
The Bird as a Sacrificial Hero in Oscar Wilde’s “The Nightingale and the Rose” and “The Happy Prince”

BY

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Heroism and sacrifice are not new concepts; they can be traced back to the early days of human life. These concepts developed throughout history as a result of the development of human thought. In literature, the idea of heroism appears on a large scale. It has been dealt with by different writers in different periods. As far as terminology is concerned, the terms of heroism and sacrifice are interchangeable. The hero must be a sacrificer and the one who sacrifices himself must be a hero, for this reason these two terms (hero and sacrificer) cannot be separated. Thus, both of them go hand in hand in so many works of literature. Heroism and sacrifice are not confined to human beings only. Some writers present their heroes as gods as in mythology, and some of them present animals as in fables.

The idea of having an animal as a sacrificial hero is shown in many of Oscar Wilde's short stories. He developed this theme as a reaction towards his age which lacked, in his view, moral as well as human values. For this reason, he chooses a bird to be his tragic hero. He epitomizes this idea in such short stories like "The Nightingale and the Rose" and "The Happy Prince". The heroes in these two short stories are birds: a swallow in "The Happy prince" and a nightingale in "The Nightingale and the Rose". These creatures are usually known of their delicacy and frailty. But in these stories they function as sacrificial heroes for the sake of others and tolerate horrible conditions of death just to please people.

"The Nightingale and the Rose" is one of Wilde's best short stories. It was published in 1888 with some other short stories. The romantic story revolves around the theme of sacrifice and presents the nightingale as a sacrificial hero who sacrifices his life to make true love last forever. The story is about a young student who holds true love towards a girl who is obsessed with material things. Her obsession leads love to end tragically, as Barbara Seward puts it, "this kind of love is oppressed by the materialism of the human beings."¹ Wilde in this story delineates the nightingale as his tragic hero. He, in fact, feels that man started to lose the heroic deeds which used to be attributed to him only. One reason behind

choosing this bird is perhaps Wilde's belief that man was dehumanized in a materialistic age, and hence he is no longer capable of achieving moral and human deeds. Thus, the use of the bird shows the spontaneity and kindness that man lacked which made him unable to do heroic deeds. Moreover, Oscar Wilde, through this story, wants to show us the difference between the human beings who do not care for the value of true love and this bird to which love means a lot to the extent that it sacrifices itself just to make that love prevail.

Unfortunately, this sacrifice was not appreciated by the human characters in the story. The bird wanted to help the student by bringing a red rose to his girl and in exchange she would dance with him in the ball held by the prince, as the student says, "she said that she would dance with me if I brought her a red rose"² (p, 27) The bird overhears the student from its nest and joyfully observes, "Here at last is a true lover" (p, 28). From this event onward the bird decides to help the student fulfill his dream. The bird believed in true love and was ready to die for it, as Robert Welch states "The Nightingale sacrifices her [nightingale] life to create the rose that will give love to the student... Our Nightingale is able to die in exchange for eternal love."³

This amiable creature describes love as a blessed feeling all over the universe saying:

Surely love is a wonderful thing. It is more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals. Pearls and pomegranates can not buy it, nor is it set forth in the market place. It may not be purchased of the merchants, nor can it be weighed out in the balance for gold. (p. 29)

This definition of true love sets the discrepancy of the bird's world of love, emotion and sacrifice, and man's world of materialism, opportunism and aversion. Moreover, the bird is presented as the true lover of the story. The Nightingale felt sympathy for the student who became sick of love "but passion has made his face like pale ivory, and sorrow has set her seal upon his brow."(p.28) Therefore, the bird decides to help the student whatever this might cost it. This sympathy on the part of the bird is so determined and resolute to help the student. It must be noticed here that the bird's quest, which is in parallel to man's lost quest, is to make the student enjoy his true love. Ironically, man is no longer capable of achieving anything in life and it is through these tiny and meek birds that he can do so. The bird is convinced with its mission and determined to bring the red rose to the student.

Consequently, the bird sets out searching for a red rose. It asked three trees of roses, one that has yellow roses, the other has white roses, and the third has red roses. To the bird's misfortune, the tree

of red rose cannot have roses in winter, because winter dries the veins of the tree and prevents it from creating red roses, as the tree tells the bird, “But the winter has chilled my veins, and the frost has nipped my buds, and the storm has broken my branches,” (p, 32). This fact upsets the bird and turns it hopeless. Yet the tree suggests a solution, though an awful one, as the tree explains:

‘If you want red rose,’ said the tree, ‘You must build it out of music by moonlight, and stain it with your heart’s-blood. You must sing to me with your breast against a thorn. All night long you must sing to me, and the thorn must pierce your heart, and your life blood must flow into my veins, and become mine.’(p. 32-33).

This pivotal point proves the nature of the bird’s sacrifice. The bird now is ready to give his life away just to see love achieved. This, in fact, shows Wilde’s pessimistic and optimistic attitudes at the same time. It displays Wilde’s loss of faith in man and the impossibility of redeeming love. On the other hand, it shows his optimistic attitude because he declares that if love is lost in man’s world, at least it can be found somewhere else. As a result, the bird accepts its fate believing in the nobility of its aim and thinking that true love is worthy to die for, as Welch states, “She [the

nightingale] thinks that the most important thing in the world is love, and even she gives her life for love.”⁴ The bird understood what made the student sad because it knew about the nature of true love, “But the Nightingale understood the secret of the student’s sorrow, and she sat silent in the oak-tree, and thought about the mystery of Love.”(p.30) Therefore, the bird gives its soul away while singing and enjoying the moment, believing that establishing true love in man’s disintegrated world is a tremendous thing and it requires a great sacrifice. Therefore, the bird resumes its process of sacrifice and accomplishes its mission. The bird keeps singing all the night with its heart against a thorn. The final outcome is a magnificent red rose full of life and true emotions of love, as Wilde describes it: “And a marvelous rose became crimson, like the rose of the eastern sky” (p, 38).

The bird died in a heroic way, a death that made it happy at the end because it was its demand. The bird’s strong belief in love made it resolute enough to give its life away. It sacrificed its life for the sake of the student, to help him win his love. All the creatures in the garden felt sad like the lizard and the butterfly, and the oak tree on which the “Nightingale” built its nest, felt heartbreaking sadness because of this painful departure. This holy bond between the oak tree and the bird is gone, but gone for a noble purpose which is true love. The other important thing which

can be noticed in this story is the difference in the characters' attitudes towards the bird.

From the beginning of the story all the creatures in the garden were with the bird, even the trees encouraged it to go on achieving its aim. They showed it the way to the final rose tree that produced the red rose. Ironically, the student was indifferent towards the bird's sacrifice and could not understand it. The nightingale tried to tell him everything it felt through its beautiful melodies, but he did not pay attention to them. Clifton Snide comments on the situation of the bird saying that, "The Student cannot understand what the Nightingale says; for he only knew the things that are written down in books, he has too much 'head' knowledge and almost no 'heart' knowledge."⁵ This indicates that people are indifferent towards other creatures and their behaviors. Here lies the irony of the story. All the efforts done by the bird were unheeded by the student who was only aware of materialism and science which enveloped his life and made him blind of others' suffering.

Wilde shows clearly how the tow worlds, the world of the bird and the world of the student can not be bridged and compromised. They are too different to meet. The bird lives for love and sacrifice, while the student, the girl, and all the human characters in the story live for materialism, science and utilitarian values. The bird thus

can be seen as a symbol of man's lost values. Moreover, birds and other creatures are presented as being more passionate, sympathetic, and sensitive towards human sorrow and sadness than people themselves.

The bird dies and the student observes the red rose the next morning and becomes very happy for this. He takes the rose to the girl, but she refuses to take it, simply because the chamberlain's nephew has brought her jewelry, as she says: "every body knows that jewels cost far more than flowers." (p, 40). The student gets astonished and throws the rose away. He considers the girl as an ungracious one, who does not value the student's love for her. Therefore, he leaves and goes back to studying again. Both the girl and the boy are ungrateful towards the bird, they do not respect the bird's sacrifice, as Roden puts it, "the Nightingale who gives her [nightingale] heart's blood for a rose, only to have the love token tossed aside by both who demanded it and the conceited student who offered it."⁶ Love is destroyed by materialism and civilization. Wilde wants to say that there is no place for love among such selfish people, who think that gold or diamonds can compensate such noble feelings, those that the bird died for willingly and happily. The bird offered its soul because it wanted the student to be a true lover, because love, according to the bird, is wiser than philosophy. The bird states that clearly: "All that I ask of you in

return is that you will be a true lover, for Love is wiser than Philosophy” (p, 34)

The other story which presents the bird as a sacrificial hero is “The Happy Prince”. This short story was also published in 1888 under the title *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*. Oscar Wilde described it in one of his letters, “It is an attempt to treat a tragic modern problem in a form that aims at delicacy and imaginative treatment; it is a reaction against the purely imitative character of modern art.”⁷ The story projects the evils of the Victorian period, an age that needed a real hero. The age witnessed the spread of social diseases, the lack of faith, the loss of talents, and the loss of compassion. Von Eckardt comments on this age saying:

The degradation, and above all the overcrowding... led to indiscriminate sexuality , incest, and child abuse. Constantly fighting for their existence and inured to pain and brutality, a Shockingly large number of women even children became night house tarts, courtesans, sailor’s whores, dolly mops.⁸

Oscar Wilde must have had London in his thought as the suitable place for his story and a rich material to speak about. He chooses London to be the setting of his story because it meets his demands. He reflects the horrors of that time just to tell the reader that such terrifying issues need a person to cure and to rescue. London, in Wilde’s view, was a degenerate city. It lacked many of the human

values, and the materialistic principles were highly adopted by its people. Thus, this city needed a hero, and since Wilde lost his faith in man, he turned to animals as in the previous story. The hero of this short story is a simple “Swallow”, this bird here takes the usual role of the human being, which is the sacrificial role, a responsibility that no one can accept but real heroes. In his story, Wilde wants to reveal a new fact about the act of heroism, the act that needs a brave soul to accomplish and a lion heart to achieve. The bird therefore is going to be that hero, who is going to show the whole world that a small bird is up to the mission. Though the little bird was not with size and energy, but for Wilde, it was the will and gumption that determine the act of heroism.

The tragic tale of “The Happy Prince” shows Wilde’s artistic abilities in depicting a serious heroic act in what seems a simple story¹⁰. The story from the beginning till the end goes around London and the people of this community. The “Swallow” appears as flying over this sad region. The mission of this bird starts the moment it delays its migration journey towards Egypt. The bird decides to stay and act heroically towards his best friend, the “Prince”, and rescue the poor. Winter, in this story, functions as an intensifying element for the heroic act of the bird. The weather is against the bird but it did not affect its great mission. On the opposite, the bird becomes more resolute than before to help the

afflicted. It decides to stay in spite of all the hardships around it, and determines to take the responsibility unlike other birds that fly away searching for a warm place, a mission that no bird can accept for the sake of humans. Thus, Wilde shows that neither birds nor humans are willing to achieve this mission. The “Swallow” did not pay attention to all of his friends and preferred to stay for a noble cause. He pities the “Prince” and decides to help him “I will stay with you always.”(p, 18) The valiant bird starts the noble journey, the first thing it does is to rescue a sick boy by flying gently “round the bed, fanning the boy’s forehead with his wings” (p, 12). The boy needs a great help, one that can be offered by a human being, but it came from a bird. This creature, in Wilde’s estimation proves to have feelings more than any ordinary human being and it is so sympathetic towards human misery.

Later on the bird bravely flies away to help the miserable writer who was trying to finish a play for the director of the theatre, but it was too cold for him to write any more, and lacked fire and food “There is no fire in the grate, and hunger has made him faint” (p, 14). The bird takes one of his friend’s eyes, the statue’s eye, and throws it to the poor writer. No one takes heed of this writer and his gifts except this simple-minded bird which knows nothing about writing; it values this person as a gifted character. Therefore, the bird helps him to continue his art. This man was neglected by

every one and this kind of neglect hurts him and curbs his inspiration and makes him feel that he is dead in life. The “Swallow” helps him restore his lost hope which was so important for him as a writer.

Moreover, the other incident that shows the bird’s sacrificial deed is when it helps the little match girl. The bird gives her one of the eyes of his friend “He swooped past the match girl, and slipped the jewel into the palm of her hand. (p, 18) This innocent girl deserves to be educated and treated in a good way rather than being thrown in the streets and abused. No one takes care of her, even her father does not, except the bird. This is another incident through which Wilde shows the discrepancy between the world of the human beings and the world of animals. The human characters neglect and insult this poor girl while the bird sacrifices its happiness in order to help her and make her happy.

At the end of the third mission, the “Swallow” begins to feel sick and tired, but this weakness does not stop him from helping the boys who were under the bridge “lying in one another’s arms to try to keep themselves warm.” (p, 20) The bird overcomes his feebleness and tosses for them one of the golden parts of his friend “Leaf after leaf of the fine gold he brought to the poor, and the children’s faces grew rosier, and they laughed and played games in the street.” (p, 20) Those orphans deserve to live and grow in a

clean, respectable, and warm place, but no one was aware of their poverty and the deplorable circumstances of their lives except the bird which found happiness in sacrificing itself for their sake. The bird was very happy in achieving his promise to his friend, and showed sympathy to the living humans as well as dead ones; at the same time it displays full awareness of the suffering of the statue of the prince, which appears as a mere monument for other people. The bird sacrifices its journey and health for the sake of the “Prince” and the poor. This sacrifice that no one is ready to accept found a real hero with a brave heart to fulfill. The odyssey of the “Swallow” is near to its end and he must go. The “Prince” thought that the bird will go to Egypt to join his friends but, in fact, it will join the angels in heaven and will sing forever.

Through these missions, the bird notices the hypocrisy of the people, how “the rich [were] making merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars were sitting at the gates.” (p. 19) This hypocrisy hurts the bird as badly as it hurts the “Prince”. The experience makes bird realize the bitter fact of this world which it could not endure any more. Therefore, the bird begins to deteriorate from within as well as from without, as Wilde describes it, “The poor little Swallow grew colder and colder, but he would not leave the Prince.” (p. 21) This, in fact, leads to the tragic end of the bird which dies holding man’s misery on its feeble body. The

death of the bird influences the “Prince” and makes his heart break into two pieces, because he felt himself alone now with no friend, in fact, with nothing.

Ironically, the mayor orders to melt down the statue of the “Prince” and throw away the bird saying: “birds are not to be allowed to die here” (p. 23), but the heart of the “Prince” does not melt, because it is a human heart full of kindness. In fact, the mayor was thinking of building a statue for himself instead: “It shall be the statue of myself” (p. 23). The irony here is that the bird sacrificed itself but was thrown on the grass! One can notice that the bird has won the salvation at the end. Hence, the little bird with all of its delicate features established the concept of self-sacrifice and became a sacrificial hero for the sake of his friend and the poor people¹¹. It endured the harsh winter season and stayed with its friend, whom it promised to help till the end.

This story accomplishes Wilde’s aim through using one character, which is a bird, to communicate a serious concept, which is of sacrifice, showing the world that a tiny creature may hold a great purpose inside, one which is greater than the materialistic and loveless purpose of the human beings. Frederick Roden states that all the stories of Oscar Wilde “involve an ultimate sacrifice on the part of one character.”¹² The bird in this tragic story accomplishes Wilde’s aim of sacrifice and heroism. It

sacrifices itself only to alleviate the pain of his friend and comfort the torments of the impecunious.

All in all, these two short stories show Wilde's loss of faith in man. He is fully aware that in such a world heroism and other human and moral values are lost. Therefore, he resorts to animals because he believes that what is lost in man is restored by animals. The spontaneity and mercy the birds have are two reasons why Wilde chooses birds. The two birds in these two short stories offer themselves to reduce human misery and suffering as well as make their wishes come true. The tragic deaths of these two birds hold these two creatures on the realm of epic tradition. Thus, Wilde succeeds in depicting his own concept of epic having a bird as its hero.

Notes

¹Barbara Seward, *The Symbolic Rose* (Dallas: Spring, 1988), p. 84.

²Oscar Wilde, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (London: David Nutt, 1888), (all subsequent references to the text will be taken from this source).

³Robert Welch, *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 8.

⁴Ibid, p.8.

⁵Clifton Snider, "On The Loom Of Sorrow" in *Eros and Logos in Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales* (California State University, Long Beach, 2006), p.2.

⁶Frederick S Roden, “Wilde the Writer” in *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*,(Macmillan, 2008), p, 38.

⁷John Allen Quintus, “The Moral Prerogative in Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales” in *Virginia Quarterly Review* , www.VQR.com. Page 2 of 4 retrieved 10/3/2009.

⁸Von Eckardt, et al *Oscar Wilde’s London: A Scrap Book of Vices and Virtues, 1880-1900* (Garden City, Nr: Anchor, 1987), p.158.

⁹Ibid, p. 146.

¹⁰ John Allen Quintus, p.3

¹¹Anne Markey, “The Happy Prince and other Tales” <http://www.litencyc.com>. Page 1 of 6, retrieved 13 February 2006.

¹²Frederick S. Roden, “Wilde the Writer” in *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*, (Macmillan:2008), p, 38.

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