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**Into the Wilde: A Jungle of Politics, Philosophy, and Love**

On October 9th, 2012, a fourteen year old girl in Pakistan was, like millions of children across the world, on a bus ride to school. However, unlike those millions of other children, this girl lived in constant fear of her education being taken away from her. Masked Taliban members shot this young scholar, Malala Yousafzai, because she voiced her opinion on education. Since that grave day two years ago, Malala has grown as a world presence, becoming a symbol for causes as varied as gender equality, the right to an education, and the anti-Taliban movement. (Walsh). Her book, “I am Malala” has remained on top of the Los Angeles Times bestsellers list for many months and her views, stories, and opinions, are being shared across the world. (Bestsellers). As shown through Malala’s story, literature can be a powerful means of spreading one’s message. Ever since the invention of movable type and the Gutenberg press, the first book published was the Bible. The power of written language to educate and inform the masses all the while captivating an audience has run constant throughout history. In interpreting works of literature to be considered “masterpieces,” one must consider first, the message the author intends to spread, second, how effectively the author spreads that message, and third, with what balance of facts, fiction, rhetoric, truth, logos, and pathos the author crafts his or her work. Oscar Wilde definitely had a message to spread. He was extremely fixated on the social and political controversies of his time and had his own fair share of turmoil over societal constructs. His stories advocate a world that is more accepting and more creative, while warning readers of the dangers of altruism to a fault. Oscar Wilde was an independent and strong visionary and revolutionary who saw himself through multiple lenses and did not let other’s criticisms affect the messages he so passionately tried to spread. These qualities, along with the powerful themes of perception, activism, and autonomy that run through his writing, make Oscar Wilde the author of masterpieces.

Although we see most of Wilde’s master works of literature fall into the argumentative social realm, his blatant criticism of policy proves that there can be no moral action taken without a discussion of politics. It is no secret that Oscar Wilde was extremely liberal-minded as per his affiliation with the aesthetic movement to capture art for no scholarly purpose besides art’s sake. However, the extent of his politics goes much deeper than moderate liberalism in the realm of the art world. Wilde was a staunch advocate for socialism, themes of which can be seen in many of his works. Oscar Wilde’s visionary and revolutionary fight for sharing is demonstrated very clearly in his famed essay, “The Soul of a Man Under Socialism.”

Wilde’s “The Soul of a Man Under Socialism” introduces the reader to a socio-political and economic structure of sharing and acceptance, while providing a warning against the dangers of ultimate altruism. He writes:

With the abolition of private property, then, we shall have true, beautiful, healthy Individualism. Nobody will waste his life in accumulating things, and the symbols for things. One will live. To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all. (The Soul of a Man Under Socialism).

Wilde advocates here for the sharing of ideas. The term “private property,” while under most of Karl Marx’s and other politician’s writings seems to be used to refer to the physical land, is used to refer to thought and the property of ideas in Wilde’s essay. This is shown by the way he capitalizes the I in “Individualism.” The “Individual” has gone from an adjective to a noun, forming a presence in Wilde’s writing as a goal. He advocates for people to live life to the fullest, using their own ideas, and co-operating with others and their shared ideas, in order to form true beauty and meaning in an “Individual.” Wilde wants to take the focus away from competition for petty items and bring the focus towards the benefits of life experience. The phrase, “Most people exist, that is all.” also speaks to Wilde’s cynicism over the lack of aesthetic progress society has made and to his belief that the only way to change politically for good is through a massive socio-political intervention.

Oscar Wilde realizes that there is no such thing as a perfect system, and this is apparent throughout his essays and political works through his consistent pessimistic tone. However, he does believe in an ideal system and has a vision of how to accomplish his vision. Wilde’s essay is a masterpiece because it shows his goals are ahead of his time. He uses literature to spread a powerful, forward-thinking message. The world had not previously seen such a cry for aesthetic socialism that was as prominent as Wilde’s. He raised awareness for his ideas effectively and did not accept circumstance as an excuse. In political literature, Wilde created a controversial work of art that pushed all social boundaries.

Wilde’s creation of a controversy, however, led to a mixed reaction from his readers. This essay had garnered a lot of attention from wide audiences of readers because of Wilde’s status as a respected author. “Public reaction is naturally contingent on public attention.” (Adut 219). Wilde’s future as an author would lie upon his constant battle with the public and with his own celebrity.

One of these battles was caused by the fine line Wilde created between Individualism and sharing. Although Wilde received praise for his ability to adapt to literature in the political realm, he was going against basic social principle. “Wilde believed that science gave a picture of human nature and its development very different from the dominant Victorian view of a basically selfish, competitive, and brutal creature…” (Helfand and Smith II 205). Wilde denounced the self-interest that plagued his society and called for complete sharing of thought. He believed the best goal in literature was to share ideas so long as the work was personal. However, this got Wilde into legal trouble. He was accused of plagiarism multiple times in his life. Unlike the plagiarism problems that plague society today, Wilde didn’t just steal ideas. He freely gave them out. He wrote, “Stealing my story was the act of a gentleman, but not telling me you had stolen was to ignore the claims of friendship.” (qtd. in Saint-Amour 66). This quote speaks to Wilde’s belief of his contemporaries as equals and as friends, showing how he was not opposed to them putting their name on and expanding his ideas so long as they asked him about it prior to publishing. One important distinction to make, however, is Wilde’s insistence that the ideas that were stolen must be in some way transformed and improved upon by the new author. Clearly, Wilde had his mind set on the future and the creation of masterpieces by different authors, expanding upon each other’s ideas, for the good of the greater whole: the readers.

Wilde’s dabble in the political provided him a gateway to entering the world of social criticism. Oscar Wilde was always cynical towards societal values, and his abhorrence of his community’s authorities culminated in his dramatic trials for libel and homosexual relations. Wilde, through most of his career, had been continuing a romantic relationship with the Marquess of Queensberry’s son, Lord Alfred Douglas. Originally, this non-secretive relationship did not cause many social rifts due to its lack of publicity. In 1895, while at a club Wilde frequented, he received a letter accusing him of sodomy from the Marquess of Queensberry. Wilde sued the Marquess for libel and Wilde lost the case, and public attention was drawn to his homosexuality. As the public grew more and more discontent with Wilde, community authorities brought Wilde to trial once again and Wilde was convicted of sodomy and left to hard labor for two years in prison, and he was ostracized by society with his work being taken off of bookshelves everywhere until he died of meningitis alone and piteous in France. (Adut 228-241).

Needless to say, Wilde’s spite for social construct was prevalent throughout his works and his advocacy for a more tolerant and liberal society showed forward-thought and vision. One of his most famous works, *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, pushes boundaries on many things that in today’s society we still see as scandalous. Homosexual rights were not even given thought to in Victorian England and still have not been approved in many states today. Throughout *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, the relationships between man and man and man and self are demonstrated in ways that suggest an obsession, a love, and an infatuation. “The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful.” (The Picture of Dorian Grey 21). Wilde shows in this quote emotions of repression and beauty. The phrase “your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself,” shows almost religious diction, as the soul is characterized as a powerful outside force that man must yield to in order to live a full life. Wilde also alludes to the Forbidden Fruit Effect which demonstrates that the more unattainable an item is, the more the person desiring said object wants to gain it. Wilde’s frustration is clear in the tone of this passage as he writes, “for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful.” This critique of social construct shows Wilde’s belief that the only reason certain things are seen as evil or sinful in our society is because humans want them to be evil, and that ideas and beliefs are not sinful by nature.

Wilde’s advocacy for tolerance in society is also seen in some of his work for younger readers. His short story *The Happy Prince* presents themes of homosexuality, exemplified as a statue and a bird. In his short stories and stories for children, Wilde often uses animals instead of human characters. To adults who read these stories, it is clear that Wilde does this for a true, raw, and animalistic representation of human nature and also for comic effect. He understands that some animals have the developed brains of humans, while some humans follow the herd like animals. “…he personifies abstractions and objects, anthropomorphizes animals, gives his settings allegorical place names and his characters generic names.” (Wood 160). *The Happy Prince* attempts to provide social acceptance for homosexuality and warn against the dangers of ultimate altruism that has been presented in his political works.

And he kissed the Happy Prince on the lips, and fell down dead at his feet. At that moment a curious crack sounded inside the statue, as if something had broken. The fact is that the leaden heart had snapped right in two. It certainly was a dreadfully hard frost. (The Happy Prince and Other Tales 22).

Oscar Wilde presents here a tragic case of lost love. As the swallow stays with the Happy Prince statue into the winter to befriend him and help save the poor and righteous, he sacrifices his own life and the life of his companion. Wilde’s simplistic and colloquial diction ensures that readers of all ages can take away his powerful message. “And he kissed the Happy Prince on the lips,” without the tumult of legal trials and social ostracism. “The leaden heart had snapped right in two,” because even the coldest hearts of his prosecutors have the opportunity to break and to feel compassion. Wilde’s use of irony by attributing the broken heart to a “dreadfully hard frost” demonstrates his dismay for the superficiality and the indifference of his fellow citizens in society.

Another story in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* anthology speaks to Wilde’s romantic nature. *The Nightingale and the Rose* portrays the tragic love story of unrequited love. A student, in love with a beautiful girl, unknowingly draws the attention of a nightingale because he wants a red rose to win her affection. However, the only roses in the garden are white.

So the nightingale pressed closer against the thorn, and the thorn touched her heart, and a fierce pang of pain shot through her. Bitter, bitter was the pain, and wilder and wilder grew her song, for she sang the love that is perfected by death, of the love that dies not in the tomb. (The Happy Prince and Other Tales 32).

Again, there are themes of love and sacrifice and the dangers of extreme altruism. The bird sacrificed herself for the student’s red rose. The repetition of words like “bitter” and “wilder” in this passage speak to Wilde’s own struggle with society. His feelings towards others got more and more cynical, bitter, and emphatic.

Perhaps you wished you were a lover of women, but you loved the chameleon and the snake with loins and hurt blue eyes…When this was pointed out to the artist that no cat stands like that he went and stood under his work and killed himself. (Connellan 367-368).

In essence, this is autobiographical. Wilde’s love “die [d] not in the tomb,” even after he “stood under his work and killed himself.” Although Wilde’s death was not suicidal, he served a life sentence as prisoner of his own mind until the day he died. However, the adoration of his works persists to this day, over a hundred years since his death. The longevity of these works of his only speaks to his status as the creator of powerful, universal, and meaningful masterpieces.

Wilde’s fixation on fixation, his love of untraditional love, and his obsession with infatuation is extremely visible in *The Portrait of Dorian Grey*. The novel juxtaposes this theme of intense affection of self with the true meaning of love and beauty.

When they entered they found hanging upon the wall a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty. Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognized who it was. (The Picture of Dorian Gray 229).

Wilde shows in this profound moment of love and loss the importance of the recognition of self. “…they found hanging upon the wall a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him,” before his sense of self corrupted his inside and his representation on canvas skewed to the ugliness of self-interest. Wilde’s use of powerful diction and consonance in “withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage,” proves his belief that no amount of vanity can save someone in their time of death. “For this is a novel about masks. No figure in the book possesses a fully integrated personality.” (Keefe 68). In essence, the novel is about masking belief and hiding true beauty under ugliness or an ugly spirit in a beautiful body. The beauty represents what one shows to the world and what one covers up. Oscar Wilde had much of his personal and private life blended and found distinctions hard to draw where they should be drawn. However, this contributes to Wilde’s work as masterpieces because Wilde doesn’t let his own misfortune stop him from educating society on the morals he believes in. He writes the novel to teach a lesson that people can grasp for many years to come.

Along with the longevity and powerful messages he put into his art, the main reason Wilde’s works were masterpieces is because of the relatable and personal psychological complexity he put into them. Wilde was always at odds with his community and with the social standards in his time, but it was his individualism that made his work important, recognizable and worthy of the title masterpiece. Despite his happy youth turning sour as he was tried for homosexuality, Wilde’s literature lives on. “To have been poet and youth, noble and rich, and be no longer more than old and sad.” (Cravan 148). Wilde is not “no longer more than old and sad,” effectively disproving Cravan’s argument. His work lives on as masterpieces in a society that once claimed his novels as sin and took them off bookshelves. Wilde’s story is the ultimate story of triumph. Although “He stood mentally always before an audience or a looking-glass,” (Ellis 191), Wilde channeled his public attention into a way to spread a message.

Oscar Wilde is now adored as a sort of fantastic god or despised as a decadent demon. He was neither god nor demon, but a reflection of an age which takes its religion as a liqueur, its love as an episode, and beauty as a mere lust of the eye or a titillation of the senses. (Ellis 192).

This quote summarizes Wilde’s work perfectly, focusing on his positive and negative press and how the two radical extremes are never close to real truth. To regard Wilde now as the creator of masterpieces is the ultimate culmination of a message he fought long and hard to spread, for there is no war without casualty, in this case, the casualty being Wilde’s own happiness. He sacrificed just enough of himself to try to better society, but was wary of ultimate altruism and still ensured that his message was spread.

Throughout his life, Wilde regarded himself in three different personas. These three personas were often referenced in his novels and major works. For example, in *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, “Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry, what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would be.” (qtd. in Nethercot 617). This novel showed Wilde as a work of art himself. None of these three characters had full qualities of their own, nor could they stand alone. They made a cohesive story by combining their parts to the whole. Dorian was clearly modeled after Wilde and Dorian was a “man once so wondrous in ‘his exquisite youth and beauty.’” (Craft 123). Wilde would eventually become the man “once” so young and passionate that became indifferent and lonely. Wilde provided a self-fulfilling prophesy in creating Dorian after himself and this can be seen as either visionary or an ominous foreshadow. Either way, this contributes to regarding his work as a masterpiece because he brought the pages to life and his tragic death created a lasting impact that would remain with his readers for the rest of their lives. “Wilde was not the man or writer to hide.” (Cartledge 12). His masterpiece was in his psyche and his durability of mind. No one could promote an idea or spread a message to the same effect as Oscar Wilde.

Wilde’s poem *Helas!* provides a culminating glance at what makes his work worthy of the title “masterpiece.” In this poem Wilde says a lot in only one short stanza. Oscar Wilde contemplates what his life’s course will be and tries to make sense of what his life has been so far. In French, Helas means “regrettably.” Regrettably is just how Wilde lived his life. However Wilde does not fail to acknowledge the crests and troughs in his life, providing contrasts to demonstrate the journey that was his existence. “…from life’s dissonance/struck one clear chord.” (*Helas!*). Here, not only is contrast used, but so is imagery as Wilde plays to the sense of sound, comparing dissonance to a chord, agony to melody. Musical diction is plentiful in this poem; “…my soul is a stringed lute…with idle songs for pipe.” (*Helas!*). These quotes show Wilde’s fluency not just in literature but also in music and his allusion to other art forms demonstrates his versatility that makes his work worthy of the title masterpiece. The wistful tone throughout the poem is Wilde venting his own depression and as is typical of masterpiece creators, voices his woes as a tortured artist, plagued by the demons of beauty and genius.

Unequivocally, Wilde was an independent thinker who refused to take criticism from others. He spread powerful messages and used his art as a means to inform. He was versatile in medium and provided a strong sense of self in his works. This adherence to his own personal psychology and beliefs makes his work worthy of the title “masterpiece.” In Greek, “hubris” means excessive pride and self-confidence that brings about a hero’s downfall. Wilde had a strong sense of self. He was a visionary, a revolutionary, and a leader. He was a hero to many people. However, when his fame inadvertently put his actions in the spotlight, he died tragically, cynical and depressed, after being tried for loving someone else and ostracized by society. However he always maintained pride in his actions, beliefs, and works. He was truly the tragic hero, and he would have it no other way. Wilde’s flair for passion, drama, love, and aesthetics provided the basis of his works’ longevity and impact even to this day.

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