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THE PROBLEM OF INNER UGLINESS AND BEAUTY IN THE WORKS BY OSCAR WILDE (FAIRYTALES, “THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY”)

What is beauty? Beauty in different cultures.

Every culture and every era is characterized by particular ideas about beauty and beautiful forms. In European culture, our understanding of beauty stems from ancient times. In Ancient Greece and Rome, beauty was equated to correct, symmetrical, harmonious forms. Ancient art aimed for perfection. That’s why ideal forms were considered beautiful. So, perfection, symmetry, harmony are synonymous to beauty in European culture.

In Japan, however, it’s different. In Ukrainian language, we only have one word – «краса», but in Japanese there are a few different terms to describe what may be considered beautiful.

There are special concepts in Japan to describe what we call beautiful. **Sabi** means beauty of the old things, like an ancient temple, or even a stone, which has been near the road for many years and is covered with moss. **Wabi** means the beauty of daily things and events. The Japanese can find beautiful features in every wild flower, house or anything else. And **Shibuy** is a type of beauty which combines discreet elegance and naturalness. The Japanese appreciate soft beauty, which does not rely on bright colors or unusual effects, it is hidden inside, but full of inner spirituality and dignity.

In late 19th century, Japan and Japanese culture became hugely popular in Europe. European artists and writers started taking interest in Japanese art, and they discovered a whole new vision of beauty as something natural and dynamic. Artists started asking questions like:

- What is art?
- What is the essence of art?
- What should art portray: should it only stick to beautiful objects, or can art portray something ugly as well? Can it portray good AND evil?
- Should art be a source of morals, or should it be independent from society and its values?

Being a great lover of beauty, Oscar Wilde also considered these questions. Beauty and beautiful characters became the main subjects of his works. Oscar Wilde was interested in Japanese art and collected Japanese prints. His idea of aestheticism (the idea of beauty in art) took shape under the influence of Japanese art.

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O. Wilde: an English writer of an Irish descent. His life and aesthetic views

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born on October 16 1854 in Dublin (Ireland). His father was Ireland's leading oto-ophthalmologic surgeon. Until he was nine, the boy was educated at home, but he later joined his brother at Portora Royal School in Enniskillen. After graduating school, he went on to study at Trinity College in Dublin, where O. Wilde established himself as a brilliant student. He came first in his class in his first year, won a scholarship by competitive examination in his second and, in his finals, won the Berkeley Gold Medal in Greek, the University's highest academic award. This award gave him an opportunity to go to Oxford university, which is one of the most well-known higher educational establishments in Europe. He came to Oxford in 1874. The future writer became a member of the elite arts club. After having received his degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1878, he started living on his own in London.

In the 1880s, O. Wilde became known as a journalist, critic, essayist, novelist, playwright, master of discussion.

Throughout his life, O. Wilde loved delicate, exquisite things and sophisticated lifestyles. When he married Constance Lloyd in the early 1880s, Wilde's house was transformed into an aesthetic salon, visited by many a famous person, including actress Sarah Bernhardt, and many writers like Mark Twain, John Ruskin, Algernon Swinburne etc.

The history of world literature remembers O. Wilde as a representative of aestheticism, which was a philosophical and aesthetic movement in the late 19th century. The cult of beauty was at the heart of aestheticism.

The idea of "pure art" was very popular among French and English painters, poets, and art critics, who stood for beauty in art and in life.

So, the basic principles of O. Wilde's aestheticism are as follows:

- the greatness and originality of art;
- the self-sufficiency of art;
- art is greater than truth and morality;
- admiration for the beautiful;
- aesthetic attention to the feelings and emotions of people;
- representation of beauty in all its manifestations is the goal of art;
- pleasure hailed as the supreme sense of existence (hedonism).

The writer took a special stance on the relationship between art and morality. In his support of the idea of the self-sufficiency of art, he denied the influence of society on the artist and his works.

"There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all."

"No artist has ethical sympathies" etc.

But his work reveals O. Wilde's interest in exploring the relationship between beauty and moral values.

The relationship between morality and beauty in “The Star-Child”

So, Oscar Wilde was married to Constance Lloyd, who he met in Dublin. They had two sons, Cyril and Vyvyan. Constance also had her own literary salon, visited by many a prominent writer, actor and artist of the time.

Somehow Oscar Wilde became interested in what his children think and dream about. He asked Cyril about this, but he suddenly told his father he had been thinking “about pigs”.

This conversation with his son prompted the artist to create literary fairytales, which had to (in the writer’s opinion) develop children’s fantasy, aesthetic taste and moral values.

In the form of a tale, Oscar Wilde tried to explain important truths: every person’s life has meaning; beauty must be not only external but also internal; people must love and respect one thing, etc.

In 1888, his fairytale collection “The Happy Prince” was published, and in 1891 – “A House of Pomegranates”. While he was working on them, Oscar Wilde wrote that his tales are “written, not for children, but for childlike people from eighteen to eighty!”

The relationship between the good and the beautiful in people’s lives is reflected in all of the writer’s works. He wrote: “We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.”

Fairytale collection “A House of Pomegranates” (1891)

Why pomegranates? In a country like Ireland, Christian traditions are especially powerful, and the pomegranate (as in the tree and its fruits) is one of the traditional symbols in Christianity, which embodies suffering, revival and resurrection. Each one of the four fairytales (“The Young King,” “The Birthday of the Infanta,” “The Fisherman and his Soul,” “The Star-Child”) tells us about different events which are related to human suffering and their spiritual revival. The word “pomegranate” appears during the most stressful moments for the characters, but at the same time it seems to hint at the path to revival. Why was the word “house” used in the name of the collection? In nineteenth-century England, this was the name given to a salon, a place where highly educated people met and talked about art, philosophy and science. Some of the salons (“houses”) had their own names. “A House of Pomegranates” is dedicated to the writer’s wife – Constance Wilde, who had her own literary salon.

Oscar Wilde’s fairytale “The Star-Child” is part of his collection of fairytales “*A House of Pomegranates*” (1892).

The work reveals the eternal struggle between good and evil, beauty and terror, virtue and violence.

From the first pages of the book, the reader is introduced to a winter forest and its inhabitants. A few magical characters are mentioned, like *the Ice-King* or *the Snow*, who don’t seem to be particularly nice in their attitudes toward people and animals. A severe frost prevents the two Woodcutters from getting back home. Something extraordinary happened to them: they saw a star fall from the sky. There was something golden in the distance. It was a child, wrapped in a golden cloak with big stars.

One of the Woodcutters pitied the boy, took him home and raised him as his own son. The Star-Child grew up in the Woodcutter’s family.

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He was very good-looking, but also self-absorbed and violent. He was “*hard of heart*”.

The fairytale repeatedly mentions the flower to which the protagonist of the work is likened, the daffodil (gold and white). The Star-Child liked watching his reflection in the water and admiring his own beauty.

“... he was white and delicate as sawn ivory, and his curls were like the rings of the **daffodil**. His lips, also, were like the petals of a red flower, and his eyes were like violets by a river of pure water, and his body like the **narcissus** of a field where the mower comes not.

Yet did his beauty work him evil. For he grew proud, and cruel, and selfish.”

It appears that the comparison between the boy and the daffodil is not only due to the natural beauty of the flower. It is related to an old story that a young man called Narcissus (‘daffodil’) was so in love with his own beauty that he couldn’t love anyone else. He was punished by the gods and turned into a daffodil, which became a symbol of cold and soulless beauty. In a figurative sense, a narcissist is a self-absorbed, self-obsessed, and self-worshipping person. The story of Narcissus is a common one in European art and literature. Oscar Wilde used it to make his character even more vivid.

The Star-Child abandoned his mother. He had given up on his mother (who had become a beggar), shut his heart from her and was punished by losing his beauty.

The Star-Child broke an important Christian commandment: “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.”

The boy has lost his attractiveness and become utterly disgusting.

“So he went to the well of water and looked into it, and lo! his face was as the face of a toad, and his body was scaled like an adder”.

“So he ran away into the forest and called out to his mother to come to him, but there was no answer”.

As he repents his guilt, he walks through the woods and villages for his mother’s forgiveness.

Now he has “passed” an important exam in front of the Almighty, having become spiritually secure, and having begged his parents for forgiveness.

As time goes by, the Star-Child is rewarded: he gets a kingdom and his parents’ love.

This fairytale urges us to think about the problem of inner and outer beauty. O. Wilde denied the relationship between beauty and morals. At the same time, the fairytale proves that cold-hearted beauty without kindness can be dangerous.

The writer’s aesthetic views as expressed in his novel “The Picture of Dorian Gray”

The author’s opinions on beauty and its essence are vividly expressed in “The Picture of Dorian Gray.”

In 1874, O. Wilde got a scholarship to study at Magdalen College in Oxford. He listened to lectures by John Ruskin, who had been the first Slade Professor of Fine Art at the University of Oxford since 1869. John Ruskin popularized the work of the artist Joseph Mallord William

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Turner, a forerunner of the French Impressionists, and strengthened the position of the Pre-Raphaelites, led by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. O. Wilde was fond of Ruskin's aesthetic ideas. Ruskin's ideas on the priority of art and its proximity to nature were particularly close to the writer's creative stance. Furthermore, both John Ruskin and O. Wilde were fascinated by the artistic heritage and innovative approaches of the Pre-Raphaelites, who, following the poet John Keats, argued that art exists for the sake of beauty, with no utilitarian meaning and no moral categories.

John Ruskin's student was Walter Pater, an English art historian who embraced aestheticism with its motto "art for art's sake." It was from W. Pater that O. Wilde (while studying in Oxford) adopted the idea that art can choose any subject of representation – both good and evil, without necessarily being dependent on the social situation or moral standards..

In 1883-1884, O. Wilde traveled to Paris where he met Paul Verlaine, Émile Zola, Stéphane Mallarmé and other writers who actively supported impressionist artists and used impressionist techniques in their own work. During those years, O. Wilde visited exhibitions of young artists, following the development of a new method in art.

The preface to the novel "The Picture of Dorian Gray" contains 25 aphorisms that declare the author's aesthetic manifesto.

"The artist is the creator of beautiful things";

"To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim";

"Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art", etc.

The author put his character, Dorian Gray, in an extraordinary situation. He is to receive eternal youth and beauty in return for his picture getting older and uglier with every year.

A wealthy, handsome young man is led into a world of pleasures by his mentor, Lord Henry Wotton, who inspired the idea of eternal youth by admiring Dorian's portrait in Basil Hallward's studio.

The artist, impressed by the young Gray's pure soul, contributed his own thoughts, feelings, vision of beauty, "part of himself" to the portrait. The beautiful work of art has absorbed a part of the artist's soul, capable of influencing and encouraging others. But Dorian Gray was attracted not by Basil's feelings, but by the ideas of Lord Henry, who said that people should not trust art or learn beauty from it, but look for it in life by themselves.

Between the artist and the lord, a battle for the soul and the beauty of the young man breaks out, in which Lord Henry is victorious in the first pages of the novel.

Dorian Gray followed his new teacher without wavering too much, having exchanged his own soul for an eternal pleasure.

Sibyl Vane who impressed our hero with her extraordinary acting talent became the first sacrifice to Dorian Gray's hedonism. His attraction disappeared fairly quickly when Sibyl, having fallen in love with the young man, could no longer pretend to be in love on stage. Without getting any satisfaction from the show, Dorian Gray roughly shooed the girl away not only from herself but also from life – she poisoned herself. This was the first crime reflected in the portrait.

This new life turned out to be a double life. In public, Gray was a brilliant dandy, an idol of the young, who followed his manners, his style, his thoughts.

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By separating beauty from spirituality, Dorian Gray became an ugly symbol of ‘new Hedonism’ promoted by Lord Henry, – a philosophy that declared pleasure and enjoyment as the greatest meaning of life. The character himself finally understood the consequences of his disdain for morality: ‘the living death of his own soul.’ The ruthless forces that Dorian Gray let into his soul ended up destroying his body: when he stabbed the portrait with a knife, he essentially killed himself.

The picture of Dorian Gray, created by the painter Basil Hallward, is a meaningful symbol. This is a symbol of true art that reveals not only the exterior but also the intimate, soul-searching nature of the human soul, even beyond the artist’s will. On the other hand, the portrait is a reflection of the character’s inner life, his vices, crimes, and lack of moral guidance. Like a magic mirror, the portrait reflects the essence of life, its light and dark elements. At the same time it signifies the immortality of art. After having exposed the intrinsic darkness of the human soul, the portrait started shining again after Dorian Gray had died. So, true beauty can regenerate again and again.

Conclusions

- Aestheticism is a philosophical theory which reinforced the priority of beauty and art. The ideas of aestheticism were reflected in O. Wilde’s works “The Star-Child,” “The Picture of Dorian Gray.”
- The writer addressed important problems in the work: beautiful appearance and spiritual beauty, the essence of art and the calling of the artist, art and morality, art and life etc.
- The portrait is a symbol of the human soul, conscience, the hidden meaning of life, but also of the eternal beauty and power of art.
- “The Picture of Dorian Gray” is an intellectual novel, which includes not only realistic elements but also elements of early Modernism, which are similar to Romanticism.

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