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Brno studies in English. 2023, vol. 49, iss. 2, pp. 145-158

ISSN 0524-6881 (print); ISSN 1805-0867 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2023-2-7>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.79908>

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Access Date: 28. 11. 2024

Version: 20240619

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WILDEAN ECOLOGY: THE REPRESENTATIONS OF AESTHETIC CULTURE AND GROTESQUE NATURE IN OSCAR WILDE'S FAIRY TALES

Brno Studies in English
Volume 49, No. 2, 2023

ISSN 0524-6881 | e-ISSN 1805-0867
<https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2023-2-7>

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Abstract

In his fairy tales, Oscar Wilde represents his ideological worldview by engendering anthropomorphised characters who would respond to Wildean didactic and Christian values. While the major literature on Oscar Wilde's fairy tales concentrates on moral values, social inequality, the concept of beauty, and Victorian consumer culture, this article investigates Wilde's perception of Victorian culture and nature through Ecocritical lenses. Wilde, I argue, draws a strict line between culture and nature, and his representations of culture are elevated, majestic, and alluring while his nature is demeaning, grotesque, and distasteful. Wilde only cherishes the aspect of nature which has become both semantically and physically domesticated and naturalised. The Garden becomes an epitome of naturalised nature which uniquely responds to cultural values. Furthermore, through exploring some tales from both *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), I suggest that Wilde's anthropomorphised characters are of less value in comparison to his human characters. Lastly, I elucidate how trespassing culture proves to be fatal for the Dwarf who represents pristine nature.

Key words

Oscar Wilde; fairy tales; ecocriticism; Victorian culture; Victorian nature

Introduction

The emergence of Victorian fairy tales gave way to meticulous analysis of this genre, and as Vaninskaya points out, "the modern study of fairy tales originates, like so much else, with the Victorians" (2011: 151). What Victorian fairy tales were mostly concerned with was engendering the proper content of fairy tales for the proper audience. Children in this era became the centre of attention, and as Thompson (2001), points out, "the Victorians may not have invented childhood, but they reinvented it in manifold guises" (192). The construction of children as beautiful, delicate, and innocent became a valid social construct in the Victorian era. This was of course, in Arnoldian terms, the case with Philistines and Barbarians rather than the Populace since "the working-class adolescent of late Victorian

and Edwardian England was, for at least one-third of his time, an actual worker” (Childs 1990: 783). On the other hand, the growing popularity of fairy tales in Victorian literature brought upon itself the attention of astute authors to include “social, political, and cultural issues (Talairach-Vielmas 2010: 273) in the context of Victorian fairy tales. The reason why fairy tales became the zeitgeist of numerous ideological controversies in the period stems from the assumed innocence and purity of children, therefore, the aim became, “constructing children, not merely as readers, but as objects of literary consumption” (Sumpter 2006: 225). In the same vein, many authors exploited this opportunity to impose ideological discourses within their works aiming to construct children into defined adults. Some of the controversies included “battles over the meaning of progress and national identity, [and] questions about the role of beauty and morality in art” (Sumpter 2006: 225); the last of which was particularly integral to Oscar Wilde.

During this era, Oscar Wilde’s *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), followed by *A House of Pomegranates* (1891) challenged the fundamental pillars of fairy-tale tradition while simultaneously promoting his worldview. He was fond of children, and in his prison writings, he asserts, “my two children are taken from me by legal procedure. That is and always will remain to me a source of infinite distress, of infinite pain, of grief without end or limit” (2013: 54). On the other hand, Wilde’s fairy tales illustrate wretched aspects of life which might not be entirely appropriate for delicate and innocent Victorian children, his tales “feature harsh realities, the suffering of the poor, acts of cruelty enacted upon the helpless and the innocent, and acts of goodness that go unrewarded” (Flegel 2018: 42). This indeed brings about a question, that is whether Wilde wrote for children or adults. In one of his letters, Wilde confesses that “in building this *House of Pomegranates* I had about as much intention of pleasing the British child as I had of pleasing the British public” (Wilde 2000: 275). Wilde consistently found children to be ignorant and in his fairy tales, he represents two motifs: “the alluring seductions of surface beauty and the other with the equally compelling visual appeal of human suffering and misery” (Tatar 2017: 151). Another frequently addressed theme in Wilde’s fairy tales is his “traditional Christian values” (Clark 1981: 231) which are strongly reverberated in *The Happy Prince*, *The Young King*, and *The Selfish Giant*. Another dominant theme in his fairy tales is a diatribe against the consumer culture, he “accuses the consumer society of shallow materialistic viewpoints which deflected the society of moral, religious, and humanist causes” (Poorghorban 2022: 62). While his plays mainly mock the British upper society, his tales propose remedies for the social injustice, ignorance, and cruelty of the upper-class society.

A critical approach to Oscar Wilde and Victorian literature in general which has been absent or mainly ignored is ecocriticism. This is while a considerable amount of research is dedicated to Ecocritical understandings of the Romantic Movement in the earlier period. Due to the empowerment of the Industrial Revolution, many new concerns came into existence including “environmental degradation, atmospheric pollution, resource depletion, and changing species relations” (Parkins & Adkins 2018: 2). In contrast, the majority of Victorian literature seems to be ignorant of these issues, and as Fuller (2013), states, “the idea of the

Victorians as environmentally considerate seems farfetched” (151). The radical social and political changes in the islands distracted the Victorians from the significant role of the environment. The genre of realism which became dominant in Victorian literature and sought “to situate itself between literature and life” (Davis 2008: 79), reflected the everyday individual and social dilemmas of the newly constructed Victorian society. On the other hand, Ecocritical approaches to Victorian literature and culture are highly crucial to our understanding of the Anthropocene since the Industrial Revolution altered our perception of the world. The Anthropocene made humans “the ultimate reference point for understanding planetary processes” (McKechnie and Miller 2012: 436). Investigating literary works in this period can establish an understanding of the relationship between humans and nature.

On the other hand, the release of Charles Darwin’s ground-breaking work, *On the Origin of Species* (1859), brought about a significant transformation in the Victorians’ perception of the environment. It shifted their perspective from a romanticised ideal of nature to one that viewed nature as an object of rigorous scientific inquiry, as noted by Levine (1993). By disrupting the Romantic notion that celebrated a harmonious connection between nature and humanity, this new perspective, while distancing humans from nature, played a pivotal role in promoting a sense of unyielding determinism. This deterministic outlook found its reflection in the literary works of Victorian novelists, with Thomas Hardy being a prominent example. The emerging viewpoint also aimed to confront nature as an imposing force, challenging it through scientific progress with the ultimate goal of asserting dominance over the natural world. According to Tait (2021), the theory of evolution ushered in a fresh materialistic perspective on nature. This perspective regarded nature not only as a subject of scientific investigation but also as a resource to be exploited for human necessities.

In this article, I intend to shed light on Oscar Wilde’s viewpoint and the relationship between culture and nature in the context of his fairy tales including *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, and *A House of Pomegranates*. I argue that Wilde portrays elements of nature in relation to Victorian culture and nature is established and defined through its relationship to Victorian Anthropocene. Wilde is cognizant of the significance of nature and in his fairy tales he draws a strict line, I argue, between culture and nature, and whatever that finds a way into the realm of culture, be it nature, must be primarily naturalised. Unlike the Romantics who situated themselves in perfect harmony with nature, the Victorians “witnessed prominent shifts in the way the human relation to the ‘natural’ world was conceptualized” (Miller 2012: 479). Mass production, consumerism, and the new capitalist worldview established a transcendental definition of culture which outweighed nature in terms of superiority and significance. All of this led to a new definition of nature which opposed the Romantic designation. The Victorian perception of nature is mainly in debt to the progressive science in the period rather than symbolic imagination. Another issue is urban experience. Parham (2010), asserts “the experience of being in the city, that epitomised, and motivated, the Victorian literary engagement with modernity” (71) is to be partially accounted for the prejudice against nature. Man no longer found himself startled by the vastness of

nature and the Romantic sublime mainly disappeared as the gigantic industrial sectors and urban sprawls did not allow much human encounter with the natural world.

Wilde's fairy tales are largely dedicated to discussions about "Christianity and the artistic life or aestheticism" (Nassaar 2010: 142). He regularly addresses "the relationship between morality and art" (Jones 2011: 884), and these two elements are inseparable. Aesthetic pleasure, for Wilde, lies in the greatest Christian moral values and his tales represent this image consistently. What seems to be ignored by many Victorian and Wildean scholars, however, is an Ecocritical approach to Wilde's tales in which the elements of nature, animals, and culture are intermingled. Approaching his tales through Ecocritical lenses can bring about a better understanding of Wilde's perception of culture and nature. Having this view, plants can be seen "as commodities, or gardens as ideological signifiers" (Voskuil 2020: 509) both of which are prevalent in Wilde's tales. This article elaborates on Wildean nature and animals by analysing the representations of nature. I argue that Wilde establishes two definitions of nature, one which is rather hostile to humans and the other in the servitude of mankind. Moreover, I assert that both of these elaborations stress the superiority of Victorian culture and humans over nature. In this sense, Wildean perception of nature is disparaged by the complexity of Victorian culture. Ecocriticism, therefore, assists in demonstrating Wildean relation to nature. In the next section, I will shed light on this relatively new school of thought.

Ecocriticism: Nature in Between Anthropocentrism and Ecocentrism

Ecocriticism is one of the interdisciplinary schools of thought which is entirely dedicated to "the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty 1996: xix). Different historical epochs defined and redefined the relationship between humans and the environment. The environmental collapse and eco-disasters in recent years have drawn attention to the perception of the environment in literary texts. Man was obliged to redefine his relationship with nature in order to survive. Anthropocene which is "the geological epoch that the Earth entered with the Industrial Revolution" (Clark 2015: 1), brought about a narcissistic worldview for humans in which the primary concern became the needs and desires of mankind. The Victorian culture, I propose, is mainly anthropocentric; that is "the view that human beings and their interests are solely of value and always take priority over those of the non-human" (Clark 2011: 3). The imperial power, the Industrial Revolution, and the strength of new modern machinery in controlling and dominating nature gave the Victorians a sense of supremacy in relation to the world around them. The ignorance of the non-human world, or the application of nature merely for human goals engendered modern environmental complications.

A certain trait of anthropocentrism is creating the other in the process of self-definition. In the same vein, the culture/nature duality comes into existence, and "one of the implicit goals of the ecocritics is to rethink the relationship be-

tween culture and nature” (Kumar 2016: 169). Culture is a political byproduct of power; it is solely defined and created by humans; however, it is itself “constantly in the process of creating meanings of and from social experience” (Fiske 2011: 1). One of the most problematic definitions that culture seeks to produce is that of nature. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, Timothy Clark offers two definitions for nature; one in a broader term which includes “the sum total of the structures, substances and causal powers that are the universe” (2011: 6). This definition of nature does not concern ecocriticism. On the other hand, he proposes the second definition which is “the non-human world, the non-artificial, considered as an object of human contemplation, exploitation, wonder or terror” (Clark 2011: 7). This definition is what interests the ecocritics the most. It must be noted that any definition of nature is as well a cultural construct, hence, the purpose of ecocritics is to introduce an equally important definition of nature in comparison to culture. In *Ecology Without Nature*, Morton defines nature as “a transcendental term in a material mask” (2007: 14), which seeks to escape any definition, imposed by shallow or deep ecologists.

The prominence of Ecocriticism is in its encounter with myriad definitions and representations of human/natural elements. In order to perceive the reality of nature and its position in relation to humans, ecocritics investigate literary texts from different historical periods. As elaborated earlier, “a culture of power is a culture of representation” (Fiske 2016: 143), and it is within these representations that the dominant epistemology reinvents everything. Nature never escapes cultural definitions and as Garrard points out, “nature is always in some ways culturally constructed” (2004: 10). The border between nature and culture is narrow in some historical epochs and radically broader in others. The Victorian period, I assert, is a historical period in which the defining factors between nature and culture are strictly drawn. The sense of unity with nature which the Romantics were looking for was wiped out for the Victorians and instead, nature was mainly thought of as banal and trivial. “For the Victorians, ‘Nature’ (capitalized or otherwise) was far stranger and more frightening than self-consciously nostalgic accounts let on” (Taylor 2015: 882). Another attributed constituent of Victorian nature (that is the definitions of the Victorians of nature) is wilderness. As Garrard asserts, “Wilderness is, in history of our species, a recent notion. To designate a place apart from, and opposed to, human culture” (2004: 60). Nowhere in the history of Great Britain has culture been so opposed to nature than in the Victorian era.

The opposition to nature is not only in the realm of meaning. The geographical opposition also contributes to the meaning of nature. The further away nature is from culture and its representations, the more vehement the opposition. On the other hand, what is geographically closer to the centre of culture, city, and civilisation is given a definition of nature which is naturalised. Hence, “the natural is a cultural product” (Fiske 2011: 44). Furthermore, the issue of nature’s efficiency is another attribute which elects the affability or hostility of culture towards itself. Baudrillard proposes two definitions of nature. He asserts that there is good nature which “is dominated and rationalised (which acts as the ideal cultural reference)” (Baudrillard 2019: 57), and then there is bad nature

which “is hostile, menacing, catastrophic, or polluted” (Baudrillard 2019: 57). Nature and its representations, particularly in Wilde’s tales, I argue, are cherished only through their usefulness to humans. The intrinsic value which is propagated by ecocritics and environmentalists is replaced by anthropocentric values within Wilde’s tales and the main body of Victorian culture. The representations of nature involve highly political discourses which “reinforce dominant ideologies of gender, class and race” (Marland 2013: 852). Consequently, understanding nature and its significance can lead to “finding the human place in the world ecosystem” (Bunting 2015: 2). Although Wilde is an acrimonious critic of Victorian culture, he obsessively holds Victorian culture in high esteem as opposed to nature since to him, language and human endeavour are the highest forms of superiority and at its centre, there exists art. Creation and appreciation of art posit humans “as superior beings whose language and self-reflective consciousness place them above and at an abyssal remove from all other animals and the natural world” (Westling 2006: 28). To Wilde, the definition of nature which he allows in cultural realms is that which functions mostly as moral commodities.

Oscar Wilde’s Good Nature: The Naturalised and Domesticated

I will begin with one of the most favourite Wildean fairy tales, *The Happy Prince*. The story circles around a statue which is personified and delivers humanitarian assistance to the city where he is placed through the service of a swallow. It is, as Rojavin claims, “a story about love, sacrifice, charity, banality, stupidity, and greed” (2014: 76). At the beginning of the story, the statue is described as being “glided all over with thin leaves of fine gold, for eyes he had two bright sapphires, and large red ruby glowed on his sword-hilt” (Wilde 1994: 11). The statue is thus very beautiful. From the very beginning of the tale, Wilde seeks to establish a solid ground to assert that the statue is useful. He declares, “people should think him unpractical, which he really was not” (Wilde 1994: 11). This Christ-like figure finds the misery and poverty within his city excruciating. He finds a swallow who decides to help him perchance. The swallow first refuses to assist the Prince since his “friends are flying up and down the Nile, and talking to the large lotus-flowers” (Wilde 1994: 15), and he intends to join them.

The Prince obliges the Swallow, however, to stay a little bit longer to run the Prince’s errands. The errands are dismantling the Prince’s jewelry and gold and sparing them to the poor. The Prince goes as far as to give up on his eyes, “my eyes are all that I have left. They are made of rare sapphires, which were brought out of India a thousand years ago” (Wilde 1994: 17). The role of the Swallow is imperative, he delivers precious jewelry to the poor and returns to the Prince every night. In this sense, it is not only the Prince who is making sacrifices, the Swallow has also given up his hopes of going away to Egypt where his species are thriving. He remains beside the Prince where “at last he knew he was going to die” (Wilde 1994: 21). The existence of both the Prince and the Swallow is justified and cherished through their usefulness in relation to human beings. What

Wilde sought to assert when he pointed out that the Statue was not impractical was merely in relation to all the self-sacrifice he made for the people of the city. Practicality is always defined in relation to humans. The end of the story reflects the obsessive anthropocentric Wildean worldview. “‘Bring me the two most precious things in the city’, said God to one of His angels; and the angel brought Him the leaden heart and the dead bird” (Wilde 1994: 23). They have been deemed the most precious things in the city solely because they gave up on their own existence for that of humans. It must be noted that the lives of these birds in Wildean tales become significant the moment they are dead. Their deeds become meaningful only when they are willing to exchange their lives for the comfort of humans. In this sense, no inherent value is bestowed upon the Swallow, and none, as I will further elaborate is bestowed upon the Nightingale in Wilde’s *The Nightingale and The Rose*. Using personified animals and objects to create a didactic narrative is very common in fairy tales. As Kujundžić (2016) elucidates, “these narratives promote moral perfectionism” (68). Moral perfectionism or Christian perfectionism in Wilde’s case is almost always achieved through the lives of these personified characters.

The second fairy tale in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), is *The Nightingale and the Rose*. The narrative begins with an account of a student who is in love with his professor’s daughter. The formidable hurdle which the student faces, however, is demonstrated at the beginning of the tale; “‘she said that she would dance with me if I brought her red roses’ cried the young student, ‘but in all my garden there is no red rose’” (Wilde 1994: 27). The quest for finding a red rose is not put upon the student’s shoulders. It is the Nightingale who finds himself tantalised by the young student’s passion for love. “‘Here, at last, a true lover’, said the Nightingale” (Wilde 1994: 27). The Swallow commences its quest in finding the red rose, “she passed through the grove like a shadow and like a shadow she said across the garden” (Wilde 1994: 29), searching for a red rose. Nowhere in the garden was the Nightingale able to find a red rose. She inquired from one rose tree to another, “give me a red rose...and I will sing you my sweetest song” (Wilde 1994: 29). Eventually, the Nightingale came across a rose tree which proposed a cruel way of achieving a red rose. The rose tree proposed, “all night long you must sing to me, and the thorn must pierce your heart, and your life-blood must flow into my veins and become mine” (Wilde 1994: 30). Similar to the Prince and the Swallow, the life of the Nightingale must be sacrificed in order to assist Wilde’s moral narrative.

The Nightingale yields to the rose tree’s request without hesitation and states, “what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a man?” (Wilde 1994: 30). The anthropocentric obsession permeates the anthropomorphism of the Nightingale. While some scholars recommend that “anthropomorphising non-human species promotes pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours” (Williams et al 2021: 1), Wilde’s anthropomorphism relegates the position and worth of animals in relation to humans. Wilde goes as far as to sacrifice the lives of other creatures for the sake of humans for “what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a man?” (Wilde 1994: 30). A double standard seems to be present in Wildean tales. In the book *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), Wilde’s

first tale, *The Young King* who is also a Christ-like figure similar to the Prince encounters epiphany in a form of a dream. In the beginning, similar to the Prince, he is ignorant of the troubles of the world around him. He is fascinated by “all rare and costly materials” (Wilde 2008: 5). He sends many merchants to different parts of the world to gather beautiful objects for him. He sends some merchants “to traffic for amber with the rough fisher-folk of the north seas, some to Egypt to look for that curious green turquoise” (Wilde 2008: 5). He devotes most of his days to planning for a perfect coronation as he is to become the young king.

On the night before the Coronation, he has three dreams which radically alter his views about the world and his surroundings. Within his dreams, he encounters the suffering of the people who are providing his costume, and when he wakes up he fashions a new coronation costume. Everyone is disgruntled with the decision of the new king, and they intend to overthrow him. The story, however, unlike that of the Happy Prince ends in *deus ex machina*. “He stood there in the raiment of a king...He stood there, and the Glory of God filled the place, and the saints in their carven niches seemed to move” (Wilde 2008: 17). *Deus ex machina* saved the Young King as “no man dared look upon his face” (Wilde 2008: 17). Simultaneously, no *deus ex machina* of any sort assisted the Prince, the Swallow, or the Nightingale. It was within their death that they became valuable. All these characters were substantial to Wilde since all of them managed to serve human purposes. They were the representations of a naturalised nature since they obeyed the social conventions and did not undermine nor challenge the position of culture. Their lives became meaningful through their death in the servitude of humanity.

Nature/Culture Opposition: Trespassing Cultural Borders

As the father of British Aestheticism, Oscar Wilde is renowned for his celebration of artifice over nature and art over reality. The poor performance of Sybil Vane in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* eventually leads to a sense of disillusionment for Wilde’s antihero, Dorian, as he laments, “how little you can know of love, if you say it mars your art” (Wilde 2020: 88). Indeed, the transformation of the portrait to its pristine beauty after Dorian’s demise symbolises Wilde’s deep appreciation for art and beauty transcending human reality and morality. Wilde’s personal life and style mirror his fascination with the consumerist Victorian culture. As Philippe Julian, one of Wilde’s biographers, observes, “this large pale youth changed his suits three times a day, from dark green tweed to brown velvet, and back again to violent checks” (1969: 41). This fixation on style and beauty was a common trait among the aesthetes. Wilde’s former professors at Oxford held a more cautious view of their appreciation of beauty compared to Oscar. Richard Ellmann, the most renowned biographer of Wilde, highlights, “though both Ruskin and Pater welcomed beauty, for Ruskin it had to be allied with good, for Pater it might have just a touch of evil” (1987: 47). Neither Wilde nor his antihero, Dorian, had any bounds when it came to extolling beauty, which ultimately wreaked havoc on both their lives.

In *The Decay of Lying* (1891), Wilde elucidates his perception of nature as de-meaning and insignificant. He asserts, “wherever we have returned to life and nature, our work has always become vulgar, common, and uninteresting” (Wilde 2021: 57). In his fairy tales, Wilde draws a line between culture and nature, and whatever epitomises nature is vulgar and obnoxious. On the other hand, whatever represents culture is alluring, sophisticated, and exciting. In all of the mentioned tales, there are representations of culture. In fact, the Swallow and the Nightingale are also the epitome of cultural nature since they are naturalised and defined through cultural constructs, and they serve human purposes. They are, therefore, domesticated and dominated. Another domesticated element in Wilde’s fairy tales is the Garden. Gardens in his fairy tales symbolise that aspect of nature which is entirely dominated and naturalised. In *Nightingale and the Rose*, both the Nightingale and the rose trees seek to bring to life a red rose in the middle of winter utterly because of the desire of the young student. The Nightingale “sailed across the garden” (Wilde 1994: 29) in order to grant the student’s wish of having a red rose. The Garden is where culture is in perfect control.

In *The Selfish Giant*, Wilde vividly depicts a garden as the exclusive playground for children—a vast, enchanting expanse adorned with soft green grass and beautiful flowers scattered like stars (Wilde 1997: 23). The garden serves as a sanctuary where children feel secure and free to play. When the selfish giant prohibits access to his garden, its charm diminishes, and a wintry desolation sets in: “only in the garden of the selfish giant it was still winter. The birds did not care to sing in it as there were no children, and the trees forgot to blossom” (Wilde 1997: 24). The vitality of the selfish giant’s garden hinges on the joy of the playing children. The narrative takes a Christian turn as the giant acknowledges his error, permitting children back into his garden. Subsequently, he passes away and joins Jesus in paradise. This anthropomorphised character realises the indispensable role of children, symbolising culture, in the garden’s formation and survival. The presence of children is crucial for the existence of the garden, as it embodies a space deeply infused with both physical and semantic aspects of culture.

The representations of culture and nature are more vividly elucidated in *The Young King*. *The Young King* is the story of a young man who is heir to an old king. He is infatuated with beauty, and beauty “was destined to have so great an influence over his life” (Wilde 2008: 4). In unfolding beauty, Wilde describes the man-made objects and artefacts, some of them are, “a great picture that had just been brought from Venice...Greek gem carved with the figure of Adonis... an antique statue that had been discovered in the bed of the river” (Wilde 2008: 5). These man-made products which Wilde describes with meticulous sensitivity are all representations of beauty and worthy of devotion, and indeed, “all rare and costly materials had certainly a great fascination for him” (Wilde 2008: 5). Wilde’s excessive faith in Western culture determines the criterion for the creation and evaluation of beauty. “The walls were hung with rich tapestries representing the Triumph of Beauty” (Wilde 2008: 6). The Young King is surrounded by such cultural artefacts, and he seeks the most wonderful objects for his coronation. A night before his coronation he has three dreams and each of which signifies nature at its utmost brutality. The Young King dreams of “a dim wood, hung

with strange fruits and with beautiful poisonous flowers” (Wilde 2008: 10). He sees “bright parrots screaming from branch to branch. Huge tortoises lay asleep upon hot mud. The trees were full of apes and peacocks” (Wilde 2008: 10). These elaborations are grotesque and frightening in relation to the fascination that the Young King has for his palace and his gardens.

Wilde associates nature with horror, death, and disorder. In the same nightmare, the Young King portrays, “and death laughed, and took up a black stone, and threw it into the forest, and out of a thicket of wild hemlock came Fever in a robe of flame” (Wilde 2008: 11). After these nightmarish descriptions, the Young King wakes up and witnesses that “the bright sunlight was streaming into the room, and from the trees of the garden and pleasance the birds were singing” (Wilde 2008: 12). The bright sunshine and the presence of trees in the King’s garden in which the birds sing represent serenity and tranquility which were lacking in the King’s nightmares. Wilde’s tales as Bernardo (2019) asserts, “solidify the separation between nature and culture” (228). The representations of nature are vulgar, threatening, and mundane while culture signifies tranquility and superiority. The borders between nature and culture are both physical and semantic. The territory of naturalised and domesticated nature is the garden while the forest and the woods represent the untamed, petrifying, and intimidating nature. Trespassing culture has terrible consequences in Wilde’s tales, and he demonstrates these consequences in *The Birthday of Infanta*.

The Birthday of the Infanta, akin to Wilde’s other tales, commences with the depiction of a cultural sanctuary where beauty and tranquility form the core elements of existence. Inside the Infanta’s palace, the scene unfolds with “purple butterflies fluttering about with gold dust on their wings, visiting each flower in turn... the pomegranates split and cracked with the heat, and showed their bleeding red hearts” (Wilde 2008: 18). The occasion is the Infanta’s birthday, a nationwide celebration marked by an extravagant ceremony exclusive to this significant event. The festivities are replete with entertaining shows, and among them, “the funniest part of the whole morning’s entertainment, was undoubtedly the dancing of the little Dwarf” (Wilde 2008: 24). Wilde’s portrayal of the Dwarf stands out as one of the most poignantly grotesque descriptions within his tales. As the Dwarf stumbles into the arena on his crooked legs, wagging his disproportionately large head from side to side, the children erupt into a loud shout of delight (Wilde 2008: 24). The Dwarf becomes an object of both scrutiny and disdain for the Infanta and her companions. His mere presence on the Infanta’s birthday appears grotesque and absurd, as the Dwarf is an outsider to Wilde’s cultural realm.

The Dwarf’s physicality plays a pivotal role in comprehending Oscar Wilde’s treatment of nature. Described as having been discovered “running wild through the forest” just the day before, by nobles hunting in a remote part of the corkwood, the Dwarf appears unmistakably out of place (Wilde 2008: 25). His true belonging lies not within the palace where he endures mockery but in the woods, where he seems to find a natural harmony with his surroundings. Through the Dwarf, Wilde skillfully portrays the exploitation of nature for human-centric gratification. The Dwarf, unwittingly transgressing cultural boundaries, becomes

a symbol of nature encroaching upon the domain of culture, demanding retribution. This retribution manifests in the form of self-realisation, a consequence of his audacious breach of cultural norms: “the most amusing thing about him was his complete unconsciousness of his own grotesque appearance” (Wilde 2008: 25). Wilde’s mockery of the character accentuates the Dwarf’s displacement within the cultural sphere. Wilde asserts that the Dwarf is “a little misshapen thing in Nature, in some humorous mood, had fashioned for others to mock at” (Wilde 2008: 25). The characters’ intolerance towards the Dwarf’s physical appearance serves as a poignant illustration of the societal rejection faced by those who deviate from established norms.

The Dwarf in Oscar Wilde’s narrative is not merely subject to mockery from the Infanta and her companions; even the garden, a cultural manifestation rooted in nature’s essence, aligns with the same disdainful perspective as the Infanta. In expressing their indignation, the flowers within the garden scorn the Dwarf’s audacity to intrude upon their exquisite abode: “The flowers were quite indignant at his daring to intrude into their beautiful home” (Wilde 2008: 26). The tulips, emblematic of subjugated nature, harbor a profound resentment towards the Dwarf, perceiving no semblance between him and the tulips or the subdued natural world. From their standpoint, he “is really far too ugly to be allowed to play in any place where we are” (Wilde 2008: 26). Jarlath Killeen, a notable Wildean critic, posits that “Mother Nature... is a debased entity in this story” (2016: 134). As nature’s representative, the Dwarf becomes a target for scrutiny, derision, and exploitation. The mirror scene unfolds as a crucial moment wherein the Dwarf undergoes self-realisation about his appearance, signaling a process of normalisation and naturalisation. Confronting his reflection, the Dwarf is confronted by a monstrous image: “It was a monster; the most grotesque monster he had ever beheld. Not properly shaped, as all other people were, but hunchbacked, and crooked-limbed, with a huge lolling head and a mane of black hair” (Wilde 2008: 33). This self-awareness becomes a punitive measure for transgressing cultural boundaries: “Why had they not left him in the forest, where there was no mirror to tell him how loathsome he was?” (Wilde 2008: 33). The Dwarf, faced with an unexpected revelation, breaks down, hiding his face in the room’s corner. When implored by the Infanta and her retinue to dance, he remains silent, and ultimately succumbs to an abrupt demise: “the little Dwarf never looked up, and his sobs grew fainter and fainter, and suddenly he gave a curious gasp, and clutched his side. And then he fell back again, and lay quite still” (Wilde 2008: 34). The Dwarf’s death underscores a radical rejection of representations of nature within cultural spheres. The Dwarf, deemed incompatible with Victorian culture, must either undergo normalization for acceptance or face complete elimination from the cultural domain.

Conclusion

The representations of nature and culture in Wilde's fairy tales shape our understanding of the position of Wilde in relation to these issues. Two opposing concepts of nature are portrayed in his tales. The first representation is always in relation to the domesticated, naturalised, and good nature which responds to Victorian values and Wildean morality. Usually, his tales begin in a culturally safe environment where naturalised nature is thriving. This depiction of nature is valued and absorbed in Victorian culture. On the other hand, physically and semantically remote nature symbolises mundane, wild, and inefficient nature. The Happy Prince, the Swallow, the Nightingale, and the rose trees all represent Wildean good nature since these anthropomorphised characters actively participate in Wilde's moral and aesthetic discourses, and they sacrifice themselves for the desires of humans. Conversely, Wilde's bad nature is unproductive and useless. This aspect of nature is vulgar, life-threatening, and grotesque. The dreams of the Young King and the demonstration of the Dwarf fail to evade Wildean portrayal of bad nature. The strict line that Wilde draws between culture and nature cannot and should not be encroached. When the Dwarf trespassed the territory of Victorian culture, he had to face the Victorian perception of beauty which did not correspond to his appearance. As a result of such inconvenience, the Dwarf could not bear this cultural burden and he died. Lastly, I argue that bad nature as shown in *The Birthday of the Infanta* is an object of gaze, wonder, and mockery which is how Wilde perceives wild nature in the mentioned fairy tales.

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