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‘The Selfish Giant’: A Study of Christian Selfishness Jo Szewczyk

‘The Selfish Giant’ by Oscar Wilde has a history rooted in Christianity. There are ample journals, books, and even some occasional movies that demonstrate Wilde’s work as a Christian allegory[1]. In a Christian analysis, the giant is seen as either St. Christopher or an unknown man whereas the child who cries is the Christ child. A Christian reading often incorporates redemption and symbolism, such as the tree the giant wishes to put the child on is a reflection of the True Cross. Nevertheless, there is a problem with most of the Christian analyses currently developed from the story.

The problem with most Christian analyses of the story is their lack of definition of Christian value. The values are assumed and seem secondary to the analysis. Many Christian scholars have lauded the lessons derived from the story whilst wrestling with the author’s personal life[2]. However, what none of the scholars really consider exploring is the method upon which the giant ceases to be selfish, and thereby becomes worthy of redemption. Moreover, the previous scholarship ignored one crucial key — does the giant ever become selfless? In order to answer this question, I will examine the text through a Christian perspective and, employing the Christian argument, determine if the giant truly acts in a selfless manner and if such a manner is truly Christian.

In the story, a giant created a magnificent garden[3]. The grass was soft and cushioned the children’s feet as they walked; the flowers rose above the grass as colourful stars. The trees that adorned the garden attracted birds whose songs were so enchanting, the children stopped playing just to listen. While the giant was away for seven years (a magical number in the bible), children would play in his garden after school. When the giant came back and saw the children trespassing, he became angry. He chased them all away and put a fence around his garden. The walling off of the garden and hoarding his wealth is seen in Christianity through the Christ’s answer of a rich man gaining entrance into heaven[4]. By walling off his garden, the giant has diminished his spirit with greed.

When the seasons changed from Winter to Spring, only the giant’s garden was still Winter. Spring was not allowed in, and his garden suffered from it. The giant’s trees never bore fruit as one spirit of nature, stated the giant was too selfish, and she rather not visit such a being. The anamorphic versions of the seasons are often left undebated in the Christian readings. Some may argue that this defies nature against the monotheism of Christianity.

It is here that the connection between the giant’s land (his estate or life’s work) and the giant himself becomes clear. They become entwined. His estate suffered because of his selfish actions in banishing the children from his garden. He was punished for his actions because he was invested in the physical. For a Christian narrative to work, the concept of the physical has to be transferred to the soul. The

giant's garden was spiritual and, thusly, he felt the changes from bloom to barren intensely.

He found redemption through the wilful acts of innocence. The children, a representation of innocence, eventually break through the wall he put around his garden. They start to play and the seasons start to shift back into the life bringing essence. The giant then realized the children are blessed. This is a parallel to the Christian story of Jesus blessing the children. When his disciples hindered the children from reaching Jesus, he rebuked them and explained that 'the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.[5]' Like the disciples, the giant realized how selfish he had been and decided to not only let the children stay, but to help the one child who seemingly cannot climb the trees with the rest. Although the children ran from him, the one remaining child, who had been crying since he couldn't reach the trees and didn't see the giant because of the tears in his eyes. This is where the Christian reading falters.

The child doesn't run because his vision is obscured. The ones who could truly see ran from the giant. As such, the innocent who can see corruption fled from it while the innocence deceived by his senses and unable to perceive corruption stayed. A more ideal Christian morale would be the power of innocence to heal corruption—not a worry of persecution by the corruption. Jesus taught to have one's eyes open and to turn the other cheek. However, this story clearly shows those who have their eyes open neglect their Christian duty of giving aid or forgiveness to the giant. Furthermore, the entire plot point of the seasons avoiding the giant shows a concept of punishment from the spiritual force in the universe. The spirits openly punish the giant, ignoring Christ's high commandment[6]. In this, the Christian readings either ignore completely or fail to truly give analysis beyond a surface reading.

The child whose vision was obscured led the rest back into the garden by an act of innocence. He hugged the giant. At this point, the others, the ones whose eyes were open, lost their fear. They came to play in his garden and all went well. However, the child in question was not seen for a very long time, as the other children knew not of him[7].

Even when the season of Winter came, the giant welcomed it. He saw it as 'merely the Spring asleep' giving the season a duality of inertia (winter) and activity (spring). He no longer resisted the winter as he now saw it as a part of the natural rhythm of life. One winter day, he saw a tree had blossomed. He ran over and discovered the child who committed the act of kindness and gave the giant his spiritual happiness. He saw wounds on the child's feet and hands. His immediate reaction was a call to arms, but the child preached patience for they were 'wounds of Love'. It is here that Wilde pulls back the veil and shows, directly, his portrayal of the Christ child.

The child was there to collect the giant to his garden of Paradise. The giant passed from life into death and flowers bloomed over his body. It is here that many of the Christian readings display the turn as a direct transfiguration of redemption. The giant was redeemable only because he was selfish and repented. He found, in the end, what he had searched for most of his life—the child who showed him the way. Moreover, the innocents who committed no wickedness knew him not. This seems to

indicate that the Christ child is only interested in the fallen and those needing to be redeemed. However, most Christian scholars also avoid this point.

As a Christian tale, 'The Selfish Giant' is curiously anti-Christian in parts. For example, the seasons attack the giant; the children, who are innocent, avoid trying to help the morally fallen giant; and the Christ child is completely unknown to the forces of 'good'. Furthermore, a Christian reading has always included the redemption of the giant through his 'selfless acts'. However, are those acts truly selfless? Is the giant not still acting—entirely—out of self-interest when he allows the children back in? His goal was to have his garden bloom again. This was not out of a will for humanity to benefit, but rather for him to profit. He, in order to achieve his goal, realizes he needs the children back.

By allowing the children to stay and embracing them, he is acting out of self-interest. It lines up with a cynical reading of the Christian religion that posits an act of 'selflessness'. There are, in the story, no selfless acts. Even the seasons, which are symbolically the Trinity, act purely out of self-interest, as does the 'innocence' represented by the children. This argument can be pushed further to its natural conclusion that not only is the giant still selfish by the end of the story: it is because he is selfish that Christ is able to redeem him.

Is Christ, Himself, acting out of self-interest in this act? That is a question that can be answered through his 'wounds of Love'. If love is truly an emotion, then Christ, too, is acting out of self-interest. He is fulfilling his duty as charged to him by God. In the end, the question ceases to become "is the giant still selfish" (he is) but rather what about selfishness is redeemable? It is here that Wilde illuminates a clear solution. Contrition.

The contrition from the giant was indirect. When the giant showed that he was truly sorry, he did so through the narrator and not through direct discourse. It was the narrator who lets us know that the giant 'was really very sorry for what he had done.' In this, the narrator—not the giant—produced the catalyst for the giant's redemption. Wilde, with the use of his narrator and not the character, allowed redemption to come from an external source when the person in question cannot articulate his own culpability. In the end, Wilde showed that the giant had not given up his selfishness, but that wasn't a bad thing. In fact, only through being selfish could the giant find redemption by Christ.

References:

[1] There are also scholars who attribute a socio-economic theme to the story instead of Christianity. A fine example of a socialist reading of the story can be found in an essay by Zvonimir Radeljkovic, 'Wilde as a Moralist: A Bosnian Reading'.

[2] An example of this is Sophia Mason's article for the Saint Austin Review, where she prefaces the Christian themes of her review with describing Wilde as someone

who has 'degraded personal life' and was 'cursed by a strong consciousness of beauty combined with an apparent inability for living the virtuous life that beauty requires.' Mason at least gives her condemnation a poetic sign whereas some, like Rowena AuYeung, who writes for Redeemer Chinese Evangelical Free Church, just flatly calls Wilde a 'notorious' person whose life was 'sordid and leaves much to be desired' then dismisses the author altogether.

[3] It is important to note that 'garden' here doesn't necessarily mean what it does in North America, but rather the English usage of the word that indicates a 'yard.'

[4] This is seen in Mathew 19:24, 'And Jesus said to His disciples, "Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.'

[5] The full quote is from Luke, 8:16, 'And they were bringing even their babies to Him so that He would touch them, but when the disciples saw it, they began rebuking them. But Jesus called for them, saying, "Permit the children to come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all.'"

[6] The greatest commandment for Christ is found in Mark 12:31, 'The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these.'

[7] This is a direct reference to John 8:18-20, 'I am He who testifies about Myself, and the Father who sent Me testifies about Me. So they were saying to Him, "Where is Your Father?" Jesus answered, 'You know neither Me nor My Father; if you knew Me, you would know My Father also.'"