

# Aspects of Christianity in Oscar Wilde (Part I) : An Analysis of *The Fairy-Tales*

Yoshinobu Umetsu

## Abstract

The artistic merits of the individual works of Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) have often been slighted in order to stress their significance as literary monuments to decadence. Criticism has been overly concerned with the light that it might shed upon the origins of Wilde's aesthetical views and his biographical approach to interpretation. However, the more significant task of asserting the religious nature and qualities of Wilde's literary works has been overlooked as well. A double and parallel weakness in a substantial number of the critical accounts of Wilde's life and literary achievements has been the tendency to see both Wilde and his works as historical and literary anomalies, rather than products of the shaping influences of decadent and *fin-de-siecle* peculiarities. Wilde was—in accordance with and based on my studies—a much greater personality than being just a mere writer.

The aim of this paper is to analyze aspects of Christianity in Oscar Wilde, especially through his fairy-tales. I have placed primary emphasis on the analytical assessment of his idea of Christianity and his literary achievements.

## Key Words

Christian compassion, Christian idealism, decadence, fairy-tales, *fin-de-siecle*, mannered morality, materialism, pessimism, practicality, realism, reality, reason, romance, satire, self-sacrifice, social injustice, sympathy, Victorian era

## Introduction

“The Happy Prince and Other Tales” was published in May 1888, and Oscar Wilde was suddenly seen as a writer of fairy-tales. After revelling in his new role as fairy-tale author, in November 1891 he gave a more ornate presentation in “A House of Pomegranates”, for which he received considerable praise for these volumes of children's stories.

Although he frequently declared that, technically speaking, all his works were equally perfect until his imprisonment, he expressed a preference for the tale of “The Young King” in his second volume of fairy-tales. After his release he thoroughly disliked all his works, saying that they were inadequate expressions of his genius.

“The Happy Prince” and “The Young King” are sermons on practical Christianity, and are, on the whole, the two most effective tales in the collection. But to critics and readers there are some principal points about these fairy-tales which bear on the nature of their author.

The first point is that Oscar Wilde was becoming extremely interested in the personality of Jesus Christ, which had been growing until often he spoke in parables. “What is the nature of the world as shaped by modern man?” “Is it possible to live in this world according to Christian ideals?” — Wilde repeatedly raises these questions in his fairy-tales.

The second point is Wilde’s sympathy for the poor and the downtrodden, which eventually found direct expression in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, an essay that aroused the secret enmity of the rich and powerful classes at whose house-parties he was an invaluable entertainer.

The third is that the dominant spirit of these fairy-tales is bitter satire differing widely from Hans Christian Andersen’s (1805-1875), whom Wilde’s literary manner so constantly recalls to us. This quality of bitterness, however, does not drive away readers at all. Instead, he gives us a pleasant sensation of humor.

Finally, we observe his growing predilection for the use of words merely for the sake of their sounds, which forms one of the most stylistic characteristics of Wilde’s fairy-tales.

Wilde himself made various comments on the fairy-tales, and these show how close the link was between their artistic conception and his general ideas about aesthetics. It is well worth remembering that shortly after the publication of “The Happy Prince and Other Tales”, Wilde published one of his most important essays, “The Decay of Lying” (1889).

### 1. “The Young King”

One of the chief functions of a true fairy-tale is to invite sympathy. Whether they are princesses, peasants, or inanimate objects, the joys and sorrows of the heroes and heroines of fairy lands will always be read by people of all ages who love fairy-tales, and regard them as the most delightful form of romance. Oscar Wilde, no doubt for excellent reasons, has chosen to present his fables in the form of fairy-tales to a public not composed solely of children.

In “The Young King” and “The Happy Prince”, Wilde looks outward at human suffering and ponders the problems of economic and social inequality and injustice. These two tales offer plenty of evidence that analyze these problems objectively, and introduce moral dilemmas and sources of personal guilt: in each, the protagonists’ awareness of human suffering conflict with their desire for a life of beauty and pleasure. Characters caught in this conflict can, just like the King and the Prince, earn salvation by converting from the pursuit of pleasure to the imitation of Christ.

In “The Young King”, Wilde criticized the social triumphs during the era of the West End of London, attacking the system that made the life of luxury possible through the excessive exploitation of the poor. Moreover, Wilde seeks to understand fully this opposition through the figure of Christ, whom the Young King emulates. The King’s coronation recalls Christ’s journey to the cross. Tired, he humbly passes through jeering crowds toward his destiny; before he reaches the cathedral, his page, playing the role of Peter, becomes afraid

and deserts him. He, just like Christ, reconciles in his person the opposing roles of beggar and king. His courtiers unimaginatively judge him by his dreams, just as doubters rejected the message of Christ:

“Surely he is mad; for what is a dream but a dream, and vision but a vision? They are not real things that one should heed them. And what have we to do with the lives of those who toil for us? Shall a man not eat bread till he has seen the sower, nor drink wine till he has talked with the vinedresser?”

(“The Young King”, p. 231)

Here, Wilde links the economic theme with Christian faith; to those who can comprehend the symbolism of the Eucharist, Christ is both sower and vinedresser. He takes upon Himself the sufferings of the poor. In denying their King, the courtiers also deny Christ.

In order to dramatically demonstrate that his protagonist is the King, Wilde employs a Christian miracle. The tale takes its final shape as a saint’s legend when God crowns the King:

And lo! through the painted windows came the sunlight streaming upon him, and the sunbeams wove round him a tissued robe that was fainter than the robe that had been fashioned for his pleasure. The dead staff blossomed, and bare lilies that were whiter than pearls. The dry thorn blossomed, and bare roses that were redder than rubies. Whiter than fine pearls were the lilies, and their stems were of bright silver. Redder than male rubies were the roses, and their leaves were of beaten gold.

(“The Young King”, p. 233)

The saint’s legend incorporates two realms: mundane reality and the spiritual. Wilde tries to realize fully the incorporation of these two realms in “The Young King”. Side by side with the King’s internal crisis and conversion, he presents a naturalistic description and an economic analysis of social injustice. Wilde has made it very clear that social injustice demands a political solution, and offers little hope that one can be implemented.

At the end of the tale, the King is saved, but his subjects are not. The controlling opposition between wealth and poverty has been reconciled only on a personal, symbolic level. Apparently because Wilde himself realized that momentous social problems could not be simplistically solved, he did not conclude with a definite statement.

## 2. “The Happy Prince”

In “The Happy Prince”, Wilde deals more successfully with the burden of human suffering. First, he combines fairy-tales with saint’s legends in order to represent the problems in less realistic terms. Rather than replicating socio-economic reality, he sets the tale in another world, where birds and statues converse. Instead of adopting an intellectual overview, he presents isolated instances of poverty that can be alleviated according to the

rules of the tale's imaginary world. Only once, and with skillful indirectness, he traces the problem to its origin.

A poor seamstress, the mother of a sick child, is sewing a gown for one of the queen's maids of honor. On his way to help the afflicted family, the Swallow passes first over the cathedral, and then over the palace. And he overhears the maid's murmur in conversation: "I hope my dress will be ready in time for the State-ball ... I have ordered passion-flowers to be embroidered on it; but the seamstresses are so lazy." ( p. 287) The flower's symbolic significance is ironically suited to unfeeling materialism and indicates the great spiritual distance that separates palace from cathedral. This indirect method of criticism blends more smoothly into the tale's core than the political speeches in "The Young King." By concentrating on simple solutions rather than the complexity of the problem, Wilde uses this style with greater effect, creating a more unified, harmonious work of art.

Like the King, the Prince converts from self-indulgence to Christian compassion for others:

"When I was alive and had a human heart," answered the statue, "I did not know what tears were, for I lived in the Palace of Sans-Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter. In the daytime I played with my companions in the garden, and in the evening I led the dance in the Great Hall. Round the garden ran a very lofty wall, but I never cared to ask what lay beyond it, everything about me was so beautiful. My courtiers called me the Happy Prince, and happy indeed I was, if pleasures be happiness. So I lived, and so I died. And now that I am dead they have set me up here so high that I can see all ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my heart made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep." ( "The Happy Prince", p. 286)

Wilde duplicates the Prince's conversion in his treatment of the Swallow. And through the bird's attachment to the Reed, he adds a playful version of erotic love. While the Prince looks back on a life of luxury, the Swallow has, in his past, a flirtation and, in his future, a sojourn in decadent Egypt. They reject these lower forms of pleasure as they come to realize the highest result of Christian love.

The social solution missing in "The Young King" manifests itself in the sacrificial acts of the Prince and the Swallow, his faithful companion. Whereas the King was magnificently transfigured, the Prince subjects himself to a gradual disfigurement, as he literally sacrifices himself for others. Having given his jewels and gold leaf to the poor, he takes upon himself the 'misery and ugliness' that were their lot. A relationship of mutual devotion purges the defect of self-love in both the Swallow and the Prince, and offers a pointed contrast to the pretty flirtation with which the tale begins. The Swallow's death causes the Prince's heart to break — a recurrent motif in the tales — and both are delivered from their sufferings.

"The Happy Prince" lacks not only the stark realism of "The Young King", but also the polar extremes of the King's marvelous coronation. Wilde presents the relatively minor miracle of a lead heart that will not melt. Divinity manifests itself less dramatically, but

more effectively, in the tale's coda:

"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." ("The Happy Prince", p. 291)

The unimaginative and materialistic mayor and council members have thrown "these two most precious things" to the dust heap. ( p. 291) Moreover, blinded by their selfishness, both the mayor and council members argue that the statue should replace the New Happy Prince.

This merely becomes a division within himself, in the image of the heart breaking so that Christ may enter it. This image that the physical heart had to break in order to unite body and soul was Wilde's own; his self had always been divided — even in its language — between the body and Victorian society.

### 3. "The Nightingale and the Rose"

Fairy-tales traditionally fulfill man's wish for a harmonious, thoroughly humanized world by providing an environment in which all forms of life — and even inanimate objects — communicate freely. Wilde, however, denies this privilege to the people in "The Nightingale and the Rose" because they do not deserve it. Nor, indeed, did one of his correspondents, who completely misunderstood the tale. The following response is surprisingly gracious, even for Wilde:

I am afraid that I don't think as much of the Young Student as you do. He seems to me a rather shallow young man and almost as bad as the girl he thinks he loves. The Nightingale is the true lover, if there is one. She, at least, is Romance, and the Student and the girl are, like most of us, unworthy of Romance. ( *Letters\**, p. 218)

The Student needs a red rose in order to win the affection of the Professor's daughter. Unable to meet her demand, he surrenders to despair. But the Nightingale rescues him from helplessness by providing the rose, which he jubilantly takes to his love. An interlude of despair, an impossible task, and deliverance through the unexpected intervention of a helping animal, these motifs comprise the classic fairy-tale situation. And early in this tale, Wilde gives the readers every reason to anticipate the expected happy ending. The Nightingale lyrically proclaims the greatness of love:

---

\* *Letters*: Hart-Davis, Rupert, ed. *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*. London: Rupert Hart Davis Ltd. 1962.

“Surely love is a wonderful thing. It is more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals. Pearls and pomegranates cannot buy it, nor is it set forth in the market-place. It may not be purchased of the merchants, nor can it be weighed out in the balance for gold.”

(“The Nightingale and the Rose”, p. 292)

“Love is wiser than Philosophy, though he is wise, and mightier than Power, though he is mighty.”

(“The Nightingale and the Rose”, p. 294)

“She has form,” he said to himself, as he walked away through the grove — “that cannot be denied to her ; but has she got feeling ? I am afraid not. In fact, she is like most artists ; she is all style without any sincerity. She would not sacrifice herself for others. She thinks merely of music, and everybody knows that the arts are selfish. Still, it must be admitted that she has some beautiful notes in her voice. What a pity it is that they do not mean anything, or do any practical good !”

(“The Nightingale and the Rose”, p. 294)

Perhaps the best example of Wilde’s method is to be found in “The Nightingale and the Rose”. Here the Nightingale has sacrificed its life in order to obtain a red rose for the Student. The Student gives the Nightingale’s gift to the daughter of the Professor in order to present the rose to her:

But the girl frowned. “I am afraid it will not go with my dress,” she answered : “and besides, the Chamberlain’s nephew has sent me some real jewels, and every body knows that jewels cost far more than flowers.”

(“The Nightingale of the Rose”, p. 296)

Then the Student, having thrown away the rose, returns to a great dusty book, reflecting: —

“What a silly thing Love is !” said the Student as he walked away. “It is not half as useful as Logic, for it does not prove anything, and it is always telling one of things that are not going to happen, and making one believe things that are not true. In fact, it is quite unpractical, and, as in this age to be practical is everything, I shall go back to Philosophy and study Metaphor.”

(“The Nightingale and the Rose”, p. 296)

It may be added that in order to get the desired effect in the conclusion of this tale, Wilde has gone dangerously close to the region of ‘sham’ sentiment. It is the only place where his artistic sense has stumbled along with the vicissitudes of life. Here materialism, practicality, and reason have excluded the imaginative perspective on experience, which yields art and generates Christian compassion for one’s fellow man.

#### 4. “The Selfish Giant”

“The Selfish Giant” brings a light of recognition that few of Wilde’s other works can do. Still, inspite of their enduring popularity, Wilde’s fairy-tales have not drawn much closer attention. This neglect might have been unfortunate, for the tales are interesting, not only as objects of literary study, but for the light they shed on Wilde’s basic literary strategies.

In many of his fairy-tales the motifs of suffering and redemption, through love, appear as consistent threads. A variety of researchers have noted the fascination Wilde seemed to have had throughout his life for Christianity, especially the figure of Christ. This Christ motif visibly permeates the texture of “The Selfish Giant”. The Little Boy whom the Giant had helped into the tree finally returns with the marks of crucifixion, a message of love, on his hands and feet.

The Christian parallels in “The Selfish Giant” are clear-cut, but Wilde gives his tale a further mythical dimension by embodying his basic Christian themes in his images of both a protean world and decadent society. The garden, a beautiful verdant paradise, becomes, through the Giant’s selfishness or lack of love, a barren wasteland torn apart by cold winds, hail, and snow. Only by the Giant’s change of heart or act of love does the wasteland become a fertile garden again. The Giant’s reward, of course, is eternity in Christ’s garden.

‘Beauty and tenderness’ were the qualities in “The Selfish Giant”, remarked upon by Walter Pater, who called it ‘perfect in its kind’ (*Letters*, p. 219), although it is a little difficult to know what ‘kind’ Pater had in mind.

In 1891, Marcel Schwob, a young lion of the day, who was a writer and journalist, asked Wilde’s permission to translate “The Selfish Giant” into French. On 27 December of that same year, it was published in *L’Echo de Paris*.

The first part of the tale is effective, with the extreme simplicity of the fable enlivened by flashes of wit and resource, and vigorous phrasing. The Giant suffers from selfishness by excluding the children from his garden. The central, transitional section, with the children creeping back into the garden through a hole in the wall, and the Giant’s heart melted by the Boy too small to climb up a tree, is written in unmistakably ‘biblical’ syntax and rhythm:

And the tree broke at once into blossom, and the birds came and sang on it, and the little boy stretched out his two arms and flung them round the Giant’s neck, and kissed him.

(“The Selfish Giant”, p. 299)

In the third section, when the Giant approaches death, the Boy is abruptly transformed into the figure of Christ. The restraining thread of wit is, naturally enough, discarded; the language becomes mechanical, and the tone verges on the moving and mawkish level. In this way, obtaining the stylistic and rhetoric effects from the Bible, the childlike Christ

figure in Wilde's famous tale "The Selfish Giant" closely reflects the Swallow in "The Happy Prince." The Giant also receives wounds for his love and self-sacrifice:

In the last scene of this tale, color presentation is effectively used;

And when the children ran in that afternoon, they found the Giant lying dead under the tree, all covered with *white blossoms*.  
(*"The Selfish Giant"*, p. 300; italics mine)

The phrase 'white blossoms' is so symbolic that we are struck by the Giant's faith-awakening and repentance, God's redemption of our sins, and our subsequent purification.

### Conclusion

Romance languishes in the age of realism and materialism. Oscar Wilde made this point in his works. There also the artist-figures found themselves isolated. But they could transcend their environment because God existed beyond it. Wilde could create transcendent art, exploiting the potential inherent in his fairy-tales and saint's legends — but only when his faith stood strong.

In the beginning he clearly began to write these fairy-tales for the study of prose. And then he tried to put them into fanciful form for Romance's sake. He meant them partly for those who had kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy.

There were a lot of rising tides of irreligion in the Victorian era, swelled by the progress of science and industry, biblical criticism, Darwin's theory of evolution, and Kantian skepticism. During this time of *fin-de-siecle* and decadence Wilde tried to seek true Christianity through writing these fairy-tales, in which he declared himself to be against the way of life and thought of the people of that era.

\* Text used in this paper: *The Works of Oscar Wilde*. edited, with an Introduction, by G. F. Maine. 1948. London & Glasgow: Collins Clear-Type Press. 1961.

I am grateful to Prof. Christopher Cuadra for his invaluable help and advice. Any mistakes are entirely my own.

## References

- Beckson, Karl. *I Can Resist Everything Except Temptation (And Other Quotations from Oscar Wilde)*. 1893. New York: Columbia University Press. 1996.
- Braybrook, Patrick. *Oscar Wilde*. London: The Folcroft Press Inc., 1970.
- Broad, Lewis. *The Friendships & Follies of Oscar Wilde*. London: Hutchinson & Co. Publishers Ltd. 1954.
- Cohen, Philip K. *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde*. London: Associated University Presses, Inc. 1976.
- Ellmann, Richard. *Oscar Wilde*. London: Hamish Hamilton Limited, 1987.
- Erickson, Donald H. *Oscar Wilde* (Twayne's English Authors Series; 211) Boston : Twayne Publisher, 1977.
- Ervine, John. *Oscar Wilde*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1951.
- Fryer, Jonathan. *Andre & Oscar*. London: Constable and Company Ltd. 1997.
- Gagnier, Regenia. *Idylls of the Marketplace (Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public)*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1986.
- Gillespie, Michael Patric. *Oscar Wilde*. Folcroft Library Editions. 1970.
- Harris, Frank. *Oscar Wilde*. London: Constable and Company Ltd. 1938.
- Hart-Davis, Rupert. ed. *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*. London: Rupert Hart Davis Ltd. 1962.
- Holland, Vyvyan. *Oscar Wilde and his World*. 1960. Thetford Lowe and Brydone Printers Ltd. 1979.
- Hopkins, R. Thurston. *Oscar Wilde*. Folcroft Library Editions. 1970.
- Horan, Patrick M. *The Importance of Being Paradoxical (Maternal Presence in the Works of Oscar Wilde)*. London: Associated University Presses Inc. 1997.
- Hyde, Harford Montgomery. *Oscar Wilde*. 1907. New York: Da Capo Press. 1985.
- Kohl, Norbert. *Oscar Wilde: The Works of the Conformist Rebel*. Trans. by David Henry Wilson. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press. 1985.
- Milward, Peter. *Christian Themes in English Literature*. 1967. Tokyo. Kenkyusha Limited. 1980.
- Nalbantian, Suzanne. *Seeds of Decadence (In the Nineteenth – Century Novel) – A Crisis in Values –*. 1984. London: Macmillan Press. 1988.
- O'Sullivan, Vincent. *Aspects of Wilde*. New York: Henry Holt and Company. 1936.
- Pearson, Hesketh. *The Life of Oscar Wilde*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1946.
- Raby, Peter. *Oscar Wilde*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1988.
- Sandulescu, C. George ed. *Rediscovering Oscar Wilde* (Princess Grace Irish Library: 8). Buckinghamshire: Colin Smyth Ltd. 1994.
- Smith, Phillip, ed. *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1989.

