

The Aesthetically and Socially Engaged Child Reader,
As Imagined by Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales

Traditionally, Oscar Wilde has been studied more for his contributions to the aesthetic and decadent movements and less as a children's author. But in recent years scholars have started to turn their attention to his relationship to childhood and his fairy tales. In 2017, Palgrave MacMillan published a collection titled *Oscar Wilde and the Cultures of Childhood* featuring articles by Maria Tatar, Jessica Straley, and Perry Nodelman focusing directly on Wilde's fairy tales. What made this collection particularly exciting was the degree to which these scholars have brought together discussions of *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism and children's literature. These chapters offer wonderful analysis of the complex morality of the stories themselves. In my paper, I intend to build upon this work by considering how reading Wilde's fairy tales as aesthetic writing opens up an opportunity to read Wilde's perception of the child reader as both sophisticated art critic and mature reader capable of social engagement.

In this paper, I focus on "The Happy Prince" and "The Young King" as examples of Wilde's simultaneous use of aesthetics and social critique to demonstrate the complexity of expectation put upon the child reader. In "The Happy Prince," a prince who used to live his life in happy ignorance of the problems of his kingdom has been immortalized as a statue who must now face the poverty of the lower classes and the callousness of the upper classes. He, and his swallow companion, work to share his gilded exterior with the suffering people of the town but little has changed systematically by the time of their deaths at the end of the story. In "The Young King" Wilde shows the reader the horrific circumstances under which the pearls, rubies, and gold threaded cloth for the aesthetic young king's coronation attire are acquired. I argue that these tales demonstrate a perspective on childhood which suggests that children can both appreciate and look beyond physical beauty; understand social problems such as systemic poverty, slavery, and brutal colonialism; and make sense of the cynical irony which haunts many of Wilde's fairy tales. Taken as whole, I argue that Wilde's fairy tales imagine childhood, itself, as a time not of innocence and shelter but rather a time to engage with the difficulties of late Victorian morality and posit their intellectual and moral ability to do so.