

Towards an Ethical Aestheticism: Christianity, Christhood and Martyrdom
in the Fiction of Oscar Wilde

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	v
Abstract.....	vii
Introduction – The Making of an Ethical Aesthete.....	1-17
Chapter One – <i>The Happy Prince and Other Stories</i>	18-34
Chapter Two – <i>A House of Pomegranates</i>	35-55
Chapter Three – <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i>	56-77
Conclusion – Redeeming the Season of Sorrow.....	78-80
Works Cited.....	81-86

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Abstract

Oscar Wilde is part of our world. With his dandyish witticisms and decadent demeanour, he continues to serve as a model of subversive grace, an aesthetic beacon drawing his readers towards a lighthouse of beauty, even more than a century after his death. Few would suspect that Wilde's work should offer any ethical guidance, given the tendency of *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism to place artistic beauty above ethical concerns. It is the purpose of this thesis to argue otherwise.

The aim of this thesis is twofold. First, it intends to show that Wilde's fiction, from his early fairy stories to his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is connected by a common interest in Christian ethics. Second, and more ambitiously, it intends to disprove the notion that aestheticism and ethics are irreconcilable. Throughout his work, Wilde develops an image of an aesthetic Jesus Christ, a martyr of beauty. Wilde dedicates much of his fictional oeuvre to illustrating this vision of Christ, usually through martyrdom and the relinquishment of selfhood. In doing so, this thesis argues that he connects artistic beauty with Christian ethics, synthesising an ethical aestheticism, only achievable through self-sacrifice in service of love – the aesthetic ideal.

This kind of aesthetic martyrdom is present throughout Wilde's fiction, the most commonly cited examples coming from two of his early fairy stories, "The Happy Prince" and "The Nightingale and the Rose" respectively. In these stories, the titular characters work to realise the vision of the aesthetic Christ – what this thesis calls his 'aesthetic ideal' – and achieve a higher appreciation of beauty, both bodily and immaterial. Christianity, this thesis finally argues, is the basis for Wilde's ethical aestheticism and it is Christian ethics that Wilde uses to orientate his readers towards aesthetic Christhood, not with the cold, judging hand of a Victorian preacher but the warm, caring shoulder-pat of an aesthetic father-figure.

Introduction – The Making of an Ethical Aesthete

Christ represents a profound and historically revolutionary act of love and self-sacrifice, but before its moral and political force can be felt, his image must exercise a certain aesthetic force. (Hanson, “Wilde’s Exquisite Pain” 117)

In 2018, Alison M. Gingeras curated *The Oscar Wilde Temple* – “a wholly immersive work of art and secular space honouring one of the earliest forebearers of gay liberation while commemorating contemporary LGBTQ+ martyrs and those lost to the AIDS crisis” – at London’s Studio Voltaire (www.oscarwildetemple.org). Gingeras’s exhibit sought to reconcile the opposing images of Wilde as a queer martyr and a man fascinated with religious aesthetics, particularly those of Roman Catholicism. Despite its stated purpose of creating a ‘secular space’, the exhibit’s acknowledgement of Catholicism as a fascination for Wilde was an important step towards furthering understanding of the importance that religion had throughout Wilde’s life and work. It is my purpose in this thesis to further illuminate the role that religion, specifically that of Christianity, played in Wilde’s fiction.

I argue in this thesis that Wilde’s fiction, from his earliest children’s fairy tales to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,¹ is connected within a common framework of Christian ethics, in which he portrays a unique, aesthetic vision of Jesus Christ, a martyr of beauty. This aesthetic Christ, as I call it, is an ironic fusion of the beauty-obsession of *fin-de-siècle* British aestheticism and the traditional morality of Christianity. Wilde’s aesthetic Christ exemplifies what I call ethical aestheticism, which equates ethical and artistic beauty. The ethical aesthete orientates himself towards love – his aesthetic ideal – whilst condemning moral ugliness, most commonly in the form of selfishness.

Although this thesis focuses on Wilde’s fiction, in order to understand the origins of ethical aestheticism, it is necessary to first take a biographical approach to Wilde’s early life, particularly his childhood in Ireland, his university education and later his travels in Europe.

¹ This thesis focuses on Wilde’s two collections of fairy tales, *The Happy Prince and Other Stories* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891) and his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). As this thesis wishes to improve understanding of Christian ideas in Wilde’s fiction and the ethics of his particular brand of aestheticism, it does not take into account Wilde’s third volume of fiction, *Lord Arthur Saville’s Crime and Other Stories* (1891) or *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* (1890). With the exception of “The Canterville Ghost”, which Jarlath Killeen describes in *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde* as “a rather didactic Catholic meditation” (ix), the three remaining stories in the former collection are satires on Victorian social norms that do not elucidate Wilde’s Christian interests. For *Mr. W.H.*, a quasi-essayistic examination of homoerotic coding in the sonnets of William Shakespeare, the same can be said.

In his 1972 biography *The Unrecorded Life of Oscar Wilde*, Rupert Croft-Cooke claims that too many biographies had already been written about Oscar Wilde (1). If Croft-Cooke's claim was true in 1972, then it is most certainly true today. The *succès de scandale* that was Wilde's life has attracted many biographers since his death in 1900 and their works vary greatly in quality.² With the exception of Emer O'Sullivan's *The Fall of the House of Wilde*, which focuses on Wilde's relations with his wider family as a man "imbued with the loyalties and loathings of his parents, their politics, their erudition, their humour and, one might add, their predisposition to calamity" (ix), the majority of biographers tend not to dwell on the details of Wilde's childhood and family, and when writing about Wilde's religious interests their focus tends to be less on Christianity and more on paganism.³ This is because it is generally assumed to be the latter rather than the former that informed Wilde's perception of beauty.

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wilde was born in 1854 to staunchly Irish nationalist parents. His father, Sir William Wilde, was a medical doctor, scholar of Irish archaeology and collector of fairy and folktales. His mother, Lady Jane Wilde, was a celebrated socialite, translator and reworker of the tales her husband collected. Fairy tales entered Wilde's world at a young age. Lady Wilde would often tell stories to Oscar and his older brother Willie, and she had a special fondness for the tales of her native Ireland. Lady Wilde did not always take the appropriateness of these tales for young children into consideration,⁴ but this did little to undermine the role they would play in the eventual establishment of her youngest son as an author.

Irish fairy tales may have been Wilde's introduction to storytelling, but it would take until 1888 for his first collection of fairy tales to be published. Before this, Wilde spent time at Trinity College, Dublin, and later Magdalen College, Oxford. It was during his studies at the former institution that Wilde's love of Romantic poetry, particularly that of John Keats, found expression. It was at the latter that Wilde was introduced to the teachings of John Ruskin and Walter Pater, two of the most influential aesthetes of the British tradition. It is the

² To cite one example, the first biography of Wilde we may term 'authoritative' was Hesketh Pearson's *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (1946). Pearson describes what Wilde's life may have been like through his own interpretive lens and, in the words of Craft-Cooke, he is "far too credulous and gave currency to too many fables" (x).

³ For instance, Frank Harris refers to Wilde as a "pagan born" regarding his interest in Ancient Greek and Roman mythology (34).

⁴ Pearson records a moment in Wilde's childhood when during the night, confronted by the traumatic sound of a dog being beaten to death, "He was told that it was a Banshee, and, supernaturally, someone in his neighbourhood had to die the following day" (15). The Banshee, writes W.B. Yeats in *The Book of Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland*, "is an attendant fairy that follows the old families, and none but them, and wails before a death" (113).

aesthetic imagination of these three writers, I argue, that formed the intellectual foundation upon which Wilde was to base his ethical aestheticism.

A literary, artistic and intellectual movement established in France in the early to mid-nineteenth century, aestheticism made its way into British consciousness towards the *fin-de-siècle*. In the words of R.V. Johnson, the term “means, broadly, a devotion to beauty, and to beauty primarily as found in the arts and in whatever is attractive in the world around us.” Johnson continues, writing that the word aestheticism “denoted something new: not merely a devotion to beauty, but a new conviction of the importance of beauty as compared with – and even in opposition to – other values” (9). This definition encapsulates the broad nature of European aestheticism, but it does not address the specific influence of French aesthetic thought. For this, we turn to Théophile Gautier, who, in *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, criticises utilitarian attitudes towards literature, which he sees as distractions from art’s inherent value as an end in itself (21-2). Gautier’s criticism was influential on Ruskin and Pater, but before them came Keats.

In 1877, whilst studying Literae Humaniores – Trinity College’s undergraduate course in Classics – Wilde published an article called “The Tomb of John Keats”. In this article, Wilde illustrates his feelings as he stands before the poet’s grave:

As I stood beside the mean grave of this divine boy, I thought of him as of a Priest of Beauty slain before his time; and the vision of Guido’s Saint Sebastian came before my eyes as I saw him at Genoa, a lovely brown boy, with crisp, clustering hair and red lips, bound by his evil enemies to a tree, and, though pierced by arrows, raising his eyes with divine, impassioned gaze towards the Eternal Beauty of the opening heavens. (477-8)

The repetition of the word ‘divine’ shows the Christian nature of Wilde’s praise, whilst the reference to the martyr Saint Sebastian – whose identity Wilde would eventually adopt during his Paris exile – evokes a homoerotic undertone (Sturgis 655). Keats describes the root of Wilde’s aesthetic conviction in the concluding lines of his “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (49-50). Additionally, in a letter to Benjamin Bailey in 1817, Keats declares “What the imagination seizes in Beauty must be truth” (489). In doing so, he equates the spheres of art and truth. I argue that Wilde, following Keats’s motion, equates the spheres of art and ethics.

For Ruskin, art and religion, specifically Christianity, are inseparable. In *Ruskin’s God*, Michael Wheeler extensively investigates how Ruskin’s Christian faith intersects with

his aestheticism. Wheeler claims that Ruskin was particularly influenced by Christ's Sermon on the Mount and his summary of the Commandments, as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew (24). Like many European thinkers in the nineteenth-century, Ruskin encountered problems throughout his life with Christianity. However, much like Wilde, according to Wheeler "his quarrel was not with the teaching of Christ but with its interpretation and application by the Church" (25). In order to mend this problem and move Christians towards a way of life closer to the teachings of Christ himself, Ruskin sought to couple religion with aestheticism; to believe in Christ was also to believe in the beautiful and to shun the ugly. What is most important about Ruskin's religious aestheticism to Wilde is its attempt to unite the spheres of artistic and ethical beauty. Put simply, it is not enough for one to be beautiful in form but to act in such a way as to improve one's moral standing.

Perhaps the most important lesson Wilde took from Ruskin was that Christianity could be a means by which one could go about this improvement. Ruskin was greatly admired by Wilde, the latter going so far as to refer to him as "the Plato of England – a Prophet of the Good and True and Beautiful,⁵ who saw as Plato saw that the three are one perfect flower" (qt. in Sturgis 66). This high praise confirms Ruskin as a formative mentor for the young Wilde, who was in search of an intellectual, moral and aesthetic creed to follow.

Karl Beckson describes in *The Oscar Wilde Encyclopedia* a consistent concern "with the effect of individualism on life and the arts, particularly architecture" in Ruskin's criticism (320). This focus on individualism and the ability of art to effect social change are reflected in "The Stones of Venice", in which Ruskin decries what he sees as the detrimental effect of industry on the nature of manual labour and the labourer himself:

You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both. Men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions. If you will have that precision out of them, and make their fingers measure degrees like cog-wheels, and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must unhumanise them. All

⁵ The 'Good and True and Beautiful' are similar terms to those used by more recent writers such as Max Weber and Jurgen Habermas, the latter of whom writes in "Modernity: An Incomplete Project" of what he calls the 'project of modernity', which

comes into focus when we dispense with the usual concentration upon art. Let me start a different analysis by recalling an idea from Max Weber. He characterized cultural modernity as the separation of the substantive reason expressed in religion and metaphysics into three autonomous spheres. They are: science, morality, and art. (theoria.art-zoo.com/modernity-an-incomplete-project-jurgen-habermas/)

the energy of their spirits must be given to make cogs and compasses of themselves. All their attention and strength must go to the accomplishment of the mean act. (40-1)

Ruskin's social critique of the dehumanising nature of industrialisation, the transformation of the workman into a mere tool of production, was a great influence on the development of Wilde's ethical compass, whose true north was compassion and love. For Ruskin as much as Wilde, when inner and outer beauty are equally valued, both flourish.

The aestheticism of Walter Pater takes a rather different approach to art and life. The Paterian aesthete is one who values experience as an end in and of itself. Pater crystallises this idea in *The Renaissance*, declaring in its infamous Conclusion that one who lives for "the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art's sake," is one who lives wisely (155). But to live in such a way creates narcissism, which, ironically, undermines the pursuit of pleasure and beauty rather than assisting it. Pater himself was not entirely convinced by his Conclusion, using his fiction as a means of testing his ideas. In Pater's only completed novel, *Marius the Epicurean*, he reflects negatively on the practicality of his philosophy. This is best exemplified when the narrator dwells on the lack of fulfilment of Marius's aesthetic lifestyle:

And while he learned that the object, the experience, as it will be known to memory, is really from first to last the chief point for consideration in the conduct of life, these things were feeding also the idealism constitutional within him – his innate and habitual longing for a world altogether fairer than that he saw. (33)

That this dissatisfaction with mere experience occurs so early in the novel only emphasises Pater's doubt in his aestheticism and I am not alone in detecting this. Wolfgang Iser argues in *Walter Pater: The Aesthetic Moment* that Pater's novel

brings to life a decisive feature missing or perhaps even deliberately omitted from the 'Conclusion'. There he had put forward the aesthetic moment as a theoretical guideline for conceiving human life, whereas in *Marius* he spotlights the spiritual problems arising from such an aesthetic conceptualisation of life by revealing the moment as the genesis of longing and anxiety. (141)

Wilde too sensed this 'anxiety' and sought to remedy it in his fiction by depicting the pitfalls of Paterian aestheticism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as I discuss at length in chapter three.

By building upon the aesthetic imagination of Keats, Ruskin and Pater, Wilde conceptualises the ethical aesthete. Like Ruskin, it is in Christian terms that the ethical aesthete's conception of moral beauty is framed. It is in these same Christian terms that moral ugliness – the ethical aesthete's equivalent of sin – is framed. Instead of uniting beauty and truth, as Keats does, the ethical aesthete unites beauty and ethics. Finally, although the ethical aesthete owes a great debt to Paterian aestheticism, he stands in opposition to it, recognising that the pursuit of experience for its own sake carries with it the potential for narcissism.

In addition to developing intellectually, during his years at Oxford Wilde became fascinated with Christianity – specifically Roman Catholicism – and this development has been mostly glossed over by critics and biographers in favour of Wilde's engagement with Classical Greece and Rome. Whilst it would be incorrect to say that Wilde's infatuation with Catholicism was sufficient to call himself a fully-fledged Catholic, its promise of foreign ritual was too much for Wilde, a Protestant since birth,⁶ to ignore. In the words of Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan* – one of Wilde's four highly successful societal comedies – “I can resist everything except temptation” (424).⁷

And resist Wilde did not, traveling to the continent in the summer of 1875. In his mostly comprehensive yet somewhat flawed biography, *Oscar Wilde*,⁸ Richard Ellmann dedicates his third chapter to describing Wilde's flirtation with the idea of converting to Catholicism in his travels, during which he was accompanied by his Trinity College tutor, John Pentland Mahaffy, and recent Catholic-convert, David Hunter-Blair (51-2). Ellmann's main pre-occupation in this chapter is with the effect these travels had on Wilde's transformation into a decadent figurehead. Although Ellmann focuses more on Wilde's experiences in Greece and how they help him in his Classical education at Oxford, he nonetheless acknowledges a Catholic influence on Wilde's life, noting that “Roman Catholicism threads its way through all Wilde's activities” (63).

⁶ We might say that converting to Catholicism was especially tempting since Wilde's father forbade him to do it (Sturgis 52). Wilde eventually converted to Catholicism on his deathbed in 1900 (713).

⁷ All quotations from Wilde's fiction, essays, poetry, non-fiction and plays hereafter are taken from *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (2003).

⁸ Ellmann claims that Wilde contracted syphilis during his time at Oxford and that this contributed to the severity of his condition leading up to his death in 1900. This claim has been refuted by Sturgis (755). Furthermore, Ellmann builds at least part of his vision of Wilde upon the false conception that Wilde posed in costume as Salomé, citing a photograph of what he assumes to be Wilde in drag as evidence. This is a case of mistaken identity for, as Joseph Pierce reveals, “in 1994, an article in the *Times Literary Supplement* proved beyond doubt that it was in fact a Hungarian opera singer, Alice Guszalewicz, photographed in Cologne in 1906” (9).

In his more authoritative and comprehensive biography, *Oscar: A Life*, Matthew Sturgis pays greater attention to Wilde's time in Italy and notes its influence on his poetic imagination: "Italy, like Oxford, seduced Wilde from the first. Everything about the country conspired to ravish the senses and the imagination: the beauty of its landscapes, the colour of its everyday life, the drama of its history and the glories of its art" (72). It was during this time that Wilde was composing some of his early poetry, which would eventually be published in his 1881 collection, *Poems*, to a mostly negative reception. These poems, in Ellmann's words, "marked stages in his spiritual history" (64), a history that would echo long throughout Wilde's career. Despite being almost completely ignored by critics, they illustrate a poet enticed by the seductive power of Catholicism. This best shows in "San Miniato":

See, I have climbed the mountain side
Up to this holy house of God,
Where once that Angel Painter trod
Who saw the heavens opened wide,

And throned upon the crescent moon
The Virginal white Queen of Grace, -
Mary! could I but see thy face
Death could not come at all too soon.

O crowned by God with thorns and pain!
Mother of Christ! O mystic wife!
My heart is weary of this life
And over-sad to sing again.

O crowned by God with love and flame!
O crowned by Christ the Holy One!
O listen ere the searching sun
Show to the world my sin and shame. (749)

The overflow of Catholic imagery in this poem, which records the speaker's experience climbing a hill to reach the early Renaissance church of San Miniato,⁹ confirms Catholicism as an intensely imaginative and romantic absorption for the young Wilde.

⁹ Whether or not Wilde actually visited this church himself is unconfirmed (Sturgis 73).

Unfortunately for Wilde, he would not make it to Rome for another two years. In two of Wilde's letters to Reginald Harding – whom he affectionately referred to as 'Kitten' – he first describes his excitement at the prospect of visiting Rome and the temptations of conversion that come with it, and second his disappointment at not making it there:

I start for Rome on Sunday; Mahaffy comes as far as Genoa with me: and I hope to see the golden dome of St. Peter's and the Eternal City by Tuesday night. This is an era in my life, a crisis. I wish I could look back into the seeds of time and see what is coming. I shall not forget you in Rome, and will burn a candle for you at the Shrine of our Lady. (43)¹⁰

I never went to Rome at all! What a changeable fellow you must think me, but Mahaffy my old tutor carried me off to Greece with him to see Mykenae and Athens. I am awfully ashamed of myself but I could not help it and will take Rome on my way back. (44)

In "Rome Unvisited", Wilde expresses his longing for the city as a then unreachable ideal with what Sturgis calls a "frequently recurring note of Catholic soul-yearning" (85). This 'note', I find, resonates with particular strength in the poem's third section:

A pilgrim from the northern seas -
What joy for me to seek alone
The wonderous Temple and the throne
Of Him who holds the awful keys!

When, bright with purple and with gold,
Come priest and holy Cardinal,
And borne above the heads of all
The gentle Shepherd of the Fold

O joy to see before I die
The only God-anointed King,
And hear the silver trumpets ring
A triumph as He passes by!

¹⁰ All quotations from Wilde's letters hereafter are taken from *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, edited by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (2000).

Or at the brazen-pillared shrine
 Holds high the mystic sacrifice,
 And shows his God to human eyes
 Beneath the veil of bread and wine. (751)

What makes this section significant is how it depicts Wilde's ideal situation, in which he actually makes it to Rome. The pilgrim whose journey the speaker narrates is clearly Wilde himself, and the 'northern seas' from which he originates are those of Ireland. Wilde may have eventually visited Rome in 1877, but his poetic longing for the city and the religious and aesthetic ideals he thought it stood for should not go unnoticed.

Understanding the biographical details of Wilde's early life is an important step in developing a full picture of the origins of ethical aestheticism. However, if this picture is to be complete, then there remain two critical issues to be investigated. The first of these is Wilde's identity as a writer of fairy stories and how critics have – or more importantly have not – responded to this identity.

A complete analysis of the history of the Western fairy tale and where Wilde fits into that history is a great task, and like a full biographical survey of Wilde's life, it is far beyond the scope of this thesis. Suffice to say that an understanding of the fairy tale form was crucial to the development of ethical aestheticism. This is because fairy tales, unlike other, longer literary forms, have the ability to deliver moral messages in a simple fashion that is easy for both adults and children to understand. Bruno Bettelheim claims in *The Uses of Enchantment* – his influential yet widely criticised psychoanalytical study of fairy tales¹¹ – that “The figures and events of fairy tales ... personify and illustrate inner conflicts, but they suggest ever so subtly how these conflicts may be solved, and what the next steps in the development toward a higher humanity might be” (26). For Bettelheim, much like Wilde, fairy tales allow us to envisage a more ethical world and give us hints as to how we may orientate ourselves to reach it.

Marina Warner, giving a more general description, describes fairy tales as “one-dimensional, depthless, abstract and sparse; their characteristic manner is matter-of-fact”

¹¹ Maria Tartar is but one of a number of fairy tale scholars who have taken issue with Bettelheim's study, stating in *Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood* that “For a book that champions the interests of children by reclaiming for them a canon of stories that has come under heavy fire from American parents, educators, and librarians, *The Uses of Enchantment* is oddly accusatory towards children” (xxii). “Once we read Bettelheim's interpretations closely and critically,” Tartar writes later, “we begin to see that his reading produces a text that is very different from one that might be constituted by a reader with different cultural assumptions and expectations” (xxiii).

(12).¹² In order to define Wilde's tales, however, we must be more specific. This need for specificity is difficult to address since 'fairy tale' is an umbrella term that encompasses a number of different types of stories, not all of which concern what we may typically think of as 'fairies'. Considering the example of oral tales, Andrew Teverson outlines what he sees as a major challenge:

any one narrative, because it is not owned by a single author, or produced in any one time or culture, must be understood as being culturally and historically layered within itself. As a generic form, the fairy tale is a many-tongued genre, a cultural palimpsest; because even as it speaks of the time in which it is told, it carries the memory of the other times in which it has circulated and flourished. It bears the print of the hand that holds it, but under that print it carries the marks of earlier hands. (10)

Teverson perceptively identifies the often notoriously difficult challenge of tracing oral tales historically, seeing that such tales specify no one particular author. What Teverson is missing, however, is that such oral stories are better defined as folk tales rather than fairy tales. Ruth B. Bottigheimer points out the distinction between the two in *Fairy Tales, A New History*:

Thinking about fairy tales begins by thinking about the differences between folk tales and fairy tales. Fairy tales are often called "folk tales" in the belief that unlettered folk storytellers created both kinds of stories. But treating fairy tales and folk tales as one and the same thing obscures fundamental, and significant differences between them. ... Folk tales differ from fairy tales in their structure, their cast of characters, their plot trajectories and their age. (3-4)

Bottigheimer later states that "The terms 'oral' and 'literary' usefully distinguish between literary styles in fairy tales" (8), and this distinction is especially significant in categorising Wilde's tales. Understanding this significance involves a return to Warner, who separates what she sees as "genuine folktales (*Märchen*) and literary or 'art' fairy tales

¹² In *Tolkien On Fairy Stories*, J.R.R. Tolkien gives an even broader description:

Faërie is a perilous land, and in it are pitfalls for the unwary and dungeons for the overbold. ... The realm of the fairy story is wide and deep and high and filled with many things: all manner of beasts and birds are found there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is enchantment, and an ever-present peril; both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords. (27)

(*Kunstmärchen*)” (11). It is into Warner’s latter category, this thesis argues, that Wilde’s fairy tales best fit.

Still, there exists no critical consensus as to the proper category of Wilde’s tales. Indeed, it is difficult for some critics, such as Richard Pine, to decide whether or not they should even be called fairy tales. Pine does in *The Thief of Reason* what Teverson does not by completely separating the fairy tale from the folk tale. In this book, Pine argues that the key difference between the fairy and folk tale is their intended audience:

A fairy story is an allegory designed to give children a picture of the real, adult, world, and to enable them, by understanding its constituent parts, to negotiate a satisfactory path in the real world. A folk tale is more vicious, a parable: it is a tale for adults who have lost their way among the signposts and have experienced some of the disruption related in the tale. Both fairy story and folk-tale are political, in that they concern relation, but the folk-tale concentrates on experience rather expectation, on action and sensibility rather than imagination. The fairy story deals with home; the folk-tale with the world. Wilde's stories belong to the folk-genre – they are intended not for nursery children (the point which confused many of their critics) – but for adult-children. (165)

Pine correctly identifies the ability of the fairy tale to prepare the child reader for the difficulties of the adult world, though I think this ability can be extended to more mature readers as well, given the complexity of content in Wilde’s second fairy tale collection, *A House of Pomegranates*. Furthermore, keeping in mind my view that Wilde’s tales fit into the category of *Künstmärchen*,¹³ I disagree with Pine’s categorisation of the tales as belonging to the typically oral tradition of the folk tale.

Wilde’s fairy tales certainly provide their readers with examples of how to act morally in the real world, but exactly who those readers are assumed to be evolves over time. One method of showing this evolution is to look at Wilde’s letters, one of which, dated June 1888 and addressed to liberal politician W.E. Gladstone, states that *The Happy Prince and Other Stories* “is really meant for children”¹⁴ (350). The stories of this first collection, as we shall

¹³ George MacDonald states in “The Fantastic Imagination” that “we have no English word corresponding to the German *Märchen*”. This, MacDonald continues, “drives us to use the word *Fairytale*, regardless of the fact that the tale may have nothing to do with any sort of fairy. The old use of the word *Fairy*, by Spenser at least, might, however, well be adduced, were justification or excuse necessary where need must” (5).

¹⁴ “The Happy Prince” is a possible exception to this. According to Anne Markey, Wilde first told this story “to an appreciative group of Cambridge undergraduates in November 1885. ... The story’s oral origin in an elite cultural setting aligns it with seventeenth-century French salon fairy tales, which were similarly told to sophisticated, educated audiences and were often concerned with issues of social responsibility” (95).

see, are innocent enough in content and simple enough in style to merit the classification of children's literature.¹⁵ Regarding *A House of Pomegranates*, there is a notable shift in maturity of content and a greater complexity of expression, indicating that Wilde has moved away from his original child readership. Wilde addresses this question in a letter to the Editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* in December 1891, in which he corrects a reviewer's misconceptions about his book:

Sir, I have just had sent to me from London a copy of the *Pall Mall Gazette* containing a review of my book *A House of Pomegranates*. The writer of this review makes a certain suggestion about my book which I beg you allow me to correct at once. He starts by asking an extremely silly question, and that is, whether or not I have written this book for the purpose of giving pleasure to the British child. Having expressed grave doubts on this subject, a subject on which I cannot conceive any fairly-educated person having any doubts at all, he proceeds, apparently quite seriously, to make the extremely limited vocabulary at the disposal of the British child the standard by which the prose of an artist is to be judged! Now in building this *House of Pomegranates*, I had about as much intention of pleasing the British child as I had of pleasing the British public. (503)

Wilde's letter does very little to make clear his intended readership, dismissing both child readers and the public at large. It may be true that Wilde had no intention of pleasing the British child or public, yet I maintain that *Pomegranates* nonetheless represents an evolution in maturity from the previous collection, especially regarding the treatment of Christian ideas, the illustration of the aesthetic Christ and ethical aestheticism. Simply put, I argue that *Pomegranates* is an intermediary between the children's fairy tales of *The Happy Prince* and the distinctly adult novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Both Wilde's collections of fairy tales, historically, have been almost entirely dismissed as unimportant juvenilia. In *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, Jack Zipes

¹⁵ Despite the growing popularity of children's literature as an academic field, whether or not the field should actually exist remains uncertain. Jacqueline Rose pioneered this debate with *The Case of Peter Pan, Or the Impossibility of Children's Literature*, which depicts what Rose sees as the problematic power dynamics between adults and children, using *Peter Pan* to illustrate her ideas: "*Peter Pan* is a front – a cover not as concealer but as vehicle – for what is most unsettling and uncertain about the relationship between adult and child. It shows innocence not as a property of childhood but as a portion of adult desire" (xii). Tartar builds on Rose argument in *Culture of Childhood*:

With a few notable exceptions, nearly every study of children's fairy tales published this century has taken the part of the parent, constructing the true meaning of the tales by using the reading strategies of an adult bent on identifying timeless moral truths, folk wisdom of the ages, and universally valid developmental paradigms for boys and girls. (xvii)

claims that “very few [critics] have dealt at length on the subject of his fairy tales, which are perhaps his best known works. Not only have they sold in the millions in different languages but they have been adapted in various ways for the stage, screen, radio and the record industry” (118). The claim that Wilde’s fairy tales are his ‘best known’ works is debatable, but Zipes nonetheless correctly points out the lack of critical engagement with them. Jarlath Killeen’s *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, and Anne Markey’s *Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales: Origins and Contexts*, first published in 2007 and 2011 respectively, are currently among the only monographs of their kind devoted exclusively to Wilde’s fairy tales. The former extensively analyses each of the nine tales, treating them primarily as individual reflections of Wilde’s Irish heritage, whereas the latter focuses on both the Irish and European cultural heritage of the tales. “Although the tales which comprise these collections have received some important critical attention they remain marginal in Wilde Studies,” writes Killeen, “simply because most critics are unsure what to make of them.” Killeen’s argument for this critical uncertainty is “partly because children’s literature in general is considered a didactic and conservative form by many of the best writers on Wilde, and due to this there has seemed little to gain in looking at such theoretically conformist work when trying to put forward a case for Wilde as a social subversive” (10). Markey puts forward a different theory to explain this lack of critical engagement, claiming that “the stories have been trawled to provide evidence of Wilde’s Irishness, his subversive attitude to Victorian conventions, transgressive sexuality, his relationship to market forces, and his increasing commitment to a decadent aesthetic” (1-2). It is true, as Markey claims, that the attention the stories have received has focused mostly on the aspects she has mentioned, though to say they have been ‘trawled’ I think is an overstatement. Furthermore, I think Killeen comes closest to identifying what I see as one of the greatest problems in Wilde criticism: the popular image of Wilde as frivolous, amoral and carefree is so central to our understanding of his life and work that any attempt to describe a religious, let alone an ethical foundation, to his aestheticism appears an immediate contradiction. The reason why Wilde’s fairy tales have been widely ignored is, therefore, because they deal with Christian ethics, which inform Wilde’s aestheticism to such a degree that they are inseparable from one another. My thesis builds upon the works of Killeen and Markey in contributing critical commentary to Wilde’s fairy tales, which is important in assisting our overall understanding of him as a fiction writer.

The aesthetic Christ is a martyr of beauty, sacrificing himself out of love for others, realising in suffering and death the true nature of selfhood, beyond the constraints of mere

self-interest.¹⁶ It is in Wilde's fiction, this thesis argues, that Wilde comes up with and best illustrates the aesthetic Christ, as represented by his various characters. With this in mind, we now turn to the second issue in completing our understanding of ethical aestheticism, which is that critical interest in Wilde's relationship with Christianity and Christhood, whilst not scarce, mostly takes his non-fiction and biography rather than his fiction as its focal point.¹⁷ Critics who analyse Christianity in Wilde's work usually do so in relation to two of his most celebrated works of non-fiction, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" and "De Profundis". In the first of these, Wilde crystallises his vision of Christ, proposing that to become a fully realised aesthete one must relinquish one's perceived selfhood, thus developing a true personality:

He [Jesus] said to man, You have a wonderful personality. Develop it. Be yourself. Don't imagine that your perfection lies in accumulating or possessing external things. Your affection is inside of you. If only you could realise that, you would not want to be rich. Ordinary riches can be stolen from a man. Real riches cannot. In the treasury-house of your soul, there are infinitely precious things, that may not be taken from you. (1180)

Wilde speaks here of a spiritual ideal beyond the material realm, an ideal achievable when we recognise the 'real riches' of moral beauty. Wilde extends this line of thought later in the same essay, proposing that "he who would live a Christlike life is he who is perfectly and absolutely himself. ... It does not matter who he is, as long as he realises the perfection of the soul that is within him" (1181). The questions of personality and selfhood are particularly interesting, seeing that Wilde's fiction tends to characterise selflessness as a moral virtue. For Wilde, when one acts selflessly, one ironically achieves a higher selfhood and a true personality. The process of this achievement involves orientating oneself towards Wilde's ultimate aesthetic ideal: love. When one accepts love as the aim of one's life, one realises one's potential to reach the divine domain of the aesthetic Christ, to become an ethical aesthete.

In the second of these works, "De Profundis", written during Wilde's imprisonment in Reading Gaol and published posthumously, he further outlines his vision of Christ, whom he

¹⁶ As Frederick S. Roden puts it in "Wild(e) Religion", "suffering as embedded in Christ *is* an aesthetic, one justified by love" (37).

¹⁷ Wilde's poems in prose also possess Christian elements and "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" – the last work Wilde published in his lifetime – shows a clear interest in the figure of Christ. The poems in prose are critically underdiscussed, whereas "Reading Gaol", according to Killeen, "posits a world of victims and victimisers, where all are indebted to the great sacrifice of Christ" (*Faiths* 180).

calls the “true precursor of the romantic movement in life, but the very basis of his nature was the same as that of the nature of the artist, an intense and flamelike imagination. ... Christ’s place indeed is with the poets” (1027). Christ, apparently, is not only the supreme individualist but also the ultimate artist, a beacon drawing us towards an aesthetic light.

Critics who focus their attention on Wilde’s vision of Christ and his broader relationship with Christianity usually do so with a methodology that focuses on his non-fiction, biography, and fiction, usually in this very order of importance. As a result, Wilde’s non-fiction usually takes precedence and his fiction tends to be side-lined. In the words of G. Wilson Knight, “Christ is the key to Wilde’s life” (147).¹⁸ It is unfortunate that so many Wilde critics have not aligned themselves with Knight’s claim. In comparison with other aspects of Wilde’s work, such as his fascination with Ancient Greece and Rome and the social satire of his plays, critics tend not to focus as much on Christianity and Christhood. Guy Willoughby is one notable exception to this, and it is to *Art and Christhood: The Aesthetics of Oscar Wilde* – his book-length exploration of Christ, Christianity and aesthetics in Wilde’s writings – that I am greatly indebted as the critical source from which my ideas of ethical aestheticism and aesthetic Christhood arise. Willoughby sets out the purpose of his study comprehensively in his introduction:

For a writer whose output was relatively slight, and whose significant literary career spanned a mere decade, Wilde’s fictions and essays have titillated, charmed, and annoyed readers by the range of their generic and stylistic postures. A coherent view of his work emerges, however, if we consider a recurrent but neglected figure: Jesus Christ. ... The writer’s deliberations in fiction and polemic on a secular Christ oblige us, further, to rethink his aesthetics – an aesthetics that unifies his diverse literary achievement. The wider purpose of my book, then, is to track the course of this new aestheticism. (15)

My thesis responds to Willoughby’s argument by expanding upon both his idea that Christ is central to Wilde’s work and his identification of Wilde’s new or, rather, ethical aestheticism.

Another study of note comes from Killeen, who argues in *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde* that “the writings of Oscar Wilde can be fruitfully analysed as expressive of an Irish Catholic

¹⁸ Ernest Renan’s *The Life of Jesus* was highly influential on how Wilde envisioned Christ. This “gracious Fifth Gospel,” as Wilde calls it in “De Profundis” (1029), historicises Christ as the “noble initiator” of Christianity yet denies his status as a divine being (212). According to Stephen Arata, “Renan was harshly criticized not just for denying the divinity of Christ but for his overall insistence that the Bible be read as a set of historical documents rather than as divine revelation” (261).

heritage” (1). Killeen’s take on Irish Catholicism is vast and comprehensive, encompassing all aspects of Wilde’s life and writing. I, however, have focused more on Wilde’s interest in Roman instead of Irish Catholicism to explain the origins of ethical aestheticism.

In “Christ, Christianity and Oscar Wilde”, John Allen Quintus focuses exclusively on the representations of Christ in Wilde’s writing and his thoughts on Christianity without attribution to his Irish heritage. Quintus writes that instead of rejecting Christianity, “Wilde modified it to suit his own needs and, consequently, brought to Christianity the same kind of aesthetic impulse he brought to the spheres of politics and ethics” (514). Quintus makes the important point that it is inappropriate to call Wilde a Christian as the term is commonly understood. Wilde was one who saw Christianity and Christ through his own aesthetic lens, using the former as a means of defining the ethical basis of his aestheticism and the latter as an example of one who lives by it. As a result, Wilde, like Ruskin, was one who appreciated the teachings of Christ himself rather than the Church.

In *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde*, Philip K. Cohen argues that Christianity informs all of Wilde’s writings:

Morality, Wilde’s constant preoccupation, orders and gives meaning to his internal world. Sin and salvation are his recurrent themes. Throughout his writings runs a conflict between Old and New Testament moral perspectives – between vengeful judgement that damns the transgressor eternally, and the Christian law of love, with its offer of forgiveness. (11)

Ellis Hanson writes along similar lines in *Decadence and Catholicism*, paying attention to the importance of Christ in Wilde’s aestheticism:

Like his aesthetic mentor, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde believed that Christianity was an extraordinary invention. Wilde brought his singular synthesis of Roman Catholicism, aestheticism, and eroticism to every book that he ever published. ... He was well read in theology and yet suspicious of dogma, enamored of Christ yet despairing of Christians, seduced by the beauty of Catholic ritual and art but appalled by the philistinism of the pious. (229)

My thesis concurs with Hanson’s assessment and aligns with a later statement in his book: “I am not, however, going to claim that Wilde’s Catholicism was a meaningless pose, or that he

was somehow immune to faith, doubt, shame, or remorse, all of which he described in religious terms with considerable eloquence” (231). Furthermore, “The Soul of Man” and “De Profundis”, as discussed, show that Wilde was quite clearly just as ‘enamored of Christ’ as Hanson claims. Jody Price continues this line of discussion in *Oscar Wilde’s Theory for Social Transformation*:

Christ, in Wilde’s aesthetic, becomes the ideal artist, who has recognized his artistic sensibility through the example of his life. Through his lessons of life and tolerance and forgiveness, he becomes a part of the creative imagination and emphathizes with the diversity of human experience. (50)

From the critics surveyed, it is clear that the interest in Wilde’s take on Christianity and Christ does not put a great deal of emphasis on his fiction. In response to this, my thesis exclusively discusses Wilde’s fiction, analysing the stories individually for their own unique representations of ethical aestheticism and the aesthetic Christ. In doing this, it is my intention to show that Wilde uses his fiction more so than his other writings to explore ethical aestheticism, using various representations of the aesthetic Christ as its embodiment. Chapter one looks at each of the five stories in *The Happy Prince*, considering their effectiveness as children’s fairy tales. Chapter two looks at the four stories in *A House of Pomegranates*, taking into account Wilde’s evolution of maturity in style and content. Finally, chapter three looks at *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as Wilde’s take on the Old Testament narrative of the Fall of Man, its portrayal of the antithesis of the aesthetic Christ and what this antithesis suggests about the future of ethical aestheticism as a philosophy.

Chapter One – *The Happy Prince and Other Stories*

Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. (King James Version, Luke 18.16)

unless we be as little children we shall never fully enter the kingdom of Oscar Wilde.
(Edwards 13)

“The Happy Prince”

Wilde’s first fairy tale, “The Happy Prince”, is a Christian story that reflects the harsh realities of underclass life in industrialised Britain and the ways by which these realities may, and may not, be remedied. The titular character is a representation of the aesthetic Christ. Decorated by “leaves of fine gold” and a “large red ruby” (272), he embodies the material, regal beauty we might typically associate with the aesthete. But this surface-level beauty is deceptive. Rather than his material possessions or gilded standing, it is the interior quality of the Prince’s sympathy that gives him his initial Christ-like qualities. “I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city,” he says, “and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep” (272).

In *Into the Demon Universe*, Christopher S. Nassaar writes that “process of age, of growing up, is one that opens the romantic to the world’s slow stain and immerses him in a black, soul-destroying universe” (2). Having lived in the “Palace of Sans-Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter” (273), the Prince is one such romantic, for whom the world’s stain is very slow indeed. The Prince is tortured by the injustices he witnesses yet, frozen in the pretty prison of his statue, he is powerless to remedy them. He is, in effect, stuck in a state that Susan Sontag calls “repulsive attractions”: a voyeuristic state in which one is repulsed by the injustices one witnesses but lacks the power to look away (96). It is the arrival of the Swallow that entices the Prince away from these attractions and into a state in which remedial action is possible.

The swallow has long been a religious symbol in Western art and literature. George Ferguson writes in *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* that the swallow is a common symbol in paintings of the Italian Renaissance – a period with which Wilde was intimately familiar – of “the incarnation of Christ” (27). Although this helps us to understand the art historical

significance of Wilde's *Swallow*, I think he makes a slight deviation from its traditional symbolism. If the Prince is an aesthetic Christ-figure, then I argue that the Swallow acts as his divine messenger, a winged disciple doing the benevolent bidding of his master.

The love that develops between the Prince and the Swallow has been a subject of interpretation for some critics, primarily for what it suggests about the roles of beauty and love in Wilde's aestheticism. In "Creating the Sensual Child", Naomi Wood points out that

Although specific pederastic practice is certainly not to be gleaned from the fairy tales, the fairy tales use the ideals and images surrounding Classical and contemporary homosexual discourses to offer an alternative, idealised form of love and morality, one that emphasizes spiritual procreancy, unselfish sacrifice, and, paradoxically, immersion in sensual experience as the means to true spirituality. (167)

Amanda Hollander makes a similar point, uniting homosexual love with aesthetics:

Given that the relationship between the Swallow and the Prince combines male homoeroticism with a bond cemented through a strong sense of shared social justice, the story also makes a profound argument in favour of an ethical aesthetics grounded in and augmented by homosexual love. (135)

Thus, we see that the homoerotically coded bond between this Christ-figure and his disciple is essential to the ethics they come to embody. Equally, this bond is also the mechanism by which the "ugliness and all the misery" of the city and its people begin to be alleviated (272).

Like any martyr, the Prince must sacrifice so that a higher ideal – in this case, love – may be realised. Like Christ at the Last Supper, the Prince sacrifices his various ornaments – symbols of his body and blood – for the betterment of his people, aided all the while by the Swallow. Commencing with the ruby on his sword-hilt, the Prince begins this self-sacrificial process, providing benevolent yet fleeting relief to the various citizens of his town, from a little boy "lying ill" to a struggling playwright with lips "as red as a pomegranate"¹⁹ (273-4).

¹⁹ The pomegranate has a long history in Christian symbolism. According to Ferguson,

the pomegranate as a rule alludes to the Church because of the inner unity of countless seeds in one and the same fruit. In pagan mythology, it was an attribute of Proserpine and symbolized her periodical return to earth in the spring. From this pagan symbolism of the return of spring and rejuvenation of the earth was derived the second symbolism of the pomegranate in Christian art, that of hope in immortality and of resurrection. (37)

The little boy, and indeed the children of the city in general, resemble the children of “Holy Thursday” in William Blake’s *Songs of Experience*: “Is this a holy thing to see, / In a rich and fruitful land, / Babes reduced to misery, / Fed with cold and usurious hands? / Is that trembling cry a song? / Can it be a song of joy? / And so many children poor? / It is a land of poverty!” (1-8). Like Blake’s bleak vision of impoverished London, when the Swallow flies over the city he glimpses the rich – “making merry in their beautiful houses” – and poor beggars – “sitting at the gates” (275). Like Blake, Wilde is writing with the consciousness of a social critic, pointing out the hypocrisy of people who claim to be Christians yet widely ignore Christ’s teachings. Unlike Blake, it is not necessarily sympathy for the impoverished and scorn for the wealthy that Wilde encourages in this contrast. Instead, Wilde appears to be suggesting that it is through the sharing of love, the development of compassion for our fellow men and women, that we achieve true beauty.

It is the death of the Prince and Swallow at the end of the story that brings their love tale full circle, with its coupling of aesthetic martyrdom with divine reward. Having sacrificed all his worldly possessions to the poor, the Prince becomes a true aesthetic Christ, a martyr of love. But this achievement comes with a price, namely the lives of both the Prince and his winged helper. Before venturing to the “House of Death”, the Swallow seals his love for the Prince with kiss on the lips, causing the latter’s “leaden heart” to snap in two (276). Whilst the breaking of one’s heart is commonly associated with love’s end, here it signifies the release of the Prince’s soul from his statuesque prison. By dying in the name of love, the Prince and Swallow realise their true identities as lovers and are rewarded with a place in God’s “garden of Paradise” (277), a stand-in for the ‘treasury-house’ mentioned in “The Soul of Man.” Hence the tale concludes with the idea that divine reward awaits those who live and die by the aesthetic Christ’s example.

Although the story, as Markey argues, “invites readers to consider contemporary political and aesthetic concerns alike and indeed to evaluate the competing claims of both” (102), the fact that we receive no confirmation as to the long-term effectiveness of the sacrifices of the Prince and Swallow leads us to question the purpose of evaluating these ‘competing claims’. The cycle of poverty and human imperfection seems only to continue, as is displayed by the town’s officials, who are ignorant of the sacrifices that have improved the

Kate Pendlebury reinforces Ferguson’s claim, articulating that “In Christian imagery and iconography, unlike Greek tradition, the pomegranate is an unambiguously positive symbol” (128). Taking the pomegranate’s second Christian symbolism, as Ferguson describes it, we may argue that the young playwright, perhaps like his author, hopes for immortality in the plays he will produce.

lives of their people. Upon discovering that the Prince has lost his adornments, the Mayor cannot help but comment on the state of his appearance. “The ruby has fallen out of his sword, his eyes are gone, and he is golden no longer”, he says, before condemning the Prince as “little better than a beggar” (276). Wilde makes a telling comment on the social blindness of the powerful, heedless of the suffering beneath them. This compels us to reflect upon the utility of charity as a means of remedying socio-political problems, a reflection that has been a discussion point for some Wilde critics. In “The Aesthetics of Altruism”, for example, Maria Tatar writes about the relationship between action and justice in the traditional fairy tale, commenting on the hopelessness that pervades the usual denouement:

In fairy tales, there may be retribution but there is no real justice. ... We are left with the *status quo ante* and the sense that poverty, child abandonment, exploitation, and other evils will continue, since the fairy tale gives us nothing more than a spectacularly singular, idiosyncratic case. ... It is in Wilde’s fairy tales that ... stories ... chart a course from beauty (as it is embodied and beheld) to generosity. But we also discover a parallel path of witnessing suffering, responding with empathy, and relieving the conditions of its existence. (150)

Even though Wilde’s characters respond with empathy to the suffering of others, he does not endorse altruism as a final solution to the problems of poverty and dispossession. In fact, he explicitly speaks against it in “The Soul of Man” as nothing more than a “mode of partial restitution, or a sentimental dole” (1176). Altruism is therefore not included in the rubric of ethical aestheticism. With this said, it is not the purpose of this story to call the reader to action for temporary social change but to briefly illustrate a scenario where aesthetic martyrdom – the individual’s sacrifice for love – stands atop the ethical hierarchy, guiding the child-reader towards an abstract vision of an ideal society and the ideal individuals who inhabit it, a vision made clearer in the following story.

“The Nightingale and the Rose”

In Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”, the speaker describes the titular bird’s song and takes care to emphasise its beauty: “Tis not through envy of thy happy lot, / But being too happy in thy happiness, - / That thou, light-wingèd Dryad of the trees, / In some melodious plot / Of beechen green, and shadows numberless, / Singest of summer in full-throated ease” (1-10).

In “The Nightingale and the Rose”, the second story in this collection, Wilde places similar emphasis on one such song, illustrating his vision of aesthetic Christhood with an allegory of the loving sacrifice of the artist in the creation of their work.

The story follows the Nightingale responding to the plea of the young Student for a red rose—a symbol of passion—to gift to a girl far beyond his social class. In Markey’s words, “The Nightingale is a Christ-like figure who suffers for the sake of an ideal love expressed through art” (109). True to Markey’s assessment, she sacrifices her life for this Student and in doing so produces the rose he desires. For the Nightingale, the Student is the archetypal “true lover” (278). He is devoted to love above all else and even “all the secrets of philosophy” are not enough to satisfy his desire for the symbolic passion of a red rose (278). The Nightingale expresses her admiration for him by admitting that

Night after night I have sung of him, though I knew him not: night after night I have told his story to the stars and now I see him. His hair is dark as the hyacinth-blossom, and his lips are red as the rose of his desire; but passion has made his face like pale ivory, and sorrow has set her seal upon his brow. (278)

The attention the Nightingale pays to the Student’s appearance, particularly his ‘hyacinth-blossom’ hair – “a symbol of Christian prudence, peace of mind and the desire for Heaven” (Ferguson 37) – helps characterise him not simply as a lover in need but as someone worthy of artistic appreciation. In reality, he is a stand-in for the Victorian philistine, privileging “practical good” over aesthetic sensibility (Wilde 280). Although the Student is central to the story, Wilde focuses primarily on the figure of the Nightingale, who not only embodies the aesthetic Christ, but much like the Swallow of the previous story, behaves as a kind of intermediary agent, hearing the plea of suffering and acting to remedy it. She is at once Christ, disciple and artist: the perfect aesthetic figure.

Like “The Happy Prince”, this tale deals with love, but it is the love of an artist for her creation rather than a homoerotic bond that defines it. For Wilde’s winged artist, to whom love is “more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals” (278), creating art and sharing it with the world is the meaning of life. Hence to create art out of “music by moonlight, and stain it with your [her] own heart’s blood” is of little consequence to the selfless Nightingale, regardless of how ineffective her sacrifice may be (279). Willoughby describes the implications of the Nightingale’s sacrifice, paying particular attention to the allegory of artistic sacrifice:

In the image of the rose deepening in colour as the life of the Nightingale ebbs away, Wilde is creating a resonant symbol for the Christlike totality of sacrifice art requires of its practitioners. That this symbol of perfection is to be “built” from the bird’s music by “moonlight,” and nourished with its “own heart’s blood”, powerfully represents the artist’s commitment and her method. (28-9)

The Nightingale’s commitment is indeed powerful and her symbol of perfection no less so, as Wilde illustrates in the aftermath of her ordeal. Like a winged Christ, bloodied from the crown of thorns after a self-imposed crucifixion, she lays “in the long grass, with the thorn in her heart” (281). The Student is initially thankful, if only in a superficial way, for the result of her labour. But his hopes are quickly dashed when the Professor’s daughter rejects his offering. Citing both the differences in their social positions and her own vanity as reasons for her rejection, she expresses her desire for the Chamberlain’s nephew, noting his ability to gift her “real jewels”, a gift that “cost[s] far more than flowers” (281). Both the Student’s rejection and his response to it – the dismissal of love as a “silly thing” and the privileging of the logic and practicality of metaphysics – demonstrates a subversion of the typical fairy tale trope of the happy ending, in which the hero is rewarded with love and devotion (282). It also shows both his lack of appreciation for the Nightingale’s artistic sacrifice and his general shallowness, which Wilde readily points out in a letter to Thomas Hutchinson:

My dear Sir, I thank you for your very charming and graceful letter, but I am afraid that I don’t think as much of the young Student as you do. He seems to me a rather shallow young man, and almost as bad as the girl he thinks to love. The nightingale is the true lover, if there is one. She, at least, is Romance, and the Student and the girl are, like most of us, unworthy of Romance (354).

The story’s conclusion also echoes Tatar’s notion that Wilde “Invokes two competing regimes, one affiliated with the alluring seductions of surface beauty and the other with the equally compelling visual appeal of human suffering and misery” in his fairy tales (151). The Student’s ingratitude for the Nightingale’s sacrifice thus brings the allegory to a close with the cynical idea that the artist is never truly appreciated for their sacrifice.

“The Selfish Giant”

In “The Stories of Oscar Wilde”, Owen Dudley Edwards depicts a reading of “The Selfish Giant”, taking care to emphasise what he sees as the story’s ubiquity:

She [The Anglican Rector's wife] read it well, and her audience was the most silent and attentive it had ever proved itself in the entire week. At the close there was one united sigh of rapture. It was perfect ecumenicism, transcending cultures, ethnicities, nationalities, religions, genders and ages. To my generation and the next, Wilde is an old friend-but to those children, some half-a-century my junior, he was evidently a (fairly) old friend, less by his own name than as the man who wrote ‘The Selfish Giant’ His sensational biography, dazzling theatre, *fin-de-siècle*, fireworks of epigram, were all irrelevant. His future in the next century is secure in the hands of these truest lovers of Art for Art’s sake. It neatly disposes of the superstition that his literary survival is a spin-off of scandal (14).

If Edwards's account is credible, then it is clear that “The Selfish Giant” possesses a unique quality that makes it particularly appealing to the child reader. My purpose in the following discussion is to elucidate exactly what this quality is and its inseparability from Christian ethics.

One of the most symbolically significant aspects of this tale is the garden in which it unfolds. Wilde figures the garden as a comfortable space, comparable to the Garden of Eden. “It was a large lovely garden,” Wilde writes, “with soft green grass. Here and there over the grass stood beautiful flowers like stars, and there were twelve peach-trees that in the spring-time broke out into delicate blossoms of pink and pearl, and in the autumn bore rich fruit” (283). Garden imagery is a consistent feature throughout ancient Hebrew and Christian literature, most notably in the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis, wherein the Garden of Eden represents Paradise: “And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (2.9). Given that the story revolves around this imagery, it is clear from the first page of “The Selfish Giant” that the story deals with Christian issues in some capacity. The Giant’s garden is a children’s playground, an innocent space free from the corrosiveness of adult influence:

Every afternoon, as they were coming from school, the children used to go and play in the Giant’s garden. It was a large lovely garden, with soft green grass. Here and there over the grass stood beautiful flowers like stars, and there were twelve peach-trees that in the spring-

time broke out into delicate blossoms of pink and pearl, and in the autumn bore rich fruit.
(283)

If we think of this garden as an aesthetic Eden, then we may also think of the children who inhabit it as carefree cherubs, little aesthetes indulging both in the beauty of their environment – with its star-like flowers and peach trees – and in each other’s company. This garden is Wilde’s ideal environment, a place where the ethical aesthete can flourish with the freedom to expand and refine his artistic sensibilities. It is a place where one can become child-like.

As idyllic as the garden is at first, it falls from its divine state upon the arrival of the Giant who, angered at the trespassing children, forbids them from returning to the garden, casting them out of Eden with the use of a simple yet powerful phrase: “Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted” (283). The Giant is a demonic figure, and as such his purpose in the story is to act as an innocence-destroying, anti-aesthetic force, ignorant of the purifying influence the children bring to his space.

The Giant’s actions transform the once beautiful garden into a barren, anti-Eden that mirrors his selfish nature. To emphasise the corrupting nature of this transformation, Wilde personifies various elements of nature commonly associated with isolation and loneliness. Writing that the “only people who were pleased were the Snow and Frost” (284), Wilde literally and figuratively signifies the Giant’s coldness, which can only be mended by the kind of selfless love demonstrated by the sacrifices of the Prince and Nightingale.

In addition to its aesthetic elements, “The Selfish Giant” joins “The Happy Prince” as the most political of Wilde’s fairy tales, with its commentary on the morally corrupting influence of private property. Wilde describes this influence at great length in “The Soul of Man”, where he describes the corrosive nature of private property as it pertains to artistic sensibility and, ironically, individualism in that it confuses “a man with what he possesses” (1178). For Wilde, then, one’s character is deeper than the desire for material prosperity that capitalism makes into an imperative. In this line of thought, the artist can neither develop their artistic character nor produce the most beautiful work of which they are capable as long as the institution of private property thrives. This critique of private property takes aim at what Wilde saw as the primary inhibitor of individualism: capitalism. The capitalistic impulse towards privatisation, in Wilde’s mind, is a barrier between the individual and his or her true self. As we have observed in the sacrifices of the Prince and Swallow, it is by offering one’s self as a martyr to the cause of love that one becomes an ethical aesthete. But

the Giant's case is somewhat different. Although the story concludes with his death, it is through the sacrifice of his property – an extension of himself – that he comes to understand the aesthetic ideal.

Whilst love is a consistent theme throughout Wilde's fiction and is the primary concern in "The Selfish Giant", it always comes with an extreme price, usually of a deathly nature. As Robert Keith Miller observes, "Wilde's attitude towards love is complex. It figures prominently in many of the stories, and it is recognized as an important virtue. On the other hand, it is frequently associated with pain" (111). Nowhere is this observation more evident than in the conclusion of "The Selfish Giant". Swift and to the point, it depicts the arrival of spring and with it the symbolic lifting of the winter of selfishness. The children, having found a way into the garden through a hole in the wall, begin to play there once more. Like a non-believer seeing the light of the aesthetic Christ for the first time, the Giant realises the error of his ways. "How selfish I have been", he exclaims, before helping a small child struggling to climb a tall tree "still covered with frost and snow" (284). Unbeknown to the Giant, this is perhaps the most significant action he could have performed as it is what transforms him into an ethical aesthete, one who indulges in the beauty that results from the relinquishment of the self.

This child is the purest embodiment of the aesthetic Christ that *The Happy Prince* has to offer. Whereas the Prince and Nightingale are representations of the aesthetic Christ, this child directly embodies Christ's purity of body, spirit and heart. As such, he is for me the ultimate proof in Wilde's fiction that Christian ethics and aestheticism are not only reconcilable but are intertwined.

Wilde's Christ-child unites two particular interpretations of children and childhood, arising respectively from the New Testament and late eighteenth century Romanticism. First, the Gospel of Matthew suggests the idea that children represent an ideal innocence:

Then there were brought unto him little children, that he [Jesus] should put *his* hands on them, and pray: and the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven. (19.13-4)

Second, the invention of childhood by the Romantics in the late 18th century brought with it the vision of the early years of human life as a time of innocence. The Romantic child, best exemplified in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, is a being privileged with an understanding of the divine nature of the imagination, which for Rousseau can only flourish

in the absence of formal education. In other words, the Romantic child – unruly and uncivilised – is to Rousseau the only truly enlightened being. Rousseau shared some of Wilde’s contentions regarding Christianity and the Church. Maurice Cranston writes in *The Noble Savage* that Rousseau thought of Jesus as “an exemplary man and a sublime teacher whose central message of love has been distorted by St. Paul and the Church” (195). He later quotes Rousseau directly from his defence of *Émile*, “I am a Christian, not as a disciple of priests, but as a disciple of Jesus Christ” (197). We may thus describe Wilde’s Christ-child as a Rousseauian-Christian creation, a moral leader for whom the Giant – having learned the error of his selfish ways – is a disciple.

As time goes on and the Giant becomes “very old and feeble”, he can only watch the children at their games from a “huge arm-chair” (285). That is until he notices the “little boy he had loved” standing underneath the tree with golden branches and “silver fruit (285), echoing the declaration in Psalms that we should be “like trees planted by streams of water that yield fruit in season,” further emphasising the moment’s biblical sub-text (1.3). Upon approaching the child, the Giant discovers his resemblance to Christ, his hands pierced with the “wounds of Love” (285), which demarcate him as a martyr. It is by the decree of the Christ-child that the Giant, in his death, joins the Prince, Swallow and Nightingale in the Garden of Paradise mentioned in “The Happy Prince”, where presumably all ethical aesthetes spend eternity.

In “The Selfish Giant”, it is the child who is divine and the adult demonic. Hence, it is the former who must learn to rediscover the aesthetic ideal from the latter, thereby returning to the selflessness of childhood. This empowers the child-reader with the knowledge that theirs is a state of grace and one they should preserve as they grow and mature. Wilde thus compacts his ethical aestheticism, with its emphasis on love and selflessness, into a literary package small enough for the child-reader to enjoy and the adult reader to reflect upon.

“The Devoted Friend”

In *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, Killeen claims that Wilde’s “The Devoted Friend” “has not been the easiest story in *The Happy Prince* to interpret. Indeed, of all of the tales in the two collections this one is the one which has been the least illuminated by the critical commentary that does exist” (102). It is certainly true, as Killeen states, that the sparse criticism on this particular story does little to assist interpretation. However, I argue that the

text itself has a strong enough ethical basis to merit discussion. With this in mind, I argue that “The Devoted Friend” is a tale of exploitation, illustrating the dangers of egotism and one which orientates the child-reader towards aesthetic Christhood.

There are two plots in “The Devoted Friend”. The first involves an interaction between three animal characters – the Water-rat, Duck and Green Linnet. The Water-rat, convinced that there is nothing in the world "that is either nobler or rarer than a devoted friendship" (286), entices the Linnet to tell a story of one such friendship. The Linnet's story tells of the downfall of "an honest little fellow named Hans" (286), whose naive devotion to the rich and powerful Big Hugh the Miller lures him into an exploitative friendship and eventually to his untimely death. Wilde separates Hans and Hugh into the categories of oppressed and oppressor, using the words 'little' and 'big' as markers of their respective status. This mirrors Hans Anderson's tale “Little Claus and Big Claus”, which contains the same dichotomy. This story tells of two men named Claus, who, as Anderson writes, can only be distinguished by the number of horses they own: “There lived in a village two men with the same name. Both were called Claus, but one of them owned four horses, and the other only one. Now to distinguish them one from the other, the one who had four horses was called Big Claus and the one who had only one Little Claus” (11). Hence the distinction between the two is based not on physical size, as is the case in Wilde's story, but on property ownership. Wilde takes this idea from Anderson's story and applies it to his own, resulting in a tale that, though lacking complexity, successfully illustrates what characterises an unwholesome friendship.

Hans is the embodiment of Christian morality. A selfless man, he is charitable and motivated only by a single-hearted devotion to his friend. However, his innocence and devotion to others leaves him open to exploitation. Hugh is the opposite of Hans in terms of his behaviour and attitudes. Consumed by his ego, he desires to take advantage of those he thinks are beneath him to the fullest extent possible whilst using friendship to disguise his true intentions:

Little Hans had a great many friends, but the most devoted friend of all was big Hugh the Miller. Indeed, so devoted was the rich Miller to little Hans, that he would never go by his garden without leaning over the wall and plucking a large nosegay, or a handful of sweet herbs, or filling his pockets with plums and cherries if it was that season. (287)

Wilde conveys one of his characteristic paradoxes in this passage. Whereas the word 'devoted' would normally indicate one's readiness to show compassion, here the opposite is true. Rather than showing devotion to Hans through the act of giving, Hugh instead takes from Hans as he pleases, showing his readiness to take advantage of his supposed 'friend'. His actions demonstrate a devotion not to friendship but to stroking his own inflated sense of self. Wilde continues to develop this paradox throughout the story in the manipulative ways in which Hugh communicates not just with Hans, but with his own family. "There is no good in my going to see little Hans as long as the snow lasts," the Miller used to say to his wife, "for when people are in trouble they should be left alone and not bothered by visitors. That at least is my idea about friendship, and I am sure I am right" (287). The Miller's wife, lulled by her husband's poise and articulation, is fooled by him. Ironically, only the Miller's young son exemplifies genuine good will by expressing a desire to give Hans half his porridge and show him his white rabbits. The characterisation of the son as selfless communicates the Romantic idea of the divine child about which "The Selfish Giant" was written, proving that even though "The Devoted Friend" is a cynical story, Wilde has not entirely abandoned the child as the archetypal saviour. However, unlike "The Selfish Giant", Wilde neither lingers on this child character nor suggests any kind of divine intervention. Instead, he continues to emphasise Hugh's egotism as he agrees to give Hans his wheelbarrow:

Hans, said the Miller, I will give you my wheelbarrow. It is not in very good repair; indeed, one side is gone, and there is something wrong with the wheel-spokes; but in spite of that I will give it to you. I know it is very generous of me, and a great many people would think me extremely foolish for parting with it, but I am not like the rest of the world. I think that generosity is the essence of friendship, and, besides, I have got a new wheelbarrow for myself. (289)

Hugh uses this act, which he believes come from a rare generosity that the rest of the world lacks, to manipulate Hans throughout the rest of the story. The continuation of their relationship performs two functions: first, it emphasises the inequality in their power-dynamic and in doing so satirises the idea that true friendship is free from "selfishness of any kind" (290). Second, it uses Hans's naivety as a warning for his young readers against perpetuating such a mentality.

The death of Hans near the story's end draws a stark contrast with those of "The Happy Prince" and "The Selfish Giant". Whereas in the conclusions of these stories the

relinquishment of selfhood is rewarded with a place in Heaven's garden, here all that remains is a futility similar to "The Nightingale and the Rose". When carrying out his last favour for Hugh, Hans drowns during a great storm, his death signifying the end both of his life and the innocence he embodied:

But the storm grew worse and worse, and the rain fell in torrents, and little Hans could not see where he was going, or keep up with the horse. At last he lost his way, and wandered off on the moor, which was a very dangerous place, as it was full of deep holes, and there poor little Hans was drowned (292).

It is not the end of Hans's life that finalises the end of innocence and reveals the ugly results of exploitation but the way Hugh responds to it at the funeral of his supposed friend. When the Blacksmith speaks of Hans's death as a loss to everyone, Hugh's reply, as expected, places his own ego at the centre of the tragedy. "Why, I had as good as given him my wheelbarrow," he says, "and now I don't know what do with it. It is very much in my way at home, and it is in such bad repair that I could not get anything for it if I sold it" (293). The conclusion reverses that of "Little Claus and Big Claus", in which Little Claus not only survives an attempt on his life but learns to thrive by his own wit and quick thinking (23-25). Unlike Little Claus, who learns to adapt to his circumstances and thus develop as a character, Hugh does not possess even the self-awareness necessary to acknowledge his many faults let alone learn to improve them. Instead, he would rather flaunt his unearned moral superiority so that those around him will supposedly think more highly of him. Hugh therefore places himself in opposition to the aesthetic Christ, feigning empathy and compassion for the sake of convincing others of his virtue, rather than expressing any genuine emotion. Unworthy of the same redemption as the Prince, the Swallow and the Giant, Wilde makes an example of Hugh as one who ignores the teachings of the aesthetic Christ.

Like all Wilde's other fairy stories, there is something to learn from the downfall of Hans, and Hugh's lack of self-awareness. The message against exploitation is obvious enough but what is more difficult to explain is the story's contradiction regarding the dangers of love. Whereas Wilde typically places love and sacrifice atop his hierarchy of virtues, here he advises his child-readers to take care regarding whom they love. In doing this, he proposes that social exploitation in the guise of friendship is a story of two parties: exploiter and exploited, guilty and innocent, both of whom are just as much to blame as the other, though in different ways. In addition to creating this contradiction, however, "The Devoted Friend"

also solves it by suggesting a preventative measure against such exploitative relationships: strengthening the child's resolve by orientating him or her towards a model of wholesome friendship.

What results from this instruction is a clear path towards the creation of a better politics of amity. Consequently, Wilde's closing affirmation that telling a story with a moral is "always a very dangerous thing to do" is appropriate as few things could be more dangerous to the powers of authority than a morally robust individual, a model of the aesthetic Christ (293).

"The Remarkable Rocket"

Much like "The Devoted Friend", the final story in this collection, "The Remarkable Rocket", is widely ignored by critics because of its apparently shallow subject matter. In my view, however, this story plays a key role in illustrating Wilde's ethical aestheticism for his child-readers precisely because of its simplicity. I argue that the Rocket belongs in the same category as Hugh in "The Devoted Friend" as one to whom ethical aestheticism is undesirable. Whereas Hugh is an unapologetic exploiter, the Rocket represents a kind of egotism that is more amusing than alarming. "The Remarkable Rocket" is a critique of narcissism that highlights precisely how *not* to reach the ideal of aesthetic Christhood.

The Rocket is a firework, a symbol of artifice. It makes perfect sense, therefore, that Wilde should choose a Rocket as his egotist, "a master of language, using it, coining it and twisting it for his own self-glorifying ends" (Markey 128). Like Hans, the Rocket is selfish. It is the moral ugliness that accompanies this, I argue, that places him against the beauty that ethical aestheticism advocates. Completely unaware of his ugliness, the Rocket bases his social standing entirely on the inconsequential features of his parentage:

I am a very remarkable Rocket, and come of remarkable parents. My mother was the most celebrated Catherine wheel of her day, and was renowned for her graceful dancing. When she made her great public appearance she spun round nineteen times before she went out, and each time that she did so she threw into the air seven pink stars. ... My father was a Rocket like myself, and of French extraction. He flew so high that people were afraid that he would never come down again. He did, ... and he made a most brilliant descent in a shower of golden rain. (296)

Putting to one side the absurd yet amusing notion that a Rocket and a Catherine wheel may sexually consummate, the idea that the Rocket believes that the exploits of his parents should make him socially respectable indicates that he bases his identity solely on his genealogy. To the Rocket, self-presentation is nothing more than a springboard to reach new social heights. The purpose of characterising the Rocket in such a way is twofold. First, it places him in opposition to ethical aestheticism. Second, it makes an example of him as the kind of moral hypocrite that Wilde opposed.

Despite the apparent seriousness of such a characterisation, the Rocket is anything but a serious character. This is exemplified by his comically paradoxical view of selfishness and sympathy. "What right have you to be happy?" the Rocket asks of a cheerful Cracker, "You should be thinking about others. In fact, you should be thinking about me. I am always thinking about myself, and I expect everybody else to do the same. That is what is called sympathy" (296). The Rocket is so incapable of recognising his own behaviour as selfish, by his own definition, that we begin to doubt the complexity of his character. Indeed, this doubt only amplifies as the Rocket continues to morally postulate, recounting how unhappy the Royals would be should anything unfortunate happen to him. "Really, when I begin to reflect on the importance of my position, I am almost moved to tears" (296), he states, unaware that his tears – symbols of his unbridled narcissism – will be his undoing. Even though the Rocket does not know any of the Royals, his ego nonetheless forces him to cry at the thought of how important he imagines he is to them.

As if the story's moral simplicity could not be any clearer, the superficial motivations of the Rocket appear to emphasise it even further. Like a pampered aristocrat, the Rocket wants only the praise of those around him without performing any notable action to earn it. There is, however, a subtle moral message underpinning his blatant narcissism. Whereas "The Devoted Friend" illustrates exploitation through Hans and Hugh's relationship, "The Remarkable Rocket" depicts narcissism to exemplify the immorality of self-interest. When we look beneath the Rocket's surface-level bravado, we discover that the deeper function of his character is as a warning against the temptations of narcissism, a warning Wilde communicates at much greater length and much more seriously in *Dorian Gray*. Wilde gives this warning by making the imagination – normally a powerful aesthetic force – into a negative attribute. This is ironic when we consider that imagination is what gives many of Wilde's characters their ability to empathise with the plights of others. In "The Happy Prince", for instance, it is the Prince's imagination that allows him to empathise with the circumstances of his citizens. In "The Selfish Giant", it is the Giant's imagination that

compels him to assist the Christ-child, an action rewarded by divine providence. For the Rocket, however, imagination is the driving force for the ego, which convinces him that he is above his peers. As Cohen suggests, "Imagination can elevate one's own misfortunes into triumphs" (94). This is precisely what the Rocket's imagination does as he fails to launch because of his relentless crying:

Every one was a great success except the Remarkable Rocket. He was so damp with crying that he could not go off at all. The best thing in him was the gunpowder, and that was so wet with tears that it was of no use. All his poor relations, to whom he would never speak, except with a sneer, shot up into the sky like wonderful golden flowers with blossoms of fire. (298)

The anti-climax of the Rocket's explosion highlights the fruitlessness of his vanity. As Killeen argues, the explosion carries Biblical implications pertaining to the crucifixion:

The explosions of the Rocket-both rhetorical effusions about his own importance and eventual pathetic eruption-are comic reversals of the Christ event. The death of Jesus was an 'explosion' of reds and blacks also-the sky darkened, the blood flowered-but it was a death of self-renunciation. (*Fairy Tales* 125-26)

Whilst the Rocket's 'Christ event' amounts to nothing more than a pathetic attempt at a spectacle rather than 'self-renunciation', the similarity to the crucifixion that Killeen notes shows that a strand of the same Christian thought that inspires the rest of Wilde's fairy stories is present here. Wilde delivers his warning against narcissism with the Rocket's explosion, but this is not because the Rocket recognises the errors in his behaviour; even as he faces his inglorious demise, he thinks of himself as "a great sensation" (301). Ironically, it is precisely because the Rocket stays true to his self-obsession that Wilde is able to successfully warn his child-readers against developing the Rocket's narcissism. By observing how the Rocket takes his place alongside Hugh as an embodiment of moral ugliness, we can also see how Wilde uses the fairy tales as a means of exploring Christian ethics whilst simultaneously orientating his readers towards aesthetic Christhood and the moral goodness that accompanies it.

Earlier, Owen Dudley Edwards described Wilde's child-readers as being the 'truest of all lovers of Art for Art's sake.' Since this thesis is concerned with linking aestheticism with ethics, with arguing against one of the central tenants of late Victorian aestheticism, the idea of children as true aesthetes merits further investigation. Stories in *The Happy Prince* such as

“The Selfish Giant”, where Christ is literally a child, and “The Devoted Friend”, where the innocent generosity of the Miller’s son contrasts with the selfishness of his father, are evidence of the idea that children possess the quality of selfless love that characterises the ethical aesthete. *The Happy Prince* as a whole may be read, with this in mind, as a reminder to the child-reader to keep this quality intact as they age. If this is the message of this first fairy tale collection, then it is the role of *A House of Pomegranates* – thematically and linguistically more appropriate for an adult readership – to encourage an older readership to return to a child-like ideal, to rediscover the path towards aesthetic Christhood from which they, in their advanced age, may have strayed.

Chapter Two – *A House of Pomegranates*

And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in abundance of the things which he possesseth. (Luke 12.15)

“The Young King”

The eponymous character of this fairy tale is the most obvious Christ-figure since the child of “The Selfish Giant”. Wilde’s approach to characterisation in this story is much more indirect, tracing the development of the Young King towards a fully realised aesthetic Christ in a cautionary story against excessive, unconscious materialism. Drawing back the pretty curtain of material beauty and riches, the Young King's redemptive journey towards aesthetic Christhood lays bare the ugliness that ironically accompanies the accumulation of beautiful things. Before we can fully appreciate the Young King's journey, however, it is necessary first to understand his similarities with two other prominent figures in late nineteenth-century aesthetic literature, Dorian Gray and Des Esseintes respectively. The purpose of understanding these similarities is, ironically, to reveal the extent to which the Young King's transformation characterises him as an anomaly among characters of this sort.

The Young King is a decadent aesthete, crying in pleasure at the “delicate raiment” and “rich jewels” that accompany his royal position (214). At the age of sixteen and with the appearance of a “brown woodland Faun,” he is the perfect image of the Wildean beautiful boy, a regal Dorian Gray (213). John-Charles Duffy, noting the story’s queer themes, suggests that the Young King's appreciation of material beauty is indicative of his underlying pre-occupation with masturbation and homosexuality:

The title character of *The Young King* is fairly obviously a masturbator and less obviously- though not surprisingly, given the Victorian views on the subject-homosexual. ... His posture is unmanly and erotically charged. The Faun simile evokes classical myths about the homosexual passions of satyrs, and the snared animal simile even introduces bondage into the picture. (334)

Duffy’s argument appears extreme, considering that there are no explicit references to masturbation in the story. Still, he perceptively notes Wilde’s curious comparison of the Young King to a Faun, a half-human and half-goat creature of Roman mythology. This

accentuates the point that the Young King fits the same beautiful boy archetype as Dorian, yet he manages to avoid the self-destruction to which Dorian succumbs, the implications of which will be discussed in chapter three.

Another infamous aesthete we may draw a comparison with is Des Essientes of Huysmans's *A Rebours*. Whereas Des Essientes was born the last in a long line of French aristocrats, the Young King did not come to develop his excessive ways by conventional means but through an illicit copulation between a princess and "one much beneath her station" (213). Still, their lifestyles are quite similar as both take pleasure in the beauty of the visual arts at the expense of all else. To be a full-time aesthete is an all-consuming occupation and, in a way that is both darkly ironic and somewhat amusing, is also a gateway to extreme melancholy. This is best exemplified in the final paragraph of *A Rebours*:

Well, it is all over now. Like a tide-race, the waves of human mediocrity are rising to the heavens and will engulf this refuge, for I am opening the flood-gates myself, against my will. Ah! but my courage fails me, and my heart is sick within me! – Lord, take pity on the Christian who doubts, on the unbeliever who would fain believe, on the galley-slave of life who puts out to sea alone, in the night, beneath a firmament no longer lit by the consoling beacon-fires of the ancient hope. (204)

Des Essientes evidently experiences this melancholy very intensely. For the Young King, it is less intense yet no more ignorable, especially once he is shown the origins of the material beauty that defines his identity.

All three of these characters are guilty of failing to acknowledge that for an appreciation of beauty to be complete, it must encompass both the material and spiritual realms, for it is in the latter that love and selflessness lie. For all the exquisite charm that their lives seem to offer, what results from their cultivation of materials is nothing but self-loathing and a nearly inescapable stagnation. Fortunately for the Young King, the 'ancient hope' has not been entirely extinguished.

Whereas Dorian Gray fails to recognise true beauty as existing beyond the material world, as chapter three will examine, the Young King eventually achieves the higher grace of ethical aestheticism. Having been "given into the charge of a common peasant and his wife," it makes sense that the Young King should take such intense pleasure – "a strange passion for beauty" – in the material pleasures of his kingdom (213-4). His carefree existence gives a convincing initial impression that his way of living, tied inextricably to material luxury, is the

ultimate form of self-satisfaction. But there is a catch to living such a life, and a dark one at that. The night before his coronation, he learns through a series of dreams of the evil and despair involved in the creation of the fine garments and ornaments he so adores and is compelled to undertake a personal journey towards divine atonement. In Joseph Campbell's terms, he must answer the 'call to adventure', which

rings up the curtain, always, on a mystery of transfiguration – a rite, or moment, of spiritual passage, which, when complete, amounts to a dying and a birth. The familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand. (42-3)

Put differently, the Young King must let go of his previous conception of himself to die so that he may be reborn a new, more morally rounded individual.

The three dreams the Young King experiences are a descent into his troubled psyche. Subsequently, they lend themselves to psychoanalytical interpretation. Carl Jung notes in "Approaching the Unconscious" that those who have "unrealistic ideas or too high an opinion of themselves, or who make grandiose plans out of proportion to their real capacities" find the dream world most unkind to their waking arrogance. "The dream", Jung continues, "compensates for the deficiencies of their personalities, and at the same time warns them of the dangers in their present course" (50). The psychological aspects of the Young King's journey into his subconscious have not gone unnoticed by critics either. For instance, Nassaar characterises sleep as "a state of mind where conscious thoughts are laid to rest and thoughts that lie beneath the surface emerge" (24), a notion that closely echoes Jung's. In his dreams, the Young King must leave his innocence behind to acknowledge the truth, integrate it and amend his behaviour. The first dream is a stark juxtaposition with the Young King's palace of *Joyeuse*. Gone are the "rich tapestries" and "delicate goblets of Venetian glass" (215). In their place, we see concise episodes of the exploitative reality behind the beauty of *Joyeuse*, a reality that is indeed far from joyous. The first dream depicts the origins of the coronation robe and is the first instance where the Young King realises the separation between himself and those who serve him:

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. (215)

As stark as the contrast this passage draws between the Royals and their workers is, there is a lesson for the Young King to learn: despite the differences between one's fellow man and oneself, there is a common humanity shared between all. One of the workers, a weaver, verbalises this idea as he informs the Young King of his master's identity: "Our master! cried the weaver, bitterly. He is a man like myself. Indeed, there is but this difference between us—that he wears fine clothes while I go about in rags, and that while I am weak from hunger he suffers not a little from overfeeding" (216). The weaver's response has a two-pronged effect: first, and most obviously, it dispels the idea that there is any separation between Royalty and the working classes, save for the material. Second, and more deeply, it validates Jung's idea that sleep reveals one's subconscious thoughts. We cannot claim that the Young King had no prior knowledge of the inequalities of the world, given that he was raised by a "common peasant and his wife" (213). Therefore, we can infer that it was a subconscious thought in the Young King's mind that the materials that enthralled him were the products, in his own words, of "the loom of Sorrow" and "the white hands of Pain," and that his dreams are a manifestation of that thought (219). This, ironically, makes the dream more real than anything in his waking life.

The second and third dreams take us to even deeper levels of the Young King's subconscious. The second introduces colonialism in the form of a slave ship, whilst the third, by way of a quasi-gothic nightmare where Death and Avarice walk the earth, takes the story briefly into the realm of mythology. In this third dream, Avarice is a symbol of the Young King's will – an enslaver of the dispossessed – whilst Death is a bringer of relief. "From the darkness of a cavern" these figures bicker over how they might trade, like common cattle, the slaves who toil outside. "I am weary; give me a third of them and let me go" Death pleads, only to be met with Avarice's antipathy. "They are my servants" she replies, showing that even through supernatural eyes the workers mean little (218). That Avarice should be personified in such a way before the Young King's very eyes emphasises his responsibility in ending the torment of the downtrodden before Death ends it for him.

The three dreams do not necessarily suggest that the Young King should be morally condemned, though he doubtlessly feels his share of guilt. Rather, the dreams send him down the path towards true beauty and are subsequently an integral part of the broader redemptive journey. Given that the dreams are a subconscious experience, the first step on this path is

found within his own mind. This is because, like Christ before him, he has realised his true personality, not as an exploiter or a regal layabout but as a lover of humanity. This realisation on the Young King's part represents an evolution of the divine messenger archetype established first by the Swallow of "The Happy Prince". Whilst the Prince is frozen in his statue and requires the Swallow to act as his divine messenger, here the Young King himself is called on to renounce his unconscious self-indulgence and become an ethical aesthete, thus making the divine duality of the Prince and the Swallow, effectively, into one.

The psychological dimension of the story may have come full circle, but the change the Young King has experienced has yet to be externalised in the waking world. Despite his revelations, not everyone in *Joyeuse* is convinced of his new wisdom. Even the bishop, a supposed representative of the divine, believes suffering to be inherent in the human condition (221). Ironically, it is by defying the accepted presumptions of the Church that the Young King achieves a Christ-like beauty, showing that the example of Christ and the religion that succeeded him do not always morally align. The divine transformation combines the beauty of both nature and art, expressing a romantic aesthetic:

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. (221)

The importance of light in this passage is paramount since it is light that gives the Young King his new clothing and, by extension, his new identity. It is light that casts away the darkness of Avarice and Death and envelops the once selfish Young King in a bright shroud – a manifestation of his new, higher selfhood – as well as a collection of aesthetic objects produced not by evil but by the will of God. As Lindsey Smith notes,

By a process of metamorphosis generated through the agency of sunlight, the Young King thereby receives, in miraculously produced form and stripped of their material value, those objects he desires simply for their aesthetic beauty. Furthermore, his wish for beauty appears sanctioned by the metaphysical transformation he undergoes, which is the result of a physical process. ... By creating for the Young King an appearance independent of human agency, Wilde's tale dwells upon the transformative power of light. (51)

Smith's analysis captures the divine significance of the Young King's advancement to a higher ethical realm, a world of true beauty where something so ugly as suffering is non-existent. In observing this transformation, we see that the end point of the ethical aesthete's heroic journey is the realisation that love for one's fellow men and women brings about true beauty. The world of self-indulgence that had once been so captivating has diminished and in its place, we see the potential for change.

“The Birthday of the Infanta”

In "The Decay of Lying", Wilde expresses the idea that "Lying, the telling of beautiful, untrue things, is the proper aim of art" (1091-2). “The Birthday of the Infanta” represents a deviation from Wilde’s proposal in this essay by telling unfortunate yet true things about the ugliness of unrequited love. Taking the theme of death from earlier, more innocent stories like “The Selfish Giant”, it is a story in which the light of the aesthetic Christ is clouded by the darkness of tragedy and despair. It is a story of masks and theatrics, behind which lurk the moral perversions of an unchecked, unregulated and ultimately false aestheticism.

Part cautionary story and part artistic meditation, “The Infanta” deals with the theme of theatricality that the dream sequences in “The Young King” touched upon, though we cannot apply the same Jungian psychological methods to analyse it. I wish to examine the ways in which Wilde expresses this theme in two key aspects of the story. The first of these is the contrasting characters of the Infanta and the Dwarf. The second is the Christian significance of the Dwarf’s descent into the symbolic Hell of Infanta’s palace. In doing this, I will show that "The Infanta" expands upon the idea of aesthetic excess that has defined *Pomegranates* thus far.

"The Infanta" depicts the twelfth birthday of the Infanta of Spain and the Indies, and the celebrations that it entails. Wilde immediately draws our attention to the Infanta, whose unique, regal beauty divides her from her playmates, who come from a lower social order:

But the Infanta was the most graceful of all, and the most tastefully attired, after the somewhat cumbrous fashion of the day. Her robe was of grey satin, the skirt and the wide puffed sleeves heavily embroidered with silver, and the stiff corset studded with rows of fine pearls. Two tiny slippers with big pink rosettes peeped out beneath her dress as she walked.

Pink and pearl was her great gauze fan, and in her hair, which like an aureole of faded gold stood out stiffly round her pale face, she had a beautiful white rose. (223)

Because she is a product of her environment and family, the Infanta is a demonic figure, a child corrupted by material excess and steered towards an extreme moral ugliness that places emphasis exclusively on physical appearance. To paraphrase Killeen, she is a negative archetype of the Biblical Eve, seeking worship from men whilst casually destroying them (*Faiths* 161). Like the Young King before her, she is the pinnacle of material excess, her body decorated with the finest ornaments delineating her high status in the Spanish social order. More than this, her beauty serves as a theatrical mask, concealing the ugliness she later reveals, with heartless intensity, to the Dwarf. Whereas the Young King's dreams force him to confront the reality behind his indulgence, the Infanta confronts no such reality and it is this, in part, that turns the story towards tragedy.

The Dwarf epitomises bodily ugliness, yet he comes the closest of all this story's characters towards aesthetic Christhood. With his "crooked legs" and "misshapen head", he is the antithesis of the Infanta in every way, a human incarnation of Hans Anderson's Ugly Duckling. There is a unique unreality about the way in which Wilde depicts the Dwarf's appearance, as though he is not human but one of the Infanta's puppets, not a real, sentient person but a thing existing only for her amusement. We glimpse this unreality during the birthday celebrations where Wilde's aesthetic theatricality is on full display, from depictions of "an African juggler" to a "troop of handsome Egyptians" (226-7). Indeed, each performance for the Infanta's amusement has an almost-dream-like quality, conveying the artificiality of her world and its ugly values. The best example of this comes in the form of a fake bull fight, a simulation of killing:

Some of the boys pranced about on richly-caparisoned hobby-horses brandishing long javelins with gay streamers of bright ribands attached to them; others went on foot waving their scarlet cloaks before the bull and vaulting lightly over the barrier when he charged at them. ... He made a splendid fight of it too, and the children got so excited that they stood up upon the benches, and waved their lace handkerchiefs and cried out: Bravo toro! Bravo toro! (226)

The playfulness of the bull fight is to be expected, given its young audience, but its effect later in the narrative is more sinister. It is the artificiality of the bull's death, I argue, that

leads to the Infanta's heartlessness in the face of the actual death of the Dwarf. Ironically, the performance that seems the most real is that of the Dwarf himself, who

was really quite irresistible, and even at the Spanish Court, always noted for its cultivated passion for the horrible, so fantastic a little monster had never been seen. ... Perhaps the most amusing thing about him was his complete unconsciousness of his own grotesque appearance. Indeed he seemed quite happy and full of the highest spirits. (228)

The Dwarf is a fundamentally innocent character, so much so that, having never seen his reflection, he has no knowledge of his own physical deformities. His innocence has a two-pronged effect, both in foreshadowing the coming, identity-shattering revelation of his identity and in placing him in opposition to the materialism of the Infanta and her ensemble. The Dwarf enjoys his life, bringing joy to others with regard neither for his own physical appearance nor that of others. In other words, he possesses the true beauty necessary to achieve aesthetic Christhood.

The Infanta, so entrenched in the philistine cult of the material, is incapable of seeing the Dwarf's inner beauty. With that said, it is difficult not to sympathise with her. The product of familial tragedy and social isolation, the opportunity for her to play with other children comes only once a year:

On ordinary days she was only allowed to play with children of her own rank, so she had always to play alone, but her birthday was an exception, and the King had given orders that she was to invite any of her young friends whom she liked to come and amuse themselves with her. (223)

For the rest of the year, we are left to assume that her only company is her father the King, a man tortured by the untimely death of his Queen in the "sombre splendour of the Spanish Court", and Don Pedro of Aragon, the King's brother, whom he suspects is responsible for the death of the Queen by way of "poisoned gloves" (224). It is tragic that the Infanta inherits her cruel disposition from her dysfunctional family.

But it is not only the Infanta who bears prejudices against the Dwarf, for the anthropomorphic elements of nature are also complicit in his social denigration. We observe this most explicitly in the snickering of the flowers that populate the forest, who are so unable to ignore the Dwarf's physical shortcomings that their feelings turn from annoyance to

repulsion: "The Flowers were quite indignant at his daring to intrude into their beautiful home, and when they saw him capering up and down the walks, and waving his arms above his head in such a ridiculous manner, they could not restrain their feelings any longer" (228-9). The passage continues with various insults aimed at the Dwarf, condemning him, for example, as a perfect horror (229). What is important about this expression of disgust is its implications for the question of belonging. More specifically, if the Infanta epitomises the class prejudices inherent in the Spanish Court, then the flowers are representations of the equally stinging disapproval of the lower social orders. If the flowers – traditional symbols of beauty – are incapable of tolerating the Dwarf's appearance, we are led to question whether or not there is a place for the Dwarf to belong or if he is simply "a misshapen thing that Nature, in some humorous mood, had fashioned for others to mock at" (228). The denouement and the build-up to it point towards the latter.

The Dwarf enters into the palace in search of the Infanta who he believes loves him. It is in this misguided venture, I argue, that Wilde brings his tale to an ending whose proportions equal those of the Crucifixion of Christ. The emphasis Wilde places on the eye-pleasing aspects of the palace creates an atmosphere of unreality, as though the Dwarf is entering into a kind of aesthetic Hell:

The little Dwarf looked in wonder all round him, and was half-afraid to go on. The strange silent horsemen that galloped so swiftly through the long glades without making any noise, seemed to him like those terrible phantoms of whom he had heard the charcoal-burners speaking. ... But he thought of the pretty Infanta, and took courage. He wanted to find her alone, and to tell her that he too loved her. Perhaps she was in the room beyond. (232)

Beauty is coupled with fear in the Dwarf's journey into this Hell, at the end of which he hopes, misguidedly, to find love. When he comes across a mirror in the palace, he is bemused by it. Wilde's depiction of this moment is almost playful, easing us into a tragic realisation with a disarming innocence. "The little Dwarf frowned, and the monster frowned also", we are told, "[h]e laughed, and it laughed with him, and held its hands to its sides, just as he himself was doing" (233). The Dwarf is like a child seeing his reflection in the mirror for the first time and pondering what this means for its identity. This is equivalent to the 'Mirror Stage' in Jacques Lacan's account of childhood development. As Philippe Julien explains in *Jacques Lacan's Return to Freud*,

In the mirror stage Lacan compressed the two stages [narcissism and aggression] into one. At the very moment when the ego is formed by the image of the other, narcissism and aggressivity are correlatives. Narcissism, in which the image of one's own body is sustained by the image of the other, in fact introduces a tension: the other in his image both attracts and rejects me. (34)

This is the exact situation the Dwarf finds himself in: attracted then very quickly rejected by his own image. As soon as he realises that the image in the glass is his own, his identity is shattered: "He crawled, like some wounded thing, into the shadow, and lay there moaning" (234). The Dwarf's interactions with his reflection, though initially endearing, thus transform into a tragedy. The arrival of the Infanta, naturally, does little to amend the Dwarf's predicament, and her comment that "he is almost as good as the puppets, only of course not quite so natural" adds an epigrammatic sting to an already painful moment (234).

As is typical of an aesthetic martyr, the Dwarf dies and his particular sacrifice is a broken heart (235). To have one's heart be broken is a tragedy, given the great emphasis Wilde places on love. Yet perhaps what makes the event so unfortunate is the lack of divine compensation that we have observed in earlier stories. Ironically, it is in death that the Dwarf escapes the Hell of the palace, but to where his soul goes, we cannot know. At any rate, he joins the company of the Nightingale and Hans as a symbol of the potential futility of martyrdom.

Overall, Wilde speaks against the notion that to appreciate beauty means exclusively to appreciate the physical. The mind of the ethical aesthete, when cultivated by beautiful, loving thoughts, stands in opposition to that of the materialist. If "The Infanta" deals with moral ugliness, then it is the ultimate cure for this ugliness – pure, reciprocated love – that we see in the next tale, "The Fisherman and His Soul".

"The Fisherman and His Soul"

In the New Testament, Matthew asks the following questions in his Gospel: "What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give for their soul?" (16.26). It is with these questions that Wilde's longest fairy story, "The Fisherman and His Soul", concerns itself.

Unlike the Student in "The Nightingale and the Rose", the Fisherman is a true archetypal lover. He is one who eventually achieves aesthetic Christhood, but not before

learning of the inseparability of the body and Soul. The object of his desire is a Mermaid with hair as “a wet fleece of gold” and “body as white as ivory” (236), unattainable without a spiritual sacrifice. This is not to say that the Fisherman sexually desires the Mermaid. Rather, it is love – the aesthetic ideal – that he truly wants. Because of this, the Fisherman has the potential to achieve aesthetic Christhood and join a growing group of Wilde’s characters in his divine realm. Naturally, however, there are numerous obstacles he must overcome before achieving this goal.

The style of “The Fisherman”, more than any previous story, mirrors that of the Old and New Testament, commencing a large number of its sentences with a capitalised ‘And’, as though the narrator were Christ delivering the Sermon on the Mount. One instance of this comes when the Fisherman meets the Mermaid for the first time: “And when she saw that she could in no way escape from him, as she began to weep, and said, I pray thee let me go, for I am the only daughter of a King, and my father is aged and alone” (236). This sets the Christian tone of the text and places its ethical concerns within a Biblical framework.

According to Duffy, the Mermaid, contrary to her female gender, is a symbol of homoerotic desire. Duffy argues that if “a “normal” heterosexual relationship is defined by its reproductivity, then the Fisherman’s relationship with the Mermaid falls into the category of sodomy since the relationship is non-reproductive” (333). Duffy maintains that because the Mermaid has no vagina and the Fisherman does not have a specifically sexual desire for her, their relationship cannot fulfil the reproductive requirements of a heterosexual relationship. Building on Duffy’s reading, if the world of the Mermaid represents the forbidden world of homoerotic desire, then the world of the Fisherman is the world of convention and puritanism. The Fisherman must sacrifice his own Soul, relinquishing his spiritual virtue and place in heaven, if he wants to live in the former world.

When tempted by the Mermaid’s tales of her exotic home, where Sirens “tell of such wonderful things” and Mermen “play upon harps and can charm the great Kraken to sleep” (237), the Fisherman casts away his Soul without a second thought, condemning it as an intangible product of mysticism. “Of what use is my Soul to me?” He asks. “I cannot see it. I may not touch it. I do not know it” (239). This dismissal is ironic given Wilde’s otherwise consistent emphasis on the divine nature of the Soul, which he has traditionally rewarded with access to the afterlife. Furthermore, the Fisherman’s focus on his inability to see and touch his own Soul leads us to believe that, like the Student of “The Nightingale and the Rose” or the town councillors of “The Happy Prince”, he is a stand-in for the Victorian philistine. As convincing as this seems, it is not the case. Instead, as Nassaar argues, “It is the

fisherman's heart, not his Soul, that occupies the position of the highest importance in this tale, for love is seen as the supreme value and the road to salvation" (14). Because it is love that the Fisherman values, he is not a philistine but one who has the potential to be an ethical aesthete.

If the Fisherman as archetypal lover exists on one side of a coin, then the Mermaid exists on the other as a symbol of that lover's desire. But to properly understand her character, we must first examine this story's positive take on Faustian legend. Goethe retells this legend in *Faust*, a play where Dr Henrich Faust, dissatisfied with his life-long and fruitless quest for knowledge, makes a deal with the mysterious Mephistopheles, a demon of German folklore. In doing so, he surrenders his Soul to the demon's will. Goethe's play is a warning against the excess of sheer ambition and encourages contentment with our imperfections. The Mermaid is like a female Mephistopheles, tempting the Faust-like Fisherman to relinquish his Soul and join her in the literal underworld of the ocean. However, Wilde reverses the Faustian narrative in that there is no downside for the Fisherman in sacrificing his Soul and the ocean – a far-cry from Hell – is where he finds love.

Although it is typical for Wilde's protagonists to become aesthetic Christ-figures or near thereto, the case of the Fisherman is more complicated. This is because of his willingness to engage in witchcraft – a distinctly un-Christian practice – to achieve his desire. During an interaction between the Fisherman and a local Priest, the latter expresses puritanical views on love and the body. "The love of the body is vile", he states, showing the kind of unsubtle contempt for bodily pleasure that is typical of the Victorian puritan. He continues his speech as follows:

vile and evil are the pagan things God suffers to wander through His world. Accursed be the Fauns of the woodland, and accursed be the singers of the sea! I have heard them at night time, and they have sought to lure me from my beads. They tap at the windows and laugh. They whisper into my ears the tale of their perilous joys. They tempt me with temptations, and when I would pray they make mouths at me. They are lost, I tell thee, they are lost. For them there is no heaven nor hell, and in neither shall they praise God's name. (238-9)

Wilde conveys the Priest's deep anxiety towards the world's temptations, so much so that we are left wondering if he really wants to advise the Fisherman on proper Christian judgement or simply to deter himself from his own sinful desires. The emphasis he places on his own experiences of temptation certainly suggests the latter.

Dissatisfied with the Priest's ramblings, the Fisherman seeks out a Witch to assist him. This Witch is perhaps the most anti-Christian figure in the story. With "her red hair falling around her" and blossoming "hemlock" (239), she is a pagan temptress luring him with the promise that his desire will be granted if he participates in her sabbath. "Round and round they whirled," writes Wilde, "and the young Witch jumped so high that he [the Fisherman] could see the scarlet heels of her shoes. Then right across the dancers came the sound of galloping of a horse, but no horse was to be seen, and he felt afraid" (241).

Although Christian authority has thus far been the greatest barrier between the Fisherman and the Mermaid, at the close of the sabbath we see a triumph of Christianity over witchcraft as the Fisherman, without knowing why, "made on his breast the sign of the Cross, and called upon the holy name" (242), causing the witches to scream and fly away.

The Fisherman nevertheless finds a way to separate his Soul from his body, and Wilde's description of the process is, to say the least, homoerotic:

Bronze limbed and well-knit, like a statue wrought by a Grecian, he stood on the sand with his back to the moon, and out of the foam came white arms that beckoned him, and out of the waves rose dim forms that did him homage. Before him lay his shadow, which was the body of his Soul, and behind him hung the moon in the honey-coloured air. And his Soul said to him, If indeed thou must drive me from thee, send me not forth without a heart. The world is cruel, give me thy heart to take with me. (243)

The separation of body and Soul results in the latter becoming its own character, taking on the same role as the Satan in the New Testament. The three journeys the Soul undertakes come to resemble the three temptations of Christ, the first of which is the temptation of materialism. According to the Gospel of Matthew, after having fasted for forty days and nights Christ was visited by Satan, who "took Him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory" (4.8). But Christ resists, declaring his love for the Lord and the Lord only. The Fisherman's Soul journeys to the East, from which "cometh everything that is wise" (244). It is on this journey that the Soul discovers that the god of the East is no god at all, but a "Mirror of Wisdom" (247). Upon returning to the Fisherman, the Soul tempts him with the promise of the Mirror's knowledge to lure him away from the Mermaid, his female God. But the Fisherman refuses, declaring like Christ before him that love is better than wisdom (247). The Soul proceeds with the second temptation, that of egotism, and is just as unsuccessful.

As has been observed consistently throughout this chapter, *Pomegranates* continues with the same interest in Christian ethics as *The Happy Prince*, yet it also unpacks some ideas that complicate the journey towards aesthetic Christhood. For the Young King, it was the lure of materialism that was a barrier to virtue, whilst the Infanta, blinded by her own selfishness, failed to see the suffering of another. One idea that has not received much attention is that of sexual desire. It is fitting, with this in mind, that it is the temptation of hedonism that causes the Fisherman to surrender to the corrupting influence of his Soul. When the Soul returns to the Fisherman the third year after their separation, he illustrates the wonders of a near-by city and the sensual delights it offers:

In a city that I know of there is an inn that standeth by a river. I sat there with sailors who drank of two different coloured wines, and ate bread made of barley, and little salt fish served in bay leaves with vinegar. And as we sat and made merry, there entered an old man bearing a letheren carpet and a lute that had two horns of amber. And when he had lain out the carpet on the floor, he struck with a quill on the wire strings of his lute, and a girl whose face was veiled ran in and began to dance before us. Her face was veiled with a veil of gauze, but her feet were naked. Naked were her feet, and they moved over the carpet like little white pigeons. Never have I seen anything so marvellous, and the city in which she dances is but a day's journey from this place. (252)

This passage addresses two themes common in decadent literature: hedonism and the exotic image of the Orient, with its fine fragrances and sexual lure. But the reward promised by these decadent delights is not what it seems, as the Fisherman discovers when his Soul compels him to do evil. From stealing a silver cup to smiting a child, the Soul exercises its power over the Fisherman as they travel to various cities, all the while repeating “Be at peace, be at peace” to lull the him into a false calmness (253). After commanding the Fisherman to commit murder and observing his distress, the Soul reveals that it is because he has not heart, and therefore no love, that he is so corrupt: “When thou didst send me forth into the world thou gavest me no heart, so I learned to do all these things and love them” (254). The Soul continues to justify his sinful ways, reassuring the Fisherman that if he continues to do as he is told, he will achieve a state of total hedonism, a decadent's dream. Wilde reinforces the idea that the possession of a heart is essential to avoid moral ugliness. To be pure, the Soul must be accompanied by a heart or, in other words, a body. When they are separated, the Soul may be corrupted by the world's influence and the body may be

tempted by hedonism. It is when they join together that one becomes an ethical aesthete and deserts the “Valley of Pleasure” for something greater (252). Wilde conveys this idea as the Fisherman dies near the story’s end:

And his Soul besought him to depart, but he would not, so great was his love. And the sea came nearer, and sought to cover him with its waves, and when he knew that the end was at hand he kissed with mad lips the cold lips of the Mermaid, and the heart that was within him brake. And as through the fulness of his love his heart did break, the Soul found an entrance and entered in, and was one with him even as before. And the sea covered the young Fisherman with its waves. (257)

Hence it is only when body and Soul – material and spirit – become one that the Fisherman finally achieves aesthetic Christhood.

“The Star Child”

The Star-Child is a continuation of the Young King’s Narcissus-complex, and it is when he is forced to confront the dark reality of this complex by humbling himself and developing empathy for others that he begins to develop towards aesthetic Christhood. It is my aim here to argue that Wilde’s story juxtaposes the figures of Christ and Narcissus, both of whom are embodied in the Star-Child, and eventually synthesises them, bringing Christian morality and Greek beauty together.

The Star-Child is one of Wilde’s most elegant egotists. He is the archetypal precocious child whose otherness to his peers is made clear by the simple fact that he is not of their world. His name has a double meaning, referring both to the stars from which he descended and his star-like beauty and poise. Wilde takes care to emphasise his physical perfection, describing him as boyish Narcissus, endowed with great beauty at the price of moral behaviour:

So the Star-Child was brought up with the children of the Woodcutter, and sat at the same board with them, and was their playmate. And every year he became more beautiful to look at, so that all those who dwelt in the village were filled with wonder, for, while they were swarthy and black-haired, he was white and delicate as sawn ivory, and his curls were like the rings of the daffodil. His lips, also, were like the petals of a red flower, and his eyes were like

violets by a river of pure water, and his body like the narcissus of a field where the mower comes not. (262)

All the traits of the Wildean beautiful boy are exemplified in this passage, with particular emphasis placed on the Star-Child's floral imagery and statuesque standing. Although Wilde refers specifically to Narcissus, we may also compare the Star-Child to beautiful male figures in Christianity. St. Sebastian is one example of this, especially when we consider that like St. Sebastian the Star-Child must also become a martyr. We may also compare him to the Christ-child of "The Selfish Giant", who also becomes a martyr for love. Keeping martyrdom in mind, a comparison between the Star-Child and Christ-children of Renaissance art is equally appropriate, as noted by Serge LeClaire, who argues that Wilde's titular character makes himself "into an object of extreme magnificence akin to the Child-Jesus majesty, a light and jewel radiating absolute power" (2-3). Yet, as is typical of Wilde's fairy stories, physical and moral beauty do not initially equate.

The Young King may have been indifferent to the suffering of the slaves and workers beneath him, but he played merely a passive role in their oppression. The Star-Child, on the other hand, makes it his active duty to cause pain to others: "he grew proud, cruel, and selfish and the other children of the village, he despised, saying that they were of mean parentage, while he was noble, being sprung from a Star, and he made himself master over them, and called them his servants" (262-3). Not even a local priest – a stand-in for the benevolent aspects of Christianity – can reform his ways. "The fly is thy brother", he begins. "Do it no harm. The wild birds that roam through the forest have their freedom. Snare them not for thy pleasure. God made the blind-worm and the mole, and each has its place. Who art thou to bring pain into God's world? Even the cattle of the field praise him" (263). But this egalitarian doctrine falls on deaf ears. The Star-Child, originating from beyond the heavenly sphere, appears to have no need of Christ's teachings.

When confronted by a beggar-woman claiming to be his mother, the Star-Child shuns her for her physical ugliness. As immoral as his response to this woman's plea is, especially when it turns out that she is in fact his mother, Wilde encourages us not to lay the blame for his behaviour solely at his own feet. Rather, he encourages us to instead interrogate the societal forces that endorse and encourage such behaviour. David Monaghan argues in "The Literary Fairy Tale" that the Star-Child's faults can be related specifically to the conditions operating in his own society:

By justifying his cruelty towards the beggar-woman on the grounds that her ugliness is spoiling the beauty of the tree beneath which she is sitting the boy reveals himself to be an adherent to the narrowly aesthetic creed that was so popular during the last years of the nineteenth century. (162)

Not only does Monaghan accurately point out Wilde's broader critique of the superficial and judgemental aspects of late Victorian society, but his point concerning the condemnation of aestheticism as a cult of vanity – an 'aesthetic creed' devoted solely to the appreciation and cultivation of bodily and material beauty – is also of note. This is because it is precisely this association of aestheticism with snobbery and vanity that Wilde, in this story and his fiction more broadly, attempts to dispel.

Ethical aestheticism condemns the mistreatment of the downtrodden and brings together the spheres of physical and immaterial beauty, which is the lesson the Star-Child reluctantly learns as he starts down his road to redemption. As his peers note, he transforms into a far uglier form and, when he gazes into a near-by well, his fears are confirmed: "So he went to the well of water and looked into it and lo! his face was as the face of a toad, and his body was scaled like an adder" (265). Whether this transformation takes place by magical means is unclear, but we do know that our Narcissus-figure no longer has cause for narcissism. Writing on the similarities between the Star-Child seeing his reflection in the water and Dorian Gray seeing his soul in his picture, Rasmus S. Simonsen describes the implications of the former's transformation:

In contrast to Dorian Gray's portrait, the surface of the well reflects the Star-Child's hideousness; but if before the latter's beautiful form seemed not to cohere with his lack of empathy ... this chiasmic structure is now reversed. The "Foulness" of his mother's face is doubled onto his own by an extreme extent, but, simultaneously, he can now attain her presumed moral awareness of others. (29).

Wilde's fascination with the Narcissus myth and its implications for his aesthetic creed have not gone unnoticed by critics. Smith points out similar contradictions between outer and inner beauty in "The Star-Child" to those I have described:

the story plays upon the mismatch between bodily beauty and blackness of heart. In this context Wilde directly couples the child's cruel denial of his mother, the beggar woman, to

his contemplation of his self-image. He peers Narcissus-like into a pool of water only to find that his face has lost its beauty. (56)

In-keeping with the symbolism of Narcissus losing himself in his reflection and paying a heavy price for it, the Star-Child undergoes a series of humbling trials after his transformation and, most importantly, does so without expecting to regain his lost perfection. It is in this second half of the story that Wilde addresses two Biblical narratives. The first is the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis, whom God exiles from the Garden of Eden for consuming the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, becoming aware and ashamed of their nakedness as a result. We may look at the Star-Child as both Adam and Eve in one, responsible for his own fall from grace into the world of experience, where the trials and tribulations of being an ordinary mortal await him. Just as Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden, so too is the Star-Child cast out of his original form. Instead of the “flaming sword” that prevented Adam and Eve’s re-entry into the Garden (2.24), it is the Star-Child’s own selfishness and shame that maintain his ugliness. It is only by serving others that he can repent.

We may also consider the Star-Child as a follower of Christ, travelling with the prophet through the Holy Land and listening to his teachings. Fittingly, there are various examples of moral wisdom in Christ’s teachings that the Star-Child would have done well to know. Part of Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, for example, runs as follows: “Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgement ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again” (Matthew 7.1-2). These words bear particular significance to the Star-Child’s predicament for it is precisely because he judged those around him that he in turn received judgement in the form of his transformation. For three years the Star-Child travels the world in search of his mother, all the while tormented by those he comes across, who “make sport of his sorrow” as he would have once done to them (266). Upon entering a city where he hopes to find his mother, the Star-Child becomes the unwitting guest of “the subtlest of the magicians of Libya”, whose lair is “covered with a pomegranate tree” (266-7). The pomegranate is a Christian symbol, as footnoted in chapter one, yet I concern myself here with its Classical symbolism. That the entrance to the Magician’s lair is marked by pomegranates symbolically indicates that it is a portal to the Underworld and though it may be argued that the Star-Child, since dismissing the beggar-woman, has spent a long time already in an Underworld of his own making, such symbolism is far from insignificant. As the Star-Child enters this Underworld, guided by the Hades-like

Magician, we may draw a parallel between the Star-Child and Persephone. That the Star-Child and Magician form a master and servant relationship provides evidence for this mythological parallel and, as Simonsen argues, intertwines with the shame that marks the Star-Child:

This scene bears a striking resemblance to the fate of Proserpine, of course, whom Pluto stole away to the Underworld. However, the pomegranate tree in Wilde's story has yet another function. The Star-Child's shame is metonymically connected with the pomegranate; since, in his nonhuman form, he is kept from blushing, the bashful colour of the pomegranate hangs over his head as an effective reminder of his shame. (32)

Although Simonsen's reading of the sequence stems from Roman rather than Greek mythology, the point regarding the Star-Child and Magician's relationship still stands.

The Star-Child must perform tasks for the Magician, lest he face sadistic punishments. The Magician asks respectively for pieces of white, yellow and red gold, and the Star-Child fails to acquire a single one. This is because he relinquishes his self-interest by putting the needs of others above his own. To a suffering leper he gifts a piece of white gold and although such an act does not cure the leper of his illness, as Christ does in the Gospel of Luke (5.12-6), it nonetheless demonstrates his willingness to make himself a martyr for the downtrodden. The Star-Child continues this trend of self-sacrifice twice more, each time receiving a harsh punishment from the Magician, who beats him, loads him with chains and casts him into a dungeon, with the lack of dignity we may expect to be given to a sub-human servant.

The punishments inflicted upon the Star-Child make him into perhaps the most tortured martyr we have observed thus far. Whereas the Happy Prince and the Nightingale suffered gradually and entirely by their own accord for the benefit of others, the Star-Child is tortured directly for his selflessness, indicating an increase in the severity of Wilde's treatment of sacrifice. This severity is amplified further when we consider the nature of the Star-Child's sacrifice for the leper, who turns out at the end of the story to be the Child's father. As Duffy points out,

The pederastic nature of the Star-Child's love for the leper is highlighted by the fact that the Star-Child is called "Child" (even though he is an adolescent, at least) and by the fact that the leper is old enough to be his father (the leper turns out, in fact, to be his father). A pederastic

love, then - one which flowers in spite of *erastes*' physical unattractiveness - is the key to redemption and happiness. At this point, it's hard not to accuse Wilde of a little self-indulgent fantasy. (340)

Duffy's characterisation of the Star-Child's relationship to the leper-turned-father as pederastic seems doubtful given the sexual implications of the term. But the aspect of the relationship that Duffy is drawing our attention to is not sexual – indeed there is no evidence in the text of any such aspect – but social. According to Andrew Lear and Eva Cantarella, pederasty was a process in which the man transmits to the boy “his experience in every field, assuming in their encounters a formative role at the moment in which the boy – a potential citizen – prepared himself to become an actual citizen, able to exercise his civil and political duties” (2). This is to say that it is the loving act of self-sacrifice the Star-Child performs for the leper that ultimately redeems him, preparing him to enter society to perform his regal duties as well as returning him to his original state of beauty, though this time with a moral conscience:

But lo! as he passed through the gate of the city, the guards bowed down and made obeisance to him, saying, How beautiful is our lord! and a crowd of citizens followed him, and cried out, Surely there is none so beautiful in the whole world! so that the Star-Child wept, and said to himself, They are mocking me, and making light of my misery. And so large was the concourse of the people, that he lost the threads of his way, and found himself at last in a great square, in which there was a palace of a king. (269)

As the citizens shower the Star-Child with praise, he does not accept it out-right, modestly assuming the worst intentions behind their behaviour. In doing so, he shows his development away from his narcissistic tendencies. Like the Young King, the Star-Child is anointed by his people as a ruler and for all the information Wilde offers, we are led to assume that he is benevolent. “Much justice did he show to all,” writes Wilde, “and the evil Magician he banished, and to the Woodcutter and his wife he sent many gifts, and to their children he gave high honour” (270). The Star-Child continues to remedy the plights of the poor and creates peace and prosperity throughout his land, accomplishing for many what the Happy Prince and Swallow could only do for a few.

The abrupt conclusion, however, seems to undermine this message of redemption. The Star-Child dies after only three years of service and his replacement rules evilly. Reading

the stories in *Pomegranates* as four parts of a whole, the ending of “The Star-Child” is most perplexing. It would be foolish to suggest that Wilde was fond of the ‘happily ever after’ trope, for even his children’s fairy tales end mostly with the death of their heroes. Still, the particularly dismissive ending of the Star-Child’s heroic journey begs further comparative analysis. The Star-Child and the Young King, as I have maintained, are very similar characters and it is not coincidental that the concluding lines to their respective stories are among the very few elements that differ between them. In “The Young King”, Wilde gives us no reason to believe that the Young King’s people will do anything but prosper under his rule, whereas in “The Star-Child” the conclusion is antithetical.

The end of this final fairy tale leads me to the idea that Wilde, despite his idealisation of beauty, love and happiness, was aware of the limitations of ethical aestheticism as a philosophy. I argue that the reason Wilde is planting doubt in our minds as to the efficacy of ethical aestheticism is holistic, connecting both his fairy tales and his novel. If the fairy tales of *The Happy Prince* are simplistic and innocent enough in content and style that the basic principles of ethical aestheticism and aesthetic Christ may be understood by child readers and those of *Pomegranates* are an evolution in complexity, then I argue that Wilde’s novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, depicts the antithesis of aesthetic Christhood. Hence the following and final chapter focuses on *Dorian Gray*, which depicts the extremities of aesthetic excess and diminishes the once brightly burning hope of divine salvation for the aesthetic martyr.

Chapter Three – *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

the world of innocence, once abandoned, can never be re-entered. (Nassaar 17)

The Picture of Dorian Gray is a novel that tends to attract critics of three different interpretative persuasions. First, there are critics who focus purely on the novel's aesthetic and decadent features at the expense of its moral content, such as Camille Paglia, who writes in *Sexual Personae* of Wilde's novel as "the fullest study of the Decadent erotic principle: the transformation of person into objet d'art" (512). Second are the critics who privilege the novel's cautionary aspects, for example Ellmann, who describes *Dorian Gray* as "the aesthetic novel *par excellence*, not in espousing the doctrine, but in exhibiting its dangers" (315). Finally, critics like Michael Patrick Gillespie walk the line in-between, noting what he sees as the 'Aesthetic Movement' encouraging both aesthetic and ethical literary interpretations: "Rather than denying a place for ethics within an aesthetic experience (the either/or choice), it instead denied primacy to conventional value systems and bluntly asserted the validity of alternative moralities (the both/and alternative)" (142). It is with the second of these persuasions that I am aligned.

Contrary to what he would have liked his public to believe, Wilde was very aware of his novel's ethical basis. Several of his letters written in the wake of the novel's original publication in 1890 show an acknowledgement of an ethical message along with a general reluctance to accept that message. In one of these letters, written to the Editor of the *Scots Observer* in July 1890, we learn that the novel was recognised by Christian papers in the United States and England as being more than a bible for the amoral aesthete:

Sir, In a letter dealing with the relations of art to morals recently published in your columns – a letter which I may say seems to me in many respects admirable, especially in its insistence on the right of the artist to select his own subject-matter – Mr Charles Whibley suggests that it must be peculiarly painful for me to find that the ethical import of *Dorian Gray* has been so strongly recognised by the foremost Christian papers in England and America that I have been greeted by more than one of them as a moral reformer! Allow me, sir, to reassure, on this point, not merely to Mr Charles Whibley himself but also your no doubt anxious readers. I have no hesitation in saying that I regard such criticisms as a very gratifying tribute to my story. For if a work of art is rich, and vital, and complete, those who have artistic instincts will see its beauty, and those to whom ethics appeal more strongly than aesthetics will see its

moral lesson. It will fill the coward with terror, and the unclean will see in it their own shame. It will be to each man what he is himself. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors. (441)

The contradictions between this letter and others Wilde wrote around the same time are profound. Wilde claims that readers who see an ethical meaning in the novel are just as justified as those who see it purely as a work of art – an end in itself – yet in another letter to the Editor of the *St James Gazette* earlier in June 1890, he condemns a reviewer of the novel for seeing it beyond its aesthetic components: “I must admit, either from temperament or from taste, or from both, I am quite incapable of understanding how any work of art can be criticised from a moral standpoint” (428).

Which of these positions are we to believe? I argue that the answer lies in yet another letter to the Editor of the *Daily Chronicle* in June of the same year, the contents of which sum up perfectly the novel’s moral:

The real moral of the story is that all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its punishment, and this moral is so far artistically and deliberately suppressed that it does not enunciate its law as general principle, but realises itself purely in the lives of individuals, and so becomes simply a dramatic element in a work of art, and not the object of the work of art itself. (435)

And here we have an admission: Wilde accepts an interpretation of the novel beyond its artistic qualities, even though he confines that interpretation to the novel’s ‘dramatic element’ and the implications of that interpretation solely to ‘the lives of individuals’. It is evident that Wilde’s thoughts on the ethical significance of *Dorian Gray* in 1890 were contradictory and when the novel was republished in 1891, he did little to mend these contradictions. In the preface to this new edition, he makes some of his most infamous statements regarding the role of art and literature in society and the role of the reader in literary interpretation. One of these infamous claims is that “there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That’s all” (17). That is not all, and it is the purpose of this chapter to show it.

This third and final chapter argues against the idea that *Dorian Gray* is an amoral novel. Instead, it argues that the novel is a retelling of the Old Testament narrative of the Fall of Man, in which Adam and Eve are cast out of the Garden of Eden – a place of innocence and purity - and into the world of experience. Just as the Fall is a warning against temptation,

so too is *Dorian Gray* a warning against the dangers of excessive indulgence and narcissism, an indictment of Paterian, experience-based aestheticism. Neither the novel's obsession with youth and beauty nor its Christian foundation have gone unnoticed by critics. Killeen, for example, writes of the novel in *The History of the Gothic* as

an indictment of the cult of youth rather than a celebration of it. Like a latter-day celebrity, Dorian wants to remain young forever, or more accurately, to remain forever an adolescent, a liminal figure trapped between full manhood and childhood, and he is surrounded by men who also want him to achieve this. (76-7)

Joyce Carol Oates describes the novel's Christian aspects in "Wilde's Parable of the Fall", criticising its "parable-like simplicity" (419). Building on the work of these critics, I argue that *Dorian Gray* works in three ways. First, it is a cautionary novel that updates the Fall narrative for an aesthetically minded adult readership. Second, it shows the creation of the antithesis of the aesthetic Christ – or, in my terms, the aesthetic antichrist. Third and finally, it is a critique of Paterian aestheticism. To illuminate these three aspects of the novel, this chapter shall consider three key relationships. First is the characterisation of Dorian's relationship with Lord Henry Wotton, the roots of which can be found in Genesis. Second is the romance between Dorian and Sybil Vane. Third is the bond binding Dorian to Basil Hallward.

Dorian Gray and Lord Henry Wotton: Innocence, Experience and the Temptation of the Male Eve

Dorian Gray is Wilde's ultimate beautiful boy. A dark narcissus yearning to be nurtured, his bodily beauty is his greatest weakness, for it leads him not only to develop the same egotism and selfishness to which the aesthetic Christ is opposed, but to have pride in it. Initially, he is ignorant of his beauty, existing in a state of innocence. It is only when he becomes aware of his bodily power that he begins his Fall, at the end of which he becomes the aesthetic antichrist.

The term 'aesthetic antichrist' may appear hyperbolic and perhaps a bit melodramatic, yet when we consider the context of the New Testament, it is not quite so. The term 'antichrist' appears only a few times in the New Testament and usually does not refer to a specific individual but to a broad concept. The First Epistle General of John, for example,

refers to the antichrist three times, most importantly in 2.22, where the antichrist is given a relatively transparent definition: “Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son.” It is from this definition of the antichrist that I base my concept, seeing that Dorian Gray comes to oppose the teachings of love and self-sacrifice that the aesthetic Christ – or the aesthetic ‘Son’ – preaches. By making the Biblical antichrist into an aesthete in the form of Dorian Gray, I argue that Wilde amplifies the potency of his novel’s aesthetic critique. With all this in mind, ‘aesthetic antichrist’ no longer seems quite as inappropriate a term as it may once have.

The story of Dorian Gray’s Fall is an indictment of the Conclusion of *The Renaissance*, and although Pater himself did not have much to say on the novel’s critique of his aestheticism, he had much to say in “A Novel by Mr. Oscar Wilde” about what he saw as the failed epicureanism of Dorian Gray:

Clever, always, this book, however, seems intended to set forth anything but a homely philosophy of life for the middle-class – a kind of dainty Epicurean theory, rather – yet fails, to some degree, in this; and one can see why. A true Epicureanism aims at a complete though harmonious development of man’s entire organism. To lose the moral sense therefore, for instance, the sense of sin and righteousness, as Mr. Wilde’s hero – his heroes are bent on doing as speedily, as completely as they can, is to lose, or lower, organisation, to become less complex, to pass from a higher to a lower degree of development. (36)

Building on Pater’s assessment of Dorian, Hanson also describes him as “a failed epicurean. He is a creature of pleasure only, blind to the spiritual beauties of sorrow and the soul” (*Decadence and Catholicism* 248). Both Pater and Hanson are correct to point out Dorian’s consumptive occupation with pleasure. However, I disagree with their mutual assessment that Dorian is a failed epicurean. This is because, in my view, Dorian does not try to be an epicurean in the first place and therefore cannot fail at becoming one. Instead, I argue that Dorian’s pursuit of pleasure takes him to extremes beyond those of which an epicurean would be capable.²⁰ The aesthetic antichrist is a dark evolution of the epicurean; his quest for pleasure and luxury takes no prisoners and he is perfectly willing to cause suffering, and even to murder, in order to complete it. In short, he is a destroyer of love, the ethical aesthete’s

²⁰ The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes epicureanism as a “devotion to a life of ease, pleasure and luxury; cultivation of a refined taste for fine food and drink, or (in extended use) some other specified pleasure or pursuit” (www.oed.com/view/Entry/63284?redirectedFrom=epicureanism+eid).

highest value. The question is, to paraphrase Paglia, how did this beautiful boy become one such destroyer (512)?

An ‘incomplete aesthete’, as once was his author,²¹ the young Dorian is accompanied by Lord Henry Wotton, suave corrupter and amoral aesthete extraordinaire. Throughout Wilde’s novel, Lord Henry tasks himself with educating Dorian in the pleasurable ways of the aesthete, slowly chipping away at his boyish innocence and replacing it with a myriad of forbidden, distinctly un-Christian experiences. Dorian is an androgynous combination of Adam and Eve, his beauty bordering on the feminine. Similarly, Lord Henry is the serpent of the Genesis narrative. If Eve has the serpent, then Dorian Gray – the male Eve – has Lord Henry Wotton. I intend to examine the relationship between innocence and experience suggested by Eve’s temptation and what this relationship suggests about Dorian’s rebellion against morality, decency and, ultimately, his own self-preservation. I wish to explore what significance the duality of Dorian Gray and Lord Henry Wotton, of innocence and experience, has in explaining the development of the aesthetic antichrist, taking the temptation of Eve and the subsequent Fall of Man as the novel’s Christian foundation.

Lord Henry Wotton is the quintessential amoral aesthete and Wilde takes care to emphasise this in the novel’s first few paragraphs. “From the corner of the divan of Persian saddlebags on which he was lying,” writes Wilde, “smoking, as was his custom, innumerable cigarettes, Lord Henry Wotton could just catch the gleam of the honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms of a laburnum, whose tremulous branches seemed hardly able to bear the burden of a beauty so flame-like as theirs” (18). His relaxed pose and leisurely demeanour signify his dandyism and the use of the term ‘flame-like’ compels us to recall Wilde’s similar depiction of Christ’s imagination in “De Profundis”, although its meaning in here is rather different. Whereas “De Profundis” uses this description to emphasise the beauty of Christ’s imagination, here its purpose is to describe Lord Henry’s finely manicured environment. Then again, we may describe Lord Henry’s imagination as being similarly flame-like, though in a very different way, with its ability to figuratively burn those whom it touches. Lord Henry’s discussions with Basil Hallward – painter and thinly veiled homosexual – fan this aesthetic flame as the former espouses his epigrammatic credo. When Lord Henry looks upon Basil’s picture of Dorian Gray, he refers to the young man as a “young Adonis” and a “Narcissus” (19), foreshadowing Dorian’s striking appearance, before going on to describe the relationship between beauty and the intellect. “Real beauty”, he says,

²¹ Ellmann’s term for Wilde when his interest in Christ was nascent (74).

ends where an intellectual expression begins. Intellect is in itself a mode of exaggeration, and destroys the harmony of any face. ... Your mysterious young friend, whose name you have never told me, but whose picture really fascinates me, never thinks. I feel quite sure of that. He is some brainless, beautiful creature, who should be always here in winter when we have no flowers to look at, and always here in summer when we want something to chill our intelligence. (19)

On a first reading, it appears Lord Henry is insulting Dorian, targeting his intelligence as something to ridicule. But to Lord Henry, a purveyor of the “great aristocratic art of doing absolutely nothing” (37), intelligence is unimportant. Youth and beauty are all that matter to him, for it is the young and beautiful, as we shall see, that are so easily corrupted by what he calls the “new Hellenism” (31), or the re-emergence of Greek pederasty; a fine lily in the fickle, prudish garden of Victorian society that beautiful boys cannot help but to pick. At this point in the novel, Dorian is not a fully-fledged character but a creation, an abstraction of Lord Henry and Basil. He is, in effect, a work of art, represented only by the unfinished picture at the easel. He is a work of art which both Basil and Lord Henry will have a part in finishing.

Lord Henry, like everything else in Wilde’s novel, does not exist in a vacuum; he is modelled on the serpent of Genesis, the great tempter, “more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made” (3.1). Lord Henry behaves with the same predatory demeanour as the serpent as he is introduced to Dorian in the novel’s second chapter, though he is careful to conceal his intentions. Dorian is a cultivated if not vacuous young man, sitting at a *piano forte* mulling over Schumann’s “Forest Scenes”, which he refers to as “perfectly charming” (26). In contrast to Dorian’s boyish enthusiasm, Lord Henry is almost unnervingly collected, never letting his aesthetic pose falter even at the sight of a future protégé, young, beautiful and easily influenced:

Lord Henry looked at him. Yes, he was certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair. There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candour of youth was there, as well as all youth’s passionate purity. One felt that he kept himself unspotted from the world. No wonder Basil Hallward worshipped him. (27)

If Lord Henry is playing the role of the voyeuristic tempter, carefully observing the body of his subject as an artist does a live model, then Dorian is a living work of art. If aestheticism had a face, it would be his.

When Basil asks Lord Henry to leave so that he may work on his picture, Wilde emphasises Lord Henry's infectious charm with a simple question: "Am I to go, Mr Gray?" (27). Much as the serpent lured Eve into consuming the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Lord Henry subtly lures Dorian into accepting his own fruit of experience. As expected, Dorian asks him to stay and watch him pose for Basil. Lord Henry then takes his voyeurism even more seriously, observing the intimate process of artistic creation as if he were a spectator at the theatre, watching a re-enactment of one of Shakespeare's beautiful boys. With the following speech, Lord Henry hypnotises this scarlet lipped "Greek youth", piercing him with aesthetic maxims like the arrows that pierced the body of Saint Sebastian:

I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream – I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of the medievalism, and return to give form to the Hellenic ideal – to something finer, richer than the Hellenic ideal, it may be. (28)

What Lord Henry means by the 'Hellenic ideal' is the idea in *fin-de-siècle* aesthetic circles that society would best serve beauty when it returns to the ways and customs of Ancient Greece, specifically the artistic and sexual appreciation of the male form. What Lord Henry preaches is a hedonism that the aesthetic Christ would abhor, a hedonism Dorian can embody if he surrenders himself to the pursuit of pleasure in all its forms, especially the criminal.

When Dorian sees Basil's finished picture, the idea that it could ever be marred could not be further from his mind. At this moment, it exists in the same state of innocence as Dorian's own body. He looks at it as if "he had recognised himself for the first time" (33), before cursing the unfairness of aging. Dorian's pact is admittedly vague and there is no evidence to suggest that he gets his wish until the novel's eighth chapter, but Lord Henry is listening nonetheless, plotting new, exciting methods with which to lull his prey. In this moment, Lord Henry and Dorian are tied together as master and apprentice, their soul-corrupting relationship taking a step forward.

The rest of the novel concerns Dorian's slow yet certain descent – or, more fittingly, Fall – into the symbolic hell of London society's decadent corners. Upon the death of Sybil

Vane, a target of Dorian's affection whose life is a subject for later discussion, Dorian notices his picture change, becoming uglier for his sin. Where once there was the "shadow of his own loveliness" (33), he finds "a touch of cruelty in the mouth" (74). The changes come slowly at first but before long they intensify and Dorian, taking after his master, delights in the transformations, for "Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins – he was to have all these things" (84). Instead of the usual scenario in which the Wildean protagonist performs his morally ugly deed, becomes aware of it, makes amends and is rewarded with divine providence, here a different scenario plays out. Because it is the picture that takes on Dorian's sins, it never becomes necessary for Dorian to redeem himself for his crimes, to become an ethical aesthete. Instead, he continues to indulge in all things ugly and depraved, not simply out of fascination but sheer, intoxicating indulgence.

The novel's eleventh chapter is one of its most infamous. Intertextual love letter to Huysmans's *A Rebours* and meditation on the aesthetics of vice, it is a lengthy disavowal of the virtue of selflessness Wilde usually communicates and a substantial step for Dorian towards his self-destruction. Lord Henry leaves Dorian a mysterious "yellow book"²² (96), enticing us to picture the infamous covers of French decadent novels and the British serial publication of the same name.²³ This assists Dorian in his transformation from beautiful innocent into a Des Esseintes-like, self-centred aesthete, a process which Lord Henry is all too happy to facilitate. Lord Henry – the aesthetic serpent – is moving to the next stage of his initiation.

This is also the point in the novel where the narrative becomes muddled, covering expansive time periods with few clear indicators of what those periods are. Wilde spends numerous paragraphs describing Dorian's various material and scientific infatuations. From a fascination with perfumes – "the secrets of their manufacture, distilling heavily-scented oils, and burning odorous gums from the East" (101) – to an indulgence in "ecclesiastical vestments" (105), there appears no bottom to the decadent hole into which he is falling. It is also in this chapter that Dorian, again like his author, flirts with Catholicism. His flirtation

²² There is much speculation as to the true identity of Dorian's 'poisonous book'. Although it is considered by most, including Ellmann (21), and Sturgis (110), to be some variation of Huysmans's novel, evidence from Wilde's letters points to an unidentified novel Wilde intended to write yet never had the chance (300). In any case, given the clear similarities between the characters of Dorian and Des Esseintes, my thesis assumes *A Rebours* is the book's identity.

²³ "The Yellow Book", according to the *The British Library*, was a "fashionable magazine which ran from 1894-97, taking its name from the notorious covering into which controversial French novels were placed at the time" (www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-yellow-book).

lasts but one paragraph and focuses on the religion's aesthetics of ritual at the expense of its moral teachings:

It was rumoured of him once that he was about to join the Roman Catholic communion; and certainly the Roman ritual had always a great attraction for him. The daily sacrifice, more awful than all the sacrifices of the antique world, stirred him as much by its superb rejection of the evidence of the senses as by the pathos of the human tragedy that it sought to symbolize. He loved to kneel down on the cold marble pavement, and watch the priest, in his stiff flowered dalmatic, slowly and with white hands moving aside the veil of the tabernacle, or raising aloft the jewelled lantern-shaped monstrance with that pallid wafer that at times, one would fain think, is indeed the '*panis caelestis*', the bread of angels, or, robed in the garments of the Passion of Christ, breaking the Host into the chalice, and smiting his breast for his sins. The fuming censors, that the grave boys, in their lace and scarlet, tossed into the air like great gilt flowers, had their subtle fascination for him. As he passed out, he used to look with wonder at the black confessionals, and long to sit in the dim shadow of one of them and listen to men and women whispering through the worn grating the true story of their lives. (100-1)

Despite the clearly homoerotic imagery of grave boys in 'lace and scarlet', the observation of Catholic ritual, with its pleasurable sights and smells, is an ironic pastime for Dorian, for whom drug-fuelled indulgences take up the majority of days. This fascination with Catholicism does, however, fit with *A Rebours*, in which Des Esseintes also takes an interest in the aesthetic aspects of the religion. This is not to say, of course, that Dorian considers accepting Catholic morality. Rather, like so many decadents, his attraction to Catholicism is purely artistic, centred on ritual and pageantry rather than ethics. Everything Dorian does he does for pleasure, to "cure the soul by means of the senses and the senses by means of the soul" (134). This phrase – Lord Henry's ultimate philosophy – means that it is by experiencing life's sensual pleasures that one achieves a kind of spiritual enlightenment, not through religious training or repentance. This idea, naturally, is a trap; a pretty trap, decorated with fine jewels and perfumed with exotic fragrances, but a trap nevertheless.

When Eve consumes the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, she and Adam become conscious of their nakedness and, for the first time, experience shame. As Dorian's eyes peruse Huysmans's intoxicating pages, Wilde makes a slight deviation from this narrative. Reading Huysmans's novel does indeed make Dorian conscious of a world of experience the likes of which he may never otherwise have known, yet it is not shame he

feels but exhilaration at the prospects of such a world, where innocence dies and unholy desire reigns supreme.

Dorian's quest for pleasure is not without its tribulations and is indeed fraught with many dangers, physical and otherwise. Whilst the young men of Eton and Oxford see in Dorian "a type that was to combine something of the real culture of the scholar with all the grace and distinction and perfect manner of a citizen of the world" (98), "there were not a few who distrusted him" (106). Although Wilde only describes "curious stories" of confrontation, from "brawling with foreign sailors" to "consorting with thieves and coiners" (106), he shows nonetheless that Lord Henry's influence leads equally to the underbelly of society and the imagination. Still, what is most remarkable about Dorian's moral descent is his complete acceptance of it. He completely recognises his lack of social respectability yet does not care for the potential consequences. He dwells mentally in the present and the present alone.

It is the destiny of the competent student to surpass his master. Hence it comes as no surprise that Dorian becomes the new master aesthete near the novel's conclusion, before allowing remorse to overtake him. In chapter IV, when Lord Henry says to Dorian, "All through your life you will tell me everything you do", Dorian replies, "Yes Harry, I believe that is true. I cannot help telling you things. You have a curious influence over me. If I ever did a crime, I would come and confess it to you" (49-50). Wilde's use of the word 'confess' here is particularly telling as it characterises Lord Henry as a kind of priest, one with the power to forgive sins whilst committing those same sins himself. More telling still is the fact that Dorian defies his master, never telling him exactly of his activities and hiding behind an aesthetic mask of which the latter would certainly be proud.

In chapter XIX, Dorian reincarnates Sybil Vane in Hetty Merton, a young country girl. Despite her "flower-like" standing (151), which Dorian no doubt finds irresistible, unlike Sybil she does not fall prey to his advances. Dorian's decision to leave her alone allows him the satisfaction of believing that he has reformed himself, repenting his sinful life without actually doing any repentance. Lord Henry is unconvinced: "There is no use your telling me that you are going to be good, cried Lord Henry, dipping his white fingers into a red copper bowl filled with rose-water. You are quite perfect. Pray, don't change" (150). We have the impression that Lord Henry is worried that his influence is fading, but this is only momentary. Dorian may say that he wants to be good, but he underestimates just how tightly the grip of vice has tightened around his life like a coiled serpent. As Lord Henry reminds him, "anybody can be good in the country. There are no temptations there" (150). Lord

Henry's words remind us that it is not Dorian's fate to 'be good', but to serve as a reminder of where an all-consuming life of indulgence can lead one. Dorian proves this himself, though perhaps unconsciously, as the untimely death of Basil becomes a topic of discussion. "What would you say, Harry, if I told you that I had murdered Basil?" Dorian asks, knowing that his relationship with Lord Henry may hinge upon the answer. Lord Henry's response that, were it true, Dorian would be "posing for a character" and that "All crime is vulgar" demonstrates that Dorian has surpassed even Lord Henry's taste for the depraved (152). Having committed murder, the aesthetic antichrist has reached his peak corruption. He is at this point irredeemable simply because, paraphrasing Lord Henry's witticism, he has done something one cannot talk about at dinner (152). At the chapter's end, Dorian hesitates a moment before leaving, "as if he had something more to say. Then he sighed and went out" (156). At this moment, we observe Dorian gesturing towards a better vision of himself. His final glance at his former master reflects an awareness of his crimes and their moral consequences, but this is as close as Dorian comes to redemption. Unlike the aesthetic Christ-figures of Wilde's fairy tales, the aesthetic antichrist cannot be saved from himself. His Fall, as I will continue show, is an incentive for readers to orientate themselves towards aesthetic Christhood and not to allow themselves to be led astray by experience, the same experience that Lord Henry Wotton, the serpentine aesthete, inspires his prey to seek.

Dorian Gray and Sybil Vane: The Falling Façade

Although I argue in this chapter that *Dorian Gray* is a cautionary novel that depicts the consequences of Paterian aestheticism, it would be foolish to deny that Wilde's novel is also decadent. One of the key aspects of the decadent novel is a concern with the artificial. In *Dorian Gray*, the most obvious example of this is the picture itself. However, as Nassaar points out, the characters in the novel are equally artificial, if not more so. The novel, argues Nassaar, is "a partly supernatural tale in which the characters are not individuals but symbols that move in a shadowy world of wit and terror" (37). No character fits this description better than Sybil Vane and it is her ill-fated romance with Dorian, I argue, that is crucial in accelerating his Fall.

Any discussion on the character of Sybil Vane must first address the following ontological question: does Sybil Vane really exist beyond the characters she portrays and, if so, is there anything of substance to her? Perhaps the most logical approach to answering this

question is a comparison between Dorian's grand representation of Sybil in chapter IV and the introduction to Sybil herself in chapter V. Sybil is Dorian's first love – at least, his first beyond himself – but being young and naïve he cannot tell the difference between the characters she portrays from her true self – that is, assuming she has one. Dorian tries to give the impression that his infatuation is intellectual when he calls Sybil a “genius” (47), but it is clear that the attraction has nothing to do with intellect; it is entirely superficial. Dorian makes this superficiality explicit as he describes Sybil's performance in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as the play's female titular character: “Harry, imagine a girl, hardly seventeen years of age, with a little flower like face, a small Greek head with plaited coils of dark-brown hair, eyes that were violet wells of passion, lips that were like the petals of a rose. She was the loveliest thing I had ever seen in my life” (49). What is striking here is that in Dorian's description of Sybil we notice a female reflection of himself, a white Narcissa to his darkening Narcissus. Wilde's earlier depictions of Dorian's “rose-red youth” and “rose-white boyhood” (29), along with Sybil's rose petal lips, mark them both as members of the same class of beautiful youth, making their mirror image more notable. What this suggests is that Dorian sees Sybil as just as much of an *objet d'art* as himself. The evidence of this in the passage is clear, the word ‘thing’, though not meant as a pejorative, most explicitly indicating just how unreal Sybil really is to Dorian. It is not love that Dorian feels but the kind of quiet exhilaration one experiences at the theatre when watching a convincing performance; an inspiring yet artificial sensation. That Sybil is a Shakespearean actress only reinforces this interpretation. Lord Henry notices from the beginning that Dorian's feelings are fleeting and is articulate yet dismissive in his approach to them. Recognising his younger self in Dorian, he understands the intoxicating power of women on inexperienced, impressionable young men. When he asks his protégé, “When is she Sybil Vane?” (51), as opposed to the Shakespearean women she portrays, he shows that he understands Sybil to the core in a way to which Dorian is blind: life, in the form of a living, breathing woman, is imitating the art of the theatre.

Sybil is an object of pleasure for Dorian. When he sees her act, an aesthetic façade erects around her, and when she performs badly, that façade falls, revealing, much to Dorian's horror, the remarkably plain person behind it. As he admires her, his focus is on the beauty of her art, but his admiration is not that of an ethical aesthete. Rather, Dorian's view better embodies Paterian aestheticism, placing emphasis on the enjoyment of experience for the sole sake of that experience. It is the experience of viewing Sybil, of ‘loving’ her that enthralls Dorian, but the experience is only a surface level phenomenon, powerful yet limited.

The ethical aesthete, on the other hand, seeks moral beauty beneath the surface and it is this that Dorian cannot do. Lord Henry understands this all too well and foresees Dorian's Fall. Wilde makes this clear by allowing us access to Lord Henry's thoughts through an inner monologue. He confesses, to little surprise, that to him Dorian is nothing more than an "interesting study" (53), and that his aesthetic education "seemed to promise rich and fruitful results" (54). The clearest foreshadowing of the end to Dorian's romance, and indeed to his own life, is Lord Henry's observation of the world beyond his window: "The sunset had smitten into scarlet gold the upper windows of the houses opposite. The panes glowed like plates of heated metal. The sky above was like a faded rose. He thought of his friend's young fiery-coloured life, and wondered how it was going to end" (54). In this highly sensorial series of aesthetic similes, the symbolism of the 'faded rose' also predicts the end of Sybil, whose rosy lips meet the kiss of death at the hands of Dorian, who, in response to his culpability, moves irrevocably towards aesthetic antichristhood.

If the purpose of chapter IV is to lay the groundwork of Dorian and Sybil's relationship, then chapter V builds upon it. Lord Henry describes Sybil as a member of the "decorative sex" (47). His suggestion may appear flippant, even sexist, yet it is difficult to prove him wrong in Sybil's case. When reading Sybil's words, in particular the way she glorifies Dorian far beyond what we know he deserves, one is hard-pressed to read her as anything other than a flat character.²⁴ Indeed, she is reminiscent of the typical fairy tale princess, passive and lacking emotional intelligence. It comes as little surprise that she refers to Dorian as "Prince Charming" (56).

Although there is little in the way of complexity in Sybil's character, we feel inclined to sympathise with her position, if only for a moment. Like so many Victorian women, she is, as Wilde describes her, a "caged bird" – a beautiful creature constrained by the conventions of her time, condemned to be observed as an actor on another's stage but never to be truly heard (55). But it is not a commentary on the position of women in society that Wilde is aiming at. Instead, it is Sybil's role to reflect Dorian's own theatrical and artistic sensibilities; inclusive of Wilde's own metaphor, it is the role of the caged bird to charm her keeper with her song before he releases her, not to freedom but to death.

It is rather simple to define Dorian and Sybil's relationship in the novel, but James Vane, an addition to the 1891 edition of the novel, is a more difficult case. The only

²⁴ H. Porter Abbott describes this term in his *Introduction to Narrative* as referring to characters who are "limited to a narrow range of predictable behaviours. ... There are no mysterious gaps to fill since what you see is what you get" (133).

obstruction between Sybil and her unfortunate destiny, he represents, on the one hand, the conservative Victorian male whose only duty and desire is to shield his sister from the rest of society. On the other hand, we may read him as a kind of anti-prince charming, a competitor for possession of the princess. We see these characterisations working hand in hand as James interacts with his sister. “You might keep some of your kisses for me, Sybil, I think” (56), he says with a jealous grunt. There is an intensity in James, his speech and demeanour showing a subtle impulse towards control and possession. It is difficult to avoid the sub-text that underlies James’s behaviour towards his sister, as though Wilde is hinting at incestual jealousy. Read in this way, it is little wonder that James takes his role as protector so seriously, going so far as to seek out Dorian two decades after his sister’s death for revenge. That James’s quest to avenge his sister ends with him dying in such an anti-climactic event as an accidental shooting leads us to question why his inclusion in the story was at all necessary. One interpretation, in-keeping with Nassaar’s earlier claim, is that James is a symbol; he is not supposed to be a fully-fledged character. Instead, he is a symbol of Dorian’s past, a spectre of his past sins, haunting him until he pays for his complicity in Sybil’s death with his own life. James Vane, in this way, finds his importance in the story as a warning that comes too late, a plea to the aesthetic antichrist to mend his ways and repent.

If Dorian is prince charming to Sybil, then she is his theatrical princess. Yet it is in this role that she fails and as a result, her aesthetic façade falls. Upon his rushed engagement to Sybil, Dorian brings Lord Henry and Basil to see her act. Acting is a notoriously inconsistent art form, one performance never entirely the same as the next. This is the lesson the naïve Dorian learns as he watches his fiancée give a soulless recital as Juliet Capulet. Sybil may move and speak with enough passion but there is a falseness in her performance:

The voice was exquisite, but from the point of view of tone it was absolutely false. It was wrong in colour. It took away all the life from the verse. It made the passion unreal. Dorian Gray grew pale as he watched her. He was puzzled and anxious. Neither of his friends dared say anything to him. She seemed to them to be absolutely incompetent. They were horribly disappointed. (69)

The once convincing actress has disappeared and in her place is an artless form, a female husk lacking all passion. What is most tragic about this realisation for Dorian is the pure, almost child-like reason for which Sybil fails to act well: she loves her prince too much. When the lacklustre performance concludes, prince charming confronts his princess not to

sweep her off her feet to some farcical ‘happily ever after’ that the former knows not to exist, but to scorn her for failing to achieve a theatrical ideal that is just as non-existent. In her innocence, Sybil remains smitten with her prince, speaking at great length on the wonders of love, beauty and art:

Dorian, Dorian, she cried, before I knew you, acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived. I thought that it was all true. I was Rosalind one night, and Portia the other. The joy of Beatrice was my joy, and the sorrows of Cordelia were mine also. I believed in everything. The common people who acted with me seemed to me to be godlike. The painted scenes were my world. I knew nothing but shadows, and I thought them real. You came – oh, my beautiful love! – and you freed my soul from prison. You taught me what reality really is. To-night, for the first time in my life, I saw through the hollowness, the sham, the silliness of the empty pageant in which I had always played. To-night, for the first time, I became conscious that the Romeo was hideous, and old, and painted, that the moonlight in the orchard was false, that the scenery was vulgar, and that the words I had to speak were unreal, were not my words, were not what I wanted to say. You had made me understand what love really is. My love! My love! Prince Charming! Prince of my life! I have grown sick of shadows. You are more to me than all art can ever be. What have I to do with the puppets of a play? When I came to-night, I could not understand how it was that everything had gone from me. I thought that I was going to be wonderful. I found that I could do nothing. Suddenly it dawned on my soul what it all meant. The knowledge was exquisite to me. I heard them hissing, and I smiled. What could they know of love such as ours? Take me away, Dorian – take me away with you, where we can be quite alone. I hate the stage. I might mimic a passion that I do not feel, but I cannot mimic one that burns me like fire. Oh, Dorian, Dorian, you understand now what it signifies? Even if I could do it, it would be profanation for me to play at being in love. You have made me see that. (71-2)

In a letter to Ralph Payne dated February 1894, Wilde wrote, “I am so glad you like that strange coloured book of mine: it contains much of me in it. Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be – in other ages, perhaps” (585). This letter clearly defines the novel’s three main male characters in relation to one another, yet it does nothing to explain Sybil’s place in the story. Taking the passage above as evidence, I argue that Sybil verges on self-actualisation, on bringing art into life, on becoming real, yet stumbles. It comes as little surprise that Dorian, obsessed with artificiality, rejects Sybil in her desire for reality. “You have killed my love” (72), he cries, admitting that

he never really cared for Sybil herself, only the characters she played. We see something akin to the harsh rejection of “The Birthday of the Infanta” repeated in this moment, though this time with a gender reversal. Unable to accept her beloved’s rejection, Sybil Vane commits suicide with poison, the same method, ironically, as the one employed by Juliet Capulet.

Theatricality is the cornerstone of Dorian’s fascination with Sybil – the projection of his narcissistic love of beauty onto another person – and when this theatricality is exposed as fake, the fascination quickly ends. The beautiful yet fake world of the theatre fades away just as the Garden of Eden, once a pleasurable paradise, fades from view for the once innocent Adam and Eve, its entrance barred by a “flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life” (Gen. 3.24).

When discussing Dorian and Sybil, it is less the Christian or even aesthetic aspects of the relationship and more its commentary on theatricality that critics tend to point out. Maho Hidaka, for example, argues that

Dorian’s affair with Sybil Vane seems to serve as a milestone in the developing theatricality of his life. His connections to her enable him not only to introduce elements of the theatrical world into his life, but even to establish himself as both an actor and audience within his own life as play. (97)

It is not until after Sybil’s death that Dorian can realise his own theatrical, or rather aesthetic, pose. Realising that his picture has taken on the physical form of his sin, Dorian constructs an aesthetic mask of fine embroideries, jewellery and perfumes. It is this mask that conceals him from any kind of Christian morality, and he wears it with confidence until he takes the life of Basil Hallward – the man who adores Dorian as both a boy and *objet d’art* – and it promptly slips.

Dorian Gray and Basil Hallward: The Death of an Ideal

During Wilde’s trial in 1895, following his misguided lawsuit against the Marquess of Queensbury for libel, he was asked by prosecutor Edward Carson to defend the allegations against him. To Carson’s request, Wilde responded most poetically with a depiction of the ideal, loving relationship between men:

The Love that dare not speak its name in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. (qt. in Medd 167)

Wilde speaks here of the institution of pederasty in Ancient Greece, which partially informed his conception of beauty and his attitude to same-sex love. Wilde takes 'The Love that dare not speak its name' from "Two Loves", a poem by his infamous *homme fatal* lover Lord Alfred Douglas, a young man in whom Wilde found reflected the boyish, narcissistic grace of his own Dorian Gray. For Wilde, the beauty of Alfred 'Bosie' Douglas was both Greek and Christ-like. In a letter written shortly before his sentencing, Wilde wrote to Bosie confessing his love for him. "O dearest of created things," he writes, "if someone wounded by silence and solitude comes to you, dishonoured, a laughing-stock to men, oh! you can close his wounds by touching them and restore his soul which unhappiness had for a moment smothered" (651). In an earlier letter, Wilde even goes so far as to describe Bosie as a "golden-haired boy with Christ's own heart" (651), showing that Christ was rarely out of his mind during this troubled part of his later life. For all his many flaws, the details of which Wilde describes in "De Profundis",²⁵ Bosie appeared to be the living embodiment of the aesthetic Christ, Wilde's male muse. But this appearance is illusory; Bosie, in fact, was very far from Wilde's ideal image of a boy beautiful in both body and soul. Bosie Douglas was, I argue, a real-life example of the aesthetic antichrist. Subsequently, if life truly imitates art, then Wilde's tortuous affair with Bosie was prefigured by the fatal and no less homoerotic 'friendship' of Basil Hallward and Dorian Gray.²⁶ If it is Lord Henry's wish to control Dorian, to dominate him and make "that wonderful spirit his own" (40), then it is Basil Hallward's wish to protect him or, at the very least, his unstained vision of him. For Dorian's Fall to be complete, this wish must fail.

²⁵ Insisting on a "a life of reckless profusion" that involved 5000 British pounds worth of expenses between 1892 and the date of Wilde's imprisonment (983), it is not difficult to see that Bosie was far from perfect.

²⁶ This is not to suggest that Wilde modelled Dorian Gray on Bosie – the two did not meet until 1891, after the second edition of the novel was published. Indeed, even the poet John Gray, who shares a last name with the novel's protagonist, was not Dorian's model. As Sturgis writes,

John Gray's own boyish good looks were, moreover, strangely suggestive of the central motif in Wilde's novel. Indeed Wilde came to consider Gray to be almost the image of Dorian. 'I didn't find or see him until after I described him in my book,' he later remarked: a wonderful confirmation of the idea that art inspires and directs nature. 'This young man,' he declared, 'would never have existed if I hadn't described Dorian.' The connection became a joke and a bond shared between them. Wilde would allude 'laughingly to John Gray as his hero, "Dorian"'. And Gray even signed himself 'Dorian' in at least one letter to Wilde. (406-7)

Whereas Adam and Eve have no hope of returning to the innocence of the Garden of Eden after their Fall, it appears in Wilde's novel that there is hope for Dorian, if only for a brief moment. This hope comes in the form of Basil's homoerotically-coded admiration for Dorian, which acts as a lifeline tying him to the moral world. That is until that line is eventually severed. Like most artists, Basil is dedicated to perfecting his craft. But to achieve perfection requires inspiration, and for Basil that inspiration is Dorian's body. I use the word 'body' specifically to emphasise the physical nature of Basil's attraction, for it appears at first glance to be Dorian's body that symbolises aesthetic perfection. As is usually the case with Wilde, this appearance is illusory. Unlike Lord Henry, Basil sees in Dorian a deeper ideal for which the body is only vessel. We glimpse this in chapter I when Basil speaks of the picture as an extension of himself, his vanity and ultimate ideal: "I have put too much of myself into it" (19). Basil appears to be reflecting upon the intimate relationship between the artist and his art, but the meaning of his words is not quite so simple. This is because the work of art, in this case, is not just paint on a canvas but a living person, Dorian Gray himself. If we are to believe that "the artist is the creator of beautiful things" (17), as Wilde claims in his preface, then Basil, along with Lord Henry, is the co-creator of Dorian, the giver of fatal beauty.

Although Basil may be in part responsible for inspiring Dorian's narcissism with his picture, the love he clearly feels for Dorian makes him a potential saviour. We glimpse this love briefly when Basil recounts his first encounter with Dorian at a party, relaying in a lengthy monologue the exquisite emotions he associates with the event:

The story is simply this, said the painter after some time. Two months ago I went to a crush at Lady Brandon's. You know we poor artists have to show ourselves in society from time to time, just to remind the public that we are not savages. With an evening coat and white tie, as you told me once, anybody, even a stock-broker, can gain a reputation for being civilized. Well, after I had been in the room about ten minutes, talking to huge overdressed dowagers and tedious Academicians, I suddenly became conscious that someone was looking at me. I turned half-way round, and saw Dorian Gray for the first time. When our eyes met, I felt that I was growing pale. A curious sensation of terror came over me. I knew that I had come face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself. ... I had a strange feeling that Fate had in store for me exquisite joys and exquisite sorrows. (21)

Basil narrates with the endearing wonder of a school-boy in the midst of his first crush, much like his author years prior,²⁷ and it is this innocence of feeling, the dwarfing sensation of observing such beauty, that nurtures his love. But the ‘exquisite joys’ Basil foresees in his future are not limited to the physical world. The creative process is transformative. Hence as Basil paints his picture, the process allows him to glimpse an ideal beyond the Paterian moment. Basil sees in Dorian the aesthetic ideal, yet the ‘exquisite sorrows’ he anticipates involve the corruption of that ideal.

The subtle sexuality of Basil’s attraction does not end here though. Other, far more innocuous moments in the novel, such as when Basil refers to Dorian as a “good boy” (28), on one level reflect the affectionate yet innocent relation of an older to a younger man, yet on another hint at a deeper emotional connection. For Basil, Dorian is a ‘good boy’ because he is beautiful, and to be a ‘bad boy’, contrariwise, would be to tarnish that beauty. Yet being bad is precisely what Dorian does and does very well, as Basil starts to learn in the days after Sybil’s death. Basil is appalled to hear of Dorian’s carefree pose in the face of his fiancée’s death, reacting with great fervour against the injustice committed by a boy he holds so highly:

You went to the Opera? said Hallward, speaking very slowly, and with a strained touch of pain in his voice. You went to the Opera while Sybil Vane was lying dead in some sordid lodging? You can talk to me of other women being charming, and of Patti singing divinely, before the girl you loved has even the quiet of a grave to sleep in? Why, man, there are horrors in store for that little white body of hers! (85)

Again, we see Wilde emphasising the sanctity of the body, here defiled by Dorian’s emotional neglect. The body of Sybil Vane becomes a tool of shame which Basil uses to compel Dorian to see his error. Unfortunately for Dorian, he can only view Sybil in terms of her art and not as a person:

²⁷ It is often assumed that Wilde’s first homosexual experience was with his life-long friend and eventual literary executor, Robbie Ross. However, as Sturgis shows, Wilde’s first homosexual encounter – brief and innocent as it was – occurred when he was a young teenager preparing to enter Trinity College, with an unnamed junior boy from Portora. As Wilde waited on the train platform, ready to depart for his university life, “He barely registered his little friend – the junior boy who had a crush on him – who insisted on coming to see him off at the station. And he was startled when the boy planted a tearful farewell kiss on his lips, as the train pulled out, heading for Dublin and the future” (36).

She lived her finest tragedy. She was always a heroine. The last night she played – the night you saw her – she acted badly because she had known the reality of love. When she knew its unreality, she died, as Juliet might have died. She passed again into the sphere of art. There is something of the martyr about her. Her death has all the pathetic uselessness of martyrdom, all its wasted beauty. (86)

Dorian's reaction is, to say the least, disturbing. The sensitive boy who responded to Sybil's suicide with tears just one chapter earlier appears to have disappeared and, in his place, we find an amoral aesthete. At this moment, Dorian is in the midst of his Fall; the extreme emotions he experienced just one chapter ago have been replaced by aloofness. Basil attempts to rescue Dorian from this aloofness, but without the moral fibre required to feel remorse, the beautiful boy cannot become the ethical aesthete Basil sees within him. When Dorian eventually murders Basil, his Fall is complete, the aesthetic antichrist is born, and innocence cannot be regained.

When Basil sees how his beloved picture has changed, watching as the canvas grins at him, he reacts with an "exclamation of horror" (115), as though watching his artistic ideal disintegrate right in front of him. Wilde reaffirms this explicitly when Dorian asks the distressed artist, "Can you see your ideal in it [the picture]?" (116). Basil could neither save Dorian from himself nor from Lord Henry, and it is the figure in the picture – the 'ideal' of a boy beautiful both in spirit and body – that has been killed. The "foul parody" and "ignoble satire" that is the picture is the last sight Basil sees (115):

There was a stifled groan, and the horrible sound of someone choking with blood. Three times the outstretched arms shot up convulsively, waving grotesque stiff-fingered hands in the air. He stabbed him twice more, but the man did not move. Something began to trickle on the floor. He waited for a moment, still pressing the head down. Then he threw the knife on the table and listened. (117)

Wilde details both Basil's response to this trauma as well as the aesthetics of that trauma, removing our focus momentarily from the murder – the anti-Christian act – and placing it on the result of the murder: the body as tarnished canvas.

On the Christian aspect of Basil's murder, Willoughby claims that "Like Christ, Basil dies for excess of love, killed because the vision he bears is unpalatable to his sometime follower" (73). Willoughby makes an important point regarding the Christ-like magnitude of

Basil's love for Dorian, but I build upon his interpretation by widening the scope of Basil's purpose: Basil is indeed like Christ, but he is also a symbol of his author's aesthetic vision, its hope as well as its fragility. Much like the kind of love Wilde described at his trial, the love of the ethical aesthete dares not speak its name, especially not through the bloodied lips of the recently departed.

When Dorian murders Basil, love – the ideal Basil saw in Dorian but could not bring to surface – dies too. As we would expect, there is no divine recompense for Dorian when the time arrives for him to pay for this sin. Standing before the picture in the novel's last chapter, observing its "look of cunning" and "scarlet dew" hand (158), it is all Dorian can do but to reflect upon the suffering he has caused, blaming beauty for his faults and directing his brewing hatred towards the picture, towards himself:

he loathed his own beauty, and flinging the mirror on the floor crushed it into silver splinters beneath his heel. It was his beauty that had ruined him, his beauty and the youth that he had prayed for. But for those two things, his life might have been free from stain. His beauty had been to him but a mask, his youth but a mockery. What was youth at best? A green, an unripe time, a time of shallow moods, and sickly thoughts. Why had he worn its livery? Youth had spoiled him. (157)

This is, for me, the most extraordinary passage in the novel as it contains one of the most paradoxical ideas of which Wilde ever wrote: contrary to the amoral aesthetic credo for which Wilde is usually celebrated, it is youth and beauty that are the very catalysts that cause the young and beautiful to commit acts of immorality towards others and themselves.

Unfortunately for Dorian, his acknowledgement of this comes too late. Taking up the same knife used to murder Basil, Dorian attempts to stab his picture and, apparently, stabs himself instead.

In his preface, Wilde writes that "The nineteenth century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass. The nineteenth century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass" (17). The death of Dorian, I find, places us in the second of these scenarios: Caliban raging against the opaqueness of a glass. Wilde's records his personal dislike of realist literature in "The Decay of Lying", claiming that "No great artist ever sees things as they really are. If he did, he would cease to be an artist" (1088). This idea that anti-realism is the mark of a 'great artist' makes it clear that Wilde is deliberate in not detailing the circumstances surrounding Dorian's death. In the

absence of any supernatural intervention, the cause of death is perhaps best summed up by Mitsuharu Matsuoka, who claims that “Dorian ultimately reacts against his lifestyle, choking on his New Hedonism” (78). Put differently, the aesthetic antichrist is destroyed by his own adoration of experience.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is an exploration of Wilde’s anti-ideal. As such, it is his most explicit and ironic warning against the precise brand of carefree indulgence and excess that would come to largely define his image in critical circles and popular culture in the years after his death. Recalling Wilde’s contradictory letters on the novel’s ethical basis, we can see that, regardless of his resistance to the idea, it is justifiable to call *Dorian Gray* a novel with ethical concerns. What is more ambiguous, though, is how exactly we are to learn from Dorian’s misdemeanours and live a truly aesthetic life. One possible answer involves returning to the ill-fated love affair between Wilde and Bosie and the former’s reflection on that affair in his final published poem, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol”. In the sixth and final section of this poem, Wilde writes prophetically that “all men kill the thing they love” (899). It would be fair to assume, in the case of Wilde’s novel, that the thing Dorian loves most is himself. On the contrary, I argue that Dorian’s great love is in fact Basil, for it is he who is the purveyor of the love that Dorian, in his selfishness, could not reciprocate. When Dorian murders Basil he fulfils Wilde’s bleak prophesy, completing his Fall. Despite this, what ultimately makes Wilde’s novel cautionary is its implication that we need not degrade ourselves as Dorian has to live truly aesthetic lives. The Water-Rat of “The Devoted Friend” may have warned us that telling a story with a moral is a dangerous thing to do (293), yet there is no danger in observing the Fall of Dorian Gray and reflecting on its ethical implications, only the potential for post-Wilde aesthetes to learn from the abominable creation of their predecessor.

Conclusion – Redeeming the Season of Sorrow

“But whatever may be the unexpected phenomena of the future, Jesus will not be surpassed. His worship will consistently renew his youth, the tale of his life will cause ceaseless tears, his sufferings will soften the best hearts; all the ages will proclaim that among the sons of men there is none born who is greater than Jesus.” (Renan 227)

“And there was silence in the House of Judgement.” (Wilde, *Complete Works* 903)

Although this thesis has concerned itself with the analysis of Wilde’s fiction, I would like to commence these last few pages with a look at “The House of Judgement”, one of Wilde’s several underdiscussed poems in prose, which I think highlights a scenario where ethical aestheticism, with its insistence in compassion, would prevent suffering. This poem is a brief yet evocative depiction of a man who comes “naked before God” (902). This man has committed acts of evil during his life, acts to which he fully admits, and it seems that Wilde intends us to condemn him as we would a common criminal. Yet in the poem’s last few lines, Wilde subverts the reader’s intention. The naked man cannot be sent to Hell, for it is in Hell he has always lived, and contrariwise he cannot be sent to Heaven, because he has never been able to imagine it (903). For all the wrong he may have done, this man’s circumstances encourage sympathy. He is a figure who, as silence descends on God’s House of Judgement, warns us against prejudice and encourages compassion and understanding. In short, he is one for whom ethical aestheticism could have made Heaven just a little more tangible.

This thesis is indebted to Guy Willoughby’s concepts of aesthetic Christhood and ‘new aestheticism’, which I have used to explore how ethics and aestheticism intersect as well as describe the Christian ethics that unite Wilde’s fiction. In doing so, I have taken Willoughby’s concept a step further by using it to define ethical aestheticism as the intellectual and moral philosophy by which the aesthetic Christ lives. By updating Willoughby’s concepts, I have attempted to show that Wilde’s fiction is the best encapsulation of his ethical aestheticism. As such, I have cast Wilde’s fictional oeuvre not as a bible whose word is sacred, but as a guidebook whose contents may help readers to learn to live a conscious, Wild(e) life.

Wilde was not a didactic writer, compelling his readers towards virtue through guilt or shame. He may more accurately be described as an aesthetic father-figure, gently nudging his readers towards aesthetic Christhood with care and patience. I have tried to show this

through my close readings of Wilde's fairy tales and novel as individual components of a broader ethical framework. In doing so, I hope to have emphasised the intrinsic, complex nature of the various fictional representations of the aesthetic Christ. By close reading Wilde's fiction, I hope to have helped to improve critical understanding of Wilde as a fiction writer, an identity that is often overshadowed by his career as a playwright, essayist and cultural contrarian. This methodology may also, I think, be applied to studies of Christian ethics in late Victorian children's fairy tales, the history of British aestheticism and 'decadent' Catholicism.

Much of the impetus behind my exploration of Wilde's Christianity stems from Wilde's on-going influence in contemporary queer and popular culture. Since Wilde's influence is still very much alive today, it is important to facilitate a deepening of our critical and casual understanding of his image. Actor and film maker Rupert Everett²⁸ came to a similar conclusion, his 2018 film *The Happy Prince* exploring the post-prison years of Wilde's life until his death in 1900. Everett positions Wilde as an aesthetic father-figure in a similar way to this thesis, as a man who, despite his many mistakes, remains a beacon of beauty drawing us towards the light of a kinder, selfless world.

Everett's film pays some much needed attention to Wilde's deathbed conversion to Catholicism and successfully captures the trauma of a man severed from all that he loved. But Wilde's conversion is neither the only Christian instance in Everett's film nor the most notable. Having rekindled his relationship with Boise, Wilde spent some time in Naples, where he attempted to write a new edition of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, all the while indulging in a daily diet of absinthe, cigarettes and rent boys, the third of which, ironically, consumed more of his monthly allowance than his actual rent (Sturgis 687-8). Upon returning to Paris, Wilde – played by Everett himself – stands half-naked before a large mirror. Suffering from an ear infection for which he would eventually require an operation, he touches his bleeding ear before tracing his blood along the mirror whilst muttering to himself, "See! See where Christ's blood streams through the firmament" (*The Happy Prince* 6:55-7:24). This line paraphrases part of a speech near the end of the A-text of Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and is followed directly by a chilling lament from the ill-fated titular character: "One drop [of blood] would save my soul, half a drop: ah, my Christ!" (5.2

²⁸ Everett acknowledges Wilde's Christ-like significance: "For me, he's better than Christ because he's half God with his talent, and his human side – which Christ never quite pulled off except by having his feet washed by Mary Magdalene" (Furness).

74-5). In the great decline of Wilde's life, in the midst of his childless and widowed despair,²⁹ he looked to the aesthetic Christ, to his enduring ideal, for a fleeting moment of comfort. But this comfort was not to last. Wilde died on 30th November 1900, having fulfilled his youthful ambition of converting to Catholicism and, in a last bout of infectious humour, having lost his hard-fought duel with the wallpaper of the L'Hôtel d'Alsace (qt. in Sturgis 712).

It was not the life of the ethical aesthete that Oscar Wilde lived after Reading Gaol. When he was not drinking, galivanting after rent boys or trying – and failing – to write, he spent the last years of his life in mourning for the life he could have lived, had only the world been kinder. But the dream of aesthetic Christhood did not die with its dreamer. Wilde's fiction is the enduring record of ethical aestheticism and its message to the aesthetically-minded reader, were I to condense this thesis into a single sentence, is this: the world you desire – the selfless, compassionate artistic world – is out there, it exists, and it is calling to you; take these stories as your guide, and seek it out. I will conclude with a passage from "De Profundis" I feel exemplifies the intensity and breadth of emotion Wilde experienced during and after his imprisonment as well as his hope for the world without him:

Suffering is one long moment. We cannot divide it by seasons. We can only record its moods, and chronicle their return. With us, time does not progress. It revolves. It seems to circle around one centre of pain. The paralysing immobility of a life, every circumstance of which is regulated after an unchangeable pattern, so that we eat and drink and walk and lie down and pray, or kneel at least for prayer, according to the inflexible laws of an iron formula: this immobile quality, that makes each dreadful day in the minutest detail like its brother, seems to communicate itself to those external forces the very essence of whose existence is ceaseless change. Of seed-time harvest, of the reapers bending over the corn, or made white with broken blossoms, or strewn with fallen fruit, we know nothing, and can know nothing. For us there is only one season, the season of sorrow. (1009-10)

It is in the unity of aestheticism and ethics, the valuing of moral beauty over the ugliness of selfish excess, that this 'season of sorrow' may be redeemed.

²⁹ Constance Wilde died on 7th April 1898, "five days after undergoing a further operation to address her creeping paralysis" (Sturgis 681). Cyril and Vyvyan Wilde would never see their father again, the former dying on the Western Front during the First World War and the latter going have one child in 1945, Merlin Holland, with his second wife, Dorothy Thelma Helen Besant.

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