Oscar Wilde's Essays and Fairy Tales

Aesthetic Morality

MA Thesis Literatuur en Cultuurkritiek

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Approx. 14.600 words

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27-8-2012

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Introduction

The name of Oscar Wilde has almost become a synonym for wit, for humour and for scandals. Even more than one hundred years after his death people are still reading his stories and perform his plays. From his earliest art reviews to his literary peak as a writer of satirist plays, everything Wilde ever wrote is surrounded with an air of discussion. There is the biting satire of manners in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, with its many puns and ridiculed mannerisms, the outrage that shook the English literary world when *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published, with its unconventional display of disregard for Christian morals, and the recognition of Wilde's literary genius in his public farewell in *De Profundis*, written while imprisoned on accounts of homosexuality.

Many modern readers, however, forget that Wilde was not only a writer of plays and controversial books; he also wrote essays on art criticism and was well known for his first collection of fairy tales, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*. Especially the story of "The Happy Prince" is still popular: it was made into a short animation film in 1973 featuring Christopher Plummer, of *Sound of Music* fame, as the voice of the Happy Prince, and more recently, in 2008, Stephen Fry recorded an audio book of the story. However, Wilde's fairy tales offer an interesting look into the mind of the author, as they are seemingly opposed to the critical views that Wilde displayed in his essays. This thesis will present a research into Wilde's critical essays, that present a view on art that is best described as aestheticism, and it will then aim to analyse a selection of Wilde's fairy tales with Wilde's own theories in mind. The selection of stories was made on the basis of common themes in the case of "The Happy Prince" and "The Devoted Friend," and on the basis of the possibility of a larger, comparative research into religious background and another well-known fairy tale, "The Little Mermaid," in the case of "The Fisherman and his Soul." These fairy tales come from both collections

Wilde published, namely *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* and *A House of Pomegranates*. The aim of this research is to find out whether or not Wilde is contradicting himself by presenting himself as an aesthete in his essays, claiming art should be just art, yet writing fairy tales, a genre that focusses on education of its audience and morality.

Wilde's Aestheticism

Oscar Wilde is generally seen as one of the biggest proponents of aestheticism in English literature. In many of his writings, Wilde comes across as vehemently anti-moralistic and as a staunch defender of the *l'art-pour-l'art* philosophy that many of his teachers adhered to. At the age of seventeen, Wilde won a scholarship to Trinity College Dublin, which brought him into contact with John Pentland Mahaffy. Mahaffy was a professor of Ancient History and instilled in the young Wilde a profound love for aestheticism. Mahaffy had lived in Greece for a number of years and had assimilated ancient Greek philosophy as his own thought, which led to him "deliberately taking the artistic standpoint towards everything" (Holland 11) in the tradition of aestheticism. In 1872, when Wilde was eighteen, Trinity College even offered a course on aesthetics, which Mahaffy would have probably urged Wilde to take (Holland 11). This seems likely, as Mahaffy had previously published his critique on Kant's writings, defending that "there can be no strict mathematical definition of beauty in nature, art, poetry or music" and that "beauty was relative to taste" (Holland 11). There are, however, no records of Wilde ever attending this course at Trinity College: the only evidence for Wilde's academic education on the subject of aestheticism can be found in his surviving notebooks from his years at Oxford (Holland 11).

Next to Mahaffy, Wilde had two other important academic teachers: John Ruskin and Walter Pater. These two scholars worked at Oxford's Magdalen College, which Wilde attended from 1874 due to gaining another scholarship. Ruskin was the Slade Professor of Fine Arts and, by the time Wilde encountered him, was well in his fifties. Ruskin was slowly moving away from his earlier work as an art historian and critic, focussing more and more on "the social aspects of contemporary art and his somewhat idealised view of the craftsman finding fulfilment through doing work with a valid purpose" (Holland 12). Ruskin's vision

entailed a unity of everything, in a Christian context, revealing the divine purpose to man through separate components, each representing another part of the divine (Raby 21). Art, then, should be true to nature, as it was created in reflection of God's creation. Moreover, Ruskin was convinced that the force of good pervaded from beautiful objects, which not only included art but also practical things such as parks and roads (Raby 19). In line with this, Ruskin had set up various projects to promote beauty in everyday life through practicality. Wilde was in awe of Ruskin and decided to take part in Ruskin's projects in the countryside near Oxford, which included building a road through a nearby marsh. By engaging with these projects, Wilde found himself becoming closely acquainted with his new mentor: "the reward was less in the toil than in the pleasure of breakfasting with Ruskin afterward" (Holland 12). Even though Wilde's initial enthusiasm diminished, the friendship between him and Ruskin stayed and proved to be of great value and importance to Wilde during his later career, as can be seen from the fact that Wilde sent Ruskin a copy of *The Happy Prince and Other Stories*, his first collection of fairy tales, with a note stuck to it in which he praised Ruskin's friendship and scholarship (Holland 12). The main element of Ruskin's art philosophy was that the force of good was present in all that is beautiful and would therefore enrich people's lives, leading to "change and improvement" (Raby 20).

In contrast to the more social aspects of the arts as dealt with by Ruskin stood Walter Pater. Wilde had read Pater's work *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* during his first year in Oxford and was inspired by Pater's aesthetic approach to art. However, Pater proved to be more reclusive and harder to reach than Ruskin, and Wilde was only introduced to him after his third year in Oxford. As Wilde still had a strong friendship with Mahaffy, he accompanied Mahaffy to Greece and Rome in the spring of 1877, which led to him returning to Oxford late – which, according to Peter Raby may have been Mahaffy's intention from the start, aiming to push Wilde towards an almost religious reverence of art (14-15). This resulted

in an official warning from the university, which in turn excluded Wilde from taking part in the rest of the academic year (Raby 13-14). Instead of returning to his family in Ireland, in an attempt to impress his tutors, Wilde set out to London, obtained an invitation to the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery and wrote a review of the exhibition. He managed to get the review published in the *Dublin University Magazine* (Holland 13). His review was remarkable: its subject was controversial, its language highly stylized and its critique demonstrated Wilde's eclectic and highly developed taste in art (Holland 15). The text showed Wilde's desire to be recognized as a critic and scholar by demonstrating Wilde's extensive knowledge of art, his experiences with continental Europe and his personal acquaintances with several artists "in the manner of a long-established reviewer" (Holland 15). More importantly, Wilde managed to include many references to theories, essays and notions of art as put forward by Ruskin and Pater, sometimes even quoting literally from their work, as is argued by Merlin Holland (15-18). After publication, Wilde sent a copy of his review to Pater, who then replied with great praise and an invitation: exactly the effect Wilde had hoped for (Holland 18).

Pater's main philosophies on art entailed that it was not the final product that created art, but rather that art was the path that led towards that creation, and that art enriched life by introducing moments of ecstasy and by filling a person with an adoration of art because of itself (Holland 12) – highly aesthetic notions, bordering the decadent. Pater's philosophy seems to suggest that the critic, with his unique vision, is actually more of an artist than those who create art on the basis of these theories, a theory that Wilde would explore in detail in *The Critic as Artist*. These notions would live on during Wilde's literary career, as can be seen in for example *The Importance of Being Earnest*, when in the third act Gwendolen says that "[i]n matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing" (*Importance*, 705), pointing towards what Holland calls the value of "the mode of expression as an art form" (Holland 18).

Wilde's last mentor was painter James McNeill Whistler. Even though Ruskin and Pater were already in opposition with each other with regards to their philosophies on art and its value, in Whistler, Wilde found someone who opposed both his mentors at the same time. Where Ruskin taught Wilde that art would have to be true to nature, Whistler told him that the creation of art excelled over nature; where Pater had introduced Wilde to aesthetic theories, intellectual appreciation and sensual notions of art, Whistler condemned these theories and other properties of art, claiming that art was simply art (Holland 18). Wilde found it hard to reconcile Whistler's notions of art with what his mentors had taught him in the years before and decided that he simply could not marry all these ideas. Instead, he selected the notions that he found most valuable and went his own way, claiming the self-styled title of Professor of Aesthetics and telling everyone willing to lend his or her ear that art was the secret of life (Holland 18). In 1885, this would cause a clash between Wilde and Whistler, as the latter claimed that Wilde had taken many of his theories on art, especially that art was merely art and not a veiled critique on society and that nature was in no way a perfect model for art, and used them in his lectures, which Wilde, after a tour of America, was now giving in England (Holland 20-23). Wilde, in his response, mainly agreed with Whistler on the points of using his ideas for his own purposes, but also argued that Whistler was wrong in saying that only painters could critique paintings and that the Aesthetic movement had devaluated art (Holland 23).

In line with his new profession as Professor of Aesthetics, in 1889, Wilde published *The Decay of Lying*. This is an essay on what Wilde sees as the devaluation of art through theorised analysis and explanation of social critique through art, put in the form of a dialogue between two characters, Cyril and Vivian. In this dialogue, Vivian presents his essay "The Decay of Lying" to Cyril. Consisting of two parts, the essay first criticises modern literature and realism, then a point is made for art being the example for reality and nature. This essay

profoundly demonstrates Wilde's aesthetic notions, through the character of Vivian. The main point of the essay is Vivian's belief that works of art should be beautiful: he values the aesthetic over the moralistic. Vivian argues that artists should not look at reality and take their situations and characters from that. The lying that is described in the essay by Vivian is the way in which artists should create their art: imagination is defended as the source of all art. Nature, according to Vivian, is imperfect: he bemoans the fact that the grass is uncomfortable and claims that artifice, such as architecture, was only invented by man because nature is imperfect. Vivian's grievances also lie with the representation of the truth, as he argues that the more reliable a newspaper is, the more unreadable it becomes. Vivian seems to bemoan the success of realism in modern literature, as seen in works by Zola, Maupassant and Henry James. In a sense, to Vivian, art exists to right nature's wrongs, much like artifice exists to improve on nature's uncomfortable character: art is praised as being superior to nature. Vivian mourns over "the decay of lying as an art, a science, and a social pleasure" (923), and instead argues that imagination should be the focal point of art. According to Vivian, novelists rely too much on facts, which makes realistic books good as moralistic works, but bad as aesthetic works – as works of art. Art, in Vivian's eyes, should be useless, as it only revolves around itself: instead of taking inspiration from reality, art should be completely invented, leaving its audience indifferent to its subject matter and the characters it presents.

In the second part of *The Decay of Lying*, proof is given that art serves as a role model for nature. Firstly, a protest against art as imitation of life is presented: according to Vivian, the use of nature and life as artistic modes is the "substitution of an imitative for a creative medium" (930), leading to works that are uninteresting and bland because they merely present the known world. After this, Vivian demonstrates that life in fact imitates art, in the sense that the creation of a character, style or even a state of mind in a work of art is imitated by life, presenting Schopenhauer's analysis of the effects of *Hamlet* on society, showing that

Hamlet's pessimism and indecisive nature were imitated by the people of the time: "Schopenhauer has analysed the pessimism that characterises modern thought, but Hamlet invented it. The world has become sad because a puppet was once melancholy" (934). Vivian then proceeds to illustrate that even nature itself imitates art, revealing that it is because of art that some natural phenomena are now perceived: "[w]here, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows?" (937). His list goes on for a while, but Vivian makes his point perfectly clear: art is imitated by life and nature, or at the very least it affects our perception of reality in such a strong way that we can no longer see the difference between reality and artifice, thereby rendering the artifice reality. From the aesthetic point of view, art should never imitate life or nature, as art contains within itself the perfection to which life and nature strive. Therefore, art only expresses itself, which is inevitably never the truth, meaning that "lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of art" (943).

The essay seems to assimilate the philosophies of all of Wilde's mentors, as it demonstrates Mahaffy's notion that beauty is a matter of taste, Pater's ideas of the love of art for its own sake, Ruskin's concept of art as a craft and Whistler's understanding that art was in every way superior to nature. Added to that, Wilde formulated a new theory that shocked the establishment, namely that life imitates art, establishing himself as a critic set to overthrow the artistic Victorian institutions (Holland 13, 25).

If *The Decay of Lying* had not been shocking in itself, the societal jolt came a year and a half later, when Wilde published *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which he put the ideas of his essay into practice. The novel was received very badly and was criticised from mainly a moral point of view, which Wilde condemned by claiming that, to him, the spheres of morality and art did not overlap and that the book should thus not be reviewed from a moral

point of view, but an artistic one (Holland 25). In the preface to *Dorian Gray*, Wilde also states this, by saying that art is useless, thereby doing away with the moral value of art (3). However, the fact that Wilde comments that the morality of his story should not be reviewed is remarkable, as according to Norbert Kohl, Wilde referred to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in a personal communication as being a moralistic story (90). The reviews of the book were mostly bad, as can be seen in the chapter on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Karl Beckson's *Oscar Wilde: the Critical Heritage*, and attacked the lack of Christian morality in the book (67-86). In fact, the book was moralistic, yet through the careful positioning of its preface, the moral had a distinctly aesthetic function: instead of being grossed out by Dorian's decadence, the reader would be won over, even though the story showed that it was aestheticism that caused Dorian's downfall.

Soon after the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde published another essay in the form of a dialogue: *The Critic as Artist*. In this essay, Wilde took his philosophy even further, presenting a view in which the critic would break free from the constraints of reviewing art and placing it into genres and conventions, and set out to prescribe art, making the critic "once freed from his subordinate role […] more creative than the artist himself" (Holland 25). Essentially, the point of the essay is that, in the vein of Pater, art is considered to be enhancing the quality of life, to which Wilde then adds that the critic enhances the quality of art, thus improving on the enhancement of the quality of life as presented by the artist. Wilde's mentors Ruskin and Pater are even mentioned in the essay and are, through their criticism, considered artists in their own right. Of Ruskin, Wilde, through the voice of Gilbert, says: "Who cares whether Mr. Ruskin's views on Turner are sound or not? […] That mighty and majestic prose of his […] is at least as great a work of art as any of those […] canvases in England's gallery; […] greater, I always think, even as literature is the greater art" (985). The praise that befalls Pater is even greater when Gilbert argues: "Who, again, cares

whether Mr. Pater has put into the portrait of Mona Lisa something that Leonardo never dreamed of," when through considering Pater's criticism on the painting "the picture becomes more wonderful to us than it really is, and reveals to us a secret of which, in truth, it knows nothing" (984-985). Gilbert claims that, had Pater's critique on the work been discussed with Leonardo, the painter would have argued that he had never considered such matters while painting the portrait, which leads Gilbert to believe that criticism like Pater's should be considered very valuable as "[i]t treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation" (985). When a work of art has been made, the artist is finished with it and it is up to the beholder to impose meaning on it, to read into it whatever he or she pleases. In this sense, Wilde is ahead of his times by doing away with the author's intention. However, in his outrageous new art-philosophy he places the task of inventing the intentions of art completely with the critic. In the view of this essay, it becomes clear that Wilde prefers style and, as he had said in *The Decay of Lying* as well, creative content over sincerity and truth in works of art: the only reason for art to exist, is to be enjoyed, which in turn improves the general quality of life.

It is remarkable then, to see that in 1891, Wilde publishes yet another essay, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, in which art does acquire a social function. In this essay, Wilde promoted a form of socialism, as opposed to the capitalist society in which he lived. According to the essay, society should be reformed "on such a basis that poverty will be impossible" (1041). Wilde presents socialism as a thoroughly aesthetic choice by presenting socialism as the only way to make a perfect society that produces perfect art. In Wilde's view, the problem of modern society is not poverty itself, but charity that seeks to lighten the suffering of the poor:

> Just as the worst slave-owners were those who were kind to their slaves and so prevented the horror of the system being realised by those who suffered from it, and

> understood by those who contemplated it, so, in the present state of things in England, the people who do most harm are the people who try to do most good. (1041)

Wilde goes on to describe the situation of the poor, paying a great amount of attention to the seemingly paradoxical notion that those amongst the poor who are grateful for charity are actually the worst poor. According to Wilde, then, discontent is what drives development: the original sin was committed out of discontent, and it is from that point onward that those who were discontented with their situation sought to improve it. Wilde then discusses the situation of the American slaves who were freed after the American Civil War. According to Wilde, "[m]isery 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" (1044). The situation of the American slaves was brought to light by external parties, agitators "who were not slaves themselves, nor owners of slaves, nor had anything to do with the question really," yet as a result the slaves were freed and "found themselves indeed so absolutely free that they were free to starve" (1044). The construction Wilde employs here makes the reader wonder about the sincerity of the text, as the situation that is described seems to be exaggerated. However, Wilde seems to be using this to enlarge the situation and point the audience directly at the fact that indeed "no class is ever really conscious of its own suffering" (1044). In the socialist state as proposed by Wilde, everyone would be fed and no pressure of labour would be forced upon the individual, which is in stark contrast to the picture painted of the freed slaves who were either fed under pressure of labour or starved when freed of that pressure. Moreover, Wilde proposes that society takes upon itself the task of developing machines that take over all manual labour, as "civilisation requires slaves" yet "[h]uman slavery is wrong, insecure and demoralising" (1051). The socialism advocated by Wilde here is completely in the service of the aesthetic: in a society in which there is no individual possession, each individual will develop to their full potential, which in Wilde's case is art, as art improves the

general quality of all life. Art, then, leads to individualism, as it is a personal expression of imaginative force, which in turn "seeks to disturb […] monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine" (1053). Wilde vividly defends Jesus as an individualist, as Jesus broke conventions of society to break free of society, not merely to improve his own situation, and ends his passionate essay by saying that "[t]he new individualism is the new Hellenism" (1066) – referring to his plea for the individualism that would result from his form of socialism as a new Renaissance in art. Wilde argues that socialism leads to art and the perfection of art. This means that Wilde looks upon socialism as an aesthetic choice, which stands in stark contrast to his mentor Ruskin's philosophy. Ruskin argued that art fulfilled a social role through criticism. In Ruskin's view, criticism, such as social commentary in drama, would eventually lead to political, social and economic change from which the state would benefit: in other words, according to Ruskin, art leads to socialism. For Wilde, however, this is reversed and he sees that socialism would free up those that are working, thus enabling them to pursue careers in the arts. In order to have perfect art, society should be free of labour, and thus function according to socialism.

In conclusion, it can be argued that Wilde's eclectic nature enabled him to bend and adapt the teachings of his mentors, in order to present new ideas on art that were defending the way in which Wilde longed to produce art himself. Wilde employed aestheticism in order to shock the establishment and he often claimed radical ideas for the sake of shocking, as can be seen in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*. This essay is often so outrageous in its political claims, such as the notion that the poor should be against charity, that one cannot take it seriously. However, Wilde's own work seems to have multiple layers of meaning and although it appears to fully adhere to aestheticism at first glance, Wilde's internal conflicts with that particular philosophy shine through when he equips his stories such as *The Devoted Friend* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with an anti-moralistic moral, which is to say: he

defends aestheticism by presenting its values, instead of Christian or societal values. As is noted by Richard Ellmann, Wilde wrote “out of a debate between doctrines rather than out of doctrine” (95). To Wilde, living means engaging with art, and he appears to savour that sentiment and he seems to acknowledge that art in itself also has a social function. However, Wilde manages to turn the accepted theories around, claiming that life imitates art, as opposed to the classical view that art imitates life. He also argues that political change leads to art, as he claims that art is the ultimate goal of life, by which the social function of art works the other way around, meaning that social criticism through art is rendered impossible and instead, art fulfils the role of an example from which society should take inspiration.

Friendship and Charity

The first collection of fairy tales Oscar Wilde published was *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*. Amongst these stories were “The Happy Prince” and “The Devoted Friend,” two stories that revolve around the value of friendship and charity. These tales were published explicitly as fairy tales, a genre known for its moralistic nature. It is ironic to see Wilde publish such a collection, considering his aesthetic approach to arts and literature, which is why a research on these tales is interesting: are they moralistic, and if so, what kind of moral can be found in them. Although these stories predate Wilde’s essays *The Decay of Lying*, *The Critic as Artist* and *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* by three years, their underlying philosophies can be clearly traced in these stories. For instance, there is the role of charity that Wilde criticises in both “The Devoted Friend” and “The Happy Prince,” as well as the illustration of life imitating art as displayed in “The Happy Prince.” Wilde’s struggle with the moralistic aspects of art is also shown in these fairy tales, as both tales demonstrably contain a moral, in spite of Wilde’s aesthetic approach to literature. However, the composition of these fairy tales can be argued to be either of a critical nature (Kohl 92-93), or an exercise in moralistic aestheticism, meaning that aestheticism is promoted throughout the stories as a means to a virtuous life and becomes the vehicle for the moral, as the stories contain social criticism, as well as vivid displays of narrative technique.

The fairy tale of “The Devoted Friend,” in which a linnet tells the story of the friendship between a gardener and a miller to a water-rat, is a rather negative story. The story begins with a duck trying to teach her children a lesson, which the water-rat observes and sneers at. The water-rat claims that the duck’s lesson is useless and says that he values a devoted friend over anything else in the world. The linnet happens to overhear this conversation and asks the water-rat what he would expect from such a devoted friend. The

water-rat's answer does not please the linnet, so he, in return, tells a story also called "The Devoted Friend," which relates the tale of Hugh the miller and Hans the gardener. Hans is a poor gardener and he is forced to sell his wheelbarrow during the winter, so he can eat. When spring returns, Hugh comes over to Hans and, after hearing of Hans' hardship, tells Hans he can have his old wheelbarrow. The old wheelbarrow is in need of repair though, but Hans has a plank he can use to mend it. Hugh, however, says that Hans should give him the plank, because he needs it and he is giving Hans the wheelbarrow. Eventually, Hugh has Hans doing all kinds of chores for the wheelbarrow he was initially going to give him for free, as he already had a new one. One night, Hugh's son is ill and Hugh sets off to Hans, to make Hans get a doctor. Hans then goes out to get the doctor, but falls in a hole and drowns. At the funeral of his friend Hans, Hugh only remarks that Hans' death is such a shame because now he is still left with his old wheelbarrow which he cannot sell. The water-rat, who identified himself with Hugh, is dissatisfied with the story, as the moral of the story does not comply with his view on devoted friendship, sneers at the linnet that the story does not have a moral and leaves. The linnet then remarks that "[he] is afraid that [he has] rather annoyed [the water-rat]" as the linnet thinks the story does contain a moral. The duck then replies that "[telling a story with a moral] is always a very dangerous thing to do" (349). Closer inspection of the moral contained within the story the linnet tells reveals that it illustrates the nature of charity and friendship, giving rise to two interpretations: either that if one claims to be selfless, such as the miller, one should act on that basis, or that at the base of charity, there is always a form of selfishness. The miller's conclusion that "[o]ne certainly suffers for being generous" (348) then becomes a satire of the moral, which offends the water-rat, who identified with the miller.

In sharp contrast with the negativity towards friendship and charity as displayed in "The Devoted Friend" is the story of "The Happy Prince." This fairy tale deals with the

swallow and the statue of the Happy Prince. The story begins with the description of the statue of the Happy Prince: it is a beautiful golden statue, with a number of precious stones embedded in it. The Prince used to live in the Palace of Sans-Souci, which means 'without worries,' leading a life of joy inside the castle walls. He would never venture out and always have fun. After his death, a statue was erected in his memory on a column high above the city. Inside the statue, the Happy Prince still lived on, but now he could see the misery of the common people, which made him sad. One night, a swallow, who decided not to fly to Egypt with his family because he was in love with a reed, decides to sleep at the statue's feet. However, the swallow soon finds that the statue is crying and flies up to the Prince's face. The Prince then asks the swallow to help him perform a number of good deeds so the poor need not suffer so much. The swallow reluctantly agrees to help the Prince. The good deeds of the Prince and the swallow are the distribution of the precious stones and the gold covering the Prince's statue amongst the poor. Slowly, a friendship develops between the swallow and the Prince, and when the swallow finally dies after his last good deed, the leaden heart inside the statue breaks as well. The next day, the mayor notices the statue's state and decides that it has to be taken down and molten into a new statue, preferably of him. However, the statue's broken heart will not melt in the furnace and it is tossed aside, as well as the dead bird. Finally, when God asks his angels to bring him the two most valuable things from the city below, they present him the broken heart and the dead bird and God praises them.

The ending to both tales is quite different and, according to Norbert Kohl, the stories each fall in separate categories: one in which there is an ending with a reward for the protagonist and one in which the egoistic nature of some of the main characters is reinforced (91). "The Happy Prince" falls into the first category, "The Devoted Friend" into the second. In "The Happy Prince," there is a reward waiting for the protagonists, as they are taken into Heaven by God, whereas in "The Devoted Friend" the water-rat's reaction to the linnet's story

only reaffirms his egoistic nature. However, in spite of this not just “The Devoted Friend” can be said to be a negative story: both tales have a significantly negative tone. In “The Happy Prince,” the protagonists are eventually rewarded for their good deeds, but only by God. For the world they leave behind, they are nothing but a dead bird and a shabby statue. The mayor, upon seeing the dead bird, even says that “[w]e really must issue a proclamation that birds are not to be allowed to die here” (323), as if the place where the statue stands is a holy place for the people. The Prince’s statue is taken down because it is no longer beautiful and therefore no longer useful (323), whereas its beauty has been used to give the poor a better life, giving it an immense value next to beauty. This situation presents a problem with regards to Wilde’s own philosophies on art. On the one hand, Wilde promotes the idea that art is merely art, the *l’art-pour-l’art* principle that was also demonstrated by his mentor Walter Pater. This can be seen in the fact that the people of the city only enjoy and value the statue of the Prince when it is beautiful. The value of the statue then becomes merely superficial, only the way it looks matters and it has no use in any way. The moment the statue has lost its superficial value, it is no longer art and has to be taken down (323). Wilde also displays this sentiment in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, when he says that “[a]ll art is quite useless” (3). However, at the same time, Wilde seems to display the ideals of his mentor John Ruskin by showing a sentimental and social value to art. This philosophy can be seen in particular in the very last part of the story, when God asks his angels to bring him the most valuable things in the city. The heart of the statue, broken after the death of the swallow, is deemed valuable by God because of the good deeds that came from it, effectively placing the inner beauty of the statue over the outer beauty due to its social value. This is a conflict then between the two philosophies, but there is a clear distinction between their spheres: whereas the superficial seems to be most important on earth, in the afterlife one seems to be judged on the inner beauty. This seems like an inconsistency, something Oscar Wilde actively supported, as

witnessed in an 1885 article, "The Relation of Dress to Art" when he stated "[c]onsistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative," although it can be argued that this is merely a display of his own struggle with the two opposing theories of his mentors. This can also be seen in the reaction the poor give to the gifts of the Prince and the swallow: they take the gifts for granted, without wondering where the precious stones and gold come from. The beauty of the gifts is disregarded and the poor merely look at the monetary value: the sick boy thinks he is getting better after receiving the ruby, the playwright imagines he received a donation from a wealthy fan who wishes to see the play finished, the matchgirl remarks that the sapphire she suddenly finds in her hand looks like glass, the poor children who receive gold say that they now have bread. The Prince's charity is taken for granted, even though it destroys his superficial value, but the narrator never seems to favour either Ruskin's or Pater's philosophy by also showing God rewarding the Prince: the story takes no sides, but rather it illustrates the debate between the two opposing philosophies.

In "The Devoted Friend," the linnet aims to tell off the water-rat by presenting him the story of Hugh and Hans, but the water-rat actually agrees with Hugh, leaving the linnet in an awkward position. The water-rat's egoistic nature is reaffirmed by his reaction to the story, as he rejects the story on the basis of its moral and subsequently claims that the story has no moral. The miller from the linnet's tale is also illustrated as a particularly egoistic person, justifying the water-rat's identification with him, but also reaffirming the categorization of the story. The water-rat also seems to think of himself as a critic, but is demonstrably more conservative than the ideal critic that Wilde imagined; the water-rat seems to be on par with the older critics of the Royal Academy. He criticises the duck for trying to teach her children how to stand on their heads, which she does to give her children a chance to be socially mobile, indicating that he sees change as something bad. Later, the water-rat tells the linnet of an encounter he has had with a critic and his pupil, where he indicates that he identified with

the critic very much and that he thought the student to be foolish for not agreeing with the critic at all times. Moreover, in relation to that particular event, the water-rat admits to having certain ideas on art, friendship and charity that he deems beautiful and relevant, whereas the conclusion of the story demonstrates that they are merely conservative and egoistic (343, 348-349).

In both "The Happy Prince" and "The Devoted Friend," there is ample criticism on the nature of art, as Wilde also displays in *The Critic as Artist* and *The Decay of Lying*. This is also noted by Peter Raby, who says that Wilde sought to present the stories such as "The Happy Prince" and "The Devoted Friend" as ideal situations, as opposed to imitative situations (60). This foreshadows Wilde's aesthetic philosophy that life imitates art: he aims to give life an example, to which it can aspire. This is also why he deals with contemporary problems, such as poverty and charity. The Happy Prince's statue is also said not to be useful anymore, because it has lost its beauty. It can be argued however, in line with Ruskin's ideas on the social value of art, that the statue of the Prince has actually gained beauty. In life, the Prince was happy, but without knowledge of the world and the statue of him was made in that image: art imitating life. After his spirit takes note of the misery of the world and the swallow helped distribute the statue's decorations, the statue looks less beautiful, thereby demoting the Prince to a beggar, as the mayor notices (323). To the people, this means that the value is diminished. However, the statue's social activities through the distribution of its wealth are an improvement on the Prince's life, as he never did such a thing while he was alive, demonstrating the superiority of art over nature. The people also immediately display a disregard for that theory of art, as the mayor immediately wants a new statue erected in his image, once again reinforcing the idea that art should imitate life. Subsequently, it is shown how art is, in fact, superior, when God himself recognizes that the statue did more good than the Prince did in life. In "The Devoted Friend," a similar sentiment is displayed. The story the

linnet tells the water-rat is an act of charity, much like the story of "The Happy Prince," but it has a sting: the benefactor is not actually doing any charity, but he is merely profiting off his friend. The linnet is telling this story to the water-rat in order to show him that what the miller is doing, is wrong. The ideal situation of this fairy tale works on two levels: not only is the fairy tale as published by Wilde setting an example for life, the fairy tale contained within it is also setting an example for the fictional world. However, this fictional world, with its conservative critics, wilfully disregards the example set by the story. This is also what Wilde argues in *The Decay of Lying* and *The Critic as Artist*.

With regard to the story of "The Happy Prince," it can be said that Wilde sees a certain important connection between life and art, in which art is the example for life. However, according to Raby, Wilde is also very wary of this connection, as is demonstrated in "The Devoted Friend" when the narrator notes that it is dangerous to tell a story with a moral (Raby 60). The moral of these stories might not be as straightforward as one would think. Norbert Kohl mentions George Woodcock's critical analysis of "The Young King," one of Wilde's other fairy tales from *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, and then dismisses this analysis, which claims that the plot of "The Young King" is actually a parable for capitalist profiteering off the lower classes in then-contemporary society, for the lack of argumentation (92). Kohl then proceeds to argue that the stories that Wilde presents in these fairy tales are merely vivid images that are only employed by the narrator to display his ability to paint an aesthetically pleasing picture (92-93). According to Kohl, the scenes depicted by the narrator are only small selections of the truth, such as the seamstress and her diseased son in "The Happy Prince," and do not realistically depict the problems of an entire class, nor do they indicate a critical strategy to propagate social change through making these isolated cases into examples (93). These individual cases of poverty and charity are introduced into the story to motivate the protagonists and seem to have their roots in sentimentalism, which was in fashion in the

late nineteenth century (Kohl 93). In this light, “The Happy Prince,” in line with Walter Pater’s philosophies, becomes more a story of personal gain through the proper creation of art – the statue of the Happy Prince is only truly art when it has shed its outer layer of gold and precious stones, as only then it becomes original – than a fairy tale that propagates friendship and charity. This is also seen in the disregard of the poor for the source of their sudden wealth: the benefactor is ignored, showing that the social value of art is ignored and that it is merely appreciated when it is useless and beautiful. The same sentiment of the value of the superficial and the disregard for charity is shown in “The Devoted Friend,” although to a lesser degree. The linnet’s story is full of very detailed descriptions of Hans’s garden, Hans’s personal situation and the miller’s life, showing that the linnet is, indeed, a very talented narrator. The attention to detail is fairly unnecessary, as the linnet is merely trying to get a point across to the water-rat. By giving these particular descriptions of individual situations, the linnet employs the same strategies as the narrator of “The Happy Prince,” painting a detailed but unrealistic picture of the situation only to present an aesthetically pleasing scene. The attention to morality, especially in “The Devoted Friend,” can then be argued to be nothing more than the narrator’s succumbing to the genre conventions of the fashionable fairy tale.

In conclusion, “The Happy Prince” and “The Devoted Friend” are both tales that revolve around the value of friendship and charity. The two tales are both fairly negative and, even though the Happy Prince and the swallow are rewarded by God for their deeds, illustrate the dominance of the superficial in life in line with the philosophies of Walter Pater. However, both stories also serve to illustrate the influence of John Ruskin on Oscar Wilde as they are infused with an appreciation of the social value of art, whether it is through the actual distribution of art by the donations of the Prince to the poor or the appreciation of the art of narration by the aesthetic composition of the moralistic story the linnet tells to the water-rat.

The narrator never takes a side in this debate between the superficial value and the social value of art, but merely illustrates the debate itself. Thus, it can be concluded that Oscar Wilde, through writing these fairy tales, is not inconsistent in his philosophies, but merely illustrating his inner struggles through a fashionable genre.

Of Mermaids and Souls

In 1891 Oscar Wilde published a second collection of fairy tales, called *A House of Pomegranates*. This collection was met with less interest than *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (Beckson 13-14). The collection consisted of four stories, “The Birthday of the Infanta,” “The Young King,” “The Star-Child” and “The Fisherman and his Soul.” These stories were written as fairy tales, but they were not meant for children (Wood 167-169). Due to its size and subject matter, the most interesting and thought provoking story in this collection is “The Fisherman and his Soul,” in which a young fisherman falls in love with a mermaid and seeks to rid himself of his soul in order to marry her. “The Fisherman and his Soul” is constructed according to the rules of fairy tales and contains many references to especially “The Little Mermaid” by Hans Christian Andersen, to the extent that, at some points, “The Fisherman and his Soul” might even be regarded as an alternative version of “The Little Mermaid.” As well as adhering to the genre conventions of fairy tales, “The Fisherman and his Soul” contains religious undertones, which can also be seen in its construction and linguistic composition. Wilde plays with the expectations of the reader by diverging from the norm of the genre. “The Fisherman and his Soul” can be seen as a Christian fairy tale with an anti-moralistic moral, as it promotes aesthetic values while establishing a Christian framework.

The story of “The Fisherman and his Soul” revolves around a young fisherman and his love for a mermaid. One day, a young fisherman finds a mermaid trapped in his nets and becomes enamoured with her. He longs to marry her, but she explains that he cannot do that as long as he has a soul. The fisherman then decides that he will loosen himself of the burden of his soul, as he deems his soul has no use: “I cannot see it. I may not touch it. I do not know it” (278). The fisherman then goes to a priest to ask how he can get rid of his soul. The priest scolds him and tells him that his soul is the most precious thing in the world (277). After the

priest forces him out of his house, the fisherman tries his luck selling his soul to the merchants, who mock him and say that it is useless and of no value for them. Finally, the fisherman goes to a witch, who reluctantly agrees to help the fisherman and gives him a knife to cut away his shadow, which the witch reveals to be his soul. The fisherman sets out to the beach and cuts away his soul. The fisherman's soul then asks him to give it his heart, because it is afraid, but the fisherman turns it down and goes into the sea to be united with his love, the mermaid. The soul then promises the fisherman that it shall come to the beach once every year and call for him, in order to be united. Every year, the soul comes to the beach: first it tells of the Mirror of Wisdom, then it tells of the Ring of Riches. The fisherman turns down its offers because he values love over wisdom and riches. The third year, the soul tells him of a nearby city where a woman dances barefooted. This interests the fisherman very much, as the mermaid he loves has no feet and he can easily go to the city to see the woman dance as it is nearby. The fisherman rises out of the water and is reunited with his soul. Leading the fisherman through various cities, the soul asks the fisherman to do three things for him: to steal a silver cup, to beat up a child and to kill the man who gave them shelter to take his gold. When the fisherman tells off his soul for its behaviour, the soul remarks that it is merely doing these things because the fisherman has denied it a heart. After finding out he cannot cut away his soul a second time, the fisherman returns to the shore to tell the mermaid of his misfortune. However, the mermaid never comes and he waits for her for several years. Then suddenly, the mermaid's dead body washes ashore and the fisherman clings to her body. He is engulfed by the sea and drowns. The next day, the priest comes to the shore to bless the sea. However, he finds the dead fisherman and mermaid, declares them and the sea cursed and orders the villagers to bury the fisherman and the mermaid in an unmarked grave on a barren field. After three years, the priest goes to the church to preach of the wrath of God, but when he sees the altar covered in flowers that he does not know, he can only preach of God's love.

When he asks the deacons where the flowers came from, they point him toward the unmarked grave of the fisherman and the mermaid. The next day, the priest sets out to bless the sea and all the things he told the fisherman were pagan. The results of these blessings remain unknown, as the mysterious flowers are then said to have never grown again in the field and the seafolk have moved away to another bay.

The story itself draws upon motifs found in traditional fairy tales, such as the inclusion of mythical creatures such as fauns and merfolk. The tale of the fisherman has numerous parallels with Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," most notably the fact that only humans possess a soul and the sacrifice of vital parts of the protagonist's self. In Andersen's story, however, it is a mermaid who falls in love with a human and seeks to obtain a soul so she can marry him – the exact opposite of the fisherman's story. The story of "The Little Mermaid" revolves around a mermaid, who is a princess of an underwater kingdom. According to the story, when mermaids turn fifteen, they are allowed to swim to the surface to watch the world of the humans and as the Little Mermaid's sisters all come of age one after another, they swim to the surface and return with stories of the world above. These stories spark the interest of the Little Mermaid. Her attitude towards the world above is different from the way her sisters think of the surface: where her sisters are marvelled by nature and care not for humanity, the Little Mermaid is mesmerized by the humans. When the Little Mermaid herself turns fifteen, she swims to the surface and watches a ship that carries a prince on board, with whom she falls in love. A storm then hits the ship and the Little Mermaid saves the prince from drowning. She then brings him to shore and waits nearby until a young girl from a nearby temple comes to him. The Little Mermaid then returns to the sea and asks her grandmother about the lifespan of humans. Her grandmother replies that humans have a short lifespan on earth, but are granted eternal life after they die because they possess a soul, contrary to the seafolk who live up to three hundred years and then dissolve into foam.

The Little Mermaid also learns that she can acquire a soul if a man would truly love her and marry her. As she is in love with the prince and yearns to live forever, the Little Mermaid decides to go to a witch to seek help with becoming a human being in order to marry the prince. The witch then, in return for her voice, brews a potion for the Little Mermaid that will transform her tail into legs. The witch tells her that with every step the Little Mermaid takes, she will suffer from great pain and her feet will bleed, and that there is a limit to the potion's effects: if the prince marries another woman, the Little Mermaid will die without a soul. The Little Mermaid then goes to the surface, takes the potion and, after her transformation, is found on the beach by the prince. He takes her into his court and, even though the Little Mermaid is mute, they grow very close. One day, the prince tells her that his parents have told him to marry the daughter of a befriended king. He then says to the Little Mermaid that he will not marry this princess, as he does not love her and that would rather marry the girl from the temple, whom he thinks saved his life. However, it is soon revealed that the princess and the girl from the temple are the very same person, so the prince decides to marry her after all. This breaks the Little Mermaid's heart, as it means that she will die. On the morning after the wedding, the Little Mermaid expects to die. However, as she looks down into the sea, to her surprise, her sisters appear, holding a knife they got from the witch in exchange for their hair. They tell the Little Mermaid to kill the prince with the knife, because if his blood touches her feet, she will once again become a mermaid. The Little Mermaid, however, decides that the prince does not deserve to die, casts the knife away and dives into the water, expecting to die. However, instead of becoming foam and simply ceasing to exist, the Little Mermaid is transformed once again, this time into a daughter of the air. These spirits welcome her to their midst, saying that she was transformed into an air spirit because she fought for her soul with whole her heart, and tell her that she can obtain a soul for herself by doing good deeds for three hundred years.

Both stories focus on the soul of the protagonist: one seeks to get rid of it, the other seeks to obtain one. The role of the witch is crucial to the central dilemma of both stories, as in both stories the protagonists resort to the help of a witch, which leads to the sacrifice of a part of the protagonist's self. The fisherman approaches the witch to get rid of his soul, the Little Mermaid reaches out for the witch in order to get legs so she can go on land. In both stories, the witches demand something in return for their help: the Little Mermaid loses her voice, the fisherman has to perform a dance at the Sabbath. These deals seem not be to be equal at first glance, but it can be argued that both stories suggest that the witches in seek, to a certain extent, to possess those who come to them. This is evident when the witch in "The Fisherman and his Soul" seems to want the fisherman to dance at the Sabbath so she can claim him for herself. This is first suggested as she turns to her mirror and says that she thinks herself to be as beautiful as the mermaid and that the fisherman should be hers (280) and later by her attitude at the Sabbath as she tries to bargain her way to freedom by claiming she is as beautiful as the mermaid (282) when the fisherman refuses to let her go after the witches scatter due to the fisherman making the sign of the cross to the witches' leader. The witch in "The Little Mermaid" also seeks to possess those who come to her, as can be seen from the fact that first she wants the Little Mermaid's voice and later the Little Mermaid's sisters' hair as payment for her spells.

The witches are also pivotal in the position the stories take towards Christianity. In both "The Little Mermaid" and "The Fisherman and his Soul," the witches are presented in a role that is very much like that of Mephistophilis in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. The witches are presented as evil, like Mephistophilis, and have dark powers that they are willing to share in exchange for a price. Like Mephistophilis, the witches are pivotal to the fall the protagonist must take. In *Doctor Faustus*, there is no way out for the protagonist: Faustus has willingly sold his soul to the devil and he cannot repent for that, illustrating the

power of free will, but also that man must live with the consequences of one's deeds. The consequences for Faustus are that he will be taken to hell after twenty four years. The same holds true for the witches in these two fairy tales: both protagonists approach them for their aid and they have to live with the consequences without a chance to repent. The Little Mermaid and the fisherman both do so gladly, willing to sacrifice whatever it takes to fulfil their quest. However, this is also where the fairy tales diverge from the premise of *Doctor Faustus* and what establishes "The Little Mermaid" as a Christian story and "The Fisherman and his Soul" as a story that disregards Christianity but rather promotes sincerity as the basis for a virtuous life. Faustus himself is oblivious to the possibility of his own salvation: there is divine intervention when he signs the contract to sell his soul, initially preventing him from signing, as well as the scholars, Mephistophilis and even Lucifer himself warning him about his damnation (Marlowe).

In "The Little Mermaid," there is also the sense of warning, much like in *Doctor Faustus*, but the Little Mermaid takes no heed of it as she is focussed on the prince and obtaining her soul. She seems to be willing to risk everything to live forever, much like Faustus is willing to risk his soul for ultimate knowledge. Much like Faustus dwells on his black magic and plays tricks on people, the Little Mermaid is set for obtaining the prince's love for her own gain. However, when her quest fails due to the prince marrying the girl from the temple, she is willing to accept her fate. She does not seek to bargain, like Faustus, and is ready to die. At that point, the witch's magic comes back into the story in the form of the Little Mermaid's sisters and the magical knife. The Little Mermaid, however, has apparently learned her lesson, and after pondering to kill the prince she decides that he cannot be blamed or held responsible for her fate. She then accepts the consequences of her own chosen path, favouring honesty over magic: she repents. This, however, makes her fall in line with Christian morality again, as she repents for her sins. Her reward for this is a transformation

into an air spirit, so she can obtain a soul for herself in three hundred years: a situation reminiscent of Christian Purgatory, where souls have to wait to be cleansed before they are admitted to Heaven. The story thereby establishes itself as Christian, showing that one can sin but that salvation awaits those who repent.

In Wilde's fairy tale, the sense of warning against cutting away the soul is much greater than when the protagonist in "The Little Mermaid" seeks to obtain a soul. When the fisherman explains his situation to the rest of his community, they scold him: the priest forces him out of his house, the merchants laugh at him. When the fisherman finally turns to the witch, he is already much more desperate than either the Little Mermaid or Faustus are at any point before they seek help from the witch and Mephistophilis, respectively. Due to the warning from the priest, the fisherman already knows that what he is about to do goes against God's wishes and this is also reflected by the actions of the witch herself, who warns him that cutting away his soul is "a terrible thing to do" (279). However, the witch from "The Fisherman and his Soul" is secretive and dishonest: she never lets the fisherman in on the whole story, whereas the seawitch tells the Little Mermaid everything about the spell and its conditions. Mephistophilis is also deceptive, but he does not withhold information from Faustus. The witch does not reveal to the fisherman that she desires him herself, which is disclosed later when she says "[h]e should have been mine" (280). More importantly, the witch withholds information regarding the conditions of cutting away one's soul, as she does not tell the fisherman that he can only cut it away once. The witch's dishonesty is also shown by the fact that she tries to bargain with the fisherman about everything from the moment he arrives at her doorstep to the moment he holds her back to claim the knife from her, as she is unwilling to keep her promises and knowingly breaks them. Arguably, it is dishonesty that ultimately causes the fisherman's downfall as the fisherman's soul exploits the fisherman's lack of knowledge to lure him out of the sea.

Not only the witch is insincere to the fisherman, his soul is as well. When the fisherman has cut away his soul, the soul asks for the fisherman's heart, but the fisherman refuses, joins the mermaid in the water and lives there happily with her. His soul comes to the beach every year to lure the fisherman out of the sea with tales of its adventures. It seems that without a heart, the soul has lost the ability to tell right from wrong and when it returns to the beach for the third time, it has become an evil soul. The soul lures the fisherman out of the sea with the same instrument the witch used in her attempt to snare the fisherman: a dance (292). The fisherman agrees to come with the soul and the two are joined again. After the soul makes the fisherman commit crimes, the fisherman longs to go back to his love in the sea and tries to cut off his soul again. However, he is unable to do so, as the soul remarks that "[o]nce in his life may a man send his soul away, but he who receiveth back his soul must keep it with him forever" (295), revealing that it was aware of this condition, like the witch, and chose not to tell the fisherman. Because he has reacquired his soul, the fisherman can no longer be with the mermaid and he sits at the beach waiting for her for two years, during which he calls out for the mermaid and the soul seeks to tempt him into letting it back into his heart. Like the witch, the soul cannot be trusted: the soul tries to tempt the fisherman through threatening and bargaining. Eventually, the soul gives up his schemes and plainly asks the fisherman to let him back in to his heart. The fisherman agrees because his soul is finally honest with him, but because his heart is full of love for the mermaid, the soul cannot enter. Finally, the mermaid washes ashore dead and the fisherman rushes to her and confesses his evil deeds. Because of his confession, his heart breaks and his soul is let back in as he drowns next to the dead body of the mermaid. The reunion of the soul and heart after the fisherman's confession is arguably his salvation, through which he can die an honest man. The flowers that eventually grow on the grave of the fisherman and the mermaid are ostensibly a symbol of this: they are beautiful and even positively influence the priest who first scolded the fisherman. The story seems to

have a moral that goes against Christian values, at first sight, as it demonstrates the demise of a man who does away with his soul for his personal gain. However, closer inspection reveals that it is a plea for sincerity that takes no stance against religion: the fisherman is only doomed because of the insincerity of the witch and his soul, as because of their insincerity, he finally becomes insincere towards the mermaid. Once he joins with his soul again, he too becomes insincere, as he leaves the water without telling his love, and he only reaches salvation when confesses to the mermaid what he has done, thereby becoming sincere once more. “The Fisherman and his Soul,” then, does not present an argument against Christian values, such as those displayed in *Doctor Faustus* and “The Little Mermaid,” but rather explores another way in which a person can live a virtuous life without religion, placing an emphasis on sincerity over blind acceptance of God’s rules. This may be considered as anti-moralistic, as aesthetic values such as experience and sensuality are placed above Christian morality.

Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” is a story that has a very clearly defined moral and is written expressly to influence its reader. An example of the story reaching out to its audience can be found in the ending of the story, where the perimeters for the Little Mermaid’s sentence are set: “The child does not know, when we fly through the room, that we smile with joy at his good conduct, for we can count one year less of our three hundred years. But when we see a naughty or a wicked child, we shed tears of sorrow, and for every tear a day is added to our time of trial!” (Andersen). The story gives its intended audience, children, an incentive to behave well, as their behaviour purportedly has a direct effect on the Little Mermaid’s punishment. This intention to influence the reader is reminiscent of the evangelical cautionary tales that were popular at the beginning of the eighteenth century and carried a strong notion that a child is born a sinner (Lam, pars. 1, 5). In the case of “The Little Mermaid,” this can be seen especially in the damning consequences for the mermaid if a child

would act against the author's advice and the fact that the mermaid's soul depends on the child's behaviour (Lam, pars. 1, 5). The moral that is displayed in "The Little Mermaid" is rather bleak: it is a story that makes a case against mixing of race and insists on clear class-boundaries in society, as argued by Rhoda Zuk in her article "The Little Mermaid: Three Political Fables" (166). "The Little Mermaid," Zuk says, is essentially a colonial tale, as it problematizes the mermaid's difference from humans as the otherness that is present in colonized people (166). In Andersen's story, the mermaid seeks to overcome her otherness and become an equal to humans, illustrative of the struggles of colonized subjects seeking to become equal to their colonizers (Zuk 166). She is exotic and foreign to humans because of her appearance. Her turning into a human can also be seen as a colonial image: she overcomes the physical differences with great pain, an allusion to the often violent oppression of colonized people. The most striking colonial image, however, lies in her lack of the ability to verbally communicate. It can be argued that the Little Mermaid's selling of her voice is illustrative of how colonized natives spoke different languages than their colonizers, thus making it hard to communicate. The Little Mermaid seeks to join the human society but has to do so without being able to speak; the only form of communication she can rely on is non-verbal. This situation is reminiscent of a colonized citizen seeking to join the colonizer's society without being able to speak the colonizer's language. The Little Mermaid is also confronted with class boundaries throughout the story. First, she is taught by her grandmother that she is bound to the rules of her class. She is dressed in white and eight oysters are pinched on her tail by her grandmother, who defends that these things are necessary due to the Little Mermaid's social standing (Zuk 168). Even though the Little Mermaid is a princess under water, in the realm of the humans, she is treated as a servant. This becomes clear when the Little Mermaid starts to dance, as the only other people that seem to dance in the human society are slaves. Moreover, the attitude of the prince towards the Little Mermaid reveals that

he sees her as a servant when he allows her to sleep at his door, not his side, and that he has a page’s dress made for her so she can accompany him when he rides. The only social upward mobility that is available for the Little Mermaid lies in marriage, as through marriage she would become the prince’s equal. However, tradition dictates that the prince should marry a princess and when the prince finally does marry, the Little Mermaid has no chance to become equal to the humans anymore. The Little Mermaid arguably loses the struggle against class boundaries and colonial power due to her inability to communicate: had she been able to tell the prince that she was, in fact, his rescuer, the ending of the tale would be rather different. Andersen’s fairy tale can therefore be said to defend class boundaries and insist on colonial values, arguing against mixing of race. The story shows the incompatibility of races through the problematic communication between the Little Mermaid and the prince, and the Little Mermaid’s failure to realize her projected marriage. Moreover, the story focusses on the inability to cross class boundaries by showing that the prince has no profound love interest in the Little Mermaid, as he sees her as a servant, which makes her unsuitable for marriage. This makes the Little Mermaid’s ultimate goal, equality to humans through the acquisition of a soul by marrying the prince, unobtainable.

The moral that is contained within Wilde’s “The Fisherman and his Soul” differs greatly from Andersen’s moral. Instead of a cautionary tale that impedes personal freedom, “The Fisherman and his Soul” promotes love, sensuality and the value of aesthetic experience. In a sense, Wilde’s story shows the inversion of a society bound by class and promotes the mixture of races, which is the exact opposite of Andersen’s story. At first, the world that is presented in “The Fisherman and his Soul” seems not to be concerned with class at all. The priest, the merchants and the fisherman all treat each other as equals: they merely scold the fisherman because he wants to get rid of his soul, not because of his status. The fisherman is even able to marry the mermaid, even though she is a princess in her own society. When,

finally, class differences are displayed in the story, it concerns the boundaries that the fisherman's soul encounters on his travels. The soul also lies about its own social status, one time claiming it is a prince in its homeland (284), another time saying it is a Dervish, meaning a Muslim who has taken a vow of poverty (288). When the soul claims it is a prince, it has no regard for the clergy and mistreats them when it demands to see their god, when the soul says it is a Dervish, it has no respect for political authority, forcing its way to the treasury of an emperor: the soul always assumes the superior position through force. When the soul is finally able to lure the fisherman out of the sea, it forces the fisherman to steal and hurt people, much like it treated those it encountered on its journeys before. However, as the fisherman still has a heart, this behaviour goes against his good nature and he confronts his soul, as his soul only overcomes class through exerting selfish power, thereby assuming a morally superior position. However, by confronting his soul, the fisherman seems to forcefully assume a morally superior position as well, as it claims the soul did evil, whereas he himself was the first to commit sin by cutting away his soul. It is only when the fisherman and the soul reconcile that they become the same again, after which they die. The story thus seems to show an inversion of class: instead of recognizing higher classes and acting accordingly, the story presents a world of equals in which only those who treat others bad can assume a morally superior position and therefore acquire a higher class. The only class boundaries that are shown in the story are presented as foreign and exotic, placing them outside the world of the story, but more importantly also outside the known society of the intended audience.

The mixture of race, then, as presented in "The Fisherman and his Soul," is seen as positive. The fisherman longs to be with the mermaid, even though she is not human. He submits to the conditions she sets for the marriage to take place and gladly joins her in the water. Although the values of his society dictate against cutting away his soul, the fisherman is willing to do so and the result of his decision is happiness. The fact that happiness, and not

sorrow, is the result of his actions can be seen as an allusion to Wilde's ideas Paterian on aestheticism. According to Naomi Wood "Pater asserts that sensory experience, not morality, ought to be the goal of life" (163), which is exactly what Wilde promotes when he shows that the fisherman is not punished for following his desires. Instead, the fisherman is leading his life on the basis of love and sincerity: he lives for experiencing, not for following Christian morality. It seems then that the relationship between the fisherman and the mermaid, as Norbert Kohl argues, can be seen as a mixture of the thrill of the abnormal and aesthetic sensuality (101). Aestheticism is promoted throughout the story in many elements (Kohl 95). First, there is the highly aesthetic character of the mermaid. She is an unnatural hybrid being, combining fish and man; she "perverts the natural possibilities" and can therefore be considered a monster (Kohl 101). Yet, her beauty is unparalleled and her magical voice gives her an irresistible, mythical charm (Kohl 101). At first, the fisherman is enchanted by her looks, but the mermaid only really lures the fisherman in with her song. It is the experience of the magical and beautiful that leads the fisherman to join her in bliss, making the fisherman's choice to join the mermaid a highly aesthetic one.

The aesthetic is also shown by the stories the soul tells the fisherman. As with "The Happy Prince," Wilde resorts to tableaus to showcase his artistic talent in lavishly describing situations. The audience is never let in on exactly when the story takes place. Moreover, the soul relates to the fisherman stories of the Orient, of places that are exotic and alien. However, the descriptions are never quite precise and seem to revolve more about providing a lavish backdrop to the tales rather than being of importance to the plot. According to Kohl, this lack of definition of location and time does not allow for complex actions within the story, reducing the action that does take place to simple, binary opposites, which enhance the aesthetic quality of the story (95). A more convincing explanation however arises when one considers the lavish descriptions that are contained within "The Happy Prince" while

analysing “The Fisherman and his Soul.” As with “The Happy Prince,” the descriptions that are given are lavish tableaus: they only depict a very small area and are not to be considered a fitting description for a society or class as a whole. These descriptions are delicately placed in the story by Wilde so he can showcase his descriptive qualities. This is also recognized by critics, as Wood relates how several reviews mention that Wilde’s descriptions hold the middle between poetic ecstasy and mere descriptions of upper class interiors (167-168). However, as with “The Happy Prince,” the lavish descriptions of exotic locations in “The Fisherman and his Soul” do not facilitate the simple actions that take place there, but rather the opposite: the use of simple, binary oppositions such as rich and poor, beautiful and ugly and honest and dishonest opens up the possibility for the writer to enhance these actions with aesthetic qualities. By constructing the story this way, the simple morality displayed becomes enhanced with aesthetic qualities. This is opposite of Kohl’s proposition that the aesthetic construction of the narrative forces a simple morality on itself, and it reaffirms the moral of the story as being rooted firmly in aestheticism. Wilde shows that leading a virtuous life can be achieved through living by the rules of Paterian aestheticism, by demonstrating that the fisherman’s longing for sensual experience is rewarded, thus providing a seemingly anti-moralistic moral. By using this construction, the story is required to be encased in aesthetic writing, which is exactly what Wilde provides by refusing to define the exact locations and time the story takes place at, yet describing everything lavishly.

“The Little Mermaid” and “The Fisherman and his Soul” both take place in a clearly Christian realm, and in both stories the religious aspects are a cause of narrative tension. In “The Little Mermaid,” religion already permeates the setting of the story, with the divisions of the separate realms that are presented. The realm of men is presented as the Christian world that we know, the sea as a place where only soulless creatures dwell, the sky as a form of Heaven or Purgatory, after which there is eternal life. The Little Mermaid is always forced to

look up, to reach for God, if she wants to obtain a soul. First because she longs for the realm of men, which lies above her own, then later when she climbs stairs and mountains – "heavenward" (Zuk 168). Then, with "her Christlike accession to the consequences of the [seawitch's spell] […] she surpasses [the spell's] limits to win heavenly grace" (Zuk 168). The fact that the Little Mermaid is, in fact, looking for divine blessing is already foreshadowed in the description of the depth of the sea, which is not measured in meters or feet but rather in church steeples (Andersen). The Little Mermaid's rather abrupt ascension to the realm of the sky spirits, however, is heavily criticized, as the story itself builds up to the demise of the Little Mermaid, not to her salvation. As Jacob Bøggild and Pernille Heegaard note, critics seem to regard Andersen's final ending to the tale a mistake, finding its origins in Andersen's religious background and profound belief in a kind God (Hans Christian Andersen Center, par. 2). The construction does, however, reinforce the Christian nature of the story and places it firmly in the tradition of Christian educational texts.

In Wilde's story, there is a sense of opposition to religion. The tale is constructed as a Biblical story, as becomes clear from the construction of the language. The fisherman and all other characters presented in the story speak with a Biblical diction, using archaic constructions and overly dramatized actions, such as the fisherman when he catches the mermaid: "I will not let thee go save thou makest me a promise that, whenever I call thee, thou wilt come and sing to me, for the fish delight to listen to the song of the seafolk, and so shall my nets be full" (275). Wilde also consciously focusses on religious aspects by drawing attention to certain details, such as the fisherman's Christianity. When the fisherman goes to the Sabbath and dances with the witches, he must also pay respect to the witches' leader. When he walks up to the tall, dark figure, he unconsciously makes the sign of the Cross, causing the witches to scatter and the Sabbath to break up (281-282). The diabolic nature of the witches is reinforced at multiple times in the story with direct references to the devil. First,

the witch swears that she will help the fisherman “by the hoofs of the goat” (280), an animal that is traditionally associated with the devil. Second, the knife the witch provides the fisherman with to cut away his soul has a handle made out of “viper skin” (282), the skin of a snake, an allusion to the devil’s form when he tempted Eve into eating the apple in the Garden of Eden. The fact that the knife’s handle is made out of viper skin also arguably symbolizes that what the fisherman is about to do is a sin for which there is no forgiveness: the gift of the snake denies him entrance to Paradise. The devil is explicitly mentioned one more time in the story, namely when the soul tells the fisherman that he cannot cut it away again. The fisherman then replies that the witch was not true to him, to which the soul replies that the witch was true to “Him she serves” (295), directly referring to the devil.

Wilde also plays with the conventions of the fairy tale genre and displays a certain amount of disregard for religion. The construction of the pivotal actions in the story is tripartite: the fisherman seeks help in three places, he is lured out of the sea the third time his soul tempts him and finally he is temped another three times by the soul to let it back into his heart. This construction in threes is part of the conventions of the fairy tale genre (Wood 160), but the number three is also a holy number in Christianity. Another part of the fairy tale genre conventions Wilde employs is the repetition of key information (Wood 160). Every time the fisherman poses his question for information on how to cut off his soul, he explains his reasons for his desire by stating that he has no use for his soul and attaches no value to it by saying: “I cannot see it. I may not touch it. I do not know it” (277-279). This reinforces the importance of the issue of the soul to the plot of the story. By constructing the story as such, Wilde creates a fairy tale with Biblical elements. The intersection of Christianity and fairy tale conventions is remarkable, as it raises expectations for the development of the plot. Andersen also makes use of such an intersection in “The Little Mermaid.” The genre conventions of the fairy tale dictate a happy ending for the story (Wood 161). However, the story itself seems to

be heading towards the demise of the Little Mermaid. Andersen chooses to adhere to the genre conventions of the fairy tale by employing the Christian values that are promoted throughout the story and gives the Little Mermaid her shot at a happy-ever-after when she repents for her sins. Wilde uses the intersection of fairy tale and religious conventions in a similar way, but with a distinctly different meaning. According to the religious values that are displayed in the story through the discussion the fisherman has with the priest, the merchants and even the witch, the story should end in the demise of the fisherman. However, Wilde chooses to adhere to the conventions of the fairy tale instead and gives the story an ending that is arguably a happy ending on closer inspection. Although the fisherman dies, he is not doomed, which is shown by the positive effect the flowers that grow on his grave have on everyone who comes into contact with them. The aesthetic values the story constantly promotes, namely the importance of experience and sensuality, ensure the fisherman's ultimate salvation. The fisherman's salvation is arguably demonstrated by the fact that, upon seeing the flowers, the priest wishes to discuss the love of God, instead of the wrath of God, which suggests that the fisherman's honesty and profound love have saved him and placed him in God's grace. This supports the argument presented by Wood: "[b]eauty [i.e. the aesthetic] creates its own meaning, whether or not it is transmitted to others" (161). The fisherman's aesthetic life is scorned by the Christian world he lives in, yet it is accepted by God. This only becomes clear to society when the flowers start to grow on the fisherman's grave and have a positive effect on everyone who comes into contact with them.

To summarize, there are many parallels between Wilde's "The Fisherman and his Soul" and Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" in both style and plot. By constructing the story as a conventional fairy tale, with religious undertones, yet with an aesthetic moral, Wilde seems to be telling an alternative version of Andersen's "The Little Mermaid." However, Wilde exploits these parallels with Andersen and manipulates the

reader's expectations of the story by diverging from the set rules of the genre of the fairy tale. In conclusion, the Christian framework and the expressly aesthetic values and moral in "The Fisherman and his Soul" make Wilde's fairy tale a Christian story with an anti-moralistic moral.

Conclusion.

In conclusion, Oscar Wilde's aestheticism can be seen as not just a way of criticizing or making art, but also as a lifestyle that Wilde promotes in his fairy tales. His attention goes to the lavish details of descriptions and to the value of art in life, which is to say the value of true experience. Wilde's essays show how his mentors, especially Pater and Ruskin, had a profound effect on his philosophies on art. He took their lessons and combined it into his own form of aestheticism, which he then showcased in his literature.

Although Wilde's aestheticism argues against a moral, it seems that Wilde himself interpreted this as an opposition to a conventional moral. He manages to tell his stories within a Christian context, promoting seemingly Christian values, yet under the surface always lies attention to experience, beauty and art. Wilde's aestheticism, then, becomes a moral in itself, which can be applied to any society. Wilde shows this in "The Fisherman and his Soul," when he paints an aesthetic picture of a Christian society. Also in "The Happy Prince" and "The Devoted Friend," Wilde shows that his aestheticism is not based on decadence, but rather sensuality, experience and beauty: the descriptions that the swallow gives of Egypt and the linnet's cautionary tale with its ironic message show this.

By creating aesthetical moralism, Wilde presents his world view, a view that is not biased against religion, but rather adopts religious values and employs it for its own gain without being decadent. Thus, it can be concluded that Wilde does not contradict his essays, that argue against conventional morality, by writing fairy tales, that exist by the grace of morals, as Wilde's aestheticism creates its own morality by adapting the conventional into something extraordinary.

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