UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE – FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA
ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

The Irish Prince: Irishness in the Works of Oscar Wilde

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Vedoucí bakalářské práce (supervisor):
Doc. Clare Wallace, PhD. M.A.

Zpracoval (author):
Štěpán Krejčí

Studijní obor (subject):
Anglistika a amerikanistika

Praha, 3.12. 2019

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Doc. Clare Wallace, PhD. M.A., for her advice and guidance in the course of writing this thesis.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Challenging the Dichotomy

If one were to find a fitting simile for discussing Oscar Wilde's Irishness, the result would probably be something like introducing a child to its long-lost parent. Literary criticism has been looking at Wilde from many angles for a long time, but "Wilde, The Irishman" is still a comparatively new concept. A proof of this is the fact that the book whose title I have borrowed here, Jerusha McCormack's edited collection, *Wilde the Irishman* published in 1998, remains one of the few major pieces dedicated solely to the problem of Wilde's Irish aspect.[1] The same applies for example to Davis Coakley's 1994 *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Irish*.[2] The whole area of Irish studies is, of course, a relatively new subject on academic soil and the Anglo-Irish relationship was a particularly sensitive topic for the larger part of the twentieth century. It seems, however, that even today, twenty years after the Good Friday Agreement was signed, Ireland is still struggling to fully embrace Wilde's legacy as one of its own.

Part of the problem might be the way postcolonialism shaped the perspective in Irish studies at the last decades of the twentieth century. David Lloyd writing in the late 1990s contends: "The most interesting work in Irish cultural studies of the past two years has been charged with the double task of re-thinking the legacy of the Irish anti-colonial struggles."[3] That is, postcolonialism was one of the major trends in Irish criticism at the turn of the century and its vestige is still strongly present. Lloyd continues: "We can […] draw much from an informed understanding of the kinds of

1 Jerusha McCormack ed., *Wilde the Irishman* (London: Yale University Press, 1998).
2 Davis Coakley, *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Irish* (Dublin: Town House, 1994).
3 David Lloyd, *Ireland After History* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999) 37.

questions and projects that postcolonial studies have helped to inform, and maintain the view that Ireland continues to be a crucial site for the understanding of processes of colonization and decolonization."[4] It seems, however, that useful as it might prove in some areas, there are those where it simply falls short. The obvious problem with this approach is the fact, that unlike other countries postcolonialism has set its sights on, Ireland is not separated from England by a whole continent but merely by a narrow stretch of water which we pompously call a sea. When applying the post-colonialist approach to Ireland, a "framework which has been developed largely in and for the so-called "Third World"[5] is being applied to a "First World country." The study of Oscar Wilde is a prime example of this.

Stefanie Bachorz points out that one of the major problems of postcolonialism is that it does almost the same as colonialism, only in reversed manner:

> At the heart of postcolonial theory lies the concept of a stable national identity. […] As Declan Kiberd points out, by declaring themselves as the "norm," British colonizers used the native population as a "foil to set off British virtues." […] This simple paradigm distinguishing the "Self" from any "other" forms of existence, becomes the basis of the ideology of colonialism. Unfortunately, however, it also lies at the heart of de-colonization. […] The colonial paradigm is reversed, the former colonial subject discovers his or her own identity. The logical next step is the liberation of the Self from the new "Other," the colonial oppressor, thus leading to a new nation as the norm, and the old colonial power as the distortion.[6]

In other words, when we define Ireland from the post-colonial perspective, we are bound to arrive at the conclusion that Ireland and England are polar opposites and that England is alien to Ireland just as much as it is to countries like Afghanistan or India:

> The point here is that no matter how one wishes to demarcate high imperialism – that period when nearly everyone in Europe and

[4] Lloyd 37-38.
[5] Stephanie Bachorz, "Postcolonial Theory and Ireland: Revising Postcolonialism," *Critical Ireland: New Essays in Literature and Culture*, Alan A. Gillis and Aaron Kelly eds. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001) 6.
[6] Bachorz 8.

> America believed him or herself to be serving the high civilizational and commercial cause of empire – imperialism itself had already been a continuous process for several centuries of overseas conquest, rapacity, and scientific exploration. For an Indian, or Irishman, or Algerian, the land was and had been dominated by an alien power, whether liberal, monarchical, or revolutionary.[7]

Yet, Ireland can hardly be alienated from England in the same manner those other countries can, and the interaction between the two countries can hardly be limited to that of an oppressor and the oppressed. Wilde himself is an example of the complexity of their relationship. After all, the very social class he emerged from – the Ascendancy – is commonly termed Anglo-Irish. However, bearing this post-colonial view in mind, it is not hard to trace the origin of the reluctance of such criticism to credit Oscar Wilde too much. By his very early departure for the land of the oppressor he effectively made himself a renegade not only for the contemporary Irish nationalist, but also for the modern critic whose "discussion," as Neil Sammells puts it "seems more than a little coloured by [...] mechanically nationalistic analysis."[8]

The presence of this dichotomous perception in Wilde's case is highlighted by the fact that writers like James Joyce, G.B. Shaw or W.B. Yeats are nowadays seen as much more inherent parts of the Irish literary canon than Wilde. That is not to say that he is not recognized at all, but he still stands somewhat in the shadow of the generation that succeeded him.[9] The term "succeeded" is of course disputable. All the above-mentioned authors were Wilde's contemporaries and all of them were old enough to be influenced by him while he was still alive. What effectively puts them

[7] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994) 221.
[8] Neil Sammells, "Rediscovering the Irish Wilde," *Rediscovering Oscar Wilde,* George Sandulescu ed. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Ltd., 1994) Sammells talks specifically about Christopher Murray's comments in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1991).
[9] Coakley, *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Irish* 1. Davis Coakley comments quite accurately on this phenomenon: "[Wilde] has been classified as an Anglo-Irish writer by literary scholars, placed at the "Anglo" end of the spectrum, and is often only grudgingly included in anthologies of Anglo-Irish literature."

"after Wilde" is his untimely departure on the one hand and also the fact that they were all present (albeit not each physically on the island) when the Irish Free State was being born, while due to this departure he was not. Indeed, Wilde missed out not only on the establishing itself, but the most prominent period of the Literary Revival came when he was already in England. Perhaps because the time was approaching for everyone born in Ireland to become slightly more Irish, it was also easier to be openly patriotic. Therefore, even though later accused of "exercising tyranny and violence"[10] in the matters of Abbey Theatre's "national appeal and its elitist, reformist, Ascendancy control,"[11] W.B. Yeats still remains the man behind the whole concept of Irish National Theatre Society. Joyce may have left his homeland as soon as the first opportunity presented itself, yet his major works are all set in Ireland, and even though G.B. Shaw, just like Wilde, had set sail for the land of the usurper quite early, he was always ready to voice his strong opinions on Irish questions in favour of the Irish people: "I am violently and arrogantly Protestant by family tradition but let no English government count on my allegiance. I am English enough to be an inveterate Republican and Home Ruler."[12]

The issue with Wilde is that he never promoted Irishness so openly. He was, nevertheless, very much aware of it both in his life and work. From his early days in Oxford, for example, he became fascinated by Catholicism.[13] This fascination is also reflected in his work. Joyce Carol Oates notices that in *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* he "delights in cataloguing" the "exotic ritual, ecclesiastical vestments, and other

[10]Lauren Arrington, *W.B. Yeats, the Abbey Theatre, Censorship, and the Irish State: Adding the Half-pence to the Pence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 5.
[11] Arrington 2.
[12] Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, 3rd print, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) 419.
[13] See chapters 3 and 4.

somewhat ludicrous treasures of the church."[14] While on tour in America, Wilde delivered two very powerful lectures on Irish poetry. During those lectures he "spoke of poetry and music of Ireland, of the country's ancient ruins, and of Celtic myths and their impact on European literature, […] criticised [Oliver] Goldsmith for his lack of national feeling and he praised the poets and writers of the 1848 rebellion."[15] Nonetheless when it came to expressing his Irishness, Oscar himself was never too vocal. His weapons had always been subtle and well-hidden in his texts. Still, he was held in high regard by his contemporaries. Noreen Doody observes how Wilde's symbolist play *Salomé* influenced several plays of W.B. Yeats,[16] and Yeats himself recalled Wilde as a man who talked "with perfect sentences, as if he had written them all overnight with labour and yet all spontaneous."[17] James Joyce went even further when he made a Christ-like figure out of the Aesthete in an article "Oscar Wilde: The Poet of Salomé" which he published in the Italian newspaper *Il Piccolo della Sera* on 24th March 1909, and in which he covertly accuses the English of killing "Oscar, the nephew of King Fingal and the only son of Ossian:"

> Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde. These were the high-sounding titles that with youthful haughtiness he had printed on the title-page of his first collection of poems, and in this proud gesture, by which he tried to achieve nobility, are the signs of his vain pretences and the fate which already awaited him. His name symbolizes him: Oscar, nephew of King Fingal and the only son of Ossian in the amorphous Celtic "Odyssey", who was treacherously killed by the hand of his host as he sat at table. O'Flahertie, a savage Irish tribe whose destiny it was to assail the gates of medieval cities; a name that incited terror in peaceful men, who still recite, among the plagues, the anger of

[14] Joyce Carol Oates, ""The Picture of Dorian Gray": Wilde's Parable of the Fall," *Critical Inquiry* 7.2 (1980): 424 JSTOR <www.jstor.org/stable/1343135>.

[15] Coakley, *Oscar Wilde* 11.

[16] Noreen Doody, "An Influential Involvement: Wilde, Yeats and the French Symbolists," *Critical Ireland: New Essays in Literature and Culture*, Alan A. Gillis and Aaron Kelly eds. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001). Doody is also the author of the book *The Influence of Oscar Wilde on W.B. Yeats*. which discusses the relationship of these two authors in greater detail, and in which she describes this relationship as "powerful" (Dublin: MacMillan, 2018) 3.

[17] W.B. Yeats, "My First Meeting with Oscar Wilde," *Oscar Wilde,* E.H. Mikhail ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1979) 144.

> God, and the spirit of fornication, in the ancient litany of the saints: from the wild O'Flaherties, libera nos Domine.[18]

It almost seems that his contemporaries appreciated Wilde as an Irish author more than he is appreciated as such today. Yet Wilde never wanted to be recognized solely as an Irish author. He was an artist in the first place, an Aesthete. However he might have despised the English Imperialism, he loved the English language which, after all, was his mother tongue: "The Saxon took our lands from us and made them destitute … but we took their language and added beauties to it."[19]

Based on this philosophy, Wilde had no problem adopting the English land as "our"[20] in his poetry just because he felt that to count oneself of the same race as Keats or Shakespeare was a noble privilege.[21] Declan Kiberd comments on the motif of the Double in *The Importance of Being Earnest*:

> The Wildean moment is that at which all polar oppositions are transcended. […] The psychologist Otto Rank has argued that the double, being a handy device for the off-loading of all that embarrasses, may epitomize one's noble soul or one's base guilts, or indeed both at the same time. Which is to say that the Double is a close relation of the Englishman's Celtic Other. Many characters in literature have sought to murder their double in order to do away with guilt (as England had tried to annihilate Irish culture), but have then found that it is not so easily repressed, since it may also contain man's utopian self.[22]

This motif is not exclusive to Algy and Bunbury in *The Importance*. Wilde made use of it on other occasions as well, most notably in *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* The desire to annihilate the English other was palpable in Victorian Ireland. Oscar Wilde refused this, seeing that one really cannot do away with their double unless they perish themselves, just like Dorian Gray

[18] Mason Ellsworth, "James Joyce's Shrill Note. The Piccolo Della Sera Articles," *Twentieth Century Literature* 2.3 (1956): 126, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/440499.
[19] Kiberd 35.
[20] Oscar Wilde, *Collected Poems of Oscar Wilde,* Anne Varty ed. (Ware: Wordsworth, 1994) 71.
[21] McCormack 181.
[22] Kiberd 42.

does. Instead he tried to embrace both, his Irishness as well as his Englishness – something that the English society ultimately refused when Wilde was imprisoned in Reading, and the Irish is still struggling to come to terms with today.

This thesis seeks to show some of the ways in which Oscar Wilde's writing was Irish. Attention will be paid to three elements of his work. In the first chapter, Wilde's early play *Vera; or The Nihilists* (1883) will be studied as this was heavily influenced by his mother and the Irish nationalism. The second chapter will examine Oscar Wilde's fairy tales, focusing also on the influence of Irish folklore. In the third chapter, his poetry will be discussed paying attention mainly to his early collection *Eleutheria* (1881) and his poetic masterpiece written during his imprisonment, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898). The aim of the thesis is not to depict Oscar Wilde as exclusively Irish. Rather it should provide a point of view to him as an Irishman through the examination of works where his Irishness can be traced, and thus help see him in the greater complexity of his artistic persona.

1.2 Wilde's Ireland: Historical Background, Wilde in Dublin

1.2.1 The Position of the Ascendancy

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born on 16 October 1854 in 21 Westland Row, Dublin into an Anglo-Irish Ascendancy family.[23] Slightly more than a half of a century before that, Edmund Burke had viewed the "Irish problem" in his *Irish Affairs* as a problem of "the resolution of a Protestant minority to reduce a Catholic majority to slavery under a military power, and

[23] Ellmann 15.

thereafter to divide the public revenues, the result of general taxation, as a military booty solely among themselves."[24] This provided the image of Ireland as one of the many English colonies governed by a privileged minority, with the one difference that the indigenous people were actually of the same faith, only different division. However, by the time Wilde was born, much had changed, and Burke's image of Ireland was no longer current.

Burke wrote from the viewpoint of the Georgian Ascendancy immediately before one of the major turning points in its role in Ireland took place – The Act of Union in 1800. Before that, the Ascendancy was indeed more or less still in the position of those living "at the top of the gilded world."[25] Mainly Protestant, a group still favoured by law over the Catholic majority, the Ascendancy could still afford to live under the illusion that to be Anglo-Irish was the same as to be English. Already in the 1790's, however, its relationship with England was showing signs of fragility. This was due to the fact that many of its members' expectations for a successful career in England had failed – just like Jonathan Swift's did as he was forced to embark on a return journey from England to what he termed "the land I hate,"[26] – and largely also because, in the aftermath of the French Revolution, the British government was doing everything they could to prevent unrest in Ireland, even if it meant listening to the demands of the Catholic majority. Thus was the Ascendancy left "prey to fears that England would let them down by breaking their monopoly" and "liberalizing the laws against Catholics."[27] This uneasiness culminated after the Rebellion of 1798 and the following Act of

[24] Kiberd 419.
[25] R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972* (London: Penguin Books, 1989) 168.
[26] Foster 176.
[27] Foster 173.

Union, which effectively rid the Ascendancy of their privileged political position by abolishing the Irish parliament and compensating only with a largely disproportionate representation in Westminster.[28] The Ascendancy greatly disillusioned with England,[29] the path was clear for a forming of a new Irish identity.

This identity was manifest in different forms ranging from the likes of those "grouped round the *Dublin University Magazine*, who determined […] to assert an identity that was Protestant, Unionist and Irish,"[30] to those ready to repeal the Union. An example of the latter is the Young Ireland movement, "grouped round the young journalists and publicists who started the *Nation* newspaper."[31] Though largely Protestant, Young Ireland was a nationalist movement and through their emphasis on Irish history and Celtic virtues, many of its members soon arrived at the conclusion that "backing Catholic nationalism against alien Protestantism" is vital for their cause.[32] This put them in their efforts alongside Daniel O'Connell (although most of the time only figuratively[33]), who had by then achieved Catholic Emancipation, which shows just how much had the character of the Ascendancy changed since Burke. It was no longer the detached ruling class, but an integral part of the nation, itself divided by different political visions for Ireland. Six years prior to Wilde's birth, it was radical Young Irelanders who stood at the centre of the

[28] Foster 282-3.
[29] Foster, 290 comments: "The Irish, even those who made it to Westminster as MPs, were rather left out of [governing Ireland]. Ireland came to be seen as an appropriate area for administrative energy, and even experiment: but this was without reference to the small proportion of Irish MPs, or to any larger constituency of opinion in Ireland at large. […] whatever the Union was doing, it was not making Ireland a little England."
[30] Foster 306.
[31] Foster 311.
[32] Foster 313.
[33] O'Connell was termed "next to the British government, the worst enemy that Ireland ever had" by Young Irelanders. Foster 317.

unsuccessful United Irishmen Rebellion in 1848[34] after what Declan Kiberd terms "The last betrayal by England"[35] – The Famine of 1846 –1851.

1.2.2 Family Wilde

The Wilde family was a perfect example of the division in Ascendancy lines. Oscar's father, Sir William Robert Wilde, was a physician and a Protestant. Both his brothers were Church of Ireland clergy and in 1863, he was appointed Surgeon Oculist to the Queen in Ireland. The following year, he was knighted.[36] He was a respected man in Dublin, even though his hygiene and some of his practices with patients were frequently subject to various rumours.[37] He was really an all-round man – a traveller, amateur archaeologist, antiquarian, writer and a collector of Irish Folklore.[38] Sir William Wilde came from Castlereagh and he later purchased an estate in the west of Ireland where he frequently spent time with his wife and sons, and where, according to Coakley, he was "peculiarly loved and trusted, for he had brought back joy and hope to many households"[39] when he provided his medical skills to the peasantry. The trips to the west of Ireland and his father's love of folklore undoubtedly served as a major source of inspiration to Oscar when writing some of his fairy tales. Even though he loved his native country and "admired the romanticism and idealism of the Young Irelanders,"[40] William Wilde had always refused to compromise in his faith. Oscar himself

[34] Foster 316.
[35] Kiberd 21.
[36] Ellmann 10.
[37] Sir William Wilde was known to be "dirty" among the Dublin society and there was once an unsuccessful rape case filed against him. Ellmann 11-14.
[38] Coakley, *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Irish* 12-20.
[39] Coakley 94.
[40] Coakley 21.

once recorded how if he had become a Catholic, his father would have "cut him off altogether."[41] Oscar's mother, however, was a completely different case.

Lady Jane Francesca Wilde came from a notable Anglo-Irish Dublin family. Just like her husband, she admired the Young Ireland movement, although she went further than pure admiration. Her accounts of what exactly it was that ignited her passion for the nationalist cause varied. Once she claimed that it was a pamphlet written by Richard D'Alton Williams, tried for treason in 1848, that inspired her, other times the large crowd gathered at Thomas Davis' funeral supposedly sparked her interest (both men were important figures in the Young Ireland movement).[42] Whatever her initial inspiration, in the period after the famine, Jane Elgee (which was her maiden name) began to write verse on the coming revolution, on the famine, and the exodus from Ireland of the famished. These she submitted to Charles Gavan Duffy, editor of the *Nation.*"[43] She published under the pseudonym "Speranza," which means "hope" in Italian and which she linked to her alleged Italian heritage, claiming descent from no other than Dante Alighieri. According to her, Elgee was originally Algiati which in turn was a corruption of Alighieri.[44] Her passion for nationalism lasted for the rest of her life and even when she left Ireland to live with her son in London, she frequently entertained prominent Irish artists and other visitors from her native country in her Chelsea home.[45] Unlike her husband, Speranza also showed great

[41] Ellmann 52.
[42] Ellmann 7.
[43] Ellmann 7.
[44] Joseph Pearce, *The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde* (London: Harper Collins, 2000).
[45] Coakley, *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Irish* 181.

inclination towards Catholicism. Richard Ellmann tells of one particularly amusing instance of her exhibiting her patriotic fervour in family life: While holidaying in County Waterford, she let her sons be baptized in a Catholic church (even though they both had already been baptized as Protestants), and then asked the chaplain who performed the ritual to inform their father about it. As Ellmann points out, the "resolute protestant […] cannot have been pleased."[46]

There would have been other important people shaping Oscar Wilde while he was growing up in Dublin. Davis Coakley mentions his two tutors at Trinity: "[John P.] Mahaffy and [Robert W.] Tyrell influenced and inspired Wilde greatly, and he would later write, "I got my love of the Greek ideal and my knowledge of the language at Trinity from Mahaffy and Tyrell."[47] His national awareness was in this period, however, primarily influenced by his parents. His father provided him with the necessary knowledge of Irish geography, folklore and history, and his mother supplemented the young mind with noble ideas of nationalism. It is no wonder then, that one of Oscar Wilde's early plays was inspired by her. In the next chapter, Speranza's influence on *Vera*, other patriotic themes in the play, and Wilde's general attitude to politics shall be discussed.

[46] Ellman 18.
[47] Davis Coakley, "The Neglected Years: Wilde in Dublin," *Rediscovering Oscar Wilde,* C. George Sandulescu ed. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Ltd., 1994) 59.

Chapter 2 – Oscar Wilde's Political Play

2.1 A Play of No Importance

Oscar Wilde's first play, *Vera; or The Nihilists* (1880, premiered 1883), is in the context of his career as a dramatist often overlooked. In his essay "Oscar Wilde and the politics of style" published in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* (2004), Neil Sammells writes: "[Wilde's] reasons for turning to the theatre, in the wake of disappointing royalties from *Dorian Gray* and the escalating cost of his private life, were unashamedly financial." He also describes *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) as "that most stylish, playful and political of his writings."[1] *Vera* is thus completely disregarded by him as it not only preceded *Dorian Gray* (1890) but revolved around the efforts of a revolutionary underground organization trying to assassinate a head of state. Yet this covert jab at imperialism has at least an ambition to compete with *The Importance* in being political. It was also this play that was withdrawn in Britain even though, unlike most of Wilde's drama, it is not set on the Isles, nor is any of the characters English. Although, the withdrawal was, rather than a direct government initiative, a consequence of actions taken as a result of diplomatic pressure from St. Petersburg and Berlin in the aftermath of the assassination of the Russian Tsar in 1881. *Vera* was withdrawn after one month of rehearsals.[2] From today's perspective, it only underscores the Wildean moment of the play (and indeed the whole affair) when the reason for the withdrawal – Tsar's assassination – was de facto prophesied by the playwright.[3]

[1] Neil Sammells, "Oscar Wilde and the Politics of Style", *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama,* ed. Shaun Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 111.
[2] Jerusha McCormack, "The Wilde Irishman: Oscar as Aesthete and Anarchist," *Wilde The Irishman,* Jerusha McCormack ed. (London: Yale University Press, 1998) 84.
[3] Alexander II was assassinated in 1881 by the Nihilists. McCormack 84.

The plot of the play is centred around a group of Russian Nihilists whose aim is to assassinate the Czar. In the prologue which takes place in the Russian countryside, the protagonist, Vera Sabouroff, recognizes her brother among a group of captured Nihilists being taken to work in Siberian mines by a unit of Imperial soldiers who on their way made a stop in her father's inn. Dmitri, her brother, tells Vera that she cannot save him but that she can avenge him by going to Moscow, becoming a Nihilist herself and help liberate Russia from the Tsarist power. The play then runs five years forward. The first act takes place at a secret meeting. Vera has already become a notable Nihilist, held in great esteem by her brethren. However, she confesses her feelings towards young Alexis (also a Nihilist) that contradict her will to fully devote herself to the Nihilist cause. Alexis is meanwhile suspected by Michael of being a spy. At the end of the first act, soldiers interrupt the meeting and Alexis is forced to reveal himself to the General as the young Czarevitch in order to spare the rest of the Nihilists (whom he introduces as actors) unmasking themselves and thus save their lives. The second act takes place at the royal palace. The Czar is being manipulated by his most prominent counsellor, Prince Paul, into signing an order to enact martial law in Moscow. The young Czarevitch strongly disagrees and after a quarrel with his father unveils himself as a nihilist. The Czar is shaken by his son's betrayal and orders him to be taken to "the blackest prison in Moscow."[4] Before that can happen, the Czar is shot after emerging onto the balcony. The third act then sees Prince Paul joining the Nihilists in order to help assassinate the new Czar, Alexis, so that his puppet, the Grand Duke, could ascend. After Alexis misses the meeting due to his being engaged in planning reforms in Russia, it is decided that he must be killed.

[4] Oscar Wilde, "Vera," *Collected Works of Oscar Wilde* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1997) *390*. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

Vera draws the lot, thus it becomes her task to be the regicide. She makes her way into the royal palace in act four after Alexis had banished his ministers from Russia, having overheard them talking mockingly about his reforms. After she invades his chamber, Alexis confesses his love for her, making her realise that she loves him as well. However, because the Nihilists are already waiting for Vera's bloody dagger to be thrown out of the window as a signal that the young Czar is dead, and Alexis had dismissed his guards, Vera chooses to stab herself with the poisoned dagger and sacrifice herself so that Alexis could live. "I have saved Russia," (406) she pronounces just before the play ends with her death.

For the general Wilde critic, the play has not been of great interest so far. When it failed in Britain for the aforementioned reasons, Wilde took it to America, where it simply did not attract sufficient attention and was soon withdrawn on the grounds that "it is very melancholy to be obliged to accept the situation, but we lost $2,500 on the piece last week, and that is a great deal better than losing $25,000, which would very likely be the result if we kept it on a while longer."[5] It remains a matter for discussion what exactly caused this fiasco as otherwise Wilde enjoyed ample attention and hospitality from Americans on his tour of the country. Of course, being his first theatrical attempt, the play had a few shortcomings. Dion Boucicault, who directed both of the productions, sent Wilde a "candid critique of *Vera*, advising him that he had not shaped his subject well enough before beginning the play and that there was too much discussion rather than action."[6] Also, with *Vera,* Wilde was introducing a play that dealt with the overthrowing of centralized power and

[5] Union Square Theatre Mr. Pretzel's comments presented in the New York Times. "Oscar Wilde's Play Withdrawn," *The New York Times* (August 28, 1883) Available at https://www.nytimes.com/1883/08/28/archives/oscar-wildes-play-withdrawn-not-paying-in-the-city-but-better-luck.html.
[6] Davis Coakley, *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Irish* (Dublin: Town House, 1994) 185.

establishment of republic into a country that had very recently witnessed somewhat similar attempt. As Coakley points out, it is well probable that Wilde cherished certain sympathy for the Southern cause in Civil War.[7] Wilde himself commented on this in an interview:

> We in Ireland are fighting for the principle of autonomy against empire, for independence against centralization, for the principles for which the South fought. So it was a matter of immense interest and pleasure to me to meet the leader of such a great cause. Because although there may be a failure in fact, in idea there is no failure possible.[8]

The "leader of such a great cause" is Jefferson Davis, whom Wilde had met shortly before. This philosophy probably did not resonate with the Northern audience in New York who would have sooner remembered the "failure in fact" than the noble "idea" that had been alien to them in the first place. *Vera* was then simply not a play with appropriately American subject matter.

2.2 *Vera* in The Irish Context

Yet, these reasons, which made the play a disaster in America, become particularly interesting when *Vera* is read as an Irish Play. Instead of setting the play in Ireland and risking an immediate ban in Britain, Wilde offers an Irish allegory on the background of Tsarist Russia. The setting might have been carefully thought through, but it is more likely that Wilde just grasped what lay nearest to his hand. As Michael Newton points out, the topic of Russian Nihilism was relatively current and somewhat

[7] Coakley 184.
[8] Matthew Hoffer, Gary Scharnhorst eds., *Oscar Wilde in America* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois press, 2010) 159-160.

fashionable in Britain in the time of Wilde's writing,[9] and at one point while he attended Trinity College in Dublin, a petition against the knouting of peasants in Russia circulated on the College grounds. Wilde's tutor, Reverend J.P. Mahaffy notably glossed that "if he [The Tsar] doesn't knout them, they'll knout themselves."[10] Such kind of speech is not altogether different from that of Prince Paul in the play. The atrocities committed on peasantry are already a strong link to Ireland and Wilde is careful to stress Vera's rural background in the prologue which takes place in a deserted part of the land en route to Siberian camps.

It is important to note that, even though himself a Dubliner, Wilde's farmers could have been partially based on his own experience. As a child, Oscar would frequently visit his father's estate in Connemara as the city was not a healthy environment for children. Later, his father built a villa in County Mayo as a mean of moving his family "from the ranks of the 'loyal professional people' into the ranks of the 'country gentry.'"[11] Sir William developed great interest and passion for the west of Ireland and Irish folklore, and the local population developed a great liking to him as he often provided them with his medical skills when needed, not hesitant to "cross moor and mountain at the summons of some poor sufferer who believed with simple faith that the Docteur mor (the great Doctor, as they called him) would certainly restore the blessed light of heaven to blind-struck eyes." [12]

This passion of his provided the opportunity for his sons to get acquainted with the local population. As Davis Coakley writes, "From an early age, Oscar and

[9] Michael Newton, "Nihilists of Castlebar! Exporting Russian Nihilism in the 1880s and the Case of Oscar Wilde's *Vera; or the Nihilists,*" *Russia in Britain, 1880-1940: From Melodrama to Modernism*, Rebecca Beasley and Philip Ross Bullock eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) 37.
[10] Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Random House, 1988) 28.
[11] Coakley 94.
[12] William Wilde, *Memoir of Gabriel Beranger, and His Labours in the Cause of Irish Art and Antiques, from 1760 to 1780* (Dublin: Simpkin, Marshal, 1880) 141. Available at https://archive.org/details/memoirgabrielbe00wildgoog/page/n6.

Willie accompanied their father on his archaeological expeditions, and they mixed with the local people."[13] Having never visited Russia, it might have been the case that Wilde built his serfs and their unique language on the blueprint of Irish Peasants that he was at least partially acquainted with. In the prologue then, an unintentionally humorous blend of the Irish with what Wilde imagined to be the Russian appears. In the initial dialogue of Peter and Michael, one cannot help but notice the latter sounding a little like a somewhat better version of stage Irishman:

> PETER (warming his hands at a stove). Has Vera not come back yet, Michael?
>
> MICHAEL No, Father Peter, not yet; 'tis[14] a good three miles to the post office, and she has to milk the cows besides, and that dun one is a rare plaguey creature for a wench to handle.

The two then discuss Michael's prospect of making Vera, who had gone out, fall in love with him, and Peter stresses his being in possession of "a good grass farm, and the best cow in the village." The dialogue takes rather humorous turn, to the point where it balances on verge of farce, when they discuss Peter's son, Dmitri, not writing to his father from Moscow and Michael recalls an incident from the past: "Do you remember how he shot the bear at the barn in the great winter?" (365) As if to remind us that the play indeed takes place in Russia and not in Ireland, Wilde draws two of the most obvious Russian stereotypes, a bear and harsh winter, out of his sleeve and throws them in after the subtler Irish ones. This amusing imagery at the offset of the play could, however, hardly stand as the basis for arguing its Irishness. In this respect, Peter's comment about Michael's owning a farm becomes

[13] Coakley 96.
[14] "tis" stands out as the prominent aspect of Hiberno-English in Michael's rather comical lexis, even though it is not used here in the distinctive copular form which i.e. T.P. Dolan lists in his dictionary. Terrence P. Dolan, *A Dictionary of Hiberno-English: The Irish Use of English* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2006) 204.

relevant when the developments in Ireland before and during Wilde's writing of the play and the significance of the role of the peasants are considered.

Introducing Vera's background and her motivation to join the Nihilists, the prologue serves as a source for all the play's actions. In post-famine Ireland, similar catalyst of action was the land question. Topics such as landlordism, rent and tenants' rights grew to be still more passionately debated in Irish society from the 1840s, "beginning with unrealistic and grandiloquent appeals to the landlord class to join the neo-Young Irelanders in 1848"[15] (A proposal not dissimilar to Prince Paul's joining the Nihilists under false pretence in Act III (391)), and culminating with Land League and Parnellism during the land agitation of 1879-1882,[16] just as *Vera* was being written. Russia as a representation of Ireland is here a fitting choice with its own disreputable pseudo-feudal system, if a little hyperbolical one as the Irish situation was already in the 1840's better than ever before with the cases of eviction dropping rapidly,[17] and the tenant farmer unlikely to be ever knouted. The distribution of power, on the other hand, continued to be a dire prospect with a great proportion of landlords still resident outside the island, taking substantial part of Ireland's produce out of the country. In the course of the prologue, Peter's house is also symbolically invaded by the imperial power, the soldiers who are not native to the region. Peter is forced to humbly serve their colonel his best meat while *Vera* is forced to give up her necklace to the soldiers, in order to be allowed to tend to the prisoners. Doing that, she

[15] Roy F. Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972* (London: Penguin, 1989) *381*.
[16] Foster 403.
[17] For detailed statistics see Foster 374.

discovers that one of the men in chains is her brother Dmitri, a captured Nihilist.

The irony here is evident. While Peter is serving the colonel who openly disparages him and regards him only as a "clod" that should "till his fields, store his harvest, pay his taxes and obey his masters – that is his duty" (367), his son is sitting manacled in his own house, waiting to be taken away. In the beginning of the prologue, it is hinted that even Michael is subject to similar exploitation. When Peter talks about his farm, he also asks him the rhetorical question: "Aren't you one of Prince Maraloffski's gamekeepers?" (365), thus suggesting that Michael is not the owner of the land he farms on. Michael himself mentions this fact again when he meets with the Prince later in the play:

> MICHAEL: I have had a good deal of practice shooting, since I have been a boy, off your Highness's wild boars.
> PRINCE PAUL: Are my gamekeepers like moles, then, always asleep?
> MICHAEL: No, Prince. I am one of them; but, like you, I am fond of robbing what I am put to watch.
> PRESIDENT: This must be a new atmosphere for you, Prince Paul. We speak the truth to one another here. (394)

The mention of gamekeepers links the passage in act III back to the prologue and Michael's subsequent comment about robbing that which one is put to watch together with President's validation of that as the truth covertly hint at the supposedly unlawful practises of landlordism.

The development in the play is also subtly reminiscent of the development in Ireland. The most prominent Nihilists of the plot, Vera and Michael, both came to Moscow from the rural Russia to repay the wrongs that had been done to them by the Imperial power. Although Michael's motivation may have initially been purely romantic, following Vera, he gradually became

one of the leading Nihilists and ultimately it is he, who murders the king in his palace. (390) Vera is then chosen to assassinate the young Czarevitch. In this way, the radicalized peasants enter the underground revolutionary organization and fuel the fight against the empire. Similarly in Ireland, the "vital seedbed of what looked to many like revolution was County Mayo"[18] where events such as meetings at Irishtown and Westport, where Charles Stewart Parnell gave his speech urging the tenants to "keep a firm grip of their homesteads,"[19] took place in 1879 on the offset of the Land War. The rural county Mayo was the powder keg that went off spreading its radicalism further into the country. As it was progressing, the land movement and the Mayo radicalism mixed with or became of interest to other more or less radical elements in Ireland such as Parnellism, Home rule and even Fenianism. The Revolution thus spread from county Mayo took on nation-wide importance. As Foster writes, "The concordat with some Fenians was part of an alliance between the land movement and the Home Rulers to use the tenant question as the basis for a general forward policy."[20]

Something similar takes place in the plot of *Vera*. After the prologue, as Vera and Michael relocate to Moscow, the scale of their revolutionary undertakings becomes more substantial and nationwide, with Vera travelling as far as Novgorod to spread the revolution. (374) Also, the discourse of the play changes. While the prologue is earthly with the protagonists attending to problems of everyday existence, the dialogues of the rest of the play deal with more profound political and philosophical issues. The link between Nihilism

[18] Foster 403.
[19] Foster 404.
[20] Foster 404.

in Russia and Fenianism in Ireland and their symbolical substitution is also noticed by Michael Newton in his essay "Nihilists of Castlebar! Exporting Russian Nihilism in the 1880s and the case of Oscar Wilde's *Vera; or the Nihilists.*" Newton writes:

> To suggest that Wilde positions his work as a contribution to British-Irish politics is not to deny that Wilde's *Vera* depends upon its Russian setting […] It is this dual vision that characterized much of the British and Irish discourse about Russia, asserting foreignness even as they let its strangeness seep into domestic concerns. Russia remains Russia, nihilists stay nihilists, even as they evoke thoughts of Ireland and "Fenianism."[21]

Newton's dual vision is particularly interesting if read in context of Kiberd's Double. *Vera*'s trick is in the fact that just like the Saxon is unable to acknowledge the Celt as its double, so was British Imperialism unable to acknowledge its own reflection in Russia, and just like the Saxon tries to annihilate the Celt, so did Britain contest Russia in the Great Game. Newton additionally makes one more interesting observation about *Vera*'s Irishness worth mentioning:

> In the first draft of the play […] Wilde has the Seventh Conspirator declaim, "Our mission is to give freedom to three millions of people now enslaved to one man." In the first edition of the play, this number, roughly equivalent to the population of Ireland at the time has been upgraded to a more Russian-sounding, "one hundred millions."[22]

Interestingly, in the latter editions, the number has been dropped altogether and the Seventh Conspirator simply proclaims, "To give freedom." (370)

[21] Newton 38.
[22] Newton 44.

2.3 Mother and Mahaffy

Wilde did not completely make up his heroine in *Vera*. Namewise, she is based on Vera Zasulich, an actual Russian Nihilist who attempted to murder the Governor-General of St. Petersburg as a revenge for his cruel treatment of a particular prisoner in 1878. Surprisingly, she was acquitted.[23] Wilde's links with Russia being confined to scandalous stories like this that were brought to him by newspaper or university sources, however, Mrs. Zasulich's story would have been hardly sufficient as a model to base the titular character on. When it comes to the question of inspiration for Vera, it is generally agreed that the right direction to look in is towards Wilde's mother, Speranza.

Just like for Oscar she was the centre and symbol of Irish patriotism, so is Vera the central figure of the Nihilist movement. María P. Pulido writes:

> Speranza' represented her innermost aspirations and around that pseudonym she weaved her own legend as a poet of the nation: she claimed descent from Dante, she probably changed her name from Frances to Francesca, and surrounded her persona with the gloss and glamour of the anecdotal, opening with her conversion to nationalism and closing with her often quoted interruption at Gavan Duffy's trial at which she cried out: "I am the culprit!," words, which as she confessed later, she never actually uttered.[24]

In the play, Vera also created a "legend" about herself. Michael's proclamation that her name "made every despot tremble for his life" (397) is supported on various occasions by *the* despot himself, the Czar, i.e. when he states:

> CZAR: The Governor of Archangel shot in his own courtyard by a woman! I'm not safe here. I'm not safe anywhere, with that she devil of the revolution, Vera Sabouroff, here in Moscow. Prince Paul, is that woman still here? (385)

[23] Newton 35.
[24] María Pilar Pulido, "Lady Wilde 'Speranza:' A Woman of Great Importance," *Rediscovering Oscar Wilde,* C. George Sandulescu ed. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1994) 320.

But even revolutionary heroines are not immune to love, and so just like Vera struggles to remain true to the oath she has taken, “To strangle whatever nature is in me; neither to love nor to be loved; neither to pity nor to be pitied; neither to marry nor to be given in marriage, till the end is come,” (369) when she confronts her romantic feelings for Alexis and ultimately choses “self-sacrifice over murder,”[25] so did Speranza eventually surrender her patriotism for love. In the latter’s case, however, it was not romantic love that diverged her from her cause as passion is not something that the accounts of Oscar Wilde’s parents usually list as the main asset of their relationship.[26] Lady Wilde gave up her patriotism for her children because a woman cannot live for both, as she wrote in a letter.[27] She loved her three children dearly and dedicated her full attention to them, particularly Oscar, whom she intended to “rear a hero.”[28] In this, she succeeded – just like Vera.

While Speranza compensated Ireland for her abandonment of the patriotic cause by rearing one of its greatest writers, Vera’s final sacrifice have the potential to bear fruit for Russia. In the final scene, after she finds that she is unable to kill Alexis, and proclaims, as if echoing Speranza, “Oh, I am a woman! God help me, I am a woman!” (405), she stabs herself with the poisoned dagger in order to save her love. Yet in a very non-Shakespearian way, she throws the poisoned dagger out of the window to make the Nihilists think she was successful in her mission, so that they do not enter the palace and kill Alexis. Just before she dies, she urges Alexis to live “for liberty, for

[25] Newton 38.
[26] Pulido rather cynically comments that “her husband’s knighthood did not displease her, nor the pension she received from Her Majesty after sir William’s demise,” before continuing with a quotation from a letter describing her passion for certain Scotchman. Pulido 323.
[27] McCormack 83.
[28] Pulido 323.

Russia, for me!" (406). Alexis, who has a great potential to be a much more benevolent Czar than his father, having already banished his malicious ministers, and planning many reforms, symbolizes the hope Vera gave Russia by killing herself. The last sentence she mouths before she dies is "I have saved Russia" (406), which is also the last sentence of the play. Likewise, Speranza's sacrifice was not in vain and Wilde was aware of that. He had a very close relationship with his mother, keeping her near both emotionally and physically for most of his life. *Vera* is one of the most palpable indicators of this relationship and Speranza's role in shaping her son as an Irishman.

If Speranza stood model for the protagonist, it is viable to ask whether there was a similar inspiration for the antagonist. There might have been. As has been already said, not everyone in Wilde's Ireland shared the sentiments expressed in *Vera*. It has been mentioned that one of Wilde's tutors at Trinity, J.P. Mahaffy, was not at all sympathetic when the aforementioned petition circulated. Richard Ellmann draws the comparison between him and the character of Prince Paul in the play:

> Their Politics were different, the tutor Tory and Unionist, his pupil anti-Tory and nationalist […] Wilde, whose play *Vera* was to express sympathy with the knouted, may have drawn on Mahaffy's manner and opinions for the character of the unsympathetic Prince Paul in the play.[29]

This observation proves valid when some of the traits of Prince Paul are compared with descriptions of Wilde's tutor.

Even though a polar opposite in political philosophy, Wilde felt certain gratitude towards Mahaffy, and even described him as his first and his best

[29] Ellmann 28.

teacher who "showed him how to love Greek things."[30] Exactly such is Prince Paul. Even though he is the antagonist of the play, he is not a pure villain. It is he who stands out with his wit among the incompetent ministers and his cunning makes him superior even to the cowardly Czar. Also like Mahaffy, who apart from English spoke German, French, Italian, Hebrew and tutored Wilde in the Classics,[31] he is the most eloquent person in the play. It is him who produces the majority of the play's witticisms, and he is the only one at the Palace able to read between the lines. Even the Nihilists quickly agree to cooperate with him when he comes among them intending to use them to get rid of the new Czar. (392) This includes the most radical of them, Michael, who earlier refused to trust Alexis whose intentions were, unlike Paul's, genuine. Even though his tactics are reliant on treachery and intrigue, Paul is not at all a disagreeable character – no more than i.e. Michael, whose stubbornness and brutality are in comparison with Paul's cleverness almost condemnable, whatever their cause. It is a bit ironic that this image of a clever scoundrel later proved true of Mahaffy who, having previously bragged of creating Wilde, refused to sign the petition for his early release from prison, describing him as "the one blot on my tutorship"[32]

The reflection of Mahaffy in *Vera* goes even further, however. Not relying solely on Prince Paul, it seems that Wilde infused Mahaffy into the imperial other in general. As Ellmann writes, "Mahaffy was born an authority figure and at 32 was already known as 'The General,' while Oscar Wilde at sixteen was a delicate and modulated non-combatant." Mahaffy's nickname is

[30] Elmann 28.
[31] Ellmann 27.
[32] Ellmann 29.

of interest especially when his comment about the peasants knouting themselves is compared with a line from the play: “You peasants are getting too saucy since you ceased to be serfs, and the knout is the best school for you to learn politics in.” (369) The author of these words from the prologue, which sound not unlike Mahaffy’s declaration is Colonel Kotemkin. It is the same Kotemkin who has been by the first act, where he actually remembers his meeting with Vera in the prologue, (378-379) promoted to the rank of General.

Two major influences of Wilde’s Dublin life are thus reflected in the play. Their contradiction hints once again at the ever-present motif of the double not only in Wilde, but in Ireland generally. With Prince Paul, Wilde once again shows reluctance to annihilate the double, just like his mother was not attempting annihilation and just like Vera ultimately, by killing herself, gives birth to a new Russia rather than annihilate the old. With a Nihilist who learnt to create, Wilde stresses the importance of adapting to the double’s existence rather than attempting its complete destruction.

2.4 The Socialist Individual of Merrion Square

With the link to Young Ireland and Fenianism established in 2.2, a question of Wilde’s political views arises. *Vera* is overtly republican. The play is rich with mentions of republicanism, either on the part of the Nihilists whose aim it is to establish a republic in Russia, or the Royal Palace whose ministers fear the idea. Yet, it is sensible to ask whether Oscar Wilde was a republican. The biggest complication in such discourse is the fact that he was by profession an artist and a political advocate in his spare time, and consequently, it is impossible to trace any consistent agenda in his writing. In “The Soul of Man

under Socialism," Wilde effectively proclaims himself a socialist. Still, as Richard Ellmann rightly points out, "by socialism he did not mean any specific variety but a general hatred of tyranny." He also once declared that socialism was beautiful.[33]

The same could perhaps be said about his engagement in Irish policies. He loved his native land, but one could not with a clear conscience argue that he was a nationalist, let alone a Home Ruler. Every hint of his political views he provides is therefore very subtle or an unorthodox one. In one of his American Interviews, Wilde said this about Ireland: "I live in London for its artistic life and opportunities. There is no lack of culture in Ireland, but it is nearly all absorbed in politics. Had I remained there my career would have been a political one."[34] As a writer he often revisited Ireland and even its politics, without taking part in them directly. In his essay, "Wilde and Parnell," W.J. McCormack points out how Wilde's writing career corresponds into certain extent with the developments in British politics around Charles S. Parnell:

> There is something to be said in the shift in his journalism, away from the largely *belle-lettriste* reviews of 1885-6, towards a more aggressive stance […] In May, "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" began to appear in the *Court and Society Review*, just as *The Times* renewed publication of the "Parnellism and Crime" series of articles. At the beginning of 1888, Wilde gave a lecture in Bournemouth on the eighteenth-century poet Thomas Chatterton, who fabricated impressive fifteenth-century poems but committed suicide in poverty and despair. On 1 March 1889, Richard Piggot committed suicide following the exposure as forgeries of the letters allegedly written by Parnell. In April, Wilde wrote to the publisher William blackwood offering a story in dialogue, "The Portrait of Mr. W.H.," in which an enthusiastic critic of Shakespeare's sonnets forges a portrait of an untraceable young man to whom he is convinced the poems were addressed; like the real-life

[33] Ellmann 121.
[34] Hoffer, Scharnhorst 116.

> forger, once discovered his fabrication, the critic responsible for the false portraits commits suicide.[35]

Later, McCormack compares Parnell's life with *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*:

> The common denominator was the recurrent and pervasive Victorian phenomenon of a double life. Parnell was a bachelor and an undeclared sexual partner of a woman whose husband was politically sustained by the rival. Dorian Gray was an unblemished figure and a hidden icon of corruption and depravity. Moreover, the creator of Dorian Gray was himself living a double life, as the husband of Constance Lloyd and father of her children, and as the undeclared sexual partner of Robbie Ross, John Gray and – from June or July 1891 – Alfred Douglas also.[36]

Even *Vera* has its own Parnellite figure. In the play, Alexis, just like Parnell, is fluctuating between the world of highest national politics and the revolutionary underground. What was for Parnell Westminster, for Alexis is the royal palace, and if Parnell had to strike deals with the Fenians, Alexis must position himself in within the Nihilist infrastructure. Parnell was the figure advocating for Ireland with the empire in the British Parliament. When the soldiers invade Nihilist meeting in Act one, it is Alexis who unmasks himself and speaks to General Kotemkin:

> ALEXIS: Stand back, I say, General Kotemkin!
> GENERAL: Who are you, fellow, that talk with such a tripping tongue to your betters? (Alexis takes his mask off.) His Imperial Highness the Czarevitch!
> ALL: The Czarevitch! It is all over!
> PRESIDENT: He will give us up to the soldiers.
> MICHAEL (to Vera): Why did you not let me kill him? Come, we must fight to the death for it.
> VERA: Peace! he will not betray us. (378)

In the Palace, Alexis talks to his father and his ministers about reforms, the needs of the people and the wrongs that are being done to them:

> CZAREVITCH: (slowly, after a pause). I want change of air.

35 W.J. McCormack, "Wilde and Parnell," *Wilde the Irishman* ed. Jerusha McCormack (London: Yale University Press, 1998) 98.
36 McCormack 99.

> PRINCE PAUL (smiling): A most revolutionary sentiment! Your Imperial father would highly disapprove of any reforms with the thermometer in Russia.
> CZAREVITCH (bitterly): My Imperial father had kept me for six months in this dungeon of a palace. This morning he has me suddenly woke up to see some wretched Nihilists hung; it sickened me, the bloody butchery, though it was a noble thing to see how well these men can die.[37]
> PRINCE PAUL: When you are as old as I am, Prince, you will understand that there are few things easier than to live badly and to die well. (380)

Just like Parnell in his "rather comfortable suite of cells in Kilmainham Gaol,"[38] Alexis was kept in what he calls "dungeon of a palace" here. Like Parnell's, his containment is a rather mild one compared to that of captured Nihilists. When Alexis demands that the Czar make reforms and in the heat of the moment proclaims himself Nihilist, he faces the danger of a real imprisonment. Even this danger quickly ceases, however, as the Czar is briskly murdered, and instead of descending into gaol, Alexis ascends the throne. (388-90) The parallel with Parnell is apparent also in Alexis' struggles to persuade the Nihilists of his loyalty. In Ireland, Parnell's position inside the Irish Party was by no means a stable one. McCormack writes about the "furious conflict between Parnell's supporters and the majority of the Irish Party who required his resignation."[39] It is not hard to imagine that especially among the radical Fenians, his position in Westminster must have been regarded as nothing short of betrayal. So is Alexis' position constantly

[37] The last Fenian publicly executed in Britain was Michael Barret responsible for the Clerkenwell bombing in 1867. His execution the next year was also the last public execution performed in Britain with the law changing three days later. Whether the fact that the most radical Nihilist of the play is also called Michael is a coincidence remains a subject for discussion. Eva Ó Cathaoir, "150 Years Ago Today, a Fenian Became the Last Person to Be Publicly Executed in England," *The Irish Times* (26 May 2018) Available at https://www.irishtimes.com/.
[38] McCormack 97.
[39] McCormack 99.

challenged by Michael, the most radical of the Nihilists.[40] When Alexis fails to attend the meeting in Act III, a passionate discussion regarding his devotion to the Nihilist cause ensues, and it is ultimately decided that he is a "tyrant" and a traitor and as such must be annihilated. (398) The notion of double life is recurrent in other works by Wilde as well. Most notably in *The Importance of Being Earnest* which revolves almost exclusively around the theme of leading a double life and the problems of such conduct.

When it comes to discussing Wilde's self-proclaimed[41] socialism in this context, the situation is similar. Josephine M. Guy elaborates on Ellmann's comment about general hatred for the oppressed by pointing out that it "hints at the confusing fluidity of this term at the late 1880s and early 1890s when there were at least three political groupings that appropriated this label."[42] Indeed, the term socialism was in Wilde's days still one covering different utopian ideologies whose common denominator was sympathy with the exploited and general hatred of tyranny yet to acquire its distinct meaning in the next century. "The Soul of Man," is rich with exactly those motives, yet it is extremely vague in terms of offering any useful solutions – in terms of what thinkers such as Karl Marx wrote about. In this respect Wilde was no greater socialist than Dickens. In fact, because of the aforementioned vagueness of the term "socialism," it could be argued that Wilde's essay is not about socialism at all. When discussing private property, Wilde writes:

[40] María Pulido also comments on Michael's role in this context. She draws the link to "pre-48 revolutionary Ireland" by comparing his disagreements with The Professor regarding effectiveness of violent policies with "the split between Young Ireland and 'The Liberator.' Pulido 321.
[41] Apart from compiling his ideas in "The Soul of Man under Socialism," Wilde is also known to have claimed openly "I am a socialist" in a conversation. See Ellmann 121.
[42] Josephine M. Guy, "Wilde and Socialism," *Oscar Wilde in Context,* Kerry Powell and Peter Raby eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 243.

> If the Socialism is Authoritarian; if there are Governments armed with economic power as they are now with political power; if, in a word, we are to have Industrial Tyrannies, then the last state of man will be worse than the first. At present, in consequence of the existence of private property, a great many people are enabled to develop a certain very limited amount of Individualism. They are either under no necessity to work for their living, or are enabled to choose the sphere of activity that is really congenial to them, and gives them pleasure. These are the poets, the philosophers, the men of science, the men of culture – in a word, the real men, the men who have realised themselves, and in whom all Humanity gains a partial realisation.[43]

He sees socialism as a way to individualism that will free people from the hideousness of manual labour and enable them to fully engage in tasks whose produce will make the world more aesthetically beautiful and thus more pleasing to live in. The tyranny that the society should get rid of by means of socialism is to him forcing people into manual labour from which they draw no enjoyment.

> And as I have mentioned the word labour, I cannot help saying that a great deal of nonsense is being written and talked nowadays about the dignity of manual labour. There is nothing necessarily dignified about manual labour at all, and most of it is absolutely degrading.[44]

In his understanding of socialism, Wilde stands very far from most socialist thinkers who saw manual labour as a virtuous undertaking that needs to be managed by the workers. That view to him is a "great deal of nonsense."

What Wilde termed "socialism" in his essay transforms into a kind of anarchism in *Vera*. The tragedy of the Irish peasants and Russian serfs is not in the fact that their work is being exploited. It is in the fact that the state forces that work upon them in order for them to survive. Wilde's feelings towards the common peasant as such were likely ambiguous. One account describes Wilde's interaction with the local community on his western trips as such:

[43] Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man under Socialism," *Collected Works* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1997) 1042.
[44] Wilde, "The Soul of Man" 1050.

"When I met him, he always seemed to me very dull company. I suppose he looked at all the people about as brainless ignorant lot, not worth talking to, whose souls never rose above the weather, the crops, fishing or shooting."[45] This is also reflected in *Vera* when the main protagonist herself once proclaims this:

> VERA: Come, are these the proclamations? Yes, they will do; yes, they will do. Send five hundred to Kiev and Odessa and Novgorod, five hundred to Warsaw, and have twice the number distributed among the Southern Provinces, though these dull Russian peasants care little for our proclamations, and less for our martyrdoms. When the blow is struck, it must be from the town, not from the country. (375 –376)

This might, in fact, be yet another element of Speranza's influence on her son and the play as this view of common folk Wilde shared with his mother. As María P. Pulido points out:

> The nationalist ideology of Young Irelanders, despite its proclaimed pan-Hibernian temper, never ceased to be elitist and was of little appeal to the masses […] She [Speranza] herself was concerned with the dignity of Ireland as an Imaginary unit and not so much with the welfare of the middle of the road Irishman […] She abhorred democracy: "No Democracy. Why should a rude, uncultured mob dare to utter its voice? Let the best reign, Intellect and Ability."[46]

For Wilde, the fascination was in the fight against tyranny which suffocated people like his mother. He admired revolutionary groups aiming to get rid of such tyranny – Nihilists, Anarchists, Fenians and Young Irelanders – even the Confederation. It is possible that in his eyes, the sacrifice Speranza made when she surrendered her life of artistic anarchism for her Victorian family one was an inspiration to see such surrender in every Irishman. For Wilde, art and beauty were the ultimate virtues that revolution promised to provide to Ireland. George Bernard Shaw claimed to have sparked Wilde's interest in socialism after he was told by

[45] Coakley 97.
[46] Pulido 322.

Robert Ross that "The Soul of Man" had been inspired by his address on socialism delivered "somewhere in Westminster" where Wilde "turned up and spoke."[47] It was also Shaw's petition supporting the American anarchists that Wilde signed in 1886.[48] While he "genuinely detested private property and repeatedly mocked its power over the individual and society alike,"[49] it was because the lack of it prevented self-realization – he did not despise the rich. As Guy writes, "his role as an Irish landlord, his extravagant lifestyle and apparent reluctance to get directly involved in political causes, do not sit easily with the young man who allegedly proclaimed to Violet Hut "I am a socialist."[50] And the truth is that he was not. In *Vera,* he seems to acknowledge his position through the words of Prince Paul:

> PRINCE PAUL: Your Majesty, there is no need for alarm. The Prince is a very ingenuous young man. He pretends to be devoted to the people, and lives in a palace; preaches socialism, and draws a salary that would support a province. He'll find out one day that the best cure for Republicanism is the Imperial crown, and will cut up the "bonnet rogue" of Democracy to make decorations for his Prime Minister. (387)

Oscar Wilde was an artist with passion for liberty, and because Ireland never had her Charlotte Corday, he created one – inspired by a woman who may have come closest to becoming one.

[47] George Bernard Shaw, "My Memories of Oscar Wilde," *Oscar Wilde, A Collection of Critical Essays*, Richard Ellmann ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969) 94.
[48] McCormack 98.
[49] McCormack 101.
[50] Guy 243.

Chapter 3 – The Fairy Tales

3.1. Rediscovering the Native

Oscar Wilde published two collections of fairy tales during his lifetime: *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *The House of Pomegranates* (1891), the second collection famously intended "neither for the British child nor the British public."[1] This puts his fairy tales in a special position in the context of Wilde's Irish writing as both in *Vera* and many of his poems the British imperial factor plays a pivotal role in defining Irishness. The fairy tales on the other hand usually lack a coloniser figure against whom one could contrast the colonised. Yet it is not always exclusively true and, as Neil Sammells rightly points out in his essay "Oscar Wilde, The Fairy Tale, and The Critics," post-colonial and political readings of the fairy tales are not uncommon among the critics. Sammells mentions for example Jerusha McCormack's claim that the fairy tales "are to be read from the perspective of the poor, the colonised, the disreputable and dispossessed" or George Woodcock's reading of "The Young King" as a "parable on the capitalist system of exploitation."[2] Such readings have validity since the motifs that Wilde introduces in *Vera* or his essays are present in his fairy tales as well. The Happy Prince gives away his gold to help the poor. In "The Devoted Friend," Hans lets himself be abused by the deceitful Miller who takes advantage of their friendship and The Young King's dreams are a showcase of regal exploitation. The presence of Wilde's political thinking in the collections is perhaps best exemplified in "The Star-Child" when the two woodcutters lament their poverty

1 David Stuart Davies, Afterword in *The Happy Prince and Other Stories* (London: CRW Publishing, 2008) 299.
2 Neil Sammells, "Oscar Wilde, The Fairy Tale, and The Critics," *That Other World vol. 2*, Bruce Stewart ed. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1998) 228.

in a manner which echoes Wilde's openly socialist writing discussed in the previous chapter:

> Yet, after that they had laughed they became sad, for they remembered their poverty, and one of them said to the other, "Why did we make merry, seeing that life is for the rich, and not for such as we are? Better that we had died of cold in the forest, or that some wild beast had fallen upon us and slain us." "Truly," answered his companion, much is given to some, and little is given to others. Injustice has parcelled out the world, nor is there equal division of aught save of sorrow."[3]

What is different in the case of *Happy Prince* and *The House of Pomegranates* is not the absence of the British but the presence of the uniquely Irish. In an article "Folklore and Fairy Tales" published by Clarese A. James in *Folklore* in 1945, the fairy tale genre is seen as providing a lead to the primitive stages of human development:

> There is first the most primitive period, traces of which we find in the primitive customs and beliefs alluded to in the tale: such things as marriage customs, kingly state, the practice of cannibalism, helpful and talking animals, magical transformation, monsters, protracted sleep, separable soul, animism, the renewal of life, sorcery and taboo […] In passing it is interesting to note that the popularity of these stories in the nursery is attributed by psychologists to the fact that as the child reproduces the cultural stages of humanity, at this period he has much in common with his primitive ancestors who invented the theme. Stories of inanimate objects behaving as real or living beings, of animals talking and other wonders, fit in singularly well with his development."[4]

If, as Wilde himself stated, his fairy tales were not intended for the British child, Ireland seems as the best place to trace this "primitive" back to. James later points out the fact that unlike the indigenous English fairy tale that has been "completely obliterated" in the seventeenth century by the popular European tales such as *Cinderella* or those of the Grimm brothers, "reading a collection of Irish fairy tales

[3] Oscar Wilde, *Collected Works of Oscar Wilde* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1997) 304. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.
[4] Clarese A. James, "Folklore and Fairy Tales," *Folklore* 56.4 (1945): 336. Jstor, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1256727.

one feels that in them, we have something comparable to what our own lost English stories may have been."[5] This suggests that in engaging this genre, Wilde engaged a media inherently Irish of which there is no English counterpart. Being Oscar Wilde, however, this engagement is uniquely different from what would have been expected.

3.2 Imagining Orality

Perhaps the most frequent, and at the same time most problematic, term that appears in the critical discourse surrounding Wilde's fairy tales is "orality." Deirdre Toomey speaks of a "dying oral culture to which Wilde was tied by what Yeats called his 'half-civilised blood,' the culture of those who listened to spoken tales, undivided by book culture."[6] Wilde truly was a product of what Jarlath Killeen termed the "peripheral, marginal zone" of the British Isles where "oral traditions still held sway."[7] The effect of this sway must have been felt by Wilde particularly strongly as he was surrounded by the Irish love of folklore for the greater part of his life. During Wilde's lifetime, Irish folklore enjoyed great attention in its country. In the broader sense of the word,[8] it was a great passion of folklorists like Sir William Wilde (who in particular spent a lot of time in archaeological research or collecting notes from locals in the west of Ireland, often in exchange for medical advice.) Apart from the likes of Sir William, there were also many writers who were attempting to transfer the oral tradition into writing by means of various collections. Speranza herself was the author

[5] James 337.
[6] Deirdre Toomey, "The Story-Teller at Fault: Oscar Wilde and Irish Orality," *Wilde The Irishman ed*. Jerusha McCormack (London: Yale University Press, 1998) 35.
[7] Jarlath Killeen, "Wilde, The Fairy Tales and The Oral Tradition," *Oscar Wilde in Context*, Kerry Powell and Peter Raby eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 187.
[8] Based on *A Handbook of Irish Folklore,* Anne Markey and Anne O'Connor include in the term "folklore" every aspect of the daily life and "the totality of folk culture" from "settlement and dwelling" to "everything supernatural," a range whose both extremes would have been equally fascinating to Sir William. Anne Markey and Anne O'Connor, *Folklore and Modern Irish Writing* (Sallins: Irish Academic Press, 2014) 5-6.

of *Ancient Legends of Mystic Charms, and Superstitions of Ireland* and *Ancient Curses, Charms and Usages*, two volumes based on Sir William's notes.[9] Unlike Oscar's father's, her motivation was likely not purely folklorist as she was also a keen nationalist and thus part of the sphere of society where words like "folklore," "Gaelic" or "Celtic" became a tool of political propaganda. Young Ireland, a group Speranza was so close to, are especially known to have promoted cultural nationalism using orality and Gaelic folklore "in their claim of unifying cultural past in which men of letters had a decisive role to play leaders of the nation"[10] Later on, in England and even France, Wilde was unable to completely escape the influence of his homeland's primitive past as this found its way even into the highest Irish literary circles in diaspora. An aspiring folklorist W.B. Yeats not only "went about collecting legends of healing wells and peasant miracles,"[11] but openly acknowledged the contribution of Speranza's first collection on his own *Irish Fairy Tales* (1892) which was then in turn reviewed by Oscar. [12]

The one problem with such collections is that they take what is meant to be reproduced by speech and speech only and put it into letters. By doing this, the original, "primitive" element is of course obliterated. Some of the collectors would have regarded it as an advance from a primitive form of literature to a higher one as well as from a primitive form of civilisation to an advanced one. They would usually do this with an openly culturally superior attitude, sometimes even disdain for the culture they were thus recording. According to Jarlath Killeen, one such collector was

[9] Maria Pilar Pulido, "The Incursion of The Wildes into Tír-na-nÓg," *That Other World vol. 2*, Bruce Stewart ed. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Ltd., 1998) 219.
[10] Pulido 221.
[11] Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) 425.
[12] Angela Bourke, "Hunting Out the Fairies: E.F. Benson, Oscar Wilde and the Burning of Bridget Cleary," *Wilde The Irishman,* Jerusha McCormack ed. (London: Yale University Press, 1998) 39-40.

the Irish antiquary Thomas Crofton Croker, author of *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland*:

> Croker was interested in collecting and describing oral traditions and stories, but only with the intent of overcoming them, not to "perpetuate a creed which has disappeared," but in order to destroy the beliefs which were "retarding the progress of [Irish] civilisation." Croker is representative of a host of Irish folklorists who recognized and more or less accepted the disciplinary designation of Ireland as a kind of quaint repository of primitive culture and traditions, inhabited by far too many of the folk, but who held out great hopes for the (probably) slow dissipation of this culture by the spread of literacy and education.[13]

Of course, the Wildes never belonged to the same type of folklorists. Sir William, though a protestant, was genuinely in love with the Gaelic Ireland. The fact that he frequently gave medical advice to the western folk for merely a story in return suggests that he must have felt those primitive stories of at least the same value as his knowledge of modern medicine. Meanwhile Speranza's interest echoed the motivation of Young Ireland to "articulate the "otherness" of Ireland around its own centre, both geographically and politically and in relation to the myth of a unified and coherent cultural past."[14] Where Croker bemoaned certain backwardness of Irish society, they praised its virtue. Sir William even once woefully acknowledged his own contribution to the "uprooting" of traditions in his *Irish Popular Superstitions* (1852):

> These legendary tales and superstitions have now become the history of the past – a portion of the traits and characteristics of other days. Will their recital revive their practice? No! Nothing contributes more to uproot superstitious rites and forms than to print them.[15]

As for Oscar, his exact opinions about the Irish oral tradition and folklore, and their impact on him are still a subject to critical debate with

[13]Killeen 187.
[14] Pulido 221.
[15] Jarlath Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2007) 6.

critics as Deirdre Toomey and Neil Sammells seeing him much engaged with them and others, like Máire ní Fhlathúin in her essay "The Irish Oscar Wilde: Appropriations of the Artist," as being rather forcefully placed within such engagement by the former.[16] It would probably be wrong to attribute to the aesthete the same love for folklore as to his father. After all, we know that he did not always feel particularly at home in the West of Ireland.[17] Ní Fhlathúin's claim, on the other hand, seems to work with the presupposition that the whole concept of Irish Wilde has been artificially created by the modern critics – a view perhaps too radical. Wilde much valued the oral and often presented some of his tales, including the early version of *Dorian Gray* in oral form to various listeners. He perhaps even preferred this form to writing, which might have been, however, partly due to the seeming tediousness of publishing.[18] Deirdre Toomey also points out the inherently communal character of oral art:

> Wilde lacked any strong sense of ownership in his oral tales – an identifying characteristic of oral cultures, in which the text belongs to the whole community [...] Another area in which oral culture differs absolutely from literate culture is in its attitude to cliché, stereotype and plagiary. These cardinal sins of literacy are cardinal virtues of orality. Originality in an oral culture consists not in inventing an absolutely new story but in stitching together the familiar in a manner suitable to a particular audience, or by introducing new elements into an old story.[19]

This aspect of oral culture must have definitely struck a chord with Wilde, whose demands on originality were always rather lax at best:

[16] Máire ní Fhlathúin, "The Irish Oscar Wilde: Appropriations of the Artist." Available at http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/1990/1/wilde_in_irish_studies_review_1999.pdf.
[17] Davis Coakley mentions a record of Oscar that describes him as a bit aloof and reluctant to engage much with the locals while at Moytura. Davis Coakley, *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Irish* (Dublin: Town House, 1994) 97.
[18] Toomey 26.
[19] Toomey 26 – 28.

> When I see a monstrous tulip with four wonderful petals in someone else's garden, I am impelled to grow a monstrous tulip with five wonderful petals, but that is no reason why someone should grow a tulip with only three petals.[20]

Jarlath Killeen presents an interesting ambiguity which helps to understand Wilde's position a little better.[21] On the one hand, there is the Wilde who admired all beautiful art, sang Gaelic lullabies to his sons[22] and whose belief in the mystical was as strong as that of the western Irish folk[23], having repeatedly claimed to have been witness to supernatural occurrences.[24] Against this Wilde, Killeen contrasts the Wilde who "appears to have genuinely accepted certain traditional belief considered superstitious by the cosmopolitan mind, but acknowledged his distance from primary orality by using the condescending term when describing these beliefs," Wilde who "tries to maintain a cosmopolitan scepticism about oral traditions while simultaneously maintaining their vitality and power."[25]

Wilde's fairy tales reflect this ambiguity. He was, and must have felt himself, a product of a culture with deeply rooted oral tradition, yet from his experience as a member of an educated literary society, he refused to do what his parents did –transform this culture to print and thus contribute to its decay. Instead, he composed his own stories – stories that are inspired by this culture and that reflect rather than take out some of its aspects. W.B. Yeats considered

[20] Robert Ross' recollection recorded in the preface to *Salomé*. Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*. Published by ebooks@Adelaide at https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/wilde/oscar/salome/index.html.
[21] Killeen in *Context* 189-193.
[22] Vyvyan Holland, *Son of Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957) 45.
[23] An interesting account of the power of such believes in the West of Ireland is given in Angela Bourke's Essay "Hunting of the Fairies: E.F. Benson, Oscar Wilde and the Burning of Bridget Cleary." In this essay, the author also draws a link between Wilde's writing and the outcast characters in Irish fairy legends. Bourke in *Wilde The Irishman* 36-46.
[24] Wilde claimed among else to have seen a ghost near Moytura or heard a banshee outside his window in Merrion Square. Killeen in *Context* 189.
[25] Killeen in *Context* 190.

Wilde a great narrator and in his introduction to *The Happy Prince* wrote that "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."[26] In the same introduction he writes about the oral quality of "The Fisherman and His Soul:"

> I try to imagine it as it must have been when he spoke it […] Only when I so imagine it do I discover the incident of the young Fisherman's dissatisfaction with his mermaid mistress, upon hearing a description of a girl dancing with bare feet was witty, charming, and characteristic. The young Fisherman has resisted many great temptations, but never before had he seen so plainly that she had no feet. In the written story that incident is so lost in decorations that we let it pass unnoticed at a first reading, yet it is the crisis of the tale.[27]

Deirdre Toomey reflects the mutuality of this appreciation and points out that "Wilde himself praised the young Yeats for his story telling" and that the latter was made "tell long Irish stories" by the former who compared his art of story-telling to Homer's.[28] In the fairy tales, this "cultural valuing of the oral over the written" is formally reflected in the frame narrative of "The Devoted Friend" where the Linnet acts as the story-teller for the pond community. (339-350) In the rest of this chapter I will discuss the two major Irish Wildean themes in the two collections.

3.3. The Blinding of the Happy Prince

In attempt to discuss those themes that the notion of orality frames in Wilde's fairy tales, I am going to move from the ancient times to a more recent development in Irish thinking, starting with what David Berman terms "the root metaphor of Irish

[26] W.B. Yeats, *Prefaces and Introductions*, W.H. O'Donnell ed. (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988) 147.
[27] Yeats 149.
[28] Toomey 25.

philosophy"[29] In his essay "The Irish Counter-Enlightenment," Berman discusses the ideas with which Irish thinkers reacted to Enlightenment and especially to John Locke. Such discussion would have included strong opinions about religion anywhere in Europe, therefore it does not come as a surprise that in Ireland, Christianity and its meaning became the cornerstone of the debate. In our context, the most interesting idea that stemmed from it is the metaphor of the blind man. The debate revolved around the question of mysteriousness of Christianity. The initial argument presented by John Toland and later expanded on by other rationalist thinkers is that "there is nothing in the gospel contrary to reason or above it," that even though we do not know all that can be known, we are sure that that which we do perceive and conceive is not mysterious, therefore,[30] and that "No man can believe explicitly what he does not understand, for faith is an act of understanding"[31] In response to this, some thinkers including Edward Synge and Peter Browne presented the metaphor of the blind man who is unable to perceive light or colour and their knowledge is thus inaccessible to him yet "he should assent to their existence."[32]

This idea is also reflected in "The Happy Prince," where it is, however, reversed in the sense that the Happy Prince is initially able to perceive light and colours. Yet what he sees is only suffering and injustice:

> I can see all the unhappiness of my city. My heart now is made of a cheap metal. But even that poor heart can feel, and so I cry. (318)

Therefore, in order to help the people, he voluntarily choses to blind himself with the help of the little swallow:

[29] David Berman, "The Irish Counter-Enlightenment," *The Irish Mind,* Richard Kearney ed. (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1987) 123.
[30] Berman 120.
[31] Berman 121.
[32] Berman 122.

> "In the square below," said the Happy Prince, "there stands a little match-girl. She has let her matches fall in the gutter, and they are all spoiled. Her father will beat her if she does not bring home some money, and she is crying. She has no shoes or stockings, and her little head is bare. Pluck out my other eye, and give it to her, and her father will not beat her."
> "I will stay with you one night longer," said the Swallow, "but I cannot pluck out your eye. You would be quite blind then."
> "Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow," said the Prince, "do as I command you." (321)

By doing this he not only helps release the poor from their suffering but also accepts the blindness and mysteriousness of knowing over rational empiricism, and his source of knowledge as being a "matter of trust and authority" (just as Browne sees the accepting of Christian doctrine[33]) by entrusting his vision into the eyes of the swallow the next time he wishes to look at the city beneath him. (322)

To propose that on Wilde's side this was a conscious attempt to join the philosophical debate would be a long shot and the arguments in favour of such theory would in all probability ultimately fall short of a convincing conclusion. Nevertheless, Wilde might have subconsciously picked up the metaphor when alluding to the main topic here – Christianity. As Berman stresses, "the similitude of the blind man is more than a mere illustration. It is the root metaphor, as it were, of Irish philosophy."[34] It is highly probable that Wilde would have come across the concept as a student, maybe even more than once, though philosophy was not his primary discipline. Also, at the Wilde household this theory must have been well-known as its origins are pragmatically linked to Molyneux' *Dioptrica Nova*,[35] a book on optics with

33 Berman 122.
34 Berman 123.
35 Berman 119.

which Sir William, among whose major medical achievements belonged the recovering of the King of Sweden's sight,[36] must have been well acquainted.

Wilde's relationship with Christianity is marked throughout his life by the dilemma of choosing between Catholicism and Protestantism. He was a Protestant by birth, yet his heart was never really true to this faith. For most of his life, it was simply something that was present – before he rejected it altogether. As if prophesied by his mother's unofficial attempt to have him and his brother baptized as children, Wilde's leaning towards Catholicism first openly manifested itself at Oxford, with the environment ironically more relaxed regarding this issue than in Dublin where the dangers of Catholic allure to young Oscar were felt and acted against by both his Trinity tutors, and Sir William, who threatened disinheritance should his son turn Catholic.[37] In Oxford, far from being deterred from it, Wilde was encouraged in his embracing of the Catholic faith by his friend Hunter Blair who in 1875 obtained a leave to study music in Leipzig whence he travelled to Rome for his conversion.[38] Wilde himself showed great interest in Catholicism and especially in the Roman Ritual. His "long-haired head [was] full of nonsense regarding the Church of Rome [and] his room full of photographs of the Pope."[39] In the summer of 1875 Wilde travelled through Italy and wrote several poems and sonnets with Christian themes. "Rome Unvisited" especially delighted Blair as it "expressed Wilde's desire to meet the pope as 'the only God-Appointed King'"[40] and in 1877 (after some frustration with

[36] Holland 15.
[37] Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Random House, 1988) 34.
[38] Ellmann 53.
[39] Lord Ronald Gower's observations. Ellmann 54.
[40] Ellmann 57.

Wilde's indecision in the matter of conversion) he paid for Wilde's journey to the Vatican. In the last minute, Wilde was dissuaded by John P. Mahaffy who convinced his former student to accompany him to Greece by way of Ravenna instead – a moment which, as Mahaffy also writes in a letter to his wife, might be regarded as the beginning of Wilde's turn from Catholicism towards paganism.[41] Wilde waited with his baptism (at least the one undeniably recorded) into the very last moment. He was received into the Catholic Church on his deathbed in Paris, unable to speak, after Robert Ross had made an educated guess that it would be preferable to call for a priest based on Wilde's previous declaration that "Catholicism is the only religion to die in."[42]

Just like Wilde's view on religious commitments was not orthodox, his interpretations of the teaching were often unique. The time of publication of his fairy tale collections corresponds with his increased interest in the figure of Christ:

> At the same time [late 1880s], however, he had begun to intensify his study of the personality of Christ, who would become Wilde's model for the artist's life. "Jesus was often in his thoughts and he always spoke of Him with admiration," observed a rather disbelieving Frank Harris.[43]

In *De Profundis* Wilde himself writes:

> Nor is it merely that we can discern in Christ that close union of personality with perfection which forms the real distinction between the classical and romantic movement in life, but the very basis of his nature was the same as that of the nature of the artist—an intense and flamelike imagination. He realised in the entire sphere of human relations that imaginative sympathy which in the sphere of Art is the sole secret of creation. He understood the leprosy of the leper, the darkness of the blind, the fierce misery of those who live for pleasure, the strange poverty of the rich. Someone wrote to me in trouble,

[41] Ronald Schuchard, "Wilde's Dark Angel and The Spell of Decadent Catholicism," *Rediscovering Oscar Wilde,* C. George Sandulescu ed. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1994) 374.
[42] Ellmann 583.
[43] Schuchard 382.

> "When you are not on your pedestal you are not interesting." How remote was the writer from what Matthew Arnold calls "the Secret of Jesus." Either would have taught him that whatever happens to another happens to oneself, and if you want an inscription to read at dawn and at night-time, and for pleasure or for pain, write up on the walls of your house in letters for the sun to gild and the moon to silver, "Whatever happens to oneself happens to another."[44]

Even though explicitly recorded later, this interest is reflected also in the fairy tales. On multiple occasions, Wilde creates a protagonist who is somehow above everyone else due to their ability to such "imaginative sympathy." The Happy Prince is one such example, placed above everyone not only metaphorically but also symbolically in his position on a column above the city. He is able to see the plight of the citizens and, just like Christ, sacrifices himself for them. Wilde goes further with his metaphor when he compares the treatment of the Christ figure on earth and in heaven. Whereas on the Earth, the Prince is melted in a furnace and his heart thrown into a dustbin, in heaven he is at last welcomed and appreciated:

> "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.
> "You have rightly chosen," said God, "for in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me." (323)

Another instance of the employment of a Christ figure is "The Young King" from *The House of Pomegranates*. The protagonist is again endowed with a gift of perception of suffering and of sympathy which his inferiors lack. The Young King awakens from his dreadful dreams and informs his Chamberlain about his visions as well as his intention to present himself to the people in shepherd's clothes:

> And the Chamberlain spake to the young King, and said, "My lord, I pray thee set aside these black thoughts of thine, and put on this fair

[44] Oscar Wilde, "De Profundis," *Collected Works* 1081.

> robe, and set this crown upon thy head. For how shall the people know that thou art a king, if thou hast not a king's raiment?"
> And the young King looked at him. "Is it so, indeed?" he questioned. "Will they not know me for a king if I have not a king's raiment?"
> "They will not know thee, my lord," cried the Chamberlain. (254)

Yet the king does not heed his advisor's instruction and departs for the church in plain clothes. At first, nobody recognizes him including the Bishop. Still the Young King is unshakable in his faith and when the nobles force entry into the cathedral to seize him, his apparel is divinely transformed:

> And lo! through the painted windows came the sunlight streaming upon him, and the sun-beams 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.
> He stood there in the raiment of a king, and the gates of the jewelled shrine flew open, and from the crystal of the many-rayed monstrance shone a marvellous and mystical light. He stood there in a king's raiment, and the Glory of God filled the place, and the saints in their carven niches seemed to move. In the fair raiment of a king he stood before them, and the organ pealed out its music, and the trumpeters blew upon their trumpets, and the singing boys sang. (256)

This scene stands in contrast with Blair's description of the Pope as the "Only God-appointed king" suggesting that for Wilde, the authority of Christ was far superior to that of the Church – a possible hint to his lack of decisiveness in the question of conversion. This is evident also in the description of the Church's altar in "The Young King" where the figure of Christ is clearly highlighted as central with the Young King approaching and identifying himself with Christ, disregarding the presence of the Bishop and the priests:

> "Sayest thou that in this house?" said the young King, and he strode past the Bishop, and climbed up the steps of the altar, and stood before the image of Christ.
> He stood before the image of Christ, and on his right hand and on his left were the marvellous vessels of gold, the chalice with the yellow wine, and the vial with the holy oil.

> He knelt before the image of Christ, and the great candles burned brightly by the jewelled shrine, and the smoke of the incense curled in thin blue wreaths through the dome. He bowed his head in prayer, and the priests in their stiff copes crept away from the altar. (256)

Another theme which is important in this respect is the Garden of Eden. Prior to his death, when Robert Ross still hesitated to call the priest, Wilde once called him "the cherub with the flaming sword, forbidding my entrance into Eden."[45] This statement can of course go either way in the sense that it could have been just another one of Wilde's witticisms, yet at the same time a hint to his possible uncertainty of what would come after his death. Reading through the fairy tales, the second option does not seem completely unlikely. The Happy Prince mentions his carefree past in a garden surrounded by a "very lofty wall." (318) At the end of the story, he arrives with the swallow to the garden of Paradise. (323) In fact, both gardens might be one if we allow the role of the Happy Prince as Christ figure. The Selfish Giant also lives surrounded by a garden where an eternal winter reigns because he banished the children from it. Once they come back, he realises his mistake and repents for his sin by lifting a little boy upon a tree. This little boy later returns to take the Giant into Eden in a scene where Christ is depicted in perhaps the most overt manner in all of Wilde's fairy tales:

> Downstairs ran the Giant in great joy, and out into the garden. He hastened across the grass, and came near to the child. And when he came quite close his face grew red with anger, and he said, "Who hath dared to wound thee?" For on the palms of the child's hands were the prints of two nails, and the prints of two nails were on the little feet.
> "Who hath dared to wound thee?" cried the Giant; "tell me, that I may take my big sword and slay him."
> "Nay!" answered the child; "but these are the wounds of Love."
> "Who art thou?" said the Giant, and a strange awe fell on him, and he knelt before the little child.

[45] Ellmann 583.

> And the child smiled on the Giant, and said to him, "You let me play once in your garden, to-day you shall come with me to my garden, which is Paradise."
> And when the children ran in that afternoon, they found the Giant lying dead under the tree, all covered with white blossoms. (337-338)

Finally, the theme of banishment from Eden is also present in "Star Child" where the Child must roam the world in search of his mother whom he had initially denounced. He is eventually able to gain access back to the symbolic Eden – the walled city – by atoning for his sin and giving alms to beggars.(313)

3.4. The Actress and the Witch

Just as was Oscar Wilde always somehow trapped between the two countries – Ireland and England – so was his position in the sphere of gender rather ambiguous. Today, we generally accept his sexual role in society as "the married lover of young men, the propagator of a Platonic philosophy of homophile friendship."[46] Wilde certainly has become a role model for the gay writer and reader. It is a question, however, how much this is thanks to the authorities who punished him for being one. Wayn Koestenbaum sees the birth of gay reading with Wilde. Seeing Wilde as a Warholian anticipator of post-modernism, he writes that Wilde "invented an essentialist gay reader."[47] Yet he is also quick to add that the "gay identity was born from Wilde's trial." Indeed it is "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (1898) and "De Profundis" (1905), the "'you' supplicated and denounced"[48] in the latter being Bosie or Lord

[46] Joseph Bristow, "'A Complex Multiform Crature:' Wilde's Sexual Identities," *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde,* Peter Raby ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 196.
[47] Wayne Kostenbaum, "Wilde's Hard Labor and the Birth of Gay Reading," *Engendering Men*, Joseph A.Boone and Michael Cadden eds. (London: Routledge, 1990) 177.
[48] Kostenbaum 178.

Alfred Douglas, Wilde's lover, that serve as the point of departure for extending gay reading of Wilde further, into earlier works such as *Dorian Gray*. It is quite possible that without the sentence for gross indecency, there would have been no "Gay Wilde" at all – at least not in such extent. As relevant as his homosexuality is, it may sometimes cast a shadow over the sexuality and gender of the pre-Reading Oscar Wilde, and especially his relationship with women.

Victoria White explores the somewhat problematic role of women in Wilde's writing:

> What Wilde does in the paradoxes is very simple and rarely alters: he takes a wise saw and inverts it, so that it mocks the norms of the society in which he lived. What he is saying, then about his sex life is fairly serious. He is saying he did it because it was fun, because it was exactly the opposite of what was expected of him, and because he despised and scorned that expectation. He is saying that he was reacting against a system rather than creating one. The system against which he reacted had the relationship between men and women at its very core […] In Wilde's work, women embody the most conservative norms of society. Mighty dowagers heft their way through the plays and prose of Wilde, like lumbering elephants.[49]

This provides quite an accurate picture of the female characters in Wilde's society plays, that is, in his London plays. White later claims that he could not tolerate "a mature, sexually attractive, reproductive woman who moved from virgin status to sexually expressive womanhood."[50] This claim is, however based solely on reading of those plays written in London – those mocking its society with all its failings. As White herself suggests, it is Wilde's rebellion against that society and its expectations for a woman. Therefore, when he

[49] Victoria White, "Women of No Importance: Misogyny in the Work of Oscar Wilde," *Wilde the Irishman* 159.
[50] White 160.

describes the Duchess of Berwick as a "public building"[51] it is not a proof of the author's misogyny, but of his scorn of such misogyny in the Victorians. In the same manner his apparent disgust for the "sexually expressive womanhood" was merely a disgust for the Victorian notion of a woman's predestination as a housewife meant to marry and reproduce. What supports this reading is the fact that when we broaden the scope of Wilde's writings considered, we must at some point inevitably arrive at a work that sees women in a completely different light, even superior to men. Those works are largely those within the Irish context.

The situation in Ireland was quite different in this respect. Wilde's earliest impression of womanhood would have been that of an independent artist fighting for a noble national cause – his mother. It is exactly this impression that is reflected in *Vera*: A free spirit, more cunning than all the men around her – the soul of the rebellion. Then, while still a child in Dublin, another woman entered his life. When Oscar was three years old, his sister, Isola Francesca Emily was born. Everyone in the family was very fond of her and according to Vyvyan Holland, Oscar worshipped her.[52] When Isola tragically died at the age of ten, her devastated brother composed a poem which shows just how much he loved her. It ends in those lines:

> Peace Peace, she cannot hear
> Lyre or Sonnet,
> All my life's buried here,
> Heap earth upon it.[53]

[51] White mentions this line from *Lady Windemere's Fan.* 158.
[52] Holland 16.
[53] Holland 17.

The male role model, on the contrary, did not quite equal the female. With Sir William being interested in everything Irish purely from the scientific point of view, threatening to disinherit Oscar should he deviate from the Protestant path, and his renown for both his practices with female patients and personal hygiene being questionable at least, his mother's heroic femininity would have most likely been the dominant force in the shaping of young Wilde's grasp of gender and sexuality. What is more, Oscar would have quite easily had a reason to blame his father for preventing his rebellious mother from being true to her nature and fulfilling her destiny as Vera when he gave her children and thus sentenced her to a domestic life in the symbolic "fetters" she herself had written about in her essay "The Bondage of Woman."[54] As if to underscore her transition from an Irish revolutionist to a Victorian wife, when her son brought her to London, her spirit seemed to die and she became an old lady "dressed as a tragedy queen" in a room with permanently drawn curtains.[55] Considering all of the above, it is not surprising that when Wilde created an independent, beautiful heroine, it was in Irish framework, not English.

One such heroine appears also in the fairy tales – the Witch in "The Fisherman and his Soul" from *House of Pomegranates*. In the story, a young Fisherman falls in love with a Mermaid whom he catches one day into his net and releases. He is, however, unable to live with her in the sea because he has a soul. He goes to the Witch seeking advice about how to get rid of his soul. The Witch and the Mermaid are the two contrasting representations of the feminine in the story. The Mermaid is described thus:

[54] Ellmann 9.
[55] V. Holland's recollections of visits at his grandmother's house in Chelsea. Holland 19.

> Her hair was as a wet fleece of gold, and each separate hair as a thread of fine gold in a cup of glass. Her body was as white ivory, and her tail was of silver and pearl. Silver and pearl was her tail, and the green weeds of the sea coiled round it; and like sea-shells were her ears, and her lips were like sea-coral. (275)

In obvious disparity, such is the description of the Witch:

> And at noon he remembered how one of his companions, who was a gatherer of samphire, had told him of a certain young Witch who dwelt in a cave at the head of the bay and was very cunning in her witcheries. And he set to and ran, so eager was he to get rid of his soul, and a cloud of dust followed him as he sped round the sand of the shore. By the itching of her palm the young Witch knew his coming, and she laughed and let down her red hair. With her red hair falling around her, she stood at the opening of the cave, and in her hand she had a spray of wild hemlock that was blossoming. (278-279)

Physically, the Mermaid is unmistakably Germanic with her hair as a fleece of gold and body as a white Ivory. The Witch on the other hand is precisely as if from a Celtic legend with her long red hair let down, surrounded by wild nature. The way the Fisherman approaches each is also important. While the Mermaid lets herself be captured by him and in exchange for her seeming freedom promises to come back every day and sing for him, the Witch is described as "cunning" and when the Fisherman approaches her cave, she can already tell by instinct that he is coming. She has the upper hand and is the superior element in relationship to the Fisherman, unlike the Mermaid who seems to have no willpower of her own and readily submits to her captivator. The highly poisonous hemlock held by the Witch symbolically underscores this superiority and her cunningness and untameable intelligence.

Still, to be completely fair, even in London, Wilde was able to find women equal to his Witch. Usually they were actresses whom Wilde admired precisely because they were so much like his Irish mother:

> With their powers of speech and gesture, actresses could hold audiences spellbound instead of merely "suffer and be still," as Victorian women were typically advised to do. Yet performing women were thought to look with regret to what Wilde calls in "Sen Artysty" the "sweet confines" of the garden close that was sacrificed for a public career. Their lives were believed to be incompatible with the domestic satisfactions of other women whose identity seemed single rather than complex, their lives contained by marriage and motherhood.[56]

This admiration of London life lived outside the fetters of domesticity is represented for example in *Dorian Gray* in the character of Sibyl Vane. It is more explicitly expressed in some of Wilde's poems dedicated to famous actresses. In "Phèdre," he praises Sarah Bernhardt as a mythological goddess for whom this world must seem "vain and dull."[57] Yet for Wilde, the Victorian actress might have been quite close to the Irish Witch. Commenting on this particular sonnet, Kerry Powell stresses the vampiric quality Wilde gives to Bernhardt:

> His sonnet on Bernhardt represents the actress of his dreams as a monstrous Phedre - a vampire from hell, the recipient of kisses from "the loveless lips" of dead men. This note of dread in Wilde's "To Sarah Bernhardt" is evident in many other enthusiastic assessments of Bernhardt's harrowing style as an actress. To the critic Arthur Symons, who sensed an obscure peril and felt an "electrical shock" on his spinal cord when he saw Bernhardt perform, the actress seemed as inhuman as she did to Wilde. Bernhardt "tears the words with her teeth," writes Symons, "and spits them out of her mouth, like a wild beast ravening its Prey." George Bernard Shaw characterises Bernhardt's art as "entirely Inhuman", and the actress herself a kind of diseased vampire, jolting the sensibilities of her audience with gleaming teeth and "paroxysms of phthisis."[58]

Such depiction is strikingly evoking of mystical Ireland with one work of Irish literature springing to mind almost immediately due to the vampirical link – J.S. Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872) with its independent female protagonist,

[56] Kerry Powell, "A Verdict of Death: Oscar Wilde, Actresses and Victorian Women," *Companion* 181-182.
[57] Oscar Wilde, *Collected Poems of Oscar Wilde*, Anne Varty ed. (Ware: Wordsworth, 1994) 80.
[58] Powell 182.

transgressing and breaking gender rules and placing female sexuality over male. Just like Le Fanu's vampire gradually seizes control from her male host, Wilde's Witch proves superior to the Fisherman during their dance in the ritual which suggests sin by the presence of the devil himself in form of the "man dressed in a suit of black velvet, cut in the Spanish fashion." Ultimately, the Fisherman grows afraid of the Witch's superior sexuality and escapes to the Mermaid by making "on his breast the sign of the Cross, [and calling] upon the holy name." (281) Wilde allows the Fisherman to escape only by means of Christ – the other major Irish element of his fairy tales.

Chapter 4 – Poetry

4.1 The Apple Not Far from The Tree

In his lecture on *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1897), Seamus Heaney mentioned that poetry was not Oscar Wilde's "proper genre" but one that was "naturally available to him from the start."[1] Should this chapter contain only one sentence, Heaney's quote would perfectly sum up what shall be discussed in more detail on the following pages. Wilde was not famous mainly for his poetry. Yet having been reared by a prominent contemporary poetess, this mode of expression remained close to him and he wrote many poems during his career even if they often lacked the popularity of his plays.

Wilde's first collections of poems appeared in 1881, simply titled *Poems*.[2] It was a compilation of his work written during several years prior, mostly in the late 1870's. The collection consists of several separate groups of poems. Of those, the most relevant in terms of his nationality are the first two: "Eleutheria" and "Rosa Mystica." The latter is significant as most of its content was written or conceived to be written when Wilde was travelling around Italy, fuelled by his passion for Catholicism. Karl Beckson and Bobby Fong comment on this topic in their essay "Wilde as Poet:"

> A significant early focus of Wilde's poetic impulses occurred when he visited Italy in the summer of 1875. Already attracted to Roman Catholicism, he wrote a number of religious poems, such as "San Miniato," in which he describes his ascent (physical and spiritual) to the twelfth-century church on one of the hills overlooking Florence. Measuring his own life by that of the pure Virgin and implying a

[1] Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995) 98.
[2] Many critics tend to see *Poems* as Wilde's poetic debut. It is not quite accurate as he had published works that did not appear in poems before. Those, and even some of the ones that have their place in the collection but had been published initially on their own, were mainly published in Irish or Catholic journals during his years at Trinity and Oxford. Wilde turned to English publishers only after his move to London. Nick Frankel, "'Ave Imperatrix:' Oscar Wilde and the Poetry of Englishness," *Victorian Poetry* 35.2 (West Virginia University Press, 1997) 118. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40003617.

> parallel between the crucified Christ and the Romantic image of the martyred artist.[3]

Wilde's identification of the martyred artist with Christ is found again, much more profoundly engaged, in his last poem, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* just like his apparent issue with the authority of the crown which appears already in "Rosa Mystica" where in "Rome Unvisited", he ostensibly refuses the authority of the Church of England:

> O joy to see before I die
> The only God-anointed King,
> And hear the silver trumpets ring
> A triumph as He passes by![4]

This refusal of secular regal power is another sign of things to come on a much profounder scale in *The Ballad.* Yet already in "Poems," Wilde manifested his at least disapproving opinions of the British Empire and Imperial oppression in general. The opening section of the collection, suitably named "Eleutheria" (Greek for "liberty") echoes Speranza like no other work by her son.

4.2 The Poet as a Republican

The section called Liberty opens with a poem called "Sonnet to Liberty" as if to stress the important theme of this passage of "Poems." Its subject matter reflects into large extend that of *Vera*, which is not surprising as it came out the same year the play was banned by the British authorities[5] and Wilde had all the right reasons to feel that his liberty as an author was being trampled

[3] Karl Beckson and B. Fong, "Wilde as Poet," *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde,* ed. Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 57.
[4] Oscar Wilde, *Collected Poems of Oscar Wilde,* Anne Varty ed. (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1994) 22. All further quotations are from this edition.
[5] Jerusha McCormack, "The Wilde Irishman: Oscar as Aesthete and Anarchist," *Wilde The Irishman* (London: Yale University Press, 1998) 84.

upon. In the sonnet, he directly addresses Liberty herself, confessing his sentiments towards her. He starts by acknowledging certain reluctance to fully embrace what he calls "thy children" (6) and what most probably means anarchy. Throughout "Eleutheria" it is evident that Wilde somewhat struggles to fully embrace his mother's passions and take them to such extremes as she did as in his view beneath anarchy's "ignorant reign/ Arts, Culture, Reverence, Honour, all things fade."(9) Even though the ideas behind popular revolutions appealed to him, he was no friend of the ignorant mob and was ready to mourn the fate of "Pour boy" Louis Napoleon in a poem which at the same time celebrated the birth of the French Republic. (7) In "Sonnet to Liberty" Wilde portrays the ignorant children of Liberty whose "minds know nothing, nothing care to know." Yet he continues with these lines:

> But that the roar of thy Democracies,
> Thy reigns of Terror, thy great Anarchies,
> Mirror my wildest passions like the sea,—
> And give my rage a brother——! Liberty!

Wilde choses to focus on the very idea of resistance against imperial terror rather than dissect its consequences. His poetry praises the noble cause. The result is unimportant. As if to stress this, the poet uses the word "knout," which appears prominently in *Vera*, instead of the less specific "whip:"

> For this sake only do thy dissonant cries
> Delight my discreet soul, else might all kings
> By bloody knout or treacherous cannonades
> Rob nations of their rights inviolate (2)

It seems that Wilde mostly associated his idea of Liberty with republicanism. On several occasions in "Eleutheria", it is praised almost as a virtue. In "Sacra Franca Fames" he writes that "[he was] nurtured in democracy,/ And liking best that state republican" (9) In "Quantum Mutata" and "To Milton" he writes favourably about the

time of Cromwell as in his view, England had a chance to become a republic then. "Quantum Mutata" thus begins:

> There was a time in Europe long ago
> When no man died for freedom anywhere,
> But England's lion leaping from its lair
> Laid hands on the oppressor! it was so
> While England could a great Republic show. (7)

His most openly anti-imperialist poem of the whole collection is then paradoxically named "Ave Imperatrix." Rather than addressing the Empress of India herself, Wilde uses her title as a synecdoche for the whole British Empire or as a feminized idea of Imperialism, just like he did elsewhere with Liberty or Democracy. Beckson and Fong describe the poem thus:

> "Ave Imperatrix" […] hails England Before whose feet the worlds divide and whom "The treacherous Russian know so well". Later in the poem, Wilde expresses grief over the price that war exacts: "Down in some treacherous black ravine, / Clutching his flag, the dead boy lies" to be buried, like other English soldiers, "not in quiet English fields but throughout the Empire. Nevertheless, "Up the steep road must England go "to advance the political ideal of republicanism, which will "Rise from these crimson seas of war." Thus, as though assuming the role of poet laureate, Wilde celebrates England's noble mission.[6]

In context of "Eleutheria," it is, however, hard to fully accept such interpretation. That Wilde would at one point call the British government "ignorant demagogues" (7) in "To Milton" and here suddenly honestly praise the same demagogues for "countering Russian expansionism" and merely expressing "grief over the price that war exacts" is somehow hard to believe given that in *Vera*, he uses Russian Imperialism as an allegory for the English one. Nick Frankel in his essay "Oscar Wilde and the Poetry of Englishness" provides more satisfactory interpretation when he notes the paradoxical structure of the poem:

[6] Beckson, Fong 62.

> In the first stanza its speaker seems to inhabit an England imagined as the visible centre of the British Isles, a position achieved by and identified with naval control of the North Sea […] Almost immediately, however, the poem's speaker assumes a position of rhetorical alienation ("What shall men say of *thee*"). The contradiction is evident in the poem's structure too. Though the first stanza sets up for a political meditation on empire, the poem's judgement does not come till much later, and then with a certain confusion. Instead, the poem's first half digresses into a series of sketches of England's imperial possessions, places of far-flung exoticism. These sketches seem as driven by a desire to inhabit the imperial domain through acts of imagination as they are by any desire to criticize English militarism and empire.[7]

Frankel then marks another turn in the poem:

> The poem's commitments to the English empire are especially evident in its second half, where Wilde, like many modern English xenophobes, postulates that the empire is achieved precisely at the expense of the English, whose vital energies are being snapped […] The pacifism in here, like the poem's xenophobia, depends almost wholly on our unquestioning assumption of an English point of view.[8]

Yet, given all the context already discussed, one simply must question such point of view because of stanzas that do not fit into it well. Stanzas like these:

> 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?
>
> Go! crown with thorns thy gold-crowned head,
>   Change thy glad song to song of pain;
> Wind and wild wave have got thy dead,
>   And will not yield them back again.
>
> Wave and wild wind and foreign shore
>   Possess the flower of English land—
> Lips that thy lips shall kiss no more,
>   Hands that shall never clasp thy hand.
>
> What profit now that we have bound
>   The whole round world with nets of gold,

[7] Frankel 123 – 124.
[8] Frankel 124.

If hidden in our heart is found
  The care that groweth never old? (5)

First of all, the mention of Cromwell suggests a look back at what Wilde perceived as the English golden age. Again, the parallel between the glorious past of the young republic and foul present days of demagogical imperialism is apparent. Frankel's suggestion that Wilde's view is like that of "many modern English xenophobes" clashes with the second stanza here in which the poet seems to address those English xenophobes who see the dead lives as a price to pay for extension of the empire, and urges them to change "glad songs to song of pain" and perceive those deaths as a tragedy caused by imperialism. This statement is stressed in the fourth verse where the poet asks whether the riches are worth the price – obviously a rhetorical question with only the negative answer acceptable. Wilde laments the fates of people in England who will never see their loved ones again – something no amount of Afghan riches can compensate for:

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. (4)

Frankel seems in favour of the English point of view and argues that "Ave Imperatrix" manifests Wild's Englishness. He bases this argument partly on an already edited version of the poem, however himself makes an interesting observation which is not entirely in favour of such interpretation:

> The Englishness of the poem's 1881 version emerges most tellingly, however, in Wilde's substitution of the more English "will" for the more Irish "shall" […] This was a grammatical substitution that Wilde was to remain particularly sensitive about throughout his life. Wilde did not alter the poem's final two stanzas, however, which […] foresee English decline and the rise of post-colonialism.[9]

It is exactly in those concluding stanzas where Wilde finishes the whole paradoxical progress of his poem by not making this change. The unchanged verse concludes thus:

> Peace, peace! we wrong the noble dead
> To vex their solemn slumber so;
> Though childless, and with thorn-crowned head,
> Up the steep road must England go,
>
> Yet when this fiery web is spun,
> Her watchmen shall descry from far
> The young Republic like a sun
> Rise from these crimson seas of war. (6)

The poet says that England must suffer with a thorn crown on its head until it rids itself of Imperialism. Yet this England is childless, therefore the child that shall rise from the "crimson sea of war" is not to be her own. The end of the poem effectively sees an Irish author who suddenly turns back to Irish grammar, prophesying a Republic which shall not be England's child.

His poetry as a whole is perhaps the most ambiguous portion of Wilde's work in terms of defining his nationality with openly anti-imperialist poems like "Ave Imperatrix" on the one hand, and "Grave of Keats," where he describes the Romantic as "poet-painter of our English Land" (71) on the other. The Irish did not always warm to this double allegiance with Mathew Russel, editor of *The Irish Monthly*, once questioning Wilde's wording in "Grave of Keats," when he asked whether the land is really "our" even though

[9] Frankel 125.

"we understand Shakespeare as one of our own." In reply, Wilde wrote: "I am sorry you object to the words *our* English Land. It is a noble privilege to count oneself of the same race as Keats or Shakespeare. However I have changed it."[10] Only he did not and came to the publisher with the same exact wording. For Wilde, unlike for his mother, artistic expression did not always go hand in hand with national or political beliefs. Art was supposed to be pursued for art's sake. He was ready to use it as a means of voicing patriotic sentiments, but he did not allow those sentiments to get in art's way. Being English meant being able to count himself to the same race as Shakespeare and Keats and he did not see Englishness as exclusive of being Irish. In fact, aside from Speranza, one of the sources of inspiration for the poetry examined in this chapter might well have been the works of the English romantic poet, P.B. Shelley.

Wilde admired Shelley as a writer "tremulously sensitive and poetic,"[11] evoking his lines in his own poetry.[12] "Sonnet to Liberty" and "Ave Imperatrix" then reflect certain sentiments expressed in Shelley's poems "Ode to Liberty" and "The Mask of Anarchy." Wilde's passionate confession of his love for Liberty in "Sonnet" echoes Shelley's hungry longing for the same in "Ode:"

> A Glorious people vibrated again
> The lightning of the nations: Liberty,
> From heart to heart, from tower to tower, o'er Spain,
> Scattering contagious fire into the sky,
> Gleamed. My soul spurned the chains of its dismay,
> And, in the rapid plumes of song,
> Clothed itself sublime and strong;

[10] Alex R. Falzon, "Wilde and Keats: *La Donné*," *The Challenge of Keats,* Allan C. Christensen et al. eds. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000) 251-52.
[11] Oscar Wilde, *Pen, Pencil and Poison: a Study in Green*. Available at http://www.public-library.uk/ebooks/74/24.pdf. 14 Oct 2019.
[12] Beckson, Fong 60.

As a young eagle soars the morning clouds among,
Hovering inverse o'er its accustomed prey;[13]

Similarly, Wilde concludes "Ave Imperatrix" with the image of young Republic rising like a sun from "crimson seas of war" (6). This echoes the final stanza of "The Mask of Anarchy:"

'Rise like Lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number,
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you -
Ye are many - they are few.'[14]

This is hardly surprising if we consider the fact that Shelley was, like Wilde, criticizing British imperialism and advocating for an oppressed group of citizens. The only difference is that this oppression was not based on race but class. "The Mask of Anarchy was written as a reaction to the Peterloo Massacre in 1819 and in its opening lines, Shelley openly criticizes several representatives of the British government including the Viscount of Castlereagh, infamous, incidentally, for his role in suppressing the 1798 Rebellion:[15]

I met Murder on the way -
He had a mask like Castlereagh -
Very smooth he looked, yet grim;
Seven blood-hounds followed him[16]

The enemy of the Irish nationalist was often an enemy of the English working man as well. When Shelley spoke for the latter, he gave voice to Wilde who would later support the former. Eventually, Wilde had to find out that what England was willing to tolerate in the case of an English writer, would not be acceptable in an Irish one's.

13 P.B. Shelley, *The Selected Poetry and Prose of* (Ware: Wordsworth, 2002) 473.
14 Shelley 401.
15 R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972*, 6th print (London: Penguin Books, 1989) 279-285.
16 Shelley 387.

4.3 The Ballad of Reading Gaol

4.3.1 Paving the Way to Reading

On May 26th 1895, Justice Alfred Wills concluded the series of some of the most (if not the most) notorious trials of the 1890s in Britain by sentencing Oscar Wilde and one Alfred Taylor to two years hard labour imprisonment for gross indecency according to the law, or, in Wills' words, for keeping "a kind of male brothel" in Taylor's case and being "the centre of a circle of extensive corruption of the most hideous kind among young men"[17] in Wilde's. Regardless of whether we opt for the correct legal or Wills' somewhat sensational interpretation of the crime, it is certain that this was the moment when the English society finally rejected Wilde as an alien not fit to be its part and as someone corrupt and deprived of morals who should be promptly put away so that he can spread his corruption no longer. Ironically, the verdict was a result which could have been, and towards the end of the trials, undoubtedly was, expected by not only Wilde himself, but many of his friends as well. Yet not only did he refuse to leave England for Paris as he was advised on several occasions during the trials, and stood firmly believing that the inevitable would ultimately be avoided. Wilde effectively brought the disaster upon his own head when he initiated the whole affair by taking Marquess of Queensbury to court for libel after being called a "posing sodomite" by him.[18] The trial was doomed to be lost since its beginning as Queensbury promptly assumed the role of a protective father who only tried to shield his son, Lord Alfred Douglas, from Wilde's homosexual influence, thus making it almost impossible for any jury in Victorian England to find him guilty.

[17] Douglas O. Linder, "Sentencing Statement of Justice Wills," *Famous Trials.com*, UMKC School of Law, 1995, https://famous-trials.com/wilde/335-statement, 22 Jun 2019.
[18] Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Random House, 1988) 438.

It is this first trial that is perhaps the most interesting in the context of Wilde trials in terms of Wilde's position in English society as an Irishman. It is obvious that initially, Wilde was quite sure of the firmness of the English soil he on which he stood by not only contemplating such an idea as suing Queensbury, but also going through with it. He must have felt that the English loved him enough to prevent his fall. Then, as the trial proceeded and ample evidence was gathered not only to defend Queensbury but to start another trial against Wilde, he did consider dropping the case and leaving for Paris as Frank Harris and G.B. Shaw suggested. Ultimately, however, he decided against it, prompted perhaps by a rather childish reaction of Douglas who dramatically accused Harris of being "No friend of Oscar"[19] giving him such advice. Wilde decided to defend himself in the case where he was the prosecutor,[20] mistaking perhaps Douglas's attitude for that of the whole of England. If not won, this case would make him a martyr in the English eyes.

Paradoxically, it took an Irishman to prove him wrong. One of the most intriguing parts of the trial is undoubtedly Wilde's examination by Queensbury's solicitor Edward Carson. Carson, a former student at Trinity College was at first reluctant to enter the case, his conscience unwilling to defend against a fellow Irishman from the same university but ultimately, after the evidence was gathered and the case rendered a certain success for Queensbury, he decided to favour "Protestant morality" before "college loyalty," as Ellmann puts it. Later, Carson's cross-examination of Wilde was perhaps the most spectacular event in the whole episode, unwinding into a sequence of sharp dialogue on both sides. Wilde got the better of Carson when he exposed his literary ignorance,[21] Carson was the ultimate winner

[19] Ellmann 443.
[20] As he himself proclaimed when he took stand. Ellmann 445.
[21] Ellmann 448.

when the verdict was pronounced. When Queensbury was found not guilty, and the impeding trials against Wilde loomed, it became obvious that Wilde was no martyr for the English. He became, however, one for the Irish. At least for the Catholic, Republican Irish who opposed English rule and despised everything that Carson represented. Wilde's acceptance of his newly assumed role of the outcast and his disillusionment with the English law is palpable in his most notorious poem, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

4.3.2 Refusing Britishness in a British Coat

Written shortly after his release,[22] *The Ballad* assumed a special place in context of Wilde's poetry from the biographical as well as stylistic point of view. In his last poetic work, Wilde engages a form completely new to him in order to describe a completely new experience. Joseph Bristow observes this in his essay "Oscar Wilde's Poetic Traditions: from Aristophanes's Clouds to The Ballad of Reading Gaol:"

> First of all, the *Ballad* adapts the stanzas of Thomas Hood's *Dream of Eugene Aram* (1829), which recalls the exposure of an otherwise respectable man as a murderer, further, it performs critiques of two imperialist bards, Rudyard Kipling and W.E. Henley. Kipling's "Danny Deever" caught attention in 1892 when it described, from the perspective of an ordinary soldier, the horror of military hanging. Henley, who published Kipling's "Danny Deever," appealed to the imperial spirit in poems such as "The Song of The Sword" (1892) (Also dedicated to Kipling) in which the "*Clanging imperious"* weapon sings its "*ancient and triumphing Song.*" Given his abhorrence of the "spears of crimson-suited war," Wilde found such writing repellent. In the *Ballad*, he saw himself "out-Henleying Kipling" by ironically evoking their thundering rhythms and bullish rhetoric in the name of making a contentious point about humankind's intimate relationship with violence.[23]

[22] Wilde was released on May 7 1897, while the poem was published in February 1898. Most of the time in between was spent revising the poem, however. Norman Page, "Decoding *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*," *Rediscovering Oscar Wilde*, C.G. Sandulescu ed. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1994) 305-306.

[23] Jan-Melissa Schramm, "Wilde and Christ," *Oscar Wilde in Context*, P. Raby, K. Powell eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 84.

In the *Ballad,* Wilde recalls his hatred of imperialism manifest in *Poems*, wrapping it in an imperialistic poetic form, thus creating a sharp contrast between form and subject matter as if to tear the bonds between himself and the society which had refused him. Earlier in his career, when he engaged in critique of British Imperialistic practises, it was from a distant, observing position. Similarly, when he talked of "our English land," it was the land of artists bound by common English language which was on his mind. In *The Ballad,* he allows these two to blend into one as if he was reluctantly allowing that one cannot live for an English art without acknowledging, or worse, participating on the horrors inherent in the British Imperialism and that he can never become part of the oppressing body any more than he is one of the oppressed. Norman Page notices an interesting contrast:

> What we find on turning to the poem, however, is not a direct confrontation of this personal tragedy but an objectifying and displacing of his experience. The protagonist of *The Ballad* is – like the protagonist of Kipling's great ballad *Danny Deever* […] – a soldier sentenced to be hanged for murder. The dedication identifies its central character as a former "Trooper of the Royal Horse guards," the poem's opening line refers to his "scarlet coat."[24]

Later, he writes:

> It is, then, a poem based upon the most intense experience of Wilde's life, but at the same time a very literary poem, almost a pastiche, in what one might have supposed *a priori* to be a deeply uncongenial style, and it is a poem whose different elements seem to be in conflict with each other.[25]

The Ballad is at once an objective account of the last days of a convict sentenced to death, covert critique of the British prison system or an agitation

[24] Page 306-307.
[25] Page 308.

against death penalty, but at the same time a highly subjective account of Oscar Wilde's divorce with Englishness.

When W.B. Yeats revised Wilde's poem in 1936,[26] he left out several passages which he deemed too "explicit" for what should be expressed implicitly. According to Seamus Heaney, Yeats' "proper object" was "the man who had actually killed his wife in a fit of jealousy and swung for it in Reading Gaol in July 1896," and his rendition of the poem "comparatively objective and forthright, the work of an authoritative public poet," while Wilde's original was "more compensatory and confiding, the work of an ex-convict on the run from English society."[27] As a result, one of the best-known passages of the poem is missing from Yeats' version:

> Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
> By each let this be heard,
> Some do it with a bitter look,
> Some with a flattering word,
> The coward does it with a kiss,
> The brave man with a sword! (137)

If we allow that this stanza was too subjective for Yeats, we must also accept Heaney's argument that "The fever and power of this stanza derive from Wilde's sense that the condemned man is his double."[28] In fact, it is not only here that Wilde hints some sort of affinity of the narrative voice with the convict. At the beginning of the poem, Wilde already hints a kind of bond between him and the convict:

> Like two doomed ships that pass in storm
> We had crossed each other's way:
> But we made no sign, we said no word,
> We had no word to say;
> For we did not meet in the holy night,

[26] Oscar Wilde, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, W.B. Yeats ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1936) 37-45.
[27] Heaney 89.
[28] Heaney 89.

But in the shameful day. (140)

Certain development of this relationship can be observed when compared with one of the stanzas that come later in the poem:

I never saw sad men who looked
  With such a wistful eye
Upon that little tent of blue
  We prisoners called the sky,
And at every careless cloud that passed
  In happy freedom by. (147)

Already in the first of the two stanzas, by using the pronouns "we" and "each other," Wilde suggests a strong relationship between him and the convict. This is perpetrated further in the second instance when the pronoun "we" bounds the narrator to the whole society of prisoners united by common longing for freedom such as that of the passing clouds. Moreover, when Wilde writes elsewhere "Alas! it is a fearful thing / To feel another's guilt!" and then later in the same stanza "And as molten lead the tears we shed / For the blood we had not spilt," (143) it is suggested that not only the bond of life behind prison bars in Reading is what the poet and the convict share, but their sole existence outside the English society – their status of the unwanted and despised, burdened with crimes which are not necessarily their own – binds them. When *The Ballad* is compared with "Danny Deever,"[29] this becomes even more obvious.

While Kipling focuses his poem towards the executed, from the perspective of one of his former comrades, Wilde, even though also merely observing the execution, associates himself with the convicted man and invokes a shared bond. Where Kipling's Sergeant lies about the causes of

[29] Rudyard Kipling, *Recessional and other poems* (New York and Boston: T.Y Crowell, 1919) 5-8.

distress in his men, claiming that it is only "bitter cold and "a touch o' sun" that makes his men breathe hard and fall down, he is addressing the anguish of his men in front of the gallows and not the plight of the one on them. Wilde, on the contrary, writes about feeling another's guilt, suggesting a comradery where Kipling's poem suggests exclusion. Kipling writes from the position of the imperial power, though only a single link in the chain, whilst Wilde represents the voice of those oppressed by that power.

4.3.4 The Christ of Reading Gaol

The Ballad of Reading Gaol is the final masterpiece of a poet who through association with England arrives at the conclusion that he has never been truly English. Or if he has, it was a status reluctantly lent to him which was taken away again when its bearer became too much to handle. Once during his trial, Frank Harris warned Oscar Wilde to drop the case with the argument that "The English despise the beaten – *vae victis* – Don't commit suicide!"[30] This ignored advice proved accurate not only in its explicit meaning of losing the case, but also in its referenced Roman significance – the imperialist predisposition to scorn subjugated nations. When Wilde sued Queensbury, he assumed the role of an Irishman. The only one that was left was the one of the bad (pseudo)Catholic Irishman as the good obedient Protestant was represented by Carson. In *The Ballad,* instead of trying to shake it off, Wilde embraces this role as his natural one. Throughout the poem, several references to Christ are scattered which, if studied together, communicate a message.

[30] Ellmann 442.

Early in the ballad he writes that "men knelt to pray who never prayed before," as if to suggest that Christ's presence in the gaol is so strong that men who previously did not have him in their lives now turn towards him. This is supported by a verse which as if suggests that this presence is most strongly felt on the gallows as that is the closest place to Heaven on the Earth that most men visit shortly before their soul departs:

> The loftiest place is that seat of grace
> For which all worldlings try:
> But who would stand in hempen band
> Upon a scaffold high,
> And through a murderer's collar take
> His last look at the sky? (140)

The hopeful first part of the verse is here put in blatant contrast with the lament in the last four lines. The convicts joy of meeting God is severely marred by the "murderer's collar" which was put on him by worldly authority of the English law and which renders him guilty before God. Yet this authority is not that of God or Christ and therefore should have no right to tell who is and is not with guilt. Another verse then points out the irony of protestant law when secular institutions effectively pre-determine who is guilty before God and who is not so that the chaplains in the gaol can take the liberty to act based on those secular judgments and refrain from their duties as the representatives of God on Earth:

> The Chaplain would not kneel to pray
> By his dishonoured grave:
> Nor mark it with that blessed Cross
> That Christ for sinners gave,
> Because the man was one of those
> Whom Christ came down to save. (150)

Not only does the chaplain here neglect his duties and assumes the right to tell who is with guilt which should be God's exclusively, he is also wrong in doing

so, as Wilde suggests in the last two lines, as all those who Christ came down to save – all men – should be treated equally for the Chaplain's role is to prepare all men to be judged by God regardless of secular verdicts. Wilde highlights the wrongness of such doing and the deep-seeded injustice of the English legal and penal institutions further at the end of the ballad:

> And he of the swollen purple throat,
>   And the stark and staring eyes,
> Waits for the holy hands that took
>   The Thief to Paradise;
> And a broken and a contrite heart
>   The Lord will not despise. (153)

Therefore, when he talks of feeling "another's guilt," it is less the guilt for the deed which broke secular law than the consciousness of mutual equality before Lord.

Perhaps the most interesting and at the same time the most poignant passage to look at is this one:

> They think a murderer's heart would taint
>   Each simple seed they sow.
> It is not true! God's kindly earth
>   Is kindlier than men know,
> And the red rose would but blow more red,
>   The white rose whiter blow.
>
> Out of his mouth a red, red rose!
>   Out of his heart a white!
> For who can say by what strange way,
>   Christ brings His will to light,
> Since the barren staff the pilgrim bore
>   Bloomed in the great Pope's sight?
>
> But neither milk-white rose nor red
>   May bloom in prison-air;
> The shard, the pebble, and the flint,
>   Are what they give us there:
> For flowers have been known to heal
>   A common man's despair.
>
> So never will wine-red rose or white,
>   Petal by petal, fall

On that stretch of mud and sand that lies
  By the hideous prison-wall,
To tell the men who tramp the yard
  That God's Son died for all. (149-150)

Wilde again criticises the steps taken by the secular authorities to show that the guilty was indeed with guilt by contrasting it with God's love for all men, this time adding one more poke at the English by choosing white and red roses as his metaphor. In the last stanza, he suddenly switches focus from the prison yard soil and introduces Christ and his sacrifice again. Such rapid transfer from the grave of the dead convict lying in the soil suggests a link between the executed and Christ himself. When this is remembered together with earlier descriptions of the former as a composed figure, aloof and remote from all the other prisoners, and with Heaney's observations that "The poem's true subject is entrapment, intimacy and collusion"[31] it is not hard to see the convict as another of Wilde's Christ figures. He is the Christ in the Gaol. He is the Christ in the prison yard, he is the Christ entrapped in his cell just as he once was on earth, and he is the Christ on the gallows leading the souls to Heaven. As is more profoundly evidenced in his letter from gaol, *De Profundis* (1897), "in prison, Wilde realised […] that men are called to find meaning in suffering and that 'where there is Sorrow, there is Holy Ground,'"[32] and, as Karl Beckson points out, drew parallel between the suffering Christ and the martyred artist.[33] Therefore when Heaney writes that "the poem can bestow no final liberation upon either the speaker or the condemned man, each in his numbered tomb, because the speaker *is* the condemned man" and that "the ties

[31] Heaney 92.
[32] Schramm 259.
[33] Beckson, Fong 62.

that bind them, erotic and conspiratorial, survive the execution and will not admit of being loosened,"[34] it is an evidence of a strong identification of Wild with Christ and of him feeling profound love for Christ. Of Course, as Beckson also mentions, this realization did not suddenly enlighten Wilde in prison but rather is the conclusion of thoughts that Wilde had engaged in some of his earlier writings – for example in "Grave of Keats" or the fairy tales – and that were strengthened by this experience.

J.M. Schramm writes:

> In prison, Wilde discovers that neither metaphysics, religion, reason, nor morality aids his survival […] what is left is love embodied in Christ, and in his attempts to articulate the power of this encounter, Wilde returns to the language of recognition which characterized his earlier short stories.[35]

With Christ, he returns also to his fairy tales by fully accepting what he has been toying with back then. More importantly, by choosing the form which, as Heaney points out was not his proper genre but naturally available to him from the start, he returns to his mother as a poet and as an Irish patriot. Heaney also stresses this when discussing the poem. Additionally, he cites a passage from Wilde's lecture on Irish poets in San Francisco in 1882. In the passage, Wilde talks of the revolutionaries of 1848 as of loved symbols he was taught to revere by Speranza. He also talks of the poets among them with a sentiment of a true Irishmen.[36] In a sense, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is Wilde's final answer to the question whether he would assume his place next to them or next to Kipling and Hood. Every sentiment that binds him to Christ in the poem binds him at the same time to his compatriots and the heroes of 1848 as

[34] Heaney 93.
[35] Schramm 259.
[36] Heaney 98-99.

well as 1798 and 1916. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is at the same time a ballad of Kilmainham, and it is a major exclamation mark in Wilde's search for an identity.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

After examining all of the examples of Oscar Wilde's work in this thesis, it is evident that there is a specific reason without which there might have never been such concept as an Irish Wilde. As was mentioned already in the introduction, Wilde was not yet of the generation of authors from whom it was expected to be Irish – the one of Yeats and Joyce. The demand for Irishness was not so pressing for him and he would have probably gotten away quite easily if he together with his brogue got rid of everything Irish that was in him while in Oxford. What is more, it would have probably been beneficial for him. Yet he was never really able to do that. The reason for this – the biggest at least – was undeniably his love for his mother, the once great revolutionist, Speranza. Wilde's early play, *Vera* proved a good starting point to trace his Irishness from, precisely because of the fact that it is de facto an allegory on her life and her influence on her son is a direct inspiration for the play and is treated most palpably (and in all probability consciously) in it. Also, the links to politics and metaphors for the situation in Ireland are easily traceable here.

When Wilde wrote his fairy tales, he was turning to a genre which was native to him in the sense that in Ireland it had a tradition which surpassed the English one in all respects. Wilde used whole scale of Irish themes from the vivaciously Celtic depiction of his witch to serene Christian metaphors inspired by his longing for the forbidden fruit of Catholicism. Once again, this longing can be traced to his mother who was herself fascinated by the Catholic faith and by its role in defining the Irish against the English. For a long time, Wilde himself refused to accept this dichotomy. In *Poems*, he engages his mother's radicalism, this time in his own voice, claiming as his what in *Vera* he merely described. When he voices his desire for freedom, hatred of Imperialism and sympathy with the oppressed, it is a critique of Britishness, yet

one written from a British perspective. For most of his life, Oscar Wilde defined his Irishness on the background of his Englishness, arguing that his blood could be Irish just as much as it is English. This is where he departs from Speranza. Still it was her Irishness that he tried to marry with Englishness in his works – an effort symbolically expressed when he moved her to London with him. Speranza never really warmed to the English capital and ultimately Oscar was not able to balance being English with being Irish. He chose not to be English in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, by using his most Irish metaphor – that of Christ. That was the first time he did not balance anything English against his Irishness and when he actually depicted the English as the oppressing other. That was the first time when he was writing like Speranza. It was a ballad of a broken man, however, and Speranza's is a poetry of a proud woman. Perhaps because he saw this and did not want to say the same things as his mother in such drastically different manner, and perhaps because he never really accepted the exclusiveness of Englishness and Irishness, he chose to spend the rest of his days in a foreign place – in Paris.

Speranza was a major in fluence on Oscar Wilde as an author and nationalist but also as a woman and a mother. When discussing his Irishness, she is a starting point to which most of the other influences can be traced. This thesis examined three major areas of Wilde's work where his Irishness is either a primary focus or is profoundly engaged and thus easily traceable. After this examination, it can be safely said that Oscar Wilde truly was an Irish author with Irish themes and topics present in his work. The next step in the research would now be to trace this Irishness further and expand the scope on the literature which is not chiefly concerned with it. That is the literature that he is famous for writing such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and his plays *The Importance of Being Earnest* or *A Woman of No Importance*. Often it is this

literature that is being discussed as the only source for tracing Wilde's Irishness. This sometimes results in rather incomprehensible or vague interpretations as the arguments do not have proper basis. The discussion provided in this thesis, I believe, can serve as that basis to trace Wilde's Irishness from even in his notorious works and also for further discussion of related topics such as Speranza as a role model and her influence on Wilde's relationship with women, his sexuality and depiction of these in his works.[1] More generally, Wilde's Irishness could further benefit in discussions on the concept of "other" in his works and generally in the topic of Anglo-Irish relationship, his attitude towards the otherness and his desire to be both Irish and English at the same time now perhaps more current than ever.

[1] The relation of these themes is briefly discussed in the discussion in 3.4.

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Summary

Oscar Wilde's place among the Victorians has been more or less firmly established by critics and the general reading public alike. Usually, he is seen as a rebel playwright and one-time novelist defragmenting the English society from the inside and presenting its numerous flaws and weaknesses. Wilde, however, stood outside this very society as much as he was inside it. Born in Ireland, he brought to London with him a perspective different from those of the natives. However he tried to become more English, he never became an inherent part of the society which ultimately expelled him from its core and thrown him into gaol. Yet, by leaving Ireland and focusing on his art he ceased to be a part of the Irish society as well – a fact loudly voiced by the politically active part of the diaspora whose expectations for the son of Speranza, one of the most notorious nationalist poets, has been left somewhat unfulfilled. This thesis analyses Wilde's short fiction, an early drama and poetry in terms of his Irishness and presents his Irish identity through his writing. As recent criticism reveals, Wilde's Irishness is in his work more palpable than it might seem on the surface. It is perhaps less obvious in his most famous plays and the novel which were, after all, written primarily for the English audience. In his less known works, however, he seems to have allowed himself into a more personal space and given us a clue to his personal ideas, emotions and conflicts.

In the first chapter, a general introduction to the topic and critical context is given together with a brief historical and biographical overview. The second chapter deals with his early, and probably the least-known play *Vera; or the Nihilists* and the influence of Wilde's mother, the nationalist poet Speranza who is by critics considered the template for the title character of the play. The third chapter studies Wilde's collections of fairy-tales *The Happy Prince and Other Tales,* and *A House of Pomegranates*, of which Wilde himself proclaimed that it was "intended neither for the British child nor the British public."[1] In the fourth chapter, Wilde's collection of poems *Poems* and "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" is discussed and Wilde's persona as an Irish poet is focused on. Together with his Irishness, Wilde's Englishness is often discussed as his relationship with England is important to understand that with Ireland and Englishness often serves as a "double" for Irishness – a concept Wilde more or less rejected for most of his career.

The thesis references subject-specific critical literature such as Jerusha McCormack's collections of essays *Wilde the Irishman*[2] as well as important works in Irish studies as Richard Kearney's *The Irish Mind*,[3] and works specific to the themes of the individual chapters such as Seamus Heaney's *The Redress of Poetry*[4]. By focusing on the non-canonical and less often debated works, this thesis aims to provide a different perspective to the general discussion.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, Ireland, Irishness, fairy tales, drama, poetry, Irish literature

1 David Stuart Davies, Afterword in *The Happy Prince and Other Stories* (London: CRW Publishing, 2008) 299.

2 Jerusha McCormack, ed., *Wilde the Irishman* (London: Yale University Press, 1998).

3 Richard Kearney ed., *The Irish Mind* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1987).

4 Seamus Heaney *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995).

Resumé

Oscar Wilde má své pevné místo mezi spisovateli Viktoriánské doby potvrzené uznáním jak ze strany kritiků, tak veřejnosti. Obecně je na něj nahlíženo jako na rebelujícího dramatika, který nastavuje zrcadlo viktoriánské společnosti a ve svých hrách odkrývá její všelijaké chyby a nedostatky. Wilde nicméně nikdy zcela nezapadal do společnosti, kterou jako by rozebíral zevnitř. Narozen v Dublinu, jeho úhel pohledu byl odlišný od toho ryze Londýnského a jakkoliv se snažil zapadnout a stát se nedílnou součástí anglické společnosti, ta ho nikdy nepřijala, a nakonec ho ze svého středu vykázala a uvrhla do věznice v Readingu. Bohužel touto snahou proti sobě poštval i část Irska a zejména Irská diaspora mu nikdy nepřestala vyčítat, že nenaplnil roli, kterou si pro něj mnozí její členové vysnili – syna, který bude kráčet ve šlépějích své matky, hrdé patriotky a básnířky Speranzy. Wilde vždy věnoval většinu svého úsilí umění které považoval za krásné spíše než důležité. Nedávný výzkum však dokazuje, že tato obvinění nejsou zcela oprávněná a že Wilde ve svém díle dával své irství najevo více než by se na první pohled mohlo zdát. Často to však nebylo v jeho nejznámějších a komerčně nejúspěšnějších dílech. Tato práce zkoumá tři méně známé části jeho tvorby – první hru, pohádky a poezii – s cílem dokázat přítomnost irských témat a podrobně rozebrat jejich význam a dokázat tak, že Oscar Wilde je stejně tak irským autorem jako je dnes stále považován za anglického.

První kapitola poskytuje stručný úvod do problematiky a krátký historický a biografický přehled. Druhá kapitola rozebírá Wildovu dramatickou prvotinu, hru *Vera; or The Nihilists*, pro kterou mu inspirací byla jeho matka, Speranza. Ve třetí kapitole je pozornost věnována jeho dvěma kolekcím pohádek *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* a zejména pak *A House of Pomegranates*, o které se autor sám vyjádřil, že "není určena pro britské dítě ani veřejnost."[1] Ve čtvrté kapitole jsou rozebrány Wildova kolekce básní *Poems* a jeho poslední báseň napsaná částečně ve vězení "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." Práce také nahlíží na Wildův vztah k Anglii, což je nezbytné k úspěšnému definování a pochopení jeho vztahu k Irsku. Koncept Anglie jako „dvojníka" Irska, který Wilde celý život odmítal přijmout, je též prezentován. Práce čerpá se sekundární literaturou ve formě již vydaných kritických děl k danému tématu jako například *Wilde the Irishman* Jerushy McCormacka,[2] prameny z oboru irských studií jako je *The Irish Mind* Richarda Kearneyho[3] či zdroje relevantní pro jednotlivé probírané žánry jako *The Redress of Poetry* Seamuse Heaneyho.[4] Upřením pozornosti na méně známá a nekanonická díla si tato práce klade za cíl přispět k diskuzi čerstvým úhlem pohledu.

Klíčová slova: Oscar Wilde, Irsko, pohádky, drama, poezie, irská literatura

1 David Stuart Davies, Afterword in *The Happy Prince and Other Stories* (London: CRW Publishing, 2008) 299.
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