

An elusive utopia: conflicting christian and socialist themes in oscar wilde's fa...

[Environment](#), [Air](#)



Not many Literary Figures have retained notoriety quite as splendidly as Oscar Wilde has. His illustrious body of work continues to be heavily debated to this day. Although renown for his plays and sole novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde wrote an influential collection of Fairy Tales he deemed suitable for “childlike people aged eighteen to eighty”. This disclaimer was likely made to avoid being accused of indecorous themes for children’s literature. Scholars have long concentrated on the homosexual allusions found in these tales which has repeatedly eclipsed their shrewd social commentary. *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* is a collection of short stories published in 1888. The Christian influences suggest he was partially inspired by Hans Christian Andersen. Unlike Andersen’s penchant for the transcendent powers of suffering, the end of Wilde’s tales often ring hollow. The Selfish Giant dies, the Happy Prince has idly given everything he has, and the Nightingale sacrifices her life in vain. There is no “Happy Ever After”. While it may seem peculiar that he would write such weighted pieces when he was a ardent believer in “art for the sake of art”, Wilde has never been an embodiment of consistency. He went as far as admitting that “Consistency was the last refuge of the unimaginative”. The myriad of Christian socialist references foreshadow his future marxist influenced work. In “*The Soul of Man Under Socialism*,” written years later, Wilde presents an argument for an ideal society in which Socialism and Christianity are intimately intertwined. Wilde bases this premise from the distinctly singular perspective of an artist, in a setting in which Socialism has already reached it’s peak: Individualism. Self-Realization and Socialism are seldom seen as compatible, as one seems inherently selfish and the other fundamentally

selfless. This may be the author's way to compel society to accept him for being drastically different and to refuse settling for contentment. Wilde attempts to reconcile these antagonistic notions in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*.

As one reads through the tales, it becomes apparent Wilde is disturbed by the rigidity of social expectations. They mirror the issues he perceives during the Victorian Era. The use of the Fairy Tale form permitted him certain liberties in expressing his contempt for social conventions, authoritarian institutions and charity. The first story in the collection is the best-known and titled tale "The Happy Prince". The religious symbolism and socialist messages are vivid. The adorned statue of the Happy Prince, a once oblivious monarch living above his city and never having a care in the world, is confronted with the harsh living circumstances of his subjects. A swallow lands near him and notices the statue is shedding tears for he has come to the realization that he had not known of the misery plaguing his people while he was alive. He pleads with the swallow to do him favours, each of which demand an ornament be plucked out of him to be given to a poor family. The swallow reluctantly agrees to help the Happy Prince and carries out his wishes. Their love for each other grows as the story progresses and the swallow stays with the statue throughout winter. Eventually, the Happy Prince's statue becomes ashen and the swallow passes away from the cold, causing the statue's leaden heart to break. This echoes the altruistic death of Christ. The next day, the Mayor and councilmen pass by the statue and are taken aback by its' lacklustre appearance. They melt the statue to make a new one in the Mayor's image. While the council decides on the ways to

proceed, an Angel brings the leaden heart and the lifeless bird to Heaven. Acknowledging their selfless sacrifice, God grants them access to his Garden for Eternity. As poetic as the ending of the tale is, Wilde makes a few perceptive remarks. The Happy Prince, as philanthropist as he may have been in death, was blissfully unaware of hardships in life, and attempts to remedy this by gifting gems till he has nothing left to give. When he is no longer considered beautiful, he is no longer considered useful and is melted to create another embellished statue, suggesting a vicious cycle. He may have helped those families to survive the winter, but social change does not come to pass. The swallow dies carrying out the Happy Prince's egotistical attempts to atone for his past negligence. One may argue that the pair is given salvation and eternal life to spend with each other, but it seems difficult to dissociate the happiness of the few when the villagers are likely to continue living in aggravated circumstances. Wilde considers charity to be a selfish deed, as it only truly helps the benefactor sleep better at night. I do not believe Wilde condemns the idea of compassion but rather the blind importance of material over the continuously degrading systemic issues.

"The Selfish Giant" is another tale bountiful with Christian and anti-capitalist symbolism. In the Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion, Jack Zipes divides the tale in three stages. The first is the Giant, a metaphorical land owner evicting children from his Garden. He comes home after a seven year absence and is enraged to see children have trespassed into his beautiful garden. He scares them away. His actions causes the seasons to halt mid-winter on his property. His ungenerous disposition is punished as he cannot

enjoy his barren garden. Spring, symbolic for new beginnings cannot come to pass. The second stage is the realization that his selfishness causes a small child's misery and he understands why Spring would not arrive. Wilde emphasizes the beauty the children bring to garden. They are innocent, void of social constraints and thus inherently prone to self-realization. This is apparent when the only child not to run away is the one blinded by tears. He cannot see the Giant, and is therefore an uncorrupted judge. The last stage is the phenomenal changes the Giant and the Garden go through when he shares his property. The Giant finds happiness when he opens his Garden to the local children. This ensures the garden's prosperity and becomes similar to Eden, a Garden free of impurity. The small child reappears wounded and bloodied many years later. He is an incarnation of Christ and has come to take the Giant up to Heaven. Wilde uses this love and compassion as a fundamental base for true socialism. It is not uncommon for many to interpret the kiss between the Christ-like figure and the Giant as a depiction of a homosexual relation. "The Selfish Giant" is the story of a sinner's road to redemption. Wilde may have very well identified with the Giant, as he was a particularly large man. It is possible that he wrote this in the spirit that he too would be forgiven. However legitimate this argument may be, the allegory functions on many levels, the most conspicuous being the spiritual union with Christ.

The final Fairy Tale examined is "The Nightingale and the Rose", a tragic tale of unrequited love. Believing a student was destined to be a "true lover", the nightingale decides to help him find a rose, even though it is out

of season, so he may profess his love to the daughter of a Professor. The bird searches frantically for a red rose, and as she finds the adequate Tree, it cannot produce a rose as it is Winter. The Tree reluctantly offers the only solution by saying “ build it out of music by moonlight, and stain it with your own heart’s-blood. You must sing to me with your breast against a thorn. All night long you must sing to me, and the thorn must pierce your heart, and your life-blood must flow into my veins, and become mine.” Believing the student’s love is earnest she sings slowly piercing her chest while singing till the morning light. The student listens and notes the lack of sincerity in her notes. He only understands logic and cannot comprehend the passion behind the sacrificial song. When the Nightingale dies and the rose is born, the Student attributes the miraculous apparition of a rose in winter to mere luck. He presents it to the Professor’s daughter, only to have her reject it because it didn’t compliment her dress and adding she had received jewels from another suitor. The tale is a tragically ironic love story in which the only pure symbol of love is tainted by materialism and obtuse logic. Once again, Wilde end the tale on a decidedly somber note. The nightingale selfless suffering is not rewarded with spiritual release. Not only is this a comment on the shortcomings brought on by capitalism (materialism), it is a reaffirmation of Wilde’s stance on the Aesthetic movement. Firmly identifying beauty and art to be transcending reason.

Oscar Wilde does a masterful job of writing whimsical tales that are lighthearted in appearance. Andersen’s Tales are violent in comparison, but the moral ensures some form of salvation for selfless actions. Wilde’s Tales

however, do not provide happy endings. The Happy Prince and Swallow spend eternity in Heaven yet the subjects continue to live miserably. The Giant is forgiven for his sins, but the sight of his lifeless body is the last image we are left with. The Nightingale pointlessly sacrifices her beauty, her talent and her life for a society with skewed priorities. Wilde will later describe Christ as a “ man who abandons society entirely, or of the man who resists society absolutely,” and is therefore the paragon of Individualism. His arguments contradict each other considering that forgoing society completely would entail a physical distance from people. As social animals, I do not think one can have true Individualism and Socialism simultaneously. Wilde’s strive for a Christian socialist notion of Individualism is deeply rooted in his own desire to be accepted wholly by society but also maintaining a social conscience.

Works Cited:

Quintus, John Allen. “ Christ, Christianity, and Oscar Wilde”. *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 33. 4 (1991): 514-527. Web...

Talairach-Vielmas, Laurence. *Marvels & Tales* 25. 2 (2011): 392-394. Web...

Tatar, Maria. “ Chapter 6, Oscar Wilde, Introduction.” *The Classic Fairy Tales: Texts, Criticism*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1999. Print.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Soul of Man under Socialism*. Champaign, Ill.: Project Gutenberg, 199. Print.

Zipes, Jack. "Inverting and Subverting the World With Hope: The Fairy Tales of George MacDonald, Oscar Wilde, and L. Baum." *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization*. New York: Wildman, 1983. Print.