The Social Conditions of Poverty in Oscar Wilde's "The Happy Prince": Re-evaluating Causes and Effects of Poverty in Victorian London

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While the Victorian period in London between 1837-1901 is often looked back upon by contemporaries as a time of great prosperity for England's industrial might as a world power in terms of trade and production, the lassez-faire economic policy that supported an unregulated free market also resulted in disastrous failings for the working class people and encouraged a growing wealth disparity between the aristocracy and the poor, further exacerbating social problems felt mainly by the poorer classes. Oscar Wilde's fairy tale, "The Happy Prince" in his collection titled *The Happy Prince and Other Tales,* published in London in 1888, exposes the wealth gap between the wealthy and the poor and the failings of both the wealthy classes and the British Government during the Victorian period. Speaking from the perspective of a gold statue who was once a "Prince" in a great city, Wilde provides social commentary that both critiques the attitudes of the wealthy towards the poor and creates

empathy for the poor throughout the story in order to humanize them and their suffering to children reading his tale. Wilde's story reveals the widespread poverty across London during the Victorian period and the social factors contributing to their misery, including unemployment and homelessness, rampant disease and starvation, and little support from the government in terms of work and safety regulations that allowed for the creation of workhouses across England which further worsened the already dire circumstances of the poor classes.

Claiming to be a human in his past life, Wilde's story begins with the introduction of the "Happy Prince" statue and his misery at being forced to witness the sufferings of the city below him. Before coming alive as a statue, the Happy Prince states that he " did not know what tears were, for [he] lived in the Palace of Sans-Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter" and "never cared to ask what lay beyond it, everything about [him]was so beautiful" (Wilde). After dying with no cause to leave his palace walls as a human, the Happy Prince comes alive again in the form of a giant gold statue erected above the city, forced to "see all the ugliness and all the misery of [his] city, and though [his] heart is made of lead yet [he] cannot choose but weep" (Wilde). Seemingly coming alive again only to witness misery and suffering he cannot physically stop, a sense of punishment for the ignorance of the Happy Prince in his human

life is created. While the Prince's wealth could shield him from the realities of the city's poor behind his palaces figurative and literal walls, his new status as a gold statue forces him to face the terrible treatment of the poor through his own ignorance and assumptions, as well as through exploitative measures by wealthy business owners increasing their already substantial wealth. After a swallow chooses to sleep upon the Happy Prince, he is able to convince the swallow to help him aid the poor around the city. Throughout the story, the description of the poor by the swallow reveals the devastating realities of the Victorian era poor and the social problems contributing to their exploitation and abuse, including Laissez-Faire Capitalism, unemployment, homelessness, sickness, hunger, and the perception of them by the weather classes as being violent, lazy, stupid, and unmotivated to work for a living.

After gaining help from the swallow, the Happy Prince statue sends the bird to a poor house in order to offer up the ruby in his sword hilt to them to ease their suffering. Looking across the city, the Prince sees a "poor house. One of the windows is open, and through it [he] can see a woman seated at a table. Her face is thin and worn, and she has coarse, red hands, all pricked by the needle, for she is a seamstress…In a bed in the corner of the room her little boy is lying ill. He has a fever, and is asking for oranges. His mother has nothing to give him but river water,

so he is crying" (Wilde). The description reveals what the Happy Prince must look upon everyday, that being the constant suffering felt and experienced by the poor. The poor house in which the woman lives has the windows smashed out, and she and her son are confined to a single room that they must share within the building, showing the crampedness of housing available to the poor. While her son is sick, the poor mother has no choice but to work, seemingly non-stop due to the condition of her hands, with no respite. She has no food or medicine to give her sick child, only river water, demonstrating her state of destitution as she works in the hope of being able to care for her child.

A British ship owner by the name of Charles Booth, also decided to study the daily lives of London's poor and middle classes by creating a survey called the Charles Booth's Inquiry into Life and Labour in London. Operating from 1886 to 1903, Booth's survey consisted of street by street walks accompanied by police officers through various districts in London and compiled notebooks of data on London's poor and middle classes, including information about their daily lives and general observations by the surveyors of the poverty-stricken areas. From the data, Booth was able to create a series of maps which established the social conditions of a street's inhabitants according to a legend which delineated the various classes across

the city. Just as Wilde's story reveals the dire conditions of the Victorian poor and the disregard of them by the wealthy classes, his maps also contradicted general beliefs of the wealthy classes that London's poor were isolated to a specific area and inherently "unreachable" to the public. In Laura Vaughan's article discussing the effects of Charles Booths' study, she states that "He showed that districts such as the East End were not an undifferentiated morass of poor, criminal streets, but in fact contained a variety of classes, with finely differentiated deprivation situations"(Vaughan 27). By providing a method to visualize the widespread and scattered poverty across London, his study proved to be a starting point for the wealthier classes to be able to discuss and make apparent the systemic causes for the recorded problems of the poor based on physical evidence instead of general negative rhetoric regarding the character of the poor. Instead of being able to assume that poverty was an isolated problem and unrelated to the actions of the wealthier classes, Booth's maps proved that underlying societal factors were contributing to the poverty and paved the way for future advocates for the poor and social research. Both Wilde's story and Booth's survey acted as a medium to reveal the reality of the lives of the poor, critique the social problems contributing to poverty, and humanize the poor to the wealthy classes who regarded them as naturally violent and criminal.

Due to Laissez-Faire Economic policy dominating in England during the 19th century and the booming industrial revolution generating new products, markets, and capital, London's labor market was focused on fluctuating market demands, which resulted in seasonal workers and casual employment (Vaughan 8). Coupled with increased immigration to the major cities looking for new job opportunities and virtually no government regulation, business owners could drive down wages tremendously due to the large workforce pool to choose from and exploit their employees to work gruelling and long hours under unsafe working conditions for meagre pay, often not enough to support a family on a singular factory job. Social reformer Andrew Mearns' work titled *The Outcry of Outcast London: An inquiry Into the Condition of the Abject Poor*, published in 1883, reveals the inhumane working conditions subjected upon the poor due to low government regulation:

We ask a woman who is making tweed trousers, how much she can earn in a day, and are told one shilling. But what does a day mean to this poor soul? *Seventeen hours!* From five in the morning to ten at night—no pause for meals. She eats her crust and drinks a little tea as she works, making in truth, with her needle and thread, not her living only, but her shroud. For making men's shirts these women are paid 10d. a dozen; lawn

tennis aprons, 3d. a dozen; and babies' hoods, from 1s. 6d. to 2s. 6d. a dozen. (Mearns 16)

Mearns' questioning of a poor Victorian woman demonstrates the incredibly low wages and long hours that people were forced to work in order to pay for food and lodging for their families. More often than not, due to the incredibly low wages and absent safety and child labor regulations controlled by private businessmen, families were forced to send their young children to work in the factories, docks, and mines to help support the family, commonly risking their health and safety due to unsafe working conditions. While the fortunate could find low paying jobs, many turned to prostitution, thieving, petty and violent crime, or simply wandered the streets aimlessly as they could find no work or aid to support themselves (Booth/B/350). As immigration increased and contributed to a large workpool, private business and factory owners could drive down the wages of their employees tremendously, and due to no government intervention or regulation, these businessmen could very quickly exploit desperate working class people desperate for employment and force them to work in harsh conditions for immensely long periods of time no matter the age, health condition, or disability. Able to capitalize on the poors' desperation for employment, private business owners decisions to lower wages contributed to further social problems arising

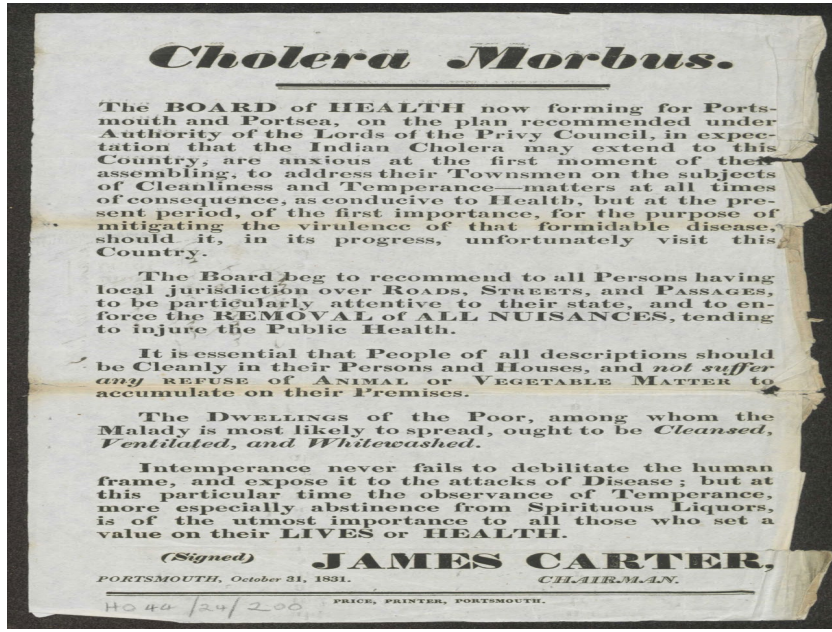
from the increasing poverty, such as a housing crisis, epidemics of contagious disease due to unhygienic conditions the poor were subjected to, and the development of workhouses for the poor.

As the story of the Happy Prince progresses, he asks the swallow to stay and help him deliver his sapphire eyes to other poor people within the city. Flying over the city, the swallow witnessed “the rich making merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars were sitting at the gates. He flew into dark lanes, and saw the white faces of starving children looking out listlessly at the black streets. Under the archway of a bridge two little boys were lying in one another’s arms to try and keep themselves warm” (Wilde). Describing the contrast between the bright and cheerful homes of the wealthy and the black, dark streets and alleys that poor children frequented in a state of listlessness demonstrates the rampant homelessness present in the Victorian city. Wilde reveals the sad reality for the lives of the Victorian poor as low wages and unemployment compounded into a housing crises that saw the increase of poor communal housing called “slums” and workhouses ran by private business owner to house their employees in exchange for work, often leading to abuse and further exploitation of the poor for cheap labor made possible by absentee government regulations. In police walk notebooks from Booth’s survey, the

poor streets, defined by the color black on the map, are described with common characteristics of streets lined with two to three storied buildings in which single rooms within the buildings were rented out to entire poor families, resulting in immense overcrowding (Duckworth, Booth/B/350 165-170). These building's windows were commonly smashed out and patched by brown paper, the doors wide open, and occupied by ragged, dirty, and barefooted children and women (Duckworth, Booth/B/350 209). Similar to business owners, home and property owners were not subject to government regulations such as rent control, health and safety regulations, or maintenance standards for the properties rented out to the poor, and could get away with no repercussions for housing people in unsafe, overcrowded, and unhygienic conditions for cheap rent. In her article analyzing the findings of Charles Booth's poverty maps, Vaughan describes a notorious slum in London, known as the Old Nichol in Shoreditch East London: "The Nichol was a densely populated warren of streets containing appalling housing conditions. Life expectancy was said to be just 16. The district's rotten housing stock meant that it was the last refuge of the poor and its bewildering layout meant that it had a reputation locally as a criminal enclave" (Vaughan 21-22). Due to rising rent of other properties that only the wealthier classes could afford, further pushing the poor into already full cheap housing,

these “slums” such as the Old Nichol became common places for the poor to frequent as it was the only shelter financially available to them. These “slums” were not regulated by government officials and thus, private owners had no incentive to upkeep the properties of slum housing, causing rampant disease to spread due to unhygienic conditions paired with the overcrowding of malnourished people creating the ideal conditions for epidemics to spread quickly. Mearn’s also ventured into slum housing and recorded the horrors of what slum housing entailed for the poor, writing that “To get into them you have to penetrate courts reeking with poisonous and malodorous gases arising from accumulations of sewage and refuse scattered in all directions and often flowing beneath your feet;... You have to grope your way along dark and filthy passages swarming with vermin” (Mearns 8). Mearns further describes the rampant sickness and death prevalent in slum housing, stating that inspector reports detail families living with pigs in a single room, people sick with smallpox and confined to filthy rooms, children running half naked and caked in dirt, upwards of 7 people living all together in an underground kitchen with a dead child in the room among them, a case of a poor widow living with her three children and a dead baby who had been deceased thirteen days, the father committing suicide shortly before the death of the baby (Mearns 9). Along with

smallpox, cholera spread quickly to residents of slum housing as people were forced to drink water contaminated with sewage, prompting the Board of Health to administer pamphlets across poor districts, such as one published in 1831 for the residents of Portsmouth and Portsea:



Cholera Morbus.

The BOARD of HEALTH now forming for Portsmouth and Portsea, on the plan recommended under Authority of the Lords of the Privy Council, in expectation that the Indian Cholera may extend to this Country, are anxious at the first moment of their assembling, to address their Townsmen on the subjects of Cleanliness and Temperance—matters at all times of consequence, as conducive to Health, but at the present period, of the first importance, for the purpose of mitigating the virulence of that formidable disease, should it, in its progress, unfortunately visit this Country.

The Board beg to recommend to all Persons having local jurisdiction over ROADS, STREETS, and PASSAGES, to be particularly attentive to their state, and to enforce the REMOVAL of ALL NUISANCES, tending to injure the Public Health.

It is essential that People of all descriptions should be Cleanly in their Persons and Houses, and *not suffer any* REFUSE of ANIMAL or VEGETABLE MATTER to accumulate on their Premises.

The DWELLINGS of the Poor, among whom the Malady is most likely to spread, ought to be *Cleansed, Ventilated, and Whitewashed.*

Intemperance never fails to debilitate the human frame, and expose it to the attacks of Disease; but at this particular time the observance of Temperance, more especially abstinence from Spirituous Liquors, is of the utmost importance to all those who set a value on their LIVES or HEALTH.

(Signed) **JAMES CARTER,**

PORTSMOUTH, October 31, 1831. *CHAIRMAN.*

PRICE, PRINTER, PORTSMOUTH.

HO 40 /24/ 200

(Carter, James)

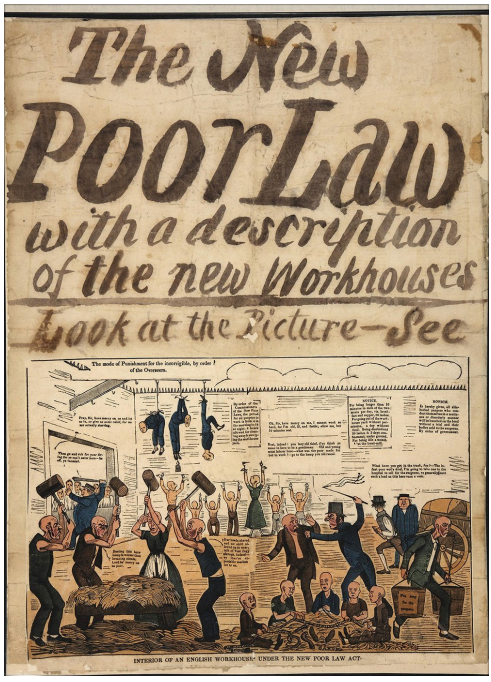
While demonstrating the prevalence of cholera during this time, the pamphlet also shows that government officials were clearly aware of the unhealthy conditions of the poor and were not simply unaware of the misery and suffering happening around the country. Commonly thought to be inherently violent criminals who were too lazy to work for living (Vaughan 27),

poor people were often looked down upon by the wealthier classes which contributed to their continued abuse and exploitation throughout the Victorian period as no further thought or study went into social problems such as low wages and exploitative labor that was actively contributing to the poverty issues.

Also contributing to the exploitation of the poor through labor was the creation of workhouses, mandated by the England Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834. Charlotte Newman states in her article that the Act was meant to help relieve widespread poverty and homelessness, however, it was made on the assumption that poverty was the result of a population suffering from idleness (123), not due to low wages and immigration compounding into a situation working class people could not escape. The Act established a Commission that would have the power to oversee a system of relief for the poor through the creation of "workhouses" that would offer relief to any able-bodied poor worker in exchange for labor (Newman 123). Thought to reduce the amount of government aid spent on the poor and lessen the rampant homelessness, the "workhouses" were instead a shameful and harrowing prospect that was forced upon the poor in their already dire circumstances (Newman 123). Once in the workhouse, the workers were referred to as "paupers" and were subject to various abuses at the hands of

their “Guardians”. In a letter written by a pauper named James Archer to the Poor Law Commissioners in 1863, he informed them that “in consequence of the depression of Trade have been unemployed for seven months” (Voices of Victorian Poor) and that when he had applied to the Commission at an earlier date for relief, they refused outside aid to his family, only offering pauperism in the workhouse as an alternative. Refusing to be pauperized and subject to the abuses in the workhouse, Archer wrote that he told the Commissioner “ it was unjust treatment and I should Resist it by Pursuing another course which was to apply to you hoping you will not allow me to be perpetually Pauperised without affording me a chance of Striving against it” (Voices of the Victorian Poor). His determination to avoid the workhouse demonstrates the fear and dread shared among the poor who were forced into the workhouses through exploitation by the Guardians. By refusing outside aid to families requesting relief, the Guardians could manipulate the poor into becoming pauperized, for they feared death by starvation and homelessness should they not accept. Countless letters were written by paupers informing the Commission of the abuses they suffered at the workhouses and an organization devoted to exposing neglect towards the poor was created in response to the workhouses in 1846, called the Poor Man’s Guardian Society. They also created a newspaper called *The Poor Man’s Guardian,*

and released an anti-workhouse poster revealing the abuses the poor were being subject to in the workhouse:



(Unknown Artist)

The poster depicts various scenes, including one of an elderly pauper being whipped by a Guardian, begging "Oh Sir, have mercy on me, I cannot work so hard, for I'm old, ill, and feeble, allow me, but 10 minutes rest" (UK National Archives). Another scene depicts paupers being hung by the ceiling from their appendages, with the heading above them reading, "The mode of Punishment for the incorrigible, by order of the Overseers" (UK National Archives). Beside the hanging paupers, a message reads "By order of the Commissioners of the

New Poor Laws, the period for all paupers to work is from 4 in the morning to 10 at night. 3 hours allowed for clearing away and sweeping the workhouse yard" (UK National Archives). These scenes depict the paupers with shaven heads, rugged and ripped clothing, and are all expressing fear of the Guardian in the dark and dirty workhouse. The lack of regulations and intervention when complaints were received by paupers allowed the Guardians to subject their employees to inhumane work hours, unsanitary and unsafe working and living conditions, physical and sexual assault, could separate parents from their children, deny them medical aid when ill, and abuse and overwork the disabled and elderly with impunity, for no repercussions by the law would follow the Gaurdians abuse and exploitation of the poor for their own financial gain.

Oscar Wilde's story of the Happy Prince shows the desperation of the poor in the Victorian period and creates empathy for the poor through the actions of the Happy Prince statue and the swallow, and condemns the wealthy classes by exposing the shallowness and ignorance of the mayor and the town councillors. After giving his eyes, ruby sword hilt, and golden covering to the poor across the city, the Happy Prince is noticed by the city's mayor and town councillors, exclaiming "Dear me! how shabby the Happy Prince looks!" (Wilde), agreeing that as he no longer had his beautiful material

attributes, that he looked “Little better than a beggar” (Wilde). After knowing all that the Happy Prince has sacrificed for his city’s poor, including his own vision, the mayor and town councillors' perception of him as a “beggar” simply because he looks “shabby” is while incredibly inaccurate and misplaced, the common perception of poor people in the Vicorian times by the wealthy classes. The wealthier men, only seeing worth and legitimacy in material possessions or displays of wealth and grandeur, look down upon the Happy Prince in his changed state, although he is ironically the opposite of a beggar, freely giving his material possessions to the poor, asking for nothing in return for his gifts. Wilde reveals the perception of the poor by the upper classes and their blatant ignorance of the sufferings of the poor, as they only noticed the condition of the “shabby” statue, not the immense amount of suffering felt by the poor around their entire city. Wilde critiques the superficiality of the mayor and councillors and encourages children reading the story to aspire to act as the Happy Prince and the swallow would by associating their good deeds and empathy for the poor as being traits worthy of someone heaven-bound. After God calls out for “the two most precious things in the city” (Wilde), angels bring the Prince and the swallow to God, to which he says “for in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me” (Wilde),

demonstrating their guaranteed ascent to Paradise for their good deeds. Just as Wilde critiqued the treatment of the poor by the wealthy class and encouraged empathy and changed perception of the poor through his story for children, many other advocates such as Charles Booth and Andrew Mearns dedicated analysis and study of the social conditions surrounding poverty in Victorian England through Booth's Map Survey and Mearn's published expose condemning the treatment of the poor. While the aforementioned people had the most influence in changing the perception of Victorian England's poor due to their elevated status in society, the poor also played an active role in the condemnation of their treatment by the government and Poor Laws. They created organizations and wrote letters to board officials detailing their experiences of abuse and exploitation and the indisputable reasons for their sufferings, such as unemployment, sickness, injury, and low pay. While these letters may not have been accessible to the eyes of the wealthy classes during the early Victorian period and therefore did not have much influence in terms of their treatment, these letters demonstrate that the poor were often educated, smart, hard-working, literate, and were not lazy thieves as they were commonly thought to be by the wealthy classes, but instead ordinary, law-abiding citizens simply unable to change their socio-economic position, often forcing them into lucrative

businesses or illegal crimes in order to feed themselves and their families.

By describing the various scenes of poverty across the city, Wilde reveals the social issues surrounding mass poverty within cities, such as unemployment, low wages for incredibly long hours, homelessness, starvation, and repulsion of them by the wealthy classes within their communities. Charles Booths' study of maps corroborate Wilde's depictions, as police notebooks provide primary source material of the mass poverty across London caused by these compounding social ills, including descriptions of decrepit slum housing, the demand for cheap housing due low wages and unregulated rent increases coupled with increased immigration from foreign countries, the ragged and starved state of poor women and children aimlessly walking or playing in the streets, prostitutes and pimps looking out from smashed windows, descriptions of the limited seasonal trades available to the growing working class, and thieving and stabbings taking place in the poorest areas where unemployment was particularly prevalent. The compilation of this data into maps to determine the social status of an areas inhabitants also revealed that poverty was not isolated to a singular area in London and due to an inherently "violent" or "criminal" geographical area, but instead spread across the city, often in close proximity to wealthy classes on adjacent streets and

blocks. Andrew Mearn's publication of *The Outcry of Outcast London: An inquiry Into the Condition of the Abject Poor* in 1883 also advocated for the poor by revealing and condemning the treatment of the poor by their fellow Christians. He described the horrors of slum housing resulting in overcrowding, disease and death, the exhaustive long hours without rest worked by the elderly to be able to afford little food and a place to live, and the feelings of despair, hopelessness, and defeat felt by the poor alike during the Victorian period due to the inhumanity and ignorance of the upper classes to look into their sufferings further and realize the factors outside of their control contributing to their poverty. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 that saw the creation of workhouses and "paupers" greatly increased the abuse of the poor by forcing them into workhouses by refusing them outside aid, and once pauperized, were bound to the Guardians in charge of the workhouse. Due to the absence of regulations, the workhouses were opportunities for the Guardians to exploit the poor, as they exploited men, women, the elderly, disabled, and children alike for their labor. Many letters written by paupers detail abuse by the Guardians such as long working hours with no rest, not being allowed to leave the workhouse, physical and sexual abuse, inadequate access to nutritous food and appropriate clothing, and denial of medical care. The Act also prompted the creation of the Poor Man's

Guardian Society which was dedicated to exposing the neglect towards the poor within the workhouses and shares common sentiments between the thousands of letters sent to the Poor Law Commission during the Victorian period. In conclusion, throughout Oscar Wilde's story, "The Happy Prince", the mistreatment of the poor by the wealthy is critiqued and empathy for the poor is created through the humanization of the poor's sufferings and the circumstances outside of their control. His story, along with others works during the Victorian period that advocated for the poor, demonstrate the social issues that compounded to create a situation of perpetual and widespread poverty during the Victorian period, and contributed to changing the perception of the poor's individual characteristics as being the reason of their poverty towards the study of the socio-economic factors being significant factors contributing to their state of poverty.

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