

Allegories of Pleasure and Pain: Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales of Passion

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“All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.” (Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*)

Introduction: On Wilde's Aestheticism and Fairy Tales

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (1854-1900), better known as Oscar Wilde, the 19th-century Irish playwright, novelist, essayist, and poet – noted for his unquestionable wit and genius –, was a dominant figure in English literature. One of the many works he was celebrated for was his plays, including *Salomé*, *An Ideal Husband*, or *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The latter is not only a satirical comedy of manners but also introduces a new Victorian figure – a *dandy* – who, while exposing the hypocrisy of society with his wit and charm, also pays special attention to his attire and extravagant lifestyle (Horzum 77). But, being the “extreme aesthete” (Ellmann 143), Wilde was not much different from this iconic phenomenon; on the contrary, Wilde was wilder. His flamboyant appearance was the perfect stereotype of a Victorian poseur and dandy (Adut 227). Another, if not his most famous work, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) – what Wilde called “an essay on decorative art” (Frankel 24) –, stands as a quintessential writing of Aestheticism which flourished in the late 19th century and left a significant impact on literature, visual arts and interior design. However, the novel was greeted with a fierce reception in the British press, and was stigmatised as “subversive”, “vulgar”, “unclean”, “poisonous” and the like since it encoded homoerotic and homosocial desires (Frankel 4-5).¹

The Victorian mainstream viewed art and literature as the ‘golden road’ to their success to control ethical roles by exemplifying proper behaviour and illustrating the ‘rewards’ of performing noble deeds and the ‘punishment’ of immoral acts. In contrast, followers of Aestheticism believed that art and morality should remain separate, arguing that art is free from didacticism, since its sole purpose is the pure creation and appreciation of beauty (Britannica

¹ Yet, another novel, attributed to Wilde and titled *Teleny*, covers a male homoerotic pornography and, to quote Ed Cohen, “unfolds a tale of seduction, sex [...], orgies, incest, blackmail, rape, suicide, death and love” (803).

2011). Therefore, those who favoured the conventional Victorian standards, saw the last decade (*la fin de siècle*) of the 19th century as a decay or degeneration (*décadent*). The notion concerns general disillusionment among ‘decadent authors’ who consequently introduced new perspectives, covering themes of sensuality, perverse, hedonistic and morbid desires in artistic creations (Boyiopoulos et al. 1).² Publications, such as *The Yellow Book*, a literary magazine of avant-garde writing and visual art, were contributed to the further exploration of the Aesthetic Movement’s principles and embodied its *Zeitgeist* by promoting the essence of beauty and artistic expression (Glick 328-29). However, Walter (Horatio) Pater was the one who introduced the French-originated *l’art pour l’art* or “*art for art’s sake*” (the later motto of aesthetes) movement to England, and Oscar Wilde was its advocate (Quintus 1980, 559-62). Even in Wilde’s “Preface”³ of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he claims that art should remain nothing but amoral, being outside the realm of morality versus immorality, since “[t]here is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all. [...] All art is quite useless” (2014, 3-4).

Alongside Wilde, Pater’s writings also feature the so-called ‘decadence’. In his work, *The Renaissance* – the “manifesto of Aestheticism” and Wilde’s “golden book” (Ellmann 93) –, it is even stated that art is “relative” and cannot be defined. Furthermore, Pater claims that it is the critic’s duty to express his own impressions to render meaning of a given work of art. In his “Conclusion”, which was omitted from the second edition due to the possible “misinterpretations” by young men – “into whose hands it might fall” –, he suggests that one should experience as many sensations as possible in order to taste the beauty and delight art has to offer. “The love of art for its own sake” can provide the most exquisite quality to one’s moments, fulfilling the yearning for beauty, and the only success in our life is to keep that ecstasy, “to burn always with this hard, gemlike flame” (2020).

Oscar Wilde was one of the young men whose hands this book fell into (Frankel 2012, 28). He shared some of Pater’s views, yet on the other hand, Wilde had his own, more radical understanding of art and beauty that even his oeuvre attests. For instance, in “The Decay of Lying”, one of Wilde’s notable essays on art, he claims that “[a]rt never expresses anything but

² Also, such authors were branded as “mental prostitutes” for desiring such “a new [...] disease” (Boyiopoulos et al. 1-4).

³ In later in-text references: “Preface”.

itself,” and “all bad art comes from returning to life and nature”. Moreover, “life imitates art far more than art imitates life,” as life only shows what poetry or paintings have already revealed to us because art shapes our perception of reality. Finally, he concludes that the true purpose of art is lying; to create “beautiful untrue things” (170-171). Andrew R. Morris explains that Wilde’s theory indicates that artistic imagination needs to be reinscribed into life; this is not the straightforward *l’art pour l’art* of Pater’s aestheticism, but rather a nuanced critique of late-Victorian ideology (516).

In the subsequent part of my analysis, it is also crucial to determine ‘fairy tales’. A *fairy tale* is a genre within folklore that is part of oral tradition, characterised by narratives involving supernatural beings, magical adventures, enchantments, and often moral lessons – exploring human nature and psychology. Its roots can be traced back to earlier storytelling traditions, such as the Middle Eastern *The Thousand and One Nights*, but it has also been shaped by European literary works, notably Charles Perrault’s *Contes de ma mère l’Oye* and the collection of tales by 19th century folklorist, the Brothers Grimm’s *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, which became a cornerstone of fairy-tale literature. (Cuddon et al. 266). Most of these stories include dark and complex themes, with daunting and gruesome plot threads – which probably many of us would not consider suitable for children at all (Sale 372-74). Alongside this, the target audience for Oscar Wilde’s tales is also questionable due to the themes they cover. In her study, Hope Howell Hodgkins cites Wilde’s correspondence found in his *Letters* Wilde’s claim that his stories were created “to mirror modern life in a form remote from reality [...] and written, not for children, but for childlike people from eighteen to eighty!” – for an adult age audience that can grasp the complex moral and aesthetic dimensions (Hodgkins 45).

At the same time while fairy tales are generally known for their colourful plots and lively protagonists, their significance passes far beyond mere entertainment. These stories convey moral and philosophical depth through allegorical narratives, where, for example, capitalised telling names often signal this literary device. Allegory is narrative or a simple image that can cover several layers of meanings besides its surface significance. It can also be interpreted as an “extended metaphor”, often used for satirical, moral, and salutary purposes

(Cuddon et al. 21).⁴ Wilde frequently uses this literary device throughout his narratives, where even the names of his fairy tale characters often hint at the themes of each piece. For instance, in “The Happy Prince”, “The Selfish Giant”, and “The Remarkable Rocket”, the protagonists’ common names initially suggest certain traits; however, as the plots develop, it becomes clear that they are all intended to ironically misrepresent the characters’ true nature. However, these narratives also contain much more complex and deeper layers of meaning, which I will explore in the following chapters.

⁴ On the other hand, essential works can also be included here such as: Aesop’s fables, Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” from *The Republic*, John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, or C.S. Lewis’ *The Chronicle of Narnia* – as well as the Old and New Testaments – are prime examples of allegory (Quilligan 1979).

I. The Decay of Beauty

“*Mi bella Princesa*, your funny little dwarf will never dance again. It is a pity, for he is so ugly that he might have made the King smile.”

“But why will he not dance again?” asked the Infanta, laughing.

“Because his heart is broken,” answered the Chamberlain.

And the Infanta frowned, and her dainty rose-leaf lips curled in pretty disdain.

“For the future let those who come to play with me have no hearts,” she cried, and she ran out into the garden.” (Oscar Wilde, “The Birthday of the Infanta”)⁵

It is no coincidence that I have chosen this excerpt since this chilling turn in one of Oscar Wilde’s tales captures the often cruel contrasts between innocence and indifference, beauty and brutality that characterise his stories. Far from being simple morality tales, Wilde’s works offer a unique perspective on human passions, delving into the depth of emotions and the complexities of the psyche. These tales, while most are charming and often whimsical on the surface, are imbued with melancholy and moral ambiguity, reflecting his nuanced understanding of (his) life and art. These interpretations are expressed through different levels of meaning, exploring themes of love, passion, sacrifice, ephemeral beauty, and sexuality. In the first section of my analysis, I would like to focus on the latter two.

Wilde’s fairy tales, and his writings in general, consciously illustrate his artistic and aesthetic credo, in which art and beauty are regarded as superior to moral and didactic standards. His narratives are highly embellished with stylised, vivid imagery, giving the reader the opportunity to engage all their senses in imagination and to be captivated by the enchanting worlds they offer. Another hallmark of his is the ‘shaded’ depiction of Wildean “male love” – or Wildean *paiderastia* (pederasty, a love between an older man [*erastes*] and an adolescent/much younger boy [*eromenos*]),⁶ which is a recurring and celebrated theme in his tales as well. (Wood

⁵ This tale is from the collection *The Happy Prince and Other Stories*, containing the volumes “The Happy Prince and Other Stories” and “A House of Pomegranates”; hereafter referred to as *HP*.

⁶ During Wilde’s trial, he was called upon to discuss Douglas’s poem, “Two Loves” – particularly his famous closing line: “The love that dare not speak its name,” – whether it carried a homoerotic connotation. Wilde responded with an eloquent defence on the subject: “in this century it is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man” – and vice versa – “that deep, spiritual affection which is as pure as it is perfect”. Though his phrasing might suggest a

167). Simultaneously, Justin T. Jones observes that “Wilde frequently inverts generic fairy tale structures to denote his break with convention and to complicate the relationship between beauty and morality in his stories” (886).

Referring back to the pomegranate mentioned at the beginning of my introduction; each of the tales embraces understandings on different, deepening layers. On the surface – or the outer skin of ‘Wilde’s pomegranate’ –, we can find “The Remarkable Rocket”, “The Birthday of the Infanta”, and “The Young King” that cover themes of external aesthetic matters and values. Nevertheless, their central setting is mainly within or around a palace, which is, as Jones calls it, “the palace of art” (889) – or rather the ‘palace of Wildeanism’ – where it becomes clear that those who do not conform to Wilde’s standards, are inevitably cast out one way or another. Wilde highlights the relationship between beauty and ugliness, delight and despair through richly symbolic narratives. These tales indicate an artistic universe where, once ugliness tries to penetrate with a rebellious yell, art evokes an *auto-da-fé* to restore the balance of beauty.

One of the clearest examples of this feature is “The Remarkable Rocket”. This story is the quintessential portrayal of a self-indulgent and hypocritical artist who draws the attention to his high societal significance and his exquisite appearance – only alleged by him through quite satirical monologues: “You should be thinking about others. In fact, you should be thinking about me. I am always thinking about myself, and I expect everybody else to do the same. That is what is called sympathy” (HP 40).⁷ Nonetheless, Wilde adorns his narrative with delightful descriptions in decorated language such as: “then the moon rose like a wonderful silver shield; and the stars began to shine, and a sound of music came from the palace” (HP 42); this is the palace where the Prince, with his “dreamy violet eyes”, and hair like “fine gold”, and the little Princess, as pale as a white rose, hold their wedding ceremony. Their names, however, do not necessarily imply size but age differences, which brings us back to the ‘pederastic’ view of Wilde – with an older lover and a younger beloved –, here with a female adolescent. The “White rose, Red rose” (HP 37) part is also quite allegorical due to the use of colours since white symbolises

non-sexual/asexual relationship, it did not mirror the real case of Wilde as John-Charles Duffy covers this nuance in his research, “Gay-Related Themes in the Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde” (2001).

⁷ Richard Ellman remarks in Oscar Wilde’s biography memoir that Wilde associated the Rocket with James McNeill Whistler, and was inspired by his painting, *The Falling Rocket*. Wilde even noted that “Mr. Whistler always spelt art, and I believe still spells it, with a capital ‘I’” (450).

‘innocence’, ‘cleanness’ etc., and red is the colour of “the delights of married life”, “blood”, “flame”, “love” etc. (Shukla 78), which can indicate the loss of the little Princess’ virginity.

While the fireworks are waiting to be let off to give the most exquisite attraction for the celebration of the Prince and the little Princess’ marriage, the Roman Rocket presents his quite ironic, egoistic life philosophy to the others. Close to the midnight show, the Rocket becomes overheated with self-adoration which gets him very emotional. His tears of pleasure make his gunpowder so wet that he becomes unable to ascend to the sky with the other fireworks. Besides, he fails to have any of the characteristics of being “Remarkable”, he even gets tossed into the mud. At the end of the tale, when he finally manages to be shot – only by chance – into the sky, his ‘work of art’ still goes unnoticed. And if that is not enough, after he ‘explodes’, he is still convinced that this performance was the most amazing one man has ever ‘seen’. Without even noticing, the Roman Rocket gets expelled from the ‘Willean Palace’, since he is too self-absorbed to be pleasing. It is stated in “Preface” to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that “the only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely” (4), and since the Rocket is useless in a sense that his only duty is to fascinate, but still he is admired by none at all, therefore there is no excuse for him to remain in Wilde’s ‘artistic realm’.

Arrogance and trampling on others also feature in “The Birthday of the Infanta”; embodied by the Spanish Princess, but in a more brutal and far-reaching way, where the illustration of aesthetic beauty and sexuality is more prominent. At the beginning, Wilde invites his reader to an exquisite occasion; the twelfth birthday of the Infanta. His richly descriptive prose grabs its readers into the world of sensations by giving the chance to visualise the setting; with the brightly shining sun, the “striped tulips” that standing “straight” to pay their homage to the Infanta, the “splendid” roses, the “purple butterflies” with “gold dust on their wings”, with the sweet scent of the magnolia trees etc.

It is such a blissful day that even “the pomegranates split and cracked with the heat, and showed their bleeding red heart” (*HP* 69), which, according to Kate Pendlebury, suggests the most explicit depiction of the Infanta’s incipient sexual maturation (131), since she is at the age when adolescent girls start menstruating. In addition, ‘pomegranate’ is a symbol of fertility too, as also suggested by its Latin name; *pomum granatum* (many-seeded apple) (Atre, 3), which further supports Pendlebury’s claim on sexual maturation. Indeed, another highly erotic reference

is the touch of the sun on the pomegranates; for it “was shining so brightly” that its heat caused the split and bleed of the fruit – just as the first sexual penetration results in the loss of virginity. But the pomegranate motif in this tale implies a lot of other interpretations. Continuing Pendlebury’s analysis, the cracked and bleeding pomegranate on the one hand could symbolise a broken heart because of the unfulfilled romantic love in both the King’s and the Dwarf’s cases (as the King’s beloved wife is dead and the Dwarf’s feelings are unrequited by the Infanta), and on the other it foreshadows the tragic death of the “*petit monsire*”⁸ (131-2).

Since the Infanta’s birthday is an extraordinary celebration in the kingdom, this is an exceptional occasion when she is allowed to play with children of her choice, outside her rank. Even if her little playfellows wear fancy clothes for the ceremony; the boys “large-plumed hats and short fluttering cloaks” and the girls “long brocaded gowns”, the Infanta with “aureole of faded gold” hair, wearing a grey satin robe, a heavily embroidered silver skirt with a puffed sleeve and a rigid corset decorated with delicate pearls,⁹ is still the “most graceful of all” (*HP* 70). To make this prestigious day even more magnificent, various shows are organised to ensure the pleasure of the Infanta. As attested by Justin T. Jones, the entertainments “are only diluted representations of reality – highly stylized and exaggerated to avoid verisimilitude” and to protect the children’s pure and beautiful “aesthetic world” from harsh reality (888). There is a fake bullfight, an Italian puppetry,¹⁰ animal shows, singing, dancing and the like, but the most amusing one for the children is the little Dwarf’s dancing which is greeted with a “loud shout of delight” (*HP* 77). Although the reason behind this great excitement has nothing to do with the Dwarf’s dancing skills, but the fact that he is so ugly that it causes the Court’s, but especially the Infanta’s astonishment. It is the kind of *astonishment* that Edmund Burke highlights in his essay on the *sublime* (vs. the beautiful). According to Burke, it is “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling”; such objects that can evoke the feeling of pain, danger, terror or uneasiness (without any physical interference) are “the source of the *sublime*” (part I. sec. VII.).

⁸ As Don Pedro calls the Dwarf near the end of the tale – a playful version of *Monsieur* (sir/mister in French) instead of *monstre* (monster): an ironic twist by Wilde.

⁹ Wilde reveals in one of his letters that he modelled the Infanta from Diego Velázquez’s famed painting, the *Las Meninas* (1656) of the Spanish royal family (Jones 900, n. 22), and of the little girl standing in the middle of the painting in a beautiful dress.

¹⁰ Of all the ones listed, these two are the most brutal, as they depict various fatal (even suicidal – the tragedy of *Sophonisba*), bloody and cruel events of real life, where the latter performance even makes the children cry.

In the case of the little Dwarf, with his unnatural look: “hunchbacked, and crooked-limbed, with huge lolling head and mane of black hair” (*HP* 86), can produce a heightened sense of *delightful horror* – “the horrible” which the Spanish Court always had a “cultivated passion for” (*HP* 77) – which is “one of the strongest of all the passions”. There is also a sense of “tranquillity” lurking in the feeling of *terror*; “its object is the sublime” (part IV. Sec VII.). Thus, despite being so grotesque and monstrous in appearance – the “perfect horror” how the Cactus refers to him (*HP* 79) – as to arouse fear, the Dwarf’s playful and kind nature makes him harmless to any of the characters and provide a sense of relief in them. As Burke explains, it is the feeling of *delight* accompanied by “the removal of pain or danger” – that is, *relative pleasure* (part I. Sec IV.). Shun-liang Chao’s study, “The Grotesque Sublime” explores how the grotesque or “the idea of deformity [...] and incompleteness lies at the very centre of the sublime” (Chao 2). Chao explains the aesthetic significance of the grotesque, by using Ovid’s monsters as an example,¹¹ in which the delight of the imagination is provided by strangeness and curiosity we have never experienced before (6). Therefore, the deformed Dwarf even in the Kantian sense is the manifestation of the *sublime* by summoning the “unboundedness” (or, as Kant puts it, the “Unform”) and provokes the “Enthusiastic Terror” (Chao 4) or (relative) pleasure and pain in his audience.

The relationship between pleasure and pain is a dominant theme in the work. There is the Queen (who is already deceased by the time the narrative begins), whom the King loves so insanely and passionately, but so blindly that he does not even notice she suffers from a “strange malady” which eventually causes her death. A “terrible agony” falls on the King he cannot bear, and which leads to his morbid, necrophiliac behaviour of not allowing his wife to be buried but keeping her in the Palace’s chapel where he goes frequently to attempt waking “the cold painted face” with “his mad kisses”. He doesn’t even take part in his own daughter’s birthday as she now looks just like the Queen at the time the King met her; “when he was but fifteen of age, and she still younger” (*HP* 71-3) – another pederastic reference. Then, similarly, these two phenomena appear with the Dwarf, who by being happy with “full of the highest spirit”, madly falls in love

¹¹ In both antiquity and the Renaissance grotesque images were called “monsters” as they represented a combination of the “unnatural” and the “natural” (Summers 24). At the same time, another interpretation of monsters can be read in Duffy’s analysis where he sees the Dwarf’s grotesqueness as a symbol of homosexuality, since at the time the Victorian press referred to homosexuals as “monsters” (348, n. 15), and similarly labelled them as “unnatural” or “exotic” beings.

with the Infanta, who (just to tease another character) throws a white rose to him. He starts “kissing the white rose in an absurd ecstasy of pleasure” and makes “the most uncouth and clumsy gestures of delight” (*HP* 79), resulting in a highly sexual portrayal and indicating another pederastic desire, since the Infanta is much younger (and more attractive) than the Dwarf (Duffy 339). Later, terror arises when he finally discovers his hideous appearance in a mirror by realising the creature in front of him, who holds the same white rose as his, is the Dwarf himself. With “a wild cry of despair,” he understands and comprehends; it is his reflection,¹² and that he is the object of ridicule in the Spanish Court. Due to his great pain, his heart breaks and he collapses; provoking another great laughing of the children, but this time the *petit monsire* never to rise and dance anymore. To quote Jones: “[the Dwarf] has looked through the mirrored window into the real world and introduced cruel reality into the palace of art” (890) for which he pays the ultimate price.

The only one whose pleasure cannot be disrupted in any way is the Infanta’s. Even when she sees his grieving father or the dying Dwarf, her joyful mood doesn’t fade. Her last remark in the story also shows her cruel indifference as she declares that “for the future” those who come to play with her should “have no hearts” (*HP* 89) – such as those who are there to celebrate her. The tale presents the Wildean Aestheticism in the person of the Infanta. Wilde in his critical essay, “The Decay of Lying” asserts that “all bad art comes from returning to life and nature” (1999, 170), and since here Heart symbolise life and the Dwarf represents Nature (because he is discovered “running wild through the forest” (77), in his natural habitat)¹³ he brings disbalance into the realm of ‘Art’, therefore his fate is ultimately sealed.

Yet, of all these tales, it is “The Young King” where aestheticism is at its most prominent – declares John-Charles Duffy (336) – and which already shows a shift towards the theme of chapter two. The tale professes an unconventional luxurious lifestyle (Quintus 1977, 710), where the Young King’s excessive pleasure-seeking is best illustrated by the rather explicit

¹² This moment can be compared to the kind of recognition that Jacques Lacan discusses in his psychoanalytic theory of the “mirror stage”; a misrecognition of infants that creates an idealised image (“Ideal-I”) of a complete self when they first see their reflection in the mirror (76). In the Dwarf’s case, however, it is his true, unfiltered self he sees, and instead of satisfaction, this revelation brings horror and despair to him. Moreover, according to John-Charles Duffy, this scene parallels Dorian Gray’s discovery of his own monstrosity in the enchanted portrait, which Eve K. Sedgwick describes as a gay-themed plot element as well (348, n. 15).

¹³ Not to mention his bizarre look and lack of interest towards beauty – as he cares “nothing for all this magnificence” (*HP* 85) he sees in the Palace.

(homo)sexual imagery of the narrative, with his overflowing obsession towards (male) beauty – or as Wilde features; the Young King’s “strange passion for beauty that was destined to have so great an influence over his life” (HP 54).¹⁴

The King surrounds himself with more and more fascinating and decorative objects (rich jewels, clothes, perfumes, fine furnishings etc.) and takes “voyages through a marvellous land”, in the “wonderful palace – *Joyeuse*” (HP 55). During his artistic adventure, he bumps into sculptures like Hadrian’s Bithynian slave that he kisses, and worships – even kneels before – the kind of artworks that illustrates beautiful Greek (naked) men, such as Adonis, Endymion, or Narcissus. As it is indicated in Duffy’s analysis, the setting with different objects around the King refers to the Victorian homosexuals of London’s underworld. Items like the laughing, green, bronze Narcissus, or the flowers in the King’s sight, are all signifiers of homosexuality, since ‘Narcissus’ was a code word for appealing gay men, also male florists; or simply just the frequent use of flowers in literature were considered to be associated with gay cult (337).

The Young King, furthermore, embodies the Victorian dandy with his effeminate style in which he pays excessively special attention to his appearance, and he takes delight in all things beautiful. Just like Dorian in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (or Wilde himself), the Young King is a “natural aesthete”, and he is fully devoted to art and beauty. Nothing proves this better than the immense excitement he feels towards his coronation garment: “the robe of tissue gold, and the ruby-studded crown, and the sceptre with its rows and rigs of pearl”. Moreover, he already sees “himself in fancy standing at the high altar of the cathedral in the fair raiment of a King” (HP 56), as the true king of the ‘Wildean Palace of Art’. On the other hand, apart from his figure advocates homoerotic desires, in Duffy’s reading the Young King is even a “masturbator” (337) which is depicted at the very beginning of the tale when he:

[...] had flung himself back with deep sigh of relief on the soft cushion of his embroidered couch, lying there, wild-eyed and open mouthed, like a brown woodland Faun, or some young animal of the forest newly snared by the hunters.
(HP 53)

¹⁴ In such a way that, as it was above mentioned in the introduction, Oscar Wilde describes in *De Profundis*, Pater’s *Renaissance*; “that book, which has had such a strange influence over my life” (63).

Duffy's interpretation could also be supported by the Faun simile that Wilde presents in his tale. Fauns are known to be subhuman – half man and half goat – creatures in Roman mythology that are akin to Greek satyrs who were considered to be “uncouth men”, the followers of the god of wine, Dionysus (Britannica 2020). One of the oldest and most influential works of art of a Faun is from the Hellenistic period (circa 220 B.C.), comes from Munich, this is *The Barberini Faun* (Harris et al. 2015). The posture of this statue is one and all the same as Wilde's description of the Young King. It is the “absolute exhaustion” what this sculpture's face tells but in a quite erotic way, and to quote Duffy, it very much “evokes classical myths about the homosexual passions of satyrs” (334). Other depiction of masturbation is also depicted (e.g. to a male ejaculation with “great tufts of ostrich plumes sprang, like white foam”) where Wilde leaves “no doubt as to his intention” at all as Duffy states. Moreover, these sexual aspects also focus on the Young King's suspicious “friendship” with his “little page”, that possibly represents (aside from another pederastic relationship) a covert homosexual affair (Duffy 335).

After three symbolic dreams, the King realises (unlike the Infanta) that his luxurious lifestyle and his love of pleasures in an absurd way could lead to the decay of his kingdom and the suffering of his own people. Therefore, he renounces all forms of splendour, including his coronation attire. As for art, his insane obsession transforms and his love is directed rather towards Christ, albeit not in a sense the reader might expect. Several studies, including Justin T. Jones', confirm that the Young King fancies Christ's image and worships its beauty only in an aesthetic way, without any intention to practice religion (894-95). The aforementioned artistic vision of the King (when he sees himself in fancy standing at the high altar) also foreshadows the “Triumph of Beauty” (*HP* 56), and at the same time, the Young King's salvation as in his *Imitatio Christi* he is willing to be killed to spare the poor from suffering (but his main purpose is to be adored by people just like Christ was). The Young King enters into a “revised Christian aesthetic” realm (Jones 895) where the emphasis is on celestial, majestic beauty, not religion itself, since the “Glory of God” manifests in Art itself that eventually crowns the Young King (*HP* 68). Nevertheless, with the ending of “The Young King”, Wilde begins to peel the outer skin of beauty to slowly reveal, layer by layer, the innermost core of his allegorical pomegranate. In my forthcoming chapter, I will unfold what lurks under this delightful skin in the heart of the particular tales of passion.

II. The (Un)Importance of Being Moral

Oscar Wilde's tales, "The Star-Child", "The Devoted Friend" and "The Nightingale and The Rose", may initially suggest 'ethical enlightenments' due to his characters' (lethal) sacrifice, although a closer analysis unveils that his intentions should be understood in his aestheticised framework. The choice of my title, "The (Un)Importance of Being Moral" aligns with Wilde's artistic philosophy: rather than focusing on external moral teaching, he emphasises inner 'ethical beauty,' or what he calls "the higher ethics" in "The Critic as Artist" (1999, 195). He highlights the importance of individualism and self-reliance while rejecting societal norms. This concept parallels his understanding of the 'role' of art, where self-development, creativity, and spiritual liberation are essential to the pursuit of beauty and truth – the aesthetic appreciation of both art and life (Quintus 1980, 571).

Thus, being 'ethically beautiful' holds value if it only emphasises beauty – such as cultivating a beautiful heart or soul, appreciating life's beauty, or creating art for its own sake. However, as soon as didacticism takes precedence, the essence of morality in Wilde's view is lost, as no work of art should serve a moral principle. This idea is also supported by Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where he claims that "no artist has ethical sympathies" ("Preface" 3). He further attests that "thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art" and "vice and virtue are [only] to the artist material for an art" ("Preface" 3), acknowledging that beauty holds such emotional and spiritual elements that could influence its beholder for a higher form of living ("higher ethics"). According to Wilde, "those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated" ("Preface" 3), indicating that those who have a good nature with a beautiful heart will find the works of art pleasurable and beautiful.

In these three stories, Wilde portrays his vicious characters as having ugly features and the virtuous ones as beautiful beings, or as those whose life is beautiful. The tale of "The Star-Child" is one of the perfect examples to present the above highlighted characteristic of Wilde's works. At the beginning of the tale, the Star-Child is found in the forest by poor Woodcutters with the help of a shooting star.¹⁵ The first few years, he spends with the Woodcutter family serve as an allegorical illustration of "the unsteady relationship between art and real-world morality",

¹⁵ Similar celestial event happens in the Bible when the "Star of Bethlehem" leads the three magi to the newborn Jesus.

as Jones observes it (895). Despite a morally correct upbringing, the Star-Child is still consumed by his own beauty and pride. Due to his “origin”,¹⁶ he thinks of himself as a “master” of the other children and calls them his “servants”.¹⁷ He has “no pity [...] for the poor, or for those who [are] [...] in any way afflicted” (*HP* 134). He despises ‘the ugly’ where (he believes), due to her appearance, his own mother also belongs to, and to whom he even declares that “I am no son of thine, for thou art a beggar, and ugly, and in rags”, and he shuts “the door of his heart against her” (*HP* 136). When the boy understands that he is the true son of a poor and ugly-looking woman, his imagined artistic realm gets destroyed.

Despite being appealing on the outside, the Star-Child’s evil nature leads him to his downfall; whereas the consequence of finding pleasure in being malicious and despising his own mother, manifests with his transition to a grotesque creature, and a long, painful decay takes over his life. This kind of transformation is presented in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, when the gorgeous Dorian pledges his soul to stay forever young and beautiful; instead of him, his portrait should bear the burden of his aging and scandals. Due to Dorian’s decadent way of living (filled with hedonism and sinful deeds), his painting transforms into a horrific and hideous picture, mirroring his corrupted soul. The climax of the novel is reached when Dorian attempts to restore morality into his life by destroying the painting; however, it leads to his own death instead, and the artwork remains intact. Art takes revenge on Dorian since with his villainy he disfigures and ‘re-paints’ his own portrait (of his spirit), which eventually becomes so loathsome that it cannot fit into the aestheticised world of Wilde anymore. In the same vein, the Star-Child, to regain his attractive appearance and to beautify his soul, is willing to suffer and sacrifice himself for the welfare of others (e.g. he saves the Hare’s life, who in return helps him to find the “three pieces of gold” the Star-Child has to bring to the Magician). Yet, unlike Dorian, he finally achieves the beautification of his whole being (as he passes the three tests, offering the three kinds of gold to the leper – even if it could have cost him his own life) and becomes the king.

Additionally, the illustration of pomegranates stands as a significant motif in this tale with mythological and biblical implications as well. During the Star-Child’s three-year long wandering to find his mother, he reaches a gate of a “strong-walled city” where at the entrance its soldiers block his way. After mocking the appearance of his, these soldiers agree on selling the

¹⁶ He believes, he is descended from the stars (from God).

¹⁷ It is a foreshadowing scene of his later status, although here with the lack of goodness in his heart.

grotesque-looking boy as a slave for “the price of a bowl of sweet wine”. An old man passing by, is willing to pay for him and takes him home. As they arrive at “a little door that was set in a wall that was covered with a pomegranate tree”, they enter the garden of this old man who turns out to be a cruel magician. He covers the eyes of the Star-Child, then leads him into a dungeon where he gets locked in (*HP* 139-140). According to Kate Pendlebury, the pomegranate tree symbolises the entrance of the netherworld (138), since on the one hand, in Greek mythology pomegranates have a strong connection with the myth of Persephone who was abducted by Hades, the god of the underworld, and by eating six pomegranate seeds, she was tied to the realm of the dead (Atre 2). On the other hand, the blindfolding of the Star-Child to see nothing till he reaches the dungeon, is also a quite symbolic act as in the Bible “darkness” in some sections refers to suffering and Hell itself (e.g. Matthew 8:12 or Peter 2:4).¹⁸ Moreover, pomegranates were believed being “the forbidden fruit of the garden of Eden” (Atre 2) that brought the expulsion of mankind from God’s Paradise. These two approaches are closely intertwined, as both characters embody malicious, immoral figures: since the Magician is referred to as an “evil-visaged old man” that evokes an image of a Satanist or Satan himself who takes the Star-Child to his Hell-like underworld, into his kingdom of suffering. The features of the Star-Child (after his transformation) with a “face of a toad” and a sealed body “like an adder” (*HP* 137) suggest an impression of a particular snake: a reference to a Satan-like character from “The Book of Genesis” that causes the Fall of humanity by convincing Adam and Eve in the form of a serpent to eat from “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:17) – which in “The Star-Child” the pomegranate tree symbolises.

All these motifs and the references of the devil in this tale imply immoral or evil aspects that evoke the ugly nature of heartless, or ‘closed-hearted’ characters, who eventually get banished from the ‘Garden of Oscar Wilde’ for being hideous due to maliciousness. Finally, the narrative concludes that the again-beautiful Star-Child shows mercy and justice for his people but punishes those who live for wickedness. He teaches love, kindness and charity, brings harmony and peace into his kingdom. However, the twist in the plot comes right after: “yet ruled he not long, so great had been his suffering, and so bitter the fire of his testing, for after the space

¹⁸ Another symbolic scene is the Magician’s garden “filled with black poppies and green jars of burnt clay” or the dungeon “lit by a lantern of horn”. These images could be read as the depictions (1) of human ashes (with the seeds of the black poppies) that are placed in “green” urns “of burnt clay”; (2) of the ‘horned’ devil from Hell.

of three years he died. And he who came after him ruled evilly” (*HP* 146). So, in vain has the Star-Child done ethical purification, yet his sacrifice has proved to have only a self-serving purpose: he makes his life valuable (undergoes character development), and reunites with his parents at last; the disguised King (the leper) and Queen (the beggar woman), and his role ends there – he does not become a Christ-like character, a saviour –, he passed the final test given by Wilde, therefore he gets written out from the story and could return to ‘Art’s Paradise.’

Similarly, “The Devoted Friend” tale takes the same approach on this matter. The narrative covers a parody of a ‘true friendship’ – where the second plot is narrated by a character (here the Linnet) from the first story.¹⁹ In the tale, there is also a ‘Rocket-like’ selfish and cruel character, the (ugly) Water-rat, who remarks his preference of friendship over love and having a family. He is asked to describe what a devoted friend means to him, and he replies: “I should expect my devoted friend to be devoted to me, of course” (*HP* 24); albeit he implies that in return, the other party better not to expect anything. Thus, the Linnet tells a tale about the ‘friendship’ of little Hans and big Hugh (or the rich Miller), to convey the moral of the story by drawing a parallel between the Miller and the Rat. As the Linnet begins her story, it soon becomes clear that the relationship of the two characters is rather one-sided (from little Hans’s part), also interest-based (from the Miller’s part). Indeed, ironically, the Miller thinks, he is fulfilling the role of a devoted friend, when in fact, he seems to be the worst man could ever wish for a friend. Despite offering little Hans his broken wheelbarrow, this object becomes the uninhibitedly selfish Hugh’s tool of blackmail to get Hans to do what he asks. However, after each favour of little Hans, the Miller never manages to accomplish his promise.

The true devoted friend in the tale is little Hans himself, who makes several sacrifices for his ‘best friend’, even if he gets nothing in return (because he expects nothing in exchange, his intentions are sincere). The expression ‘devoted’ reaches its supreme meaning when Hans does his last favour for the Miller family: during a terrible storm he rushes to get the Doctor for the little son of the Millers since he has injured himself, but on the way back Hans arrives at a “very dangerous place” with “full of deep holes” where he eventually drowns. Yet, all the good deeds he does in the Linnet’s tale are not recognised nor appreciated, not even mentioned on his own funeral.

¹⁹ The use of this literary device can also suggest the ever-deepening meanings of Wilde’s allegorical narratives in which even tale by tale, the reader can enter the depth through the layers.

The Miller's nature lacks every aspect of sympathy and empathy. He is too self-absorbed to understand the seriousness of the situation which his speech also demonstrates. It is not much different from the Water-rat's case. The Linnet vainly does her best to present that parable with little Hans's sacrifice to him, her intention is thwarted; the Water-rat feels 'sympathy' only for big Hugh. Moreover, when the rat is asked about his understanding of the moral, he expresses his deep disinterest towards such tales, then goes back into his hole. His behaviour echoes Wilde's credo of a work of art that should remain amoral. But even though the 'moral' does not fall on sympathetic ears at the Water-rat, Wilde's readership can draw their own conclusion of the tale 'sung' by the Linnet. Nevertheless, little Hans's life also puts the emphasis on beauty as his heart is pure and gentle, his love towards his friend is genuine. Hans possesses 'ethical beauty' to 'adore,' he remains true to himself despite being surrounded by so much evil; therefore, he has a place in the Wildean realm of art.

Then another bird's miraculous singing is next in line who can be found in "The Nightingale and The Rose". This tale most beautifully portrays the Nightingale's sacrifice for love and art, where her devotion transforms into a living passion, culminating in the creation of a marvellous work of art. As an opening, Wilde presents a blossoming young love, still in its early but blinkered stage in the life of the Student. However, the sorrow of his is great as he cannot find a red rose in his garden that he can bring to his lover, the Professor's daughter, to make her dance with him at the Prince's ball. The Nightingale, by hearing his lamentation, decides to help the Student since she believes, it is not just any kind of love, but the true one at its finest. When the other characters see the boy's weeping, they do not understand why his sadness is so painful; the Nightingale explains the reason, and the Lizard cynically remarks how ridiculous it is to weep for a red rose. But the Nightingale understands the true essence of Love, so she flies to the Rose-trees, but none of them can provide her with exactly what she is looking for. Then, the final Tree comes up with one possible solution, but it requires a terrible sacrifice of the Nightingale:

"If you want a red rose," said the Tree, "you must build it out of music by moonlight, and stain it with your own heart's-blood. You must sing to me with your breast against a thorn. All night long you must sing to me, and the thorn must pierce your heart, and your life-blood must flow into my veins, and become mine". (*HP* 14)

The little Nightingale willingly makes this fatal sacrifice by declaring that “Death is a great price to pay for a red rose” but “Love is better than Life”, for “what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a man” (*HP* 14)? Therefore, she flies to the Student to proclaim the good news, but he does not understand anything what the bird says – as he only knows “the things that are written down in books” (*HP* 14). Furthermore, when the Nightingale starts to sing – at the request of the Oak-tree, who understands the outcome of such an act, thus he pities her –, the Student (having no idea of the bird’s intention) questions whether she has any feelings at all. He alleges that “she is like most artists; she is all style, without any sincerity” and without any purpose to “sacrifice herself for others” as “the arts are selfish [...] they do not mean anything, or do any practical good” (*HP* 15), echoing the aesthetic doctrine on art’s role.

Yet, as the Moon rises, the ‘ritual’ between the Nightingale and the Rose-tree begins. She presses her breast against the Tree and sings all night long with the thorn going deeper and deeper inside her chest to fulfil her mission. The first song she sings is about “the birth of love of a boy and a girl”, resulting in the Tree’s blooming and a pale rose “as the mist that hangs over the river” appears “on the topmost spray” of it. But then the Rose-tree begs the Nightingale to press her breast closer to its thorn before the Sun rises, which makes her singing even louder. The Nightingale continues with a song about “the birth of passion in the soul of a man and a maid” which starts to colour the rose’s petals. The Nightingale’s pain grows “bitter and bitter”, and her song goes “wilder and wilder”, for she sings “of the Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb” (*HP* 16); the everlasting love itself, which paints “the marvellous rose” crimson, “like the rose of the eastern sky” (*HP* 16). After that, Wilde ravishingly describes what happens:

Then she gave one last burst of music. The white Moon heard it, and she forgot the dawn, and lingered on in the sky. The red rose heard it, and it trembled all over with ecstasy, and opened its petals to the cold morning air. Echo bore it to her purple cavern in the hills, and woke the sleeping shepherds from their dreams. It floated through the reeds of the river, and they carried its message to the sea. (*HP* 16)

The Nightingale’s last breath sends her angelic song soaring, and her divine artwork is finally done.

On the other hand, another way to interpret the above-mentioned part of the plot is through its sexual dimension. The tale contains quite explicit descriptions of a sexual intercourse, including the suggestion of orgasm, unfolding under the three songs of the Nightingale. First, when the bird presses herself against the Tree's thorn, their interaction causes a "pale rose" to grow on the "topmost spray" of the Tree – a fairly straightforward depiction of a pre-ejaculatory stage of male arousal. Then, as her song intensifies and the rose deepens in colour, the characters are getting closer to their metaphorical orgasmic stage, with the act becoming increasingly dynamic. Although, when the Rose-tree's thorn pierces the Nightingale's heart – implying the reach of the sexual climax –, ²⁰ her song grows "fainter", and "a film [comes] over her eyes," (*HP* 16) and she starts to lose consciousness. The tale reaches its symbolic resolution (the last stage of orgasm): (1) when the rose on the Tree responds to the Nightingale's "voice," trembling "all over with ecstasy" before opening "its petals to the cold morning air" (*HP* 16); and (2) with the Nightingale's death. However, in this context, the death is also only figurative, evoking the French concept of *la petite mort* ("the little death"), which is defined as "the sensation of orgasm as linked to death" (Wingrove 228). This "momentary unconsciousness" also reflects Sigmund Freud's distinction between our two drives; life instinct (*Eros*) and death instinct (*Thanatos*), both of which play a role in the sexual act being perfected at its climax (Antal 69).

Still, the creation of this fascinating red rose ultimately falls short of the Student's goal. He finds the magical flower in his garden and rushes to give it to his lover as a token of his affection, hoping that she will accompany him to the Ball – as she promised him earlier under this condition. Yet, she refuses the rose, stating that it doesn't match her dress and that she has already been invited by the Chamberlain's nephew, who offered her real jewels, "and everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers" (*HP* 17). Being so outraged, the Student throws the rose into the street, where a cart tramples it, destroying the hitherto outstanding flower; the Nightingale's gorgeous work of art. He then affirms that Love is foolish and "not half as useful as Logic" (*HP* 17), contradicting the Nightingale's earlier view of Love's importance. The ending also echoes Wilde's artistic credo that no artwork should serve any purpose other than

²⁰ The connection between the Nightingale and the Rose-tree contradicts the narrative's initial portrayal of heterosexual relationship. The Nightingale is gendered as female ("she/her"), while the Rose-tree is ungendered ("it") and their symbolic "sex act" is a "non-reproductive" penetration as they also belong to different species, moreover it is even unproductive since in the end no one values the rose. This also parallels how homosexuality was viewed as "unproductive" in Victorian society since the parties were not able to produce children (Duffy 334).

existing for its own sake (other than giving pleasure). For the Student, the rose is merely a tool to win the girl of his dream, rather than something to be admired for its beauty. This is why the rose is ultimately ruined – it would otherwise be tainted by unworthiness of the Professor’s daughter and the Student, who both eventually fail to appreciate art and true love.

In addition, the depiction of pomegranates in this tale should not be overlooked either, as they symbolise richness, and wealth. Yet, Wilde places Love above all these, describing it as follows:

Surely Love is a wonderful thing. It is more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals. Pearls and pomegranates cannot buy it, nor is it set forth in the marketplace. It may not be purchased of the merchants, nor can it be weighed out in the balance for gold. (*HP* 11)

This can also be viewed within the context of Wilde’s aesthetic worldview, where pure love and a loving heart open the opportunity for the creation of the most exquisite works of art, works into which the artist with the use of self-expression, pours their entire spirit. The artist sacrifices themselves to produce something lasting and dazzling, to be able to put impact on the audience and evoke delight in the beholder. The relationship between pleasure and pain is also presented, since, to create a pleasurable piece of work, on the part of the creator, it involves sacrifice – which is manifested in the artist’s renunciation of something precious. In “The Nightingale and The Rose”, the pleasurable rose symbolises the Nightingale’s masterpiece, born from the fusion of her three songs – about love, passion, and eternal love – while also representing her artistic sacrifice, as she literally puts her whole heart and life into the making process, then dies as an artist.

Following the same path, Christianity also occurs in the tale in a veiled way. There is a parallel between the Nightingale’s death and the Crucifixion of Christ, since both sacrificed their life and shed their blood for those who are unworthy for such ‘moral redemption’. Wilde even alludes to some views about Christian teachings (of love and forgiveness) in his stories. In the following chapter, I uncover the allegorical layer of Christ’s Passion as well – that is, the core of our allegorical pomegranate, which by now “split and cracked” to show its concealed red heart at last.

III. The Picture of the Wild(e)ness

Oscar Wilde loved breaking conventions nearly as much as he adored art, which extended to his unique approach to Christianity, where he famously called Christ “the supreme Individualist” (Wilde 1999, 73). As John Allen Quintus explains, Wilde “sought to appreciate aesthetic and psychological possibilities inherent in each [Christianity and Christ] rather than espouse religious principles or theological lessons” (1991, 515). Furthermore, Quintus observes that Wilde not only considered Christ as a “realised man” who rebelled against the social norms and “became what he wanted to become”, but also identified him as the “precursor” of Romanticism in the field of art and “the supreme artificer” in history. Wilde saw Christ as an artist whose life embodied beauty and sacrifice, infusing spirituality with creative expressions. Consequently, Wilde regarded these phenomena as “capable of transforming human beings into sentient people” who exhibit both compassion and autonomy, making them “conscious of art and culture and aware of the importance of their souls” (1991, 515-16). This approach shows some similarities with Wilde’s idea of “higher ethics”.

Oscar Wilde’s works emphasise aesthetic and spiritual sensibilities, placing at the heart of a Christ-like life (alongside love and forgiveness), a journey to self-development, self-reliance, and self-expression, where one “must be entirely and absolutely himself” (Wilde 1999, 69). For Wilde, there is an “intimate and immediate connection between the true life of Christ and the true life of the artist” exemplified by the description of “the painter to whom the world is a pageant and the poet for whom the world is a song” (Wilde 1999, 69). It highlights Wilde’s belief that living such a lifestyle means embracing individuality and creative self-manifestation, since the world is full of opportunities for fulfilment. Therefore, in this view, Wilde’s ideas can also be understood as encouraging intellectual and artistic autonomy, so that man can become his own ‘personal Jesus’.

In my last analytical chapter, I examine the remaining three fairy tales; “The Happy Prince”, “The Selfish Giant” and “The Fisherman and His Soul”, which explore themes of Christianity (or rather a ‘Wildean’ Christ-like life) and passion, whilst revealing the allegorical layers connected to the Passion of Christ. Although on the surface these tales may seem innocuous, they are imbued with repressed desires and inner demons.

“The Happy Prince”, Wilde’s earliest fairy tale (1885) and the eponymous story of his initial collection, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), has been “a perennial favourite of children”, and is still celebrated in the 21st century too (Wood 157). The tale is about a pure and unconditional love between the two main (male) characters, the Happy Prince and the little Swallow, who, by selflessly helping the poor, eventually ascends to Heaven. The narrative starts with the description of the Happy Prince’s beautiful statue that stands on a tall column, high above the city: he is “gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold”, for his eyes he has “two bright sapphires”, and “a large red ruby” glows “on his sword-hilt” (*HP* 1). He is very much adored and looked up to by the citizens who wish to be as happy as he was when he was alive and lived with pleasure in the Palace of Sans-Souci (*HP* 3).²¹ Then, one night the little Swallow flies over the city and looks for a place to rest. His friends have already gone away to Egypt, but since he falls in love with the Reed, he rather stays at her side. Yet, after a long courtship, the bird finally admits that it is indeed a “ridiculous attachment” and they are not meant for each other as the Reed is “so attached to her home”, but since the Swallow loves travelling, he abandons her after all.

The bird in flight, notices the towering statue and decides to settle “between the feet of the Happy Prince”. Suddenly, large drops of water fall on him, and as he looks up, he discovers that the statue’s eyes are “filled with tears” that stream down “his golden cheeks”: the Happy Prince is not as happy as his name implies, observes the Swallow. It turns out that since the Prince has been set up so high, he is also able to see “all the ugliness and all the misery” of his city and though his heart “is made of lead” yet he “cannot chose but weep” (*HP* 3). This kind of illustration could depict the image of Christ who sees all the sinful life of humanity and the sufferings (e.g. poverty, hunger, grief, pain, and death). Nevertheless, there are three cases mentioned in the Bible when Jesus ‘weeps’ which also show his humanity and compassion for affliction (as in the case of the Prince), including: (1) when he is at the tomb of Lazarus, though he knows he will raise him from the dead, he shares his grief with those who mourn Lazarus’s death (John 11:35); (2) when he approaches Jerusalem and foresees its destruction and failure even the peace and salvation he brings there cannot prevent (Luke 19:41-44); (3) and when he is in the Garden of the Gethsemane and fervently prays to God before his crucifixion, which also shows his (human) agony (and fear) before taking on mankind’s sins (Hebrews 5:7).

²¹ In French *Palais Sans Souci* means ‘careless palace’.

The Happy Prince begs the Swallow to stay with him each night and help those in need, promising the little bird that once their work is done, he may leave for Egypt. Out of empathy, the Swallow agrees and sadly begins to remove all the jewels and gold from the Prince, giving them to the poor. They help the seamstress and his little ill boy by bringing them the ruby out of the sword-hilt. The Prince also offers two of his sapphire eyes and sends one to a young playwright and the other to a little match-girl, which leaves him completely blind. Then, since the Swallow decides to stay with the Prince, he flies over the city and besides the bliss of the rich, he sees the great plight of the poor. The Happy Prince commands the bird to take off his golden leaves that cover him and bring those to the poor. Thus, while the Prince is getting paler and greyer (with the removal of his coating), the starving children's faces grow rosier; they are really delighted and cry out: "We have bread now!" (HP 9).

This part offers a reference to the miracles of Jesus as well as his Passion. He healed the sick, regained the sight of the blind, fed the hungry etc. At the same time, as the end of his earthly life drew near, by carrying the cross on his back to Calvary, Christ also took upon himself the sins and miseries of humanity – a parallel with the illustration of the Happy Prince since, with blindness and pallor (sick) appearance, he also carries the burden of his sacrifice for people. The Prince becomes a Christ-like character, and the Swallow, by being a loyal helper of his beloved friend, simultaneously represents one of the followers of Christ, notably John "the beloved disciple" (John 13:23, 19:26). John remained close to Jesus even at the foot of his cross, which in the tale is a significant scene as well, since at first, the Swallow settles at the foot of the Prince's statue – where their 'friendship' begins –, and after they give a kiss to each other, the little bird falls down dead at the Prince's feet – resulting in the end of their earthly relationship. After the death of the Swallow, the leaden heart of the Happy Prince breaks of sorrow, which symbolises not only his own death, but also gives another reference to Christ as his heart was stabbed through when he died on the cross (John 19:34). Last, but not least, with the sacrifice of the three (Christ, the Happy Prince and the Swallow), their mission is finally completed – or as Christ is quoted in the Gospel of John: "*Tetelestai!*" (John 19:30).²²

Both the Swallow and the Happy Prince eventually manage to beautify their souls and go through an aestheticised spiritual improvement, which transform their selfishness into

²² *Tetelestai* or τετέλεσται in Greek means "it is finished" or "paid in full", referring to the completion of redemption, the victory over sin and death (Manning 2022).

selflessness. At first, they only care about themselves and their own pleasures. The Swallow abandons his friends for the Reed, and the Prince – when he “was alive and had a human heart” lived only for his own happiness and delight: “in the daytime [he] played with [his] companions in the garden” and “in the evening [he] led the dance in the Great Hall”; that is why he is called “the Happy Prince” (*HP* 3). Then, they start to follow a (‘Wildean’) Christ-life which ultimately results in their free entry to God’s “garden of Paradise” (and to ‘Wilde’s Garden of Art’), where “the little bird shall sing for evermore,” and in the “city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise” God (*HP* 10).

On the other hand, the pomegranate motif is also present in the plot with the young playwright student whose “lips are red as a pomegranate” (*HP* 6). In this single description the image of the fruit carries several allegorical meanings, such as: beauty, decadence, sin, death, and resurrection (Pendlebury 2011). Wilde, while presenting the blossoming, fresh young boy, with a “brown and crisp” hair and “large and dreamy eyes”, also reveals his excessive admiration towards (young) male beauty. As it was discussed earlier, works that cover such themes were considered to be decadent and perverse obsessions. Such an attraction was defined as “gross indecency” or “so(m)domitic” tendency, which although was not punished by execution, but definitely excluded the possibility of redemption (as the conventional Victorians believed). Yet, Wilde was able to portray this kind of affection as the purest form of love, resurrected and perfected in Heaven.

Moving ahead, in “The Selfish Giant”, the figure of Christ appears in the form of a little child. The narrative introduces an initially ‘selfish’ Giant who, by returning after his long visit of his friend, the Cornish ogre, gets incredibly angry as he sees that children sneak into his gorgeous garden to play every day. He declares that “my own garden is my own garden [...] and I will allow nobody to play in it but myself”. Then, he builds a high wall around it, and even puts up a notice board, saying: “TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED” (*HP* 18-19). According to Hodgkins, the Giant’s garden represents the “original forbidden garden in Genesis”, where the Selfish Giant is portrayed as a God-like character who, without any reason, bans the children from his ‘Eden’ (43). The wall-building solution of his also refers to the Book of Genesis as God, after the expulsion, placed *cherubim* (angelic beings) and a flaming sword at the entrance to his Garden to guard the Tree of Life (Genesis 3:24). In addition, in the Giant’s garden there are

“twelve peach-trees” which cannot only refer to the twelve apostles (the chosen people by Jesus to help him accomplish his mission) but also to the Tree of Life from Revelation as it produces “twelve crops of fruit”, one for each month (Revelation 22:2), symbolising eternal abundance, of which the garden of the Giant is also capable of if the children are there. Moreover, it is also noted that the Giant is away from home for seven years. The number seven has one of the most prominent symbolic meanings in the Bible, reflecting to, for instance, God’s divine creation of the world within seven days (Genesis 2:2-3) – similarly with the Giant, who after “the seven years were over he had said all that he had to say, for his conversation was limited, and he determined to return to his own castle” (*HP* 18).

But, as he bans the children from his garden, the realm of an eternal winter starts to cover the place resulting in the symbolical death of nature. The birds do “not care to sing in it” anymore as there is “no children, and the trees” even “forget to blossom” because of that. Only the Frost, who paints “all the trees silver”, and the Snow, who covers “the grass with her great white cloak” are pleased there. They even invite the roaring North Wind and the rattling Hail to stay with them. Still, the Giant does not understand why neither the Spring, nor the Summer is coming – since “[h]e is too Selfish” remarks the Autumn (*HP* 19-20). However, one morning, the Selfish Giant hears a wonderful melody coming from outside. As he looks out, he is stunned to see that Spring finally has arrived: the birds are twittering with delight, the flowers are looking up and laughing through the green grass, and in every blossomed tree there is a little child who has crept in through a little hole in the wall. But in the farthest corner winter is still lingering, and there cries a little boy, who is too small to reach the branches of the tree. Seeing it, the Giant’s heart melts and realises how selfish he has been. He decides to help the poor child, and since he has regretted his action, the Giant even states that his garden now “shall be the children’s playground for ever and ever”, so he will knock down his wall (*HP* 21).

As he goes out to help, he also frightens the other children who therefore run away, and winter covers the garden again. Only the little boy stays as his eyes are full of tears, thus he cannot see the approaching Giant. He finally puts the boy up gently on the tree and in return the little one wraps his arms around the Giant’s neck and kisses him. The other children, seeing that the Giant is not wicked anymore, come back and bring Spring with them into the garden again. The Giant offers his whole garden to the little children, so they can come to play every day. Although

the little boy, whom he loved the best, does not appear here anymore. Even his playfellows do not know who or where he is. It makes the Giant very sad but remains very kind to them and declares that “I have many beautiful flowers, [...] but the children are the most beautiful flowers of all” (*HP* 22).

The Giant gets closer to his salvation when one winter day he notices his little friend in the garden. Yet the Giant’s joy soon wears off, as he sees the nail marks on both the boy’s palms and little legs (which is the most explicit illustration of Christ in a body of a child). The boy reassures the Giant that these are only “the wounds of Love”, and when the Giant kneels before the child, the boy then continues: “You let me play once in your garden, to-day you shall come with me to my garden, which is Paradise.” After that, the children run into the garden in that afternoon and they find the Giant “lying dead under the tree, all covered with white blossoms” (*HP* 22). This last section reveals one of the key messages of Christ (and Wilde), that is: children are an inherent part of God’s kingdom, and no one can ever stop them from reaching out to Him – not even a ‘selfish giant’. Wilde in the “De Profundis” states that “[t]he body of a child is as the body of the Lord” (1999, 73). Moreover, there is a significant part in the Bible when the children try to approach Christ, yet the disciples stop them, but Jesus says: “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:13). In addition, he even says that: “unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. [...] Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me” (Matthew 18:2-5), and since the Giant received the children in his garden at last – and he also became one of them with the Christ-child’s invitation to his “garden” – he eventually could enter Paradise too.

In “The Fisherman and His Soul”, the longest and darkest tale of them all, Wilde demonstrates a troubled relationship between the human body and soul, where the main focus is on the consequences of bodily and hedonistic desires that poison one’s spirit. Such an affection emerges between the young Fisherman and the little Mermaid, whom the Fisherman accidentally pulls out of the sea while he is fishing. He does not want to let the Mermaid go until she promises him to come and sing to him every time, he summons her. The mermaid’s song is so enchanting for the Fisherman that he falls in love with her – and even asks her to marry him. But

the situation is far from being that simple: the Fisherman has a human soul, therefore, until he gives it up, the Mermaid cannot love him since “the Sea-folk have no souls” (*HP* 93-4).

The Fisherman goes to the Priest to help in getting rid of his own soul as he has no need for that: if he cannot see or touch it, then there is no point of having it either. But the Priest corrects him by stating that “the soul is the noblest part of man” that was given by God and “there is no thing more precious than the human soul”, so he must take care of it instead (*HP* 94). The Fisherman wants to do the exact opposite, declaring that he would give his own soul for the body of the Mermaid and surrender heaven for her love. But the “love of the body is vile” attests the Priest, who even refers to the Sea-folks and the other creatures who have no soul as “pagan things”, the unblessed creatures whose temptations must be resisted. The Priest rejects the Fisherman’s request and sends him away.

Being so blinded by and obsessed with the desired Mermaid, The Fisherman goes even to the market to sell his soul which he eventually fails to do as for the merchants “it is not worth a clipped piece of silver”, but it is his body that he can make a use of (*HP* 96). Then, he goes to a young Witch who at first also refuses his plea, muttering that is “a terrible thing to do” to send one’s soul away, but later she agrees under one condition: the “pretty boy” must ‘dance’ with her “in some secret place”, the top of the mountain, when the moon shows its full form on the sky. (*HP* 98). The Fisherman does exactly what he is told and their ‘dancing ritual’ begins. Yet, a huge horror falls on the Fisherman when he notices that “some evil thing” watches him from the shadow. Duffy covers this scene as well in his study, where, according to him, the figure of Satan appears who is also described as a dandy – or as Wilde himself is depicted on the cover of Duffy’s edition of the complete work (343). This ‘Wildean Satan’ only has eyes for the Fisherman no matter where he ‘dances’. When the Witch invites the Fisherman to worship “Him” (Wilde’s ‘god of homosexuality’), he unconsciously makes the sign of the Cross on his breast and calls the forbidden “holy name”, which results in the demonic characters’ fleeing. However, before the young Witch can escape, the Fisherman gets the secret of the ‘soul-removal-method’ out of her: he needs to cut his shadow away around his feet with a knife of green viper’s skin on its handle, and he must turn his back to the moon – to see his own shadow – as the body’s shadow is the body of the soul.

The Fisherman's Soul, before getting completely abandoned by the Body, asks for the heart of the young man since "the world is very cruel" to live without it. But his heart is already his lover's, therefore the Soul cannot get it, so he chases his Soul away instead. The Soul makes a promise that every year he will come down to the shore and call his name to make sure whether he has changed his mind about uniting again, or not. Each year the Soul tells his adventures to the Fisherman, where, according to Duffy, the focus is on the Oriental exoticism, which was associated with homosexuality among the Victorians (344). At the same time, these journeys also symbolise spiritual and moral decay since the Soul has no heart to possess a Christ-like life. The Soul's lack of love makes him being capable of doing such wicked acts, descending into sins, that the Fisherman himself (with his heart full of Love) otherwise could not do. Each places represent some kind of – if not specifically the seven deadly – sins, including: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, sloth, but also idolatry, malice, killing, stealing and the like.²³ They are also intertwined with beauty, pleasure, richness etc.

For instance, there is the "Mirror of Wisdom" which the Soul can only approach by going through three chambers: while he is looking for "god" (but ironically, he himself is already doing godly acts) it turns out that this 'god' is non-existent as an entity, but there is a mirror instead, "set on an altar of stone", that can reflect "all the things that are in heaven and on earth" and those who can possess it, will know everything and will be worshipped by the priests (*HP* 109). The "Mirror of Wisdom" that is placed on an altar is an allegorical manifestation to selfishness. The Soul does anything to seduce the Fisherman from the Mermaid, but to no avail: 'Selfless-Love' is stronger than self-love. The Soul, having no heart with which to love, cannot understand such intimate emotions; he only speaks the language of the earthly, bodily pleasures that he experiences during his journey; that stands behind his hedonistic lifestyle. After he gets separated from the Fisherman, he becomes an entity on its own, and his name even gets capitalised (from "soul" to "the Soul").

However, there is one thing that eventually makes the Fisherman abandon his lover, which is 'dance' – the bodily pleasure – and a dancing girl whose feet are naked. Duffy also highlights this matter: since the Mermaid has no legs to dance with – so, she has no female genitalia to have any 'human' sexual intercourse (333) – therefore, the Fisherman's needs are

²³ Which even depicts some of God's violations of the Ten Commandments or the seven deadly sins.

unsatisfied. He decides to indulge his desires and goes with his Soul at last. But instead of dancing, his Soul makes him do sinful deeds (e.g. smiting a child, slaying a merchant). At this point, it is noteworthy to mention that through such demonic acts, the image of pomegranates also appears in different forms (“Street of Pomegranates”, “garden of pomegranates” – two times), which in this tale symbolises sin, death, homosexuality, and pleasure since, for instance, in the “Street of Pomegranates” a brothel-like building is described, where the eunuchs are quite suspiciously portrayed as homosexuals: “one of them drew aside the captain of the guard, and in a low voice whispered to him. The other kept munching scented pastilles, which he took with an affected gesture out of an oval box of lilac enamel” (*HP* 113). And when they pass through the pomegranate garden and arrive at a house, when the night comes, they kill the merchant who provides them with accommodation.

Ultimately, since the Fisherman yields to the temptation and lets the corrupted, sinner Soul inside him, at the same time, he unconsciously excludes his beloved Mermaid from his earthly life. When the Soul tries to enter the heart of the Fisherman a “great cry of mourning from the sea” comes; he rushes down to the shore. Seeing the dead body of the Mermaid, the Fisherman starts to weep with great pain. He tries in vain to revive his lover with his mad kisses, her cold lips will never be warm again, her eyelids shall never open anymore. With the death the little Mermaid, he finally realises how selfish he was. He concludes that “Love is better than wisdom, and more precious than riches, and fairer than the feet of the daughters of men” (*HP* 125). Then, as love completely fills his heart, it eventually breaks, and his Soul can enter in to become one with him and die together.

Although the Fisherman and the Mermaid lie dead on the ground in each other’s arms, still the Priest commands to bury them in an unmarked grave in the corner of the “Field of the Fuller” since they are cursed. The place also has a biblical reference; the fullers’ (washermen) job is to ‘full’ (to thicken) or clean (whiten) clothes (Isaiah 7:3; 36:2; 2 Kings 18:17) which, in a spiritual sense, can be interpreted as an act of ‘self-purification’. As the Fisherman (with his sinner soul) and the Mermaid (without a soul) are placed there, they are symbolically ‘sentenced to’ Purgatory to get cleansed from their trespasses before they ascend to heaven. After three years, when the Priest enters the chapel, he notices that the altar is covered with beautiful, sweet-scented “white flowers”, which troubles his senses and makes him talking not of the “wrath of

God, but of the God whose name is Love". It turns out that these flowers are "from the corners of the Fuller's Field", from the tomb of the lovers. The outgrown divine flowers are the symbolic representation of their purged spirits. Thus, the Priest in the next morning blesses all the sea-folks and who are in the woodland, granting them forgiveness and salvation from their "unblessedness." (*HP* 127-28).

Conclusion

Now that all the fairy tales have come to their end, simultaneously the innermost secret of the ‘Wildean Pomegranate’ is revealed; that is the beauty of the core, the greatness of the soul by being magnanimous. It holds all the great pleasures and pains: the elevated feelings of delight and burning passions. ‘The fruit of *passion*’ is what this pomegranate symbolises, and in this sense, it means the willingness to suffer for something or someone we love from the depths of our heart and soul. Wilde in “De Profundis” quotes Christ who calls the soul “God’s Kingdom” and compares it “to a pearl” or a “tiny seed” that he can find in everyone. The soul is the core of the human body, and one can only notice his own if he gets rid of “all alien passions, [...] and all external possession” (1999, 73). This is what Wilde presents throughout his tales with the use of allegories. In the nine tales, the allegories can be envisioned as being placed within each other (as if being Chinese boxes), where each individual work embraced by the overall aesthetic framework. The nested design of the Russian (Matryoshka) doll can also be compared to this concept, where at the core lies the Heart – in the tales of “The Fisherman and His Soul” and “The Nightingale and Rose” – covering the most prominent theme one should focus on, that is the transformation of human love into the passion of art and Passion of Christ.

At the same time, some interconnections between the tales can be observed, such as the parallel between tale of the Fisherman and the Nightingale. The Nightingale’s last song about “the Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb” is perfectly illustrated in the Fisherman’s story with the lover’s being purified, then ascend to heaven. Also, the Fisherman echoes the Nightingale’s love philosophy (Love is better than life and wisdom), where in both tales (but also in “The Selfish Giant”) the word ‘Love’ is capitalised, which presents the whole frame of tales. Moreover, the bird characters embody different figures: the Linnet is a priestess-like character who tries to convey parables to those who seemingly listen but deaf to their lesson; the Nightingale is an artist who creates a magnificent work of art for those who cannot value it; and the Swallow is like the Holy Spirit who brings blessings for those who in need, yet he is thrown in the dust-heap at the end. Not to mention the cynic Lizard, popping up in some of the tales and represents Wilde’s contemporary readers – who could realise the real essence of the birds’ “songs” and were able to understand ‘the higher ethics’ of the story.

To conclude the exploration of Oscar Wilde's fairy tales, it is essential to note the author's autobiographical presence in them. Wilde's nuanced struggles could be noticed through his allegorical motifs and particularly with the illustration of his pomegranates: once he becomes a Happy Prince or a dying Nightingale, other times he is a free Swallow if not an imprisoned Dwarf. He embodies pleasure-seeking Young King and celebrates like a Spanish Infanta. There are moments transform him from a Selfish Giant into a Devoted Friend, and even there are occasions when he calls out to his reader from the depths of Hell like a lost Soul.

Wilde could also relate to Christ's Passion, which is beautifully portrayed in "The Happy Prince" and "The Selfish Giant" but even in "The Nightingale and The Rose". He shows that Love is the "only possible explanation of the extra amount of suffering that there is in the world" (1999, 67). During Wilde's imprisonment, he remained true to his principles that this excerpt from his poem, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" also describes:

Ah, happy they whose hearts can break
And peace of pardon win!
How else may man make straight his plan
And cleanse his soul from Sin?
How else but through a broken heart
May Lord Christ enter in? (1999, 137)

In his critical essay, "The Soul of Man under Socialism" he further elaborates on his understanding of Christ's message: "'Know Thyself' was written over the portal of the antique world. Over the portal of the new world, 'Be thyself' shall be written. And the message of Christ was simply 'Be thyself.' That is the secret of Christ" (1999, 255)²⁴ and that is the secret of Oscar Wilde as well.

²⁴ Later, Wilde explains in the same essay how to interpret this 'secret': "You have a wonderful personality. Develop it. Be yourself. Don't imagine that your perfection lies in accumulating or possessing external things. Your perfection is inside of you. [...] In the treasury-house of your soul, there are infinitely precious things." Therefore, "man reaches his perfection, not through what he has, not even through what he does, but entirely through what he is" (1999, 255-56).

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