

## The Effect of Imaginary and Religious Elements Vis- À-Vis Death in *Oscar and The Pink Lady*

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**Abstract** No doubt, one of the prominent concepts of literary works of the world is "death" which gains meaning vis-à-vis life. In the works of writers death is often manifested in an ugly manner that is indicative of man's bond with material belongings and worldly life. But the contemporary French writer, Eric Emmanuel Schmitt's approach to death is a specific one. His outstanding work *Oscar the lady in pink* is the most account of a sick child who is in the brink of death, yet the writer, who is aware of the impact of imagination on the child's psyche and the depth of human spirit, creates an imaginary world for him. Thus not only death is not ugly and horrendous but it becomes acceptable to the child, too. Imagination, as a revitalizing force is the only tool to recognize an abstract phenomenon like death. Making use of this force, which is more apt to be recreated in a child to the pleasant and splendid moments in a way that he has no fear of facing death. Combining the elements and concepts of short story stemming from the contemporary real world with the world of imagination, the writer creates a story with a unique theme and draws everybody's attention to an ideal humane and hopeful world. This article, whit regard to Schmitt's purpose, motivation and mental actions, shows how he, relying on religious beliefs and humanitarian emotions and exploiting psychological elements and imagination, enables the character of the story to easily accept death that lies beyond tangible manifestations.

**Key words:** death, imagination, belief in God, worldly life, spiritual value.

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### 1. Introduction

Literary-philosophical stories which are considered among the most controversial genres of fiction literature have always drawn the attention of those who look for a more profound perception of the universe. Many thinkers have used fiction literature to expound their philosophical ideas and religious beliefs; and have examined concepts like "being" and "death" in the form of various literary works. Eric Emmanuel Schmitt, one of the renowned figures of the contemporary French Literature, has benefited from this interconnection of philosophy and literature and has displayed philosophical notion in the form of story works.

Most of his works indicate his way of thinking and looking to the philosophy of being. Thus, his presence in the recent decade of the French contemporary literature is exceptional: Breaking the cliché story patterns and tending to the philosophical literature with a plain and simple diction. Among his outstanding works mention can be made of *Monsieur Ibrahim et les fleurs du Coran* meaning *Master Ibrahim and the flowers of the Quran*, *la nuit des Valognes* meaning *The night of the Valognes* and *The visitor* in most of this French writer's works there have occurred changes in the theme and structure of the story which imply a sort of innovation. In his works, he tends towards philosophical and religious notions and makes the audience acquainted with its surrounding world.

Tendency towards religion is regarded as a part of the writer's outlook during his activity. One of his prominent works, *Oscar and lady in pink* is an imaginary story with symbolic aspects. In other words, imagination is more present than realism. The fundamental notion of the work is "the bond of life and death."

The concept of "life" is associated with being alive and attempting in man's mind; but "death" arouses grief and fear in him.

Yet, exploiting psychoanalysis & the creative force of imagination in man, Schmitt makes a beautiful imaginary world and relying on faith in God, he not only negates fear of death but also portrays it as natural process. Therefore we would like to choose this story to deal with the relation of "death and imagination" together with enumerating some of its innovations in content.

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1 Para Textual Elements of the Work

Our first approach to any work is shaped by seeing its title. The title "Oscar and Lady in pink" brings at least two meanings to the mind; first it shows that the work consists of the inter-text dialogue between Oscar and a woman named "Rose", and also the color pink in the word "lady in pink" indicates Mrs. Rose's job who is the nurse of children in hospital. Meanwhile according to the psychology of colors "pink" is the symbol of "psychological calm". When we open the first pages the book, we witness the power and positive psychological impact of Mrs. Rose on the sick child "Oscar" in a way that she brings him tranquility via creating an imaginary world for him and establishing a link between him and his creator. One can say that Mrs. Rose is the prominent character of the story.

Some characters such as Oscar's father and mother are considered secondary Characters who have no role in the story. These two characters no names and are only called "father" and "mother" in other words they have lost their identity, name and title and gain title and identity just by their child. This is a very common phenomenon in the contemporary stories and negating thoughts and behavior of these characters is often manifested in depreciating their name and character or lack of these two.

It seems the writer who believes in God tries to depict the faithless characters as aimless and lacking identity via relying on spiritual and religious principles. It's not only considers such peoples thought against death, fear and horror but also puts their practice against the faithful people:

- "Oscar, haven't your father and mother talked to you about God?"

- No, my mom and papa are fools.

- You mean they have never told you anything on God?

- Why not, only once. They said they don't believe in God." (Schmitt, p.25)

"At last I could see them. They were there. I could see their voices..."

I heard what I shouldn't have. My mother was sobbing. Doctor Dusseldorf was repeating himself: we did our best but...

Would you like to see him?

My mother said: I don't dare at all.

My father said: he shouldn't see us like this.

And then I understood that my father and mother were cowards and feared death." (Ibid, p.21)

In this symbolic work we see two different human thoughts: "Oscar's parents" who are the symbol of mundane humans and Mrs. "Rose" who is familiar with spiritual values.

Therefore what is important in this work is the impact of an event like death rather than suggesting the sense of dying to the reader, that's why the personal feelings and beliefs of writer are regarded as effective factor in shaping the trend of the story.

The writer benefits from the inter-textual dialogue between the two persons (Oscar and Mrs. Rose) to narrate the story. Schmitt, in this work, innovates a novel meaning of "I" which is sometimes shown as a child or with childish phrases (he relates his own childhood naughtiness) and at times plays the act of the narrator

cleverly analyzing the events pertaining to his disease and death but most scenes of the story are a combination of dialogues and analyses of the two characters of story who illustrate inward and outward layers of Schmitt's thought.

As a matter of fact, the writer on the one hand materializes his personal feelings and religious beliefs in the character of Mrs. Rose and on the other displays the imaginations of his childhood in the hero of the story. So Mrs. Rose looks a thoughtful and patient Lady who makes "Oscar" hopeful of life by challenging his mind. He depicts his wrestling contests for him in different ways and with simple diction; for, he thinks that struggle is not stopped with one failure and any failure is the beginning of a new struggle. At some junctures he does even beyond this and describes various forms of struggling with the fear of death:

"Mommy Rose, wasn't I successful? Does it mean, death is waiting for me?  
Mammy Rose didn't answer.

Whenever she was silent, it meant she confirmed my word. When she was sure that I got the answer, she came near to me and entreatingly said:

-surely I didn't tell you anything .Do you swear?

-I swear.

-We were silent for a second and weighed these fresh thoughts.

-Oscar, if you'd written a letter to God?

"-Why should I write a letter to God?

-You'll feel less lonely by writing a letter to God..." (Ibid.p.15)

The writer makes an emotional relationship between the child, as the symbol of purity and immaturity, and a middle-aged woman (Mrs. Rose) who is the symbol of experience and wisdom in public culture; and thereby creates a conflict in the reader's mind and arouses him to read the work.

The writer believes that life's real meaning is in face of death; and understanding the death destroys the absurdity of the routine life. Thus a dying man realizes each moments of life and in his view time has a special value. In this story by creating an imaginary context for Oscar, Mrs. Rose makes him more familiar with the meaning and value of time. In such an imaginary world, time not only continues to proceed but it goes ahead exponentially so that Oscar can experience different phases of life (youth, middle age oldness) and creates a vivid life.

## 2.2. *Imagination, a Creative Force*

"Imagination is the force of life and the preliminary factor for all human perceptions. This force is a coordinating power. It is a means to differentiate between things, to put them to order, to distinguish between them or to combine them and as a result to reach perception." (Meqdadi, p. 142)

Imagination not only is manifested in the mental and psychological pictures but in all human affairs including artistic and scientific activities and creates a new phenomenon.

Imagination plays the pivotal role in many human mental notions because this divine bounty is the mental process of human being which not only reproduces the daily world of perception but it can lead to the creation of a more beautiful world than the real one. "The imaginary world is the one that has an ontological reality that without accepting it and awareness from its nature we will be unable to understand many religious-mystic teachings and the interpretation of its paradoxes. Knowing imagination is a key to attain different kinds of teachings that are not naturally disclosed to our minds." (Ebn Arabi, p. 74)

According to the believers of thought imagination is considered the force of primordial creation in life which perishes by the passage of time. That is why many of psychoanalysts stress on the impact of age over the characteristics of the course of imagination. They believe that "children get a sense-like perception of the

world and they have not gotten abstract concepts; so the imagination force is much more productive in them" (Roset, p. 373).

The character of the story "*Oscar and lady in pink*" is a ten year old child named "Oscar" who suffers from an incurable disease and is hospitalized.

He gets acquainted with a nurse called "Madame Rose". Mrs. Rose is a kind and experienced woman who uses Oscar's childish imagination and guides him to a fictitious world to pass last days of his life calmly:

"This is a tale .The tale of foretelling 12 days. Come and let's foretell, too. Especially you, From now on, let's count each day as ten years.

-ten years?

- Yeah, one day equals ten years.

-Now I'm ten, in this way after 12 days I'll be 130 years old."(Schmitt, 29)

The world of imagination makes it possible to personify dreams. This is the most important feature of the world of imagination. Once Mrs. Rose knows of Oscar's incurable disease and his imminent death, she breaks his routine place-time frame by applying the faculty of imagination. She mixes his childhood, youth and old age. Oscar, every days imagines himself in a period of life that is a product of his imagination and looks at his nice wishes realistically. It is quite and looks clear that this riddance of disease and the ensuing relief from the limits of time and place is short-lived. What is important for the winter is to portray the child's relief and riddance from all confinements, because having experienced different phases of life in his imagination. He will embrace death more easily. Mrs. Rose, on one side, is the symbol of an awakening creature which openly looks at the surrounding world and on the other side is a leader towards the world of imagination that causes change and revolution in the character of the story. Due to her age and experience she is aware of the mysteries and wanders of the world of imagination; so, resorting to this divine gift that becomes more fruitful and wider in children, she encourages Oscar to make golden days in his imaginary world.

The desirable thoughts are reflected on his imagination with a slow contemplation. The power and vastness of imagination and the dream-like atmosphere of the work is so palpable that not only the hero of story but the reader accepts the imaginary context as a part of the reality of life. Oscar has a receptive vision, especial power of imagination and as an ill person he is able though he is young, weak and suffering. He reproduces the imaginary and fictitious world within a psychological process in his mind: after that not only he is not preoccupied by death but also shows happiness in his behavior and speech. The great advantage of this mental embodiment is the creation of rapture and excitement in him which is the source of dynamism in his short life. He is so submerged in his imaginary world that just wants to benefit from the remaining days of his life.

"Today I passed my teen-age, I didn't pass it alone. What a story! So far I have had a lot of problems whit my parents and friends all of which have been because of girls. According to the tale that mammy Rose recounted I've become 20 tonight and I'm not worried at it because I have passed the hard time of puberty." (Ibid, p.31)

Mrs. Rose, in order to strengthen Oscar's spirit vis-à-vis death, arouses his inner motivation to continue living so that he shows some activities. She makes friendship between him and other children; and paves the ground for him to mix his imagination with reality. Oscar, who is passing through youth in his fictitious world, seeks to have a wife and Mrs. Rose provides the ground so that through loving "Peggy Blue" and caring for her, he experiences marriage in his imagination and thereby delays his death:

"Peggy Blue has a blue skin. She is in the last but one room of the corridor. She has a sweet smile but she doesn't speak. I love her but I can't tell her. Why, why don't you tell her? What do you feel about her?

-I want to look after her.

-O.K, go and tell her."( Ibid, p. 33)

Being acquainted with the psychology of children, Mrs. Rose, through activating the childish imagination of Oscar, paves a suitable ground for him via a psychological process, so that he is gradually reminded of the limitation of life's days in a symbolic way without affecting his childish morale.

"Death is not a durable reality in the child's mind." (Kubler, p. 178).

But in this story the nurse, "Mrs. Rose" inculcating her thought over Oscar's imagination, gradually shapes the realistic meaning of death in Oscar's mind; that is death as a biological process. She prepares Oscar to give in to his imaginations so that her desired ideas are reflected in his imagination without any attempt and with a slow contemplation. And since Oscar's relation with his practitioner is based on friendship, the consequence of such mental inculcation is very positive.

Famous psychoanalyst, Freud, insisting on his precise analysis of the world of imagination, believes that all elements of imagination and dream are closely related with our entire inner world even though they may be meaningless, fragmented or absurd. Therefore, they have psychological meaning." (Roset, p. 98)

In other words, the pictures of the imagination have completely real bases and they are somehow indicative of the inward and the psyche of man. Oscar, the child of story, in his imagination passes youth, middle age, and old age; and this implies his excessive Love of life and hatred of death. Thus, imagination is a valuable asset so that he creates in his mind what he is skimped by life. Different psychological and philosophical approaches of the nature of imagination show that it is a self-dynamic creative ability. Imagination can lead to psychological sorrow, psychological disorder, hatred or even suicide" (Ibid, p. 18) and it can play.

The role of a factor or an inevitable pre-requisite in creating. But without doubt the most important psychological motive of imagination is creativity. "Imagination" in the story of *Oscar and Lady in pink* is considered as a mechanism of hope-inspiring pictures that the character uses to confront death.

### 2.3 The Impact of Religious Beliefs on Accepting Death

Death is one of the discussions in the infrastructure of the philosophy of universe, but there is no consensus among human beings as to what it means and in the world of Literature every writer gives a particular meaning of it based on his/her special way of thinking, imagination or attitude. In other words, it is an intricate philosophical system that the human mind is unable to understand. In such a system wisdom and logic do not lead to certitude, so his creative cognizance of death is due to his faculty of imagination.

The philosophy of death in Schmitt, unlike that of the most modern writer which is a mundane and objective one, has a lofty aspect. He considers death as a part of life and regards "mortality" as the most important characteristic of man, it is philosophy and thoughts are shaped according to his religious beliefs and this ideology is visible in all his works in the form of simple and plain vocabulary. In this story, he considers the belief in a super-human power as the most important means to accept death and expanding man's relation with God is one of his philosophical ideas. Thus he materializes his cordial beliefs in the form of "Mrs. Rose" in the story. Mrs. Rose, who is aware of Oscar's physical and spiritual condition, with the help of religious thought, persuades him to struggle against the hardships of life. In her opinion moving towards cognizance of the creator of universe and association with him will reduce man's pains. In other words, religious experience plays the most important role in creating tranquility. Therefore, she asks Oscar to write letter to God?

"-This will make you feel less lonely.

-I will feel less lonely with the one who doesn't exist?

-Well, you could do something that he exists. If you think of Him and believe in Him, You will feel Him more and if you insist he will be completely there. Then His favor will encompass you."(Schmitt. P.16)

From the middle of story, the novel continues in the form of Oscar's letters written for God.

He writes about the beauties and ugliness of the surrounding world. He tells God of the friends' affection and his parents' lack of affection and at the end of the letter he puts forward his wish in the form of an appeal or a prayer. "From the psychoanalytical point of view God is the partner to parents in their duty towards child. Indeed God is in a perfect and sublime position." (Williams, p. 24)



Writing letter to God is a sort of externalization and relying on a supernatural force. That's why Oscar's talking with God alleviates him and this bond diminishes the fear of death in him. According to the religious world outlook the pristine status of every creature is with the creator; so Oscar's talking with God is a sweet onset of the child's return to the creator.

Religion is one of the oldest and most common manifestations of human spirit; and the religious beliefs have an effective role to reduce human concern. No doubt the greatest concern experienced by man is the one related to death and fearing it. Therefore religious beliefs are the means that make human beings immune in face of the impalpable phenomena like death. Many of the psychoanalysts like Freud are of the opinion that religion and ritual ceremonies work for the same end and reduce individual's worry. They prevent harmful sexual arousals and also social selfish arousals, too."(Ibid, p. 25)

Schmitt thinks that belief in God in the essence of life and not only gives meaning to human life but it also makes understandable the end of life and death.

He considers faith as man's journey towards perception of the realities of universe and as a submission to God's imperishable decree whose mysteries are hidden to all. Therefore it leads the character of the story, who is deprived of this bounty, towards the belief in God; because he considers faith as the foundation of hope and he emphasizes on the creative force of "belief". By choosing a ten year old child as the main character of the story, the writer tries to plant the sapling of belief in his pure and clean heart; and making a link between the child's Love and his God embellishes death in his eyes and makes it pleasant for him.

The parable and figurative language of Schmitt in growing this theme is very fascinating. The child creates relation with his God with very simple phrases and asks him to fulfill his needs as the creator and the most superior force in the Universe: "My God! Make Peggy Blue think that her act was successful. My God! I rely on you." (Schmitt, p. 51)

One can say that the theme of the work, "Belief in God" not only has a fundamental value in structuring the novel, but it is closely related with the main notion of the work, namely "death". Movement and dynamism are the inseparable part of Schmitt's works. Putting the different notions of the work, we will gain access to the human change from the low stage to the high one. This basic change, which occurs in the light of faith and belief in God, teaches the hero that death is a part of life and as Hegel says, "Death is in the essence of life and it is undeniable." (Lepp, p.270).

That's why Oscar consciously accepts that death is right and concludes that: "Life is a ridiculous present. We regard much importance for it at the beginning and we think that we will have an eternal life. Then we depreciate it. It looks short and slow; and we even want to throw it away and at the end we understand that life is not a present but an object of trust. So we try to deserve life." (Schmitt, p. 77)

### 3. Conclusion

The notion of "death" is one of the most important notions in the literary works and literature provides a very suitable ground for expressing the complicated relationship of imagination and death. No doubt, death has a special status in Schmitt's works. His appreciation of death is different from that of his contemporary writers. He considers death a reality of the universe (creation); so in his view death is like a mere transient defensive method. In "*Oscar and Lady in pink*", Schmitt, in the midst of story beautifully analyses death and shows some manifestations of the impact of imagination on human spirit. "One of the major motives of talking refuge in the world of imagination is to escape from the routine life with all its annoying cruelties and pitiable absurdities." (Roset, p.335)

In this work, too, imagination is a valuable asset which is considered as an effective factor or pre-requisite to create another world in the mind and psyche of the hero of the story so that the necessary mechanism is prepared in his childish spirit to accept death.

The belief in religion creates a kind of solace and humbleness before the will of God in the thought of the man who believes in the source of creation. In this story, too, the writer, using the asset of religion, creates a

good chance for the child who is devoid of religious education in order to give him spiritual solace to regard death as a factor of associating with the creator of the universe. Therefore, he doesn't view death as a bitter and killing event; but a happening that causes passing from this world to the Hereafter.

Schmitt applies religious and ideological concepts as the material for his story in order to purify the thought and behavior of his contemporary writers. He provides the ground for rethinking on religion and belief in God. Putting forward these teachings not only will lead to the qualitative and quantitative growth of literature, but also it is indicative of the magnanimity of his religious culture and thought.

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