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RESEARCH ARTICLE

SOCIAL CRITICISM TOWARDS LATE VICTORIAN SOCIETY AND THE THEME OF SACRIFICE IN OSCAR WILDE'S THE HAPPY PRINCE

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Abstract

The social context in the period of Victorian era is a valuable point to study. Those who belonged to the upper class lived wealthily and irresponsibly. One reverse side was that although they were in the high social status, they seemed to be poor in knowledge and tried to act as if they had had profound understanding of everything. In addition, the statue of the Happy Prince was considered a punishment for the leader who had been irresponsible for the life of his local citizens during his lifetime. When he died, he had to witness everything and endured what the local citizens had experienced such as the utter misery and the harshness of the weather. This research is aimed at giving critiques on the social context of the late Victorian era and analyzing deeply the theme of sacrifice through Oscar Wilde's "The Happy Prince". The Victorian era was known as the era of materialism and individualism in which the luxurious life of the rich was depicted clearly; and self-importance was on top of everything and that resulted in the ignorance of the poor's lives.

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Introduction:-

Literary work is not only used to express the individuals' feelings, viewpoints and entertainment, but also used as documentation, a reflection, a tool or media of social critiques of a particular society. This explains how literature may underlie social-political messages of its surrounding environment and atmosphere of a particular society in a certain era. This belief is also believed to be found in Oscar Wilde's short stories, especially "The Happy Prince".

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (16 October 1854 – 30 November 1900) was a 19th century Irish writer of numerous short stories and one novel (Raby, 1988). He was also one of the Victorian era's most famous writers. He lived in the phase of the Victorian era in London. England's economy was developed greatly. However, in the years of 1874-1875, the economy of England was in crisis. The nineteenth century was a thriving and prosperous time for those who belonged to upper and middle classes in the society. Otherwise, the people who belonged to the lower class lived in the utter misery. This was the reverse side of society in the Victorian era. The rich, especially the governors, were seeking for the ways to be satisfied in life; they ignored the poverty of the citizens.

Background to The Study and Literature Review:

Social Criticism:

Social criticism is similar to historical criticism in recognizing literature as a reflection of its environment. For example, Jane Austen's novels depict the emphasis on decorum and etiquette by the English country gentry at the

end of the eighteenth century. In recent times, social criticism has described a particular kind of social reality and a particular economic and social theory. Social critics were most active in the 1930s and in the late nineteenth century during the Great Depression. They applauded literature that portrayed the struggles of the poor and downtrodden, especially when they engaged in strikes against oppressive capitalist bosses (Roberts & Roberts, 1985).

Social Condition in the Victorian Era:

The Victorian era of British history was the period of Queen of Victoria's reign from 20 June 1837 until her death on 22 January 1901. It was known as a long period of peace, prosperity, excellent sensibilities and national self-confidence. However, it was also the stage when religious morality changed significantly. When Queen Victoria took the throne, the Anglican Church had the power in running schools and universities, and with high ranking churchman holding offices in the Houses of Lords. The Church's power continued to rule in rural areas throughout the Victorian Era. However, that was not the case in industrialized cities. In the cities, those who were against the church were many; the disagreement and rejection were everywhere (Roberts & Roberts, 1985).

Sacrifice:

Sacrifice is defined as giving up one's own interests in order to promote the well-being of a partner or a relationship (Van, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, Witcher, & Cox, 1997).

Sacrifice consists of providing a positive benefit for another individual by subordinating one's own personal goals and potentially accruing personal costs in the process (Killen & Turiel, 1998). In addition, sacrifice can be defined as when someone puts aside his or her personal goals and interests or assets in order to provide help.

Oscar Wilde's Biography:

As mentioned in the introduction section, Oscar Wilde was an Irish writer of the nineteenth century. He was also known as one of the most famous writers in the Victorian era. He grew up in a rich family and distinguished himself at Dublin's Trinity College and London's Oxford (Raby, 1988; Richard, 1988). He published his first volume of poems in 1881 and found work in England as a critic and lecturer, but it was his socializing and self-promotion that made him famous, even before the publication of "The picture of Dorian Gray" – One of his literature works in 1890 (Raby, 1988; Richard, 1988)..

In 1895, at the height of his popularity, his relationship with the young poet Lord Alfred Douglas was declared inappropriately intimated by Douglas's father, The Marquess of Queensberry. Wilde sued for defamation, but the tables were turned when it became clear that there was enough evidence to charge Wilde with "clearly seen Indecency" for his homosexual relationship. He was convicted and spent two years in jail, after which he went into self-imposed exile in France, bankrupt, and in ill health. His other works include the comedies "Lady Windermere's Fan" (1892), "A Woman of No Importance" (1893) and "Ideal Husband" (1895), several collections of children's stories like "The Happy Prince and Other Tales" (1896). At first, Oscar's works of art were known as children's bedtime stories, but then they became so popular not only for children but also for adult people (Encyclopedia, 1964).

**Social Criticism towards Late Victorian Society in Oscar Wilde's The Happy Prince:
Social Status, Unequal Social Treatment and Exploitation Depicted in The Happy Prince:**

The Happy Prince brought out the issue of social status through the representation of two different classes between "The Happy Prince", "the Town Councilors" and "the poor". On base of the social status, The Happy Prince was categorized in the highest position because during his lifetime he lived in the Palace of Sans-Souci where sorrow was hindered to enter. He never went outside to see the living conditions of his citizens. He lived luxuriously while outside there were a majority of people who were in need. Besides, a group of people who had power in the town, their duties were to make the town more and more developed. They also were in good living conditions whereas the local citizens were in misery. Here we can see that the importance of those who were in high ranking in the society. The Prince and the leaders were those who played important roles in the lives of the local people. In their social status, they could do everything to help and support the poor. Boringly, they did nothing. The Victorian era was known for its serenity, prosperity and wealth, but no one knew the dark side of it.

After reading The Happy Prince story, readers could see the injustice in society at that time. The prince during his lifetime and the town councilors lived for their lives. The writer also brought out the exploitation very spectacularly. The people at court, the Jews, and the rich were exploiting the poor. The mayor and the Town Councilors

represented the exploitation of power. For example, the son of a seamstress was suffering from a fever, but she could not attend to him. She had to embroider the passionflowers for the Queen's maids-of-honor to wear at the next Court-ball. She was judged to be lazy by the Queen. The poor were working hard, but they could not buy any stuff, even oranges. This was the worst kind of exploitation in the Victorian society. Moreover, some people were so poor that they were starving while the rich were making merry and the Jews were weighing out money on copper scales. The writers of that time were also exploited. A young male hunger in a garret was trying to finish a play for the Director of the Theatre in the severe weather. Moreover, the Town Councilors were exploiting their power. Each of them wanted to have his statue built in place of the Happy Prince's statue. The Mayor proclaimed that the Swallow was not allowed to die under the statue. In conclusion, individualism and self-importance were portrayed and reflected vividly by Oscar through the activities of the local authority.

Critique on The Statue of the Happy Prince, The Hypocrisy, Flattery, and The Social Irresponsibility:

Here in the story, Oscar Wilde brought out the hypocrisy and irresponsibility of the town leaders. The statue of the Happy Prince was glory and covered with precious stones, gold, sapphires, and ruby that adorned him in a constructive and practical manner. It stood as a symbol of artistic perfection as it was admired by the people, especially the town leaders. Paradoxically, the Happy Prince contrasted with a miserable town ruled by the town councilors who turned later to be mere hypocrites. The word "happy" in the story was ironically used to emphasize the opposite of what it really meant. It revealed and foreshadowed the society with numerous contradictions. Like a punishment for him, when he died, the town council built a statue of him which was high enough to see what was happening in the town with the aim of letting him see how miserable the life was. During his life, he did not see the poverty, the misery, and the reverse side of the outside world, and now in his after-life time, he had to witness everything as a penalty.

He was very much admired indeed. "He is as beautiful as a weathercock," remarked one of the town councilors who wished to gain a reputation for having artistic tastes; "only not quite so useful," He added, fearing lest people should think him unpractical, which he really was not (Wilde, 1997). This makes an example of ironical expression – hypocrisy. The point "one of the town councilors remarked that the statue of the Happy Prince is as beautiful as a weathercock" (Wilde, 1997) shows that the town councilor himself is in contradiction with his character. The readers can realize that what he said was just to gain a reputation for having artistic tastes whereas, in fact, he did not have any artistic tastes but he wanted to show that he had that artistic taste. He praised the beauty of the statue in the most inartistic way. He was so hypocrite, he added that he was not quite useful for the fear of the people. Because in those days, people believed that art must have had some usefulness, otherwise, it was bad art. This is the smart way that Oscar used to mildly criticize the dumb government official at that time.

Those who were rich at that time seemed to be foolish and stupid, but tried to show off that they themselves were smart. When day broke, he flew down to the river and had a bath. "What a remarkable phenomenon, said the Professor of Ornithology as he was passing over the bridge. "A swallow in winter!" and he wrote a long letter about it to the local newspaper. Everyone quoted it, it was full of so many words that they could not understand (Wilde, 1997). When the professor saw the Sallow, he wrote a long letter to the local newspaper. It was full of so many words that were hard to understand. However, many people still quoted it to each other just to show off as if they had understood an artistic work; in fact, they did not understand what the writer wanted to convey. In brief, people who belonged to the upper class were ignoramuses and hypocrites.

The town councilors were the most vivid example of hypocrisy and flattery. Early the next morning the Mayor was walking in the square below in company with the Town Councilors. As they passed the column he looked up at the statue: "Dear me! How shabby the Happy Prince looks!" he said. "How shabby, indeed!" cried the Town Councilors, who always agreed with the Mayor; and they went up to look at it. "The ruby has fallen out of his sword, his eyes are gone, and he is golden no longer," said the Mayor; "in fact, he is little better than a beggar!" "Little better than a beggar," said the Town Councilors (Wilde, 1997). This extract is another example of ironical expression. It shows the hypocrisy of the town councilors who were stupid and flattered. They always imitated what the Mayor said. In fact, they had their own desires, but they always pretended to agree with the Mayors just to get his favor. They were flatterers and hypocrites that they even repeated the words spoken by the Mayor "little better than a beggar!" (Wilde, 1997). This is the Oscar Wilde's talent in mildly criticizing the fool town Councilors at that time.

The reverse side of society was depicted through the corruption, selfishness and irresponsibility of the Mayor and Town Councilors. They ought to have been responsible for the well-being of the citizens in the town, but they only thought of themselves. The Queen did not care about the tough life of the seamstress, she judged her to be lazy and she just cared about her dress for the next Court-ball. Moreover, the rich were making merry in their beautiful houses while the beggars were sitting at the gates. The street was full of starving children. The two little boys lying under the archway of the bridge were driven away by the Watchman. No one put concerns on them; the town leaders were too preoccupied with their own sense of self-importance. Besides, while the Happy Prince was adorned in finery, he was judged to be a symbol of prosperity in the town. Yet when his finery disappeared, and he no longer looked as attractive as he had previously been. The Mayor and Town Councilors wanted to remove his statue and replace it with the statue of the Mayor. In brief, the town authority did not see the poverty existing in their town or they just ignored to see it. Rather than looking after others, they were looking after and thinking of themselves only.

The Theme of Sacrifice:

The theme of sacrifice can be explored in the story. That the Happy Prince wept when seeing the misery of the local citizens showed his compassion towards them. He shared with the Swallow that he did not know what tears were when he had a human heart, but now, although his heart was made of lead, he could not control the emotions. His sacrifice was shown through asking the Swallow to take out the precious parts of his body and bring them to those who needed a helping hand. He asked the Swallow to take the ruby out of his sword-hilt to give to the seamstress with a son who was ill. He told the Swallow to take out one of his eyes which were made of sapphires originated in India a thousand years ago and bring it to the students in a garret. His other eye was plucked out and sent to a little match-girl who would be beat by her father if she did not bring home some money. The Happy Prince asked the Swallow to take off the gold-covered layer of his body in leaf by leaf and give to the poor including the beggars sitting at the gates of the beautiful houses, the starving children looking out listlessly at the black street and the two little boys lying under the archway of the bridge. Consequently, the Happy Prince’s body turned dull and grey. We can see not only the Happy Prince who had made sacrifices but also the Swallow which had intended to fly to Egypt, but stayed with the Prince permanently at last (Raby, 1988). On several occasions, he could have abandoned the Happy Prince but he decided to be by his side as the Happy Prince helped others. In brief, The Happy Prince and the Swallow were more concerned about others than they were about themselves. They were selfless.

Conclusion:-

In Oscar Wilde’s The Happy Prince, there are many things which are worth analyzing and critiquing. The social context in the period of Victorian era is a valuable point to study. Those who belonged to the upper class lived wealthily and irresponsibly. One reverse side was that although the upper class were in high social status, they seemed to be poor in knowledge, ironically tried to act as if they had had profound understanding of everything. In addition, the statue of the Happy Prince was considered a punishment for the leader who had been irresponsible for the life of his local citizens during his lifetime. When he died, he had to witness everything and endured what the local citizens had experienced such as the utter misery and the harshness of the weather. Moreover, the hypocrisy, flattery and irresponsibility are depicted vividly through the skillful pen of the author in order to reflect the corruptive and decayed society ruled by the town councilors at that time. Finally, sacrifice was conveyed touchingly through the actions of the Happy Prince and the Sallow.

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