

THE DISPLACED *SEANCHAI*:
IRISH HERITAGE IN THE WORKS OF OSCAR WILDE

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ABSTRACT

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Critics traditionally have insisted on labeling Oscar Wilde as an English writer, largely neglecting the fact that he was born and raised in Ireland. Many factors contribute to the categorization of Wilde as English: he lived outside of Ireland much of his life, attended Oxford, was tried and imprisoned in England, and was reticent about his heritage, even dropping his Irish accent upon entering university. In current attempts to read Ireland as a postcolonial location, however, there is increased interest in Wilde as an Irishman. As a result, scholarship in the last two decades has begun to address the question of Wilde's nationality. The son of well-known, intelligent Irish parents, Sir William and Lady Jane Francesca Wilde, Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin and lived in Ireland until his early twenties. He attended the Portora Royal School in Enniskillen and Trinity College, Dublin, prior to enrolling at Oxford. Even after moving to England, Wilde continued to publish primarily in Irish journals and to dabble in Catholicism, the historic faith of the Irish. Further, he made numerous comments throughout his life that lend themselves to a postcolonial reading of Wilde as Irishman, such as "with the coming of the English, art in Ireland came to an end . . . for art could not live and flourish under a tyrant." This study builds upon the critical discussion surrounding Oscar Wilde's nationality by analyzing

several of his works for evidence of his Irish heritage and by understanding them in their Irish context. Rather than focusing on his most popular works, this analysis examines some of Wilde's less frequently studied compositions, such as his poetry, critical essays, and fairy tales, as well as biographical sources such as Richard Ellmann's landmark biography, *Oscar Wilde* (1988), and Wilde's own extensive correspondence. The objective of this thesis is to demonstrate that the nationalist politics, ancient oral traditions, and Celtic folktales to which Wilde was regularly exposed as a result of his Irish heritage become important contexts for interpretation that critics have thus far largely neglected.

INTRODUCTION: WILDE THE ENGLISH IRISHMAN

Oscar Wilde always intended to cause a stir in society; when asked as a young man about his ambitions, he vowed: “I’ll be a poet, a writer, a dramatist. Somehow or other I’ll be famous, and if not famous, I’ll be notorious” (qtd. in Morley 31). He realized his goal, achieving both fame and notoriety as a clever but eccentric dandy, as a successful playwright, as the author of a controversial novel, and finally as the defendant in a scandalous homosexuality trial. Given all of the things Wilde did to get the public’s attention, intentionally or otherwise, he probably never would have expected for people to focus on his nationality, a subject which was not of primary concern to him. Yet it is the question of Wilde’s Irishness—not his value as an artist or his contributions to the aesthetic movement or even his homosexuality—that has become the central debate in recent Wildean scholarship.

Critics traditionally have insisted on labeling Oscar Wilde as an English writer, largely neglecting the fact that he was born and raised in Ireland. Many factors contribute to the categorization of Wilde as English: he lived outside of Ireland much of his life, attended Oxford, was tried and imprisoned in England, and was reticent about his heritage, even dropping his Irish accent upon entering university. He was a popular fixture in late nineteenth-century London society, set many of his plays in London, and made self-inclusive statements such as his reference to Keats as the “poet-painter of our English Land” (CW 776). In current attempts to read Ireland as a postcolonial location, however, there is increased interest in Wilde as an Irishman. As a result, scholarship in the last two decades has begun to address the question of Wilde’s nationality.

Wilde was born in Dublin and lived in Ireland until his early twenties. He was the son of well-known, intelligent Irish parents who also demonstrated rather eccentric behavior. His mother, Lady Jane Francesca Wilde (who went by the *nom de plume* Speranza), was a vocal supporter of the nationalist cause and wrote poetry in support of Home Rule and the Young Ireland Movement. She claimed to have reared Oscar to be “a Hero perhaps and President of the future Irish Republic” (qtd. in Ellmann 21). An avid socialite, Speranza hosted weekly soirees in Wilde’s childhood home at 1 Merrion Square that were frequented by Ireland’s famous literary and political figures. Wilde’s father, Sir William Wilde, was an eminent oculist and eye surgeon to the Queen. Though not as politically inclined as his wife, Sir William was deeply concerned with the preservation of his country’s history; he was a collector of Irish antiquities and an amateur anthropologist. Wilde accompanied his father on numerous trips to the West of Ireland, where Sir William collected Irish fairy and folktales, often in lieu of monetary payment for his services to the peasants. Many of these stories were repeated to Oscar when he was a child. In addition to his informal schooling at the hands of his parents, Wilde received a formal Irish education: prior to enrolling at Oxford, he attended the Portora Royal School in Enniskillen and subsequently Trinity College, Dublin.

Even after moving to England, various critics have pointed out, Wilde continued to publish primarily in Irish journals and to dabble in Catholicism, the historic faith of the Irish, throughout his life. Further, during his American lecture tour in 1882, he made numerous comments that lend themselves to a postcolonial reading of Wilde as Irishman, such as “with the coming of the English, art in Ireland came to an end . . . for art could not live and flourish under a tyrant” (qtd. in Ellmann 196). He even famously declared,

on the potential banning of *Salomé* in England, “I am not English. I am Irish which is quite another thing” (qtd. in Ellmann 372).

While recent scholarship acknowledges the complexity of Wilde’s Anglo-Irish background, there is also a general tendency to attempt to reclaim Wilde as Irish. Critics such as Davis Coakley, Jerusha McCormack, and David Upchurch focus on describing the ways that Wilde’s background (i.e. his father’s interest in Irish folklore, his mother’s nationalism, and his own childhood experiences in the rural West of Ireland) influenced his life and work. Declan Kiberd presents Wilde as a key figure of the Irish renaissance and as a militant nationalist, and he has even analyzed Wilde’s most popular play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, through this republican lens. Bernard Beatty has determined that Wilde’s syntactical habit of “witty reversal” is distinctly Irish. In contrast, Máire Ní Fhlathúin disputes postcolonial attempts to define Wilde in terms of his politics and the specific associations that can be tied to him, seeing him rather as an opportunistic artist who changed his persona, often contradictorily, to suit his audience and purpose. Another critic, Richard Pine, labels Wilde as an outsider of both Irish and English culture, while Ian Christopher Fletcher depicts him as a product of Victorian imperialism. Although many critics have weighed in on the issue of Wilde’s identity, however, there has been little textual analysis of his works to establish the extent to which his Irish heritage influenced and appeared in his writing.

After considerable analysis of his corpus of works and biographical materials, it is my contention that Wilde’s Irish heritage played a significant role in shaping the complex figure he became. Fhlathúin is correct when she assesses Wilde as an eccentric genius and an opportunistic artist who adopted the persona he deemed most beneficial at a given

point in his life. There is no evidence to suggest that Wilde had a nationalist agenda, nor was he a subversive rebel trying to attack the English from within through his writing, as some scholars have argued. To uphold him as a paragon of what it means to be Irish is to ignore Wilde's years as a quintessential Oxford man and London socialite. Wilde was neither Irish nor English; he was Anglo-Irish. While he may have looked and even acted like an Englishman, as a result of his upbringing in Ireland, Wilde was essentially a displaced modern *seanchaí* [Irish storyteller].

This study builds upon the critical discussion surrounding Wilde's nationality by analyzing several of his works for evidence of his Irish heritage and by understanding them in their Irish context. Rather than focusing on his most popular works, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I decided to examine some of Wilde's less frequently studied compositions, such as his poetry, critical essays, and fairy tales. The first chapter explores several of Wilde's poems and essays to expose some of the often contradictory personas, or masks, that he adopted throughout his life and reveal how those masks indicate his heritage rather than concealing it. The second chapter draws upon the text of "The Soul of Man under Socialism" as well as biographical materials, personal correspondence, and criticism to illustrate the ways in which Wilde's Irish heritage informed the socialist politics he espouses in that essay. The third chapter examines how three of Wilde's fairy tales—"The Selfish Giant," "The Devoted Friend," and "The Young King"—reflect his Irishness through the traditional Celtic folk elements they contain and the republican and anti-imperialist sentiments they convey. The fourth and final chapter compares the style, narrative techniques, and content of Wilde's written works to the characteristics of traditional Irish storytelling

practices to prove that, even in England, Wilde was essentially a modern *seanchaí*. I have augmented my analysis of Wilde's works with thorough research into the writer's life, relying on sources such as Richard Ellmann's landmark biography, *Oscar Wilde* (1988), and on Wilde's own extensive correspondence. The collective goal of these chapters is to demonstrate that the nationalist politics, ancient oral traditions, and Celtic folktales to which Wilde was regularly exposed become important contexts for interpretation that critics have thus far neglected.

“THE TRUTH OF MASKS”:
THE IRISH UNDERGARMENT OF WILDE’S PERSONAS

Many scholars use Oscar Wilde’s relative reticence on the subject of his nationality as evidence of his desire to be disassociated with the Irish or, at the very least, as a reason to classify him as an English writer. Wilde’s comments about Ireland were infrequent and, some claim, opportunistic,¹ but the influence of his heritage is evident, if subtle, throughout the corpus of his works. Michael Patrick Gillespie suggests a legitimate reading of Wilde’s texts in an Irish context is flawed at best when he argues that the lens through which readers choose to view a work necessarily affects their interpretations—that readers will always see what they wish to see; in other words, those critics seeking evidence of Wilde’s Irishness in his writings will find it even though others may interpret the same works differently. To be fair, Wilde himself wrote that “It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors” (*CW* 17). On the other hand, Gillespie rather paradoxically asserts the importance of biographical context when interpreting a work:

No one attentive to the impact of the composition process upon how we understand literature would advocate ignoring the background of the writer. As many contemporary critics have argued, a writer’s cultural heritage inevitably exerts a shaping force upon the art that he or she produces and by extension upon what we try to comprehend . . . Engaging the writer’s cultural heritage remains an important part of the interpretive process. (98)

¹ See Anya Clayworth and Máire Ní Fhlathúin.

In order to fully understand a piece of literature, according to Gillespie, the reader must be familiar the background of the author. Similarly, in his final and perhaps most serious and heartfelt work, “De Profundis,” Wilde also writes, “To reject one’s own experiences is to arrest one’s own development. To deny one’s own experiences is to put a lie into the lips of one’s own life. It is no less than a denial of the Soul” (CW 916). Wilde was born, raised, and educated in Ireland; he spent half of his life in his native country before moving to Oxford and then London, the city with which he is most commonly associated.² Thus, it is impossible to dismiss the Irish experiences which shaped his personality as that omission would be, by Wilde’s standards, a dishonest representation of his life. Accordingly, a reading of Wilde in an Irish context becomes not only possible, but necessary to form an accurate picture of the artist. To that end, I will identify some of the Irish influences in Wilde’s life in connection with his works and, by examining selected poetry, prose, and correspondence, demonstrate how an assessment of Wilde’s heritage provides a better insight into the often paradoxical artist.

Some difficulties arise when readers attempt to identify an author or work in terms of nationality as defining cultural characteristics are largely subjective in the first place. “In a world of subjective readings,” Gillespie writes, “the term *Irishness* has no greater or lesser specificity than does any other word” (97). He raises a valid point: what does it mean to be “Irish”—or, for that matter, “Indian,” “Jamaican,” or “American”—and how are those qualities manifested in literature? David Lloyd argues that “cultural difference is not an essential racial characteristic but an always emerging effect of

² Critics cite the fact that Wilde left Ireland in his early twenties and returned only a few times to argue that the writer rejected his native country; however, he rarely returned to Ireland for the simple reason that his father died, the family properties were sold to pay bills, and his mother and brother moved to London (Coakley 2; 179).

colonial intervention” (319). In that light, trying to establish what constitutes Irish writing poses more problems than postcolonial readings of literature from other regions; as Catherine Hall explains, Ireland occupied a unique “half-metropolitan, half-colonial” position in the British Empire and its people can be seen as “both within and without” (qtd. in Fletcher 335). The nineteenth-century Irish were “inhabitants of Europe, the predominant society of early modern colonizers, yet victims of an imperial regime,” so it is difficult to determine which characteristics of non-Gaelic literature produced in Victorian Ireland were inherently Irish and which were the result of England’s centuries of influence (Gillespie 96). To complicate matters further, as members of the Irish gentry, Wilde’s family can only properly be classified as Anglo-Irish. For the purposes of this study, I will define an Irish influence as something that has its roots in Irish/Celtic culture, something which with Wilde had experience or to which he was exposed specifically because he was raised in Ireland.

Contradictions and Masks

Wilde occasionally adopted an English persona in his writing, as in the poem “The Grave of Keats,” in which he includes himself amongst the mourning populace of England:

O poet-painter of our English Land!
 Thy name was writ in water—it shall stand:
 And tears like mine will keep thy memory green,
 As Isabella did her Basil-tree. (*CW* 776)

Many scholars use such instances as proof that Wilde saw himself as an Englishman.

This assumption, however, is flawed. One of the primary difficulties that arises in

Wildean studies is the dual nature of Oscar Wilde the man. Duality pervaded every aspect of his life: he intermittently occupied the ranks of Irish and English, protestant and Catholic, wealthy and poor, heterosexual and homosexual, law-abiding citizen and criminal, rusticated student and Oxford scholar. He was self-contradictory at nearly every turn and he seemed to thrive on the contradictions, much like his mother. In “The Truth of Masks,” for example, he writes in his typically paradoxical fashion:

Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in æsthetic criticism attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true. . . . The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks. (CW 1078)

The concept of masks further complicates interpretations of Wilde. Earlier in “The Truth of Masks,” Wilde declares costumes “one of the essential factors of the means which a true illusionist has at his disposal” (CW 1065). In “Pen, Pencil and Poison,” he explains how disguises allow the wearers to exhibit their true personalities, concluding “a mask tells us more than a face” (CW 995), and in “The Decay of Lying,” he claims “what is interesting about people in good society . . . is the mask that each one of them wears, not the reality that lies behind the mask” (CW 975).

Given these complexities, it is difficult to ascertain how Wilde saw himself at any given point in time; to claim with any definitiveness that he considered himself an Englishman is impossible. In fact, Declan Kiberd asserts that “Wearing the mask of the English Oxonian, Wilde was paradoxically freed to become more ‘Irish’ than he could

ever have been back in Ireland” (“Oscar Wilde,” 48). The pattern of Wilde’s poetry publications supports Kiberd’s assessment. According to Nick Frankel, up until Wilde left Oxford for London in April 1879, “every one of his publications took place in an Irish journal—a total of twenty-four poems over three and a half years published exclusively in Ireland or Irish journals” (118). Further, while he was a student at Oxford, Wilde’s poetry was included in the 1878 Irish anthology *Lyra Hibernica Sacra* (Frankel 118). Ironically, it was during his years at Oxford (1874-1879) that he “forgot” his Irish accent, as he would later claim (O’Neill 30). Wilde’s national identity appears at this time to be split; in his early twenties, he had already begun to wear masks.

Thus, when Wilde publishes two poems in the fall of 1880 in which he speaks from an English vantage-point—“Ave Imperatrix” and “Libertatis Sacra Fames”—it is likely, Joseph Pearce observes, that “his poetic posturing was little more than a mask”(57). What can be found amid the affectation of Englishness are indications of Wilde’s Irishness. In “Ave Imperatrix,” for example, the narrator eulogizes “our English chivalry” and “quiet English fields,” but the poem is hardly what Pearce labels “a hymn of praise to the Empire or a genuflection to the glories of Pax Britannica,” as the title suggests (Pearce 57). Instead, the poet criticizes the loss of life associated with Britain’s imperialism more than he praises its conquests, as a member of a colonized nation (as opposed to an English citizen) might:

Here have our wild war-eagles flown,
And flapped wide wings in fiery fight;
But the sad dove, that sits alone
In England—she hath no delight.

In vain the laughing girl will lean
 To greet her love with love-lit eyes:
 Down in some treacherous black ravine,
 Clutching his flag, the dead boy lies.

And many a moon and sun will see
 The lingering wistful children wait
 To climb upon their father's knee;
 And in each house made desolate

Pale women who have lost their lord
 Will kiss the relics of the slain—
 Some tarnished epaulette—some sword—
 Poor toys to soothe such anguished pain.

. . .

And thou whose wounds are never healed,
 Whose weary race is never won,
 O Cromwell's England! must thou yield
 For every inch of ground a son? (CW 711-12)

The narrator does not praise the eagles of war, but laments the loss of peace and young life, like one who suffers as a result of conquest rather than benefitting from it. Not only does this verse contain a harsh criticism of English imperialism, but more importantly, as

Pearce has observed, it “retains a subtle sense of Wilde’s Irishness in the implicit condemnation of Cromwell and in the lament over those who had died in foreign lands” (57). Similarly, the short poem “*Libertatis Sacra Fames*” ultimately praises the state of liberty in England, but it begins with a decidedly more republican tone:

Albeit nurtured in democracy,
And liking best that state republican
Where every man is Kinglike and no man
Is crowned above his fellows, yet I see,
Spite of this modern fret for Liberty,
Better the rule of One, whom all obey,
Than to let clamorous demagogues betray
Our freedom with the kiss of anarchy. (*CW* 715)

The poet advocates the monarchy, like a loyal English subject, but only over the alternative of anarchy. Within these lines there is also an implicit preference for a democratic government and individual freedom over the oppression of a monarchy that is reminiscent of the Irish nationalists’ philosophy—a philosophy which with Wilde was familiar from childhood. Characteristic of Wilde’s style, the text and the message of “*Libertatis Sacra Fames*” work at cross purposes.

Whether or not he considered himself English, as a young man, Wilde did go to great lengths to make his early poetry sound as English as possible. Frankel argues that Wilde intentionally substituted “the more English ‘will’ for the more Irish ‘shall’ in phrases like ‘the laughing girl will lean / To greet her love’ and ‘many a moon and sun will see’,” and that the grammatical substitution was a concern of Wilde’s throughout his

life (125).³ Wilde also imitated the themes and styles of the Romantic poets. So much so, in fact, that on receiving Wilde's collection *Poems* (1881), Oliver Elton dismissed his poetry as uninteresting on the grounds that it perfectly simulates the English canon. Some critics view Wilde's veritable plagiarism in his early poetry as further evidence of his desire to be English. However, Frankel has proposed a more likely alternative. At Platts Hall, San Francisco, on 5 April 1882, before an audience largely composed of Irish émigrés, Wilde lectured on "Irish Poets and Poetry of the Nineteenth Century." Frankel explains that the speech, which primarily praises Irish political poets, also provides some insight into Wilde's own poetic efforts:

As much as Wilde's lecture attempts to recover a suppressed Irish tradition, it also articulates the ideological rationale for his own cultivation of an "English" aesthetic. That is to say, if there was a certain polemical value to be had from lecturing on Irish poetry in 1882, Wilde's own comments show that he felt . . . that the poetry of Englishness was also the poetry of power. (132)

Wilde wanted his art to be known, and not just in his native country, so he wrote what he thought would get him noticed. According to Frankel, in his essay "The Incompatibles" (1881), Matthew Arnold proposes that if the Irish want to "acquiesce" in English culture, the Irishman must first learn to simulate the Englishman because "English culture, civilization, and power, far from being inbred or innate, are . . . fundamentally a matter of acquiring and displaying all the right signs" (128). Frankel goes on to interpret Elton's criticisms as confirmation that Wilde "had taken only too literally Arnold's injunction to

³ In an 1891 letter to his editor, Coulson Kernahan, Wilde writes "look after my 'wills' and 'shalls' in proof. I am Celtic in my use of these words, not English" (CL 473).

imitate the classic poem” in his endeavor to become famous (128). Not only does Frankel’s assessment make Wilde sound like an idiot, it fails to recognize that Wilde consciously adopted the English style because that was the poetry of the hegemony at the time (and probably partially because he was a fan of the Romantic poets). Wilde’s “Romantic poet” persona was just another mask he donned when it was beneficial.

Criticism of England

Although he emulated the English and counted himself amongst them in his early poetry, there were several occasions on which Wilde identified his true nationality. According to Richard Ellmann, during an interview with Robert Ross for the *Pall Mall Budget*, Wilde threatened to leave England and settle in France if his play *Salomé* was banned: “I will not consent to call myself a citizen of a country that shows such narrowness in artistic judgement. I am not English. I am Irish which is quite another thing” (qtd. in Ellmann 372). In “De Profundis,” Wilde extends his personal grief into a reflection of the historical English/Irish issue when he refers to his interactions with Lord Alfred Douglas’s aristocratic English family as “the ruin your race has brought on mine” (CW 947). And when Lord Frederick Cavendish, an English friend of the Wilde family, was murdered in Phoenix Park, Dublin, by an Irish nationalist group called the Invincibles, Wilde admitted to a reporter, “When liberty comes with hands dabbled in blood it is hard to shake hands with her.” However, he immediately qualified his statement by refocusing the blame in the incident: “We forget how much England is to blame. She is reaping the fruit of seven centuries of injustice” (qtd. in Ellmann 196). It seems Wilde retained the principles of his mother’s nationalism, “even if he, like her, abhorred the violent way it was being practised” (Pearce 148). Most of the time, Wilde

seemed content to hide behind an English façade, but on some occasions, he wholeheartedly embraced his Irish nationality in order to unequivocally separate himself from the English.

Wilde not only distanced himself from the English on several occasions, but was also highly critical of them at times. As numerous scholars have demonstrated in the past century, Wilde's society plays, particularly *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *Lady Windermere's Fan*, contain pointed criticisms of Victorian England. Less discussed is the fact that his criticism is not isolated to the plays alone; Wilde's other writings are rife with anti-English sentiment. In all of his aphorisms and witty remarks, there is nothing negative about the Irish, but the English race—their art in particular—is the subject of repeated attacks. For instance, in an article for the *Saturday Review* entitled “A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated,” Wilde writes, “The English are always degrading truths into facts. When a truth becomes a fact it loses all its intellectual value” and “The only link between Literature and the Drama left to us in England at the present moment is the bill of the play” (CW 1203). Similarly, in “The Decay of Lying,” the character of Vivian quips, “Thinking is the most unhealthy thing in the world, and people die of it just as they die of any other disease. Fortunately, in England at any rate, thought is not catching” (CW 971). English writer George Meredith is also wittily disparaged in that essay: “As a writer he has mastered everything except language: as a novelist he can do everything, except tell a story: as an artist he is everything except articulate” (CW 976). In these situations, wit becomes a mask that allows Wilde to insult those he lives amongst; his criticisms against Victorian society are

likely seen as ironic, coming from one of themselves, but hiding beneath the humor and the cleverly turned phrase is a decidedly derisive undertone.

Language and Style

Much about Wilde's writing style is indicative of his Irish heritage. Wilde came from a culture that prided itself on "being able to turn a phrase," according to Jerusha McCormack ("Wilde's Fictions," 98). Recent scholarship has produced several articles devoted to the idea that the witty quips and quotable one-liners for which he is so famous reflect not only Wilde's genius as a writer, but his cultural heritage as well. McCormack asserts that because he grew up in a British colony, Wilde was "forever suspicious of official cant" (97). In "The Soul of Man under Socialism," she argues, Wilde's statement that "one of the results of the extraordinary tyranny of authority is that words are absolutely distorted from their proper and simple meaning, and are used to express the obverse of their right signification" (*CW* 1101) could only be the result of "a radical estrangement—not merely from the father country, but from the father-tongue" ("Wilde's Fictions," 97-98). As a result of spending long family holidays in County Mayo, Wilde grew up surrounded by peasants who were bilingual (*CW* 930). It was through these people, who "lived under the compulsion of adopting a foreign tongue," that Wilde had witnessed "a policy of what can only be called linguistic terrorism," McCormack explains ("Wilde's Fictions," 98). To combat the sense of displacement he felt as a result of the language issue, Wilde learned to turn the doublespeak of Empire back on itself through wit, or "counterspeech" (98). Neil Sammells reaches a similar conclusion about the Irish nature of Wilde's wit:

For Wilde, to be Irish is to be an exile, to suffer exile is to share the fate of the artist, to be an artist is to be political . . . his subversive literary strategies and distinctive wit can be seen as the response of a colonial subject to discourses which are, as Eagleton puts it, “on the side of Caesar.” (119)

Because he is automatically an outsider in English society by virtue of his heritage, Sammells posits, Wilde adopts the mask of wit as a defense mechanism. McCormack describes Wilde’s counterspeech strategy as subverting the English formula of the axiom by “camouflaging his own attack in the language of the enemy” (“Wilde’s Fictions,” 98-99). A statement such as “Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others” (CW 1205), according to McCormack, is “precisely the kind of self-cancelling oxymoron by which the dandy detonates the self-satisfied platitudes of his audience” (“Wilde’s Fictions,” 99). Bernard Beatty credits the success of Wilde’s “habit of witty reversal” to “a syntax made up of balancing and equivalent clauses” that essentially nullify each other (33). The “art of substitution” that Beatty describes is illustrated by “A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated”:

What is abnormal in Life stands in normal relations to Art. It is the only thing in Life that stands in normal relations to Art.

Art is the only serious thing in the world. And the artist is the only person who is never serious.

The only thing that can console one for being poor is extravagance. The only thing that can console one for being rich is economy. (CW 1203-04)

Readers are amused at their own expense, a feat Wilde is able to accomplish precisely because he uses the language of his audience—a language McCormack labels “already faithless, the language of common double-talk” (“Wilde’s Fictions,” 98-99). Wilde hints at this behavior himself in “The Decay of Lying” when he calls imitation the “sincerest form of insult” (CW 986). W. B. Yeats even contributed to the discussion of Wilde’s linguistic acrobatics in a review printed in the *United Ireland* on 26 September 1891:

“Beer, bible, and the seven deadly virtues have made England what she is,” wrote Mr. Wilde once; and a part of the Nemesis that has fallen upon her is a complete inability to understand anything he says. *We* should not find him so unintelligible—for much about him is Irish of the Irish.

(“Oscar Wilde’s Last,” 143-44)

Yeats implies that the Irish possess an inherent linguistic superiority, such as counterspeech, which allows them to simultaneously amuse and insult the English; in addition to supporting his compatriot, Yeats seizes the opportunity to join Wilde in mocking the English, thereby demonstrating a united Irish front.

Beatty has also made stylistic connections between Macpherson’s translation of the ancient Celtic Ossian stories and Wilde’s *Salomé* and “The Ballad of Reading Gaol”: “This style—Ossian’s—just like Wilde’s, is based on metrically paired very short sentences, an abundance of similes, and here, too, pauses displace elaborated syntax” (Beatty 41). Beatty does not suggest that Wilde attempted to imitate Macpherson, merely that he was likely familiar with the text. Not only was Wilde familiar with the text, he praised it in his speech “Irish Poets of the Nineteenth Century”:

[T]o [Celtic genius] we owe the sentiment of modern thought and to it those chords of penetrating passion and melancholy which swept over Europe with the publication of Macpherson's *Ossian*, whose echo still lingers in the work of every poet of our day. (qtd. in O'Neill 31)

Given that the Ossianic cycle was the source of two of Wilde's five names (Oscar is the son of Ossian and grandson of Fingal), the tales were certainly held in some regard by his parents. Lady Wilde wrote to a friend when Oscar was one month old, "He is to be called Oscar Fingal Wilde. Is not that grand, misty, and Ossianic?" (Ellmann 17). If Lady Wilde held the Ossian stories in high regard, then her doting son likely esteemed them as well. Whether or not Macpherson's Ossian stories actually influenced Wilde's writings, the connection between Wilde and Ossian must have been obvious enough; according to Beatty, "in March 1882, Wilde's visit to America was caricatured in *Punch* in Ossianic style" (42). In name as well as writing style, Wilde resembled his Celtic heritage enough that a British tabloid picked up on the correlation.

Wilde's use of the ballad stanza can be attributed to other Celtic influences besides the Ossianic cycle; as in many of his other works, Wilde consciously or subconsciously drew on several sources when writing "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." The ballad stanza was popular with nineteenth-century poets seeking to recreate traditional Irish forms because of its "Romantic 'folk' appropriateness" and because ballad stanzas "separate their lines, use much repetition, and produce syntactically paired utterances rather than a more deliberated syntax" (Beatty 42-3). Wilde was brought up in a household devoted to literature as well as Celtic tradition, so it is not surprising that he

utilized the ballad stanza in “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” and *Salomé*;⁴ he likely encountered the form in numerous different works. Davis Coakley presents one potential source of inspiration for “The Ballad”; he suggests that when Wilde “poured out his personal pain and anguish in ‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol,’ he chose a metre that had been used by the Young Ireland poet Denis Florence McCarthy to express the pain and anguish of the Irish nation in ‘A New Year’s Song’” (210). Coakley’s correlation of the two works is not unreasonable; McCarthy’s work was highly admired by Lady Wilde her son, and at one point McCarthy praised Wilde’s work (Coakley 210). Regardless of which source actually influenced it, Wilde’s use of the ballad stanza is consistent with Irish culture.

The Celtic School

Wilde may not have mentioned his Irish nationality very often, but he frequently spoke with pride about his Celtic heritage and thereby provided another glimpse behind his English mask. As the people of modern Ireland are descended from the Celts, and Ireland is one of the few countries where a Celtic language has survived, “Celtic” and “Irish” are basically interchangeable; the only distinction Wilde makes between the two terms is to include the Scottish and the Welsh under the banner of “us who are Celts” (*CL* 470). Like Yeats, Wilde “was a firm believer in the hereditary genius of the Celtic race” (Coakley 188). In his 1882 lecture “Irish Poets,” Wilde praises the Celtic legacy in art:

The influence of Celtic poetry was not merely the primary basis of Irish politics, the keystone of Irish liberty, for to it—to the Celtic imagination—we owe nearly all the great beauties of modern literature. We owe to it, to

⁴ In “De Profundis,” Wilde refers to “one of the refrains whose recurring *motifs* make *Salomé* so like a piece of music and bind it together as a ballad” (*CW* 922).

begin with, the spirit of modern romance, we owe to it the feeling for style in literature, rhyme, which is the basis of modern poetry, being a Celtic invention; to it we owe the sentiment of modern thought and to it those chords of penetrating passion and melancholy which swept over Europe with the publication of Macpherson's *Ossian*, whose echo still lingers in the work of every poet of our day. (qtd. in O'Neill 31)

Even though he strove to imitate English poetry in his younger days, in this speech, Wilde credits the Celts, his ancestors, for the beauty of modern literature. Wilde's writings indicate that he saw himself, George Bernard Shaw, and others as part of a new, "great Celtic School" of literature, the "Hibernian School, London" (CL 563).⁵ In "The Critic as Artist," he even aligns the artists of the Irish Revival, himself presumably included, with those of the Italian Renaissance: "[A]s the creative instinct is strong in the Celt, and it is the Celt who leads in art, there is no reason why in future years this strange Renaissance should not become almost as mighty in its way as was that new birth of Art that woke many centuries ago in the cities of Italy" (CW 1050). Wilde contributed to the revival not only as a successful Irish writer, but through advocacy of Celtic art as well. According to Ellmann, Wilde was a charter member of the Irish Literary Society in London, as were his mother, Lady Wilde, and his brother, Willie (126). Additionally, Richard Haslam notes, Wilde wrote numerous positive reviews of Irish, Scottish, and English poetry and was outspoken in his reprehension of stage-Irishry, which portrayed his compatriots negatively through exaggerated ethnic stereotypes (2).

⁵ In a letter dated 9 May 1893, Wilde thanks Shaw for "Op. 2 of the great Celtic School": *Widowers' Houses*. According to Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis, Wilde inscribed Shaw's copy of *Lady Windermere's Fan* "Op. I of the Hibernian School, London '93" (see footnote #2 on CL 563).

Wilde's interest in the Celtic tradition and his own increasing fame, in turn, influenced the writers of the late nineteenth-century Celtic Revival. As Coakley has demonstrated, Yeats's aesthetic theory and obsession with the importance of the mask for the artist were derived "almost entirely from Wilde" and John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, "the plot of which revolves around 'the power of a lie,' was also influenced by Wilde's ideas in *The Decay of Lying*" (190). In his essay "The Celt in English Art," which was published in the same edition of the *Fortnightly Review* as Wilde's "The Soul of Man under Socialism," Grant Allen aligns Wilde with artistic Celts such as William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, praising him as "'a man of rare insight and strong common-sense . . . an Irishman to the core'" (qtd. in Haslam 2). In a February 1891 letter to Allen, Wilde responded by proposing the inauguration of a Celtic Dinner: "*all* of us who are Celts, Welsh, Scotch, and Irish, should inaugurate a Celtic Dinner, and assert ourselves, and show these tedious Angles or Teutons what a race we are, and how proud we are to belong to that race" (CL 470). In the spirit of a united race, Wilde and other Celtic writers frequently demonstrated animosity towards the English. For instance, in a review of *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories*, Yeats described Wilde's works as "an extravagant Celtic crusade against Anglo-Saxon stupidity" ("Oscar Wilde's Last," 144). In February 1893, Wilde thanked George Bernard Shaw for his article opposing "the ridiculous institution of a stage-censorship" in England, declaring "England is the land of intellectual fogs but you have done much to clear the air" (CL 554). Wilde went on to establish their ethnic kinship by adding "we are both Celtic, and I like to think that we are friends" (CL 554). One of Wilde's harshest

criticisms of the English accompanied his praise of the Celts at the conclusion of “Irish Poets”:

[T]he poetic genius of the Celtic race never flags or wearies; it is as sweet by the groves of California as by the groves of Ireland, as strong in foreign lands as in the land which gave it birth. And indeed I do not know anything more wonderful or more characteristic of the Celtic genius than the quick artistic spirit in which we adapted ourselves to the English tongue. The Saxon took our lands and left them desolate. We took their language and added new beauty to it. (qtd. in O’Neill 32)

The Mask of an Artist

Wilde was not anti-English by any means, but nor was he anti-Irish, as some critics have argued. When reading someone as paradoxical and interested in illusion as Wilde was, it is probably safest to assume that he always wore a “mask” when he wrote—at the very least, the mask of an artist—and approach his work with an appropriate amount of skepticism. What appears as humor may, in fact, be scathing criticism, and an outpouring of nationalism may prove to be nothing more than opportunism (a view many scholars take of Wilde’s American lectures on Irish poetry). As modern readers, we have no way of knowing how Wilde really felt about any of his subjects. What we do know for certain is that Wilde was born and raised in Ireland, and through the lens of postcolonial criticism, readers can clearly discern the influences of Wilde’s heritage behind the masks of the language and style in his otherwise English works.

“A MOST RECALCITRANT PATRIOT”:
WILDE’S IRISH VISION OF SOCIALISM

Oscar Wilde is remembered for his witty aphorisms, his society plays, his role in the aesthetic movement, and his affinity for fashion. What he is less known for is political commentary. Yet the human condition in Victorian England is the theme of Wilde’s lengthy essay, “The Soul of Man under Socialism.” First printed in the *Fortnightly Review* in February 1891, “The Soul of Man” appears to be more concerned with aestheticism and art than politics as Wilde concludes that “Socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to Individualism” (CW 1080). Fulfillment of individual artistic purpose in a socialist society, he argues, can only occur when humans no longer have to perform mindless manual work:

All unintellectual labour, all monotonous, dull labour, all labour that deals with dreadful things, and involves unpleasant conditions, must be done by machinery. . . just as trees grow while the country gentleman is asleep, so while Humanity will be amusing itself, or enjoying cultivated leisure—which, and not labour, is the aim of man—or making beautiful things, or reading beautiful things, or simply contemplating the world with admiration and delight, machinery will be doing all the necessary and unpleasant work. (CW 1089)

Despite Wilde’s focus on aestheticism in the latter half of the essay, “The Soul of Man” begins by tackling more serious social concerns, namely the rampant poverty and starvation in Britain that has resulted from industrialization and the economic depression of the late nineteenth century. It is these issues that socialism will resolve, Wilde claims,

although he does not have any suggestions as to how the transition from the present social order to this idealized future society is to be achieved.

Critics have traditionally read “The Soul of Man” as merely the musings of a naïve London dandy, as a tongue-in-cheek promotion of anarchy for the sake of individualism, or as a contribution to what Matthew Beaumont calls the Utopian discourse “about post-capitalist society that characterized the *fin de siècle*” (14). In so doing, however, they neglect a key factor in Wilde’s politics: his Irish heritage. Wilde was not, as Declan Kiberd presents him, a “militant Irish republican” (qtd. in Fhlathúin 341); he was, rather, a self-described “most recalcitrant patriot” (CL 371).⁶ But given that Wilde’s mother was a nationalist poet and that Wilde himself sympathized with Home Rule for Ireland, supported Charles Stewart Parnell, and frequently derided the English in his writing, it is impossible not to see an underlying connection between the text of “The Soul of Man” and the influences of Wilde’s upbringing in Ireland. Drawing upon the essay itself as well as biographical materials, personal correspondence, and criticism, this chapter will demonstrate how Wilde’s Irish heritage informed his socialist politics in “The Soul of Man under Socialism.”

The Influence of Speranza

It is evident from his biographies and writings that one of the most significant influences in many aspects of Wilde’s life was his mother.⁷ Lady Jane Francesca Wilde (née Elgee), who went by the *nom de plume* Speranza, was a vocal proponent of the Irish

⁶ Wilde described himself as “a most recalcitrant patriot” in a letter dated 1888 to James Nicol Dunn, managing editor of the *Scots Observer*, when he declined to be a contributor for the newspaper, known for its anti-Home Rule position.

⁷ Richard Ellmann’s *Oscar Wilde* and Davis Coakley’s *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Irish* thoroughly examine the relationship between Wilde and his mother.

nationalist cause. She published poetry in support of Home Rule and the Young Ireland Movement, once declaring “I express the soul of a great nation. Nothing less would content me, who am the acknowledged voice in poetry of all the people of Ireland” (qtd. in Ellman 9). With motherly and nationalist pride, Speranza claimed to have reared Oscar to be “a Hero perhaps and President of the future Irish Republic” (qtd. in Ellman 21), an ambition which could have had no little impact on her son, who witnessed public adulation of his mother. Máire Ní Fhlathúin cautions that readers cannot view Speranza’s ambitions for her son as “a vital element of the picture of Wilde himself” (341). Conversely, Jane Yolen argues “If one remembers that his mother was a politicized Irish nationalist prosecuted for publishing seditious materials, Oscar’s political background becomes foreground . . . Lady Wilde’s influence on her son was enormous” (245). Yolen supports her assertion with an anecdote about Speranza’s fame: “When Wilde first appeared before an Irish American group in St. Paul, Minnesota, on St. Patrick’s Day 1882, he was introduced not as a rising literary star, but as ‘the son of one of Ireland’s noblest daughters . . . who did much to keep the fire of patriotism burning brightly’” (245). Wilde did not mind being overshadowed by his mother’s fame; rather, he embraced it, incorporating nationalist topics into the remainder of his American lecture tour on aesthetics. Wilde clearly respected his mother; as Patrick Horan points out, he ranked her intellectually with Elizabeth Barrett Browning, one of the most respected Victorian female intellectuals, in his essay “*De Profundis*” (115). Further, in his youth, he demonstrated a desire to emulate her by being a political critic and made attempts to write “political” sonnets (50).⁸

⁸ Wilde’s attempts at political criticism and poetry are an early example of the

Speranza's influence on her son is evident in the similarities between her writing and several of the ideas he discusses in "The Soul of Man." According to Richard Ellmann, Speranza claimed "she loved 'to make a sensation'" (8). Thus, it is not surprising that sensationalism characterizes her nationalist poetry. For example, in "The Famine Year," she describes the suffering of the poor at the hands of the English during the Great Irish Famine:

There's a proud array of soldiers—what do they round your door?
 They guard our masters' granaries from the thin hands of the poor.
 Pale mothers, wherefore weeping?—Would to God that we were dead—
 Our children swoon before us, and we cannot give them bread. (1.5-8)

Her description of the "pale mothers" watching their children starve to death plays heavily on readers' emotions and incites them to action. Wilde echoes the idea of a dramatic appeal to human emotion in "The Soul of Man" when he writes:

The majority of people spoil their lives by an unhealthy and exaggerated altruism—are forced, indeed, so to spoil them. They find themselves surrounded by hideous poverty, by hideous ugliness, by hideous starvation. It is inevitable that they should be strongly moved by all this. The emotions of man are stirred more quickly than man's intelligence; and . . . it is much more easy to have sympathy with suffering than it is to have sympathy with thought. Accordingly, with admirable, though

paradoxical nature he and his mother often exhibited. As Horan notes, "In his 1887 essay 'The Poets and the People,' Wilde had stressed that the poet could be an influential political critic. By 1890, however, he advocated in *Intentions* (his collection of criticism) that poetry should be divorced from life" (50).

misdirected intentions, they very seriously and very sentimentally set themselves to the task of remedying the evils that they see. (CW 1079)

Wilde puts a negative spin on the altruism that results from pity, but his sentiments about the effectiveness of appealing to emotions sound as though they could have been written by Speranza herself. It is clear that his mother's ideas still held significant sway with Wilde even in his adulthood.

Owen Dudley Edwards observes that in "The Famine Year," Speranza was also "assailing suffering in her own country, and charging her own caste and their English cousins with its responsibility" (53). The wealthy English and Irish landowners exported food from Ireland during the famine for profit, hence Speranza's accusatory lines: "Fainting forms, hunger stricken, what see you in the offing? / Stately ships to bear our food away, amid the stranger's scoffing" (1.3-4).⁹ Similarly, in "The Soul of Man," Wilde blames the institution of private property and the unequal distribution of wealth, which are primarily enjoyed by his class and the aristocracy, with the "horrible evils" (i.e. poverty, hunger, homelessness) that exist in their society (CW 1080-81).

In another of her poems, "The Brothers," Speranza declares that death is preferable to veritable enslavement at the hands of the English aristocracy who control her native country: "Those pale lips yet implore us, from their graves, / To strive for our birthright as God's creatures, / Or die, if we can but live as slaves" (10.6-8). Wilde uses a

⁹ Edwards explains that Speranza was writing during the famine, when horror stories circulated in abundance. In the subsequent decades, historians determined that accounts of "corn-laden ships leaving the Famine-stricken island in inexorable pursuit of the wealth of nations" were propaganda stories implanted by the Whig party, and that Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel did "more than might be expected from any other contemporary premier or putative Irish self-ruling government, in distributing relief and funding schemes of public works" (52).

similar sentiment to argue against charity in “The Soul of Man” when he writes that the demoralizing effect of altruism creates a sort of psychological enslavement for the recipients:

Charity they feel to be a ridiculously inadequate mode of partial restitution, or a sentimental dole, usually accompanied by some impertinent attempt on the part of the sentimentalist to tyrannise over their private lives. . . . As for the virtuous poor, one can pity them, of course, but one cannot possibly admire them. They have made private terms with the enemy, and sold their birthright for very bad pottage. (CW 1081)

Here Wilde suggests that it would be better for the poor to resist the charity that sustains them than to accept it and be under obligation to those who provide it. Although the subject matter is her son’s, once again, Speranza’s nationalist influence helps to shape his philosophy.

It is clear from accounts of her life that Speranza thrived on contradictions and irony. Jerusha McCormack notes that Speranza predicted a popular revolt in Ireland, but she “distrusted democracy as mob rule, writing of the Fenians that ‘it is a decidedly *democratic* movement and the gentry and the aristocracy will suffer much from them’” (“The Wilde Irishman,” 83). In a similar fashion, Speranza wrote nationalist poetry on behalf of all her compatriots and published two collections of folk tales and superstitions gathered from the peasants in rural Ireland by her husband, yet she only associated with fellow members of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy herself, even moving to London for the latter part of her life. Wilde apparently inherited not only his mother’s politics, but her

penchant for living life at cross-purposes (83). Like his mother, Wilde distrusted democracy despite his republican leanings:

Individualism, then, is what through Socialism we are to attain. As a natural result the State must give up all idea of government. It must give it up because, as a wise man once said many centuries before Christ, there is such a thing as leaving mankind alone; there is no such thing as governing mankind. All modes of government are failures . . . High hopes were once formed of democracy; but democracy means simply the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people. It has been found out. I must say that it was high time, for all authority is quite degrading. It degrades those who exercise it, and degrades those over whom it is exercised. (CW 1087)

In this passage, Wilde does not just argue against democracy; he calls for the abolition of all authority. As McCormack puts it, “what is advocated is not socialism at all, but pure anarchy, once defined by Arnold in a famous essay under that rubric, as ‘doing as one likes’” (“The Wilde Irishman,” 86). Yet, in his poem “Libertatis Sacra Fames,” Wilde’s political ideology dramatically shifts again:

Albeit nurtured in democracy,
 And liking best that state republican
 Where every man is Kinglike and no man
 Is crowned above his fellows, yet I see,
 Spite of this modern fret for Liberty,
 Better the rule of One, whom all obey,
 Than to let clamorous demagogues betray

Our freedom with the kiss of anarchy. (CW 715)

In these lines he not only promotes government, but the monarchy, which is surprising for someone who supports Home Rule for Ireland. Rather than indicating indecisiveness, however, the apparent contradictions within Wilde's philosophy likely reflect the affinity for irony and paradox that he shared with his mother—a further example of the extent to which Speranza influenced her son.

Much as she influenced him directly, Wilde's mother helped mold his philosophies indirectly as well. An avid socialite, Speranza hosted weekly salons in Wilde's childhood home at 1 Merrion Square in Dublin that were frequented by famous literary and political figures. Her guests encompassed a diverse array of artistically innovative thinkers such as George Bernard Shaw, Aubrey de Vere, John Hogan, George Petrie, Henry O'Neill, William Rowan Hamilton, and John Butler Yeats, father of William Butler Yeats (Coakley 28, 36; Edwards 57). Although a child, Wilde was permitted to interact with the guests, so he was exposed to a wide variety of opinions on political, scientific, artistic, cultural, and philosophical topics. As an adult, Horan finds, Wilde often restated Speranza's guests' ideas in his own fashion (27). According to Horan and Beaumont, "The Soul of Man under Socialism" was born from Wilde's fascination with Shaw's theories of socialism and his desire to try his hand at socialist writing (27; 15).

The Influence of Irish Revolutionaries

Through Speranza, Wilde became very familiar with Irish nationalism and even got to meet members of the Young Ireland movement in his home. These social revolutionaries, particularly the Young Ireland poets, had a significant impact on Wilde's

political development, as a lecture he gave on Irish poetry in San Francisco (5 April 1882) clearly proves. In his speech, Wilde criticized poets who lacked nationalist pride and praised the writers of the 1848 rebellion: “As regards these men of ’48, I look on their work with peculiar reverence and love, for I was indeed trained by my mother to love and reverence them, as a Catholic child is the Saints of the Calendar” (qtd. in O’Neill 30). He goes on to list among his heroes William Smith O’Brien, John Mitchel, John Savage, Charles Gavan Duffy, Thomas Davis, and James Clarence Mangan.

The influence of the revolutionaries in Wilde’s youth remains evident in his adulthood. According to Davis Coakley, Wilde may have been introduced in childhood to some of the radical ideas he develops in “The Soul of Man” through Young Irelander Henry O’Neill’s controversial book *Ireland for the Irish* (1868), which advocated the nationalization of land and warned of potential social revolution if reforms were not made (29). Although “a most recalcitrant patriot” himself, Wilde consistently supported Home Rule for Ireland, Irish nationalists, and revolutionaries in general. For example, when his compatriot George Bernard Shaw circulated a petition in the late 1880s calling for a reprieve for the Irish-American anarchists involved in Chicago’s Haymarket Riots, Wilde was the only man of letters in London who signed the document (Nolan 104).

Revolutionaries, or “agitators,” he argues, are fundamental members of a society:

What is said by great employers of labour against agitators is unquestionably true. Agitators are a set of interfering, meddling people, who come down to some perfectly contented class of the community and sow the seeds of discontent amongst them. That is the reason why

agitators are so absolutely necessary. Without them, in our incomplete state, there would be no advance towards civilisation. (CW 1082)

By writing “The Soul of Man,” Wilde places himself among the ranks of agitators who are leading humanity towards civilization, but in a less direct way than the Irish nationalists he admired as a boy.

One agitator in particular drew significant support from Wilde. When Anglo-Irish tensions increased during the 1880s, according to Coakley, Wilde openly backed Charles Stewart Parnell, a Protestant landowner and leader of the Home Rule party (2). Living in London at the time, Wilde attended meetings of the Parnell Commission, an investigation into numerous criminal charges against the Irish parliamentarian and his party (Ellmann 289). Wilde also owned the tremendous volumes which comprised the Commission’s report (289). Parnell was eventually vindicated in this case, but he was shortly thereafter named as a correspondent in the divorce proceedings of Captain O’Shea and his wife, Kitty, with whom Parnell had a long-term affair (290). The case received significant newspaper coverage and Parnell died in shame in 1891, but not before his party was divided and many of his political accomplishments negated. The incident elicited further sympathy from Wilde, who lashes out at the media in “The Soul of Man”:

The harm is done by the serious, thoughtful, earnest journalists, who solemnly, as they are doing at present, will drag before the eyes of the public some incident in the private life of a great statesman, of a man who is a leader of political thought as he is a creator of political force, and invite the public to discuss the incident, to exercise authority in the matter, to give their views . . . in fact, to make them-selves ridiculous, offensive,

and harmful. The private lives of men and women should not be told to the public. The public have nothing to do with them at all. (CW 1095)

Throughout his life, Wilde was routinely derisive of journalists, so it is not surprising that he places the sole blame for his hero's downfall on journalists and their reading public rather than on Parnell himself. W. J. McCormack has pointed out that, as implicit as the identification seems, "the fact remains that Parnell is not explicitly named" in this passage (99). On the other hand, Edwards argues that when Wilde involved the fate of Parnell in "The Soul of Man under Socialism," he knew "that every reader of the *Fortnightly Review* for February 1891 would know to whom he was referring"; the exclusion of Parnell's name "from his philippic against the press jackals . . . shrouded his meaning for posterity. But contemporaries would have understood his reference with more clarity than almost any other allusion he made" (68). Wilde's unwavering support for Irish nationalists such as Parnell is a testament to the tremendous influence they had on his politics.

Anglo-Irish Relations

In "Mr. Froude's Blue-Book," a review published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (13 April 1889), Wilde writes of England, "If in the last century she tried to govern Ireland with an insolence that was intensified by race-hatred and religious prejudice, she has sought to rule her in this century with a stupidity that is aggravated by good intentions" (476). He may have lived in England for the latter part of his life, but Wilde had no problem being critical of the empire that was guilty of "seven centuries of injustice" in his homeland (qtd. in J. McCormack, "The Wilde Irishman," 84). Such harsh words are understandable when one takes into consideration the atmosphere of nineteenth-century Dublin and post-Famine rural Ireland in which Wilde was raised. Richard Pine argues

that speaking of “hunger and poverty and a ‘ceaseless quest for property’ as the background to Wilde’s *Soul of Man under Socialism*, without looking at the Irish Famine and Land War for a possible cause of preoccupation with land and survival, is like discussing Wordsworth without recourse to nature” (5). Of course there was poverty, hunger, and homelessness in London in 1891 and that is ostensibly Wilde’s subject matter; however, through a post-colonial lens, portions of “The Soul of Man” can clearly be read as a scathing critique of English landlords who were overcharging their impoverished tenants in Ireland:

When there is no punishment at all, crime will either cease to exist, or, if it occurs, will be treated by physicians as a very distressing form of dementia, to be cured by care and kindness. For what are called criminals nowadays are not criminals at all. Starvation, and not sin, is the parent of modern crime. That indeed is the reason why our criminals are, as a class, so absolutely uninteresting from any psychological point of view. They are not marvellous Macbeths and terrible Vautrins. They are merely what ordinary respectable, commonplace people would be if they had not got enough to eat. (CW 1088)

By sarcastically decriminalizing the behavior of the impoverished—people Wilde observed as a child in the rural communities of western Ireland and those he witnesses around him in London—he places blame for the state of society on those who have the power to improve conditions but do not: the English aristocracy. Further, Wilde charges that while humanity prospers materially from the collective force of the poor, the poor person himself is disregarded: “He is merely the infinitesimal atom of a force that, so far

from regarding him, crushes him: indeed, prefers him crushed, as in that case he is far more obedient” (*CW* 1080). It does not take much imagination to figure out what the “force” is that prefers “crushed” and “more obedient” workers.

From a Marxist perspective, capitalism is its own executioner in “The Soul of Man”; Edwards labels it “the finest measurement of the relations of Death and Avarice in the Irish context” as “Ireland’s rulers did not want to kill the people, but (to their own grief and mortification) aided the Death they sought to avert” (55). Superficial charitable efforts, Wilde argues, do not solve the problem but treat the symptoms while contributing to the perpetuation of the underlying issues. He proposes that organized social reform is necessary, or changes of a more revolutionary nature are inevitable:

Why should they [the poor] be grateful for the crumbs that fall from the rich man’s table? They should be seated at the board, and are beginning to know it. As for being discontented, a man who would not be discontented with such surroundings and such a low mode of life would be a perfect brute. Disobedience, in the eyes of any one who has read history, is man’s original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and through rebellion. (*CW* 1081)

Not only is a revolution at hand, but it is likely that Wilde, given his nationalist sympathies, will support such a movement. Wilde is not advocating a division of the British Empire in this essay, though. His argument is that the government cannot force anything on the populace: “authority and compulsion are out of the question. All association must be quite voluntary. It is only in voluntary associations that man is fine”

(CW 1082). Implicit in the last line is the idea that the condition of those being governed, namely the Irish, is not “fine” presently.

Empathy for Marginalized Peoples

Wilde inhabited a rather hazy area in society: despite being an Oxford man, London socialite, and quintessential dandy, he was still an outsider in England because of his Irish heritage. Furthermore, he was a rather eccentric artist and, for several years, an undisclosed homosexual. According to Horan, “being in the Irish minority strengthened Wilde’s notion that most artists were alienated and unappreciated by the populace” (46). The various types of marginalization Wilde experienced likely contributed to the emphasis he places on individualism in the utopian society he envisions in “The Soul of Man.” After laying out his suggestions for reform, Wilde concludes that “Socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to Individualism” (CW 1080). He goes on to explain the ideal state of humanity:

Under the new conditions Individualism will be far freer, far finer, and far more intensified than it is now. I am not talking of the great imaginatively realised Individualism of such poets as I have mentioned, but of the great actual Individualism latent and potential in mankind generally . . . The true perfection of man lies, not in what man has, but in what man is. (CW 1083)

It is not just for himself that Wilde desires the “new conditions.” In a passage reminiscent of fellow Irishman Jonathan Swift’s treatise “A Modest Proposal,” Wilde observes that “the majority of people . . . find themselves surrounded by hideous poverty, by hideous ugliness, by hideous starvation” and by “people living in fetid dens and fetid

rags, and bringing up unhealthy, hunger-pinched children in the midst of impossible and absolutely repulsive surroundings” (CW 1079-80). When these unfortunates do find work, “being always on the brink of sheer starvation,” they “are compelled to do the work of beasts of burden, to do work that is quite uncongenial to them, and to which they are forced by the peremptory, unreasonable, degrading Tyranny of want” (CW 1080). Although Wilde does not use the word “alienation,” Aaron Noland argues, “the impact of all this on the individual, as Wilde described it, merits the term” (102). Like the Irish, poor people were also disenfranchised in Victorian society.

Wilde’s utopian ideals extend beyond the Irish and the poor to include all people on the fringes of society, especially artists (like himself). Lawrence Danson has proposed that the individualism of “The Soul of Man” is at least partially a defensive reaction to the vilification Wilde suffered for his controversial novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (94). Accordingly, in Wilde’s anarchic socialist utopia, artists will be free from the interfering public’s attempts to exercise control over them, left alone to create beautiful things. But in light of Wilde’s imprisonment, Danson notes, “his plea to leave others alone as we would be left alone reveals its urgently wider applicability, to sexual minorities and to all dissident or marginalised people” (94). In this context, “The Soul of Man” is not so much a socialist manifesto as a not-so-veiled criticism of Victorian society on the whole.

An Irish Vision of Socialism

In “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” Wilde strayed from his more successful milieux of art criticism, poetry, and drama to try his hand at political nonfiction. It almost seems as though he were trying to be someone else, to emulate one of the social

critics he looked up to, such as John Ruskin, Walter Pater, or Thomas Carlyle, and the result was not one of his best works. In Wilde's terms, he donned a mask that did not suit him. Regardless of the quality of social reform theories it contains, however, "The Soul of Man" is valuable for its illustration of the extent to which Wilde's Irish heritage played a role in his politics; even though Wilde does not explicitly mention his nationality, Speranza, Parnell, or even Ireland in his pseudo-socialist manifesto, a post-colonial interpretation of the essay makes it clear that the influences of his Hibernian childhood had a significant impact on Wilde's adult philosophies.

SOCIAL COMMENTARY MEETS THE SUPERNATURAL: THE IRISHNESS OF WILDE'S FAIRY TALES

Like Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray before him, Oscar Wilde briefly strayed from his typical literary ventures—poetry, book reviews, and society plays—to try his hand at a much different genre: fairy tales. People question Wilde's purpose in writing fairy tales; given the rest of his body of work, the genre is a bit surprising. Ann Shillinglaw, for example, suggests that Wilde may have had one of several agendas behind writing his two collections: to entertain his children,¹⁰ to acknowledge his parents' folkloric preservation efforts, to participate in the trend of leading Victorian literary figures writing fairy tales, to provide an engaged protest against the elements of nineteenth-century British culture that he opposed, or to "bring the Celtish fairy charm, in [Matthew] Arnold's words, to the English reading public, and thereby gain for himself a much wider audience" (83). Biographical materials indicate Wilde may have chosen the genre because of a propensity towards childishness himself. Wilde's younger son, Vyvyan, remembers his father as a child at heart:

Most parents in those days were far too solemn and pompous with their children, insisting on a vast amount of usually undeserved respect. My own father was quite different; he had so much of the child in his own nature that he delighted in playing our games. He would get down on all fours on the nursery floor, being in turn a lion, a wolf, a horse, caring nothing for his usually immaculate appearance. (Holland 52-53)

¹⁰ Numerous biographical accounts recall that Wilde often spun his fairy tales for his young sons before writing them down.

It is likely that all of the aforementioned factors contributed to Wilde's decision to dabble in fairy tales to some extent; the content of the tales themselves support this hypothesis. Whatever his initial reason for writing them, Wilde's stories serve another purpose for postcolonial readers: far from being mere educational fables for children, Wilde's fairy tales prove to be an interesting medium for reflecting his Irishness because they both contain elements of traditional Irish folklore and convey republican and anti-imperialist sentiments. Their agenda is what leads Jerusha McCormack to label Wilde's fairy stories "misleadingly slight":

All, while posing as innocent, were dangerous; all drew their inspiration from a degraded culture, driven underground—whether that of the “little people,” fairies or children, or of the emerging gay subculture of the 1880s. It is from the margins of society, from the perspective of the poor, the colonised, the disreputable and the dispossessed, that these stories must be read. (“Wilde's Fictions,” 102)

Analyzing the tales from a post-colonial perspective and recognizing their Irish elements serves to eliminate some of the critical mystery that has adhered to them in the past century. As Jarlath Killeen explains, “Wilde encountered the fairy tale and folklore traditions he uses through an Irish lens first and while this certainly does not mean that he was not influenced by other sources, it does mean that it is important to take serious account of this Irish material” (17). Although there are arguably Irish elements in all of Wilde's fairy tales and they all lend themselves to anti-imperialist readings, three stories are particularly loaded: “The Selfish Giant” (1888), “The Devoted Friend” (1888), and “The Young King” (1891).

Although the nine stories which make up *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891) are referred to collectively in Wildean studies as Wilde's "fairy tales," many critics will argue that the stories are not in fact fairy tales at all, but folk tales. Richard Pine distinguishes between the two forms:

A fairy story is an allegory designed to give children a picture of the real, adult, world, and to enable them, by understanding its constituent parts, to negotiate a satisfactory path in the real world. A folk-tale is more vicious, a parable: it is a tale for adults who have lost their way among the signposts and have experienced some of the disruption related in the tale. Both fairy story and folk-tale are political, in that they concern relation, but the folk-tale concentrates on experience rather than expectation, on action and sensibility rather than imagination. The fairy story deals with home; the folk-tale with the world. (165)

By this rubric, Wilde's stories belong primarily to the folk genre. However, there is one notable exception: rather than concentrating on "sensibility," Wilde's tales rely heavily on the imagination. In fact, he often uses imaginative elements to illustrate political issues and promote action. Consequently, as Pine puts it, these stories "are intended not for nursery children . . . but for adult-children" (165). Although they are generally suitable for young people to read, the underlying sociopolitical themes direct Wilde's fairy-folk tales at a decidedly more mature audience.

"The Selfish Giant"

The third fairy tale in Wilde's first collection, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, is "The Selfish Giant." The story begins with a Giant returning from an extended

absence to find that village children have been playing in his beautiful garden. The Giant promptly erects a wall around his land to keep the children out, but the garden is plagued by perpetual winter in the children's absence. When the children, who can find nowhere else to play, sneak back into the garden, bringing spring with them, the Giant has a change of heart and helps one little boy climb a tree, vowing to destroy the wall and share his garden for ever. He watches the children play every day, but is not visited again by the little boy of whom he has grown so fond for many years. The little boy finally returns on the day of the Giant's death, nail wounds in his hands and feet, and promises the repentant Giant a future in Heaven.

According to Owen Dudley Edwards, Patrick Pearse—an Irish writer and one of the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising—drew directly from “The Selfish Giant” for his Irish-language short story “Íosagán” (59).¹¹ The fact that a political radical like Pearse would appropriate the tale, Killeen observes, indicates that allegorical elements of the original narrative address important Irish issues (63). What those issues are becomes evident through a post-colonial re-contextualization of the tale. To understand “The Selfish Giant” fully, one must read it against the land struggle that was taking place in Ireland during the 1880s. Edwards surmises that Wilde set his story in western Ireland, around Connaught, where Sir William Wilde owned the Moytura estate, defined the topography of Lough Corrib, and presumably took his sons on folklore expeditions during holidays. In this vein, Edwards argues, “The Selfish Giant” implies not just a peasant context, but “the Giant as owner of the Big House with the little children as peasants and, presumably, Catholics” (59). The tenant- peasant children appreciate the

¹¹ Edwards also argues that another of Wilde's tales, “The Happy Prince,” is the source of Pearse's story “Eoghainín na n-Éan” (59).

natural beauty of the garden and enjoy interacting with the land that they see as belonging to everyone. The Giant, who spends long periods of time away from his garden and stays inside when he is home, does not care for the land so much as property ownership:

“My own garden is my own garden,” said the Giant; “any one can understand that, and I will allow nobody to play in it but myself.” So he built a high wall all round it, and put up a notice-board.

TRESPASSERS

WILL BE

PROSECUTED

He was a very selfish Giant. (*CW* 297)

The problem at the heart of the story, then, is the clash between two diametrically opposed conceptions of land and ownership, a clash that was central to the land struggle in late nineteenth-century Ireland (Killeen 64).

Embodying the attitudes of landlordism in the 1800s, the Giant does with the land whatever he wants without consulting the tenants or demonstrating concern for their interests. By expelling the children from his garden, the Giant abolishes any sense of loyalty that was protective of him and kept the children fairly content; Killeen points out, “notions of dispossession have had a strong role in Irish history and, by activating them, the Giant is simply laying the ground for trouble in his future” (69). The children gather outside the garden walls and commiserate, perhaps contemplating sedition:

The poor children had now nowhere to play. They tried to play on the road, but the road was very dusty and full of hard stones, and they did not like it. They used to wander round the high walls when their lessons were

over, and talk about the beautiful garden inside. “How happy we were there!” they said to each other. (*CW* 297)

It is only a matter of time before the children-peasants, unsatisfied with their situation, revolt. Through a postcolonial lens, it is easy to see a connection between the dispossessed children and the farmers who joined the Irish Land League to campaign for tenant’s rights in the nineteenth century.

The Giant’s seven-year absence at the beginning of the story also reflects the problem of absentee landlords in nineteenth-century Ireland. Good landlords were expected to be present and honor their duties to their tenants and land; absenteeism, or leaving these matters to an agent, Killeen explains, weakened whatever loyalty the child-tenants felt towards their landlord-father (66). Again, a breakdown in the system often spelled trouble for the landlord. Killeen observes that in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland, “when tenant farmers became fed up with their landlord and the way he approached the land issue, they behaved in precisely the way children in fairy tales react to Giants and ogres: they committed violence upon them” (69). In this fairy tale, the children have no reason to respect the Giant and their revolt takes the form of forcible entry back into the garden against his command.

Nature in “The Selfish Giant” seems to be on the side of the tenants as the greedy landlord is plagued by perpetual winter during the children’s expulsion. Killeen sees the images of barren land as reminiscent of the recent Irish famine; behind the imagery of winter, he declares, is “the history of crop failure and climate disaster that had haunted nineteenth-century Ireland itself” (73). The problem with Killeen’s winter-famine analogy is that Nature is always good to the children in Wilde’s tale while, in reality, it

was the tenant farmers who naturally felt the harshest effects of famine, not the landlords. Instead, the incapacitating winter of Wilde's story is a sort of scare tactic for those who would abuse their positions for capitalist gain—a warning to landlords that their land will not be productive without the tenant farmers who appreciate and care for it. Killeen's assertion that the turning of the political and economic tide that accompanied the Great Famine led to the end of the landlord class (73) does find a parallel in Wilde's story: it is the failure of the system resulting from the absence of the tenant-children (i.e. winter) that prompts the Giant's drastic decision to renounce ownership of the land and surrender it to the child-like Irish. Wilde uses nature to promote his vision of the ideal state of land ownership in Ireland.

It is at the end of "The Selfish Giant" that the folk-Catholic influences of Wilde's childhood appear. The Giant is saved from the doomed fate he has created for himself by the sudden appearance and intercession of a child-Christ in his garden. The vision of the boy unable to climb the tree causes an instant conversion:

"How selfish I have been!" he said; "now I know why the Spring would not come here. I will put that poor little boy on the top of the tree, and then I will knock down the wall, and my garden shall be the children's playground for ever and ever." He was really very sorry for what he had done. (CW 298)

The Giant keeps his promise and lives out the rest of his days repentantly sharing his garden and watching for the return of the child-Christ. The boy does not return for many years, but when he does, he has nail wounds in his hands and feet. The aged and feeble Giant demands to know who hurt the boy so that he can avenge him, but the child-Christ

says simply “these are the wounds of Love” (CW 300). He then tells the Giant, “You let me play once in your garden, to-day you shall come with me to my garden, which is Paradise,” after which the Giant dies and his body is covered with white blossoms (CW 300). Killeen argues that the final scenes represent a conversion of the Protestant Giant to Catholicism. The allegory can be extended further, though. It is representative of the Giant’s (English) acceptance of and accession to the ways of the children (Irish Catholics). It is Wilde’s version of an Irish “happily ever after.”

The most obvious element of folkloric tradition in this story is the unification of humans, nature, and religion, a tradition with which Wilde was likely familiar through the writings of his parents, if not through personal observation in the west of Ireland. In spite of their Catholic beliefs, the peasants of nineteenth-century Ireland preserved remnants of their pagan ancestors’ practices, particularly those pertaining to their livelihood of farming. In his book *Irish Popular Superstitions*, Sir William Wilde observed that well into the 1800s, vestiges of May Day—a celebration of the beginning of summer—could be seen in rural communities throughout the British Isles (36-40). He even likened some of these rituals to ancient acts of nature worship (48). The rites of May that Sir William and Lady Wilde recorded, Killeen notes, reveal that the Irish believed the regeneration of plant life, the regeneration of human existence, and the regeneration of the agricultural year all take place together (76). This close bond between the Irish and nature is exemplified in “The Selfish Giant” by the spring accompanying the children to the garden. When the children are in the garden, celebrating its beauty, the land is renewed: trees blossom and bear fruit, flowers bloom, and birds sing. When the children are evicted from the garden, their unhappiness over their separation from the land is mirrored

by the onset of harsh winter snows, frost, hail, and wind. Nature shuns the Giant, who has no connection to the land. It takes the return of the children to herald in spring and allow the rebirth of the garden. When he acknowledges the importance of the human element to nature and embraces it, the Giant becomes part of the natural system; the seasons resume their regular pattern, and as a result, the Giant “did not hate the Winter now, for he knew that it was merely the Spring asleep, and that the flowers were resting” (CW 299). The fact that the deceased Giant’s body is covered with the white blossoms of the trees suggests that Nature is embracing him; in death, he becomes part of the natural cycle. Or, as Killeen puts it, the blossoms are a sign of nature “incorporating him, and the English nation he represents, back into a scheme of creation amenable to a peaceful Ireland” (78). In either reading, the fairy tale ends with a positive message about the potential for future peace if the Giant (England) demonstrates some compassion and sympathy towards the children (Irish) and their beliefs.

“The Devoted Friend”

Also published in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, “The Devoted Friend,” begins with the truly fairy tale-like feature of talking animals. The story is structured as a frame narrative, with a Green Linnet recounting the dysfunctional friendship of Little Hans and Hugh the Miller to a Water-rat. In “The Devoted Friend,” a wealthy Miller uses his “friendship” as leverage to get poor Hans to neglect his own work and do everything for him, from home repairs to selling his flour at the market. The one-sided friendship leads to Hans’s death when he gets lost in a blizzard and drowns during an errand for the Miller. Instead of acknowledging any personal blame in the matter,

however, the Miller feels sorry for himself—not because Hans is dead, but because he is stuck with the dilapidated wheelbarrow Hans was going to take.

From a post-colonial perspective, this story is clearly an allegory of Anglo-Irish relations, with Little Hans representing Ireland and the Miller representing his “neighbor,” England. The pejorative adjective appended to Hans’s name again reflects the English belittlement of the Irish; “little” connotes not only small size, but childishness and even dependence. A feature of the story that is less obvious to modern readers but supports an anti-imperialist agenda is Wilde’s use of the Green Linnet as narrator. According to Edwards, “Green Linnet” is found as a folk-motif in nineteenth-century agrarian and patriotic song as a code name for both Daniel O’Connell, an early nineteenth-century campaigner for Catholic Emancipation and repeal of the Act of Union, and Michael Davitt, one of the leaders of the Irish Land League movement in the 1880s (60). Wilde’s decision to have a figure bearing the allegorical name of great nationalist leaders tell the story adds import to the political message it conveys; contemporary readers would have recognized the significance and implications of “Green Linnet” (a linnet is a bird common to Europe, but there is no such thing as a green linnet). Furthermore, as Killeen points out, the allegorical nature of the story itself is “highlighted by the Green Linnet very early in the narrative when he tells the Water-rat that while the story of the Devoted Friend is not ‘about’ him, ‘it is applicable’ to him” (81). Wilde makes it clear from the beginning of the fairy tale that “The Devoted Friend” has an underlying message for readers.

Edwards argues that Wilde’s story reflects the kind of political economic logic applied to the starving poor during the Great Famine in Ireland (60). In the mid-1800s,

widespread failure of potato crops in Ireland, coupled with the sociopolitical climate of the time, led to mass starvation, disease, and emigration. Killeen posits that behind much of the English government's reluctance to assist the starving Irish during this period was the conviction that charity created a multitude of sins (83). Similarly, the Miller withholds the supply of food from the needy Hans because it would induce both envy and idleness:

“Why, if little Hans came up here, and saw our warm fire, and our good supper, and our great cask of red wine, he might get envious, and envy is a most terrible thing, and would spoil anybody's nature. I certainly will not allow Hans' nature to be spoiled. I am his best friend, and I will always watch over him, and see that he is not led into any temptations. Besides, if Hans came here, he might ask me to let him have some flour on credit, and that I could not do. Flour is one thing, and friendship is another, and they should not be confused.” (CW 303)

Not only does the Miller fail to help Hans during the winter, he criticizes the impoverished man for selling his only valuables to buy food: ““Buy back your wheelbarrow? You don't mean to say you have sold it? What a very stupid thing to do!”” (CW 304). His response makes it clear that the Miller feels Hans does not work hard enough to support himself. The only thing the Miller is ever willing to give Hans, and that reluctantly, is his broken wheelbarrow, and Hans must work himself literally to death to earn it. It is not a matter of the Miller not wanting to part with his property; on the contrary, he declares after Hans's death, “I had as good as given him my wheelbarrow, and now I really don't know what to do with it. It is very much in my way

at home, and it is in such bad repair that I could not get anything for it if I sold it” (CW 308). The Miller does not want to help/spoil Hans, but for Hans to help himself and thereby help the Miller as well.

Instead, the relationship between the Miller and Hans, like that between England and Ireland, is really an abusive relationship where one party exploits the other under the guise of a “devoted friendship.” Killeen contends, quite rightly, that Hans’s behavior is almost as bad as that of the Miller:

The most disturbing thing about his relationship with Hans is not actually the extent to which the Miller will go in order to squeeze every last ounce of work out of the starving flower-grower, but rather the eagerness with which Hans takes to being exploited, mimicking the slaves Wilde mentions in “The Soul of Man” who preferred slavery to freedom because they had nice masters. (85)

Hans not only puts up with the treatment, he acquiesces to the Miller’s whims with irritating obsequiousness. Hans/Ireland’s passive suffering was a subject of concern in the nineteenth century as much as it is to modern readers, as evidenced by literature of the period. Killeen cites as an example Speranza’s poem “The Enigma” (first published as “The Challenge to Ireland” in the *Nation* of July 1848), which “depicts an Irish nation composed of slaves (like Hans perhaps), who have worked themselves to death in the service of their imperial master, England, and asks what has happened to Irish masculinity that it should be so content with such mindless servitude” (88):

What! are there no MEN in your Fatherland,
To confront the tyrant’s stormy glare,

With a scorn as deep as the wrongs ye bear,
With defiance as fierce as the oaths they swear,
With vengeance as wild as the cries of despair,
That rise from your suffering Fatherland?

Are there no SWORDS in your Fatherland,
To smite down the proud, insulting foe,
With the strength of despair give blow for blow
Till the blood of the baffled murderers flow
On the trampled soil of your outraged land?

Are your right arms weak in that land of slaves,
That ye stand by your murdered brothers' graves,
Yet tremble like coward and crouching knaves,
To strike for Freedom and Fatherland?

Oh! had ye faith in your Fatherland,
In God, your Cause, and your own Right hand,
Ye would go forth as saints to the holy fight,
Go in the strength of eternal right,
Go in the conquering Godhead's might—
And save or AVENGE your Fatherland! (Speranza 13)

Speranza expresses her disappointment in the would-be patriots of her country and attempts, as in much of her poetry, to anger and incite them to action. Killeen notes that in “The Devoted Friend,” Wilde is echoing the frustration of his mother at “the preparedness of the Irish to suffer all manner of indignity rather than protest in the form of manly valour” (89). He removes sole blame for the Irish situation from England, making it equally Ireland’s fault; viz. Hans is deserving of some sympathy, but ultimately, he is partially responsible for his situation as the selfish Miller can only exert as much influence over his “friend” as Hans allows. Wilde makes it clear that meek submission to such abuse and failure to recognize it for what it is, is as unacceptable as the abuse itself (Killeen 81). In this vein, Wilde is issuing a warning to Ireland that ridiculous passivity will ultimately be the downfall of the nation.

The rural setting of “The Devoted Friend,” the presence of the Green Linnet, and the gombeen-man ethics displayed by the Miller give the story a decidedly Irish tone. However, Wilde also incorporates two Irish folk elements into the tale which, though well-hidden, add another layer of Irishness to the story and its message. One of the folk elements is primroses. According to Lady Wilde’s two folklore collections, primroses were used by peasants as a protection against witchcraft and evil intent; in *Ancient Cures, Charms, and Usages of Ireland*, she explains:

[T]he best preventive against fairy or demon power was to scatter primroses on the threshold, for no fairy could pass the flower, and the house and household were left in peace . . . a bunch of primroses [was] tied to the cow’s tail, for the evil spirits cannot touch anything guarded by these flowers. (99-101)

At the beginning of “The Devoted Friend,” the flowers in Hans’s garden which the Miller appropriates are primroses. Hans plans to use the bounty of flowers to purchase back his few valuable belongings, but the Miller insists that Hans give them all to him instead. Hans is guilted into doing so in the name of friendship. In accordance with Irish superstition, once Hans and his cottage are no longer surrounded by the protection of the primroses, the poor gardener is in peril; by removing the flowers, he opens himself to evil influences. Evil in this case comes in the form of the self-centered Miller, whose abusive treatment of his “friend” ultimately leads to Hans’s death. Wilde could have Hans grow any type of flower he wanted, so the fact that he (consciously or subconsciously) chose primroses, which are so powerful in Celtic superstition, reflects the influence of Wilde’s Irish heritage.

The color scarlet is another element Wilde utilizes in this fairy tale that has links to Irish folklore. Both Sir William and Lady Wilde recorded several uses of the color scarlet in their collections of Irish lore and in every instance the color is associated with benevolence, well-being, or safety. For example, scarlet thread tied about the wrists or throat was used by the rural Irish as a charm to cure various ailments. And while most fairies were believed to harm humans or try to steal from them, the two fairy entities who are described in the Wildes’ books as wearing scarlet actually help people. In “The Changeling,” the young fairy woman who helps a couple get their own child back from the fairies after it has been replaced by a changeling wears “a scarlet handkerchief wound round her head” (L. Wilde, *Ancient Legends*, 2.150). Similarly, the fairy king who helps a young woman return home after her abduction in “The Fairy Nurse” is described as “dressed all in scarlet” (W. Wilde 132). In “The Devoted Friend,” the color scarlet

appears two times, both in reference to benevolent characters. The first reference is to the Miller's son, who selflessly offers to share his porridge with starving Hans when the Miller neglects him during the winter: after his father's reprimand, the thoughtful child "felt so ashamed of himself that he hung his head down, and grew quite scarlet and began to cry into his tea" (CW 303). The second use of scarlet refers to Hans's attire: when Hans leaves to fetch the doctor on the night of his death, he dons his "warm scarlet cap" (CW 307). Hans and the little boy are arguably the only two decent characters in "The Devoted Friend," and they both place the well-being of others ahead of their own. By associating the two of them, and only the two of them, with the color scarlet, Wilde aligns "the good guys" with a color subconsciously viewed as positive in traditional Irish lore. Whether he intended to or not, Wilde subtly demonstrates the influence of his Celtic upbringing in "The Selfish Giant."

"The Young King"

The first tale in Wilde's second collection, *A House of Pomegranates*, "The Young King" is the story of a boy who is raised by peasants because his grandfather, the king, did not approve of the boy's father. On his deathbed, the king, who has no other living heirs, summons the leather-clad, bare-limbed 16-year-old who thinks he is the son of a goatherd to take over the throne. After his simple upbringing, the new king develops a "strange passion" for beautiful things and spends his time admiring his new belongings around the castle. He is particularly fascinated by the ornate robe, crown, and scepter intended for his coronation. However, on the eve of his coronation, the Young King has a series of three dreams about the suffering the peasants went through to produce his royal apparel, and decides that he will not wear it. Against the advice of his

Chamberlain, the nobles, and the Bishop, the Young King dons his peasant's tunic and cloak, a crown of wild briar, and his shepherd's staff and goes to the cathedral where he is to be crowned. An angry mob gathers to slay the boy who brings shame on their state by dressing like a beggar, but divine intervention saves him: light suddenly shines through the stained-glass windows and arrays him in a robe of many colors and the dead staff in his hand the dry crown of thorns on his head blossom. The people fall to their knees in homage and the authority of the Young King who showed pity for human suffering is no longer questioned.

Through a post-colonial lens, "The Young King" reflects the attitude of a colonized subject, and it can certainly be read as an Irishman responding to English imperialism. Wilde's own family was far from poor, but he would have observed significant poverty in rural areas of Ireland, particularly on his visits as a child to the west. The starvation and poverty portrayed in "The Young King" recall the conditions in Ireland during the famine of the mid-nineteenth century. In fact, Maureen O'Connor cites Speranza's poem "The Famine Year" as a source of influence for Wilde's allegories of ague, fever, and famine in his fairy tale (421). For Wilde, McCormack explains, "Coming from the modest wealth of Dublin, London's obscene luxury, its conspicuous waste, could only provide a corrosive contrast to the extreme poverty Wilde had seen in post-Famine Ireland" ("Wilde's Fictions," 104). This disparity would likely have heightened any sense of distrust towards the English that Wilde might have inherited from his parents. McCormack speculates that Sir William and Lady Wilde, "having lived through the Famine, were critical of an imperial regime which had, through commercial greed and indifference, allowed large numbers of the people of its nearest colony to

starve, while food was openly exported abroad” (104-05). Wilde adopts this theme in his story, having one of the peasant laborers lament:

In war . . . the strong make slaves of the weak, and in peace the rich make slaves of the poor. We must work to live, and they give us such mean wages that we die. We toil for them all day long, and they heap up gold in their coffers, and our children fade away before their time. . . . We tread out the grapes, and another drinks the wine. We sow the corn, and our own board is empty. (*CW* 227)

Accordingly, when he dreams about the circumstances under which they were made, the Young King rejects his royal vestments because they represent slavery: ““We have chains, though no eye beholds them; and we are slaves, though men call us free,”” his subjects tell him (*CW* 227). As William Racicot puts it, “he will not accept his role as the man who causes divers to bleed through ears and nostrils and die; he will not willingly participate in the deaths of entire mining communities” (94). In fact, the Young King is so adamantly opposed to unnecessary human suffering that he is willing to face the rejection of his subjects and potential mob lynching to do what he thinks is right (i.e. not wear his coronation apparel). By highlighting the conditions of the impoverished in Ireland (described as Catholic peasants) and the exploitation of other colonial subjects, such as the Negro pearl divers and the jungle miners, Wilde criticizes the imperialist system that is responsible for the problems. His message, articulated by the weaver in the story, is a harsh one:

It is so with all . . . with the young as well as with the old, with the women as well as with the men, with the little children as well as with those who

are stricken in years. The merchants grind us down, and we must needs do their bidding. The priest rides by and tells his beads, and no man has care of us. Through our sunless lanes creeps Poverty with her hungry eyes, and Sin with his sodden face follows close behind her. Misery wakes us in the morning, and Shame sits with us at night. (CW 227)

Using the façade of a fairy tale, Wilde forces his largely middle- and upper-class British audience to face the uncomfortable reality of the social and political climate which supports their comfortable lives. From a post-colonial perspective, one can even see the responsible leadership and regal behavior displayed by the Young King as advice specifically geared towards the English royal family from one of its Irish subjects.

Supernatural elements are the means by which Wilde introduces Irish folk motifs into the naturalistic drama of “The Young King.” Pine notices the changeling motif in this story (177), but based on Lady Wilde’s definitions of a “changeling” in her collected Irish lore, Pine’s assumption is tenuous at best. According to Lady Wilde, a changeling is a fairy being—usually described as ugly, shrivelled, misshapened, or wizened—left in place of an abducted human baby. Changeling stories usually concern stolen children, although young women are sometimes victims as well, and they all revolve around the interference of the fairy race with humans. There is no fairy element in “The Young King,” nor is there an exchange of the boy for another being.¹² The closest thing to the changeling myth in this story is the alteration of the Young King’s appearance at the conclusion. The influence of Irish folklore can be seen in the final scene of the tale,

¹² The changeling motif does appear in other stories by Wilde, most notably “The Star-Child” and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which many critics argue is an extended fairy tale.

when the Young King's simple goatherd's clothing is magically transformed into raiment fit for a king. As in "The Selfish Giant," Wilde incorporates the idea of interconnectedness between humans and nature in "The Young King." The boy is described from the beginning of the story as a wild creature: he is "bare-limbed" and "wild-eyed and open-mouthed, like a brown woodland Faun, or some young animal of the forest newly snared by the hunters" with "dark woodland eyes" (CW 224; 226). Until he is brought to the castle, the boy is satisfied to be the son of a goatherd. When he sees all of the exquisite things he will own once he is re-established as heir to the throne, the boy flings aside his "rough leathern tunic and coarse sheepskin cloak" for the delicate garments of a king (CW 225). However, he finds only unhappiness in his new role; he misses at times "the freedom of the forest life," and after learning of the human suffering behind his beautiful belongings, he can no longer enjoy them—the only aspect of his new life that he cares about (CW 225). When he shuns the riches of the world and re-embraces the simplicity of nature out of compassion for other lives, the Young King finds peace and is blessed by God and/or nature:

And lo! through the painted windows came the sunlight streaming upon him, and the sunbeams wove round him a tissued robe that was fairer than the robe that had been fashioned for his pleasure. The dead staff blossomed, and bare lilies that were whiter than pearls. The dry thorn blossomed, and bare roses that were redder than rubies. Whiter than fine pearls were the lilies, and their stems were of bright silver. Redder than male rubies were the roses, and their leaves were of beaten gold. (CW 233)

In this passage, Wilde uses Biblical-sounding language to describe the beauty of the Young King's natural raiment; the description arguably even has undertones of nature worship. Through the mystical coronation, Wilde once again merges humans, nature, and religion into one harmonious system, much like ancient Irish did—a connection which is evident as a result of post-colonial hindsight.

An Irishman through an through

Lord Alfred Douglas once wrote, “Unless you understand that Wilde is an Irishman through and through, you will never get an idea of what his real nature is. In many ways he is as simple and innocent as a child” (qtd. in O'Connor 415). Douglas's statement, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin points out, inadvertently reflects a nineteenth-century English tendency to relegate the Irish not only to the role of inferiors, but of “childish buffoons and natural dependents” (30). Two prominent Celticists of Wilde's time, Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold, and the antiquarian Thomas Crofton Croker, for example, all describe the Irish race as explicitly child-like, according to O'Connor (414). Rather than internalizing the imperialist stereotype, Wilde uses the form of children's literature—fairy tales—to explode it; as O'Connor puts it, he paradoxically counters and inverts the “infantilization of the Irish” by “willfully inhabiting and deploying it through genre, suggesting the possibility of subverting and transforming repressive authority from ‘below’” (414-15). In this vein, Wilde's fairy tales, laced with elements of Irish folklore, should be read not as instructional tales for children, but as anti-imperialist criticism intended for the adults of the British empire.

THE DISPLACED *SEANCHAI*: WILDE AND IRISH ORAL TRADITION

“I cannot think otherwise than in stories,” Oscar Wilde once told his friend, André Gide (qtd. in Gide 38). Perhaps that is because at heart, Wilde was not just a writer, but a *seanchaí*—a Gaelic storyteller. *Seanchaí* refers specifically “to a person, man or woman, who makes a specialty of local tales, family-sagas, or genealogies, social-historical tradition, and the like, and can recount many tales [*seanchas*] of a short realistic type about fairies, ghosts, and other supernatural beings” (Delargy 6). These storytellers were unofficially responsible for entertainment and historical knowledge in their largely illiterate peasant communities, and they handed down their *seanchas* orally through the centuries from one generation to another. Seán Ó Súilleabháin explains that the *seanchaithe* were common when the Irish language was spoken extensively in Ireland because storytelling—which took place by the fireside to an audience of family members and visiting neighbors—was the primary source of entertainment during the long winter nights (54). Improved literacy rates, easier travel, and modern forms of entertainment naturally led to a decline in the number of *seanchaithe* in the 1800s, but the art of storytelling was still common in rural Ireland as late as the early twentieth century.

Seanchaithe were generally ordinary people, but the most famous one in Irish lore, according to Owen Dudley Edwards, was the legendary Oisín, son of Fionn Mac Cumhaill (also known as Finn MacCool or Fingal), “whose stories (produced to a surprisingly credulous Christian audience after 300 years’ preservation of the narrator in *Tír na n-Og*) turned chiefly on his father or his heroic son Oscar” (57). Thus, when William and Jane Wilde gave their second son the names “Oscar” and “Fingal,” they

linked him from birth with the ancient bardic tradition. Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was, as Edwards so eloquently puts it, "a hostage to Irish cultural identity" (58).

Wilde's association with storytelling was not limited to the connotative qualities of his name alone, however. He was introduced to the folkloric traditions of rural Ireland at a young age. Wilde's father, an amateur antiquarian, regularly took the family on folklore-gathering trips to the west of Ireland, where the Gaelic oral culture still thrived in peasant communities. It was through his father's research efforts that Wilde likely picked up the numerous folktales and some Gaelic lullabies that he would repeat later in life. As Davis Coakley reports, he was even exposed to storytelling at Moytura, the family home in County Mayo, where Wilde listened to the stories of Frank Houlihan, a man from Galway who worked for his father (99). Wilde learned the art of storytelling from rural Ireland, but he also grew up surrounded by good talkers. Lady Wilde was often the best speaker at her own weekly Dublin salons, which were attended by the great literary figures of the day, and young Wilde attended these gatherings and interacted with the talented visitors. And Sir William, much to the irritation of some of his guests, had a reputation for dominating dinner-table conversation. W. B. Yeats remembered Wilde saying to him of the Irish, "we are a nation of brilliant failures, but we are the greatest talkers since the Greeks" (*Four Years*, 22). Wilde's own affinity for storytelling became evident in his early childhood. A school friend, Edward Sullivan, recalled Wilde's habit of turning even the most ordinary events into fantastic stories. In one instance, after Wilde and some friends caused mischief in Enniskillen, they made a hasty retreat for school during which Wilde accidentally knocked an aged cripple down. "By the time he reached Portora," biographer Richard Ellmann records, "this sorry incident had

undergone Falstaffian transformation: an angry giant had barred his path, he had had to fight him through round after round and eventually, after prodigies of valor, to leave him for dead” (23).

The oral storytelling practices he learned in childhood accompanied Wilde into adulthood and London society; reports from a diverse array of his contemporaries make it clear that, even outside of his native country, Wilde was a natural *seanchaí*. French poet and novelist Henri de Regnier remembered Wilde as “an incomparable teller of tales” who “knew thousands of stories which linked themselves one to the other in an endless chain” (qtd. in Coakley 99). Even George Bernard Shaw, who had a less-than-amiable relationship with Wilde at times, was impressed by his compatriot’s skill; he recollected a chance meeting they had at Rosherville Gardens one day: “Wilde and I got on extraordinarily well on this occasion. I had not to talk myself, but to listen to a man telling me stories better than I could have told them. . . . I understood why Morris, when he was dying slowly, enjoyed a visit from Wilde more than from anybody else” (A12-13). During social gatherings, according to Thomas Wright, Wilde was frequently the center of attention, entertaining interested audiences for hours with “an inexhaustible fund of stories ranging from humorous anecdotes to poetical fables and irreverent adaptations of biblical tales” (10). Yeats later remarked, “the dinner table was Wilde’s event and made him the greatest talker of his time” (*Four Years*, 27). Wilde’s performances on those occasions were memorable enough for Max Beerbohm to recall them in a letter to Wilde’s son, Vyvyan Holland, 53 years after his father’s death:

I suppose there are now few survivors among the people who had the delight of hearing Oscar Wilde talk. Of these I am one. I have had the

privilege of listening also to many other masters of table-talk . . . all of them splendid in their own way. But assuredly Oscar in *his* own way was the greatest of them all—the most spontaneous and yet the most polished, the most soothing and yet the most surprising. (qtd. in McDiarmid 56)

It seems Wilde inherited and improved upon his parents' ability to dominate social settings verbally.

Although Wilde's conversation was admired for its brilliant epigrams and paradoxes, Coakley points out, his friends were more impressed by the ““strange and symbolic stories”” themselves (99). And according to Wright, many of Wilde's written works, such as his fairy tales, some of his plays (including *The Importance of Being Earnest*), *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the *Poems in Prose*, were told and retold as stories years before and sometimes also years after they were published (11). *Salomé* (1894), for example, was originally an oral tale. As legend has it, over lunch in Paris one day, Wilde made up the play while talking to a group of young writers, filling in the details of the storyline as he went along.

Wilde's storytelling was so unforgettable because he did not just narrate; he performed, using mimicry and gestures for illustration like a *seanchaí*. In the 1930s, Tadhg Ó Murchú witnessed one of the last storytellers—an octogenarian from Kerry—in action and provided an account of the moving experience:

His piercing eyes are on my face . . . he uses a great deal of gesticulation, and by the movement of his body, hands, and head, tries to convey hate and anger, fear and humour, like an actor in a play. He raises his voice at

certain passages, at other times it becomes almost a whisper. (qtd. in Delargy 16)

Descriptions of Wilde in the act of narrating portray strikingly similar behavior.

According to Deirdre Toomey, Charles Ricketts “remembered Wilde’s tendency to pause upon certain key words and to gesture as if to arrest their sound, his subtle but expressive use of gesture and mimesis” (28). In addition to the repertoire of gestures that accompanied Wilde’s stories, Ricketts writes of his vocal ability: “there was, besides, the cadenced and varied intonation, pausing on a word, a sentence, as a violinist accents and phrases his music” (qtd. in Toomey 28). It is apparent from this and numerous other contemporary accounts that Wilde excelled in the traditional art of storytelling as a true *seanchaí*.

In fact, many of Wilde’s friends and early critics who were familiar with his spoken stories believed that his talent lay in talk rather than in writing. Wright lists W. B. Yeats, Vincent O’Sullivan, Charles Ricketts, Max Beerbohm, André Gide, and Frank Harris among Wilde’s friends who “believed that his works lost a great deal of their power in the translation from speech to writing” (14). In an introduction to *The Happy Prince and Other Fairy Tales* (1923), for instance, Yeats observes, “when I remember him with pleasure it is always the talker I remember. . . . The further Wilde goes in his writings from the method of speech, from improvisation, from sympathy with some especial audience the less original he is, the less accomplished” (qtd. in McCormack, “Wilde’s Fictions,” 102). Yeats also criticized that Wilde’s “plays and dialogues have what merit they possess from being now an imitation, now a record, of his talk” (*Four Years*, 27). Similarly, Robert Ross writes of *Poems in Prose* (1894): “To those who

remember hearing them from Wilde's lips there must always be a feeling of disappointment on reading them. He overloaded their ornament when he came to transcribe them, and some of his friends did not hesitate to make that criticism personally" (qtd. in Wright 14). Even though he is now famous for his written works, Wilde also seemed to feel his genius lay in oral storytelling, or at least that was his preferred medium. In a letter of November 1894, Wilde refers to his spoken stories:

I wish I could write them down, these little coloured parables or poems that live for a moment in some cell of my brain, and then leave it to go wandering elsewhere. I hate writing: the mere act of writing a thing down is troublesome to me. I want some fine medium, and look for it in vain.
(*CL* 621)

As Wright notes, Arthur Ransome posited that Wilde would never have written a single line had he been rich (14). Wilde's own remarks about orality support this thesis. In "The Critic as Artist" (1891), he has Gilbert declare the primacy of voice: "When Milton became blind he composed, as every one should compose, with the voice purely . . . Yes: writing has done much harm to writers. We must return to the voice" (*CW* 1017). Regardless of his preference, Wilde sensed the impossibility of simply "returning to the voice." Thus Gilbert concludes, "As it now is, we cannot do so" (*CW* 1017). There was no money in storytelling, and money was what Wilde needed; he routinely lived beyond his means, particularly after his father's death, often borrowing money and requiring advances on his later plays. Consequently, Wilde the oral storyteller was forced to become Wilde the writer. True to his heritage, however, Wilde did not abandon his storytelling practices when it came to writing; on the contrary, as the following

paragraphs will demonstrate, Wilde's written works exhibit many characteristics of the Irish storytelling tradition. He was as much the *seanchaí* on paper as he was in speech, in practice if not effectiveness.

Stylistic Similarities

One of the most obvious correlations between Wilde's spoken and written stories is the conversational tone—what Wright calls “a distinctly oral flavour” (17). When Wilde writes in a letter referring to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), “I am afraid it is rather like my own life—all conversation and no action” (CL 425), he emphasizes the strength of his writing rather than pointing out a weakness. The conversational nature of Wilde's writing was certainly appreciated by his contemporaries. In his famous review of *Dorian Gray*, Walter Pater writes, “There is always something of an excellent talker about the writing of Mr. Oscar Wilde” (126), and he concludes by praising Wilde for writing “with the ease and fluidity . . . of one telling a story by word of mouth” (133). Declan Kiberd explains that a delivery style that verges on the conversational is characteristic of ancient sagas as well as the modern Irish folk-tale and is the influence of the Gaelic tradition of storytelling (“Story-Telling,” 20). “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” (1891) is an excellent example of a narrative in which Wilde employs a highly conversational tone. Throughout the story, but particularly in the beginning, one can almost hear Wilde speaking the words aloud himself:

I had been dining with Erskine in his pretty little house in Birdcage Walk, and we were sitting in the library over our coffee and cigarettes, when the question of literary forgeries happened to turn up in conversation. I

cannot at present remember how it was that we struck upon this somewhat curious topic . . .

Erskine . . . suddenly put his hand upon my shoulder and said to me, “What would you say about a young man who had a strange theory about a certain work of art, believed in his theory, and committed a forgery in order to prove it?”

“Ah! that is quite a different matter,” I answered.

Erskine remained silent for a few moments, looking at the thin grey threads of smoke that were rising from his cigarette. “Yes,” he said, after a pause, “quite different.”

There was something in the tone of his voice, a slight touch of bitterness perhaps, that excited my curiosity. “Did you ever know anybody who did that?” I cried.

“Yes,” he answered, throwing his cigarette into the fire— “a great friend of mine, Cyril Graham. . . .” (CW 1150)

The informal style with which the narrator recounts his visit with a friend creates a sense of intimacy between the writer and the reader, as if the narrator were speaking directly to the audience. The oral tone is largely the result of not only the first-person narrator, but

the recounted dialogue of the characters. Wilde uses dialogue extensively in his stories—a habit, Wright notes, that we can only understand if we appreciate the fact that their origin lies in the spoken word (17-18). Rather than indicating an inability on Wilde's part to write action sequences, the abundant dialogue of his stories reflects the author's background in Gaelic orality.

There are other ways in which Wilde's written works stylistically echo traditional storytelling. W. H. Delargy asserts that no hero-tale is complete without the characteristic and often semi-obscure "runs," elaborate embellishments used to impress the listeners:

The thick growth of alliterative adjectives would roll trippingly on the tongue of a practised story-teller, and have the effect of impressing his illiterate audience, to whom, a thousand years ago as to-day, high-flown rhetoric had a charm and an ever-new appeal. The boastful speeches of kings and heroes, the long alliterative "runs" and obscure passages, together with the tricks and quips of narrative were hallowed by long tradition. (32-33)

Two of Wilde's works, the play *Salomé* and the novel *Dorian Gray*, exhibit lengthy descriptive passages which fit Delargy's rubric for "runs." For example, in *Salomé*, the princess elaborately describes the traits of the prophet Jokanaan, after whom she lusts, such as his mouth:

It is thy mouth that I desire, Jokanaan. Thy mouth is like a band of scarlet on a tower of ivory. It is like a pomegranate cut in twain with a knife of ivory. The pomegranate-flowers that blossom in the gardens of Tyre, and

are redder than roses, are not so red. The red blasts of trumpets, that herald the approach of kings, and make afraid the enemy, are not so red. Thy mouth is redder than the feet of those who tread the wine in the wine-press. Thy mouth is redder than the feet of the doves who haunt the temples and are fed by the priests. It is redder than the feet of him who cometh from a forest where he hath slain a lion, and seen gilded tigers. Thy mouth is like a branch of coral that fishers have found in the twilight of the sea, the coral that they keep for the kings . . . ! It is like the vermilion that the Moabites find in the mines of Moab, the vermilion that the kings take from them. It is like the bow of the King of the Persians, that is painted with vermilion, and is tipped with coral. There is nothing in the world so red as thy mouth. (CW 559)

The repetition of the phrase “thy mouth,” the use of simile after grandiose simile for the redness of Jokanaan’s lips, and the “high-flown rhetoric” (particularly the use of “thy”) of the heroine speaking it combine to make this passage resemble a traditional run. In the final scene of the play, King Herod also gives several back-to-back, multi-paragraph “boastful” speeches full of metaphors describing the wealth he will bestow on Salomé if she will not request of him the head of Jokanaan. Similarly, Wilde creates lengthy, “colourful descriptive passages” in *Dorian Gray* which, Coakley argues, are “reminiscent of those used by the bards in ancient mythological tales” (99). The influence of oral tradition provides a solid explanation for the troublesome passages which many scholars view as flaws, signs of an unrestrained style, in Wilde’s otherwise meticulous works. These Wildean “runs” are decidedly tedious for the reading audience; however, Delargy

explains that traditional runs “were intended for the approval of the listener rather than of the reader,” though he acknowledges that having to “strip apart the story imprisoned in the tangled net of this beloved verbiage” is “for many of us to-day a dreary duty” (32-33). Perhaps acknowledging the historical purpose behind them can help the modern audience appreciate Wilde’s rather overwhelming descriptive passages.

One of the qualities for which Wilde’s writing is most famous is his use of witty dialogue, quips, and aphorisms. What few readers realize is that this characteristic style also has its origin in Irish oral culture. Irish speech, Ó Súilleabháin explains, is traditionally marked by the use of Gaelic proverbs and *deisbhéalaí*:

Within the compass of a few words, they [Gaelic proverbs] summed up the accumulated wisdom of our people concerning particular aspects of life. In both their language and philosophy, they were redolent of the Irish attitude of life. Side by side with them, went what has been termed in Irish *deisbhéalaí*—witty retorts to questions or other remarks, in no way to be equated with punning. They could be either humorous or satirical, but were always pointed and sharp, both in language and thought. (53-54)

It is unreasonable to suggest that Wilde’s aptitude for witty speech was intrinsic because of his nationality; however, Toomey’s assertion that Wilde’s love of the aphorism and his elevation of aphorism above narrative in *Dorian Gray* is typical of the Irish oral mode is valid (29). Wilde did not merely quote proverbs he learned in childhood, however; he invented his own aphorisms, often variations of traditional proverbs, such as “Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others” (CW 1205). Wilde not only peppered his essays and plays with them, but

published two collections of nothing but aphorisms: “A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated” (1894), which appeared in the *Saturday Review*, and “Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young” (1894), which was featured in the *Chameleon*. Even more notable than his aphorisms, however, was Wilde’s use of what can only be adequately described as *deisbhéalaí*. Witty retorts that are humorous or satirical, pointed and sharp, characterize the dialogue of the characters in Wilde’s society plays as well as the content of his critical essays. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), for example, Wilde uses clever wording to humorously criticize various aspects of Victorian society, as in the following exchange between Algernon and his butler, Lane:

ALGERNON. Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralising as that?

LANE. I believe it *is* a very pleasant state, sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.

ALGERNON (*languidly*). I don’t know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane.

LANE. No, sir; it is not a very interesting subject. I never think of it myself.

ALGERNON. Very natural, I am sure. That will do, Lane, thank you.

LANE. Thank you, sir. (LANE *moves to go out.*) . . .

ALGERNON. Lane’s views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don’t set us a good example, what on earth is the use

of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility. (CW 321-22)

The witty repartee only subtly masks commentary on the institution of marriage, the attitudes of aristocracy towards the working class, and the stereotype that the lower classes lack moral values. Similarly, in “Pen, Pencil, and Poison” (1889), Wilde makes a very tongue-in-cheek observation about the ridiculousness of human behavior in the face of romance: “He knew that this forgery had been discovered, and that by returning to England he was imperilling his life. Yet he returned. Should one wonder? It was said that the woman was very beautiful. Besides, she did not love him” (CW 1005). The depth of Wilde’s language and thought in these works goes far beyond mere puns or sarcasm to echo the *deisbhéalaí* of Irish oral tradition.

First-Person Narrator

In addition to the stylistic similarities already addressed, many of Wilde’s writings demonstrate another key practice of the *seanchaí*: first-person narration. Vivian Mercier explains that the “relationship between storyteller and audience is the indispensable component of the oral tradition; without it, the finest of storytellers loses his function” (110). To establish a connection with his/her audience, the fireside *seanchaí* usually spoke as a first-person narrator, addressing the listeners both personally and intimately. Additionally, Kiberd adds, the *seanchaí* told the story as if he/she had witnessed it personally (“Story-Telling,” 16). Like an oral storyteller, Wilde creates a sense of intimacy between the writer and the reading audience by adopting a first-person narrative stance in works such as “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” and “The Sphinx Without a Secret” (1891). In each story, the narrator recounts an episode in which he himself

participated, interjecting personal opinions, observations, and emotions into the action. Thomas O'Grady observes that some Irish storytellers also have the first-person protagonist share with the reading audience some revelation resulting from a personal experience (324). Some of Wilde's works exhibit this characteristic as well, most notably "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" and "*De Profundis*." A non-fiction poem and essay, respectively, both are told in the first-person by Wilde himself and deal with intensely personal experiences and revelations in an effort to gain sympathy with the audience (the general public for the former and Bosie Douglas for the latter).

As Kiberd has established, some storytellers assert their authorial presence into their narratives by correcting exaggerations in folk anecdotes or inserting personal opinion ("Story-Telling," 17-18). Wilde's appropriation of this practice is infrequent, but noticeable for its effect. In "The Selfish Giant," for instance, after setting the scene for the story by describing how the giant fortifies his garden from the village children, the narrator suddenly declares, "He was a very selfish Giant" (CW 297). The anonymous narrator then resumes a third-person omniscient point of view for the remainder of the tale. Similarly, in "The Devoted Friend," the narrator, who is completely removed up until the end of the story, suddenly interjects his opinion in the very last line (hence the lack of quotation marks):

"I am rather afraid that I have annoyed him," answered the Linnet. "The fact is that I told him a story with a moral."

"Ah! that is always a very dangerous thing to do," said the Duck.

And I quite agree with her. (CW 309)

The intrusion of the narrator in this story has sparked significant debate amongst scholars, many of whom want to read the new voice as that of Wilde himself and the statement as a social critique. In “The Star-Child,” the narrator does not slip into first person, but he does assert his authorial presence in the final paragraph. After setting up a “happily ever after” ending, the narrator appends a more realistic conclusion, almost as an after-thought:

Much justice and mercy did he show to all, and the evil Magician he banished, and to the Woodcutter and his wife he sent many rich gifts, and to their children he gave high honour. Nor would he suffer any to be cruel to bird or beast, but taught love and loving-kindness and charity, and to the poor he gave bread, and to the naked he gave raiment, and there was peace and plenty in the land.

Yet ruled he not long, so great had been his suffering, and so bitter the fire of his testing, for after the space of three years he died. And he who came after him ruled evilly. (CW 284)

For all of the debate on the matter, it is impossible to determine the authorial intent behind Wilde’s intrusive narrators. Regardless of its purpose, Wilde’s narrative practice does serve as another reflection of his background in the Irish storytelling tradition.

Elements of Traditional Lore

Kiberd explains that one of the functions of a *seanchaí* was to narrate local tales and lore concerning familiar places, family genealogies, fairies, and ghosts (“Story-Telling,” 15). Like a traditional storyteller, Wilde incorporates traditional Celtic lore into

many of his stories, verbal and written. “The Selfish Giant,” for instance, takes as its motif a variation of the Celtic and Slavonic folk-tale motif “Giant without a heart.”

Numerous critics have drawn parallels between *Dorian Gray* and the Celtic legend of Oisín and Tír na nÓg. And the stories “The Star-Child” and “The Young King” incorporate the changeling motif, according to Pine (177). Kiberd also avers that the oral tradition usually took the spectacular as its subject (“Story-Telling,” 20). In keeping with tradition, the subjects of all of Wilde’s fairytales are fantastical; he writes of changelings, a Giant, a mermaid, a disembodied soul, witches, a dwarf, statues that come to life, and talking animals.

The story that best demonstrates Wilde’s use of traditional folklore in his writing is probably “The Fisherman and His Soul,” from *A House of Pomegranates* (1891). The tale, about a fisherman who falls in love with a mermaid and consults a witch to help him separate his body from his soul so he can go live with the Sea-folk, borrows its basic storyline from “The Priest’s Soul” and “The Dead Soldier,” old folktales collected by Sir William Wilde and recorded by Lady Wilde in *Ancient Legends of Ireland*. In addition to drawing on folklore for the plot of “The Fisherman,” Wilde incorporates numerous Irish superstitions and supernatural influences into his fairytale. For example, when he has the witches flee in terror after the young fisherman “made on his breast the sign of the Cross, and called upon the holy name” (CW 255), Wilde upholds the Celtic belief that the *sídh*e [fairy race] cannot hear the name of God or see a cross. This tradition is one which Lady Wilde mentions several times in both of her collections of Irish lore, as in this warning given to a mortal abducted by the fairies in *Ancient Cures, Charms, and Usages of Ireland*: ““that name [God] is never to be named here. There are people coming who

would kill you if you uttered that word before them. . . . beware of making the sign of the Cross, or of naming the Name” (137). In “The Fisherman,” Wilde also alludes to the evil eye in his description of the Spanish master: “The young Fisherman watched him, as one snared in a spell. At last their eyes met, and wherever he danced it seemed to him that the eyes of the man were upon him” (CW 254). In her *Ancient Legends*, Lady Wilde explains that “[n]othing is more dreaded by the peasantry than the full, fixed, direct glance of one suspected of the Evil Eye, and should it fall upon them, or on any of their household, a terrible fear and trembling of heart takes possession of them, which often ends in sickness or sometimes even in death” (1.44). The fact that the beautiful witch of Wilde’s tale has red hair is likely not accidental. In Celtic lore, Lady Wilde notes, a red-haired woman was considered particularly unfortunate: “Red hair is supposed to have a most malign influence, and it has even passed into a proverb: ‘Let not the eye of a red-haired woman rest on you’” (1.43). Further, the scene wherein the witch requires the fisherman to dance with her on a hill at midnight is straight out of Irish folklore. Fairies frequently attempt to get humans to dance with them, especially at night on a hill or fairy mound, as recorded in numerous stories in *Ancient Legends*, such as the “The Fairy Dance.” Whether Wilde was familiar with these traditions from his childhood or as a result of reviewing his mother’s books as an adult, he chose to include elements of Irish orality in many of his stories, particularly the fairytales, thereby linking his own works to the Celtic storytelling tradition.

Plagiarism

Jerusha McCormack has observed rather acerbically that “It is hard to say anything original about *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, largely because there is so little that

is original in it” (“Wilde’s Fictions,” 110). Although she is correct—accusations of plagiarism were leveled at Wilde long before his death—McCormack does not necessarily devalue Wilde’s only novel with her assertion. The reason behind Wilde’s liberal appropriations in his stories lies in his *seanchaí* background; scholars have begun to see Wilde’s Irish cultural inheritance as a means of addressing his plagiarism. As an Irishman, Wilde was raised in what Toomey calls “the most oral culture in Western Europe, a culture which retained primary orality . . . well into the twentieth century” (25). In oral tradition, the manner in which a storyteller developed his tale was valued over originality of content. The *seanchaí* was not expected to invent new stories, but to annex and give new life to well-known plots. An appreciation of Wilde the storyteller, therefore, may indeed elucidate Wilde the writer’s lack of interest in the idea of originality, as Wright suggests: “[H]is habit of continually using the writings of others in his own works can be compared to the way a storyteller draws upon traditional material for his tales” (17). Paul Saint-Amour contends that Wilde is better understood as “a self-conscious practitioner of a resuscitated ‘orality’ than as a writer who happened to talk well and commit the odd plagiarism” (64). Biographical information about Wilde supports Saint-Amour’s assessment. Wilde’s spoken stories and, subsequently, his written works were usually adaptations of traditional stories familiar to his listeners. As Wright correctly points out, he developed idiosyncratic accounts of episodes from well-known literary works such as *Antony and Cleopatra* and the Bible as well as from history (11). *Dorian Gray*, a variation of Goethe’s Faust myth and a retelling of the Oisín legend, offers additional evidence of Wilde’s willingness to push the boundaries of conventionally appropriate intertextuality.

Nor was he liberal only in his own borrowings. Wilde's lack of concern about plagiarism extends to his own original stories, according to Saint-Amour: "Wilde tended to be equally generous in allowing others to pilfer and profit by his ideas . . . Because writing, as he claimed, bored him, his listeners often reaped the profits for tales that he never bothered to publish" (65). Numerous writers, Saint-Amour continues, are known to have recorded Wilde's unwritten stories, and a handful of them—including Frank Harris, George Moore, Arthur Symons, and Evelyn Waugh—published Wilde's oral tales as their own (65). Yet Wilde did not seem to mind, as evidenced by his amiable response to W. B. Maxwell's admission that he had published one of Wilde's tales under his own name: "stealing my story was the act of a gentleman, but not telling me you had stolen it was to ignore the claims of friendship'" (qtd. in Toomey 26). Much like a traditional Gaelic storyteller, Wilde treated the stories he told like the stories he borrowed—as communal property.

His lack of desire to publish his oral tales likely stemmed not only from Wilde's disinclination towards writing them down, but also from his childhood, during which he observed the negative results of his father's efforts to preserve the folkloric tradition. The young Wilde heard fantastic stories circulated and enjoyed among the peasants of rural Ireland as they had been for centuries. Thanks to his father, he also witnessed the losses incurred when talk was written down, owned, and sold. By recording and publishing the traditional folklore he sought to preserve, Saint-Amour explains, Sir William Wilde "calcified a plural, mutable narrative into a single telling" and "brought under the rubric of private accumulation (the sole authorship and copyright of Sir William Robert Wills Wilde) material whose value had originally dwelt in its circulation

and in its status as the property of a community” (63). Instead of committing his stories to paper and profiting from them, Wilde followed the pattern established by centuries of *seanchaithe* before him and left the majority of his oral tales unrecorded. At the time of his death, in fact, many of his friends lamented the loss of Wilde’s oral tales and attempted to capture them in various biographies and collections, which are now our primary sources on the subject.

A *Seanchaí* to the End

Following his release from prison, Oscar Wilde exiled himself to Paris where he died impoverished and alone. As Toomey puts it, “Wilde ended his life, like Raftery—the last wandering Irish poet—‘playing music to empty pockets’” (34). His writings may not have proven as lucrative in his own lifetime as Wilde would have liked, but they have become invaluable for the modern audience seeking to reconcile the Victorian dandy with his Irish heritage. Wilde’s familiarity with the Gaelic storytelling tradition helps place his writings in an Irish context; he was not just an Irishman transplanted to England, but a displaced *seanchaí* who transferred the Celtic storytelling techniques he picked up in childhood to the page and earned fame as both a talker and a writer far beyond the borders of his native country.

OSCAR WILDE: “QUITE ANOTHER THING”

Oscar Wilde was not Irish or English, Protestant or Catholic, heterosexual or homosexual, poet or playwright, Trinity student or Oxonian, nationalist, aesthete, or dandy; he was, intermittently, all of them. Thus, it would be difficult and rather cruel to attempt to label in limiting, conventional terms the man who declared “I live in terror of not being misunderstood” (CW 1016) and “consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative” (“The Relation,” 7). Wilde enjoyed the paradoxical persona he created, and paradoxical is how he should be remembered. In that spirit, it is not my goal in this study to charge Wilde, who would be a most reluctant candidate, with carrying the green banner into the battle of postcolonial cultural reclamation—he basically lived as an Englishman, not an Irishman, for the greater part of his life, and he died an exile of both England and Ireland. Those critics who seek to define Wilde in terms of his Irishness, such as Declan Kiberd and Jerusha McCormack, are as misguided as those old-fashioned canon compilers who insisted upon labeling Wilde as an English writer. In contrast to the other two camps, I seek not to categorize Wilde, but to increase awareness of how his Irish heritage helped to shape the complex and fascinating figure he remains in British literature. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapters, the people, places, education, and traditions to which Wilde was exposed during his upbringing in Ireland influenced his philosophies and, more significantly (though to varying degrees), his writings throughout his life. The one thing that never varied about him, regardless of his residence or age, however, was his affinity for storytelling; it did not matter if he was in England, France, America, or even Ireland—Wilde was always a displaced *seanchaí*.

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