E. T. A. Hoffmann and the novels and stories of Poe and Wilde as existing on a relatively stable continuum with the myths and practices of the ancient Egyptians and Greeks. This suggests in part that their approaches offer more insight into contemporary works than the ancient or folkic ones. One of the central claims of Lévi-Strauss, for whom folktales and myths stand somewhere among the seemingly disparate realms of science, dream, and art, is that mythology, like science and philosophy, works to impose order on an otherwise chaotic reality, in an almost kaleidoscopic manner: the kalei- doscope’s “fragments” are the elements of a reality deconstructed and then reconstituted into patterns that “project models of intelligibility” whose components and interconnections have significance only in terms of the pat- tern as a whole.47

It could be said that Wilde uses fairy-tale elements to manufacture a world that can explore the tension between his fairy tales and his critical essays. Wilde’s novel opens with a combination of material from his critical essays, a work of art, and the hallucinatory auspices of Lord Henry’s “heavy opium-tainted cigarettes” (71) and the surreal flowers, insects, and modulat- ing shades of light of Basil’s studio and garden. The novel provides a complex and even violent synthesis for Wilde, between the meandering yet carefully argued critical philosophy of the essays and the formulaic and almost apolo- getic fairy tales.

As suggested already, readers familiar with Wilde’s novel, plays, and critical writing might be surprised that his fairy tales almost without excep- tion convey messages of Christian sacrifice and renunciation. They are often heavily allegorical. For example, “The Young King” deals with a prince who, in a succession of dreams, witnesses the violent and exploitative sources of his power. These include a vision of a slave dying in the act of securing a pearl for the king’s scepter, and one of “an immense multitude of men toil- ing in the bed of a dried-up river,”48 suffering disease and pestilence in order to procure rubies for him. He renounces riches and takes for the signs of his rule a shepherd’s staff and a crown of thorns, and when he emerges as the king of his now reverent people, he appears with “the face of an angel.”49 This fairy tale resembles some of the utopian allegorical visions of one of Wilde’s contemporaries, the South African author Olive Schreiner, found in her novel *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), as well as in short works such as “The Sunlight Lay Across My Bed,” in which a dreamer, guided by none other than God himself, visits a banquet house where the privileged few drink wine mingled with human blood. God explains to the dreamer that the revelers are

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the successful, who “in the treading of the [wine] press . . . came to the top”;50 the unsuccessful, meanwhile, become pressed into wine or, wounded, are refused even the solace of drinking their own blood. A distorted version of the communion, the allegory is a blunt critique of the struggle for existence. Both Wilde and Schreiner follow in the tradition established by the Christian Socialist Charles Kingsley. Kingsley’s *The Water Babies* (1863) is a Christian Socialist utopian fairy tale, the story of a magically transported chimney sweep that serves in part to draw attention to the plight of child workers. Its protagonist, Tom, begins “being hungry, and being beaten,”51 accepting this fate as unshakable reality. In the world of the Water Babies, he not only receives knowledge unavailable to him in his normal life but also learns that forces such as Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby are setting in motion important social reforms.

Of course, most of Wilde’s work seems to make him strange company with social ameliorists such as Schreiner and Kingsley. In “The Critic as Artist,” Gilbert, one of Wilde’s dialogic interlocutors, laments that modern philanthropy counterproductively ensures the “survival of the failure.”52 In *Dorian Gray*, it is quipped that “there is something terribly morbid in the mod- ern sympathy with pain.”53 The characters of *Dorian Gray* for the most part abjure conventional morality; Dorian tries on Roman Catholicism almost blasphemously, as part of his epicurean self-development. There is a marked Christian streak in *Dorian Gray*, though, especially in Basil’s pleas, upon wit- nessing the moral corruption evinced in the portrait—“the face of a satyr” (222), as Basil describes it—that the two of them “kneel down and try if we can remember a prayer” (223). This affirmation of Christian morality, in the wake of what feels like the founding text of a new aestheticist doctrine, is far more pronounced in the original version of the novel, where it closely pre- cedes Dorian’s fate, than in the revised book of 1891. In the latter edition, the narrative of Dorian’s self-development is bracketed instead by the shadowing of Dorian by his working-class antagonist, James Vane. Among other effects of this addition is the displacement of the Christian moral in favor of the delayed realization of Vane’s desire for vengeance against “Prince Charming.” At the same time, though, this downplaying of the Christian moral is shifted to a concern with the effect of Dorian’s actions—and through them, of all those would-be affluent utopians who act primarily in the pursuit of self- development—on the classes that they necessarily exploit.

We see this wavering between various codes and standards of judgment in at least some of the fairy tales. “The Fisherman and His Soul” (1891), 296

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especially, seems more compatible with Wilde’s other work than the overtly Christian fables; but with its moral of repentance and salvation, it skirts the line between the two worlds. It deals with self-development through trans- gression, but not with the unrepentant embrace of sin found in works such as “The Critic as Artist.” In comparison with most of his other fairy tales, “The Fisherman and His Soul” is less directly allegorical. The protagonist frees his soul for a chance at loving a phantasmal being, a mermaid, after learning that no man with a soul can possess her. He learns from a witch that his shadow is in fact “the body of the Soul,”54 echoing the integral yet complex relation- ship between spiritual and physical existence explored in *Dorian Gray*. After giving up his Soul, the Fisherman experiences a period of tranquil life with the Mermaid in an idyllic, timeless undersea world. The Soul, however, who is forced to wander “without a heart” and without useful occupation in a world full of money and opportunities for violence,55 travels in exotic settings and goes through a variety of strange experiences including warfare, murder, and robbery. Eventually, the Fisherman binds his Soul to himself and thus gains partial control over it. He discovers, though, that only “once in his life may a man send his Soul away, but he who receiveth back his Soul must keep it with him for ever, and this is his punishment and his reward.”56 As a result, he cannot rejoin the Sea-folk, who have no souls, and his Edenic life is shat- tered. His absence causes the death of the Mermaid. The Fisherman repents but simultaneously loses the will to live, and in the vulnerability of his dying moment he manages to reconcile completely with his soul. The double life, asymmetrically divided between hedonistic exploitation and fantastic idyll, proves unsustainable, and an epilogue advocating Christian forgiveness closes the tale.

This fairy tale indicates Wilde’s interest, further developed in *Dorian Gray*, in the relationship between unrestricted self-development and an out- side world inhabited not only by hostile Philistines but also by innocent peo- ple with the capacity to suffer. In addition to the protagonist’s relationship to a double, “The Fisherman and His Soul” evokes the longest chapter of *Dorian Gray*, relating Dorian’s proclivity for going to the East End and the docks for mysterious and dangerous adventures and experiencing life as “the first, the greatest of the arts” (190), through all varieties of sensual and intel- lectual pleasure. The Soul’s voyages, loosely resembling the episodic exploits of *One Thousand and One Nights*, are undertaken in a spirit of restlessness and adventure. Dorian differs because he pursues higher forms of epicureanism as well; however, in one of the dispersed pivotal moments found throughout

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the novel, his descent into real sin begins one evening when, as he tells Harry, “I determined to go out in search of some adventure. I felt as if this grey, monstrous London of ours, with its myriads of people, its splendid sinners, and its sordid sins . . . must have something in store for me” (115). This image of a “monstrous,” broiling entanglement of desires and impulses is emblem- atic of the cramped and distorted aspect of society that Wilde in his criti- cal writing feels should be brought to the surface and freed of impediments; the exploitation involved in the world of “splendid sinners and “sordid sins,” though, represents a real challenge to efforts to advance this transition.

Boundaries and Limitations in Wilde’s Utopianism

While the division between heart and soul in the fairy tale is straightforward (representing above all a split between the experiencing self and the ethical capacity), the corresponding division in the novel is part of a more complex social process. Dorian transfers his soul onto the painting, but we know that the painting already contains something of Basil’s spiritual essence. The novel has thus thwarted blunt readings. For example, in his book *The Double*, Otto Rank readily interpreted *Dorian Gray* as the confessionary product of a diseased mind, though he spared Wilde the detailed biographical analysis undertaken in the case of authors such as Poe. Wilde famously sought to shield himself from this tendency (or to provoke its practitioners) when he added the 1891 preface, which insists both that “the highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography” and that “it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors” (273). Rank nevertheless attempts to fit the novel into his template, according to which other narcissistic tragic figures in double stories “become deranged in love for woman.”57 He thus misreads the story when he remarks that Dorian “first notices a change in the picture when Sibyl, who loves him above all else, cruelly and coldly repulses him.”58 This change—the sudden appearance of “a touch of cruelty in the mouth” (148)—actually occurs when Dorian, disgusted by Sybil’s inability to maintain her acting skill once she falls in love with him, breaks off his engagement with her. It also coincides closely with her suicide, of which Dorian is unaware at the time. Rank’s misreading is instructive, though, because it draws our attention to the diffuse nature of transformative moments in the novel.

Other insights in Rank’s treatise resonate more closely with *Dorian Gray*. Despite the dual nature of the double as both narcissistic fantasy of youthful 298

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immortality and the corresponding fear of the alienated self to which this irrational wish gives rise, Rank believes that the double was “originally cre- ated as a wish-defense against a dreaded eternal destruction.”59 Double fanta- sies, he speculates, emerged in the deep past from the desire for extended life, and “only gradually did their harmful (death) meaning develop along with the strengthening of the belief in a life after death.”60 Rank situates *Dorian Gray* in the context of other doppelgänger tales, most of which—including Adelbert von Chamisso’s *Peter Schlemihl* (1814) and Stellan Rye’s silent film, *The Student of Prague* (1913)—involve a deal with the devil. Wilde’s novel, in which the fear of death weighs heavily upon the main characters, both is and is not a deal-with-the-devil narrative. Lord Henry, with “dreamy, heavy- lidded eyes” (97) like those of the devil in “The Fisherman,” looms as the story’s tempter and corrupter; however, Basil also points out to Lord Henry that “you never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing” (76). As the story progresses, and Dorian becomes more violently sensual, Wotton becomes obsolete and fades rather than haunting his victim like Coppelius of Hoffmann’s “The Sandman.” Meanwhile, Henry makes an unholy bargain himself. He admits that “to influence a person is to give him one’s own soul” and that the influenced person becomes “an echo of some one else’s music” (94). Thus Dorian is, in part, Wotton’s evil shadow. Basil’s situation is parallel to Henry’s: acknowledging that “every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not the sitter” (77), he has an uncanny foreboding that his work holds “the secret of my own soul” (78).

In a similarly diffuse manner, Dorian’s transformation has multiple prompts besides Lord Henry and the portrait. He is also “poisoned by a book” to view “evil simply as a mode through which he could realize his conception of the beautiful” (210) and is prompted by “the still more poisonous influences that came from his own temperament” (178). The transference of his spiri- tual condition onto the portrait occurs “in answer to a prayer” (164). These moments are interspersed across much of the novel, intermittently providing new propulsion to his experimentation. Other important events in the novel are also multiplied. For example, the suicide of Dorian’s lover, Sibyl Vane, is reprised later in the novel during his brief romance with the village girl, Hetty Sorel. The killing of his admirer, Basil, the suicide of Alan Campbell (a former friend, whom Dorian has brought into contact with Basil’s murder), and the corruptions of young men and women hinted at by Basil and oth- ers combine to constitute a complex and emphatically social entanglement of fates.

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