

SUBVERSION OF THE MATERIAL WORLD  
IN OSCAR WILDE'S FAIRY TALES

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A Thesis

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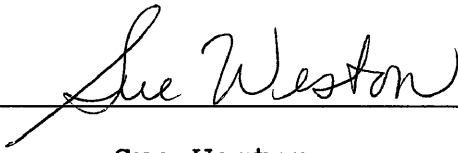
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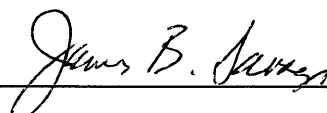
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## ABSTRACT

In his two collections of fairy tales, The Happy Prince and Other Tales and A House of Pomegranates, Oscar Wilde offered a spiritualized literature which explored the limitless world of the imagination. He used the fairy tale form because it offered an opportunity for unrestricted creativity. As a form, the fairy tale most reflected his artistic concept of an idea becoming an ideal.

Through an analysis of Wilde's essays and letters, the thesis reveals the strong link between Wilde's artistic, political, and social philosophies. Wilde's socialism, like his Aestheticism, was based upon a yearning for some kind of transcendent artistic and moral beauty, an ideal achieved only through the freedom of the individual to explore and exploit the limits of his own imagination.

**SUBVERSION OF THE MATERIAL WORLD  
IN OSCAR WILDE'S FAIRY TALES**

In his two collection of fairy tales, The Happy Prince and Other Tales and A House of Pomegranates, Oscar Wilde offered a spiritualized literature which explored the limitless world of the imagination. He used the fairy tale form for the latitude it allowed him to exaggerate, to exploit unrealistic details, and to engage in indirect social criticism. In a letter referring to "The Nightingale and the Rose," Wilde indicated his preference for form over substance

I did not start with an idea and clothe it in form, but began with a form and strove to make it beautiful enough to have many secrets and many answers. (Letters, p. 218)

Wilde's essays and letters make it clear that the artistic ideals realized in the form and the social ideals expressed in the content of the tales were identical; personal and creative freedom results in self-knowledge - "one...realises one's soul" ("De Profundis" in Letters, p. 479). In a fairy tale, Wilde could stretch his creative, visionary wings and offer the fruits of his fantasy to a public imagination starved by grim reality. If "the artist seeks to realise in a certain material his immaterial idea of beauty...to transform an idea into an ideal" (Letters, p. 302), Wilde achieved this transformation by expressing through the beauty of his tales his ideal of the supremacy of the imagination.

Wilde based his aesthetic theory on the perception of the spectator and critic. His celebration of the imagination is an attempt to intensify the experience of beauty, to open the self to a wider variety of aesthetic appreciation; the mind of the spectator becomes as much a part of the work of art as the

artist's vision. In "The Decay of Lying," Wilde writes, "One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and only then, does it come into existence" (Complete Works, p. 986). Art for Wilde was *not* a concrete thing. It is a stimulus which arouses a response of some kind in the viewer's mind - in his imagination. These "sense-impressions" ("De Profundis", in CW, p. 483) are filtered through the imagination to create our reality, to form what becomes for us "truth." Therefore, "it is the spectator, and the mind of the spectator...that art really mirrors" (Letters, p. 301), and what constitutes beauty or truth, ugliness or lies for the spectator is the product of the individual imagination. One cannot define the truth, cannot subjugate it to the limited perspective of a personal perception; it cannot be measured, boxed, and presented. What the individual can do, and must do according to Wilde, is develop and refine his imagination until it embraces the world outside of the self. The purpose of the fairy tales, as if their beauty alone were not enough, is that they offer "an escape into a wider world" ("Decay...", in CW, p. 1031): the world of the imagination.

For Wilde, the imagination was the basis upon which an individual built his conception of himself, and through which he interpreted and interacted with the world. Wilde and his fellow Aesthetes reacted against artistic and societal restriction, liberating the content and structure of their art in order to reveal and explore the workings of their own imaginations. What the fairy tales represent is a

conciliatory effort on Wilde's part to once more engage the imagination of the adult through a recollection of childhood fantasy. Aesthetic poetry and prose, however, are unable to keep their sweetness and light completely free of the bitter taste of reality; as adults, we know that the miracles worked in fantasy seldom, if ever, occur in our actual lives.

Charles Dickens, for all of the sentimentalism of which he is accused, was also trying to extract some sweet fantasy from the bitter reality. His article "Frauds on the Fairies" defends fairy tales, acknowledging that in a

utilitarian age...it is a matter of grave importance that Fairy tales should be respected...A nation without fancy, without some romance, never did, never can, never will, hold a great place under the sun. (Dickens, p. 269)

For a people forced, for the most part, to labor hard and long for the bare necessities, the English needed fantasy, some kind of entertainment far removed from their world of poverty and hardship. Fairy tales, representatives of the undiluted fancies of the imagination, had to remain free from the narrow-minded scrutiny of those, like Mr. Gradgrind in Hard Times, who would restrict even individual thought.

Barbara Charlesworth sees the Aesthetic Movement as a "necessary strategic withdrawal into the inner strongholds of the imagination in the face of an uncompromising materialism" (Charlesworth, p. 179), yet for Wilde and the other Aesthetes it was less a retreat than a regrouping. Aesthetic poetry and prose refuse to hide, to deny, to compromise; the imagination itself refused to be a sanctuary, and instead became a weapon.

In the true Paterian sense of "not the fruit of experience, but experience itself" (Pater, p. 219), Wilde and the Aesthetes challenged artistic and moral orthodoxy in an attempt to reveal the many facets of the human potential for creativity.

A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament. Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is. It has nothing to do with the fact that other people want what they want...Art is the most intense mood of Individualism that the world has known. I am inclined to say that it is the only real mode of Individualism that the world has known. ("Soul of Man...", in CW, p. 1090)

Wilde challenged production with creativity, just as John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold had in their essays attacking materialism's chokehold on the British mind.

In trying to fuse his artistic and political ideals, Wilde was following in the footsteps of the Romantics, particularly Shelley. Shelley's consideration of poets as the "unacknowledged legislators of the world" (Shelley, p. 255) finds correspondence in Wilde's glorification of them as the ultimate evolution of the individual imagination (See "The Critic as Artist," "The Decay of Lying," and "The Soul of Man under Socialism"). The crucial difference between Wilde and Shelley is that for Shelley art holds a mirror up to reality, making "beautiful that which is distorted" (Shelley, p. 233) and ultimately effecting some kind of moral improvement; for Wilde, Art is an end in itself in its function as an intellectual exercise, regardless of any definitive "lesson" it teaches or fails to teach.

Wilde's socialism, like his Aestheticism, is based upon a yearning for some kind of transcendent artistic and moral beauty, an ideal achieved only through the freedom of the individual to explore and exploit the limits of his own imagination. Man cannot realize his full potential if he is trapped by the economics of capitalism, forced to work long hours under harsh conditions just to survive; "We live in the age of the overworked, and the under-educated; the age in which people are so industrious that they become absolutely stupid" ("The Critic as Artist," in CW, p. 1042). The ideal would be realized when the basic needs of life were met because men had "convert[ed] private property into public wealth, and substitute[d] cooperation for competition" ("Soul of Man," in CW, p. 1080), machines were slaves to men instead of the reverse, and awareness not accumulation was the goal of life. Each person would then be liberated to explore the self, to discover his natural gifts and abilities, and to enrich society through

that perfection of which the saints have dreamed, the perfection of those to whom sin is impossible, not because they make the renunciations of the ascetic, but because they can do everything they wish without hurt to the soul, and can wish for nothing that can do the soul harm. ("Critic...", in CW, p. 1058)

In "The Decay of Lying," Wilde writes, "the energy of life, as Aristotle would call it - is simply the desire for expression" (CW, p. 985); art is the outward expression of the inner man. Later, in "De Profundis," Wilde comes back to this point;

To the artist, expression is the only mode under which he can conceive life at all....[Truth in Art is] that in which the outward is expressive of the inward; in which the soul is made flesh, and the body instinct with spirit. (Letters, p. 481-482)

The fruit of this artistic philosophy are the fairy tales, in which the imagination becomes flesh. Inextricably linked to the form - the incarnate ideal - is the idea: Wilde's social and, for lack of a more Wildean term, moral criteria. The fairy tales are imaginative expressions of a wish to express the imagination freely. Roger B. Henkle groups Wilde with the Symbolists, for like them

he is engaged in an attempt to spiritualize literature, to evade the old bondage of rhetoric, the old bondage of exteriority. He is in revolt against an English literary tradition that simply rearranges and reinterprets material things in accordance with mundane values. Symbolist art takes, as must all art, the concrete and existent as its symbols but conceives of them as representations of a higher order of transcendent meaning, as elements in an organic and truly imaginative expression. (Henkle, p. 300)

Wilde's "spiritualization" of literature is his attempt to reveal the imagination, to condense the experience of man into a form compatible with Pater's idea of "the whole scope of observation...dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind" (Pater, p. 218). In the fairy tales, Wilde illustrates "Art for Art's sake," but art in the sense of that imaginative faculty by which a man expresses himself.

The artistic and political philosophies which underly the fairy tales - and which always have their base in individualism - are explicated in the essays. Particularly in "The Soul of Man under Socialism," Wilde consolidates his

thoughts into one strong attack against personal property, conformity, and the quest for wealth. With few exceptions, Victorian writers resigned themselves to the status quo, seeming to look longingly out the window without realizing that there was a door to the outside. Wilde knew that the potential for change certainly did exist. The poverty, sickness, and wretchedness of the lower classes were due to not their being inferior, but to the inequity of a system which took from one segment of the population and gave to another, leaving the majority powerless, disenfranchised, and dehumanized. The individuality of the worker and the basic human rights of the poor were denied for economic reasons. In Wilde's "The Young King," the aristocracy, merchants, and clergy ask, "Shall a man not eat bread till he has seen the sower, nor drink wine till he has talked with the vinedresser?" ("The Young King," in CW, p. 231); Wilde's answer is "Yes," as a direct encounter would be an acknowledgment of the existence of the sower and the vinedresser as people, not just as producers.

The soul of a man is his imagination; if he is denied access to it, and the opportunity to indulge it, his individuality, his very existence, will disappear. "Now, nothing should be able to rob a man at all. What a man really has, is what is in him. What is outside of him should be a matter of no importance," writes Wilde in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (CW, p. 1084). To society's insistence upon the virtues of the material, Wilde presents an alternative way

of thinking and living which would provide necessities for all, and which would encourage and allow the individual to truly know himself and others, and to live life to its fullest. Socialism, an economic and social system in which, ideally, everyone benefits, is Wilde's alternative to capitalism, to materialism, to Victorianism.

In "The Soul of Man," Wilde is very precise in his attack on the social and artistic implication of capitalism. He condemns materialism, but he also denounces its co-conspirators, authority and conformity. What makes his call for individualism so complete is his rejection of authority, be it religious, political, or social. He rejects the idea of charity in a capitalistic society because "it is immoral to use private property in order to alleviate the horrible evils that result from the institution of private property. It is both immoral and unfair" (CW, p. 1079). Those who substitute charity for equality are as guilty as those who do not care at all. It is starvation which motivates the poor man to steal, but it is a warped sense of self which causes the rich man to sin; both groups suffer from the emphasis placed on the trappings of wealth by a capitalistic society, one unable to obtain necessities, the other unable to find happiness with the luxuries.

Wilde's concept of individualism, which can only flower in a socialist system, is a further rejection of any authority outside of the self. He dismisses the authority of "the People" as "blind, deaf, hideous, grotesque, tragic, amusing,

serious, and obscene" (CW, p. 1099). That one body, "the People," should have the power to determine morals, artistic ideals, and the distribution of wealth - solely because of economic superiority - was deplorable. Wilde's politics are a result of his complete faith in the basic goodness of human nature and in the potential of each man to move towards perfection; "Evolution is the law of life, and there is no evolution except towards individualism" (CW, p. 1101). It was the system which made men greedy and selfish and cruel, denying as it did their individuality in favor of soul-destroying materialism. When survival dictates one's employment, one does not have the luxury of choosing an occupation; any job, no matter how awful, is preferable to no job. Wilde objected to the unfairness of the capitalist system by which the majority broke their backs for a pittance, while the fruits of their labor were enjoyed by a minority. Providing charity did not eliminate the problem, it aggravated it by emphasizing again that a few "had" while many "had not," and that the latter group had been made dependent upon the former.

What makes Wilde's socialism so important to the fairy tales is that the stories center upon a dramatic transfiguration, in which compassion, empathy, understanding, and love are the reward for turning from society to the dictates of one's own heart and soul. These abstracts, further obscured as they are by their emotional effect, cannot be measured in financial terms, cannot be accurately assessed

by "the People." Their value is to the individual or individuals involved. Charity is a quantifiable action; compassion is not. Once again, Wilde stresses the internal over the external, the intangible over the concrete. The lessons learned and the profits reaped are in the imagination, which for Wilde leads to the heart.

In a sense, the Aesthetic artists were "getting back to nature" through complete confidence in their own human nature. Hence Wilde's belief that "Be thyself" was "the secret of Christ" and the message of the new world (CW, p. 1085). Given the opportunity, we can know ourselves, and can become what our nature dictates for us.

It will be a marvellous thing - the true personality of man - when we see it...Its value will not be measured by material things. It will have nothing...And yet while it will not meddle with others, it will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us, by being what it is. The personality of man will be very wonderful. It will be as wonderful as the personality of a child. (CW, p. 1084)

As Norbert Kohl argues in Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel, Wilde insisted upon the evolution of man to individualism and self-realization, an evolution to individual perfection (Kohl, p. 136). The system most suited to the needs of the developing personality would be socialism, with its emphasis on the whole man, rather than on the narrow goal of production demanded by capitalism.

Because Wilde's view of the world begins on the inside, his essay "A Chinese Sage" reveals just as much about Wilde as it does about his subject. As Kohl notes, Wilde's philosophy

was not shaped by Chuang Tzu but by Pater (Kohl, p. 135). Pater declared that one must experience each sensation to the fullest, a response clearly ignited more by the brain than by the body, and certainly requiring cerebral, not physical amplification. The Irishman says of the sage, "To resolve action into thought, and thought into abstraction, was his wicked transcendental aim" (Essays, p. 287). Wilde hardly thinks Chuang Tzu "wicked," sharing as he does the philosopher's disgust with government, philanthropists, and social reformers (p. 291), but his choice of the word "transcendental" is interesting. In his own work, Wilde sought to transcend the limitations of language and logic, to force the mind of the audience to stretch beyond the norm.

In his fairy tales, Wilde uses imagery - verbal abstractions - to again turn people's thoughts in another, higher direction. Those protagonists in the fairy tales who would seem to achieve Wilde's idea of self-fulfillment usually reach a point when they cease doing what is expected and begin to listen to the promptings of their own selves. Action becomes useful as a means to an end, not in any way the end itself. Wilde challenged a society dependent upon conformity and rule-following.

And what would be the fate of governments and professional politicians if we came to the conclusion that there is no such thing as governing mankind at all? It is clear that Chuang Tzu is a very dangerous writer...It may be true that the ideal of self-culture and self-development, which is the aim of his scheme of life...is an ideal somewhat needed by an age like ours, in which most people are so anxious to educate their neighbours

that they have actually no time left in which to educate themselves. But would it be wise to say so? (p. 295)

The invitation to look within oneself instead of at others - this call to individuals to be individuals and not just an amorphous mass - affects all aspects of life. The political ideals expressed in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" are the same as the artistic ideals in "The Critic as Artist" and the philosophy revealed in "A Chinese Sage." The Happy Prince and Other Tales and A House of Pomegranates are further articulations of the same idea: the liberation of the individual through complete recognition of himself. It is another question whether or not individual fulfillment leads to universal perfection.

For Wilde, the perfection of the world is not the purpose of man; man's goal must be to perfect himself, by being perfectly himself. In "De Profundis" Wilde writes, "Love is fed by the imagination" (in Letters, p. 445). The flowering of the imagination depends upon individual autonomy; hence the cultivation of love is dependent upon individualism. Wilde's argument is that men are fully capable of genuine love if they themselves are perfectly free; materialism enslaves and enfeebles men's faculties and hardens their hearts. Each individual has the power to recreate his life and his world through a conscious refinement of his perceptions. Awareness is gained at the expense of the body: "Pleasure for the beautiful body, but Pain for the beautiful Soul" ("DP," in Letters, p. 474). The essence of a man is his soul, and the

soul is the imagination.

Expanding the idea that a man is his soul, and therefore his imagination, Wilde uses the image of a deconstructing self - the loss of the material self as the spiritual self develops - to represent the liberation or imprisonment of the imagination. This image emphasizes the superiority of the spiritual over the material, evidence that the life of a man is "no more than the life of a flower" (Letters, p. 477). Flowers indeed miraculously appear in the stories as symbols of a character's final redemption, although not always in a religious sense. The ephemeral nature of man's flower-like existence, quicksilver in its tangibility, makes the self-discoveries of Wilde's heroes all the more effective. Their sufferings and deaths are confrontations with and ultimately an acceptance of their own souls, not sacrificial offerings to some outside entity, be it God or society. The soul which is hidden by a physical wall must be uncovered; the soul must take precedence over the material man.

Because the imagination is the soul, when it has gained supremacy the physical self is no longer necessary, and Wilde's tales end logically with the death of the hero. In order to break through the wall of the flesh, the hero's awareness of the limitations of his physical self is eliminated, but the strength and power of his spiritual self are liberated. In "The Critic as Artist" he writes,

Self-denial is simply a method by which man arrests his progress, and self-sacrifice a survival of the mutilation of the savage....(CW, p. 1024)

What separates Wilde's waning heroes from the human sacrifices found in other Victorian literature is that his characters are motivated by the prompting of their imagination; something within is informing this corresponding need for an exterior action. Wilde interprets Christ's life from the artistic perspective because Christ created his role and his self from within.

To the artist, expression is the only mode under which he can conceive life at all. To him what is dumb is dead. But to Christ it was not so...And feeling, with the artistic nature of one to whom Sorrow and Suffering were modes through which he could realise his conception of the Beautiful, that an idea is of no value till it becomes incarnate and is made an image, he makes of himself the image of the Man of Sorrows....("De Profundis," in CW, p. 927)

The heroes of the fairy tales are Christ-like in Wilde's definition of the term; they begin with a conception of beauty based upon joy and pleasure - physical stimuli - but are transformed by the more elusive beauty of compassion and love achieved through sorrow and loss.

It is this willing surrender to love, to the imagination, or inability to surrender, which decides the success or failure of the hero. In "The Nightingale and the Rose," "The Devoted Friend," "The Remarkable Rocket," and "The Birthday of the Infanta," the protagonists respond as expected to society's prescribed rules, not to the truths which they might find within themselves. The Nightingale sees a student mooning over a girl, and decides that he is a "true lover," when in reality he is just a caricature of one. Little Hans sacrifices himself for the despicable Miller because he cannot

see his own worth; he allows himself to be kept prisoner of the Miller's superior rhetoric. The rocket, on the other hand, cannot see his own insignificance, believing that worth depends upon one can's ability to explode, to "create a great sensation" (CW, p. 318), in public. The saddest of them all is the Dwarf in "The Birthday of the Infanta." He is happy until he sees himself in the mirror; he sees not his goodness but his ugliness, his vision warped by society's emphasis on physical, not spiritual, beauty. The sweetness of love is denied these characters because they have been immobilized by society's superficial expectations; they are completely innocent, and therefore are doomed to be victims of a society which favors form over substance.

In each of the above tales, the fate of the protagonist relies upon his or her interaction with the outside world. Whether locked into a dependence on verbal or physical stimuli, or handicapped by their own distorted ideals, these characters are destined to die without having achieved self-realization. In "De Profundis," Wilde explains the difference between the artistic temperament and that of those who are "more mechanical":

A man whose desire is to be something separate from himself, to be a Member of Parliament, or a successful grocer, or a prominent solicitor, or a judge, or something equally tedious, invariably succeeds in being what he wants to be. That is his punishment. Those who want a mask have to wear it. (CW, p. 934)

Unfortunately for the characters in the above tales, they want the masks of "nightingale," "devoted friend," and "remarkable

rocket," and monster.

The dwarf in "The Birthday of the Infanta" does not want to be mocked by the Princess and her court, but he believes that they are right in labeling him hideous.

When the truth dawned upon him, he gave a wild cry of despair, and fell sobbing to the ground. So it was he who was misshapen and hunchbacked, foul to look at and grotesque. He himself was the monster....(CW, p. 246)

The nightingale, told that only her lifeblood will procure her a red rose, willingly makes the sacrifice; she echoes society's cliches: "Yet Love is better than Life, and what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a man?" (CW, p. 294). Hans repeatedly sacrifices his well-being, prosperity, and happiness in order to placate the Miller, whose pronouncements on what friendship entails are so glaringly self-serving that sympathy for Hans is tempered by impatience with his credulity.

'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 I certainly don't like any of my friends to be idle or sluggish...Anybody can say charming things and try to please and flatter, but a true friend always says unpleasant things, and does not mind giving pain.' (CW, p. 306)

Hans never refuses or opposes the Miller, which leads to his own poverty and death. The Miller is not really a villain as Hans is such a willing victim, but it is a tragedy that Hans accepts friendship as some kind of business arrangement rather than a mutual expression of respect and affection. "The Remarkable Rocket" plays with the idea of the artist aiming

only for praise, for the attention of the world, when really the only one interested is himself:

'Why, anybody can have common sense, provided that they have no imagination. But I have imagination, for I never think of things as they really are; I always think of them as being quite different...The only thing that sustains one through life is the consciousness of the immense inferiority of everybody else, and this is a feeling I have always cultivated....'(CW, p. 313)

"The Remarkable Rocket," despite its levity, poses the same questions as the other tales: what does it mean to be oneself; is this a self-inflicted and self-generated conception or is it dependent upon the standards of one's society? How and when does one know when one's actions and thoughts are original or just reflections of accepted expectations of behavior and thought?

In each of his tales, Wilde is trying to work out some method for the individual to recognize and define himself, to articulate the idea of himself and then to become that idea. For those who are successful, this self-realization demands a denial of the world outside the self, or rather an extremely radical interpretation of the "sense impressions" which one receives from that outside world. John McGowan considers Wilde

torn from the start between a belief that the self is a fiction that can be reinvented in each successive moment and more traditional notions of destiny and identity that were grounded in a belief in an essential character or soul possessed by each individual. (McGowan, p. 426)

The idea of the self as a fiction belongs to the mind of the unenlightened man; the recognition of one's soul leads to the

fulfillment of the personality, which puts an end to conceptualizing the self as a fiction. In the fairy tales, it is perfectly natural for a character to begin with one self and to "recreate" that self in the sense of cutting through layers of self-deception and outside influence. In society, the self is indeed a fiction; it has to be in order to survive. But once one has seen the world beyond society's narrow confines, one is given a chance to find and to be one's self.

The truth of the soul is found within and through the imagination. Wilde's heroes - the Happy Prince, the Selfish Giant, the Fisherman, the Star-Child, and the Young King make their destinies by breaking through the barriers to their imaginations. Even the names given them are inaccurate, at least in the beginning; they recreate themselves in their own images, not within the boundaries assigned by society, by the church, or by the government. Many of the stories begin with a character enclosed by a wall; although the garden or the palace within the wall may be beautiful, each is limiting. In order to learn, to experience, to grow, the hero must travel beyond the wall, or break down the wall and let the world in.

Metaphorically, how one approaches the wall is how one will approach one's own search for self. The Selfish Giant will break down the wall and let the children in; he does not need to go outside of the boundaries of his garden because love comes in with the children. The Happy Prince, however, dies within the walls of the palace of Sans Souci, and can

only see beyond its limits by breaking through the walls of death, through the lead prison of the statue he has become. The same is true for all of Wilde's heroes; all of them must find their way out or through the deceptive physical self to their spiritual reality.

What prompts the characters to begin this journey is either a dream or a vision, neither of which can be defined in material terms with any consistency or certainty. In most of the tales, it is a visual image which causes a sudden change, but these visual images are based in the imagination, not necessarily upon a material reality. The imagination, therefore, is the motivating factor: the Young King dreams of suffering workers, the Star-Child sees himself covered with scales, the Selfish Giant sees one child unable to climb the tree, the Fisherman sees a beautiful mermaid and falls in love. They follow a mirage of what they think they want to find, but behind the mirage it is the hero's self beckoning.

The inspirational vision - which plants the seed of imagination and love - has always been before the hero, but it is only through his faith in his imaginative interpretation of that vision that the hero can proceed. The narrator says of the Young King that he was like one "seeking to find in beauty an anodyne from pain, a sort of restoration from sickness" (CW, p. 225), but this is said before the King even dreams that there is a dark world outside the palace walls; he actively pursues an idea to make it a truth. The Fisherman rejects his soul based on his belief: "Of what use is my Soul

to me? I cannot see it. I may not touch it. I do not know it" (CW, p. 251). Yet he continues to deny the reality of his Soul even when he can see, hear, and know it; like the other heroes, the Fisherman must come full circle to re-encounter himself, to completely realize and accept himself, his soul.

This circuit away from and back into themselves which the heroes make illustrates Wilde's concept of the artist. These characters are the artists of their own lives and souls: "The artist seeks to realise in a certain material his immaterial idea of beauty, and thus to transform an idea into an ideal" (Letters, p. 302). In each story it is a vision of love which the heroes pursue; whether it is borne out of desire or compassion, love is the motivation and the object. If, to Wilde, love is fed by the imagination, and the imagination is the soul, then it follows that the love which the soul pursues has its origination in the soul, in the imagination. Truth in art is "that in which the outward is expressive of the inward; in which the soul is made flesh, and the body instinct with spirit" ("De Profundis," in Letters, p. 482), but in the scale of the fairy tales, which focus on the individual, Truth is the outward expression by the individual of his soul. "The true artist is a man who believes absolutely in himself, because he is absolutely himself," Wilde writes in "The Soul of Man"; Wilde's heroes have no need of outside authority or sanction because their truths are self-generated and self-fulfilling. Wilde's idea of Christ as the supreme Individualist is merely a restatement of "the word made

flesh," and each of Wilde's self-realized characters imitate Christ in that respect: the imagination (soul) becomes flesh.

Before exploring the more complicated tales I would like to discuss "The Selfish Giant." This story seems to appear most in collections for children; its simple language (as compared to "The Young King" or "The Fisherman and His Soul") and fresh sweetness make it "perfect of its kind," in the words of Walter Pater (Letters, p. 219). The Giant's beautiful garden is his alone, its treasures kept from the outside world by a high wall. But children break down the walls of the garden and of the Giant's heart; his joy in his possession gives way to joy in sharing it with others. The Giant's garden without the children is a sterile plot of eternal winter; his soul is as cold and dead as the ground. The children bring Spring and the opportunity for renewal and rebirth, and the natural world blossoms and love blooms in the Giant's heart: " 'I have many beautiful flowers,' he said; 'but the children are the most beautiful flowers of all' " (CW, p. 299). Most importantly, the Giant loves the tiny boy who brings Spring in the middle of Winter, whose stigmata anger the Giant. The child calms him by saying, " 'Nay...but these are the wounds of Love' " (p. 300). The garden is the Giant's soul, and having let love in through the persons of the children and Christ, he is rewarded with the garden of Paradise.

The Giant is unique among Wilde's fairy tale characters in that he lives a long life, yet typical because his final

realization of the depth of love ends with his immediate death. The child whom the Giant encountered once in his garden is the one for whom he is always searching, the one seed which can only blossom at the very end of his life. "The Selfish Giant" is, in my view, the most Christian of the tales, in the sense of its reliance upon obvious Christian symbolism. Yet it is Wilde's particular slant which saves it from preachiness; the Giant is not a saint, nor does he view the child as Christ. For Wilde, Christ is the symbol of love, and in this story love is the symbol of Christ; it is not Christ as the incarnation of God for whom the Giant feels awe, but Christ as the incarnation of universal love which makes him kneel. The Giant really has no idea who the child is, but he understands the love which he has for him, and which the child reciprocates. The white blossoms which cover the Giant's body after his death symbolize the purity of spiritual love, as they do in "The Young King" and "The Fisherman and His Soul."

Although it is unnecessary and maybe a bit precarious to assign a moral to one of Wilde's fairy tales, Jack Zipes, in Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales, gives a brief yet thoughtful analysis of the socialist idea he finds in "The Selfish Giant." When enclosed within the boundaries of his own selfishness, the Giant's heart as well as his garden lives in eternal winter. But the children, through their collective strength, knock a hole in the garden wall, bringing with them the spring and Christ, the symbol of

love. Zipes' reflection on the children as the heroes, and the Giant as the rescued, is no doubt due to his concentration on the story as a work for children. This reading supports Wilde's concern that the individual not be isolated, or isolate himself, from the world, as it is only through contact with the world that one can refine one's response to it; it is only through a complete vision that one can understand the individual self in a universal context.

If "The Selfish Giant" explores the importance of barriers between the individual and the world being removed, then "The Birthday of the Infanta" reveals the tragedy of the individual brought into the confines of society. The dwarf's happiness in the natural world is starkly contrasted with the abnormal grief and grotesque ceremony of the Spanish court. Society, with which Wilde always had an ambiguous relationship, is seen as the enemy; the adults, the children, even the flowers and animals adhere to an unnatural, insensitive code of behavior based upon material wealth or physical beauty. Dragging the innocent dwarf into the court, and surrounding him with their rules which were meant to shut out such as he, the Spanish nobility succeed in illustrating the casualness of human cruelty in a society so concerned with the material and the physical. The king's love for his dead queen is not touching, it is revolting; he feels only his own grief: no mercy, no compassion, not even paternal interest. Love is meant to "feed the imagination," not to suffocate and blind it. And although the imagination is meant to nourish

love, it cannot do so in a society which does not respect or accept what is different or what is imperfect.

The dwarf's vulnerability, like that of the nightingale, Little Hans, and even the rocket, is a neat foil for the quietly confident, intense inner strength of the other protagonists. In "De Profundis" Wilde writes that "The Happy Prince" and "The Young King" foreshadow his own life (CW, p. 475). Like Wilde, these characters, as well as the Fisherman and the Star-Child, are forced to look at and internalize the darker side of life: the sorrow, the pain, the guilt. They are transformed by this encounter with suffering, for it is only by the complete experience that one can become whole. Richard Ellmann commented that the "other side of the garden," an expression Wilde uses in "De Profundis," is a "potent image" in Wilde's work (Ellmann, p. 269), and this is very clear in "The Happy Prince," "The Young King," "The Star-Child," and "The Fisherman and His Soul".

The transforming power of coming face to face with the world's pain is best expressed by the Happy Prince:

'My courtiers called me the Happy Prince, and happy indeed I was, if pleasure be happiness. So I lived, and so I died. And now that I am dead they have set me up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep.' (CW, p. 286)

As the statue's physical self is peeled away, providing sustenance to the poor and the sick, it loses its material value. But the values of compassion and love - the Prince's broken heart and the dead Swallow - are recognized by God.

Wilde's belief that love is fed by the imagination corresponds to Shelley's idea of the imagination as "the great instrument of moral good."

A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensively and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination. (Shelley, p. 233)

The Prince literally gives himself up to relieve suffering, not out of a sense of duty but from compassion. His heart breaks from real love of the Sparrow, not from desire. His imagination has been freed of the narrow expectations and petty desires of the court, allowing him to see, hear, and feel the world around him for the first time. The disintegration of the physical self is prompted by the interior self's struggle to free the imagination, to reach beyond the physical limitations of the body, of the baggage of learned behaviors and opinions, of the tyranny even of words.

Like Wilde's view of Christ as "the image of the Man of Sorrows" ("De Profundis," in CW, p. 481), his heroes recreate themselves: the Happy Prince becomes a lead statue capable of tears and love; Star-Child becomes a social outcast; the Fisherman becomes one of "the Lost"; the Young King gives up his crown. Through the quest for a solution to the puzzle of suffering, be it another's or their own, the characters perceive and comprehend the truth within themselves which is the soul.

Foremost among these quests is that of the Fisherman in

"The Fisherman and His Soul," in which the Soul itself, as a separate entity, craves reunion with the body. Like the doubt which the Fisherman expresses about the value of his soul, the amoral behavior of the soul reflects its inability to find meaning in the physical world's riches and temptations without possession of the Fisherman. Of all the tales, this one is the most complex; Wilde's partition of the Fisherman's body and soul causes the soul, not the body, to sin. "Once in his life may a man send his Soul away, but he who receiveth back his Soul must keep it with him for ever, and this is his punishment and his reward" (CW, p. 268), warns the fisherman's soul. The fisherman's punishment is to sin with his body and with his soul; his reward is his final recognition of pure love.

It is not surprising that Wilde, given his predilection for inverting standards and traditions, should make the Soul the perverse one, frequently criminal but never remorseful. Against the teachings of his society and religion, against the warnings of his own soul, the fisherman heeds the call of the mermaid, desiring her jewel-like beauty and musical voice. His concern is only for the satisfaction of his physical desire through possession of the mermaid. The soul which is so highly valued by the priest, the merchants, and the witch is worthless to the Fisherman because it cannot give him the mermaid. The Fisherman's rejection of the artificial laws and treasures of mankind stems from his desire to be with the mermaid, to join the Sea-folk for "their days are as the days

of flowers" (p. 251). The natural world, as it is in all of Wilde's fairy tales, is free from restriction because it is soulless, not in the negative sense of church teachings, but in the sense of a one-dimensional personality. Nature is good not because of active goodness as defined by men, but because it lacks the capacity for evil; mankind, in a sense, is blessed and cursed by the soul's capacity for evil and for good.

What maintains a balance of good impulses over bad in the soul is the heart, the human ability to love. The Soul explains his crimes to the Fisherman thus: " 'When thou didst send me forth into the world thou gavest me no heart, so I learned to do all these things and love them' " (p. 267). As in the other tales, the absence of love leads to cruelty, but the presence of love transfigures its possessor. The Fisherman's love for the mermaid is true, but without his soul it is not the transfiguring force it has the potential to be.

The Fisherman's recognition of love is not sweet: "Bitter, bitter was his joy, and full of strange gladness was his pain" (p. 270), but it is only through this intense torture of the heart that the soul is redeemed.

'Love is better than wisdom, and more precious than riches, and fairer than the feet of the daughters of men...I called on thee at dawn, and thou didst come to my call...For evilly had I left thee, and to my own hurt had I wandered away. Yet ever did thy love abide with me, and ever was it strong, nor did aught prevail against it, though I have looked upon evil and looked upon good. And now that thou art dead, surely I will die with thee also.' (p. 271)

The Fisherman dies, but the appearance of mysterious flowers on his grave indicates Wilde's blessing, for the Fisherman allowed himself to become so consumed by love for another that his own life ceased to matter. As Richard Ellmann notes, in the fairy tales the power of love is greater than the power of good or evil (Ellmann, p. 299); love transcends men's efforts to analyze and define it. The priest who cursed the Fisherman for wanting to live with the Sea-folk finds that the subject of his sermon becomes not that of "the wrath of God, but of the God whose name is Love" (CW, p. 272); the presence of the mysterious flowers causes him to weep. But the priest's sudden change of heart does not result in miracles, and the flowers never grow again on the Fisherman and mermaid's grave. The individual experience of intense love remains singular; each man must find love in his own heart and in his own soul.

"The Star-Child" follows the pattern of "The Fisherman and his Soul"; the hero rejects love and then must suffer before it is restored to him. The Star-Child, like the Fisherman, must confront his own cruelty and redeem himself before he can recognize love. Because of his cruelty to the defenseless, including his own mother, the Star-Child is transformed into a being "foul as the toad, and as loathsome as the adder" (p. 278). People and animals refuse to help him in his search for his mother, either because of his previous cruelty or because of his physical ugliness: "For the space of three years he wandered over the world, and in the world there was neither love nor loving-kindness nor charity for him, but

it was even such a world as he had made for himself in the days of his great pride" (p.279). The world in the fairy tales is always a self-made one, the individual hero's perceptions colored, distorted, or clarified by his self, by the ego he must recognize and accept.

For Wilde the individual is always himself, but is also always in a state of flux, moving towards perfection, not in the sense of a single ideal, but according to the potential for perfection in his mind, soul, and heart: "At every single moment of one's life one is what one is going to be no less than what one has been" ("De Profundis," in Letters, p. 476). The Star-Child learns pity and charity through genuine compassion, through the experience of his own intense suffering. Wilde believed cruelty to be a result of "a lack of imagination" (Letters, p. 751); animals suddenly begin to speak in "The Star-Child," but only when the quest has begun. The Star-Child will not achieve redemption merely by going through the motions of reformation, he himself must experience the pain he inflicted by opening his imagination to the feelings of those he hurt. Only by listening to the animals' fear and hastening to their aid will he be worthy of their magical assistance. Once he learns to say, " 'Thy need is greater than mine,' " the Star-Child is restored to his original beauty and "he saw that in his eyes which he had not seen there before" (CW, p. 283).

The enlightenment of the individual, however, does not indicate a corresponding enlightenment of society as a whole.

Despite the Star-Child's reunion with and forgiveness by his royal parents, Wilde denies the reader the usual happy ending; the Star-Child's short reign of "peace and plenty" ends with his death, and "he who came after him ruled evilly" (CW, p.284).

In "The Young King" the hero's indictment of his country's materialism brings him the recognition of truth, but his individual awakening does not transform his society. Like "The Star-Child," "The Fisherman and his Soul," and "The Happy Prince," "The Young King" tells the story of an individual experience only; in a multitude, there is only one who will transform his perceptions of the world through the power of his imagination.

The elaborate descriptions of the riches of the palace *Joyeuse* are often seen by critics as excessively voluptuous, but in the context of the story they are perfect. As in The Picture of Dorian Gray, Wilde catches the reader's attention with a catalogue of exquisite details, making the reader also share the Young King's passion for beauty.

A large press, inlaid with agate and lapis lazuli, filled one corner, and facing the window stood a curiously wrought cabinet with lacquer panels of powdered and mosaiced gold, on which were placed some delicate goblets of Venetian glass, and a cup of dark-veined onyx. Pale poppies were broidered on the silk coverlet of the bed, as though they had fallen from the tired hands of sleep, and tall reeds of fluted ivory bare up the velvet canopy, from which great tufts of ostrich plumes sprang, like white foam, to the pallid silver of the fretted ceiling. (CW, p. 226)

I have no idea what half of those objects could possibly look

like, but imagination can fill in the details that knowledge lacks. Given the opinions expressed in Wilde's essays and letters, this description of royal excess at the beginning of "The Young King" serves as a test for the reader; if he can picture in his mind the magnificence of the palace, then he also can imagine, like the Young King, the suffering involved in the production of such sensory pleasures.

Contemporary reviewers of A House of Pomegranates commented on the "socialist" bent of "The Young King," its exposure of the poverty and illness which support the facade of wealth and power. Wilde's strategy in "The Young King" is interesting because it illustrates the corruption of the souls of the wealthy by the system as well as the distress of the workers; neither group can achieve the realization of personality which Wilde found the aim of life. The imagination as a force for change has been deadened in the rich by complacency and in the poor by necessity; capitalism and materialism have lead to the degeneration of the rich and the poor. It is no wonder then that neither group appreciates the Young King's sudden concern for the source of his expensive regalia; they could not survive in such a society if they thought about the nature of that society.

What prompts the Young King to search for the truth are three dreams, dreams being the imagination's domain. He has never seen anything but beauty, never experienced anything but joy, but the Young King nevertheless imagines the suffering involved in the preparations for his coronation. The memory

of his dreams - vivid with blood and pain and an allegory of Death and Avarice - causes him to refuse his robe, crown, and sceptre.

'Take these things away, and hide them from me. Though it be the day of my coronation, I will not wear them. For on the loom of sorrow, and by the white hand of Pain, has this my robe been woven. There is Blood in the heart of the ruby, and Death in the heart of the pearl.' (p. 230)

The courtiers cannot understand his concerns, nor can the people when he goes among them dressed as a goatherd. Even the bishop urges him to return to his palace for " 'The burden of this world is too great for one man to bear, and the world's sorrow too heavy for one heart to suffer' " (p. 232). The Young King, however, turns to the image of Christ in the cathedral, and is transfigured.

He stood there in the raiment of a king, and the gates of the jewelled shrine flew open and from the crystal of the many-rayed monstrance shone a marvellous and mystical light. He stood there in a king's raiment, and the Glory of God filled the place, and the saints in their carven niches seemed to move. (p. 233)

A direct reference to God or Christ occurs only in this tale, "The Happy Prince," and "The Selfish Giant." In the other tales love has a specific object, but here in "The Young King" Christ, and through him all who suffer, is the object. This is the only tale that is overtly religious, but it is not religious in the sentimental sense of goodness rewarded. Its spirituality is a result of the Young King's deeply personal identification and communication with the image of Christ, and his quest remains distinctly individual, prompted as it is by

his own imagination, and not by some mystical "call" from the outside.

"By their imaginative beauty" the fairy tales "make all interpretations true, and no interpretation final" ("Critic as Artist," in CW, p. 1031). Wilde goes on to write

Yes; Form is everything. It is the secret of life. Find expression for a sorrow, and it will become dear to you. Find expression for a joy, and you intensify its ecstasy. Do you wish to love? Use Love's Litany, and the words will create the yearning from which the world fancies that they spring...it is Form that creates not merely the critical temperament, but also the aesthetic instinct, that unerring instinct that reveals to one all things under their conditions of beauty" (p. 1052)

The fairy tale form allowed Wilde to express the imagination as a symbol, but also to express it as itself. H.L. Mencken, of all people, considered A House of Pomegranates the perfect representative of Wilde's artistic theory.

What he set up was a theory of the world as purely aesthetic spectacle, superb in its beauty, sufficiently its own cause and motive, ordered only by its own inner laws, and as innocent of all ethical import and utility as the precession of the equinoxes. (Mencken, in Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage, p. 381)

The language of the critics who most admire Wilde and his fairy tales becomes more and more obscure and abstract, as though they too are seeking the proper form for criticism.

William Butler Yeats manages the best, I think, to convey the beauty and significance of Wilde's fairy tales and of Wilde's literary achievement. Comparing Wilde with native Irish talkers, Yeats finds "their minds, more learned in all the poetry of the world than mine, and vehement with phantasy,

played with the fundamental and the insoluble" (Yeats, in Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage, p. 397). As opposed to the "accidental and the soluble" concerns of George Bernard Shaw, Wilde's art

adds something new to the imagination of the world, it suddenly confronts the mind - as does all great art - with the fundamental and the insoluble. (p. 398)

The fundamental and insoluble is the imagination, that internal core of man's mind and soul which cannot be quantified by any material measure, but which forms the essence of art and of the spectator's response to art. "Aesthetics are higher than ethics. They belong to a more spiritual sphere. To discern the beauty of a thing is the finest point to which we can arrive" ("The Critic as Artist," in CW, p. 1058). The beauty of the fairy tales remains fundamental and insoluble, as does the beauty of Wilde's artistic and political theories.

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