

Original Paper

On the Aesthetic Value of “The Fleeting”—A Case Study of Wilde’s Fairy Tales such as The Nightingale and the Rose

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Abstract

The quality of “the fleeting” clearly runs counter to the traditional pursuit of eternal life. This reflected a major shift in social values at the time: the rise of aestheticism. And it is this temperament of rebellious that has elucidated its unique aesthetic value. This paper will discuss the quality of “the fleeting” itself, focus on “moment” and “gone”, the two main part of it, and will try to explore its aesthetic value. From this perspective, the paper will reexamine Wilde’s classic fairy tales such as “The Nightingale and the Rose”, and further explain the aesthetic value of “fleeting”.

Keyword

the fleeting, temporalism, aestheticism, Wilde’s fairy tales, fairy tales’ aesthetics

1. Introduction: “The Fleeting” and its Betrayal to the Tradition Value

There is a common sense that the pursuit of eternity and continuity of life is an instinct. In order to extend life in the physical, people achieve it by procreating offsprings; in order to extend life in the spiritual, people pass on culture. While “the fleeting” quality is clearly contrary to the previous traditional values. With the rise of aestheticism, writers and artists tried to separate art from the secular utilitarian purposes such as morality, education, practicality and commercial value. The quality of “the fleeting”, or this plot, this train of thought for composition, has also become a fad in the trend of rebellion: “The advent of such an era of anti-traditional enlightenment or anti-grand narrative, its appearance may be traced back to the second half of the 19th century, and its basic characteristics are: people stopped believing in eternity and began to look everywhere for the fleeting beauty in life. This ‘beauty’ can be put in quotation marks, and includes the ‘filth’ that traditional or ‘grand narrative’ values despise, because the ‘fleeting beauty’ affirms everything, This ‘everything’ denies some privileged value and always crosses all sorts of standard boundaries” (Note 1). This spirit of rebellion is

also reflected in the fact that the relevant writers and artists do not shy away from words such as “death”, “disappearance” and “destruction”, or they can embrace it, record it and recurrence it in an ordinary and optimistic mentality—so that the “destruction” or “death” in their fiction may not have profound value, let alone show solemn and heavy. It’s more like letting the story run its course and everything happened. For example, in Wilde’s fairy tale, “The giant lies under a tree, he is dead, and covered with white flowers”. “The reign of the star-child was not long; his sufferings were too great, and his trials too bitter, so that he lived only three years. When he died, an awful king succeeded him”. These sentences are located at the end of the story, whether the writer arranges for the main character to die at this point or not does not affect the progress of the story, but Wilde persist in making them dead. The aesthetic writers and artists are willing to record and reproduce the quality of “the fleeting”, which means that there is a considerable aesthetic value behind it. Maybe because of its strong pertinence and small scope, it is difficult to support a sufficient and abundant length, so it has always been less formally discussed. This paper intends to explore this.

There is a Chinese idiom called “epiphyllum bloom a second”, which literally means that this kind of flower bloomed beautifully but its blossom lasts only a short, but the flowering period only lasts a short time, and this idiom is used to metaphor “beautiful things but easily dissipate”. It is because the epiphyllum bloom only lasts a moment, just make it precious; so does “the fleeting”, because it is about to pass away, the moment of its existence is gripping. While readers lament over the short life of beauty, these writers and artists—especially in their aesthetically tinged works—take the initiative to “kill” the beautiful things. Just as people will first wonder about the murderer’s motive in the face of a murder case, the following will first try to explore the motives behind the artists’ “killing” to those beautiful things in their works.

2. “Moment”: Wilde’s Fairy Tale Narrative about the Ephemeral Beauty

“The fleeting” things exist only in the temporary, specifically, this temporary refers to the short life of all beautiful things, or their beautiful state can not last for a long time, or they are inherently fragile properties. Of course, this characteristic worth writing by nature, and aestheticians have their own ingenuity in this regard, giving it a different kind of aesthetic value. First of all, we may look at this quality anatomically: first, “the fleeting” things only exist in the “instant”; the second is that after this “moment”, the thing immediately “gone”.

2.1 The Experiential Attribute of “Moment”

Combined with the background of the emergence of aestheticism—as Marx evaluated, “all fixed things have disappeared”—it is an era in which the past is unreliable, the future is unforeseeable, and only the present is accessible, so aesthete writers and artists tend to separate the “past”, “future” and “present” and isolate each other, which means transactionalism: “It represents a distinct conception of time,

which is an emphasis on the present and a negation of the past and future. Everything about the present becomes the focus of attention... In particular, the aesthetic is highlighted. Here time actually stops and transforms into spatial form” (Note 2). Although the original linearity of time is separated in reality, the pursuit of writers and artists in art works is quite different from this attitude, and the ephemeral “now” is the object attained infinite attention, which shows the first attribute of “the fleeting”: experience. “The result of cutting off and isolating the present from the past and the future is a great increase in the depth and intensity of the subject’s experience of the present; the senses, sight, and hearing themselves are fully developed. At the same time, the aesthetic nature of the object is also greatly strengthened. So, the body, the object, etc., becomes an object of aesthetic appreciation and is worshiped”. As the English aesthete theorist Peter Pater said, “Art comes to you and brings you nothing but a moment of the highest quality”.

Take Wilde’s “The Young King” as an example: the full text describes the life of the young king, the luxurious life after returning to the palace, dreaming that the people are trapped in painful work for themselves, and insisting on attending the coronation ceremony in plain clothes the next day, while the scene of the young king receiving the coronation of God as the climax and highlight moment of the full text only accounts for the last five paragraphs at the end of the article. This seems to be an inappropriate arrangement between detailedness and curtness, but in fact, it achieves the effect of seeing the essence in the concentration. This short scene contains: the beauty of the young king, the compassion of the young king to the people, the fearlessness of the young king in the face of the killer, the consciousness of the young King empathizing with the people, the divinity of the young King at this time, even God was moved by this, and people who did not understand the young King also showed their awe to him... and several other pieces of information. This scene elevates the beauty of the story to a higher level, and also responds to all the plots mentioned above. Although it is short, it does play an important role in the story.

2.2 The Concentrability Attribute of “Moment”

However, there is another problem: although aesthete writers believe that the present can be cut from the past and the future, if there is no paving and build-up by the previous plot, and the scene of the coronation of the young king is isolated from the story, it will not be reduced to an magnificent but empty scene of coronation. Can it still have the dramatic tension and beauty it could have?

This brings us to the second property of the “moment”: concentration. It is because writers and artists pursue to achieve the highest quality and the ultimate experience in a moment, so that moment cannot be an aerial castle. The “moment” in reality is an island, but the “moment” in art should have all the vital organs. The solution of this contradiction is to compress: sacrifice the life length of “beauty” in exchange for the unit concentration of “beauty”: the “short” of “short life” is set to infinity here, that is, “moment”; but in this “moment”, the life, as the object of beauty, is complete; this “moment” already

includes its birth, its important scenes, its death: “The preciousness of the fleeting is that ‘love at first sight’ is also ‘love at last sight’”. “The first time is the last time at the same time, which reveals the thickness of the moment, the preciousness and beauty of the moment, and therein lies its value”. And the process from “first” to “last” is simplified and reduced to zero, so that this “moment” is its way of existing, its purest and most uncontaminated state: “If time is a big concept like the ‘grand narrative’, then the moment is the time observed under the microscope, the true prototype of time” (Note 3). This extreme simplification of the process can be seen in this passage from the Mother Goose Nursery Rhyme: “Born on Monday, baptized on Tuesday, married on Wednesday, sick on Thursday, dying on Friday, dead on Saturday, buried on Sunday, Solomon Grundy’s life was complete”.

Birth, baptism, marriage, illness, dying, death, burial, the gaps between several key links are negligible, and these elements alone are enough to constitute a complete life of Solomon Grundy. In the same way: birth, important scenes, death, for the beautiful things have also the complete lives, and the intermediate process is not important, nor is it worth the waste of ink of writers and artists. It should be noted that only when the “death” is included can things considered beautiful be “complete”, this paper believes that this may also be one of the reasons why writers and artists are loyal to depicting the “death”.

In summary, “moment” means the double attributes of experiential and concentrability. The unstable times and social background prompted the aesthete writers and artists to “live in the moment”—to be precise, they only have the present moment. The form of existence of things depends less and less on time and more and more on space, which is through the infinite enhancement of physical sensory experience, so everything becomes an aesthetic object, and the present moment becomes the object of the highest experience pursued by aesthetic writers and artists. In literary and artistic creation, these writers and artists exchange the length of life of aesthetic objects for the concentration of beauty, so they simplify the connection process between important links as much as possible: the fleeting existence of beauty and its death are enough to be on behalf of the lifetime of beauty.

3. “Gone”: Wilde’s Fairy Tale’s Representation of Beauty of “Death for the Death’s Sake”

3.1 The Immortality Attribute of “Gone”

In the process of “the fleeting”, the “gone” of things is like the decline after epiphyllum bloomed. The aesthete writers and artists designed this plot was originally for the purpose of opposing traditional aesthetics or traditional literary and art values. After all, most readers are happy to see the beauty of epiphyllum blooming, and cannot bear to see it fade, but writers and artists make them see, it is not too much to regard these arrangements as torturing readers. This practice, contrary to the expectations of the outside world, but in accordance with the artist’s own heart.

The readers cannot bear to see the fading is to escape the cold reality in the fictional world, while the aesthete writers present the depression scene to the readers, in order to restore and recurrence a certain real world, and make the reality to imitation it. They rebel against traditional values and readers' expectations, but remain loyal to a certain "real world". Even that "real world" may exist only in the mind of the artist himself.

In the traditional technique, the plot of "gone" is directly to serve the tragic elements of the story, so in contrast, the "gone" created by aesthetic writers and artists obviously has other purposes: it is not to "tear up anything meritorious" as the tragedy Lu Xun described, let alone to convey any theme. In particular, the "gone" in Wilde's fairy tales is mostly good deeds come to no good ends: "Star Child" brings the people a prosperous time, while everyone hopes that this beautiful scenery can continue, Wilde let him die three years later, and the tyrant succeed; The statues and swallows in "The Happy Prince" exhaust themselves to help others, but are abandoned because of their ugly appearance; The nightingale in "The Nightingale and the Rose" exchanged her life for the rose, but she could not please the girl's eyes, and was thrown to the roadside by the youth and crushed by the wheel. These arrangements have a sense of mocking the sublime and deconstructing the greatness, and the death of these characters is meaningless, worthless, and even like the "the best ending of a painting is to be burned" that seems to be somewhat joking and blasphemous. It is as if the aesthete writers and artists had decided that the object was due to die—its finest moment, for example - and had followed the Muse's instructions and killed it.

3.2 *The Aimlessness Attribute of "Death"*

It is no exaggeration to say that the practice of these writers and artists quite has the meaning of "death for the death's sake", as if the beautiful things born, its only meaning is to gone after the moment of the highlight scene, and the whole text is to prepare for that moment. Thinking in this sense, we can even venture to think that the writers and artists have arranged a whole text as a stage for the display of that highlight moment, which occupies a position above all other parts of the text, instead of following the traditional linear thought for composition, making the work "go on by itself".

For example, if the *Selfish Giant* is composed according to the traditional thought, it may be that the first plan is to design the giant as the protagonist, the God who appears later in the story as the secondary protagonist, the giant's beautiful garden as the stage, the transformation of the giant from the selfish closure of the garden to the generous opening of the garden as main story, with repentance and redemption as the key words, and the giant followed the God to go to heaven as the end. In this way, the time, place, characters and the general framework of the transition are determined, and then the development of the plot is filled in. However, this is the work of Wilde, the representative writer of aestheticism. According to "the fleeting" idea of aestheticism discussed in this paper, the formation process of this work may also be as follows: The writer thinks that the scene of someone dying under a

tree covered with white flowers is very beautiful, so he arranges a character to die in this scene. In order to show the meaning and thickness of this scene of death, he implied the meaning of “repentance” and “redemption” in it, in order to the meaning of “repentance” and “redemption” can be established, the dead character should make mistakes and be punished for his mistakes... and here is the selfish giant who is the protagonist of this article and his once beautiful but then wintery garden, and God’s coming to the garden to witness the giant’s repentance. The result is such a warm and moving fairy tale, but the original motive of this story is to see the scene of a character dead, covering with flowers.

This inversion is not difficult to understand: for the aestheticians, it is not art that imitates reality, but reality imitates art. As Pater said, “Art comes to you and gives you nothing but a moment of the highest quality.” The “momentary” beauty of “the fleeting” occupies a dominant position in the text, so that the thought, emotion or theme connotation of the text should give way to it, thinking of the pursued beyond utilitarianism by aesthetic writers and artists, such arrangement is not surprising. Perhaps there is a “showy and not substantial” suspicion, but this paper believes that, rather than evaluating it as “showy and not substantial”, it is more accurate to say that the ultimate pursuit of “showy” by writers and artists enables them to reconcile to “not substantial”, and even take the price of “substantial” for “showy”. After all, the mainstream of commodity culture and consumerism have come to accept that the aesthetics of goods can equal to their usefulness, and there is no reason why writers and artists behind them.

It could be seen that in the works of aesthetic writers and artists, the reason why beautiful things have to “die” is more like a mission: martyrdom. But their belief is not the “tragic value”, “emotion”, “theme” in the traditional sense, nor is it related to the secular sense of “moral education”, “transmission of information”, but the writers and artists’ concept of “art for art’s sake”, they can do anything for this.

4. The Ultimate Pursuit of Aestheticism Beauty: The Aesthetic Value of Wilde’s Fairy Tales

To sum up, the “moment” is concentrated, the “gone” is to make the beautiful things a complete life. In order to be loyal to their inner world, what writers and artists really want to express, to pay attention to and focus on is this “moment”, and naturally assume the obligation to design it. Even if the quality of “the fleeting” has a congenital deviation from traditional values, but abiding the belief in art, aesthetic writers and artists will not deviate from the most common, the most basic, the lowest principles and laws of creation. The measures they take are to constantly raise the price of the “moment” itself, with this “moment” as the core and climax. Based on this, a whole story line was developed to serve this “moment”.

So this “moment”, in terms of linear time, cuts off the past and the future, preserves only the present; However, by observing on its meaning, we will find that the beauty brought by “the fleeting” relies on this “moment”, which is the moment that has been paved and designed before, and is also the result of the artist’s plenty of composition experience and emotional accumulation, which is condensed in the moment in a work. The moment is often a special field composed of many elements that provide aesthetic value that can be appreciated. In other words, the beauty of “the fleeting” comes from its explosive power: the antecedents of this “moment”, its above, can be regarded as the “down-lead”, when the reader enters the text, the down-lead is ignited at the same time; The aftermath of this moment “gone”, leaving only the dissipated ashes.

In this sense, the quality of “fleeting” itself has a certain contradiction: writers and artists consciously want to cut off this “moment” from its past and future; And in the subconscious mind it is impossible to completely isolate the moment from its antecedent or consequence context, so they add more and more profundity to the moment as a solution of this contradiction: “The aesthete’s only existence is the present: pure, multilayered, reinforced, sensual, beautiful moment” (Note 4).

The quality of “the fleeting” is reflected in Wilde’s fairy tale world, which can often be traced to such a pattern: the “moment” is the existence of beautiful things, and “gone” is often their end. In this way, Wilde repeatedly constructs tragedy stories about good deeds come to no good ends.

4.1 The Nightingale and the Rose: Instant is Equivalent to Life

Obviously, in this fairy tale that does not follow the traditional model of happy ending, there is too much value torn up: The nightingale’s life passed away, the rose that the nightingale bought with her life failed to enable the young man to please the girl, so the youth no longer loved the girl and did not become a sincere lover as the nightingale wanted, the rose was thrown on the roadside and crushed by wheel. The nightingale died early, the girl did not care for the rose, the youth’s love for the girl immediately turned, the rose from the landing of the youth’s hand to the roadside was crushed in less than a day... The whole work is full of “short life” elements, by contrast, Wilde’s large length focuses on the nightingale’s seeking for the rose, including how the nightingale seek for the rose, willing to give its life for the rose, and the final singing for getting the rose. Such an arrangement lives up to the generalization of “the fleeting”.

How to explain this feature of the text? The author believes that this arrangement is the practice of the transactionalism: The life of the nightingale was exchanged for the rose, and though the rose did not perform its intended function, and the exchange seem extremely unworthy. Actually, the nightingale could sing such a powerful song for the rose—it provided the highest auditory pleasure, and in exchange for the most beautiful rose—it obtained the highest visual pleasure. The value of a nightingale’s life is encapsulated in this short song, which means “the life of the nightingale = the song of the nightingale = the beauty of the rose,” and all three have the same status. Perhaps this is why the

title of the fairy tale is “The Nightingale and the Rose”, not only because the former is the main character and the latter is the key item, but also because (in Wilde’s subconscious mind) the two are considered equivalent, so the “and” is used as a conjunction between the nightingale and the rose in the title, indicating a juxtaposition, or equivalence. Instead of the story being titled “The Nightingale”.

4.2 “Star Child” and “Happy Prince”: *The Most Unpreservable in the World*

Among Wilde’s other fairy tales, the Star Child is the most ephemeral. He admitted his mistakes, repented and expiate, he became the king and achieves peace and security. He dead three years later and the reign of a cruel tyrant means that the goodness created by the Star Child has suddenly disappeared. The story could have ended at the moment when the star-child brought up the golden age, but the subsequent arrangement of a tyrant’s succession turned the atmosphere into a sharp downward spiral, and the reader’s mood also fell sharply. At the beginning of the story, the star child is a “heavenly treasure”, so his short life, and being erased, is maybe a hint that “he only belongs to heaven and should not be stained with the world”, just like Remedios the beauty who fly into sky covered with a white sheet. If this statement is true, then the beauty brought by the star child, the several tests and baptism of the star child experienced, and the short life of the star child have added a bit of mythological and legendary color to the role.

Another example is “Happy Prince”, in which the fleeting moment is one of the gentle moments: the swallow will give the gold leaf to the poor, complete happy prince’s wish, the two people tell each other love, the swallow calmly accept death, fell at the feet of the happy prince. Such a beautiful picture is enough to become the curtain call in the traditional fairy tale works, but Wilde would add such a follow-up: when the people found that the Happy Prince was no longer beautiful, they would abandon him and throw his lead heart and the dead swallow into the trash can—he bent on breaking the peace that swallow and the Happy Prince enjoyed last night. In fact, it is at this point when the Happy Prince and the Swallow are rejected by all the citizens that Wilde really realizes what he wants to express, that is, their good deeds come to no good ends, and even not understood. But God understood, so he sent an angel to bring back the Happy Prince’s lead heart and the dead swallow, calling them “the two most precious things in the world”.

4.3 “The Selfish Giant”: *The Uncertainty of Life*

“I have many beautiful flowers, but they are the most beautiful.” This line is immediately before the passage of the giant’s death, and also points to the most beautiful scene in the whole text: the giant changes his selfishness and reopens the garden to the children, who are playing happily in the garden, accompanied by the giant, and waiting for the arrival of the child he loves most—God. A great deal of ink is devoted to the description of the garden, but in only two cases is the phrase “most beautiful” used: one is when passers-by call it “the most beautiful garden” when they see the giant reopen the garden to play with children, and the other is when the giant says “they (the children) are the most beautiful”.

Simple two words, rich in meaning, the former is the passers-by praise the giant's generosity and kindness, the latter is condensed the giant's complex mood: not only thank the children to make this garden trapped in the winter for a long time back to spring, but also the giant for the previous selfish repentance and self-redemption.

In the fantasy world of fairy tales, Wilde is good at creating scenes full of beauty, dramatic tension, and which can arouse readers' complex feelings. Inheriting the previous emotions all the way to this, this scene should be the position of "happy reunion after the tempest". However, the good times do not last long, and the old giant dies suddenly in the next few paragraphs, and even the happy reunion cannot escape the fleeting fate. There is only one shot of "the giant lying peacefully under the tree, covered with white flowers", which does not explain how the giant left with God, how will the garden and children after the giant gone. It can only be left to the reader's imagination: in children's view, the giant had been playing with them the yesterday, and had suddenly died now, and it was indeed a matter of uncertainty of lives, and it was a pity that the happy time was so short. The so-called "uncertainty" is also one of the principles of "the fleeting" of beautiful things.

As a representative aesthete, Wilde's aesthetic concept of "the more far away from reality and beyond reality, the more beautiful" coincides with the innate imagination and fantasy attributes of the fairy tale genre. Although aestheticism advocates the decoupling of art and morality, we can still find in Wilde's fairy tales the integration of "the true, the kind and the beautiful": the nightingale in exchange for the rose, the change of the appearance of the star child, the happy prince and the kindness of the swallow are recognized by God as the most beautiful thing in the world... surreal beauty is often accompanied by surreal kindness, but the mundane people have shown their disdain, incomprehension, abandonment and ruin. It is hard to say whether this arrangement also hides a certain pessimism of Wilde's about reality.

5. Conclusion

Since the core point of aestheticism is to abandon morality and utility for only pursuing pure beauty, the interpretation of its works should not only focus on their criticism of the social status quo, but return to the beauty provided by the text itself. Therefore, this paper is more willing to, and more interested in, from the standpoint and perspective of the writers and artists to speculate the quality of "the fleeting", in addition to the larger background factors of "rebellion against traditional values", what is the more direct motivation artists insist on.

To discuss this, we must return to the trait itself. After disassembling it, the author concludes that the "moment" is experiential, but also in order to maximize the unit concentration of beauty, so remove all the red tape, make the plot most simplified, to get this moment; The end of "gone" also creates beauty, which is the last link that makes beauty complete. For this reason, writers and artists are willing to

“death for the death’s sake”. If the prevalence of consumerism has led people to accept “showy and not substantial” and even “showy equals substantial” when writers and artists have arranged their works, they made the “moment” prevails over all other parts of the text. This narrative skill conforms to the superutilitarian and pure artistic concept of aestheticism writers and artists, which is “art for art’s sake” and “art only provides sensory pleasure and does not convey certain moral information”. It can even be said that they arrange the beautiful things in their works to be “the fleeting”, precisely in order to be loyal to their own inner art.

When writers and artists write, even if they are innovative in their train of thought for composition, they do not violate the underlying principles of creation, so “the fleeting” as the core of the text cannot become a castle in the air, and they still have the responsibility to design the former and latter context. The measures they take are to pave and accumulate, and constantly increase the thickness, to create a special field composed of plenty of elements at that “moment”, so that the beauty of the explosion at this time, and then “gone”. This leaves the reader with a strong impact and a distinct impression: “In all the fleeting beauty, what is obtained is a mental reflex which is not ready to think, a sense of vertigo, an inability to refer to precedent, an inability to agree—if these are called spiritual crisis, then this crisis is fascinating” (Note 5). “The fleeting beauty makes one fascinated, dizzy, and feels the unique novelty. They do not exist in the heavenly world; they exist in the seemingly repeating world of life. The question is whether we have the vision to embrace them with our mental and physical energy”.

In Wilde’s fairy tale world, as mentioned above, the “moment” is the state of existence of beauty things, and “gone” is mostly their end. In his writing, he either directly and obviously, or indirectly and twists and turns to expound “the fleeting” fate of his characters or many beautiful things. This arrangement is Wilde’s “thinking further” than the common fairy tales, and also becomes his characteristic, showing his pride against the ordinary flow of “the prince and princess live happily together”, and also brings plenty of aesthetic value and interpretation space that can be discussed.

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Notes

Note 1. Shang Jie: Modernity and “the fleeting beauty”—A theoretical revision of “grand narrative”

Note 2. Zhou Xiaoyi: Salome’s Art of Dying Aestheticism, Consumerism and Chinese Modernity. another quote in the paragraph is also from this paper.

Note 3. Shang Jie: Modernity and “the fleeting beauty”—A theoretical revision of “grand narrative”, another quote in the paragraph is also from this paper.

Note 4. Zhou Xiaoyi: Oscar Wilde: Consumer Culture and Postmodernist Theory at the end of the nineteenth Century

Note 5. Shang Jie: Modernity and “the fleeting beauty”—A theoretical revision of “grand narrative”, another quote in the paragraph is also from this paper.