pater. The Renaissance by Pater is Wilde's "golden book" and he carries it with him everywhere, as he famously stated in a letter to Yeats (Yeats, *Autobiography* 80). But Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Pater's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* were both dubbed "poisonous books" by some critics who felt they promoted pederasty too much (Wood 158). The idea that an older, wiser man might "spiritually impregnate" and inspire a younger, more impressionable student who loves and admires him was first put out by Socrates (Dowling 83).

On the other hand, Snider notes that the Prince is a hybrid of *senex* and *puer*, which gives him a complete identity. He claims the prince was blissfully unaware of the suffering outside the royal walls while he was alive. He represented the prevalent Victorian approach towards social problems by his *puer* status, which was a result of his ignorance and *laissez-faire* attitude towards the less fortunate. He dies as a self-sacrificial sacrifice in order to turn into a *senex*. In this way, the figure represents the fullness of a sound mind and the possibility of individuality.

## 1.3 Diverse Relationships

Through the story, Wilde depicts three relationships: that of the Swallow and the Reed, the Prince and the Swallow, and the lovers on the balcony. Being a female with attributes associated with Victorian femininity, the Swallow's relationship with the Reed was bound to fail. Take her "is always flirting," her "has no money," and her "far too many relationships" as examples of how she is domestic and he is always in flight. By purposefully referring to the Reed as the Swallow's "lady-love", Wilde highlights the heterosexual nature of their relationship. When the Swallow eventually meets the Prince, Wilde wishes to differentiate between heterosexual and homosexual love, even though it is conventionally believed that a man's lover is a woman. The Swallow's feelings for the Reed are clearly those of a naive teenager. He maintains his stance that she should share his passion of travel and refuses to settle for anything less than a lifelong commitment. Once more, Wilde shows that the Swallow plans to have another heterosexual relationship down the road.

Even the story's second couple are straight. It would appear that the couple on the balcony is having relationship and communication issues. In contrast to the man's ardor and passion, the maid-of-honor is shown as heartless, self-centered, and lacking in love. To woo a girl, a guy would exclaim something like, "How wonderful the stars are [...] and how wonderful is the power of love!", the seamstress is "so lazy", and she worries that her dress won't be ready for the State-Ball. Her face is "thin and worn, and she has coarse, red hands, all pricked by the needle", so it's unfair to say that the seamstress is "so lazy" when she's clearly working hard to care for her sick young child. According to Jacobs, the maid-of-honor's callousness and lack of empathy will lead to the lovers' breakup, with the girl taking the blame. There is a degree of similarity between the lovers' relationship and that of the Swallow and the Reed. Neither of the female characters gives a damn about their relationships' basic necessities, and they both seem to have the same outlook on life.

## 1.4 Gender Attributes

A recurring motif in "The Happy Prince" is the portrayal of gender roles. According to Zipes, Wilde used fairy tales as a means to challenge the stereotypical portrayal of modern society (AS 114). Logos, the masculine aspect, and Eros, the feminine aspect, are at odds in the stories (Snider 8), since Wilde makes the male characters sissy by taking Eros away from them. Eros comes from the Greek word for "son of Aphrodite" and a "principle of connection" that Carl Jung referred to as a "feminine principle" (Hopcke 32). Hopcke states that "Eros seeks relationship, connection, warmth, oneness, and interactions of feeling, life, spontaneity, and merger". Some of Anderson's stories that exhibit this quality include "The Little Mermaid" and "Thumbelina."

On the other hand, the Prince's gender is not clearly defined. In order to represent spiritual virtue, Wilde, according to Claudia Nelson (quoted in Cogan Thaker 76), uses cryptic and confusing messages that bring to mind the feminized masculine. The prince used to be carefree and "play" and "dance" before his strange death. He is not mentioned while engaging in any traditionally masculine pursuits, such as studying or playing sports. Furthermore, the Prince cries and preaches like a frail old lady (Balog 313). In addition, the Prince is linked to the moon—a sign of femininity—four times: when the small boy weeps and when the Swallow arrives after each of the three duties. In addition, he possesses a "low musical voice" reminiscent of sirens, which he uses to entice the Swallow to obey him and, in the end, meet his fate. Jewels having feminine qualities, such as gold, rubies, and sapphires, adorn the Prince's statue. The word "beautiful" is more commonly used to describe the Prince than "handsome" in characterizing him.

The majority of Wilde's stories glorify masculine beauty. He describes his male characters sensually but refrains from doing the same for his female ones. As Rita Felski points out, "the male aesthete's playful subversion of gender norms, his adoption of feminine traits paradoxically reinforces his distance from and elevation above women". The playwright's description is rich with sensory details: "His hair is brown and crisp, and his lips are red as a pomegranate, and he has large and dreamy eyes". In contrast, the maid-of-honour's description is less descriptive and sensual, being only "loveliest" and "beautiful".

## 1.5 Christian Undertones

Christian ethics are central to all nine of Wilde's fairy tales. The traditional enchantment of fairy tales is replaced by Christian miracles (Spelman 2959-A). Wilde is not accommodating Christianity, despite the fact that several of her heroes are clearly Christ-like figures (Zipes, AS 122-23).

The story takes on a more religious tone due to the many parallels between the Prince and Jesus Christ. The prince, for instance, has a double birth and dies as a kindness to others at the tale's conclusion. Because his precious stones fed the widow and her ill son, the playwright, the match girl, and the street children who sang out, "we have bread now!" Jesus is called the "bread of life" (John 6:35). The Prince, according to Zipes, stands for the "artist whose task is to enrich other people's lives without expecting acknowledgment or rewards" (WDCT 138), a figure reminiscent of Christ. Christ, according to Wilde's "De Profundis," is the prototypical artist.

This century, Wilde said during his trials, "is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan [...]" (referred to in Ellmann 435). "The soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (1 Sam. 18:1)—as stated in the Bible—when the young slayer of Goliath and Jonathan, son of King Saul, met for the first time. Jonathan proceeded to fall head over heels for David. They struck a pact, and "Jonathan took off his coat and gave it to David, along with all of his clothing, including his sword, bow, and girdle" (1 Sam. 18:4). "And David set out on whatever mission the Lord had for him." (5:1) in 1 Samuel. "Whatever thy soul desired, I will even do it for thee," Jonathan promised David in a separate vow. According to the Bible, the two men kissed and grieved together till David was overshadowed. First Samuel 20:41. According to Samuel 1:26, once Jonathan passes away, David admits

that his love for Jonathan was greater than any love he had ever had for a woman. Jonathan and David often state their affection for one another throughout the chapters.

### 1.6 Happily Ever After?

Despite Wilde's sexual orientation, he believed that the fairy tale heroes should be male. However, he was also aware that this ideal was unacceptable according to Victorian ideals. An angel is dispatched by God to "bring him the two most precious things in the city" following the death of the Swallow and the melting of the Prince's statue. After the Swallow dies, the Angel takes its leaden heart and returns it to the statue. In recognition of the heroes' status as the "two most precious things," God bestows blessings upon them. But unlike in fairy tales, the heroes don't all end up together in paradise and live happily ever after. Each is sent to his own place: the prince to the "city of gold" and the swallow to God's "garden of Paradise" where the prince will glorify God forever. Instead of receiving the communion they sought, God separates the heroes, who self-destruct while aiding the less fortunate (Balog 312).

Is a happy ending hinted at in the fairy tale? Should there be a happy conclusion for the characters? The Happy Prince has a spiritual awakening after a life of luxury, which causes him to develop mercy and give his life to aid the downtrodden. This happens after he has lived in blissfully ignorant to the suffering of others. The reason the Prince's spirit is still active among the living is something Balog mulls over. Since the prince did not live "consciously" or fully experience his "carnal existence," he draws the conclusion that his soul will remain on Earth. According to Balog, the story is just another version of the ghost story, in which the prince's spirit visits the swallow to convince him to "exterminate" the ornamental uses of his wealth by donating it to the less fortunate.

It would have been easy for Wilde to pen a traditional, happily-ever-after fairytale. Since the heroes can only get some sort of restitution by the application of the deus ex machina, the abrupt and unnatural ending provides a definitive kind of closure (Balog 300). A flat and impertinent method of poetical justice, according to Nietzsche, is the deus ex machina. I concur with Jacobs' assessment that "it seems to be more of an escape-clause, a bid of respectability". Traditional Christian fairy stories often end happily, however this is by no means guaranteed. Balog views "The Happy Prince" as an anti-tale, in accordance with Vladimir Propp's beliefs, for this same reason. However, while some reviewers, such as Gillespie and Jacobs, think the ending is cheerful, others, like Snider and Corse, think it's not. The "lovers" are split up, and the prince's divine reward—eternal life in the city of gold—isn't exactly going to bring him "happily ever after," in my view (as stated before).

Jacobs and Snider also consider what may have happened to the story if the Swallow had been a woman. According to Snider, Wilde had the opportunity to give the Swallow a feminine gender, similar to the one in the Greek myth of Procne and Philomela. I concur with Jacobs and Snider that the story would have been a more poignant tale of love and sacrifice if the Swallow had been a female. The lovers' relationship would have been heterosexual, and they would have lived happily ever after in paradise. This conclusion, meanwhile, would have failed to accomplish Wilde's goal in penning the story. He appears to have a negative outlook on life and the discrimination that homosexual people face. Wilde could have gone in a different direction with the finale, having the Prince and the Swallow spend forever together in paradise, if he had hoped that his lifestyle would be accepted in the future.

### 1.7 VIRGINIA WOOLF'S JACOB'S ROOM

In particular, the third chapter aims to show how the novel's new narrative approach and plot fragmentation came to be published, as well as the circumstances surrounding the publication of the work. To understand how *Jacob's Room* addresses the Great War, one must examine the protagonist. The reader may become confused attempting to distinguish between the characters' actual experiences and their memories in

Woolf's third novel, which is widely regarded as one of the earliest forays beyond the standard novel's framework. Considering this, it might be difficult to approach the sexuality theme in *Jacob's Room* since, unlike in the first two novels, this one doesn't exactly raise eyebrows.

The sexual expressions occur during Jacob Flanders' exploits as this book is a vague and partial chronicle of him. One could argue that the novel's focus on sexuality is less than in Woolf's previous works; Jacob develops relationships with a number of women, but the book doesn't really go into detail about their romance or physical intimacy. Conversely, the protagonist's demise is presumably hastened by Rachel Vinrace's association with Terence Hewet, a pivotal plot point in the novel. There is no way *Night and Day* could have concluded without the central themes of love and sexuality—Ralph Denham's pathological infatuation with Katharine—and the novel's exploration of these topics. Upon coming to this realization, the reader notices that Jacob's life is unconcerned with the love of a woman or man. Although he is clearly not asexual, the relationships do not appear to significantly effects his path through life. Even if Jacob's feelings for Clara Durrant are superficial, he does appreciate her—particularly in comparison to the other women he has cheated on. She possessed a heroic quality reminiscent of her mother. (Theobald 531 Along with Jacob's other romantic interests, Clara is only one of many characters in *Jacob's Room* who contribute to the story of a young man's life leading up to his death in the Great War.

Even though the physical side of love isn't explicitly mentioned, it's nevertheless crucial to the plot of *Night and Day*. Jacob Flanders isn't attempting to shun commitment or closeness; still, the reader can see how his emotions consume him, elevating him beyond the status of a simple representation of a young man searching for his identity. "Students, debutantes, art-models, mothers, girlfriends, wives, students, prostitutes, and furniture are all women in Jacob's room."

## 1.8 Conclusion

The arguments presented here suggest that Woolf did not make sexuality an excessively central issue in *Jacob's Room*, the first of the experimental novels. Rather than making it a central theme to the protagonist, she utilized it to enrich the portrait of Jacob Flanders's life. Despite their shakiness and possible lack of impact compared to scenes in *The Voyage Out*, the sexually explicit sections in this novel enhance the overall experience. *Night and Day* centres on relationships and love, but Woolf opts to center her third work on the individual.

The protagonist, Jacob, is the only real character in this novel, and much like Woolf's first two books, virtually every other character serves just to link Jacob to the outside world. Because Jacob's life story is presented in a very rough fashion, the reader is left to fill in some of the blanks based on their own perceptions of the character. Many changes in Woolf's third novel are discussed in "Toward the Far Side of Language:

Ohmann states in his work that. The reader is required to adopt a new perspective on reading a novel because of the frequent shifts in setting and progression through Jacob's life history, which is not limited to a linear narration. The significance of the novel's protagonist is examined in "Jacob's Room: Woolf's Satiric Elegy" by Alex Zwerdling. It would appear that Jacob Flanders exemplifies the archetype of fictional psychological inscrutability. Werdling 894 At times, it is difficult to understand the guy and his motivations. Jacob isn't always there in the story; instead, he's portrayed as a recollection of his loved ones, which is the first peculiar aspect of the book.

As a shadow, he stands for a generation that could have achieved great things. His eventual disappearance from the book and the half-formed, half-mysterious presence he will exude throughout are both hinted to in "Missing Jacob." The number 361 produced by Flint Jacob, in contrast to Katharine Hilbery, who is there virtually the whole time and whose actions are clear and explicable to the reader, is erratic and restless.

The story features a few creative moments, such as the opening scene where Jacob's mother writes a letter and other situations where Jacob writes letters to his friend Bonamy. Actually, the reader learns a great deal about Jacob and his views on life and society from his letters. Another thing to think about is that the protagonist has a lot more leeway to make his own life in this work than in Woolf's first two novels. Even if she changes a lot, Rachel is still impacted by Helen, St. John, and other personalities; in contrast, Katharine has her life planned out and can't veer off course.

Woolf enters a new phase in *Jacob's Room*, which breaks free from the constraints of her earlier works. "Being free meant to be structurally adventurous, less burdened by tradition, shorter, more condensed and fragmentary." The novel *Ulysses* by James Joyce had an impact on her because of the fresh perspective it offered to literature. By deviating from the norm of what is typically considered a book, Woolf was able to capitalise on the need for a brave, innovative, and risk-taking novel. Her third novel was a triumph in terms of creating a fresh narrative voice, despite the fact that she may have felt the weight of her father's legacy early in her literary career. She had longed for this since her 1891 attempts at writing with Vanessa and Thoby, and *Jacob's Room* gave her the opportunity to express herself and make the most of her skill. Even though the Hyde Park Gate News was a children's affair, Virginia had an interest in writing and journalism from an early age and continued until her mental illness rendered her unable to continue.

Looking at Woolf's work from her own eyes may provide the clearest picture of how her mental illness impacted her writing. "And I haven't told you much, or even hinted at the terrifying abysses that await me in just a few days. I'm embarrassed, but I'm trying to put it down on paper so I can expose the egotism that lies at its core." As stated in *Caramagno* by Wolf, verse eleven. Woolf devotes a considerable amount of space in her diaries to detailing the many symptoms of the instability and, later, the full-blown illness, which was frequently characterized by depressive episodes that could endure for months at a time. She was unable to channel her creative energy during her rest cure, which led to months of writing and proofreading novels—not to mention the innumerable letters—and ultimately ruined her delicate mind. Although Woolf's mental health improved while she was a patient at the Twickenham mental institution, she struggled to maintain control over her condition and continued to experience extreme highs and lows. "She started to feel like she couldn't write around the beginning of the year [1940]." According to Lee (753), This release occurred around 20 years after she wrote *Jacob's Room*, but it demonstrates that she battled the mental illness throughout her adult life; if her literary brilliance is lauded, her obstinacy is doubly so. Despite how thin and weak she looked towards the end of her life, she was unquestionably a warrior; some researchers may oversimplify the reasons for her mental state, but that doesn't change the fact. Because she probably sought every medication or surgery that may have helped her with her disease, it would be unfair to think of her suicide by jumping into the River Ouse as a sign of weakness. Willpower alone, along with the encouragement of Leonard, Vanessa, and a small group of close friends, kept her going and allowed her to write prolifically.

There is less discussion of mental illness in *Jacob's Room* as compared to *Night and Day* and *The Voyage Out*. Woolf pondered in her first book the possibility that an abrupt and intense flood of knowledge would cause pain and death. This was like playing with fire since she had crippling depressive episodes and the memory of the suicide attempt doesn't go away just because she dealt with it. Although Woolf contended with a certain form of mental illness, Ralph Denham's seeming insanity in *Night and Day* is probably of a different kind. The event that occurs near the novel's end when Betty Flanders has hallucinations could be seen as a sign of psychological instability. Woolf had episodes of hallucinations herself and would sometimes fictionalize her personal struggles, such as the profound depression that Septimus Smith experiences in *Mrs. Dalloway* as a result of shell shock. Conversely, it's not unreasonable to assume that naval gunfire is the source of night time waves smashing. Since Jacob's death is first revealed in the last chapter, it is possible that he perished in the gunshots on the eve of the Great battle, and Woolf likely utilized the relatively interchangeable sounds to establish the impending battle. Just before the story abruptly ends in Jacob's room, a few characters see Jacob, but they all know it was a hallucination, just like Jacob's mother. A specter, a lingering presence of

a once-known but now-mysterious someone, was what they perceived. He may have blended in with the crowd of other young men if his lauded uniqueness and attractiveness hadn't been so ubiquitous. The progressive breakdown of an undisturbed mind under the influence of society is something that Woolf may have aimed to show through Jacob, who represents a consciousness that eventually succumbs to the world.

### References

1. Beckson, Karl (Ed). Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970.
2. Bell, Quentin. Virginia Woolf: A Biography. London: Random House, 1996. Print.
3. Bettelheim, Bruno. The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales. New York: Vintage, 1977.
4. Cott, Jonathan . Beyond the Looking Glass: Extraordinary Works of Fairy Tale and Fantasy. New York: Stonehill, 1973.
5. De Gay, Jane. Virginia Woolf's Novels and the Literary Past. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2006. Print.
6. Ellmann, Richard. Oscar Wilde. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988.
7. Gillespie, Michael Patrick. Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996.
8. Goldman, Jane. The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf. Cambridge: CUP, 2006. Print.
9. Martin, Robert K. "Oscar Wilde and the Fairy Tale: 'The Happy Prince' as Self-Dramatization." *Studies in Short Fiction* vol 16 1979. p. 74-77.
10. Opie, Iona and Peter. The Classic Fairy Tales. New York: Oxford, 1974. Pearson, Hesketh. The Life of Oscar Wilde. London: Methuen, 1954.
11. Ronchetti, Ann. The Artist, Society & Sexuality in Virginia Woolf's Novels. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
12. Woolf, Virginia, and Julia Stephen. On Being Ill. Ashfield, MA: Paris, 2012. Print.