

Multiple closure in “The happy prince”

Opinion

In an article¹ I attempted to show that some tales have two or more closures instead of one, as is generally expected of a short tale. I selected three tales having multiple closures. All of them are humorous; the second and third closures make the humour more boisterous. However, multiple closures is not limited to humorous tales. Oscar Wilde’s “The Happy Prince,” a story intended primarily for children, has no fewer than three closures which is worth examining in detail. Since the story is well-known, I need not give a summary of it. I rather go straight to the successive closures. The first closure comes with the death of the Swallow.

At that moment a curious crack sounded inside the statue, as if something had broken. The fact is that a leaden heart had snapped right in two. It certainly was a dreadfully hard frost. This is statement of fact, the expected end of the story. Wilde² however does not end the story here. He adds a new paragraph narrating the reactions of the Mayor and the Town Councillors, hard-hearted practical types. They decide to pull down the statue of the Happy Prince, which is now “little better than a beggar”. The statue is pulled down with the Art Professor – a pure aesthete – agreeing to the decision, for “as he (sc. the Happy Prince) is no longer beautiful he is no longer useful.” It is decided that the statue should be melted down. The Mayor wants to have a statue of him instead. The Town Councillors, however, calmour among themselves, each demanding that it should be his statue. Wilde adds: “When I last heard of them they were quarrelling still.”

This is the second ending which can serve also as a fit closure, bringing the story back to the world of reality where petty people squabble over their selfish interests, which sharply contrasts with the quiet self-sacrifice of the Happy Prince and the Swallow. Not content with the second closure, Wilde introduces a third. The overseer of the workmen at the foundry finds that the broken lead heart will not melt in the furnace, So it is thrown on a dust-heap where the dead swallow is also lying. The story is transferred to heaven: “Bring me the two most precious things in the city,” said God to one of His Angels; and the Angel brought Him the leaden heart and the dead bird. “You have rightly chosen,” said God, “for in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing forevermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me.”

This is the third and ultimate closure, a neat round-off that leaves nothing more to be desired and at the same time elevates a children’s story to a moving moral fable. The story could easily have done

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without the second and third closures. Nevertheless Wilde goes on adding new dimensions to the story. Although written in the form of a fairytale, “The Happy Prince” brings out the state of the poor and the needy in vivid details: the seamstress and her ailing son, the shivering young dramatist in his garret, the little match-girl, and the starving children looking out listlessly at the black streets. The Happy Prince has patiently heard the stories of strange lands from the Swallow and says, “Dear little Swallow, you tell me of marvellous things, but more marvellous than anything is the suffering of men and of women. There is no Mystery so great as Misery.” Such a profound reflection embodied in the form of an aphorism calls for an equally profound closure. Neither the death of the Swallow nor the stupid bickering of the Councillors would serve the purpose. Wilde defers the third closure till he has prepared the ground for it in the first two. Multiple closure is not generally expected in a short story; it is more appropriate for a novella or a novel. But, as we have seen, double or even triple closure, though rare, is encountered even in short tales.¹ The purpose is pretty evident: highlighting – and sometimes heightening – the theme of the story, be it humorous or serious.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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