

THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE UGLY IN OSCAR WILDE'S WORKS

*....the search for beauty is the real secret of life*  
*Oscar Wilde*

The desire to reveal the true meaning of a piece of writing has led linguists and literary critics to all extremes. The unending search gave rise to numerous theories - old and new. Despite the attempts of the New Critics to put an end to the realm of the author, text interpretation practice still heavily rests upon the traditional approaches to this issue. Hermeneutics claim that the text may best be explained by the combination of two factors – the revelation of the personality of the author and the linguistic analysis of the work. These two must be viewed as a whole where one complements the other.

The examination of the image of the author is but essential. To get closer to the hidden meaning and the actual goal of a work one needs to have at least some basic idea about the convictions, beliefs and principles that make up the author's worldview and world perception. In this case, the personality of Oscar Wilde comes to the fore, since one is able to understand the author when he has disclosed his attitude to a certain topic and his interpretation of it.

This paradoxical, rebellious and somewhat eccentric Irish poet, a true defender of beauty, managed to taste the wreaths of glory and the contempt and the ridicule of the society within a decade. Throughout his literary career and the ups and downs that he was compelled to overcome, Wilde remained faithful to his calling – the praise of the beauty with the firm belief that beauty is the sole and ultimate goal of any art. “The artist is the creator of beautiful things”, “Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated”, “They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only beauty” (Wilde 2008:3-4). The ideas of O. Wilde about diverse issues of creative act in general and literature, in particular, are introduced in some of his best known essays and lectures.

*Art is not simple truth but complex beauty (The Decay of Lying)*

*Beauty has as many meanings as man has moods. Beauty is the symbol of symbols. Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing. When it shows us itself, it shows us the whole fiery-coloured world. (The Critic as Artist)*

Beauty is the true art itself. This is the key message, this is the source and

the only basis of all his works. The true literature should be beautiful which of course, does not always mean one with a happy end. Genius is the writer who is able to detect the beauty in suffering and sin, or in actions that are socially unacceptable and detestable. This is what Oscar Wilde the writer believed in. Hence, it is not least surprising to come across the same concepts on and off in Oscar Wilde's works. In fact, these are the ideas that he tries to preach in all of his works. Consequently, when referring to the key characteristics of the individual style of Wilde, one is sure to see that his approaches to the concept of beauty hold the first place. Most surprisingly, he left the theoretical grounds and practiced it in his own life.

Oscar Wilde was quite different from his contemporaries. He was a man who had his own understanding of beautiful clothing and the like. In quest for the right outfit he turned to the help of the theatre tailors to make his everyday suits. O. Wilde trusted the power of the external appearance and tried to exert some dramatic effect in that way, too. *"To me, beauty is the wonder of wonders. It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible"* (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*). This is one reason why Wilde does not hesitate to give the reader a most elaborate and detailed description of his characters for he believes that the appearance is the key to the soul and the character of a person.

*Yes, he was certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair. There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candour of youth was there, as well as all youth's passionate purity. One felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world. (Wilde 2008:17)*

*...a girl, hardly seventeen years of age, with a little, flowerlike face, a small Greek head with plaited coils of dark-brown hair, eyes that were violet wells of passion, lips that were like the petals of a rose (Wilde 2008:45)*

*He was gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold, for eyes he had two bright sapphires, and a large red ruby glowed on his sword-hilt. He was very much admired indeed. He is as beautiful as a weathercock. (Wilde 1979:27)*

*Her hair was as a wet fleece of gold, and each separate hair as a thread of line gold in a cup of glass. Her body was as white ivory, and her tail was of silver and pearl. Silver and pearl was her tail, and the green weeds of the sea coiled round it; and like sea-shells were her ears, and her lips were like sea-coral. The cold waves dashed over her cold breasts, and the salt glistened upon her eyelids. So beautiful was she that when the young Fisherman saw her he was filled with wonder... (Wilde 1979:134)*

...[And every year] he became more beautiful to look at, so that all those who dwelt in the village were filled with wonder, for, while they were swarthy and black-haired, 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.... (Wilde 1979:183)

In all the extracts presented Wilde sings to the external beauty. As already stated, his attitude to the theme is best summed up in some of his most influential critical essays namely “Critic as Artist”, “The Decay of Lying”, “The Truth of Masks”, etc. These essays cannot be considered as mere essays since they contain all the features typical of fiction. Moreover, they are presented in the form of a dialogue. In doing so the author attempts to exclude himself and appear before the public in two characters. Nevertheless, between the questions and answers of the characters the position of the author becomes more than obvious. The thorough investigation of his works leads to interesting conclusions – his approach to diverse topics like beauty, art, nature, morality and criticism and many more which are constantly repeated in his works. Maybe in a more or less transformed form, but they are always there. If we are to single out some of the topics that run like a red line through all his works, we will have the following picture - beauty, individualism, ambiguity, paradox, rebel, sin and suffering, perversion, love and passion, etc. What seems really surprising is the fact that regardless of the genre of the work, be it a critical essay, play or a novel, there is the impression that there is one person talking to the reader. This is also true for dialogues. There is no dialogue between two different men. It seems that one comes to continue the speech of the other one.

Despite the great diversity of themes Wilde addresses, they seem to make pairs – life and death, morality and perversion, sin and suffering, priest and devil, etc. These contrasts appear at every step in his works. Having in mind his obsession with the physical appearance, the pair of the beauty and ugly is quite an expected one. Moreover, it enjoys full monopoly over the rest. Ironically enough, Oscar Wilde’s life was based on such a contrast, as well. This conflict or disharmony between the external appearance and the inner world seems to be chasing Wilde since he was a victim of such conflicts carrying both the sinful and the preacher in himself. The dark side of his life became a public property and the public that had put him on the pedestal *dethroned* him with the same ease and vigor.

Literary critics hold the view that Oscar Wilde was the most paradoxical writer of his days. Generally, the stylistic device of paradox rests upon a contrast. The attraction of paradox lies in the fact that however contradictory and

controversial it may sound, it does contain a grain of truth. In fact, the truth is born as a result of the everlasting contrasts.

The tale “The Birthday of Infanta” is a vivid example of the eternal conflict between the soul and the body. This is a touching story of an extremely kind and terribly ugly dwarf who falls in love with a fabulous princess. At the culmination of the story the dwarf sees his own reflection in the mirror. As always, the plot is built upon opposite concepts – kindness and evil, beautiful and ugly, nice body-monstrous soul and vice versa. As a result, the work acquires tragic overtones.

*... Nor was he alone. Standing under the shadow of the doorway, at the extreme end of the room, he saw a little figure watching him. His heart trembled, a cry of joy broke from his lips, and he moved out into the sunlight. As he did so, the figure moved out also, and he saw it plainly.*

*The Infanta! It was a monster, the most grotesque monster he had ever beheld. Not properly shaped, as all other people were, but hunchbacked, and crooked-limbed, with huge lolling head and mane of black hair. The **little Dwarf frowned, and the monster frowned also. He laughed, and it laughed with him, and held its hands to its sides, just as he himself was doing. He made it a mocking bow, and it returned him a low reverence. He went towards it, and it came to meet him, copying each step that he made, and stopping when he stopped himself. He shouted with amusement, and ran forward, and reached out his hand, and the hand of the monster touched his, and it was as cold as ice....***

*What is it? He thought for a moment, and looked round at the rest of the room. It was strange, but everything seemed to have its double in this invisible wall of clear water. Yes, picture for picture was repeated, and couch for couch. **The sleeping Faun that lay in the alcove by the doorway had its twin brother that slumbered, and the silver Venus that stood in the sunlight held out her arms to a Venus as lovely as herself.***

*He started, and taking from his breast **the beautiful white rose**, he turned round, and kissed it. The monster had a rose of its own, petal for petal the same! It kissed it with like kisses, and pressed it to its heart with horrible gestures.*

*.....The hot tears poured down his cheeks, and he **tore the white rose to pieces**. The sprawling monster did the same, and scattered the **faint petals** in the air. It **groveled on the ground**, and, when he **looked at it, it watched him** with a face drawn with pain. He crept away, lest he should see it, and covered his eyes with his hands. He crawled, like some wounded thing, into the shadow, and lay there moaning.*

*(The Birthday of Infanta)*

These contrasts manifest themselves first of all at the lexical level. Here, the

description of the dwarf and his reflection in the mirror are based on the synonymic constructions which make the mirror - the invisible wall of clear water – more visible and tangible.

*The sleeping Faun that lay in the alcove by the doorway had its twin brother that slumbered, and the silver Venus that stood in the sunlight held out her arms to a Venus as lovely as herself.*

Of course, the verbs “to sleep” and “to slumber” are synonyms. However, not absolute synonyms. The next synonymic group is more poetic in nature. Here, the author chose the adjective “lovely” to act as synonym for the phrase “to stand in the sunlight”. Hence, one of them is neutral and the other is emotionally charged. Let’s consider some more examples.

*He laughed... It laughed with him; he made a mocking bow, he returned it with a low reverence; he went towards it, it came to meet him; he reached out his hand and the monster touched it; he tore the white rose into pieces, it scattered the faint petals in the air.*

The choice of the lexical units ‘dwarf’ and ‘monster’ are not accidental. The word “dwarf”, unlike “gnome” or “goblin”, evokes positive feelings. With the play on words Wilde comes to emphasize the contrast between the outer and inner sides of the creature. The use of the pronouns *he* and *it* come to prove the idea stated. When describing the external appearance the pronoun *it* standing for inanimate objects and animals is used, thereby stressing the disgust and revolt of the hero towards his own appearance. So, there is the impression that there are two characters, whereas, they both refer to one and the same being. Moreover, this contrast is more striking on the lexical level when the words go beyond their semantic level. The dwarf standing in front of the mirror “reached out his hand and the monster touched it and it was as cold as ice. He tried to press it but something hard and smooth stopped him”. The passage may be perceived both literally and figuratively. The dwarf touches the mirror which is smooth and cold. However, on the metasemiotic level it again and again comes to signify the difference between a living being and a monster. The latter was cold and there was a kind of barrier between the two. From the very moment when the monster realizes that the mirror reflects his own appearance, the reflection is described with negative overtones “he tore the white rose; he scattered the faint petals in the air. So, “the beautiful white rose” is transformed into “a faint petal” which conveys the psychological state of the hero. The beautiful rose ceases being as such. Now, they are not more than colorless petals.

*“He groveled on the ground, and when he looked at him it watched him with a face drawn with pain”.*

The linguopoetic study of the sentence shows that his emotional expressive mood is created by the contrast between the denotational and connotational meanings of the words. Oxford Dictionary defines the verb “*to grovel*” as “to behave in a very humble manner in order to gain favor or be forgiven for something; to crawl”, i.e. to give signs of subjection. The powerless dwarf looks at his own reflection which does not look back at him. Instead, it watches him. Here, the verbs “*to look*” and “*to watch*” take on the emotional charge. Though synonyms, the latter acquires a negative connotation in the context to describe the constant stare of the monster from which the dwarf could not escape. It was always there and watched every step of his. The adjectives and verbs of this passage deserve a special attention, as well, *misshapen, hunchbacked, foul, grotesque, twisted limbs, loathsome, wounded; to cry, to sob, to moan, etc.* which help create the general tragic mood of the work.

The conflict between the soul and the body and the motif of the revelation of the soul through the mirror lies in “The Picture of Dorian Gray”, as well. In fact, it is the cornerstone around which the whole drama is built. With only one exception, though. Here, the function of the mirror is taken on by the portrait. And unlike “the Birthday of Infanta”, where the author portrays the conflict of the ugly appearance and the beautiful soul, here we deal with the divine beauty and the ugliest possible soul.

*His eye fell on a large, purple satin coverlet heavily embroidered with gold, a splendid piece of late seventeenth-century Venetian work that his grandfather had found in a convent near Bologna. Yes, that would serve to wrap the dreadful thing in. It had perhaps served often as a pall for the dead. Now it was to hide something that had a corruption of its own, worse than the corruption of death itself- something that would breed horrors and yet would never die. What the worm was to the corpse, his sins would be to the painted image on the canvas. They would mar its beauty and eat away its grace. They would defile it and make it shameful. And yet the thing would still live on. It would be always alive. (The Picture of Dorian Gray)*

The contrast is striking at first sight and it is not always presented directly with the adequate words. Very often the author turns to the descriptive method, indirect comparisons which are perceived rather intuitively and are mostly available to the keen eye and experienced reader. In the passage above the author depicts the conflict between Gray’s soul and body. The first sentence is quite remarkable. It seems not to have any relation to the topic and is merely a description of a coverlet. However, the linguopoetic analysis suggests that the coverlet comes to represent the human skin – the external cover that may hide

the most horrid soul of a human. With the help of the comparison Wilde delicately emphasizes the difference and the description gets even stronger. *Purple satin coverlet heavily embroidered with gold, a splendid piece of late seventeenth-century Venetian work and serve to wrap the dreadful thing in.* And the canvass becomes personified. The picture is further intensified with the help of parallel constructions, repetition and gradation.

*Now it was to hide something that had a corruption of its own, worse than the corruption of death itself- something that would breed horrors and yet would never die. What the worm was to the corpse, his sins would be to the painted image on the canvas. They would mar its beauty and eat away its grace. They would defile it and make it shameful. And yet the thing would still live on. It would be always alive.*

It is not difficult to trace several synonymic groups. 1) Corruption, horror, worm, corpse, sins; 2) to breed horrors, to mar, to eat away, to defile, to make shameful; 3) beauty and grace; and finally, the passage ends up with the strongest synonymic group in terms of stylistic and emotional and expressive features - 4) yet it would never die – it would still live on; it would be always alive. Here, one should single out the comparison between the sin and the worm which helps the word “*sin*” get additional meta-significance. It is no longer an abstract phenomenon but rather becomes quite physical. It is personified and may even “devour” one’s soul as the worm destroys the dead body. Like all other works by Wilde, this passage is distinguished with its peculiar musicality. Due to parallel constructions, the rhythm intensifies and it lingers on and gradually builds on up to the last sentence where the adverbial modifier of time carries the logical stress. Consequently, the sentence is read at a slower pace, thus somehow opposing the ideas stated before.

*...he himself would creep upstairs to the locked room, open the door with the key that never left him now, and stand, with a mirror, in front of the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him, looking now at the evil and aging face on the canvas, and now at the fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass. The very sharpness of the contrast used to quicken his sense of pleasure. He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul. He would examine with minute care, and sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth, wondering sometimes which were the more horrible, the signs of sin or the signs of age. He would place his white hands beside the coarse bloated*

*hands of the picture, and smile. He mocked the misshapen body and the failing limbs. (The Picture of Dorian Gray)*

Apart from synonyms (a mirror - the polished glass; enamoured – interested; sear - crawl), antonymic groups are also common here: 1) the evil and aging face - the fair young face; his own [young] beauty - corruption of his own soul; his white hands – coarse bloated hand; the wrinkling forehead – sensual mouth. They somehow take on the lead.

The great fan of paradoxes and contrasts, the paradoxical and contradictory Wilde makes abundant use of oxymoron, i.e. a combination of words with opposite meanings. The result is contrasts again - monstrous, terrible delight. On the lexical level we should distinguish the verbs “to sear” and “to crawl”. The verb “to sear” means “to burn”. The verb “to crawl” has the meaning of “to creep”. However, these two verbs, so dissimilar, both refer to the wrinkles and the semantic gap between them somehow becomes smaller. The combination of the verb “to crawl” and the phrase “sensual mouth” is worth attention, as well. The figurative expression comes to emphasize the distorted and corrupt soul of the hero. Generally, the verb “to crawl”, unlike the verb “to creep” evokes negative associations since in most cases it is used to describe reptiles. And due to the contrast between the wrinkled forehead and the lips burning with passion and lust, the author manages to achieve the desired stylistic effect.

The concepts of beauty and ugly may easily be traced in other stories as well – “The Happy Prince”, “The Star Child” “The Nightingale and the Rose”, etc.

The works of Oscar Wilde call for numerous interpretations and feelings. However, there is one idea that all readers are sure to share. Wilde was able to achieve the beautiful art he believed in. Regardless of the theme, this most controversial writer succeeded in creating literature that is first of all beautiful. And reading his most touching ballad – “The Reading Gaol”, where the despaired and abandoned Wilde portrays the tortures of the misery-torn convicts with no strength to live on and no hope to cling to, one can’t but say - “Beautiful”.

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1. **Wilde Oscar**, *Fairy Tales*. Москва: Прогресс, 1979.
2. **Wilde Oscar**, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. UK: Oxford University Press, 2008.