

Extract from an English student's learning journal.

Week Five - Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)

The Decay of Lying (1889, revised 1891)

'The Happy Prince', 'The Nightingale and the Rose', 'The Selfish Giant', 'The Remarkable Rocket' and 'The Devoted Friend' from *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888)

My immediate response to these works by Oscar Wilde is that they are charmingly light-hearted, evocative, challenging in content and meaning, and that the Fairy stories, in particular, are a delight to read.

With his fairy stories, Oscar Wilde has fused a traditional literary form with contemporary social issues. His stories use evocative imagery, personified animals and objects and fantastical situations, all in the manner of traditional fairy stories. But Wilde, through both direct and symbolic channels, imbues his works with an acidic bite. Unlike conventional children's stories, his concern themselves with unrequited love, unnoticed death, and social injustice and several of them end unhappily or at least with a bittersweet tinge to their resolutions. Wilde manages to set up and utilise rhythm in his stories through the repetition of actions or motifs, but then breaks with that rhythm to give the reader the unconventional ending. 'The Devoted Friend' is a good example of this as it deals with the continued and repeated mis-treatment of an individual and ends with his death. The repetition is broken and we are left jaded and in reflective mood.

Wilde is successful in lampooning the institutions of religion and the class system because his comments on them fit in neatly to the narrative of the stories and the language he uses to express his sentiment is economical. In 'The Happy Prince', for example, he says of the town councillors, 'When I last heard of them they were quarrelling still.' Language plays a key role in these stories. The biblical language and references to heaven and God dignify Wilde's project and protect it from attack. He uses the language of satire and he is very aware of voice and the style of narration he employs. In 'The Devoted Friend' the narration is given through a narrator in the story, the Linnet, but we are always aware of Wilde's own voice, with his quips and asides that are epigrammatic in style. It is in being able to imagine Oscar telling these stories to us personally that gives these works that added edge of delight.

It is fair to say that Wilde was right when he said his fairy stories are for children of all sizes, for the mix of exotic fantasy images, social comment and the pure readability of them, means they can be enjoyed by anyone of any age. One main element that allows us to buy into the fantasy settings and animal characters is that Wilde immediately gives us a position towards the text and maintains this throughout each story. For example, 'The Selfish Giant' begins with the line 'Every afternoon, as they were coming from school, the children used to go and play in the Giant's garden.' In this line we are taken to the everyday world of the child

and perhaps even our own childhood memories are invoked and as we are led directly into imagining this scene, the reference to the giant is entirely acceptable. Subsequently, as the adult reader has bought into the premise, they are then more open to the intentions of the author and the issues he raises.

These stories by Wilde are beautifully written and they concern themselves with images and concepts of beauty. In 'The Selfish Giant' the swallow talks of 'the King of the Mountains of the Moon, who is as black as ebony, and worships a large crystal.' But more than just relaying images of beauty, Wilde offers to us the beauty of human action and sacrifice: 'the Nightingale made no answer, for she was lying dead in the long grass, with the thorn in her heart.' The heroes of the stories are imperfect and yet, as a reader, you gain a warm feeling from their actions as they try to do what they feel is right. What is conveyed is an honesty that is far truer to real-life than anything found in *Sleeping Beauty* and something which draws out the positive from the negative, leaving a sense of hope in the reader's mind.

In *The Decay of Lying* Wilde utilises his own techniques of essay writing to good effect. He uses the characters of Vivian and Cyril and the setting to distance himself from the essay, but his own voice still maintains a dominance throughout. He takes this opportunity to speak forthrightly, for example, he openly attacks anything from America and George Washington to Shakespeare and Realism. His caustic wit and comedy is often used in conjunction with these statements: 'facts are [...] excluded on the general grounds of dullness'. We also see several techniques employed in his Fairy stories put into service in his essay, for we are taken to a place of 'winged lions' and told of the 'chilling touch' of facts. We are also drawn into the text through Cyril as he personifies the reaction of the reader, drawing us personally into the debate. All these techniques serve to maintain the interest of the reader and the charm they create makes us more open to the essay's issues.

Wilde uses opposing symbols to exemplify the difference between art and nature in *The Decay of Lying*. The discussion between Vivian and Cyril is given the fictional setting of a library, which in itself contains fiction, or the representation of art. But much of the discussion concerns itself with what lies beyond the threshold of the interior - the outside world, or nature. The reader, if able to remain aware of the setting amid Vivian's lengthy speech is then aware of the diametrical positioning of the sentiments of the text in relation to its setting. But Wilde also uses irony to good effect in playing with this idea. The lengthy debate is ignited when Cyril, upon entering the library from the terrace, extols the beauty of the day. But despite all that is said about art being superior to nature, the essay concludes with Vivian and Cyril departing from the interior world to enjoy the outside world. This irony of Wilde's reflects the light-heartedness of his reasoning and puts into question Wilde's volition in what he has conveyed. I really enjoyed this playfulness as it added a dynamic to the text in retrospect.

In the seminar we discussed some of the broader ideas of Wilde's *The Decay of Lying*. We questioned the validity of 'lying' and the maxim that art is superior to nature. On one side we considered Plato's *The Republic*, which conveys a fantasy utopia from which poets are excluded for their untruthfulness. But, in Wilde's terms, 'lying' is merely another way of saying imagination. A place without poets and without art would, therefore, be a place devoid of imagination and creativity. What a thought! Wilde justifies the place of art by saying 'Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life' and gives a somewhat rudimentary example of how life imitates art in the story of the boy burglars. In discussion, we came up with modern examples of life imitating art: copy-cat crimes, fashion and musical tastes, and, of course, the 'Free Deirdre Rachid Campaign', a la *Coronation Street*.

This week's writing exercise was to write a fairy story, or part of a fairy story, using themes and stylistic devices which seemed to me to be characteristically Wildean. First, I thought about what my fairy story might be about. I decided that I would utilise the device of the bird that Wilde had used in several of his stories. The bird would act as a guide through the narrative. Deciding upon a central theme for the story was easy, as two of Wilde's main textual ideas is prejudice and acceptance. My story, using the characters of two mice, deals with the possibility of and social/religious barriers surrounding the concept of gay marriage. Using my reading and seminar notes I identified key themes, such as religion, exoticism, social commentary etc. and tried my best to incorporate as many of them as I could into and around the narrative. When writing the story I applied what I believe to be a hybrid of Wilde's wit and my own. So, the process, for me, was a simple and enjoyable one, and I am very pleased with the finished piece.