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For Those Who Have Kept the Childlike Faculties of Wonder and Joy:

Oscar Wilde's Intervention Within the Fairy Tale Tradition

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Introduction

Every written text is born into a discourse. Michel Foucault (1924-1986), a noted French philosopher and social theorist, introduced the literary world to the idea of discourse as the synthesis of the various views and points of views that are present about a topic at any given time. Foucault, in his collection *The History of Sexuality* (1976), demonstrates the way in which discourse is used systematically to shape behaviors and norms in order to obtain certain political goals. With this definition of discourse in mind, it becomes clear that there is a relationship between texts and traditions, as well as the social and political environment from which a work emerges. It is thus impossible for any work—whether it be fiction, nonfiction or fantasy—to be born free from its author’s perspective. Often, these perspectives are subliminal. The author invokes them unconsciously. Other times, the perspective is pertinent to the writer’s intention. The latter of the two views is historically germane to the tradition of fairy tales. In his critical work *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, Jack Zipes explains:

Almost all critics who have studied the emergence of the literary fairy tale in Europe agree that educated writers purposely appropriated the oral folktale and converted it into a type of literary discourse about mores, values, and manners so that children and adults would become civilized according to the social code of that time. (3)

It is critical to highlight that fairy tales have functioned as a means of socializing not only children, but adults as well. Much like the Bible, they contain allegories pertaining to the various roles an individual plays within a society, and which behaviors are deemed exemplary or otherwise deviant. But the fairy tale is not a stagnant genre. Over its history, it has served a

variety of ends. Fairy tales have been censored, edited by governing forces, and often even written in coded language in order to insert covertly subversive messages.

The genre of fairy tales plays a very important role in children's coming of age in society. As Bruno Bettelheim postulates in his analytical work *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*,

Myths and fairy stories both answer the eternal questions: What is the world really like? How am I to live my life in it? How can I truly be myself? The answers given by... the fairy tale [are] suggestive; its messages may imply solutions, but it never spells them out. Fairy tales leave to the child's fantasizing whether and how to apply to himself what the story reveals about life and human nature. (45)

It is precisely the fantastical nature of fairy tales that allows the reader to detach him or herself from the literal plot on the page and delve deeper into what the tale can tell us about ourselves and about how the society from which the tale grew functions. The decision a character makes becomes less important, and the reason he makes the decision is increasingly interesting.

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was an active critic of the late Victorian society within which he lived. His published writings span an impressive list of genres, with theater manuscripts, a novel, and literary criticisms topping the list of his most notable publications. Wilde's fairy tales, however, encompass many of his earliest pieces of work but are often overshadowed by the notoriety of his later works. To many, the idea of Wilde writing fairy tales for children may seem out of character when contrasting the genre to his hedonistic novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) or his comic theatrical critique of high society, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). His use of the fairy tale tradition, however, is not as out of character as it might initially appear.

According to Jack Zipes in the *Oxford Companion of Fairy Tales*, Wilde explained that his fairy tales were “partly for children and partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy” (549). Wilde wrote his fairy tales in such a way that children could enjoy them, but he did not write them *expressly* for children. On the surface of his tales are traditional tropes such as friendship, kindness, and wrong versus right. But Wilde also provides his perception of society— at times accompanied by harsh critique—and opens the realm of introspection and reflection for his adult readers.

Wilde in Context

With such parents as Sir William and Lady Jane Wilde, it was inevitable that Oscar Wilde should have experimented with the tradition of the fairy tale. Though an Irish eye and ear surgeon, William Wilde was an active advocate for the preservation of the Irish cultural tradition of the oral folktale. He had put great effort into recording as many folktales as he could remember in a collection entitled *Irish Popular Superstitions* (1852). Irish critic Anne Markey, in her comprehensive book *Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales*, explains that Sir William believed this sort of cultural accounting to be important work because he held the view that

“These matters of popular belief and folkslore, were after all, *the poetry of the people*, the bond that knit the peasant to the soil, and cheered many a cottier’s fireside”. If this view seems to smack of Victorian condescension, the phrase “*the poetry of the people*” conveys his respect for a “deep-rooted belief in the supernatural—an unconquerable reverence for ancient customs”, which “was rapidly becoming obliterated; never to return”. (41-42)

Sir William understood Irish folk customs to be a form of art worthy of respect, for it was an articulation of an ancient Irish civility that was rapidly disappearing from the culture due to political mismanagement of the state. His collection contained a number of digressions from the retelling of superstitions in order to condemn the “forces which conspire to keep the people in a state of ignorance” (Markey 42)—including famine, emigration, and pauperizing poor laws. Sir William used the oral folktales that he was cataloguing as a platform for social critique, and he did so openly.

Lady Jane Wilde continued her husband’s work after his death in 1876 and published her own folklore collection titled *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms, and Superstitions of Ireland* (1887), under the pen name Speranza. The book contains select material that Jane believed to showcase the “links between the mystic Irish past and the contemporary Irish peasant’s ‘instinctive belief in the existence of certain unseen agencies that influence all human life’. In her view, this material exemplified a once universal mytho-poetic faculty that she lamented ‘only exists now, naturally, in children, poets and the childlike races, like the Irish’” (Markey 43). The term “childlike races” at first glance has a negative connotation. However, Lady Jane believed these oral folktales to be art in a form so pure and magical that its authenticity could only diminish with the progress of civilization. Children and peasants continued to have access to this mystic view of the world because of their ignorance, in accordance with Sir William’s view that “forces” leave certain oppressed populations in the past—and the Irish were certainly an oppressed population under the English empire. Lady Jane, a poet herself, positioned poets in a league of their own with abilities to transcend such sociopolitical divides. And much like her husband, Lady Jane felt a distinctly Irish connection to the folkloric tradition and wished to

preserve that facet of the nation's cultural identity during a time when governing and civilizing bodies were understating its importance.

Oscar Wilde was incredibly close with his mother and inherited her extraordinary gift for storytelling, but he did not share the same high opinion of the folklore tradition, finding it to be an inferior form of literature. With parents such as his, however, it was impossible for him to disregard the cultural value of folklore. Wilde wrote, “the Folk-tale is the father of all fiction as the folk song is the mother of all poetry; and in the games, the talks and the ballads of primitive people it is easy to see the germs of such perfected forms of art as the drama, the novel and the epic” (Markey 51). To Wilde, the folktale—though often simple and unsophisticated—is a fruitful root from which enlightened and cultivated art forms blossom.

Jack Zipes illuminates the core difference between folklore and the fairy tale in his introduction to *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*: “the fairy tale distinguished itself from the oral tradition...through carefully constructed plots, sophisticated references to religion, literature, and customs, embellished language that signified the high civilized status of the writer, and linguistic codes that were informed by a particular civilizing process and carried information about it” (xx). While both traditions act as tools with which to socialize their audiences, the oral tale utilizes a simple form, with the aim to impart knowledge to its listener about how to comport oneself, or how to take advantage of a given opportunity. The literary fairy tale, on the other hand, puts much more importance on its form, the larger themes to which it alludes, and the impact of its language. Markey further explains the distinction between the folkloric tradition and Wilde's affinity for the literary fairy tale when she writes:

The hero of a traditional folktale is rarely endowed with any psychological depth or particular individuality, whereas the hero of a literary fairy tale usually is. In

order to facilitate oral transmission, the folktale tends to divulge only necessary information, so its narrative style is sparse and focused. By contrast, the literary fairy tale can indulge in lavish descriptions, generous digressions, and poetic interludes. (61)

Wilde as an author, regardless of the genre within which he wrote, flourished from developing intriguing and unique characters. Furthermore, he was fond of setting intricate, sometimes even baroque, settings and paid close attention to the lavish details in his rich descriptions.¹

Critics often ask why Wilde, a gifted writer and critic, chose to write within such a traditionally innocuous genre as the fairy tale. Even contemporary critics did not fully know what to make of Wilde's first collection of fairy tales. Wilde initially attempted to have the prestigious Macmillan and Co. publish his original collection of fairy tales, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888). A reader from the company described Wilde's work critically: "Two or three of the stories are very pretty, but I can hardly say as a whole that they have any striking imaginative brilliance—nor do I think that they would be likely to rush into marked popularity. They are pretty and bright, but they hardly strike into the reader's mind. They are good and respectable. Whether they are more than that, I doubt" (qtd. in Markey 87). The publishing company rejected Wilde's manuscript, but he later found a publisher named David Nutt whose firm specialized in the translations of classic works and books on religion. That David Nutt agreed to publish the fairy tale collection is a testament to Wilde's intention of producing a work that is more than it seems. Markey postulates that the fairy tale tradition and its "perceived frivolity could enable writers to escape the censure brought to bear on other literary forms, so that it offered greater potential for social criticism and literary experimentation than that afforded by more canonical genres" (63). An analysis of this collection reveals that Wilde used the

genre's potential ambiguity to do just that. However, while Sir William makes his political intervention clear and direct with his collection of folktales, Wilde arguably uses his masterful literary artistry to implant the germs of a more just society into the subconscious of the readers of his fairy tales.

Wilde's Fairy Tales

Oscar Wilde published two collections of fairy tales in his lifetime. *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) contains five stories entitled "The Happy Prince," "The Nightingale and the Rose," "The Selfish Giant," "The Devoted Friend," and "The Remarkable Rocket." The tales use classic fairy tale techniques—such as talking animals, the personification of inanimate objects, and magical creatures—as vehicles to critique reality-based social issues. As Donald Ericksen highlights in his critical work *Oscar Wilde*, "Wilde's deep concern with social issues is strikingly evident in [his] stories... The lack of understanding or sympathy between the sensitive artistic soul and the unfeeling Philistine majority, a common theme in Wilde's other works, is prominent also in [his fairy tales]" (54). This trope and method of societal critique can be traced in almost all of Wilde's fairy tales. In "The Selfish Giant," for example, there is a beautiful garden where children love to play. A giant, however, owns the garden and when he returns home to find the children laughing and playing merrily, he scares them away and builds a wall to ensure they may not return. This action causes a frost to fall over the garden, which does not thaw until the giant sees the error of his selfish ways and tears down the walls for good. His personal development is sparked by his interaction with a Christ-like figure, who fills the giant's heart with such love that he is incapable of ever returning to his old ways: "'How selfish I have been!' [the Giant] said; 'now I know why the Spring would not come here'" ("The Selfish Giant"

5). Wilde often uses Christ-like figures in his fairy tales, but his intention in doing so may be unclear. Zipes argues:

The fact that [Wilde] portrayed so many Christlike protagonists in his fairy tales did not mean that he wanted to propagate the Christian way as the path toward salvation or that he felt obliged to indulge himself in Christian moralizing for the sake of the children, as some critics have mistakenly argued... Actually, Wilde used the figure of Christ to show the need to subvert the traditional Christian message. (*Art of Subversion* 122-23)

To Wilde, the Victorian church was a rigid structure that stifled individualism and policed which behaviors were acceptable or otherwise deviant. Instead, arguably he uses martyred Christ-like figures, as well as Christian language and imagery, to present an all-encompassing love in the image of Jesus's love that saves deviant or misguided characters and grants them paradise after death. He creates common ground with his mainly Protestant Victorian readers, making his stories less abrasive, but also inspiring Christian sympathy for the martyred character, such as the singing Nightingale in "The Nightingale in the Rose," who pierces a thorn through its heart as it sings in order to make a white rose red in the name of love. The bird believes love is "more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals. Pearls and pomegranates cannot buy it, nor is it set forth in the marketplace" ("The Nightingale and the Rose" 1), and so it sacrifices its life because it believes the Student is an embodiment of the true lover about whom the bird always sings. The Nightingale sacrifices itself only to have the rose thrown into a gutter and trampled for superficial and materialistic reasons. After all, the rose did not match the girl's dress, and the Student realizes that love is a silly thing, "not half as useful as Logic, for it does not prove anything" ("The Nightingale and the Rose" 7). Wilde expresses great

sympathy in his fairy tales for the artistic individual who is willing to sacrifice himself in the pursuit of perfection.

Wilde's first collection of fairy tales was generally well received, though not necessarily highly praised in the reviews of the period. Members of the literary community in England found the stories beautiful and humorous, if only slightly unfit for children. Alexander Galt Ross, in a review that was published in *The Saturday Review* in 1888, complained that "No child will sympathize" with Wilde's prince, because "Children do not care for satire, and the dominant spirit of these stories is satire" (Beckson 61). Critics like Ross did not overlook the ulterior motives and social commentaries of Wilde's collection, but his contemporaries certainly underestimated the potential reach of his stories.

The second collection of tales, *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), contained four stories entitled "The Young King," "The Birthday of the Infanta," "The Fisherman and His Soul," and "The Star-Child." These tales were much longer and more elaborate than Wilde's previous productions, for which he received much criticism. An unsigned reviewer from *Athenaeum* wrote in February 1892, "Mr. Wilde resembles the modern manager who crowds his stage with aesthetic upholstery and *bric-à-brac* until the characters have scarcely room to walk about" (Beckson 117). Many critics found Wilde's intricate descriptions and fanciful diction too convoluted for a child readership while others understood that such a quibble did not concern Wilde, for his intentions for the collection's readership were vast.

While Wilde's literary approach to writing his fairy tales undoubtedly changed, his purpose remained steady. Wilde attacked social issues present in Victorian England through the use of imaginary worlds, but he clearly critiqued Victorian reality. In fact, in this later collection, magical intervention is limited. These stories contain mermaids, witches, dwarves, and dream

visions, but the protagonists are realistic figures to whom fantastic things happen. Arguably, the second collection is much *less* for children than the first, but its messages are just as pertinent and digestible to the average people who had been consuming Wilde's works all along. In her book, Markey introduces this interesting interpretation of the way Wilde's contemporary received the two collections:

Claiming that Wilde's conversational genius reflected their shared Irish background, Yeats argued that while this genius carried through *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* 'because he told its stories,' it was missing from *A House of Pomegranates*, 'because he wrote its stories.' Yeats regarded *The Happy Prince* as more successful because the stories it contained were simpler, more conversational in tone and less contrived than those in *A House of Pomegranates*.

(5)

W.B. Yeats and Wilde shared an Irish heritage, and both were well versed in the tradition of the oral folktale. Yeats believed that the closer Wilde stayed to the oral tradition that had endured centuries, the more successful his works were. Yeats' perception of Wilde's two fairy tale collections, though well founded, does not necessarily give *A House of Pomegranates* as much credit as it deserves for its Irishness. As Michael Newton points out in his introduction to *Victorian Fairy Tales*, "[Now] most critics understand Wilde as a covertly Irish nationalist writer, undermining 'John Bull' through wit and humor that English people failed to get" (xiv). Wilde moved away from the folkloric tradition as a way of covertly subverting his Victorian society and thus advancing his social agenda of inspiring a more just society onto the public's subconscious.

Fairy Tales and Socialism

In order to parse fully Oscar Wilde's intentions with his fairy tales, it is critical first to understand the ideological forces that drove his writing. While Wilde's first collection of fairy tales, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, was published in 1888, followed years later by *A House of Pomegranates* in 1891, Wilde published a work of an entirely different genre in between the two collections that offers a key to unlocking many of the morals he presents within these fairy tales. The 1891 essay titled *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* details Wilde's socially forward beliefs and explains the socioaesthetic tendency incorporated into his fairy tales.²

In the essay Wilde discusses his belief that private property hinders man from reaching his perfect potential. It is through an obsession with the acquisition of things, and their maintenance that the wealthy man fails himself. The poor population's lack of basic necessities and preoccupation with mere survival hinders them, too, from bettering themselves as individuals. Here is one of Wilde's most striking declarations:

The true perfection of man lies not in what man has, but in what man is. Private property has crushed true Individualism, and set up an Individualism that is false. It has debarred one part of the community from being individual by starving them. It has debarred the other part of the community by putting them on the wrong road and encumbering them. (*The Soul of Man under Socialism* 132-33)

Wilde understands wealth as a blessing. Money frees a man from the burden of working for a living and thus affords him the freedom to pursue activities that provide both pleasure and introspection. Wealth allows man to worry about nothing but his own desires, for he has no concerns about his future or that of his loved ones. On the other hand, Wilde postulates that a society that uses private property as a measure of man's character has "harmed Individualism,

and obscured it, by confusing a man with what he possesses. It has led Individualism entirely astray. It has made gain not growth its aim. So that man thought that the important thing was to have, and did not know that the important thing is to be” (*The Soul of Man* 132). In his Victorian age of production and consumption, Wilde argues that the wealthy are controlled by their desire to acquire more, and thus fail to give their own personal development sufficient attention while the poor are ruled by sheer starvation and must devote themselves to labor that provides no personal gain besides the provisions necessary to survive. For Wilde, the only way to save the Individual is through socialism, because the obsession with acquiring wealth that capitalism fosters contributes to the degradation of man.³ It absorbs all of the Individual’s attention and, consequently, his potential for perfection, in either the desire for property, or that of survival.

Wilde allegorizes this belief in his early fairy tale “The Happy Prince” as well as in one of his later tales, “The Young King,” the latter of which many often consider an elaboration of the former. Both tales make use of Christ-like protagonists in order to contrast the popular sentiment of the ruling classes and make room for the possibility of a more equitable social construction. Comparing the two tales and analyzing the differences in Wilde’s authorial choices elucidates the role Wilde believes the upper reaches should play in society—and it is not one of charity. Unlike many Great Victorian thinkers such as Thomas Carlyle, who champions the wealthy manufacturer to be a “Captain of Industry,” who use their amassed wealth to improve society, as detailed in his vastly popular book *Past and Present* (1843), Wilde believes that charity is a detriment to the soul of both rich man and poor man, alleviating one’s guilt for living so comfortably while making the other complacent about living in a broken system. Through these two vastly different portrayals of princes, Wilde demonstrates the way private property

creates divides in society that foster ignorance. But he also illuminates potential for the creation of a more just system.

“The Happy Prince” is arguably one of Wilde’s most famous fairy tales. It revolves around the relationship between an intricate statue of a dead prince and a devoted swallow that should fly south for the winter. Ironically, the swallow first meets the “happy” prince because the prince’s tears fall upon him. Out of curiosity, the swallow flies up to him and inquires as to why the prince is crying. The prince responds, “When I was alive and had a human heart... I did not know what tears were, for I lived in the Palace of San-Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter... Round the garden ran a very lofty wall, but I never cared to ask what lay beyond it” (3). Now, as a statue high above the city, all the Prince can see day in and day out is the “ugliness and misery” of the people he once ruled in blissful ignorance. Wilde uses the ignorance of the Happy Prince to demonstrate that, when he was alive, the prince was not heartless. It was simply the presence of beautiful things in front of him, the superficial happiness that beautiful things provided him, that prevented the prince from acknowledging the realities of the people over whom he ruled. The Prince then attempts to atone for this neglect of his people by stripping himself of his gold adornments and jewels and dispersing them among those in need within the kingdom, asking the swallow for his help in delivering them.

Wilde revisits this trope in “The Young King” (1891) by giving a different “happy prince” the same awakening, but in life rather than in death. The prince of this fairy tale has experienced humility before he becomes royalty. Two peasants, whom he had believed to be his parents before he discovers his true (and still somewhat obscured) lineage, raise him to be a goatherd. The young boy is content until the King, on his deathbed, reveals the identity of his

long-lost son and summons him. His ties to reality, however, do not prevent him from falling victim to the temptation of beautiful things. The tale explains:

Those who accompanied [the Young King] to the suite of rooms set apart for his service, often spoke of the cry of pleasure that broke from his lips when he saw the delicate raiment and rich jewels that had been prepared for him, and of the almost fierce joy with which he flung aside his rough leathern tunic and coarse sheepskin cloak. (*The Young King* 2)

The tale continues to describe the way the Young King kneels before paintings in adoration as though they come from gods and how he sends merchants all over the world for the finest and most novel of precious items. Wilde makes clear that the Young King could be happy for the rest of his days by surrounding himself with beautiful things in the same way that The Happy Prince had been in his lifetime. He then disrupts this possibility by sending the Young King a set of three dreams detailing the misery that has procured for him the beautiful things he holds in such high esteem. In these dreams, the Young King is vividly transported into a textile workhouse, a slave ship, and a ruby mine.

Once again, Wilde ensures that the reader understands that the prince's vice comes from ignorance and not from a cold heart. In each of the dreams, the Young King witnesses different ways in which humankind suffers in the name of Capitalism—but in each instance, it is not until the King realizes that the scenes he sees are directly related to his own luxuries that he swoons with terror and guilt. Upon awaking, the Young King declares, “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 hands 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” (*The Young King* 11). The prince

cannot be happy surrounded by his luxuries once his dreams illuminate their true price to humanity. Wilde provides the Young King with a humble upbringing as a stable identity to which the Young King can revert, and it allows him to execute his next decision with clear determination.

In *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, Zipes insists that “the beauty of [the King’s] deed derives from a compassion for humankind and a realization that his own potential depends on whether people are truly free” (124). The Young King becomes a symbol of the perfection of man that Wilde describes in his essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* once he embraces who he is as an individual: a King of humble means but with considerable power to change the lives of those in *need* of change. And he does so selflessly. As Zipes poignantly explains, “[the King’s] rejection of robe, crown, and scepter is a rejection of private property, ornamentation, and unjust power. By refusing to be parasitic, and by dressing in his original clothes, he becomes both an individual and an equal among men” (*Art of Subversion* 124). The Young King strips himself of all unearned ornamentation and determines to help the lower reaches of his kingdom as king, just as the statue of the “Happy Prince” strips himself of all of his jewels and gold leaves with the same intent.

The difference between the early and late tales is that, in “The Happy Prince,” the Christ-like figure dies for his cause. His selfless acts go unnoticed and, even worse, they are not enough to end the suffering of his people that tortures him so deeply. His statue is removed and melted down to make a new statue, and the social order remains intact. The Happy Prince’s demise reflects Wilde’s view on charity:

Charity [the poor] feel to be a ridiculously inadequate mode of partial restitution, or a sentimental dole, usually accompanied by some impertinent attempt on the

part of the sentimentalist to tyrannise over their private lives. Why should they be grateful for the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table? They should be seated at the board, and are beginning to know it. (*The Soul of Man* 130)

The Happy Prince demonstrates extreme selflessness after death, but his acts of charity do nothing to counteract the system that oppresses the people he helps or the many others whom he simply is unable to help. In contrast, the prince in "The Young King," by dispelling his ignorance while he is still alive, is in a position to catalyze significant change.

Wilde is known for creating fairy tales with ironic or grim endings, but *The Young King* differentiates itself from the others by means of its hopeful tone. This change is likely a reflection of Wilde's essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, which was published shortly before his second collection of fairy tales was released. In the essay, Wilde says, "A map of the world that does not include Utopia, is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopia" (*The Soul of Man under Socialism* 141). In his writings, Wilde expresses his thoughts on the reemergence of the individual for the sake of humanity, and that the individual can thrive only in the ecosystem of socialism. He believes that the rich are to blame, having prevented the rise of socialism in order to continue filling their coffers ever higher while the poor died in workhouses (and on ships, in mines, etc.).

And yet, within *The Young King*, Wilde does include an oppositional voice that seemingly speaks with reason. As the Young King proceeds through the crowd of his subjects wearing his humble clothing, one man approaches him and asks, "Sir, knowest thou not that out of the luxury of the rich cometh the life of the poor? By your pomp we are nurtured, and your

vices give us bread. To toil for a hard master is bitter, but to have no master to toil for is more bitter still” (*The Young King* 12). This man is the personification of capitalist values—buying things is beneficial to the economy because it provides people with jobs. But the Young King does not flinch in his resolution. He is clear-headed and has determined who he will be and how he will rule. And Wilde makes it clear that the King has made the right decision. As Zipes theorizes, “The king epitomizes the individual who refuses to compromise until the people learn to see that society must change. His beggarly appearance is ennobled and becomes radiant in the eyes of his onlookers because he has found the social essence of beauty” (*Art of Subversion* 124). The Young King is Wilde’s perfect individual because he rejects excess and insinuates a change in the social order to minimize the suffering of the lower reaches. The essence of Wilde’s belief, in his own words, dictates, “With the abolition of private property, then, we shall have true, beautiful, healthy Individualism. Nobody will waste his life in accumulating things, and the symbols for things. One will live. To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all” (*The Soul of Man* 133). It would take immense power to restructure a societal system that is founded on the acquisition of private property, and it may take a Christ-like King to catalyze such a change.

Wilde’s Revision of Andersen

Oscar Wilde is famous for entering a given literary tradition and using its form in new and different ways in order to challenge established social norms. Hans Christen Andersen’s stories were popularly considered the gold standard for fairy tales at the time Wilde began experimenting with the genre and, accordingly, they greatly influenced Wilde’s work. Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875) was a Danish author who, much like Wilde, expressed himself

through a multitude of literary genres. He wrote plays, novels, and poems, but his fairy tales are deemed to be the works through which he truly left a mark. Zipes explains, “From the dominant class point of view his tales were deemed useful and worthy enough for rearing children of all classes, and they became a literary staple in Western culture” (*Art of Subversion* 81). At the time Andersen was writing, the bourgeoisie was in the process of realizing the usefulness of fairy tales in socializing children and establishing norms that reinforced the current social structure. Zipes asserts further: “In almost all of Andersen’s fairy tales, he focuses on lower-class or disenfranchised protagonists, who work their way up and into society. Their rise is predicated on their proper behavior that must correspond to a higher power, which elects and tests the hero” (*Art of Subversion* 95). This is indeed the case in Andersen’s canonical fairy tale “The Little Mermaid” (1837). A young mermaid fascinated with the human world saves a handsome prince from a shipwreck and decides to use magic to exchange her tail and voice for the chance to be a human, fall in love, and ultimately obtain an immortal soul. The process is not a painless one, however, for “each time her foot touched the floor it seemed as if she trod on sharp knives” (“The Little Mermaid” 14). But she is willing to endure the pain as she gets closer and closer to the prince and her dream life.

Her love remains unrealized, however, for the prince has fallen in love with someone else, and the marriage to a princess from another kingdom is inevitable. And yet the little mermaid does not falter in her devotion to the prince. Resolved to marry the prince, the prince asks of the little mermaid, “‘You will rejoice at my happiness; for your devotion to me is great and sincere.’ The little mermaid kissed his hand, and felt as if her heart were already broken. His wedding morning would bring death to her, and she would change into the foam of the sea” (“The Little Mermaid” 17). Even when given an opportunity by her sisters to avoid her demise

by stabbing the prince in the heart with a magic dagger, the little mermaid stays true to her love for the prince. She succumbs to her fate and throws the dagger and herself into the sea.

The little mermaid has hope for a happy ending, however. Though she does not have a ‘happily ever after’ with her Prince Charming, her wish for an immortal soul is answered. After she throws herself into the sea, she experiences the unusual sensation of floating and finds herself in the company of the “daughters of the air.” They explain to her, “You, poor little mermaid, have tried with your whole heart to do as we are doing; you have suffered and endured and raised yourself to the spirit-world by your good deeds; and now, by striving for three hundred years in the same way, you may obtain an immortal soul” (“The Little Mermaid” 19). The daughters of the air do not possess an immortal soul, but by their good deeds they can procure one. With an ending such as this, Andersen does not challenge any social structures. In fact, he reinforces that the Little Mermaid acts rightly to desire a human soul—for heaven is glorious—and the fact that she does not have one yet deems her unworthy of the love of a prince. The ending is a hopeful one, but it will not be *happy* until the Little Mermaid completes her difficult task.

Wilde read many of Andersen’s fairy tales, and took inspiration from a number of them. Wilde’s tale “The Fisherman and His Soul” (1891) greatly resembles “The Little Mermaid” but with purposeful differences that speak to Wilde’s subversive intentions in writing within the fairy tale genre. In Wilde’s revision to the story, not only are the gender roles reversed with the man giving up *his* soul to be with a mermaid, but also the Soul is not considered a redeeming characteristic of humanity.⁴ In the tale, a fisherman catches a beautiful mermaid in his net, and he desires to keep her. After hearing her pleas—she is the only daughter of the Sea King and does not wish to leave him elderly and alone—the fisherman agrees to let her go on the condition

that she will come to him whenever he calls and help him catch many fish by luring them with her song. Through this partnership the fisherman falls in love with her, and determines that he will gladly do anything to be with her. She soon informs him, “‘Thou hast a human soul... If only thou wouldst send away thy soul, then could I love thee.’ And the young fisherman said to himself, ‘Of what use is my soul to me? I cannot see it. I may not touch it. I do not know it. Surely I will send it away from me, and much gladness shall be mine’” (“The Fisherman and His Soul” 3-4). Unlike the Little Mermaid, who does not know what it means to have a soul and yet desires it, the young fisherman has a soul and does not see its practical value. All he knows is that the Soul hinders him from the one thing he truly desires.⁵

It is significant that, in Andersen’s tale, both the male and female protagonists are of noble backgrounds. The mermaid is the youngest of six royal daughters to the Sea King, and her grandmother is particularly bent on making their status known:

The old lady ordered eight great oysters to attach themselves to the tail of the princess to show her high rank. ‘But they hurt me so,’ said the little mermaid. ‘Pride must suffer pain,’ replied the old lady. Oh, how gladly she would have shaken off all this grandeur, and laid aside the heavy wreath! The red flowers in her own garden would have suited her much better, but she could not help herself. (“The Little Mermaid” 5)

Though the little mermaid does not necessarily appreciate the grandeur of her position, to the reader it signifies that she is worthy of the love of the prince whom she saves. She is not one of the slaves that sing and dance in his court, attempting to improve her station in life by marrying the prince. She is a princess who is motivated by love and human desire. And yet, because she is not human, she is not worthy of her perfectly happy ending.

Wilde chooses to make his tale that of an average man. The protagonist is a fisherman whose livelihood depends on the direction from which the wind blows, and his first wish of the mermaid is for her to help him attain wealth. Even then, however, he is willing to discard everything he owns, even his Soul, for *her*. She, in turn, is a beautiful princess. But besides the title, no mark of her rank is ever provided. He does not love her because she is a princess. He grows to love her after days of her faithfully coming to his aid and singing for him. And she grows to love him too. She does not worry herself with his station in life. The only obstacle hindering their future is that sea creatures may not have souls.

Against the advice of many, the fisherman is determined to rid himself of his soul. Even the evil witch, worshipper of dark powers, disapproves and “grew pale, and shuddered, and hid her face in her blue mantle. ‘Pretty boy, pretty boy,’ she muttered, ‘that is a terrible thing to do’” (“The Fisherman and His Soul” 7). But seeing the fisherman’s resolve, she provides him with the magical dagger that will cut away his soul. However, the fisherman’s soul does not leave him easily. It calls out to him and begs him not to part with it. The Soul reminds the fisherman that it has been a faithful servant to him all his life, and it does not deserve such a punishment. When the fisherman laughs and explains that he has no need for a soul, the Soul entreats him to at least provide it with a heart as well:

“If indeed thou must drive me from thee, send me not forth without a heart. The world is cruel, give me thy heart to take with me.” [The fisherman] tossed his head and smiled. “With what should I love my love if I gave thee my heart?” he cried. “Nay, but be merciful,” said his Soul: “give me thy heart, for this world is very cruel, and I am afraid.” “My heart is my love’s,” he answered, “therefore tarry not, but get thee gone.” “Should I not love also?” asked his Soul. “Get thee

gone, for I have no need of thee,” cried the young fisherman, and he took the little knife with its handle of green viper’s skin, and cut away his shadow from around his feet. (“The Fisherman and His Soul” 13)

Wilde personifies the Soul, drastically changing its role in the tale from what Andersen envisions. In “The Little Mermaid,” mermaids live much longer than humans—about three hundred years—but once they die, they become one with the sea foam and there is nothing beyond. For the young mermaid, a soul is a pathway to eternal happiness after death. She ruminates, “Why have not we an immortal soul?... I would give gladly all the hundreds of years that I have to live, to be a human being only for one day, and to have the hope of knowing the happiness of that glorious world above the stars” (“The Little Mermaid” 9). To the best of her knowledge, the only way for the little mermaid to obtain a soul is to have a human fall in love with her and desire her as a wife. For Andersen, to be human, to love, and to find God is intertwined, and the key is an immortal soul. His story reaffirms traditional Christian values.

Wilde depicts a similar equation, and yet challenges what humanity, love, and spirituality come to mean. The fisherman is a man of humble means, and he was born with a soul and thus with the potential to serve God and one day meet Him. But his ability to love does not depend on his Soul. In fact, his Soul tries to lead him astray from his love every year since they part. On the second anniversary of their separation, the Soul calls out to the fisherman and entreats him:

“In a cave that is but a day’s journey from this place have I hidden the Ring of Riches. It is but a day’s journey from this place...He who had this Ring is richer than all the kings of the world. Come therefore and take it, and the world’s riches shall be thine.” But the young fisherman laughed. “Love is better than riches,” he cried, “and the little mermaid loves me.” “Nay, but there is nothing better than

Riches,” said the Soul. “Love is better,” answered the young fisherman, and he plunged into the deep, and the Soul went weeping away over the marshes. (“The Fisherman and His Soul” 25-26)

Even without his Soul, the fisherman is able to love strongly and surely, and his soulless wife loves him in return. As Christopher Nassaar argues in his essay, “Andersen’s “The Shadow” and Wilde’s “The Fisherman and His Soul”: A Case of Influence,”

Wilde’s [protagonist] is a common man, still very young and with no education to speak of. But Wilde treats this difference in a very ironic and paradoxical way. For it is the fisherman who has real knowledge: he knows the value of love... [and] at the end it becomes all-encompassing... His education becomes complete, he is purged of all imperfection, and he enters heaven. (222)

The fact that the Fisherman has made the horrible decision to cast away his soul—a thought that makes even a witch shudder—does not bar the fisherman from entering heaven, for he is saved by the purity of his love. Andersen did not allow his Little Mermaid to enter heaven, despite the purity of her heart. But God is merciful, and provides her with a long and difficult path to paradise, if she is truly committed. Wilde, however, depicts God’s love differently. Though the Fisherman and his wife are deviant characters, the purity of their love opens the doors of heaven for them, painting them in a sympathetic light for Christian readers. The tale’s ending suggests that if God can forgive and accept the deviant individual, society should.

Hans Christian Andersen had a great preoccupation with social class. Having come from humble means and working his way into high Danish society, it is evident in his fairy tales that he was captivated by the idea of the exceptional individual and his or her proper behavior. Wilde did not follow Andersen’s example in his tales. As Zipes explains, Wilde and his generation of

authors who wrote within the fairy tale tradition “generally told their stories from the perspective of the oppressed lower classes and added a dimension to their dissatisfaction that resisted the compromises that Andersen had proposed for his protagonists” (*Art of Subversion* 109).

Andersen reinforced the status quo with his fairy tales, while Wilde wished to deconstruct the architecture of society and implicitly propose a new understanding of justice.

Conclusion

Oscar Wilde was a man who refused to abide by prescribed social norms. As Zipes explains, “[Wilde] wanted to be accepted by society as unacceptable. That was his calling card, and the more he was accepted by society, the more he sought to break the norms and test the repressive tolerance of a cruel system of class justice” (*Art of Subversion* 120). And Wilde himself can be seen in a number of his own deviant creatures. He is the beautiful ornate statue, looking down at the suffering people from the top of a hill. He is the Nightingale, piercing a thorn through his heart for the sake of love. He is the Fisherman, relinquishing his soul and all of its uses to be with his forbidden desire, regardless of the consequences. He is the outcast. “In many of Wilde’s fairy tales the motifs of suffering and redemption through love appear as consistent threads” (Erickson 64), and whether it is true that the outcast will be saved by God’s all-encompassing love or not, it is the way Wilde believes things should be.

When he attended Oxford, Wilde created close relationships with English writers John Ruskin and Walter Pater. These two men helped develop the socioaesthetic tendency that runs through all of Wilde’s texts, in that “Ruskin drew Wilde’s attention to social questions and the connections between art and concrete practical life, whereas Pater demonstrated how private experience is essential for grasping the beautiful and profound nature of the external world” (*Art*

of Subversion 119). Wilde, like his parents, recognized that there were oppressive forces in society that favored certain individuals, while crushing others. Believing that there must be a better way for civilized people to function, Wilde framed compassion and sympathy beautifully in his art as an igniting force to inspire change. As Zipes explains, “Wilde synthesized the notions of these two brilliant scholars to form his own social concept of aesthetics, and in some respects his own personality was symbolically most representative of this concept: Wilde was always bent on transforming himself into a work of art” (*Art of Subversion* 119). And in the end, Wilde was much like one of his own Christ-like figures, dying tragically and ironically, having martyred himself for the sake of exposing society’s failings.

Even today, many critics regard the fairy tale tradition as one of the simplest of narrative forms. But in the nineteenth century, it was undoubtedly one of the most experimental. Authors writing within the genre challenged literary structures, purposes, and traditional tropes as a means of critiquing society in a digestible, far-reaching form. These authors created other worlds in which Utopia was in the distance, putting a mirror up to the faults of the real world, and at the same time proposing the possibility of a non-magical, more-perfect reality. Michael Newton expands on this idea in his introduction to *Victorian Fairy Tales* when he explains:

Condemnations of escapism should further be tempered by the fact that for loathers of industrialism such as John Ruskin or George MacDonald, for women like Dinah Mulock Craik and Mary De Morgan, for gay men like Oscar Wilde or Laurence Housman, there was much in contemporary Victorian life from which one might want to escape...Moreover, far from pure flight from life, such stories are rather a way to expose social tensions and psychological conflicts and to devise their potential solutions. (Newton ix)

Wilde was one of the most experimental writers of time. The works Wilde produced, such as his reworking of an Andersen tale, exemplify the way he took a classic staple within a tradition, and repurposed it to challenge the status quo. Wilde, himself a work of art, looked at the world as something that could be made more perfect *through* art, and through individuals working to realize their more-perfect potential. By means of his fairy tales, Oscar Wilde is simply trying to catalyze such a movement towards a more just and compassionate society.

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¹ An example of Wilde's affinity for excessive description can be found in chapter 11 of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which the very long chapter is filled with in-depth descriptions of a multitude of *stuff*, as well as an introduction of a book without a plot.

² Wilde was a vocal believer in the prospect of "art for art's sake," and through his works, transcending their genres, Wilde expressed his desire to inspire his audiences to envision a more perfect world.

³ Wilde's concept of Socialism referred to a society in which the poor were sufficiently looked after, and the rich were hindered from excess.

⁴ There is a possibility the idea was inspired by Wilde's mother who, "in a footnote to a poem entitled 'Undine' included in her collection, *Poems*, notes: 'Love gives soul to a woman but takes it from a man'" (Markey 173).

⁵ This trope resurfaces in Wilde's later work, *The Picture in Dorian Gray* (1890), in which a young man named Dorian does not see the value of a pure soul, and thus leads a life of pleasure without heeding the consequences.