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Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales: The Aesthetically and Socially Engaged Child

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'Oscar Wilde and fairy tales? Putting the two in the same sentence has a jarring effect' suggests fairy tale scholar Maria Tatar.[1] This has to do, in large part, with Wilde's fame as a decadent author and an aesthete. While some have found Wilde's choice of writing children's literature, in the form of his fairy tales, a strange one, this interest in childhood is less surprising than one might think. Conceptualizations of childhood at the fin de siècle were influenced by lingering Romantic ideas of childhood built upon the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and William Wordsworth[2], as well as the budding psychological field of Child Study spearheaded in Britain by James Sully.[3] Scholars in this field perceived the child as both evolutionarily 'savage' or animalistic and, also, Romantically imaginative, rebellious, and visionary. While older models of Romantic childhood, both savage and sweet, defined the child by simplicity, Wilde addressed child readers as an audience capable of understanding complex ironies, multilayered moral messages, and even open-ended problems in the world. Wilde uses fairy tales as pathways to engage the child reader with his critiques of the world as it is and his vision for the world as it could be. I turn to two of Wilde's most famous fairy tales, 'The Happy Prince' and 'The Young King', to demonstrate how we might read these decadent fairy tales as attempts to bring the child into social consciousness. In both stories Wilde encourages the child reader to question adult authority, face real tragedy, recognize the complexity of social problems, appreciate the beauty of queer companionship, and challenge the political status quo. And he does this through, rather than against, a love of aesthetics.

Wilde's fairy tales, as scholars have pointed out, are written in ways that do not quite fit into the usual assumptions about what texts for children should look like. Perry Nodelman, in 'The Young Know Everything', argues that the problem with a much scholarship about Wilde's tales is that it bases

its interpretation of the tales on 'a consideration of what these scholars assume to be the characteristics of children', rather than on the characteristics of the stories themselves.[4] The result of this is that many scholars have argued that Wilde's tales are *not* for children, or rather that the most interesting and complex aspects of the texts are intended to appeal more to adults. I propose to follow Nodelman's lead here and interpret these tales as children's literature. Through this view, these tales reflect what Wilde perceived to be the artistic tastes and literary capabilities of children, and we can see how Wilde addresses the child reader as an astute literary aesthete and potential social activist.

'The Happy Prince' and Aesthetic Morality

In 'The Happy Prince' Wilde ostensibly positions decadent, orientalist tropes and aesthetic pleasure against material self-sacrifice. Yet, this tale also suggests the futility of both short-term charity to make lasting change and the comfort of queer love and aesthetic beauty in the face of bleak social inequalities. It also positions authority figures as ineffective, self-absorbed, and the primary objects of mockery. Further, this tale works as a piece of decadent art, with lush, detailed descriptions that develop its emotional resonance. Through its very narrative function, then, the text suggests the usefulness of decadence and aestheticism in moving audiences to emotional reaction and social action. 'The Happy Prince' primarily follows the converging stories of a living, but non-moving, statue of the late prince and the Swallow, who has left his flock to pursue love. Together they work to give gold and jewels to the destitute and struggling townspeople, and these actions lead ultimately to both of their deaths. In a cynical twist, the tale ends when the town council determines to take down the (now ugly) statue of the Prince and replace it with another beautiful, gilded statue, preferably of one of their own number.

When the Swallow meets the Prince, the Prince shares his sorrow for his town and together they begin spreading the gold and jewels from the statue's body to the poor, sick, abused, and disheartened. The Prince explains his grief by telling his own tale to the Swallow:

> I did not know what tears were, for I lived in the Palace of Sans-Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter. […] Round the garden ran a very lofty wall, but I never cared to ask what lay beyond it, everything about me was so beautiful. […] And now that I am dead they have set me up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and misery of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep.[5]

In his past life, the Happy Prince was a decadent figure, who enjoyed pleasure and beauty unrestrained and without awareness of or concern for the suffering of his people. His current, suspended vantage-point has now brought this suffering into unavoidable view yet traps him in a position unable to move or help. Now able to compare the beauty of his past life to the darkness of his current perspective, the Prince concludes that 'more marvellous than anything is the suffering of men and of women. There is no Mystery so great as Misery' (p. 19). The ugliness of the world seems to overpower the beauty and absorbs his mind. For this reason, he recruits the help of the Swallow to act as his hands and strip his body of its precious and beautiful metal and jewels.

The moral 'lesson' of the tale revolves around these acts of generosity. The Swallow, who is out of his climate as the season swiftly changes, suddenly finds himself feeling warm despite the weather. The Prince explains this warmth by saying 'that is because you have done a good thing' (p. 15). Charity, then, is its own reward. Those who contribute to the suffering of the poor, such as the rich young girl waiting for her dress to be embroidered by the seamstress whose child is ill, are presented as selfishly unaware of the misery to which they contribute. To her lover she says, 'I hope my dress will be ready in time for the State-ball, […]; I have ordered passionflowers to be embroidered on it; but the seamstresses are so lazy' (p. 14). She highlights the beauty of the detail-work which will be produced while denigrating the work ethic of the artist who produces it. In this way aesthetics contributes directly to a lack of empathy. Conversely, the ruby that the Prince and Swallow offer to

the seamstress is aesthetically beautiful, but this value is sacrificed for its value as potential currency; it can be sold to get her out of her financial problems. The 'happy' ending of the story comes after both the Swallow and statue have died. God sends an angel to collect 'the two most precious things in the city' (p. 22) and the angel brings the Swallow's body and the statue's broken, leaden heart to heaven. We are told that the angel had 'chosen rightly', confirming the righteousness of their charitable choices, and that in 'Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me' (p. 22). This constitutes their reward for their martyrdom and the 'positive' note on which the story ends. Yet, as Nodelman puts it, Wilde's fairy tales appear to be 'teasingly insistent on undermining the apparent moral thrust of his stories'.[6]

Alongside this straightforward life lesson about self-effacement and self-sacrifice, this story also offers some dissonant messages about the potential value of aesthetics as well as the potential futility of charity to change the system in which injustice thrives. Early in the story we are given several examples from the townspeople of the inspiration the Happy Prince brings to the town. One 'disappointed man' looks at the statue and says, 'I am glad there is someone in the world who is quite happy' (p. 10). For this disgruntled townsperson, the Happy Prince serves as an image of what could be, of some happiness to aspire to. A class of Charity Children say 'He looks just like an angel' (p. 10). Thus, to the children his beauty embodies their spiritual imagination and reinforces their belief in angels. Not only the townspeople, but also the Swallow is drawn to the Prince's beauty and inspired by it. The Swallow settles happily into the shelter of the statue saying to himself 'I have a golden bedroom' (p. 11). Their initial meeting is made possible because the Swallow is drawn to the Prince's beauty. Further, the Swallow is convinced to go along with the Prince's scheme because of the Prince's beauty: 'The eyes of the Happy Prince were filled with tears, and tears were running down his golden cheeks. His face was so beautiful in the moonlight that the little Swallow was filled with pity' (p. 12).

His agreement to help the Prince spread his wealth is motivated in part by the persuasive quality of the Prince's sad beauty.

The Swallow acts as a decadent storyteller who enthrals both the statue and the reader with his elaborate, excessive, and orientalizing descriptions of Egypt. He has been left behind by the rest of his flock who have already flown ahead to Egypt, and he longs to follow them to warm and beautiful places. Although the swallow's life is in real danger if he remains until winter, his primary explanations of his reasons for desiring to leave are grounded in exotic beauty:

> My friends are flying up and down the Nile, and talking to the large lotus-flowers. Soon they will go to sleep in the tomb of the great King. The King is there himself in his painted coffin. He is wrapped in yellow linen, and embalmed in spices. Round his neck is a chain of pale green jade, and his hands are like withered leaves. (p. 13)

The Swallows are not just going to spend the winter in the warm climate of Egypt, living in the trees or bushes, they are going to immerse themselves in the most famous history and art of the country. They will spend time among flowers known only in myth in England and literally climb inside a Pharoah's tomb to sleep. Familiar tropes of decadent writing are woven into the Swallow's descriptions such as the detailed attention paid to the linen which encases the corpse, the spices in which the body is embalmed, and even the withering of the mummy's hands. Even the slow decay of the body is rendered in terms of beauty, alongside exotic jewellery.

These stories of Egypt function as a contrast to the dark, dingy streets of this European town. Light, beauty, and hope seem to radiate from these decadent descriptions of foreign places. This 'decadent aesthetic imagery',[7] to quote Fleurot, works to attract child readers with their Romance and beauty while demonstrating a clear contrast with the dark poverty of the European urban landscape.

Another common decadent trope we see in this tale is the lauding of queer love as a symbol of hope and the impetus for moral goodness. The emotional drive of this tale comes from the deep, selfless love that develops between two males, the statue and the Swallow. While the Swallow initially spares no thought for the people of the town, his love for the statue teaches him to become invested

in the plights of others. He learns empathy not only for the starving mother, artist, and child, but also for the statue. When winter has fully come along, the Swallow refuses to leave the statue because he is now blind. He does not want the statue to live in a cold, dark world alone in which he cannot move. So, the Swallow remains behind, with the knowledge that the cost will be his life, to paint beautiful pictures of the world for him with his words. Those decadent descriptions are the last gift of the Swallow to his love – a love briefly consummated with a kiss on the lips before the Swallow freezes to death. In turn, the statue's leaden heart breaks in two at the loss of his love.

With only this image of noble self-sacrifice to consider, one might think that the child reader should come away having learned that empathy for the poor and suffering should lead to charity and self-sacrifice. Yet, Wilde's story is more complicated than this. The story ends on a humorous but disheartening note. The sacrifices of the statue are, of course, never recognized by the townspeople who do not realize that the statue is alive. Further, once the statue's gilded and bejewelled exterior is stripped away, they decide that 'as he is no longer beautiful he is no longer useful' (p. 21), and tear the statue down. Although as readers we are, perhaps, heartbroken that they do not realize the goodness of his sacrifices, in two different senses they are right. If his aesthetic beauty was functioning as an inspiration to the townspeople, then he can no longer fulfil that role. Further, if his moral 'use' was charity, he no longer has anything to give away to the poor and suffering. He has given all he has to give.

More importantly, the material and political situation of the town has not notably changed. There are some poignant moments of happiness when individual acts of charity happen in the story. When the 'matchgirl' (a pointed reference to Hans Christian Andersen's tale) gets to take home the 'lovely bit of glass' (p. 18) she finds that, at least for one night, her father will not beat her. Thus, briefly, the reader can experience relief and happiness. When the children of the town who receive the statue's gold leaf cry out with joy – 'we have bread now!' (p. 20) – it may feel like the town has

improved on a broad scale with so many different people getting help. Yet the story undercuts this with a scene involving the Town Councillors. These figures function as comedic caricatures of selfish obliviousness. When they decide to tear down the Prince's statue, the Mayor immediately suggests, 'we must have another, of course […] and it shall be a statue of myself' (p. 21). In response to this, "'of myself', said each of the Town Councillors, and they quarrelled. When last I heard of them they were quarrelling still' (p. 21). The description of adults squabbling incessantly is intended to be humorous to a child reader, but it still leaves the end of the tale bitter-sweet. Readers are forced to face how little has changed in the town. The leadership has not changed, nor have the politicians and community leaders learned anything. In fact, we get a clear sign that they plan to go right back to where they were before the incidents of this story. They want to have a beautiful statue that glorifies the wealthy and offers nothing of material value to the townspeople. Further, with the charity of the Prince and Swallow gone, there is no one to offer any support to the poor and suffering when future problems arise. As Monica Flegel argues, in many of Wilde's tales, he 'presents good actions as ephemeral, without lasting impact'.[8] By turning back to the Town Councillors, then, the reader is forced to face the fact that charity did not solve the problems of the town; it only temporarily assuaged their symptoms.

In 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' (1891), Wilde addresses the relationship between charity and poverty directly. With his characteristic wit, Wilde famously tells readers that 'Charity creates a multitude of sins."[9] He goes on to cogently argue that this is because '[i]t is immoral to use private property in order to alleviate the horrible evils that result from the institution of private property' and, thus, that '[t]he proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible'.[10] In short, his political philosophy, as laid out in the essay is against small gestures of generosity which, he argues, make the person who gives feel better but achieve nothing in terms of solving the true problems of inequality that underpin poverty; those gestures reinforce the exploitative

economic system by propping up its failures. However, in the essay he does acknowledge the aesthetic and emotional drive to acts of charity, admitting that philanthropists 'find themselves surrounded by hideous poverty, by hideous ugliness, by hideous starvation. It is inevitable that they should be strongly moved by all this.'[11] Suffering is ugly and ugliness is immoral. Yet he suggests that this impulse is moving in the wrong direction. Rather than offer acts of charity, one should be rethinking the system entirely. While not directly discussing child readers, in *Oscar Wilde and the Radical Politics of the Fin de Siècle* (2020), Deaglán Ó Donghaile suggests that Wilde's fairy tales put his socialist 'theory into literary action'.[12] In 'The Happy Prince', we can see his political and economic philosophy simplified for child readers.

The story engages, to use Vernon Lee's term, an 'aesthetico-moral' connection to encourage the child reader to feel invested in this problem.[13] The story critiques authority, through humour, by making authoritative adults the objects of mockery. The authorities who run things are silly and not to be trusted. So while the story makes clear that the statue and the Swallow's method of addressing the problem does not lead to long-term change for the town, encouraging the child reader to look for another solution to the problem, and it suggests the authorities who maintain the current system as the likely target to challenge. As Wilde notes in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, 'all modes of government are failures' and 'all authority is quite degrading'.[14]

Wilde's 'The Young King' and Beautiful Anti-Materialism

Wilde returns to these themes in his second fairy tale collection, *A House of Pomegranates* (1892). His tale 'The Young King' follows the story of a prince raised as a goatherd returned to the palace to rule as king after his grandfather's death. The tale paints a portrait of a young lad somewhere between a wild faun and a decadent gentleman and then confronts this character with the unethical production of the beautiful materials he so admires. While the tale ends with a Christian message of rejecting

materialism and embracing Christ, it also represents that turn to God through a resurgence of aesthetic power. The story also includes pitting the young king's childish empathy, idealism, and faith against the jaded protestations of the older authorities around him. Much like 'The Happy Prince', 'The Young King' signals Wilde's belief in the comprehensive capabilities of his child readers by both incorporating subtle humour and exposing them to harsh and bloody realities of the production of gold cloth, pearls, and jewels in the late nineteenth century. This tale further eschews straightforward moral lessons by incorporating complex economic arguments that are never fully resolved within the tale. While the reader is encouraged to question the wisdom of the established authorities, these open-ended problems of economic disparity, which remain at the end of the tale, suggest to a child reader that the young King has not found the solution to these issues either. Further thought, then, is necessary to consider how the entire system might change.

This tale contains a host of familiar tropes that work to characterize the young king as a decadent while Wilde simultaneously makes use of the techniques of decadent authors in his storytelling to engage the reader in aesthetic appreciation. The tale's first description of the young king tells us that

> the lad […] had flung himself back with a deep sigh of relief on the soft cushions of his embroidered couch, lying there, wild-eyed and open-mouthed, like a brown woodland Faun, or some young animal of the forest newly snared by the hunters.[15]

Wilde presents the king as boyish, wild, and languorously erotic. An appreciation of the natural world laced with a dash of pagan mysticism abounds in decadent writing and the young king, at the beginning of the story, embodies this feral child of nature trope. He remains like a frolicking creature and, although he is apparently old enough to be crowned king, he maintains a childish wide-eyed sense of wonder and idealistic optimism.

However, the young king does not remain unchanged after being thrust into the palace. While his love of beauty seems to be already fully formed before his recognition as the heir to the throne, he

quickly learns to embrace the costly materials of the palace rather than those of the wild. When he is brought to the palace and given the clothes of royalty, 'a cry of pleasure broke from his lips when he saw the delicate raiment and rich jewels that had been prepared for him' and 'he flung aside his rough leathern tunic and coarse sheepskin cloak' with 'almost fierce joy' (p. 79). He immediately embraces an intense appreciation of decadent aesthetics and whiles away hours appreciating the excessive material beauty of the palace. This obsession with beautiful things quickly begins to expand beyond the bounds of the palace itself into the acquisition of rare pretty things from across the globe:

> All rare and costly materials had certainly a great fascination for him, and in his eagerness to procure them he had sent away many merchants, some to traffic for amber with the rough fisher-folk of the north seas, some to Egypt to look for that curious green turquoise which is found only in the tombs of kings, and is said to possess magical properties, some to Persia for silken carpets and painted pottery, and others to India to buy gauze and stained ivory, moonstones and bracelets of jade, sandalwood and blue enamel and shawls of fine wool. (p. 81)

His move from appreciation to collection suggests the insatiability of his desires. These mentions of the various exotic locales from which these artifacts must be brought begins to signal that these objects are not just neutral aesthetic objects, but objects embedded in a context. Wilde introduces us to the idea that these things come from places – 'Egypt', 'Persia', 'India', 'the north seas' – and from people – 'merchants', 'rough fisher-folk', 'kings' – but the young king himself does not yet have a clear image of the reality of this, knowledge which will become clear in his later dreams.

It is worth mentioning at this point that Wilde's text draws us along with the young king in the appreciation of beauty. An aesthete himself, Wilde entrances the reader with lush descriptions of the beauty within the palace. When it comes to the young king's beloved art, the reader is treated to extended, detailed descriptions of every item:

> The walls were hung with rich tapestries representing the Triumph of Beauty. A large press, inlaid with agate and lapis-lazuli, filled one corner, and facing the window stood a curiously wrought cabinet with lacquer panels of powdered and mosaiced gold, on which were placed some delicate goblets of Venetian glass, and a cup of dark-veined onyx. Pale poppies were broidered on the silk coverlet of the bed, as though they had fallen from the tired hands of sleep, and tall reeds of fluted ivory bare up the velvet canopy, from which great tufts of ostrich

> plumes sprang, like white foam, to the pallid silver of the fretted ceiling. A laughing Narcissus in green bronze held a polished mirror above its head. On the table stood a flat bowl of amethyst. (p. 82)

The narrator describes each piece of furniture in his bedroom: the colour, material, pattern, and shape of each item. Wilde develops animated metaphors to describe the drape and movement of such details as the poppies on the coverlet and the ostrich plumes on the canopy. Specific gemstones are mentioned (agate, lapis-lazuli, onyx, amethyst), specific styles (such as Venetian glass), and specific mythical figures (such as Narcissus) are referenced. The result is a description not only dense but also lively, exotic, and colourful, capturing the reader's attention and inviting them to be enraptured, much as is the young king, by these objects.

The moral lesson, however, will come for both the young King and the reader once the story turns to his three dreams. These dreams reveal to the young King the circumstances under which the gold fabric for his mantle was woven, the pearls for his sceptre were hunted, and the rubies for his crown were mined. As Ó Donghaile notes, this story offers a critique of imperial capitalism that aligns with Wilde's politics.[16] The first of these dreams shows him the textile factory in which the golden mantle was being woven:

> The meagre daylight peered in through the grated windows, and showed him the gaunt figures of the weavers bending over their cases. Pale, sickly-looking children were crouched on the huge crossbeams. […] Their faces were pinched with famine, and their thin hands shook and trembled. Some haggard women were seated at a table sewing. A horrible odour filled the place. The air was foul and heavy, and the walls dripped and streamed with damp. (p. 83)

In a sort of Dickensian flash, the story demonstrates the horrors of the English working poor as they produce luxury items for the rich. The young king weakly argues that they are not slaves and are free to leave, but a weaver quickly dismisses that idea by reminding him that they must eat and that all other opportunities of industry for the poor similarly benefit the rich and create suffering for the poor. 'We have chains, though no eye beholds them', the weaver tells the young king, 'and [we] are slaves, though men call us free' (p. 84). This episode makes clear that having the ontological freedom to walk

away from a bad situation does not necessarily equate to having the actual opportunity to do so, if there are no better alternatives for survival. The exchange between the young king and the weaver works to highlight that this is a systemic societal problem.

Here Wilde begins educating his child readers on the complex economics of their industrialized society and hints at the need for large-scale changes to assuage the suffering of the poor. This story, much like 'The Happy Prince', also seems to draw upon the same concepts Wilde discusses in 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism'. This dream, and the ones that follow, focus on the 'hideous poverty', 'hideous ugliness', and 'hideous starvation' that Wilde tells us drives people to want to act against economic injustice.[17] Through these dreams he begins to develop his argument that humankind should not be 'compelled to do the work of beasts of burden' as are all the labourers in these dreams.[18] And, much like in his essay on socialism, throughout the dialogue this story rejects simple answers to economic injustice. As the weaver with whom he speaks makes clear, this is a problem of the entire capitalist system which has put these workers in a position from which there is no escape without remaking the system.

The next dream shifts from metaphorical to literal slavery by following a 'negro' pearl-hunting ship manned by slaves off the coast of an unspecified country populated by 'Arabs'. Thus, Wilde moves from the perhaps more familiar injustices at home to the violent impact of colonialism world-wide and the hardships of non-Western peoples in the face of Western commercial demand. The horrific process of forcibly submerging an enslaved man using a large stone tied to his waist is described in great detail, including the wax shoved into his nose and ears to block out the water. Finally, he is forced to a depth beyond the human capacity for survival and retrieves the perfect pearl before, as Wilde describes, 'he fell upon the deck [and] the blood gushed from his ears and mouth. He quivered for a little, and then he was still. The negroes shrugged their shoulder and threw the body overboard' (p. 87). Due to its stark reality, and because it comes immediately after the factory dream,

which most British readers would recognize as true, the reader must also confront the fact that this bloody end awaits many enslaved people who are forced to hunt pearls for Western consumption. If child readers are to come with the young king on his path to economic education, they must face this brutal reality alongside him. They must also recognize that injustice and suffering, including that in which one's own society is implicated, extend beyond one's own borders and across the globe. Thus, Wilde uses the child's aesthetic sense to teach them a new kind of lesson, one about ugliness and cruelty.

The final dream is a little different, because it distances itself from real circumstances and instead explains the suffering of the ruby miners in the jungle through an allegorical tale about an argument between personifications of Avarice and Death. Avarice refuses to share her grains of corn with Death, so he kills off 'her servants' by calling forth Ague, Fever, and Plague (also personified in this tale). This dream focuses more on naming and underscoring the foolishness of the sin in question – Avarice – rather than highlighting the realistic plight of the diseased miners in the jungle. But in this, as in every other case, the point is made clear that the cause for it all is the young king's requested coronation outfit. The young king, and the reader, are forced to confront the idea that luxurious materials are acquired through the suffering of the poor. The young king then takes responsibility for his culpability by rejecting the coronation outfit and going forth to his coronation dressed as a goatherd once more: 'For on the loom of Sorrow, and by the white hands of Pain, has this my robe been woven. There is Blood in the heart of the ruby, and Death in the heart of the pearl' (p. 87). The reader is by now likely repulsed by the robe, sceptre, and crown as well, and applauds his decision. But the straightforward nature of his choice will soon be complicated by both the aesthetics of Catholicism and by economic complexity before the tale comes to its conclusion.

The young king's appearance as a goatherd is certainly indicative of the figure of Christ as a shepherd, and the invocations of a Christ-like image continue through the rest of the tale's ending.

The young king comes to represent humility and the rejection of earthly possessions, signalling a turn away from his previous decadent habits of material collection. However, the grounded logistical problems of this approach to halting labour injustice are brought to the fore by his courtiers, the working people of the city, and even the Bishop. His courtiers object that an awareness of the provenance of every item one purchases is extremely difficult – 'shall a man not eat bread till he has seen the sower, nor drink wine till he has talked with the vinedresser?' (p. 91). These concerns are valid – maintaining complete knowledge of the provenance of what one consumes is nearly impossible – and yet, we still know that something must be done. As readers, we are likely to side with the young king in rejecting, at the very least what one knows (in this case through divine revelation) to be unethical materials.

The next notable challenge to the young king's goatherd protest outfit is from the people who remind him that, for better or worse, many of their jobs rely on rich buyers:

> Sir, knowest thou not that out of the luxury of the rich cometh the life of the poor? By your pomp we are nurtured, and your vices give us bread. To toil for a hard master is bitter, but to have no master to toil for is more bitter still. Thinkest thou that the ravens will feed us? And what cure hast thou for these things? (p. 93)

This pointed question hangs in the air for the rest of the tale. So far as we know, the young King has no plan for how he will remake the economy of his country to ease the violence of labour while still making sure that everyone has jobs that feed them. While the labour is bitter, and sometimes fatal, there are no alternatives presented to these people. Simple boycott will be fatal to them as well.

Finally, the young king reaches the church only to be confronted by the Bishop, suggesting that even the Church is not supporting his actions in pursuit of human compassion. Instead, he makes the argument that what the young king seeks to do is impossible,

> My son, I am an old man, and in the winter of my days, and I know that many evil things are done in the wide world. […] Canst though make these things not be? Wilt thou take the leper for thy bedfellow, and set the beggar at thy board? Shall the lion do thy bidding, and the wild boar obey thee? Is not He who made misery wiser than thou art? (p. 95)

While the arguments that no one has enough power and control to end suffering are more easily addressed, the argument that God himself has made suffering and therefore must have a good reason for doing so is theologically more vexing. The bishop's questions interestingly place the blame on God for the horrors revealed in the young king's dreams rather than on the choices of men. They might even suggest that this human brutality is just another part of nature, including human nature, as created by God, and thus serves some mysterious purpose which should not be questioned or interfered with. While the reader ponders these sombre questions, the young king ignores this quandary and responds instead to the question of what one man alone is capable of by evoking the power of Christ.

The point at which this tale turns from a straightforward rejection of material beauty into something more complicated is the aesthetic spectacle of its climax. As the young king speaks aloud of the power of Christ a visual display breaks forth:

> And lo! Through the painted windows came the sunlight streaming upon him, and the sunbeams wove round him a tissued robe that was fairer than the robe that had been fashioned for his pleasure. The dead staff blossomed, and bare lilies that were whiter than pearls. The dry thorn blossomed, and bare roses that were redder than rubies. Whiter than fine pearls were the lilies, and their stems were of bright silver. Redder than male rubies were the roses, and their leaves were of beaten gold. (p. 96)

While the form his protest had taken was the rejection of the beautiful robe, sceptre, and crown crafted for him through violent labour, God ultimately reveals his power by replacing his goatherd costume with an even more splendid outfit. Rather than rejecting beauty, then, or positioning beauty as the opposite to ethics, aesthetics here signal divinity and goodness. Further, the beauty of God is even greater than the beauty of those objects wrought by suffering human hands. One need not reject aesthetics but rather seek Christianity and a new form of decadence, revelling in the aesthetic splendour of the Lord, will follow. As Nodelman suggests of many of Wilde's tales, 'they offer fairy-tale opulence in the process of attacking indulgence in opulence'.[19] The spectacle expands beyond the young king's body and festoons the rest of the church:

> He stood there in the raiment of a king, and the gates of the jewelled shrine flew open, and from the crystal of the many-rayed monstrance shone a marvellous and mystical light. He stood there in a king's raiment, and the Glory of God filled the place, and the saints in their carven niches seemed to move. In the fair raiment of a king he stood before them, and the organ pealed out its music, and the trumpeters blew upon their trumpets, and the singing boys sang. (p. 97)

Through this somewhat repetitive, incantatory description the young king's true kingliness is confirmed. Thus, despite what our protagonist has said earlier in the narrative, there is a specific look to a king which God has now given to him because of his goodness. Further, God's glory represents itself in all the arts, not only visual but also through music and even the movement of the statues of the saints. In this case, to recognize and worship God's power is to recognize and worship the beauty of these arts. This alignment of aestheticism and Christianity speaks to the pageantry of Catholicism so appreciated by Wilde and decadence more broadly. As Ellis Hanson explains in *Decadence and Catholicism* (1997),

> the sheer excess of the Church – its archaic splendour, the weight of its history, the elaborate embroidery of its robes, the labyrinthine mysteries of its symbolism, the elephantine exquisiteness by which it performs its daily miracles – has always made it an aesthetic and fetishistic object of wonder.[20]

We can see how Catholic aesthetics were thought to help shape the child's artistic mind in Vernon Lee's essay 'The Child in the Vatican' (1881). However, the criticism of figures like the Bishop in the story also suggests that church dogma is another form of authority that should be mocked and rejected for being ineffectual. This, too, dovetails with what Ó Donghaile refers to as Wilde's 'challenge to religious dogma in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism"'.[21] The solution to the problems of unethical labour in this story is not to reject the love of aesthetics, nor is it to trust the church, but to embrace a more ethical form of aesthetic appreciation.

Undoubtedly, Wilde's tale involves complex moral concerns. Its ethical dilemmas require the reader to think about an object's origins, to consider how one action affects another, and to recognize power structures that span the globe. It can certainly be argued that because the tales themselves do

not offer a clean-cut rejection of aesthetic materialism there is no easy lesson for a reader to take away. The tale also offers several counter-arguments to the young king's choices that are never fully resolved. The brutality of the images shown encourage readers to wholeheartedly take his side, and yet his actions neither fully resolve the issues at stake, as several characters point out, nor are they repeatable for the 'average' 'general' reader. In short, we are left with a messy ending. What this inconclusiveness does, I am suggesting, is encourage readers, even child readers who might not fully grasp every detail, to think further about where things come from and how the whole system of traditional authority might need to be challenged. As Nodelman argues, Wilde's fairy tales encourage 'ironic reading'. They

> present characters and their actions in ways that seem to invite an awareness that more is going on than meets the eye, that things are not quite as simple or as pleasant as at first glance they might appear to be or as the characters believe them to be.[22]

While reading this story does not immediately make children into baby socialists, it does encourage child readers to take an interest in their world beyond what they see in front of them and to see the objects in front of them as belonging to a broader, more complex world in which they have some responsibility.

In Wilde's fairy tales we see his opinion that children are capable of not only understanding but also affecting complex social problems on full display. While I have focused on only two stories in this article, much the same could be said for many of his other fairy tales such as 'The Selfish Giant', 'The Nightingale and the Rose', and 'The Star-Child'. In 'The Selfish Giant', we once again see children as the drivers of change and aesthetic beauty as the harbinger of Christ. In 'The Nightingale and the Rose', the child is expected to engage with the same type of complex and understated satire, directed at the philosophy student, as we see in parts of 'The Happy Prince', directed towards the councilmen and intellectuals. In 'The Star-Child', we see the same type of circular ending, in which the problem has not really been solved, as we see in 'The Young King'. Wilde gives his child readers credit for their

ability to understand literary complexity, and he places his hopes for a better future in the hands of these readers who may be able to imagine a different type of world.

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[1] Maria Tatar, 'The Aesthetics of Altruism in Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales', in *Oscar Wilde and the Cultures of Childhood*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 145-57 (p. 145).
[2] See, for example, Eric Tribunella and Carrie Hintz, *Reading Children's Literature: A Critical Introduction* (Broadview, 2019); Sally Shuttleworth, *The Mind of the Child: Childhood Development in Literature, Science, and Medicine, 1840 – 1900* (Oxford University Press, 2010); James R. Kincaid, *Child Loving: The Erotic Child in Victorian Culture* (Routledge, 1992); Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, eds, *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Marah Gubar, *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children's Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2009); and Victoria Ford Smith, *Between Generations: Collaborative Authorship in the Golden Age of Children's Literature* (University Press of Mississippi, 2017).
[3] James Sully. *Studies of Childhood* (Aberdeen University Press, 1896), *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/cu31924055378305 [accessed 5 January 2026].
[4] Perry Nodelman, 'The Young Know Everything: Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales as Children's Literature', in *Oscar Wilde and the Cultures of Childhood*, pp. 181-201 (p. 182).
[5] Oscar Wilde, 'The Happy Prince', *The Complete Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (Signet Classics, 2008), pp. 9-22 (p. 12). Subsequent references to this story are given inline.
[6] Nodelman, 'The Young Know Everything', p. 189.
[7] Fleurot, 'Decadence and Regeneration', p. 73.
[8] Monica Flegel, 'Innocent Cruelty and the Love of Beauty in Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales', in *Cruel Children in Popular Texts and Cultures*, ed. by Monica Flegel and Christopher Parkes (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 41-60 (p. 43).
[9] Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (Max N. Maisel, 1915), p. 5.
[10] Ibid., pp. 5 an 4.
[11] Ibid., pp. 3-4.
[12] Deaglán Ó Donghaile, *Oscar Wilde and the Radical Politics of the Fin de Siècle* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p. 122.
[13] Vernon Lee, *The Child in the Vatican* (T. B. Mosher, 1900), *HathiTrust*, p. 18, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/njp.32101068155439 [accessed 31 December 2025].
[14] Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism,* p. 23.
[15] Oscar Wilde, 'The Young King', in *The Complete Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (Signet Classics, 2008), pp. 77-97 (p. 78). Subsequent references to this story are given inline.
[16] Ó Donghaile, *Oscar Wilde and the Radical Politics of the Fin de Siècle*, pp. 132-44.
[17] Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, p. 3.
[18] Ibid., p. 6.
[19] Nodelman, 'The Young Know Everything', p. 197.
[20] Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 5.
[21] Ó Donghaile, *Oscar Wilde and the Radical Politics of the Fin de Siècle*, p. 5.
[22] Nodelman, 'The Young Know Everything', p. 191.