
The Moral Value of Oscar Wilde's the Model Millionaire

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Abstract: *The aim of this work is to unravel the moral value in Oscar Wilde's short story, The Model Millionaire. Therefore, story serves as a major and primary source of our data, while other literature as secondary. The data are interpreted with hermeneutic and meditative mind. The finding of this work is that altruism, almsgiving, charity and selfless interests are great values which attract blessings from God and men. The author admonishes us to pursue and practice them as they make society humane.*

Keywords: *Oscar Wilde, Model Millionaire, Charity, Selflessness, Almsgiving, Altruism.*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Aristotle (1976: 63), "Every art and every investigation, and similarly every action and pursuit, is considered to aim at some good". What is the aim of The Model Millionaire, a short story written by Oscar Wilde (16th October, 1854- 30th November, 1900), an Irish poet and playwright? (Holland, 2003; Mason, 1972). What is the moral lesson embedded in that story? This is exactly the aim of this work: to unravel the moral value of the story. Therefore, the story published in Oscar Wilde online serves as a major and primary source of our data, while other literature as secondary. The data are interpreted with hermeneutic and meditative mind. The work begins with a synopsis of the story and thereafter the moral lesson.

Synopsis of the Model Millionaire

The short story begins with aphorism: "Unless one is wealthy there is no use in being a charming fellow. Romance is the privilege of the rich, not the profession of the unemployed. The poor should be practical and prosaic. It is better to have a permanent income than to be fascinating" (p.1). These are the truths about Hughie Erskine who was very brilliant, handsome but very poor. He had been hustling to make money but no success. But had a good spirit, that he loved helping the poor from the little he had. He was indeed a wretched kind fellow. He wished he could make it in life at least take care of his basic needs and be

able to put smiles on the face of the poverty-ridden ones but all his efforts kept being abortive.

He had tried everything. He had gone on the Stock Exchange for six months; but what was a butterfly to do among bulls and bears? He had been a tea-merchant for a little longer, but soon tired of pekoe and souchong. Then he tried selling dry sherry. That did not answer; the sherry was a little too dry. Ultimately, he became nothing, a delightful, ineffectual young man with a perfect profile and no profession (p.1).

To make matters worse, Hughie was in love with Laura Merton, the daughter of a retired colonel. Laura loved Hughie so much as Hughie also did, but the military father could not allow Hughie to marry her because of his poverty. Making the matter very difficult for Hughie, Laura's father told Hughie: "Come to me my boy, when you have got ten thousand pounds of your own, and we see about it". In other words, they can only discuss the possibility of Hughie marrying his daughter, Laura, when Hughie had made his first ten thousand pounds as his personal money. This made Hughie depressed, but consoled by Laura's continued love and relationship with him.

One morning, he was going to Holland Park and decided to drop in and greet his great friend, Allan Trevor, who was a painter and an artist. When Hughie came in, he saw Allan Trevor "putting finishing touches to wonderful life-sized picture of a beggar-man", and "the beggar himself was standing physically "on raised platform in a corner of the studio, with a face wrinkled parchment, and a most piteous expression" (p.1). The man looked tattered with tattered coarse brown cloak and thick deformed shoe, leaning on a stick and with one hand held out his hat for alms.

Hughie pitied the condition of the beggar, while praising his friend for a work well done. Allan Trevor, who had a call, asked Hughie to look after the studio for him as he had somewhere to go, leaving Hughie to be alone with the beggar. The old beggar took the advantage of Allen Trevor's absence to rest on a wooden bench behind the studio, while Hughie pitied him. "How can I help this fellow?" Hughie asked himself. I had nothing except "a sovereign and a copper in my pocket. I know I am poor, and I don't even have any other money at home except this money but this poor fellow needs them more than I do" (emphasis mine). Hughie out of compassion walked across the studio and slipped the money into the beggar's hand. The beggar responded "Thank you sir!" Allan Trevor returned and Hughie took his leave.

When he reached home, he was scolded that night by Laura for his extravagance. To escape Laura's nagging over his action, he decided to went to beer-parlour where he met his friend Allan Trevor smoking and drinking. He asked Trevor whether he had finished the picture and the painting of the beggar. Trevor answered "yes", and told him the deeper truth about the old beggar. Allan Trevor told him how much the man was fond of him. Hughie wished he could see him again and give him some of his clothes to replace the lags he was wearing. As they discussed further, Allen Trevor continued telling him how much the man was interested in him even in his relationship with Laura. "You don't mean to say you talked to him about her?" Hughie queried. "Certainly I did. He knows all about the relentless colonel, the lovely Laura and the 10,000 pounds" Allen Trevor responded (p.3).

Hughie was not happy about what Trevor did. In an attempt to pacify him, Trevor revealed the truth about the man to Hughie; that he was the famous Baron Hausberg, one of the richest men in Europe. According to him, he was not a beggar but requested him to make his image-beggar-portrait for him. Hughie blamed Trevor for not telling him his identity earlier as he

had given him all the money he had in a bid to help him. He thought that his action must have embarrassed the man and that he had made a fool of himself before the rich man. Hughie walked home feeling angry, depressed and stupid.

The next morning, as he was about to take his breakfast, a visitor knocked and was received. An old man came in and said he was sent by Baron Hausberg. Hughie was tendering his apology for embarrassing the billionaire when the old man intercepted the good news that he was commissioned by the Baron to give him this letter. On the outside of the sealed letter was written “A wedding present to Hugh Erskine and Laura Merton, from an old beggar”, and inside was a cheque of 10.000 pounds (p.4). Hughie therefore proceeded to marry his heartthrob Laura. Allen Trevor was the best man, while Baron made a speech at the wedding ceremony. The story ends with a remark: Millionaire models are rare but model millionaires are rarer still.

Moral Lessons

We are living in the age of individualism and selfishness where nobody cares for others. The rich oppress the poor with their wealth. We are living in a society where the interest of individuals is greater than the interest of the community (Akudolu, 2021). This kind of selfish spirit manifests in politics where politicians divert the wealth of nations into their private pocket while the masses suffer (Akudolu, 2019). In business, the business man sells fake and adulterated good in the name of the original. People take over people’s property and take them to court. Selfishness and egoism is indeed destruction to this capitalist age. Nobody thinks of the interests of others. People do not help any more. Charity and almsgiving are becoming things of the past. But the life of Hughie in this story is a great lesson to us.

Hughie, though very poor, seeks the interest of others which manifested in his philanthropic spirit; that out of his poverty, he kept helping those he felt he was better than. His continued acts of almsgiving led him into his divine helper. Do you think the billionaire Baron would stop at that juncture, no; he would make sure his life changed. It is indeed good to be sympathetic with the condition of others rather than being too concerned with our own interest.

In the scripture, we had a similar story about Abraham. He and his wife had no children but had a hospitable spirit. They saw three stranded men, brought them in, fed and took good care of them, not knowing he was helping the angels of God. At the end, the angel told him that by next year, he would have a son, and it happened just as they said.

Similar thing also happened somewhere in my place. A wealthy woman decided to empower some people who are into small scale business. She dressed as a poor lady and entered into one roadside restaurant and a beggar rich woman asked her to assist her with food as she had never eaten since two days ago. The woman poured her water and chased her away, shouting, “Do you think I am here to run a charity organization?”

The rich but pretended to be poor woman entered into another small shop and continued with her begging but kept receiving insults from those poor women she wanted to support financially. Later, she stumbled into one small restaurant owned by a poor widow. The widow who had six children left for her by her late husband to care for was with her as they were expelled from school for not paying school fees. Yet the widow pitied her. She gave her food, and asked her: “What drink do you want? Do you need meat or chicken?”. She gave her all that she requested and didn’t collect any money from her.



When the rich but pretended poor woman wanted to go, she appreciated the poor widow, encouraged her to continue with her good spirit and then revealed her true identity and mission to her. She transferred one million naira (₦1, 000,000) to the widow's bank account and placed all her children on scholarship.

2. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we want to emphasize that it is good to be kind and generous to people, especially those that we are better than. Don't think that you don't have but out of the little you have, give to others. Be merciful to others; help the poor and less privileged for this attracts divine favor and help. When you have an opportunity to be in a great position, use it positively to improve people's lives and society at large. As a wealthy person, use your wealth to affect lives positively. This is exactly what Oscar Wilde has taught us through his short story, *The Model Millionaire*. Hughie though poor was indeed a millionaire, and I wish you would be one.

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