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**OSCAR FINGAL O'FLAHERTIE, THE WILDE COLONIAL BOY:
SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SUBVERSION IN
OSCAR WILDE'S FAIRY TALES**

by

Carol Ann Tattersall

**A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of English
University of Toronto**

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Abstract: Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie, *The Wilde Colonial Boy*
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Wilde used The Happy Prince and Other Tales and A House of Pomegranates to scrutinize the literary, moral and political assumptions that underpinned nineteenth-century morality and politics, especially as they affected marginalized people both in Britain and in the colonies.

During his Oxford years, Wilde played down his Irishness, but his observations and experiences during his North American lecture tour seem to have reminded him of his socialist/Irish Nationalist heritage, and caused him to re-examine his literary agenda in relation to English society and values.

Wilde's satirical strategy develops gradually from gentle parody of society's foibles in "The Happy Prince" and "The Nightingale and the Rose," to a serious interrogation of patriarchal and imperial practices in "The Young King" and "The Star Child." In the later tales, he examines how both the fairy tale and the Bible had been enlisted to promote values that sustained nineteenth-century English systems of control. His early letters, reviews and essays demonstrate that he recognized the power of popular fiction, especially the fairy tale, as moral propaganda. Consequently, he chose that genre to represent his revisionist ideas, and gradually devised more sophisticated

methods to suit the complexities of the issues he was addressing. Wilde's agenda becomes more focused, and his strategies more subtle, as he discovers the extent to which both fairy tales and the Bible have been used by the Establishment as controlling agents. As post-colonial writers reclaim their history and identity through ironic mimicry of the perceptions and discourse of the oppressor, Wilde, by echoing the language and content of the King James Bible, authenticates his own point of view and reclaims those parts of biblical teaching that have been ignored or altered to preserve the moral and social status quo.

Through the two sets of fairy tales, Wilde exposes the abuses of the marginalized in society by the systems of control, and the ways in which apparently innocuous children's literature and even the Bible itself can be exploited to serve those systems.

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Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie: The Wilde Colonial Boy

Introduction

The Happy Prince and Other Tales, Wilde's first collection of short stories, was published in the spring of 1888. By 1910 the book had gone into its seventh printing, and has enjoyed commercial success ever since. Not even Wilde's public disgrace and imprisonment had much effect on the popularity of his first volume of fairy tales, and over the years the stories have been translated into numerous languages, have been adapted for the stage and have even appeared as animated films. The same is not true, however, of the second collection, A House of Pomegranates, which was published in the autumn of 1891. Perhaps the rash of negative reviews appearing at regular intervals in the press between November 1891 and February 1892 was part of the reason why the enthusiastic readers of the first collection showed so little interest in the second. While The Happy Prince had delighted the critics with its lively simplicity, A House of Pomegranates displeased them with the "ultra-aestheticism of the pictures" and its "rather 'fleshly' style" (Pall Mall Gazette. London. 30th Nov, 1891). By 1912 its first edition had still not sold out.

Although each volume when it first appeared did, for quite different reasons, excite public and journalistic interest, neither book has ever elicited much scholarly response. Even in the recent surge of critical activity associated with Wilde and his work little attention has been given to the fairy tales. Indeed, the fairy tale label may in part explain why they arouse so little academic curiosity compared to the rest of Wilde's writing: more than two thirds of the critical work on the tales deals with them exclusively in the context of folk literature or of children's literature. Of course, the stories, especially in the first collection, do undeniably belong to the category of children's literature, but as Wilde himself pointed out in response to both friendly and unfriendly reviews of the tales, he intended them as much more than mere diversions for young readers.

In June 1888 in a note to G.H. Kersley, a friend and poet, Wilde remarks:

[The stories in The Happy Prince] are studies in prose, put for Romance's sake into a fanciful form: meant partly for children and partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy, and who find in simplicity a subtle strangeness. [They] are an attempt to mirror modern life in a form remote from reality

-- to deal with modern problems in a mode that is ideal and not imitative: I hope you will like them: they are, of course, slight and fanciful, and written, not for children, but for childlike people from eighteen to eighty! (Letters 219)

Clearly Wilde's agenda in writing the tales was more complicated than might at first appear. Not only does he claim a wider potential audience than merely children, but he also admits to using the fairy-tale form quite consciously to deal with "modern problems."

Three years later, with the publication of A House of Pomegranates, he is even more adamant about his literary intentions. To the editor of the Pall Mall Gazette he writes:

[Your reviewer] starts by asking an extremely silly question, and that is, whether or not I have written this book for the purpose of giving pleasure to the British child. Having expressed grave doubts on this subject, a subject on which I cannot conceive any fairly-educated person having any doubts at all, he proceeds, apparently quite seriously to make the extremely limited vocabulary at the disposal of the British child the standard by which the prose of an artist is to be judged! Now in building this House of Pomegranates I had

about as much intention of pleasing the British child as I had of pleasing the British public

(Letters 302)

If we accept the comments Wilde makes about his tales in his letters, then, it seems insufficient to treat them simply as literature aimed at children, especially when we also consider the opinions about the relationship between life and art that he expresses in essays written at the same period. Wilde saw literature as "the perfect expression of life" (1890, AC 350), and not merely as a representation of nature and mundane human existence. He believed that art must transform the ordinary, must offer to its audience something beyond even what in Nature is considered beautiful:

Life and Nature may sometimes be used as part of Art's rough material, but before they are of any real service to art they must be translated into artistic conventions (1890, AC 319).

Wilde seemed to feel that his fairy tales fulfilled the expectations for art that he outlines in his essays, and even those critics who have analyzed them mainly as children's literature, demonstrate an awareness of some of the social and literary dimensions of the stories. The earliest reviews of The Happy Prince, which appeared (unsigned) on 1 Sept, 1888, in the Athenaeum, and on 20 Oct

in The Saturday Review, refer to "a piquant touch of contemporary satire" (Athenaeum XXII 286) and "bitterness" mixed with a "sensation of the humorous" (Saturday Review LXVI 472).

Also, few critics fail to remark on the moral elements in the tales (in 1977, J. A. Quintus wrote an article entirely on "The Moral Prerogative in Oscar Wilde: A Look at the Fairy Tales"), but this is hardly surprising, since most children's literature, especially from the nineteenth century, tends to be didactic. Unfortunately, partly because of concerns with morality, until the 1970s little appeared that was not coloured by some bias against the writer himself, although Vyvyan Holland, Wilde's son, wrote a perceptive and useful analysis of the tales in May 1954, in The Adelphi, on the hundredth anniversary of his father's birth . Another interesting analysis that recognizes the complexity of the apparently simple children's stories was offered as early as 1962 by John Updike, in his introduction to a Macmillan edition of "The Young King" and Other Fairy Tales by Oscar Wilde. While acknowledging the suitability of the stories for young readers, Updike notes that they are also, in many ways, like old morality plays and aimed at adults.

It was not, however, until the 1970s that critical responses to the tales began to recognise more consistently

some of the interesting ways in which they address the relationships between art and life. During that decade works appeared that concentrated specifically on Wilde's use of the tales for self-examination and self-creation. In 1978, for instance, Marlyn Kelly Spelman completed a Ph.D. thesis on The Self-Realization Theme in "The Happy Prince" and "A House of Pomegranates," and in 1979 Robert Martin, in a short article, claimed that the fairy tales provided a suitable vehicle for Wilde's expression of his own inner development (Studies in Short Fiction 16, 74-77). Certainly, Wilde made little effort to distance himself from his own work; indeed, as Edward Said has pointed out, he did rather the opposite: "What he wrote was intended for more comment or for quotation or, most important, for tracing back to him" (The World, the Text and the Critic 42). Wilde is always to some extent the subject of his own text.

Recently (1993), Guy Willoughby has produced a book length study of the fairy tales, much of which deals with the artist's exploration of himself in his writing. Willoughby analyses the use of images of Christ in the stories, and ways in which Wilde as artist relates to these images. The main focus, however, is not on the revelation of the artist in his work, but on the development of Wilde's religious and social perspectives through the stories. Willoughby's analysis is thorough and perceptive, and

particularly demonstrates consistency in the development of Wilde's literary agenda from the fairy stories through De Profundis. The observation of constantly evolving attitudes and beliefs in Wilde's work would correspond with Wilde's own view of the relationship between art and truth. In Wilde's opinion, truth is never static, and is attainable, even temporarily, only through the expression and exploration of apparently contradictory ideas.¹

In "The Critic as Artist," one of his most sophisticated essays, Wilde maintains: "...we are never more true to ourselves than when we are inconsistent" (CW 887). As J. E. Chamberlin remarks in "Oscar Wilde and the Importance of Doing Nothing:" "It is the genius of Wilde that he did recognise this slippery paradox, where 'the contradictory is also true,' and that he embodied it in all of his work" (The Hudson Review 205).

¹ Some of Wilde's original student notebooks have been preserved, and are part of the extensive collection of his manuscripts at the William Clarke Library, Los Angeles. The most complete was entitled by its author Commonplace Book. The notebooks have been edited by Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfland. There Wilde remarks:

For Hegel the realization of intentions (or of the idea) in human history occurred through the negation of present existence by antithetical ideas.

(Oxford Notebooks 59)

His editors gloss this comment:

The truth for Wilde is, as always, dialectical.... To be truly useful the artist's imagination must intervene in the imitative and reproductive process to provide new ideas for life. (60 - 61)

Those who read the tales as the artist's examination of himself present a valid point of view, in that the writer does, indeed, create alternative constructs of himself in his work and, almost certainly, was continually reinventing himself "through the negation of [his] present existence by antithetical ideas." But contrary to the pose he most often chose to assume, Wilde was not merely a narcissistic aesthete. He was, in fact, deeply committed to the quest for "new ideas for life." Perhaps at the beginning of his writing career, his efforts were mostly focused on finding new modes of artistic expression, and certainly, he had a particular aversion to realism, most eloquently expressed in "The Decay of Lying." That essay is written in the form of a Platonic dialogue, and in his search for appropriate forms Wilde experimented with a whole series of genres, both recent and archaic: the sonnet, the ballad, the parable, the gothic novel, the comedy of manners and, of course, the fairy tale. He was not, however, interested merely in imitation or even in avoiding "modernity" in what he believed to be its most insidious form, "realism," but rather in how the familiar can serve as a basis for innovation, and by its very familiarity emphasise what does not conform to convention.

In 1974, David Monaghan pointed out that Wilde understood the conventions of the fairy tale so well that he

was able to signal and enhance the meanings of his stories through deviations from the accepted norms of the genre. Five years later, Michael Kotzin also discussed the writerly self-consciousness of Wilde's use of fairy-tale conventions. Both critics have argued convincingly that Wilde quite intentionally chose the fairy tale genre because he recognized the potential for multiplication of meanings through manipulation of traditional forms and formulae. While each of these critics limits his discussion to one or two specific tales, I believe that Wilde's experimentation with conventions is not only deliberate but also consistent and increasingly complex throughout the two collections. But critical studies of The Happy Prince and Other Tales and A House of Pomegranates are clearly not numerous and, apart from Willoughby's book, Spelman's dissertation and introductions to various editions, tend to concentrate on one or two stories; it is not, then, surprising that Kotzin and Monaghan have not pursued their observations further.

In examining Wilde's use of convention it is also necessary to consider the complex nature of the genre in which he was working. Hallet and Karasek, in Folk and Fairy Tales, warn that

...the fairy tale must be seen as a continuum. At one extreme we find the oral folk tale, which by its very nature cannot be represented in this

book; ...the oral tale's transformation into literary form requires careful analysis, not only of the tale itself, but also of the motives and values of those responsible for its metamorphosis. At the other extreme there is the literary tale written by a specific person at a specific time.... In between these two poles, however, we have a virtually infinite number of permutations, as tradition blends with invention in the writer's mind. (5)

It was my own need to define the ways in which Wilde inventively manipulates fairy-tale conventions in his stories that led me to recognise the multiplicity of ambiguities and ironies the writer creates in his two sets of stories. Also, as is usually the case, the whole is very much greater than the sum of its parts, for each story and each set of stories extends its implications exponentially when read in relation to the other(s). I also soon discovered that although the main tradition in which Wilde is working is that of the folk tale, at least as it was recorded by Perrault, the Grimms, and others, and the literary fairy-tale as it had developed into the nineteenth-century, he draws equally from another source of folk wisdom: the Bible, specifically the version authorized by King James I in 1612.

Just as he plays with familiar elements of fairy tales to create the sort of conflict between form and content that will alert attentive readers to other levels of meaning, so Wilde also uses biblical references to complicate the reader's response to characters and incidents in his stories. In fact, as the tales progress, Wilde's use of the Bible becomes increasingly sophisticated: not only do his references become more specific but he actually begins to imitate the style and syntax of the Bible's English translation, even incorporating direct quotations in his own texts. In "The Fisherman and his Soul," for instance, the echo of Mark 8.36, "For what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul," is unmistakable: "And as for my soul, what does it profit me, if it stand between me and the thing I love" (128).²

It would not be difficult to believe that the density of reference and the clever manipulation of form are merely evidence of the writer's delight in excess and his propensity for plagiarism and revelling in his own genius. But, again, when we consider the stories in the context of "The Soul of Man under Socialism," "The Critic as Artist" and "The Decay of Lying," all written in the interval between the two sets of tales, and in light of his own

² I shall discuss the significance of Wilde's use of such quotations in Chapter IV.

comments about his intentions in the fairy tales, it seems likely that the stories are, as much as the major essays, a product of a period of reflection and transition in Wilde's literary, social and philosophical development. Indeed, I believe that these tales address, in a deceptively simple form, not only the same issues that Wilde deals with in the essays but also many of those in his later work.

In effect, what Wilde does in his fairy tales, published in 1888 and 1891, is, it seems, very little different from what post-colonial writers have been doing in this century: he creates "counter-discursive strategies" of the sort that Helen Tiffin describes in her essay "Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse:"

[such strategies] involve a mapping of the dominant discourse, a reading and exposing of its underlying assumptions, and the dis/mantling of these assumptions from the cross-cultural standpoint of the imperially subjectified 'local'.... (Kunapipi 23)

Ironically, it seems that the texts that employ the dominant discourse whose "underlying assumptions" Wilde seeks to "expose" and "dis/mantle" are the seemingly innocuous fairy tale and even the revered King James Bible. But it is not, in fact, the Bible or the fairy tale that Wilde challenges; rather, he aims to disengage the language,

the mythology and especially the values of both from the discourse that underpins patriarchal and imperial systems of control, and sets the boundaries of normality. With reference to Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea, Helen Tiffin discusses strategies that are, I believe, similar to Wilde's:

[the novel] directly contests British sovereignty -- of persons, of place, of culture, of language. It reinvests its own hybridised world with a provisionally authoritative perspective, but one which is deliberately constructed as provisional since the novel is at pains to demonstrate the subjective nature of point of view and hence the cultural construction of meaning. (Kunapipi 23)

So also Wilde creates in his fairy tales a "provisionally normative perspective," destabilizing apparently fixed codes of morality and positing the validity of alternative values.

Wilde remarked, in response to what he deemed inane criticism of A House of Pomegranates:

The artist seeks to realize in a certain material his immaterial idea of beauty, and thus to transform an idea into an ideal. That is the way an artist makes things. That is why an artist makes things. The artist has no other object in making things. (Letters 302)

The "ideas" and "ideals" that Wilde speaks of here might well seem to be related only to his increasing interest in aestheticism and in "art for Art's sake." But, in fact, by 1891 Wilde's concept of the role of the artist in society had expanded to include much more than aesthetic ideals: he had begun to assert that art, in seeking to be "the perfect expression of Life" (AC 351), must not only discover and create beauty but must also, and perhaps more importantly, expose and correct ugliness, especially the ugliness of social and political exploitation. Earlier in the same year that A House of Pomegranates was published, "The Soul of Man under Socialism" had also appeared. In that essay Wilde claims:

Misery and poverty are so absolutely degrading, and exercise such a paralysing effect over the nature of men, that no class is ever really conscious of its own suffering. They have to be told of it by other people.

... it is curious to note that from the slaves themselves [those who worked for the abolition of slavery] received, not merely very little assistance, but hardly any sympathy even; and when... the slaves found themselves... free to starve, many of them bitterly regretted the new state of things. (AC 260 -261)

The same situation that Wilde discusses here, he reworks in many of the stories in both collections of tales, especially in "The Young King." When the King, realizing that he is responsible for the suffering of the poor throughout his empire, repents and refuses to wear "what grief has fashioned," one of his oppressed subjects points out bitterly that with the removal of his source of income, he and his family will be in even worse straits. Wilde understands quite well the conflicts involved in solving the problems of poverty; he knows that simplistic "remedies do not cure the disease: they merely prolong it," and that the "proper aim is to try to reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible" (AC 256). But to motivate reconstruction

agitators are absolutely necessary.... Agitators are a set of interfering, meddling people, who come down to some perfectly contented class of the community, and sow the seeds of discontent among them. (AC 259).

In writing his tales, although he does not perhaps go so far as to become an agitator himself, Wilde certainly offers a view of society that might move people of a certain temperament towards agitation. Yet in exposing society's ugliness, he does not transgress his own artistic code that allows him to create only what is beautiful: the Young King,

for instance, in proposing a system in which the rich no longer exploit the poor, offers society an "immaterial idea of beauty," a concept, at that point attainable only through the artist's imagination. Wilde explains this apparent paradox in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" when comparing the work of medieval and renaissance painters. As they depicted Christ's pain, Wilde believes, the medieval artists came closer to capturing the essence of divine beauty than the renaissance artists, who represented only the imagined outward radiance of their subject; the medieval painters concentrated not on the physical attributes of Jesus but on the more profound attractions of his "marvellous soul," his "divinity."³ Similarly, in his own art, Wilde seeks not merely to represent what is outwardly pleasing, but to alter the perspective on his subject so that the elements that distinguish beauty and ugliness become less clearly defined. What is particularly remarkable, however, is the increasing sophistication of the devices that Wilde develops to effect this change in audience perception: to encourage life to

³ This would seem at odds with the views expressed by Browning's late medieval/early renaissance artist, Fra Lippo Lippi. But, in effect, Wilde is not advocating that the artist make the public "forget there's such a thing as flesh" ("Fra Lippo Lippi," Men and Women 32), but rather, like Fra Lippo, he should show that body and soul are inseparable. In depicting beauty, the artist is representing the soul; he should "take breath and try to add life's flesh,/ And then add soul and heighten them threefold" ("Lippo" 32-33).

imitate art.

Wilde does not aim simply to displace the dominant culture and morality as they are represented in nineteenth-century adaptations of fairy tales, often given authority by the use of the idiom and narratives of the Bible, but rather to create space at the moral and cultural centre for other constructs of "normality." While he writes within the rules and conventions of the fairy-tale genre, he enlists those same conventions to call into question the values that the Victorian versions of the tales were used to endorse. Wilde's protagonists, for instance, although they seem to be typical fairy tale characters, with all the attributes of personality, appearance and lineage that might be expected, seldom behave as tradition demands. The same is true of other conventions of the genre: one very important element of plot is the transformation of the hero, and usually also of his community, yet although Wilde's characters are almost invariably transformed it is not always in the ways we might expect, and the transformation seldom affects the rest of society. But perhaps the most obvious, and also the most significant convention that is observed yet somehow reinterpreted in Wilde's tales is the moral lesson at the end; the lesson is still there, but is strangely inconclusive. In Chapter III, I shall demonstrate more specifically how Wilde manipulates various fairy-tale

conventions to reclaim the genre as both exemplar for and representative of the ordinary folk with whom it originated, and to reject the controlling systems that it has so long been enlisted to serve.

In the two remaining chapters I shall demonstrate that, by using the Bible text in contexts that are quite different from those in which it is usually found in nineteenth-century fairy tales, Wilde interrogates ways in which the Bible itself has been exploited. His investigation and methods both become more complex as the stories progress. At first the references are no more than echoes, recalling only in a general way precepts or accepted teachings from the Old and New Testaments. Soon, however, we begin to recognise more specific biblical incidents and even actual characters who parallel characters in Wilde's stories; and, eventually, we find almost direct quotations from the Bible itself. These are not, however, used in ways typical of the popular Victorian fairy tale, to reinforce standard concepts of morality. Indeed, we shall see that Wilde uses references and quotations from the Bible not to reinforce but to challenge conventional values. He consistently implies that the Bible has been uprooted from its initial status as a repository of folk wisdom, and, specifically, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, as the word of God, and enlisted as part of the discourse used to perpetuate systems of control

and domination.

Of course, as an Oxford graduate and a coveted dinner guest among the social Establishment, Wilde seemed to belong to the class that designed and administered the systems of control. Consequently, he would seem an unlikely champion of the poor and oppressed, and especially unqualified to represent what Tiffin calls the "cross-cultural standpoint of the imperially subjectified 'local'." But, and this is essential to my reading of the fairy tales, Wilde did not really belong to the Establishment. Neither through birth nor through achievement could he ever be admitted to the ranks of the social or literary elite in England, for he was, after all, Irish, and I believe that his Irishness, more even than his homosexuality, is what defines both for him and for English society his status as outsider.

Wilde was, in fact, not only Irish, but the son of two notoriously vocal advocates of Home Rule for Ireland, and grew up in a house frequented by revolutionaries, some of whom were actually deported for their insurrectionist activities. Nor was the family sympathy for the oppressed Irish merely political theory or posturing. William Wilde, Oscar's father, was friendly with many of the peasant farmers in the West of Ireland, where he owned property and visited frequently to do folk and archaeological research, taking his sons along. Thus, in his early years Oscar was

exposed to the continued suffering of the Irish poor in the aftermath of the Great Famine and, as he travelled, especially in rural Ireland, he would have seen deserted cottages and even whole villages, silent witnesses to the devastation of Irish life and culture, and to the depopulation of the country through death and emigration.

There is, of course, only slender evidence during Wilde's time in Oxford and the first few years in London that he retained any strong impressions from his childhood experiences in Ireland. After 1883, however, the references in his letters, and eventually in his work, to his home country and his ethnic background become frequent and even, at times, quite fiercely nationalistic. In his earliest writing and even in his demeanour at Oxford, Wilde left little doubt that he considered himself an individualist and made every effort to be regarded as distinct, revelling in the role of aesthete and avant garde artist. But I believe that it was not until his lecture tour of the United States and Canada, in 1882, that he began to realize the real reasons for and the extent of his difference from the English whom he so much admired. In the chapter that follows I shall trace the emergence of Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie as the Wilde Colonial Boy and argue that Wilde's Irishness, his status as colonial, and the republican convictions absorbed in childhood and reawakened in America eventually govern

every aspect of his writing. I shall also argue that, in style, strategy, content and point of view The Happy Prince and Other Tales and A House of Pomegranates are, essentially, precursors of twentieth-century post-colonial writing.

Chapter I

Pen, Power and Protest:

Irish and American Influences on Wilde's Philosophy of Art

Irish Childhood and Parental Influences

In his article "Rediscovering the Irish Wilde," Neil Sammells remarks that "Shaw proclaims that 'there is nothing in the world quite so exquisitely comic as an Englishman's seriousness'" (Rediscovering O.W. 366), and certainly Irish writers had traditionally regarded the English as fair game for their satire. But more than the Irish literary heritage determines Wilde's approach to his writing. By the time he wrote the fairy tales his motivation was, I believe, inextricably linked with his own experience as a child growing up in Dublin and the West of Ireland, influenced by his distinctive parents and their diverse circle of friends. Yet, while Wilde's life has probably received much more scrutiny than his work, curiously, until very lately little

significance has been attached to his being Irish.¹

Wilde himself, however, clearly realized the importance of being Irish: even writing to his friends while still under the spell of Oxford he makes frequent references to his Celtic heritage. But later letters to his Irish literary peers, especially, reveal his pride in his origins: in 1893, he wrote to G.B. Shaw: "...England is the land of intellectual fogs but you have done much to clear the air: we are both Celtic..." (Letters 332). Not only do Wilde's letters assert his own and Shaw's difference from the English, but they also infer the superiority of the Irish; Shaw's work and correspondence suggest that he shared Wilde's sentiments on this subject. Also Yeats, although perhaps a little more diplomatic, was no less convinced of the reality of Celtic literary genius, and saw Wilde as a perfect example of the Irishman unafraid to use his innate wit to attack English dullness. He says of Wilde: "...much about him is Irish of the Irish. I see in his life and works an extravagant Celtic crusade against Anglo-Saxon stupidity" (Yeats, Uncollected Prose, 203).

While his Irish peers took almost proprietary delight

1

Since 1992 three books focusing on the significance of Wilde's Irishness have appeared: Richard Pine. The Thief of Reason, 1995; Davis Coakley. The Importance of Being Irish, 1994; David Upchurch. Wilde's Use of Irish Celtic Elements in 'The Picture of Dorian Gray', 1992.

in Wilde's flaunting of his Irish wit mainly to flout what he saw as hypocritical English social restraints, the English too emphasized his alien Celtic characteristics, but from a much less positive and often even petty perspective. Alfred Douglas, for instance, mocked his Irish propensity to confuse his "shalls and wills." It is, then, all the more surprising that, although he was certainly regarded by his contemporaries as quintessentially Irish (though what is quintessential about the Irish varies greatly according to one's point of view), the effects of his ethnic background on Wilde's writing have, until now, been almost studiously ignored. Perhaps it is because, unlike Swift, Edgeworth, Yeats, Joyce, Shaw, and almost every other Irish writer, Wilde did not make Ireland or things Irish the obvious subject of any of his work.

In his book, The Thief of Reason: Oscar Wilde and Modern Ireland, however, Richard Pine makes a very convincing case for treating Wilde as an "Irish" writer, establishes the terms of reference for "Irishness" in the nineteenth century, and traces the various Irish literary and folk influences in Wilde's work. He comments:

...because Wilde appears to have little mainstream connection with indigenous (as opposed to emigré) Irish writing -- a situation which seems to have been largely created by the neglect of the critics

-- there has seemed little cause for delving into the marginalized Irish folklore when similar instances could be found in more accessible texts.

(Pine, Thief 181)

Pine goes on to place Wilde's fairy tales very firmly in the Irish folk tradition, and also shows the detailed connections between Wilde's work and the whole canon of Irish literature from Swift, Edgeworth, Sheridan and their contemporaries to Yeats, Shaw and Boucicault. In his treatment of the fairy tales, Pine concentrates on motif and imagery, although he does see the stories as "intensely speculative and intellectual" and Wilde as a "natural seanchai" (161).² He believes

[t]he core of Wilde's Irishness in his storytelling is in the distinction between fiction and myth. As Denis Donoghue has observed, 'fiction is a means of being conscious without further responsibility. A myth may be equally fictive, but it has these quite different qualities: we have not invented it; we have received it from its use by other people' -- in fact it has invented us. In his stories and plays Wilde receives the mythic

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The seanchai is not only a storyteller, but an originator and interpreter of myths respected not only for gifts of language but for insight and wisdom.

wisdom of a previous world and makes it modern.

(Thief 184)

That Wilde draws on "the mythic wisdom of a previous world," especially if we include the Bible as part of the myth that has "invented us," is indisputable, that he "makes it modern" is not entirely accurate.³ What Wilde does with myth is not to modify it or to remake it in any way to suit a modern consciousness, but, rather, to return to it its status as timeless wisdom, and in doing so to question the validity of the modern constructions and even deliberate perversions of truths that have emerged through centuries of storytelling. Thus, it is not so much the direct borrowings from Irish myth in Wilde's fairy tales that are pertinent to my argument, as the ways in which his perception and presentation of wisdom and humanity are affected by his exposure to Irish folk tales and literature, to a culture that is by British standards essentially foreign.

Wilde was not only ostentatiously Irish, but also acutely conscious of the ironic gap between his perception of Irishness as a matter of pride and the English equation of Irishness with inferiority. Clearly, Wilde's views, like those of most Irish people, diverged at many points quite

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In this context, "modern," of course, refers to whatever was current in art and literature at the end of the nineteenth century.

dramatically from those of the average middle-class English person. Indeed, as Pine points out:

[f]or the Irishman, seen both in isolation and in terms of Ireland's experience of England, the social construction of reality is in fact 'unreal' because he cannot subscribe to its rules and its canon. (Thief 3)

Although it may seem like exaggeration to suggest that the Irish experience "reality" differently from the English, this is, in fact, perfectly reasonable. For the Irish, England is more culturally alien than Canada, Australia, New Zealand or the United States, for those countries, like Ireland, were at one time colonized by England. Also, of course, displaced Irish constitute a large part of the population of all four countries, and certainly, in the United States and Australia, the Irish were partly responsible for the assertion of cultural and political separateness from Britain.

The Irish are no less perplexed by the niceties of English etiquette, the strangeness of English customs and the formality of English society than are observers from other colonies; indeed, their consciousness of their own difference may be even more acute than that of other foreigners, accentuated as it has been throughout history by Ireland's reluctance to submit to British rule, or to accept

the English construct of the Irish as coarse, simple and socially challenged. And the group to whom that categorization is most offensive is, ironically, the Anglo-Irish, the same group that is, by outside analysts, implicated equally with the English in the oppression of the indigenous Irish, the group to which the Wilde family belonged.

Certainly the Irish upper and middle classes cannot escape culpability for the abuses of the Irish poor, but we must not lose sight of the fact that just as those who fought hardest for the abolition of slavery were from the same class as the slave owners, so those who have protested most volubly against the treatment of the Irish peasants are those with the wealth, education and power to be able to make their voices heard: mainly those known as the Anglo-Irish.⁴ Jonathan Swift, Maria Edgeworth, Wolfe Tone, Augusta Gregory, John Mitchel: whether in politics or literature, those with conscience and talent, whether Catholic or Protestant, have been for centuries the advocates of justice and the voices of protest for the silenced and the oppressed

4

The term itself is a misnomer suggesting an affiliation with the English that need not necessarily exist. Many of the more responsible resident landlords traced their roots in Ireland to Norman times and were of French rather than Anglo-Saxon stock, and most middle and upper-middle class Irish by the nineteenth century considered themselves as Irish as anyone living in Ireland.

of their country, and consider themselves entirely Irish; indeed, many have little traceable English connection. The Wildes, for instance, had been in Ireland for at least one and a half centuries by the mid-eighteenth century, and came probably from Holland. Also, William Wilde's mother, Amalia Flynn, was from the west of Ireland and had an obviously Celtic surname. Oscar's mother's family had apparently been in Ireland since the seventeenth century, having come originally from Florence and changed their name to Elgee from Algiati. (Speranza claimed direct descent from Dante Aligheri, on her father's side). Through her mother she was related to the Maturins, clearly of Norman extraction. Consequently, to assume that by acting at times more English than the English, Wilde forfeited his Irish birthright is to ignore not only his actual family background but also the whole tradition, literary and political, to which his family belonged.

Even if I have successfully urged Wilde's Irishness, however, and relocated him from the periphery of the English literary canon to the company of renowned Irish literary satirists and subversives, I have not yet offered sufficient evidence for his inclusion among what we now call post-colonial writers: those involved "in the project of asserting difference from the imperial centre" (Empire 5). Certainly, I cannot support this claim simply by showing

that he writes in an Irish rather than an English literary tradition, for in the terms of post-colonial theory I can find little distinction: for some paradoxical reason, despite the very broad, but fairly generally accepted definition quoted above, Ireland has managed to be excluded from almost any list of the countries whose literature is now described as Post-colonial. I suggest that this may be for the same reason that the Anglo-Irish have been regarded as pseudo-Irish, the oppressors of the indigenous people and interested, therefore, in supporting rather than resisting the imperial power. (Ironically, such a division subscribes to the imperialist British notion that all "real" Irish are poor and ignorant).⁵

Of course, the Irish ascendancy who chose to oppose imperialist control placed themselves in a very ambivalent position by undercutting the very system on which their own

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In his article, "Educational Policy and Social Control in Early Victorian England," Richard Johnson paraphrases part of a Pamphlet written in 1832 by Dr. Kay, an expert on education of the poor. He lists the tendencies among the working class that he believes could lead to the collapse of society: "...crime, prostitution, drunkenness, irreligion, machine breaking, pauperism and Irish immigration (that 'colonisation of savage tribes')" (Stansky, Victorian Revolution 205). Kay also "stressed throughout a 'contagion of manner,' a spread of 'barbarous habits,' commonly originating among the 'degraded' Irish population" (207). Such attitudes had become even more entrenched later in the century as agitation for Irish Home Rule increased.

status was predicated. Nevertheless, many made that choice, among them Oscar Wilde's own parents, who both spoke out passionately against the policies that during and after the Great Famine led to the depopulation of Ireland. His mother, Jane Francesca Elgee, better known as Speranza, is perhaps more famous as an insurgent, her writings having led to the indictment of her publisher, Gavan Duffy, the editor of The Nation. He was never, however, found guilty of the charges regarding the articles in The Nation, because Speranza insisted on publicly claiming their authorship.

[She] went to the Solicitor-General, denounced herself as author of the articles, and asked to have the added charge removed from Gavan Duffy's indictment. She was refused.... When the prosecutor interrogated Gavan Duffy about the articles, a tall woman arose in the gallery to interrupt. 'I, and I alone, am the culprit, if culprit there be.' (Ellmann, OW 8)

Ellmann points out that the two articles in question, "The Hour of Destiny" and "Jacta Alea Est" (The Die is Cast), appeared as editorials in The Nation on 22 and 29 July, 1848, while Duffy was in prison (Ellmann, OW 8). After four trials without a conviction by any jury, Duffy was set

free.⁶

Many have questioned the sincerity of Speranza's revolutionary zeal, but that she believed herself sincere and passed on her subversive views to her children can hardly be doubted. Her husband, on the other hand, was without question a man of strong convictions, and in spite of his philandering and his eccentric appearance, commanded respect at every level of society both in Ireland and abroad: he was "appointed Surgeon Oculist to the Queen in Ireland in 1863, and the next year was knighted" (Ellmann, OW 10); in 1862 he received the Order of the Polar Star from Sweden; in 1873 he was given the Royal Academy of Ireland's highest honour, the Cunningham Gold Medal. Although William Wilde was a famous and brilliant physician, involved in his profession until he died, he found time for many other activities, including working as a Medical Census Commissioner. Eric Lambert remarks:

This was the first time in Ireland's history that a clear general view of the nation's state of health, the incidence of diseases and the main causes of death among its population were

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In 1854, the year of Oscar's birth, Duffy emigrated to Australia where he became a minister in the government, and -- a wonderful irony -- was knighted in 1873 by Queen Victoria, against whom he had been accused of plotting treason.

available. (Mad with Much Heart 34)

Besides paid and voluntary work, Wilde also managed to find time to pursue his other consuming interests: history, archaeology and folklore of Ireland. He owned property on Lough Corrib, in the West, and often went there with his sons to do research among the dolmens, ring forts, stone circles, burial chambers and other remains that are so plentiful in that part of the country. At the same time he would visit and listen to the local people in their own homes, collecting and recording not only their tales but also their tellings. He was aware that the idiom, structure and imagery of the stories were just as important as their content, and that his job was becoming increasingly urgent. In Irish Popular Superstitions he writes:

... with depopulation the most terrific which any country ever experienced, on the one hand, and the spread of education, and the introduction of railroads, colleges, industrial or other educational schools, on the other, -- together with the rapid decay of the Irish vernacular, in which most of our legends, romantic tales, ballads, and bardic annals, the vestiges of Pagan rites, and the relics of fairy charms were preserved, -- can superstition, or if superstitious belief, can superstitious practices

continue to exist? (11)

In another part of the same text, which I shall discuss in Chapter IV, William Wilde demonstrates a clear understanding of ways in which the Irish language was being subtly, but systematically, eradicated by the colonizing power. He also deplores the lack of action to alleviate the effects of the famine and acknowledges the ways in which people of his own class, whether consciously or unconsciously, contributed to the devastation.

The great convulsion which society of all grades here has lately experienced, the failure of the potato crop, pestilence, famine, and a most unparalleled extent of emigration, together with bankrupt landlords, pauperizing poor laws, grinding officials, and decimating workhouses, have broken up the very foundation of social intercourse... and many of the firmest yet finest links which united the various classes in the community have been rudely burst asunder. (Irish Popular Superstitions 9 - 10)

As well as seeing clearly the systematic oppression of the Irish people and the repression of their culture, William Wilde sensed the inextricable link between nationhood and landscape: "If ever there was a nation that clung to the soil, and earned patriotism by the very ground they walk on,

it is (or we may now write was) the Irish peasantry" (20). Thus, although William Wilde did not urge revolt in quite the same spectacular way that his wife did, his analysis of the situation was probably more incisive and accurate; nor did he hesitate to criticize the British government, using the material he had collected as Census Commissioner to condemn what he saw as, at best, wilful neglect of the Queen's Irish subjects.

In spite of the evidence in the writings of both of Oscar's parents, and of hearsay, both Lambert and De Vere White, their biographers, and many of Oscar's biographers too, express scepticism about the depth of William and Jane Wilde's commitment to revolutionary politics. The main point of contention is that the Wildes continued to accept invitations to Dublin Castle, the centre of British rule in Ireland, and never refused any of the honours conferred on Sir William, or the small pension granted to his widow, by the imperialist government. Certainly, from the extreme revolutionary point of view such behaviour would be insupportable, but although William Wilde was immovable and outspoken in his condemnation of the treatment of the Irish and the destruction of their culture, he never advocated violence or direct insurrection: he was committed to reform rather than to revolution. Probably, indeed, his more moderate views may have impressed his wife, especially as

she witnessed the disintegration of the Young Ireland Movement into bitterly opposing factions.

Her husband, however, never discouraged any of Speranza's revolutionary friends from visiting 1 Merrion Square, and consequently, Oscar Wilde's formative years were spent in a most complex social and political environment. His childhood home was a meeting place for the most turbulent and contentious among the Home Rule supporters, their zeal inflamed by the horrors of the Irish famine:

They were intellectual revolutionaries, acting out of conviction and not out of suffering or oppression.

The Young Irelanders were led by four outstanding men:...William Smith O'Brien...Charles Gavan Duffy...Thomas Francis Meagher...and John Mitchel....

(Mad With Much Heart 81)

Ellmann reminds us that in his lecture "The Irish Poets of 1848" given in America in 1882, Oscar recalled several of these men:

[h]e could remember some of the oldest of these poets coming to his house, such as Smith o'Brien and John Mitchel and Charles Gavin Duffy. He praised these, and the poet he described as the greatest of them, Thomas Davis....

(Ellmann, OW 186)

It was also on that tour that Wilde described himself as a "thorough republican" (Ellmann, OW 186). In fact, it was in America that Oscar first began to express the political point of view that he could hardly have avoided absorbing from his parents and their large circle of Irish Nationalist friends. Indeed, I believe that the American tour in 1882 was absolutely essential to Wilde's discovery of the beliefs and characteristics bred and conditioned in him as a clever and impressionable child growing up in an intensely political, and intellectual atmosphere.

The American Experience

Had he stayed in Oxford, Wilde might have continued to be satisfied with the intellectual intensity and challenge of its environment, enjoying the opportunity for self-promotion enough to prevent his noticing, or at least to persuade him to ignore, any promptings of social conscience. The mutual fascination (not always expressed as admiration) of Wilde with Oxford and Oxford with Wilde was probably absorbing and stimulating enough to convince the young poet that he was well on his way to fulfilling the ambition he had announced while still at Portora Royal

school, "to make a sensation at any cost" (Ellmann, OW 23). At that point his Irishness seemed to have for him little political significance; it merely served to reinforce his image as an eccentric and avant garde artist.

When he arrived in London he was even more thoroughly seduced by the possibilities for gaining attention, and clearly took great pleasure in shocking and delighting fashionable society with his flamboyant appearance and outrageous Irish wit. But in those early days in London, and in his early work, there is little to see of the Irish Nationalist or even of the conscientious socialist we might expect to have been bred from his childhood environment. At that stage Oscar was much more socialite than socialist; of course, the need to be the centre of attention was also inherited or at least learned from both parents, especially from his mother. It might, indeed, have been partly his need to "cause a sensation" that first motivated him to challenge the repressive elements of the society that he had earlier emulated. Yet it was not until Wilde's return from his American tour, in 1883, that the real socialist and subversive Wilde begins to emerge both in his behaviour and in his work.

In his lecture about his American tour, Wilde remarks that there he discovered that "poverty is not a necessary accompaniment to civilization" (AC 11), and that "[i]t is

well worth one's while to go to a country which can teach us the beauty of the word FREEDOM and the value of the thing LIBERTY" (AC 12). These are certainly sentiments more in keeping with what we might expect from the son of William and Jane Wilde, and since they first found expression only after Oscar's American experience, it is worth exploring what in that year of travel through the United States and Canada might have awakened such socialist idealism in the previously insouciant aesthete whose most profound belief was in his own genius.

In 1882, Wilde supposedly announced to customs officials in New York that he had nothing to declare but his genius, and he would, no doubt, also have declared only his genius as the inspiration for his work. Although there were, of course, many influences that Wilde might and perhaps ought to have acknowledged, it is probably true that what distinguishes his writing and has allowed it not only to endure but to gain in popularity can, indeed, be attributed only to the uniqueness of Wilde's own insight. His real genius, apart from his obvious gift of language, was, in fact, his instinctive understanding of how tradition and innovation could be synthesized to create original, artistically satisfying effects, and to challenge readers to reassess their own assumptions about conventions, literary and social, political and moral.

It seems, however, that it was not until after his North American tour that Wilde began to realize that his agenda might include not only literary but also social, political and, perhaps somewhat ironically, moral concerns. Probably the most important impact on Wilde of his encounter with America was the overall ethos of that society, so determined to assert its separateness from the controlling power that it had fought a war to establish its independence. As a result of his North American experiences Wilde would gradually realize that his efforts to become English might be better spent in establishing a demeanour and a discourse that would express his identity as Irish (and as he would also soon realize, homosexual). But to understand how the artist arrived at the point where he could perceive, in such complex terms, the relationship between himself and all of those who are forced to exist at the peripheries of society, we need to examine the events that led him to reassess his views of British Imperialism.

In January 1882, Wilde arrived in New York resplendent in his aesthete's regalia, ready to exploit both his image and his ideas for financial gain. But as often happens, the effort of convincing others clarified for the lecturer the complexities of his own hypotheses. It seems that he began to make some connections between his unconventional views about art, his unconventional upbringing and his distrust of

convention both in art and in life. In his biography of Wilde, Richard Ellmann, perhaps a little facetiously, notes the beginning of Wilde's reawakening: "An unexpected result of his tour was that he rediscovered himself as an Irishman" (OW 185). Ellmann is actually gently satirising a phenomenon familiar among the Irish abroad: the reaffirmation of common (though, no doubt, often imaginary) characteristics that set them apart from other people. But Wilde rediscovered more than his superficial Irishness; he also confronted the discrepancy between his own attitudes to humanity and those of that part of British society to which he so avidly wished to belong. Just as the palace mirror revealed to Wilde's Dwarf in "The Birthday of the Infanta" the devastating truth about why the children found him funny, so American culture provided for Wilde a reflection of himself that made disturbingly clear that probably the real reasons why the English thought him amusing had less to do with respect for his impressive intellect than with condescension to his peculiarities. Many of his so-called friends in England, perhaps prompted by envy of Wilde's popularity in America, although they were judging only by hearsay, ridiculed his behaviour on his lecture tour: Swinburne declared him "a harmless young nobody" (Ellmann, OW 169). The resulting ambivalence about his own identity was to be a recurring motif in much of Wilde's best work, and a source of some of

his most innovative ideas.

While press accounts of Wilde's tour are plentiful, his letters provide the best record of his own response to his experience. He wrote to a multitude of people, but some of his most regular and relaxed correspondence was with two friends: Norman Forbes-Robertson and Helena Sickert.⁷ A week after arriving in New York Oscar wrote to Forbes-Robertson:

I am torn in bits by Society. Immense receptions, wonderful dinners, crowds wait for my carriage. I wave a gloved hand ... and they cheer....

I have ... two secretaries, one to write my autograph and answer the hundreds of letters that come begging for it. Another whose hair is brown to send locks of his own hair to young ladies who write asking for mine; he is rapidly becoming bald. Also a black servant, who is my slave -- in a free country one cannot live without a slave -- rather like a Christy minstrel except that he knows no riddles. Also a carriage and a black

7

Wilde had been friendly with Norman Forbes-Robertson since about 1880. He was a young actor, belonging to a well known theatrical family, and used the stage name Norman Forbes. Helena Sickert, the younger sister of the artist Walter Sickert, was still a teenager when she first met Wilde, in 1879. Later, as "Mrs H. M. Swanwich, she was to become known as a writer and lecturer and untiring advocate of women's rights" (H. Montgomery Hyde 49).

tiger who is like a little monkey....

(Letters 87)⁸

Wilde's tone is, of course, ironic and is as satirical of himself as of New York society, and, indirectly, of Imperialist values; but the harsh nonchalance of his comments about his black servants lacks the sensibility and humanity that are so apparent five years later in the stories in The Happy Prince, and that distinguish all his later work.

The respect for all people, regardless of their status, that young Oscar had learned from his father probably was to some extent revived by his continuing association with the black valet, Traquair, who accompanied him during his stay. It was reported by the Atlanta Constitution in July 1882, six months after he had written that flippant letter, that Wilde had tried to insist that his attendant travel in the same sleeping car, although it was reserved for whites only. He was forced to relent when the conductor persuaded him that the valet's life would be in danger if he were found in that car by the people of Jonesboro, the next stop. His behaviour, as represented in this incident, certainly seems to suggest that Wilde's attitude towards his black servants was no longer as flippant and dehumanizing as when he had

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A "tiger" was the fashionable term for a groom.

referred to them as a "Christy minstrel" and a "little monkey."

The change in his perception is also marked in a letter Wilde wrote from Missouri, in April, to Forbes-Robertson about the men in The Matchless silver mine which he had visited:

...they called me in their simple language "a bully boy with no glass eye," spontaneous and artless praise far better in its unstudied frankness than the laboured and pompous panegyric of the literary critics. (Letters 113)

In another letter, this time to Helena Sickert, Wilde writes with sympathetic simplicity:

They drove me out to see the great prison afterwards! Poor odd types of humanity in hideous striped dresses making bricks in the sun and all mean looking, which consoled me, for I should hate to see a criminal with a noble face. Little whitewashed cells so tragically tidy, but with books in them. In one I found a translation of Dante, and a Shelley. Strange and beautiful it seemed to me that the sorrow of a single Florentine in exile should, hundreds of years afterwards, lighten the sorrow of some common prisoner in a modern gaol, and one murderer with

melancholy eyes -- to be hung they told me in three weeks -- spending that interval in reading novels, a bad preparation for facing God or Nothing. (Letters 115)

By this stage in his tour Wilde's focus in his letters has changed noticeably. He has begun to demonstrate compassion for the unfortunate in society, more in keeping with what he had observed and perhaps unconsciously learned from the example of his parents, Sir William and Lady Wilde.

It seems from his letters, then, that in North America Wilde began to become aware of "modern problems." While still, certainly, the prophet of aestheticism, preaching about the beauties of dress and home decor, he seems also to have envisioned some bolder possibilities for his art.⁹ It was not only his contact with miners, servants and prisoners, however, that altered Wilde's vision; the very tenor of post-colonial American life clearly contrasted with life at the imperial centre Wilde had recently left, but it

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Although dress and decor might seem like trivial interests, as Wilde treated them they became socially subversive. Essentially his theories about clothes and furnishings, as expressed especially in his American lecture and in his essay "The Relation of Dress to Art," advocated resistance to traditional restraints. Women should reject corsets, bustles and laces that restricted their freedom and contorted their bodies; men should rebel against the drabness and conformity of male fashions because they repressed individuality. Decor and furnishings should also express personal tastes.

would also, of course, in many ways have recalled the society in which he had grown up and, as Ellmann claims, have prompted his rediscovery of himself as an Irishman. Socially and culturally, Boston and New York, in particular, were and still are very much influenced by the Irish immigrant population.

As well as reanimating his Irish socialist self in America, Wilde also rediscovered both the delight and the terrors of spontaneity in social relationships. Among the delights was Wilde's visit to Walt Whitman at Camden; the grand old poet poured elderberry wine for the grateful young writer, and enchanted his guest with his warmth and outspoken honesty. Wilde afterwards told a reporter:

I regard him as one of those wonderful, large entire men who might have lived in any age, and is not peculiar to any people. Strong, true and perfectly sane.... (Ellmann, OW 162)

Probably Wilde was, at least in part, responding to the older artist's success in achieving what Wilde was still unable to articulate clearly as his own goal. Physically, at Camden, and artistically, in his own work, Whitman had constructed his own alternative space and identity, independent of the demands of cultural and literary convention.¹⁰ But restraint in America was, in Wilde's

opinion, much more tempered by tolerance than in Britain.

According to Richard Pine,

Wilde in his late adolescence emphasised America as a place where deviancy could resolve its differences with society -- the Irish made a success there, while Thoreau made a virtue of civil disobedience and Whitman's homosexuality was no obstacle to his success and esteem as a poet. 'The Saxon basis is the rough block of the Nation,' Speranza asserted, 'but it is the Celtic influence that gives it all its artistic value and finish.' America was a place of assimilation, Britain of alienation. (Thief 35)

The quote from Speranza is from Social Studies, published in 1893, and since she had never been to America, her views might well have been partly derived from her son's account of the country.

Apart from the development that we see in Wilde's attitudes towards people and politics, it is interesting also to note the change in his perception even of the landscape. Writing again to Forbes-Robertson, he describes

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Wilde did not, however, tell reporters that he was especially impressed that Whitman had made no effort to conceal his homosexuality from him. He wrote later to a friend, George Ives, "The kiss of Walt Whitman is still on my lips" (Ellmann, OW 163).

a train journey to California:

...the Sierra Nevadas, the snow capped mountains shining like shields of polished silver in that vault of blue flame we call the sky, and deep cañons full of pine trees... and at last from the chill winter of the mountains down into the eternal summer here, groves of orange trees in fruit and flower....(Letters 109)

Wilde's unaffected appreciation of the scenery contrasts markedly with his earlier facetiousness, when, on landing in New York in January 1882, he was reported to have been displeased with the Atlantic because it was "not so majestic" (Ellmann, OW 151) as he had expected and a few months later to have declared that Niagara Falls was a great disappointment. The tone also recalls that of an earlier Oscar who wrote from Moytura, a family property in the West of Ireland, to his fellow Oxonian William Ward: "I am sure you would like this wild mountainous country.... It is in every way magnificent and makes me years younger than actual history records" (Letters 25). Such connection of the self with the landscape also recalls William Wilde's comments about pride in the land itself as essential to patriotism.

Whether Wilde believed his early comments about the American landscape, or simply felt they suited his pose is impossible to know, but a few months later he had either

changed his opinion or his pose. Whatever the case, he seems to have begun to realize the extent to which his persistent and conscious Anglicization of his public image had altered the private person. Exposure to American culture and attitudes and the constant subtle assertion of difference from England and things English in the post-colonial federation, seems to have awakened Wilde to the paradox inherent in being simultaneously Irish and British at a time when the two were becoming more stubbornly irreconcilable. Consequently, although most of the impressions that Wilde brought back with him from America were still vague and undefined, the motivation for his work, philosophy and even life seemed to have shifted significantly. In his letters from America and the subsequent essays about his experiences there we see the first inklings of an understanding of individualism that goes beyond mere posturing. In his work, Wilde would continue to explore the relationship of the individual to society and, while incarcerated in Reading Gaol, he would affirm his profound faith in the freedom of the individual to define and assert his or her independent identity, and a conviction that if "life imitates art," then through art each person can have access to his or her own fundamental being.

During his time at Oxford and in London, Wilde had allowed himself to be dazzled by the cool glare of his

sophisticated and apparently enlightened environment, but his experiences in the United States and Canada seem to have changed his perspective. He returned to England with the stirrings of a new need to use his art to explore and to establish his own identity, and to subvert rather than sustain the "dull lifeless system" of imperialism. Consequently, it seems he found himself unable to return to his role as "court jester" to the society that he had temporarily left behind. The delicate aestheticism that pursued "art for art's sake," and maintained that it had no responsibility outside of its own existence, had apparently been replaced by a new robust aestheticism that saw art and life as inseparable, each imbuing the other with creative vitality. Wilde's early and tentative theories about the use of art to serve the human need to resist stagnation had now taken on a renewed vigour. Now he realized that the independence of the individual could not be achieved merely by striking a conspicuous pose; the artist must strive to subvert, through art, "lifeless systems" that control power and identity. Soon he would begin to rewrite the narrative of authority and morality as it had been developed in adaptations of fairy tales, nineteenth-century literary fairy tales and especially popular Victorian children's stories.

Inevitably, such pursuits were to create tension

between the artist and the establishment. But, while still at Oxford, Wilde had claimed that all progress "occurred through the negation of present existence by antithetical ideas" (Oxford Notebooks 59), and it seems that his North American tour had reawakened his determination to use his own "antithetical ideas" to challenge the status quo. Such conflict could, at least in his work, have only positive results. In America he had rediscovered the beauty and value of freedom and liberty, conditions that he had learned from his parents to appreciate above almost any others. In the same lecture in which he praises liberty and freedom, Wilde also recalls some vivid impressions of San Francisco:

China Town, peopled by Chinese labourers, is the most artistic town I have ever come across. The people -- strange melancholy Orientals, whom many people would call common, and they are certainly very poor -- have determined that they will have nothing about them that is not beautiful. In the Chinese restaurant, where these navvies meet to have supper in the evening, I found them drinking tea out of china cups as delicate as the petals of a rose leaf, whereas at the gaudy hotels I was supplied with a delf cup an inch and a half thick. When the bill was presented it was made out on rice paper, the account being done in Indian ink

as fantastically as if an artist had been etching
little birds on a fan. (AC 9)

The Chinese, who had, despite poverty and hard labour, managed to combine beauty and utility, were for Wilde a living image of individualism not as a pose to gain attention, but as a quiet assertion of self and cultural identity. Perhaps the most telling discovery that Wilde made while in America was that a "navvy" was as capable of "living up to his blue china" as was an affected Oxford student, that art belonged as much to the ordinary person as to the privileged leisure classes.

The Emergence of the Irish Socialist

When he first returned from his tour of North America, however, Wilde's artistic agenda was still very vague; perhaps the only thing that was clear to him was that he was no longer content to write merely what was artistically fashionable or commercially viable. That is not to say that a work could not be both and still satisfy Wilde's own demands, but he had much to explore about himself and his

art, and the place of both in society, before he would write anything of which he himself would fully approve. Yet it seems that Wilde's lecture tour of North America, undertaken primarily for financial gain, had to some extent reanimated the artist's creativity and caused him to look more critically at his own literary and social affectations, and to recognize how such preoccupations had hindered the development of both his person and his work.

On returning to England, Wilde very soon began to capitalize on his experience abroad by going on a tour of Britain to lecture about his American tour. In that lecture he seems to satirize America as brash, noisy, unartistic and unpoetic, unlike Britain, but, in effect, he draws a much more powerful contrast between the new and the old worlds: between vitality, on the one hand, and stagnation, on the other. Indeed, he leads his audience to value everything American that is plain, unaffected, practical and the opposite of the opulent and elitist British establishment. He still admits his appreciation of the timeless beauty of "Oxford, Cambridge, Salisbury or Winchester" (AC 7), but discovers in America a new and literally more dynamic beauty that pays tribute to originality and innovation:

In England an inventor is regarded almost as a crazy man, and in too many instances invention ends in disappointment and poverty. In America an

inventor is honoured, help is forthcoming, and the exercise of ingenuity, the application of science to the work of man, is there the shortest road to wealth. There is no country in the world where machinery is so lovely as in America.

I have always wished to believe that the line of strength and the line of beauty are one. That wish was realized when I contemplated American machinery. (AC 7)

Also while ostensibly comparing the dress sense of the two nations, Wilde draws attention to the differing levels of poverty in America and in England:

...men [there] wear the shocking swallow-tail coat, but few are to be seen with no coat at all. There is an air of comfort in the people which is in marked contrast to that seen in this country, where, too often, people are seen in close contact with rags. (AC 6)

Wilde not only expresses his concern for the poor but also subtly airs his suspicion that the very sophistication that he continues to venerate is a source of exploitation of misery:

[i]n going to America one learns that poverty is not a necessary accompaniment to civilisation. There at any rate is a country that has no

trappings, no pageants and no gorgeous ceremonies.

(AC 11).

The English lecture tour, intended, it seems, as a move by Wilde, after his year-long absence from the London social scene, towards re-integrating himself in the English cultural milieu and re-establishing his reputation as artist and wit, becomes an occasion for public criticism of many of the elements that define that same society in which he still, apparently, would like to re-locate himself. In fact, in this lecture Wilde demonstrates the beginning of an appreciation for what is referred to in The Empire Writes Back as "the dynamic possibilities available to writing [or, in this case, speaking] within the tension of 'centre' and 'margin'" (Empire 59). His posture as elegant "British" observer amused by the lack of cultural grace and sophistication in the former colony, is in constant conflict with his admiration of the pragmatism that has apparently reduced human privations through the application of "common sense."

Also, although eager for recognition and success, Wilde seems much more determined to assert his real concern with the Irish question and his pride in his own ethnic origins, both reawakened by his experiences in America. Forced to make a living if he wished to remain in London, he started writing regular reviews for The Pall Mall Gazette and other

magazines, and, in some of these, his Irish republican sentiments are quite openly expressed. In his review "Mr. Froude's Blue Book [on Ireland]," for instance, Wilde leaves us in no doubt about his position regarding the relationship between the English and the Irish:

The society that [Froude] describes has long since passed away. An entirely new factor has appeared in the social development of the country, and this factor is the Irish-American and his influence. To mature its powers, to concentrate its action, to learn the secret of its own strength and of England's weakness, the Celtic intellect has had to cross the Atlantic. At home it had but learned the pathetic weakness of nationality; in a strange land it learned what indomitable forces nationality possesses. What captivity was to the Jews, exile has been to the Irish. America and American influence has educated them. (AC 136)

The article ends on a bitter note, reminiscent of Swift:

There are some who will welcome with delight the idea of solving the Irish question by doing away with the Irish people. There are others who will remember that Ireland has extended her

boundaries,¹¹ and that we now have to reckon with her not merely in the Old World but also in the New. (AC 140)

Wilde certainly seems to have returned to England with his "Celtic intellect" stimulated by having crossed the Atlantic, and his pride in his Irish origins reawakened. Indeed, he had not only reaffirmed his Irish identity, but was ready to advertise it as a matter of pride and as an explanation for his already declared genius.

What he was not yet ready to reveal, however, was his homosexuality. If we believe Robert Ross's account (and there is no reason to doubt it, since, of all Wilde's friends, Ross demonstrated absolute loyalty and integrity), Wilde may not yet have acknowledged, even to himself, his homosexuality, his first homosexual encounter having been with Ross, in 1886. Also, as Richard Pine argues, if Wilde was intentionally concealing his homosexuality, his being Irish facilitated the deception:

It was his Irishness which for so long prevented all but his closest associates -- even perhaps his

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By describing the Irish presence in the New World as extending Ireland's boundaries, Wilde also satirizes Imperialist notions of colonization. The Irish came to America, Australia and New Zealand not to claim territory, but to escape oppression, or even as transportees, having broken British laws.

wife -- from detecting his homosexuality, because the two referential contexts were so proximate. (12)

Imagination, feyness, unpredictability were associated in the Victorian mind with both the Irish and the feminine; thus Wilde's being Irish explained so-called feminine traits that would otherwise have been interpreted as signs of homosexuality. There were, of course, also excellent practical reasons for Wilde's reticence about admitting, even to himself, his "abnormal" sexual proclivities: "sodomy," the only term available at the time to describe a sexual relationship between two males, was a criminal offense carrying severe penalties, as is evidenced by Wilde's later imprisonment. But, certainly, by 1886, Wilde was aware that any one of the elements of his complicated identity as Irish, homosexual artist with socialist leanings, would disqualify him from claiming any right of membership in imperialist British society.

Another development that might have intensified Wilde's awareness of his difference from the English "norm" was that in the decade before the turn of the century there was an almost morbid interest in the psychology of the abnormal: "abnormal" was invariably defined as the opposite of "natural." Max Nordau, whose "scientific" theories appealed to the popular perception, in his best-seller, Degeneration,

published in German and translated for the English market in 1895, actually singled out Wilde as a perfect example of the "madness" of decadence:

The ego-mania of decadentism, its love of the artificial, its aversion to nature, and to all forms of activity and movement, its megalomaniacal contempt for men and its exaggeration of the importance of art, have found their English representative among the "Aesthetes," the chief of whom is Oscar Wilde. (The Decadent Dilemma 65)¹²

Had Nordau been aware that Wilde was Irish and not, as he assumes, English, he would have had further evidence to support his claims about Wilde's excesses. As Richard Haslam points out:

[Matthew] Arnold had [earlier that century] identified the unifying trait of the Celtic race as sentiment: this caused 'its chafing against the despotism of fact, its perpetual straining after emotion.' (Richard Haslam, Irish Studies Review 11, 2.)

¹²

It is interesting that Nordau believed Wilde to be English. Perhaps, had he known of the writer's Irish origin, he might have seen that as a partial explanation for Wilde's deviancy. In 1896, one year after Nordau's book was published, Ernest Renan wrote in his book about Celtic poetry, "The Celtic race is an essentially feminine race" (The Poetry of the Celtic Race 8).

Wilde's petition for the remission of his sentence, written from prison to the Home Secretary, makes clear that he was familiar with theories about deviance and decadence, such as those of Nordau and Lombroso, and was almost certainly aware, on some level, of what Foucault would later describe as "the great nineteenth-century effort in discipline and normalization" and "how, at the initial stages of industrial societies, a particular punitive apparatus was set up together with a system for separating the normal and the abnormal" ("Truth and Power" in Power/Knowledge 61). He also knew that according to British standards of "normality" he himself would fail on several counts. It is against such efforts at "normalization" that Wilde is reacting when he writes in De Profundis:

Christ had no patience with the dull lifeless mechanical systems that treat people as if they were things, and so treat everybody alike....
 ...he could not stand stupid people, especially those who are made stupid by education: people who are full of opinions not one of which they even understand.... [He castigates] their heavy inaccessibility to ideas, their dull respectability, their tedious orthodoxy, their worship of vulgar success, their entire preoccupation with the gross material side of

life, and their ridiculous estimate of themselves
and their importance.... (CW 803)

In De Profundis Wilde identifies with Christ insofar as "Christ was the supreme individualist" (CW 803), and both Wilde and Christ were punished for challenging established authorities. But long before he went to prison Wilde had begun to demonstrate an awareness of the ways in which government and commercial interests work to maintain the hierarchies on which their power depends and the part that popular literature plays in that process. When, on returning from America, he came to realize the precariousness of his own position in society, Wilde also began to scrutinize the mechanisms which force to the periphery and render impotent all those who are categorized as other by the dominant culture: not only the colonized but also the immoral, the poor, the insane and, of course, the artist, who, Wilde believed, was seen by the "public" as deviant by choice.

The Development of Post-colonial Strategies in the Fairy Tales

If we assume that before 1886 Wilde had probably not yet admitted even to himself that he was definitely

homosexual, he was still, by ethnicity alone, marked as deficient. David Cairns and Shaun Richards, in Writing Ireland, show that, even as early as the sixteenth century, the English regarded the Irish as inferior and

... during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the understanding of the Native Irish and the Old English held by the New English required the latter to treat the former as subjects fit only for domination.... This understanding... necessarily meant that the assimilation of the Irish into a dominant English culture on terms of equality became unthinkable. (7)

Cairns and Richards claim also that in English writing:

The process of describing the colonized [in Ireland] and inscribing them in the discourse as second-order citizens in comparison with the colonizers commenced with the invocation of the judicial and military power of the state, but subsequently the colonizers attempted to convince the colonized of their irremovable deficiencies and the consequent naturalness and permanence of their subordination. (178)

In "Post-colonial Literatures and Counter-discourse," Helen Tiffin points out that

... the function of ... canonical text[s] at the colonial periphery also becomes an important part of material imperial practice, in that, through educational and critical institutions, it continually displays and repeats for the other, the original capture of his/her alterity and the processes of its annihilation, marginalisation, or naturalisation as if this were axiomatic, culturally ungrounded, 'universal', natural.

(Kunapipi 23)

Wilde, of course, had quite directly addressed such processes in his response to Froude's Blue Book on Ireland, not a canonical text, perhaps, in Tiffin's sense, but certainly widely read and accepted in its own time. But he was also aware of the control that the amorphous English "public" mind wielded over literary production, and the "public" as characterised by Wilde equates closely to what we might now call the moral majority or what, in post-colonial theory, is referred to as the imperial centre.

According to Wilde:

The public dislike novelty because they are afraid of it. It represents to them a mode of Individualism, an assertion on the part of the artist that he selects his own subject, and treats it as he chooses. The public are quite right in

their attitude. Art is Individualism, and Individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force. Therein lies its immense value. For what it seeks to disturb is monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of machine. (AC 272)

Not only does Wilde recognize the restriction of the artist by popular opinion, but he also perceives ways in which "canonical texts... become an important part of material imperial practice," at least in dictating boundaries for the artist. He claims:

The fact is, the public makes use of the classics of a country as a means of checking the progress of Art. They degrade the classics into authorities. They use them as bludgeons for preventing the free expression of Beauty in new forms. (AC 273)

Clearly Wilde did not intend to be confined in his art or in his life by the restrictions imposed by a "public" that he despised;¹³ as artist, as Irishman and as homosexual he had begun to assert his "Individualism" and to use his

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Although Wilde had little respect for the "public," he made a clear distinction between the amorphous, blindly censorious public and those who read literature receptively and appreciatively. I shall discuss the importance of this distinction in Chapter III.

art to challenge the assumptions of the British establishment and the stereotypes associated with various aspects of his identity. His comments about the effects of the "public" on art demonstrate that he appreciated the difficulty of his task. Indeed, his assessment of the situation of the artist in relation to society in late Victorian England is in many respects similar to what Ashcroft and others identify as the position of post-colonial writers "exploring [the] anti-imperial potential" of their work:

...the potential for subversion in their themes cannot be fully realized.... Both the available discourse and the material conditions of production ... restrain this possibility. The institution of 'Literature' ... is under the direct control of the imperial ruling class who alone license the acceptable form and permit the publication and distribution of the resulting work. So texts of this kind come into being within the constraints of a discourse and the institutional practice of a patronage which limits and undercuts their assertion of a different perspective. The development of independent literatures depended upon the abrogation of this restraining power and the appropriation of

language and writing for new and distinctive usages. (Empire 6)

Having asserted that it was the responsibility of the artist to present "a different perspective," Wilde set about finding his own means of "abrogating the restraining power" and of appropriating the language for his own "distinctive uses." Although pessimistic about British aesthetic and social values, Wilde was, it seems, still optimistic about the potential of the individual to re-construct and re-place him/herself -- to create an alternative authenticity, and somehow to realize "the potential for subversion" in his own work.¹⁴ His art becomes the means by which he not only re-constructs himself on his own terms but also seeks to deconstruct some of the "dull lifeless systems" that dictate the terms of existence for all marginalized people. He was, however, anxious to retain and even expand his audience without compromising his artistic and cultural principles to appease the "public" that he so despised.

So, although Wilde realized the importance to his art

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Wilde never lost his faith in the individual. Even in prison he was able to appreciate the human spirit. He claims : "...humanity has been in prison along with us all, and now when I go out I shall always remember great kindnesses I have received here from almost everybody..." (CW 935). Although he condemns certain aspects of society, like his compatriot Jonathan Swift, he commends those who, in spite of dehumanizing systems, remain humane.

of his being Irish, he knew that to advertise his Irishness in his work, except self-deprecatingly, which, as his letters attest, he was not willing to do, would be a mistake. To be a colonial was to be British not by privilege but by imposition: subject not only to the Queen but essentially also to her English subjects. Wilde was also well aware that the only really effective position from which he could work, despite its obvious challenges and restrictions, was at the centre of a society that tacitly rejected him, and to which he knew he did not belong. As J. E. Chamberlin points out:

[t]he dreamers, as far as Wilde was concerned, were of no use at all if they insisted on dreaming on the mountain top. They must do their dreaming in the market-place, for it is there that they are the most irritating, and there that the contagion can spread. And dreaming has, of course, always been (to the authorities) as much a social disaster as the plague. (212)

Indeed, the conflict between Wilde the prophetic dreamer and Oscar the pretentious hedonist no doubt contributes to the tension and ambiguity that distinguish all of his work, and nowhere are the tension and ambiguity more remarkable than

in the fairy tales, especially in A House of Pomegranates.¹⁵

Although Wilde published several short stories before The Happy Prince collection and wrote his best critical work and Dorian Gray in the interval before A House of Pomegranates, I believe that in the fairy tales he discovered the most effective medium for social satire, equalled only by his play, The Importance of Being Earnest. He was not the first, of course, to see the potential for satire in the genre; Hans Christian Andersen, for instance, had already used the fairy tale very successfully to draw attention to the hypocrisy of nineteenth-century society¹⁶ and, as we shall see, Wilde did not hesitate to use Andersen's material as source and reference in his own tales.

But Wilde goes much further than Andersen in his adaptation of form, language and convention to serve his own purposes. Indeed, as Monaghan and Kotzin point out, it is by

¹⁵

It is interesting to note the persistence of the dream/vision motif throughout the fairy tales. Wilde makes frequent use of this folk tradition, common in Judaeo-Christian and Celtic myths. In such tales, truth is revealed to the prophet while he is in a trance or dream-like state.

¹⁶

Like Wilde, Andersen parodied the propensity of society to judge by appearances, and to promote conformity to the point where freedom of expression was repressed. His "Ugly Duckling," for example, is not accepted until he becomes a beautiful swan, and no adult is able to admit what a child can plainly see: that the king is stark naked in public.

manipulating the conventions themselves that Wilde subverts the sort of morality that was commonly endorsed by nineteenth-century versions of fairy tales, modified by their writers to "provide moral instruction" (Folk and Fairy Tales 7). Hallet and Karasek remark that

Rational Moralists and Sunday School Moralists of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries looked upon this popular literature [fairy tales] with consternation verging on horror. (7)

Not only does Wilde exploit generic conventions, however, but also language itself. He recognised that the idiom of both nineteenth-century fairy tales and children's stories generally, although apparently simple and unsophisticated, was often derived from the same source as the authoritarian discourse that so solidly underpinned the hierarchical systems of the British empire: the King James Bible.

Andersen recognised this, too, in relation to his own society, but, when he echoes or quotes the Bible directly, as in "The Red Shoes" (Tales 68-69) and "The Snow Queen" (Tales 146), he tends to reinforce a moral perspective that is, ultimately, not very different from a conventional philanthropic view. Wilde, however, uses both echoes and quotations of biblical incident and text in much more complex ways and for much more devious purposes. Although he does not discredit the efforts of those who wish both to be

and to do good, he does subtly challenge the validity of society's definition of "good." Yet the stories themselves, at least those in The Happy Prince, still delight, and might even have satisfied the standards of the "Sunday School Moralists" in their apparent approval of virtue and decency. Even A House of Pomegranates, although criticized for its too sensuous style, was not much censured for its content. Wilde had, in fact, found a genre that would, while meeting the demands of the public, "the restraining power," also serve his own ends, by allowing him to appropriate the form and language of contemporary fairy tales and even popular children's literature "for new and distinctive usages," specifically to question those very standards to which the fairy tales seem to subscribe.

In effect, by presenting social and political truths in the guise of children's stories, Wilde demonstrates his own theory that "[t]he truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks" (AC 432). Like the "figures of colonial resistance" in Indian literature as discussed by Jenny Sharpe, Wilde's tales "simultaneously reinforce colonial authority and disturb [...] it" (Modern Fiction Studies 140), creating what Helen Tiffin calls a

canonical counter-discourse.... in which the post-colonial writer takes up a character or characters, or the basic assumptions of a British

canonical text, and unveils those assumptions, subverting the text for post-colonial purposes (Kunapipi 22)

Of course, although Wilde recognised his ambivalent position not only as colonial, but as Irish, the most troublesome of the colonial subjects, his agenda was not specifically Irish Nationalist. It was, however, political, in that it sought to challenge oppressive systems that exploited the poor, the weak and the marginalized, and silenced all those who did not conform to its regulatory codes. Thus, while he still used the fairy tale genre to inspire "morality," the values that Wilde sought to instill were, in many respects, at odds with nineteenth-century moral principles, and aimed not at children nor at those that society would have identified as immoral. Wilde knew that "morality" according to nineteenth-century English standards, was a luxury that only the wealthy could afford. In "The Young King" the weaver explains bitterly:

...the rich make slaves of the poor....We toil for them all day long, and they heap up gold in their coffers, and our children fade away before their time, and the faces of those we love become hard and evil....

Through our sunless lanes creeps Poverty with her hungry eyes, and Sin with his sodden face follows

close behind her. Misery wakes us in the morning,
and Shame sits with us at night. (CW 227)

Wilde's image of poverty is, in fact, similar to that in a tract, "In Darkest England and the Way Out," written by William Booth, in 1890.

Talk about Dante's hell, and all the horrors and cruelties of the torture-chamber of the lost! The man who walks with open eyes and with bleeding heart through the shambles of our civilization needs no such fantastic images of the poet to teach him horror. (The Decadent Dilemma 13)

Somewhat surprisingly, the fantastic images, based on the observations of the effete poet and icon of the Aesthetic Movement, closely match those of one of Britain's most powerful and pragmatic social activists. Wilde had already seen, on his visit to the prison in Missouri, that there is nothing ennobling about poverty, suffering or isolation, but while his perceptions were similar to Booth's, his reactions were very different.

Booth, of course, founded The Salvation Army, an organization whose charitable activities continue to

alleviate suffering worldwide.¹⁷ Wilde, being of a less forthright and practical disposition, took another approach to the problem. While his efforts, unlike Booth's, did not perhaps produce immediately perceptible results, they at least seemed to share the same motivation. The artist proposed to use his art to address "modern problems," to challenge fallacious and demeaning assumptions not only about the poor, but about all those who are marginalized by society, and to demonstrate that the stereotyping of those who were classified as "other" contributes to the justification and perpetuation of a powerful moral and economic centre. Wilde obviously did not expect that as a result of reading his stories his audience would rush out and become anarchists, denounce imperialist exploitation of the colonies -- especially Ireland -- or demand the decriminalisation of homosexuality, but rather that they might be made aware through his art, of the horrifying inequities in the structures of power and, perhaps, of how the structures were used to marginalize and make impotent

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While many, for instance Shaw in Major Barbara, might argue, with good reason, that the Salvation Army, especially with its militaristic associations, reinforces hierarchical control, the original organizers did at least recognize that those who wished to nourish the souls of the poor had a responsibility to see that the needs of the body had first been met. Also, they acknowledged that the working-classes were not responsible for their own wretchedness but that it was a direct result of exploitation by the wealthy.

all those who might oppose them.

He did not aim to accuse or to convict but rather, through art itself, subtly to change the readers' overall perceptions of life. By using "a process that relentlessly foregrounds variance and marginality as the norm" (Empire 75), Wilde hoped at least to posit an alternative to "normality" as constructed by the establishment. As he commented during his American lecture tour, while he was still at least posing as an aesthete, "the truths of art cannot be taught. They are revealed to natures which have made themselves receptive of all beautiful impressions...." (Ellmann, OW 593). His aim is not simply to use his art to reinforce the finest human aspirations, but rather to challenge the very basis of what is believed to be "fine," and to uncover the fallacy that "fineness" and "goodness" are synonymous with conformity, humility and obedience to authority.

Already, in 1887, in "The Canterville Ghost," "Lord Arthur Saville's Crime" and "The Sphinx Without a Secret" (originally published as "Lady Alroy"), by manipulating the reader to sympathize with amoral protagonists, Wilde questions whether moral standards are stable or absolute. But while the characters elicit our sympathy they do not cause us to identify with them, because we recognize that we are in the territory of the absurd. The sympathy we feel for

the characters in the fairy tales, however, is more sincere and consequently more disturbing. The dilemmas facing the protagonists of these tales are the dilemmas of everyday existence; although they inhabit the world of the fairy tale, their spiritual and intellectual experiences are authentic and convincing. Wilde had found a medium in which he could address social realities and yet avoid literary realism, a mode which he thoroughly despised.

By using the fairy tale, Wilde was to gain access to the nurseries and drawing rooms of the English middle and upper-classes, the audience whom he most wished to reach, and by choosing the world of fantasy, he would allow himself access to his own most obvious assets: the gifts of language and imagination. If we believe Arnold, dreaming and fantasy were normal pursuits for a Celt, and with that at least Wilde would have agreed, having claimed:

I do not know anything more wonderful or more characteristic of the Celtic genius, than the quick artistic spirit in which we adapted ourselves to the English tongue. The Saxons took our lands from us and left them desolate -- we took their language and added new beauties to it.

(Pine 13)

Such notions, reinforced by Pine's opinion that Wilde was a natural seanchai, would suggest that the fairy tale should

indeed prove to be the perfect medium for Wilde to address "modern problems" in a form that was "imaginative and not imitative."

In "The Critic as Artist," Wilde has Gilbert declare, "The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it" (AC 359). In this apparently flippant paradox, Gilbert actually proposes the project that the marginalized and the colonized, in the broadest sense of the term, have in the last few decades undertaken with growing conviction and creativity. Whether or not it was Wilde's intent to rewrite history in the fairy tales, he certainly challenges notions of wisdom and morality that had, in the course of history, gained the status of "truths." Wilde also knew, as Gilbert in "The Critic as Artist" declares, that "[i]t is only by language that we rise above [the animals], or above each other -- by language, which is the parent, and not the child, of thought" (AC 359). According to Wilde, language gives the writer the power to create, like the visual artist, images and ideas that not only influence but actually control the ways in which people experience reality.

Through the observations of Vivian in "The Decay of Lying," Wilde expands this concept:

The Japanese people are the deliberate self-conscious creation of certain individual

artists....

The actual people who live in Japan are not unlike the general run of English people; that is to say they are extremely commonplace, and have nothing curious or extraordinary about them. In fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people. (AC 315).

Vivian's hypothesis, in effect, anticipates the theories of Edward Said as developed in Orientalism:

...`Orient' and `Occident' are man-made.

Therefore, as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other. (5)

If, as Wilde suggests, a whole country and its people could be invented so vividly as to persuade the population of Western Europe to believe in it, what could prevent him, "the lord of language" (CW 905), from modifying, even transforming, conventional concepts of normality, especially as they affect moral values? After making his sweeping claims about the influence of art on life, Gilbert goes on to address established notions about virtue and vice:

What is termed Sin is an essential element of

progress. Without it the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colourless. By its curiosity, Sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from the monotony of type. In its rejection of the current notions about morality, it is one with the higher ethics. (AC 360)

It seems that for Wilde the "assertion of individualism" absolutely requires a reassessment of the criteria for evaluating human behaviour and determining distinctions between virtue and vice. As his letters show, the opportunities he had in North America to observe many positive effects of original ideas and independent behaviour caused him to question and to clarify his own rather naive notions about "individualism." I believe that, next to the perceptiveness and compassion inherited from his parents and the socialist sympathies learned from his family and their politically active friends, Wilde's North American tour was the event that most profoundly affected his approach to his art. His experiences during that time certainly help to account for the large gap between the style and content of his early aesthetic poetry and the fairy tales where he begins to explore the possibilities for re-drawing the traditional boundaries that define good and evil.

Wilde may have chosen the fairy tale genre because of

the scope it allowed for manipulation of language and indulgence in imagination, or he may already have been aware of the role the genre had been adapted to serve in reinforcing structures of power during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but certainly, even in the first story, "The Happy Prince," he is already making use of conventions of the form to subvert judgements that the story itself has encouraged its readers to make. As the stories progress, especially in A House of Pomegranates, Wilde begins to challenge not only the assumptions of the text but also ways in which the form itself contributes to those assumptions. Ultimately, not only the fairy tale but also the Bible become the focus of Wilde's investigation, biblical allusions being by that time so much a part of the Victorian literary fairy tale. M. N. Cutt remarks on this growing phenomenon in Ministering Angels:

A clear link with Biblical themes is apparent: unjust stewards (i.e. grasping landlords, wicked guardians, malicious superiors) are eventually found out and punished; faithful servants are rewarded; prodigals repent; and the lost (or stolen) are found. (112-113)

At this point, which is not, of course, actually a point, but rather a continuous process of emergence, Wilde's strategies become, in Stephen Slemon's term,

"`entangle[d]'...within the colonialist machineries they seek to displace" (World Literature Written in English 30, 39). While he challenges "the world view that... polarize[s] centre and periphery" (Empire 33) and that apparently is supported by both the Bible and fairy tale, Wilde simultaneously works to dissociate the two main sources of original folk wisdom from moral systems that perpetuate such dichotomies and privilege values that insist upon differentiation between normal and abnormal, right and wrong.

Wilde's difficulty in disentangling the Bible and the fairy tale from the moral discourse with which they had become integrated, in fact, parallels his own situation as representative of the marginalized, continuing to operate at the centre of the society that not only endorses but perpetuates the oppression of those it designates other. Indeed, his own position is not unlike that of his parents, who persistently sought to dismantle the exploitative systems of which they themselves were a part. Stephen Slemon describes the complexity of such enterprises:

... the illusion of a stable self/other, here/there binary division has never been available to Second-World writers, and ... as a result, the sites of figural contestation between oppressor and oppressed, colonizer and colonized,

have been taken inward and internalized in Second-World textual practice.... the ambivalence of literary resistance itself is the 'always already' condition of Second-World settler and post-colonial literary writing.... (World Literature Written in English 30, 38)

Thus, as visionary, alienated from, yet continuing to operate at the centre of the establishment he wished to undermine, writing in a genre that had long been enlisted as part of the discourse of control, and using the language, imagery and idiom of the text that was considered the foundation of conventional morality, Wilde had set for himself an infinitely complex task. Yet, as we shall see in the chapters that follow, with his sensitivity to and understanding of the possibilities and power of language, his sympathy for humanity in its infinite variety reawakened by his experiences in North America, and, of course, his own alterity and native wit, he was more than equal to the task.

Chapter II

A Person of No Importance: Wilde's Appropriation and
Adaptation of Fairy Tale Conventions to Explore Society's
Constructs of Abnormality and Deviance

Although Wilde seems to have returned from his North American tour with his aesthetic theories much modified, his social conscience invigorated and his Irish identity reinforced, he does not appear to have brought with him the inspiration he needed to transform good intentions into good art. Indeed, it would be five years before he published anything more substantial than his regular literary reviews and occasional short stories. The reviews and stories certainly have their own charm, but they lack the artistry and intensity that distinguish his later work. Five years, his marriage to Constance Lloyd, the birth of his sons, Cyril and Vyvyan, his first homosexual encounter, with Robert Ross, and another visit to France were to intervene before the first volume of fairy tales, The Happy Prince and Other Tales, would be published.

The Happy Prince elicited generally enthusiastic reviews, but probably none of these matched Wilde's own enthusiasm for his work, witnessed by the many letters he wrote mentioning the tales. Among these is one sent on May

7, 1888 to an aspiring young poet, Thomas Hutchinson, who had declared his admiration for the Student in "The Nightingale and the Rose." Wilde diplomatically questions the young man's perception of merit in the Student, but allows that there may

be many meanings in the tale, for in writing it [he] did not start with an idea and clothe it in form, but began with a form and strove to make it beautiful enough to have many secrets and many answers. (Letters 218)

Two months later, he wrote to a friend, Leonard Smithers, about "The Happy Prince," "The story is an attempt to treat a tragic modern problem in a form that aims at delicacy and imaginative treatment: it is a reaction against the purely imitative character of modern art..." (Letters 221).

These and several other letters that discuss The Happy Prince and A House of Pomegranates suggest that during the five years since his North American tour, and no doubt also in the actual process of writing the stories, Wilde had succeeded in clarifying for himself his artistic aims, and finding a genre suitable at least to begin his task. The letters consistently emphasize that the stories are aimed at adults as much as at children; although they have aesthetic and literary appeal, they also express the writer's social concerns and challenge literary conventions. Judging from

his remarks about his intentions in writing the stories, Wilde's tardiness in producing substantial work may be partly attributed to the stringency of his own standards, and his difficulty in settling on a form suitable to his complex agenda. A review by Wilde, written in the period before the publication of the tales, implies that he was aware that his search for a suitable medium, conscious and intense as it was, was not unusual among young artists; in a critique of Robert Sherard's work he refers satirically to the young artist syndrome: "[...he has] come through 'early poems', a three-volume novel and other complaints common to his time of life" (Robert Sherard, The Real Oscar Wilde 53). Wilde himself, although he did contract a particularly bad case of "early poems," avoided the second complaint, the three volume novel, choosing instead to write a sequence of short stories in the guise of children's tales.

That Wilde, wishing to address "modern problem(s)" and fascinated with both language and structure, chose not to write a realist novel, a genre that, especially in the nineteenth century, had become associated with the expression of social concerns, seems at first a little contrary. But, even in his diaries, his letters and his earliest reviews, Wilde makes very clear that he has strong reservations about the directions in which the novel had developed, and ways in which he felt the form was being

commercially exploited. Although he claims to wish to address "tragic modern problems," he was anxious to avoid any association with the "purely imitative" writing that he disdained and the sentimentalism that he abhorred. In Wilde's opinion, many novelists who believed they were serving the interests of the disadvantaged were actually, however unintentionally, using the disadvantaged to serve the interests of the novelist. Dickens especially elicited disapproval from Wilde for enlisting human misery to serve his art. In "Pen, Pencil and Poison," Wilde remarks that "[while Wainewright, the notorious poisoner and subject of the essay] was in gaol, Dickens, Macready and Hablot Browne came across him by chance. They had been going over the prisons of London looking for artistic effects..." (CW 1006).

Wilde felt that for the artist to expect "Life" to provide "artistic effects" was a mistake. In "The Decay of Lying," Vivian explains:

Life and Nature may sometimes be used as part of Art's rough material, but before they are of any real service to art they must be translated into artistic conventions. The moment Art surrenders its imaginative medium it surrenders everything. As a method Realism is a complete failure, and the two things that every artist should avoid are

modernity of form and modernity of subject-matter.

(AC 319)

Although he condemns "Realism" and suspects the motives of certain writers who use it, especially novelists, Wilde is convinced that the artist must work to inspire change. In "The Poets and the People," in 1887, he asks:

Who, in the midst of all our poverty and distress, that threatens to become intensified, will step into the breach and rouse us to the almost superhuman effort that is necessary to alter the existing state of things? (AC 43)

He goes on to answer his own question:

When the poor are suffering from inherent faults of their own, and the greediness of capitalists.... surely the hour has come when poets should exercise their influence for good, and set fairer ideals before all than the mere love of wealth.... (AC 43 - 44)

At the same time, however, Wilde is quite aware that "love of wealth" is one of the main vices that render the novelist ineffectual as a social reformer, for the wish to produce a work that is commercially viable makes the writer a servant of the "public," whose taste and judgement Wilde despised.

This is not, of course, to suggest that Wilde was indifferent to his readers; on the contrary, he believed

that no work was complete until exposed to an audience. Edward Said identifies Wilde as "the type of author" who deliberately conceives the text as supported by a discursive situation involving speaker and audience; the designed interplay between speech and reception, between verbality and textuality, is the text's situation, its placing of itself in the world. (The World, the Text and the Critic 40)

But Wilde makes a very clear distinction between "public" and "audience:" for him the terms are not synonymous; they are, rather, antithetical. In Wilde's view, the public tries to exert its influence on art, but the audience is willing to be influenced by art.

In "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," Wilde castigates not only the public but also those novelists who exploit the poor to accommodate art, and at the same time exploit art to accommodate the public: "A true artist takes no notice whatever of the public. The public are to him non-existent" (AC 280). Wilde was, however, aware that for the artist to ignore the demands of the public was to risk commercial failure and even moral condemnation. He remarks: "There is not a single real poet or prose-writer of this century, for instance, on whom the British have not solemnly conferred diplomas of immorality..." (AC 273). The "real poet(s)" and "prose-writer(s)," according to Wilde's estimation, would be

those who wrote not for, but in spite of, public opinion. It was not without understanding of the potential consequences that Wilde resolved to "take no notice of the public."

In 1887, Wilde wrote, in reference to an exhibition of the work of the members of the Royal Academy: "... dulness has become the basis of respectability, and seriousness the only reference of the shallow" (AC 72), and in 1889, he admired in Whitman "... the lofty spirit of a grand and free acceptance of all things that are worthy of existence" (AC 124 -125). By the time Wilde wrote the "Soul of Man Under Socialism," he was keenly aware that conventionality labels difference as abnormal:

The public dislike novelty because they are afraid of it.... [They] are quite right in their attitude. Art is Individualism, and Individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force. Therein lies its immense value. For what it seeks to disturb is monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of machine. (AC 272)

Even before the publication of Nordau's Degeneration¹,

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The effect on the public perception of Wilde and on the artist's understanding of his own status, of Max Nordau's Degeneration, published in English in 1895, has been discussed in Chapter I.

Wilde was aware that both his art and his life were probably perceived by the British public as "deviant." Newspapers and magazines frequently satirized his "effeminate" behaviour and dress (Appendix A 303): a cartoon in The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News (July 21, 1883. 493) even depicted him in prison clothes, with the caption, "Frightful foreshadowing of our Oscar's future should he continue to cut his hair and resume the knee breeches" (Appendix A 304). But although pessimistic about British aesthetic and social values, Wilde was still optimistic about the power of the individual to re-invent him/herself in opposition to imposed stereotypes -- to create an alternative authenticity. Such an ideal is implicit in his admiration for Whitman who, Wilde believes, "seeks to build up the masses by 'building up grand individuals'" and in whose "views there is a largeness of vision, a healthy sanity, and a fine ethical purpose" (AC 125). Before he had begun to write his fairy tales, then, Wilde was already convinced that through his art he could reconstruct himself on his own terms and, at the same time, subvert some of the "dull lifeless systems" that defined "normality" and "deviance." He had, however, discounted the novel as a medium for realizing his artistic and social agenda.

Also, in the essays collected in 1891 in the volume titled Intentions -- all, except for "The Truth of Masks"

(1885), written in the period between the publication of the two sets of fairy tales -- Wilde developed his theories regarding the functions of art and the artist in society. Although comments such as "... language... is the parent and not the child of thought" and "[t]he one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it" (AC 359) seem little more than playful paradoxes, they actually express Wilde's understanding of the power of language to shape ideas and his distrust of recorded "facts." In "The Decay of Lying" he remarks, "The ancient historians gave us delightful fictions in the form of fact; the modern novelist presents us with dull facts under the guise of fiction" (AC 293). Clearly Wilde was aware that the distinction between reality and imagination is arbitrary. Consequently, he almost certainly realized what Ashcroft describes as "the potential for subversion" (Empire 6) in storytelling, and the opportunity his work might offer to appropriate "language and writing for new and distinctive uses" (Empire 6).

Perhaps it was Wilde's wish to find "new and distinctive uses" for his writing, along with his horror of writing "novels that are so like life that no one can possibly believe in their probability" (AC 294) that prompted him to consider the fairy tale as a medium. Certainly the genre could offer almost unlimited scope for a writer with ambitions to be a "magnificent liar" (AC 295).

But Wilde would still, no doubt, have had some reservations about the suitability of the literary fairy tale for his complex purposes. He was convinced that "all bad art is the result of good intentions" (CW 941), and in recent decades fairy tales had definitely become entangled with not only with good intentions but with sentimentalism, which he also deplored. Partly the term fairy tale had come to be associated with any sort of fantasy literature especially that aimed at children, but also even the best of writers and collectors, such as Lang, Macdonald, Stretton, Kingsley and Dickens, quite understandably, wrote with an eye to public demand. Cutt points out that Dickens, in particular,

...became a model for the aspiring writer with social purpose. He trained the reading taste of his day to expect certain pathetic characters in universally appealing situations... and continued for many years to supply such characters and feed the taste he had helped to form. (108-109)

In De Profundis, Wilde explains his aversion to gratuitous pathos and emotionalism -- "for a sentimentalist is one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it" (CW 946).

Wilde's tolerance for exploitative emotionalism was, as we have seen, very low. He particularly despised the sort of sensationalism that, masquerading as earnest social realism,

degraded art as well as its subject. In an 1887 review, he expresses his scepticism about the integrity of a writer who like

...those old sculptors of our Gothic cathedrals... could give form to the most fantastic fancy... but who saw little of the grace and dignity and beauty of the men and women among whom they lived, and whose art lacking sanity was therefore incomplete.

(AC 47)

Here he was again speaking specifically about Dickens, who, perhaps somewhat unfairly, always elicited from Wilde a negative response. Even when that author tried to depict "grace and dignity and beauty," Wilde remained unimpressed. His remark to Ada Levenson is justly infamous: "One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing" (OW, Ellmann 441). While he was critical of Dickens in particular, he stood only a little lower in Wilde's esteem than most other nineteenth-century "social realists." It was not callousness that prompted Wilde's mockery, but a horror of the sort of zeal that in the guise of sympathy actually used the misery of the poor to allow a comfortable public to experience suffering as a form of entertainment.

In "The Decay of Lying" and "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" especially, Wilde makes clear that his main

objection to sentimentalism is not merely aesthetic: he particularly disapproved of the use of art to reinforce values that contributed to the aberrant operation of power and privilege to control potential opposition among the marginalized. As we have seen, Wilde believed that solicitude about the problems of poverty had some negative effects on the development of the novel, but he was also aware of its even more direct influence on the production and evolution of short fiction. Cutt reinforces this view, claiming "Society's poor... supplied tract literature with an enduring excuse for the display of pathos and sentiment as well as with causes to support" (106). She also points out that "cheap popular fiction utilized pathos to catch and hold a reader's sympathy" (107), and that "it soon filtered down into books for children" (107). In "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," Wilde refers to the practice of circulating such material not only to children and adults generally, but even among the inmates of Britain's prisons. He suggests the grim inappropriateness of such material for desolate convicts:

And twice a day the Chaplain called,
And left a little tract.

And twice a day he smoked his pipe,
And drank his quart of beer:

His soul was resolute, and held
 No hiding place for fear;
 He often said that he was glad
 The hangman's day was near.

(CW 848)

The recipient of the "tracts" -- not one but two per day -- awaits hanging for murder, desperate, isolated and in need of much more tangible human comfort than such literature could offer. The idea of inculcation of morality through exemplary stories, although not new, had gained rapidly in popularity towards the end of the eighteenth century. Muir believes "the seed [had been] sown by the Puritans (82), and that it was propagated throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, largely by women who avidly produced stories aimed mainly at children and "strongly flavoured with morals" (83). Cutt also notes this trend, commenting on the sort of literature recommended for young readers by Anne Thackeray, late in the century:

Sentimental and pastoral, dashed with melodrama
 for excitement, virtue rewarded and villany
 punished -- her selection accords perfectly with
 the Victorian taste for pathos and sentiment.

(107)

As literacy among the working classes gradually increased as a result of educational and social reforms, similar material

was made more widely available to working class adults.

The Reform Acts under Disraeli's ministry had, especially, done much to improve the quality of life for the working classes; H.A. Clement claims:

1875 was a veritable annus mirabilis of domestic reforms.... A great Public Health Act consolidated many previous measures, required local authorities to appoint medical officers of health and sanitary inspectors....

In 1876 elementary education was made compulsory....In 1878 a Factory and Workshops Act consolidated previous acts, prohibited all employment of children under ten years of age and more than half-daily employment for children from ten to fourteen. (The Story of Britain: 1714 - 1958 198)

Instead of being forced, for pitiful wages, to perform gruelling tasks, small children were now required to receive basic schooling provided by the government.

There were, however, as James Laver explains in Manners and Morals in the Age of Optimism, some less encouraging implications for the poor, associated with the zeal for reform, and especially with the motives that inspired such zeal. Laver asserts:

It would hardly be an exaggeration to call

religion the dominant interest of vast numbers of the middle classes. It affected their thinking, it dictated their conduct, or at least it dictated their ethical ideals, however far short of them may have been their practice. (Laver 117 -118)

Laver acknowledges the contribution of the righteous middle classes to social reform, but, as Wilde did in his own time, voices some suspicion of their concepts of morality:

It is undeniable that many of the Evangelical leaders were public-spirited and high-minded men. They were the spear-head of the anti-slavery movement and in the forefront of the fight for the Factory Acts. Nevertheless, they sought to impose (and in fact did impose) upon the people of England a gloomy fanaticism unparalleled since the seventeenth-century Rule of the Saints. They frowned upon all amusements however innocent; they converted the Day of Rest into a day of pious exercises for themselves and a day of frustration and boredom for everybody else. (119)

Laver also comments that social historians claim an "intimate connection between Puritan morals and the rise of capitalism" (120), because religious Victorians believed that there was a direct link between morality and prosperity, and "it necessarily followed that poverty was

the result of sin; indeed, was itself a sin. If the poor were poor it was because they were shiftless or immoral, or both" (120). Such theories are borne out by various writings from the era relating to problems of poverty. In his essay "Educational Policy and Social Control in Early Victorian England," Richard Johnson quotes a document written in 1832 by "Dr. James Phillips Kay, doyen of orthodox educationalists and the chief educational policy-maker within the government in the 1840s" (Victorian Revolution 202). Kay expresses concern about the moral and physical conditions of the working classes in Manchester: "'It is melancholy to perceive... how many of the evils suffered by the poor flow from their own ignorance and moral errors'" (The Victorian Revolution 206). He maintains that efforts to reduce the working hours of the poor are misguided, since such people will waste their leisure in "sloth" and "dissipation." His proposed solution is education to teach the artisan "'the nature of his domestic and social relations ... his political position in society, and the moral and religious duties appropriate to it'" (206).²

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It is interesting to note how often Kay remarks that the most "barbarous" habits of the poor originate among the "degraded" Irish population. Even Wilde with his wit, education and social grace would not have escaped such stigma. With the influx of Irish immigrants since the famine and the growth of agitation for "Home Rule" in Wilde's own time, prejudice against the Irish had, in fact, intensified.

Although Kay was writing in 1832, his notions about improving the lot of the poor by raising their moral standards and correcting their perception of their place in society through education were hardly new, nor had they changed very much by the eighteen-eighties. Inculcation of values appropriate to the maintenance of society's hierarchies had, for instance, long been part of the function of children's literature. Unquestioning obedience, humility and diligence were the qualities that ensured success for the heroes of children's stories. But by the end of the eighteenth century, short stories about the rewards of righteousness and the fearsome consequences of sin were no longer aimed only at middle-class children but also at all of the working classes, adults and children. Those who charitably offered literacy to the working classes could also, of course, control the supply of reading material: since few working people could afford books, they read only what was distributed free through Sunday Schools and various evangelical organizations.

Percy Muir notes in English Children's Books:

Between 1795 and 1798 [Hannah More] and her sister produced the well known series of Cheap Repository Tracts which were partly aimed at children.... The circulation of tracts is said to have reached two million in the first year. This worthy effort led

to the foundation of the Religious Tract Society.

(Muir 94)

The Society was flourishing still in Wilde's time; indeed, it had spread throughout the English-speaking world. An Annual Report of the Kingston [Ontario] Auxiliary of the London Religious Tract Society, undated, but believed to be from about 1900, was published in The Kingston Chronicle and News. The chair reminds the company that the Society

has become a mighty tree, whose branches literally cover the earth and whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. By its instrumentality the Gospel has been proclaimed in simple yet expressive language to nearly all kindreds and peoples and tongues.... (The Kingston Chronicle and News 189- or 19--. 5)

One of the most loved of the writers for the R.T.S., as it came to be known, was Hesba Stretton, who wrote mainly for children but also had a huge adult audience. Cutt remarks that "Little Meg's Children," for instance,

[l]ike the rest of Hesba Stretton's little books... was principally intended for children and newly-literate adults. It was a Sunday book to edify, instruct and elevate, both morally and spiritually. (144)

Other examples of less literary merit than Stretton's

stories, but typical of the sort of literature published for, and distributed by, the Society are in Appendix B (327-329). Little Molly, the Shepherd's daughter, has, it seems, learned that she is particularly blessed not only to have potatoes to eat, but to have salt for them. Her father approves and reinforces the lesson, pointing out that it is good, concerning bodily comfort, to compare ourselves to those who are more needy, but, concerning wisdom, we should compare ourselves to our betters (Appendix B 328). Such moral philosophy will, as he himself points out, keep people such as they are, feeling thankful, humble and content with their lot. To persuade the poor and ignorant that it is a privilege to be as they are, clearly serves the interests of social stability. (Appendix B 328). Wretched and abused African Yamba, who believes that "British laws... protect not slaves like me" (Appendix B 329), about to hurl herself in the ocean, fortuitously meets an "English missionary good, / He had a Bible book in hand, / ... Told me 'twas the Christian's lot / Much to suffer here below" (Appendix B 329). As the century progressed, such material was available not only through the Religious Tract Society; it had become the staple fare of the average Victorian reader, and its production had become a very lucrative industry.

While many writers and publishers of short stories sincerely tried to address social wrongs and to draw

attention to the plight of less privileged members of society, many others had a more mercenary approach to their art, or trade. They soon discovered that, like the novel, short fiction could be effectively exploited for healthy financial gains. But whether their motivation was partly financial or purely charitable, it probably did not occur to many popular writers that the short story or the novel could become a part of a system that perpetuated the abuses against which they were protesting. Hesba Stretton, a tireless campaigner for social reform, who even dared to include subtle references to such unmentionable evils as prostitution in her stories, certainly does not intend to condone child abuse in "Little Meg's Children," yet she has her eight-year-old heroine say to her father, who has just returned from sea:

'Don't cry father God took care of us, and baby too though she's dead....'

'Why, you're always good to us father,' answered, Meg in a tone of loving surprise. 'You never beat us much when you get drunk. But Robin and me always say, "Pray God bless father." I don't quite know what bless means, but it's something good.'

(Novels of Faith and Doubt 137)

In her depiction of the unquestioning devotion of a child to a father who doesn't beat his children much when he

is drunk, and has lied to his family, leaving them unable to use money that might have saved their lives, because he thought his wife might squander it, the writer, quite unintentionally, endorses deference and obedience to patriarchal authority, regardless of the consequences.

The story, in fact, illustrates very well what Wilde meant by bad literature created through "good intentions." He would, no doubt, have appreciated the grim humour of the incident as much as we now do, for his essays and reviews show that he recognized that such fictions upheld the status quo just as surely as did religious tracts. Considering his familiarity with the popular market for fiction, and his comments in reviews and letters about the sort of material that pleased the public taste, we can be almost certain that Wilde also understood the apparent irony of his choosing the fairy tale as a medium, since it was, by the eighteen-eighties, at least in the public's perception, closely linked to the popular sentimental short fiction that he despised. Although he would not have used the same rhetoric, Wilde would probably have agreed with Jack Zipes that

....the fairy tale genre was controlled by the same sociopolitical tendencies which contributed towards strengthening bourgeois domination of the public sphere in the first half of the nineteenth century. Reason and morality were used perversely

to conserve the gains of the rising middle-classes.

(Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion 98)

In light of all Wilde's reservations about the didactic and political uses of fiction, it might seem a little surprising that he should have chosen the fairy tale to "deal with [...] modern problem(s)." But, when we look more closely at the original oral tales from which the literary genre evolved, Wilde's decision to use the fairy tale to explore the values of his society seems more appropriate. The sort of folk tales that became familiar to British readers in the eighteenth century, and came to be known as fairy tales, were collected in book form in France by Charles Perrault (or as some believe, his son Pierre), and translated into English by R. Sember, probably in 1729. In Germany, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm recorded surviving folk stories and published them between 1812 and 1818; these were translated into English, and first published in Dublin in 1823 -1826. By the middle of the nineteenth century several people, including Wilde's own parents, were involved in preserving folk legends and traditions, with a special emphasis on Celtic lore: in the same year that Wilde's The Happy Prince came out, W. B. Yeats' Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry was published and, in 1892, Joseph Jacobs' Celtic Fairy Tales appeared. In 1889, perhaps the

most popular of all the fairy tale collections, Andrew Lang's eclectic compilation The Blue Fairy Book, was published and was followed by others in a selection of colours, until 1910.

Nor was Wilde the first to adapt the genre to write his own tales. Most notably, in Denmark in 1835, Hans Christian Andersen's collection of original fairy tales was published, and relatively soon after, in 1846, a translation by Mary Howitt of ten of the stories was available in England. However, Percy Muir claims, "There has been little addition to the true fairy tale canon since Andersen..." (106).

Ruskin, Thackeray, George Macdonald, Andrew Lang, Mrs. Craik, among others, have written fairy-tales, and it is certainly true that some of them have been reprinted and would bear revival. The obstinate and inescapable fact remains that none of them has caught the fancy of children in the same way as Perrault, Andersen, or Grimm....

One minor masterpiece which, despite the unsuitability of its method of presentation and the unexpectedness of the author's name, has gained and retained a reputation with young readers is Wilde's Happy Prince and Other Tales, first published in 1888. Pater truly said of "The

"Selfish Giant" in this collection that it was
'perfect of its kind.' (Muir 106 - 107)

Wilde, of course, claims to be aiming his work at a mature as well as at a younger audience, but probably the reasons why the stories have continued to appeal to children for over a century are not very different from those that explain their success with adult audiences: they represent, as Wilde intended, "a reaction against the purely imitative character of modern [late Victorian] art" (Letters 221) and they address universal human concerns. In other words they offer fantasy and imagination, but do not seek to avoid or to trivialize the difficult and often disturbing challenges of every-day life. In effect, Wilde respects even, and perhaps especially, the youngest of his readers. Although, when the first set of tales was published, his own children would have been still rather too young to appreciate them, Wilde seems aware of the paradoxical mix of absolute trust and absolute scepticism that is typical in the very young: a child who will eagerly accept talking animals, petulant giants and animated statues will instantly question fraudulent evasions, turgid didacticism and trite solutions. Perhaps it was such apparently innate critical faculties that Wilde had in mind when he wrote to Mrs Chanler that his tales were written "for childlike people from eighteen to

eighty" (Letters 237).³

The same attitudes in children would also explain why the work of other writers Muir mentions did not enjoy popularity among the young comparable to the original fairy tales, or to Wilde's stories. As Muir remarks, "Good judges may think that The King of the Golden River or The Rose and the Ring are the equal of anything of the kind that has been written for children; it does not follow that children will agree with them..." (Muir 106). Indeed, although I have now come to appreciate The King of the Golden River, I remember clearly my irritation with Gluck when, at about age ten, I first read it: I could not understand why he could not "see through" his "sneaky" brothers: I sympathised with him, but did not admire his gullibility and submissiveness. Although Ruskin's style is impeccable, and he eschews sentimentalism, he nevertheless subscribes to the same values endorsed by Hesba Stretton, Hannah More and their like. The same is true to a lesser extent of Macdonald and Lang and even, at times, of Andersen. Although all write with verve, humour and conviction, and, to varying degrees, successfully recreate

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Charlotte Bronte also demonstrates an awareness of the overlap between literal and fantastic in a child's mind. In Jane Eyre, little Adele, although with some scepticism, accepts that Mr. Rochester is taking Mademoiselle to live on the moon, but points out practical problems such as finding food and clothing there (Jane Eyre 294-295).

the fairy-tale ethos and structure, they advocate those attributes that best accord with nineteenth-century notions of morality, especially humility and obedience. Folklore and myth from all parts of the world have, on the other hand, always emphasised courage, cunning, originality and determination as much as the more passive traits of the hero. Max Lüthi claims:

The fairy-tale hero, or heroine, to be sure, is sometimes a rollicking daredevil and sometimes a silent sufferer; at times a lazybones and at times a diligent helper; often sly and wily but just as often open and honest. (Lüthi 137)

Hansel and Gretel, Jack the Giant Killer, Aladdin, Odysseus, the North American Trickster, Cuchulain, for instance, all rely on their own cleverness to outwit their opposition.

No doubt, it was mainly their endorsement of aggressive as well as passive behaviour that, when Perrault's and the Grimms' fairy tales first appeared in their English translations, made them prey to the "censorship of prudery" that Wilde so despised. Percy Muir makes particular mention of the efforts of Sarah Trimmer to protect the reading public, and especially children, from such literary

corruption.⁴

She was a campaigner, she had principles, theories, strong views on what was bad for children, even more than on what was good for them.... Her main concern was to instil into parents a knowledge of what she conceived to be the true principles of a moral upbringing....

(Muir 87)

In her own periodical, The Guardian of Education, 4 (1805), she declares:

A moment's consideration will surely be sufficient to convince people of the least reflection, of the danger, as well as the impropriety, of putting such books into the hands of little children, whose minds are susceptible of every impression.... (Hallet and Karasek 7)

While Trimmer's views about the harmful effects of immoral literature on its readers, and specifically on youth, may seem rather extreme, they were, in fact, only a little more fanatical than what popular opinion dictated. In the course of the century, the proliferation and popularity of mediocre

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Sarah Trimmer was one of the growing number of women who were engaged by publishers, around the end of the eighteenth century, to write moral tales for children. Trimmer's sponsor was Longman.

but "moral" reading matter made the task of the sincere and original artist increasingly difficult. Even those who, like Ruskin and Macdonald, wrote with honesty, conviction and an obvious sensitivity to their young readers were, nevertheless, inevitably affected by the moral and religious values which were so deeply imbedded in their own systems of belief that they were not open to question.

For Wilde, however, many of those values conflicted with those that had begun to emerge as a result of his own ambivalent status as Irishman, socialist and homosexual, and whose development had been accelerated by his experiences during his North American tour. Also, as his diaries and letters demonstrate, questioning was for Wilde an inescapable mental attitude. His remark "The well-bred contradict other people. The wise contradict themselves" (AC 433), was probably as close as he ever expected to come to absolute truth. Nothing Wilde ever wrote, could ever be an endorsement or even an explanation; everything, including life itself, was merely inquiry, a challenging of present values and existence. The traditional fairy tale, then, with its emphasis on questing, curiosity and challenge, as opposed to the insipid tract-like short stories that were so common, must have seemed to Wilde an excellent form in which to investigate his own and society's moral assumptions.

As well, of course, the public enthusiasm for fairy

tales, as they had come to know them, would provide for Wilde's work a ready market. In effect, he had discovered a form in which he could write what was commercially viable without compromising his artistic integrity. Using style, structure and tone that were both familiar to and popular among the reading public, he could introduce innovative concepts that challenged accepted patterns of thought and behaviour. As I claim in Chapter I, in the fairy tales Wilde actually uses strategies that have only fairly lately been identified in the work of colonial writers. Homi Bhabha explains some such subtly subversive techniques in his essay "Signs Taken for Wonders":

Resistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention, nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the "content" of another culture, as a difference once perceived. It is the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and reimplicate them within the deferential relations of colonial power -- hierarchy, normalization, marginalization and so forth. (Race Writing and Difference 172)

I shall show that in the fairy tales, Wilde seeks not to negate or to exclude existing moral and cultural standards,

but to create ambivalence through which he can introduce an alternative standard. Thus, when we consider Wilde's strategy in light of post-colonial theory, his choice of the so-called "fairy tale," with its close connection to the sort of short fiction used to instil values that helped sustain the hierarchical society that he opposes, seems quite appropriate.

While ready to trade on the popularity of the fairy tale, however, Wilde, not altogether surprisingly, omits the "moral" that had come to be expected at the end of the story; he even questions the very concept of universal "morality." But he is, at least in The Happy Prince, careful not to alienate his audience, for believing as he does that "the truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks" (AC 432), Wilde is able to use both the form and the language of the fairy tale simultaneously to disguise and to reveal the "truth." The tales, like all his writing, invite more than one interpretation: they can be read simply as charming stories suitable for children, or as complex satires that challenge the values that fairy tales would normally be expected to endorse.

There are, of course, a variety of elements that we should expect to find in the fairy tale, but I shall limit my discussion to three particular aspects of the form that Bettelheim, Tolkien, Lüthi, the Opies among other experts in the field agree are common to most tales: the outsider as protagonist; the motif of transformation and redemption; and the moral, whether implicit or explicit. All of these, although used for somewhat different effects, had survived the evolution from original folk tale to the more "morally correct" Victorian fairy tale, and all three are used consistently by Wilde in both sets of stories, but for increasingly subversive purposes in A House of Pomegranates. Indeed, in many ways, the stories in the second collection retrieve and rehabilitate elements of the original folk tales that, in the interests of what was considered moral rectitude, had been subsumed by or eliminated from popular Victorian fairy stories.

In order to address an apparent contradiction in my argument I shall begin at the end of my list. Having stated above that Wilde fails to provide moral resolutions at the end of his stories, I have then included the moral among those elements of the genre that Wilde manipulates as part of his counter discourse; but, of course, absence can be a very powerful form of resistance, especially when presence is not only an expectation but a positive requirement.

Although most of Wilde's contemporaries no longer found it necessary to offer a formal explication of the lesson to be learned from the story, they did, it seems, feel obliged to provide the sort of closure that saw virtue rewarded and wickedness punished, just as in the original folk tales. Of course, concepts of virtue had also changed along with the structures of society.

For instance, all of the tales in Andrew Lang's Blue Fairy Book, although honest and refreshing in their determination to restore the energy of the original tales, and in their retention of even the more grisly resolutions, still reinforce behaviour that contributes to the perpetuation of the hierarchies of power: witches -- female, of course, and the most common embodiment of evil -- are burned in their own ovens, torn apart by horses, devoured in tubs by their own evil water creatures; frogs and beasts are restored to their rightful stations as princes and rulers because of the patience, endurance and gentleness of young women; young men who are not princes are elevated to positions of power through their own intelligence and courage but, in keeping with the proper order, we almost always find that those who attain nobility are of aristocratic origins but have been temporarily displaced by evil enchantment. Most importantly, those judged to be good receive their reward, either here or in the hereafter.

Even Hans Christian Andersen who, like Wilde, often uses his tales to chastise society, occasionally sentimentalizes his protagonists -- usually the innocent and decent are removed from a corrupt society and taken up like "The Little Match Girl" to heavenly bliss. And while Andersen tends more to forgiveness than punishment as closure, he still occasionally resorts to gloating descriptions of brutal vengeance. "The Tinder Box" ends: "And then the dogs rushed at the soldiers and councillors. They took one by the legs and another by the nose and threw them up many fathoms into the air, and when they fell down they were all broken to pieces" (Andersen's Fairy Tales 343). George Macdonald, whose gently beguiling humour provides a counterbalance to didacticism and sentimentalism in his stories, like Andersen, occasionally cannot resist the urge to represent the violent destruction of evil. In "The Giant's Heart", when the Giant breaks his promise to let his wife take control of his wicked heart, Buffy-Bob

... buried his knife in it, up to the hilt. A fountain of blood spouted from it; and with dreadful groan the Giant fell dead at the feet of little Tricksey-Wee, who could not help being sorry for him, after all. (The Gifts of the Child Christ 72)

In contrast, Wilde eschews the portrayal of violent

death as the wages of sin. Unlike both the original folk tales and Victorian fairy tales, none of his stories ends with the destruction of evil, whether simply for vengeance or as a moral lesson for those who might be tempted to wickedness. The modern reader might, indeed, be pleased to see retribution replaced by rehabilitation but, as I shall discuss under the heading of transformation and redemption, retribution is not actually replaced by anything. Also, with the exception perhaps of "The Happy Prince" and the "Selfish Giant," none of Wilde's stories encourages "goodness" by showing virtue rewarded by riches and power, or even by divine blessing. On the contrary, those who unquestioningly obey society's rules or who, though they may have transgressed, repent and work for the benefit of others are most often overlooked, misunderstood or even ostracized by their community. Seldom do they receive any commendation or appreciation from their peers.

The most optimistic ending is to the first of the tales, "The Happy Prince," and is also the one in which Wilde comes closest to allowing himself to express a moral by contrasting the egotistical quarrelling of the Town Councillors and the practical utilitarian judgements of the foundry workers with the higher perception of the Angel:

'...it shall be a statue of myself.'

'Of myself,' said each of the Town

Councillors, and they quarrelled. When I last heard of them they were quarrelling still.

'What a strange thing!' said the overseer of the workmen at the foundry. 'This broken lead heart will not melt in the furnace. We must throw it away.' So they threw it on a dust heap where the dead swallow was also lying.

'Bring me the two most precious things in the city,' said God to one of His Angels; and the Angel brought Him the leaden heart and the dead bird.

'You have rightly chosen,' said God, 'for in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me.' (CW 291)

Unfortunately, the even more selfless bird in the next story, "The Nightingale and the Rose," seems not to have caught God's attention by giving up her life for what she believes is Love. She is left "lying dead in the long grass, with [a] thorn in her heart" (CW 295), and the one perfect red rose for which she has bled to death "[falls] into the gutter, and a cartwheel [runs] over it" (CW 296). In the story that follows, the Selfish Giant, who learns to share his lovely garden, does, however, receive an eternal prize; the child who bears the wounds of Christ says to him:

'You let me play once in your garden, today you shall come with me to my garden, which is Paradise.'

And when the children ran in that afternoon, they found the Giant lying dead under the tree, all covered with white blossoms. (CW 300)

The Giant is the last of the heroes in the tales to be rewarded for his kindness. In those that follow not only is virtue not rewarded, but it is often not even acknowledged, or it is recognised so late that it benefits neither community nor individual. Unlike the typical fairy tale hero, such as Lang's Aladdin, who disposes of the sources of wickedness, lives in peace with his wife, "succeed[s] the sultan when he die[s], and reign[s] for many years, leaving behind him a long line of kings" (Blue 93), the Star Child, for instance, reigns only for three years. With his wisdom he does create

...peace and plenty in the land.

Yet ruled he not long, so great had been his suffering, and so bitter the fire of his testing, for after the space of three years he died. And he who came after him ruled evilly. (CW 284)

In this, the last story of the nine in the two collections, Wilde does not even imply that goodness will eventually be recognized. The Star Child's inner qualities

are never actually acknowledged; those who have previously spurned him because of his ugliness welcome him only because of the comeliness of his outer appearance: "...the guards bowed down and made obeisance to him, saying, 'How beautiful is our lord!' and a crowd of citizens followed him, and cried out, 'Surely there is none so beautiful in the whole world!'" (CW 283). There is no suggestion that the admirers are aware that the fairness of their lord is the outward manifestation of a refined and comely soul. The community that benefits from the generosity and wisdom of the ruler they have chosen for his fine appearance learns nothing from his example. When he dies, evil returns to the land. Nor do we have any assurance that the just and repentant hero has gone to a better world. I shall consider further the puzzling nature of these endings when I examine the representation of redemption and transformation in these tales.

Although Wilde's two collections of stories seem to progress towards pessimism bordering on despair, it would be quite wrong to read them as lessons on the futility of unselfish behaviour. In his refusal to pass judgement for the reader on the actions either of society or of its separate members, Wilde avoids performing an "oppositional act of political intention" in negating or excluding the "content" of the culture of the moral centre. He merely

creates a space in which an alternative perspective can be constructed, by "the dismantling of notions of essence and authenticity" and "refut[ing] the privileged position and any monocentric view of human experience" (Empire 41).

When the gentle Dwarf dies of a broken heart and can no longer dance for the Infanta, she frowns "...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 crie[s] and she [runs] out into in the garden" (CW 247). The readers are left to contemplate the implications for the Infanta and her court where only heartless people may be admitted. No terrible revenge is exacted on the callous community by higher and wiser moral powers; no kind angel takes up the sadly misused Dwarf; indeed, it seems that the only lesson learned by those who wield power is that in future they should be harsher in their control of potentially disruptive elements like the Dwarf. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the apparent amorality of Wilde's stories is that, while they are as fanciful and artificial as fairy tales should be, they, in fact, reflect the more sinister side of human behaviour as accurately and effectively as the starkest of "realist" novels. But they stringently avoid offering a moral resolution.

There are, of course, precedents for tales without explicitly stated morals in the parables of Christ. While he

was in prison, Wilde came to regard Christ as the supreme artist, but in his decision to present his stories without drawing a moral, he was, in fact, already following the example of Christ, who would end his parables with no more than a mild admonition: "He who hath ears to hear let him hear" (Mark 4,9). The author of the Gospel of Mark also tells us, when Jesus was alone with his disciples, they asked him to interpret his story for them and he said: "Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables" (Mark 4,11). For all his arrogance, Wilde believed that the artist who offered a definitive interpretation, even of his own work, made himself like God, for art must always have its own integrity, independent of the intention of the creator. He accepted that the work, once published, was no longer exclusively the property of its maker; as Said points out, he realized that the text exists in the world: he acknowledged to a young man who admired the Student in "The Nightingale", there may be "many meanings in [a] tale" (Letters 218).

We are left in no doubt that Wilde's failure to state a "moral" in his stories was deliberate, for he even includes in one of the tales a discussion of the absence of the conventional didactic ending. "The Devoted Friend," one of the most ironic and disturbing of the stories, is framed by

a debate among some water-creatures about the nature of friendship and the telling of an exemplary tale by the Linnet. Her story elicits the following exchange:

'I am afraid you don't quite see the moral of the story,' remarked the Linnet.

'The what?' screamed the Water-rat.

'The moral.'

'Do you mean to say the story has a moral?'

'Certainly.' said the Linnet.

'Well, really,' said the Water-rat, in a very angry manner, 'I think you should have told me that before you began. If you had done so I certainly would not have listened to you....'

(CW 308)

As the Water-rat departs in high dudgeon, the Linnet remarks to the Duck:

'I am rather afraid that I have annoyed him....The fact is that I told him a story with a moral.'

'Ah! that is always a very dangerous thing to do,' said the Duck.

And I quite agree with her. (CW 309)

Wilde, in effect, announces and, at the same time ironizes his own disapproval of the overtly moral tale while he is apparently writing a whole collection of such stories.

Like Christ, however, Wilde engages his audience not by telling them what to think but by challenging them to think for themselves; he leaves his readers to consider whether a story so disturbing is really a fairy tale. The answer, to some extent, is fairly simple, for as the Opies point out, "most events in fairy tales are remarkable for their unpleasantness" (Opies 11), and what we have come to think of as the original fairy tales are actually "prettified abridgement[s]" (Opies 11) of original oral tales. In effect, by reacting against the sentimentalizing of the original tales Wilde refuses to avoid the unpleasantness of human experience. But we cannot so easily account for his uncompromising endings, for however harrowing a fairy tale may be, however high the cost, when the full price is exacted, the story almost always ends with the restoration of peace and goodwill:

The wonderful happens, the lover is recognized, the spell of misfortune is broken, when the situation that already exists is utterly accepted, when additional tasks or disappointments are boldly faced, when poverty is seen to be of no consequence, when unfairness is borne without indignation, when the loathsome is loved.

(Opies 12)

"[N]oble personages may be brought low by fairy enchantment

or by human beastliness, but the lowly are seldom made noble. The established order is not stood on its head" (Opies 11).

Nor is order "stood on its head" by Wilde, but, on the other hand, he does not offer conclusions that endorse the status quo by reinforcing hierarchies, trivializing privations of poverty and valorizing unquestioning humility, obedience and endurance. Instead, he creates in his audience dissatisfaction with such contrivances and a need to construct alternative resolutions. Wilde uses the tales not only to jolt his readers into recognition of the failings of the society of which they are a part, but also to examine, for his own sake, the behaviour of the characters who represent the marginalized, such as the Dwarf, the Prince, the Young King and even the Rocket. The stories are, in a sense, self-referential, not because they seek to represent their writer in any direct way, but because Wilde uses them to explore his own image of himself and his relationship to a society from which he feels increasingly alienated.

Bruce King, analyzing American writing in a colonial context identifies a similar approach in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself":

His poetry was meant as autobiographical..., but it is not autobiographical in the usual sense of the word. It records how he saw himself, a

representative personality, a common man, of the new American democracy. (Literatures of the World in English 179)

The difference in Wilde's stories, of course, is that he saw himself as a non-representative personality, an uncommon man, displaced from the old British democracy,

...forced into the search for an alternative authenticity which seemed to be escaping [him], since the concept of authenticity itself was endorsed by a centre to which he did not belong and yet was continually contradicted by the everyday experience of marginality. (Empire 41)

The concept of the protagonist as "outsider" is, of course, an accepted convention of fairy tales. Typically, both the traditional fairy-tale hero and his nineteenth-century counterpart are isolated because of a variety of unusual but generally attractive personal attributes ranging from naivety or lack of maturity to superiority of intellect, profound wisdom, physical powers or often simply birth or beauty. Also, the hero can be alienated from society by factors over which he has no control: misfortune, often in the form of a curse that causes a hundred year sleep, being turned into a frog or beast, or being mislaid as a baby. But almost all fairy-tale heroes share one trait: although it is seldom apparent in the beginning, they are in

some respect superior to common people (in Victorian stories superiority usually involves innate or learned religious fortitude), and the gradual revelation of their remarkable qualities provides the motivation of the plot.

Wilde certainly makes use of the conventions of the fairy-tale hero: many of protagonists are simple and naive - the Dwarf, Little Hans, the Nightingale; several are of noble birth -- the Star Child, the Young King, the Happy Prince; some have superior strength -- presumably the Giant, and many have a fine perceptiveness; two, the Star Child and the Young King, have the misfortune of having been misplaced at birth. Unlike regular fairy-tale heroes, however, they seldom use their special gifts to gain power and recognition; indeed, those who have talents often squander them so that both they and society suffer, and those who are not endowed with spiritual or physical gifts, if they do develop them, almost always find that they work to their own detriment. In effect, Wilde creates not fairy-tale heroes but anti-heroes

If I return, then, to the claim I have made above, that the tales are to some extent autobiographical, these anti-heroes seem even more incongruous; not only do they not behave as the protagonists of fairy tales should, but they present for their creator a less admirable image of the outsider (the role in which he sees himself) than he might

have wished to contemplate. There are, however, two very sound reasons why Wilde chose to abrogate rather than appropriate the figure of the hero as he/she usually appeared in fairy tales. First, and here I borrow again from King's comments about Whitman's autobiographical strategies:

The self-conscious ego seems unbearably vain and can too easily label the ordinary as sublime.

Whitman was aware of this; his boasts were often modified by playful ironies. There is often self-mockery and an awareness of the absurdity of claiming to embody universal truth: 'I dote on myself, there is that lot of me and all so luscious.' (King, 180)

Wilde, too, doted on himself and thoroughly enjoyed playful ironies. The Remarkable Rocket, for instance, although believed to represent James Whistler, clearly also parodies his own creator when he declares: "'I like hearing myself talk. It is one of my greatest pleasures. I often have long conversations all by myself, and I am so clever that sometimes I don't understand a single word of what I am saying'" (CW 316).

As the tales progress, however, the ironies become, perhaps no less playful, but certainly more unsettling and more complex. Wilde knew that to accomplish his demanding and complicated agenda, not only to re-write the fairy tale

as counter-discourse to the authoritative moral text that it had become since the eighteenth century, but to re-site himself as Irish and homosexual in that counter-discourse, he had to be as willing to scrutinize his own construct of himself as to reject those aspects of his identity that had been constructed for him by the British imperialist centre. As Jerry Phillips claims in "Melville, Bloom and the Rhetoric of Imperialist Instruction," with regard to "...the task of defining a civilian identity for the purpose of post-colonial nationhood. Underlying such an ambitious project is a double contention: we are what we read; we should read who we are" (Recasting the World 28). Although he was not quite defining nationhood, Wilde was conscientiously seeking to understand concepts of difference as construed by those who set the standards for "normality." Obviously society's notions of deviance were relevant to Wilde's own situation, but in exploring how society constructed variance, he was considering not only himself but all who were, for whatever reason, designated other.

While Wilde, understandably, sympathizes with the marginalized, he resists the temptation to idealize them as patient, noble or blameless.⁵ He even demonstrates in some

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In the chapter that follows, the lack of sentimentality in Wilde's depiction of the helpless and destitute will be explored in more detail.

of the stories how easily the formerly marginalized and powerless, when given access to wealth and control, may themselves be seduced into callousness and indifference. For instance, the Young King, who has lived in relative poverty and innocence, is soon corrupted by luxury and leisure when he comes to the Palace, which is ironically named Joyeuse. Nor when he is confronted, in his dreams, by the victims of the immoral system of which he is the head, does he find them gentle and meek: they are angry and resentful. In his depiction of the Young King's poor subjects Wilde seems to draw on remembered images of the faces of the prisoners in the Nebraska gaol: "[p]oor odd types of humanity.... all mean looking" (Letters 115). The response of the workers to the inquiry of the Young King, "Who is thy master?," (CW 227) is rather ominous:

'Our master!' cried the weaver, bitterly, 'He is a man like myself. Indeed, there is but this difference between us -- that he wears fine clothes while I go in rags, and that while I am weak from hunger he suffers not a little from over feeding.' (CW 227)

Not only are the exploited not noble, they are well aware of who is responsible for their suffering.

While neither the exploiters nor their victims are admirable, we might expect that the heroes, at least, should

have some virtues that the other members of society lack: wisdom, trust, generosity or courage. But, because they are not ordinary fairy-tale heroes, none of the protagonists has all or sometimes even any of these attributes: courage, like Jack the Giant Killer and The Brave little Tailor; cunning, like Aladdin and Grettel; generosity, like Gluck and Snow White; trust and innocence, like the Ugly Duckling, the Little Match Girl and Cinderella. Instead, they range from hopelessly naive creatures who fail to learn from experience, to selfish beings who give pain to others, and repent only before death. Obviously, they were never conceived as traditional fairy-tale heroes but, more likely, represent the artist's awareness of his own failings and vulnerability. Wilde could never be complacent about his own identity, because an Irish man living in England could never experience the reassurance of seeing himself and his own values reflected in a group whose values he shared, and of which he was a part. Occasionally, however, he was able to enjoy the indulgence of the outsider -- trading ironic comments about the centre with fellow aliens like G. B. Shaw, with whom he frequently exchanged manuscripts, accompanied by remarks such as:

England is the land of intellectual fogs but you
have done much to clear the air: we are both
Celtic and I like to think that we are friends:

for these and many other reasons Salome presents herself to you in purple raiment. (Letters 332)⁶

Although Wilde could joke with fellow Irish people about their Celtic virtues, he could not discuss his homosexuality so openly, and certainly not in writing. Thus, while he was aware of his peripheral status as Irish colonial living on the mainland, he was almost certainly also affected by his growing realization of his position as homosexual. His Irishness he could assert with a humorous assumption of superiority, but his homosexuality must always remain a secret that was perilous to share even with other gay persons.⁷ In his introduction to The Importance of Being Earnest and Related Writings, Joseph Bristow describes the climate in which Wilde was working:

Late nineteenth-century homosexuality emerged in an atmosphere where the anxious society feared

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"Salome" was, of course, Wilde's play of the same name, which, ironically, did not reach its destination: Wilde had to send a second copy. The play was also banned, as was Shaw's Mrs Warren's Profession, from the British stage, both on the mainland and in Ireland.

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Alfred Douglas left some letters that Wilde had written to him in the pocket of a suit that he then gave to a male prostitute. The same letters were used first in an unsuccessful attempt to blackmail Wilde, and then as part of the evidence at his trial.

more and more the threat of 'degeneration'. The idea of 'degeneration' brought together a cluster of ideas about moral corruption, racial impurity, lack of sanitation among the working classes, and, most controversially of all, homosexuality....

...journal articles from the mid-1890s frequently referred to 'morbid' sexuality, by which they probably meant homosexuality. It is worth bearing in mind that at this time 'homosexuality' was not known by that name.... Prior to [the Wilde trials] homosexuality was understood only in terms of the sexual act. Men were hanged for committing buggery or sodomy rather than for being homosexuals, until 1836. (Bristow 16-17)

So, although the 'crime' of which Wilde knew himself to be guilty was no longer punishable by hanging, it carried a social stigma not much less abhorrent than murder.

The outsiders in Wilde's fairy tales, created out of a confusion of pride and guilt, of defiance and defensiveness, are very much more than the innocent victims we would normally expect to find in children's tales, or even in fairy tales: Tom, in "The Water Babies," Tiny Tim, in "A Christmas Carol," or The Sleeping Beauty or Cinderella . Even though Wilde believed his vocation was to tell "beautiful untrue things," his heroes are themselves often

less than "beautiful," for as he intensifies his investigation of the self, he seems to imply that at the centre of his being is not, as he no doubt hoped, the pure altruistic, unsullied artist's soul, with the special compassion of one who knows the pain of isolation, but a spirit who, given the opportunity, is capable of excess and selfishness equal to that of the moral centre that condemns as deviant and abnormal not only his obvious racial difference, but especially his secret sexual orientation. Paradoxically, through the tales, he seems to indicate that most of those designated abnormal by society are, indeed, no different from those who believe themselves normal. This is not, however, a triumphant discovery but, instead, a depressing realization that only in a few cases is a person defined as different because he or she is less corrupt or corruptible than the rest of the community.

The gradual blurring of the distinction between hero and villain is achieved through a strategy of contradictions and inversions. Joseph Bristow believes that Wilde's theories about the mutability of truth are a result of the combined influences of Ruskin, Hegel and Darwin, and sees the same pattern throughout his writing:

All of Wilde's work is marked by a strenuous resistance to fixed interpretations, since he felt that each and every one of them would inevitably

alter with time. His writing revels in ambiguity and contradiction. For him no one meaning will do.
(Bristow 4)

Even the arrangement of the stories in The Happy Prince is designed to create ambiguities and contradictions. The order of the stories is as follows: "The Happy Prince," "The Nightingale and the Rose," "The Selfish Giant," "The Devoted Friend," and "The Remarkable Rocket." At first there seems little connection among the tales, but closer reading shows that particular stories are juxtaposed so as to emphasize apparent conflicts, especially in their conclusions; lessons learned by each protagonist are negated by the experience of the hero of the story that follows. The sacrifice of the Prince when apparently repeated by the Nightingale brings no reward from God, and again, although the Giant's eventual generosity with his garden is approved by God, poor Hans receives no reward for having always shared his flowers and produce. The protagonist of "The Remarkable Rocket," the story which follows "The Devoted Friend," reflects not the Dwarf but the Miller. Both the Dwarf's so-called friend and the Rocket are entirely self-centred and vain, and assume that the rest of creation exists only to admire their superior qualities. But while the Miller, even at the end of the story, is still regarded by the rest of the community as wise and worthy, the Rocket suffers an ignominious end.

Whether Wilde images the outsider as the well-meaning aesthete or as a supercilious egotist, however, he clearly sees the philosophical and practical limitations of merely accepting a marginal status and attempting to alter society from the periphery. He knew, as Chamberlin suggests, that to have any effect on others, the dreamer must do his dreaming in the marketplace. The Happy Prince, for all his magnificence can do nothing to alleviate the misery he has to witness daily. He weeps bitterly because, while he was alive, he was oblivious to the wretchedness of his people and now, as he tells his reluctant helper: "'My feet are fastened to this pedestal and I cannot move'" (CW 287). Only the "flighty" Swallow, who is able to dart unnoticed among the suffering, can offer help to them. Theories, intentions, and even grand romantic gestures, as we learn from the fate of the Nightingale in the next story, are of no practical use. Ironically, of course, the Swallow is not motivated by altruism or by philanthropy, but by love. But this is probably why he and the Prince earn an everlasting reward while the Nightingale remains isolated, even in death -- the Prince and the Swallow, because they learn to love one another, understand how to love humanity; the Nightingale loved not a person but a concept of Love.

In these two stories, Wilde creates what seem, at first, to be typical fairy-tale heroes: the Prince, royal,

golden and bejewelled, literally above ordinary mortals, high on his pedestal, trying to find a way to ease the burden of humanity; and the Nightingale, courageous, determined and selfless, also quite literally singing her heart out for the sake of Romantic Love. But, in effect, neither behaves as a fairy-tale hero should: neither succeeds in achieving his goal, nor does anyone live happily ever after. The Nightingale sacrifices her own life and achieves nothing, but even worse, the Prince sacrifices not only his own life but that of his friend. We might be tempted to believe, however, that the Prince at least makes a difference in society, but even that assumption is tenuous, for although the children smile and grow "rosier" and cry "We have bread now!" (CW 290), winter comes, the Prince is stripped of his fine gold, the Swallow dies and the source of bread is gone. Even the recipients of the first and largest gems fail to understand their real value: the mother of the sick child does not seem to see the ruby; the Student assumes arrogantly that the sapphire is from an admirer; and the Match Girl thinks the jewel is a pretty piece of glass.

Although the marginalized characters in these two stories are naive, they are still entirely sympathetic. Even the Giant, in the next story, is appealing and amusing although he is a "Selfish Giant." Like the Swallow, he is

delightfully characterized: rather spoiled and empty-headed, absorbed in the pleasures of socializing and the enjoyment of cultivated beauty, but when forced to confront the unhappiness of others, he responds with surprising and unselfish compassion. Both, too, are isolated from society, but interestingly, by their own choice, or at least, as a result of their own actions: the Swallow is left behind when his friends fly south because he will not abandon his infatuation with the Reed; the Giant is left alone in his barren garden because he chases out the children, builds a high wall and erects a notice board saying:

TRESPASSERS
will be
PROSECUTED

(CW 297)

Unfortunately, the reintegration of each into society leads to his death, but death, too, is by painful choice -- a result of selfless love. Possibly, since Wilde had recently confronted his homosexuality in a physical encounter with Robert Ross, and had shortly thereafter met and fallen in love with Alfred Douglas, it is significant that both characters give up their lives for the love of a beautiful boy.

It would be difficult to ignore the parallels between these two characters and the writer himself. Certainly, it seems that Wilde was creating for his own perusal a portrait of the artist, but, like the picture of Dorian Gray, although it starts out as a record of the perfection of the subject, it changes horrifyingly as Wilde gradually begins to recognize what he believes to be his own imperfections. He creates in stages a text where he is able only too clearly to "read himself" -- a very complex self. In this respect Wilde's heroes, especially those in the second set of stories, differ notably from those in other fairy tales: they have personalities, and react to people and situations in the complicated and often somewhat baffling ways that we would expect from characters in a novel, or even in real life. The characters in fairy tales are usually "...stock figures. They are either altogether good or altogether bad, and there is no evolution of character. Fairy tales are more concerned with situation than with character" (Opies 15).

Unlike the original tellers of fairy tales, or their nineteenth-century counterparts, Wilde is more interested in the development of his heroes than in incident or action; his depiction of both society and of the hero is honest and straightforward, paying equal attention to the shortcomings on both sides. "The Devoted Friend," the story that follows "The Selfish Giant," presents a protagonist and a

representative of the central power who are, perhaps, two of the least sympathetic of Wilde's characters in these two sets of tales. Little Hans at first seems sympathetic but he is actually only pathetic. While he is the epitome of generosity, he has no great plans, like the earlier heroes, to help the unfortunate; instead, although he has the resources to be independent, he allows himself to be misused by the Miller to the extent that he pointlessly sacrifices his own life, undertaking a task which the Miller should have done himself. Just as the preceding stories clearly reflect aspects of the artist and of marginalized people in general, it is difficult to believe that this story is not a calculated exposé of colonial exploitation, somewhat in the style of Swift -- dry, distanced and ironically rational. Certainly the treatment Hans receives from the Miller seems to parallel the treatment of colonized countries, especially Ireland, under imperialism. The Miller not only takes advantage of Hans, appropriating his goods, time, and labour, but justifies his actions by constructing Hans as idle, ungrateful and foolish, unable to exist without the help and advice of his wise mentor.

The most frustrating, and also the most moving, aspect of the story is Hans' sacrifice of his individuality and autonomy because he believes in the higher authority of the Miller and his right to demand loyalty and sacrifice in the

name of "friendship." Nor is Hans merely a gullible dupe, for he often worries about the state of his own affairs: "Poor little Hans was very anxious to go and work in his garden, for his flowers had not been watered for two days, but he did not like to refuse the Miller as he was such a good friend to him" (CW 306). In this tale, Wilde offers a profound and disturbing insight into the insidious working of colonization, emphasising the collusion of the colonized in his own surrender of self-determination. Hans, for all his good-natured ingenuousness, is certainly no typical fairy-tale hero. He experiences no reversal of fortune like Jack the Beanstalk Climber in the traditional tale, whose trusting but foolish transaction -- a cow for a handful of beans -- eventually leads him to wealth and fame.

Nor, indeed, is the Remarkable Rocket, who is remarkable in his own estimation but ridiculous in the opinion of everyone else, a typical hero.⁸ He is so completely vacuous and self-absorbed that he neither affects nor is he affected by the rest of society. His sole interest is in talking about himself. He does not even need an

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Richard Ellmann, and others in Wilde's own time, believed that the Rocket is a parody of James Whistler, and no doubt it is. But I believe that Wilde was perfectly aware that he was capable of being just as self-absorbed as his artist friend, and like Whitman in 'Song of Myself,' he takes this opportunity to indulge in some "playful irony" about the absurdity of his own behaviour.

audience -- which is fortunate since all his listeners abandon him -- for, as we saw above, what he enjoys most is hearing himself talk. When the Rocket fizzles, even the reader merely shrugs and smiles. The soul devoted only to itself may enjoy its own existence, but Wilde seems to conclude that such a life has no purpose. Paradoxically, he continues to endorse the need for community, even though community, as represented in the tales, must, almost always, disadvantage certain individuals. The story also has another purpose. The Rocket is blissfully oblivious to his own ridiculousness and total dislocation from the rest of society, while all of the other protagonists in The Happy Prince concern themselves perhaps too much with pleasing others. The story, therefore, provides a transition to A House of Pomegranates which, at least in the characterization of the heroes, is antithetical to the first set of tales. In all but one of the stories in the second set, the main characters are, at least at first, motivated entirely by selfishness.

The first story, "The Young King," is particularly interesting as a portrait of the artist. Like Wilde, a young man comes from the outskirts of the kingdom, from a natural, simpler setting, and like Wilde he is soon seduced by the sophisticated splendour of his new life. More significantly, rumours begin to circulate about his odd behaviour:

[He] had been discovered... gazing, as one in a trance, at a Greek gem carved with the figure of Adonis. He had been seen, so the tale ran, pressing his warm lips to the marble brow of an antique statue... inscribed with the name of the Bithynian slave of Hadrian. He had passed a whole night in noting the effect of the moonlight on a silver image of Endymion. (CW 225)

Again, Wilde draws on personal experience in the characterization of the young King fascinated by images of beautiful boys, and it is, then, ironic that he depicts the courtiers as willing to accommodate their new ruler, so long as his extravagances cause no disruption in their lives. The King, unlike Wilde, however, is beautiful and of noble birth, two obvious assets in the estimation of the court.

It is only when the King, haunted by his dreams, like Joseph in the Old Testament, tries to share his insight that his people turn against him, for he is telling them ugly truths that they have no wish to hear. Once again the truths involve exploitation of the poor and powerless, in both domestic and colonial settings, and to his horror, the young King realizes that he, as the centre of power, is directly responsible for the suffering and abuse of his subjects. In his third dream

...the young King wept, and said: 'Who were these

men, and for what were they seeking?'

'For rubies for a king's crown,' answered one who stood behind him.

And the young King started, and, turning round, he saw a man habited as a pilgrim and holding in his hand a mirror of silver.

And he grew pale, and said: 'For what king?'

And the pilgrim answered: 'Look in this mirror, and thou shalt see him.' (CW 230)

The revelation that the young King faces in the mirror is even more devastating than that the Happy Prince sees from his pedestal, for while the Prince sees that he was guilty of indifference to the hardship of his people, the young King confronts the distressing reality that he is directly responsible for the suffering he has witnessed. In this story Wilde seems to be grappling with the intricate issues of the transfer of power to the previously marginalized -- the same situation he had witnessed during his tour of the United States -- the inevitable process by which the newly-empowered inherit, with self-determination, the right to determine the fate of all those who were formerly subject to the displaced power, and the responsibility for any abuses inherent in the old systems.

Wilde demonstrates an acute awareness of the

"impossibility" of displacing the centre of control. When the young King is summoned from the periphery to occupy the palace, the centre of government, he is expected to perpetuate established forms, and when he expresses his determination to reform the mechanisms of control, all those who are part of the machine immediately threaten not only to return him to the margins but to dismember him. He has told his dreams "in the market place" and the people do not want to hear:

'Where is this dreamer of dreams?' they cried.

'Where is this King, who is apparelled like a beggar -- this boy who brings shame upon our state? Surely we will slay him, for he is unworthy to rule over us.' (CW 233)

The parallels with Joseph, who was betrayed by his brothers, and with Christ, who was betrayed by a disciple, are obvious in this passage, and as the story draws to its end it is clear that the young King has, in fact, become a Christ figure, the figure of the ultimate outsider. But he is not required to sacrifice his life, for

...the Glory of God filled the place.... And the people fell upon their knees in awe.... And the young King came down from the high altar, and passed home through the midst of the people. But no man dared look upon his face, for it was the

face of an angel. (CW 233)

When read without reference to the other stories this tale seems to have a happy ending; certainly, it seems that God has helped the King to achieve his goal and the people have been won over. But when approached in the context of the other stories, especially "The Birthday of the Infanta" and "The Star Child," this ending is actually ironic. It becomes clear that Wilde believes that it is only with the help of spectacular and miraculous intervention by God that society can be changed, and, even then, the outsider remains isolated, for he has now become, after all, an angel, and cannot, therefore, expect to relate on an equal level to ordinary mortals.

In the next tale, "The Birthday of the Infanta," the Dwarf too is brought to the court from a place of innocence, the forest, where

(h)e knew the cry of every bird, and could call the starlings from the treetop, or the heron from the mere. He knew the trail of every animal, and could track the hare by its delicate footprints, and the boar by the trampled leaves. (CW 242)

At the court, even the garden itself is an image of decadence and excess:

...the little lizards crept out of the crevices of the wall, and lay basking in the white glare; and

the pomegranates split and cracked with the heat, and showed their bleeding red hearts. Even the pale yellow lemons, that hung in such profusion from the mouldering trellis and along the dim arcades seemed to have caught a richer colour from the wonderful sunlight, and the magnolia trees opened their great glove-like blossoms of folded ivory, and filled the air with a sweet heavy perfume. (CW 234)

In his characterization of the outsider as in tune with nature, and the centre of power as "decadent," Wilde creates an ironic reversal of the pseudo-scientific theories, like those of Nordau and Lombroso, about deviation and its rejection of the natural. Everything cultivated, including even the flowers, recoils from the Dwarf because of his appearance:

The flowers were quite indignant at his daring to intrude into their beautiful home....

'He is really far too ugly to be allowed to play in any place where we are,' cried the Tulips.

(CW 240)

The Dwarf, unlike the young King, does not have beauty and birth to compensate for the "naturalness" of his behaviour and manners. His naive good nature is of no consequence in the estimation of the court. When he ceases to amuse he

becomes merely an inconvenience. The Dwarf dies of a broken heart, and as in the case of the Nightingale, God does not intervene. Like the Nightingale, the Dwarf accepts the values that set appearances above all else; he is persuaded to see himself through the eyes of the court, to disregard his own gifts of generosity and humour and concentrate only on his superficial ugliness. He dies because he is untrue to himself.

Both the King and the Dwarf are forced to recognize elements of themselves of which they had been previously unaware. But whereas the young King, with the help of a divine agency, is able to use his knowledge for the good of society, the Dwarf, having none of the advantages of intelligence, power and outward charm, becomes merely a victim of the vanity of the court. Both characters are brought to the court from a part of the kingdom that is still wild and unsophisticated, like the colonies (at least from the perspective of the colonizers), but the Dwarf who, in the eyes of the court, is deformed and ugly (perhaps a metaphor for Wilde's anxiety about his "deviant" sexual practices) cannot hope to become civilized, whereas the beautiful, intelligent young King is soon the toast of the kingdom. Of course, there is one other difference: the King never was a wild colonial boy, for, in the tradition of the "real" fairy tale, he has royal blood, the passport that

makes him acceptable and influential. In fact, these two stories together create a dark and cynical vision of the moral, social and political centre and especially of the pettiness of its motivation in its treatment of abnormality.

As reflections on the marginalized, however, both stories are relatively positive and sympathetic, for, although the young King is, at first, selfish and self-centred, he becomes humane and selfless when forced to confront the suffering of the oppressed. And the Dwarf, of course, as naive and trusting victim, arouses the compassion of the readers more than even Hans, who, as we have seen, is complicit in his own fate. In contrast to such sympathetic characters, however, the protagonist of the final story, "The Star Child," is entirely unappealing. He has all the assets of the young King, but through his own ill-nature he becomes much more repellent than the Dwarf.

It is likely that the clearest projections we have of the artist are in the tortured Star Child and the Fisherman. And while they seem to draw specifically on Wilde's own experience, especially his homosexuality, theirs are the most stringent and uncompromising statements of the impossibility of reconciliation between centre and margin. The mischievous delight of the young aesthete Wilde when flaunting his "difference" and flouting social rules seems to have evolved into near despair not only about the

intransigence and hypocrisy of his society, but also about the nature of his own difference. It seems that as Wilde gradually became more fascinated with the sort of art that society deemed decadent and more involved in the London homosexual sub-culture, he also wrestled with his own conscience. Despite his somewhat eccentric family background he cannot have escaped strong Protestant indoctrination in his middle school years at Portora Royal, or even later, at Trinity and Magdalen; at various stages in his life, starting while at Oxford, he also flirted with the Roman Catholic Church, and clearly his knowledge of the Bible was very thorough. Indeed, as we shall see in the next two chapters, both "The Star Child" and "The Fisherman and his Soul" echo with biblical reference and rhetoric.

Besides being frequently bothered by his Irish Protestant conscience, Wilde must also have been troubled by the many "books pertaining to 'degeneration' [which] were published from the 1880s onwards. As was already discussed, concerns about this nebulous social and physical disease were accentuated by the publication of Max Nordau's book, Degeneration, in 1895" (Bristow 17). That Wilde was himself aware of such literature, is clear from his petition written from prison to the Home Secretary, asking for a reduction in his sentence:

...such offenses are forms of sexual madness and

are recognised as such not merely by modern pathological science but by much modern legislation...on the ground that they are diseases to be cured by a physician, rather than crimes to be punished by a judge. In the works of eminent men of science such as Lombroso and Nordau, to take merely two incidences out of many, this is especially insisted on with reference to the intimate connection between madness and the literary and artistic temperament....

(Letters 402)

In effect, during the eighties, science confirmed many of Wilde's anxieties about his sexuality: although the "definitive" text, Nordau's, was not published in English until 1895 (German 1893), articles and books continually appeared, asserting that behaviour like Wilde's was symptomatic of physical and mental "disease." Of course, even the above petition is not proof that Wilde agreed with any of the propaganda against degeneration, since he was merely using "expert testimony" to make a convincing case for his release. But whatever Wilde's private feelings about his inclinations and activities, it seems that his understanding of how deviance is constructed by society and how marginalization affects the behaviour of the individual become more complex as the tales progress. The last two

heroes are certainly not mere victims: indeed, they are as capable as their oppressors of inflicting pain on others. Wilde knew only too well the effects that his flouting of society's taboos, especially regarding what was considered homosexual behaviour, would have on anyone with whom he was associated, most importantly his family. Yet, as he wrote to Douglas from prison, he let himself

be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease.... Desire, at the end, was a malady, or a madness, or both. I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me and passed on. (CW 913)

In their behaviour, the Fisherman and the Star Child seem to foreshadow the same selfish behaviour for which Wilde would later berate himself. They have little to do with the kind and remorseful statue on a pedestal, or the ugly but good-hearted Dwarf. It is not superior virtue, insight or even merely appearance that causes these characters to be marginalized, but their own self-absorption. These two characters actually engineer their own isolation by their contempt for the opinion of society. They not only fail to benefit the community, but actually share in its corruption. Not only are they indifferent to the suffering of others but they actually inflict pain on the innocent.

It would seem, at first, in this pair of stories, that the antithetical relationship that we have observed between other consecutive stories has changed: the fates of the characters seem to affirm rather than contradict each other. Both protagonists repent and are forgiven by God; both die as a result of the suffering induced by their own sins (although the Star Child lives a little longer); and neither society is permanently improved by the actions of the hero. But, in fact, Wilde has not altered the pattern where the individual tale is both complemented and complicated by reference to its counterpart; he has, instead, adjusted his focus. While the other stories all concentrate on the various relationships between the marginalised hero and the rest of society, and the apparently inevitable failure of any attempt at integration, these two tales, as the title of the first, "The Fisherman and his Soul," suggests, chronicle the internal struggle of a man trying to reconcile his exotic impulses with the needs of his "soul." The young fisherman "cuts off" his Soul for the love of a Mermaid -- an obvious metaphor for sexual "deviance" -- but, alone, the Soul becomes more corrupt than the man and leads him into terrible wickedness, for as the Soul explains: "'When thou didst send me forth into the world thou gavest me no heart, so I learned to do all these things and love them'" (CW 267). It is only when the Mermaid is washed up dead on the

beach and the Fisherman's heart breaks that "the Soul [finds] an entrance and enter[s] in, and [is] one with him even as before. And the sea cover[s] the young Fisherman with its waves" (CW 271).

Unfortunately, the reunion of the man with his soul, and subsequently with God, can be completed only in death: the split between the physical and the spiritual man, caused by the pursuit of a forbidden love, is irreparable in this life. But, even in death, there is no reconciliation between the man and the community, a situation that I shall explore further in the next part of my discussion. But what seems even more significant to this analysis is not only the change of emphasis from the relationship between centre and margin, but the focus on choice. The Fisherman progresses from being an acceptable, if somewhat lowly member of society, to becoming a reviled outsider. Unlike the other protagonists, he determines his own fate by pursuing selfish ends. He is not arbitrarily oppressed. But, since this is the case, the ending is particularly interesting, for God, who does not intervene for Hans or the Nightingale, provides a sign of forgiveness. Again, I shall discuss this odd phenomenon later. The Star Child, in the final story, is even more selfish than the Fisherman, but he is also closer to the traditional fairy-tale hero: he is found in the forest by a poor woodcutter, and with him the evidence --

unrecognised -- of his royal birth; he grows up more beautiful and talented than all the other children; but, in a reversal of convention, he is renowned not for his goodness but for his cruelty. Also in the tradition of the fairy tale, the beautiful protagonist suddenly finds that he is ugly: "So he went to the well of water and looked into it, and lo! his face was the face of a toad, and his body was scaled like an adder" (CW 278). But again in contradiction of convention, he has become repellent because of his own corrupt nature: "'Surely this has come upon me by reason of my sin. For I have denied my mother, and driven her away and been proud and cruel to her'" (CW 278). As the Star Child brings about his own fate, so he must also work out his own redemption, for "... in the world there was neither loving-kindness nor charity for him, but it was even such a world as he had made for himself in the days of his great pride" (CW 279). He is helped by a talking Hare, but only when he shows compassion learned through his own suffering.

As "The Devoted Friend" examines the ultimate abuse of the marginalized individual, so this final story considers the extent to which such a character can inflict abuse upon society and consequently upon himself. Also, within the limitations of one story Wilde manages to explore "difference" from almost every angle: the protagonist is

isolated for both his beauty and his ugliness, for both his wickedness and his goodness. He experiences every aspect of alienation, but when he finds himself in a position of power, having made recompense for his sins, he rules wisely. He does not, however, live long and, after his death, the kingdom reverts to its evil ways.

It certainly seems, then, that Wilde's protagonists do not conform to the conventional type of the fairy-tale hero, not only because they are complex, but also because they do not live happily ever after in harmony with their society. Yet, in a paradoxical way they satisfy some of the traditional criteria for fairy-tale heroes, who "... do the right thing, they hit the right key; they are heaven's favourites" (Lüthi 143); "... the insignificant, the neglected.... proves to be strong noble and blessed" (Lüthi 145). Most perplexingly, those who commit the most heinous sins are most obviously approved by God, but only after they have repented and made, or offered to make, a supreme sacrifice for love of another. But while they succeed in finding favour with the higher spiritual powers, unlike conventional heroes, they remain outside the community, and the community is ultimately unchanged by the hero's actions.

In the course of the nine tales, by his selective appropriation of certain characteristics of the fairy-tale hero and his abrogation of others, Wilde reveals what his

articles and letters indicate he already suspected, that the marginalized can be just as selfish and as corrupt as the rest of society: the colonized when granted power, become the colonizers. But whereas individuals may work out their own redemption, no matter how great their transgressions, systems of control and structures of power remain, in Wilde's tales, stubbornly resistant to change.

Once again, in seeking to conclude one debate, Wilde actually opens another. In the course of trying to define the relationship of the marginalized to the centre, he discovers new and disturbing dimensions in the relationship. He even posits for the soul a whole separate existence; ironically, when his character comes in "contact with his soul" he finds not rest and unity but conflict and division. As Wilde expected, he is able to find through art "soul-turmoil" but not, as he had hoped, "soul-peace". Nor is his discovery about society any less disturbing. The marginalized Irish homosexual would no doubt have preferred to be able to continue throughout the tales to satirize a corrupt society and approve an outsider like the Prince who, by his superior perception and kindness, can make life better for the poor. But art dictates otherwise, leading its creator through a series of antithetical hypotheses to discover, like the Star Child, that this "is even such a world as he had made for himself" (CW 279). The outsider is

no less marginalized, and the world no better than before. The conclusion is depressing, but also, unfortunately, realistic.

In the beginning, Wilde uses the conventions of the genre to satirize a society that defines as virtuous what benefits the status quo, and not humanity. Even the early stories, as we have seen, refuse to subscribe to the "happy ending" where reward is earned by the sort of conduct that helps sustain the hierarchies: humility, patience, endurance, pragmatism and unwavering devotion. Nor did he allow that such behaviour would, sometimes with the help of supernatural forces, lead to the eventual transformation of the alienated protagonist into a triumphant saviour of the community, as in the traditional tale. But probably, when writing the first story about the self-sacrificing Prince and his tireless friend, the Swallow, misunderstood by an ignorant and selfish community, Wilde did not expect to find that the hero -- at least until he repents -- could be as indifferent to others as the systems that have marginalized him.

Ruskin, Macdonald, Thackeray and others, unlike Wilde, all to some extent perpetuate the concept of the transformation of the hero because of his/her appropriate virtues, his/her reconciliation with the community and the restoration of peace and order as a result. Even traditional

folk tales subscribe to the reintegration of the hero into society. For example, Perrault's "Cinderella" found the shoe fitted, then "... in came her godmother, who, having touched with her wand Cinderella's clothes, made them richer and more magnificent than any of those she had before" (Blue 78). Her sisters threw themselves at her feet, she forgave them, and she

...was conducted to the young Prince, dressed as she was; he thought her more charming than ever, and, a few days after, married her. Cinderella, who was no less good than beautiful, gave her two sisters lodgings in the palace, and that very same day matched them with two great lords of the court. (Blue 79)

Similarly, Grimms' Hansel and Gretel, although not physically transformed, experience a complete change, economically and emotionally. They fall on their father's neck, strew their pearls and precious stones at his feet, and they all live "happily ever afterwards." The formula is repeated in almost all traditional folk tales.

Hans Christian Andersen too, although he adapts conventions to his own purposes, tends to favour the "transformation and reconciliation" ending, as in "The Wild Swans". When the enchantment of the Princes is broken through Elise's perseverance: "[a]ll the church bells began

to ring of their own accord, and the singing birds flocked around them. Surely such a bridal procession went back to the palace as no king had ever seen before!" (Andersen 211). He does, however, vary the endings in ways that to some extent anticipate Wilde: he creates heroes who are capable of selfish and wilful behaviour, and posits a more active role for them in their own repentance. But once the transformation is achieved, with the help of God rather than pagan magic, the hero is joyfully reunited with the community. When Karen not only regrets her fascination with the Red Shoes but is able to read her prayer book "with a humble mind" and cry, "'Oh, God help me!'" (Andersen 69), she is transported to the church and is welcomed by the congregation. Like several of Wilde's protagonists, she dies as a result of her ordeal, but unlike them, she first rejoins society.

Like Andersen, Wilde also appropriates the concept of transformation of the hero, but his adaptations are much more radical than Andersen's. Indeed, as we have seen in the majority of his stories, he does not even offer the consolation that the hero changes or learns anything from his mistakes; in fact, many of the protagonists are given no chance to reform -- they die too soon. But if we look first at the stories where this is the case, we find that the only reason the hero needs to change is because he is too

idealistic for this world, and suffers as a result. Transformation for the Nightingale, for the Dwarf and for little Hans would make them better able to cope with and even, perhaps, able to survive in the corrupt societies they inhabit; but the transformation would then, it seems, be a sad compromise.

Several of the other stories make better sense in a Christian humanist context: the Remarkable Rocket has no wish to change anything about himself, cares nothing for anyone else, and deserves to fizzle; the Happy Prince and the Swallow have both been thoughtless, but, confronted with wretchedness, both repent, are transformed, sacrifice their lives for the poor, and, in the end, receive their just reward from God; the Selfish Giant learns to be generous and to share with others, so, in life he finds happiness among the innocent and, in death, a place in paradise; even the young King presumably finds an eternal reward after he changes from selfish hedonist to selfless socialist, followed by his miraculous transfiguration. Although the last three stories make sense in Christian and humanist terms, and do make use of the motif of transformation, they certainly do not satisfy the requirements of either the folk tale or the Victorian fairy tale in the nature of the transformation of the hero or in its effects on the community.

In one respect, if we accept Iona and Peter Opie's summary of transformation as found in fairy tales, Wilde's heroes do fit the accepted pattern: "On the face of it the message of the fairy tales is that transformation to a state of bliss is effected not by magic, but by the perfect love of one person for another" (Opies 14). Certainly, the Prince, the Swallow and the Giant are all transformed and redeemed because of their perfect love of others, and if we may widen the definition to include perfect love of all, the young King also qualifies. But the summary continues:

Yet clearly even this is not the whole story. The transformation is not an actual transformation but a disenchantment, the breaking of the spell. In each case we are aware that the person was always noble, that the magic has wrought no change in the person's soul, only in his or her outward form. In fairy tales there is no saving of the wicked in heart. (Opies 14)

The Opies' definition would apply equally to the original fairy tales and to the more religiously motivated Victorian tales. In Wilde's tales, however, no outside agent is involved in the transformation of the hero; there is no supernatural enchantment that disguises the hero's beauty or aristocratic heritage. Wilde's protagonists are guided entirely by their own judgement. Although in A House of

Pomegranates they do at times encounter mysterious beings, these creatures have no direct control over the fate of the heroes. Instead they interact with the protagonist in much the same way as do ordinary human characters; they do not come to interfere in the course of the hero's life by popping up, like Rumpelstiltskin, to help and to trick the Miller's Daughter, or like Cinderella's Godmother, magically to provide a ball gown and accessories, or by dropping in uninvited at a feast, like the old disgruntled fairy to cast a sleeping spell on the beautiful Princess and her court.

In fact, Wilde's heroes must go out of their way to find the supernatural: the Fisherman demands a promise from the Mermaid that she will visit him; he seeks the young Witch in her own cave, and he persuades her, against her will to tell the secret of how to be rid of his soul: "She grew grey as a blossom of the Judas tree, and shuddered. 'Be it so,' she muttered, 'It is thy Soul and not mine. Do with it as thou wilt'" (CW 255). It is he, and only he, who decides the direction his life will take. Similarly, the Star Child finds the talking Hare because, remembering his own suffering, he is moved to compassion when he hears the cry of someone in pain. Unlike most animals in distress in fairy tales, this apparently is not an enchanted human placed intentionally to test the hero, but simply a Hare who knows where treasure is hidden. Again, the interaction of

the hero with another -- his capacity for pity -- is what causes transformation: the treasure given to him by the Hare has no other significance than that the Star Child is willing to give it to one worse off than himself, even though he faces dire consequences for returning without it. It is not a magical talisman that will directly solve all his problems and bring him fame and fortune. Neither the Hare nor the treasure is the cause of the hero's transformation; it is his own selfless generosity that restores him to his former beauty, just as it was his selfish cruelty that made him repellent in the first place.

As the protagonists of the tales are not mere stereotypes, but complex and convincing characters, so the situations they face are not simply steps toward a predetermined destiny. They do not undergo a test of endurance, perseverance, or cunning that will lead to their inevitable transformation into clever, attractive and successful persons. Wilde's characters face challenging, confusing and often distressing situations in which they must use their own resources and make their own decisions. If transformation takes place, it is always related to the way in which the hero treats other people, and it may be either negative or positive. Nor is it merely a superficial change, for while in some cases the outward appearance of the character may be altered, it is always as a reflection

of the inward person. Both in Wilde's tales and in traditional fairy tales transformation has much in common with Ovidian metamorphosis. Joseph Solodow defines metamorphosis in Ovid as "clarification":

... a process by which characteristics of a person, essential or incidental, are given physical embodiments and so are rendered visible and manifest. Metamorphosis makes plain a person's qualities, yet without passing judgement on them.... a change which preserves, an alteration which maintains identity. (The World of Ovid's Metamorphoses 174)

But whereas, as the Opies explain, transformation in fairy tales is achieved through the breaking of a spell and the freeing of the hero's nobility of soul, Wilde's heroes attain transformation through something more like real human growth of spirit. Later in his discussion, Solodow also points out "that divinity is not bestowed on the hero through metamorphosis, it is in him all along and merely comes to predominate" (Solodow 191). For Wilde's characters, however, there is always the possibility that good might not triumph. For them there is not the certainty of predestination or magic; they must work out their own fates.

Wilde, then, makes use of the fairy-tale motif of transformation, but he also draws on his familiarity with

the classics. Some of the characters even undergo more than one transformation; the Star Child, for instance, progresses from beautiful to ugly to beautiful as his soul develops from innocent to wicked to compassionate. The Fisherman, too, becomes corrupt when he re-establishes contact with his banished soul, and his final transformation, as his soul rejoins his body in death, is not seen but suggested by the blossoming of the flowers on his grave.

Transformation, then, in Wilde's stories, is not "a disenchantment" (Opies 14) and a return to the nobility that was temporarily suppressed in the hero. Indeed, as we have seen, in most cases the ending Wilde provides, through the transformation of the hero, is by fairy-tale standards, and by association, conventional social standards, quite "inappropriate;" that is, disturbing and unsatisfying. In these tales there is change in the "person's soul" and "the wicked in heart" are often saved. Not only that, but often, especially in the second set of tales, it is difficult to define what is meant by "the wicked in heart" and who fits the definition. In A House of Pomegranates, an old Priest tries to dissuade the young King from his good intent, while a young witch tries to dissuade the Fisherman from his evil intent; a guard in armour inlaid with gilt flowers reviles the ugly Star Child, while the stone-faced Chamberlain shows pity and regret for the death of the ugly Dwarf.

Conventional assumptions about good and evil are challenged throughout the two sets of tales, and the last two tales in the second collection, especially, offer not a reversal but a confusion of values that forces the reader to reassess the very basis of traditional "morality." The tales are not, then, what Bhabha terms "a simple negation or exclusion of the 'content' of another culture." While Wilde may have set out intending to re-locate the marginalized in relation to the centre and to privilege the perspective of those designated deviant, he, as always, is led by his art, allowing truth to evolve rather than situating it, and therefore restricting it, within a fixed system. But, although the image of the outsider develops and is metamorphosed, one aspect of Wilde's vision is curiously static throughout the stories: the moral, political and social values of society remain fixed and immovable; unlike fairy-tale heroes Wilde's protagonists are never reconciled with the community, nor is society ever included in the redemption of the protagonist.

The only story that offers any hope for a reformation of the "dull lifeless systems" that Wilde so despised is "The Young King", and that is only because "the Glory of God filled the place," terrifying those who would oppose the new King. Even with God's intervention, hope is faint, because the motivation of the people is not love but awe and fear,

and, since the tales make clear that only love has redeeming power, the future is still not optimistic. It might be argued too that the ending of "The Fisherman and his Soul" offers a glimmer of reassurance, when the Priest responds to the posthumous sign of God's approval of the Fisherman, by leading a procession to bless the sea and its inhabitants. But, it seems, repentance has come too late, for the sea people never return, and the motivation for penitence is fear. The final story, "The Star Child," in its last sentence pronounces what seems to be the consensus of the tales regarding the future of a society based on traditional values and controlled by conventional structures of power: "And he who came after him ruled evilly" (189). In writing his fairy tales, Wilde clarified both his perception of those who, like himself, for various reasons, must exist on the periphery of society, and his understanding of the process by which society constructs difference. Also, in appropriating and manipulating the genre that, as Zipes has claimed, "contributed towards strengthening bourgeois domination..." and was "used to conserve the gains of the rising middle classes," he has challenged his readers to reassess their own perceptions not only of those categorized as deviant by society, but of the very bases on which such judgements are made.

Like recent post-colonial writers, Wilde

seize[s] the language of the centre and replace[s] it in a discourse fully adapted to [the space he inhabits as Irish and homosexual].... There are two distinct processes by which [he] does this. The first, the abrogation or denial of the privilege of "English" involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication. The second, the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre, the process of capturing and remoulding the language to new usages marks a separation from the site of colonial privilege. (Empire 38)

That Wilde chose the fairy-tale genre to express his lack of confidence in absolute moral values is in itself subversive, since the form was, at the time he was writing, closely associated with the reinforcement of moral values. I do not suggest that he goes so far as to replace "received" English in his stories by an idiom peculiar to his own status, but rather that he adapts the actual form of communication to his own ends by manipulating the structure and conventions of the fairy tale. I realize that this may seem a rather idiosyncratic interpretation of the abrogation of English, but it is not without precedent. In a comparison of two "Canadian Settler Texts" written sixteen years apart by two sisters, Gillian Whitlock remarks:

Whereas Traill's guide was squarely part of the imperial project, Moodie's sketches have all the marks of a colonial counter-discourse, where the unsuitability of received systems of meaning, subjectivity and value are openly found wanting.

(Re-siting Queen's English 21)

I suggest that Wilde's fairy tales are also a counter-discourse, representing a view from the periphery that shares many characteristics with colonial writing. He has, in effect, written what might be called counter-fairy-tales, in that while the tales seem to adhere to the conventions of the nineteenth-century fairy story, they actually systematically subvert them.

All of this he does without ever suggesting conclusions. His text is indeed what Ashcroft and others would designate as post-colonial: "...always a complex and hybridized formation. It is inadequate to read it either as a reconstruction of pure traditional values or as simply foreign and intrusive" (Empire 110). While he lived in England, Wilde was by all outward appearances an Englishman, but, as his letters and reviews reveal, he was stubbornly and proudly Irish, and as was to be soon revealed, he was also homosexual. It is not surprising that he found the popular forms of literature inadequate to his purpose, for he was himself a complex and hybridized person, and

certainly his appropriation and adaptation of the fairy tale is what he would no doubt in his own modest way have described as a stroke of genius. In the chapters that follow, we shall see that his genius led him to appropriate and adapt not only the conventions of the fairy tale for his own purposes, but also to manipulate the form and idiom of both the fairy tale and the King James Bible in order to subvert the moral and social assumptions to which the stories seemed to subscribe.

Chapter III

The Soul of Man Under Imperialism:
Wilde's Use of Biblical Images
to Re-examine Traditional Concepts of Morality

In the preceding chapter, I have suggested that Wilde's motivation for writing fairy tales was not mere whimsical experimentation or even only commercial gain, but a genuine need to find a form that would appeal to a large audience and, at the same time, allow him to re-assess and challenge various political and literary preconceptions. Since Celticism was still a popular trend in art, we might wonder that Wilde did not make more direct use of his native Irish folk tales which, in many ways, were well suited to his agenda. As Richard Pine points out, the concept of the hero as paradigm of suffering and fulfilment is central to Irish mythology (26), and would, therefore, present a suitable type of the individual alienated and oppressed by society. Pine also claims that in the Irish mind "feminine intuition is opposed to masculine knowledge, dreaming gayness to materialism, myth and mythopoeism to logic and logocentrism, deviance to orthodoxy, introspection to expansionism" (27). Pine's hypothesis, although speculative, is synthesized from

sources as diverse as Berkeley, Arnold, Yeats, Shaw, Renan and, of course, Wilde himself.

If Irish patterns of mythology and thought are, indeed, as Pine represents them, then Wilde's tales do seem to derive from a peculiarly Irish consciousness and draw on the Celtic folk tradition for their construct of heroism. But, while this may be true, the style and form of the stories still observe the conventions of the literary fairy tale made popular in the nineteenth-century among English audiences, by translators such Edgar Taylor (Grimms' tales, 1823-6) and Mary Howitt (Andersen's tales, 1846), collectors such as Andrew Lang (Blue Fairy Book, 1889) and writers such as Ruskin (The King of the Golden River, 1851) and Macdonald (At the Back of the North Wind, 1871). Consequently, since Wilde's target audience was still mainly English, his choice of a genre that had proven appeal for that audience made good sense. Also, to use a genre that was specifically Celtic would have conflicted with his intent to explore and, to a large extent, explode English literary and social assumptions.

As was discussed in Chapter II, in seeking to adapt his chosen genre to his own purposes, Wilde developed strategies that simultaneously imitated and undercut the generic conventions of the fairy tale. In this chapter, I shall show that he did not limit his experiments only to conventions of

form; he even more thoroughly interrogated the use of language itself to manipulate, control and silence potential opposition. He, in effect, not only subtly exposed the various fallacies in systems of knowledge and morality represented in the discourse of the nineteenth-century fairy tale, but he also created a style and syntax that while echoing and apparently observing the linguistic conventions of the genre, at the same time resisted the traditional discourse of didactic literature.

While the twentieth-century reader is alerted to Wilde's subversive subtext by various sources, such as letters and essays written or collected, mostly since the fairy tales were composed, for his contemporaries, many of the satirical references in the stories would have been immediately accessible only to those who inhabited the same part of the periphery as did Wilde -- the cultural suburbs of the aesthete, the Irish and the gay -- and who might be expected to view the world from the same perspective as he.

To accept that because Wilde was Irish and gay his view of society was radically different from the British "norm," is, I believe essential in reading the complex codes that he devises to disguise the subversive concepts submerged in texts masquerading as various forms of harmless light entertainment: fairy tales, gothic fiction or social comedies. Clearly, he felt the masquerade was necessary,

that his message had to be carefully encoded, and that he would be unwise to experiment openly with style or form. In "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," for instance, he offers some very good reasons for his caution:

...the public makes use of the classics of a country as a means of checking the progress of Art. They degrade the classics into authorities. They use them as bludgeons for preventing the free expression of beauty in new forms.... When they say a work is grossly unintelligible, they mean that the artist has said or made a beautiful thing that is new; when they describe a work as grossly immoral, they mean that the artist has said or made a beautiful thing that is true. (AC 273)

Thus, the artist was challenged to find a way to avoid charges of immorality and unintelligibility without compromising the integrity of his own vision. Wilde, not surprisingly, enlisted that gift that had made him a sought-after dinner guest: his Celtic wit and imagination. For Wilde, wit encompassed more than mere humour: he exercised and understood wit in the more archaic sense of sharp subtle intelligence. Imagination, too, was much more than the mere ability to escape from the mundane into fantasy; in Wilde's opinion, imagination should not seek to escape but rather to transform the commonplace. In De Profundis, Wilde credits

Christ himself with "... that imaginative sympathy which in the sphere of art is the sole secret of creation" (CW 923); and in "The Critic as Artist" he claims "...the creative instinct is strong in the Celt, and it is the Celt who leads in art" (AC 396).

He had few doubts about the genius and originality of his own life and work, and as we saw earlier in his letters to G.B. Shaw -- an equally modest Irishman -- he attributed such genius to the good fortune of their sharing the superior Celtic genes that endowed them with the special insight to penetrate the "intellectual fogs" in England. Whether we judge such comments as insufferably arrogant or as intentionally self-ironizing, we must at least acknowledge a sceptically and condescendingly ironic attitude towards the English and their society that was common among Irish writers since they first began to use the English language.

Now, with relatively easy access to texts from many previously and presently colonized territories, we are able to compare the strategies of Irish writers to those of writers who have also experienced the ambivalence of writing the self in a colonial context -- writing back to the Empire, which was, as I have argued, what Wilde was quite consciously doing in all of his work. His most popular, and, as critics have progressively been discovering, most

cunningly subversive work is, of course, The Importance of Being Earnest. In his summary of Wilde's life and work, Gillespie remarks:

Earnest draws much of its comic effect from its repeated assault upon the mores of the middle class and from the clever perversion by any number of characters of the broad societal rules putatively meant to regulate behaviour. (OW Life, Work and Criticism 23)

He also points out that earnest was "a code word for a 'homosexual'" (23) and Pine believes that in this play "Wilde provocatively displayed his homosexuality" (239). It was in the fairy tales that he first practised the artifice that he would perfect in his later writing: he led his audience to believe that they were reading "a work that was quite intelligible and highly moral" (AC 274) while actually being exposed to ideas that they might have considered dangerously subversive.

Thus, while many who wish to reclaim Wilde for the Irish doggedly seek to identify specific Celtic elements in his work, they miss the most obvious Irish attribute: a sentient and alert linguistic instinct that has little to do with education or even conventional intelligence. But, while the gift of oral expression has tended to be associated with the Irish, it is probably common to most predominantly

oral cultures, especially those where the native language has been replaced by that of the colonizers. Owen Dudley Edwards, with reference to Wilde's satiric style, posits a convincing theory about this phenomenon.

Wilde's wit in itself was a natural product of the linguistic frontier, the awareness by the user that English is not a universe he inhabits but a contestant however increasingly triumphant. Hence he saw language with an objectivity alien to his audience. His originality raged against the stultification in cliché; his charm offered the prompt resource of its challenge as inversion. Inevitably his sexual history invited psychological interpretations for his preference for inversion. (Irish Studies Review 11, 12)

Whether or not it had anything to do with his sexual history, inversion was certainly one of Wilde's favourite ploys, both in speech and in writing; he evidently enjoyed neatly reversing proverbial wisdom in statements such as "Work is the curse of the drinking classes." The most likely explanation for his facility with the cleverly turned phrase was that from his childhood it would have been the currency of everyday conversation. In Causeway, Summer 1994, John Wilson Foster fills several pages with pithy phrases recalled from his own Irish childhood, for instance: "He's a

big man, but a wee coat fits him" (36). While the idiom used in the phrases he quotes is essentially colloquial, and the speakers would probably not be able to identify their own examples of meiosis, hyperbole, litotes, etc., their delight and skill in playing with language are very clear.

Since the suggestion that Wilde's cleverness with language was simply because he was Irish might seem not only facile but also presumptuous, let me return quickly to Edwards' remarks about the "linguistic frontier" and English as "contestant." To use the language that is one's first and often only language, and yet, on some level, forever the language of the oppressor, must inevitably create a peculiar ambivalence. In The Empire Writes Back, the replacing of native languages by the language of the colonizer is discussed in relation to the African slave trade.

This policy of language suppression was continued on the plantations of the New World wherever it could be implemented. The result was that within two or three generations (sometimes within one) the only language available to the Africans for communication either amongst themselves or with the master was the European language of that master....

African slaves could not avoid an awareness of the cruel pressure of an imposed language and the loss

of their own 'voice', a loss incurred, moreover, in an alien landscape. So, subject to a tragic alienation from both language and landscape, the transplanted Africans found that psychic survival depended on their facility for a kind of double entendre. They were forced to develop the skill of saying one thing in front of 'massa' and have it interpreted differently by their fellow slaves. This skill involved a radical subversion of the meanings of the master's tongue. (Empire 146)

Although the Irish were not actually sold to owners in the New World they were certainly evicted and transported in vast numbers, and their enslavement and treatment by the colonizers though, perhaps, not quite so brutally extreme as those of the Africans were just as deliberately dehumanizing. They too were, eventually, prevented from speaking or reading their own language or teaching it to their children. Also, while those Irish who remained in Ireland continued, unlike the captive Africans, to inhabit their own country, their cities, streets, hills, rivers, even the ancient high crosses, dolmens and other landmarks

were all given English names.¹ Indeed, since the Irish resistance to the English presence has persisted for about four and a half centuries, it is hardly surprising that we should find in English as spoken by the Irish the same evasions and circumlocutions as in more recently colonized countries, but with the sophistication of hundreds of years of practice.

As we have already seen, Wilde was familiar with English as spoken by the "peasant" Irish, through the contact he had with the local people while helping his father in his research into Irish culture, both ancient and current. When William Wilde recounts stories or anecdotes as told by the local people, he not only captures the sincerity and energy of the original, but also faithfully and without condescension imitates the dialect and cadences of the speech. His record of Michaleen Branagh's account of seeing the thivish, for example, catches the tone and immediacy of the original:

`I've seen the thivish. I stud face to face with
my fetch this blessed evening, straight forninst

1

Brian Friel's play Translations explores the catastrophic effects, both physical and psychological, of the British mapping and renaming of the Irish landscape on the people of the village, and on the British men responsible for the project.

me in the bawne of Ballintober. There it was in the gap in the ould wall, as like me as if I stud before a lookin'-glass. Whatever I did, it did the same; and I thought it might be one of the boys making game of me, till I blessed myself -- but it never riz a hand, and then I knew it was the thivish. It was well I didn't fall out of my standing. Mother I'm a gone man, and I thought as much this many a day.' (Irish Popular Superstitions 111 - 112)

His wife, of course, was even more openly involved in the cause of the "Irish peasantry." Her poem "The Famine Year" not only mourns the plight of the peasant people of Ireland, but also boldly exposes the causes of their wretchedness: colonial indifference and exploitation.

There's a proud array of soldiers -- what do they
round your door?

"They guard our master's granaries from the thin
hands of the poor."

Accursed are we in our own land, yet toil we still
and toil;

But the stranger reaps our harvest -- the alien
owns our soil.

(1000 Years of Irish Poetry 495-496)

Interestingly, Speranza also chooses not merely to speak out for the oppressed, but to allow the voices of the Irish poor to speak in the poem for themselves. While this strategy still poses problems about the appropriation of voice, there was no direct way that the peasants could, at that time, make their voices heard. The alternative was silence.

Owen Dudley Edwards remarks that Lady Wilde's poem, unlike many other literary works on the Irish Famine,

... did not sanitise it. It did offer an extraordinary awareness of how Protestant profiteers from land confiscation must look through the eyes of a starving Catholic peasantry, much as her son's Ballad [of Reading Gaol] wholly identifies with the criminal classes in prison.... But Wilde's father as census-director and Wilde's mother as poet-journalist transmitted to their son something of what it meant to be a privileged remnant in a country that had wiped out its lowest class. As a result he could speak for the downmost doomed when his time came. (Irish Studies Review 11, 13)

Edwards' final sentence is particularly interesting, for I have argued that, except in his talent for striking a pose and affecting the manners of the aristocracy, Wilde was in no respect English, and in every respect Irish; indeed, it

was his ability to see not only from the perspective of the exploited colonial but of all marginalized people that informs all his work. Especially, it allows him to transform the fairy tales from mildly didactic children's stories to pointedly satirical social commentaries.

In choosing to write fairy tales, Wilde was, of course, limiting his own expression to a discourse peculiar to that form. But I believe that was exactly why he chose the genre in the first place: tradition and convention are, in fact, the necessary bases for Wilde's strategy, for it is in subtly deconstructing received forms and idiom that he achieves his satirical effects.² His exposure to the variety of dialects of English spoken in Dublin, in the West of Ireland, in the border country where he went to school, and by the various classes with which he associated in each location, could well have increased his sensitivity to the nuances of meaning achieved by variation in syntax and cadence. Drawing on such linguistic experience learned from everyday conversation, and a sensitivity to the politics of

2

In this Wilde is again drawing on his Irish heritage, specifically in literature. Swift, Sterne, Edgeworth, Sheridan, Congreve, Goldsmith, Wilde's mother, Speranza, his uncle Charles Maturin and many of his friends, such as Boucicault, Shaw and Yeats, all consciously manipulated for satirical effects familiar genres: travelogue, picaresque and gothic novels, comedy of manners and others.

language inherited from his parents, Wilde, by inverting not only the forms of the fairy tale but the idiom itself, invites reconsideration of the moral implications of the tale. But, of course, since the moral in Wilde's tales is never defined, the reader can change his/her view without ultimately seeming to reject any prescribed authority.

While Wilde obviously wrote in a specifically Irish tradition of satire,³ it is interesting to note how closely his methods parallel those of contemporary colonial writers. Gareth Griffiths, addressing the question "How can oppression be spoken?" appeals to an experienced source.

Homi Bhabha has also acknowledged that subaltern speech is in some sense conditional upon the dominant discourse: 'For it is between the edict of Englishness and the assault of the dark unruly places of the earth, through an act of repetition, that the colonial text emerges uncertainly....'
 For Homi Bhabha... if I read him correctly, the possibility of subaltern speech exists principally

3

Richard Pine not only locates Wilde in the Irish literary tradition but sees him "as a central and dominant influence on the development of Yeats and Joyce in particular. Like Ferguson and Le Fanu, Wilde provides a powerful index to the evolution from 1830 to 1900 of the Anglo-Irish literature which provided the impetus for political independence, and of which he was a primary conduit" (Pine 13).

and crucially when its mediation through mimicry and parody of the dominant discourse subverts and menaces the authority within which it necessarily comes into being. (De-Scribing Empire 75)

In Wilde's case, then, the fairy tale would seem to be the dominant discourse that he would wish to "parody," "subvert" and even "menace". Although to menace hardly seems in keeping with Wilde's style, and probably never actually was in any way his intent, his writing and behaviour were certainly interpreted by many as a dire threat to decency and normality as constructed by British society. All of the other verbs listed above, however, very aptly describe Wilde's agenda in composing the fairy tales. But the genre itself was not his main target, nor even were its underlying assumptions; for Wilde, the fairy tale merely represented how literature and art could be controlled and restricted by that amorphous group he called the public. Again, there is a direct parallel with Wilde's aims and strategies in modern colonial writing; Helen Tiffin, discussing the revisionist novels of J.M. Coetzee and Samuel Selvon, claims:

Neither writer is simply 'writing back' to an English canonical text, but to the whole of the discursive field within which such a text operated and continues to operate in post-colonial worlds.

(Kunapipi 23)

Wilde, then, was not merely drawing attention to the ways in which the fairy tale had been enlisted to instil the principles and reinforce the power of the patriarchy; he was "writing back" to the "whole of the discursive field within which" not only the fairy tale, but all popular Victorian literature, especially the novel and the short story operated. His goal was, as he repeats in several letters, "to mirror life in a form remote from reality -- to deal with modern problems in a mode that is ideal not imitative" (Letters 219). He aimed to expose the ways in which "literature" with all its connotations of respectability, dignity and authority had been appropriated by the moral centre to perpetuate its views. Indeed, Wilde felt so strongly about the misuse of art as propaganda that even at his trial, when cross-examined by Lord Carson, he would not abandon his beliefs, even though he knew he was giving his accusers exactly the proof they needed that he was "morally corrupt."

At the end of his selection of Wilde's critical works, The Artist as Critic, Ellmann provides an excerpt from the trial transcripts. Carson addresses Wilde:

This is your introduction to Dorian Gray: 'There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written.' That .. expresses your view? -- My view on art, yes....

Then a well written book putting forward
perverted moral views may be a good book? -- No
work of art ever puts forward views. Views belong
to people who are not artists. (AC 438)⁴

It might seem that Wilde's stance is hypocritical, since he used his own work to "put forward" views on art and life; but as I have argued in the previous chapter, he not only avoided offering any moral ending, but actually denied any satisfying closure. Instead of using his writing to propagate a point of view, he used it to challenge the audience to see alternative possibilities in every situation; it is up to the reader to discover his/her own "truth" in the work. When Carson questioned Wilde, quoting one of his own aphorisms: "A truth ceases to be true when more than one person believes in it?", Wilde responded, "Perfectly. That would be my metaphysical definition of truth; something so personal that the same truth could never

4

Wilde's responses in this exchange have often been attributed to his lack of judgement and his wish to shock, but, at this point, as his letters reveal, he was well aware that the chance that he would be acquitted was very small. Also, against the advice of his good friends, and in response to his mother's appeal to his honour as an Irishman, he had chosen to stay and face the charges rather than take the opportunity, while on bail, to flee to France. Consequently, I believe that everything that Wilde had to say at this point in the trial, with the exception of one or two fatally facetious comments, was as sincere as what he wrote from prison, for he knew that he was already condemned.

be appreciated by two minds" (AC 437).

Assertions such as this scandalized a public which valued the stability of their whole system of values. If one person's truth could differ from another, then morality -- right and wrong -- became suddenly unfixed and arbitrary. Also, the idea that truth might be subjective challenged the comfortable complacency of those who believed that the British Empire was founded on standards of righteousness as set forth in indisputable terms in the Bible; specifically, the version authorized by James I in 1611 was generally believed to contain the inspired word of God as revealed to the English. James Laver comments that, with the exception of the Unitarians, all the other main nonconformist sects "based their doctrine on the infallibility of the Bible not only in its original tongues but in the English Authorized Version" (The Age of Optimism 119). The evangelicals, including not only nonconformists but also Anglicans, each believed that they alone knew God's plan for salvation, and that it was, therefore, their responsibility to spread the truth to non-believers, especially the unfortunate 'heathens.' Missionary zeal thus became a justification for the imposition of British culture, in the guise of 'Christianity,' in the colonies. The distinction between God's salvation and British civilization was quite shadowy: as we saw in the last chapter, Yamba, the African slave, is

fortunate to be saved physically and spiritually by the English missionary with "Bible book in hand." Wilde himself venerated the Bible as an example of literary perfection just as he regarded Christ as the ultimate example of human perfection. His letters demonstrate how familiar he was with both the Old and New Testaments, for he quotes scripture frequently, and from many different books: Genesis, Exodus, Kings, Psalms, The Song of Solomon, Isaiah, Mark, Luke, John and the Acts, and he refers to "the simple romantic charm of the gospels" (Letters 483). Also, in "The Gospel According to Walt Whitman," Wilde notes, "...the English translation of the Bible seems to have suggested to him the possibility of a poetic form which while maintaining the spirit of poetry would still be free from the trammels of rhyme and of a definite metrical system" (AC 122). So, it is not surprising that his endeavour in writing back to the moral centre included not only the reclamation of the fairy tale and other genres that had, in his opinion, been appropriated by the imperial and patriarchal establishment, but also the rescue of the Bible itself from those he believed perverted its message to serve their own ends. Consequently, while we frequently recognise the voice of Andersen, or the styles of Ruskin, Morris or Kingsley in Wilde's stories, the echo that pervades all the tales, and gradually becomes the dominant idiom in the later ones is,

in fact, the King James Bible.

In Art and Christhood, Guy Willoughby points out that in A House of Pomegranates, "...the comic ironies of The Happy Prince are replaced by a repetitive biblical syntax and idiom" (35). He also comments that "while asserting a homiletic mode [the biblical style] lend[s] to the various pseudohistories described a seriousness and a 'sense of propriety' beyond the reach of the simple fairy tale" (35). Willoughby's observations are, indeed, pertinent, for certainly one of the most marked effects of Wilde's use of biblical style is the dignity it lends to the narrative. But Wilde uses biblical language and style in the tales for purposes more complex than merely to create a more serious tone. As Zhang Longxi advises in his article on "The Critical Legacy of Oscar Wilde", we must

...read all of Wilde with a conscious effort to see what is going on underneath, or within, his highly polished sparkling language. To read Wilde is never to read literally but to be sensitive to the workings of language. (Texas Studies in Literature 30, 100)

Gerhard Joseph also draws attention to "a binary opposition of form and content, of surface and substance" (Victorian Newsletter 72, 61).

Both are discussing the critical essays, but I believe

various levels of meaning are to be found in all of Wilde's writing, including the fairy tales. Joseph's use of the phrase "binary opposition," however, is somewhat misleading, for while Wilde appreciates and makes use of the dynamic tension of dialectic oppositions, he does not seem to comprehend opposition in terms simple enough to be reduced to polarities; so, while we should, as Longxi points out, be sensitive to the workings of language, we should also beware of the temptation to oversimplify the implications of the subtext. We must never assume that because Wilde seems to suggest that the conventional understanding of a concept is erroneous, he consequently supports an antithetical view, or proposes an alternative truth. In effect, all that he ever offers is an opportunity for the reader to discover his/her own version of the truth. It is, I believe, for this reason that he combines the forms and language of the Bible and the fairy tale, for centuries regarded as the repositories, respectively, of spiritual wisdom and common sense.

Of course, the Bible is also quite frequently used by other fairy-tale writers, but almost always in the form of direct quotations, and certainly without irony. Generally, a biblical reference is, as Willoughby remarks, used to add seriousness to tone, and usually it is found at the end of a story, reinforcing a moral lesson. In Andersen's "The Snow Queen," for instance, when Kay and Gerda return to the quiet

simplicity of home,

Grandmother sat in God's warm sunshine reading
from her Bible.

'Without you become as little children ye
cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven.'

(Andersen's Fairy Tales 146)

The lesson about becoming childlike is fundamentally the same one that Wilde seems to imply in his tales. So we might wonder whether he might not also, like other storytellers, have alluded directly to the Bible to reinforce his point. But as I have already claimed, we can never assume that we or Wilde can know what the whole point is -- only what it is not; that is, a traditional interpretation. Even were he to quote the seemingly simple and straightforward lines above, he would have to find a way to question the conventional understanding of what it is, for instance, to "become as little children," or what it means to "enter into the kingdom of heaven." Thus, instead of merely lending weight to a certain perspective, Wilde appropriates the discourse of the moral centre and causes it "to operate in modified or transposed forms" (Ariel 127), creating "counter-discursive strategies which challenge the claims of or avoid circumscription within one or other form of cultural centrism" (Ariel 127). That is, Wilde not only uses the Bible to give credence to his ideas, as do other

writers, but he also seeks to reclaim the text that has been adopted and, as he seems to suggest, also subtly adapted to serve as the source and mainstay of patriarchal and imperial power. Wilde's references to the Bible are, in fact, designed to point out the gap between the original biblical text and the carefully constructed discourse of control in which the same words and stories have been inscribed.

Clearly, such an enterprise must necessarily be very complex, for Wilde does not merely avoid using the Bible as other fairy-tale writers often do, to reinforce the moral at the end of the story, but he actually uses it to subvert conventional assumptions about morality. Nor does he stop there; not content only to undermine what society interprets as morally correct, he also interrogates the relationship of that interpretation to what is actually presented in the teachings of Christ. Indeed, he goes beyond questioning the moral centre's reading of the Bible, even so far as to query their concepts of God, Christ and the Church. As I mentioned in the opening chapter, a good deal of attention has been given to Wilde's use of images of Christ in his early works and, especially lately, in De Profundis with its apparent construction of the artist as Christ figure. Some investigation of this aspect of the fairy tales has also been undertaken, notably by Guy Willoughby and by Ed Cohen. Cohen, unfortunately, cannot resist passing moral judgement

upon the writer, but Willoughby clearly appreciates the ironies involved in Wilde's use of "Jesus as the compelling ethical model for the central characters [in the fairy tales], as they battle to win community in a sadly fractious world" (Art and Christhood 19).

But although Wilde's use of biblical imagery, especially images of Christ, is very important to his dismantling, in the fairy tales, of concepts of morality, it is only a small part of his whole strategy. As well as the associations created through imagery, connections are established through references, direct and indirect, to actual incidents and events from both the Old and New Testaments. His most complex, and most effective ploy, however, is to echo not only the content of the Bible but also its style. When we hear echoes of the King James Bible in the description, for example, of an encounter between a fisherman and a mermaid, we should expect to find levels of implication beyond what is immediately obvious.⁵

In "The Fisherman and His Soul," both language and imagery recall Christ's final appearance after his death to seven of his disciples, when he gave -- three times -- to

⁵ Clearly Wilde would also have had in mind Andersen's tale "The Little Mermaid," and there are certainly echoes of that story in Wilde's narrative. In this chapter, however, I shall concentrate specifically on biblical references in Wilde's tales.

Simon Peter the commission "feed my sheep" and to John the command "follow me." Both by his occupation and through the details and tone of the narrative, the Fisherman is associated with the first disciples to whom Christ brought his message. The story of the catching of the mermaid parallels, in several particulars, the biblical incident related in John's Gospel, in which Jesus tells his friends, who are disheartened that they have fished all night and caught nothing, to cast their nets one more time and "[t]hey cast therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes" (John 21, 6). Wilde's story opens with a vivid image of the dark nights on which, like the disciples in the Gospel story, the Fisherman had braved dangerous winds and waters, but caught no fish. But "one evening the net was so heavy that hardly could he draw it into the boat" (CW 248).

The opening scenes seem to suggest that the simple Fisherman might be another "fisher of men" as Jesus called those first disciples whom he chose to continue his work on earth. Thus, as Willoughby points out, the biblical associations do indeed add propriety and seriousness to the content of the tale. Wilde's Fisherman, however, catches not fish, the main nourishment of Jesus and his followers, the traditional food for fast days in Western society, and the universal symbol of Christianity; instead, he nets an exotic

creature whose shape is part fish, part human, and whose gender is female, like Eve, through whom, according to biblical tradition, evil entered the world. This strange being, though herself an innocent victim, is to cause a disastrous rift not only between the man and his community, but also between the man and his soul. The Fisherman seems to be, in effect, the antithesis of what the context first suggests: he becomes not an obedient servant of Christ, but a rebellious individualist who cuts himself off even from his own soul. The association of such a character with Jesus' disciples would have presented a challenge to sentimental nineteenth-century constructs of the disciples. In their evolution into exemplars of restraint and morality, blustering Peter, dreamy John, practical Andrew and acerbic James had all become pale, saintly figures printed on cards given to reward good behaviour in Sunday School.

Even more perplexing than the association between the Fisherman and the disciples is the marked link between the Mermaid and the Bride of Christ. The connection is not only through the broad use of image and incident, but through the actual syntax and diction of the passage. As the young man gazes at the sleeping Mermaid he sees that

Her hair was as a wet fleece of gold, and each separate hair as a thread of fine gold in a cup of glass. Her body was as white ivory, and her tail

was of silver and pearl. Silver and pearl was her tail, and the green weeds of the sea coiled round it; and like sea-shells were her ears, and her lips were like sea-coral. (CW 248)

In the sensuousness of the language, in the clustering of extravagant metaphor and simile, in the reflective inversion, and especially in its cadences the description of the Mermaid recalls "The Song of Solomon"⁶ to his beloved, which is, traditionally, regarded as the expression of the love of Christ for his Bride, the Church. His use of such echoes is not allegorical, as in, for instance, John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, where direct parallels are established with biblical characters and incident. Wilde's method relies on cumulative suggestion, almost at times subliminal, but gradually creating a sense of unmistakable connectedness with the biblical text. When the Bridegroom in "The Song of Solomon" contemplates his Bride he says, for example:

Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet and thy
speech is comely: thy temples are like a piece of

⁶ Wilde certainly was familiar with "The Song of Solomon. Apparently, and not altogether surprisingly, considering his love of extravagant language and aesthetic taste, it was one of his favourite books in the Bible. He quotes it in a letter to Reggie Turner, and Ellmann relates how he tried to read from that book instead of from Deuteronomy, when his turn came to read in Chapel, while at Magdalen (OW 91).

pomegranate within thy locks....

Thy lips, O my spouse, drop as the honeycomb:
honey and milk are under thy tongue; and the smell
of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon.

("Song of Solomon" 4, 4 and 11)

By suggesting associations between the Fisherman and his exotic love, and Christ's disciples and his Bride, the Church, Wilde's discourse challenges the judgement of the moral centre, represented in the story by the Priest, who exclaims on hearing of the young man's love, "'Alack, alack, thou art mad...'" (CW 250). "'The love of the body is vile,'" he cries, "'and vile and evil are the pagan things God suffers to wander through His world'" (CW 251). As we saw in Chapter II, the ending of the story seems to imply that the Priest was not only unequal to the task of providing guidance to the young man, but he was also confused about the nature of sin and of God's vengeance. Yet, while the Priest seems misguided, he is not "evil," for he is able to respond to the mysterious sign of what seems to be God's forgiveness of the Fisherman and the Mermaid:

But the beauty of the white flowers troubled him,
and their odour was sweet to his nostrils, and
there came another word into his lips, and he
spake not of the wrath of God, but of the God
whose name is Love. And why he spake, he knew not.

(CW 272)

The Priest, unable to comprehend the symbol of the flowers, believes that they are a sign from God, but his efforts at retribution and reconciliation do not bring back the sea people or even produce more flowers. Yet because of his blessing of "[a]ll the things in God's world," the "people were filled with joy and wonder" (CW 272). In effect, Wilde's ending is as enigmatic as the rest of the story. Any effort to arrive at closure simply takes the reader back into the text for more clues, and the addition of the biblical allusions only serves further to complicate analysis. Thus, Wilde's fairy tale offers not the usual exemplary cycle of temptation, sin, repentance and forgiveness, but a challenge to re-evaluate what each of those terms means.

The puzzle, however, is probably insoluble, not through lack of information, but through a surfeit of associations. The soul, for instance, is usually assumed to be the element through which humanity has contact with God, and yet, when the Fisherman cuts his Soul loose from his body, which, in the conventional interpretation of Bible teaching, is most vulnerable to temptation, the Soul wanders through the world creating misery and evil. The conundrum becomes more and more complex as the Soul returns, leads the man into wickedness, is cut off again, and is finally forgiven as the

Fisherman's heart breaks when he gives up his life for love.

As I have already mentioned, Wilde's method is not allegorical; indeed, as I have shown above, if we try to trace direct parallels, we quickly become inextricably entangled in the complex web of allusions. Although Wilde is not among those whom Arthur Symons identifies as "Symbolists," his strategy in these tales might best be defined in the terms used by Comte Goblet d'Alviella as quoted by Symons: "... a representation which does not aim at being a reproduction" (The Symbolist Movement 1). In such writing according to Symons, "beautiful things may be evoked magically.... Mystery is no longer feared... (5). Wilde's own response to praise for "The Happy Prince, "it is a reaction against the purely imitative character of modern art" (Letters 221), and his claim that he "strove to make ["The Nightingale"] beautiful enough to have many secrets and many answers," suggest that, like many artists of the "fin de siècle" he was involved in what Ellmann describes as "the search for a psychic reality which had little to do with exterior reality" (The Symbolist Movement vii). Consequently, any allusion he makes, whether to the Bible or to other sources will tend to evoke not one direct association, but many, and be more likely to raise questions than to offer any answers.

I shall not, then, attempt to provide even tentative

answers to the questions Wilde poses in these stories, or begin to identify even the major issues raised; instead, by concentrating on his creation of biblical associations, sometimes through imagery, often by recalling certain incidents and, almost throughout, by the use of diction and syntax that echo the King James Bible, I shall attempt to analyze some of the strategies used by Wilde to create such ambiguity. I have begun with the "Fisherman" partly because, of all Wilde's tales, this one seems to be the most unfathomable, but also because the short passage to which I have referred demonstrates Wilde's use of all of the strategies listed above. In this chapter, I shall examine mainly Wilde's use of images that elicit biblical associations; in Chapter IV I shall discuss his use of quotations from and echoes of the language of the King James Bible; and in both I shall refer to particular biblical incidents.

As I have already indicated, the most straightforward form of reference and, at least in the early stories, the least ironic is Wilde's use of imagery. Even the imagery, however, is never without some usually subversive implication. We can never assume that the sole purpose of an

association is to dignify the content of the tale. While the allusions in the early stories seem to be, at least on the surface, reasonably accessible, in the later tales the inferences become more and more dense and convoluted, not only complicating but often undercutting the most obvious interpretation, and as always, creating another level of resistance to moral authority. Wilde's view is, however, revisionist not anarchistic; he does not randomly attack or even question all traditional values, but seeks rather, to offer a parallel perspective, which for him, as Irish and gay, is as valid and rational as any that is conventionally accepted. Enlisting as his medium both the fairy tale and the Bible, two forms deeply imbedded in British literary and cultural tradition, he offers alternative interpretations of morality and even of history and suggests through the intricacies of his text that diverse views may exist side by side and not necessarily in conflict: that more than one version of truth is possible.

Homi Bhabha, discussing how "meanings and values are (mis)read or signs are misappropriated" between cultures (New Formations 19), is actually analyzing the same problem that Wilde first addressed in his fairy tales.

The enunciation of cultural difference
problematizes the division of past and present,
tradition and modernity, at the level of cultural

representation and its authoritative address. It is the problem of how, in signifying the present, something comes to be repeated, relocated, and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory but a strategy of representing authority in terms of the artifice of the archaic.... (New Formations 19)

The intervention of the Third Space, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is continuously revealed as an integrated, open expanding code. (New Formations 21)

Bhabha is, of course, referring to current strategies used by the colonised to challenge and revise "our sense of the historical identity of a culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary past...." (New Formations 21), but Wilde's revisions of patriarchal accounts of morality use very similar strategies. He too attempts to clear a "Third Space" to accommodate his own ambivalence about normality as constructed by the moral centre, and to expose how literature and the Bible have been "repeated, relocated and translated in the name of tradition representing authority in terms of the artifice of the

archaic." But, instead of openly satirizing the appropriation of the Bible and folk tradition to lend authority to a conventional moral standpoint, Wilde mimics such strategies; by thus broadening the perspective, he invites not scepticism so much as the exercise of creative imagination. In "The Happy Prince," for instance, few critics overlook the obvious image of Christ in the statue who willingly sacrifices himself to alleviate the wretchedness he sees from his pedestal above the city. But as Wilde develops the image the connection to Christ becomes more specific: the very way in which the Prince allows his body to be broken and distributed among his people is reminiscent of the Christian Eucharist. Similarly, in the Swallow, Wilde offers a complex portrayal of discipleship: as Willoughby points out,

[m]oved by the Prince's sadness [the Swallow] begins his task, gradually forgetting his own egotistical concerns out of a growing love for the statue. He becomes, in fact, a kind of disciple, distributing the alms of the master in much the same way ... that Christ's apostles did in the Gospel stories. Indeed, he is not unlike the Holy Ghost itself, that in the form of a dove visits upon Christ's favoured ones the spiritual benison of God. (24)

The apparently quite direct analogy: Statue equals Christ, Swallow equals disciple, however, becomes a little less direct with the association of the Swallow with Holy Spirit.

Like Willoughby, I believe the allusion is not accidental; the Swallow alights on the Statue at the very point when he begins to consider how he can relieve the suffering in his city, just as the Holy Ghost descended upon Christ as he was about to begin his ministry: "And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the spirit like a dove descending upon him" (Mark 1,10). Also, the appearance of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove occurred at the baptism of Christ by John, and the arrival of the Swallow happens as the Statue is bathed in his own tears of compassion and repentance. So, the Swallow is not only Christ's lowly helper, but also in his association with the Holy Spirit, his spiritual support; but even before he met the Statue he had an aura of biblical significance. The Swallow's association with God's chosen goes back even further than Jesus, for he yearns to be among the bulrushes in Egypt, a fairly obvious reference to Moses who, as a baby, was hidden by his mother in the bulrushes to escape Pharaoh's slaughter of all Jewish males under two years old. Moses was found and brought up in the palace by Pharaoh's daughter, and as a man, led God's people out of slavery. In personality, the Swallow is very much like

Moses, rather spoiled and self-centred, daring to question his commissions, and at least at first, undertaking them with a very bad grace.

Of course, Jesus' disciples also occasionally doubted and expressed reluctance to do his will, or simply were unequal to his demands. In Gethsemane, for instance, Peter, James and John, asked by Jesus to watch while he prayed, fell asleep, and, when the Statue says to the Swallow, "...will you not stay with me one night longer?" (CW 289) we hear Christ's question to his disciples in the garden, "...could ye not watch with me one hour" (Matt. 26,41). The Swallow, it seems is more reliable than Peter, James and John: he learns to love the Statue so much that he sacrifices his life rather than leave him.

Thus, while the biblical images may indeed dignify the tone of the story, they add a great deal more than mere dignity to its content. When we compare the Statue with Jesus, as the imagery seems to invite us to, the Statue, although unselfish and compassionate, fails to recognise the enormous sacrifice he is asking of the Swallow: his request lacks the kind of consciousness present in Christ's injunction, "Take up your cross and follow me." This may seem a harsh judgement, but when we encounter the other "Christ figures" in the tales we shall see that none is worthy of comparison with Jesus, except one, the child in

"The Selfish Giant," who is, of all the characters, the most direct representation of Christ. When I have explored the images of Christ in the rest of the stories, I shall suggest some reasons why Wilde establishes this overall pattern.

There can be no doubt that the Statue represents "good" and that the city sages, who, like the Pharisees, are so secure in their own wisdom and judgement that they are unable to see past his once glittering and then dull surface, are fools. When God tells the Angel who brings him "the leaden heart [of the Statue] and the dead bird, 'You have rightly chosen...,'" the shallowness of the councillors, merchants and professors is confirmed. Once again, "dull lifeless" people and oppressive systems which deny orphans their dreams, and are oblivious to real charity are held up to ridicule. As the moral centre, by distributing tracts and promoting didactic short stories that freely quote the Bible, reinforces values that help maintain the status quo, so Wilde reappropriates biblical material not simply to undercut such values, but to encourage speculation about their implications for humanity and their relationship to the scripture and folk wisdom on which they are predicated.

But what of the Swallow and all of the allusions with which he is surrounded? Once again, I believe that there is a pattern that we shall see repeated throughout the stories;

the Swallow is the first in a series of characters that Wilde creates to undercut the popular public understanding of "worthiness." Many of the characters in his tales try to "do good," but few succeed. Ironically, those who achieve results, and we have seen in the previous chapters that successes are pitifully few, are not the intense, righteous philanthropists, but the insouciant, often self-centred and apparently shallow people.

This, I believe, is exactly why the Swallow is associated with such a multiplicity of biblical figures. Once again, Wilde creates an odd and interesting reversal, for while the biblical allusions do emphasize the Swallow's affinity with the divine, they also accentuate the fallibility of the characters with whom he is linked. This is not to say that Moses, Peter, James, and John are made any less admirable, but rather, that we are prompted to contemplate their humanity -- Moses, the doubter, as a helpless baby in the bulrushes, dependent on the loyalty of his sister and at the mercy of Pharaoh's daughter, and the weak and unreliable disciples who could not stay awake. But Moses, led by God, and the disciples when filled with the Holy Spirit, whom the Swallow also seems to represent, all became formidable ambassadors for God, and leaders of their people, just as the silly Swallow discovered his capacity for heroism and self-sacrifice.

Wilde's heroes are invariably unlikely candidates for glory, and because of the stereotypes in which their communities believe, remain largely unrecognized. By associating such characters with certain biblical personalities or situations, Wilde reminds the reader that, almost invariably, God has chosen not those whom society judges upright and virtuous, but the ordinary, and often the rebellious to become ambassadors on earth. Thus, Wilde not only challenges presuppositions about wisdom and foolishness, good and evil, morality and immorality, but encourages the reader to return to the Bible and to see the discrepancies between its wisdom and that of the moral centre. Wilde does not question the idea that unselfish behaviour is, in itself, worthy and desirable; rather he challenges the sentimental constructs of kindness that pass for purity, simplicity, humility and righteousness. Indeed, in reminding the readers of the imperfections of the biblical personalities with whom his characters are associated, he urges even more strongly the standards set by Christ, but not in the form in which they have been "repeated, relocated and translated in the name of tradition" (New Frontiers 19).

If "The Happy Prince" creates some doubts about society's ability to appreciate generosity and emphasizes the superficiality of public judgement, "The Nightingale and

the Rose" certainly reinforces those sentiments. But in this story even the motives of the hero come under scrutiny. Clearly the Nightingale represents the artist-philosopher, willing to give up her life for what she believes to be the most important aspect of existence: Love. When she hears the cost of one perfect red rose, she exclaims: "Death is a great price to pay for a red rose.... Yet Love is better than Life..." (CW 293-294), echoing Psalm 63, 3: "... thy lovingkindness is better than life." As we shall see, the small inaccuracy in the biblical reference is absolutely essential to our understanding of the fate of the Nightingale. In her announcement, he also loosely paraphrases Christ's statement "Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15, 13).

The parallels with Christ are, of course, much more obvious than this, for in her efforts to produce the one perfect red rose, the Nightingale re-enacts the crucifixion of Christ. Although the details are mixed, the image of the little bird pouring out her life-blood by pressing her breast against a thorn on a Tree until it pierces her heart, is unmistakably reminiscent of Christ's own sacrifice, especially since "Tree" had become a common euphemism in hymns, etc., for the cross; the reference to thorns, too,

obviously intensifies the connection.⁷ It seems, then, that such a selfless act must be an example of the great love of which Christ spoke, and certainly we cannot ignore the indictment of the society that is not only indifferent to the Nightingale's great sacrifice, but puts the baubles bought with money above the rose purchased with a life.

When we begin to examine the details of the image of the Nightingale's sacrificing her life and spilling her own blood, however, we are forced to wonder, since the parallel of the bird with Christ seems even more obvious than that of the Statue in the previous story, why Wilde does not follow the crucifixion with some form of resurrection. The Statue and the Swallow were, after all, taken up by God, and the Giant in the next story is given assurance of a place in Paradise. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, I believe the placing of this tale is far from accidental, since the fates of the heroes of the other two stories actually emphasize the sadness and apparent unfairness of the Nightingale's demise. Also, the prototype of this bird is clearly Andersen's Nightingale, also a creative artist who knows the power of his gift. But she too has a more

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The image recalls the myth of the Pelican who tears her own breast with her beak to feed her young, conventionally associated with Christ.

felicitous destiny than Wilde's hapless bird.

Again, it seems that the variety of associations elicited by the image of the Nightingale's sacrifice, and most importantly, its relationship to Christ of the crucifixion, are essential to any coherent reading of the Nightingale's actions and their consequences. Andersen's bird also uses his singing for the good of another, and returns unselfishly and unsummoned to the side of the Emperor, who had thoughtlessly abandoned him earlier. The kindness of the characters in Wilde's two other tales is equally gratuitous, and so it seems is the sacrifice of the Nightingale. Yet the Nightingale, unlike the Giant, the Swallow and the Statue, receives no eternal reward; indeed, she does not even earn a temporal reward as Andersen's bird does. To encourage the reader to link the two Nightingales, Wilde clearly echoes Andersen's prose in his own description of his Nightingale's song. Just before she expires, Wilde's Nightingale sings of undying Love perfected in Death, and Andersen's little bird "... sang about the quiet churchyard where the roses bloom... and the fresh grass is ever moistened anew by the tears of the mourners" (Andersen 254). The songs are very similar, but their effects are very different. The bird's song in Andersen's tale "brought to Death a longing for his own garden, and like a cold grey mist he passed out of the window" (254). Wilde's

Nightingale's song is equally successful in achieving its end, for "the marvellous rose became crimson, like the rose of the eastern sky" (CW 295); but, whereas the song of the Nightingale in Andersen's tale restores life to the Emperor, the Nightingale in Wilde's tale is required to give up her life, which is surely the greater sacrifice. Wilde, however, by creating the links between his own and Andersen's tale, and by imaging so clearly the crucifixion of Christ, draws our attention not only to the sacrifice and its outcome, but also to the reason for the sacrifice. Just as Christ called out "It is finished" as his work was completed, so the Tree cries "the rose is finished now" as the bird falls dead in the grass.

The Statue and the Swallow did what they could to ease the misery of the poor; the Giant learned to share his garden with the children, and died for the love of the most vulnerable one; Andersen's Nightingale through love and humility, saves the life of the Emperor; and Wilde's Nightingale gives her life to make one perfect rose, which is left discarded in the gutter. When we view the Nightingale's deeds in the context that Wilde provides, we begin to understand her fate. And when we consider her sacrifice, as Wilde through imagery ensures we should, as similar to the sacrifice of Christ, we begin to realize the disturbing irony of the tale. Christ by his sacrifice

vanquished sin and provided an example of perfect human love, while all that the bird accomplished by her sacrifice was the production of a rose that, far from becoming the expression of pure human love, becomes the symbol of extreme human selfishness. She was, indeed, mistaken in her judgement concerning the meaning of love. Nevertheless, the story has an impact that still makes children and even adults weep.

Wilde undoubtedly knew that he would bring his audience to tears, for, on its surface, the story is as sentimental as the "public" he so despised could wish. But through his use of the association with the Christ image, and as we shall later see, even more insistently, through biblical language, he offered a critique of the same sentiments to which the story seems to subscribe, for it is the Nightingale's misunderstanding of "Love" that leads to her dramatic but futile demise. Misled by her fatuously romantic notion of "Love" as passion, she squanders her gifts and her own sincere "lovingkindness" on an unworthy cause. She believed that "Love is better than Life," but unfortunately, she did not comprehend the meaning of love as Christ had taught it, as the heroes of other stories had understood it and, ironically, as she herself had offered it; she perceived Love only in terms of romance and sentiment.

Far from dignifying the Nightingale's actions, then,

the biblical imagery, coupled with the allusions to Wilde's and to Andersen's fairy tales, accentuates the irrelevance of the bird's supreme sacrifice and the triviality of the cause for which she dies. Wilde seems to infer that the sadness we feel should not be for the loss of the heroic character in a worthy endeavour, but for the utter waste of a generous and gifted being, deluded by her own romantic notions of Love and Life. Of course, the implication is that such notions originate in a culture that glorifies shallow sentiment, and it is this culture at which Wilde's satire is directed, not at the naive Nightingale, who is its victim.⁸

Although the Nightingale is the most obvious example of a character whose efforts to follow Christ's example are unacknowledged by society, this aspect is in fact common to all the stories that make reference, directly or indirectly, to the life and work of Christ. Indeed, the motif that unites all of the tales in both collections is the universal failure of the community at large to recognize any spontaneous act of human kindness or generosity, whether misguided or not. As Wilde continues to interrogate the

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In his infatuation with Douglas, Wilde seems to have fallen prey to the same lack of judgement as the Nightingale. It was not his passion for Douglas, however, that persuaded him to stay in England and stand trial, but his sense of responsibility to his family and the friends who supported him, and his pride as an Irishman (Ellmann, OW 441 -443).

relationship between conventional morality and morality as it is practised by the heroes of his stories, his allusions to Christ become increasingly perplexing. It is tempting to say simply that the gap between the hero and his community gradually widens, but, in a typically Wildean paradox, the reverse is also true. If we define the gap as lack of contact, then it is the characters in the early tales who are most thoroughly isolated; the rest of their society, including the recipients of their beneficence, remains oblivious to the behaviour of the Statue, the Swallow, the Nightingale, Little Hans and to a lesser extent, the Giant.

If, however, we define the gap as lack of communication then the characters in the later tales experience a more painful and complete dislocation both from their peers and from the people. Whereas the characters in the first set of stories seem content to act entirely independently, and are as indifferent to the reaction of their society as it is to them (even Hans is concerned only about the Miller's opinion), the heroes of the second set of tales are desperate to make their behaviour understood and actually to have an effect upon the rest of the community. Their sense of otherness is confirmed not by society's indifference but by its hostility. While gratuitous kindness, even if mistakenly bestowed, is the aspect of the early characters that makes them like Christ, it is their determination to

persuade the rest of society to recognize and practise "loving kindness" that associates the later ones even more closely with his example.

In The Happy Prince, Wilde does not overtly condemn the appropriation and interpretation of the Bible and the fairy tale by the moral centre; he merely demonstrates the harm that can be caused both by the presentation of opinions as moral certainties and by the willingness of the public to accept without question the status quo. In A House of Pomegranates, however, he seems to pronounce a harsher judgement on those who presume to interpret the meaning of Scripture for the lay person; we shall see that the moral centre is represented in these stories not as a relatively innocuous, though admittedly unsound influence, but as an active and malignant power. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the characters in A House of Pomegranates, although they may start out as naive, when exposed to society, quickly become much less innocent than those in the first set of tales. Indeed, the main sin of which each, under the various influences of their communities, is guilty is selfishness. The Dwarf is merely a victim of his own artless gullibility, but the other three heroes, who are quite

positively linked through image, incident and language with Christ, remain, because of their lack of concern for others, very problematic as Christlike examples.

Even in the earlier tales, it seems that Wilde believed that there simply is no person who is by instinct and inclination able to achieve the standard of goodness preached by Christ. In fact, as we have seen, even the living Prince did not learn to care for others until he became a Statue fixed to a pedestal and forced to see the wretchedness of others. I have already discussed some of the apparent difficulties and intricacies of the biblical associations in "The Fisherman", who is certainly, it would seem, not an exemplary figure. But even he at one point is associated not only with the disciples but also with Jesus, or at least with the Holy Family, when he tells the merchant who finds him in the market-place, "I can find no inn in this city..." (CW 267). Of course he repays the kindness of the merchant who offers him shelter with violence and robbery, repeating the pattern of reversal that pervades the whole of that disturbing story.

In effect, although "The Fisherman" may be the most bewildering of all the tales, it still follows the design of most of the other stories in A House of Pomegranates. Again, as was discussed in the previous chapter, the hero, when in pursuit of his own yearnings, is self-centred and

indifferent to the misery of others, but through ordeal and suffering, he learns repentance and is transformed. But as we have seen, the effects of the transformation are quite different from those in most nineteenth-century fairy tales, where the sinner is almost always forgiven and received again into the community of the righteous as a result of his or her repentance and prayers, as in Andersen's "The Red Shoes" and Dickens's A Christmas Carol, or because of the intercession of other devout souls, as in Stretton's "Little Meg's Children." As was noted above, the experience of Wilde's heroes is quite the opposite. In the beginning, when they are self-absorbed and oblivious to the effects of their behaviour on others, as in the case of the Young King and the Fisherman, or, like the Star Child, openly sadistic, they are accepted or even admired by their peers. When each becomes enlightened and expresses remorse for his past vices, there is little positive response from society.

This is, in fact, hardly surprising when we examine the whole context of the heroes' descents into evil, for in each of the stories the pattern is very similar, and generally the reverse of that in literary fairy tales such as Andersen's "Red Shoes" or "The Snow Queen," and especially popular Victorian children's fiction, where characters tend to commit evil deeds as a result of their own wilfulness and disregard of authority, as in Strickland's Rowland

Massingham and Gatty's "Kicking." All of Wilde's main characters do start in a state of innocence: it is only under the influence and sometimes the direction of the community, and in two instances, its religious leaders, that inexperienced and simple beings become selfish, or come to regard what may have been harmless and natural instincts as sin. When brought to the palace, the Young King becomes a worshipper of beauty to the exclusion of all else; the Star Child is obsessed with the power and popularity that he gains from his peers by inflicting misery on others; even the little Dwarf is so seduced by the beauty of the Infanta that he is willing to abandon his woodland friends; and the Fisherman, erroneously persuaded by the Priest that his love for the Mermaid is corrupt, turns to the forces of evil in the form of a Witch to achieve his desires. When Wilde's characters reach a state of personal enlightenment and try to share their insight with society they invariably encounter opposition and even hostility.

Once again, Wilde uses biblical imagery to reinforce the failure of society to recognize and to react favourably to the reformed or transformed hero. In two of the stories, "The Birthday of the Infanta" and "The Young King," the biblical references are subtle and indirect: the characters are taken from a sort of prelapsarian, Edenic setting and brought to a materialistic court where they are soon tainted

by the corruption of their surroundings. The biblical imagery at the beginning of each of the other two stories is, however, more pointed. As was demonstrated earlier, the opening passages of "The Fisherman" are laden with allusion both to the Old and the New Testaments, establishing connections between the Mermaid and the Church and the Fisherman and Christ's disciples. "The Star Child" too is replete with biblical imagery, opening with sequences that recall the birth of Christ by conflating wise men and shepherds in the woodcutters who, returning home in the middle of winter, see a star fall from the sky on to a sheepfold. Guided by the star they find "wrapped in many folds... a little child who was asleep" (CW 274). Although this child inspires love and goodness, he, unlike the Christ Child, responds to kindness and attention with pride and cruelty. Like all of the characters who seem to be in some way Christ figures, he fails to live up to the image; indeed, the Star Child fails quite miserably.

In the end, however, the Christ-like promise is fulfilled when, after both inflicting and suffering terrible cruelty, the youth, because of his own sad experience, responds with pity to the trapped Hare and to the leper who seems even less fortunate than he. The Young King, whose sins, unlike those of the Star Child, are of omission rather than commission, also learns that he is responsible for the

evils in his kingdom. In this story, Wilde quite pointedly extends his criticism to include colonial exploitation. Indeed, the evils in the colonies exceed any that are perpetrated domestically. In keeping with a common biblical tradition, the revelation of truth comes in the form of dreams, and to reinforce the parallel, Wilde, as I shall discuss in more detail in the next chapter, associates his hero very obviously with the Old Testament Joseph, whose dreams saved both his adopted people and his own family.

At this point, however, I wish to concentrate on the image that occurs at the end of "The Young King," and its resemblance to the image at the end of "The Star Child." Both potential young rulers are spoiled aesthetes, encouraged in their vanity and indulged in their selfishness by sycophantic flatterers; but both, when shown the evidence of their own corruption, immediately regret their negligence and narcissism and seek to make amends. In each case the transformation is a direct result of the hero's own efforts; there are no supernatural or even natural mediators. Some aspects of each tale might appear magical: the Hare in "The Star Child" does talk, but so do most fairy-tale animals, and there is nothing magical about his knowing how to find the treasure; the Young King's dreams, of course, may seem mystical, but they are presented in Wilde's tale as merely a product of the young man's own super-sensitive psyche and

not as miraculous occurrences.

The most significant aspect of the changes in the young men is that they are not, in fact, really transformations, but like the metamorphoses of Ovid's characters, as Solodow explains, manifestations of already existing traits. Conversion is not achieved through external forces such as punishment, instruction, rehabilitation or intercession but, as in all the stories, by the spontaneous response that connects humanity to Christ himself: compassion. Indeed, the connection is reinforced when, as a result of their acts of altruistic love, the Star Child and the Young King are literally trans/figured; that is, their appearance comes to resemble Christ's as he himself is figured in the Bible in quite specific incidents.

The Young King rejects the conservative, and self-serving advice of the old Priest, when he insists on going to his coronation wearing only his rough garments and, more significantly, a circlet of wild briar, taking on the image of Christ as he was mocked by the Roman soldiers. He even defies the armed force of the enraged nobles whose threats recall those of the multitude crying out for the crucifixion of Christ: "'Surely we will slay him, for he is unworthy to rule over us'" (CW 233). His only defence is to pray, and clearly God hears his prayer, for

... when he had finished his prayer he rose up....

And lo! through the painted windows came the sunlight streaming upon him, and the sunbeams wove round him a tissued robe that was fairer than the robe that had been fashioned for his pleasure.... And the Young King came down from the high altar, and passed home through the midst of the people. But no man dared look upon his face, for it was the face of an angel. (CW 233)

What the people witness is obviously intended to recall for the reader the experience of the disciples who were present at the transfiguration of Christ: Wilde's description melds the accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke:

... and his face did shine as the sun and his raiment was white as the light. (Matt 17, 2)

... and his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them. (Mark 9, 3)

And as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistering. (Luke 9, 27)

The transfiguration of Christ reveals to his disciples, Peter, James and John -- the same three who feature in the story that is recalled at the beginning of "The Fisherman and his Soul" -- Christ's place as first among the great high priests. The linking of the Young King with the

priesthood is consolidated when his "dead staff blossom[s]" (CW 233), as did Aaron's rod when the people began to rebel against him and his brother: "...Moses went into the tabernacle of witness; and behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds and bloomed blossoms..." (Numbers 17, 8). The murmurings of discontent against God's chosen high priests ceased at the sight of the blossoms, as did those of the opponents of Wilde's young hero at the miraculous proof of God's approval of his wisdom.

Wilde's representation of the hero takes the form not merely of a general equation of the goodness of the Young King with the example of Christ. It is specific in all its detail, alluding in several particular aspects to the election of the high priest by God himself. Since all of the references are precise and clearly identifiable, it seems likely that Wilde had also in mind the full implication of the office of the high priest as associated both with Christ and with the Old Testament priests of the house of Levi.

St Paul, in his letter to the Hebrews, provides a very thorough exegesis of the role of the high priest especially as it is exemplified in Christ:

For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet

without sin....

For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things pertaining to God....

Who can have compassion on the ignorant and on them who are out of the way; for that he himself is also compassed with infirmity.

(Hebrews 4, 15 - 5, 2)

Once more, it is not righteousness or any other virtue that singles out the hero as suitable to mediate between God and his people, but somewhat ironically, his human frailty, the element that enables one person to have compassion for others. Whether the people who see the signs of God's favour toward the young man continue to venerate him as their King and as God's chosen high priest, however, we cannot know, for the story ends with the problems of exploitation that the Young King has identified, still unsolved.

In this story more than in any other, Wilde implies the insidiousness of a concept of morality that leads not only to the sorts of abuses of power that the Young King tries to oppose, but also to the violent reaction against his attempts to correct these. Also, Wilde comes closer in this tale than in the others to offering an alternative to conventional values; he does not merely condemn stagnant conservatism, but posits a carefully considered doctrine based on his perceptive synthesis of texts in the Old and

New Testaments. He subtly and effectively reappropriates the discourse of conventional morality, re-viewing and re-constructing figures, literal and figurative, of piety and righteousness.

The closing image of the Star Child too relies heavily on biblical association, but is less complex in its reference than the "Young King," although the working out of the redemption of the hero is more complicated and at the same time closer to the fairy-tale tradition than in any of the other stories. Using familiar folk formulas such as triple repetitions, Wilde takes the Star Child through a process of repentance and retribution, but the hero's various acts of kindness are spontaneous rather than calculated to pay off the debt of guilt accrued through his earlier cruelty. Thus, when he is returned to his former outward beauty, the young man is unaware of this, thinking he is being mocked when "as he passed through the gates of the city, the guards bowed down and made obeisance to him,

saying, 'How beautiful is our lord'" (CW 283).⁹

A crowd continues to follow the hero crying "'Surely there is none so beautiful in the whole world!'" (CW 283), and eventually the throng becomes so large that he loses his way, and as he enters the palace, even "the priests and the high officers of the city ran forth to meet him, and they abased themselves before him, and said, 'Thou art our lord for whom we have been waiting, and the son of our King'" (CW 283). In effect, the Star Child's entry into the city is modelled on Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem in the week before his crucifixion, although the Star Child's welcome is more universal and not quite so shortlived. But while the recognition of Christ as the Messiah seemed strange, what with his rough attire and donkey, the sudden acceptance of the Star Child is entirely because of his outward appearance. Now that he has recovered his physical

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On the helmet of the man who shows the Star Child his reflection in his shield is the lion with wings, the emblem of St Mark, whose Gospel focuses on the resurrection. The same person, however, earlier sells the boy to the evil magician. Once again Wilde elicits a disturbing set of associations. We might explain the selling as the beginning of the process of change, but the connection to the Gopellor in this would be problematic, and would not address the inescapable associations with betrayal, in particular Jacob/Esau (the bowl of pottage for a birthright), Joseph's brothers and, of course, Judas. In the complexity of allusion, Wilde again challenges conventional distinctions between good and evil and offers not a conclusion but a query.

splendour, he commands the adulation of the public as he had when he was wicked but charming.

Wilde again satirises the shallowness of a society which having once produced a monster of vanity, is instantly ready when seduced by a comely exterior, to repeat its former error. More importantly, by drawing a parallel with those who moved from wildly cheering Christ to roaring for his execution, he emphasizes not only the vapidness of the public but also its perniciousness. The use of the biblical allusion reveals Wilde's profound mistrust of the mindless masses and their susceptibility to the emotion of the moment. Even when the Star Child protests his own unworthiness, the people will not be moved from their determination to crown him King, simply because he is so handsome that they believe he must be the royal son they have been expecting.

The final sentence of the story, of A House of Pomegranates and of all Wilde's fairy tales, is also Wilde's final sentence on society as a whole: "And he who came after him ruled evilly" (CW 284). A community so easily swayed by mere outward impressions, and so oblivious to the finer aspects of their chosen ruler, Wilde seems to imply, will inevitably allow itself to be governed by anyone able to put on a good show, and will, therefore, be susceptible to deception by anyone courting popularity for purely selfish

ends. In very straightforward terms, the writer's conclusion is that the public will get exactly what it deserves: not peace and goodwill but discord and bigotry.

In none of the stories is there any recognition, by any earthly agency, of the insight of the heroes. Only God himself, it seems, appreciates their efforts to initiate change and alleviate suffering. Even the Young King, who is acknowledged by his subjects only because of divine intervention, inspires not love and confidence but wonder and apprehension:

And the people fell upon their knees in awe... and the Bishop's face grew pale, and his hands trembled.... [And] no man dared look upon his face, for it was the face of an angel. (CW 233)

The same anxious terror of the supernatural inspires the Priest in "The Fisherman and his Soul," when he attempts to make amends for his treatment of the Fisherman and the Mermaid.

It is interesting that the phenomenon that elicits fear and remorse is again mysteriously blooming flowers: life and beauty flourishing where least expected, as a result of human acts of love, courage and conviction. Also, whether by coincidence or by design, Wilde has the Fisherman and his love buried in the Field of the Fullers, while Mark in his account of Christ's transfiguration comments that Jesus'

garments were "exceeding white as snow, so as no fuller on earth can white them" (Mark 9, 3). In death, the lovers are buried together in the very earth that is used by humans to cleanse and whiten their clothes -- that is, their outward appearance -- but it seems that in their return to the earth, the Fisherman and the Mermaid are also purified, perhaps eternally transfigured. Presumably as a sign of the sanctification of the strange couple's devotion, God causes the formerly barren soil to produce sweetly scented exotic white flowers. But, of course, after the initial burst of fertility the land returns to its sterile state.

The only story that seems to offer any hope for permanent change is "The Selfish Giant," but again the change is not in all of society, but only within the bounds of the Giant's own garden. Once more it is an act of compassion and unselfishness that produces the transformation, and the symbol of God's approval is in the restored fruitfulness of the plot made temporarily barren by its owner's meanness. In this story we are, I believe, offered a single glimpse of essential Christhood as conceived by Wilde. The helpless child with the nail-prints on his hands and feet is clearly an embodiment of Christ himself; but somewhat intriguingly, unlike all the other characters who in various ways are associated with Christ, the child performs no specific act of courage or pity.

Instead he becomes the catalyst for another's, the Giant's, generosity. His divinity is manifest not in absolute Godlike power, but in the vulnerability that elicits a compassionate response. Through the child humanity discovers its own potential for divinity. In De Profundis Wilde recalls having said

...that wherever there was any sorrow, though but that of a child in some little garden weeping over a fault that it had or had not committed, the whole face of creation was completely marred. I was entirely wrong....

Now it seems to me that Love of some kind is the only explanation for the extraordinary amount of suffering that there is in the world... if the worlds have indeed, as I have said, been built out of Sorrow, it has been by the hands of Love, because in no other way could the Soul of man for whom the worlds are made reach the full stature of its perfection. (CW 920-921)

The child has, in effect, more in common with the poor in the kingdoms of the Happy Prince and the Young King, or the leper and the old woman in that of the Star Child. It is not what he does that is important but the reaction that he inspires. In his letter from prison, Wilde says of Christ, "He does not really teach one anything, but by being brought

into his presence one becomes something" (CW 934). The child's weakness melts the Giant's heart and causes him not only to respond with gentle concern to the child himself, but to break down the wall of his garden so that all the children can enjoy it. Not until the Giant sees the child's wounds, and is persuaded not to react with anger, however, does he recognize the significance of the child's presence in the garden; and for his insight and selflessness, the Giant receives an eternal reward. The child smiles at the Giant, and says, "...to-day you shall come with me to my garden, which is Paradise" (CW 300), echoing the words of Christ to the thief on the cross, "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Luke 23, 43).

As the thief understands that the man being crucified beside him "hath done nothing amiss" (Luke 23, 41), so the Giant recognizes the innocence of the child and the profound significance of his unjustly inflicted wounds. Both the thief and the Giant are appalled by what they believe is injustice and, although too late to redress the wrong, experience compassion. Also, once again we see the white blossom, which, in this case, falls from the tree and covers the Giant, signalling that he has been blessed by God. The Giant, like the thief, epitomises morality as Wilde would later claim Christ himself represented it: "His morality is all sympathy, just what morality should be" (CW 931). In De

Profundis, Wilde pictures Jesus as

a young Galilean peasant imagining that he could bear on his shoulders the burden of the entire world... oppressed nationalities, factory children, thieves, people in prison, outcasts, those who are dumb under oppression and whose silence is heard only of God. (CW 923-924)

He took the entire world of the inarticulate, the voiceless world of pain, as his kingdom, and made of himself its external mouthpiece. (CW 927)

This, of course, is what the Young King also tries to do, and what his community so vehemently opposes, and it is also what Wilde attempts to do through his work, starting with the fairy tales. Perhaps because his public persona seemed so at odds with such humane and essentially socialist aims, little has been discussed of this aspect of Wilde's writing, except with reference to obviously political essays such as "The Soul of Man Under Socialism". The voice that speaks for the "voiceless world of pain" protests quietly but insistently throughout the fairy tales, using the same discourse that is enlisted to silence any opposition from the oppressed, and to reinforce the validity of the systems of power and control.

It is not, however, only through imagery that Wilde seeks to reappropriate the authority of the Bible; his

stories are also liberally sprinkled with incidents and characters that quite directly parallel actual biblical episodes, and with phrases and even passages that are almost direct quotations of the Authorized Version. Also, just as the biblical imagery does much more than merely add propriety to and dignify the tone of the narrative, so the incidents, characters and especially the quotations add another level to the complex strategy of subversion in Wilde's tales. In the chapter that follows, after an initial sketching of theoretical context, I shall explore these aspects of Wilde's social and literary satire in A House of Pomegranates.

Chapter IV

Unhappy Princes, an Unselfish Dwarf and a Devoted Fisherman:
Reviewed Texts and Retrieved Contexts in
A House of Pomegranates

I have argued above that the protagonists in A House of Pomegranates are much more problematic as heroes than those in the earlier tales, because they are not only in more direct and active conflict with their communities than are the heroes of The Happy Prince, but are also, to a large extent, responsible for their own fates. Indeed, they do not behave at all as fairy-tale heroes should. Instead of being willing to take advice and reinforcing, through their behaviour, the values of their societies, the protagonists in the later tales actually challenge the ways in which wisdom and virtue are perceived by their societies. Consequently, we are all the more disturbed as we witness the contentious and often rebellious attitudes of these people who are, through imagery, associated with Christ.

Perhaps Wilde himself shared our perplexity as his fairy-tale heroes refused to behave as they should. Certainly, it seems that the actual process of writing the stories became for Wilde a mode of revelation, amplifying

for him the contrasts between his own moral perspective and that of his society and, more significantly, his own understanding of morality as preached and practised by Christ. In the second set of stories, Wilde's awareness of the need for creative change in the systems of regulation of the poor and powerless is more acute and, more disconcertingly, there is a tangible sense of his own contribution to the status quo. In failing to oppose or even to define the social problems that he, with the benefit of his North American experiences, was beginning to recognize, Wilde seems to have begun to see himself, like his own protagonists, as complicit in the abuses he condemned. Certainly, in prison he acknowledges his avoidance of the unpleasant things in life and neglect of other's suffering:

... I wanted to eat of the fruit of all the trees in the garden of the world.... My only mistake was that I confined myself so exclusively to the trees of what seemed to me the sungilt side of the garden, and shunned the other side for its shadow and its gloom. Failure, disgrace, poverty, sorrow, despair, suffering, tears even, the broken words that come from the lips of pain... all these were things of which I was afraid. (CW 921 -922)

Wilde's sense of his own ambiguous position in relation to the practices of which he disapproved no doubt had some

influence on the development of the complex strategies of resistance that we see evolving in his work after the publication of The Happy Prince. Through the fairy tales, we see a gradual emergence of Wilde's understanding of his responsibilities as artist and socialist. Guy Willoughby sees in some of Wilde's prose parables a sensitivity to the
 ...genuine requirements of Christian imitation.

Real discipleship involves imagination, selflessness, and courage; false discipleship -- which, Wilde implies, too often assumes the name of real discipleship -- is characterized by self-gratification.... (Art and Chrtisthood 97)

It was one of Wilde's deepest regrets that, while he never lacked imagination and courage, he was unable to achieve in his own life what he himself would have accepted as a state of selflessness. In De Profundis, contemplating the personality of Christ and what was revealed of the nature of God's love by Jesus's life on earth, Wilde proposes:

Most people live for love and admiration. But it is by love and admiration that we should live. If any love is shown us we should recognize that we are quite unworthy of it. Nobody is worthy to be loved. The fact that God loves man shows us that in the divine order of ideal things it is written

that eternal love is to be given to what is
eternally unworthy. (CW 930)

Wilde certainly numbered himself among those least worthy of eternal love. Clearly, it is essential to Wilde's creed that love as exemplified in Christ cannot and, fortunately, need not be earned. In the characterization of the later fairy-tale heroes Wilde emphasizes that all of his heroes have some share in the guilt for the oppression of the poor, the helpless and the silenced in society, and yet all who repent are eligible for God's grace. Whatever he felt about his failings in the area of self-sacrifice, however, Wilde did not neglect to exercise imagination and courage, and as we have seen, perhaps his most imaginatively courageous act was to enlist the discourse and content of the Bible itself as a means to express his concerns with what he saw as the perversion and misinterpretation of moral values in the systems of control.

It is only recently that literary criticism has even begun to theorize methods of resistance like those that Wilde had begun to explore as early as 1887, in his short stories, and would continue to develop through all his work. Clearly, he was very conscious of the complexity of his own

position in relation to English society: Anglo, but Irish; male, but gay; celebrated, but notorious -- simultaneously meeting and disappointing the requirements for acceptance among the elite. Indeed, the problems inherent in the ambivalence of Wilde's social status, and their effect on his efforts to subvert received values through his writing, parallel quite closely the difficulties that are now perceived in classifying the modes of resistance practised by settler/colonial writers in the "Second World." As Stephen Slemon points out:

[the] concept of the post-colonial has a marked tendency to blur when it tries to focus upon ambiguously placed or ambivalent material....
 ...this blurring is everywhere in evidence in relation to what world systems theory calls the field of 'semi-periphery', and what follows behind it is a radical foreclosing by post-colonial criticism on settler/colonial writing: the radical ambivalence of colonialism's middle ground....

(World Literature Written in English 30, 34)

...the new binaristic absolutism ... seems to be working in several ways to drive that trans-national region of ex-colonial settler cultures away from the field of post-colonial literary representation. (WLWE 30, 35)

Slemon goes on to argue that even when the validity of the challenge to the "centre" by the nearly central is recognised, such "literary resistance is necessarily in a place of ambivalence: between systems, between discursive worlds, implicit and complicit in both of them" (WLWE 30, 37). "[T]he illusion of a stable self/other, here/there binary division has never been available to Second-World writers..." (WLWE 30, 38).

Few could have been more aware of the problems attending that lack of a convenient "self/other binary division" than the Wilde family. When William Wilde set out to preserve Irish folk lore by collecting the stories told by the "peasants," he was very conscious of the part Protestant planters of his own class had played in the destruction of Irish tradition and culture. In his introduction to Irish Popular Superstitions, he claims that colonial institutions and practices -- such as workhouses, poor-laws and absentee landlords -- have not only destroyed Irish social and cultural traditions, but "have swept away the established theories of political economists, and uprooted many of our long-cherished opinions" (Superstitions 10). In his use of the first-person plural possessive, Wilde implicitly includes himself among the oppressors, as did his wife when she wrote her poems exposing the contribution of

land confiscation by Protestant profiteers to the Irish famine.

The elder Wilde even demonstrates an understanding of the subtle ploys by which not only the property of the native Irish but even their very culture was being eroded. He remarks:

We have already alluded to the decay of the Irish language as one of the means by which our legends and superstitions are becoming obliterated. It is scarcely possible to conceive the rapidity with which this is being effected, or the means taken to bring it about. (20)

To illustrate his point, he recalls an incident that occurred during one of his visits to Connemarra:

...we were received for the night with that hospitality which has for ever been the characteristic of those wild mountaineers.... the children gathered round to have a look at the stranger, and one of them, a little boy of about eight years of age, addressed a short sentence in Irish to his sister, but meeting the father's eye, he immediately cowered back, having, to all appearance, committed some heinous fault. (21)

Wilde goes on to record the father's explanation: the children were discouraged by their families, using corporal

punishment, from speaking Irish, because the British had provided "National Schools," but allowed the pupils to communicate only in English. The Irish, according to Wilde, valued education so highly that they unwittingly almost eradicated their own language in the interest of their children's future.

The Wilde boys, then, can hardly have escaped developing a healthy sense of the heavy responsibility they shared, as part of the Protestant planter elite, for the dreadful abuses inflicted upon the native Irish by the colonizers. But, as we have seen, although their origins were not entirely Celtic, the family was as proudly Irish as any that could trace their ancestry in Ireland through centuries. Oscar clearly shared the sense of pride in his family heritage; moreover, in his letters, he frequently and earnestly expresses his love and admiration of his parents. He writes to Douglas from prison:

She [his mother] and my father had bequeathed me a name they had made noble and honoured, not merely in literature, art, archaeology, and science but in the public history of my own country, in its evolution as a nation. (CW 905)

Also, as was discussed in Chapter I, although they would have been designated as Anglo-Irish, the Wildes came apparently from Holland, and the Elgees (his mother's side),

according to Speranza, came originally from Italy. It is hardly surprising, then, that Oscar, despite his posing, felt so little in common with the English, and that he had little trouble in distancing himself far enough from their culture and society to be able to see clearly both their peculiar attractions and their nasty blemishes.

Yet he could not escape being implicated in the crimes of colonialism, especially as they applied to Ireland. Literary resistance, as Slemon points out in reference to settler texts in countries such as Australia and Canada, could never

...be directed at an object or discursive structure which can be seen purely external to the self. The Second-World writer, the Second-World text, that is, have always been complicit in colonialism's territorial appropriation of land, and voice, and agency, and this has been their inescapable condition even at those moments when they have promulgated their most strident and most spectacular figures of post-colonial resistance.

(WLWE 30, 38)

Spectacular and strident are hardly adjectives that could be applied to Wilde's House of Pomegranates, but certainly all of the stories do signal their author's awareness of his ambivalent position as complicit in the

oppressive order that he would expose. Not only does Wilde reveal colonial exploitation, however, but he also unmasks the perversity of a society that values wealth, class, and cunning above honesty, humanity and trust, and bestows or withholds power and favour quite capriciously. In A House of Pomegranates, we see yet another application of Wilde's strategy of arranging his stories to counterbalance and to provide foils for each other, as he seeks both to demonstrate and to explore the vagaries of society in its creation of heroes and scapegoats.

The paralleling of the stories, as outlined in Chapter III, is relevant also to this analysis: the Young King is brought from the woods because he is believed to be the heir to the throne; he is, of course, also physically attractive, and he is indulged with all the luxury and attention that the court can offer. In the story that follows, "The Birthday of the Infanta," the Dwarf is similarly brought from country to court, but this time to please the whim of the heir to the throne. Although the Dwarf is benevolent and amusing he is physically grotesque; consequently, when he has served his purpose he is allowed to die of grief. The next two stories are also similar in theme, each depicting a

protagonist determined to pursue his own impulses, without regard for any other creature. Again, although the transgressions of each character are comparable, the Star Child, who, it is discovered, has wealth and station as well as beauty, is reconciled with his community, while the lowly Fisherman is rejected by his.

While the structure of A House of Pomegranates, like that of The Happy Prince, is designed to draw attention to the various contradictions in the treatment of the individual by society, the collection is altogether more complex and presents a much more disturbing view of the individual, a more disconcerting perspective on society and a more troubling vision of the relationship of each to the other. In all of the stories in A House of Pomegranates the hero is, as was discussed in Chapter III, profoundly aware of his otherness; more than any of the characters in The Happy Prince, the protagonists in the second set of tales are conscious of their own difference, whether in perception, appearance, motivation or aptitude. In many ways the second set of stories is a reprise of the first: many issues raised in the first collection are revisited in the second and, to a large extent, the protagonists are reincarnations of the heroes of the previous stories. Like the Happy Prince, the Young King learns only in retrospect of his own contribution to the plight of his subjects and,

subsequently, gives up everything to atone for his indifference; like Hans and the Nightingale, the Dwarf is simply too naive and well meaning for his materialistic society; and like the Selfish Giant and the Remarkable Rocket, the Star Child and the Fisherman are completely motivated by self-interest.

The similarities are, however, quite superficial; while the protagonists in the earlier stories share characteristics of the later heroes they are, as was also discussed at some length in Chapter III, much less like fairy-tale heroes, much more human, with all of the imperfections that attend the human condition. In fact, as I have argued in that chapter, the protagonists of the later tales seem to be rather painful projections of Wilde's perceptions of his own weakness, especially of what he sees as his self-centredness and even of that supreme flaw, shallowness. Except for the Dwarf, all of the main characters are, at least to begin with, entirely motivated by self-interest. Indeed, the heroes of "The Young King," "The Fisherman and his Soul" and "The Star Child" are, from the reader's point of view, progressively less attractive; they become egotistic, self-indulgent and even cruel.

The stages of selfish behaviour through which the characters move are, in themselves, interesting, progressing from mere thoughtlessness through immovable obstinacy to

malevolent abusiveness. In "The Birthday of the Infanta" we have a reminder of the effect of a cold and indifferent society on an innocent individual, but in the other three stories, we see individuals who are, at best, no better than the rest of their society and, at worst, much worse than their peers. Wilde gradually allows the protagonist to become the epitome of those attitudes in society that he has consistently mocked and condemned in all of the other stories. But, as we have seen, it is these very flawed people who emerge as the prophets or potential saviours of their communities. They do not, however, succeed in becoming integrated; indeed, the lessons they learn and endeavour to impart to others become the new barriers that separate them from a society that cannot or will not share the protagonist's revised vision of humanity and of the exercise of authority.

The Young King's re-visioning of the possibilities for government comes to him early in the tale, for he is not, it seems, innately selfish; he is, rather, so seduced by the wonders of his new environment that he is distracted from his duty as ruler. Perhaps it is, in fact, this absorption in the beauties of the court that saves him from being corrupted by the much worse temptation associated with his position: unbridled power. Also, he himself does not actively commit any trespass against another human being;

his only sin is his lack of awareness, which is caused by his obsession with art and aesthetics. Consequently, what he suffers as a result of his obliviousness is not physical, but only emotional, and that mainly in the subconscious world of dreams. His enlightenment and reformation both come from within. No outside agent is necessary to show him his errors, and his response to the revelation of his own guilt is immediate. Thus, while Wilde makes clear that the protagonist of this tale is certainly implicated in the evils perpetrated by a greedy and oppressive government, his guilt is somewhat ameliorated by his acknowledgement of his own culpability and his efforts to make amends, when he encounters the effects of his self-involvement on the helpless and exploited in his kingdom.

The case of the Fisherman and his Soul is more complicated, for the Fisherman is warned from the beginning that his selfish desire for the Mermaid will have far-reaching consequences. While the end of the story strongly suggests that there was, probably, no actual sin in loving another species, the body of the work infers that the form of the Fisherman's protest against society's restraints -- single-minded pursuit of his own fixation -- is the cause of all the pain inflicted on both humans and sea-folk. Even the Mermaid dies because of her lover's selfishness. The Fisherman's initial act of violence in severing his Soul

from the rest of himself leads directly to the deterioration of both parts of the person; the Soul, dislocated from the body, indulges in unimaginable excesses, culminating in murder. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, this is an interesting inversion, suggesting that it is the flesh and the desires of the heart that keep the Soul contained within human boundaries, rather than the Soul which restrains the desires of the heart and the flesh. Of course, the Fisherman is ultimately guilty of all that his Soul has done, for he remains responsible for the Soul's actions; he is the ruler who relinquishes his duty to his subject. In a further twist, the Fisherman then allows the dissolute and desperate Soul to lead him into temptation and sin.

Clearly, the Fisherman's transgressions are much worse than the Young King's. He is not selfish only through carelessness, but is stubborn and recalcitrant, determined not only to ignore the advice of the Priest, but defying even the young Witch who, despite her familiarity with the powers of evil, is so appalled by his request that she pleads with him not to force her to assist him in his wickedness. In keeping with the heinousness of the Fisherman's sin, the process of redemption is grievously difficult, requiring the death of the Fisherman, his Soul and the Mermaid, for only death, it seems, can reunite the three, and perhaps, Wilde seems to imply, only the ultimate

sacrifice can purge selfishness so complete and devastating.

While the Fisherman's self-centredness is obviously deplorable, the Star Child's is still more depraved, for although the Fisherman's sins are great, he is, in a misguided way, acting out of a desire for love. The Star Child's iniquities are, on the other hand, entirely gratuitous; he is not motivated by a desire for anything outside of himself, but inflicts suffering on others entirely for pleasure, presumably inspired by a sense of superiority and power. He repays concern with disdain and kindness with brutality; he despises weakness and scorns servility, yet he accepts as his right the fear and adulation of all. Those who dare to chastise him for his vanity and viciousness he treats with contempt and vindictiveness, but nonetheless, Wilde emphasizes, because the Star Child is outwardly beautiful and charming, he becomes for most of his community an object of worship. Of course the flattery of his followers feeds his conceit and encourages his self-indulgence and malevolence.

The Star Child is, in effect, the antithesis of the unprepossessing Dwarf, whose only wish is to please all with whom he comes in contact, whether at the court or in the woods. In the natural environment, he finds friends among the small animals, who appreciate and return his kindness, but at court he is judged entirely by appearance and,

consequently, mocked and rejected. Wilde's indictment of the public blinded by outward appearance is quite explicit in his depiction of the treatment of the Dwarf by the court, but in society's reaction to the Star Child we see an even more bitter condemnation, not only of the public's lack of insight, but of the effect such myopia can have on the development of a gifted individual.

Once he is convicted of his own sin, however, the Star Child is determined to find the one he has most wronged and beg forgiveness, and, of course, the revelation of his vileness comes when he sees his own reflection. Like the rest of his society, the Star Child, at this point, is able to respond only to what is visible; it is only through experiencing the same kind of suffering that he has inflicted on others that he is able to develop the perceptiveness that allows him to see below the surface, to make contact, as the Fisherman did, with his own soul. Unlike the Fisherman, however, although the Star Child's sins against humanity are huge, he does not transgress so far against himself: he stops short of cutting off his own soul. Wilde seems to suggest that so long as the person remains intact, true to himself, there is still hope of redemption in this life. It is, in fact, difficult to know whether the Star Child, in all his calculated acts of cruelty, is really to be considered more malignant than the

Fisherman, who is willing to cause pain to others simply to fulfil his own desires.

However we judge the degree of selfishness of the Young King, the Fisherman and the Star Child in relation to each other, there can be no doubt that, in relation to humanity as a whole none of them seems, in the beginning, at all promising as a fairy-tale hero, and still less, perhaps, as a moral example. Yet, in the end, each becomes not only an example of Christlike love but also a prophet able to reveal God's will to his people. And, rather bewilderingly, once again, a benign, passive and blameless character, in this case the Dwarf, dies without, in any demonstrable way, changing or even challenging the values of the society whose victim he becomes. Yet the Star Child and the Young King, in their efforts to make recompense for their past errors, inspire readers' full approbation, and the Fisherman, although his strange behaviour may cause us some consternation, still elicits our sympathy and ultimate acceptance when his heart breaks for love.

Wilde seems to suggest that not only the people in fairy tales, but humanity in general, are more likely to be impressed by the reformed sinner than by the person who has never sinned, and of course, once again, he uses as his ultimate authority the source that most nineteenth-century readers would not dream of questioning: the Bible. We have

already seen various ways in which Wilde appropriates elements of that text: echoing cadence and syntax; employing familiar images; and, especially, recalling Christ himself in the speech and actions of the protagonists. Through these various devices he not only lends dignity to the stories, but as was discussed in the previous chapters, he also challenges traditional constructions of morality generally accepted by Victorian society.

In A House of Pomegranates, however, we see yet another application of the echoing of the King James Bible; indeed, what we hear in these stories are not so much echoes as actual quotations. But these quotations are also used in entirely different ways from those in literary fairy tales and popular Victorian children's literature; in fact, I shall show that, in many ways, Wilde's strategies in using biblical sources parallel the practices of post-modern writers as described by John McGowan in The John Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory. McGowan claims that such writers are preoccupied with

... images in circulation in culture and their recoding, reuse and recycling in art.... the post-modern artist works with cultural givens, trying

to manipulate them in various ways... for various ends. The ultimate aim is to appropriate these materials in such a way as to avoid being utterly dominated by them. (Hopkins 586)

Therefore, the words of the Bible as cited in Wilde's stories, although they do maintain their validity and, consequently, allow their speaker to share in the respect accorded to his pronouncements, are seldom spoken by conventional authority figures or by benign elderly sages, and certainly are not used directly to support or to validate a moral lesson. Instead, excerpts from the Bible are most often spoken by voices that would traditionally be silenced or rejected by society. Thus, a sort of recoding is achieved through the reversal of expectation; the biblical text is returned to its original status as the word of God communicated by whomever that higher power deems worthy, and is, consequently, removed from its role as the discourse of control. Thus, like post-colonial writers who use the discourse of the oppressor to subvert those values that it would normally support, Wilde uses biblical quotations to question rather than to support meek obedience to authority.

Restraint of individuality and encouragement of conformity for the good of the community are dominant motifs in many nineteenth-century children's stories. Even Margaret Gatty, whose Parables from Nature are charming and

essentially reasonable in their approach to morality, uses the Scriptures as the ultimate authority to reinforce values that maintain the proper order of society. Many of her tales are prefaced by quotations from the Bible; for example, "Kicking," a parable about an ungovernable young colt, has an epigraph taken from 1. Samuel xv, 23: "Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft" (Gatty 275). The tale ends with a rehearsal of the same hierarchical assumptions that Wilde's stories subtly query:

Animals under man -- servants under masters --
 children under parents -- wives under husbands --
 men under authorities -- nations under rulers --
 all under God, it is the same with all: -- in
 obedience of will is the only true peace.

(Gatty 296)

Susannah Strickland also uses biblical quotations for the sort of effect that Wilde seems in his tales to challenge. Rowland Massingham is the story of a wilful boy whose parents wish him to become a clergyman but, as a result of defying his elders, he accidentally shoots off his own hand. Instead of letting the story teach its own lesson, the narrator intervenes at the end to press home the moral:

Should any of my young readers feel inclined to
 . act like Rowland Massingham, and insist on being
 their own masters, I hope they will receive a

warning from his fate, and early renounce such a foolish and presumptuous line of conduct.... often what appears harsh and stern to a child, is absolutely necessary for his future welfare, and is adopted by his parents to save his body and soul from hell. Does not our blessed Lord himself tell us, "That if ye love not your parents whom ye have seen, how can you love God whom you have not seen?" (Strickland 183 - 184)

Like Gatty's narrator, Strickland's interprets the moral message of the tale, but in this case, part of John's Gospel is adapted to underline the lesson on filial duty.

Occasionally, in some of Wilde's later tales, we do see words from the Bible used in ways that may seem similar to those discussed above, or spoken by voices that society might consider appropriate, though certainly never by the narrator, but the effect is almost always ironic, undercutting rather than underlining any conventional moral interpretation.

In their manipulation of the narrative conventions of the genre in which they are written, Wilde's strategies parallel those of post-modern writers, "recoding, reus[ing] and recycling" what seem to be "cultural givens." Also, in positing alternative views of morality, but offering no direct contradiction of conventional values, Wilde's tales

are similar to the works of Second World colonial writers as discussed by Stephen Slemon, for whom

...resistance itself is...never simply a
 `reversal' of power...never purely resistance,
 never simply there in the text or the interpretive
 community, but is always necessarily complicit in
 the apparatus it seeks to transgress. (WLWE 36-37)

Indeed, far from offering direct resistance to the appropriation of biblical language as part of the discourse of moral authority, Wilde seems to endorse the practice through imitation. But as Homi Bhabha points out, in reference to the tactics of Indians writing in English, "The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (October 28, 129).

Obviously, then, Wilde's use of biblical quotations is not merely to enhance the tone of his storytelling, and this is further underlined by the very self-conscious selection and arrangement of biblical material in each separate tale. While each of the stories creates its own pattern in its use of biblical text, each also forms a part of an overall design that unites the whole collection. As we have seen, throughout the two sets of tales, Wilde's strategy is to maintain a continuity of purpose and achieve a cumulative impact that is greater than that of any individual story. In

the "The Young King," "The Fisherman" and "The Star Child" the Bible is quoted, or very consciously and closely paraphrased. Again the overall effect is to lend dignity, and validity to the tone and themes of the works, but, in each story, the design is somewhat different, creating a subtext specific to the issues that are investigated in that particular tale.

The biblical references in "The Young King" point to a succession of mundane people called from among both oppressors and oppressed to be leaders of, or prophets to their own and sometimes other people. The characters and events are drawn both from the Old and the New Testaments, establishing connections between the Young King and individuals who, in the span of Judaeo-Christian history, have been chosen by God as ambassadors to humanity. Thus, Wilde's protagonist in this story comes to epitomise the sort of person whom God might select as a disciple, but, of course, the only attribute that God's representatives seem to have in common is that they would never have been elected by their peers.

In "The Fisherman and his Soul" the material is again drawn both from the Old and the New Testaments, but in this story the quotations are put to a very different use: here, the emphases are as much on the speakers as on the text itself. The words and lessons associated with prophets and

various servants of God -- even Christ himself -- issue from the mouths of society's most marginalized. In one case, even the young Witch, who uses the words of the Psalms and of the Prayer Book, "Come let us worship" (Psalm 95, 6),¹ to urge the Fisherman to worship the darker forces in creation, when she realizes his intent, makes a sincere effort to divert the Fisherman from his self-destructive course. The Priest, on the other hand, offers only moral platitudes and condemnation. God's wisdom, it seems, is not revealed only to those whom society venerates; indeed, the perceptions of those who represent the conventional perspective are often shown to be not only prejudiced but ultimately damaging both to the individual and to the community.

In the appropriation of biblical language, however, it is probably "The Star Child" that is most disturbing, for the passages that Wilde chooses to use here are almost exclusively from the Gospels. It is impossible to overlook the parallels between the miscreant protagonist of this story and the Son of God himself, but we shall see that, however close the connection between the protagonist and Christ, unlike the child in the Selfish Giant's garden, the Star Child never actually becomes a direct representation of

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More specific analysis of this incident will be offered later.

Christ himself, who simply in being inspires goodness in others.

In A House of Pomegranates, Wilde continues to use biblical images and references as he had done in The Happy Prince, to subvert conventional notions of morality and to suggest alternative interpretations of goodness and wisdom. By this point, however, he has developed the device into a more precise and sustained strategy; indeed, Wilde's use of biblical myth in these tales is very like Joyce's use of Greek myth in Ulysses, the same technique that Eliot identified as "mythical method." In "Ulysses, Order and Myth" Eliot claims:

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him.... It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.

(Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot 177)

Ironically, Wilde used mythical parallels to question what he believed to be an excess of control and order in his own society.

It is interesting, too, to note that in Eliot's opinion,

It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious.... Instead of narrative method, we may now use mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step towards making the modern world possible to art...toward ... order and form.

(Eliot 178)

As we have already seen, Yeats greatly admired Wilde and his work, and may have been influenced by both, but probably the use of myth by all three writers has more to do with their shared Irish heritage than with any direct literary legacy passed from one to another. Richard Pine speaks of the Irish "ability to suspend both time and space, the two elements in Irish history which had proved to be the undoing of 'mind' and the curse of 'memory.'" (Thief 23). He goes on to quote Berkeley, who claimed:

'The mathematicians talk of what they call a point. This, they say, is not altogether nothing, nor is it downright something. Now us Irishmen are apt to think something and nothing are next neighbours.' (Thief 24)

Pine then relates Berkeley's distrust of absolutes to the inquiry by Yeats in "The Statues:"

When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side,

What stalked through the post office? What
 intellect,
 What calculation, number, measurement, replied?
 We Irish, born into that ancient sect,
 But thrown upon this filthy modern tide...
 Climb to our proper dark.... (Yeats, Thief 25)

In Pine's reading, Yeats expresses

...the need for the modern political will to
 validate itself by reference to ancient heroism,
 the rejection of order as understood by the
 logocentric mind and its replacement by a
 visionary culture.... (Thief 25)

According to Berkeley, the Irish habit of mind differs from the English quite specifically in its reluctance to believe that any fact is entirely verifiable. As Wilde declared at his trial, truth is very much a matter of perspective. The same attitude, I believe, leads to the apparent confusion regarding chronology; for the Irish, antiquity is not only, as Pine recognises, a reference to "validate" modern political will, but rather a context that remains always immediate to contemporary existence. History and memory, although a record of the past, exist also in the present as they continue to affect current thought, behaviour and events. Bloom, Pearse and the Young King do not merely parallel Ulysses, Cuchulain and Christ,

respectively: they can be conceived as they are only because the others already existed either in reality or in imagination. This applies equally to the "real" Pearse as to the fictional Bloom and the Young King. Is not Bloom whose day is celebrated annually not only in Ireland, but in many other parts of the world, as real as Pearse, and has not Pearse, in the mythologizing of the rebellion, become as fictional as Bloom? Myth is, then, certainly for the Irish, intimately involved in the perception of history, and both are not only linked to the present, but through imagination, co-exist with it. For writers such as Joyce, Yeats and Wilde to draw on antiquity and mythology is probably almost instinctive. As Eliot points out, however, with reference to Joyce, it is not simply his use of mythological references that is remarkable, but rather his sustained and patterned use of myth, and his creation through that patterning of new possibilities for literary form. Also, although Eliot identifies Yeats as the first to use "mythical method," it seems that the ground breaking work was actually done by Wilde in his fairy tales, especially in A House of Pomegranates.

Apart from any literary considerations, however, had Wilde's contemporary audience been fully aware of the moral implications of his apparently innocent fairy tales, they might have been as scandalized by his almost heretical

suggestions as they were a few years later by his "indecent behaviour." In each of the stories, through random circumstances or stubborn determination, the protagonist gains control not only of his own destiny but also of the fate of a part or even of his whole community. The heroes in these stories represent the potential subversive working from within society; indeed, they fulfil the role of "agitators" as defined by Wilde in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism." Like the writer, each can choose to subscribe to, or to question the premises and practices of his community, and all, of course, choose to question. The interrogation, as we might expect, does not lead to any clear answers, but rather exposes the complexity of the issues under investigation, mainly, in this case, the problems attending the appropriate exercise of power and authority.

In "The Young King," the particular focus is not so much on abuse of power in general as on the desecration of cultures and individuals through colonization.² Wilde had witnessed the degradation of his own people, as a result of three hundred years of misrule. He had, of course, also

² It is interesting to note that this fairy tale was written about the same time that Joseph Conrad made his trip up the Congo, a trip that provided the material for his exposure of the horrors of colonial practices in Africa, and its dehumanizing effects on both exploiters and exploited.

observed and expressed his disapproval of the treatment of his African American valet who had to ride in a separate railway carriage while they were travelling through the southern United States. Also, a few years later, in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," he discussed the emancipation of slaves in relation to issues of individual freedom. Wilde's images of slavery are, not surprisingly, then, no less vivid and disturbing than any that might have been gathered through direct experience.

In its own way "The Young King" offers an indictment of colonial abuse as pointed as that in "Heart of Darkness." Conrad's Marlow makes clear that he deplores the decimation of the people of Africa and their culture, and especially its perverse justification under the laws imposed by the colonizing power:

They were dying slowly --it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts.... (Heart of Darkness 82)

Wilde's narrator's account of imperial oppression, as imaged in the Young King's dreams, although allegorical, is no less haunting and no less damning of colonial practices:

...he saw an immense multitude of men toiling in the bed of a dried-up river. They swarmed up the crag like ants. They dug deep pits in the ground and went down into them. Some of them cleft the rocks with great axes; others grabbed in the sand. (CW 229)

Avarice and Death then fight for possession of the slaves; Avarice refuses to pay for even one soul; Death laughs and summons

Fever in a robe of flame. She passed through the multitude, and touched them, and each man she touched died. The grass withered beneath her feet as she walked. (CW 229)

The Young King weeps as he witnesses the carnage, but when he asks for whom the men are working, he is shown himself in a mirror.

What is particularly significant, however, is that Wilde seems aware of his own inevitable involvement in the practices he abhors. It is interesting that the Young King, although certainly not of peasant stock, is brought from among the peasant community on the periphery of the

kingdom,³ a setting not unlike Ireland, as seen by the English -- marginal and culturally uncultivated -- and

...from the very first moment of his recognition he had shown signs of that strange passion for beauty that was destined to have so great an influence over his life.

...often he would be alone, feeling through a certain quick instinct, which was almost a divination, that the secrets of art are best learned in secret, and that Beauty, like Wisdom, loves the lonely worshipper. (CW 225)

The Young King, like his creator, is clearly an aesthete, distracted for a while by the splendour and sensuousness of his environment: "Never before had he felt so keenly, or with such exquisite joy, the magic and mystery of beautiful things" (CW 226).

Like Wilde, however, he gradually becomes aware of the ambivalence of his own position. Just as the Young King confronts his own failings in the illusory world of dreams, so Wilde images his own shortcomings in the fantastic medium of the fairy tale. Whereas the tales in The Happy Prince

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The motif of the lost heir raised among peasants is, of course, common in folk lore and mythology. Oedipus, for instance, is in many ways similar to the Young King.

concentrate on exposing the culpability of society, and the suffering inflicted on the innocent by systems predicated on power, whether physical, fiscal, political or religious, those in A House of Pomegranates recognize that their resistance is "complicit in the apparatus it seeks to transgress" (WLWE 37)

I have already argued that Wilde was well aware that the fairy-tale genre was a part of the apparatus used to normalize and perpetuate perceptions of morality designed to sustain patriarchal mythologies, but in these later tales he expands the concept of complicity to include not only the medium but the artist himself. As mentioned above, the Young King is clearly like Wilde not only in his aesthetic tastes, but also in his background and behaviour. However, it soon becomes evident that the writer includes more than himself in his satire of the abstracted artistic temperament. Indeed, even the most respectable, competent and sensitive among those who influence the public cannot escape some censure, for the prototype of the Young King is none other than Joseph, the great-grandson of Abraham, father of the Israel as in the Mohammedan tradition, he is father of Islam.

Like the Young King who takes such delight in his fine clothes, Joseph is renowned for his splendid coat of many colours, a gift from his doting father. At the beginning of

the Young King's transformation from self-absorbed aesthete into wise social reformer, Wilde reinforces the association with Joseph, for the boy does not simply dream or have a dream, instead "he dreamed a dream" as did Joseph (Genesis 37,5). And both young men become objects of envy and ridicule for both their dress and their dreams. When Joseph dutifully obeys his father's request to take food to his hard-working brothers, they see him at a distance and scoffing, "Behold, this dreamer cometh," begin to plot his death: "Come now therefore, and let us slay him..." (Genesis 19-20). Similarly, when the Young King steadfastly obeys his own conscience, his subjects mockingly cry out, "Where is this dreamer of dreams?... Surely we will slay him, for he is unworthy to rule over us" (CW 233).

At this point in both stories, while we may not approve the homicidal instincts of the adversaries of the two boys, we can at least sympathize with their irritation. Neither of the two young men seems very promising material for a future ruler; both are so naive that they are completely unaware that their trust in their own insights might be interpreted as arrogance. But, of course, the higher power, from which their inspiration comes, knows better. Thus, while the fairy tale does at first seem to mock its own protagonist, it also endorses his credibility by creating the biblical parallel, for while the reader may react with scepticism to the young

Joseph, there is nothing in the tone of the Genesis narrative to promote such a response. In effect, in recalling Joseph, the dreamer of biblical fame, Wilde immediately validates the Young King's vision; the reader knows that Joseph's dreams were indeed prophetic, and that he was to become the saviour not only of his own family, but of two great nations, Egypt and Israel, and that many more than his brothers would bow to him.

By directly quoting parts of the Old Testament, then, Wilde establishes precedent for, and lends status to the dreams: since the Young King is associated with a biblical hero, we must give credence to his perceptions. Those who doubt the authenticity of his divinations align themselves with Joseph's brothers, the doubters who will be painfully proven wrong. But unlike Joseph's dreams, which reveal his destiny as a wise and just ruler, the Young King's dreams are more like nightmares, in which he himself is the demon. Again the ironies created by Wilde's narration are intricate and disturbing: the authentication of the dreams confirms the Young King's conviction that he is himself responsible for the ills inflicted on his people, both at home and in what are obviously the colonies. Wilde, then, not only challenges the exploitative systems of government and commerce, but by creating a protagonist whose flaws so closely resemble his own, he acknowledges his complicity in

the abuse. He also makes clear that no one who benefits consciously or unconsciously from such practices can avoid a share in the guilt.

In the Young King's dream of the textile factory, he blithely tells a weaver, "The land is free... and thou art no man's slave." But the weaver quickly sets him right:

"In war, ...the strong make slaves of the weak, and in peace the rich make slaves of the poor. We must work to live, and they give us such mean wages that we die.... We have chains, though no eye beholds them; and we are slaves, though men call us free." (CW 227)

The message is succinct, compelling and apparently indisputable, but in the weaver's next answer, Wilde adds an even more unsettling message. Again, the echoes from the Bible are unmistakable, but instead of a direct quote or paraphrase, we hear a strange inversion of the original text. "'Misery wakes us in the morning, and Shame sits with us at night'" (CW 227), says the weaver recalling the psalmist David's song of gratitude for his deliverance from his enemies: "weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning" (Psalms 30,5). The sinister reversal suitably accentuates the injustice and perversity of the systems that oppress the poor. The Young King's reaction when he realizes that the garment the weaver is working on

is the coronation robe is a cry of anguish.

His response in his next dream is more extreme. As he falls asleep again, he finds himself among slaves on a galley. The slaves are being forced to dive for pearls. That the quest is specifically for pearls is significant, for in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus himself warned: "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you" (Matt. 7, 6). The connection between the slave masters and the swine is obvious to anyone familiar with the frequently quoted phrase, and when the slave boy dies retrieving the fairest pearl of all, we are reminded of a parable told by Jesus, recounted later in the same Gospel:

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls:

Who, when he found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it. (Matt.

13, 45-46)

But those in Wilde's story who want the pearl risk nothing of their own; instead, they sacrifice the life of a young boy. Once more, by inverting the details of a biblical incident, Wilde subtly, but unmistakably, condemns those who indiscriminately seek to satisfy their own greed through the exploitation of the powerless.

In this, his second dream, the Young King is so affected that he cannot even cry out, for when he "tried to speak... his tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth" (CW 228). The phrase used to describe the Young King's condition occurs in the story about Ezekiel, who was also stricken dumb. Ezekiel's silencing, however, was to serve the will of God. The prophet is commissioned by God to warn Israel of their coming captivity. But God tells him,

... the house of Israel will not hearken unto thee; for they will not hearken unto me: for all the house of Israel are impudent and hard hearted.
(Ezekiel 3,7)

Consequently, God continues,

... I will make thy tongue cleave to the roof of thy mouth, that thou shalt be dumb, and shalt not be to them a reprover: for they are a rebellious house. (Ezekiel 3, 26)

Like the Israelites, the Young King's own people are not ready to hear from him what he believes is God's will, and like Ezekiel, the young man must wait until a higher power allows him to speak.

The impact of the biblical reference is also, in this case, reinforced by a second allusion, for the same words recur when, captive in Babylon, as predicted by Ezekiel, a psalmist laments the lost glories of Zion: "If I do not

remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy" (Psalms 137, 6). Thus, in a single phrase, the Young King is elevated by his association with an Old Testament prophet, and his response to what he has dreamt is authenticated by the psalm that verifies what the prophet foretold. By implication, of course, Wilde, as the creator of both the Young King and of his dreams, confirms the truth of his own vision; in his complex integration of biblical quotes and references in his own text, Wilde confers on himself not only a share in the guilt for society's transgressions, but also the status of prophet. Of course, ultimately, Victorian England also takes on the role of Israel, so set on its self-serving course that it is, through several generations, irredeemable.⁴

The theme of colonial exploitation is continued in the Young King's final dream, in Wilde's use of one of the most familiar narratives from the history of the Hebrews: their captivity in Egypt. The story of the Israelite slavery under the Egyptian pharaohs, and God's intervention through Moses to free his people has long been a popular resource in literature. But, as we might expect, Wilde's allusions are

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Wilde may also have intended a reference to William Blake's prophetic poem, "Jerusalem", which uses the British myth that England is the New Jerusalem to point to heresy and corruption.

less than straightforward. The slaves in the Young King's dream do not escape; rather, like the natives in "Heart of Darkness," they rot, fade, fester and die. They are visited in turn by Plague, Ague, Fever and Death, but the greatest villain is Avarice, for she, who could buy the lives of the people, will not pay the paltry price of even one grain of corn.

Probably the price that Death sets has a special significance for Wilde, for, because of his parents' political involvements, he would have known that during the Great Famine abundant harvests of Irish corn continued to be exported to Britain while the people of Ireland starved. It was not merely the failure of the potato crop that caused the depopulation of the country by more than one third.⁵ It is not, however, only the mistreatment of the Irish by the

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I discussed the matter of the famine as political genocide with John McGarry, an expert in the field, who confirmed that the Potato Famine is now commonly believed to have been a calculated act of genocide, in response to the escalating political insurrection in Ireland. Of course, the effect was to create sympathy among conscientious English people such as those who organized shipments of food to Ireland, or those led by Gladstone, whom Oscar fervently admired, who tried to pass the Irish Home Rule bill. But, most importantly, the crisis raised awareness among the Irish middle-classes of the desperate situation of the peasants in their country, and consequently, created a new solidarity among the Irish people that did eventually lead to rebellion. Among the more active of the agitators was, as we have seen, Oscar Wilde's mother.

British that is echoed in this narrative, but the general subjugation of native peoples in various colonial outposts.

While the motif of the enslavement of the Hebrews in Egypt is obvious, it is also, I believe, purposely vague, incorporating overlapping allusions to wars, famines and plagues throughout history. References to Egypt, to the Nile, and especially to locusts establish the link with the biblical narrative of the plagues, but in another ironic reversal, it is the captive people who are decimated by the various scourges and not, as in the Bible, the captors. Nor does Wilde quote or paraphrase specific passages from the Authorized Version. Instead, the final dream provides an apocalyptic vision of humanity's potential to prey upon itself, and ends with the most haunting image of all: the King asking for whom the slaves toil and die and being shown his own face in a silver mirror.

Ultimately, the King himself is the source of all the abuses that he so abhors, and, of course, prompted by his own dreams, he resolves to reform not only himself but his kingdom. Were this a nineteenth-century fairy tale in the popular style, even as told by some of the better and more socially-aware writers like George MacDonald or Charles Kingsley, a king would probably use his sway to persuade his court to repent: those who did not comply would be cast out, the poor would be recompensed and happiness and harmony

would be restored. But these tales, although fantastic, never compromise their own integrity by using fantasy as a convenient escape from the issues they raise. Wilde effectively exposes the hypocrisy and corruption of the existing systems, but he does not pretend to have any solutions. As was discussed earlier, even with infinite faith and courage, the Young King can achieve nothing without the miraculous intervention of God. Again, somewhat obliquely, but resolutely, Wilde acknowledges that exploitation is so deeply imbedded in the culture that even well-intentioned attempts to alleviate the situation of the poor will simply change rather than solve their problems. When the Young King, like Joseph, insists on telling his dreams to the common people, he is challenged by a man in the crowd.

The poor man's speech, filled with anger and resentment, is also laden with biblical echoes. He asks bitterly, "Thinkest thou that the ravens will feed us?" (CW 232), recalling God's provision for his servant when he commanded the ravens to feed Elijah at the brook of Cherith (1 Kings 17, 4-6). The man implies that, among the poor, only prophets are likely to get special attention, even from God, and consequently, the King is presumptuous and naive to think he can alter exploitative systems. "Therefore," he taunts the Young King, "go back to thy Palace and put on thy

purple and fine linen" (CW 232). Once again, the Young King is associated with Joseph, who was raised by Pharaoh to the status of Prince when the ruler gave him the ring of state and dressed him in fine linen (Genesis 41,42). The insinuation is that, robed in power, the King is too far removed from his people to care for their misfortunes, and these negative implications are amplified by the association with another who was clothed in "purple and fine linen:" the rich man who callously ignored the suffering of Lazarus, who sat at his gate (Luke 16, 19). To press home his point, the man, in his next sentence, asks mockingly, "What hast thou to do with us?" linking himself and those he represents with those whom even Christ rejected: the evil spirits cast out of the vagrant into the Gadarene swine, who ran over the cliff into the sea (Mark 5,7). And finally, in response to the Young King's reminder that the rich and the poor are brothers, the man answers, "Ay... and the name of the rich brother is Cain" (CW 232).

Fortunately, the man is wrong in equating the young ruler with Cain, for, like Joseph with whom the imagery in the man's tirade links the object of his scorn, the Young King has steadfast faith and the courage of his convictions. Indeed, he reaches beyond even Joseph's achievements, and, as we saw in the last chapter, he is willing, like Christ, to risk his life. Unlike Christ, however, he is not required

to make the ultimate sacrifice. But as has also already been discussed, the ending of the story is ambiguous, for when they witness the transfiguration of their King, the people are filled with fear rather than faith. Nevertheless, although Wilde's prognosis for the moral healing of society is at best reticent, he does offer hope for the individual who is willing to resist and challenge the "dull, lifeless systems" that restrict human efforts and aspirations. Through his reappropriation of biblical text, Wilde suggests that we can each re-examine, reinterpret, reconstruct and thereby reclaim at least the discourse on which western society claims its ethics are based.

"The Young King," then, although it offers no well developed solutions to the dilemmas it addresses, at least makes quite clear which aspects of social and political control are reprehensible and in need of adjustment. The objects of criticism in "The Fisherman and his Soul," however, are much less obvious; not only are the solutions to society's misdemeanours inaccessible, but what the abuses actually are is very enigmatic. The story creates a pervading sense that "something is rotten," but offers no definitive vision, like that in the Young King's dreams, of

the source of the decay. Indeed, in many ways the protagonist in this story is more decadent than his community, and certainly his alienated Soul is just as morally confused as even the court of the Infanta. The transgressions of the Fisherman and of the Soul are fairly specific: respectively, self-indulgence without consideration for others, and self-indulgence that thrives on the conscious abuse of others, but society's sins are less easy to categorize.

Yet the clues to what is being interrogated in this tale are subtly integrated in the text itself. As was discussed in the previous chapter, the story begins by recalling Jesus' first disciples, whom he made fishers of men, and then goes on, in the sequence about the first encounter between the Mermaid and the Fisherman, to echo the Song of Solomon. I believe, in these opening passages, through the references to the Bible, Wilde introduces once again the same theme that recurs throughout all the tales: the conflict between love and commitment as epitomised in Scripture and especially in Christ's teaching, and the interpretation of those attributes according to society's moral code. Thus, while this story at first seems somewhat anomalous in the overall dialectic of the collection, it does, in fact, maintain perfect decorum with the content of the other stories. Also, although the style may seem oddly

expansive, indulgent and even decadent in comparison with the simpler, though certainly decorative style of the rest of the tales, it is, in effect, merely more consciously derivative of biblical discourse.

In the other tales, we hear echoes of scripture, recognize actual biblical characters and events, and can even identify direct quotes and paraphrases of the text itself. In this story, however, our experience of the biblical context is even more immediate and intense, for not only does Wilde use quotations, paraphrases and allusions, he couches the whole tale in cadences, diction and even syntax that recall the seventeenth-century, and in this context, the King James Bible. He achieves this effect by consistently using archaic language and structures: verb and pronoun forms such as "hast," "dost," "knoweth," "thee;" words and phrases that are no longer current, for instance, "lo," "smite," "stricken in years," "the evil thou hast wrought," "prevail against;" and inversions and repetitions like "...go to the room ... even to the room," "what I did matters not." Thus, a typical passage reads:

‘My desire is but for a little thing,’ said the young Fisherman, ‘yet hath the Priest been wroth with me, and driven me forth. It is but for a little thing, and the merchants have mocked at me, and denied me. Therefore am I come to thee,

though men call thee evil, and whatever be thy price, I shall pay it.'

'What wouldst thou?' asked the Witch, coming near to him. (CW 252)

Superficially, considering the apparent conflict between form and content, Wilde's appropriation of the biblical discourse may seem singularly unsuitable, to the point, almost, of blasphemy; but, of course, he has, again, I believe, a deliberate agenda in adapting the overall biblical style to his own purpose. First, if we consider the sort of stories that we find in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, there is really nothing, even in the despicable behaviour of the Soul, that does not have precedent in biblical narratives: Jael, for instance, is celebrated for her cunning in seducing an enemy commander and, as he sleeps, pounding a tent peg through his head; King David, lusting for Bathsheba, sends her husband to his death by ordering his troops to leave him stranded, alone, in the front line of battle. Even Wilde's fertile imagination could probably not conjure anything more sordid than some of the stories he heard as a child in church. Thus, whatever his characters may do, we should not be surprised that they remain eligible for God's grace. In effect, the constant reinforcement of the scriptural link, through style, tone and language in this particular

narrative serves as a persistent reminder that, while Wilde's characters exist in the world of fantasy, they could just as easily inhabit that space in history in which we locate the origins of western ethics and morality. Also, of course, there is a reciprocal effect: when we view the biblical narratives and western history in light of Wilde's stories, we realize that, as Wilde himself frequently insists, life may indeed imitate art and "fact" is just as fantastic as any fiction.

Although this tale proposes, as do many others, that biblical figures are as fallible as any in God's creation, its focus is a little different from that of the other stories. As was discussed in an earlier chapter, in most of the tales, both plot and character development contribute to our understanding of the relationship of love as epitomised in Christ and love as it is bowdlerized to suit public taste and convenience; but here the main emphasis is on how the ways in which love is construed or, more accurately, misconstrued can affect not only the individual but all of society. Not only the narrative itself but also the narrative strategies simultaneously clarify and complicate this problem.

That Wilde chooses to adopt the style and tone of biblical discourse throughout his tale, instead of, as in the other stories, introducing quotes or allusions only at

certain points, does not preclude his also making use of specific references, as he does in the other stories. I have earlier shown that while the obviously biblical style in the opening passages is important in establishing the tone of the story, the actual events recalled are even more pertinent. The tactics that Wilde uses here are, in fact, repeated frequently in the course of the narrative, and gradually establish a pattern that is essential to the overall interpretation of the text. At those points where we hear not only the cadences of the King James Bible but also echoes of content, the writer quite consistently offers intimations of his convictions about the gap between divine love and human love.

In "The Nightingale and the Rose," Wilde had already examined the sad consequences of the bird's confusing sentimentalized romantic love with the "loving kindness" advocated by Christ. Here, he undertakes a more exhaustive investigation of various, mostly mistaken, concepts of love as epitomised in the responses of the Fisherman, his Soul, the Priest, and most interestingly, of the Mermaid. In each case, the reader's possible preconceptions are confirmed or countered not only by the actions of the characters, but also by the subtle biblical associations that Wilde creates through his manipulation of diction and syntax. In another context, we have already seen how, through the textual

echoes of the Gospels and the Song of Solomon, the Fisherman is, in the beginning, linked with Jesus' disciples and the love between the two is paralleled with the love between Christ and his bride, the Church. Thus, the discourse itself, by creating associations with sacred precedents, offers a tacit approval of the encounter it narrates, and the same method is used consistently throughout the story.

As the Fisherman's love intensifies to the point where he naively talks of sending his Soul away, but before he realizes the full implications of such a decision, he fantasizes:

'...and in the depth of the sea we will dwell together, and all that thou hast sung of thou shalt show me, and all that thou desirest I will do, nor shall our lives be divided.' (CW 250)

In style, context and content, his speech recalls the type of loyalty figured in Ruth's response to Naomi: Ruth's husband has died, and Naomi, her mother-in-law, who is also widowed, knowing that she will be destitute, advises Ruth to look after her own interests by returning to her own people, her own culture and her own religion. But Ruth, out of loyalty refuses to go, saying:

Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I

will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.

(Ruth 1,16.)

Ruth's faithfulness eventually brings prosperity and happiness for both Naomi and herself. It would appear, then, that there is nothing inherently wrong with the Fisherman's original impulse to give up everything for the one he loves, even though, like Ruth, he would have to abandon his own place and his own people to live among strangers in a foreign culture. There is, of course, one crucial difference between the Fisherman's decision and Ruth's: the things that she relinquishes are all extraneous to her essential self; indeed, had she chosen to leave her mother-in-law, she might actually have betrayed her true self. Consequently, the Fisherman's dilemma is even more distressing and complex than Ruth's: it seems that Wilde suggests that any human yearning that requires for its fulfilment a distinction among the interests of mind, body and spirit must inevitably become self-destructive. The allusion to Ruth, then, implies that the Fisherman is correct when he argues that love is greater than even wisdom and riches, but the remainder of the story demonstrates that some commitments may require even more than the renunciation of wealth and wisdom. Even though love may be the best that humanity can aspire to, unless the love we desire can be satisfied without

fragmentation of the self, it may be attainable only in death.

Thus, at the outset of the story, the biblical allusions seem to support the instincts and actions of the Fisherman. As Ruth is proven right in her rejection of Naomi's advice so, to some extent, is the Fisherman when he refuses to heed the voices of experience, for the end of the story shows that he is, in fact, quite justified in defying conventional, and conflicting, opinions offered by the representatives of religion and commerce. But, as his predicament is more complicated than Ruth's, so also is his search for a solution. In his determination to have his way, he goes beyond the usual sources to find help and direction; having dismissed the wisdom of the priests and the merchants, he finally goes in search of a witch, just as King Saul did, when none of his advisors would support his stubborn and misguided plans(1 Sam, 28).

The Witch, in keeping with most of Wilde's creations, does not fit a fairy-tale stereotype; far from being old, wizened and ugly, this Witch is young and beautiful, but she "was very cunning in her witcheries" (CW 251). Nor does the witch that Saul consulted at Endor seem like the usual type, for she is, though nervous, kind and nurturing, and unlike other witches, neither of these tries to trick her client; indeed, both are terrified when they realize what they are

expected to do, and perform their magic against their better judgement. Like Saul, the Fisherman has already decided on his own course, and will not be dissuaded, even by the intervention of the supernatural. Saul, who was chosen by God, and anointed by Samuel, in the end was so set on his own course that he had to die; the Fisherman, who at first is linked to Christ's disciples, and whose love is paralleled to Christ's love for his bride, becomes so obsessed with the physical consummation of his love, that he too, ultimately, must lose his life. While the connection with Ruth confirms the initial positive image of the Fisherman, then, the allusion to Saul signals that the young man has, at this point, chosen the option that will inevitably lead to his ruin. And we shall see that, in his death, the Fisherman is again directly associated with Saul.

The Fisherman's pursuit of his ideal love, therefore, although neither justifiable nor even worthy of sympathy in its obsessiveness, becomes, at least, less baffling in light of biblical parallels. Clearly, it is not his devotion to the Mermaid that is in itself sinful, as the Priest believes; it is, rather, the extent to which the Fisherman is willing to go to fulfil his own selfish ends that is the real transgression. He is not like Christ, who sacrifices himself for love of others, but, instead, like the slave masters who force the boy to seek for the perfect pearl

until he dies. The Fisherman banishes his Soul so that he, or at least the "he" that remains, can enjoy the Mermaid. In fact, ironically, the Mermaid who, in the Priest's opinion, is one of the "vile and evil... pagan things God suffers to wander through His world" (CW 251), provides the real example of Christ-like love. Unlike the Fisherman, she is willing to forego the ultimate consummation of their love, for after explaining to him that he must give up his Soul to be with her, "she [sinks] down into the deep, looking wistfully at him" (CW 250). She accepts the impossibility of the relationship and makes no demands.

Thus, the more specific echoes of the Bible, inserted at particular points into a narrative that is already consistently biblical in its style, actually serve to interpret as well as to embellish the actions and dialogue of the characters. Such allusions do in themselves help towards a more complete understanding of a very dense and puzzling tale, especially in unravelling the motivation and culpability of the Fisherman. But there is yet another level of biblical reference, the near quote, that offers insight not only into the behaviour of the protagonist but into that other enigma: the nature of society's sin.

Although direct quotes from the Bible are few, those that do occur actually help to construe society's flaws. As I pointed out earlier, there is a general sense that while

the Fisherman is certainly at fault, his community is equally blameworthy, but to name the transgression is very difficult, for on the whole, the merchants, the Priest and the common folk seem guilty only of misunderstanding. As in the case of the Fisherman, however, we discover that it is not so much the initial instinct that is reprehensible but, rather, the extent to which it is allowed to go unchecked. Not only do the people misunderstand God's will, but led by the Priest, they radically misinterpret God's word. The Priest and his followers are not, however, finally indicted until the closing sequences of the story. When their condemnation comes, they are ultimately aligned not only with the misguided Fisherman, but also with the Soul and with the Witch, who have all earlier, and in the same way revealed their wilful abuse of the words of the Bible.

All commit the same offence: they pervert the word of God by using it to initiate, describe or justify most ungodly behaviour. The Fisherman is the first to transgress when he tries to defend his wish to part with his Soul: "And as for my Soul, what doth my Soul profit me, if it stand between me and the thing that I love?" (CW 251). His query echoes, but reverses, Christ's question: "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" (Mark 8, 36). Significantly, the context for Jesus' question is his foretelling his own death and

discussing the challenges of discipleship. Clearly, the Fisherman, in following his obsession, has already removed himself from his original association with Christ's disciples, but, in his distortion of the words of Christ, he confirms the extent of his own corruption.

In effect, the Fisherman seems little better than the Witch he is still to consult. She, too, misappropriates a phrase that is familiar not only from the ninety-fifth Psalm, but as part of the liturgy of Morning Prayer, in the Book of Common Prayer: the Venite, "Come! let us worship" (CW 254), she whispers to the Fisherman, and he follows her; but of course the object of worship is not God but Satan. Oddly enough, although the Witch's words seem the most blasphemous of all, it is she who begs the Fisherman not to commit the terrible sin of banishing his Soul. Nevertheless, she is guilty of perverting the words of the Bible to serve her own evil purpose. The banished Soul also uses a biblical reference, close enough to the original to be immediately recognizable, when he relates his own wicked exploits to the Fisherman.

'The rest murmured against me, and said that I had brought them an evil fortune. I took a horned adder from beneath a stone and let it sting me. When they saw that I did not sicken they grew afraid.' (CW 258)

His experience recalls the powers promised to the disciples (Mark 16:18), and more specifically, the incident when St. Paul was shipwrecked on Melita. He, too, after being bitten on the arm by a snake, and suffering no ill effects is believed by the people to be a god (Acts 28, 1-8). Both the Soul and St. Paul undertake similar journeys, but whereas Paul's task is to convert the people he meets to the ways of Christ, the Soul's mission is to corrupt and lead others in the ways of sin.

The Soul's abuse of others, mentally, spiritually and physically, is conscious and malicious, and yet, except in its physical aspects, his behaviour is little different from that of the Priest. He too is regarded with fear, and is believed by his people to understand the will of God. Yet, from his first encounter with the Fisherman, when he denounces the Sea-folk and condemns the young man outright rather than try to offer guidance, we suspect that his interpretation of God's relationship with his followers may be more than a little misguided. However, as I mention above, it is not until the end of the story, when the Priest, like the Fisherman, the Witch and the Soul misuses the words of the Bible to serve his own purpose that our suspicion is confirmed. When he curses the Fisherman, the Mermaid and all the Sea-folk, claiming they have been "slain by God's judgement," he ends his tirade: "For accursed were

they in their lives, and accursed shall they be in their deaths also'" (CW 271). In his bitterness and vindictive satisfaction at the deaths of those who defied what he believed to be God's law, the Priest recalls David's moving lament for the deaths of his two former friends turned enemies: "Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their deaths they were not divided..." (2 Sam, 23). As it transpires, the original words of David would have been a much more appropriate eulogy for the Fisherman and his Mermaid, but the Priest is so convinced of his own righteousness, and has so completely lost sight of God's grace and mercy, that he leads not only himself but also his people into the ultimate evil of replacing love and forgiveness with hate and condemnation.

Of course, as we saw above, God intervenes to show the Priest the error of his "righteous" judgement, not with direct punishment or even chastisement, but with a sign of his forgiveness of the Fisherman and his Mermaid. After three years, white flowers spring over the place in the fuller's field where the lovers were buried, and by coincidence, the same flowers decorate the altar in the chapel. Ironically, the blossoms appear on the day when the Priest is again about to preach his perverted interpretation of the gospel to his people, showing "the wounds of the Lord" and speaking "about the wrath of God" (CW 271), with

no inkling of the fundamental contradiction in his own message. Even when he changes his sermon to talk "not of the wrath of God, but the God whose name is Love" (CW 272), he still does not know why. Perhaps this is the reason that, although, in the end, the Priest blesses all God's creatures, the field never blooms again, nor do the Sea-folk return. By mimicking, and in this case, also subtly reversing the discourse that has been used to perpetuate patriarchal power and knowledge, Wilde, as Bhabha puts it, "disclose[s] the ambivalence of [the] discourse [and] also disrupts its authority" (October 28, 129). As usual, Wilde provides an alternative to conventional morality, yet offers little hope that the alternative might be adopted by the community in general, and again the essential foundation of the morality he proposes is tolerance and loving-kindness as exemplified in Christ.

Loving-kindness is, once again, the writer's focus in the final story of the two collections, "The Star Child." This tale, however, does not simply present yet another example of how society appropriates and wilfully misuses biblical discourse to reinforce corrupt systems and values; instead, it sums up Wilde's moral philosophy as it has gradually emerged through the other stories. We have seen that Guy Willoughby, in his analysis of Wilde's prose parables, claims that "real discipleship", as envisioned by

Wilde, "...involves imagination, selflessness and courage," and certainly, the Star Child seems to offer a paradigm for such discipleship. When the Star Child repents and seeks to make amends for his wickedness, he quickly discovers redemption requires not obedience to a stagnant and misguided code of righteousness, but steadfast determination to be true to the self through compassion for others, in other words, to follow Christ's own example.

Before his final exploration of what it means to "follow Christ's example," however, whether to amuse himself, to set his audience off guard, or both, Wilde, for the first time in the whole set of stories, uses a conventional fairy-tale opening: "Once upon a time," reminding his readers of the genre of these stories. He follows this with a very Andersen-like conversation among some animals. Indeed, in his introduction, he seems almost to allow himself a last shot at each of the social conventions and institutions that have been targeted throughout the tales: government, pseudo-science, sentimentalism, pragmatism, self-interest and, of course, the didactic fairy tale. Whatever his various motives, the shift from the gently satirical tone that is obviously reminiscent of the earlier tales, where Turtle-doves feel it is "...their duty to take a romantic view of the situation" (CW 273), happens suddenly and effectively when the

woodcutters realize that their situation might actually be life threatening. The lively dialogue between the animals, subtly demonstrating how even a discussion of the weather can reveal social and political biases, gives way to an anxious exchange between the woodcutters, who are in real danger of perishing from the cold. The distance between the playful tone of the opening passages and the remainder of the story also emphasizes the philosophical and artistic development that has occurred since Wilde wrote the first of the tales that make up the two collections.

As the focus of the story changes, so also does the style of narration, returning to the diction and syntax of the King James Bible present in "The Fisherman and his Soul." And in the modification of the discourse, the genre itself metamorphoses from fairy tale to parable. Indeed, as I suggest above, this tale is not only the last in a series, but actually a subtle exegesis of Wilde's whole theory of discipleship as developed through the other stories. Unlike the references in the other stories, however, the ones used in this tale do not merely offer insight into characters, or into the conduct of the community; instead, collectively they echo and reinforce the essence of Christ's teaching about how to treat others: "...love... thy neighbour as thyself" (Luke 10,27).

In reinforcing the concept of neighbourly love, the

tale also, with close reference to Christ's teachings, recalls his very broad definition of "neighbour." As Jesus understood the term, neighbour includes not only those whom we might regard as our peers, but especially those whom society ignores or rejects: the poor, the diseased, the physically grotesque. However, like the Selfish Giant, the Happy Prince, the Young King and the Fisherman, the protagonist is, in the beginning, one of the oppressors and, of course, his abuses, because they are for him both conscious and pleasurable, are even more abhorrent. But in his selfishness and cruelty, the Star Child offers proof of Wilde's theory, as quoted above, that "...in the divine order of ideal things it is written that eternal love is to be given to whoever is eternally unworthy" (CW 930).

In other words, divine love cannot to be earned; however, as Wilde reiterates throughout the collections, divine love can and must be imitated, for only through humans can God's love be felt among humanity, and reach the suffering. Ironically, as is suggested repeatedly, it is mainly those who have themselves endured hardship who are able to show compassion to others, and the pattern is not broken in this story, for the first to act selflessly is the wretched woodcutter. Although he is himself impoverished, this man cannot leave a strange foundling infant to perish in the snow. His wife, fearing for her own hungry children,

chastises him: "Who is there who careth for us? And who giveth us food?" (CW 275). But he answers, "Nay, but God careth for the sparrows even, and feedeth them" (CW 275). While the words themselves are poignant and appropriate, their original contexts are even more significant, for in his response, the poor man conflates two passages from Christ's teaching: "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall to the ground without your Father" (Matt 10, 29), and "Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap... yet your heavenly Father feedeth them" (Matt 6, 28). In one sentence, Wilde recalls Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount about the error of trusting in material wealth instead of in God's care, and his later specific instructions to his disciples, as he sent them out to do his work.

The voice of the woodcutter becomes the voice of Christ, and he himself, in the moment of speaking, becomes Christ-like. The words confirm his instincts and actions; also, his wife, moved by her husband's selflessness and the child's helplessness, heeds his advice and accepts the child as their own. Thus, in his compassion and self-sacrifice for another, the woodcutter imitates Christ, and in following his example, his wife also is redeemed. Implicitly, the couple's trust is also rewarded, for they and their family apparently grow in health and contentment. Ironically,

however, the child they succoured grows "proud, and cruel, and selfish" (CW 276). As he performs more and more heinous and gratuitous acts of brutality, he and his disciples become "hard of heart," as did Pharaoh when, after each plague, he broke his promise to Moses and refused to let the Israelites go (Exodus 7, 1). Despite his wickedness, the Star Child remains outwardly beautiful until he commits what Wilde seems to regard as the ultimate sin: he rejects his own mother. Immediately, he becomes "as foul as the toad, and as loathsome as the adder" (CW 278), and his former friends, again with perceptible echoes of the Bible (Genesis 37, 18-19), behave like Joseph's brothers and, "when they beh[o]ld him coming... mock[...] him" (CW 278).

Ugly and abandoned by his former friends, the Star Child encounters many of his own victims, who as a result of his earlier abuses are now unable to help him, and guilty and ashamed, he prays for the forgiveness of God's things. But he cannot rest until he finds his mother and begs her pardon. After wandering for three⁶ years he tries to enter the city, and again is treated as Joseph was by his envious brothers (Genesis 37, 27). He is sold as a slave, but the

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Three is, of course, a magical number in folklore, and also the number of Christ's years of active ministry before his triumphant entry into Jerusalem and subsequent crucifixion.

price is a bowl of sweet wine, an oblique reference, perhaps, to the price that Jacob paid when he cunningly persuaded his brother Esau to sell his birthright for a bowl of pottage. Those who abuse and scorn the Star Child in his misery recall such biblical characters as those who violated family relationships, betraying their own brothers, as the Star Child denies his own mother. It appears that the worst sin is disloyalty, and as the Star Child discovers, while God may love unconditionally, the only way to be redeemed is to resolve, whatever the cost, to emulate the example of Christ.

Although he himself may be unaware of the significance of his decision, when the Star Child, unable to find the piece of white gold, the commission given him by the magician to whom he is enslaved, "set[s] his face towards home", knowing "what fate [is] in store for him" (CW 281) he acts with Christ-like resolve. Even though he too knew his fate, when it was time, Jesus "...steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9, 51). Almost immediately the Star Child has his first opportunity to redeem his past transgressions: hearing the cry of a Hare caught in a trap, he releases it saying, "'I am myself but a slave, yet may I give thee thy freedom'" (CW 281). He performs an act of gratuitous kindness that reverses the many acts of cruelty in his earlier life. But this act costs him nothing; indeed,

it brings an instant reward, for the Hare is able to show him where to find the piece of gold he needs, and will, in subsequent days, help him find the other pieces. Yet, in his freeing the Hare, the Star Child, unaware of any possible advantage for himself, demonstrates the sincerity of his change of heart.

The real tests are still to come; while the boy has proven that he is capable of pity, he has yet to show whether that pity can supplant his own interests. His chance comes, not once, but like Christ's temptations, three times. As he returns with his gold the young man is accosted by a leper, who begs for money, and in spite of his own plight the Star Child gives the man the gold piece. Each day the pattern is repeated, and even though, on the third day, the boy's choice is between freedom if he brings back the coin and death if he fails, he gives the leper "the piece of red gold, saying, 'Thy need is greater than mine'" (CW 283). At that, the Star Child, although he himself does not realize it, becomes again outwardly beautiful, and is received by the people of the city as the King for whom they have been waiting. In effect, he takes on the quality of Christ as Messiah; by proving that he cares enough for another selflessly to risk death, the Star Child recalls Christ. Wilde clearly suggests that when love and compassion for another outweigh consideration for the physical self,

humanity is transformed to the likeness of Christ.

The restoration of the Star Child's outward beauty, his triumphal entry into the city, and his coronation are all discussed in the previous chapter, in the context of biblical imagery. But I have purposely left the detailed discussion of the reconciliation between the boy and his parents for the last. I believe, in fact, that in this incident, through a series of complex reversals, Wilde offers the final synthesis of the dialectic that is formed by the two collections of fairy tales. That the Star Child, through his selfless actions, should be transformed into the likeness of Christ seems almost predictable, in light of all the preceding stories. Yet, in his restoration to his parents, and elevation to his proper status as ruler, he, his mother and his father also assume, through various biblical links, a variety of roles, which infinitely complicate, yet in a typical Wildean paradox also elucidate the relationships between Christ and humanity.

I hope that I have, thus far, convincingly demonstrated that the Star Child, on his entry into the city, takes on the image of Christ. When he sees his mother, however, a strange inversion occurs: he "kneel[s] down... and kisse[s] the wounds on his mother's feet, and wet[s] them with his tears" (CW 283). Suddenly the Christ-like boy becomes the lowly woman, Mary, who at Bethany stood behind Jesus

"weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears" (Luke 7, 38), and the old woman who has wounds in her feet is associated with Christ. The association is reinforced when, in response to the boy's questions she, like Christ before Pilate (Matt 27, 14), "answered him not a word" (CW 284). Then the same phrase is used of the leper, who also fails to respond to the boy. At first, the conflicts and apparent contradictions of this incident seem hopelessly tangled, but, in effect, Wilde is being absolutely true to Christ's own teaching. The boy, in his humility, not only confirms again his own Christ-like qualities, for Christ after all did wash his disciples' feet, but he also shows his complete understanding of Christ's teachings, as summed up in his address to his disciples shortly before his betrayal by Judas, and, in Matthew's chronology, just before Mary anointed his feet.

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger and ye took me in....

Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye

have done it unto me. (Matt 25, 34-40)

The Star Child shows that he now understands the significance of his own transformation: that in serving the most wretched in God's creation, he has, in fact, both imitated Christ and served him.

Although the people, blinded by his outward beauty, have already accepted the boy as their king, it is only when he demonstrates the depth of his insight and his inward transformation that his parents acknowledge him as their son. Fittingly, as they admit their relationship to the Star Child, like the father of the Prodigal Son, they "fell on his neck and kissed him" (Luke 15, 20) (CW 284). Since Jesus told the story of the Prodigal to illustrate the relationship of God to his people, the Star Child again takes on the role of Christ and his parents the role of God. But while both parents and son are fit to represent the kingdom of heaven on earth, and for a time, the Star Child creates heaven on earth, as far as is possible in his human capacity, the people whom he both rules and serves fail to understand or to follow his example. "And he who came after him ruled evilly" (CW 284).

In the final scenes of "The Star Child," then, Wilde not only challenges hierarchical systems of control, but questions the very concept of even trying to establish such systems. The series of rapid and confusing reversals of

roles and status demonstrate that, in Christ's own paradigm, government has little to do with power and control; instead, it should be based on mutual service and responsibility for others. The Star Child rules through justice and mercy, yet he does not tolerate wickedness: "...the evil Magician he banished" (CW 284), and he teaches "love and loving-kindness" (CW 284) to all. In this final story, Wilde again, through close reference to biblical sources, suggests an alternative to autocratic control, yet, at the same time recognizes that probably the need to dominate and to dictate standards of behaviour is so strong among a certain element of humanity that gentler possibilities for government are unlikely ever to be permanently established.

In her discussion of canonical counter-discourse, Helen Tiffin has examined strategies that very closely parallel those that Wilde uses in these fairy tales: the writer "...takes up a character or characters, or the basic assumptions of a British canonical text, and unveils those assumptions, subverting the text..." (Reader 97). Of course, it is not the text itself, the Bible, that Wilde seeks to subvert, but conventional and, in his eyes, even distorted readings of that text. His project is, rather, to restore the words and teachings to their original context, and, thus, reappropriate the text for all people. In reclaiming the right of the individual to read and interpret the Bible,

at least in the English translation that was most freely available, the King James version. Wilde abrogates the authority of the discourse of control that the text had for so long been enlisted to serve. In fact, he discredits the narrative that Sharpe claims has helped to bolster and perpetuate colonial authority: "...the civilizing mission, which is primarily a story about the colonizing culture as an emissary of light" (Modern Fiction Studies 35, 140), and suggests that it is the responsibility of each individual to construct his/her own narrative in relation to the original sources of enlightenment and common sense: the Bible and the folk tale.

Conclusion
Fairy Tales and Fantasy:
Forbidden Fruits?

In the epilogue to his 1987 biography of Wilde, Ellmann writes:

We inherit his struggle to achieve supreme fictions in art, to associate art with social change, to bring together individual and social impulse, to save what is eccentric and singular from being sanitized and standardized, to replace a morality of severity with one of sympathy. He belongs to our world more than to Victoria's.

(Ellmann, OW 553)

Certainly it seems true that Wilde belongs to our world more than to Victoria's, but it is truer -- truth for Wilde being always relative -- that while he seems to represent twentieth-century attitudes and ideas more than those of the nineteenth, he does not really belong to any one world. Chronologically, of course, Wilde belonged in the late Victorian era, but if we apply Berkeley's "Irish logic," even that becomes tenuous, for as Wilde himself has shown, followed by Yeats, Joyce, perhaps Beckett, and recently Boland and Carson, in the creative imagination, time is not

linear, nor does any figure, real or fictional, exist only within ordinary temporal restraints.

As Ellmann suggests, Wilde was particularly attracted to the "eccentric and singular." He was constantly searching for new modes of expression both in his life and in his work, and the fairy tales reflect the intensity of his quest. As we have seen, The Happy Prince and Other Tales and A House of Pomegranates are more than pleasant stories aimed at children, more even than clever satires aimed at adults. They are, in fact, quite pointedly revisionist in their approach to the fairy-tale genre itself, and quite specifically anti-patriarchal/imperialist in their satire. In adapting the fairy tale to his own uses Wilde laid the basis of a narrative method that T.S. Eliot would later call innovative, when used by Yeats and Joyce; and in seeking to challenge systems that marginalized those who were, like himself, according to society's standards, abnormal, he developed a style and approach that we now essentially designate as post-colonial.

Such strategies are identifiable even in the earliest tales, but become more marked and sustained, especially in A House of Pomegranates. When he wrote and assembled the first collection of stories, The Happy Prince and Other Tales, Wilde already had, as his letters reveal, a fairly clear literary and social agenda; the socialist leanings

almost certainly were inherited from his Irish Nationalist parents and, as I have argued, were probably activated by his North American experience. By the time he wrote and organized the second set, his agenda had not changed, but he had a much keener sense of himself as artist, his relationship to society, and of how he might use his writing to address and challenge the "dull lifeless systems" that circumscribed his existence and that of all whom society marginalized. Also, Gillespie records, between 1886 and 1891 Wilde "appears to have engaged in promiscuous adultery having little or no bearing upon his creative life..."

(Oscar Wilde: Life, Work and Criticism 8). There was little in Wilde's creative life, however, that was not affected by his day-to-day existence: not only did the artist derive much of his art from his life but he also, to some extent, approached life through his art. Consequently, his growing involvement in the homosexual sub-culture of London -- "feasting with panthers" (OW, Ellmann 389) as he referred to it -- would have surely had at least some impact on his work.

Indeed, I believe that just as the North American tour was the chief motivator for The Happy Prince collection, and continued to influence all of his writing, so Wilde's recognition of, and subsequent exploration of, his homosexuality had a profound effect on his perception of

himself, and consequently on his work. As Irishman, socialist and artist, he relished his status as different from British society: he had no doubt about his own superiority. It is clear, however, even after his imprisonment, that he was never able to convince himself entirely that he was without blame in his sexual orientation. In this one particular, unfortunately, he was unable to resist the pressure of rigid and punitive Victorian morality. On April 1, 1897, about seven weeks before his release from prison, Wilde wrote to Robert Ross:

...my friends must face the fact that... I am not in prison as an innocent man. On the contrary, my record of perversities of passion and distorted romances would fill many scarlet volumes. (Letters 515)

Thus although in A House of Pomegranates Wilde's indictment of society's treatment of the marginalized and the powerless is even more pointed and assured than in the earlier tales, his characterization of the protagonists is much more ambivalent. Unlike the heroes of The Happy Prince, these are not altruistic and blameless, showing kindness and concern for others; they are, rather, quite likely as a reflection of their creator, very flawed and self-absorbed, coming to redemption by more and more difficult routes. It is difficult to make the case that Wilde was fully aware of

the contrasts in characterization between the two collections, but his responses to reviews reveal that he intended that the style of the second set should be more aesthetic than the first, perhaps even sensuous, "the prose of an artist" (Letters 302), and not certainly exclusively aimed at children. Another remark in the same letter is also quite revealing, for he talks of "building this House of Pomegranates" (302): clearly Wilde had a sense of the collection, not as a randomly assembled group of stories but as a carefully structured artifact, a building.

I have already shown the complex relationships between the stories that make up this "house," but I feel the rest of the title also deserves more than a cursory glance. Pomegranates seem like an odd choice of building material: very unstable, requiring a mason's skill to keep them together. Perhaps it was such an image that Wilde had in mind, realizing the difficulty of his own task in cementing these very disparate elements into a coherent whole. Of course, the title could also mean a house full of pomegranates, and if this is the case, which it necessarily must be, since, in Wilde's theory, the work has as many meanings as readers, then the implications become even more complicated. Pomegranates are no ordinary fruit: in England, at Wilde's time, they were both rare and exotic. Besides their scarcity, they are, not surprisingly, surrounded by

myths both biblical and classical: Robert Graves claims that the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil that the serpent persuaded Eve to eat, and that Eve then fed to Adam, was no mere lowly apple but a pomegranate.⁷ Considering that these tales interrogate constructs of good and evil, the pomegranate in its association with the fall of humanity seems an appropriate image.

Also, as Eve was seduced by the Serpent into tasting the pomegranate, so was Persephone tempted by Hades into eating pomegranate seeds, thus sabotaging the carefully laid plans of Zeus and her mother, Demeter, to have her released from the underworld whence Hades had abducted her. Apparently, in the underworld, eating pomegranate seeds creates a sort of marriage pact between feeder and consumer. Zeus wisely persuaded all parties to compromise: Persephone would spend the larger part of the year with her mother, and the rest with her husband. Since Demeter, who was also the goddess of fertility, swore to keep earth barren so long as her daughter was not with her, this was a good arrangement for earth dwellers. (There is also an echo of this myth in "The Selfish Giant"). Clearly, then, the pomegranate is laden with connotations: it tempts the appetite so powerfully that it can overcome the threat of banishment

⁷ Robert Graves. The White Goddess, 386-7.

from paradise or confinement in the underworld, and is the direct cause of loss of innocence.

Had I recounted these myths as part of a conventional nineteenth-century fairy tale, the moral would be explicit: beware of people bearing pomegranates. But, since A House of Pomegranates is Wilde's choice of title, the lesson cannot be so straightforward. In the Persephone myth, her seed eating is the direct cause of winter, but then winter is the time when Earth rests and regathers her strength to produce another harvest; in the Adam and Eve myth, their eating of the forbidden fruit causes their expulsion from Eden, but it seems that, had they not taken the fateful bites, they would never have come to know one another, in the biblical sense, and populated the earth with vital but flawed humanity. Pomegranates apparently, despite their dangerous attractions, can have beneficial effects, at least for the ordinary mortals to whom fertility, their own and Earth's, is essential for survival. I cannot doubt that Wilde was aware of all of these connotations and many more when he named his second collection of tales. The conflicting implications of the title reflect Wilde's increasing awareness of the complexity of the content of his tales and the issues they were designed to address. He clearly believed that nineteenth-century morality was self-serving and, therefore, by the Christian standards on which it

believed itself based, quite immoral; but, at the same time, he was probably beginning to wonder whether even his own morality might also be somewhat self-serving. His growing uneasiness about his homosexual activities seemed to have begun to undermine his previously confident belief in own moral superiority.

Even the titles of the tales, then, reveal the self-consciousness of Wilde's agenda in writing them. A House of Pomegranates is apparently a much less straightforward undertaking both for the writer and the reader than The Happy Prince and Other Tales, and as Ellmann claims for all of Wilde's work, the moral, political and literary implications of the tales are as pertinent still as when they were first published. Although Ellmann intends a compliment in suggesting that Wilde was ahead of his time, Wilde himself would probably have been more pleased to think that his ideas were not bound by time, but were equally applicable in any era. In claiming the more inspired thinkers of the past for our own time, we actually compliment only ourselves: as Wilde said, "The ages live in history through their anachronisms" (AC 434), so those that seem out of step with our own time, are probably those that the future will wish to claim. In his disdain for much of what was "modern" in his own time, Wilde recognizes the danger of confusing contemporaneity with originality.

Wilde's own originality was, in effect, a sort of creative paradox, for he delighted in appropriating ideas from all sources, from ancient wisdom to whatever might have been said at a dinner party the previous evening. His gift was in synthesizing even apparently opposing truths to create new and challenging possibilities for thought; consequently, he has often been accused of plagiarism.

His grandson, Merlin Holland, discusses Wilde's propensity to use, without acknowledgement, whatever appealed to him:

...his reading was prodigious and he used it to supplement his own creative imagination. I am not implying that he was intellectually amoral but more that he seemed to believe in a sort of communism of language and ideas on which to draw, justifying it in the name of style. 'In all important matters', as he said, 'style, not sincerity, is the essential....' (Rediscovering Oscar Wilde 208)

Style was also a major consideration for Wilde in his representation of himself; Holland notes that the public naturally sees Oscar in the place of Lord Illingworth who remarks, 'vulgar habit that is people have nowadays of asking one whether one is serious or not. Nothing is serious except passion.'

The intellect is not a serious thing and never has been. It is an instrument on which one plays, that is all.'

The image of scintillating and paradoxical superficiality as well as studied indifference to hard work was a myth which he was at pains to cultivate as early as his Oxford days.

(Rediscovering Oscar Wilde 194)

Self-mythologizing was indeed the basis of Wilde's approach to life, and the resulting impression was the "paradoxical superficiality" to which Holland refers. Whether consciously or instinctively Wilde, Irish socialist homosexual, effectively used style simultaneously to create and to conceal his very complex personality. As he himself claimed, "One should always be a little improbable" (AC 434), and "The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible" (AC 433), because "Only the shallow know themselves" (AC 434).

Edward Said discusses the relevance to his writing of Wilde's emphasis on self-presentation:

It was said of Oscar Wilde by one of his contemporaries that everything he spoke sounded as if it were enclosed in quotation marks. This is no less true of everything he wrote, for such was the consequence of having a pose, which Wilde defined

as 'a formal recognition of the importance of treating life from a definite reasoned standpoint.'.... Always ready with a quotable comment, Wilde filled his manuscripts with epigrams on every conceivable subject.... (The World, the Text and the Critic 42)

Paraphrasing Frye's definition of epigram, "a complex utterance capable of the utmost range of subject matter, the greatest authority, and the least equivocation as to its author," Said claims that "[w]hen he invaded other forms of art, Wilde converted them into longer epigrams" (42).

Certainly, according to Frye's criteria, the fairy tales qualify as "longer epigrams:" at least in their style and apparent artificiality, a literary replication of their author. Like Wilde himself, however, they seem at first merely entertaining, superficial, slight and fantastical. But, as we have seen, Wilde's image was the calculated result of his "recognition of the importance of treating life from a definite reasoned standpoint." The man, public and private, was, in fact, largely of his own creating: a stylish myth. And so also are the tales. But obviously, since my reading of the tales has concentrated mainly on Wilde's use of style and myth to interrogate nineteenth-century British values and behaviour, this is not a reproof of their triviality.

In the fairy tales, in fact, Wilde confirms his own claim that "style, not sincerity, is the essential." Most nineteenth-century authors of children's stories probably wrote with great sincerity, in an effort to offer their readers sound moral lessons, but whereas much that they produced, despite its good intentions, now seems mawkish and even grimly amusing, Wilde's stories still move not only children but also adults. It is not so much the sincerity of the ideas, but the language, tone and form in which they are expressed that make the tales effective. For instance, when Wilde makes reference to the Bible, as do many of his contemporaries in their stories, it is not to reinforce trite notions of righteousness, but to recall the original tellings and encourage his readers to re-examine traditional interpretations. Without making any direct rhetorical challenge, he succeeds in causing his readers to question, not only conventional moral values, but also to consider particular issues, such as the validity of patriarchal systems and imperial practices used to silence and control the poor, the colonized and otherwise marginalized people. Even one hundred years later, many of the issues that the tales invite their readers to address are still pertinent; problems of morality, at least as construed by Wilde, do not, it seems, change much through time.

Ellmann speaks of Wilde's need to "replace a morality

of severity with one of sympathy" and "to associate art with social change;" Wilde stressed his own wish to address "modern problems" in a form that was "ideal not imitative;" and I have argued that it was this aim that led him to experiment with biblical and folk myth. In his two collections of tales, Wilde makes effective use not only of art in general to explore social situations, but specifically of the form and conventions of the genre in which he is writing: the fairy tale. As the stories progress, he also increasingly integrates biblical imagery into apparently simple, though self-consciously aesthetic, tales. The inclusion of such elements, as Willoughby points out, adds dignity to the tone of the tale, but at the same time, it introduces conflicts and complications that the narratives never wholly resolve. The reader is left not with neat answers and righteous certainties, but with complex queries and moral uneasiness.

Wilde, in effect, uses fairy tales and the Bible, two literary bastions of morality, to investigate the values they are normally used to reinforce. He does not directly insist that change is necessary, but creates in the minds of his audience enough discomfort that they might wish to reassess their own acceptance of society's assumptions about morality. Indeed, Wilde's strategy in the fairy tales is much like post-colonial writing as discussed by Georg

Gugelberger:

the post-colonial frequently appears conservative or is bound to use a conventional mimetic mode (related to realism in its many debates) but is essentially radical in the sense of demanding change. (The John Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism 584)

Wilde would, of course, have been uncomfortable with any relationship of his writing to "realism," but almost certainly would have accepted that most of his work was "essentially radical." As I have pointed out, Wilde does not go so far as to "demand" change, but otherwise his agenda and technique in the fairy tales both fit Gugelberger's description of post-colonial writing.

Although it seems conservative to write apparently traditional fairy tales, by creating a sustained association between myth (biblical and folk) and contemporary reality, Wilde successfully subverts social and literary conventions. Using a traditionally didactic genre he creates a new sort of didacticism. His teaching method is not autocratic, but Socratic, depending less on instruction than on inquiry: he leads his readers to ask pertinent questions and to find their own answers. As Said remarks, "Oscar Wilde... deliberately conceives the text as supported by a discursive situation involving speaker and audience..." (The World, the

Text, and the Critic 40), and in the case of the fairy tales the audience is outside of the text, and yet essentially a part of its construction and interpretation.

As well as revising didactic technique in the fairy tales, Wilde, as I have already discussed, moved toward a new narrative strategy, what Eliot identifies in Joyce's Ulysses as "mythical method." It is hardly surprising that Wilde should have developed a literary method that was based on mythology and on mythologizing: the first was a large part of both his Irish background and his academic studies; the second was a large part of his personality. As Holland mentions, Wilde liked to construct myths about himself for public consumption, but often his own myths were so attractive that he came to believe in them himself, and to adjust his own image accordingly. We see the same process even in his work, of which the man is always very much a part: there is, for instance, a peculiar cyclical link between the writer and his characters. As many writers do, Wilde incorporates aspects of himself in his protagonists, but as his characters develop, in an act of conscious self-imagining, Wilde seems also to integrate into his own persona attributes of his literary creations. Wilde uses his work, like other writers, as a mode of self-exploration, but he also uses it as a medium of self-invention. It seems only a small step from viewing and reviewing the self in terms of

myth to understanding human thought and behaviour in the larger context of myth, as Wilde does in the fairy tales, in relation to those myths through which humanity has conceived and expressed itself, especially biblical myths.

In The Happy Prince and Other Tales and A House of Pomegranates Wilde invites us, through fantasy and imagination, to re-visit our own myths. But, as Chamberlin has pointed out, such "dreaming" is sometimes perceived by society as a threat to its moral and political stability. Indeed, when we consider even some of the implications of the title of the second set, A House of Pomegranates, we might feel uneasy about entering such a house, much less taking our children into it. Perhaps we need to be wary of what Wilde is offering for our consumption. Yet, despite its resistant skin, and the perils attendant on its consumption, the pomegranate, once penetrated, is both nourishing and delicious; although it requires careful dissection, its succulent contents are well worth the effort.

APPENDIX A

- Publicity Copy for Gilbert and Sullivan's Patience.
Radio Times Hulton Picture Library. 324
 Source: Fido, M. Oscar Wilde: An Illustrated
 Biography. New York: Peter Bedrick Books,
 1985.
- Caricatures of Oscar. The Illustrated Sporting and
 Dramatic News (July 21, 1883): 493. 325
 Source: Fido, M. Oscar Wilde: An Illustrated
 Biography.



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APPENDIX B

Excerpts from "The Shepherd of Salisbury Plain"

Part II and "The Sorrows of Yamba." (a poem) 327-328

Source: (Cheap Repository of Religious Tracts)

Philadelphia: B. and J. Johnson, 18--.

THE
Shepherd of Salisbury Plain.

PART II.

TO WHICH IS ADDED
THE
SORROWS OF YAMBA,
A POEM.



PHILADELPHIA :

PRINTED BY B. & J. JOHNSON,

147 HIGH-STREET.

[Price 4d. Or 2s. 9d. per copy.]

The Shepherd and his wife then sat down with great seeming cheerfulness, but the children stood; and while the mother was helping them, little fresh-coloured Molly who had picked the wool from the bushes with so much delight, cried out, "Father, I wish I was big enough to say grace, I am sure I should say it very heartily to-day, for I was thinking what must *poor* people do who have no salt to their potatoes, and do, but look our dish is quite full."—"This is the true way of thinking, Molly," said the Father, "in whatever concerns bodily wants, and bodily comforts, it is our duty to compare our own lot with the lot of those who are worse off, and this will keep us thankful. On the other hand, whenever we are tempted to set up our own wisdom or goodnefs, we must compare ourselves with those who are wiser and better, and that will keep us humble." Molly was now so hungry, and found the potatoes so good, that she had no time to make any more remarks; but was devour-

" British laws shall ne'er befriend me ;
 " They protect not slaves like me !"
 Mourning thus my wretched state,
 (Ne'er may I forget the day)
 Once in dusk of evening late,
 Far from home I dar'd to stray ;
 Dared, alas ! with impious haste,
 Towards the roaring sea to fly ;
 Death itself I long'd to taste,
 Long'd to cast me in and die.
 There I met upon the strand
 English missionary good,
 He had Bible book in hand,
 Which poor me no understood.
 Then he led me to his cot,
 Sooth'd and pity'd all my woe ;
 Told me 'twas the christian's lot
 Much to suffer here below.
 Told me then of God's dear Son,
 (Strange and wond'rous is the story
 What sad wrong to him was done,
 Tho' he was the Lord of glory.
 Told me too, like one who knew him,
 (Can such love as this be true ?)
 How he dy'd for them that slew him,
 Died for wretched Yamba too.
 Freely he his mercy proffer'd
 And to sinners he was sent ;
 E'en to massa pardon's offer'd ;
 O if massa would repent !
 Wicked deed full many a time
 Sinful Yamba too hath done ;
 But She wails to God her crime ;
 But she trusts his only Son.
 O ye slaves whom massa's beat,
 Ye are stain'd with guilt within,

Works Consulted

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