AN ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS OF OSCAR WILDE'S FAIRY TALES: BETWEEN AESTHETICISM, CHRISTIANITY AND ECOCRITICISM

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Abstract: This paper proposes an ecocritical analysis of Oscar Wilde's two volumes of fairy tales. It finds out that the tales are addressed to adults, and are imbued with aestheticism, Christianity and ecocriticism. Such apparently different currents of thought and literature are happily brought together by Wilde. The paper analyses all his fairy tales published in two volumes from these three points of view, and finds points of intersection between the three approaches to Wilde's fairy tales.
The Christian ethics is not very different from the ecocritical ethics. Aestheticism is a trend that suits extremely well fairy tales, in their love for beautiful imagery.
The ecocritical tropes discovered in these tales are "The Animal," "Wilderness," "The Apocalypse," "Cornucopia".

Keywords: fairy tale, ecocriticism, Christianity, aestheticism, trope

Oscar Wilde's fairy tales, published in two volumes following the birth of his children, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1892), are considered by many critics a common Victorian genre, practised by a large number of his contemporaries, including Wilde's wife, Constance, who published two volumes of children's stories (in 1889 and 1892), thus not a surprising genre for the period, when such writers as John Ruskin, William Makepeace Thackeray, Lewis Carroll and Andrew Lang wrote fairy tales. We consider them a literary exercise practised before the writing of his great novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).

He stated that the fairy tales were meant for both children and adults who kept a child's heart. "They are studies in prose, put for Romance's sake into fanciful form meant partly for children and partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy, and who find simplicity in a subtle strangeness." (Wilde, Letter to George Herbert Kersley, 1888).

However, from the analysis done on them, we have found out that they are not addressed to children at all, they are fables and parables meant for the grownups. Children could not accept or benefit from such unhappy-ended tales, from their pessimistic moral. Literary biographers consider their pessimism prophetic for the life and writings that later reflected his homosexuality. We do not. We deem them to be the expression of Christian love for man.

Wilde was the son of a nationalist Irish folklorist, who published *Irish Popular Superstitions* (1852) and of an Irish authoress, who published *Ancient Cures, Mystic Charms and Superstitions* (1888) and *Ancient Cures, Charms and Usages of Ireland* (1890). He himself reviewed William Butler Yeats's *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1889).

His volume *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) included: "The Happy Prince", "The Nightingale and the Rose," "The Selfish Giant," "The Devoted Friend," "The Remarkable Rocket." The volume *A House of Pomegranates* (1892) included: "The Young King," "The Birthday of the Infanta ," "The Fisherman and His Soul," "The Star-Child."

The Happy Prince in the eponymous tale is a Christ-like figure. He sacrifices himself gradually, like Christ in the Calvary mounting the Golgotha, until he is sent to be melt in the fire as a useless object. This death in the fire stands for the Biblical crucifixion. He melts,

being made of lead, but his heart survives to the fire. This can be read as an allusion to Christ's heart in the Catholic icons. His only friend and aid is a Swallow. In an ecocritical interpretation, this formidable friendship which leads to the sacrifice of both friends but also to the salvation of many humans, is the supreme connection between a man and an animal. In the Christian interpretation of the tale, the Swallow represents the Holy Spirit, who plays the part of Christ's messenger and servant in the tale. The aestheticism of the tale is obvious: the Happy Prince is a lead statue covered in a foil of gold, his eyes are sapphires, he has a ruby on the handle of his sword. All the fairy tales have this taste for precious metals and gems and this despise for other metals such as lead, and Wilde's ones are not an exception to the rule. Wilde ends the tale with the line: "Bring me the two most precious things in the city," said God to one of His Angels, and the Angel brought Him the leaden heart and the dead bird. "You have rightly chosen," said God" (Wilde 22) Christianity's symbols of the immortal heart in flames and of the Holy Ghost as a bird are here identified with the Animal trope represented by a swallow and the Apocalypse trope represented by a dead heart and a dead bird.

"The Nightingale and the Rose" is another parable-fable combining Christian meanings with ecocritical symbolism. A poor student in love with a coquettish beauty needs a red rose to gain her love. The Nightingale, his friend, flying here and there to help him find such a rose, receives a Christ's Passion-like proposal from a rose tree. "If you want a red rose," said the tree," you must build it out of music by moonlight, and stain it with your own heart's blood. You must sing to me with your breast against a thorn." (26), which the Nightingale does, to its death, obtaining by its supreme Christ-like sacrifice a red rose, since "Love is better than Life, and what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a man?" (27), an ecocritical idea. However, the Nightingale's self-sacrifice has been in vain, because on receiving the red rose, the coquette says that it will not match her dress, and she prefers now real jewels sent to her by another wooer.

"The Selfish Giant" is a perfect combination between a Christian parable and an ecocritical pastoral tale. The giant hates children's noise and playing. Children are ecocritically identified with the four seasons. When they are forbidden to enter the giant's garden, the seasons stop coming, too. The garden is deserted and lifeless and the giant deeply regrets his decision of declaring playing children trespassers. When they come back, they trigger the return of the seasons, making the giant enjoy nature's rebirth. The only one who has no season, or nature around him is a very small baby, sleeping up on a tree. The baby obviously stands for Baby Christ. Helping him out of poor pity to descend the tree, the giant has his own heart melting with love, and he thus makes the patch of nature around the baby revive with the beauty of seasons. The link between Christianity, ecocriticism and the aestheticism of fairy tales is very strong in this parable which identifies love for children with love for God and with love for nature.

Based on Hans Christian Andersen's "Little Claus and Big Claus," "The Devoted Friend" is a bitterly ironical parable on two friends, Little Hans the flower gardener and Hugh the Miller. The latter boasts true friendship, repeating that "friendship never forgets" (46), and using little Hans to overwork for him at all times. He keeps on promising an old wheelbarrow (which he cannot repair) as the payment of all the service Little Hans does to him. When Little Hans ultimately dies from overwork and danger, getting drowned, the hypocritical Miller is his most theatrical mourner. The ecocritical side of the parable is that of being told by an animal (the Linnet) to another (a Water-rat) and these, together with a Duck, commenting on humans' deeds and thoughts. Moreover, the animals even pronounce critical considerations on literature. "Every good story teller nowadays starts with the end, and then goes on to the beginning, and concludes with the middle. That is the new method." (45)

"The Remarkable Rocket" is another ironical parable and fable, this time the main character is an object, seemingly announcing Object Oriented Ontology, OOO. This time talks are between various exploding fireworks: the Rocket, the Squib, the Roman Candle, the Catherine Wheel, the Cracker, the Bengal Light, the Fire-balloon. Their logic is humorous, such as their language is. One of them says "pylotechnic" instead of "pyrotechnic". Another one says that "A sensitive person is "a person who, because he has corns himself, always treads on other people's toes" (62). Or "I am always thinking of myself and I expect everybody else to do the same. That is what is called sympathy" (Wilde 63) or "It is a very dangerous thing to know one's friends." (65).

Getting wet, the Remarkable Rocket is not able to explode at the firework show for the princess, and it ends up in a ditch, where he meets and talks to a series of animals: a Frog, a White Duck, a Goose. When it finally explodes, it is a lightless and noiseless failure ending with it becoming a mere stick falling on a Goose. We may consider the story a fable on pride and boasting, oversizing personal limits always ending with failure as a bitter lesson. Both objects and animals have life, logic and personality, this is the ecocritical conclusion of the text.

In "The Young King," Wilde's aestheticism is obvious in such characters as the one who "was seeking to find in beauty an anodyne from pain" (Wilde 80) and in such fairy-tale descriptions and lists expressing ecocritical cornucopia: "He had sent away many merchants, some to traffic for amber with the rough fisher-folk of the north seas, some to Egypt to look for that curious green turquoise which is found only in the tombs of kings, and is said to possess magical properties, some to Persia for silken carpets and painted pottery, and others to India to buy gauze and stained ivory, moonstones and bracelets of jade, sandalwood and blue enamel and shawls of fine wool." (81) or "he had given orders that the artificers were to toil night and day to carry them out, and that the whole world was to be searched for jewels that would be worthy of their work" (81).

The aestheticist descriptions of the tale, beside being characteristic of fairy-tales imagery, are a feature of both aestheticism and ecocritical cornucopia. "A large press, inlaid with agate and lapis-lazuli, filled one corner, and facing the window stood a curiously wrought cabinet with lacquer panels of powdered and mosaiced gold, on which were placed some delicate goblets of Venetian glass, and a cup of dark-veined onyx. Pale poppies were broidered on the silk canopy of the bed, as though they were fallen from the tired hands of sleep, and tall reeds of fluted ivory bare up the velvet canopy, from which great tufts of ostrich plumes sprang, like white foam, to the pallid silver of the fretted ceiling." (82) or "Never before had he felt so keenly, or with such exquisite joy, the magic and the mystery of beautiful things." (82)

Before his coronation the Young King sleeps and has three dreams on the dire price the poor toilers pay to make his costume, jewels and ceremony. He dreams of a starving weaver's children, then he dreams of a pearl merchant who is killed aboard a ship for bringing the most beautiful pearl in the world, then he dreams of an argument between Death and Avarice for a grain of corn, followed by Plague called by Death to destroy life in Egypt in a series of images belonging to the Apocalypse trope. "And Death laughed again, and he whistled through his fingers, and a woman came flying through the air. Plague was written upon her forehead and a crowd of lean vultures wheeled round her. She covered the valley with her wings, and no man was left alive…And out of the slimes at the bottom of the valley crept dragons and horrible things with scales, and the jackals came trotting along the sand, sniffing up the air with their nostrils." (89)

Such imagery obviously belongs to the Apocalypse trope. It impresses the young king to such an extent that he definitely gives up all the clothes and jewels of his coronation schedule, asking "Will they not know me for a king if I have not a king's raiment?" (91),

which is clearly an allusion to Jesus. Likewise, he chooses a briar crown. When the people mock at him taking him for the king's fool, he asks, "Are not the rich and the poor brothers?" "Aye," answered the man, "and the name of the rich brother is Cain." (93) The Biblical allusion is obvious. The poorly clad young king defies the bishop who asks him to come to the shrine in kingly raiment and climbs to the altar by himself and he embraces Christ's statue kneeling before the Biblical Son of God. "He stood before the image of Christ, and on his right hand and on his left were the marvellous vessels of gold, the chalice with the yellow wine, and the vial with the holy oil. He knelt before the image of Christ" (96)

When the noblemen and the soldiers come into the church with their swords to kill the beggarly king, the Christ in the church and the saints' statues perform a miracle: they dress him as a king for the others' eyes, everybody shows awe and the humble bishop confesses, "A greater than I hath crowned thee" (97) As he "passed home through the midst of the people…no man dared look upon his face, for it was like the face of an angel." (97). The moral of the tale is that aestheticism regarded as cornucopia is inhuman and anti-Christian, while humbleness identified with pity and love for one's poor brethren is anti-cornucopian Christian love, which saves the Young King's soul and makes Christ perform a miracle for his illuminated disciple, and spare him from sword and re-award him his title and kingdom.

"The Birthday of the Infanta" is a parable on the acceptance and rejection of the otherness, here exemplified as ugliness. It is the drama of a poor horrible dwarf, in love with the Infanta and accepted by her with laughing that he takes to be a love sign. In the Princess's garden every plant and animal is as splendid and haughty as possible. "The tall striped tulips stood straight on their stalks, like long rows of soldiers, and looked defiantly across the grass at the rows of at the roses, and said: "We are quite as splendid as you are now." (99)

The description of the garden continues with the same type of aestheticist imagery. The personification of flowers and insects, imbuing every living organism (tulips, butterflies, lizards, pomegranates, lemons, magnolia trees) with human intelligence and soul is both an ecocritical means and a characteristic feature of fairy tales. The human portraits are also aestheticist: "There was a stately grace about these slim Spanish children as they glided about, the boys with their large plumed hats and short fluttering cloaks, the girls holding up the trains of their long brocaded gowns, and shielding the sun from their eyes with huge fans of black and silver." (100)

Aestheticism is overstrained with Wilde at times: when he speaks of the queen dead twelve years before, he writes that at the king's order she had been embalmed and not interred, but left in a chapel where the king would come once a year to kiss her face and jewelled hands passionately in accesses of necrophilia.

The description of the moments of the show for children on the occasion of the Infanta's birthday is also aestheticist: there is a fake corrida, where the bull hides an ambassador's son, a tight-rope number, a tragedy that makes the children cry and they are comforted with sweetmeats, a juggler with two snakes, who is also a magician who changes a fan into a bird and who makes a fruit tree grow rapidly, give fruit and have the fruit ripen, a boy-performed minuet, a gipsy band playing zithers and tambourines, humming, and driving a dancing bear and some apes and shooting guns in imitation of the royal guards, but especially the Dwarf, who "stumbled into the arena, waddling on his crooked legs and wagging his huge mishappen head from side to side" (110), which provokes a wild laughter to everybody, including the Infanta. "Perhaps the most amusing thing was his complete unconsciousness of his own grotesque appearance." (110)

There follows an ecocritical dialogue between flowers, which have a reverse racist talk on the horrible Dwarf, who should not be admitted among their splendid beings. This ecocritical talk has upside-down standards. The flowers call him "thief" for depriving them of the Infanta's love. However, the birds and lizards accept him and like him, thinking that

"Everyone could not be as beautiful as a lizard" (115). In their haughty racist view, flowers consider birds and lizards "mere vagrants like the gipsies (which) should be treated in exactly the same manner." (116) being inferior creatures.

The Dwarf has no idea of this argument, and he loves immensely all the animals and the plants. The moment he sees the Infanta he irresistibly falls in love with her. He imagines making nature sites even more lovable for her in innumerable ways, expressing Wilde's eco-centrical love for nature in various imaginings. "He could make little cages out of rushes for the grasshoppers to sing in, and fashion the long-jointed bamboo into the pipe that Pan loves to hear. He knew the crying of every bird, and could call the starlings from the tree-top, or the heron from the mere" (117) among many others. The Dwarf is an authentic lover and connoisseur of plants and animals, he is the author's alter-ego's voice.

In love with the Infanta, the Dwarf looks for her in the palace from room to room, sure of their love reciprocity. He finds a mirror, an object he has never encountered before, and he discovers in it a horrible creature, moving exactly like himself, his reflected image. "Not properly shaped, as all other people were, but hunchbacked, and crooked-limbed, with huge lolling head and mane of black hair." (123) The discovery is a terrible shock for him. "When the truth dawned upon him, he gave a wild cry of despair." (124). Coming into the room with her attendants, the Infanta finds him beating the ground with his fists, which she finds even more humorous than his number performed before. But neither she nor anyone else is aware of his immense pain, that breaks his heart, and he dies under their eyes. When she orders him to dance for her, he is already stiff dead. When the chamberlain tells her that the Dwarf will not dance for her again because his heart is broken, the Infanta orders, "For the future, let those who come to play with me have no hearts" (127). The rich and the noble accept otherness only as objects that can be used for their entertainment, not as human beings with feelings. Otherness cannot induce empathy to the noble. As such, they are neither Christian nor eco-lovers.

In "The Fisherman and His Soul," Wilde presents a counter-story to Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid". The main characters are the Fisherman, standing for humans, and the Mermaid, standing for nature. Catching a Mermaid in his net, the Fisherman promises to her to liberate her only if she sings to him whenever he calls for her to come, for her song attracts the fish to fill his nets. She sings to him and he frees her. But he falls in love with her song. He would like to join her in the sea, but she sees an impossibility: he has a human soul and she could love him only if he got rid of his human soul. Andersen or Eminescu's stories work vice-versa. Thus, the Fisherman considers his soul and finds it of no use to him. He goes to a priest and asks him to get him rid of his soul. The priest protests that the soul is the noblest part of a human being and pronounces the seafolk accursed, for they have no soul and for them there will be neither heaven nor hell (the Christian meaning of the text is that nature has no afterlife, whereas humans have). The Fisherman then tries to sell his soul to some merchants, but they will not buy it, because it has no trade value for them. He considers these two opposite ways of thinking and finds it strange that they contradict one another. He then goes to a young witch, and she promises to release him from his soul if he dances with her on a Sabbath night, when the moon is full. At the Sabbath, all the witches submit to a monk-like weird figure, whom he cannot identify and whom he fears, therefore he makes the sign of the Cross, and the ritual is interrupted, and the witch confesses that she would have liked to keep him for herself, but he avoided this with the sign of the Cross. Then she gives him a knife and tells him to use it to cut off his shadow. "What men call the shadow of the body is not the shadow of the body, but is the body of the soul. …Cut around from thy feet thy shadow, which is thy soul's body, and bid thy soul leave thee, and it will do so." (144) He does as he is told to, and his Soul promises to leave him if they meet once a year on

the same seashore. Liberated from his Soul, he goes into the sea depth and marries the Mermaid.

After one year, he comes to the meeting. The Soul tells him that he travelled to the country of the Tartars, then to that of the worshippers of Mohammed in Africa. Then he went to the country of those who curse the Moon (Gryphons, Dragons, Pigmies). Then he went to the country of the Mirror of Wisdom. The Soul implores him to let him enter his body again, and promises to make him the wisest man in the world. But the Fisherman answers "Love id better than Wisdom", and the soul leaves weeping.

On their meeting of the second year, the Soul tells him that he went to Mecca, to Syria, to India, to Armenia, Nubia and other countries of the East, described in an aestheticist manner (and therefore, very much fairy-tale-like).The Soul tells him that he met the emperor of the Riches, and the latter offered him half of his fortune, but he chose to take only a leaden ring with a secret text engraved inside, that gave him access to all the Riches of the world. He proposes the Fisherman to lead him to the ring, but the Fisherman answers, "Love is better than Riches" and returns to the Mermaid.

On their meeting of the third year, the Soul proposes to him one day with a dancer whose feet can be seen dancing. Remembering that his Mermaid has no feet and therefore cannot dance, and reckoning that one day's delay is not much, he accepts the proposal. They travel for three days, then they are offered hospitality by a merchant, but the Soul tells him to slay the merchant during the night and steal his purses of gold. He does so, but is discontent that he has been led to do evil and wants to get rid of his Soul, who reminds the Fisherman that he did not give him a heart, so he is a heartless soul. Also, the Soul tells him that a man can part with his soul only once in his life, so the witch's charms are inefficient a second time and he will have to live on with his bad soul.

The Fisherman swears to keep silent. The Soul has tempted him with evil, now he tempts him with good, to no avail. The Fisherman comes to the shore where he met his Mermaid and calls her, but she does not come. Later, the seafolk bring him her dead body. Abandoned by him, she died from grief. The Fisherman is "smitten with grief" (174). His heart breaks and he is taken away by the sea and dies. The next morning, the priest comes and finds the dead Fisherman and the dead Mermaid, lying embraced in the surf. The place fills with strange perfumed flowers that enchant the priest, who speaks "not of the wrath of God, but of the God whose name is Love." (178). From a Christian point of view, this is very much like Christ's sort of love for man, from an ecocritical point of view, this corresponds to inter-species love, or to love between man and nature, from an aestheticist point of view, this corresponds to amoral love for beauty. The priest "blessed the sea and all the wild things that are in it. …All the things in God's world he blessed, and the people were filled with joy and wonder. Yet never again in the corner of the Fullers' Field grew flowers of any kind, but the field remained barren even as before." (179) This passage should be read ecocritically as the rupture of the love link between man and nature and the impossibility of finding again the previous harmony between these two parties. In Christian terms it means the impossibility of redemption after the sin. In aestheticist terms it means the impossibility of keeping the perfect beauty of the union between man and an imaginary species forever.

"The Star-Child" is a story of atonement of a proud being. The beginning tells of a terrible winter by making a lot of animals (Wolf, Squirrels, Linnet, Woodpecker, Turtledoves) comment on the frost. Two poor woodcutters find a baby wrapped in a precious woven cloak embroidered with gold and baring an amber chain round his neck (a symbol of Baby Christ). One of the woodcutters takes the child to his home, names him the Star-Child and grows him up. His wife keeps the precious cloak and chain in a truck.

The Star-Child is very haughty and cruel to the other children. His adoptive parents chide him: "Who art thou to bring pain into God's world? Even the cattle of the field praise

him" (188) Wilde links Christian ethics to ecocriticism here. An "ugly ill-flavoured beggar woman" comes by to him only to be rejected by him. The adoptive parents show her the cloak and the chain and she tells them that he is her lost child, for whom she has travelled all the world to find him. He insults her, saying that he would prefer to be toad-like and adder-like to being like her. After her departure, his aspect abruptly changes: he becomes ugly and repulsive like a toad or an adder. He sees himself mirrored in the water and understands that he has been punished for being cruel to his mother. He goes into the forests and asks the animals about her (an ecocritical talk), but they have not seen her. For three years he travels all over the world looking for her. He is made prisoner by a magician who feeds him badly and chains him. Then the magician sends him to fetch a piece of white gold. On the way, he frees a trapped Hare, and the hare brings him the piece of white gold. But he meets a very poor leper, and, out of pity, he gives the piece of gold to him. There follows the same story with a piece of yellow gold and the same leper, and then with a piece of red gold. But as he passes the gates of the city, the crowd expresses its admiration for his beauty and recognizes him as its lord. Being brought to the palace, he recognises his beggar mother in the person of the queen and the leper in the person of the king. He asks for forgiveness, and he receives it, on the account of his good deeds, and is enthroned. Thus, both religiously and ecocritically, the moral of the story is that a good deed brings a good reward, and a bad deed brings punishment. Aesthetically, the meaning of the tale is that a good soul is mirrored by physical beauty and an evil deed is mirrored by ugliness, thus precluding *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

The Christian ethics is not very different from the ecocritical ethics. Aestheticism is a trend that suits extremely well fairy tales, in their love for beautiful imagery. The ecocritical tropes discovered in these tales are "The Animal," "Wilderness," "The Apocalypse," "Cornucopia". Such sad-ended tales are addressed to adults and are imbued with aestheticism, Christianity and ecocriticism. Such apparently different currents of thought and literature are happily brought together by Wilde.

Throughout the tales, there is a pessimistic moral of death as the final point to which love for humanity and love for art lead. All the Christ-like figures (the Happy Prince, the Fisherman, the Young King) or the Holy Ghost-like figures (the Swallow, the Nightingale) die through sacrifice, the Young King, an exception to the rule, being miraculously saved from death by Christ's intervention. The Star-Child is the reverse of the future Dorian Gray, changing for the better while the novel hero changes for the worse. The Infanta and the Miller are noble or rich people who use and abuse the poor. Wilde's fairy tales are an expression of the necessity of Christian love, even if it does not bring about social justice. His animals are symbolic characters for human features (like in fables) or stand for the Holy Spirit. The otherness as nature (the Mermaid) or as ugliness (the Dwarf) deserves pity and love to survive.

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