



Zobrazení viktoriánské marnivosti v pohádkách Oscara Wilda

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The Depiction of Victorian Vanity in Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales

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Anotace

Tato práce se zabývá zobrazením viktoriánské marnivosti a kritikou společenských poměrů v díle Oscara Wildea, konkrétně v jeho sbírkách *Šťastný princ a jiné pohádky* a *Dům granátových jablek*. Mimo obecných společenských rysů viktoriánské společnosti, marnivosti a problematiky dandismu také zohledňuje aspekty autorova života, zatímco se snaží interpretovat jednotlivé příběhy s ohledem na kritiku společenských poměrů a zobrazení marnivosti.

Klíčová slova

Viktoriánská éra, marnivost, kritika společenských poměrů, Oscar Wilde, pohádka

Abstract

The thesis deals with the depiction of Victorian vanity and social criticism in works of Oscar Wilde, in particular in his fairy tales collections *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* and *The House of Pomegranates*. Considering the general features of Victorian society that may be criticised, vanity itself and the subject of dandyism, the thesis also incorporates the author's biographical aspects, while trying to interpret individual tales with respect to social criticism and display of vanity.

Key words

Victorian era, vanity, social criticism, Oscar Wilde, fairy tale

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1. Introduction

Oscar Wilde, a controversial figure of the late Victorian age, has been a subject of academic discourse for many years, and this fascination does not seem to cease; possibly because there is still a considerable intellectual contribution to draw from his work. The ideas implied by his texts have made a great impact on their readers; and as Wilde lets one of his characters in the essay “The Critic as an Artist” explain, “an idea that is not dangerous is unworthy of being called an idea at all” (Wilde 2003b, 95). Consequently, the aim of this thesis is to analyse those “dangerous ideas” and prove that it is possible that Oscar Wilde bestowed his fairy tales with a deeper meaning; to be more specific, with a criticism of Victorian society, its hypocrisy, pride, ignorance and display of vanity.

The thesis is divided into four parts. Firstly, the character of Victorian society will be discussed, considering its obsession with respectability, taking the personality traits of a gentleman as well as that of a respectable lady into account. Furthermore, the inclination of the Victorians to rank the world of appearances higher than reality will be focused on. Moreover, the topic of vanity in general needs to be addressed and explained, not to be mistaken for self-love. The concern about one’s public image also needs to be understood in connection to money. The Victorian Age and vanity are terms that both allude to the last topic of the first part: dandyism. The Dandy will be interpreted not as a mere narcissist, but as a social critic, cunningly displaying his dismay by setting a mirror to society.

Secondly, the persona of Oscar Wilde will be dealt with, his possible vanity being taken into consideration. Having been a dandy and a key representative of British aestheticism, his interest in beauty and dress will be focused on, considering

the possibility that this behaviour resulted out of a need for self-advertisement in his contemporary society.

Thirdly, the genre of the fairy tale as such will be concentrated on. To begin with, the difference between the folk tale and the literary fairy tale needs to be explained; moreover, the thesis will discuss that there might be an intention of subversion behind every fairy tale and the possibility of social criticism through it, as well as the fairy tale being the reflection of its era.

Lastly, the final part will try to analyse the two fairy tale collections by Oscar Wilde, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* and *The House of Pomegranates*. The fairy tales will be interpreted from various points of view, such as the Victorian concern about reputation and the consequent ostracism of those who do not fit in, money being considered the ultimate value and also the fairy tales as a criticism of the social conditions of the underprivileged with a touch of socialist ideas. In addition, this part focuses on the depiction of societal vanity and tendency to judge the book by its cover, general inclination to prefer beautiful exteriors without even considering the interior, as well as vanity in connection with pride and self-importance.

2. Victorian Values, Vanity and Dandyism

2.1. Victorian Values

The conviction is already not far from being universal, that the times are pregnant with change; and that the nineteenth century will be known to posterity as the era of one of the greatest revolutions of which history has preserved the remembrance, in the human mind, and in the whole constitution of human society (Mill 1986, 228).

The famous quote coming from John Stuart Mill's essay "The Spirit of the Age" expresses that from the brink of their era, the Victorians had great expectations for themselves. Whether their own expectations had been fulfilled, one can only guess. However, with great expectations came also strong rules, how the society should work, what one should and should not think and how he or she should behave. And these matters are also what this chapter is going to deal with: Victorian society and its values. Although it is quite hard to imagine in the contemporary, diverse society, the Victorian society lived according to strict rules, values and assumptions. The concept of the value, which should be lived up to, was regarded as very important, Gagnier even emphasizes that "The Victorians agonised about values" (Gagnier 2004, 18). Boghian names a great many of them: "hard work, sexual morality, individual responsibility, education, religion, ambition, sobriety, thrift, punctuality and a constructive use of leisure time" (2014, 92). Hard work, the first value having been mentioned, was characterized through the so called "Self-help". Sally Mitchell claims that the "Victorians believed in progress, and they believed people could change their lives and rise in the world through selfhelp" (Mitchell 2009, 261).

Self-help, written by Samuel Smiles, was a book that to a certain degree characterized the era. Smiles was convinced that everybody can help himself best, and that if working hard, everybody has an opportunity for the pursuit of happiness, a state one could call “the Victorian Dream”¹. In *Self-help* he points out that “opportunities [...] fall in the way of every man who is resolved to take advantage of them” (Smiles 1859, 15), essentially advising people to be diligent; only by hard work they can achieve their goals.

A very important distinctive trait of the era was respectability, which “was used as a primary social distinction, often more important than the class line” (Mitchell 2009, 264). A respectable person was usually very conservative, did not do anything unexpected and did not wear any clothing that would attract attention or be conspicuous in any way: in other words, he or she was “quiet and unassuming in their clothing” (266). As Mitchell mentions, “it was important never to go outside without being properly dressed” (265). Furthermore, the individuals who did not follow these social conventions were often excluded from the society. When interfering with this kind of people, respectable families’ reputation was often at stake. This claim is confirmed by Mitchell: “a respectable family had tidy clothes, a clean house, and good manners; its members were chaste, sober, and honest. A well-to-do man who was clearly not respectable—who did not pay his debts, or openly kept a mistress—would not be invited into the homes of most men in his class” (264).

In addition, a respectable man was able to support his family through ceaseless work without taking a loan, whereas for a woman, it was not considered respectable to

¹ It is noticeable that the idea of “the Victorian Dream” may be similar to the one of “the American Dream”, which predates the Victorian era by several centuries (c.f. John Winthrop). Nevertheless, the “rags to riches happy ending” somehow did not seem to be meant for any other social group than bourgeoisie and aristocracy.

indulge herself in any kind of work that would be paid for – she was only supposed to stay at home to protect the family hearth. Mitchell adds that according to the conventional social image a woman “preserved the higher moral values, guarded her husband’s conscience, guided her children’s training, and helped regenerate society through her daily display of Christianity in action” (266). Displaying Christianity by means of charity was indeed something a respectable woman was expected to be *seen* doing. Boghian maintains that women were seen “as the moral lights in society” who were supposed to display a “proper behaviour towards the poor”, but nevertheless, “their caring for the poor should not lead them to neglecting their own families” (Boghian 2014, 93). Thus it is no wonder that charity was quite a fashionable kind of behaviour.

As the former text suggests, the right gentlemanly behaviour was governed by a strict unwritten code of what was “done” and what was “not done” – one of the most typical characteristics of a gentleman was his “disinterestedness” in financial matters. He was not supposed to attend to the costs of something as long as he was sure that it was the right thing (Mitchell 2009, 272). This kind of behaviour is very well depicted in Charles Dickens’ book *Great Expectations*. The protagonist of the book, Pip, once having obtained an income and a gentlemanly status, also lived large although he mostly could not afford it, not sincerely considering the fact that he would have to, sooner or later, either repay his debts or go to the debtors prison. His elevated social position essentially deprived him of the right to care about money.

Another remarkable trait was the so called “stiff upper lip” – the emotional reservation that was already being imprinted on the minds of small boys in public schools (272) and very much corresponding with the attitude towards marriage and family as a part of business.

All the information and claims above might be considered general knowledge, however, many think of the Victorian era as moral, virtuous and hardworking. The weakest spot which could be criticized about the era was the division between the wealthy and the poor. However, there are several sources that claim that the Victorians provided their poor with significantly better care than the generations to precede them. Queen Victoria's "new moral and social concern led to new laws that would affect many people's daily lives during the remainder of the century" (Mitchell 2009, 4), which included vaccination, sewer system, compulsory education or shorter working time. Himmelfarb confirms this claim, stating that "the Victorians acted on behalf of the poor, whom they sought not only to assist materially but also to elevate morally, spiritually, culturally, intellectually" (Himmelfarb 1995, 25).

The question may come to mind what the true motives behind these actions were. Waldrep Shelton claims that "Victorian culture was based upon the elaborate creation of simulacra". He further describes:

Victorians were always extremely invested in the fake – even in the authenticity of the fakery, such as Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc's "Gothic" designs for Notre Dame de Paris or A. C. Swinburne's invented rural dialects in which he would write the "lost" epics of a region and recite them to the people living there who were convinced that he had indeed uncovered the "real" poem (Shelton 2002, 2).

This whole style, called *Gothic Revival* or sometimes also *Victorian Gothic*, although being a symbol of the past which might have provided them with the stability desperately needed in a quickly changing time of progress of science, concurred with the sentiment of the Victorian era: similar to the intentions of the medieval architects,

the high-reaching churches, monasteries and houses were meant to impress and to leave the observer with the feeling of sophistication and confidence. What one's neighbour or the wealthy unmarried viscount thought was of great importance; as Boghian comments, "it becomes more and more important that properties should reflect wealth – it becomes even more important than needs or beauty and partially explains the Victorian taste. One should not lead only a comfortable and constructive life, but also a consciously commercial one" (Boghian 2014, 94). When in possession of money, the scourge of those times, it was important to display it. If one did not display it, it was as if he did not have it. Consequently, one can say that the surface was more important than the real traits of one's personality, and that the society in the Victorian era was genuinely invested in what they could show and how they were viewed rather than what they truly were like on the inside. ²

Based on the statements above it is obvious that Victorian society followed some strict rules and held certain values, e.g. hard work, respectability and gentlemanly behaviour in general, very important. Nevertheless, the motives behind this praiseworthy mindset might not necessarily come from the goodness of their hearts and may well correspond with their urge to appeal to others. To be perceived as a respectable person was placed somewhere at the top of one's values list; hence, the crude importance accounted to being earnest may be related to being vain.

² Furthermore, one may ask oneself, why there was such a disparity between what was expected of a man and what was expected of women. Men were supposed to be active, enterprising and emotionally distant, whereas women were meant to sit at home, exert a moral influence upon the children and act charitably. Odubajo confirms this claim by stating that "one of the major characteristics of the Victorian society is the gender-based inequality that existed in the period" and that "the history adequately captures the Victorian society as having existed on the tenets of exploitation, double standards and hypocrisy" (Odubajo 2017, 9224).

2.2.Vanity

This thesis attempts to prove the claim that Oscar Wilde criticised Victorian vanity and therefore Victorians must have seemed vain to him. Firstly, it would seem suitable to cover the possible definition of vanity itself. A century before the Victorian age, David Hume was concerned with the concept of vanity and the differences between vanity and self-love. He came to the conclusion that:

A man's vanity seems to consist chiefly in:

- immoderately displaying his advantages, honours, and accomplishments, and
- openly and pushily demanding praise and admiration, to such an extent that he offends others and encroaches too far on their vanity and ambition, which they have kept secret. It's also a sure symptom of the lack of the true dignity and high-mindedness that is such a great ornament in any character" (Hume 2017, 53).

Doing things only to boast and make others realise one's excellence might be a sign of one's suffering from a deficiency of virtue and dignity. A person who is sure about himself does not need to display his achievements and qualities, because he is not in need of the approval of society. Hume also specifies that "avarice, ambition, vanity, and all the passions [...] are commonly though wrongly classified as kinds of self-love" (56), proving that both terms, vanity and self-love, can be looked upon as ambiguous and may sometimes be misinterpreted in one's favour.

Another philosopher who dealt with vanity was Friedrich Nietzsche³. As well as Hume, Nietzsche also distinguishes between vanity and self-love, and assigns this

³ "the philosopher with whom Wilde is most often compared in their transvaluation of values" (Gagnier 2004, 18)

flaw to a personality that lacks autonomy. Nevertheless, as Abbey claims, vanity can also be a trait of those who want to be recognised as powerful: “the amount of power others impute to you is very important in attaining and retaining actual power” (Abbey 2015, 400). This personality trait could easily be related to aristocracy, which is a social class that could be a potential recipient of Wilde’s criticism.

A more modern definition was composed by Webster et al. who perceive vanity as “a negatively viewed social behaviour fuelled by excessive concern over one’s public image, characterized by a willingness to incur personal cost because of this concern” (Webster et al 2014, 613)⁴. Webster’s view is different from Hume’s, because it implies that being vain costs money which is something Hume, coming from a gentlemanly middle class, was not supposed to be interested in. Nevertheless, Webster et al rightly notice that vanity and demonstrating of financial prosperity (and hence also often power) are closely related.

Oscar Wilde was not the only writer who addressed the topic of vanity. William Makepeace Thackeray, with his famous *Vanity Fair*, was also disturbed by a notion that the Victorian society is considerably vain. Cole argues that the desire to be or at least seem ennobled is the source of vanity of middle-class persons:

Thackeray mischievously suggests that the Victorian bourgeoisie was driven not by utilitarian calculation or domestic ideology, but by the desire for aristocratic status—a desire that turns ordinary middle-class men into lesser versions of Beau Brummell. Not only are Thackeray’s middle-class male characters obsessed with aristocratic concepts of gentility, but they are also, like the dandy Brummell, flagrantly vain (Cole 2006, 138).

⁴ This relatively recent definition is sadly relatable both to this and the Victorian age; “the public image”, or how we are perceived by other people, was and still remains fairly important.

Vanity, that is, addiction to praise from others and intentional depiction of the self in the best light possible, though it does not necessarily have to correspond with the reality, differs from the so called “self-love”. Vanity may arise from the lack of dignity and the need of the approval of society and is often closely connected to displaying wealth.

2.3.Dandyism

The above mentioned Beau Brummell is a name that reminds people of the lifestyle called dandyism; surely, when one thinks of the Victorian age and vanity, the word *dandy* comes to mind as the most relevant association. Lynn Ramert maintains that “the definition of the dandy is often disputed between critics, but descriptors that are often repeated include artificial, effeminate, arrogant, classless, self-centered, hedonistic, aesthetic, performative and paradoxical” (Ramert 2009, 447). That is, a great many negative personality traits are often assigned to them; arrogance and artificiality with the urge to show off. Oscar Wilde, Lord Byron, Wilde’s both idol and opponent James Whistler or Robert de Montesquiou were all famous for being dandies.

Nevertheless, it is highly improbable that those famous influencers were just petty, selfish, vain men consumed by themselves, desperate to be noticed and admired for their distinctive looks. For example, Ramert further specifies that although a dandy seems to be concerned only with his appearance, “he actually bears a deeper political meaning. With flamboyant dress, controlled personality, and life purpose in seeking pleasure, the dandy actually serves as a sort of foil for his time, pointing out the hypocrisies and the social climate by testing boundaries” (Ramert 2009, 448). Thus, dandyism is a conscious form of social criticism, or as skilfully described by Rhonda

Garelick, an “artful manipulation of posture, social skill, manners, conversation, and dress” (Garelick 1998, 3). To the greatest extent, it was the dandies’ dress that attracted other people’s attraction or judging looks. As Ramert further adds, dress was definitely the most important way of expression of a dandy:

Fashion is a critical point to examine when it comes to the dandy of any era. The dandy’s clothes are more meaningful than mere vanity or frivolity. Though critics often consider fashion a reflection of its time, the dandy uses fashion as a weapon against his time, to point out the faults of, or even protest against, his time. For example, in Victorian England, popular fashion reflected the rigid social mores: women wore corsets and demurely covered themselves from neck to toes, and men avoided any sort of “feminine” clothing—lace, heels, or bright colors. Victorian society strictly defined the realms of man and woman; even in fashion there could be no ambiguity. The dandy’s fashion flaunted these rules (Ramert 2009, 451).

Hence, a dandy uses his apparel as a medium to criticize society. For instance, effeminate clothing, often accompanied by a flower of some sort, including not very manly materials like lace or satin, was meant to make society aware that the strictly set rules and prejudices were shallow and unnecessary. It was meant to awe and shock the passers-by.

In his essay “The Decay of Lying”, Oscar Wilde claims that “Imitation can be made the sincerest form of insult” (Wilde 2003c, 28). Here, one can assume, he reveals his intention and intentions of many of his well-known contemporaries. McCormack illustrates the dandy’s motives through the following description: “despising the very society into which he seeks initiation, the dandy takes his

revenge by creating himself in its image, miming its clothes, its manners and mannerisms” (McCormack 2004, 97).

Consequently, even though the representatives of the lifestyle called dandyism seemed to be vain, self-centred, superficial or arrogant, they actually may only have imitated the weaknesses of their time and thus set a metaphorical mirror to their age. Their main medium was their apparel, with which they distinguished themselves from the others and attracted attention. Their dress, as well as their mannerisms and unconventional conversational skills, might have pointed out the flaws of their contemporaries.

In essence, it has been shown that Victorian society was a complex organism which was compelled to follow certain rules. As it happens, those who did not follow the rules were banished from the society. In order to avoid that, they paid great attention to the opinions of other people and what impression they made on other people. This may have, in some cases, resulted in displaying vanity, consisting of need of approval and praise, possibly emanating from lower self-esteem. Vanity was also rather associated with those more affluent members of society who made a habit of displaying wealth and investing to means to impress other people. Making an impression on other people was also in the agenda of the dandies, who, even though seemingly arrogant and vain, possibly aimed at social criticism through being different.

3. Oscar Wilde and Vanity

The aim of this chapter is to explore the life and attitudes of Oscar Wilde and to try to assume whether he actually could have considered Victorian society vain. Facts and his quotes will be taken into account.

As Peter Raby describes him in his *Cambridge Companion*, he is surely “a figure of paradox and contradiction” (Gagnier 1997, 18). Standing out from the crowd, not only due to his slightly larger physical proportions but mostly because of his strikingly unusual dandy outfits and hair worn long and wavy, he lectured around the United States about the Beautiful and aestheticism and at the same time wrote plays and stories that were meant to mock the society in many ways. The question arises, whether this kind of behaviour was the one of a vain person, or whether it was solely for the purposes of surviving in the society of the period, which was ignorant of his ideals of the beautiful.

In his early childhood, according to Ellmann, his mother dressed him as a girl and paid attention to his dress, which might have influenced the attitude to his attire later on: “Lady Wilde declared that, for the first ten years of Oscar’s life, she had treated him as a daughter rather than as a son in dress, habit, and companions” (Ellmann 1988, 17). Possibly due to this treatment, he considerably attended to his dress; already in his letters from the Portoro school to his mother, one of their most frequent topics were his clothes. Dress and its beauties could, apart from Greek classical literature, definitely be considered his hobby, he aimed to differ; particularly his knee breeches worn during his lectures around America are to be mentioned, as they made a great commotion among the public. Moreover, after he married, he forced his shy wife Constance to wear extravagant dresses, as he could not wear them himself during his rather tied up era. His whole attitude to dress can

be summed up by many of his famous quotes: “One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art” (Wilde 2016, 22); or “With an evening coat and white tie, anybody, even a stock-broker, can gain reputation of being civilized” (Wilde 2016, 28). The former quote comes from his privately printed book *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young*, published in 1894. In this extract, Wilde highlights the importance of dress and appearance in Victorian Society. The latter quote is mouthed by Basil Hallward, a painter in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. There is a significant reason to believe that this statement is something Wilde himself would have said; as he says in a letter to a friend: “Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be — in other ages, perhaps” (Wilde 1962, 352). Thereupon one could assume that Oscar Wilde identifies himself with the character. A possible interpretation of the saying is that the actual behaviour of a stock broker may be seen as unworthy of a gentleman, despite the fact that he may be able to cover it with gentlemanly attire, as the society pays more attention to his exterior than his interior.

Not only in Wilde’s wardrobe was luxury a must, which was also manifested in the negative balance in his bank account and persistent debts. Blue china, expensive furniture and luxurious hotels and restaurants were typical for his lifestyle. Richard Ellmann recounts a story dating to the years after Reading; despite being in an unfortunate financial situation, he always demanded the best article on the market and even the best ones were not good enough; when the waiter brought him the best cigarettes available and wanted to return change to him, he responded: “No, keep it. That way I’ll delude myself into thinking these cigarettes are good” (Ellmann 1988, 542).

His obsession with outward beauty was quite noticeable. As reported by Ellmann (1988, 328), during his stay in France, once he was supposed to dine with Marcel Proust in his house. He left shortly after his arrival and later told to a friend that he could not dine in a house so ugly.

His love of the beautiful surroundings is confirmed in his partly autobiographical essay “Pen, Pencil and Poison”. Here, he praises a fictional artist who obviously bears his own personal features, who is also concerned about the space he spends time in: “He is keenly sensitive to the value of beautiful surroundings, and never wearies of describing to us the rooms to which he lived, or would have liked to live” (Wilde 2003a, 281).

Whether he was vain or not, is disputable. He allegedly appeared vain to his considerably less successful brother Willie Wilde. His vanity was, in the eyes of his brother, a reason of his eventual downfall: “It is his vanity that has brought all this disgrace upon him” (Ellmann 1988, 439). In this case, however, Willie might have rather meant his homosexuality, from which he attempted to disassociate. Richard Ellmann further adds that he was never “severe with pride’s outward show, vanity, as displayed in his delight in clothing and appearance, in a turn of a phrase or a cut of a coat” (1988, 515).

As already suggested by the examples above, Oscar Wilde, born into an aristocratic family, was used to a certain lifestyle. Nevertheless, he was perfectly aware that a style that differed from the mainstream was the best kind of advertisement. The following quote was also published as an advice to the young: “In all unimportant matters, style, not sincerity, is the essential. In all important matters, style, not sincerity, is the essential” (Wilde 2016, 21). Although style is a broad word covering many fields, it could also be interpreted in the meaning of

fashion and general behaviour. Thus he could mean that style, or the outward behaviour of a person and the influence upon the people one consorts, incorporates the most important thing in all “important” and “unimportant matters”. In short, we can and should influence how we are perceived. While one could assume that he truly believes the bare message of the saying, others might consider, him being a social butterfly up from the beginning of his career, that he came to truly understand the society of his era, which ran on money and reputation. In order to be able to become a famous artist, he had to become notorious. Given his fascination with the aesthetic movement, “startl[ing] the town like a dandy” (Wilde 2003a, 280) seemed to be the most natural way. In “Pen, Pencil and Poison” he maintains that “it was quite easy by continued reiteration to make the public interested in his own personality” (290). This idea is confirmed by Frank Harris, who describes Wilde’s strategy in his biography of Wilde. He recounts being mentioned in some newspaper article at which he decided not to react. Wilde allegedly cautioned him of making a mistake:

If you wish for reputation and fame in this world, and success during your lifetime, you ought to seize every opportunity of advertising yourself. [...] You must go about repeating how great you are till the dull crowd comes to believe it (Harris 1916, 36).

The advice Wilde gave to Harris obviously illustrates the importance he assigned to reputation and his perception by other members of society. Thus it can be observed that his obsession about his appearance might rather have arisen from more practical reasons than just plain vanity.

Another point to prove that he was not truly vain was his generosity. Hosting and inviting people to dinners was one of his main activities, gifts presented to his

friends and acquaintances were eventually turned against him during his trial. Illustrating his generosity, Richard Ellmann tells a story about how Edgar Saltus and Wilde once met a beggar on a chilly night: “[the] man [...] opened his jacket to show he had nothing on underneath. Saltus gave the man a gold coin but Wilde took off his overcoat and put it round him” (Ellmann 1988, 389). This act of kindness perfectly reflects that even though he took pride in his appearance, he was able to judge what was truly important and moral. In his essay *The Soul of Man under Socialism* he claims that “charity creates a multitude of sins” (Wilde 2003e, 236), as it justifies exploitation of the poor and the true motive behind is to pose as an excellent person. He, on the other hand, provided the aid most needed – a warm coat on a chilly night, and did not boast or tell stories about it.

Speaking of clothes and the way of dressing, after a series of lectures on aestheticism around the United States, he decided to go on another tour around the British Isles, this time discussing the topic of dressing in his lecture “The Relation of Dress to Art”. In this lecture he alluded to the fact that the outer appearance may not be the essential thing and that there may exist more points of views: “That, under certain conditions of light and shade, what is ugly in fact may, in its effect, become beautiful, is true” (Wilde 2003d, 303). Moreover he emphasizes that clothing should be inspired by the Greeks, Egyptians and Assyrians and should rather be practical than fancy; “for all costumes are caricatures” (305). This implies that he might consider Victorian laced up dresses only designed to be delightful to observe, impractical and thus vain.

The whole phenomenon called Oscar Wilde, with his captivating fluent talk, peculiar appearance and seemingly vain manners can either be seen as a product of his time or a well plotted business strategy. As he describes his fictional artist in

“Pen, Pencil and Poison”: “for some of his faults we must blame the time in which he lived” (Wilde 2003a, 298). His inclinations to fashion, self-centeredness (as illustrated by his famous quote he allegedly said upon his arrival to America: “I have nothing to declare but my genius” (Harris 1916, 26) or his self-appreciation after the tour, “remarking with Whistlerian vanity ‘I was quite amazing’” (Ellmann 1988, 213)) and luxury can well be based on his preferences or they may be the most pleasant way to accompany his intended lifestyle. His being a pioneer in aestheticism in Britain must also be considered, as he saw beauty as a value, according which he tried to live. In the Preface to *Dorian Gray* he maintains:

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 (Wilde 1997, 4).

It is very likely that his ostensibly vain lifestyle originated in his deep conviction to live a beautiful life, no matter the consequences.

It is also very probable that he was aware of the weaknesses of his contemporaries and did not hesitate to highlight them, although he also needed to survive and thus behaved in an expected way within the social boundaries. As told to Arthur Roberts: “A comic spirit is a necessity in life, as a purge to all human vanity” (Ellmann 1988, 388), possibly meaning that human weaknesses, as vanity, are meant to be satirized in order to heal them.

4. The Fairy Tale Genre as an Instrument of Subversion

This chapter is going to deal with the subversive power of the fairy tale genre, trying to examine how an author could possibly use the genre to endow criticism upon the society he wrote for.

One can say that the fairy tale as such has been present in human culture as long as we can remember. According to Jack Zipes, “it is impossible to trace the historical origins and evolution of fairy tales to a particular time and place”, but he confirms that “humans began telling tales as soon as they developed the capacity of speech” (Zipes 2012, 2). At first, fairy tales were passed on orally among the simple folks and later on, it grew in popularity also among the middle class and aristocracy. Here, it seems appropriate to distinguish between folk tales and literary fairy tales⁵. The belief that folk tales and fairy tales differ based on the intention of the text and its recipients is voiced by Jarlath Killeen in his book on Oscar Wilde’s fairy tales: “while fairy tales are designed to socialise children, to ‘educate’ them into pre-existing adult world, folk tales are counter-hegemonic challenges to the ‘adult’ aristocrats by ‘child-like’ peasants who desire some kind of social upheaval” (Killeen 2007, 2). This can lead to the conclusion that folk tales are in fact a kind of compensation literature, satisfying the needs of a frustrated working class craving a better social status, later making an appeal to the ruling class to change their ways. Nevertheless, Richard Pine finds another function for a folk tale: “a folk-tale is more vicious, a parable: it is a tale for adults who have lost their way among the signposts

⁵ As Zipes mentions, literary fairy tales were a trend introduced by Madame D’Aulnoy at the end of the 18th century in France: “the literary fairy tale became the talk of literary salons, or what had been the talk in these salons now came to print” (Zipes 2006, 30). This trend did not seem to disappear for the whole next century; and over the years, this sort of content has also been introduced to dinner parties. Folk tales were used as a means to make oneself seem interesting, as “a non-compulsive elegant mode of conversing was developed [...] which paradoxically emanated from a compulsion to respect strict rules of decorum” (11). Hence, the folk tale was taken and remade for the needs of their high born recipients and turned into literary fairy tales. Interestingly enough, this kind of conversation and narration was exactly what Wilde grew popular for.

and have experienced some of the disruption related in the tale” (Pine 1995, 165). A folk tale assures the hearer/reader who finds the content relatable that the situation he might have found himself in can happen, and that there is always a solution that can even lead to a happy ending; or, it forces him to beware the consequences of his not exactly approvable actions (e.g. going to hell) and points him in the way of redemption.

If the folk tale may be seen as an, in a way, unconscious cry of the lower classes for a better life, fairy tales are consciously designed instruments to raise children to behave according to the standards of society. This concerns especially middle class children and it is quite unsurprising that “fairy tales and middle class emerged simultaneously” (Killeen 2007, 4).

The text above already suggests that there is always an intention behind both fairy and folk tales. Zipes maintains that “the purpose of the tale from beginning was to instruct and amuse; that is, to make moral lessons and strictures palatable” (Zipes 2006, 9). In an amusing way, certain content, including the author’s viewpoint is communicated to the reader. It applies even more so to the genre of the fairy tale which is further confirmed by Zipes: “Certainly one can speak about the single literary fairy tale for children as a symbolic act infused by the ideological viewpoint of the individual author” (3). It is rather disputable whether the specific work of art was ‘infused’ by the ideology consciously or subconsciously, as both is possible. The latter, nevertheless, may always be seen as the more possible option. The human being lives within a certain society whose rules he needs to follow in order to fit in and be listened to, and whose rules he eventually adopts. In order to be able to be listened to, one has to be ‘relevant’: “all tales want to be relevant, in the same way that we seek to make ourselves relevant through storytelling” (2012, 17). Hence,

being relevant, he follows certain patterns of behaviour and beliefs society has prescribed for him to follow. Killeen observes that “children’s literature is a highly politicised genre” (Killeen 2007, 9), which is confirmed by Reynolds who claims that “no literature is neutral, but children’s literature is more concerned with shaping its readers’ attitudes than most” (Reynolds 1994, ix). Clearly, it can be said that there is ideology behind every fairy tale; the ideology emanating from the general ideas about what is and is not supposed to be done or thought prevailing at the particular point in time and space. Thus, every fairy tale reflects its own era: “It is a historical statement” (Zipes 2006, 10).

For this reason it is highly probable that the author of the fairy tale, by describing the era and, whether consciously or subconsciously, applying the social codes of the time, means to depict and mock the flaws of his contemporaries. Identifying the flaws may also bring the reader to the thought what would the world look like if the flaws disappeared, bringing the reader to an utopian dimension, which is also asserted by Zipes: “the once upon a time is not a past designation but futuristic: the timelessness of the tale and lack of geographical specificity endow it with utopian connotations” (Zipes 1999, 4). Due to the historical and spatial ambiguity, it is convenient for the author to express social criticism even in times when censorship suppresses free speech⁶. The genre of fairy tales is highly appropriate for these purposes, as it can be easily adapted to suit any social requirements, which has been confirmed by Killeen: “One important fact about such tales is their relatively fluid character; the storyteller would invariably change the tale to suit the audience” (Killeen 2007, 3). The ‘fluid character’ mentioned above

⁶ Disguising the true intentions of the text by any means was quite relevant in the Victorian era, as explained by Ioannidou, who maintains that the intervention of the publishing industry in the original text was quite a common phenomenon: “for the Victorian era, where the literature was largely distributed by means of circulating libraries which conformed to the strict Victorian regime of propriety, it alludes to the practice of censorship” (Ioannidou 2013, 132).

gives the author immense opportunities to express his social criticism so it is not obvious at the first sight, but at the same time, derivable after a deeper analysis.

There are reasons to believe that Oscar Wilde might very well have criticised Victorian society with his fairy tale collections. Pine argues that “Wilde effectively disguised his collections as children-oriented in order to ensure that his work reached the Victorian *parents*”, claiming that the actual recipients of his texts were not “nursery children, but [...] adult-children” (Pine 1995, 165). The adulthood of the designated recipients of Wilde’s stories is actually confirmed by facts in Richard Ellmann’s biography of Wilde where he describes how Wilde told the story of “The Happy Prince” to a group of Cambridge students while visiting the university in 1885, and moreover that the story was actually published when his firstborn son Cyril was only an infant, in spite of the general belief that the fairy tales were invented while telling them to his children (Ellmann 1988, 253). Wilde himself commented on his fairy tales as “meant partly for children, and partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy” (Wilde 1962, 352).

Furthermore, this confirms the hypothesis that one of the reasons Wilde chose the fairy tale genre was to convey a message that was rather unconventional and could not be written in a verbatim manner. In addition, this has also been confirmed by Zipes, who describes Wilde as an author “who used fairy tales as a radical mirror to reflect what was wrong with the general discourse on manners, mores, and norms in society” (Zipes 2006, 107). As he drew attention to himself with his dandy outfits, he also used his literary talents to express concerns he had about society, which corresponds with Killeen’s description of him as “a writer who set out to deconstruct social values” (Killeen 2007, 9), as well as his two fairy tale collections, which he

characterizes as “subversive in that they undercut the morality of late Victorian England” (15).

Given the above, it can be seen that fairy tales, with their directive and educational objectives, are an instrument designed to manipulate human behaviour and to set social codes and values in their readers’ minds, as Zipes claimed; fairy tales are “historical prescriptions, internalized, potent, explosive, and we acknowledge the power they hold over us by mystifying them” (Zipes 2006, 11). Literature, with the fairy tales in particular, is shaped by the ideology infused by the author, who is also influenced by the society (and/or the political regime) he lives in. Yet there exists a possibility of the author being aware of the social norms and manners of his time with which he might not be satisfied. In that case, the fairy tale genre seems to be the most convenient to choose, as it reaches both children and their parents. Therefore it can be concluded that there is credible reason to believe that Oscar Wilde could have and also did criticise the Victorian society with his fairy tales collections.

5. Analysis of the Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde

Many reasons why Oscar Wilde was very likely to criticise society have been presented so far, using mostly secondary sources. There is, however, a richer source for the reasoning that he might have perceived his contemporary society as “frosty, inclement [and] threatening” (Schmidgal 1994, 156), namely the literary works of Wilde himself. The following chapter is going to take his two collections of fairy tales apart, aiming to prove Wilde’s possible intentions using his original texts.

5.1. Wilde’s Fairy Tales Meant as Social Criticism

This chapter is going to point out Wilde’s possible comments of the general flaws of the Victorian society, discussing their obsession with certain values, mostly reputation. Furthermore, the most important subject of Victorian discourse – money – will be discussed, considering all the aspects leading up to it, such as reason and practicality, and the hunger for power. Another topic that may not be omitted is Wilde’s criticism of the social conditions, very much influenced by his socialist views, having been concerned with the problem of poverty, the gap between the rich and the poor, and the hypocritical behaviour of other social groups, such as the church and nobility.

As already discussed in the preceding chapters, Victorians considered their own image in the eyes of the others more important than their actual nature, in order to survive in society.⁷ This is skilfully illustrated in his first fairy tale, “The Happy Prince”, as confirmed by Killeen, asserting in that in this tale “[i]n both Victorian

⁷ Nevertheless, these restrictions did not necessarily include their beloved monarch Queen Victoria, who, at the occasion of her Golden Jubilee, refused to wear the crown. Killeen maintains that the fairy tale “The Young King” may be the inspired by this event and written in appropriation of her modesty: “Victoria refused to wear her crown or her robes of state, a decision which caused consternation among the people”, even the coachman complaining about driving her to the Abbey so inappropriately dressed (Killeen 2007, 114).

London and Wilde's mythical City, the middle class preach the gospel of respectability, improvement and courtesy" (Killeen 2007, 26). At the beginning of the fairy tale, one of the Town Councillors comments on the beauty of the Happy Prince: "'He is as beautiful as a weathercock,' remarked one of the Town Councillors who wished to gain a reputation for having artistic tastes, 'only not quite so useful,' he added, fearing lest people should think him unpractical, which he really was not" (Wilde 2010, 71). Being known for having artistic tastes⁸ is a pleasant asset, but much more important is to appear practical, as practicality leads to profit and money was everything.

The phenomenon of the importance of reputation and social conformity appears in his fairy tales several times. In "The Remarkable Rocket", this message is conveyed quite literally: "Arguments are extremely vulgar, for everybody in good society holds exactly the same opinions" (107); this is what the Frog, the Rocket's vain counterpart reflecting his behaviour, explains to the Rocket. This piece of wisdom is actually acted upon earlier in the tale, as the courtiers praise the true love of the prince and the princess, their claim being based on old superstitions:

The prince and the princess sat at the top of the Great Hall and drank out of a cup of clear crystal. Only true lovers could drink out of this cup, for if false lips touched it, it grew grey and dull and cloudy.

"It is quite clear that they love each other," said the little Page, "as clear as crystal!" (101)

It is also as clear as crystal that the page only reacts to the needs of society and exclaims what the others want to hear, possibly not even believing it himself.

⁸ This passage might also reflect Wilde's feelings about how aestheticism was misunderstood by the Victorians.

Furthermore, in the tale called ‘The Star-Child’, the animals have to suffer through a very cold winter. The behaviour of the turtle doves speaks for itself, as they try hard to fulfil the societal expectations despite apparently having different opinions, commenting on very frosty weather no one is happy about:

“The Earth is going to be married, and this is her bridal dress,” whispered the turtle-doves to each other. Their little pink feet were quite frost-bitten, but they felt that it was their duty to take a romantic view of the situation (202).

The Turtle Doves are obviously freezing and do not consider the weather romantic at all, yet they put on an act, in order to meet the expectations of the others. This demeanour may also be related to the popularity of “the fake” among Wilde’s contemporaries. In ‘The Remarkable Rocket’, the King weds his son to a Russian princess, who has no notion of fireworks and wonders what they are. The King provides her with the following answer: “They are like Aurora Borealis, [...] only much more natural. I prefer them to the stars myself, as you always know when they are going to appear, and they are as delightful as my flute-playing” (101). Hence, he ignorantly compares two natural occurrences – northern lights and stars – with the fireworks. The irony consists in the fact that he claims that the manmade pyrotechnics are more “natural” than nature itself and namely due to the fact that one can control it; and that may be the point of taking pleasure in artificial matters – one can easily affect how they are going to look, unlike nature, which may not come out as planned.

Being controlling and practical as the King was thus a very common asset of late 19th century Britain. Wilde, a profound aesthete, may have found this quite dismaying. In “The Nightingale and the Rose”, he puts forward the contrast of the Nightingale, a natural, passionate artist, and the logical, reasonable Student who

somewhat lacks imagination and rather bemoans his misfortune than he would step out of his comfort zone. The difference between them is clearly demonstrated on the way they both describe love. The Nightingale praises love as “a wonderful thing. It is more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals. [...] It may not be purchased of the merchants, nor can it be weighed out in the balance of gold” (71). In her eyes, love cannot be bought, measured, and is far more precious than any of the world’s riches, being prepared to die for it. On the other hand, the Student summarizes love in the following manner:

What a silly thing love is, [...] [i]t is not half as useful as Logic, for it does not prove anything, and it is always telling one of things that are not going to happen, and making one believe things that are not true. In fact, it is quite unpractical, and, as in this age to be practical is everything, I shall go back to Philosophy and study Metaphysics (84).

The student, being raised in the practical Victorian world, is not able to appreciate the real beauty behind things and tries to fit everything in the known frame. His shallow love for the professor’s daughter can obviously be counted, and in the end, subtracted, while the real feelings and deeds of the Nightingale can only be measured by death. This is further confirmed, as he later criticises the last Nightingale song she sings to an Oak tree before she sacrifices herself for him (the Student): “it must be admitted that she has some beautiful notes in her voice. What a pity it is that they do not mean anything, or do any practical good” (82).

Practical is actually also an adjective that could describe the marriage and courting of the Victorian age in general; as further satirised by Wilde in “The Happy Prince”. In the story, the Swallow falls in love with the Reed, “attracted by her slender waist” (71). Nevertheless, their relationship is not approved by the other

members of the swallow society, who comment on their love with sheer practicality: “‘It is a ridiculous attachment,’ twittered the other Swallows, ‘she has no money, and far too many relations;’” (71). This points at the fact that love is considered a business deal with no place for real feelings and that it would be quite disadvantageous for the Swallow to marry the Reed and thus unreasonable. This argument is supported by Killeen who argues that “the dysfunctional courtship of the Reed and the Swallow exposes the hypocrisy of Victorian mating rituals” (Killeen 2007, 26). The other swallows do not consider whether they love each other, but only whether she has any money and whether it is a reasonable relationship.

As already mentioned above, the tendency to be reasonable prevailed in people’s minds, since it was rooted there from their early childhood. Wilde suggests that one should, time to time, look back and try to look at the world through children’s eyes. In “The Happy Prince”, the Charity Children compare the Happy Prince to an angel, for which they get scorned by their Mathematical Master, who tries to prove they can’t possibly know that:

“He looks just like an angel,” said the Charity Children as they came out of the cathedral in their bright scarlet cloaks, and their clean, white pinafores.

“How do you know?” said the Mathematical Master, “you have never seen one,”

“Ah, but we have, in our dreams,” answered the children; and the Mathematical Master frowned and looked very severe, for he did not approve of children dreaming (Wilde 2010, 71).

This reflects the stern Victorian society, which did not let people dream and be creative unless the creativity led to inventions that earned the money. Here again, one can observe impracticality having been frowned upon. Indeed, what else was the

practicality for other than efficiency, and what was efficiency for other than profit. Money was what all the other values led up to; as the Happy Prince sadly notices: “the living always think that gold can make them happy” (77). Wilde, famous for being captivated by the notion of socialism, reflected the fact also in other fairy tales that the Victorians care far too much about money. For instance, quite an abstract depiction of their excessive concern about money can be found in “The Young King”. As the King dreams about the exploitation of the poor by the rich, he witnesses the dispute between Avarice and Death. Death demands one corn of the three corns Avarice holds in her hand, but Avarice refuses to give him any. Three times Avarice denies Death his corns, and three times Death kills people whose hearts Avarice commands. A possible interpretation arises, and namely that the greater the people’s greed is, the greater the suffering of the ones who work for them is. Furthermore, in “The Fisherman and his Soul”, the Fisherman needs to lose his soul in order to be able to live with his beloved Mermaid in the sea. Until he fell in love with the Mermaid, he knew nothing else than his trade; catching fish and selling it for money. Hence he wonders, what he needs his soul for: “Of what value is the soul to me? I cannot see it. I may not touch it. I do not know it” (174); the first thing that appears on his mind is *value, price*. His soul does not enrich him in any material, practical way; and spirituality is hardly appreciated in his century. Thus, he does not hesitate to dispose of it. The unimportance of a spiritual basis is confirmed by the merchants, who mock him for offering his soul to them: “Of what use is a man’s soul to us? It is not worth a clipped piece of silver” (175). Later in the story, the Witch actually proves the importance of having a soul; she offers him usual “goods” she sells to others and emphasizes that everything has a price; when he reveals his true wish to her, she is scared, tries to discourage him from doing so.

The Soul he parts with is desperate and begs him to at least give him a heart; unfortunately that he cannot do, for he would have nothing to love the Mermaid with. Thus the Soul wanders through the world, learns from others and adopts their way of thinking about money and riches and power. What he wants the most is to return to the Fisherman and so he tempts him. At first, it is wisdom he offers (which might bring power with itself) and then it is riches – having travelled the world he learnt that power and riches is what people desire the most. For the Fisherman, on the other hand, the greatest value is love.

That love is greater than money is also what the originally vain and proud Star-Child has to learn after having endured his ordeal. Becoming the lowest of the low, in order to enter a city where his mother might potentially dwell, he is sold to an evil Magician for “a bowl of sweet wine” (210). A similar ending awaits the pearl diver who dives until he dies. His death is met with quite an emotionless reaction: “The negroes shrugged their shoulders, and threw the body overboard” (147); the pearls for the King’s sceptre are far more valuable than human life. Thus, the people who sell them show that everything in the world has a price and the lower one stands on the social ladder the smaller the price is.

This brings one to the problem of poverty, very much exploited by Wilde in his fairy tale collections. Wilde’s suggestion to pay more attention to the wretched situation of the poor strikes one the most while reading “The Happy Prince” and “The Young King”. The Happy Prince, having spent his whole life in the palace of Sans-Souci⁹, “where sorrow is not allowed to enter” (72), is first posthumously

⁹ This description of the Happy Prince’s life, spending it in a pretty castle unconscious of any human suffering, is strikingly similar to the life of Oscar Wilde. When he was a boy, he lived in a house on Merrion Square, to which belonged a beautiful locked garden. In the garden only Wilde and his friends of the same social class could play; he did not come to see much suffering of the poor during his childhood years. Then coming from school to school, he was probably first directly confronted with the poor upon his arrival to London. His son Vyvyan Holland describes their house in Tite street:

confronted with the torment of this world. Ironically, had he been alive, he may have been able to influence the living conditions of the poor, but now all he is left with are several jewels and golden plates he is covered with to give away. Through the eyes of the Happy Prince and his bird companion, Wilde vividly describes the sorrows of his town:

the rich making merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars were sitting at the gates. He flew into dark lanes, and saw the white faces of the starving children looking out listlessly at the black streets. Under the archway of a bridge two little boys were lying in one another's arms to try and keep themselves warm. "How hungry we are!" they said. "You must not lie here," shouted the Watchman, and they wandered out into the rain (77).

The contrast between the rich having plenty and nice houses to live in and the poor freezing children being ostracized and not taken care of is quite obvious here. Killeen supports this claim through the following comment: "The story is best read as an attack on the utilitarian and pragmatic mentality which governed public and political dealings with the poor in nineteenth century London and an attempt to find a more compassionate, and effective, means of dealing with what seemed to be an intractable problem" (Killeen 2007, 21). Indeed, the pragmatic society which is well provided for seems to be quite undisturbed by the suffering of others, as the Watchman driving the children away. The Happy Prince, having seen this sort of bearing, desires to make at least a little difference and so he strips himself of his gold and jewels and shares them with those in need "to become as poverty-stricken as his subjects. For this, he is rewarded with everlasting life in heaven" (37).

'the west side of the street backed on to Paradise Walk ... one of the most forbidding of Chelsea slums. It was a row of tenement houses with wretched, filthy back-yards, from which the sounds of bawling arose nightly'(Killeen 2007, 24).

Quite similar to “The Happy Prince” is the fairy tale called “The Young King”. As Zipes maintains, “in contrast with the Happy Prince, who was ultimately crucified despite (or perhaps because) of his philanthropic measures, the young king points a way to utopia by setting a model of behaviour which he hopes everyone will recognise and follow” (Zipes 2006, 118). The Young King, having been raised by simple peasants, is at first overwhelmed by the beauties of the palace and he enjoys them to the last bit. Nonetheless, he is quite taken aback when confronted by poverty, by the poorest of the workers, the weavers¹⁰, whose working conditions are described in a rather gloomy manner:

The meagre daylight peered in through the grated windows, and showed him the gaunt figures of the weavers bending over their cases. Pale, sickly-looking children were crouched on the huge cross-beams [...] their face were pinched with famine, and their thin hands shook and trembled (Wilde 2010, 144).

This passage can clearly be associated with Wilde’s socialist view, having been concerned with the exploitation of the poor. That claim is further confirmed by George Woodcock who maintains that “the story is a parable on the capitalist system of exploitation [...] and it can stand beside the passages of Marx as an indictment of the kinds of horrors which, Wilde was fully aware, were inflicted on the toilers in this world” (Woodcock 1949, 148-9). Wilde also implies that the rich may mostly not realize what practically lies behind their beautiful accessories and things making their lives comfortable: the toil and dreadful living conditions of the working class, often being on the brink of death. His taking both possible views (those of the rich and those of the poor) into account is further confirmed by Philip Cohen, commenting of Wilde’s kind of narration: “Rather than merely bemoaning the fact of

¹⁰ The Weavers were a social group that was known for poor living conditions due to a very small income. When considering taking up this topic, Wilde may have been inspired by the Luddite rebellion taking place in the first half of the 19th century (Chambers 1878, 357).

poverty¹¹, he isolates its causes and presents valid insights into the psychology of exploiter and exploited alike” (Cohen 1987, 81).

Further in the story, the weaver in the first dream actually promotes the view that there is no reason why they should be left in poverty while others are enjoying themselves, only because they come of richer parents:

“Our master!” cried the weaver, bitterly. “He is a man like myself. Indeed, there is but this difference between us – that he wears fine clothes while I go in rags, and that while I am weak from hunger, he suffers not a little from overfeeding.”

“The land is free,” said the Young King, “and thou art no man’s slave”

“In war,” answered the weaver, “the strong make slaves of the weak, and in peace the rich make slaves of the poor. We must work to live, and they give us such mean wages that we die. We toil for them all day long, and they heap up gold in their coffers, and our children fade away in their time, and the faces of those we love become hard and evil. We tread out the grapes, and another drinks the wine. We sow the corn, and our own board is empty. We have chains, though no eye beholds them; and we are slaves though men call us free” (Wilde 2010, 144-145).

In this passage, Wilde is trying to point to the terrible living and working conditions of the poor and he also points out the naïveness of the King. He inserts the words to

¹¹ Oscar Wilde actually comments on the reason of choosing the fairy tale genre through one of his letters: “the story is an attempt to treat a tragic modern problem in a form that aims at delicacy and imaginative treatment: it is a reaction against the purely imitative character of modern art” (Wilde 1962, 355). This statement may well be understood as an attack on the most common literary genre of his contemporaries: realism. Realism, in his view, only mirrors the issue of social conditions, but does not attempt to solve it. Thus Wilde chooses the fairy tale genre, “the very form considered escapist by the realists and the middle classes, Wilde suggest that social inequality cannot be solved by a radical shake-up of the political system, but only through a radical moral transformation of the individual (Killeen 2007, 22).

the mouth of the representative of the poor, who, in this case, really manages to open the eyes of the ruling class. That this is actually possible, although only in a fairy tale, may be seen as the means of encouraging a change in the “real” ruling class. The fact that he sees the rich as responsible for the lives of the poor is supported by a random poor man who answers the King’s question: “‘Are not the rich and the poor brothers?’ asked the Young King. ‘Aye,’ answered the man, ‘and the name of the rich brother is Cain’” (151). Using the biblical reference he may imply that the rich letting the poor starve and toil to death is basically fratricide.

This fairy tale also interestingly points out the fact that poverty leads to crime, as the Weaver metaphorically expresses that “Through our sunless lanes creeps Poverty with her hungry eyes, and Sin with his sodden face follows close behind her”, and as a consequence of that “faces of those [they] love become hard and evil” (145). People who find themselves in desperate situations have to make do in any way they can and crime is often the easiest way there is. As a source of this immorality, Wilde considers the capitalist society which lives at the suffering of its subjects. The Young King, nevertheless, after having come to terms with his own consciousness speaking to him through his dreams, he decides to change his ways and dresses in his old shepherd apparel and a thorn wreath for his own coronation. He proves that his social awareness is far stronger than his love of beautiful things and his humility and modesty is rewarded by God and protected from his superficial courtiers who want to kill him, as he does not resemble a true King in his old clothes. In accordance with the previous claim, Killeen states that the King realizes that “the paraphernalia of court is based on imperial exploitation and a global system of class and ethnicity, with assumptions of racial and class superiority legitimating such activities” (Killeen 2007, 114) and he is easily able to lose them in order to elevate

the people from their wretched states of lives, hoping that other nobles will follow his example. The righteousness of his decision is confirmed by *deus ex machina* who expresses his approval by granting him a breathtaking costume.

In this story, God definitely shows the right mindset, unlike the clergy, whose behaviour is described by the Weaver in the following manner: “The priest rides by and tells his beads, and no man has care of us” (Wilde 2010, 145). The highest of the priests, the Bishop, actually confirms this claim and tries to mask it by saying the usual: the suffering of men is God’s will and we cannot influence it: “Is not He who made misery wiser than thou art?” (151).

The hypocrisy of the Church is actually mirrored in other fairy tales as well; the most obvious example is probably the character of the Miller in “The Devoted Friend”. Apart from criticising Victorian hypocrisy in general, he is a typical example of a person saying beautiful things and not living up to them; as one hears the Miller preach about helping others but on the other hand, is very well provided for and is too greedy to share it with anybody. As well as the Miller, the Church also does not act on behalf of the poor; they are only provided with *charity* because it paints the Church in a good light, but this institution did not use their money to really *help* them. This hypothesis is further proved through the following passage, in which the Miller turns his selfishness of not sharing anything with the starving little Hans into a virtue:

“You are certainly very thoughtful about others,” answered the Wife, as she sat in her comfortable armchair by the big, pinewood fire; “very thoughtful indeed. It is quite a treat to hear you talk about friendship. I am sure the clergyman himself could not say such beautiful things as you do, though he

does live in a three-storied house, and wear a gold ring on his little finger” (91).

This clearly indicates the fact that those who are in service of the clergy lead a very comfortable life in exchange for “saying beautiful things” instead of acting. Gary Schmidgal describes the Miller’s behaviour in the following statement: “by sheer force of rhetoric, [he] manages to disguise total selfishness as altruism and generosity” (Schmidgal 1994, 150). Furthermore, the Miller uses the handy technique of masking his own flaws by finding them in others and reproaching them for it, as when he forces little Hans to do things and run errands for him, and when he sleeps in because he is tired to death, he claims: “‘Upon my word,’ said the Miller, ‘you are very lazy. Really, considering that I am going to give you my wheelbarrow, I think you might work harder. Idleness is a great sin, and certainly don’t like any of my friends to be idle or sluggish’” (Wilde 2010, 95). A possible interpretation of Miller’s broken wheelbarrow is that the wheelbarrow represents the “certainty” of going to heaven after having spent one’s life as an obedient Christian and having been very easy to manipulate with. Promising the utopian vision of never-ending joy in heaven, the church reproaches people for every “immorality” (and rules about what is moral and immoral are created by them) and sometimes can be seen living in glass houses and throwing stones.

That the Miller is not really earnest about any of his beautiful speeches about friendship is proved at the end of the story, when he finds a new piece of equipment, the lantern, more precious than the life of his “precious” best friend. When he sends Hans to fetch the doctor at a stormy night and Hans only asks him to lend him his lantern, the Miller refuses: “‘I am very sorry,’ answered the Miller, ‘but it is my new lantern and it would be a great loss to me if anything happened to it’” (97); once

again proving that his money and things he invested it in are far more valuable than little Hans, who, as a consequence of the Miller's greed, wanders off to the moors and drowns. This also points to the greed of the Church who rather value their money and property than the lives of other individuals.

The Church is not the only social group that is reprimanded through Wilde's works; the nobility is also depicted in an unflattering manner, especially in the fairy tale called "The Remarkable Rocket". The protagonist of the story is the proud and vain Rocket, who only loves himself and his favourite pastime is hearing himself talk. He finds a perfect counterpart in the figure of the King, who is also arrogant and egotistical. The difference between the two of them resides in the fact that no one dares to point out the King's flaws, whereas the arrogance and pride of the Rocket is laughed at.

The Rocket having similar features as the King may also point out the flaws of the nobility who only boast about their superiority but there is no difference between them and average individuals, apart from the fact that they were conveniently born. Wilde's possible criticism of the aristocracy may correspond with his insights about the absurdity of the contemporary political system on the British Isles and his socialist tendencies eloquently expressed in his essay "The Soul of Man under Socialism". The possibility of the Rocket depicting the nobility is also proved in the passage when the Duck decides to leave him and he concludes that he is actually "glad that she has gone" because "she ha[d] a decidedly middle-class mind" (109).

The conclusion one can draw from reading this fairy tale may have a slightly anarchistic touch to it: the hypocrisy of the society possibly emanates out of social oppression. In the tale, "the King had promised to play the flute. He played it very

badly, but no one had ever dared to tell him so, because he was the King. Indeed, he only knew two airs, and was never quite certain which one he was playing; but it made no matter, for, whatever he did, everybody cried out, 'Charming! Charming!'" (101). In this extract, one can observe that the King's flute playing is on no account "charming", but the philistine courtiers pretend it to be in order to get into the good graces of the powerful by overpraising everything they do. Thus, the problem above only appears because we allow it.

Wilde, dealing with the problem of poverty and the gap between the rich and poor, seems to be strongly convinced that true goodness can be found by those whose minds are not spoilt by riches and who themselves have so little to spare and they still do not hesitate to share with others. The poor Woodcutter in "The Star-Child" may serve as an illustrative example. Although they experience great hardships and are aware of it, as in "Why did we make merry, seeing that life is for the rich, and not for such as we are?" or as they further lament: "much is given to some, and little is given to the others. Injustice has parcelled out of the world, nor is there equal division of aught save of sorrow" (203); the poor Woodcutter still proves with his deeds that those who have nothing to give are often more generous than those who have plenty, as he resists the reasoning of his friend and wife that he hardly has enough to feed his own children and he raises the Star-Child.

Nevertheless, despite expressing faith in the working class, one cannot help but sense a sort of scepticism in the way the fairy tale ends. The reader would expect a happy ending, yet Wilde obviously does not see that a happy ending is possible, as his fairy tales are supposed to be the true realism, reality reflected by art; he concludes his fairy tale with an unsettling paragraph: "Yet he ruled not long, so great

has been his suffering, and so bitter the fire of his testing, for after the space of three years he died. And who came after him ruled evilly” (216).

In this chapter, one can see that Wilde’s concern with Victorian values and the question of poverty was indeed present in his fairy tales. He satirised Victorian obsession with reputation and practicality, often emanating from social conformity. Wilde, having himself often been short of money, was aware of the fact that money was the fuel of his contemporary society, influencing every sphere of life. One can also assume that the ultimate shortage of money in poverty was caused by the imperial exploitation of the poor by the rich, to which he saw socialism as an answer, considering the nobility and the Church as influential contributors.

5.2. Wilde’s Fairy Tales as a Depiction of Victorian Vanity

In this chapter, the problem of vanity displayed in the works of Oscar Wilde will be dealt with: from the vanity and narrow-mindedness of society in general and vanity concerning beauty and good looks connected to material wealth as opposed to poverty, to pride, ignorance, and self-importance that often comes hand in hand with vanity; these occurrences will be pointed out and commented on.

In his fairy tale “The Devoted Friend”, one of the minor characters is the Water-rat. The Water-rat represents egotism, ignorance, and self-importance, as confirmed by his statement: “‘Is the story about me?’ asked the Water-rat. ‘If so, I will listen to it, for I am extremely fond of fiction’” (89). This draws attention to the fact that Wilde, in his fairy tales as well as in his other works, satirized the flaws of Victorian society and yet they enjoyed it thoroughly. Nevertheless, at the end of the story, he sketches an alternate reality, what it would look like if the criticised society comprehended the real “moral of the story”. In the end, the water-rat does not

understand the moral and what is more, when he learns that the story had a moral, he is offended and leaves. This shows that the people who are criticized are mostly not aware of them being the object of the satire, as accurately illustrated in Victorian society loving Wilde's plays and being the object of criticism at the same time; nevertheless, Wilde also implies that it might be tricky to depict the social flaws in a story, for it might be actually correctly understood: "The fact is, that I told him a story with a moral.'

'Ah! that is always a very dangerous thing to do,' said the Duck. And I quite agree with her" (99). The choice of words here may be related to the fact that, as Killeen points out: "'dangerous' was a description often applied to Wilde's works by the Victorian press and if morals are dangerous perhaps we should not be surprised to find that Wilde frequently resorts to them in his fiction" (Killeen 2007, 80). This confirms that Wilde actually had a message to communicate about the true nature of the Victorian society, as will be explained in the following chapter.

The already mentioned Water-rat was further used to indicate how the Victorian society judged the book by its cover: in a passage, in which Wilde satirises modern art, he is talking about an art critic whom he considered knowledgeable because he had a certain style: "I am sure he must have been right, for he had blue spectacles and a bald head" (Wilde 2010, 92). The Water-rat does not in any way doubt the contents of the Critic's speech; he considers his "expert opinion" accurate because he was appropriately dressed to fit his social role.

An example of being dismissed of society as a result of not keeping the expected exterior is also in the story of "The Happy Prince". After having been stripped of his golden plates and jewels, there was no longer any reason to keep him up: "Dear me! How shabby the Happy Prince looks! [...] in fact, he is little better

than a beggar!” (78), yet when he was still beautiful “he was very much admired indeed” (71).

The beauty of the Happy Prince was measured in jewels and precious metals, but as soon as he showed that the real beauty comes from the inside, he was torn down and melted; there was no place in society for a person who sacrifices the outer beauty and thus is excluded and destroyed. Zipes supports this idea with the following statement: “The real beauty of the prince goes unnoticed because the town councillors and the people are too accustomed to identifying beauty with material wealth and splendour” (Zipes 2006, 123).

Stripped of the “material wealth and splendour”, also the protagonist in “The Young King” faces the vanity of his courtiers, as they accuse him of “bring[ing] shame upon [their] state and [being] unworthy to be [their] master” (Wilde 2010, 150). They do not heed his explanations of why he came in a simple dress and justify their views by the following reasoning: “how shall the people know that thou art a king, if thou hast not a king’s raiment?” (149). The importance they assign to his apparel corresponds with the general trend of judging people according to their appearance.

An example of groups of people being seduced by one’s good looks can also be found in “the Star-Child”. The Star-Child, in spite of being proud and arrogant, exercises great influence upon the other children of the village. They follow him for he is beautiful and adopt his manners of cruelty and pride: “and his companions followed him, for he was fair” (206). This underlines the fact that society tends to be blinded by good looks and ignores what lies underneath. Furthermore, not only did they despise those who did not abound in beauty, but they also beat and banish them, being so obsessed with beauty that they would not suffer anything like this in their

presence. This alludes to the fact that people who are somewhat out of ordinary are usually excluded out of society; society being vain and shallow, not accepting difference.

Another example of the way society treats individuals who do not fit in is depicted in the fairy tale “The Birthday of the Infanta”. The Infanta is a spoilt, selfish aristocratic child, who is praised and loved for her beauty by everybody, including the flowers and some animals. Despite her ugly interior, she is far better accepted than the ugly dwarf. The Dwarf represents nature and proves that despite his monstrous exterior he has a beautiful interior, taking care of the forest animals and being of a kind and merry nature. After having seen himself in the mirror and being faced with the fact that he can never live undisturbed in this world/society where one’s exterior is considered of such importance, he laments and eventually, dies of a broken heart.¹² The cold reaction of the princess on the one hand perfectly reflects her “ugly” nature, and on the other hand, gently suggests the heartlessness of the nobility: “For the future let those who come to play with me have no hearts” (170). Reacting to Infanta’s bearing, Christopher Nassaar characterises her in the following manner: “The Infanta is the epitome of beauty but she is a moral monster, repulsive in spite of her dazzling outward appearance” (Nassaar 1974, 84). Confirming Nassaar’s claim, Jarlath Killeen adds that in the story, “moral beauty is demonstrated as superior to physical attraction” (Killeen 2007, 125).

In “The Happy Prince”, the rich girl who has her dress embroidered by the poor seamstress can also be offered as the perfect example of vanity. In this case one can observe the perspective of the poor and the perspective of the rich: the poor

¹² As many of Wilde’s fairy tales, this clearly refers to Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale “The Ugly Duckling”; yet, Wilde adds a more pessimistic touch to it. Instead of the Dwarf metamorphosing into a beautiful person, he rather dies of broken a heart because despite being of a simple nature he is aware that with this sort of appearance he will never be accepted into society and will spend the rest of his life a living caricature. This future prospect, his heart simply cannot bear and breaks.

mother only cares to feed her son and help him recover from his illness, whereas the rich girl worries about her dress coming in time so she can look stunning at a ball.

“How wonderful the stars are,” he said to her, “and how wonderful is the power of love!” “I hope my dress will be ready in time for the State-ball,” she answered; “I have ordered passion-flowers to be embroidered on it; but the seamstresses are so lazy” (Wilde 2010, 74).

There is also the young man who is obviously in love with the girl and expresses his love to her. The vain girl does probably not reciprocate his love, as she is more in love with herself and her good looks. Moreover, the rich girl worries about passion-flowers on her beautiful dress, whereas there are people who have nothing to wear whatsoever on a cold winter night, as the little match girl, who “has no shoes or stockings, and her little head is bare” (76). Once again a reminder of those who live in poverty appears to be gently set in contrast with the vanity of those who have plenty.

The above mentioned rich girl and the daughter of the Professor are quite similar characters used to prove the same point; they may even as well be the same people in the same city. The latter, in order to sound interesting, promises the student that she will dance with him if he brings her a red rose, which she does not really mean. After the altruistic little bird rather painfully dies to fulfil her wish and is confronted with the Student’s naïve eagerness, she is quite frank with him and reveals her true nature:

“I am afraid it will not go with my dress,” [talking of the rose] she answered, “and besides, the Chamberlain’s nephew has sent me some real jewels, and everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers. [...] [A]nd, after all,

who are you? Only a Student. Why, I don't believe you have even got silver buckles to your shoes as the Chamberlain's nephew has;" (83-84).

Here one may notice that she only cares about the exterior of herself and other people; the Student expressing her love is just words to her, what is of real value are the silver buckles on the Chamberlain's nephew's shoes. That underlines the fact that although the Victorian society was deeply invested in their "values", the most important value was always the tangible one: money.

Additionally, a delicate suggestion of the dangers of vanity and its consequences is implemented in the fairy tale "The Young King". The character of the young King may closely reflect the journey of someone unenlightened or less cultured into the beauties of aestheticism, e.g. surrounding oneself with beautiful things, which is very likely to be somewhere in the marginal space between perceiving beauty as one's main value and vanity. The King, coming from a poor background of simple shepherds, is mesmerized by all the riches and beauty he suddenly happened to come by; and discovers a "strange passion for beauty that was destined to have so great an influence over his life" (142).

After having claimed his new position, he "flung aside his rough leathern tunic and a coarse sheepskin cloak" (142) and started to explore the fineries the palace was full of. He was fascinated by rare jewels and ended up sending merchants to dangerous places to get him more of them (e.g. the tombs of Egyptian pharaohs, Persia, the bottom of the sea for rare pearls etc.) and "order[ed] that the artificers were to toil night and day to carry them out" (143). Furthermore, what was really important to him was his dress, which seems to be an indicator of the fact that there is a thin line between aestheticism and vanity: "But what occupied him most was the robe he was to wear at his coronation, the robe of tissue gold and the ruby-studded crown, and

the sceptre with its rows and rings of pearls” (143). Notwithstanding, at the end of the story, he learns that outward beauty is not the beauty to focus on and contents himself with his old shepherd tunic. Rodney Shewan claims that his “aesthetic metamorphosis” happens to “oppose the private paradise of physical beauty to the moral beauty which seems to attend its renunciation” (Shewan 1977, 51). The Young King, the moral hero of the story, is possibly intended as an example to follow by everybody in his position.

The King from the previous story was only meddling with vanity, whereas the young boy from the tale called “The Star-Child was far more consumed by his own image. As a baby, the Star-Child was found in the woods by a poor woodcutter and brought up together with his own children. However, he was extraordinarily beautiful, which resulted in him being vain, cruel and proud. This is confirmed by Killeen, who maintains that “the Star-Child perversely believes that he rests atop this hierarchical chain and his egoistical arrogance is reflected in his aesthetic difference” (Killeen 2007, 161). Hence, being more beautiful than everyone else, he considered himself superior to others:

Yet his beauty work him evil. For he grew proud, and cruel, and selfish. The children of the Woodcutter, and the other children of the village, he despised, saying that they were of mean parentage, while he was noble, being sprung from a Star, and he made himself master over them, and called them his servants” (Wilde 2010, 205).

After losing his good looks and setting off to find his mother he offended, he falls in the hands of an evil magician. As a handy allegory of his self serves the forest the magician sends him to on a quest:

This wood was very fair to look at from without, and seemed full of singing birds and sweet-scented flowers, and the Star-Child entered it gladly. Yet did its beauty profit him little, for wherever he went harsh briars and thorns shot up from the ground and encompassed him, and evil nettles stung him, and the thistle pierced him with her daggers, so that he was in sore distress (211).

He, also, used to be as beautiful as the forest from the outside, but to look at the inside was quite painful.

Moreover, he was very invested in his own image and rejected all who were not blessed in this respect as he was: “Indeed, he was as one enamoured of beauty, and would mock all the weakly and ill-favoured, and make jest of them; and himself he loved, and in summer, when the winds were still, he would lie by the well in the priest’s orchard and look down at the marvel of his own face, and laugh for the pleasure he had in his fairness” (206). His staring at his own image in the water surface clearly implies a reference to the story of Narcissus who fell in love with his own reflection (Ovid 1960, 67), which was a popular classical story material also used by other artists of (not only) British aestheticism (c.f. Pater, Gide). Gary Schmidgall states that the text can “be easily be read as cautionary one aimed at the male narcissus [...] who is quite aware of his attraction and cynically exploits his charisma” (Schmidgall 1994, 162).

Narcissus cherishing his own reflection is also a topic reflected in “The Happy Prince”. The perfect idea of beauty, according to the town representatives, was to look at their own images; after they tore the Happy Prince down, already stripped down of his jewels and golden plates, the mayor offered a solution to replace him: ““We must have another statue, of course,” he said, ‘and it shall be the statue of myself!’” (Wilde 2010, 78). Here he shows how shallow and vain he is, having an

opportunity to show himself in a good light, he intends to use in order to obtain the admiration of the others. At this point, he even gets in a fight with the town councillors because they also crave a statue of themselves and want to replace the Happy Prince. Not for the first time, Wilde draws attention to the vanity and ignorance of the middle class.

An example of a character deeply consumed by himself is also the Rocket in the tale "The Remarkable Rocket". Interpreting this tale, Killeen suggests that it is supposed to serve "as an attack on the narcissistic imagination" (Killeen 2007, 97). All in all, the Rocket is vain, proud and does not allow other people's perspectives. His pride and impoliteness is striking from the moment one encountered him, as he "always looked over the shoulder of the person to whom he was talking" (Wilde 2010, 102), proving that he does not consider the person worthy of having a conversation with himself. His own personality is what he always treasures above all else, as when he forgets what he was talking about, he is reminded by the Roman Candle that he was talking about himself: "Of course; I knew I was discussing some interesting subject" (103). Moreover, he is cautious never to let anybody else get into the centre of attention: "I hate people who talk about themselves, as you do, when one wants to talk about oneself, as I do" (107). In that statement, he unknowingly criticises his own behaviour. A similar example follows when the Cracker, who is actually laughing at a joke secretly made about the Rocket, but when being asked what was he laughing at, responds that he was laughing because he was happy. The Rocket is very dissatisfied: "'That is a very selfish reason,' said the Rocket angrily. 'What right have you to be happy? You should be thinking about others. In fact, you should be thinking about me. I am always thinking about myself, and I expect everybody else to do the same'" (103). As illustrated by the previous example, the

Rocket is so preoccupied with himself that he disproves his own claim in the same sentence.

With humour, his ignorance is emphasized by the fact that he thinks that his launch is an event and the prince and the princess are just lucky to get married at the same date, considering himself the most important person everybody should bow to: “‘How fortunate it is for the King’s son,’ he remarked, ‘that he is to be married on the very day on which I am to be let off. Really, if it had been arranged beforehand, it could not have turned out better for him; but Princes are always lucky’” (102). His self-centredness is literally summarized later on: “The only thing that sustains one through life is the consciousness of immense inferiority of everybody else, and this is a feeling that I have always cultivated” (104).

Nevertheless, his feeling of “inferiority of everybody else” keeps him from establishing relationships with other people. In the end, he indeed flew and shone beautifully across the sky, but nobody saw it; “and all that was left of him was a stick” (110). The moral one can draw from this story can be interpreted that even though the person who is proud and vain may be remarkable indeed, if he or she is selfish and despises everybody else, there will be no one to admire him as he will have no friends.¹³ As fairy tales usually tend to have a moral, one of the morals of this fairy tale can be expressed by the proverb *pride comes before the fall*; in the case of the Rocket, the literal fall in the gutter where he is thrown into after not being able to ignite.

All things considered, there is a significant reason to believe that Wilde did use his fairy tales to criticise Victorian vanity. The society he portrayed in his works

¹³ Many critics have agreed on the fact that this story may in a way be inspired by Wilde’s relationship with his former friend James Whistler, an eccentric and a perfect example of vanity, with whom he did not part on good terms, and ended by Whistler having accused him of “stealing his best lines and making money out of their relationship” (Killeen 2007, 98).

was indeed self-centred and consumed by its image, as already shown in many examples above. To create a better contrast, the societal flaws were set in comparison with those suffering in poverty, the criticised social groups having rather been the middle class and the aristocracy.

Overall, Wilde's concern with Victorian values, standards, and mores is quite traceable in his works. He uses the medium of fairy tale to exploit them in a way that is less obvious than plain realism, also suggesting possible ways to change them. He humorously depicted the excessive concern about one's image in the eyes of the others, the hypocrisy of the single constituents of society and the extreme attention dedicated to financial matters. The gap between the individual social classes was also one of the main topics Wilde was concerned with, which was largely reflected forming his opinion on contemporary society. Furthermore, specifically vanity may have been a thorn in his side, considering that he factored this flaw by writing his "dangerous stories with a moral".

6. Conclusion

“A little sincerity is a dangerous thing and a great deal of it is absolutely fatal” (Wilde 2003b, 101). This statement coming from “The Critic as an Artist” may nicely summarise Wilde’s possible intention behind having chosen the genre of fairy tales to criticise Victorian society. As proved above, the fairy tale genre is a suitable instrument to vocalise a message that would influence people’s minds, the meaning of which does not have to be obvious at first sight, supposing that there is a need to avoid censorship in a country which does not support the idea of free speech.

Given Wilde’s history, he was not a typical member of Victorian society. An Irish immigrant with a homosexual history, not to mention his dandyism, is very likely to provide insight on general patterns and flaws of his contemporary society, such as their obsession with reputation and one’s public image, behavioural patterns that need to be kept in order not to be excluded from society, or their general tendency to create simulacra and to choose it over the natural. Moreover, his inclination to the socialist movement explains his dismay about society caring too much about money and profit and too little about the living condition of the working class.

The unsatisfactory living conditions of the poor are handily set in contrast with the general vanity and pride of the well-endowed individuals in his tales, who are mostly interested in what they are going to wear and how their actions will be perceived by others, and generally display their pride and ignorance. His fairy tales confirm more than any other of his texts that though he himself may have seemed to be vain and to go to great lengths in order to impress society, it appears that he only did what was necessary in order to survive in society and through his actions, he attempted to mirror the true nature of his contemporaries.

Not only did he try to reflect the weaknesses, but he also suggested a possible solution, as was shown for instance in the fairy tale “The Young King”. This somewhat utopian wish to change the long established ways again proves that a fairy tale is a consciously chosen instrument to advocate for social change. J. R. R. Tolkien describes the function of fairy tales in the following way: “fairy tales open a door on Other time, and if we pass through, though only for a moment, we stand outside our time, outside Time itself maybe” (Tolkien 1947, 11). Outside time, outside reality, out there in the ocean of one’s imagination, which every great revolutionary has to enter in order to make the leap and allow change to commence. And thus, a revolutionary mind indeed could be traced in the criticism of vanity and hypocrisy weaved into Wilde’s fairy tales.

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