

Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci

Filozofická fakulta

Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

**Aesthetic Morality in Oscar Wilde's Fairy
Tales**

Bakalářská práce

Romana Ryšková

Studijní obor: Anglická filologie – Francouzská filologie

Vedoucí práce: Mgr. Ema Jelínková, Ph.D.

Olomouc 2020

Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci na téma “Aesthetic Morality in Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales” vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucí práce a uvedla jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

V Olomouci dne 7. 5. 2020

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Mgr. Ema Jelínková, Ph.D. for her patience and help during the process of writing my thesis. I also want to thank my family and friends for their support.

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Introduction

For anyone who at least dipped their toes into the waters of British literature, Oscar Wilde must be undoubtedly a name they have stumbled upon. Even more than a hundred years after his death, this audacious author does not stop fascinating readers all over the world, as the themes he deals with seem to be immortal, regardless of the times in which his books are read. Moreover, due to his extraordinary genius, he is able to capture the reader with unexpected wit and humor as well as great profoundness. He represents a man who, during his lifetime, got to know what it means to experience an enormous success, as he once became one of the most sought after celebrities in the society as well as a complete and utter downfall, humiliation and rejection by those who previously celebrated him.

Wilde lived his life as a dandy, focusing on the pleasure that the present moment had to offer, rather than getting his options limited by thinking about possible consequences. As a result of this lifestyle, he had gained an enormous amount of experience and opinions about the world, life, and society which he could subsequently use in his writing. Thanks to his outstanding intelligence and creativity, he was not limited to one specific genre in his literary work. Nevertheless, he did not gain a reputation for all of them, as the competition was relentless. Though starting as a poet and finishing likewise, it was his prose that was and still is glorified. He was not hesitant to produce a play, essay, and even a novel.

The focus of this thesis will be, however, put on his fairy tales which he deals with in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* and *A House of Pomegranates*. These two little volumes occupy a somewhat obscure place among the rest of his literary writings. Oscar Wilde is not thought of as a children's storyteller nowadays nor was he during his lifetime. Yet, these beautiful stories reflect gravely some of his views and attitudes and make up an important piece of the puzzle when getting to know the author.

Nevertheless, what may cause some difficulty, is the attempt to analyze these stories as moral as is often done. This thesis will try to shed some light on Wilde's understanding of morality and his reasoning for writing the stories. It will try to prove that, taking into account his theoretical works, these stories cannot be

interpreted as carrying a certain moral message, as this kind of interpretation would mean that they deviate significantly from Wilde's perception of art encoded in a aesthetic doctrine preached by him. It would be very hard to make sense of such a paradox. It will, therefore, try to find evidence showing that the stories are, on the contrary, works of aesthetic writing par excellence. The reason why it becomes essential when decoding a certain piece of art, especially of a literary character, to lean on a wider range of works by the same author, is because when certain ambiguity of meaning arises, a critic may be in the danger of losing objectivity and seeing what he wants to see. Wilde was aware of this when he wrote in the "Preface" to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors."¹

Firstly, though, there will be given a brief introduction into the life of the writer, highlighting the most important events and people that crafted him into the Oscar Wilde as we know him. It is essential to look at the life of an artist in order to decode his work. There will also be a section diving deeper into the notion of aestheticism, looking into its roots and reasons for creating such movement and how it manifested in the life of Oscar Wilde.

¹ Oscar Wilde, preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, by Oscar Wilde (Urbana, Illinois: Project Gutenberg, 2008), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/174/174-h/174-h.htm>.

1 Oscar Wilde

1.1 Introduction to Life

Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde, the notoriously known and respected author, was born on October 16, 1854, in the city of Dublin. Despite his Irish origin, he made himself known mainly in London as well as Paris and The United States. Given his upbringing, which could be defined as rather unconventional, he was destined to strive for greatness. As a son of two people remarkably distinct in the area of their occupation, intelligent and somewhat extravagant with eccentric lifestyle, Oscar’s becoming a mediocre Irishman was out of the question. The mixture of great brain and loose morals inherited from his parentage and enhanced by his own nature caused his unexpected rise to the top, followed by an unavoidable fall.

His father was William Wilde, a knight and surgeon of considerable renown who, on the top of his medical career, found interest in archeology and collecting Irish folklore. Unfortunately, he also became famous as a womanizer with “a lusty enjoyment of life”² as Arthur Ransome puts it. Surprisingly, the parent casting bigger influence over Oscar’s development was his mother. The two shared an unusually close relationship as their personalities, amoralistic approach towards life and love for beautiful things and “words and phrases”³ were very much alike. Jane Wilde was likewise burning with a literary aspiration, writing under the pen name of ‘Speranza’, and in her work she was driven by a nationalistic and revolutionary spirit. She became particularly known for her salon, and even at a young age Oscar nor his brother were excluded from these intellectual gatherings. This is a fact that Hesketh Pearson sees as rather corruptive in Wilde’s development: “At an age when most boys were fast asleep in bed Willie and Oscar were allowed to stay up for dinner ... and as the liquor flowed as freely as the conversation, the two youngsters were educated in the ways of the world long before such knowledge was helpful.”⁴

In conclusion, when scrutinizing the family background of Oscar Wilde, it becomes obvious that his parents undeniably prepared the ground for his further

² Arthur Ransome, *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study* (London: Methuen, 1913), 26.

³ G. J. Renier, *Oscar Wilde* (Hamburg: Albatross, 1934), 22.

⁴ Hesketh Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (London, Methuen, 1947), 17.

flourishment and set him up for success. Yet, without education outside of his household, he would not be able to reach his full potential. He first started to attend Portora Royal School, Enniskillen, then Trinity College in Dublin, and finally, he got accepted at Magdalen College in Oxford. During his studies, Oscar was an outstanding scholar, often at the top of his class and winning many prizes. Robert Thurston Hopkins in the biography *Oscar Wilde: A Study Of The Man And His Work* summarizes his Oxford years in a simple sentence: “While he was at Oxford he was a brilliant success from first to last.”⁵

1.2 The Real Oscar

For a better understanding of the work, first, the man responsible for it needs to be understood. The ancestry and schools of Oscar Wilde were shortly touched upon, so now one question needs to be answered. Who is the man behind all the notoriety? As Ransome wistfully claims: “One cannot define in a sentence a man whom it has taken God several millions of years to make.”⁶ G. J. Renier in *Oscar Wilde* then concludes that Wilde’s mental constitution was too mysterious and incomprehensible.⁷ It seems like these men find it an impossible task to sufficiently characterize the author, and discouraged by such statements, one is tempted to give up altogether. Still, as fascinating as this particular personality is, it would be unpardonable to omit at least its most salient features.

To begin with, it is convenient to look at what Hopkins: “To escape censure and abominable lies, one must do nothing, say nothing and be nothing.”⁸ And he continues: “To be safe, and to avoid trouble, one has but to move with the stream.”⁹ To understand well the nature of Oscar Wilde, it is sufficient so simply imagine the polar opposite of these proclamations. Oscar was certainly far from wanting to move with the stream when it meant denying his own nature and preferences. Already at school, it was more than clear that this boy was unique. He found pleasure in different kinds of occupations than his peers such as spending time in

⁵ Robert Thurston Hopkins, *Oscar Wilde: A Study Of The Man And His Work* (London: Lynwood and Co., 1913), 21.

⁶ Ransome, *Oscar Wilde*, 23.

⁷ Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 8-9.

⁸ Thurston Hopkins, *Oscar Wilde*, 19.

⁹ Thurston Hopkins, *Oscar Wilde*, 19.

ardent reading, caring about the clothes or simply being alone. For all that deviation from what was considered a norm, he was never part of the popular group and this did not change during his time at Trinity College where he did not socialize with his fellow students when there was no reason for it. He did gain some popularity at Oxford where he became famous for the parties he was throwing.

Besides, a certain duality of nature was characteristic of him. Needless to say that it is a feature shared by all humanity, yet in this specific case, it appears that the angel and devil on his shoulder were exceptionally loud, trying to fight for his soul. Pearson is also perceptive of this aspect when he describes how his amiable and warm side altered with his “egotism, self-assertion, and love of notoriety”.¹⁰ In both, the good and bad deeds he went often to the limits. He was known for being extremely supportive of others, encouraging people to reach their full potential and providing them with necessary advice or money, even in times when in his own pocket there was not an abundance of it. But when he chased after vice, nothing could stop him.

What set him apart from anyone else was his exceptional skill to converse. In this he had no competition, and with his voice and words he was like a Pied Piper, people simply could not resist him. Pearson quotes one of Wilde’s contemporaries who said that Oscar was able to discuss any subject and make it interesting by his characteristic paradoxical speech while “laughing as heartily as anyone else at his own absurdities.”¹¹ The absurdities or nonsense were, in fact, one of the building elements of his speech. He loved to use them and sometimes made it seem like these remarks lacking any sense actually entail some profound meaning.

Anyone whose aim is to gain recognition should adopt a unique persona that distinguishes them from the rest and makes them stand out. Wilde chose to become an entertainer, although he did not really choose it, he simply did not restrain his natural temper with its absence of seriousness. Renier calls this pose “a clown”.¹² That does not mean he would only talk about nonsense in an engaging and humorous way, he was very well-read, familiar with an excessive amount of literature, and overall intelligent and observant which he made obvious in his talk as well. Interestingly, Renier assumes that his intellect did not prove to do him any

¹⁰ Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 57.

¹¹ Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 35.

¹² Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 28.

favor, rather the opposite: “society discovered that its clown had wisdom. It was a discovery that did the clown no good.”¹³

Having reached the top, Wilde did not think very clearly. Renier is quite straightforward in his explanation: “He was a King of Language, and therefore, a King of Life.”¹⁴ This shows that Wilde believed in some sort of superiority he had over morality as well as law as someone who mastered the art of language. This explains his infamous affair with young Oxonian Lord Alfred Douglas while being married. He ended up in prison because of this relationship and died soon after his release. It may be argued that without the boldness and strong self-confidence, he might have reached a better ending in his life.

To end on a more positive note, even though according to Ransome it is not possible to define a man in one sentence, Renier managed to do so in four words that capture perfectly the essence of Wilde’s identity and carry in themselves enough information that it is possible to make up a good picture about the author. He describes him as “a charmer, an idler, a temperament, an artist.”¹⁵ He indeed was all of that.

¹³ Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 10.

¹⁴ Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 81.

¹⁵ Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 20.

2 Aestheticism

Aestheticism was an artistic movement, influential primarily during the 19th century. It should be, however, pointed out that the expression movement does not entirely capture the nature of aestheticism. Pearson explains: “the aesthetes were not a group of men banded together to pursue a common object, which is the usual meaning of the word ‘Movement’.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, this word will be used for the sake of this thesis in order to avoid a long and maybe a vain search for a more accurate term.

Aestheticism declares that art has no other purpose besides being beautiful. Hence, it does not have to serve the society by carrying any religious, didactic or moral message. Its representatives also believed that it was them who were enlightened enough to discern what is this beauty as Renier explains: “The apostles of the new cult prided themselves upon having discovered what was beautiful in nature and art”.¹⁷ Another major characteristic concerns life and how it should be lived in connection with beauty. Aestheticians claim that life ought to imitate art and not the other way around.¹⁸

The motivation for the birth of such values and tendencies in art comes from various sources. Inspiration was drawn mainly from the French symbolism and decadence. In the context of British literature, numerous artists may be considered the predecessors of the movement. Above all, it was the Pre-Raphaelites who prepared the ground with their concept of ‘Art for Art’s Sake’. To dive even deeper into the origins of the movement, Pearson recognizes John Keats as the “unconscious parent of aestheticism”¹⁹ as the Pre-Raphaelite Brethren was inspired by his poems.

In poetry, the most distinctive representative would be Algernon Swinburne, but no other than Oscar Wilde is credited with molding the aestheticism into the shape that is known today. This fact is pointed out by J. M. Kennedy who claims that after Wilde took upon himself the position of aesthetic leader, the movement became basically a platform for exhibition of his personal ideas and convictions.²⁰

¹⁶ Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 43.

¹⁷ Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 2-3.

¹⁸ Oscar Wilde, *Intentions*, 7th ed. (London: Methuen, 1913), 30.

¹⁹ Person, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 44.

²⁰ J. M. Kennedy, *English Literature 1880-1905* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1910), 60.

It is him who became the living embodiment of the aesthetic doctrine and its leading figure, however, as was just proven, he was only building upon the already existing foundation.

In the life of this artist two men played the key role in directing him into the aesthetic path. He met both as his professors in Oxford, and namely it was John Ruskin and Walter Pater. The former's view of beauty and sympathy with the "poor and outcast"²¹ appealed to the young student. By listening to Ruskin's lectures he experienced an epiphany, and realized that he can consciously operate with the ideas that were already long before stored in his subconscious. Nonetheless, it was the latter whose work had an irreversible impact on Wilde's further development. Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* became his 'golden book'. Renier emphasizes the importance of the publication: "The doctrine that man, a creature under sentence of death but reprieved for a short while, must endeavor to make every moment of his existence supremely significant was a revelation to young Oscar."²²

Nevertheless, ultimately, neither of the professors satisfied Wilde in their representation of the ideas he was intrigued by. He could never fully agree with Ruskin who at no time separated beauty and moral good, and as for Pater, he did not comprehend how the author of such a masterpiece could be so tedious, shy, and anxious in real life. Thus, he took it upon himself to show these convictions to the world in a way they deserved and decided to bring the theory into practice. Chew and Altick fittingly described this act as "Adopting a pose of extravagant aestheticism".²³

Sure enough, soon after he graduated from Oxford, he managed to become a celebrity, representing aestheticism with pride. He wanted the aesthetic doctrine to scream from him at first sight. That is why his clothes needed to be different. Over the years his wardrobe underwent several changes, but the unconventionality of his attire remained the same. Two flowers are considered an integral part of the aesthetic movement, it was a lily and a sunflower because they were "the two most

²¹ Samuel C. Chew and Richard D. Altick, *A Literary History Of England. Volume 4, The Nineteenth Century And After (1789-1939)*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), 1480.

²² Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 26.

²³ Chew and Altick, *A Literary History Of England. Volume 4, The Nineteenth Century And After (1789-1939)*, 1480.

perfect models of design, the most naturally adapted for decorative art”.²⁴ Wilde was allegedly seen carrying a flower in his pocket and though it might be a myth, it would be no surprise.

His exaggerated and fanciful way of representing the movement made him also a target for ridicule. It was especially the satirical magazine *Punch* that took the duty upon itself and enjoyed to caricature this man of letters in their cartoons which J. M. Kennedy describes as “good-naturedly spiteful”.²⁵ Being accepted with enthusiasm, the satire was brought into theatres. Firstly, the play called *The Colonel* emerged, which was written by no other than the editor of *Punch* himself. Later, Gilbert and Sullivan succeeded with their production of an opera with the title *Patience*. This piece represented a turning point in Wilde’s career and surprisingly not in a negative way. *Patience* was so well received, it was decided that Americans should be also given an opportunity to admire this masterpiece. However, as the people living across the ocean were not fully acquainted with the movement that the opera was making fun of, the promoters agreed that Americans needed to meet an aesthete in flesh first in order to appreciate the parody. That is essentially why a lecturing agency reached out to Oscar Wilde and proposed him to lecture in the US. Always in need of money, Wilde accepted the offer and he set off towards the United States. Thus the ideas of aestheticism spread abroad, but Wilde’s later imprisonment and following death brought an end to the movement.

2.1. Wildean Concept of Art

Firstly, before jumping into the analysis itself, it is necessary to provide a condensed version of aesthetic teachings. As for the material that will serve for comparison, works that are selected describe his convictions in intelligible and elaborated way. These will be namely three of his essays: *The Decay of Lying*, *The Critic as Artist* and *Soul of Man*, then the “Preface” to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, some of his letters including *De Profundis*, and possibly some relevant pieces of conversation found elsewhere. The following chapters will focus on several subjects integral to aestheticism and at the same time underlying always at least

²⁴ Ransome, *Oscar Wilde*, 69.

²⁵ Kennedy, *English Literature 1880-1905*, 62.

several of the tales so that it can be decided whether the theory and practical treatment agree or not. These include the concept of beauty, individualism, then, of course, his attitude towards morality, specifically in relation with his views of charity and Christianity. Lastly, his socialistic tendencies will be touched upon as well.

2.1.1. Individualism

Understanding the notion of individualism is probably key to understanding the whole aesthetic movement. In general, aestheticism proclaims that art should not serve any higher purpose, in *The Decay of Lying* Wilde says: “Art never expresses anything but itself.”²⁶ This means that an artist can in his work freely express anything he wants without being burdened with the responsibility of its effect on others. Wilde argues that the negative emotions art may evoke were already in the person: “Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us.”²⁷ But this also means that art can be the cause of awakening in someone’s life, as it helps him to access certain parts of his nature that he has not discovered yet, and thus become a more perfect version of himself and a true individualist. This transformation under artistic influence appears repeatedly in the tales.

Wilde uses the terms artist and individualist interchangeably because in his view “Art is Individualism”²⁸ and so will this thesis. From his perspective the word artist does not necessarily allude to a painter, writer or a composer. In fact, many of those whose occupation is of that sort would not deserve the title. A true artist is only he who is an individualist, regardless of what he does in real life.

There is only one real criterion that must be met for a man to earn the right to be called an artist. He has to be aware of the very special and important role that he plays in the world because only he can bring some real change: “Individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force. Therein lies its immense value. For what it seeks to disturb is monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine.”²⁹ This, of course, means that he stands

²⁶ Wilde, *Intentions*, 42.

²⁷ Wilde, *Intentions*, 39.

²⁸ Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man* (Urbana, Illinois: Project Gutenberg, 2014), 47, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1017/1017-h/1017-h.htm>.

²⁹ Wilde, *The Soul of Man*, 47.

always in opposition to society and can never be accepted by his contemporaries. On this account Wilde expressed his worry of “not being misunderstood”.³⁰ The true artist must withstand the social pressure which includes the criticism of scholars but also the public demand which is particularly dangerous because by yielding to it, he would have to surrender his artistic integrity: “the artist would have to ... write not for the artistic joy of writing, but for the amusement of half-educated people, and so would have to suppress his individualism, forget his culture, annihilate his style, and surrender everything that is valuable in him.”³¹ In other words, an authentic and valuable work of art must be completely subjective.

Wilde’s emphasis on individualism strongly opposes the philosophy of Utilitarianism popular during his lifetime which overlooked the happiness of one in favor of the greater good. It says that actions and things should be useful which was in Wilde’s eyes something despicable, and he proclaims that art should be everything but practical. On paper, the theory does not appear to be very harmful but, in reality, it became one of the dangerous weapons of the middle class which used it in pursuit of consolidating its power as Granville Hicks comments: “From utilitarian ethics and laissez-faire economics the middle class took what it wanted, forging a body of ideas that served its needs.”³²

2.1.2. Beauty

The concept of beauty was one of Wilde’s favorite topics for contemplation: “There is nothing sane about the worship of beauty. It is too splendid to be sane.”³³ He believed it to be the purpose of art and life. Of course, only the real individualist is capable of discerning beauty as well as producing it. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that in the volumes of fairy tales beauty emerges in different nuances and forms, never leaving until the last sentence. The reader is consequently forced to meditate on the notion of beauty and its role in the world.

As for the specific manner in which it relates to the tales, when Wilde sent his first volume of fairy tales to Ruskin, he wrote: “Dear Mr. Ruskin, I send you my little book, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, and need hardly say how gratified

³⁰ Wilde, *Intentions*, 111.

³¹ Wilde, *The Soul of Man*, 45-46.

³² Granville Hicks, “The Literary Opposition to Utilitarianism,” *Science & Society* 1, no. 4 (1937): 454, Accessed February 15, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875809990090>.

³³ Wilde, *Intentions*, 190.

I will be if you find in it any charm or beauty.”³⁴ He made it obvious that it was above all beauty that he wanted his audience to taste in the book. Possibly, it was his only goal. In “Preface” to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he states: “Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope. They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only beauty.”³⁵ Later he adds: “All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.”³⁶ Although Wilde most likely did not wish his work to be put under scrutiny lest the reader’s attention is distracted and overlooks the beauty in a search of some meaning, he does not deny that there are deeper layers. Despite the prophesied danger in analyzing the books, it seems to be worth the risk.

2.1.3. Morality

When it comes to the decision whether to interpret these tales as moral or without an explicit moral message, it appears that even critics are not unanimous. Some treat them as advocating morality, others are refuting these opinions. For instance, John Allen Quintus in “The Moral Prerogative of Oscar Wilde: A Look At the Fairy Tales” is firm in his position that in the case of the fairy tales, Oscar gave in to the Victorian love of moralizing and regards them as an anomaly within his oeuvre, and even criticizes those who overlook these clearly moralistic publications: “But largely critics have emphasized aestheticism, Satanism, decadence, and degeneration in Wilde’s work and have hesitated to allow that the real Oscar, underneath the masks and poses, was a Victorian gentleman who could not altogether escape a Victorian predilection to preach—indeed, to be moralistic.”³⁷ On the other hand, Justin T. Jones in his article “Morality’s Ugly Implications in Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales” claims that morality plays a destructive and very negative role in the stories and Wilde’s aim is to warn about its dangers,

³⁴ Oscar Wilde, *Selected Letters Of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 71.

³⁵ Wilde, preface.

³⁶ Wilde, preface.

³⁷ JOHN ALLEN QUINTUS, “THE MORAL PREROGATIVE IN OSCAR WILDE: A LOOK AT THE FAIRY TALES,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 53, no. 4 (1977): 708, Accessed February 20, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/26435981.

not to promote it.³⁸ Interestingly, Wilde himself was not worried about disagreement in opinions, he regarded it as a positive phenomenon: “Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital. When critics disagree, the artist is in accord with himself.”³⁹

As the main aim of the thesis is trying to prove that fairy tales that Oscar Wilde wrote are not to be interpreted as moral, it is essential to first define what characteristics should such a story carry. “The moral of a story is supposed to teach you how to be a better person. If *moral* is used as an adjective, it means good, or ethical. If you have a strong moral character, you are a good member of society.”⁴⁰ This definition from an online dictionary includes two decisive points that need to be in accordance in order for the story to be read as moral. Firstly, it teaches how to be a better person. This explanation is rather vague given that everyone has a different understanding of what it means to be a ‘good person’. That is why the last part of the definition cannot be overlooked, emphasizing that the decision is up to the social convention. In summary, society as a whole is the judge of what is good and what is wrong.

In this case, it was the Victorian society, more specifically its middle class, who was the dictator in these matters. According to Beibei Guan, it was an often debated topic: “During the reign of Victoria, in the United Kingdom, the word morality was frequently discussed. Everything was judged by a moral standard. Morals were used to define social norms.”⁴¹ This type of morality promotes watchwords like honesty, chastity, hard work, altruistic behavior and charity towards the poor. The standard for moral goodness was largely set by the Church as well where it was measured by the ten commandments. The terms vice and virtue, so often used in connection with morality, can be thus interpreted in the framework of Christianity in which case vice would be an equivalent of sin.

Here are some opinions that Wilde expressed regarding the topic: “Morality does not help me. I am a born antinomian. I am one of those who are made for

³⁸ JUSTIN T. JONES, “Morality’s Ugly Implications in Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 51, no. 4 (2011): 885, Accessed February 21, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/41349042.

³⁹ Wilde, preface.

⁴⁰ “Moral - Dictionary Definition.” n.d. Vocabulary.com. Accessed February 15, 2020. <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/moral>.

⁴¹ Beibei Guan, “Oscar Wilde’s Aestheticism,” *Journal of Arts and Humanities* 7, no. 2 (2018): 26, Accessed February 14, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.18533/journal.v7i2.1331>.

exceptions, not for laws. But while I see that there is nothing wrong in what one does, I see that there is something wrong in what one becomes. It is well to have learned that.”⁴² Of course, he often talks about his convictions through his fictional character as well. For instance, in *An Ideal Husband* Mrs. Cheveley says: “Remember to what a point your Puritanism in England has brought you. ... Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, everyone has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues—and what is the result? You all go over like ninepins—one after another.”⁴³ When he speaks about it in relation to artistic creation, he says that art belongs to a different, higher and more intelligent sphere than morality and that these two spheres do not clash.⁴⁴ In his tale “The Devoted Friend” he then explicitly proclaims that relating stories with morals is hazardous.⁴⁵ And lastly he declares that “Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art.”⁴⁶

These few quotes are enough to conclude that Wilde was really hostile to the notion of morality. Surprisingly, he acknowledges it in reference to Jesus, when he says simply: “His morality is all sympathy, just what morality should be.”⁴⁷ This proves that he does not condemn the general concept of morals, when he criticizes them, he merely alludes to the set of values presented by the society of the 19th century. His version with a revised understanding of good and evil could be called aesthetic morality.

2.1.3.1. Charity

One of the spheres of morality is charity. In the nineteenth century, poverty was a serious problem. Urban areas suffered from overpopulation, unemployment, and unbearable living conditions. As the state of affairs was affecting the whole society, many charitable activities were endorsed. Altruism was considered a natural part of the middle-class lifestyle and Wilde, as an opponent of anything that defies the middle-class, expressed some strong opinions concerning this topic,

⁴² Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1905), 30-31.

⁴³ Oscar Wilde, *The Works of Oscar Wilde* (Great Britain: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1949), 480.

⁴⁴ Wilde, *Intentions*, 192.

⁴⁵ Oscar Wilde, *The Happy Prince And Other Tales*, Tauchnitz ed.: Collection of British Authors, vol. 4141 (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1909), 107.

⁴⁶ Wilde, preface.

⁴⁷ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 106.

notably in the essays *The Soul of Man* as well as *The Critic as Artist* where he writes: “Charity ... creates a multitude of evils.”⁴⁸

There are several reasons why he so strongly opposed the seemingly praiseworthy initiative. Firstly, he believed that charity is not the cure to the problem, rather the opposite, that it is an obstacle on the way of finding a real solution:

The proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible. And the altruistic virtues have really prevented the carrying out of this aim. Just as the worst slave-owners were those who were kind to their slaves, and so prevented the horror of the system being realised by those who suffered from it, and understood by those who contemplated it, so, in the present state of things in England, the people who do most harm are the people who try to do most good.⁴⁹

Peter Shapely, when describing the situation in Manchester notes that the main figures of the time were eager to participate in charitable work in order to portray themselves as “altruistic and morally upstanding members of the community.”⁵⁰ But Wilde could read the real intentions behind this kind of involvement. He knew that the real goal was not helping others but rather climbing the social ladder. Last but not least, he thought that altruism and individualism are two irreconcilable ways of living: “But alone, without any reference to his neighbours, without any interference, the artist can fashion a beautiful thing; and if he does not do it solely for his own pleasure, he is not an artist at all.”⁵¹

Again, there can be no question regarding Wilde’s disapproving stand. Nonetheless, as charity is one of the major and recurrent themes in the fairy tales, its role there is rather puzzling. Many of the stories do appear to be advocating philanthropy. How can it be so, will be therefore discussed.

2.1.3.2. Christianity

Sometimes, there is a tendency to marginalize Wilde’s religious preoccupations, maybe because they do not fit perfectly into the image of free-spirited hedonistic dandy that is prevailing among the public to this day. In reality,

⁴⁸ Wilde, *Intentions*, 130.

⁴⁹ Wilde, *The Soul of Man*, 3.

⁵⁰ Peter Shapely, “Charity, Status and Leadership: Charitable Image and the Manchester Man,” *Journal of Social History* 32, no. 1 (January 1998): 157, Accessed March 3, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh/32.1.157>.

⁵¹ Wilde, *The Soul of Man*, 42.

his whole body of work is more or less marked by Biblical references and Wilde's own interpretation of them. For instance, Patrick R. O'Malley notices that "Wilde flaunts religion even more consistently than he does sexuality or Irishness".⁵²

It was said that the Church was very influential in establishing rules for the right way of living, hence Wilde should be naturally opposed to it. Christian imaginary is, however, omnipresent in the tales. To comprehend why, his own attitude to spirituality must be discussed more in depth. Hopkins admits that when it comes to the question of transcendence, Wilde's point of view is somewhat blurry: "What he felt about religion and religious controversy is rather difficult to divine."⁵³ The issue is not his indifference, the problem stems from his opinions being often paradoxical and contradictory. Simon Critchley describes Wilde's religious beliefs as "adventurous"⁵⁴ which seems to be a very fitting term. Nevertheless, by comparing his own statements, it is possible to find some consistency.

The proof that he did not take this topic lightly can be observed in his essays, especially in *The Soul of Man*. Later in *De Profundis* he contemplates some more on the role of faith in his life, on religion in general, and he provides an elaborated insight into his understanding of Jesus Christ. This part becomes particularly crucial for the study of the fairy tales, as the appearance of Christ, in more or less obvious shapes and forms, is a prevalent motive.

The most ambiguity causes his faith as such. In "Preface" to *De Profundis*, he writes: "Still I believe that at the beginning God made a world for each separate man".⁵⁵ This God, of course, might be some sort of a metaphor, it is possible that the God he is referring to is rather some kind of consciousness universal for all humanity, not necessarily the God of Bible as a personal being. In support of this statement, it is convenient to look at what he says in the letter itself: "Religion does

⁵² Patrick R. O'Malley, "Religion," in *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*, ed. Frederick S. Roden (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 168.
https://books.google.cz/books?id=iyN_DAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summ ary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

⁵³ Thurston Hopkins, *Oscar Wilde*, 93.

⁵⁴ Simon Critchley, "Oscar Wilde's Faithless Christianity," *The Guardian*, January 15, 2009, Accessed March 19, 2020,
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/jan/14/religion-wilde>.

⁵⁵ Robert Ross, preface to *De Profundis*, by Oscar Wilde, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1905), vii.

not help me. The faith that others give to what is unseen, I give to what one can touch, and look at.”⁵⁶ He further elaborates this position:

When I think about religion at all, I feel as if I would like to found an order for those who cannot believe: the Confraternity of the Faithless, one might call it, where on an altar, on which no taper burned, a priest, in whose heart peace had no dwelling, might celebrate with unblessed bread and a chalice empty of wine. Every thing to be true must become a religion. And agnosticism should have its ritual no less than faith.⁵⁷

The end of the sentence implies that he considered himself an agnostic but the statement as a whole is immensely fascinating and entails several interesting implications. Critchley, for instance, tackles the meaning of the truth Wilde is alluding to. He concludes that truth “is an experience of faith”⁵⁸ which is shared by those who acknowledge the existence of God, agnostics and atheists alike. By the experience is meant the “framework of ritual in which they believe.”⁵⁹ He admits that now one is left with one great paradox “of the faith of the faithless and the belief of the unbelievers.”⁶⁰

The key to understanding this contradiction may be found in his attraction to the Catholic Church. According to Hopkins, Wilde was once heard saying: “If I had been a Roman Catholic in my youth I should not have fallen.”⁶¹ It is hard to divine what exactly did he mean, at the very least, it shows that he held Catholicism in high esteem. Alexander Grinstein says that he “often flirted with becoming a Catholic”.⁶² His fascination, however, was not the result of his faith, he was attracted by the rituals performed during the liturgy. It does not mean that he assigned to them the same meaning as the other believers, quite the opposite. He says: “Only that is spiritual which makes its own form. If I may not find its secrets within myself, I shall never find it”.⁶³ He refers to the process of the transfiguration of the body of Christ into the Eucharist during which the spiritual meaning acquires a tangible form. He is fascinated by this transformation and uses it in his own work but with his own symbolism. He expresses his belief that “Beauty cannot be left in

⁵⁶ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 31.

⁵⁷ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 31-32.

⁵⁸ Critchley, “Oscar Wilde’s Faithless Christianity.”

⁵⁹ Critchley, “Oscar Wilde’s Faithless Christianity.”

⁶⁰ Critchley, “Oscar Wilde’s Faithless Christianity.”

⁶¹ Thurston Hopkins, *Oscar Wilde*, 93-94.

⁶² Alexander Grinstein, “OSCAR WILDE,” *American Imago* 37, no. 2 (1980): 141, Accessed April 4, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/26303564.

⁶³ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 32-33.

the abstract realm of metaphysics”⁶⁴ as Joseph McQueen puts it. That is essentially the reasoning behind Wilde’s desire to create ‘the Confraternity of the Faithless’, he insists that even those who do not believe in the traditional sense have their own various beliefs and should have the platform or ritual where they can express them. In *The Critic as Artist*, Wilde emphasizes the importance of finding the perfect form for an expression: “Form is everything. It is the secret of life.”⁶⁵ He regards the Eucharist as the perfect expression of Jesus’ sacrifice and attempts to achieve the same ideal. This endeavor indeed does not go unnoticed, Renier, for example, remarks: “Whatever may be the merits or demerits of the content of his work, it cannot be gainsaid that he form is a sheer delight.”⁶⁶ McQueen calls this whole process the “logic of incarnation”⁶⁷ whose basic role lies in bringing the abstract idea into concrete reality.⁶⁸

McQueen is particularly attentive to Wilde’s Catholic interests which he interprets as a result of secularization during the Victorian era: “For only against the backdrop of secularity do the subversive connections between Wilde’s aestheticism and Catholicism become apparent.”⁶⁹ He believes that Wilde adheres to this specific form of religion in resistance of the “reductive understandings of goodness and truth prominent in the nineteenth century”.⁷⁰ Besides, secularization meant a much bigger problem which was a loss of imagination. In *The Decay of Lying* Wilde castigates the realistic tendencies in the artistic domain. He discovers that in a world that slowly loses its imaginative spirit, he can find refuge in the Catholic beliefs that are based on imagination. The essay is constructed as a dialogue between two men, Vivian and Cyril, who are discussing artistic questions, and even though religion in itself is not its primary subject, the essay brings some enlightenment concerning it as well. For instance, Vivian claims that: “As for the Church I cannot conceive anything better for the culture of a country than the presence in it of a body of men whose duty it is to believe in the supernatural, to

⁶⁴ Joseph McQueen, “Oscar Wilde’s Catholic Aesthetics in a Secular Age,” *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 57, no. 4 (Autumn 2017): 876-877, Accessed February 29, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/37298150/Oscar_Wildes_Catholic_Aesthetics_in_a_Secular_Age.

⁶⁵ Wilde, *Intentions*, 201.

⁶⁶ Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 46.

⁶⁷ McQueen, “Oscar Wilde’s Catholic Aesthetics in a Secular Age,” 877.

⁶⁸ McQueen, “Oscar Wilde’s Catholic Aesthetics in a Secular Age,” 877.

⁶⁹ McQueen, “Oscar Wilde’s Catholic Aesthetics in a Secular Age,” 866.

⁷⁰ McQueen, “Oscar Wilde’s Catholic Aesthetics in a Secular Age,” 867.

perform daily miracles, and to keep alive that mythopoeic faculty which is so essential for the imagination”.⁷¹

Despite his fascination with practices exercised during the Mass, he was not blind to the problems of the Church as an institution. Jarlath Killeen claims that Oscar was aware of its “oppressive and domineering force.”⁷² He did not think about the actual people in the hierarchy of the Church highly either. As an illustration, in *De Profundis* portrays clergymen as those who speak without having much clever to say.⁷³ He clearly did not acknowledge the authority of the priesthood and trusted himself better with comprehension of the metaphysical.

In general, Wilde was very well-read and educated but the Holy Bible shaped him as a writer arguably more than any other piece of literature, maybe except Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. Still again, he takes the word of God and finds his own meaning in it as he does with the religious rites. He was certainly intrigued by what the Bible had to offer but was influenced by his persistent “Inclination towards ... merging of the sacred and the secular”⁷⁴ as Jennifer Stevens calls it. He often used Biblical text as inspiration for his own fiction which explains why the tales resemble little parables.

Lastly, the most important part of Wildean agnostic theology was his perception of Jesus Christ by whose personality he was captivated. Yet, the fascination is not of someone who accepts him as the son of God and his personal savior. Wilde finds a completely different message in Jesus’ quest on Earth, one that is decidedly unconventional and differs greatly from the usual interpretation of the gospels. He admires him for his absolute individualism and praises his imaginative power through which he built his whole ministry and secured his place in history: “It is the imaginative quality of Christ’s own nature that makes him this palpitating centre of romance. ... out of his own imagination entirely did Jesus of Nazareth create himself.”⁷⁵ Of course, as he represented the perfect artist, he could recognize the true beauty which he found especially in flowers and children. Wilde says that Jesus “was the first person who ever said to people that they should live

⁷¹ Wilde, *Intentions*, 47-48.

⁷² Jarlath Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 142.

⁷³ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 52.

⁷⁴ JENNIFER STEVENS, “The Fifth Gospel of Oscar Wilde,” in *The Historical Jesus and the Literary Imagination 1860–1920*, Accessed April 4, 2020, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 140, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vjbx8.9>.

⁷⁵ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 95-96.

‘flower-like lives.’ He fixed the phrase. He took children as the type of what people should try to become. He held them up as examples to their elders, which I myself have always thought the chief use of children, if what is perfect should have a use.”⁷⁶ One last thing that attracted Wilde immensely was Christ’s attitude towards society. As an individualist, he was not under the influence of social conformity, and his last goal in life was to fit in. He continuously criticized the hypocrisy of his age:

His chief war was against the Philistines. That is the war every child of light has to wage. Philistinism was the note of the age and community in which he lived. In their heavy inaccessibility to ideas, their dull respectability, their tedious orthodoxy, their worship of vulgar success, their entire preoccupation with the gross materialistic side of life, and their ridiculous estimate of themselves and their importance, the Jews of Jerusalem in Christ’s day were the exact counterpart of the British Philistine of our own.⁷⁷

To conclude, Wilde never saw in Jesus Christ the true and only son of God, he admired him solely for his imagination which pulled him out of the ordinary. This is where his uniqueness comes from and Wilde wanted to follow his example. He did so quite successfully. He imitated Jesus from his love for children and flowers to the social criticism and often made his fictional characters do so as well. Hopkins in his biography compares him to Christ: “Great reformers and men of genius have always been despised and reviled, even crucified between thieves.”⁷⁸ This comparison would Wilde undoubtedly consider a great honor. After piecing together different aspects of religion that Wilde was intrigued by, a certain pattern becomes apparent. In Christ he sees the ideal individualist, the highest degree of perfection an artist can reach. He does so through imaginative power which is inspired by the liturgic rituals and results in a form resembling a metamorphosed Biblical narrative.

2.1.4. Socialism

The last little section is dedicated to his socialistic views. Although his political preferences may seem unrelated to his artistic beliefs and irrelevant in a work like this, they prove to be necessary for a full understanding of his aesthetic

⁷⁶ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 104-105.

⁷⁷ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 109-110.

⁷⁸ Thurston Hopkins, *Oscar Wilde*, 19.

doctrine. His essay *The Soul of Man* is where he fully explains his thoughts on the topic but as Matthew McCaffrey comments: “he assays the problem of socialism from the perspective of an artist rather than an economist or philosopher”.⁷⁹

From today’s perspective, the term socialism evokes rather negative connotations due to its indisputable failure as a political system. However, in the Victorian age, socialism was regarded as a solution to many challenges of Great Britain caused by capitalistic oppressors. It must be highlighted that Wilde could not in the least be considered an advocate of any authoritative state power, quite the opposite, in the essay he claims that people must have complete freedom in choice of their occupation.⁸⁰

The only value that Wilde sees in socialism is that it helps reach individualism by helping to break free from an unhealthy relation with materialistic world: “Private property has crushed true Individualism, and set up an Individualism that is false.”⁸¹ He sees the resolution in taking the radical step of abolishing property altogether: “With the abolition of private property, then, we shall have true, beautiful, healthy Individualism. Nobody will waste his life in accumulating things, and the symbols for things. One will live. To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all.”⁸²

It is quite clear that the Wildean concept of socialism could not be actually put into practice. Even George Orwell saw the flaws in his philosophy when he remarked that “Wilde’s vision of Socialism ... is Utopian and anarchistic.”⁸³ It is hard to divine how he intended to combine the abolishment of property and noninterference of government. Besides, the fact that an individualist would not have control over his own possessions seem highly paradoxical.

⁷⁹ Matthew McCaffrey, “The Confused Socialism of Oscar Wilde,” Mises Institute, November 23, 2007, Accessed April 23, 2020, <https://mises.org/library/confused-socialism-oscar-wilde>.

⁸⁰ Wilde, *The Soul of Man*, 13-14.

⁸¹ Wilde, *The Soul of Man*, 17.

⁸² Wilde, *The Soul of Man*, 19.

⁸³ George Orwell, “George Orwell on Oscar Wilde’s Anarchic Genius,” *The Guardian*, January 27, 2013, Accessed April 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jan/27/george-orwell-assesses-oscar-wilde-socialism>.

3 Wilde's Fairy Tales

Fairy tales have a long tradition but it may seem striking that Wilde in particular should be interested in writing them. Nevertheless, when looking closer at his life as well as his other literary works, several hints emerge that may help to explain his intentions behind their creation. Pearson probably suggested the key information that may help with the explanation. In his personality, he notices an emotional immaturity, that is combined with superior intellect, to be precise he calls him "half boy, half genius".⁸⁴ He gives the childish part credit for finding pleasure in the magical stories: "part also of the boy in him ... had not outgrown the phase when fairy-tales are more real than reality."⁸⁵ Besides, it was also mentioned that his parents were collectors of Irish folklore so he grew up in an environment that valued the great power of imagination. The obvious reason was then, of course, his own parenthood. Pearson, for example, talks about his ability to entertain his sons with lovely stories he would make up.⁸⁶

Aside from his personality and domestic situation, his own artistic persuasion played an elemental part in choosing the genre as well. In his works, he does not try to hide his contempt for realistic literature. In fact, he dedicates almost a whole essay *The Decay of Lying* to the criticism of realism which was a movement prevailing at the time, especially in France. He writes there that "As a method, realism is a complete failure."⁸⁷ It is thus possible that these tales came as a revolt against this particular category of literature because he claims that "The moment Art surrenders its imaginative medium it surrenders everything."⁸⁸ He apparently did not think that the realistic writer possesses a great imaginative faculty, and selects the most contrastive genre where his creative power is not restrained by the limitations of reality.

The way he deals with a fairy tale is most remarkable and proves that he was indeed a childish genius. An inattentive reader may perceive nothing distinctive or unique that would make him question Wilde's motives. Nevertheless, detailed analysis reveals that he takes certain elements which are fundamental for this

⁸⁴ Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 42.

⁸⁵ Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 188.

⁸⁶ Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 184.

⁸⁷ Wilde, *Intentions*, 23.

⁸⁸ Wilde, *Intentions*, 52.

specific type of literature and turns them upside down. For instance, the way he deals with beauty, charity or the traditional role of hero and villain, radically departs from conventional treatment of those themes in a fairy tale. Sometimes, he takes another story, decomposes it, and rebuilds it again so that it fits his own values, often mocking those of the original. The tales are a confirmation of Ransome's observation that "He left no form of literature exactly as he found it."⁸⁹ Furthermore, a fairy tale is an amazing platform for his systematic criticism of the hypocrisy of the reigning bourgeoisie. His dislike for the class system and capitalism is very cleverly woven into the narratives.

By combining all of the aspects above it seems like the birth of books of fairy tales was inevitable at some point of Oscar Wilde's literary career. But at the same time, there emerges a question concerning the intended target audience. It seems that a child can hardly notice all the allusions, let alone understand them. In some preserved correspondence, the author himself elucidates his intentions. In June of 1888, he claimed to G. H. Kersley that his first volume was "meant partly for children, and partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy, and who find in simplicity a subtle strangeness".⁹⁰ Interestingly, later in December 1891, he wrote to the editor of *The Pall Mall Gazette* in connection with his second volume: "I had about as much intention of pleasing the British child as I had of pleasing the British public".⁹¹

Though Wilde seems to contradict himself, his first answer is more plausible. When talking about Jesus he said: "Like all poetical natures he loved ignorant people. He knew that in the soul of one who is ignorant there is always room for a great idea."⁹² Wilde similarly held in high esteem those who were still capable of using their imagination of whom children were the best representatives.

The following analysis will try to resolve the dilemma of the stories being moral or without a moral message. It will do so by deciding whether Wilde's attitudes towards certain topics in the tales are consistent with his aesthetic views because they cannot represent aestheticism and carry Victorian moral values at the same time. Three tales are chosen for closer examination. In "The Happy Prince"

⁸⁹ Ransome, *Oscar Wilde*, 22.

⁹⁰ Oscar Wilde, *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), 219.

⁹¹ Wilde, *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 302.

⁹² Wilde, *De Profundis*, 108.

the focus will be on the role of charity and the figure of Jesus Christ as a model for imitation. “The Selfish Giant” will put into perspective the concept of socialism, it will also look at Jesus and his power of making disciples. Lastly, “The Fisherman and His Soul” will deal with the perception of good and evil and differentiation between the two notions.

3.1. The Happy Prince

“The Happy Prince” is probably Wilde’s best-known fairy tale, moreover, it is one of the most interesting ones when it comes to analysis. The story carrying a seemingly obvious moral message, teaching the necessity of charity and Christianity, is underlain with far deeper meanings. The fact that it is included in the title of the book signals its uniqueness as well.

The narrative revolves around a relationship between a statue of the Happy Prince and a little Swallow who create a strong bond. The name Happy Prince is reminiscent of his previous life as a human when he lived in “the Palace of Sans-Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter.”⁹³ This life was a representation of a perfect aesthetic bubble, devoid of anything that does not bring pleasure. In such paradise, the soul is not troubled by the ugly reality of the actual world. After his death, he is suddenly exposed to the misery and ugliness of the city that he overlooks. Here, the death symbolizes an awakening and realization that this ideal does not exist, but Wilde also provides suggestions on how to overcome this horrid epiphany.

Face to face with the pitiless reality, The Happy Prince proceeds to help those who are in need by sacrificing parts of himself. He gives up the ruby from his sword-hilt as well as his eyes and also every golden leaf from his body until he looks “quite dull and grey.”⁹⁴ The little bird helps him, although it means that he cannot fly to Egypt and eventually freezes to death. The loss of a friend dear to him, causes Price’s leaden heart to break. An unexpected happy ending awaits the couple when God himself proclaims that the heart of the Happy Prince and the little

⁹³ Oscar Wilde, *The Happy Prince And Other Tales*, 17.

⁹⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Happy Prince And Other Tales*, 32.

Swallow are “the two most precious things in the city ”⁹⁵ and welcomes them into his Paradise.

The story seems to be simple and innocent, yet it contains almost the entire Wildean ideology. His ability to compress the complexity of his thoughts and worldview in such an elegant and intriguing manner is striking. He scatters a number of symbols and implications carrying a deep social criticism throughout the narrative in such a way, that they often pass unnoticed. He implements his aesthetic doctrine as a solution to these problems. Firstly, the analysis will focus on the subjects of his criticism and then on the protagonist and his role in solving the issues.

To begin with, the narrator hints that the position of the statue is above a city but does not reveal any specifics concerning the city’s precise location except that it is in the north of Europe.⁹⁶ Yet, it is not hard to guess that it is supposed to represent Victorian London which is not surprising given that Wilde had the first-hand experience of the conditions of its life. Killeen confirms this supposition when he remarks: “London is important to our interests because it is clear that it is the intended subject of many of Wilde’s fairy tales”.⁹⁷ As a result, in order to understand author’s critique, it is necessary to have in mind the state of London during this period because without at least the basic historical context, a present reader cannot fully grasp its full purport.

The Victorian era was a time of great contradiction. On one hand, during the reign of Queen Victoria, the British Empire became the world’s biggest economic power, and London as its capital grew in wealth, population and territory in a short period of time. It became a crucial center of politic affairs, commerce as well as culture. On the other hand, urbanization was followed by an emergence of slums where the living conditions were almost unbearable. Overpopulation caused extreme poverty, sickness, and a high death rate among the working-class. One key information is that the major part of those who came to London at this time was made up of the Irish population. The flood of Irish immigration was caused primarily by the Great Famine in 1848 which forced the people to leave their homeland. There were so many of them that the place gained nicknames like “Little

⁹⁵ Oscar Wilde, *The Happy Prince And Other Tales*, 36.

⁹⁶ Oscar Wilde, *The Happy Prince And Other Tales*, 16.

⁹⁷ Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, 24.

Ireland”⁹⁸, or “The Holy Land”.⁹⁹ The Irish brought two things with them, poverty and religion.

Wilde was not blind to the miserable state of affairs, he lived close to Paradise Walk, “one of the most forbidding of Chelsea slums.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, the story portrays representatives of the suffering classes such as little match-girl, a poor seamstress but also a struggling writer which implies that he counted artists among the victims of the oppression. In his personal view the misery was caused by the capitalistic system and executed by the middle-class whose great influence is highlighted by Killeen: “In both Victorian London and Wilde’s mythical City, the middle class preach the gospel of respectability, improvement and courtesy. They formulate an ideological manifesto implicitly designed to defend and extend their social position.”¹⁰¹ For this reason, Wilde repeatedly mocks the capitalist archetypes such as the town councillors or the educated professors and satirizes their typical behavior. He reveals that the abuse does not happen in a form of overt cruelty. He constantly points out that the subtle suppression of imagination is the secret weapon by which they stop the flourishing of individualism and consequently any possible revolution.

In the story Wilde idealizes two types which are the targets of oppression. These include a child and a Catholic Irishman, whom he often fuses into one powerful force. He praises the child for its pure imaginative capacity. In *De Profundis* Wilde says: “Far off, like a perfect pearl, one can see the city of God. It is so wonderful that it seems as if a child could reach it in a summer’s day. And so a child could.”¹⁰² The meaning of this metaphor is clarified some pages later: “It is man’s soul that Christ is always looking for. He calls it ‘God’s Kingdom,’ and finds it in every one. He compares it to little things, to a tiny seed, to a handful of leaven, to a pearl. That is because one realises one’s soul only by getting rid of all alien passions, all acquired culture, and all external possessions, be they good or evil.”¹⁰³ It is evident that he values children immensely, and alludes that only he who has a

⁹⁸ Maeve Kennedy, “London parish’s descent from glamour to grime charted in exhibition,” *The Guardian*, May 16, 2011, Accessed March 5, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/may/16/london-parish-glamour-grime-rookery-exhibition>.

⁹⁹ Kennedy, “London parish’s descent from glamour to grime charted in exhibition.”

¹⁰⁰ Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, 24.

¹⁰¹ Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, 26.

¹⁰² Wilde, *De Profundis*, 60.

¹⁰³ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 80-81.

childlike spirit can reach this city of God which is nothing else than one's own soul. By doing so, he can consequently achieve a real change in the external world as well. On the other hand, the strength of the Irish is rooted in their faith. In the chapter discussing Wilde's attraction to Catholicism, it was concluded that his interest was again merely in the imagery of their faith.

Wilde argues that those in power fear them and will do everything to stop the imagination from growing into its dangerous potential. Such a plan is accomplished chiefly by education and scorn for anything that nourishes it. He suggests that they are indeed succeeding in this endeavor. In *The Decay of Lying* he expresses his regret that this imaginative ability is usually short-lived:

Many a young man starts in life with a natural gift for exaggeration which, if nurtured in congenial and sympathetic surroundings, or by the imitation of the best models, might grow into something really great and wonderful. But, as a rule, he comes to nothing. ... He either falls into careless habits of accuracy, or takes to frequenting the society of the aged and the well informed. Both things are equally fatal to his imagination.¹⁰⁴

The episode with the 'Charity children' is interesting for better illustration. They represent the perfect spirit Wilde is looking for. Killeen assigns great importance to their brief appearance in the story because when they come out of the cathedral "the (Irish-like) Charity Children turning their eyes to heaven, while the (English) Mathematical Master seems unable to clear the smoke of hard industrial fact from his vision".¹⁰⁵ Here Wilde intentionally juxtaposes the children who clearly discern the beauty around them with the professor who lost this ability due to education.

Wilde's criticism is not targeted only towards the usurpers, he condemns the oppressed as well. He despises their willingness to submit to the dictatorial ideology and points out that they completely fail to recognize the power they have and practically blames them for their misery: "As for the virtuous poor, one can pity them, of course, but one cannot possibly admire them. They have made private terms with the enemy, and sold their birthright for very bad pottage. They must also be extraordinarily stupid."¹⁰⁶ They must become like a superstitious child because only then is there a chance for better days. This, however, the characters in the tale fail to do.

¹⁰⁴ Wilde, *Intentions*, 7-8.

¹⁰⁵ Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, 30.

¹⁰⁶ Wilde, *The Soul of Man*, 11.

Now follows the analysis of the protagonist himself who, unlike the poor, manages to escape the despotism. From the beginning, it is clear that he represents the artistic force, as he is always associated with beauty. The reader learns that the statue was “gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold, for eyes he had two bright sapphires, and a large red ruby glowed on his sword hilt.”¹⁰⁷ Unfortunately, during his existence, there are two occasions when the Happy Prince suffers a loss of beauty. Each time it has a different cause as well as slightly different consequences, so it is interesting to look at those moments, see how they effect the artist and how he deals with the misfortune.

The loss occurs for the first time when he is symbolically banished from the Palace of Sans-Souci. Justin T. Jones studies more in depth the process of the loss of beauty in the tales. His view is enlightening in this first case and helps to understand why was the Happy Prince taken from the palace of pleasure in the first place. Based on his view, there is one force that causes absolute destruction to the domain of beauty, and its name is moral instruction. To those, who see the story in itself as being moral, this approach may seem disturbing. Taking into consideration the course of the story, its outcome, author’s views, his own personality, and life, it becomes clear that the anti-moral explanation is very plausible, if not the only one that makes sense. Jones says: “Once Wilde subjects one of his fairy tale characters to moral correction, that character is in danger of losing his otherworldly beauty or his love of beauty for its own sake—both gifts of the supernatural realm of art.”¹⁰⁸ The Happy Prince wakes up from the aesthetic slumber which leads to his metaphorical death. He is technically alive, but his soul and spirit are dead being confronted with all the misery. To fight this he commits himself to the imitation of Jesus Christ. The decision to do so may not be a conscious one but the true artist inherently knows that it is necessary. This process represents the Eucharistic transubstantiation

The second time loss beauty happens when he gives up the physical evidence of it in the form of the valuable stones and gold. Before he does so, he is admired by everyone for his astonishing beauty: “‘He is as beautiful as a weathercock’ remarked one of the Town Councillors who wished to gain a

¹⁰⁷ Wilde, *The Happy Prince And Other Tales*, 11.

¹⁰⁸ JONES, “Morality’s Ugly Implications in Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales,” 885.

reputation for having artistic tastes; ‘only not quite so useful’.”¹⁰⁹ Prince’s sacrifice stripped him of his apparent beauty which was visible only through the eyes. Just like in the case of Christ’s sacrifice, the ones that once admired him, despise him now. When the Mayor and Town Councillors see the statue in its pathetic state, it loses all value to them: “he is little better than a beggar!”¹¹⁰ and they decide to destroy it. The Art Professor at the University concludes: “‘As he is no longer beautiful he is no longer useful,’”¹¹¹ The Happy Prince, as well as Jesus, reached a higher state of beauty, one that the closed-minded middle-class hypocrite cannot see. Pearson records one of Wilde’s conversations where he expresses this idea:

“‘What is civilisation, M. Wilde?’
‘Love of beauty.’
‘And what is beauty?’
‘That which the bourgeois call ugly.’”¹¹²

The fact that the pretentious antagonist was perceptive of the physical beauty but fail to recognize the true beauty in the spiritual form, shows Wilde’s criticism of the Utilitarian approach to art which cannot recognize beauty for its own sake without the obligation of being useful.

The time which the Happy Prince spends as a statue can be compared to the Catholic concept of purgatory, where he needs to find his true self, the reason for his existence and also see clearly the world surrounding him. He successfully does so, and the loss of beauty is simply a part of his journey. Once he accomplishes this task, his spirit can ascend to heaven, the most perfect kingdom of aestheticism.

The problem of seeing the tales as moral arises mainly from the charitable deeds done by both the Prince and the little Swallow and their misinterpretation. Some see the salvation at the end as a direct outcome of these acts. For example, Clifton Schneider writes that “he changes into a self-sacrificing martyr who literally gives his life for the suffering poor.”¹¹³ But the critics who take this stand may struggle with disenchantment when they do not see any real changes following the

¹⁰⁹ Wilde, *The Happy Prince And Other Tales*, 11.

¹¹⁰ Wilde, *The Happy Prince And Other Tales*, 35.

¹¹¹ Wilde, *The Happy Prince And Other Tales*, 35.

¹¹² Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 79.

¹¹³ Clifton Schneider, “‘On the Loom of Sorrow’: Eros and Logos in Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales,” *Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales*, by Clifton Snider, Accessed May 2, 2020, <https://web.csulb.edu/~csnider/wilde.fairy.tales.html>.

charity. Guy Willoughby implies that everything the Prince does is “quite futile”.¹¹⁴ Killeen suggests that “His gifts of gold and jewels have merely provided a local and temporary respite for some from the full rigours of the capitalist system which inevitably marginalises so many.”¹¹⁵

The reason why the tale cannot be interpreted as promoting charity is that Wilde had a very negative opinion about it which was discussed. He considers charity to be the fuel of poverty because the poor do not have any reason for radical change. In this tale, it is quite obvious that the people are quite satisfied with the temporary relief, but his ideal vision is quite different:

We are often told that the poor are grateful for charity. Some of them are, no doubt, but the best amongst the poor are never grateful. They are ungrateful, discontented, disobedient, and rebellious. ... Why should they be grateful for the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table? They should be seated at the board, and are beginning to know it. As for being discontented, a man who would not be discontented with such surroundings and such a low mode of life would be a perfect brute.¹¹⁶

Therefore, those who interpret the story as encouraging charity fail to understand that the transformation the Happy Prince undergoes is not from egoistic hedonist into humble altruist but from a joyous artist into a more perfect and profound version of himself. The charity is merely a side effect of that progression. He contributes to the development of society only by becoming his true self. The truth is that the acknowledgment of the suffering is not positive. Jones insists that in the case of the Happy Prince, the only way back to the unspoiled aestheticism is to “succumb to a revised aesthetic where Christ's image is the source of beauty.”¹¹⁷

Now, why does the Happy Prince need to resemble Christ and how is it manifested practically in his life. First of all, one of the core principles of aestheticism is that life imitates art and the Happy Prince as a genuine artist should follow this instruction. Wilde says: “Christ was not merely the supreme individualist, but he was the first individualist in history.”¹¹⁸ This explains why it should be above all Jesus Christ whom the real artist should follow and the Happy Prince does so successfully. When this is taken into consideration, suddenly

¹¹⁴ Guy Willoughby, *Art and Christhood: the Aesthetics of Oscar Wilde* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1993), 26.

¹¹⁵ Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, 22.

¹¹⁶ Wilde, *The Soul of Man*, 9-10.

¹¹⁷ JONES, “Morality's Ugly Implications in Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales,” 885.

¹¹⁸ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 83.

everything he does is put into perspective. His goodness towards others is easy to justify as the reflection of Christ's similar behavior. This is how Wilde explains Jesus' kindness: "People have tried to make him out an ordinary philanthropist, or ranked him as an altruist with the unscientific and sentimental. But he was really neither one nor the other."¹¹⁹ "In his own entreaty to the young man, 'Sell all that thou hast and give to the poor,' it is not of the state of the poor that he is thinking but of the soul of the young man, the soul that wealth was marring."¹²⁰ In summary, Wilde's Jesus encourages people to be completely themselves, not to donate everything to people who will not appreciate it anyway. He wants everyone to find what is the best in him, what is the true core of a person and realize it accordingly.

For the Happy Prince it is the love which he discovers within himself and brings it into the external world by giving his own riches to others. He realizes that though beautiful to look at, his jewels are not the most valuable thing he has. The Happy Prince knows that only through love one can be saved and that is exactly what Christ was preaching by everything he did: "One always thinks of him as ... a lover for whose love the whole world was too small."¹²¹ For the love of the Happy Prince, the world is not enough either, so God calls him to his kingdom. In the end, it does not matter that people do not appreciate his sacrifice or that nothing really changes. The only thing that matters is that the Happy Prince finds his true identity. Through this artistic transfiguration he gives other example which they can imitate and find their own freedom.

To conclude, the story contains numerous messages. Firstly, there is an important warning that moral awakening is extremely dangerous for the domain of beauty, but in the long run, the acknowledgment of suffering can lead to a higher mode of existence. Next, the story highlights the importance of Christ-like individualism rather than preaching the necessity of altruism. Charity on its own cannot be the saving factor because it does not bring any real change. It is only through the power of imagination that social conditions can be reversed but because it is constantly suppressed, ordinary people fail to exercise their imaginative faculty. It is then up to the artist to make a difference, and he does so by being completely himself and thus he becomes a role model for the rest.

¹¹⁹ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 83.

¹²⁰ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 84-85.

¹²¹ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 77-78.

3.2. The Selfish Giant

“The Selfish Giant” is another fairy tale from Wilde’s first volume *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*. The moral seems to teach that happiness can be obtained only through selflessness and living for others. The story then explores primarily author’s socialistic views. This part will try to determine whether his theory corresponds to the way he treats the topic in this tale. According to Jeanette Winterson, it is his “most overtly religious story”¹²² so the Christian layer will be discussed likewise.

The main character of the story is, as the title suggests, a Giant who is incredibly selfish. He owns a beautiful garden with charming flora and lively fauna. The garden is in its full blossom and its loveliness attracts little children from the neighborhood who come and play and are very joyous there: “How happy we are here!”¹²³ In the meantime, the Giant is away, visiting an ogre, his friend. His visit lasts for seven years and when it comes to an end, the Giant comes back. He is not at all happy with what he sees, and the children are immediately forbidden from coming to the garden. He even proceeds to build a wall in order to protect his property. However, something unexpected happens. Without children, the Spring refuses to come. The Giant is puzzled and does not comprehend why is the Winter still reigning in his home. One day, the children find their way back to the garden, and nature finally wakes up. The Giant realizes his selfishness and lets the children play. He is particularly drawn to one of them, a tiny boy who cannot climb a tree. The Giant helps him and later finds out that he is Jesus Christ himself. Thanks to his change of heart, the Giant is taken into heaven.

The emphasis on a child in the narrative can be read as a reaction to its pathetic position in the hierarchy of Victorian society. The exploitation of children, primarily in the form of child labor, robbed the little ones of their happy childhood. In the story, they are likewise evicted from their natural joyous environment and thrown into unsuitable conditions: “The poor children had now nowhere to play. They tried to play on the road, but the road was very dusty and full of hard stones,

¹²² Jeanette Winterson, “Why We Need Fairytales: Jeanette Winterson on Oscar Wilde,” *The Guardian*, October 16, 2013, Accessed March 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/16/jeanette-winterson-fairytales-oscar-wilde>.

¹²³ Wilde, *The Happy Prince And Other Tales*, 60.

and they did not like it.”¹²⁴ Killeen sees Giant’s newly sprung love for them as the repentance of adults for their vicious behavior towards children:

‘The Selfish Giant’ can thus be seen as a compelling cultural attempt by the Victorians to seek forgiveness for their bad treatment of children ... and also their efforts to rectify child neglect through philanthropic intervention, as visioned in the Giant magnanimously breaking down the wall and allowing the children access to the pleasures he had forbidden them.¹²⁵

As mentioned in the previously, Wilde has great respect for children in general, especially for their unspoiled imaginative capacity. He uses them as an example that should be followed by those who are wicked, in this case, due to influence of capitalistic ideology.

As for the Giant’s importance as a reflection of the historical context, this is what Winterson observes: “Wilde’s Giant is both fairytale giant and Victorian industrialist.”¹²⁶ This interpretation suggests that the core of the story is a conflict between the capitalistic manufacturer and the powerless working class. Killeen, on the other hand, sees the narrative rather as an allegory for the land ownership in Ireland and the friction between the landlord and the tenant caused by a different religion and nationality: “there was always a pronounced cleavage between the Catholic ‘Gaelic’ tenant and his Protestant ‘English’ landlord”.¹²⁷ The playground as a representation of Ireland would also explain Giant’s long absence, as the concept of so-called absenteeism was largely practiced there. R. D. Collison Black writes that “a considerable proportion of the Irish proprietors resided, temporarily or permanently, in England or abroad”.¹²⁸ Nevertheless, whether the Irish question is the direct basis for the tale or not, the attack of the capitalistic form of rule is more than obvious.

Wilde makes the Selfish Giant an example of someone who is bound to the materialistic world in which he finds his identity. He believes that all the worldly pleasures are limited to his wealth and that there is nothing more in life to be obtained. This gives him an illusion of individualism: “For the recognition of

¹²⁴ Wilde, *The Happy Prince And Other Tales*, 61.

¹²⁵ Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, 63.

¹²⁶ Winterson, “Why We Need Fairytales: Jeanette Winterson on Oscar Wilde.”

¹²⁷ Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, 66.

¹²⁸ R. D. Collison Black, *Economic Thought and the Irish Question 1817-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 72.

https://books.google.cz/books?id=YBVEBgAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

private property has really harmed Individualism, and obscured it, by confusing a man with what he possesses. ... The true perfection of man lies, not in what man has, but in what man is.”¹²⁹

As a result, he is overprotective of what he owns to a ridiculous extent lest he should lose this fake identity. Wilde argues that tangible reality in its essence can never be a source of true understanding of one’s nature. On the other hand, he surely does not oppose things as such, he was known for living quite luxuriously and surrounding himself with beautiful objects. One of his most famous quotes: “I hope I shall be able to live up to my blue china”¹³⁰ is a proof of that. The difference is that for a true artist the material is a source of inspiration but things can represent a real danger for someone who has not reached this stage of artistic development. The Giant is without a doubt a victim of such deception.

The results of the fact that the protagonist has an unhealthy relationship with his property are not favorable and make him evil. Wilde talks about this phenomenon in *The Soul of Man* where he states that “The possession of private property is very often extremely demoralising.”¹³¹ At the beginning of the story, it is manifested by his contempt for the children and by his selfishness. What is more, his prioritizing of the material above anything generates many unexpected complications. One consequence, that the Giant could not have seen coming, is that the garden itself turns its back on him. By default, the selfishness of one causes a struggle for another. In the story, those who suffer are clearly the children, and the garden sides with them against their usurper. The garden refuses to wake up while the children are not allowed to play there:

Then the Spring came, and all over the country there were little blossoms and little birds. Only in the garden of the Selfish Giant it was still Winter. The birds did not care to sing in it as there were no children, and the trees forgot to blossom. Once a beautiful flower put its head out from the grass ... it was so sorry for the children that it slipped back into the ground again, and went off to sleep.¹³²

A garden is essentially a part of nature and as it is full of life, it can be an agent with an independent will. In *De Profundis*, he explains the relationship between children and nature, specifically a flower and a child: “a child being no

¹²⁹ Wilde, *The Soul of Man*, 16-17.

¹³⁰ Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 6.

¹³¹ Wilde, *The Soul of Man*, 8.

¹³² Wilde, *The Happy Prince And Other Tales*, 61-62 .

more than an April day on which there is both rain and sun for the narcissus.”¹³³ This explains their friendship and unity against the oppressor. A child is essential for the growth of a flower which is in the aesthetic movement of significant importance as the symbol of beauty. Thus, in order for the Giant to reach the beauty within him and reconcile with his environment, he has to also adopt this child-like spirit.

In this case, the garden performs the duty of a judge, as it recognizes that the children are secluded from benefiting from its pleasures and beauty which would help them in their own pursuit of individualistic identity. In other words, not only does the selfish capitalist prevent himself from growing but those who are dependent on him as well. Consequently, the whole society is affected. When talking about the wickedness of property, Wilde says: “It has debarred one part of the community from being individual by starving them. It has debarred the other part of the community from being individual by putting them on the wrong road, and encumbering them.”¹³⁴ The Giant blinded by his riches starves the children not by depriving them of bread but of their aesthetic environment which is a much greater sin.

There is one more reason why the Giant must change and that is to sustain peace. The oppressed, though they are poor and without evident power, have great strength in their unified thinking. They are aware of their unfair position and it is a matter of time before they revolt. In the story the children do so by sneaking back into the garden: “Through a little hole in the wall the children had crept in, and they were sitting in the branches of the trees.”¹³⁵ Only Giant’s alternation prevents further conflict as Killeen comments: “‘The Selfish Giant’ assures the reader that political and military conflict can be averted, and violence diverted”.¹³⁶

In the end, the Giant does realize that he must change. The question is what is the cause of the sudden shift in his conscience. Of course, he notices that once the children are back, the Spring finally comes. It is risky, though, to conclude that this alone could be behind the radical change. Here again, Wilde incorporates the Christian symbolism. In this tale, the figure of Christ is not embodied by the protagonist himself, the Giant plays the role of his disciple, who is changed

¹³³ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 95.

¹³⁴ Wilde, *The Soul of Man*, 17.

¹³⁵ Wilde, *The Happy Prince And Other Tales*, 64.

¹³⁶ Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, 74.

radically merely by his presence. The fact that Jesus appears in a body of child heightens his power and influence even more. The quickness of Giant's transformation is remarkable and almost unbelievable. He watches little Jesus as he struggles to climb a tree and this encounter is sufficient for the Giant to realize his wrongdoings:

And the Giant's heart melted as he looked out. "How selfish I have been!" he said; "now I know why the Spring would not come here. I will put that poor little boy on the top of the tree, and then I will knock down the wall, and my garden shall bet he children's playground for ever and ever." He was really very sorry for what he had done.¹³⁷

But in Wilde's eyes, the intense effect of Christ's presence is not something unnatural as he points out in *De Profundis*: "Indeed, that is the charm about Christ, when all is said: he is just like a work of art. He does not really teach one anything, but by being brought into his presence one becomes something."¹³⁸ Christ's message is then this: "You have a wonderful personality. Develop it. Be yourself. Don't imagine that your perfection lies in accumulating or possessing external things. Your affection is inside of you. If only you could realise that, you would not want to be rich. Ordinary riches can be stolen from a man. Real riches cannot."¹³⁹ Interestingly, none of this has to be verbalized, his presence is enough to cause the epiphany in an individual.

When Giant comes to this realization, his reaction is extraordinary. There are several proofs that he indeed gets on the right aesthetic path. First of all, he allows the children to come to his garden and even plays with them which confirms his awakened child-like spirit. He also becomes naturally aware of the connection between children and flowers: "I have many beautiful flowers ... but the children are the most beautiful flowers of all."¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, his garden is rejoicing by the change in its owner and no longer rebels against him. Subsequently, it becomes the most beautiful garden ever seen where everything is in balance as Wilde predicts in *The Soul of Man*: "Pleasure is Nature's test, her sign of approval. When man is happy, he is in harmony with himself and his environment."¹⁴¹ At the end of the story when the Giant reaches his highest mode of individualism, he is rewarded not

¹³⁷ Wilde, *The Happy Prince And Other Tales*, 66.

¹³⁸ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 117-118.

¹³⁹ Wilde, *The Soul of Man*, 24.

¹⁴⁰ Wilde, *The Happy Prince And Other Tales*, 69.

¹⁴¹ Wilde, *The Soul of Man*, 90.

only by nature which covers his grave with white flowers as the final sign of their reconciliation, but also by God who takes him into heaven.

The conclusion of the story is, therefore, in accordance with the premise in his socialistic essay. It proves that man who is fixated on his possessions and the material world cannot find true happiness. By this lifestyle he causes harm not only to himself but to society as a whole. However, the story also shows the flaws in his utopian manifesto. Problematic is his suggestion of complete abolition of property. In the fairy tale, the Giant remains the rightful owner of his own property. Otherwise, his salvation and recognition by God would not be possible. John Robinson notices that:

The Giant is redeemed because he opens his garden to the children by his own choice. Presumably, he would not have been so rewarded if some higher authority were to have preemptively taken from him the option to invite the child into the garden. His dominion over the garden allows him to be selfish, but also allows him to be generous.¹⁴²

This proves that the essay *The Soul of Man* is paradoxical and should be treated as part of his artistic theory where such contradiction is not of great importance, rather than a serious political document.

The story is also an example of Wilde's disobedience to the established rules of the genre. Marina Warner concludes that usually "Ogres are fated to be outwitted by tricks played on them by heroes much smaller than themselves."¹⁴³ But Wilde takes a traditional villain and makes him a hero, thus giving chance to all who are lost, if they yield to the rules of aesthetic growth. Again, the goal is to transform the hero into an independent individualist. In this case, it is done by following the socialistic ideology which is triggered by Christian awakening. Like in "The Happy Prince", generosity is not the source of Giant's happiness but merely a natural outcome of his personal growth because "Under Individualism people will be quite natural and absolutely unselfish".¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² John Robinson, "Goldilocks, Aragorn, and the Essence of Property," *The Independent Review* 22, no. 3 (2018): 410, Accessed April 4, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/26314774.

¹⁴³ Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogyman: Scaring, Lulling, and Making Mock* (London: Vintage, 2000), 312.

¹⁴⁴ Wilde, *The Soul of Man*, 82.

3.3. The Fisherman and His Soul

“The Fisherman and his Soul” is Wilde’s story from his second volume of fairy tales *A House of Pomegranates*, it is also his longest tale which suggests that there is much to be discovered. Due to its obscurity, it is not dealt with by critics as often as his other fairy tales. However, the narrative provides a key to a better understanding of author’s concept of good versus evil. As morality is based on the differentiation between these notions, it is necessary to know how Wilde deals with the problematics, so that it is possible to decide whether his views align with those of the general public or whether there are any signs of aestheticism.

The fairy tale depicts a story about a young Fisherman living an ordinary and repetitive life focused on catching fish and selling them at a market. One evening his life is changed forever when he discovers a little Mermaid caught in his net. This proves to be a pivotal moment, directing the course of the rest of his life. The couple slowly falls in love. Consequently, the Fisherman loses all passion for the mundane life and becomes interested only in being with his sweetheart. Unfortunately, there is a catch in his way to happiness. In order to join the little Mermaid and the Sea-folk in their kingdom under water, he needs to give up his soul. Without hesitation, he wants to proceed with the task, though, not knowing how to get rid of it, he consults a Priest. The horrified man condemns Fisherman’s intentions and refuses to help. The young lover is not discouraged and finds a Witch who tells him the secret. He learns that his shadow is, in fact, his soul and needs to be cut off. The Fisherman does just that and then starts his happy life while the soul wanders away. Every year the soul comes back, relating about its wonderful adventures and tempts the Fisherman. It wants to unite again and chase together after these worldly wonders. He always refuses, except for the last time when the temptation seems irresistible. He allows the soul to come back for a little while but does not know that they cannot be separated again. Soon the Soul proves to be evil, making the Fisherman commit evil deeds. As a consequence of yielding to the temptations, he is not reunited with his love until death. Unexpected twist awaits at the end of the story when the Priest accepts their love after finding out that God did not condemn them.

Due to its complexity, “The Fisherman and his Soul” is open to interpretation. Nevertheless, taking into consideration the critics who did attempt to

analyze the story, their approach varies significantly. For instance, John-Charles Duffy argues that the relationship between the Fisherman and the Mermaid is a symbol of homosexual affection given it is very likely “non-reproductive”.¹⁴⁵ Of course, this perspective is not impossible but more plausible seems Killeen’s explanation. He translates the core of the story as a conflict between the old Ireland founded on a belief in God as well as superstition, and newly emerging face of the country influenced by English rationality which refuses the old Irish traditions.¹⁴⁶ Despite the variety in the analysis of the story, there is a unanimous agreement that the Fisherman and his Soul represent a certain duality and division within an individual as well as in society. This thesis will argue that, similarly as in the previous tales, the story depicts a relation between an artist portrayed by the Fisherman and an artistic realm represented by the Mermaid. At the beginning, the Fisherman is not aware of his true identity but slowly discovers the attraction and beauty of art. Their relation is shaped by the perception of good and evil.

There are several arguments why does the Mermaid represent art, specifically art in its aesthetic sense. First of all, if a literary text raises much ambiguity such as in this case, it helps to understand the motivation behind its writing. It has been long observed that many of the fairy tales are inspired by the tales of Hans Christian Andersen. He frequently takes some Andersenian motive or character and creates his own reconstructed cadre for them, often reversing the original message. The story is very likely a reaction to Anderson’s “The Shadow” which also deals with separation between a man and an integral part of his being, in his case a shadow. Fisherman’s Soul in Wilde’s tale has also a form of a Shadow which is already an eye-catching resemblance. The connection between the stories is further elaborated by Christopher S. Nassaar in his article called “Andersen’s “The Shadow” and Wilde’s “The Fisherman and His Soul”: A Case of Influence”.

The tale talks about a man who one day becomes mesmerized by the sight of a beautiful girl in a window and sends his Shadow to find out more about her. The Shadow, however, does not come back for a long time and when it finally returns, it is completely spoiled by what it has learned. Wilde’s inspiration could not be denied, yet there are some big contrasts as well. In both stories, some

¹⁴⁵ John-Charles Duffy, “Gay-Related Themes In The Fairy Tales Of Oscar Wilde,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 29, no. 2 (2001): 333, Accessed April 18, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1060150301002054>.

¹⁴⁶ Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, 142.

character is lured away from his current way of living by a beautiful girl or creature and changed by their presence. The major difference is that in “The Fisherman and his Soul”, it is the Fisherman who gives in to the temptation of beauty while in the “Shadow” it is the Shadow, not his owner, who chases after the girl. The difference is pivotal because in Andersen’s tale the girl proves to be none other than Poetry:

Do you know who it was that lived in the house over the way?" said the Shadow. "It was the most beautiful thing there is: it was Poetry. I was there for three weeks, and the effect was the same as if one had spent three thousand years in reading everything that has been sung and written. I say it, and it is the truth. I have seen everything, and I know everything."¹⁴⁷

Andersen essentially blames Poetry for the corruption of the Shadow. This is Wilde’s opinion about poetry: “The poet is the supreme artist, for he is the master of colour and of form, and the real musician besides, and is lord over all life and all arts”.¹⁴⁸ It is, therefore, possible that Wilde interpreted Andersenian Poetry as a substitute for all artistic creation, so it logically follows that the girl’s counterpart should have the same symbolism. Unlike Andersen, Wilde shows in his tale it is not art that causes the perversion but rather life without it.

There is another argument in favor of Mermaid’s aesthetic meaning. In general, all of his fairy tales are about the battle between the aesthetic and realistic sphere, between the ugly and the beautiful. However, sometimes it is hard for a reader to recognize which side of the story is supposed to represent the domain of beauty and which is the ugly reality. One specific technique that Wilde uses, and that helps with the discernment, is giving breathtaking descriptions of the beautiful objects or characters which represent the sphere of beauty. The Mermaid is certainly described beautifully and therefore is playing the aesthetic role: “Her hair was a wet fleece of gold, and each separate hair as a thread of fine gold in a cup of glass. Her body was as white as ivory, and her tail was of silver and pearl.”¹⁴⁹ Beside her physical beauty, she also sings about amazing stories of the Sea-folk so she embodies the oral tradition, which is an important part of art. The fact that a

¹⁴⁷ Hans Christian Andersen, “The Shadow,” in *Forty-Two Stories*, trans. Montague Rhodes James (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), <https://gutenberg.ca/ebooks/andersen-shadow/andersen-shadow-00-h.html>.

¹⁴⁸ Oscar Wilde, *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 15. https://books.google.cz/books?id=RqnxvCU8YzQC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

¹⁴⁹ Oscar Wilde, *A House Of Pomegranates*, Tauchnitz ed.: Collection of British Autors, vol. 4095 (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1909), 108-109.

mythical being is given this much importance shows Wilde's revolt against the tradition in England because as Jack Zipes comments: "It was not considered proper to defend the fairies and elves—neither in literature for adults nor in literature for children."¹⁵⁰

Now, as the Fisherman and his Soul are the main characters according to the title, it is essential to understand their relation. When the story begins, the Fisherman is a complete person with his Soul still in him. The way it reflects in his real life is that he leads an average life unmoved by any higher ideals or ambitious prospects for the future. He is an exemplary contributing member of society. Everything changes when he discovers the little Mermaid. He is so bewitched by her charm that he decides to leave his old lifestyle and way of thinking behind.

The Soul represents the middle-class hypocritical thinking widespread in the society. It is the cause for all the corruption in a man. In *The Critic as Artist*, Wilde describes the way he sees a soul:

And so, it is not our own life that we live, but the lives of the dead, and the soul that dwells within us is no single spiritual entity, making us personal and individual, created for our service, and entering into us for our joy. It is something that has dwelt in fearful places, and in ancient sepulchres has made its abode. It is sick with many maladies, and has memories of curious sins.¹⁵¹

Although, when combined with the heart it is somewhat tamed. The problem comes when the need for artistic individuality suddenly awakens, and a person realizes that its achievement is the only way to true happiness but still has to fight the old ways. This causes fragmentation in one's personality. In the story, Wilde uses this radical division of the two forces represented by the soul and the heart, in order to show them in their true colors and demonstrate how they behave separately.

Interesting is that the progress from an indifferent Fisherman unmoved by art to its passionate lover. When he sees the little Mermaid for the first time, the Fisherman is "filled with wonder"¹⁵² and it is obvious that something shifts within him. Nevertheless, he sees her as something that can be useful to him. In exchange for freedom, he forces her to help him catch more fish by her singing: "I will not

¹⁵⁰ Jack Zipes, introduction to *Victorian Fairy Tales: the Revolt of the Fairies and Elves*, by Jack Zipes (London: Routledge, 2016), xiv, https://books.google.cz/books?id=ukEuoa90QPwC&printsec=frontcover&source=gb_s_g_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=true.

¹⁵¹ Wilde, *Intentions*, 173-174.

¹⁵² Wilde, *A House Of Pomegranates*, 109.

let thee go save thou makest me a promise that whenever I call thee, thou wilt come and sing to me, for the fish delight to listen to the song of the Sea-folk, and so shall my nets be full.”¹⁵³ The fact that his thoughts go into this direction is caused by the presence of the Soul still in him. Of course, the Soul thinks that art should be useful, as this was a popular opinion at the time. Here Wilde again expresses his anti-Utilitarian views. Luckily, little by little, the Fisherman discovers that art has much more to offer. He becomes aware that it shields his true self and in quest of finding it, he is willing to give up everything that makes him just a cog in the wheel of the system. He does not hesitate to give up his identity of a Fisherman which is his current function in society: “So sweet was her voice that he forgot his nets and his cunning, and had no care of his craft.”¹⁵⁴ After all, the reader does not find out Fisherman’s actual name, only his occupation. This fact completely dehumanizes him. His love for the Mermaid gives him back his humanity by making him realize that he has a higher purpose to attain to. Then, he finally decides to get rid of his Soul. On its own, it becomes absolutely evil while the Fisherman, being driven only by the love in his heart, is completely pure and happy.

Of course, in real life the two parts of a person cannot be literally separated. In the story, this is represented by the fact that when the Fisherman gives up his Soul, it never really leaves. The narrative is essentially about their reconciliation in a way that is not destructive for one’s individualism. The Soul comes once a year and tempts the Fisherman. It wants to reunite with him in exchange for what it has discovered in the world on his marvelous travels. First, it is Wisdom, then Riches. Both times the young man replies that Love is better. The third time it tells him about something different, about a new form of art. It talks about a beautiful dancer with naked feet that he saw. Finally, the Fisherman is tempted: “Now when the young Fisherman heard the words of his Soul, he remembered that the little Mermaid had no feet and could not dance. And a great desire came over him”.¹⁵⁵ He agrees to go and see her, just for a day and then he intends to come back. However, the wicked Soul does not take him to see the girl. It lures him into various places and makes him do evil things. It persuades him to hide a silver cup, to strike a child and finally to kill a good-hearted merchant. Interestingly, while committing

¹⁵³ Wilde, *A House Of Pomegranates*, 110.

¹⁵⁴ Wilde, *A House Of Pomegranates*, 114.

¹⁵⁵ Wilde, *A House Of Pomegranates*, 177.

the crimes, the Fisherman does not seem to be aware of his actions. His Soul has complete control over him. Only after the deed is done does he wake up from the trance and sees the horror. But he experiences even greater panic once he realizes that he cannot get rid of his Soul for the second time.

Not being able to return to his Mermaid, he is overcome by sorrow which intensifies his love. It is necessary for him to experience this feeling in order to achieve the absolute level of artistic perfection. Wilde states that in *De Profundis*: “I now see that sorrow, being the supreme emotion of which man is capable, is at once the type and test of all great art.”¹⁵⁶ He is now immune to Soul’s sinful temptations. Noticing the change, the Soul tries a different strategy: “I have tempted my master with evil, and his love is stronger than I am. I will tempt him now with good, and it may be that he will come with me.”¹⁵⁷ It proceeds to talk about the misery that reigns in the world: “For of a truth pain is the Lord of this world, nor is there anyone who escapes from its net. There be some who lack raiment, and others who lack bread. ... Come, let us go forth and mend these things, and make them not to be.”¹⁵⁸ This shows the twisted minds of the hypocrites who use charity only to achieve their own goals. The Fisherman recognizes the pharisaism and refuses.

In the end, the Soul gives up its evil attempts, and the Fisherman lets it enter into his heart. He realizes that it must have been difficult for the Soul to live without a heart. The two parts of him reconcile, though the Soul can enter only after his heart breaks after he finds out that the Mermaid is dead. The death of the Fisherman is not a depiction of a tragic end. Like in “The Happy Prince” the broken heart means that the character attained to the most perfect state on Earth and that there is no more progression for him. Now, he is ready to continue his life in another world where his soul and heart are in harmony and where his Mermaid is always by his side, inspiring him with her beauty. In the end, it is again the Christian love that unites everything.

As for the differentiation between good and evil, it becomes a little complicated. So far, it has been concluded that the heart, which listens to its artistic calling, represents the good side in a man, the side that helps a person to break free

¹⁵⁶ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 52-53.

¹⁵⁷ Wilde, *A House Of Pomegranates*, 193.

¹⁵⁸ Wilde, *A House Of Pomegranates*, 193-194.

from the conventions of society. On the other hand, the Soul is the source of evil temptations which strives to stop these attempts. Nonetheless, this is a conclusion from the artistic perspective. From the point of view of society, the opinion would be radically different, probably exactly the opposite. In this tale, the social perception of sin, which for the sake of this thesis is used as a synonym of evil, is taken from the perspective of the Church.

The issue is that on an artistic journey, one is sometimes forced to take steps that are not exactly traditional or even acceptable in the public view. For instance, when the Fisherman finds out that he has to give up his Soul, he has no questions and immediately recognizes it as something that holds him back. However, the Priest cannot be more horrified when he learns about Fisherman's plan: "There is nothing more precious than a human soul, nor any earthly thing that can be weighed with it. ... Therefore, my son, think not any more of this matter, for it is a sin that may not be forgiven."¹⁵⁹ He even excludes the soulless form the kingdom of God: "And as for the Sea-folk, they are lost, and they who would traffic with them are lost also. They are as the beasts of the field that know not good from evil, and for them the Lord has not died."¹⁶⁰ The Priest gives his reasons why he believes they are evil: "I have heard them at night-time, and they have sought to lure me from my beads. ... They whisper into my ears the tale of their perilous joys. They tempt me with temptations, and when I pray they make mouths at me."¹⁶¹

Apparently, there are parallels between the Soul and the mythical creatures. They are all source of temptations which require taking untraditional measures. However, while the Soul makes one a murderer, the beings representing the aesthetic kingdom offer a supreme joy and pleasure. Wilde points out that those among the public who are afraid of surrendering to the latter may often falsely call the aesthetic pleasure a sin.

Another episode where Wilde challenges the traditional understanding of good and evil, is when the Fisherman goes to the Witch for help. This act would certainly be considered extremely wicked and sinful, but again, Wilde treats it only as a necessary means for the Fisherman to obtain what his heart desires. The Fisherman as the artist does not think of these deeds as trespasses. This is the

¹⁵⁹ Wilde, *A House Of Pomegranates*, 118.

¹⁶⁰ Wilde, *A House Of Pomegranates*, 118.

¹⁶¹ Wilde, *A House Of Pomegranates*, 119.

context in which he talks about sin: “Nay, but thou art evil, and hast made me forget my love, and hast tempted me with temptations, and hast set my feet in the ways of sin.”¹⁶² Here, he accuses the Soul of making him commit things due to which he forgets his love. Those comprise the objectively wrong acts as well as virtuous altruistic behavior. The real Wildean sin is simply everything that makes the artist forget love and stop his progress. In *The Critic as Artist* he explains that what is usually labelled as sin, does not fall into this category at all:

What is termed Sin is an essential element of progress. Without it the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colourless. By its curiosity Sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from monotony of type. In its rejection of the current notions about morality, it is one with the higher ethics.¹⁶³

The reason why is his perception of good and evil so reversed, is that Wilde is convinced that sin can over a period of time prove to be beneficial and that virtuous behavior can bring evil in the end: “It is well for our vanity that we slay the criminal, for if we suffered him to live he might show us what we had gained by his crime. It is well for his peace that the saint goes to his martyrdom. He is spared the sight of the horror of his harvest.”¹⁶⁴

The last statement is well embodied in the narrative. When the bodies of the lovers are found dead at the shore, the Priest curses them and has them buried in an unmarked grave. He is persuaded that this destiny was brought upon them as God’s judgment. However, one day the Priest goes to the chapel. He intends to speak about God’s wrath, but something extraordinary happens: “the altar was covered with strange flowers that never had been seen before. Strange were they to look at, and of curious beauty, and their beauty troubled him, and their odour was sweet in his nostrils. And he felt glad, and understood not why he was glad.”¹⁶⁵ Mesmerized by this incident, the Priest cannot speak about the wrath of God. By some invisible force, he is compelled to give a sermon about “the God whose name is Love.”¹⁶⁶ Later the Priest learns that the flowers were from the grave of the accursed couple. He trembles at this information and proceeds to bless “all the things in God’s world.”¹⁶⁷ Thus Fisherman’s ‘sin’ proves to save not only himself but the Priest

¹⁶² Wilde, *A House Of Pomegranates*, 186.

¹⁶³ Wilde, *Intentions*, 130.

¹⁶⁴ Wilde, *Intentions*, 131.

¹⁶⁵ Wilde, *A House Of Pomegranates*, 202.

¹⁶⁶ Wilde, *A House Of Pomegranates*, 203.

¹⁶⁷ Wilde, *A House Of Pomegranates*, 204.

also. It is almost ironic that God's servant discovers his true love through someone else's sin. This proves that it was not sin at all. If it was possible to say that story has any moral, it would be that God loves all equally. Nassar also agrees with this conclusion: "Andersen's tale was about the triumph of evil, but Wilde's is about the victory of all-embracing Christian love."¹⁶⁸

Lastly, it is interesting to mention what Russell Hoban said on account of the tale:

But what a strange and troubling story this one is! Not that I found it strange and troubling at the age of eight or nine—a wandering soul without a heart and soulless man living beneath the sea with a mermaid presented no problem whatever because the story rang true; there was something in it deeper than the high-flown not-really-oriental carpet of Wilde's prose: a sadness at the heart of things that I recognised and responded to.¹⁶⁹ "Reading him now I find it impossible not to think of Wilde as a failed grownup with an urge to self-destruction."¹⁷⁰

This shows that the tales are indeed intended for children because only the pure soul of a child can grasp their complexity and receive their message not with naivety but with profound understanding. Adult readers who lost the imaginative ability will analyze the stories and argue about their hidden meaning, but a child will recognize it naturally because his and author's perception of the world are the same.

To sum up, this tale is one of the hardest to analyze. If anyone still insists that the tales are teaching morality, this story alone could prove otherwise. There is no seeming moral that would be pleasing to a Victorian adult reader as the line between good and evil is very blurry. It shows that there are two parts in man, a pure artistic heart and a soul which belong to society. In a boring normal life, these two can coexist quietly and a person is not aware of their existence. Once the individual discovers beauty and lets his heart lead, the soul fights back. It is therefore essential to learn how to overcome this fragmentation, in order to become an individualist and reach true happiness. The ultimate deciding factor between good and evil, virtue and sin, is where a certain action leads on the journey to individualism. Therefore, an artist does not have to follow any other external moral law. As shown, the tale finds its meaning only within the aesthetic doctrine.

¹⁶⁸ Christopher S. Nassar, "Andersen's "The Shadow" and Wilde's "The Fisherman and His Soul": A Case of Influence," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 50, no. 2 (1995): 217-224, Accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2933693>.

¹⁶⁹ Russell Hoban, "Wilde Pomegranates," *Children's Literature in Education* 28, no. 1 (1997): 26, Accessed April 30, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1025024230745>.

¹⁷⁰ Hoban, "Wilde Pomegranates," 29.

Conclusion

In conclusion, even though the only two little volumes of fairy tales written by Oscar Wilde are often overshadowed by his only novel and plays, they are not of inferior quality. The reason why they tend to be ignored by critics is likely due to the ambiguity of their meaning and purpose. The aim of this thesis was to refute the claim that there was a desire for teaching children moral lessons behind the birth of the tales.

The work is divided into three main sections. The first part provides an insight into author's life and personality because a work of art cannot be completely separated from its creator, especially if the purpose of its production is in question. A writer who preaches ethics in his work is expected to follow the same principles in private. It was shown that the life of Oscar Wilde could be hardly presented as a model of moral behavior. To a large extent, he was destined to be different thanks to his family background. He inherited the free-spirited mind from his parents who themselves did not succumb to the conventions of their time.

The next section is dedicated to the aesthetic movement. Discussed are its origins, main representatives, basic ideas, and the way Wilde shaped it when he overtook as its leader and central public figure. The primary focus is then put on the core of his ideology which is formulated by assembling his beliefs and opinions expressed in his theoretical writings. The entire aesthetic doctrine is based on several separate topics that need to be studied together in order to create a coherent theory.

The thesis focuses mainly on the principles of individualism, beauty, morality, and socialism. In the aesthetic sphere, these seemingly unrelated notions complete one another. According to Wilde, an artistic creation has to be first and foremost beautiful. This work of art can be a tangible object, individual actions or a whole person. In order to recognize this beauty and be able to imitate it, one has to become completely individualistic, That means to rely solely on one's own judgment and ideas, without any reference to society or neighbors. On this journey, an artist is not subject to the differentiation between good and evil according to the middle-class and religious definition. In the framework of aestheticism, the good is

anything that pushes a person towards reaching a higher mode of individualism, while evil creates an obstruction on the way.

Wilde provides two primary means of succeeding in this aspiration, which can be applied separately, but often go hand in hand. The first one is to follow the example of Jesus Christ. Wilde saw in him the supreme artist and as life should imitate art, trying to resemble Jesus is a sure win. The other way is to be set free from the burdens of private property. Otherwise a person is at risk of finding a false individuality in what he owns rather than its unspoiled version which is hidden in what he is.

Next, one thing needs to be made clear. The fact that the artist stands against society and does not yield to its dictatorship, does not mean that he disregards the social problems or that he does not talk about them in his oeuvre. It may seem that as an aesthetic artist, Wilde was living in his own Palace Sans-Souci, chasing the newest pleasure and new forms of beauty. This image of him would be incorrect, as he was deeply aware of the harsh conditions and challenges of his era. That is why he consistently draws attention to the poor and struggling individuals throughout the volumes. Social criticism is a part of aestheticism which at the same time provides a unique solution to the troubles. Wilde rejects a sudden global revolution and asserts that the change can come only through individuals and their imaginative faculty.

The last and main part of the thesis is the actual analysis. Even though at first glance it may seem that the fairy tales are educating children in ethics, after closer examination it becomes obvious that it is not so. Wilde tells them to be imaginative and warns them not to let adults, who know nothing of the real purpose of life, spoil their minds. He also demonstrates what happens if they do not follow his advice.

In “The Happy Prince” author shows children that if they reach their full potential by helping others, they can do so, but also points out that charity for charity’s sake is utterly useless. He provides an example of what happens when the poor accept help without striving to ameliorate their situation. In “The Selfish Giant” he warns children not to succumb to the oppressive capitalistic power. He wants them to be aware of their rights and exercise them just like the children who sneaked into Giant’s garden. He encourages them to be bold and fight for what is theirs. He shows how an unhealthy love for property can spoil a spirit. “The

Fisherman and his Soul” is proof that true happiness is achieved through the love of beauty only, and that the traditional understanding of sin is irrelevant in the life of an artist.

Despite of the fact that the stories of the three selected fairy tales vary, it cannot be overlooked that they follow a similar pattern. At the beginning, there is always an artist who is unaware of his true calling. Once he experiences the epiphany, he has to conquer some forces that are holding him back. These forces are usually within himself as well as in the world surrounding him. The successful fulfillment of the task is confirmed by God’s acceptance. The similarity in the design of the stories proves the consistency in Wilde’s views. In the tales, there is no deviation from his aesthetic teachings, rather the opposite. From beginning to end, they make the doctrine come alive. As aestheticism explicitly rejects the custom of inserting morals into literature, the tales could hardly be interpreted as carrying any. This does not imply that he did not wish to impact the reader. However, his fairy tales do not teach, they serve as models for imitation. They are based on the principles of aesthetic morality which could not be further from the mainstream Victorian understanding of the word.

Shrnutí

Na závěr je třeba říci, že třebaže jsou jediné dva svazky pohádek, které Oscar Wilde napsal, často zastíněny jeho románem a divadelními hrami, neznamená to, že by strádaly na kvalitě. Důvodem, proč jsou kritiky často přehlíženy, je zřejmě nejasnost jejich smyslu a účelu. Cílem této bakalářské práce bylo vyvrátit tvrzení, že za zrodem těchto pohádek byla touha vyučovat děti morálním lekcím.

Práce je rozdělena do tří hlavních sekcí. První část umožňuje náhled do života a osobnosti autora, protože umělecké dílo nelze zcela oddělit od jeho tvůrce, především zabýváme-li se otázkou účelu jeho vzniku. Od spisovatele, který ve svém díle hlásá etiku se očekává, že se bude stejnými zásadami řídit také v soukromí. Bylo prokázáno, že život Oscara Wilda lze jen těžko považovat za model morálního chování. Do značné míry byl předurčen k odlišnosti díky svému rodinnému zázemí vzhledem k tomu, že zdědil jistou svobodomyšlnost po rodičích, kteří se také odmítali podříditi konvencím jejich doby.

Další část se věnuje estetickému směru. Předmětem diskuze jsou jeho kořeny, hlavní představitelé, základní myšlenky a způsob, jakým Wilde tento směr formoval, poté co na sebe vzal roli jeho vůdce a ústřední veřejné osobnosti. Předmětem zkoumání je především jádro jeho ideologie, které je utvořeno shromážděním jeho přesvědčení a názorů vyjádřených v jeho teoretických pracích. Celá estetická doktrína je založena na několika samostatných principech, které je ale třeba studovat současně, aby vytvořily smysluplnou teorii.

Tato práce se soustřeďuje hlavně na koncept individualismu, krásy, morálky a socialismu. Tyto zdánlivě nesouvisející pojmy se v estetické sféře vzájemně doplňují. Wilde byl toho názoru, že umělecké dílo musí být v první řadě krásné. Takovým dílem může být jak hmatatelný objekt, tak i činy, nebo dokonce celá osoba. Jednotlivec se musí naprosto individualizovat, aby tuto krásu rozpoznal a byl schopný ji napodobit. Učiní tak, pokud bude spoléhat výhradně na svůj vlastní úsudek bez ohledu na společnost nebo své bližní. Na této cestě umělec nepodléhá rozlišování dobra a zla podle definice střední třídy a církve. V rámci estetismu je za dobro považováno vše, co tlačí člověka k dosažení vyššího stupně individualismu, zatímco zlo vytváří překážku na této cestě.

Wilde poskytuje dva způsoby, jak úspěšně tuto touhu po individualismu naplnit. Mohou být přitom aplikovány odděleně, ale často jdou ruku v ruce. Prvním způsobem je následování příkladu Ježíše Krista. Wilde ho viděl jako nadřazeného umělce a vzhledem k tomu, že život by měl napodobovat umění, snaha podobat se Kristu je zaručeným úspěchem. Druhou možností je oprostít se od lpění na soukromém majetku, aby člověk nenašel falešnou individuality v tom, co má, namísto její pravé ryzí verze, která se skrývá v tom, co člověk je.

Dále je třeba objasnit jednu věc. Fakt, že umělec stojí v opozici vůči společnosti a nepodléhá jejímu diktátorství, neznamena, že přehlíží sociální problémy nebo že o nich nemluví ve svém díle. Může se zdát, že Wilde, jakožto estetický umělec, žil ve svém paláci Sans-Souci, kde vyhledával vždy nový druh potěšení a novou formou krásy. Taková představa by ovšem byla nesprávná. Pravdou je, že si byl plně vědom tvrdých podmínek a problémů své doby. To je důvod, proč neustále zaměřuje pozornost na jednotlivce, kteří se potýkají se životem, zejména v důsledku chudoby. Kritika společnosti je součástí estetismu, který zároveň nabízí jedinečné řešení těchto obtíží. Wilde odmítá náhlou globální revoluci a tvrdí, že změna může přijít výhradně skrze jednotlivce a jejich schopnost představitosti.

Poslední a zároveň hlavní částí bakalářské práce je samotná analýza. Přestože se může na první pohled zdát, že tyto pohádky mají za cíl vyučovat děti etiku, po bližším prozkoumání je zřejmé, že tomu tak není. Wilde děti přesvědčuje, aby si zachovaly svou představitost a nenechaly dospělé, kteří sami nevědí nic o skutečném smyslu života, aby zatemnil jejich mysl. Mimoto také demonstuje, co se stane, když se nebudou řídit jeho radou.

V pohádce „Šťastný princ“ autor dětem ukazuje, že pokud naplní svůj potenciál, tím, že budou pomáhat druhým, mohou tak učinit. Zároveň ale zdůrazňuje, že dobročinnost sama o sobě je naprosto zbytečná. Ilustruje zde také, co se stane, pokud chudí přijmou tuto pomoc, aniž by se snažili zlepšit svou situaci. Příběhem „Sobecký obr“ děti varuje, aby se nepodřídily utlačující kapitalistické moci. Snaží se je přimět, aby si byly vědomé svých práv a uplatňovaly je stejně jako děti, které se vplížily do obrovi zahrady. Vybízí je, aby byly odvážné a bojovaly za to, co jim náleží. „Rybář a jeho duše“ je důkazem, že skutečné štěstí může přinést jedině láska ke kráse a že tradiční chápání hříchu je v životě umělce irelevantní.

Přestože se příběhy třech vybraných pohádek liší, nelze si nevšimnout, že jsou vystavěny podle podobného vzorce. Na začátku je vždy umělec, který si není vědomý svého skutečného poslání, ale jakmile dojde k prozření, musí nejprve překonat síly, které ho drží zpátky. Tyto síly se většinou nacházejí jak v něm samotném, tak i v okolním světě. Úspěšné naplnění jeho poslání je následně potvrzeno Božím přijetím. Podobnost v tom, jak jsou jednotlivé příběhy navrženy je důkazem, že Wildovy názory jsou konzistentní. V pohádkách nedochází k žádným odchylkám od estetického učení, právě naopak. Od začátku až do konce přivádějí tuto doktrínu k životu. Vzhledem k tomu, že estetismus explicitně odmítá zvyk vkládání morálního ponaučení do literatury, mohou být tyto pohádky jen těžko interpretovány jako jeho nositelé. To ale neznamená, že Wilde nechtěl mít vliv na svého čtenáře. Nicméně jeho pohádky neučí, ale slouží jako model k imitaci. Jsou založeny na principech estetické morálky, která se však diametrálně odlišuje od běžného viktoriánského chápání tohoto slova.

Annotation

Author: Romana Ryšková

Faculty and department: Faculty of Arts, Department of English and American Studies

Title: Aesthetic Morality in Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales

Supervisor: Mgr. Ema Jelínková, Ph.D.

Number of characters: 135 787

Number of appendices: 1 CD

Keywords: Aestheticism, fairy tale, morality, beauty, individualism, charity, socialism, Jesus Christ

Description: Oscar Wilde wrote two volumes of fairy tales during his life. They are called *The Happy Prince And Other Tales* and *A House of Pomegranates*. The tales, however, raise much ambiguity and their purpose is hard to divine, especially when it comes to the aspect of morality. Critics still argue whether to interpret the stories as teaching moral lessons or not. The aim of this thesis is to show that the fairy tales do not have any such objective, as it would mean that their author was a proponent of morality which was not the case. Wilde was a leader of Aestheticism which rejects the Victorian understanding of morals. The thesis points out the traces of aestheticism in the tales which proves that they cannot be teaching ethics. It also argues that the message that Wilde tried to convey could be called Aesthetic morality which has a reversed understanding of good and evil.

Anotace

Autor: Romana Ryšková

Fakulta a katedra: Filozofická fakulta, Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Název práce: Estetická morálka v pohádkách Oscara Wilda

Vedoucí práce: Mgr. Ema Jelínková, Ph.D.

Počet znaků: 135 787

Počet příloh: 1 CD

Klíčová slova: estetismus, pohádka, morálka, krása, individualismus, dobročinnost, socialismus, Ježíš Kristus

Popis: Oscar Wilde napsal během svého života dvě sbírky pohádek. Jsou to *Šťastný princ a jiné pohádky* a *Dům granátových jablek*. Tyto příběhy však vyvolávají mnoho nejasností a jejich účel není snadné uhodnout, zvláště pokud jde o jejich morální stránku. Kritici se stále nemohou shodnout na tom, zda by měly být tyto pohádky interpretovány jako příběhy, které obsahují morální ponaučení, či nikoli. Cílem této bakalářské práce je ukázat, že tomu tak není. Znamenalo by to totiž, že jejich autor byl sám zastáncem morálky, což nebyla pravda. Wilde byl vůdcem estetického směru, který odmítá viktoriánské chápání morálních lekcí. Tato práce poukazuje na známky estetismu v pohádkách, což dokazuje, že nevyučují etice. Tvrdí také, že poselství, které se Wilde pokusil sdělit, lze nazvat estetickou morálkou, která má odlišné chápání dobra a zla.

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