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THE WILDEAN PALACE OF ART: ALLEGORIES OF EPHEMERAL BEAUTY AND EVERLASTING PASSION IN OSCAR WILDE'S FAIRY TALES

Abstract

Oscar Wilde's two collections of fairy tales, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), are often grouped together and categorised under children's literature. Yet, even at first glance, the reader may wonder whether these stories are truly intended for a young audience, especially when reading the latter volume. I intend to approach three specific tales in which their allegorical layers of meaning are envisioned as interlaced – akin to the *mise en abyme* artistic technique – where each individual work is embraced by the overall aesthetic framework. Similar to a palace, representing the artistic framing, in which there is a room within a room (which is itself found inside yet another room): as well as the layers of meaning being placed into each other. The aim of my analysis is to interpret Wilde's three narratives in the Victorian cultural context, revealing their deeper layers and thus shedding light on the complex relationship between pleasure and pain. My research begins by discussing Wilde's influence on Aestheticism and Victorian society, followed by a general introduction to fairy tales. Ultimately, I examine the motifs of aestheticism and passion in depth, which become manifestations of artistic and philosophical aspects in the allegorical structure of these tales.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, aestheticism, allegory, *The Happy Prince and Other Stories,* Victorian literature, *mise en abyme*

> "All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril."
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> (Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*)

On Wilde's Aestheticism, Fairy Tales and Allegory

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (1854-1900), better known as Oscar Wilde (or Sebastian Melmoth, after moving to Paris in his last years), was a 19th-century Irish playwright, novelist, essayist, and poet. He was not only noted for his unquestionable wit and genius but was also a defining figure in English literature. Among the many works he was celebrated for were his plays, including *Salomé, A Woman of No*

Importance, An Ideal Husband, or *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The latter one is not only a satirical comedy of manners but also introduces a new Victorian figure, the *dandy*, who, while exposing the hypocrisy of society with his wit and charm, also pays special attention to his attire and extravagant lifestyle (Horzum 77). But, being the "extreme aesthete" (Ellmann 143), Wilde was not much different from that iconic phenomenon; on the contrary, Wilde was wilder. Ari Adut's study reveals that Wilde's overflowing and "effeminate public persona" – with his billowing curls, enormous flapping collars surrounded by vibrant scarves, velvet frock coats, and knee-length stockings – was the perfect stereotype of a Victorian poseur and dandy; or, as Adut puts it, a homosexual. Not to mention that, at the time, caricatures of Wilde (for instance, by George du Maurier) were regular in the *Punch* magazine that mocked his extravagant, controversial and unconventional style, which remained his characteristics even after his death (Adut 227). Another, if not his most famous work, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), what Wilde called "an essay on decorative art" (Frankel 24), stands as a quintessential writing of Aestheticism which flourished in the late 19th century and left a significant impact on literature, visual arts and interior design. However, the novel was greeted with a fierce reception in the British press, and was stigmatised as "subversive," "vulgar," "unclean," "poisonous" and the like, since it encoded homoerotic and homosocial desires (Frankel 4–5).[1]

In Victorian England, art and literature were viewed as the 'golden path' through which ethical roles were presented, exemplifying proper behaviour and illustrating the 'reward' for noble deeds and the 'punishment' for immoral acts. In contrast, followers of Aestheticism believed that art and morality should remain separate, arguing that art was free from didacticism, since its sole purpose was the pure creation and appreciation of beauty (Britannica 2011). Therefore, those who favoured the conventional Victorian standards saw the last decade of the 19th century, *la fin de siècle*, as an era of decay and degeneration. The notion concerns general disillusionment among decadent authors who consequently introduced new perspectives, covering themes of sensuality with perverse, hedonistic and morbid desires in artistic creations (Boyiopoulos et. al. 1). In the Aesthetic Movement, such publications, as *The Yellow Book*, a literary magazine of avant-garde writing and visual art, were contributed to the further exploration of the principles and embodied its *Zeitgeist* by promoting the essence of beauty and artistic expression (Glick 328–29). However, Walter (Horatio) Pater was the one who introduced the French-originated *l'art pour l'art* or "*art for art's sake*" movement to England, and Oscar Wilde was its advocate (Quintus 1980, 559–62). Even in Wilde's "Preface" of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,[2] he claims that art should remain nothing but amoral, being outside the realm of morality versus immorality, since "[t]here is no such thing as a

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[1] Yet another novel, attributed to Wilde, titled *Teleny,* covers a male homoerotic pornography and, to quote Ed Cohen, "unfolds a tale of seduction, sex […], orgies, incest, blackmail, rape, suicide, death and love" (803).

[2] Later in-text references see as "Preface."

moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all. […] All art is quite useless" (3–4).

Alongside Wilde, Pater's writings also feature the so-called *decadence*. In his work, *The Renaissance* – the "manifesto of Aestheticism" and Wilde's "golden book" (Ellmann 93) –, it is stated that art is "relative" and cannot be defined. Pater claims that it is the critic's duty to express his own impressions to render meaning of a given work of art. In his "Conclusion," which was omitted from the second edition due to the possible "misinterpretations" by young men ("into whose hands it might fall"), he suggests that one should experience as many sensations as possible in order to taste the beauty and delight art has to offer. As Pater sums up, "the love of art for its own sake" can provide the most exquisite quality to one's moments, fulfilling the yearning for beauty, and the only success in our life is to keep that ecstasy, "to burn always with this hard, gemlike flame" (2020).

Oscar Wilde was one of the young men whose hands this book fell into (Frankel 28), and in "De Profundis," he refers to it as the book, "which has had such a strange influence over [his] life" (63). Wilde shared some of Pater's views, yet on the other hand, he had his own, more radical understanding of art and beauty that even his oeuvre attested. For instance, in "The Decay of Lying," one of Wilde's notable essays on art, he claims that "art never expresses anything but itself," and "all bad art comes from returning to life and nature." For him, "life imitates art far more than art imitates life," as life only shows what poetry or paintings have already revealed to us since art shapes our perception of reality. Finally, he concludes that the true purpose of art is lying: to create "beautiful untrue things" (1999, 170–171). Andrew R. Morris explains that Wilde's theory indicates that artistic imagination needs to be reinscribed into life; this is not the straightforward *l'art pour l'art* of Pater's aestheticism, but rather a nuanced critique of late-Victorian ideology (516).

These views even feature in Oscar Wilde's other literary works, most notably his fairy tales, collected in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891). Far from being simple morality tales, these decadent narratives offer a unique perspective on human passions, delving into the depths of emotion and the complexities of the psyche. As Justin T. Jones observes, "Wilde frequently inverts generic fairy tale structures to denote his break with convention and to complicate the relationship between beauty and morality in his stories" (886). While Wilde's tales are charming and often whimsical on the surface, they are imbued with melancholy and moral ambiguity, reflecting his aesthetic vision, and his complex understanding of life and art. This shift becomes even more significant when considering the broader tradition of *fairy tales*, a form within folklore rooted in oral traditions and characterised by supernatural beings, magical adventures, enchantments, and moral lessons that explore human nature and psychology. Their origins can be traced back to earlier storytelling traditions, such as the Middle Eastern *The Thousand and One Nights*, but it has also been shaped by European literary works, notably Charles Perrault's *Contes de ma mère l'Oye* and the collection of tales by 19th-century folklorists, such as the Brothers Grimm's *Kinder- und*

Hausmärchen, which became a cornerstone of fairy-tale literature (Cuddon et al. 266). Although many of these stories contain disturbing or gruesome episodes (which probably many of us would not consider suitable for children at all; cf. Sale 372–74), they ultimately strengthen traditional moral conventions – unlike Wilde's stories that demolish these conventions and can leave the reader in an atmosphere of ambiguity and unease.

Alongside this, the target audience for Oscar Wilde's tales is also questionable due to the dark themes they cover yet they are marked as bedtime stories *for children*. In her study, Hope Howell Hodgkins cites Wilde's claim that these stories were created "to mirror modern life in a form remote from reality […] and written, not for children, but for childlike people from eighteen to eighty!"; that is, for an adult age audience that can grasp the complex moral and aesthetic dimensions (45). Wilde frequently uses allegory in his narratives, where even the capitalised names of his characters often hint at the themes of each piece. For instance, in "The Happy Prince," "The Selfish Giant," and "The Remarkable Rocket," the protagonists' common names initially suggest certain traits (happy, selfish, remarkable). At the same time, as the plots develop, it becomes apparent that they are all intended to ironically misrepresent the characters' true nature. Allegory – cf. *allegoria*, that is "speaking otherwise" in Greek – can be interpreted as an "extended metaphor," often used for satirical, moral, and salutary purposes and it can be "a story or image with several layers of meaning: behind the literal or surface meaning lie one or more secondary meanings of varying degrees of complexity" (Cuddon et al. 21).[3]

On the other hand, Wilde's stories can equally be approached from a different perspective, namely by considering *how* their allegorical layers are arranged, for Wilde binds them together brilliantly. The conception of *mise en abyme* is a great illustration of this idea, as it refers to the "process of representation within representation" and engagement "with the art experience" (qtd. in Tsang 103) – as well as being an inherent part of Oscar Wilde's artistic palette. In his study, Jacob Emery summarises that the hermeneutical value of the *mise en abyme* or "text within a text" is generally perceived as deriving from its potential to indicate, or more precisely to portray "the framing text" (341). In this paper, I argue that in Wilde's tales this concept can be interpreted as 'a layer within a layer,' placed within yet another layer and framed by a larger aesthetic whole. A comparable image (mentioned in my title as well) is that of a palace as the artistic framing, containing a room within a room, each one placed inside another one. Wilde's artistic vision and philosophy are expressed on multiple levels of meaning, while he touches on themes such as love, passion, sacrifice, ephemeral beauty, and sexuality within an artistic frame *mise en abyme*. In the following section, I explore these allegorical layers from this artistic perspective, where I intend to put the emphasis on the aesthetic and sexual elements of the selected pieces, "The Remarkable Rocket," "The Birthday of the Infanta" and "The Young King," and how they are placed in the *Wildean Palace of Art*.

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[3] Furthermore, essential works can also be included here such as Aesop's fables, Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" from *The Republic*, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, or C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicle of Narnia* as well as the parables in the Old and New Testaments – all being prime examples of allegory (Quilligan 1979).

The Wildean Palace

> "*Mi bella Princesa*, your funny little dwarf will never dance again. It is a pity, for he is so ugly that he might have made the King smile."
> "But why will he not dance again?" asked the Infanta, laughing.
> "Because his heart is broken," answered the Chamberlain.
> And the Infanta frowned, and her dainty rose-leaf lips curled in pretty disdain.
> "For the future let those who come to play with me have no hearts," she cried, and she ran out into the garden." (Oscar Wilde, "The Birthday of the Infanta")[4]

It is no coincidence that I have chosen this excerpt since this chilling turn in one of Oscar Wilde's tales captures the often-cruel contrasts between innocence and indifference, beauty and brutality that characterise his stories. Wilde's fairy tales, and his writings in general, consciously illustrate his artistic and aesthetic credo, in which art and beauty are regarded as superior to moral and didactic standards. These narratives are highly embellished with stylised, vivid imagery, giving the reader the opportunity to engage all their senses in imagination and to be captivated by the enchanting worlds they offer. Nevertheless, the stories to be analysed, "The Remarkable Rocket," "The Birthday of the Infanta" and "The Young King," are primarily set within or around a palace – what Justin T. Jones terms "the palace of art" (889), or rather the 'palace of Wildeanism' – where it becomes clear that those who do not conform to Wilde's standards, are inevitably cast out one way or another. Another hallmark of his is the 'shaded' depiction of Wildean "male love" – or Wildean *paiderastia* (pederasty, a love between an older man [*erastes*] and an adolescent/much younger boy [*eromenos*]), which is a recurring and celebrated theme in his tales as well (Wood 167). Simultaneously, Wilde highlights the relationship between beauty and ugliness, delight and despair through richly symbolic narratives. These tales indicate an artistic universe where, once ugliness tries to penetrate with a rebellious yell, art evokes an *auto-da-fé* to restore the balance of beauty.

One of the clearest examples of this feature is "The Remarkable Rocket." This story is the quintessential portrayal of a self-indulgent and hypocritical artist who draws the attention to his high social significance and his exquisite appearance –

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[4] This tale is from the collection *The Happy Prince and Other Stories*, containing the volumes *The Happy Prince and Other Stories* and *A House of Pomegranates*; hereafter referred to as *HP*.

only alleged by him through quite satirical monologues: “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” (*HP* 40).[5] Nonetheless, Wilde adorns the narrative with delightful descriptions in decorated language, as in the image of the moon rising “like a wonderful silver shield,” the stars beginning to shine, and the sound of music coming from the palace (*HP* 42), the very place where the Prince, with his “dreamy violet eyes” and hair like “fine gold,” and the little Princess, as pale as a white rose, hold their wedding ceremony. Their names, however, do not necessarily imply size but age differences, which brings us back to the ‘pederastic’ view of Wilde – with an older lover and a younger beloved, here with a female adolescent. The “White rose, Red rose” (*HP* 37) part is also quite allegorical due to the use of colours since white symbolises innocence, cleanness etc., and red is the colour of “the delights of married life,” “blood,” “flame,” “love” etc. (Shukla 78), which can even indicate the loss of the little Princess’s virginity.

While the fireworks are waiting to be let off to give the most exquisite attraction for the celebration of the Prince and the little Princess’s marriage, the Roman Rocket presents his quite ironic, egoistic life philosophy to the others. Close to the midnight show, the Rocket becomes overheated with self-adoration which gets him very emotional. His tears of pleasure make his gunpowder so wet that he becomes unable to ascend to the sky with the other fireworks. Besides, he fails to have any of the characteristics of being “Remarkable,” he even gets tossed into the mud. At the end of the tale, when he finally manages to be shot – only by chance – into the sky, his ‘work of art’ still goes unnoticed. And if that is not enough, after he ‘explodes,’ he is still convinced that this performance has been the most amazing one man has ever ‘seen.’ Without even noticing, the Roman Rocket gets expelled from the ‘Wildean Palace,’ since he is too self-absorbed to be pleasing. It is stated in “Preface” to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that “the only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely” (4), and since the Rocket is useless in a sense that his only duty is to fascinate, but still he is admired by none at all, therefore there is no excuse for him to remain in Wilde’s artistic realm.

Arrogance and trampling on others also feature in “The Birthday of the Infanta,” embodied by the Spanish Princess, but in a more brutal and far-reaching way, where the illustration of aesthetic beauty and sexuality is more prominent. At the beginning, Wilde invites his reader to an exquisite occasion: the twelfth birthday of the Infanta. His richly descriptive prose grabs its readers into the world of sensations by giving the chance to visualise the setting with the brightly shining sun, the “striped tulips” that standing straight to pay their homage to the Infanta, and the “splendid” roses, the "purple butterflies" with "gold dust on their wings," with the sweet scent of the magnolia trees etc. The use of colours, especially bright ones – purple, violet, scarlet, blood-red, white, gold, vermilion etc. – also plays a special role in this tale. Shukla puts the emphasis on paleness with which Wilde endows most of his characters. Shukla argues that one of the associations of 'pallor' is beauty, for instance, the Infanta's pale face and pale-gold hair or "the pale jewelled hand" of her deceased mother suggest their appealing, pure look. Even in "The Remarkable Rocket," the beauty of the little Princess is identified with paleness (77): "so pale was she that as she drove through the streets all the people wondered. She was like a white rose" (*HP* 36).

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[5] Richard Ellman remarks in Oscar Wilde’s biography memoir that Wilde associated the Rocket with James McNeill Whistler, and was inspired by his painting, *The Falling Rocket*. Wilde even noted that “Mr. Whistler always spelt art, and I believe still spells it, with a capital ‘I’” (450).

It is such a blissful day that even "the pomegranates split and cracked with the heat, and showed their bleeding red heart" (*HP* 69), which, according to Kate Pendlebury, suggests the most explicit depiction of the Infanta's incipient sexual maturation (131), since she is at the age when adolescent girls start menstruating. In addition, the pomegranate symbolises fertility too, as it is also suggested by its Latin name, *pomum granatum* (many-seeded apple) (Atre 3), which further supports Pendlebury's claim on sexual maturation. Indeed, another highly erotic reference is the touch of the sun on the pomegranates; for it "was shining so brightly" that its heat caused the split and bleed of the fruit: just as the first sexual penetration results in the loss of virginity. But the pomegranate motif in this tale implies other level of interpretation. Continuing Pendlebury's analysis, the cracked and bleeding pomegranate, on the one hand, could symbolise a broken heart because of the unfulfilled romantic love in both the King's and the Dwarf's cases (as the King's beloved wife is dead and the Dwarf's feelings are unrequited by the Infanta), and on the other hand, it foreshadows the tragic death of the "*petit monsire*"[6] (131–2). Thus, this allegorical fruit itself represents the layer of sexuality being placed in the Wildean Palace of Art.

Since the Infanta's birthday is an extraordinary celebration in the kingdom, this is an exceptional occasion when she is allowed to play with children of her choice, outside her rank. Even if her little playfellows wear fancy clothes for the ceremony; the boys "large-plumed hats and short fluttering cloaks" and the girls "long brocaded gowns," the Infanta with "aureole of faded gold" hair, wearing a grey satin robe, a heavily embroidered silver skirt with a puffed sleeve and a rigid corset decorated with delicate pearls,[7] is still the "most graceful of all" (*HP* 70). To make this

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[6] As Don Pedro calls the Dwarf near the end of the tale. It is a playful version of *Monsieur* (sir/mister in French) instead of *monstre* (monster) being an ironic twist by Wilde.

[7] Wilde reveals in one of his letters that he modelled the Infanta after Diego Velázquez's famed painting, *Las Meninas* (1656) of the Spanish royal family (Jones 900, n. 22), and of the little girl standing in the middle of the painting in a beautiful dress. Not to mention that even a Dwarf-like character is presented in the painting as well. Moreover, this artwork's significance extends further, as it is one of the finest examples of *mise en abyme* in art. Through its depiction of Infanta Margarita and her entourage in front of a mirror, it also presents King Philip IV and Queen Mariana outside the frame, while at the same time making

prestigious day even more magnificent, various shows are organised to ensure the pleasure of the Infanta. As attested by Justin T. Jones, the entertainments "are only diluted representations of reality – highly stylized and exaggerated to avoid verisimilitude" and to protect the children's pure and beautiful "aesthetic world" from harsh reality (888). There is a fake bullfight, an Italian puppetry,[8] animal shows, singing, dancing and the like, but the most amusing one for the children is the little Dwarf's dancing which is greeted with a "loud shout of delight" (*HP* 77). Although the reason behind this great excitement has nothing to do with the Dwarf's dancing skills, but the fact that he is so ugly that it causes the Court's, but especially the Infanta's astonishment. It is the kind of *astonishment* that Edmund Burke highlights in his essay on the *sublime* (vs. the beautiful). According to Burke, it is "the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling:" such objects that can evoke the feeling of pain, danger, terror or uneasiness (without any physical interference) are "the source of the *sublime*" (part I. sec. VII.).

In the case of the little Dwarf, with his unnatural look: "hunchbacked, and crooked-limbed, with huge lolling head and mane of black hair" (*HP* 86), can produce a heightened sense of *delightful horror* – "the horrible" which the Spanish Court always had a "cultivated passion for" (*HP* 77), which is "one of the strongest of all the passions." There is also a sense of "tranquillity" lurking in the feeling of *terror;* "its object is the sublime" (Burke part IV. Sec VII.). Thus, despite being so grotesque and monstrous in appearance – the "perfect horror" how the Cactus refers to him (*HP* 79) – as to arouse fear, the Dwarf's playful and kind nature makes him harmless to any of the characters and provides a sense of relief in them. As Burke explains, it is the feeling of *delight* accompanied by "the removal of pain or danger" – that is, *relative pleasure* (part I. Sec IV.). Shun-liang Chao explores how the grotesque or "the idea of deformity […] and incompleteness lies at the very centre of the sublime" (2). Chao explains the aesthetic significance of the grotesque, by using Ovid's monsters as an example,[9] in which the delight of the imagination is provided by strangeness and curiosity we have never experienced before (6).

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them part of the scene. The artist Velázquez also appears in the composition by holding a brush in front of a large canvas, which breaks down the boundaries between the painter, the painting, and the viewer (Konstantinidis 2–3). Thus, *Las Meninas* presents a repetitive multi-layered structure, which includes a painting inside another painting and a gaze within another gaze, portraying the *mise en abyme* artistic technique.

[8] Of all the ones listed, these two are the most brutal, as they depict various fatal (even suicidal in the tragedy of *Sophonisba*), bloody and cruel events of real life, where the latter performance even makes the children cry.

[9] In both antiquity and the Renaissance, grotesque images were called "monsters" as they represented a combination of the "unnatural" and the "natural" (Summers 24). At the same time, another interpretation of monsters can be read in Duffy's analysis where he sees the Dwarf's grotesqueness as a symbol of homosexuality, since at the time the Victorian press referred to homosexuals as "monsters" (348, n. 15) and similarly labelled them as "unnatural" or "exotic" beings.

Therefore, the deformed Dwarf even in the Kantian sense is the manifestation of the *sublime* by summoning the "unboundedness" or rather, as Kant puts it, the "Unform," and provokes the "Enthusiastic Terror" (Chao 4) or (relative) pleasure and pain in his audience.

The relationship between pleasure and pain is also a dominant theme in the work, allegorically associated with beauty (pleasure) and passion (pain). There is the Queen (who is already deceased by the time the narrative begins), whom the King loves so insanely and passionately, but so blindly that he does not even notice she suffers from a "strange malady" which eventually causes her death. A "terrible agony" falls on the King he cannot bear, which leads to his morbid, necrophiliac behaviour of not allowing his wife to be buried but keeping her in the Palace's chapel where he goes frequently to attempt waking "the cold painted face" with "his mad kisses." He does not even take part in his own daughter's birthday as she now looks just like her mother at the time the King met her: "when he was but fifteen of age, and she still younger" (*HP* 71–3) – it can be another pederastic reference. Then, similarly, these two phenomena appear with the Dwarf, who by being happy with "full of the highest spirit," madly falls in love with the Infanta, who, only to tease another character, throws a white rose to him. He starts "kissing the white rose in an absurd ecstasy of pleasure" and makes "the most uncouth and clumsy gestures of delight" (*HP* 79), resulting in a highly sexual portrayal and indicating another pederastic desire, since the Infanta is much younger than the Dwarf (Duffy 339).

Later, terror arises when he finally discovers his hideous appearance in a mirror by realising the creature in front of him is his reflection,[10] and that he is the object of ridicule in the Spanish Court. Due to his great pain, his heart breaks and he collapses, provoking another great laughing of the children, but this time the *petit monsire* never to rise and dance anymore. To quote Jones: "[the Dwarf] has looked through the mirrored window into the real world and introduced cruel reality into the palace of art" (890) for which he pays the ultimate price. Each room the Dwarf passes through reflects a deeper allegorical layer of his journey toward self-realisation: from grandeur, through violence and madness (presented via tapestry and paintings) to the throne-room of judgment (covered with luxury and splendour), and finally the "brightest" chamber where its mirror reveals the Dwarf's true grotesque self (illuminating his own being). In this progress, being mirrored in the narrative *mise en abyme,* the aestheticised outside world guides him to his inner allegorical awakening, which climaxes in his tragic recognition (and death) when he faces his monstrous reflection.

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[10] This moment can be compared to the kind of recognition that Jacques Lacan discusses in his psychoanalytic theory of the "mirror stage"; a misrecognition of infants that creates an idealised image ("Ideal-I") of a complete self when they first see their reflection in the mirror (76). In the Dwarf's case, however, it is his true, unfiltered self he sees, and instead of satisfaction, this revelation brings horror and despair to him. Moreover, according to Duffy, this scene parallels Dorian Gray's discovery of his own monstrosity in the enchanted portrait, which Eve K. Sedgwick describes as a gay-themed plot element as well (qtd. in Duffy 348, n. 15).

The only one whose pleasure cannot be disrupted in any way is the Infanta. Even when she sees his grieving father or the dying Dwarf, her joyful mood does not fade. Her last remark in the story also shows her cruel indifference as she declares that "for the future" those who come to play with her should "have no hearts" (*HP* 89) – such as those who are there to celebrate her. The tale presents the Wildean Aestheticism in the person of the Infanta. Wilde in his critical essay, "The Decay of Lying" asserts that "all bad art comes from returning to life and nature" (1999, 170), and since here Heart symbolises life and the Dwarf represents Nature (which is his natural habitat), he brings misbalance into the realm of 'Art',[11] therefore his fate is ultimately sealed.

Yet, of all these tales, it is "The Young King" where aestheticism is at its most prominent, declares Duffy (336). The tale professes an unconventional luxurious lifestyle (Quintus 1977, 710), where the Young King's excessive pleasure-seeking is best illustrated by the rather explicit (homo)sexual imagery of the narrative, with his overflowing obsession towards (male) beauty – or as Wilde features: the Young King's "strange passion for beauty that was destined to have so great an influence over his life" (HP 54). The King surrounds himself with more and more fascinating and decorative objects (rich jewels, clothes, perfumes, fine furnishings etc.) and takes "voyages through a marvellous land," in the "wonderful palace – *Joyeuse*"[12] (*HP* 55). During his artistic adventure, he bumps into sculptures like Hadrian's Bithynian slave that he kisses, and worships – even kneels before – the kind of artworks that illustrates beautiful Greek (naked) men, such as Adonis, Endymion, or Narcissus.[13]

The Young King, furthermore, embodies a Victorian dandy with his effeminate style in which he pays excessively special attention to his appearance, and he takes delight in all things beautiful. Just like Dorian in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (or Wilde himself), the Young King is a "natural aesthete," and he is fully devoted to art and beauty. Nothing proves this better than the immense excitement he feels towards his coronation garment: "the robe of tissue gold, and the ruby-studded crown, and the sceptre with its rows and rigs of pearl" (*HP* 56). Moreover, he already sees "himself in fancy standing at the high altar of the cathedral in the fair raiment of a King" (*HP* 56), as the true king of the 'Wildean Palace of Art.' On the other hand, the tale also engages with sexual themes. At the very beginning, the description of the King – who “had flung himself back with deep sigh of relief on the soft cushion of his embroidered couch, lying there, wild-eyed and open mouthed, like a brown woodland Faun, or some young animal of the forest newly snared by the hunters” (*HP* 53) – evokes an autoerotic scene. Similar imagery appears in the “great tufts of ostrich plumes sprang, like white foam,” which as Duffy notes, leaves “no doubt as to [Wilde’s] intention.” In addition, the Young King’s close “friendship” with his “little page” can be read as a covertly homosexual relationship, recalling pederastic intimacy (Duffy 335).

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[11] Among his bizarre look and lack of interest towards beauty, since he cares "nothing for all this magnificence" (*HP* 85) he sees in the Palace.

[12] *Joyeuse* or *joyeux* means 'joyful', 'happy' in French.

[13] As it is indicated in Duffy's analysis, the setting with different objects around the King refers to the Victorian homosexuals of London's underworld. Items like the laughing, green, bronze Narcissus, or the flowers in the King's sight, are all signifiers of homosexuality, since 'Narcissus' was a code word for appealing gay men, also male florists, or simply just the frequent use of flowers in literature were associated with gay cult (337).

After three symbolic dreams about the growing horrors and sacrifices his coronation regalia brings to his people – the King realises (unlike the Infanta) that his devotion to luxury and pleasure could ultimately result in the decay of his kingdom. Thus, he renounces all forms of splendour, including his coronation attire. His former wild obsession with art is transformed into a devotion to Christ, though not in a sense the reader might expect. In several studies, including Justin T. Jones’s, it is confirmed that the Young King fancies Christ’s image and worships its beauty only in an aesthetic way, without any intention to practice religion (894–95). The aforementioned artistic vision of the King (when he sees himself in fancy standing at the high altar) also foreshadows the “Triumph of Beauty” (*HP* 56), and at the same time, the Young King’s salvation, as in his *Imitatio Christi* he is willing to be killed to spare the poor from suffering – but his main purpose is to be adored by people just like Christ was. The Young King enters into a “revised Christian aesthetic” realm (Jones 895) where the emphasis is on celestial, majestic beauty, not religion itself, since the “Glory of God” manifests in Art that eventually crowns the Young King (*HP* 68).

Conclusion

With the ending of “The Young King,” Wilde opens the main entrance of his ‘Palace of Art,’ revealing layer by layer the innermost core of his allegorical tales. In an aestheticised framework, he depicts these layers with a certain kind of movement: his narratives shift from the appreciation of beauty to the role of love and passion (of art), and ultimately toward a higher aesthetic and spiritual state of Passion (of Christ in *Imitatio Christi*), where desire and sacrifice become inseparable from each other.

In “The Remarkable Rocket,” the artistic framework appears in the pomp of the royal Palace which hosts the magnificent wedding. Yet this beauty soon gets ‘tainted’ by the Rocket’s false claim of passion for beauty – in the form of self-adoration, which is a distorted demonstration of what true passion looks like to him. “The Birthday of the Infanta” deepens this motion: the Dwarf’s innocent love and admiration for the Infanta is framed within a shining aesthetic surface of the Palace, only to collapse into tragedy. Here, beauty and passion cannot coexist, since love is fragile and not able to survive in a cruel, heartless and materialistic world Wilde portrays in the narrative. Finally, “The Young King” represents the climax of the structure, where beauty and love are transformed into Passion (with a capital ‘P’), which is not only aestheticised, but also carries moral and spiritual meaning; achieved through suffering and sacrifice. Thus, in these recursive allegorical layers, it is beautifully presented how Wilde transforms beauty into love, love into passion, and passion into Passion, so that each story mirrors the other layers of meaning *mise en abyme*, within an overall aesthetic framing: in *The Wildean Palace of Art*.

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