

Aestheticism as the ‘Moral’: Resolving the Paradox of Wilde’s Art in his Fairy Tales

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The paradox of Oscar Wilde and his art is that while his aestheticism led him to espouse *l’art pour l’art* (Van den Wijngaart, 2012) such that he would have Art judged for its own sake and not for any function it supposedly should have (for instance, to reflect life or to teach morals), much of what has been written about his work shows the curious tendency to relate his writings to his homosexuality and the amorality that so offended Victorian society (Quintus, 1977).

Doing so would thus seem to indicate that the artist’s art could not be separated from the artist’s life, which goes against the grain of Aestheticism, whose proponents professed that it is not the function of Art to convey moral messages, but to instead provide refined and sensuous pleasure—a direct rebellion against the utilitarian conception of Art as having the function of conveying morals, as articulated by John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold in Wilde’s time (Langbaum, 1967).

Adding to the paradox further is that even as Wilde is well documented as having deliberately cultivated a persona with the mannered eccentricities, studied boredom, and flamboyance so indicative of the decadent *fin de siècle* spirit (Becker-Leckrone, 2002), he is also documented as being possessed of surprising simplicity, and a lack of airs and of affectation, specifically during his lecture tour of Belfast in 1884:

We have known none whose delivery was so singularly free of affectation - none who possessed (sic) the power of securing the attention of the audience for so long without resorting to any tricks of style. Mr. Wilde is refreshingly natural both in language and delivery (McCann, 1988, para.16).

It goes on to say that his language was “so easy to understand that even the most ordinary audience could listen to its flow for hours without a sense of weariness” (McCann, 1988, para.23).

This is surprising, considering that in his homeland and during his first American tour in 1882, during which he famously declared that he had nothing to declare but his genius, Wilde was known to hold audiences alternately spellbound or shocked with his “biting wit, flamboyant dress, and glittering conversation” (Macklowe Gallery, n.d., para.8).

His own paradoxical rhetoric contributes to the conundrum: while Wilde was quoted as saying that he wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a reaction to “the crude brutality of plain realism,” (qtd. in Agnir, 2013, p. 2) and sought to create a work that was totally a work of invention, he was also quoted as saying that the characters of the same novel are thus: “Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks of me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages perhaps” (qtd. in Agnir, 2013, p. 2). Furthermore, in his essay “The Critic as Artist”, Wilde states that great art does not take its material directly from life but “found it in myth, and legend, and ancient tale” (Corner, 1994, p.vi). He extends this thought by arguing that all great writing simply exist as:

...starting point for a new creation... Homer had old ballads and stories to deal with, as Shakespeare had chronicles and plays and novels from which to work, but they were merely his rough material. He took them, and shaped them into song. They became his, because he made them lovely. They were built out of music, and so not built at all, and therefore built forever. (Wilde, 1990b, para. 29).

To my mind, a way to reconcile this paradox in the man and his art is to study his fairy tales, for while Wilde calls his fairy tales “studies in prose, put for Romance’s sake into fanciful form” (Zipes,

1990, p. 207), thus keeping true to his aesthetic sensibilities, the fact that a convention of the genre is the inclusion of a moral allows any student of his fairy tales to analyze those 'moral lessons' which his avowed aestheticism would otherwise not allow us to consider as being part of the artist's intention, much less the work of art.

Furthermore, studying his fairy tales will help address the curious lack of reference to this side of the artist: as a writer of fairy tales. In many anthologies of Wilde's works, his fairy tales are not included; in fact, two such collections that this student found, each published by highly respected publishing houses (Wordsworth and Bantam Classics), do not even mention them in their Introductions, even while they cover the very years (1888-1891) during which he produced the fairy tales. Such an avoidance "suggests an unwillingness to treat material which is prima facie more serious and more moral than the amoral hedonism, the studied triviality so long associated with both Wilde's life and his art' (Quintus, 1977, p.708).

The Fairy Tales

The importance of Oscar Wilde's fairy tales cannot be downplayed, providing as they did opportunities to develop his skills as prose writer. It cannot be a coincidence that it was in the last year of the period during which he wrote them that he published his only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). They have been described, in fact, as "finely chiseled gems that have been recognized as among the best of the fairy tale genre...[and what]...enabled him to employ his keen wit to give full expression to his philosophy of art and his critique of English society" (Zipes, 1990, p.205).

Wilde is said to have "not intended [them] for children" (Quintus, 1977, p.709), and perhaps this can be traced to a remark he once made that, with respect to his fairy-tales, he "had about as much intention of pleasing the British child as [he] had of pleasing the British public as cited" (Beckson, 1970, p.113). This has been often interpreted as meaning he wishes to address an adult readership (Orhanen, 2009). However, a more accurate description of the author's intended readers is found in a letter he wrote to the poet George Herbert Kelsey in 1888, where he said that his fairy tales were "meant partly for children, and partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy, and who find simplicity in a subtle strangeness" (Zipes, 1990, p.207).

There is no evidence that explains why Wilde suddenly started writing fairy tales, but the facts are that his wife Constance gave birth to their two sons at about the same time that he wrote them, that she herself published two volumes of children's stories in the same period, that his mother edited two important books on Irish folklore, and that he himself reviewed William B. Yeats' collection of Irish folktales (Van den Wijngaart, 2012). There was, as well, a renaissance of fairy tales in England from 1865 to 1900 (Zipes, 1990).

His first volume of fairy tales, *The Happy Prince*, features five stories: "*The Happy Prince*", "*The Nightingale and the Rose*", "*The Selfish Giant*", "*The Devoted Friend*", and "*The Remarkable Rocket*." His second volume, *A House of Pomegranates*, features four: "*The Young King*", "*The Birthday of the Infanta*", "*The Fisherman and His Soul*", and "*The Star-Child*."

"*The Happy Prince*" (Wilde, 1990e) tells the tale of a beautiful statue of a prince that stands on a tall column overlooking the city: gilded in gold, with sapphire eyes and a ruby-adorned sword, he is a magnificent sight, much loved and admired by all. One night, into the space between his feet flies a swallow, who had fallen in love with and been spurned by a reed, and had been forsaken by his swallow-friends who had flown away in preparation for the winter. The swallow becomes drenched by the tears of the prince-statue, who proceeds to tell him of how he came to be called the Happy Prince: "I lived in the Palace of Sans-Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter... happy indeed I was..." (p. 12). They develop a close and loving bond, as the swallow helps the prince to give away his valuable trappings to those poor people whom he sees as needing help. When, in the end, the swallow dies from the cold, the prince's lead heart breaks. The next day, the self-important officials comment on the shabbiness of the prince, who by that time had of course been stripped of all splendor. They see the dead bird as well, and proceed to discard the two. "'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 forevermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me'" (p.22).

The rather obvious moral is that God looks not at superficial beauty but at the heart—at the beauty within. On another level,

one sees the prince-statue's sacrifice as a giving of himself, of his metamorphosis from a real but shallow prince to a beautiful gilded statue to a lump of lead which is ugly to all but is one of the two most precious things in the eyes of God and the angels. This self-sacrifice is akin to the artist's giving of self, of his gifts and talents, to a society that is in need of his gifts and yet does not acknowledge his gifts of beauty. Like the mayor, councilors, and university professor in the story, who find the Prince useless because he is no longer beautiful, "society is not yet ready to accept the noble role of the artist, who seeks to transform crass living conditions and beautify people's souls through his gifts" (Zipes, 1990, p.210).

"The Nightingale and the Rose" (Wilde, 1990f) is a story about how a nightingale sacrifices her life to help a young student win the love of a girl who wants a red rose. The nightingale searches high and low for one, but in the end can only make one if she impales herself on a thorn. She does so, and the young man gets his red rose. But the girl does not want it after all, for someone else has sent her jewels, which to her are more precious than flowers. So she turns the young man away, and he dismisses her and Love as silly, thereby also dismissing the nightingale's self-sacrifice: "What a silly thing Love is', said the student, as he walked away...In fact, it is quite impractical, and, as in this age to be practical is everything, I shall go back to Philosophy and study Metaphysics'. So he returned to his room and pulled out a great dusty book, and began to read" (p. 31).

Here, the story ends in death yet again, as does the first tale. There is again the theme of self-sacrifice, but this time the jibe at those who would have Art fulfill a function is clearer, seen in the young man's final statement quoted above, for the nightingale, in giving her all for the sake of Love, was not appreciated by him for whom she sacrificed self. He was, in fact, oblivious to it. So too, are artists not appreciated by those they seek to transform through their gifts of beauty. The irony that is Wilde's hallmark is all too apparent, as when the young man, after listening to the nightingale sing, muses: "She has form...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" (p. 28).

The irony, of course, is that in his essay "The Critic as Artist", Wilde says that Beauty is itself the expression: "what is true about

music is true about all the arts. Beauty has as many meanings as man has moods. Beauty is the symbol of symbols. Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing. When it shows us itself, it shows us the whole fiery-coloured world" (Wilde, 1990b, para. 27).

In "The Selfish Giant" (Wilde, 1990h), the reference to the artist is made in the form of the giant, who is initially selfish, but is later transformed to one who gives freely of his gifts and of himself to make others happy. In his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde says that "those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt...those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope. They are the elect for whom beautiful things mean only Beauty" (p. 3). In this third tale, then, the children who appreciate the garden, and especially the little child whom the giant loves – the Christ-figure whose presence echoes the theme of self-sacrifice — these are they whom Wilde referred to as being "cultivated" and for whom "there is hope." There is hope, too, for the selfless artist: in the story's ending, the giant, who has died, is covered with white flowers, white being the symbol of purity. Too, the reference to the Christ-child who invites the giant to his own garden (Paradise?) makes the message all too clear: that the selfless artist, even if unappreciated by most people, will find grace and favor in the eyes of the Almighty.

We see as we read, then, that one 'moral' emerging in Wilde's fairy tales is exactly the aestheticism that he espouses in his essay: *l'art pour l'art*. The giving of self that the prince, the nightingale, and the giant showed are parallels of Art giving the gift of itself. How is it possible though, that Aesthetics and Morals reconcile in Wilde's work, when the Art-for-art's-sake movement emphasized the separation of morality from art?

It becomes entirely possible when one remembers that the premise of this paper begins with the paradox that is Oscar Wilde, for whom stretching the notional limits of genres was child's play: he used the short story to present his theory of Shakespeare's sonnets, the epigram to exhibit a condensed theory of art as preface in his novel, and the dialogue instead of the essay for some of his most notable non-fiction (Murray, n.d., para. 16). As we read his fairy tales further, we discover that Wilde plays not only with the conventions of the genre and their themes but also with the very definitions of ideas, specifically of aestheticism and morality.

The last two fairy tales in the first volume feature main characters that are the antithesis of the prince, the nightingale, and the giant. In "The Devoted Friend" (Wilde, 1990c) and "The Remarkable Rocket" (Wilde, 1990g), the main characters are self-centered and believe themselves entitled to attention, adulation, and service. In the former tale, the reader is increasingly appalled at how the wealthy miller drives to his death the poor farmer, who believes himself to be the other's best friend and so will do anything for him. In the latter tale, the reader is amused at the rocket's complete lack of awareness of the truth, all the way to the end. Some critics have seen a similar theme of "unawareness" in the two stories, but with a slight variation: in the latter, "the rocket is a type of pompous artist, whose belief in his great talents and importance is deflated by the end of the tale" (Zipes, 1990, p.211).

The first story in the second volume *A House of Pomegranates* tells of a young lad raised in the remote part of a forest who suddenly becomes "The Young King" when the dying King has him brought to the palace to inherit what is rightfully his, his dead mother having been the King's own daughter. Before he is crowned, however, he is described as being observed by all to be enamored by beauty, whether in the form of paintings, or sculpture, or architecture, or clothing, or jewelry: "never before had he felt so keenly, or with such exquisite joy, the magic and the mystery of beautiful things" (Wilde, 1990j, p.82). He dreams three dreams, in which he sees that the production of the trappings of his royalty are through the blood, sweat, and tears of the poor of his kingdom. When he is awake and about to be dressed for his coronation, he shuns his robe, crown and scepter, wanting to be proclaimed King without the artificial trappings, believing that his subjects would recognize him as their monarch without those trappings. But they refuse to call "King" one who does not look like a king, and so he has to return to the palace, chastened yet no less resolute. He goes to the altar and stands before the image of Christ, and as a wild mob prepares to storm the palace to kill the "unworthy" king, the sunlight streams through the windows, infusing a burst of color all around him that clothed him in raiment finer than his King's robes and brighter than all his jewels. They kneel before him, as does the trembling Bishop, who acknowledges that the young king had been crowned by One much greater than he. And "no man dared look upon his face, for it was like the face of an angel" (p. 97).

Once again, we see the transformation, the stripping away, the losing of self, and in this process are revealed the contradictions and folly of society. In the end, the young king is robed in God's own beautiful Nature: golden sunlight, ruby-red roses, pearl-white lilacs; and his face is like that of an angel—so blindingly magnificent in countenance that mere mortals cannot bear to look at him. The allusion to the artist as favored by God is obvious, an allusion first seen in the tales of the happy prince and the no-longer-selfish giant.

Wilde does not depict all children as being intrinsically good, pure, and innocent, however. In "The Birthday of the Infanta" (Wilde, 1990a), the princess is a cruel, heartless creature who sees the dwarf as a toy, and who manipulates his love for her own selfish ends: nothing but mere entertainment for her birthday party. She is beautiful yet cruel; he is ugly but pure and innocent. The beauty that she is and that is lushly described as surrounding her is in stark contrast to the ugliness of the dwarf. In fact, everybody and everything that sees the dwarf is repulsed by his very presence:

The Flowers were quite indignant at his daring to intrude into their beautiful home... 'He is really far too ugly to be allowed to play in any place we are,' cried the Tulips. 'He should drink poppy-juice, and go to sleep for a thousand years,' said the great scarlet Lilies, and they grew quite hot and angry. 'He is a perfect Horror!' screamed the Cactus. 'Why, he is twisted and stumpy, and his head is completely out of proportion with his legs. Really he makes me feel prickly all over, and if he comes near me I will sting him with my thorns' (p.112).

Here again we see Wilde's irony, for in describing the ugliness of the dwarf, the Cactus is actually describing what he himself looks like! It is as though Wilde holds up a mirror to society, bidding them face their own hypocrisies and contradictions.

Despite his ugliness, however, the reader feels for the dwarf, especially because he is so sweetly and innocently happy in believing that the Infanta likes him, and so when he makes the terrible discovery that the ugly being in the mirror is none other than himself, and he falls to the ground sobbing, his little heart breaking at the realization that he is not worthy of her and that she could not possibly love him back, the reader feels his pain.

Here we see the theme that beautiful beginnings and good intentions do not necessarily produce beauty and goodness. The Infanta's father was a good King who loved his beautiful wife, yet their child is a beautiful monster who does not even realize she is one. There is a foreshadowing of this in an early passage where the reader sees that even as the Infanta resembles her mother, the King is somehow averse to the sight and sound of her that day:

She had all the Queen's pretty petulance of manner...the same wonderful smile...but the shrill laughter of the children grated on his ears, and the bright pitiless sunlight mocked his sorrow, and a dull odour of spices...such as embalmers use, seemed to taint...the clear morning air...and when the Infanta looked up again...the King had retired. (p.104).

The same theme of "opposing aesthetic and moral beauty" (Orhanen, 2009) that readers see in the Infanta –Dwarf dichotomy is found in "The Star-Child" (Wilde, 1990i), which tells the story of a child that is found by two woodcutters in the forest in a spot where a star from heaven had fallen. The child is brought home by one of them to his wife, and the couple raise him along with their own children. He grows up a beautiful, golden boy, and because his beauty causes everyone to marvel in awe, he becomes vain and arrogant: this, despite the good hearts of his adoptive family and the proper upbringing that he receives. He develops pleasure in showing cruelty to animals and people who are weak, poor, or not beautiful. He closes his ears to his adoptive parents' and the priest's chiding, and his heart grows cold and hard.

His undoing comes when his real mother finds him after years of searching, and he spurns her because she is old and ugly and poor: "Alas! My son,' she cried, 'wilt thou not kiss me...? For I have suffered much to find thee.' 'Nay', said the Star-Child, 'but thou art too foul to look at, and rather would I kiss the adder or the toad than thee'" (p. 191). His words become terrible prophecy, for he is transformed into an adder-toad creature, and so no one wishes to be with him: his former playmates who adored him and did his bidding now taunted him and spurned him. The Star-Child realizes that all this happens because he was evil, and because of what he said to his mother, and so he spends years looking for her so that he might convey his

remorse. In the process of going through many trials while searching, his heart learns to truly love and to feel compassion, and he becomes 'morally beautiful'. His moral transformation is soon followed by the return of his aesthetic beauty, and he finds that he is the son of a king and Queen, and he rules wisely and kindly, albeit shortly, for Wilde cannot resist giving the fairy tale his usual sad ending: "Yet ruled he not long, so great had been his suffering, and so bitter the fire of his testing, for after the space of three years he died. And he who came after him ruled evilly" (p. 204).

Aesthetic perfection, then, does not equate with morality, and goodness is not necessarily borne of goodness. This echoes the Aesthetics' view that artworks do not enfold moral content (Orhanen, 2009) and seems to echo Wilde's point that the artist's intent or the art work's content are not what make art beautiful or "good":

Who cares whether Mr. Ruskin's views on Turner are sound or not? What does it matter? That mighty and majestic prose of his, so fervid and so fiery-coloured in its noble eloquence, so rich in its elaborate symphonic music, so sure and certain, at its best, in subtle choice of word and epithet, is at least as great a work of art as any of those wonderful sunsets that bleach or rot on their corrupted canvases in England's Gallery. (Wilde, 1990b, para. 32).

Lastly, in "The Fisherman and His Soul" (Wilde, 1990d), the theme of contrasting beauty – outer and inner – is layered further with the idea that what is traditionally good, as seen by society (represented by the Soul, which is supposed to be the essence of humans and is what separates us from the beasts; and the Priest, who stands for the Church, and hence for morality and for "good") is not what will earn the approval of the Almighty, for even as the fisherman willfully "loses" his soul to satisfy his hedonistic love for a non-human creature, the priest and the rest of society condemn their love for each other, in the end, beautiful and sweet-smelling white flowers grew on the very corner of the field where the priest had the fisherman and the mermaid buried as punishment for their sin of loving.

In this tale, a fisherman falls in love with a mermaid, and when he desires to make her his bride, she tells him that they cannot wed because he has a soul: "If only thou couldn't send away thy soul,

then could I love thee" (p.133). Here, we first note the use of archaic language, like that used in the old bibles of Wilde's time. (The same style is seen in "The Star-Child", which is the last tale in the second volume). One is therefore led to think that this is intentional, and that Wilde wants the reader to situate the tale in the context of bible-reading, and thus of the preaching of morality.

We are struck too, by the oddness of the mermaid's statement that their love could prosper only if the man sends away his soul. We equate the soul with morality, for are we not taught that it is the soul that we seek to save by leading good and godly lives? Yet in this tale, it is the Soul that tempts the man to do evil and offers him worldly riches if only he would give up his forbidden love.

Here, as in the other three tales in the second volume, we see that Wilde's tales have become so much darker. The children are not all pure and innocent, the sacrifices made are more painful and the complications richly layered with undertones of evil. Indeed, the collection in *A House of Pomegranates* becomes so much less childlike than those in *The Happy Prince*.

Zipes surmises that it is as though Wilde had become "more painfully aware of the difficulties a 'deviate' artist would encounter in British society" (1990, p. 211), and if so, then we can draw a parallel between Wilde's personal turmoil and the fates of the fisherman and the young king who both go against what society upholds as being what is true and right:

The star-child, the dwarf, and the fisherman all die because their love and sacrifices go against the grain of their societies. Only the young king survives, but it is evident that his future reign, based on humility and material equality, will encounter great obstacles. There will obviously be no paradise on earth until it is necessary to have martyrs who lead Christ-like lives and die for the sake of humanity. (Zipes, 1990, pp. 212-213).

Wilde says it even more beautifully: "It is through the voice of one crying in the wilderness that the ways of the gods must be prepared" (1990b, para. 49).

What then, are the 'morals' in Wilde's fairy tales? How do we resolve the paradoxes of the artist and of his art?

First, the morals that any sober reader may extract from the tales: that those who give freely of themselves (of their art) are, in the end, transformed (the prince to a precious thing in God's eyes, the giant, the fisherman's grave becomes covered with white flowers, all who look at the young King see that he has the face of an angel); that those who are selfish and full of their self-importance (the rocket, the Infanta, and the star-child before his transformation) are inwardly ugly and should not get the attention and rewards they seek; that there is forgiveness and redemption following enlightenment and remorse (the giant, the star-child, the young king); that not all children are kind (the star-child, the Infanta); that not all those associated with the church and with learning are depicted kindly (the priest in "The Fisherman", the university art professor in "The Happy Prince"); and that what is not acceptable to society may yet find favor in the eyes of God.

If these, then, are the "morals" we see in his fairy tales, then they are a reflection of us, and not of the art. "All art is at once surface and symbols," Wilde says, and "those who go beneath the surface do so at their own peril. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors (Wilde, 1982, p.3). This is because criticism:

...treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation. It does not confine itself...to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final. And in this it is right, for the meaning of any beautiful created thing is... as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it. Nay, it is rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings, and makes it marvellous for us, and sets it in some new relation to the age, so that it becomes a vital portion of our lives, and a symbol of what we pray for, or perhaps of what, having prayed for, we fear that we may receive...For when the work is finished it has, as it were, an independent life of its own, and may deliver a message far other than that which was put into its lips to say...(Wilde, 1990b, *The Critic as Artist*, para. 62).

What of the paradoxes in his art? His fairy tales' unconventional endings veer away from the traditions of the genre, and even when the protagonist has redeemed himself, no happy ending is promised. There are the paradoxes, too, pertaining to: "beauty as both the root

of narcissistic malice and a reward for moral growth" (Orhanen, 2009, para. 13) as is seen in "The Star-Child"; the ugly but pure Dwarf dying as a consequence of the cruelty of the beautiful Infanta; the Nightingale dying to give the young man the red rose to win the girl's love, even if her sacrifice is for naught. Such paradoxes would seem to negate any "moral" message of inner beauty as being better than outer beauty, of goodness and love triumphing over evil and hate.

Instead of eliciting clear morals from the fairy tales then, we emerge with ambiguities and dichotomies. Instead of conveying a clear moral, the moral implications of the story seem contradictory. If we read Wilde's essays, however, especially "The Critic as Artist" (1990) where paradoxes abound in Gilbert's and Ernest's discussion and thus lend themselves to multiple, contradictory readings, we will see that the paradoxical elements in Wilde's fairy tales are part of his strategy through which he demonstrates his aesthetic credo:

All Art is immoral... except those baser forms of sensual or didactic art that seek to excite to action of evil or of good. For action of every kind belongs to the sphere of ethics. The aim of art is simply to create a mood... Art does not hurt us. The tears that we shed at a play are a type of the exquisite sterile emotions that it is the function of Art to awaken. We weep, but we are not wounded. We grieve, but our grief is not bitter. In the actual life of man, sorrow, as Spinoza says somewhere, is a passage to a lesser perfection. But the sorrow with which Art fills us both purifies and initiates, if I may quote once more from the great art critic of the Greeks. It is through Art, and through Art only, that we can realise our perfection; through Art, and through Art only, that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence.... (Wilde, 1990b, para. 59).

Wilde's aestheticism, then, is true philosophy: it is at the same time love of wisdom and search for knowledge as it is a code of behavior, a way of thinking, and a lifestyle. This we see in his lavish attention to details, lush descriptions, the value that he gives beautiful things in his stories, his stunningly picturesque language, and the importance that he gives to the reading experience.

Although the *l'art pour l'art* philosophy essentially argues against a marriage of art and morality, Wilde manages to show, paradoxically, how it is possible. This he does in his fairy tales, where, by providing sensuous images via lush and lavish language, he showcases not decadence, but beauty—honest and true. His aestheticism, then, becomes the moral.

The one characteristic of a beautiful form is that one can put into it whatever one wishes, and see in it whatever one chooses to see; and the Beauty, that gives to creation its universal and aesthetic element, makes the critic a creator in his turn, and whispers of a thousand different things which were not present in the mind of him who carved the statue or painted the panel or graved the gem. (Wilde, 1990b, para. 67).

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