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In the Heart of the Wildean Pomegranate: Beauty, Passion and Faith in Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales

No coração da romã de Wilde: Beleza, paixão e fé nos contos de fadas de Oscar Wilde

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Abstract: *Oscar Wilde's fiction is known for its use of richly imaginative worlds, where vividly descriptive imagery and ornate language embody the spirit of aestheticism. Within this highly decorated aesthetic framework, the allegorical layers of meaning – art, passion, and Christianity – emerge through recurring symbolic elements that lead the reader towards deeper moral and philosophical dimensions of the narratives. Among these elements, the pomegranate motif stands out as a particularly unique and unifying image which, despite its classical, biblical, and aesthetic connotations, has received surprisingly little critical attention. This paper examines how the pomegranate's multilayered associations – e.g. sensuality, suffering, separation, or salvation – illuminate the central concepts across Oscar Wilde's "The Nightingale and the Rose," "The Happy Prince" in his first collection,* The Happy Prince and Other Tales *(1888), as well as "The Fisherman and His Soul" in his second volume,* A House of Pomegranates *(1891). By tracing the development of the pomegranate motif throughout each narrative, I intend to uncover the 'core' of Wilde's stories, demonstrating how the allegorical layers of beauty, love, and faith manifest and unfold from one to the other, transforming the passion of art into the Passion of Christ.*

Keywords: *Oscar Wilde;* Happy Prince and Other Stories*; Victorian literature; Aestheticism; Allegory; Pomegranate.*

Resumo*: A ficção de Oscar Wilde é conhecida pelo uso de mundos ricamente imaginativos, onde imagens vividamente descritivas e*

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linguagem ornamentada incorporam o espírito do esteticismo. Dentro dessa estrutura estética altamente decorada, as camadas alegóricas de significado — arte, paixão e cristianismo — emergem através de elementos simbólicos recorrentes que conduzem o leitor a dimensões morais e filosóficas mais profundas das narrativas. Entre esses elementos, o motivo da romã destaca-se como uma imagem particularmente única e unificadora que, apesar de suas conotações clássicas, bíblicas e estéticas, recebeu surpreendentemente pouca atenção da crítica. Este artigo examina como as associações multifacetadas da romã — por exemplo, sensualidade, sofrimento, separação ou salvação — iluminam os conceitos centrais em "O Rouxinol e a Rosa", de Oscar Wilde, "O Príncipe Feliz", na sua primeira coleção, O Príncipe Feliz e Outros Contos *(1888), bem como "O Pescador e a Sua Alma", no seu segundo volume,* Uma Casa de Romãs *(1891). Ao traçar o desenvolvimento do motivo da romã ao longo de cada narrativa, pretendo revelar o «núcleo» das histórias de Wilde, demonstrando como as camadas alegóricas de beleza, amor e fé se manifestam e se desenrolam de uma para a outra, transformando a paixão pela arte na Paixão de Cristo.*

Palavras-chave: *Oscar Wilde,* O Príncipe Feliz e Outros Contos; *Literatura Vitoriana; Esteticismo; Alegoria; Romã*

"Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope."
(Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*)

Aestheticism and Fairy Tales

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (1854–1900), an Irish-born, decadent, "extreme aesthete" (Ellmann 143), was an outstanding novelist, essayist, dramatist, and a poet in the Late Victorian Period. His works reflect his genius and wit with their sophisticated and ornate language that was unmistakably Wilde's trademark. One of the most famed and best known pieces of his is *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) that even he himself defined as "an essay on decorative art" (Frankel 24), but was labelled by the contemporary British press as a "'vulgar,' 'unclean,'

'poisonous,' 'discreditable,' and 'a sham'" novel since it concerned latent homoerotic desires and "gross indecency" (Frankel 4–8). Still, it is considered as an integral part of the Aesthetic Movement flourishing at the end of the nineteenth century, in the 'decadent *fin de siècle*' era.

Art and literature were seen as a medium for defining and monitoring ethical rules and roles, where the representation of 'rewards' for performing noble deeds, and 'punishment' for any immoral act against strict ethical codes, was at the very centre of the exemplary demonstration of proper and virtuous behaviour (Pantić 406–407). Aesthetes, on the other hand, considered art and morality to be distinct, asserting that any artistic creation should remain devoid of didactics as its sole aim is the mere production and appreciation of beauty, as it should be made for nothing but to evoke pleasure in its audience. Thus, those who preferred the traditional Victorian norms saw the last decade as a degeneration – which is, associated with Aestheticism. The era was pervaded by a sense of disillusionment (with the Victorian materialistic and realistic mindset) of decadent artists, who, as a consequence, introduced new approaches (e.g. to literature, visual arts or interior design) and touched on topics such as perversion, sensuality, hedonism, or morbid lusts, placing a quite excessive focus on style and appearance (Boyiopoulos et. al. 1).

The *l'art pour l'art* (or "art for art's sake") movement of French origin was introduced to England by Walter Pater, who had paved the way for the notion with his notorious book, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). It is regarded as "the manifesto of Aestheticism" and the "golden book" of Oscar Wilde (Ellmann 93). According to Pater, art is a subjective concept and, *ipso facto*, cannot be defined; its value lies in the individual (sensory) experience. He proposes that it should be the critic's responsibility to formulate their own perceptions with the aim of making sense of a piece of art. In his "Conclusion," Pater encourages the reader to entirely submit oneself to as many sensations as possible, to 'feast the eyes' on the beauty and pleasure of an artistic creation. "The love of art for its own sake" brings "the highest quality to [one's] moments," satisfying the desire for beauty, therefore the sole success of our lives is to maintain this ecstasy, "to burn always with this gemlike flame" (Pater 197–99). Still, Aestheticism was most propagated by Wilde, who in his "Preface" to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*[1] summed up the purpose of art, best described in his renowned quote: "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all" (3–4). He was explicitly radical in his claims about art's amorality, being beyond the boundaries of morality and immorality.

These views even feature in Wilde's other literary works, such as in his fairy tales. His two collections, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891). A *fairy tale* is traditionally a literary form, and colloquially refers to a "widespread form of fiction for children" including classics, like *The Arabian Nights*, Perrault's *Contes de ma mère l'Oye* (1697), Andersen's *Fairy Tales* (1835), or *Winnie the Pooh* (1926) by A. A. Milne (Cuddon et al. 120) or *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*Children's and Household's Tales*). In written form, a fairy tale is usually a prose narrative about a hero's or a heroine's fortunate or unfortunate (magical) adventure, experience of supernatural events, enchantments etc., culminating in a "happily ever after" while it can often be an "interpretation of human nature and psychology" (Cuddon et al. 266). On the other hand, in his study, Jack Zipes argues that although "the literary fairy tale for children developed as a constitutive conservative element of the civilizing process;" there were always "dissenters" who have challenged its norms by parodying the genre or reshaping its themes; Zipes mentions Oscar Wilde as an example who introduced progressive ideas into his tales (304-314).

Allegory and *Mise en Abyme*

In this paper, I argue that in Wilde's tales, the allegorical layers of the narrative – namely art, passion, and Christianity – form a nested structure, with each tale, and even the allegorical layers unfolding within each other, meanwhile all embraced by a larger aesthetic framework, that is, they are to be read and approached from a distinctly artistic perspective. According to J.A. Cuddon, in an allegory, a story or image operates on several layers of meaning, with "one or more secondary meanings of varying degrees of complexity," while also being closely related to parables and fables – therefore, it likewise can be regarded as an "extended metaphor," which is often employed for moral, satirical, and educational reasons (21). In his fairy tales, Oscar Wilde repeatedly applies this literary device, and even the names of his characters frequently allude to the central topic of a certain tale.[2] The common names of his protagonists, such as Happy Prince, or Selfish Giant imply particular characteristics (happiness, selfishness), yet as the stories progress, it becomes obvious that they are all meant for deceiving the reader for ironic purposes.

At the same time, these tales are also approachable from another, novel perspective, namely *how* the allegorical layers of meaning are placed since they are, indeed, masterfully intertwined by Wilde. The artistic technique of *mise en abyme*[3] offers a way to visualise this

idea. As explained by Gregory Minissale, *mise en abyme* refers to "the process of representation within representation" and the involvement in "the art experience" (qtd. in Tsang 103). Furthermore, regarding Jacob Emery's study, the *mise en abyme*, or "text-within-the-text," is thought to have hermeneutic value due to how it can reveal, or more accurately, depict "the framing text" (314).Therefore, in the forthcoming paragraphs, I intend to investigate and illustrate the aforementioned layers in the analysis of the tales titled "The Nightingale and The Rose," The Happy Prince" and "The Fisherman and His Soul".

The Wildean Pomegranate

Oscar Wilde loved breaking conventions nearly as much as he adored art, which extended to his unique approach to Christianity, where he famously called Christ "the supreme Individualist" (1999, 73). As John Allen Quintus argues, Wilde "sought to appreciate aesthetic and psychological possibilities inherent in each [Christianity and Christ] rather than espouse religious principles or theological lessons" (515). Furthermore, Quintus observes that Wilde not only considered Christ as a "realised man" who rebelled against the social norms and "became what he wanted to become," but also identified him as the "precursor" of Romanticism in the field of art and "the supreme artificer" in history (515).

Wilde really saw Christ as an artist whose life embodied beauty and sacrifice, infusing spirituality with creative expressions. Consequently, he regarded these phenomena as "capable of transforming human beings into sentient people" who exhibit both compassion and autonomy, making them "conscious of art and culture and aware of the importance of their souls" (515–16). Wilde's works emphasise these aesthetic and spiritual sensibilities, placing at the heart of a Christ-like life (alongside love and forgiveness), a journey to self-development, self-reliance, and self-expression.

This idea highlights that living such a lifestyle means embracing creative self-manifestation, since the world is full of opportunities for fulfilment where one must remain "entirely and absolutely himself" (Wilde 1999, 69). Thus, my analysis of the allegorical layers of meaning begins with "The Nightingale and The Rose" tale which most beautifully portrays the bird's sacrifice for love and art, where her devotion transforms into a living passion, culminating in the creation of a marvellous work of art. The Nightingale – seeking to help the Student find a red rose so that he may ask his beloved to dance at the ball – must press her breast against the Rose-Tree's thorn

and sing all night, letting it pierce her heart so that her life-blood should colour the rose red. She willingly makes this lethal sacrifice, declaring that "Death is a great price to pay for a red rose" but "Love is better than Life" (*HP* 14).

As the Moon rises, the Nightingale presses her breast against the Rose-Tree and sings all night long with the thorn going deeper inside her chest to fulfil her mission. The tale contains quite explicit descriptions of a sexual intercourse, including the suggestion of orgasm, unfolding under the three songs of the Nightingale. The first song she sings is about "the birth of love of a boy and a girl," resulting in the "pale rose" to grow on the "topmost spray" of the Tree (*HP* 16) – a fairly straightforward depiction of a pre-ejaculatory stage of male arousal. Then, as her song about "the birth of passion in the soul of a man and a maid" (*HP* 16) intensifies and the rose deepens in colour: the characters are getting closer to their metaphorical orgasmic stage. When the Rose-tree's thorn pierces through the Nightingale's heart – implying the reach of the sexual climax –, for she sings about the everlasting, "divine love" (Willoughby 27) "of the Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb" (*HP* 16).

As the rose acquires its final colour, the Nightingale simultaneously begins to lose consciousness, bringing the tale to its symbolic climax – the last stage of orgasm. The rose on the Tree responds to the Nightingale's "voice," trembling "all over with ecstasy" (*HP* 16), but as a result, the Nightingale dies.[4] In this context, her death can be taken allegorically, evoking the French concept of *la petite mort* (the little death), which is defined as "the sensation of orgasm as likened to death" (Wingrove 228). This "momentary unconsciousness" also reflects Sigmund Freud's distinction between our two drives; life instinct (*Eros*) and death instinct (*Thanatos*), both of which play a role in the sexual act as well, being united and perfected at its climax (Antal 69) – which is passionately portrayed in Wilde's story.

The Nightingale's last breath sends her angelic song soaring, and her divine artwork is finally finished, yet the creation of this splendid red rose ultimately falls short of the Student's purpose. The Professor's daughter refuses the flower, stating that it does not match her dress and that she has already accepted the invitation of the Chamberlain's nephew, who offered her real jewels. Being so outraged, the Student throws the rose into the street, where a cart tramples it, destroying the hitherto outstanding flower; the Nightingale's gorgeous work of art. He then affirms that Love is foolish and "not half as useful as Logic" (*HP* 17), contradicting the Nightingale's earlier view of Love's importance. This ending echoes the aesthetic credo that no artwork should serve any purpose other than existing for its own sake (other than giving pleasure to its beholder).

For the Student, the rose is merely a tool to win the girl of his dream, rather than something to be admired for its beauty. The rose ultimately had to perish, for otherwise it would have been tainted by the unworthiness of the two human characters, who fail to appreciate either art or true love.

In the tale, the pomegranate motif shows its significance since it symbolises richness and wealth (Pendlebury 128). Yet Wilde places Love above all the luxuries, claiming that it "is more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals. Pearls and pomegranates cannot buy it, nor is it set forth in the marketplace" (*HP* 11). This should be viewed within the aesthetic framing: love opens the opportunity to create the most exquisite work of art. In "The Nightingale and The Rose," the splendid rose symbolises the Nightingale's masterpiece that born from the fusion of her three songs, while also representing her artistic sacrifice. She literally pours her whole heart into its creation, embedding her three songs within each other – and within her heart.

The Nightingale's death not only symbolises her passion for art but also evokes the imagery of Christ's Passion, aligning the bird's suffering and self-sacrifice with the broader context of the kind of redeemer. Guy Willoughby argues that this tale functions as "an allegory for the all-consuming love and commitment required of Christ's most notable imitator, the artist" (27). Willoughby suggests that the "thorn-crown" of the Nightingale's suffering blossoms into the red rose – the "venerable symbol of love, beauty, and perfection" – that becomes the artwork in which the creator's own martyrdom is embodied (27). Moreover, as Jarlath Killeen claims, there is another parallel between the Nightingale's death and the Crucifixion of Christ, since both gave their lives and shed their blood for humanity, "for a beautiful idea the world was clearly not ready for" (46).

"The Happy Prince" tale delves even further into the themes of sacrifice and compassion, using the pomegranate motif as a representation of purified and beautified celestial ascension. It is Wilde's earliest fairy tale (1885) and the eponymous story of his initial collection, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), which has been "a perennial favourite of children," and is still celebrated in the 21st century (Wood 157). The narrative opens with the embellished description of the Happy Prince, who is "gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold," for his eyes he has "two bright sapphires," and "a large red ruby" glows "on his sword-hilt" (*HP* 1) – a striking example of Wilde's use of ornate and richly decorative language that also sets the aesthetic frame of his allegorical narratives. The Prince's beauty and happiness are very much adored (like an idol) and envied by the citizens who wish to have a life like the one he lived. Yet the statue-Prince is quite unhappy, as he has been set up so high he can clearly see

"all the ugliness and all the misery" of his city, and though his heart "is made of lead" yet he "cannot chose but weep" (*HP* 3). This image recalls Christ, who beholds both the sinfulness of humanity and its sufferings (e.g. poverty, hunger, grief, pain, and death). In the Gospels there are three notable moments when Jesus weeps, each revealing his humanity and compassion for affliction, much like the Prince: (1) at the tomb of Lazarus, where – though he knows he will raise him from the dead – he shares in the grief of those who mourn (John 11:35); (2) as he approaches Jerusalem, foreseeing its destruction despite the peace and salvation he offers (Luke 19:41–44); and (3) in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he prays in anguish before the crucifixion, showing his human fear and agony (Hebrews 5:7).

Out of compassion and generosity, the Happy Prince, with the help of his loyal Swallow, gives away his splendour piece by piece. While he sacrifices his *outward* beauty and sight to bring joy to the suffering, both the Prince and the Swallow discover their *inner* beauty and undergo a process of spiritual beautification as the Swallow even notes feeling warmth after performing a good deed. The 'transformed' Prince – blind and pale from sacrifice – parallels Jesus carrying the cross, both bearing humanity's miseries and guilt upon themselves. Although the Happy Prince emerges as a Christ-like figure, the Swallow, his devoted helper, mirrors John, Christ's "beloved disciple" (John 13:23; 19:26), who remained faithful even at the foot of his cross – another parallel portrayed in the tale. The Swallow first settles at the Prince's feet, where their friendship begins, and finally dies there after a farewell kiss, marking the end of their earthly bond. The feet thus serve as both the burdened beginning and the salvific ending, recalling the symbolic role of Christ's feet in adoration (Matthew 28:9, when the women worshiped Him after the Resurrection), suffering (Psalm 22:16; Luke 24:39–40, pierced during the crucifixion), forgiveness (Luke 7:37–50, the story of the sinful woman), purification (John 13:4–15, the Last Supper), and redemption – key themes throughout the story as well. Additionally, the Swallow can also function as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, bringing gifts, love, joy, consolation, peace and guidance to those in need, while also representing loyalty, self-sacrifice, service, and spiritual transition.

After the bird's death, the leaden heart of the Prince breaks with sorrow. With these sacrifices their mission is finally completed; as Christ said: "*Tetelestai!*" (John 19:30).[5] Both the Swallow and the Happy Prince eventually manage to beautify their souls and undergo an aestheticised spiritual improvement, which transform their selfishness into selflessness (as in "The Selfish Giant"). Initially, they only pursue their own interest: the Swallow abandons his

friends for love, and the formerly-human-Prince sought various pleasures for himself. Then, they start to follow a (Wildean) Christ-life which ultimately results in their entry to God's "garden of Paradise" (*HP* 10), and Wilde's Eden of Art.

The pomegranate motif also appears in the narrative in the description of the young playwright student, with his lips being as "red as a pomegranate" (*HP* 6). In this sense, it symbolises beauty, decadence, sin, death, and even resurrection (Pendlebury 128): while Wilde presents the blossoming, fresh, young boy – with a "brown and crisp" hair and "large and dreamy eyes" (*HP* 6) – he also reveals his excessive admiration of (young) male beauty. The most explicit reference to homosexual love is the depiction of the kiss on the lips between the two main male characters. In his study, John-Charles Duffy sets the "devoted friendship" model of male love from Plato's *Symposium* as an example, which concerns the great affection between two men (330). Plato makes a distinction between *Uranian* (heavenly) and *Dionian* (earthly) forms of love, placing male-male attachment in the former and heterosexual love in the latter. Duffy also supports this ideal of devotion with a biblical parallel that: "[g]reater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13) – indicating that a "devoted friendship" is "superior to heterosexual love" (330). Thus, since both the Swallow and the Happy Prince die but eventually unite in Heaven, their powerful celestial friendship belongs to *Uranian* love (Duffy 330). Wilde portrays this type of affection as an allegorical expression of the most genuine form of love: it is ultimately purified, elevated, and perfected within a heavenly or spiritual setting. Thus, based on this, the tale's allegorical layers of meaning are mirrored *mise en abyme*: the figure of the Happy Prince as being an admired artistic creation (first layer); the self-sacrificing devotion both of the Swallow and the Prince, which serves as an emblem of human passion and affection for genuine love (second layer); and the ultimate ascension of both characters to God, which depicts the narrative from the perspective of Christian salvation and forgiveness (third layer) – all placed within an aestheticised framework.

Finally, my examination concludes with "The Fisherman and His Soul," the darkest and the most complex of Wilde's fairy tales that explores the motifs of art, Passion, (homo) sexuality, pleasure seeking, redemption, and spiritual transformation, imbued with aestheticised biblical symbolism *mise en abyme*. Here, Wilde depicts a troubled relationship between the human body and soul, focusing on the corrupting potential of bodily and hedonistic lusts. This tension emerges in the young Fisherman's affection for the little Mermaid, whom

he pulls out of the sea. The man demands she sings for him every time he summons her. Mesmerised by her angelic voice, the Fisherman falls in love with her and proposes marriage. The Mermaid's singing offers aesthetic pleasures for the Fisherman, whose fascination and love for her song could be read as a figurative attraction to beauty and art, rather than (or alongside) literal romantic desire. A similarly powerful artistic manifestation occurs in Wilde's "The Nightingale and The Rose," where the Nightingale's enchanting song culminates in her ultimate sacrifice for the sake of Love. This action also mirrors the Fisherman's passion (for art), though – unlike the Nightingale's – his actions are not motivated by selflessness, yet he still sacrifices his life (and soul).

Still, the situation is far more complicated: the Fisherman has a soul, while the Mermaid, like all Sea-folks, does not – so she cannot love him unless he renounces it. The Fisherman seeks the Priest's help to get rid of his soul, calling it a useless part of him since it cannot be seen or touched. The Priest chides him, claiming that the soul is "the noblest part of man" and "more precious than" anything else, a divine present that must be preserved (*HP* 94). Yet the Fisherman, bewitched by the desired Mermaid, declares he would even surrender Heaven itself for her love. For the Priest, however, such passion is "vile," and the soul-less Sea-folks are merely "pagan things" whose temptations must be resisted. Being rejected, the Fisherman attempts to sell his soul at the market, but the merchants find it worthless, valuing only his body (*HP* 96). In this scene, Wilde dramatises the conflicts between earthly pleasures and divine values, emphasising the struggle between vain human wishes and attaining salvation in the afterlife, thereby highlighting the moral and spiritual cost of the Fisherman's desires. He would sacrifice eternal life for love, or to put it even more bluntly, he would sell his soul to the devil.[6] He turns to the young Witch, who eventually agrees on the condition that the "pretty boy" dances with her on top of the mountain at the full moon. In this framing, dancing represents another form of artistic expression that emphasises physical desires besides transcendental meanings (like singing – cf. the Mermaid's or the Nightingale's songs). Both the Mermaid and the Witch are depicted as artist-like characters, but while the Mermaid's singing has a spiritual significance, the Witch's dance appeals more to the Fisherman's physical and sensual drives and needs.

The dancing-ritual – with strong sexual connotations, such as the illustration of horse riding, jumping, the Witch's hot breath, the intensity of the dance etc. – soon takes a darker turn when "some evil thing" starts to watch them from the shadows. Duffy interprets the Satanic figure as a typical Victorian dandy: "a man dressed in a suit of black velvet, cut in the

Spanish fashion" (343). When the woman asks the boy to worship "Him" (Wilde's symbolic 'god of aestheticism [and homosexuality]'), the Fisherman instinctively makes the sign of the Cross and utters the forbidden "holy name," causing the demonic figures to flee. Before the Witch escapes, she reveals the secret of the soul-removal method: the Fisherman must cut away his shadow with a knife of green viper's skin and turn his back to the moon, for the body's shadow is the body of the soul.

Once separated, the Fisherman's Soul – capitalised from that moment onward (from "soul" to "the Soul") and becomes independent from its former owner – asks for the man's heart so it may remain untainted by the world's cruelty. Yet the Fisherman refuses, as his heart already belongs to his beloved Mermaid. The rejected Soul promises to return to the shore every year and call out the Fisherman's name to see if he has changed his mind about reuniting, and to tell him his travels. These decadent adventures dramatise moral and spiritual decline, for without a good/beautiful heart the Soul cannot live an ethically appropriate, Christ-like life, which is another manifestation of *mise en abyme*. He becomes capable of wickedness and descends into sin – such acts that the Fisherman, whose heart remains full of Love, could never commit. Each place the Soul visits evoke not only the seven deadly sins – pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, sloth – but also idolatry, malice, murder, stealing, all portrayed through the seduction of beauty, joy and abundance (the aesthetic framing).

One example is the "Mirror of Wisdom," which the Soul can only approach by passing through three chambers, the first two of which contain idols. While seeking "god," he instead discovers a mirror, "set on an altar of stone," that reflects "all the things that are in heaven and on earth" promising omniscience and priestly worship to its beholder (*HP* 109). The "Mirror of Wisdom," functioning as a false idol, allegorically represents beauty, selfishness and the temptation to elevate oneself to a "god"-like status: where the Soul can pass through the allegorical chambers (layers) of art, passion, and corrupted spirituality *mise en abyme*. The Soul attempts to seduce the Fisherman away from his lover with such fascinations, but in vain: selfless-love still triumphs over self-love. Having no heart with which to love, the Soul cannot understand such intimacy; he only speaks the language of physical pleasures possessed during his journey; rooted in hedonism.

On the other hand, Duffy notes that the Mermaid's lack of legs also implies the absence of female genitalia (in human terms), which makes her unable to satisfy the Fisherman's needs – metaphorically referred to as *dancing* (333). Therefore, yielding to temptation, he follows

his Soul, only to be led into acts of cruelty, such as striking a child and slaying a merchant. Significantly, these demonic deeds are accompanied by recurring pomegranate images ("Street of Pomegranates," "garden of pomegranates"), which here symbolise sin, death, homosexuality, and sensual pleasure (Pendlebury 134). For instance, the "Street of Pomegranates" evokes a brothel-like setting, where the eunuchs are quite suspiciously portrayed as homosexuals, e.g. "one of them drew aside the captain of the guard, and in a low voice whispered to him. The other kept munching scented pastilles, which he took with an affected gesture out of an oval box of lilac enamel" (*HP* 113). In the pomegranate garden, the climax of their fall into sin is the murder of a merchant who provided them with accommodation.

Surrendering to the allure of dance and the sensual attraction symbolised by the pomegranate, the Fisherman finally allows his corrupt Soul to return to his body. Yet this permissive behaviour conceals a subconscious betrayal: by accepting his Soul, the Fisherman excludes the Mermaid from his earthly life. Only through her death does he recognise the selfishness of his desires, and realise that "Love is better than wisdom, and more precious than riches, and fairer than the feet of the daughters of men" (*HP* 125) Here, it is worth noting that another interconnection can be observed with "The Nightingale and The Rose". The Nightingale's last song before her death about "the Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb" (*HP* 16) is perfectly illustrated in the Fisherman's story with the lover's purification and ascension. The Fisherman even echoes the Nightingale's love philosophy: Love is better than life and wisdom. Upon this revelation, his heart becomes so entirely filled with love that it breaks – much like the broken leaden heart of the Happy Prince, or the Nightingale's heart pierced by the Rose-Tree's to fulfil her mission – allowing the Soul to reunite with him once more, not through life, but through death. This breaking of the heart recalls the piercing of Christ's side upon the cross (John 19:34), where love is likewise revealed through suffering and death, mirroring *mise en abyme* the sacrificial pattern within Wilde's tale.

Although the Fisherman and the Mermaid lie dead in each other's arms, the Priest orders them to be buried in an unmarked grave in the corner of the "Field of the Fuller," as they are considered cursed. The field itself carries biblical connotations: fullers (washermen) 'full' (thicken) or clean (whiten) clothes (Isaiah 7:3; 36:2; 2 Kings 18:17) which can allegorically represent a gradual spiritual purification. The Fisherman (with his sinner soul) and the Mermaid (without a soul) go through a period of Purgatory, where they advance through

layered states of cleansing before ascending to Heaven. Allegorically, this also mirrors *mise en abyme*, where one layer (the artistic: soul-beautifying process) opens into another (moral and Christian: redemption from sins) – art into passion, Passion into Christianity. Three years later, the Priest discovers the altar adorned with sweet-scented "white flowers," which troubles his senses and makes him talking not of the "wrath of God, but of the God whose name is Love." These flowers are "from the corners of the Fuller's Field," from the lover's tomb, signifying their purified spirits and divine reconciliation, representing that those who were once forsaken can ultimately find themselves in God's embrace.

Conclusion

Throughout his stories, Oscar Wilde guides the audience towards the innermost secret of his pomegranate motif, which is none other than the beauty of the core, the greatness of the soul by being magnanimous. The fruit of *passion/Passion* is what this pomegranate symbolises; it holds all the great pleasures and pains, the elevated feelings of delight and burning passions.

Wilde in "De Profundis" (1905) quotes Christ who calls the soul "God's Kingdom" and compares it "to a pearl" or a "tiny seed" (cf. pomegranate seeds) that he can find in everyone. For Wilde, the soul is the "treasury-house" of the body, containing "infinitely precious things" (1999, 255), yet we can recognise our own only when we shed "all alien passions, [...] and all external possession" (1999, 73). Still, such self-recognition is possible for those who can possess a beautiful heart – the very core of the human body, and the quintessential source of our capacity to live and love.

With the use of allegories, Wilde emphasises the most prominent theme one should focus on: the transformation of human love into the passion of art and the Passion of Christ. In both "The Nightingale and The Rose" and "The Fisherman and His Soul" the word *Love* is capitalised and places the whole focus of the narratives on the subject. At the same time, in all these three tales, the broken heart functions both literally and symbolically within Wilde's broader artistic frame. In the first tale analysed, "The Nightingale and the Rose," the Nightingale's heart is pierced by the thorn, using her life-blood as the very substance as the paint that begins colouring the rose, while the bird's angelic voice serves as an allegorical paintbrush, a medium that helps finishing the marvellous masterpiece, the magnificent red rose. This artistic layer connects to the next tale, "The Happy Prince," where the Prince's leaden heart eventually cracks as he witnesses his beloved friend's death: a moment of passion

that completes the tale's movement from aesthetic beauty to self-sacrificial love and redemption – the aforementioned concept of the transformation of the passion of art to the Passion of Christ. And last, but not least, in "The Fisherman and His Soul," the Fisherman's divided heart after his separation from his lover and from his soul, ultimately finds purification, and then enters God's eternal Paradise of Love.

During his imprisonment in Reading Gaol, Wilde continued to affirm this connection between art, passion and spiritual transformation. As the following stanza from "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (1898) makes clear, he regarded the broken heart as the very condition through which divine grace may enter:

> Ah, happy they whose hearts can break
> And peace of pardon win!
> How else may man make straight his plan
> And cleanse his soul from Sin?
> How else but through a broken heart
> May Lord Christ enter in? (1999, 137)

In his critical essay, "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891) Wilde elaborates on Christ's message, and how to interpret it: "'Know Thyself' was written over the portal of the antique world. Over the portal of the new world, 'Be thyself' shall be written. And the message of Christ was simply 'Be thyself.' That is the secret of Christ" (1999, 255), and, by extension, this is also the very secret that lies at the heart of the Wildean Pomegranate.

Notes

1 In later textual references see as "Preface."
2 Allegory is also indicated by common names written in capitalised letters.
3 *Mise en abyme* literally means "placed in the abyss" in French.
4 The connection between the Nightingale and the Rose-tree contradicts the narrative's initial portrayal of heterosexual relationship. The Nightingale is gendered as female ("she/her"), while the Rose-tree is ungendered ("it") and their symbolic "sex act" is a "non-reproductive" penetration as they also belong to different species, moreover it is even unproductive since in the end no one values the rose (Duffy 334).
5 Tetelestai or τετέλεσται in Greek means "it is finished" or "paid in full", referring to the completion of redemption, the victory over sin and death (Manning 2022).
6 For John-Charles Duffy, the Priest's rhetoric shows likeness to "anti-homosexual religious rhetoric," where the Priest's actions function as a reference to the Victorian mainstream who also excluded homosexuality from blessedness – regarding them as "unnatural" creatures (just like the Sea-folks) (342).

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