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The Hidden Messages in Oscar Wilde's "The Happy Prince"

And the Debate on the Target Audience

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Introduction

Oscar Wilde's fairytales have been read to children for more than a century. Nevertheless, since the time of their publication in 1888 and 1891, the target audience of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* and *A House of Pomegranates* have been the concern of critics. Delving into the context behind the rich and colourful imagery, one can find implications of homosexuality, the Paterian aesthetic and religious connotations. According to Carol Tattersall, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* successfully mislead the public that it is innocent of any intention to undermine established standards of living or writing. Tattersall's argument is based on comparing the first collection to Wilde's second, *A House of Pomegranates*, which was perceived as "offensive and immoral" (136). On the other hand, William Butler Yeats states in his introduction to *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* that overall the reviewers of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* were hostile because of Wilde's aesthetic views (ixxvi). But Yeats overlooks the fact that Wilde was very pleased and proud, dashing notes to friends and reviewers and signing copies to many people (Tattersall 129). In general, the reception of Wilde's first collection was more positive than that of the second because it was milder and more subtle in its controversial themes.

Living in Victorian England, Wilde was oppressed and ridiculed for being a homosexual, and he was ultimately charged, tried and imprisoned. This essay will illustrate that Wilde intentionally seeded "The Happy Prince" with ambiguous messages and hidden clues to advocate his homosexual standpoint and agenda. Thus, I believe that Wilde directed "The Happy Prince" not to children but rather to the adult audience. This is illustrated when Wilde himself states that the tales are meant for "people from eighteen to eighty!" yet who are "childlike" in nature and enjoy the fairytale genre (*The Letters of Oscar Wilde* 237)¹. Adults are able to appreciate the subtlety and ingenuity of Wilde's writing techniques and wit. The conventional view of

¹ Here after abbreviated LOW.

contemporary critics is that Wilde's "The Happy Prince" is children's literature. However, my research leads me to believe that children are not included in the target audience.

The main argument of this essay is that "The Happy Prince" is ambiguous, holding references to homosexuality, the Paterian aesthetic and portrayals of Biblical protagonists. My key question is: who is the intended target audience of "The Happy Prince"? I will discuss additional evidence not considered by critics such as the parallels between the relationship of the Prince and the Swallow and of Jonathan and David in the *Old Testament* contributing to my argument that "The Happy Prince" is filled with homosexual undertones and Biblical imagery. Furthermore, Brund Bettelheim argues, and I agree, that children need happy endings to reassure them that there is a possibility of overcoming obstacles and attaining happiness (23). I think that the Victorian homosexual subtext steers the tale to an unhappy ending.

I will briefly examine the history of fairytales and outline the change in the target audience, aiming to introduce a part of my argument that fairytales are not exclusively meant for children. In particular, I will analyze Oscar Wilde's "The Happy Prince" from an adult's perspective, especially one who is acquainted with Wilde's biography and therefore has a deeper understanding of the tale.

One review, targeting *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* to children in preschool to grade four, summarizes "The Happy Prince": the statue of a Prince decides to help the poor of his city and enlists a Swallow to assist him; together they bring "financial security" to the poor and are rewarded by God in paradise (Wilson 45). Another review states that the tale "will make readers feel sad when reading it, but the outcome is beautiful" (Howard 40). Moreover, *The Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English* states that "The Happy Prince" explore[s] the price paid in human suffering for beauty, art, power and wealth, and the corresponding salvation offered by selfless love" (318). These statements indicate that the tale is simple and innocent; however I

think that this is debatable and will try to show that “The Happy Prince” is complex, ambiguous and anything but innocent.

The Audience of the Fairytale

Fairytales have always been highly regarded as children's literature (Grenby 1). In his introduction to Oscar Wilde's *Complete Short Fiction* of, Ian Small says, “[...] fairy stories were originally told to children, and so their primary social function was to educate children into the values of a culture, in particular its moral values” (xxi). However, according to Jack Zipes, one of the foremost contemporary fairytale scholars, this statement is the “further[est] from the truth” (*When Dreams Came True* 1).² Despite the prima facie of the fairytale as intended for children, Zipes argues that the fairytale flourished thousands of years ago, cultivated by “mature men and women” to create bonds in the face of the forces of nature, and that in the present the fairytale's purpose is to provide hope in a “world seemingly on the brink of catastrophe” (*WDCT* 1). This is contrary to what is observed in Wilde's fairytales where hope is not provided and the outcomes tend towards the pessimistic, as will be discussed later on.

In Zipes' argument, children appear to be the last to benefit from the fairytale. Children welcome fairytales because the stories nurture their great desire for change and independence. He concludes that the fairytale is a genre for all ages (*WDCT* 1).

Today's globally celebrated fairytales like “Cinderella,” “Jack the Giant Killer,” “Beauty and the Beast,” “Little Red Riding Hood,” and “Sleeping Beauty,” were in fact not reading material for children in the eighteenth century – at the time of their publication. Even the widely acclaimed Brothers Grimm did not have children as the target audience when they published their first collection of tales in 1812. Only in 1819 did they start to clean the narratives of “erotic, cruel, or bawdy passages” (*WDCT* 18).

² Here after abbreviated *WDCT*.

In 1835, Hans Christian Andersen published his own tales, which were the source of amusement and instruction for both young and adult readers. Yet still, the child was not the main target audience. At the end of the eighteenth century, fairytales were still intended for both audiences. However, they were different in style and function as they were satirical. The primary example is, of course, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. In *Victorian Fairytales: The Revolt of the Fairies and Elves*,³ Zipes observes that during the eighteenth century, children's literature was mainly of religious and instructional nature (xiv). However, by the nineteenth century, there was a renewed interest in fairytales. Fairytale writers were concerned with promoting the child's as well as the adult's imagination and morality (Snider 2). Furthermore, Zipes remarks that many tales sought to express individual and social protest by reacting against the utopian worlds presented in literature (VF xxviii-xix). Writers started to use the genre to raise social consciousness about the consequences of the industrial revolution which caused the rise of different social classes and the problems of the oppressed and unemployed (VF xix). At the same time, these writers wanted to recapture childhood as being innocent (VF xx).

However, in the early nineteenth century, the fairytale was not considered pious, instructive or appropriate for young children because it was too pleasurable and entertaining (Zipes, *The Art of Subversion* 105).⁴ There were several who argued that the fairytale is not a proper instructional medium. One of them is Mary Martha Sherwood of the anti-fairytale school who wrote in *The Governess, or The Little Female Academy* in 1820:

Fairy-tales [. . .] are in general an improper medium of instruction because it would be absurd in such tales to introduce Christian principles as motives of action. [. . .] On this account such tales should be very sparingly used, it being extremely difficult, if not

³ Here after abbreviated VF.

⁴ Here after abbreviated AS.

impossible, from the reason I have specified, to render them really useful. (qtd. in Zipes, *VF* xvi-xvii)

Nonetheless, educators and parents alike realized that fairytales do not need to be of destructive nature or pervert children's minds (Zipes, *WDCT* 29). The fairytales of Perrault, the Brothers Grimm and Andersen had enjoyed tremendous popularity and had a positive reception in England, America and the Continent (Zipes, *AS* 105). The fairytale finally became a popular and highly acceptable form of literature (Shillinglaw 89) and, "[...] a respectable study for antiquarians, an inspiration for poets" (Opie 32). However, children were still not the main target. Zipes comments that by the 1860s fairytale writers used the genre mainly to subvert the society's formal structure and governing dictums (*WDCT* 21). Wilde probably chose the fairytale genre in order to raise his own agenda, as will be discussed later on.

It was the fin-de-siècle authors who finally came to favour "childhood over adulthood and innocence over experience" and wrote books which were about children and for children. This resulted in the "Golden Age of Children's Literature" (Wood 159). Jonathan Cott notes that by the end of the nineteenth century writing fairytales for children had become an acceptable literary activity (xlvi).

I agree with Snider that young children do not have difficulty believing in talking statues and swallows, giants or mermaids (1). Writers of children's literature stage a seduction in an attempt to draw the child reader into complicity with the pleasures offered by an adult's vision (Rose 47). On the other hand, adults respond differently to fairytales. The images and symbolism in the text stir the unconscious part of the psyche (Snider 1), allowing the perception of more complex messages. Richard Jacobs says that teachers are fond of saying "there's no such thing as an innocent text: it's only the reading that can be innocent" (300). This means that an adult reader,

like a child, can have a simplistic view of a fairytale depending on the limits of their own experiences and understanding of the world.

The fairytale has never lost its appeal towards its audience, be it children or adults. C.S. Lewis has said of fairytales: “Many children don't like them and many adults do” (qtd. in Tatar 21). Moreover, Maria Tatar writes that there is no age group monopolizing the fairytale genre (22). Fairytales contain archetypes from the collective unconscious in their most accessible forms and they can and do appeal to all age groups (Snider 4, 5). Zipes concludes:

As long as the fairytale continues to awaken our wonderment and enable us to project counter-worlds to our present society, it will serve a meaningful social and aesthetic function not just for compensation but for revelation: for the worlds portrayed by the best of our fairytales are like magic spells of enchantment that actually free us. Instead of petrifying our minds, they arouse our imagination and compel us to realize how we can fight terror and cunningly insert ourselves into our daily struggles and turn the course of the world's events in our favor. (*WDCT* 29)

The Fairytales of Oscar Wilde

Although Oscar Wilde wrote two volumes of fairytales: *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* and *A House of Pomegranates* as separate works, they are frequently published as a single volume entitled *The Fairytales of Oscar Wilde*. Tattersall finds the arbitrary grouping of the two books and the general title problematic and “contradictory” (128). She states that Wilde would not agree with this based on his own opinions about the works as he regarded them as “miniature works of art” and so she asks critics to reassess their literary status (128). Only on three occasions does Wilde refer to his work as being “fairytales.” Mostly, he describes them as being “stories,” “fairy stories” and twice as “studies in prose,” suggesting that they are experimental. This demonstrates that Wilde was unsure if the tales could be considered fairytales (Tattersall 135).

The Happy Prince and Other Tales received triumphant acclaim for its entertainment value and literary merit. It sold the initial run of 1,000 and went into a second edition the following year (Beckson 7). An unsigned notice in “The Athenaeum” in 1888 stated “The gift of writing fairytales is rare, and Mr. Oscar Wilde shows that he possesses it in a rare degree” and it further compared him to Hans Christian Andersen, saying there is no higher praise they can give (qtd. in Ellmann 299). Walter Pater, whom Wilde regarded as his mentor in aesthetics, complemented his language as “pure English” (qtd. in Beckson 53).

However, not all reviews were favourable to Wilde. The report of Macmillan's Anonymous Reader has proved to be one of the least prudent judgements in nineteenth century literary history. It states that the stories are indeed clever but that they do not have any “striking imaginative brilliance”, that they are “good and respectable” but will not gain much popularity with the general public (qtd. in Small x). Moreover, Yeats writes in the introduction to Volume iii, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* that overall the reviews were hostile because of Wilde’s aesthetic views. He adds that men of letters saw Wilde’s fairytales as imitations of Pater and that they seemed to be deliberately written for the smallest group of audience in an artificial style that interested “a few women of fashion” and their guests. Yeats continues to say that Wilde “had no practical interest, no cause to defend, no information to give, nor was he the gay jester whose very practical purpose is our pleasure. Behind his words was the whole power of his intellect, but that intellect had given itself to pure contemplation” (ixxvi). Nonetheless, Yeats does not agree with the reviews and admits that *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* is “charming and amusing” because Wilde is a good storyteller (ixxvi).

Alexander Galt Ross’ review in 1888 questions if the collection of fairytales is suitable for children. He writes that Wilde chose the genre of fairytales “for excellent reasons” for a selected

public which can enjoy the “delicate humour” and “artistic literary manner.” However, Ross argues that this public will not have children as participants. He says:

No child will sympathize at all with Mr. Wilde’s Happy Prince when he is melted down by order of the Mayor and Corporation in obedience to the dictum of the art professor at the University that, since ‘he is no longer beautiful, he is no longer useful.’ Children do not care for satire, and the dominant spirit of these stories is satire— a bitter satire differing widely from that of Hans Andersen, whom Mr. Wilde’s literary manner so constantly recalls to us. (qtd. in Beckson 57)

Yet the review in the “Athenaeum” declares that Wilde is a “teller of pure fairytales” and that he used a “delicate” style that a child would appreciate and be delighted in reading without being “troubled by the application” (qtd. in Beckson 55). On the other hand, contemporary criticism shows more favour to the fairytales. In more recent years Wilde’s credibility has been reinstated, probably assisted by the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the change in attitudes towards sexuality that the last few decades have witnessed. Isobel Murray, the editor of *Wilde’s Complete Shorter Fiction*, notes that despite the fact that critics have tended to neglect Wilde’s fairytales, they have sold in their millions. The tales have been transformed into plays, films for the cinema and the television, adapted for radio, made into cartoons, children’s opera, ballet and mime plays. She concludes that the public has never ceased to demand Wilde’s fairytales (1). *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* was the signal of the beginning of Wilde’s creative stage (Zipes, *WDCT* 137) and “The Happy Prince” is possibly the best known of all Wilde’s fairytales. The tales appeal to the “collective psyche of English-speaking people” and “have enjoyed a life of their own [...] in translations” (Snider 2; Hardwick 76). In his Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Oscar Wilde, Richard Ellmann declares that the fairytales “suffer from florid figures” and

“Biblical pronouns”. He continues to say that Wilde presents his stories like “sacraments of a lost faith” (299).

The target audience of the fairytales has been the subject of debate for critics and even Wilde himself. Wilde wrote a letter to G. H. Kersley in June 1888 that *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* are “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” (Ellmann 219). However, he seems to revise his opinions in January 1889 when he writes a letter to the American writer Amelie Rives Chanler saying that the tales are “slight and fanciful, and written, not for children, but for childlike people from eighteen to eighty!” (*LOW* 237). In the last comment, the child reader has been excluded entirely and the tales are restricted to people over eighteen. It is obvious from this that something in the subject matter is a cause of concern for Wilde.

Compared to Wilde’s other works of plays, poems, essays, prose and his novel, his fairytales gain less attention from scholars. Tattersall explains that this lack of interest is related to the fairytale label that implies that the tales belong to a specific area of interest which is children’s literature (128). Moreover, scholars and critics spend more time on Wilde’s biography when analyzing his writings. It is necessary to be acquainted with the biography of Wilde in order to fully understand his work. Knowing that Wilde was a persecuted homosexual will reflect on the reading of the text helping the reader to unearth certain messages, images and symbols which would otherwise remain buried.

His motivation in writing fairytales can be traced to his background. Both his mother, Lady Jane Wilde, known under the penname Speranza, and his father, Sir William Wilde, were collectors and editors of Irish folklore. Furthermore, Wilde’s wife Constance published two volumes of children’s literature *There Was Once* in 1889 and *A Long Time Ago* in 1892. Wilde lived at a time which is regarded as the golden age of children’s literature. In addition, his Irish

heritage must have had a major influence on him, as can be seen when he writes to Gladstone that he “should like to [present *A House of Pomegranates*] to one whom I, and all who have Celtic blood in their veins, must ever honour and revere” (*LOW* 218). It is easy to assume that he wrote to amuse his two sons. In a letter to Richard Le Gallienne, Wilde states that “It is the duty of every father to write fairytales for his children” (Pearson 107). But above all, the most compelling reason was his awareness that supporting a family of four required a greater income, thus Wilde made a commercial decision to write for a wider audience (Shillinglaw 82) choosing the fairytale genre for its immense popularity at the time. Wilde felt that the fairy realm should be the direction in which he would apply his imagination through writing, following the steps of many of contemporaries like George MacDonald, Lewis Carroll and Andrew Lang to name a few.

The Paterian Aesthetic

It seems unlikely that one would find themes of homosexuality in fairytales. However, being familiar with the way Wilde and his contemporaries like Walter Pater, Lord Tennyson, Samuel Butler and Edward FitzGerald portrayed male love, it is evident how such themes find their way into the fairytale (Duffy 327). Wilde was very much influenced by Pater. In a famous letter to Yeats, Wilde said that Pater’s *The Renaissance* is his “golden book” and that he takes it everywhere with him (Yeats, *Autobiography* 80). However, some critics called both Pater’s book and Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* “poisonous book[s]” because they promote pederasty as “the truest expression of classical heritage” (Wood 158). Socrates was the first to illustrate that the sexual and spiritual relationship between the student and his mentor allows the older, wiser man to “spiritually impregnate” and inspire the “beautiful youth” who holds love and admiration to his master (Dowling 83). Victorian writers saw that teaching younger boys and loving them “—idealistically or physically—was both intuitive and natural” (Wood 157). This can be

observed in the relationship between the Prince and the Swallow. For example, after returning from a task set by the Prince, the Swallow remarks how warm he feels, although the weather is cold. The Prince plays the role of the older, wiser mentor, a *senex*, explaining that “[it] is because you have done a good action” (7)⁵ to the Swallow who assumes the role of a *puer*. Snider justifies this view by calculating which of the two characters is older. He suggests “chronologically, the Prince, as a human who's been made into a work of art, would have to be older than the bird” (5).

The Swallow serves and learns from the Prince the meaning of sacrifice and misery. However, Snider further observes that the Prince is a *senex* and a *puer* combined, ultimately creating a whole self. He argues that when alive, the Prince was oblivious to the distressed world outside the palace's wall. His ignorance and *laissez faire* attitude towards the less fortunate made him a *puer*, thus symbolizing the prevailing Victorian attitude towards social problems. To become a *senex*, he undergoes a transformation and becomes self-sacrificial through death (5). Thus the character symbolizes the wholeness of a healthy psyche and the potential for selfhood.

Wilde applies these notions to the most obvious homosexual act in “The Happy Prince” which is the kiss between the Prince and the Swallow. Wood notes that this act is a “rare male-male kiss in children's literature.” She further explains that Wilde uses the Socratic ideas deliberately defying conventional expectations of the relationship between teacher and student (165).

Wilde's fame comes from the correlation between his writings and his life. According to Wood, Wilde's art explains his life rather than vice versa (160). Some critics, however, deny that “The Happy Prince” is “merely [a] meditation on homosexuality,” on the contrary, from the perspective of contemporary critics they are “irreducibl[e]” (Duffy 327). In “The Happy Prince as Self-Dramatization,” Martin states that Wilde casts himself as the Happy Prince. He argues that

⁵ All references to “The Happy Prince” are from the *Complete Short Fiction*, edited by Ian Small

Wilde yearned for Lord Alfred Douglas to be like the Swallow as a lover - one whom he could teach selfless love and sacrifice to achieve spiritual development. However, Lord Alfred Douglas was hardly the lover he wished him to be⁶ (76-77).

Diverse Relationships

Wilde presents three relationships in the tale: the Swallow and the Reed, the Prince and the Swallow and the lovers on the balcony. The Swallow's relationship with the Reed was doomed because she was a female with Victorian-feminine characteristics. For example, she is domestic while he is always in flight, she "is always flirting," "has no money" and "far too many relationships" (4). Wilde emphasizes that their relationship is heterosexual by deliberately calling the Reed the Swallow's "lady-love" (4). According to convention, one will assume that a male's lover is a lady, but Wilde wants to distinguish between a heterosexual love and a homosexual one when later the Swallow meets the Prince. It can be seen that the Swallow's love for the Reed is an adolescent infatuation. He is not willing to settle for a commitment to her and says: "I love travelling, and my wife, consequently, should love travelling also" (4). Again, Wilde illustrates that the Swallow expects another heterosexual relationship in the future.

The second couple in the tale are also heterosexual. The lovers on the balcony do not seem to be successful in their relationship and have communication problems. The man is romantic and passionate whereas the maid-of-honour is portrayed as being cold, selfish, vain and loveless. For example, the man romances the girl saying, "How wonderful the stars are [...] and how wonderful is the power of love!" (6); however, she replies that she is worried her dress will not be ready for the State-Ball and complains that the seamstress is "so lazy" (6). Moreover, the comment on the seamstress being "so lazy" is unfair because the reader knows that she is

⁶ In "De Profundis" Wilde faults Douglas for keeping their relationship at a lower, sensual level, and himself for allowing Douglas to keep it there when he, as the older lover, should have been nurturing Douglas's spiritual and intellectual development. "De Profundis" was meant "to restore the true relations between older lover and younger beloved, erastes and eromenos, which had been so inverted in their actual friendship" (Dowling 150).

working hard to support her sick little boy, e.g. her face is “thin and worn, and she has coarse, red hands, all pricked by the needle” (6). Jacobs predicts that the indifference of the maid-of-honour and her inability to understand the lives of those who work for her will break down the lovers’ relationship and the girl will be to blame (296). The relationship between the lovers and the Swallow and the Reed is similar to some measure. Both female characters convey the same attitudes towards life and are unfocused on the fundamental needs of their relationships.

It is interesting to note that prior to the twentieth century, it was fully acceptable for men to express themselves romantically with poets such as Keats, Shelley and William Wordsworth as their role models. Hence, I disagree with Jacobs who writes that Wilde inverts the usual stereotypes of the “manly male” and the “romantic female” rendering the last as materialistic, callous and aggressive (296). Wilde is merely presenting the Victorian society stereotypes rather than expressing a misogynistic attitude of his own.

The Swallow commits irrational choices when he chooses to fall in love with different forms of life than himself, such as a reed and later on the statue of a dead prince. However, the relationship between the Swallow and the statue of the Prince is even more unconventional, not only because one is a statue of a dead human being while the other is a living bird, but also because both of them are of male gender.

Just like the yellow moth which distracted the Swallow and ultimately led him to meeting the Reed, here the Prince’s golden facade diverts him from his journey to Egypt.⁷ The Swallow seems to assume the role of the artist (Balog 300) searching for aesthetic beauty. His motives in his relationship with the Reed are superficial and shallow, and his first interest in the statue of the Prince is of the same nature. The Swallow seems to be determined to find an outrageous and a

⁷ Egypt represents a symbolic state similar to that of the Prince's Sans-Souci: it is characterized by forgetfulness “large lotus-flowers” (5), sleep, and death. It stands for the death of the soul, in a world of comfort which ignores suffering (Martin 75).

disastrous affair, with his choices of loving a plant and a statue, both very unusual partners (Balog 313).

The Swallow's extravagant taste and flamboyance echo Wilde himself. I believe that Wilde intended to represent his own sexual agenda in the tale. "The Happy Prince" can be seen as a meditation on Wilde's first homosexual experience (Duffy 328). According to Zipes, Wilde's tales "can be regarded as artistic endeavours on the part of Wilde to confront what he already foresaw as the impending tragedy of his life" (*WDCT*, 137).

In the beginning of the tale, the Swallow has not reached the same point in the journey for sacrifice and selflessness as the Prince. He will not sacrifice his travels for the sake of his love, the Reed, and abandons her to commence his flight to Egypt. Moreover, he is arrogant and selfish; he says, "I hope the town has made preparations [to welcome him]." (4) Also, he criticizes the statue of the Prince by saying, "what is the use of a statue if it cannot keep the rain off?" (4) He is drawn to the statue of the Prince only because it is golden; he announces, "I have a golden bedroom" (4) but later when the Prince tells him that he has a leaden heart, the Swallow complains, "what, is he not solid gold?" (4) However, the Swallow begins his metamorphosis after meeting the Prince, although at first he is reluctant to stay with him to fulfil the tasks. The Swallow keeps declaring that he must go on his journey to Egypt, which based on the description is the Swallow's paradise.⁸ This is what Bettelheim has observed in children's literature to be the compensatory world of promised pleasure (65). Unfortunately, it is predictable that the Swallow's urgent attempts to move on with his journey will fail. He stays, night after night with

⁸ Wilde catalogues hypnotic, intensely aesthetic experiences simply to imagine color, taste, smell, and sight in a vastly different world from the English nursery. Reminiscent of Greek epics and *The Arabian Nights*, both well known in Victorian times particularly by the educated male elite to celebrate sexualities officially taboo to English citizens, the Swallow regales the prince with descriptions of places and people informed by assumptions and values so alien as to render them objects simply of fascinating aesthetic contemplation (Wood 165,167).

the Prince, executing his orders in giving away the ruby, sapphires and the gold to those who need it.

The Swallow achieves selfless transformation not from a moral perspective, but out of love and admiration for the Prince. He finally decides to stay forever after the Prince loses his sight. Perched on the statue's shoulder, he consoles the blind Prince with stories about Egypt. The Swallow is no longer the "natural and capricious egotist" (Shewan 40) but a compassionate and merciful being. When the statue of the Happy Prince stands shabby, grey and stripped of his wealth, the Swallow's fickle love transcends to higher and more significant ideals. He does not abandon the Prince for his ugliness, but dedicates himself to "stay with [him] always" (9). With this the Swallow is doomed because he will perish in the cold harsh winter. His character grows and develops with his attachment to the Prince. With him, he achieves self-knowledge and deeper, truer love. Both characters complement each other's wisdom and experiences (Balog 301). The Swallow's voyage from being 'one of the boys' together with his other swallow companions, to first love and its disappointment, to true love and its fulfilment and finally death, can be compared to a "gay version of Romeo and Juliet" (Jacobs 297). Moreover, I think the "lethal kiss" (Balog 313) between the Prince and the Swallow echoes the last kiss between Romeo and Juliet which heralds both couples' untimely deaths. I also suggest that the Prince and the Swallow's love ends with a catastrophe just like that of Shakespeare's tragic heroes.

In comparing the two heterosexual relationships with the suggested homosexual relationship of the Prince and the Swallow, Wilde tries to convey that male-love is an elevated form of love, based on his views of the Paterian aesthetic. However, he was also aware that this union will perish by death because the Victorian milieu did not accept homosexuality.

Gender Attributes

Another theme that prevails in “The Happy Prince” is the presentation of the male and the female. Zipes states that Wilde wrote fairytales to subvert the archetypical images of the contemporary society (AS 114). In the tales, there is a conflict between the masculine Logos and the feminine Eros (Snider 8) as Wilde deprives female characters of their Eros and grants it to the male characters making them effeminate. The term Eros is derived from Aphrodite’s son and what Carl Jung called a “principle of connection”, traditionally identified with femininity (Hopcke 32). In other words, “Eros seeks relationship, connection, warmth, oneness, interactions of feeling, life, spontaneity, and merger” (Hopcke 32). This can be identified in Anderson’s tales, for example “The Little Mermaid” and “Thumbelina.”

The Swallow possesses masculine attributes corresponding to a young male in the prime of life. He is enthusiastic to help and serve like a knight. He “love[s] travelling” (4) and exploring, he is driven by instinctive forces to find something desirable, extraordinary, challenging but unattainable and fatal. This urge comes from the “depth of his unconsciousness” as a message from his inner self and the impulse of his unfulfilled self (Balog 313).

The gender attributes associated with the Prince, however, are vague. According to Claudia Nelson, Wilde provides coded and ambiguous messages recalling the feminised male to embody the spiritual goodness (qtd. in Cogan Thaker 76). Before his mysterious death, the Prince used to “play” and “dance” (5) and be generally carefree. There are no accounts of him studying or playing sport or any other masculine activities. Moreover, the Prince weeps and moralises like a helpless old woman (Balog 313). Furthermore, the moon, which is a symbol of femininity, is associated with the Prince on four occasions: as a little boy cries and on the Swallow’s arrivals after each of the three tasks are completed. Also, he has a “low musical voice” (5) like the sirens, seductively tempting the Swallow to do his bidding and ultimately to his destiny. In addition, the

statue of the Prince is covered with gold, rubies and sapphires- jewellery which is a feminine attribute. Finally, the dominating adjective used in describing the Prince is “beautiful” rather than handsome.

There is only one image in the fairytale which portrays the masculinity of the Prince. The first line of the tale, “high above the city, on a tall column stood the statue of the Happy Prince” (3) represents him as an omnipresent ruler atop a great phallus, and his sword is a typical symbol of masculinity. However, by the end of the tale, the Prince is emasculated by the four tasks he entrusts to the Swallow. Firstly, his sword is deprived of its potency by the removal of the ruby. Secondly, by the second and third task both his eyes are plucked out by the bird, which is a gruesome image that renders the Prince blind. Thirdly, the Prince’s body is stripped naked of his coat of golden leaves. A final humiliation is when the Prince’s bare and shabby statue is demolished and melted down by the unimpressed townspeople and his leaden heart is discarded on a dust heap.

Male beauty is celebrated in most of Wilde’s tales. He portrays his male characters using sensual description and does not apply the same method when describing a female character. Rita Felski argues: “the male aesthete’s playful subversion of gender norms, his adoption of feminine traits paradoxically reinforces his distance from and elevation above women” (1100). For example, the playwright is described: “His hair is brown and crisp, and his lips are red as a pomegranate, and he has large and dreamy eyes” (7) while the maid-of-honour’s description “loveliest” (5) and “beautiful” (6) is not as detailed or sensual. Jacobs notes that the playwright’s description is more like popular romantic fiction style rather than a children’s fairytale (296). In conclusion, this is additional evidence of Wilde’s favouring of the male over the female, as Naomi Wood puts it, as epithets for objects of desire (163).

Christian Undertones

The moral views expressed in all nine of Wilde's fairytales are of Christian nature. Christian miracles substitute the conventional fairytale magic (Spelman 2959-A). However, the fact that Wilde depicts many of his protagonists overtly as Christ-like figures does not mean that he is accommodating Christianity (Zipes, *AS* 122-23). Moreover, as some critics like Edelson argue, Wilde does not moralize for the sake of children or to obey the moral conventions as "lip service" (Edelson 170).

There are a number of similarities between the Prince and Jesus Christ which give the tale a religious tone. For example, the Prince is twice born and his death at the end of the tale is a mercy to others. He is the "bread of life" (John 6:35) for his jewels and gold brought food to the seamstress and her sick son, the playwright, the match girl and the children in the street who pointedly rejoice "we have bread now!" (10). Zipes notes that as a Christ-like figure, the Prince represents the "artist whose task is to enrich other people's lives without expecting acknowledgment or rewards" (*WDCT* 138). In "De Profundis," Wilde describes Christ as the artist archetype.

The relationship between the Prince and the Swallow, in my opinion, is similar to the relationship between Jonathan and David. Wilde drew inspiration from the *Old Testament*. Martha Vicinus points out that many Victorian homosexual writers were influenced by Biblical stories and classical myth. They reinterpreted the stories and myths and gave privilege to the irrational and inexplicable in their own writings (85). In his trials, Wilde declared that "'the Love that dare not speak its name' in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan [...]" (qtd. in Ellmann 435). According to the Bible, Jonathan, son of King Saul, fell in love with the young David, the slayer of Goliath, upon their first meeting: "the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him

as his own soul” (1 Sam. 18:1). They made a covenant and “Jonathan stripped himself of the coat with which he was clothed, and gave it to David, and the rest of his garments, even to his sword, and to his bow, and to his girdle (1 Sam. 18:4). And David went out to whatsoever business [he was] sent [on]” (1 Sam. 18:5). Jonathan made another covenant to David promising him “whatsoever thy soul desireth, I will even do it for thee.” The Bible records a kiss between the two men, “[...] they kissed one another, and wept one with another, until David exceeded. (1 Sam. 20:41). Upon Jonathan’s death, David confesses that his love to Jonathan transcends the love of women “[...] very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, surpassing the love of women” (2 Sam. 1:26). Throughout the chapters, Jonathan and David consistently affirm their love for each other.

The similarities between the two relationships are: firstly, the suggestion of homosexuality between the male characters. Secondly, Jonathan - like the Prince - is the older man whereas David - like the Swallow - is the youth. Thirdly, the manner in which Jonathan removes his sword and garments, giving them to David is parallel to the Prince commanding the Swallow to take the ruby from his sword and the coat of golden leaves from his body, saying to him, “take [the golden leaves] off, leaf by leaf” (9). Fourthly, David and the Swallow are sent on quests to fulfil their masters’ desires. In the fifth instance, both couples share a kiss. And finally, David’s confession (that his love to Jonathan “surpass[es] the love of women”) (2 Sam. 1:26) which reinforces the strength of male-love can be compared to Wilde’s aims in elevating the love between two men as being superior to the love between a man and a woman, as mentioned in a previous chapter.

Martin argues that these issues in particular make readers “misunderstand” Wilde’s intentions which are to “merely” apply social attitudes in which homosexuality offers a link to a concern of beauty at the “expanse of larger social concerns” (76). Wilde states in a letter to Kersley in 1888

that the tales “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” (*LOW* 219).

Happily Ever After?

Although Wilde was a homosexual and supported his beliefs in making the heroes of the fairytale both male, he knew that this ideal was not acceptable according to Victorian values. After the Swallow’s death and the melting of the Statue of the Prince, God sends an Angel to “bring [him] the two most precious things in the city” (11). The Angel retrieves the leaden heart of the statue and the dead Swallow’s body. God appreciates that the heroes are indeed the “two most precious things” and rewards the two for their sacrifice. However, the heroes are not reunited in Heaven, they do not prescribe to the fairytale convention – to live happily ever after. The two are separated, the Swallow to God’s “garden of Paradise” (11) where he “shall sing for evermore” (11) and the Prince is sent to the “city of gold” (11) where he shall praise God. The heroes destroy themselves while helping the less fortunate but instead of gaining their desired communion they are separated by God (Balog 312).

Does the fairytale suggest a happy ending? Do the characters deserve a happy ending? After living a lifetime of pleasure oblivious to other people’s misery, the Happy Prince experiences a transformation and comes back to life spiritually awake, which leads him to acquire mercy and to sacrifice himself to help the poor. Balog considers why the Prince’s soul is still acting among the living. He concludes that the Prince’s soul will not depart from earth because he did not live “consciously” and did not fulfil his “carnal existence.” Balog sees the tale as a typical ghost story where the soul of the Prince haunts the Swallow in order to help the Prince “exterminate” the decorative purposes of his material existence (314) by giving it away to the poor.

Is the Prince’s change of heart acknowledged? At the beginning of the fairytale, the statue of the Happy Prince is a symbol of repression. One character, a disappointed man in the street,

envies the Prince's lack of misery, muttering that he is "glad there is some one in the world who is quite happy" (3). A mother uses the statue of the Prince for remonstrance, telling her child that "the Happy Prince never dreams of crying for anything" (3). The Town Councillor experiences delight when looking at the statue, but he represses the feeling because he "[fears] lest people should think him unpractical" (3). On the other hand, by the end of the tale, now that the statue is bare of the jewels and gold, the statue is accused of being shabby. The townspeople observe that the Prince looks "little better than a beggar" (11) and the Art Professor concludes that "as he is no longer beautiful, he is no longer useful" (11). The Prince's selfless deeds are not recognized and ironically his reward is to be pulled down and melted to use the iron so to serve more utilitarian purposes, and his un-melting broken heart is thrown to a dust heap next to the Swallow's carcass. The world takes little notice of their sacrifices because it is indifferent, if not hostile to selflessness (Quintus 712).

Bettelheim argues, and I agree, that children need happy endings to reassure them that there is a possibility in overcoming obstacles and attaining happiness (23). However, Wilde's tales tend to have sad endings rather than the traditional phrase "they lived happily ever after." Moreover, his tales are often "bitterly pessimistic or satiric and cynical" (Edelson 168). This leads me to believe that either Wilde chose to ignore the conventional fairytale form or that he did not intend for his fairytales to be read to children. In "The Happy Prince", the death of the heroes is elevated to have sentimental sadness and an aesthetic appeal, thus the death is made attractive. Another example is that Wilde is more concerned with the Prince's sacrifice than in the results of helping the poor. The stripping of the aesthetic beauty of the Prince's jewels and gold is detailed almost like a ceremony, an elaborate ritual in reverse (Manlove 35).

Zipes points out that there are many fairytales with ironic or tragic endings; however, these tales still seek a utopian ideal in transforming the characters to redeem their humane qualities and

overcome their bestial drives (Zipes, *WDCT* 22). In the tale, the Prince is introduced after his redemption; he no longer seeks pleasure because he realized that it is not happiness (5), instead, he wants to bring joy to the poor by sacrificing his gold and jewels. Nonetheless, he is aware of the dilemma in his plan, stating to the Swallow that “the living always think that gold can make them happy” (9). Regardless, the Prince’s good intentions are rewarded by God and he is sent to live in the “city of gold” (11) which, in my opinion, is another problem: will the Prince be happy living forever in such a place after he had realized that gold does not bring happiness? I think that this could be interpreted as an ironic punishment inflicted upon the Prince for being a homosexual. Wilde was aware that homosexuality was not acceptable according to Victorian moral values and the Christian doctrine of the time, and as such homosexual men were misunderstood and regarded as sinful, as proven by Wilde’s trials.

The Prince’s given name is “The Happy Prince” and in my opinion this creates another paradox. Although he admits that he experienced happiness from the carefree Palace life, he confesses that it was a delusion because happiness does not come from pleasure. He states that people were wrong to call him “happy” (5). Furthermore, the Prince is not portrayed as happy when he is a statue. He is shown to be miserable, weeping and lamenting the terrible condition of his city. Finally, based on my interpretation of the ending, I believe that he will not be happy in eternal Heaven either. Yet, why does Wilde christen the Prince- Happy?

Wilde could have written a conventional fairytale with a happy ending. The abrupt, unnatural ending offers an absolute form of closure applying the *deus ex machina* because only this way is it possible to provide some compensation for the heroes (Balog 300). Nietzsche states that the *deus ex machina* is a flat and impertinent way of the poetical justice (117). Jacobs writes, “it seems to be more of an escape-clause, a bid of respectability” and I agree with him (296). It is not unusual for fairytales to have orthodox Christian endings; however, they are most likely to have a

happy conclusion. This is precisely the reason why, based on Vladimir Propp's theories, Balog considers "The Happy Prince" to be an anti-tale (297). Nonetheless, some critics like Jacobs and Gillespie believe that the ending in fact is a happy one (296; 29), others like Corse and Snider feel it is not (par.14; 6). In my opinion, as mentioned above, I think it is not a happy ending because firstly, the "lovers" are separated and secondly, the Prince's divine reward, to live eternally in the city of gold, is not likely to make him live "happily ever after". The heroes are victims of love and are separated even in salvation (Balog 315). Zia Corse argues in her essay "Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales: No One Lived Happily Ever After," that instead of beginning his tales with a conflict and ending with a resolution, Wilde builds up the tale without offering a solution. This lack of resolution causes the reader to feel "unfulfilled and dissatisfied with the lack of positive outcome" (par. 14). It is possibly a strategy to give the reader the opportunity to consider the deeper message of the tale.

Furthermore, Jacobs and Snider meditate on the possibility of how the tale could have been different if the Swallow was female (296; 6). Snider argues that Wilde could have made the Swallow a female as she is in the Greek myth of Procne and Philomela (6). I agree with Jacobs and Snider and believe if the Swallow was of female gender then the tale would have been a beautiful story of sacrifice and love, the ending would not have been concluded in the separation of the lovers, because it would have been a heterosexual relationship and they would have lived happily ever after in heaven. However, this ending would not have fulfilled Wilde's purpose in writing the tale. He seems to be pessimistic about his own situation and the stigmatization of homosexuality. If he had had hope that in the future his lifestyle would become acceptable, Wilde might have chosen a different ending where the Prince and the Swallow are reunited in heaven, together for eternity.

Conclusion

Oscar Wilde wrote fairytales to influence culture and society for an adult audience who enjoy mysticism and the fantastic. Furthermore, writing fairytales was an important stage in Wilde's writing progress as it had a therapeutic effect in his attempts to understand his own situation.

"The Happy Prince" is a complex fairytale and the text is not innocent. It contains various hidden images like the suggestion of homosexuality which, in my opinion, ultimately steer the tale to an unhappy ending. Given Wilde's position as a homosexual in Victorian England, he could not imagine a homosexual relationship ending happily. This is why he steers the story to the unhappy ending as a representation of the reality of homosexuality in his time. Wilde's subsequent life and how he suffered for his homosexuality ultimately lead him to his untimely death. It is possible that he saw life as filled with subterfuge and deception, and this is why he designed a sardonic destiny for the Prince, when he was sent by God to live in the city of gold for eternity and to be separated from his beloved Swallow even in death.

Wilde was caught between two ideals and he represents this struggle in his work; the intellectual view of his mentor Pater, who sees homosexuality as a higher form of expression, and the conventional Victorian morality which views this expression as abhorrent. Like the statue of the Prince who stands as a public amusement, beautiful for all to see, Wilde amused his public through his writings and witticisms; and like the statue of the Prince, who was pulled down when he was "[...] no longer beautiful [...] no longer useful," (11) Wilde too was disgraced and rejected by his public through his trials and imprisonment.

My greatest contribution in this essay is the parallel of the Prince and the Swallow's relationship to that of the Biblical David and Jonathan. Wilde has given us the ultimate evidence in his trials as he elevates the Biblical men's love to justify his own love for Lord Alfred

Douglas. This leads me to the conclusion that Wilde may have had David and Jonathan in mind when writing “The Happy Prince”.

Wilde celebrates male beauty and sanctifies what he sees as the pure love between two males. He introduces two failed heterosexual relationships into the fairytale and shows the contrast and the polarity between the males and females. As opposed to the Prince and the Swallow’s suggested homosexual relationship, the males and females in the two relationships do not seem to need or complete each other.

I believe that Wilde wrote “The Happy Prince” as a plea to humanity to consider the plight of those who are trapped in a relationship made impossible by society’s norms. Children would enjoy the fairytale for its compassion, the messages of charity and self-sacrifice and personification of animals, plants and statues; however, they would not be aware of the socio-political aspects of the story which make it all the more pertinent for the adult audience.

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