The King of the Golden River Short Guide

The King of the Golden River by John Ruskin

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Overview

The King of the Golden River is in many respects a conventional folktale. The two Black Brothers, Hans and Schwarz, who cruelly abuse their innocent, goodhearted younger brother, Gluck, recall the evil step-sisters in Cinderella. Ruskin himself refers to the story as "a fairly good imitation" of fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm and of the novels of Charles Dickens, the popular nineteenth-century novelist. In fact, Ruskin himself did not take The King of the Golden River very seriously. Later in his life, he wrote in his autobiography that, although the story has pleased children, he considered it of little note. Some scholars have agreed with him and judged the tale trite and conventional.

Others have sought traces of Ruskin's mental disorders in the characters and events of the story.

Nevertheless, despite Ruskin's own misgivings and those of some critics, many readers have felt otherwise. The King of the Golden River is one of the most popular of Ruskin's works. In fact, it is one of the most popular children's stories ever written. By the end of the nineteenth century, eight editions had been published in England, and it had been translated into German, Italian, and Russian. Since then The King of the Golden River has been translated into Welsh, Japanese, Afrikaans, and even into the African tribal language, Kikuyu.

Since the first edition in 1851, over 130 editions of Ruskin's fairy tale have been published.

What is it about this little story that has captivated so many readers throughout the world? Although Ruskin's tale is a conventional story of the triumph of goodness over evil, he creates more interesting and realistic characters than are usually found in fairy tales. He vividly describes the violent behavior of the evil brothers and the cruelty they inflict on poor Gluck.

And the quests of all three of the brothers to turn the Golden River into real gold are suspenseful and frightening. The magical powers of two mysterious characters—South-West Wind, Esquire, and the King of the Golden River—are revealed in exciting and sometimes unexpected ways.

Of course, Gluck's triumph teaches a profound moral lesson about how to live one's life by practicing Christian humility and, above all, charity. But Ruskin tells the story so vividly that the reader never feels that he is preaching.

In fact, Ruskin lets Gluck's final happiness speak for itself without sermonizing about the dangers of sinning.

The King of the Golden River shows how loving money more than one's fellow human beings leads only to destruction.

More generally, Ruskin's tale expresses the ancient idea that both good and evil exist in the world and that the virtuous person can triumph over evil. Defeating the evils of human nature is never easy, for the conflict between good and evil occurs within ourselves as well as in the world around us. Gluck's suffering, patience, and humility are rewarded by his successful quest. In that sense he is a worthy role model.

About the Author

John Ruskin was the most notable art critic in Victorian England. Because he saw the visual arts as expressions of the moral life of the societies and artists which produced them, Ruskin's writings reflected the religious concerns of the Victorians. His judgments of good and bad art depended heavily on the evangelical Christian attitudes which he developed early in life. However, he combined this moral perspective with a profound love of art, instilled in him by his father, and a passionate devotion to the beauty of nature, enhanced by the works of the English Romantic poets. All of his writing is informed by a deep awareness of the power of nature's beauty over the imagination.

Ruskin was born in London, England, on February 8, 1819. Although his parents were both of the lower middle class, Ruskin's father became a partner in a successful wine business and became a very wealthy man. He introduced his son to the art world during frequent European tours, and father and son gradually developed an excellent art collection. They were particularly captivated by the sketches and paintings of English impressionist J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851). Under the influence of Turner's early works, which had not yet become popular, Ruskin began his greatest work of art criticism, Modern Painters, at the age of 23. The first of this five-volume masterpiece was published in 1843 and the final volume in 1860.

While completing Modem Painters, Ruskin also wrote a treatise, The Seven Lamps of Architecture (1849), and a three-volume study of the art and architecture of Venice, entitled The Stones of Venice (1851-53).

After 1860 Ruskin's writing became increasingly concerned with social issues, particularly the destructive effects of industrialism on society. Sections of Modem Painters and The Stones of Venice contain social and political commentary, but in works such as Unto This Last (1860) and Fors Clavigera (1880) Ruskin became an outspoken critic of the laissez-faire capitalism which fueled the English economy of his own day. He believed that the greed of the employers and factory owners was dehumanizing the English workers and destroying the moral life of England. He wrote that England should return to an essentially medieval society in which workers rendered service to their masters out of a sense of Christian duty as knights had rendered service to their lords during the Middle Ages. However, by this time England was the wealthiest and most powerful industrialized nation in the world, and Ruskin's radically conservative economic ideas were considered highly eccentric. Though he was still famous, he grew increasingly isolated from the public.

Unfortunately, Ruskin's fame as a critic provided little happiness in his personal life. As an only child, his youth was completely dominated by his parents, especially by his mother, whose stern religious views instilled in him a temperament which was both highly refined and subject to mental disorder.

Between 1870, when he was 51 years old, and his death in 1900, Ruskin suffered increasingly serious mental breakdowns. It is probable that his unhappy relationships

with women contributed to his declining mental health. His first love affair, with Adele Domecq, ended unhappily while he was a student at Oxford. The collapse of their relationship and the pressure of his studies led to a complete breakdown in his health.

In an effort to recover, he and his parents embarked on a tour of Europe.

In 1848 he married the beautiful Effie Gray, but the marriage was annulled six years later on the grounds that it had never been consummated. Shortly after the annulment, Effie married the PreRaphaelite painter, John Millais, with whom she had been having an affair.

The failure of his marriage created a humiliating public scandal, and Ruskin retreated even more deeply into his studies of Venetian art and architecture.

Later in life, he fell pathetically in love with a young Irish girl, Rose La Touche, whom he met when he was nearly forty and she was nine. When she was 18 Ruskin proposed marriage to Rose, but she refused him, in part because he had temporarily abandoned the evangelical Christianity of his youth. Rose, who was something of a religious fanatic, died in 1875 at the age of 25, after suffering attacks of mental illness herself.

In spite of these personal tragedies and a growing awareness that his English readers were less receptive to his social and economic theories, Ruskin continued to write and lecture extensively.

However, his later years were frequently disturbed by periods of insanity, during which he was tortured by hallucinations and a morbid obsession with damnation. As he grew older, Ruskin did return to evangelical Christianity. However, his own worsening mental illness led him to believe that the destruction of modern civilization was foretold by the presence of a huge "storm cloud" and a "plague wind" which he had repeatedly observed over England. One of his last and most powerful lectures, "The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century" (1884), records his obsessive study of this phenomenon and simultaneously provides a disturbing account of his deteriorating mental state. Nevertheless, though some of his later works display his mental instability, they concern themselves eloquently with a theme with which readers over one hundred years later are all too familiar—the destruction of nature's beauty by industrial pollution.

Setting

Though The King of the Golden River is not set in a specific time or place, the story's details suggest that, like many nineteenth-century fairy tales, it takes place sometime during the Middle Ages (A.D. 700-1500). Nineteenth-century artists and writers were interested in the art and society of this period, and they often wrote stories in which the characters were wizards, friars, knights, princesses, and peasants. Ruskin himself studied and wrote extensively about medieval art and architecture, especially about the religious sentiments of medieval society. So when he wanted to create a remote and magical setting for this tale, which has an important moral lesson, he naturally incorporated characteristics of medieval culture. Many of the story's details, such as the characters' dress, occupations, and moral values, create this atmosphere. The medieval setting is made clear in the marvelous illustrations by Richard Doyle, which are contained in the first edition of the work.

Though this medieval setting does contribute some realism to the story, Ruskin's primary objective was to set his fairy tale in a time period remote from his own. Nineteenth-century readers liked to read about the remote past, and, of course, the effectiveness of a fairy tale depends on a magical setting different from the common world of its reader.

Ruskin's story takes place in luxuriantly fertile Treasure Valley in the imaginary land of Stiria. Treasure Valley is surrounded by tall, snow-covered mountains from which huge waterfalls cascade. The residents of the valley refer to one of these falls as the Golden River because of the way in which the sun's rays shine through the falling waters.

After South-West Wind, Esquire, punishes Hans and Schwarz by destroying Treasure Valley, the brothers take poor Gluck to a nearby city where they try to make a living as goldsmiths. Here Gluck meets the King of the Golden River, who tells him how the river can be turned into real gold. When the evil brothers learn this, each decides to gain all of this wealth for himself. Their quests for the Golden River's source lead them through a strange and magical The Kingof the Golden River wilderness. Each is destroyed by his own cruelty and greed and turned into a black stone around which the waters of the river will rush forever. However, Gluck's goodness enables him to overcome the obstacles the king has arranged along the way and to succeed where his wicked brothers have failed.

Social Sensitivity

The King of the Golden River has a clearly stated moral at the end: "And thus the Treasure Valley became a garden again, and the inheritance, which had been lost by cruelty, was regained by love." However, though the values of the characters express an obvious conflict between a spirit of Christian charity and sins such as pride and avarice, Ruskin does not treat these themes in terms of Christian dogma. The moral aspect of the work is always secondary to Ruskin's main objective: to tell a truly marvelous and entertaining fairy tale, which is very much in the tradition established by the Brothers Grimm.

Contemporary readers may be disturbed by the absence of female characters in the tale. However, the fact that nineteenth-century writers in general viewed men and women differently than we do may be responsible. Fairy tales are not meant to present accurate views of the writer's society; instead, they create a magical world which is supposedly far removed from the world in which we live.

Literary Qualities

As in most fairy tales, the characters in The King of the Golden River are relatively one-dimensional. For instance, Hans and Schwarz are thoroughly evil.

They fail to turn the river to gold because their evil natures prevent their making the right moral choices. On the other hand, "little Gluck" is so kind and innocent that the reader expects his generous nature to triumph in the end.

Like the heroes in many fairy tales, Gluck's innocent goodness may even tend to get boring. However, his brothers are such believable and powerful characters that Gluck retains the reader's empathy.

These characters are allegorical in the sense that they seem to embody concepts—Hans and Schwarz represent greed or selfishness, while Gluck represents goodness or charity—instead of being real human beings, with complicated personalities. However, though the characters tend to be one-dimensional, they are still engaging because Ruskin depicts them in such graphic and interesting detail.

Ruskin describes the two evil brothers as "very ugly men, with over-hanging eyebrows and small dull eyes, which were always half shut, so that you couldn't see into them, and always fancied they saw very far into you." Such descriptions enable the reader to identify more readily with the innocent Gluck, whom his brothers regularly frighten and abuse. Though we never forget that these characters stand for certain moral values, they are realistic enough for the reader to feel some of the fear felt by poor Gluck.

The supernatural events are imaginatively realized. The episode in which Gluck rescues the King of the Golden River by pouring him out of the melting pot, thus freeing him from the cup in which he had been imprisoned, is a strange combination of magic and realism. Ruskin uses very precise descriptive language which enables us to visualize these supernatural events.

As soon as Gluck sacrifices his last three drops of holy water to save a dying dog, "the dog sprang up and stood on its hind legs. Its tail disappeared, its ears became long, longer, silky, golden; its nose became very red, its eyes became very twinkling; in three seconds the dog was gone, and before Gluck stood his old acquaintance, the King of the Golden River."

Sometimes, however, the realism of the language is more unsettling, as it is in this description of the dying dog to which Hans refuses to give any water: "It was a small dog, apparently in the last agony of death from thirst. Its tongue was out, its jaws dry, its limbs extended lifelessly, and a swarm of black ants were crawling about its lips and throat."

The detail of this description evokes great sympathy for the poor dog and intensifies the basic cruelty of Hans's nature. When Hans kicks the dying dog before turning away, the reader awaits his punishment even more eagerly than before.

When South-West Wind, Esquire, rebuffs the evil brothers' assault by tossing them head over heels into the comer, we enjoy watching the forces of good overcome evil, particularly because the little gentleman's small size appears to make him an underdog. South-West Wind, Esquire, possesses great supernatural powers in spite of his small stature and un-heroic appearance.

The King of the Golden River is similarly drawn, though his powers are even greater. The scene in which Gluck frees him by melting down his drinking mug creates an exciting, magical effect, which convinces the reader of the King's strange powers.

Once these forces of good have been introduced into the story, the reader begins to enjoy a sense that Hans and Schwarz will soon be punished for their evil deeds, and, when each one sets out to find the source of the Golden River, considerable suspense is generated by their unsatisfactory responses to the tests the King has put in their way. The tension increases greatly as the landscape through which the evil brothers travel becomes increasingly ominous and violent.

Though we expect the selfish brothers to fail in their attempts to turn the river to gold, Gluck's own journey to the source of the Golden River is also fraught with peril. He too must resolve inner conflicts before he reaches his goal, and the tension created as he climbs closer to the river's source makes for exciting reading. Ruskin's vivid descriptions create an atmosphere filled with suspense, surprise, and excitement.

The King of the Golden River also contains significant symbols, which add greatly to the story's meaning. Nature itself, as exemplified by the fertile landscape of Treasure Valley, seems to represent the moral, or spiritual state of those who inhabit it. The violent storms, and the devastation they leave behind in Treasure Valley, signify the unnaturalness of the evil Black brothers' cruelty and greed. However, when Gluck inherits Treasure Valley after the deaths of his brothers, it becomes a beautiful, fertile garden again.

Of course, the most important symbol in the story is the Golden River itself.

Ironically, when Gluck follows the King's instructions to cast three drops of dew into the source of the river, the river does not turn to real gold at all. Though Gluck is disappointed, he obeys the King and returns to Treasure Valley, which he finds has miraculously been transformed into a lush and fertile valley once again. Thus, the symbol of the Golden River has a double significance. For those ruled by avarice, like Gluck's evil brothers, "goodness" can only be understood in terms of material wealth, such as gold. However, for those like Gluck, who are ruled by love of nature and of their fellow men, "goodness" is understood to mean joy and prosperity for all.

Themes and Characters

The moral of the story is that goodness, specifically a kind of Christian charity and love of God's creation, will triumph over arrogance and selfishness. In fact, Ruskin singles out the sin of avarice, or greed for money, as the root of the evil in the Black brothers' characters. All of their cruelty and exploitation of others— their abuse of Gluck, their refusal to share anything they own with anyone else, their cheating, lying, and stealing — stems from their insatiable love of money. Their own obsession with gold drives them to their inevitable destruction.

Ruskin carefully connects the theme of avarice with the idea that a spiritual bond exists between man and nature.

One of the first things we learn about the evil Black brothers is that they "farm" the beautiful Treasure Valley by killing "everything that did not pay for its eating." So fearful are they that their profits will be diminished by sharing what they grow with the animals that they "shot the blackbirds, because they pecked the fruit; and killed the hedgehogs, lest they should suck the cows; they poisoned the crickets for eating the crumbs in the kitchen; and smothered the cicadas, which used to sing all summer in the lime trees." The reason for their abuse of nature is, of course, their greed, which makes them so selfish that they have sympathy for no other beings in God's creation.

Ruskin reinforces this link between man and nature in a negative way in his vivid descriptions of the evil Black brothers' journeys to the source of the Golden River. They must travel through a wilderness in which lofty cliffs gradually ascended till they caught the sunlight, which ran in sharp touches of ruddy colour, along the angular crags, and pierced, in long level rays, through their fringes of spear-like pine. Far above shot up red splintered masses of castellated rock, jagged and shivered into myriads of fantastic forms, with here and there a streak of sunlit snow, traced down their chasms like a line of forked lightening.

In such descriptions, the reader senses that nature is actually some sort of living power. As the evil Hans crosses a glacier, he hears "wild sounds of gushing water" that resemble "melancholy tones, or the "sudden shrieks" of "human voices in distress or pain." In this passage, the landscape becomes a mirror of the violence of Hans's own cruel nature. It is as if his cruelty and greed are so "unnatural" in the great scheme of things that the spirit of nature is horrified by his presence. By linking these natural landscapes so forcefully with human emotion, Ruskin vividly shows the evil embodied in the Black brothers. Nature can actually be considered a character in the story because it seems to embody powers that control the destiny of the characters.

South-West Wind, Esquire, and the King of the Golden River both seem to be spirits of Nature. They are powerful, supernatural beings who can magically transform the natural environment, thus bewildering and challenging the merely human characters. However, Ruskin gives them enough human peculiarities and distinctive traits to make them fascinating characters.

When South-West Wind, Esquire, comes to visit him in the form of an "old gentleman," Gluck is puzzled by his guest's behavior which is "a strange mixture of coolness and humility." His diminutive size and great age suggest that Gluck's wicked brothers will have no trouble driving him from their hearth when they return. However, the little, old man shocks them all by unleashing his terrible powers to punish the brothers for their lack of hospitality.

After hurling Hans and Schwarz into a heap by the fireside, he summons a horrible storm which destroys their home and devastates Treasure Valley.

Similarly, the King of the Golden River is depicted as a golden dwarf whose brilliantly colored dress and delicately curled hair contrast with the coarse features of his face. Gluck feels that the dwarfs expression indicates that he is both stubborn and quick-tempered, which turns out to be true. However, like South-West Wind, Esquire, the King of the Golden River uses his vast supernatural powers for noble purposes. To reward Gluck for freeing him from the power of a stronger king, who had imprisoned him in Gluck's prized golden mug, The King of the Golden River tells Gluck how to turn the Golden River into real gold. Then, of course, after his evil brothers have failed in their attempts to do so, the King rewards him for his goodness and his devotion. South-West Wind, Esquire, and the King are both simultaneously comical and menacing, which contributes to an atmosphere of unpredictability throughout much of the story. These two characters are strange enough to ensure that the reader shares poor Gluck's awe of their magical power.

Topics for Discussion

1. Gluck is obviously a kind, innocent young man. Why doesn't the King of the Golden River simply reward him without requiring him to climb through the wilderness to the Golden River's source?

2. Why do you think South-West Wind, Esquire, comes to visit Gluck and his brothers?

3. What kind of a relationship do the evil brothers, Hans and Schwarz, have with each other? What does their relationship suggest about their values?

4. Even when Gluck follows the King of the Golden River's instructions after fulfilling his quest, the Golden River still does not turn into real gold. Why not?

5. How is Gluck's journey through the wilderness to the source of the Golden River different from that of his brothers?

What does this difference mean?

6. On the way to the river's source, all three brothers meet a dog, a fair child, and an old man. What is the significance of these characters?

7. Why are Hans and Schwarz transformed into "Two Black Stones," in the river? Is this particular fate appropriate?

8. Gluck's brothers abuse him cruelly throughout the story, making his life miserable. Gluck himself is an honest, hard-working young man. Why doesn't he just leave?

9. Everytime Gluck says how wonderful it would be if the Golden River were changed into real gold, the King of the Golden River disagrees with him. But if the King does not think the river should turn to real gold, why does he tell Gluck how to do it?

10. Ruskin wrote The King of the Golden River for a young girl he knew very well. How do you think this might have effected the way he wrote the story?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Which of the characters in The King of the Golden River do you think is the most interesting? Explain your choice.

2. Choose one passage that describes a landscape and explain why the landscape is described as it is.

3. Because he was an art critic, Ruskin was very concerned with the visual qualities of art. Which of the characters in the story was easiest for you to visualize? Explain.

4. Ruskin frequently uses images of light and dark in his tale. What attitudes or moral qualities do these images represent?

5. Compare The King of the Golden River with another fairy tale you have read. Explain the similarities and differences between them.

6. Some critics have complained that The King of the Golden River is too trite and conventional to be an interesting fairy tale. Do you agree?

7. Most fairy tales have an easily recognizable plot structure, in which the hero must suffer misfortunes or overcome some obstacles in order to improve his condition. How does this pattern apply to what happens to Gluck?

8. Consider the development of one character in the story. How does this character change as the story progresses, and what is the significance of the change? If the character does not change, why doesn't he?

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