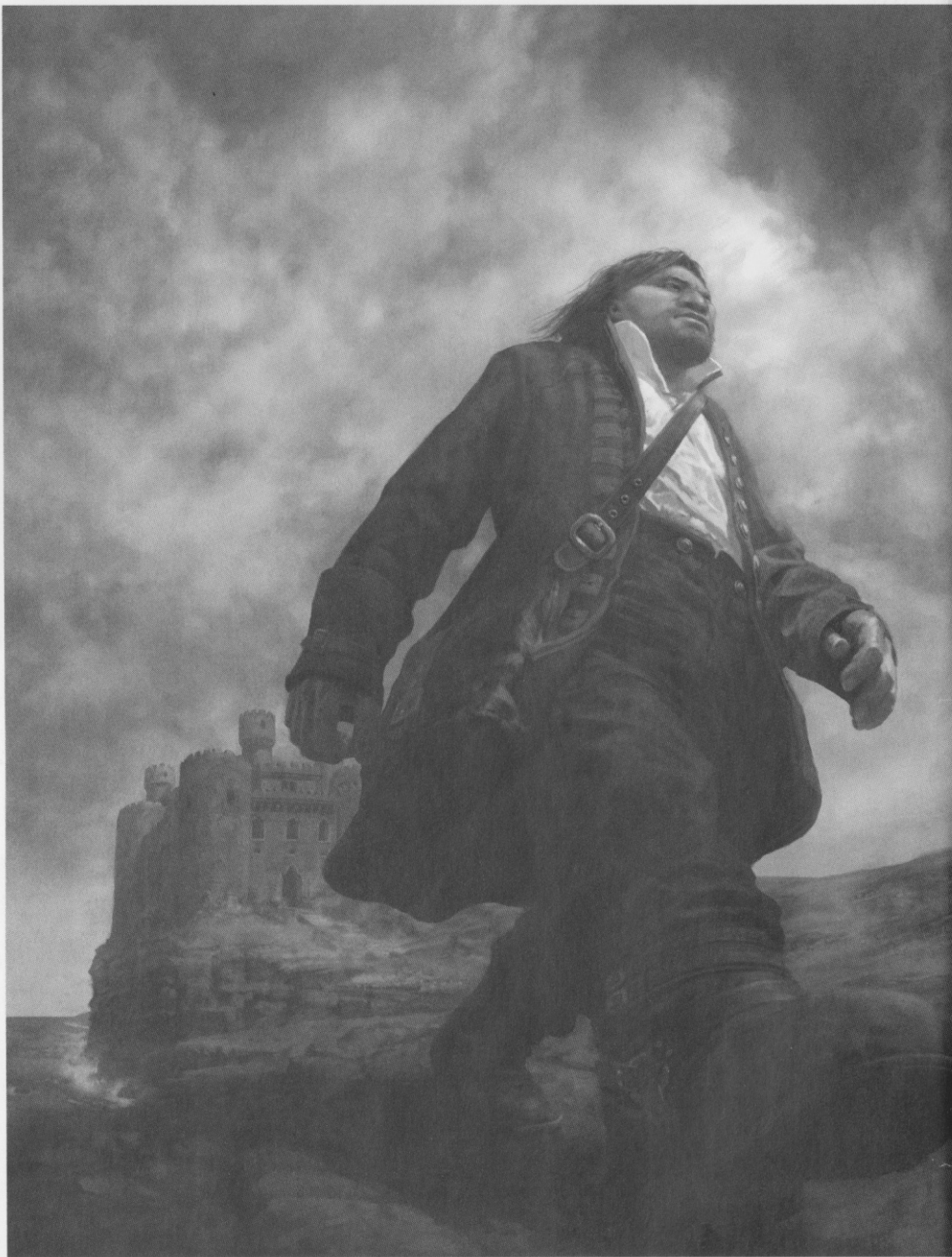


WILDE TALES



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The Victorian Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde

BY ELIZABETH GOODENOUGH

In 1889, when W.B. Yeats was invited to the Wildes' house at Chelsea, Oscar asked the poet to tell his son a fairy tale. Yeats got as far as "Once upon a time there was a giant," and the little boy ran screaming from the room. Yeats was mortified, but his incantation worked like a charm: it conjured the bogeys of childhood.

Storytelling that backfires reveals how sensitively listeners imagine words as they are uttered. The poignant and satiric tonalities of Wilde's fairy tales invite an awareness to be freshly startled. In 1886 Wilde wrote that one infinite fascination remained for him: "the mystery of moods." Like the super-sensual, paranormal and occult pastimes attractive to Wilde's circle, psychoanalysis was being formulated as an avant-garde mode of self-realization. In 1892 Yeats, who like Wilde's wife was a member of an occult organization called the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, declared that "if I had not made magic my constant study I could not have written a single word." For Wilde, magic was not the art of covering things up but the act of embodying secrets of the self.

The stories in Wilde's *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, published in 1888, consciously serve the Christian faith, whose martyred messiah is often symbolized as a child. The choice of a traditional storytelling mode rooted in paganism and turned toward socialism may seem an odd amalgam. But this Irish nephew of three clergymen, who aspired to write a long poem, "the Epic of the Cross, the Iliad of Christianity, which shall live for all time," found new possibilities in literary fairy tales.

Wilde inverts Victorian morbidity by gazing on childish pain and death and registering a childlike responsiveness to the feelings of others. His sexuality and utopian orientation radicalized the socializing mission of the literary fairy tale. The stories adhere to the penance tradition in his vision of Christ, and he likens self-realization to atonement. Wilde avoids what Marina Warner calls "the Oxfam Syndrome" – which makes the oppression of children "look like endemic, perennial hopelessness" – by drawing on the tradition of the pagan "little people" of Irish folklore.

Within intricately framed tales, Wilde nests multiple narratives that converge on a secret, disregarded pain at their heart. In "The Happy Prince," for example, to the neglected statue of the Prince comes the revelation that "there is no Mystery so great as Misery." Only a group of Charity School children recognize the suffering Prince as an Angel, like the one they have seen in their dreams. To the Mayor and Town Councillors – the philistines, utilitarian and worldly – the statue stripped of its gold and jewels looks shabby, "little better than a beggar." Private suffering on a public stage is a common theme in Wilde's work.

In "The Nightingale and the Rose," a little bird leaves her nest in the oak tree to enact the highest form of sympathy. To help a student in the agony of unrequited love, the night-



"Do not give your children moral and religious instruction unless you are quite sure they will not take it too seriously."

BERNARD SHAW, *THE REVOLUTIONIST'S HANDBOOK*

TOP: ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS BEATRICE FOR "THE SELFISH GIANT." OPPOSITE: ILLUSTRATION BY ED YOUNG FOR "THE HAPPY PRINCE."

ingale impales herself on a thorn bush to birth a red rose for the youth to give to his beloved. Moving from spectatorship to self-hurt, the nightingale proves to be the truest lover and artist. Wilde wrote his own name into the fierce pang that shot through her at the last: "Bitter, bitter was the pain, and wilder and wilder grew her song, for she sang of the Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb."

In "The Selfish Giant," a small boy paves the way for a profound change of heart. The Giant, who has built a wall so children can't trespass to play in his garden, sees a boy "so small he could not reach up to the branches of the tree...wandering all around it and crying bitterly." After the Giant lifts the boy up into the tree and is embraced by the child, he knocks down the wall with an axe. All the children return to play, and the Giant grows old in "the most beautiful garden." Years later the little boy, who had vanished after their one meeting, reappears to promise the Giant a place in heaven, and we learn that he was Christ all along.

Kate Hennig's stage adaptation uses a fourth story, "The Remarkable Rocket," as a linking device for the other three. This talking firework is even more conceited than the young woman in "The Nightingale and the Rose," and even more selfish than the Giant. Self-regarding remarks – how good I look! – are his main topic of conversation. Yet his anticipated performance and self-inflating dignity fizzle in the end, dramatizing how capacities for growth may be wasted or blighted by egoism.

Personal injury – the private suffering on a public stage – gesture toward Nature, a transfigured world that vibrates to self-giving. At the dying Nightingale's last burst of music, "the white Moon...forgot the dawn, and lingered on in the sky. The red rose heard it, and it trembled all over with ecstasy, and opened its petals to the cold morning air. Echo bore it to her purple cavern in the hills, and woke the sleeping shepherds from their dreams. It floated through the reeds of the river and they carried its mes-



sage out to sea." Wilde energizes a structure of perception that allows the flow of empathy a cosmic foundation, animating Oneness as the ground of reality.

The criminal prosecution and execution that Jesus suffered may be considered what J.R.R. Tolkien termed a "good catastrophe," but only in the otherworldly setting the fairy tale provides: "a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur." At the end of "The Happy Prince," an Angel brings God an odd pair of objects from a trash heap – a dead swallow and the Prince's leaden heart – and they are sanctified as "the two most precious things in the city." Of Jesus, Wilde said, "one always thinks of him...as a lover for whose love the whole world was too small." Wilde's use of Christian metaphor anticipates

Tolkien's claim that the fairy tale "does not deny the existence of...sorrow and failure" but gives "a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief."

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ILLUSTRATION BY LISBETH ZWERGER FOR "THE SELFISH GIANT"; ILLUSTRATION BY JANA HEIDERSDORF FOR "THE HAPPY PRINCE"; ILLUSTRATION BY WALTER CRANE FOR "THE SELFISH GIANT"; ILLUSTRATION BY CANADIAN ILLUSTRATOR JAMES HILL FOR "THE REMARKABLE ROCKET."