

**The Ignorance of Human's Feeling Due to Materialism and Individualism:
Social Critiques toward Late Victorian Society in Oscar Wilde's Selected Short
Stories**

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini memaparkan kritik sosial Oscar Wilde terhadap masyarakat Inggris pada akhir abad kesembilan belas (yang lebih dikenal sebagai zaman Victoria), yang ia sampaikan melalui tiga cerita pendeknya berjudul The Nightingale and the Rose, The Devoted Friend dan The Remarkable Rocket. Penelitian dilakukan dengan memakai pendekatan sejarah yang menghubungkan karya sastra dengan kondisi sosial saat karya tersebut ditulis. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa masyarakat Inggris di zaman Victoria cenderung mengabaikan perasaan manusia karena mereka cenderung bersifat materialis dan individualis yang disebabkan oleh adanya sistem kelas dalam masyarakat Inggris saat itu.

Kata Kunci: kritik sosial, era Victoria, Oscar Wilde, materialisme, stratifikasi sosial, individualisme

ABSTRACT

This article reveals Oscar Wilde's social critiques toward English society in the late nineteenth century (an era well known as Victorian Age) as reflected in his short stories The Nightingale and the Rose, The Devoted Friend and The Remarkable Rocket. In conducting this research, the writer applies historical approach, which relates the literary works with the contextual historical information on particular

period of time. The result of the analysis points out that the late Victorian society tends to be ignorant of human's feelings due to the materialistic and individualistic ways of life, which is caused by the system of social stratification in the society.

Keywords: social critiques, Victorian era, social stratification, materialism, individualism

1. Introduction

Literary work is not only used for individual expression and entertainment but also as a documentation, reflection and media of social critiques of a particular society in a certain era. This explains how literature may underlie social-political messages of its surrounding environment and atmosphere of a particular society in a certain period of time. This is also believed to be found in selected short stories of Oscar Wilde.

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (16 October 1854 – 30 November 1900) was an Irish playwright, poet and author of numerous short stories and one novel. He lived in the second phase of the Victorian era in London. During that time, England was enjoying economic growth. However, serious economic depression in 1874-1875 shook this great kingdom, and England had experienced this transitional period around 1880. If viewed as a whole, the nineteenth century has been a prosperous century for the British upper and the middle classes. However, at the same time, the lower class was very poor. Living in this condition made him express a critical spirit and tried to challenge the society. For example, the behavior of the different social classes in society—especially the problems between the low and high class, the common problems between couples, parents and friends.

This article presents a social discussion on Oscar Wilde's selected short stories from his short story collection The Happy Prince and Other Tales. The writer thinks that his short stories are the least-discussed compared to his other works. However the writer also believes that all of them contain social critique towards the society of the late Victorian era since they were written in the era of materialism and

individualism that led the society's ignorance of human's feeling and put material things and self-importance on top of everything.

2. Reviews of Related Studies

To enrich the analysis, the writer conducts literary review to find out what other researches say about the three short stories in particular and Wilde's writing in general. The first research is by Frank Browning (2006) who uses several of Wilde's works, including his short stories, to seek Wilde's homosexual desire as reflected in his works. Browning entitles it Oscar Wilde and Modern Homo: A Distorted Evidence. Two short stories from Wilde's short stories collection The Happy Prince and Other Tales had been analyzed to support his analysis. He claimed that the story of The Selfish Giant and The Happy Prince convey Wilde's repressed homosexuality by representing the relationship between The Giant and The Little Boy as well as between The Prince statue that The Bird adores.

Meanwhile, M.I Macaulay (2010) from McMaster University is more interested in doing stylistic analysis on The Nightingale and the Rose. He assumes that throughout the story, Oscar Wilde employs various stylistic devices for the expression of aesthetic concept. He summarized the stylistic features, which help the author creating a story that can successfully be absorbed by readers with a comprehensive stylistic analysis of the story in phonetic, lexical, syntactic, semantic and contextual aspects.

There are also a number of graduates' theses that focus on Oscar Wilde's works, but none of them had analyzed his short stories nor applied social criticism on them. However, researches in English society had been done by some graduates with different objects of literary works. One of them is Khairul Ihsan (2005), who has written an undergraduate thesis entitled The Impacts of Social Classes toward Marriage System in the Late of 19th Century in Britain as Seen in A Room with a View by E. M Foster. In his thesis, he analyzes the impacts of social classes toward

marriage system in the late of 19th century by applying sociological theory proposed by Alan Swingewood. Ihsan assumes that the novel A Room with a View is a reflection of British society in the late of 19th century, since he finds a close relationship between the novel and the factual data about Britain society especially in term of social classes and marriage system at that time which was under the control of material possession and social status.

4. The Ignorance of Human's Feeling Due to Materialism and Individualism: Social Critiques toward Late Victorian Society in Oscar Wilde's Selected Short Stories

The following discussion presents the result of analysis on Wilde's three selected short stories entitled The Nightingale and the Rose, The Devoted Friend dan The Remarkable Rocket which is divided into a) the importance of social status and the unequal social treatment, b) the materialistic way of life, and c) the social irresponsibility of the self-centered society.

a. The Importance of Social Status and Unequal Social Treatment

The Nightingale and the Rose story brings out the issue of social status through the representation of two different classes between the Student and the Chamberlain's Nephew. Referring to the earlier explanation in the previous subchapter, the Student here is categorized as the middle class member while the Chamberlain's Nephew represents the higher class. The issue of importance of social status and unequal social treatment becomes obvious through the Professor's Daughter's attitude toward the difference.

The Young Student is described as being in love with the Professor's Daughter so much that he cannot sleep thinking about where to find a red rose that he is supposed to give her if he wants her to go and dance with him at the state ball. However, even though he finally has the red rose he still cannot take the Professor's

Daughter to the ball because he loses in the aspect of wealth. Moreover, when rejecting the Student's request, she gets her temper rising that she says, "...and after all, who are you? Only a student." (17). It proves how social status matters for her to get in public. Here, Wilde points out a criticism toward the middle class of late Victorian who always tried to be the member of high class society. The situation made the condition of the poorer classes worse because the middle class tried to make themselves become even more prosperous so they could be called high class. In addition, the high class did not want to be competed by the middle class hence they also tried to make themselves better. In the story, Wilde uses the "jewels" to symbolize the power of the ruling class.

In the Devoted Friend, the problem of social class appears in the superiority of the rich before the poor. In this story, Wilde uses the character of Mr. Miller as the media to criticize the rich. Other than the difference in economical condition, the writer also finds Wilde's social critiques are addressed at the social snobbery through the animal character in the story in a satiric way.

The story begins with the descriptions of how a mother Duck tried to teach attitude to her little ducklings. There is a remark that really suites the late Victorian society, "You will never be in the best society unless you can stand on your heads", she kept saying to them, and every now and then she showed them how it was done. But the little ducks paid no attention to her. They were so young that they did not know what an advantage it is to be in a society at all" ("Devoted":23). This is a social critique toward how the society conditioned at that time. The people tried their best to be accepted into the 'right society', that was the high society. They tried so hard to stay on top of the social pyramid since social status was very important in that era. The phrase "stand on your heads" is used to ridicule it and to say how it went beyond logic.

Furthermore, The Devoted Friend also depicts the situation when England underwent the industrialism era as it became a prosperous country. The Devoted Friend clearly represents the era's two of three social classes; the one representing the

capitalist and the one representing the labor. There was a big gap between the two classes, and of course this gap created unfair treatment toward the weak. This difference is described through the character of Mr. Miller as the rich and Hans as the poor. The character of Mr. Miller represents the ruling class in the nineteenth century England who exploited the working class. As a rich person, Mr. Miller does not have any sympathy for Little Hans.

In addition to that, the ruling class tended to take advantage of the poor to make themselves richer. Little Hans' is suffering of being abused by Mr. Miller until it causes his death, only because of an old broken wheelbarrow. Mr. Miller promises Hans that he will give his wheelbarrow to Hans. However, since Mr. Miller thinks that he has already done a very admirable deed by promising Hans the wheelbarrow, he thinks that he deserves something in return. Unfortunately, Mr. Miller demands not only one or two things from Hans but lots of things instead. Along with his unstoppable demands for favors, he also pictures the hypocrisy of the typical high class people of the 19th century England by preaching beautiful yet meaningless words about friendship and good deeds.

b. The Materialistic Way of Life

The Nightingale and the Rose has great impact to the writer to seek the materialistic quality of the nineteenth century England, especially from the middle class' perspective. The different attitude received by the rich compared to the attitude given to the less rich is clearly depicted here. It is shown in two ways: the first is the Student's attitude toward the Nightingale's song, and the second is the Professor's Daughter's attitude toward the Student's effort.

The way the Student criticizes the Nightingale's song shows his tendencies to material things rather than a true art and sincere feeling,

“She has form ... that cannot be denied to her; but has she got feeling? I am afraid not. In fact, he is like most artists; she is all style without any sincerity. She would not sacrifice herself for others. She thinks merely of music, and everybody knows that the arts are selfish. Still, it must be admitted that she

has some beautiful notes in her voice. What a pity it is that they do not mean anything, or do any practical good.” (“Nightingale” 16)

From the quotation above, it shows that as a student, an educated person, the Student cannot value abstract things. It should have a clear, or in other word ‘a material form’ to make something valuable. The writer finds the social critique toward the Victorians through these long sentences, that they always tried to connect everything to material things before they could appreciate something.

Wilde then uses the later event to criticize the materialistic aspect of the late Victorian society which is implied by the attitude of the Professor’s Daughter toward the Student’s effort to find the red rose. The Student deals with a bitter reality when he arrives at the Professor’s house. The Professor’s Daughter does not want the red rose any more for the reason that she thinks that the red rose will not match her dress. However, that is not the main reason why she does not want to go with the Student despite the fact that he already brings her the red rose which she asks for, “I am afraid it will not go with my dress ... and besides, the Chamberlain’s Nephew has sent me some real jewels, and everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers.” (17). It is clear that the young student, as the common person could not compete with the Chamberlain’s Nephew. The Professor’s Daughter who belongs to the middle class society, and she has the quality of being a materialist who has shallow values. It is proven by the fact that she only sees the material quality. Considered from the middle class society, she feels prouder to go out and mingle with the people who belong to the higher social group than hers. The Professor’s Daughter has become an insensitive girl. She deliberately hurts the Student’s feeling by stating roughly that he is just a young Student who has nothing. She acts like this because she is aware that there is someone who is obviously richer than the student that can offer her more—that is the Chamberlain’s Nephew with his wealth and status. Both aspects are the things she looks for since she is a materialist. By comparing of the things offered, a rose and jewels—of which jewels were more important and valuable for her, she decides to reject the Student. The red rose here signifies sincerity and true art since

the making process took a sacred hearts and the singing process during the creating of it implies how full of true art the rose was.

c. The Social Irresponsibility of the Self-Centered Society

The title of this part points out the individualistic phenomenon which the writer finds to be the social issue in the short stories. The critique is firstly found in The Nightingale and the Rose in the representation of The Student's characterization which is proven by the following sentences: "The Student looked up from the grass, and listened but he could not understand what the nightingale was saying to him, for he only knew the things that are written in books." (15). The young Student closes his eyes on everything that happened around him. He only knows the things written down on books and this quality describes how he tends to ignore the surrounding and prefers to what explained on books. This is clearly presented by the way he criticizes the Nightingale's song which is actually sung in order to make him find the red rose he needs. It is significant that the student loses his interest in the rose when it is no longer useful to him. He cares for it only because he thought it would help him win over the girl. Another effort that is later being unnoticed, unrewarded and unappreciated is the Student's effort for the Professor's Daughter. The Professor's Daughter's rejection and ignorance toward the Student's effort shows individualist's characteristic, that she does not care about others if it stands on her way to the top.

A commentary on the 19th century England's egoism is also portrayed by the character of the Rocket in The Remarkable Rocket. The Rocket performs many of the qualities that define an egotist: he talks only of himself and considers himself the most important being. He brags about his parentage and thinks the Prince and Princess are being married in his honor, rather than the other way around. Furthermore, the Rocket adds that he comes from artistic stock; his mother was a Catherine wheel famous for her dancing and his father was a rocket whose artistic performance was reviewed in the press. He is in fact somewhat of a narcissistically individualist; he insists that he is important on his own and considers himself as one

of the most important creatures on earth, as he said, if anything were to happen to him, “The Prince and Princess would never be happy again as for the King, I know he would not get over it” (35). The individualistic qualities of him refers to the society of 19th century England when it experienced the highest level of self confidence and tended to take other for granted.

From the three short stories, it is shown how Wilde criticizes the late Victorian value by presenting the characters’ action and speech to show what each class believes and how the lower class being treated and neglected at that time. Wilde creates each major character’s uniqueness to point out and ridicule the individualism of late Victorian which had led them to ignore human’s feeling.

5. Conclusion

After analyzing the three selected works of Oscar Wilde, the writer finds some social critiques toward the late Victorian society. Wilde seems to criticize the society’s ignorance of other people’s feeling as the result of their materialism and individualism. The first critique is explained under the title “*The Importance of Social Status and Unequal Social Treatment*” which discusses about the importance of social status for the late Victorians and how the society treats people differently based on to which social status they belong. This social stratification with economic basis reflects how important material possession was for England society in 1880-1900. This condition formed a materialistic point of view and way of life among the late Victorians. Along with the materialism, the society puts tolerance toward human effort and feeling aside, and put material things on top of everything instead, as being discussed under the title “*The Materialistic Way of Life*” in the analysis. Since people of late 19th century England were busy protecting and maintaining their position, a high level of individualism were formed among the society. In “*The Social Irresponsibility of the Self-Centered Society*”, the writer discusses how the self-reliance value went too far that they only cared about them selves, neglected others

from the lower class and tended to consider themselves as the most important valuable and special being on earth.

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