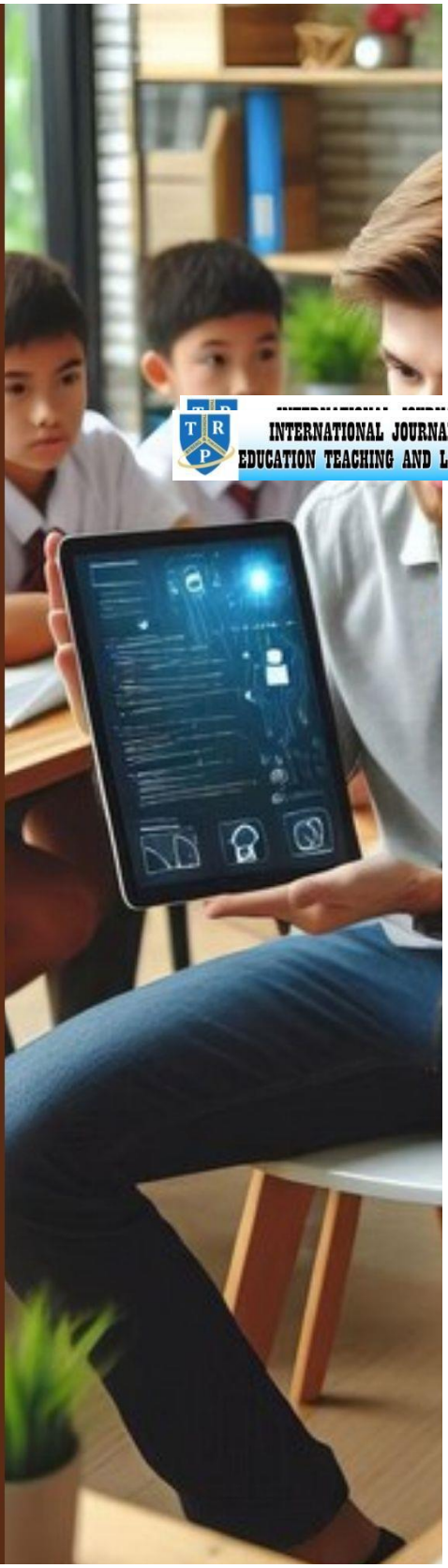
ISSN : 2455-9164

International Journal of EDUCATION TEACHING AND LEARNING

www.trpubonline.com/journals.php
trpub.online@gmail.com
or ijedtl@trpubonline.com



The Irony of Wealth and Poverty in Oscar Wilde's "The Model Millionaire" (1887)

Dr.Mrinalini B.Chavan

Department of English, D.E.S's Willingdon College, MH 416415, India.
Email: mrinalinihc@gmail.com

Abstract

Victorian literature frequently engaged with questions of wealth, class, and moral worth, reflecting the anxieties of an era marked by unprecedented economic inequality and social transformation. The present paper deals with the problem of understanding how Oscar Wilde employs irony to critique Victorian assumptions about wealth and poverty in his 1887 short story "The Model Millionaire." The purpose of this study is to analyze how Wilde's ironic reversals—a millionaire disguised as a beggar, a poor man's generosity rewarded with fortune—expose the unreliability of appearances and the limitations of materialist values. The research paper employs the research method of close textual analysis informed by scholarship on Wilde's aestheticism, Victorian cultural history, and theories of irony. The research paper concludes that Wilde constructs a multi-layered ironic structure that inverts conventional expectations about wealth and virtue, ultimately suggesting that true worth lies in generosity and character rather than financial accumulation. The future perspective of research is to situate this story within Wilde's broader exploration of wealth, art, and moral value across his fiction.

Keywords: Irony, Wealth, Poverty, Wilde, The Model Millionaire

1. Introduction

Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) remains one of the most celebrated and controversial figures in English literary history. Known for his wit, his aesthetic philosophy, and his dramatic fall from social grace, Wilde produced a body of work that continues to challenge, entertain, and provoke. His short stories, though sometimes overshadowed by his plays and novel, demonstrate the same qualities of paradox, irony, and social criticism that characterize his more famous works.

"The Model Millionaire," subtitled "A Note of Admiration," was first published in *The World* in 1887 and later collected in *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* (1891). The story recounts the experience of Hughie Erskine, a charming but impecunious young man who gives his last sovereign to what he believes is a beggar posing for an artist's painting.

The beggar proves to be Baron Hausberg, one of the wealthiest men in Europe, who rewards Hughie's generosity with a wedding present of ten thousand pounds.

This study examines the story as a carefully constructed exercise in irony, analyzing how Wilde manipulates expectations about wealth and poverty to produce both comic effect and social critique. Through attention to the story's reversals, its characterization, and its satirical edge, the paper demonstrates how Wilde uses the short story form to interrogate Victorian assumptions about class, appearance, and moral worth.

The main aim of the study is to critically analyze the use of irony in Oscar Wilde's treatment of wealth and poverty in "The Model Millionaire." The major objectives of the research study are: to examine the ironic reversals of appearance and reality in the story's treatment of the beggar-millionaire; to analyze the characterization of Hughie Erskine as a figure of impractical virtue; and to evaluate the story's satirical critique of Victorian materialism and class assumptions.

The researcher intends to evaluate how Wilde's "The Model Millionaire" employs multiple layers of irony to invert conventional Victorian assumptions about wealth and poverty, presenting a world in which appearances deceive, generosity defies economic logic, and true millionaire status is defined by moral rather than monetary wealth.

2. Review of Literature

Critical engagement with Wilde's short stories has developed considerably in recent decades. Early criticism often treated the stories as minor works, charming but slight compared to the plays and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. More recent scholarship has recognized their sophistication and their contribution to Wilde's artistic project.

Beckson (1998) examined Wilde's short fiction within the context of his aesthetic philosophy, arguing that stories like "The Model Millionaire" demonstrate Wilde's characteristic fusion of entertainment and social commentary. This approach situates the story within Wilde's broader artistic project.

Studies of Victorian attitudes toward wealth and poverty provide essential context for understanding the story's satirical targets. Gagnier (1986) analyzed how Wilde's work engages with the economic anxieties of late Victorian England, demonstrating his awareness of class tensions and his critique of capitalist values.

Scholarship on irony has illuminated Wilde's characteristic technique. Bashford (1999) examined Wilde's use of paradox and inversion, arguing that his irony functions not merely as wit but as a mode of social criticism that destabilizes conventional assumptions.

Genre studies have situated "The Model Millionaire" within the tradition of the conte or short tale. Small (1993) traced Wilde's debt to French models, particularly the ironic tales of Guy de Maupassant, while noting Wilde's distinctive transformations of the form.

Recent work has attended to the story's treatment of art and commerce. Frankel (2017)

analyzed the figure of the artist Alan Trevor and his relationship to the marketplace, arguing that the story reflects Wilde's ambivalence about the commodification of art in Victorian culture.

3. Methodology

This research employs close textual analysis as its primary methodology, attending carefully to the story's language, structure, characterization, and ironic techniques. The analysis is informed by scholarship on Wilde's aestheticism and social criticism, Victorian cultural history, and theories of irony.

The primary text utilized is "The Model Millionaire" as published in *Lord Arthur Saville's Crime and Other Stories* (1891). Secondary sources include critical editions of Wilde's works, scholarly monographs on Victorian literature and culture, and peer-reviewed articles addressing Wilde's short fiction.

The analysis proceeds by first examining the story's opening and its establishment of ironic expectations. Subsequent sections analyze the central reversal, the characterization of Hughie Erskine and Baron Hausberg, and the story's satirical implications. The conclusion evaluates the story's contribution to Wilde's critique of Victorian values.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 The Opening: Establishing Ironic Expectations

Wilde's opening paragraph immediately establishes the ironic mode that will govern the entire story:

> "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" (Wilde 193).

These opening sentences present a series of provocative assertions that seem to endorse materialist values: charm without wealth is useless; romance belongs to the rich; the poor should abandon dreams for practicality. Yet the very extremity of these claims signals irony. Wilde's aphoristic style, with its balanced antitheses ("privilege of the rich" versus "profession of the unemployed"), creates the suspicion that the narrator is not entirely sincere.

The final sentence—"It is better to have a permanent income than to be fascinating"—crystallizes this ironic mode. The comparison is absurd on its face; income and fascination belong to different categories entirely. By treating them as comparable alternatives, Wilde mocks the Victorian tendency to reduce all value to economic terms.

This opening also prepares for the story's reversal. By apparently dismissing charm without wealth, the narrator sets up a situation in which charm will prove more valuable than expected—and in which wealth will appear where least anticipated.

4.2 Hughie Erskine: The Charming Poor Man

The introduction of the protagonist extends the ironic treatment of wealth and poverty:

> "Hughie Erskine was wonderfully good-looking, with his crisp brown hair, his clear-cut profile, and his grey eyes. He was as popular with men as he was with women, and he had every accomplishment except that of making money" (Wilde 193).

Hughie possesses every desirable quality except the one Victorian society most valued: the ability to accumulate wealth. His "accomplishments" are social and aesthetic—good looks, popularity, charm—rather than economic. This characterization establishes Hughie as a figure of impractical virtue, valuable by every measure except the commercial one that dominates his society.

The narrator's account of Hughie's financial history deepens the ironic portrait:

> "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 had soon tired of pekoe and souchong" (Wilde 194).

The metaphor of the butterfly among bulls and bears captures Hughie's unsuitability for commercial life. He is a creature of beauty and lightness amid the brutal struggles of the marketplace. His quick abandonment of the tea trade—"tired of pekoe and souchong"—suggests aesthetic rather than practical objections; the words themselves bore him.

This characterization prepares for the story's central action. Hughie's impracticality and generosity will lead him to give away his last sovereign to a supposed beggar—an act that makes no economic sense but perfect moral sense.

4.3 The Beggar in the Studio: Appearance and Reality

The story's central scene occurs in the studio of the artist Alan Trevor, where Hughie encounters what he takes to be a beggar model:

> "When Hughie came in he found Trevor putting the finishing touches to a wonderful life-size picture of a beggar-man. The beggar himself was standing on a raised platform in a corner of the studio. He was a wizened old man, with a face like wrinkled parchment, and a most piteous expression" (Wilde 195).

The description emphasizes the beggar's apparent poverty: "wizened," "wrinkled parchment," "piteous expression." Everything visible confirms the identity suggested by the context—a beggar posing for an artist's painting. Yet visibility, Wilde will reveal, deceives.

Hughie's response to the beggar demonstrates his characteristic generosity:

> "'Poor old fellow!' said Hughie, 'how miserable he looks! But I suppose, to you painters, his face is his fortune?'
>
> 'Certainly,' replied Trevor, 'you don't want a beggar to look happy, do you?' " (Wilde 195).

The phrase "his face is his fortune" operates ironically on multiple levels. On the surface, Hughie means that the beggar's piteous appearance is his professional asset as a model. But the phrase will prove literally true in an unexpected way: the face that seems to belong to a beggar actually belongs to one of Europe's richest men.

Trevor's response—"you don't want a beggar to look happy"—introduces the theme of artistic representation. The beggar must look miserable for the painting to succeed; appearance is manufactured for aesthetic effect. This observation applies beyond art to social life generally: people present appearances that may not reflect their actual conditions.

4.4 The Act of Generosity

Hughie's gift to the supposed beggar forms the story's pivotal moment:

> "He walked over to where the old man was sitting, and, slipping a sovereign into his hand, whispered, 'There, my poor old fellow; it is all I have got—but I could not see you looking so miserable.' And the old man gave a slight start, and a faint smile flitted across his withered lips" (Wilde 196).

The gesture is simultaneously generous and foolish—Hughie gives his last sovereign to someone he believes needs it. The act embodies the impractical virtue established in his characterization: he responds to apparent suffering with immediate generosity, without calculating consequences.

The beggar's response—"a slight start" and "a faint smile"—hints at the reversal to come. The start suggests surprise at receiving charity; the smile suggests something more complex, perhaps amusement at the irony of the situation. Baron Hausberg, one of Europe's wealthiest men, has just received a sovereign from a man who cannot afford to give it.

4.5 The Revelation: Wealth Disguised as Poverty

The story's central reversal occurs when Hughie learns the beggar's true identity:

> "'The old man you saw to-day in the studio was Baron Hausberg. He is a great friend of mine, buys all my pictures and that sort of thing, and gave me a commission a month ago to paint him as a beggar. Que voulez-vous? La fantaisie d'un millionnaire! And I must say he made a magnificent figure in his rags, or I should say in my rags; they are an old suit I got in Spain' " (Wilde 197).

The revelation that the beggar is actually a millionaire inverts the entire situation. Trevor's casual explanation—"la fantaisie d'un millionnaire" (the whim of a millionaire)—emphasizes the arbitrary power of wealth. Baron Hausberg can afford to dress as a beggar for amusement; poverty for him is a costume, a role to be tried on and discarded.

The detail about the rags belonging to Trevor adds another layer: even the appearance of poverty is borrowed, a theatrical property rather than authentic condition. The millionaire wears the artist's old suit, performing poverty with someone else's props.

Hughie's response to this revelation demonstrates his mortification:

> "'Baron Hausberg!' cried Hughie. 'Good heavens! I gave him a sovereign!' and he sank into an arm-chair the picture of dismay" (Wilde 198).

The phrase "the picture of dismay" echoes the story's artistic framing. Hughie becomes a picture himself, an image of embarrassment that mirrors the painted beggar. His generosity, which seemed noble when directed at poverty, now appears foolish when its object proves wealthy.

4.6 The Counter-Gift: Generosity Rewarded

The story's conclusion provides the final reversal. Rather than mocking Hughie's mistake, Baron Hausberg rewards it magnificently:

> "Enclosed I find a cheque for £10,000, drawn in your favour, and written across it was, 'A wedding present to Hugh Erskine and Laura Merton, from an old beggar' " (Wilde 200).

The gift of ten thousand pounds—an enormous sum—transforms Hughie's situation entirely. His impractical generosity has produced practical reward; his sovereign has multiplied ten thousand times. The signature "from an old beggar" maintains the ironic play on identity: the millionaire signs as the beggar he pretended to be, acknowledging the role that occasioned his gift.

This conclusion operates on multiple ironic levels. First, it inverts economic logic: Hughie's charity produces profit rather than loss. Second, it rewards impracticality: the very foolishness that the opening seemed to condemn proves the path to success. Third, it redefines "model millionaire": Baron Hausberg becomes a model not of wealth accumulation but of generosity, using his millions to reward virtue rather than merely to accumulate more.

4.7 The Title's Irony: "The Model Millionaire"

The story's title encapsulates its ironic structure. "Model" operates in multiple senses: Baron Hausberg is a model (artist's model) and a model millionaire (exemplary wealthy person). The first sense is literal—he poses for a painting. The second sense is moral—he represents what a millionaire should be.

The conjunction of "model" and "millionaire" is itself ironic. Models are typically paid poorly; their profession involves lending their bodies to artists' visions. Millionaires are the opposite—they pay others, command resources, direct enterprises. By having a millionaire become a model, Wilde reverses the usual direction of economic power.

Furthermore, the subtitle—"A Note of Admiration"—signals the story's celebratory tone. But admiration for what? Not for Baron Hausberg's wealth, which is merely circumstantial, but for his generosity and his appreciation of Hughie's virtue. The millionaire is admirable not because he has money but because of what he does with it.

4.8 Satirical Critique of Victorian Values

Beyond its comic reversals, the story offers sustained critique of Victorian attitudes toward wealth and poverty. The opening's apparent endorsement of materialism is undermined by the narrative that follows. Hughie's impractical virtue proves more valuable than worldly wisdom; generosity toward the apparently poor produces rewards that calculation could never achieve.

The story also critiques the assumption that appearance reveals reality. Victorian society placed enormous emphasis on visible markers of class and status. Wilde's beggar-millionaire exposes the unreliability of such markers: clothing, posture, and expression can be performed, borrowed, or faked.

The art world setting adds another dimension to the critique. Trevor paints a millionaire as a beggar for money; appearance is manufactured for commercial purposes. This transaction parallels the broader social manufacture of appearances that Wilde satirizes throughout his work.

5. Conclusion

This analysis has demonstrated that Oscar Wilde's "The Model Millionaire" employs multiple layers of irony to critique Victorian attitudes toward wealth and poverty. Through the central reversal—a millionaire disguised as a beggar, rewarding the generosity of a poor man who pitied him—Wilde inverts conventional expectations and exposes the limitations of materialist values.

The story's ironic structure operates on several levels. First, appearance and reality are inverted: the beggar is wealthy, the wealthy young man is poor, and poverty is a costume rather than a condition. Second, economic logic is reversed: generosity produces profit, impracticality

yields success, and the gift of a sovereign returns ten thousand pounds.

Wilde's satirical targets include Victorian materialism, class prejudice, and the assumption that visible markers reliably indicate social reality. By demonstrating that a millionaire can be mistaken for a beggar and that a charming but poor young man can prove more genuinely generous than prudent calculation would allow, Wilde challenges the values that governed his society.

The story's conclusion, with its fairy-tale reward of virtue, might seem to undermine its satirical edge. Yet even this happy ending carries ironic weight. The conventional marriage plot—Hughie can now afford to marry Laura Merton—is enabled by an utterly unconventional means. The wedding present comes from a "beggar," generosity flows from apparent poverty, and the model millionaire proves to be one who gives rather than one who merely accumulates.

Future research might situate this story within Wilde's broader exploration of wealth, art, and moral value, examining how works such as "The Young King," "The Happy Prince," and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* develop related themes. Additionally, comparative analysis with other Victorian treatments of wealth and poverty might illuminate the distinctive features of Wilde's ironic method.

References

[1] Bashford, Bruce. *Oscar Wilde: The Critic as Humanist*. Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1999.

[2] Beckson, Karl. *The Oscar Wilde Encyclopedia*. AMS Press, 1998.

[3] Ellmann, Richard. *Oscar Wilde*. Hamish Hamilton, 1987.

[4] Frankel, Nicholas. *Oscar Wilde: The Unrepentant Years*. Harvard UP, 2017.

[5] Gagnier, Regenia. *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*. Stanford UP, 1986.

[6] Guy, Josephine M., and Ian Small. *Oscar Wilde's Profession: Writing and the Culture Industry in the Late Nineteenth Century*. Oxford UP, 2000.

[7] Kiberd, Declan. *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*. Jonathan Cape, 1995.

[8] Raby, Peter, editor. *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. Cambridge UP, 1997.

[9] Small, Ian. *Oscar Wilde Revalued: An Essay on New Materials and Methods of Research*. ELT Press, 1993.

[10] Wilde, Oscar. "The Model Millionaire." *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories*, Osgood, McIlvaine, 1891, pp. 193–200.

[11] Willoughby, Guy. *Art and Christhood: The Aesthetics of Oscar Wilde*. Associated University Presses, 1993.

[12] Wright, Thomas. *Oscar's Books*. Chatto & Windus, 2008.