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Twice Upon a Time: The Retellings of Fairy Tales for Contemporary Audiences

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**Twice Upon a Time: The Retellings of Fairy Tales for
Contemporary Audiences**

written by

Morgan Howard

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

Dr. Amy Sonheim, thesis director

Dr. Johnny Wink, second reader

Sarah Smith, third reader

Dr. Barbara Pemberton, Honors Program director

April 18, 2018

Introduction: Once Upon a Time

If anyone had seen me binge-watching ABC's *Once Upon a Time* (a television adaptation of *Snow White*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Cinderella*, and more) during my freshman year of college, they undoubtedly would have said I was wasting my time. In fact, I probably would have agreed with them—there were far better things for a busy English and mass communications double major to do in her free time. I didn't realize then that I was actually in the process of developing what would become my research passion for the next four years.

For my final research essay in Composition 1, my professor, Dr. Johnny Wink, had us choose a topic from a long list he created. I chose "The Disneyization of Fairy Tales." I had grown up loving Disney, and thought I might as well tie my essay into one of my favorite television shows. My essay focused on *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Princess and the Frog*, and *Frozen*, comparing the Disney movies to the original stories. I thoroughly enjoyed writing about fairy tales and got my paper back with a near-perfect score. When it came time to choose my honors directed study—in essence, a semester-long research project—I thought back to that essay and knew I wanted to learn more about fairy tales and adaptations. A year later, this thesis grew out of my directed study. I think it safe to say that my thesis would never have come about had I not decided to watch a cheesy television series.

For as long as I can remember, I have always loved Disney's adaptations of fairy tales. Something about the magic and the messages has continued to capture my imagination and stick with me through the present day. However, as people grow older, they tend to start regarding fairy tales as trivial, childish, or unrealistic. Some readers focus only on similar plot points and fail to realize the importance of deviations among adaptations. Other people assume that fairy tales are not applicable to modern readers. Still others think that because we tell fairy tales to children, adults have nothing to learn from them.

We all know the stereotypical outline: Once upon a time, in a faraway kingdom, there lived a prince. He goes on adventures and falls in love with a girl—a beautiful girl, the girl of his dreams. He brings her home and they have the most magnificent wedding the land has ever seen. Isn't that how these stories always go? Boy and girl meet, their lives change as they find true love, and that's the end of that. The world carries on and nothing much changes. Surely there is no deep, underlying value.

Why have fairy tales existed for hundreds of years, then? Why do people cling to them, passing them down for generations? Why does Disney keep basing films on fairy tales? I would argue that fairy tales are crucial for the human spirit, rather than frivolous stories for children. They teach us the necessity of diligence, the importance of empathy, and the value of love. Perhaps most importantly, they teach us that good really will triumph over evil someday. They give us hope.

In order to grasp the importance and the impact of fairy tales, we must also understand how adaptations work. Many of the stories we know so well have been around for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Susan Ohmer claims that the story of Cinderella dates back to ninth-century China (231). Because people adapt tales that have already seen countless adaptations, readers must understand that adaptations are their own entity rather than corruptions of the originals.

In this thesis, I will discuss the various ways in which people adapt stories, as well as the implications that these adaptations have. As fairy tales travel across time and place, people adapt them to their own cultural needs. That fact makes it worthwhile to examine what different fairy tales mean to different cultures. These stories seem like they could take place anywhere at any time, but their authors actually had specific locations in mind. If the tales are specific, they have a specific meaning. Fairy tales gain approval from each audience. In

studying their meanings, we can come to understand the value fairy tales had for their particular audiences and what modern readers can learn from them. My title “Twice Upon a Time” suggests that these adaptations enable each original tale to speak cross-culturally to all audiences.

The first fairy tale on which I will focus is *Cinderella*, perhaps the most widely adapted fairy tale of all time. Originally my directed study, my first chapter discusses how adaptation works by examining four different versions of *Cinderella*. The first version is Charles Perrault’s 1694 *Donkeyskin*, one of the earliest adaptations that was written down and published. It speaks to an extravagant France under the reign of Louis XIV. The next version is the well-known 1815 interpretation by the brothers Grimm for Napoleonic Wars-era Germany. Finally, I look at the 1950 and 2015 Disney movies, both called *Cinderella* and both for a post-war American audience.

Though I had originally planned to expand my thesis from *Cinderella* to other Grimm fairy tales, an opportunity arose which pushed me in a different, yet fruitful, direction: in the spring of 2017, I spent a semester studying abroad in Liverpool, England. During this time, the OBU Honors Program graciously awarded me the Carl Goodson Honors Grant, enabling me to conduct archival research on three notable British authors of fairy tales: George MacDonald, Oscar Wilde, and Beatrix Potter. This on-location research convinced me that fairy tales spring from specific history.

The first British tale I selected is George MacDonald’s 1864 *The Light Princess*. This story comments on some of the restraints of Victorian England using a stereotypical fairy tale structure. The second story I chose is Oscar Wilde’s *The Happy Prince*, published in 1888 and written in order to satirize wealthy Victorians. Finally, I focus on Beatrix Potter’s *The*

Tale of Kitty-In-Boots. Potter wrote it in 1914, just as England entered World War I. For unknown reasons, it was not published until 2016.

Once I arrived in England, I traveled to the Armitage Museum in Ambleside to get in-depth knowledge of the life of Beatrix Potter, the Imperial War Museum in London to research World War I and gain understanding of Potter's audience, King's College in London to dig through letters and photographs belonging to George MacDonald, and Oscar Wilde's childhood home in Dublin, Ireland. These locations gave me access to valuable information I would not have had access to anywhere else. Seeing the locations in which these fairy tales took place created an appreciation for the authors and for the tales themselves. A fairy tale becomes a different story once you understand who wrote it and why.

Ultimately, I want to prove why fairy tales matter. Not only did they hold a great deal of meaning for their own audiences, but they continue to be significant even today. Each adaptation exists as its own entity. What do adaptations reveal about their specific cultures? How does that enable them to speak to all audiences? I aim to explore the various meanings of these stories. In particular, I hope to demonstrate how these stories teach us about ourselves. Fairy tales have a reputation of being fanciful and silly. I disagree. What I love about fairy tales is how they apply to all walks of life. These tales allow us to escape, and escapism can be redemptive. They take us back in time to a faraway kingdom or to our own childhoods. Whether they are written, televised, or filmed, these stories influence pop culture in undeniable ways that have the potential to reach every person where they are. Through learning about fairy tales, we can learn what it means to be human.

What Becomes of the Grimm Princess During Our Wars?

Everyone knows Cinderella. My writing her name may have conjured the image of the Disney princess—the beautiful blonde in the glittering blue dress, wearing glass slippers, and living happily ever after. But do we know Cinderella’s real story? People tend to assume that Walt Disney merely adapted Cinderella’s story from the Grimms’ fairy tale by the same name. However, the evolution of *Cinderella* is much more complicated. In fact, it even has roots as distant as ninth-century China, and scholars “have identified over 700 versions of the tale” (Ohmer 231, 232). Ohmer’s research reminds us that Disney did not create the practice of reimagining existing fairy tales for new audiences, but rather revitalized it: storytellers had already been adapting Cinderella’s tale for centuries. According to Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation*, “adaptation includes almost any act of alteration performed upon specific cultural works of the past and dovetails with a general process of cultural recreation” (9). In essence, Hutcheon’s theory is that any retelling of a story constitutes an adaptation. I agree with her. Adaptation does not cheapen a story, since “the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation” (Hutcheon 8). Each retelling is its own cultural artifact. The intrinsic value lies in how it connects with the audience.

Adaptations evolve especially during wars, and wars cause stories to travel, which explains the widespread retellings of *Cinderella*. Storytellers adapt her story for what the audience needs at the time, and in times of war, people generally wish for stories of hope. The cause for such popularity does not depend on military history though, but rather on the effects of the war. In this chapter, I wish to focus particularly on effects of modern wars and how they have influenced each retelling of *Cinderella*. By comparing the two most well-known versions, *Donkeyskin* by Charles Perrault and *Cinderella* by the brothers Grimm, we can see how the ideals which characterized the French court during peacetime were modified

to reflect German society under cannon fire. The Disney cartoon provides the same contrast while also giving a great deal of insight into the American mindset of the 1950s.

Charles Perrault wrote *Donkeyskin* for the luxurious court of King Louis XIV in 1694. It tells the story of a powerful, widowed king who proposes marriage to his daughter. She runs away and begins working on a farm, wearing only the skin of a donkey. Soon she falls in love with a visiting prince. The prince falls in love with her in return, and requests that she bake him a cake. She does so but loses her ring in the batter. This prompts the prince to call for a search across the kingdom, promising to marry the lady whose finger fits the ring. He eventually finds Donkeyskin, the ring fits perfectly, and they marry, Donkeyskin being reconciled to her father.

Perrault writes with the French court of the late 17th century in mind. The plot occurs within the world of nobility: Donkeyskin starts out a princess, and later marries a prince. Other details seem especially suited to Perrault's contemporaries. For example, an emerald ring, not a glass slipper, causes the prince to search for Donkeyskin (Perrault 115). The opulence of the culture manifests itself most obviously in the three dazzlingly beautiful dresses that Donkeyskin receives from her father at the tale's beginning, which cause her to look like a goddess (112). Perhaps Perrault included these elements because they would feel more familiar to his audience—they seem particularly French, emphasizing fashion and manners.

Even Donkeyskin's sense of morality reflects the morality of 1690s France. Perrault's version has two clearly stated morals at the end: "it is better to suffer than to do wrong; sometimes suffering makes you strong," and "when we are in the grip of passion, common sense goes out of fashion. In love, we'll squander all our treasure, if it suits our sweetheart's pleasure" (117). Perrault's moral reflects the virtues of his time—qualities like purity and steadfastness. For a country at peace, the story glorified an elegant lifestyle while also

teaching game rules for nobility. In other words, it told the French court to continue being kind and glamorous—to keep up their lifestyle since the virtues had only led to peace and wealth.

Contrarily, the Grimms' version contains violence paralleling that of the Napoleonic Wars. Maria Tatar describes how in 1812, the brothers set out “to capture German folk traditions in print before they died out” (370). It makes sense that they would want to do so, with the French taking over so many aspects of their lives. Napoleon had fought his way across Europe and was well on his way to ruling the entire continent. In fact, he had taken the area of Germany in which the Grimms lived. Jack Zipes points out that while compiling their stories, the Grimms even served as librarians in the court of Napoleon's brother Jerome, recently made King of Westphalia (“How the Grimm Brothers Saved the Fairy Tale”). Like Perrault, the Grimm brothers capture an image of their own culture. For example, the evil stepmother and stepsisters talk far more than Cinderella does, emphasizing the belief that bad women have loose tongues. Also, Cinderella's love of animals demonstrates her piety, the care she gives to mice and birds accentuating her sweetness.

Cinderella's piety plays a major role in the Grimms' version of the tale. The brothers Grimm give Cinderella their own Lutheran outlook to a degree. Ruth B. Bottigheimer writes in *Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys* that rather than gaining her magic from demonic powers, “Cinderella...derives her power from her mother” (44). Her connection with her mother demonstrates the Lutheranism of the Grimms' day—it was gender-specific, with young boys expected to be bold and adventurous, and young girls expected to be housewives in training. Cinderella's purity of heart also allows her to perform her magic with the animals, a magic stemming from the divine. Similarly, “the tales occasionally offer Christian reminders about how to live [life]” (Bottigheimer 149). Readers see lessons on good and evil throughout most of the Grimms' works, especially in *Cinderella*. By making the titular

character quiet, pure, and diligent, they demonstrate how a Lutheran woman should act. The selfishness and absurdity of the stepsisters and stepmother sharply contrast Cinderella's generosity and seriousness. Ultimately, these qualities save Cinderella. Her faith causes her to gain a happy ending.

The Grimms republished their collection in 1815, this time “[adding] prominence to violent episodes” (Tatar 366). Their German audience longed for justice and had grown used to violence under French invasions. A vengeful mindset surfaces in the Grimm stories—in a way, the audiences expected violence. One stepsister “[slices] off her toe” and another “[slices] off a piece of her heel” to force their feet into the glass slipper, and later doves peck out their eyes (Grimm 121-122). Such a grim adaptation would make sense to their German readers. It makes sense that an issue as significant as the Napoleonic Wars found its way into literature of the time; it suited the folk, who were trying to survive.

Just as Perrault writes for aristocratic French culture of the late 17th century, and the brothers Grimm write for a more pious Germanic culture shocked by the Napoleonic Wars, Disney produces *Cinderella* for a country that has recently come out of depression and World War II. As a full-length animated cartoon, Disney's *Cinderella* entertains a large number of people, appealing to mass culture. However, we should not disparage its low-brow nature. Instead, let us consider what its particular adaptation can tell us. What does the 1950 Disney *Cinderella* demonstrate about post-World War II American society? How does it reflect the mindset of the country at the time? According to Jill May, Disney seemingly “was simply concerned with finding a good story that could be simplified and Americanized for his audience... a simple, rosy plot that depended upon fast action, music, and emotional reactions” (May 466). I, however, think it is not quite so simple.

Plans for the Disney cartoon dated back all the way to just after World War II ended, near 1945. Upon its release five years after the war, the movie “marked a financial turning

point for the studio... earning more money on its initial release than any Disney feature since *Snow White*" (Ohmer 232). Disney's company needed money. Zipes believes that Disney exploited his workers, particularly those who worked on *Snow White*, using their labor to get rich at the expense of unrecognized artists ("Breaking the Disney Spell" 342). While I agree that many artists went unrecognized, *Cinderella* was not some get-rich-quick scheme as Zipes and May suggest. Instead, I believe the flashy movie with its catchy soundtrack served another primary purpose: it gave Americans a way to escape from the memory of the brutal war they had recently witnessed. While the cartoon may not have mirrored society as it exactly was, it does reflect how it wished to look.

In 1950, Americans did not have the cultured, highly sophisticated mindset of Perrault's court. Nor did they have the sober, devoutly Lutheran outlook of the Grimms' rural audience. Although the movie is its own artifact, when adapting a well-known story, the writer must keep his or her own audience in mind and not get caught up in exactly replicating the original. For example, in the cartoon, Disney emphasizes human goodness and hard work rather than overtly religious themes. He paints Cinderella as nice and kind and even selfless, but not as particularly Christian. The impact of World War II seems the likeliest reason for Disney's downplay of religion. Such a large-scale, gory war disillusioned Americans, not to mention the rest of the world. Americans had witnessed an attack on their own land, spent four years fighting all over the globe, and seen the advent of the Cold War. Furthermore, Hitler had claimed to be a zealous Christian. Many Americans began to reexamine their faith in light of the Holocaust. In a way, World War II was a war about religion, and Disney did not want to get involved in that argument.

Disney's *Cinderella* demonstrates the value of innocence and devotion, exemplified by the mice Gus and Jaq. Cinderella clothes them, feeds them, and protects them. Their interactions also show how "the maternal instincts she shows towards the mice are the answer

to the King's desire for grandchildren" (Ohmer 242). In summation, the Disney cartoon highlights the virtues of goodness, innocence, hard work, and a maternal nature—but not religiosity. It marks a shift in American ideology: Christianity no longer offered much consolation to the masses.

Another way this movie demonstrates the impact of war is in the conspicuous lack of violence. As already mentioned, Grimms' *Cinderella* contains quite a bit of gore. In Disney's movie, though, no one takes drastic measures to try to fit the slipper. Even at the end, Cinderella's stepfamily receives no violent punishment. This also seems to reflect a post-Holocaust society, exhausted by brutality. After experiencing so much gore and death, Americans likely sought an escape from reminders. Disney made an intelligent and tactful decision not to include any violence that would serve as a reminder of recent horrors.

One of the most interesting ironies of the Disney cartoon is Disney's acknowledgement of Perrault for its American audience. The movie begins: music plays and the opening credits roll. Some of the first words viewers see read "From the Original Classic by Charles Perrault." The cartoon, however, bears more resemblances to the Grimm tale. Surface aspects of the Disney version reflect Perrault's story—for example, a fairy godmother and a gorgeous blue gown. However, Disney's *Cinderella* has a rich father, not a king. Her father also does not harbor any incestuous desires toward his daughter as he does in Perrault. Furthermore, the mice and birds make her first dress just as they do in the Grimms'. Why not acknowledge both versions of the story, then? Perhaps it goes back yet again to World War II. After just enduring a devastating war, it seems likely that Americans would not want to watch a film about their recent enemy. This case is not isolated to *Cinderella*. Disney took *Bambi*, released in 1942, and "changed the setting from the German Black Forest to Maine" (May 471). The French, however, were America's allies. Perhaps Perrault's version also seemed less gory. Regardless, it is interesting and important to note Disney's

reluctance to tie his movies to Germany. It once again demonstrates how in tune he appears to be with the average American's post-war mindset.

Disney's music also creates a window into the American popular mindset. "Bibbidi Bobbidi Boo," the fairy godmother's transformation scene song, "earned the studio an Oscar nomination for best song and was Number 9 on the Billboard chart for February 1950" (Ohmer 240). A song about magic, about dreams coming true, topped the music charts. Furthermore, it bears similarities to the romantic "type of ballads that had succeeded in *Snow White*" (Ohmer 240). It seems as though Americans hungered for a different era and wanted to believe in magic again. On a different but equally important note, the characters' voices themselves delineate between good and evil. The nasal singing of the stepsisters contrasts with Cinderella's own beautiful voice (Ohmer 240). Disney uses music not only to connect with his audience, but to help them distinguish the good girl from the bad ones. His fairy tale is a social construct, making fairy tales more romantic and rosy than they had been historically.

In 2015, Disney's company released a live-action remake of *Cinderella* directed by Kenneth Branagh. This movie, an adaptation itself, bears more resemblances to the 1950 cartoon than it does to Perrault or Grimm. It has similar-looking characters, similar dialogue, and similar visual shots:



Transformation scenes: 1950 (left) compared to 2015 (right)



Ball scenes: 1950 (left) compared to 2015 (right)

It almost seems as though the filmmakers took the cartoon and just transferred it into live-action. However, this does not discredit it or make it any less valuable. Some aspects are more developed, like the relationship between the King and the Prince, and the stepmother's motives for her cruelty. The prince and king enjoy a deep friendship and respect. The stepmother feels overshadowed by her husband's first wife—he clearly loves Cinderella and her dead mother more than he loves his new wife and stepchildren. Branagh also gives more details into the lives of Cinderella's parents. Perhaps this reflects some of the ways society has changed since 1950. Modern viewers love a good backstory, a way to relate to and understand even the most negative of characters. Two-dimensional characters have become an anathema among recent generations. What is the point of this remake, then? Speaking for fellow millennials, I would say it shows our nostalgic longing for our own childhoods. We want to relive the wonder the Disney cartoon gave us in childhood. Branagh's film brings a beloved story to real life. This movie breathes fresh life into the 1950 version and in doing so, makes it more relatable to 21st-century viewers.

People see themselves as this modern Cinderella, especially those affected by recent economic hardship. Planning for the movie began just a few years after the United States came out of the Great Recession. From December 2007 to June 2009, the U.S. experienced “the longest recession since World War II” (Rich). This economic downfall had harsh consequences: the Gross Domestic Product fell in “the largest decline of the postwar era,”

and the unemployment rate doubled (Rich). By the time the new remake of *Cinderella* was produced, though, people had started to rebuild their lives. The average American had experienced his or her own Cinderella story, finally making more money after years of financial instability. It represents a modern rags-to-riches story that a 21st-century audience could appreciate and find relatable.

One way Branagh's *Cinderella* appeals to more people than the cartoon does is its PG rating. According to IMDb, an online database dedicated to films and television, Branagh's film received a PG rating for "mild thematic elements" like a fast carriage ride. The movie feels far more G-rated, especially with the strong similarities to the cartoon. A PG movie makes it seem more appealing to millennials. There is a fine line, though—if it were grittier, if it included language or sex, it would take away from the nostalgia. Millennials might view it as defiling the story they grew up watching. One way director Kenneth Branagh modernizes it without inserting gratuitous elements is by casting popular actresses. Helena Bonham Carter, for instance, plays the fairy godmother. Known for darker roles like Mrs. Lovett (*Sweeney Todd*), Marla Singer (*Fight Club*), Madame Thénardier (*Les Misérables*), and even Bellatrix Lestrange (*Harry Potter*), Bonham Carter plays a good magical figure in *Cinderella*. Bonham Carter's role also draws in potential viewers—people want to see such a well-known actress, especially when she plays a role so outside her oeuvre. She seems to bring her Harry Potter wizardry into her fairy godmother magic. Older audience members, or members more familiar with traditional theatre, may also recognize the directing style of Kenneth Branagh, famous for his Shakespearian acting and directing. Even he adapted the movie in a way that reflects his personal style. For example, he includes a scene in which the prince and other young men practice jousting in a way that feels *Hamlet*-esque.

It seems that *Cinderella* needs retelling every so often. Whether it is for the French court under Louis XIV, Germans in the Napoleonic era, Americans coming out of World War

II, or modern, nostalgic millennials coming out of recession, the story impacts people in a significant way. It offers hope and lets viewers lose themselves in a world of mystery and magic. *Cinderella* in particular creates a common denominator across time. It is a rags-to-riches story that different writers adapt for their own audiences. Since fairy tales adapt through the effects of war, in a world where war has always been and will always be present, *Cinderella* can offer a spark of hope that things will indeed get better, that humans can, after all, achieve a happy ending.

A New Pulpit: The Fairy Tales of George MacDonald

George MacDonald (1824-1905) stands out in Victorian literature as a Christian minister, women's rights activist, and prominent author. He is known especially for his children's literature, and even more precisely, for his fairy tales. In fact, Tim Youngs writes that MacDonald "transformed the fairy tale, taking the traditional form and restructuring it" (140). Readers can still feel MacDonald's influence on this genre centuries later. By examining *The Light Princess*, we can see how his political, religious, and personal beliefs come together in his fight for women's equality.

By all accounts, during the nineteenth century, MacDonald supported the suffrage movement. Claudia Nelson states that he "supported women's education, was friendly with 'strong-minded' women such as Barbara Bodichon and Josephine Butler, and created in his fiction a gallery of powerful and noble female characters" (92). In other words, he saw no reason why women should not receive the same opportunities for education that men had. After all, he had five daughters himself, and a wife whom he admired and even helped at home. The suffrage movement was tame at this point, but it would develop into a series of battles—into a war, symbolically speaking—and MacDonald found himself right in the middle of it.

MacDonald's childhood helped shape the strong beliefs he would hold as an adult. Born in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, in 1824, he grew up in a large family—five brothers and three sisters. However, within the first eight years of his life, he saw the deaths of two brothers and his mother, and the remarriage of his father.

It is ironic to note that a future author of fairy tales had a fairy tale archetype of his own life reversed. Going against the stereotype, MacDonald had a good relationship with his stepmother. His father married her relatively early in MacDonald's life, but the remarriage

apparently did not disrupt the household too severely. Quite the opposite: stepmother and stepson seem to have enjoyed a companionable relationship. Muriel Hutton refers to “nineteen letters from George to his stepmother,” and many of the letters to his father “refer to ‘mother’” (75). The family remained closely knit, even when MacDonald moved out to attend Aberdeen University. He afterward became a Congregationalist minister, the same vocation as his father.

Working as a preacher gave MacDonald experience in teaching, a skill he would later utilize in writing his fairy tales. His initial choice to work in ministry delighted his father. The two MacDonald men seem to have been on close terms. Hutton has found “one hundred and eighteen letters from George to his father... and forty-one in reply” (75). These numbers indicate that they had a mutual respect for each other as they sought the other’s various opinions. The senior MacDonald does not hesitate to give advice. In a February 1851 letter, he tells his son that he “would have [him] give over pursuing the...game of poetry and apply [him]self to the preaching of the gospel of the instruction of [his] people” (“To George MacDonald”). Though there exists no evidence to suggest that Mr. MacDonald Sr. condemned his son for writing poetry, this letter implies that they may have had discussions over the art’s utility. Son George MacDonald seems to have preferred writing fairy tales over writing sermons. Nevertheless, both men place a great deal of emphasis on the importance of religion.

The faith of the younger MacDonald manifested itself in his desire to reach people through nontraditional means, such as by pushing for the radical notion of equality. At the outset, he was an ordinary Congregationalist minister. Years later, however, MacDonald grew too vocal with his unconventional ideas. Richard H. Reis describes how in 1853, MacDonald “was forced to resign his pulpit under pressure from his congregation, the elders of which resented his unorthodoxy. Presumably, they were shocked at his preaching that the

heathen would be saved” (24). This did not deter him, though. Instead of preaching from a church pulpit, MacDonald began preaching through fiction.

He started writing shortly after his dismissal, and moving in more scholarly circles. One of his greatest friends was Oxford professor Charles Dodgson, better known as Lewis Carroll, author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Dozens of photographs of MacDonald and his children have survived, and a great many give credit to Carroll for taking them. These pictures show MacDonald constantly in the presence of family or friends. The photographs not only demonstrate his love for his family, but reveal a similar adoration for his friends. He spent his days in their company and subjected himself to their influence. Perhaps he felt more at ease among authors and educators than he did among ministers. In their ranks, he would have more freedom to explore his convictions on education and on women's rights.

George MacDonald believed men and women should have the same educational opportunities. In fact, he had a cousin named Angela Powell who “was feared to be mentally handicapped until George MacDonald taught her and brought out her abilities” (Hutton 76). The most productive time of his writing career, the 1860s, coincided with perhaps the most productive time of the British suffrage movement. In 1866, “Elizabeth Garrett (later Anderson), the first British woman doctor, and Emily Davies, the founder of the first Cambridge college for women, entered the lobby of the House of Commons carrying...the ‘Ladies’ Petition,’” a large document petitioning for all people who own property to have the right to vote (van Wingerden 2). After spending decades gathering in small groups, supporters of women's suffrage finally took their requests for equality to the seat of British government. The suffrage movement slowly gained momentum.

MacDonald began to create fairy tales to demonstrate his answer to a society changing rapidly in other areas. He wrote in the middle of the Victorian era, which saw rapid

advances in transportation, technology, industry, and trade. Great Britain became an empire, experiencing “an enormous expansion of its influence around the globe” (Greenblatt, “The Victorian Age” 1025). Furthermore, with the 1859 publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, Britain’s long-held religious beliefs began to shake. Scientific discovery at this time began to challenge the public’s notions of creation, humanity, and the timeline of the Old Testament (Greenblatt, “The Victorian Age” 1027). As the world expanded, as the world became more scientific and less introspective, MacDonald created worlds of magic and subjectivity. His choice to write fairy tales reveals much about his character. MacDonald was an intelligent man and could easily have written dozens of treatises. In fact, later in his career, he published much religious nonfiction. However, the vast majority of his writing is fiction. He created volumes of poetry and fantasy, particularly at the start of his career as a writer in 1851. Perhaps this is his way of retaining his sense of humanity in a world determined to diminish it.

One of the most prevalent aspects in all of MacDonald’s writings is the focus on religion. Since he served as a minister, this is hardly surprising. But when readers consider the context in which he wrote, the previously described scientific Victorian society, it makes his focus on religion all the more significant. In fact, a 1905 journal article describes how “throughout his verse and prose, even his prose fiction at its best, the writer is either looking upward himself or endeavoring to win others to mount the climbing path of philosophy which meant to him a kind of natural Christianity” (Moffatt 59). In other words, MacDonald’s work continually emphasizes the importance of spirituality. Although he writes about fantastical or poetic subjects, he uses them to point his readers to God, rather than away from Him as society did.

Victorian and modern readers alike may dismiss the inclusion of faith as simplistic, naïve, or unnecessary in a fairy tale. However, MacDonald's faith adds to rather than takes away from the value of his stories. As Moffatt describes it,

Something of the preacher or the evangelist clung to him from the first. It was responsible for a tendency to the 'pathetic fallacy' in his treatment of nature. It accounted for the 'improving' character of his inferior stories. Yet, by a happy recompense, it lent seriousness and sincerity to all his finer work. (59)

The Christian themes have a direct impact on the various themes, which improves the nature of his best works. He responds to the society around him. If the world insists on moving forward without God, MacDonald at least wants to point them towards morality. Although he was far from the first to insert his beliefs in his works as a response to current events, MacDonald nevertheless "is a 'novelist' in the original sense of the phrase, an innovator, a speaker of new things, a seeker for the 'oraculus in the hills,' conscious of himself and of his design even in his most objective novels" (Moffatt 60). The major role that his faith plays in his writings makes him stand out among Victorian fairy tale writers.

His love for family, friends, education, and his faith sets MacDonald apart in the canon of Victorian literature. His main distinction is his rebellion against societal norms—how he interacts with his audience through his works and directly responds to events of his time. His relationships, whether with his loved ones or with God, influence all of his writings, but particularly his fairy tales. In them, readers see a reflection of how society ought to look.

The Light Princess as a Cry for Equality

George MacDonald's beliefs and battle for women's rights shine through in his most well-known fairy tale *The Light Princess* (1864). This humorous story tells of an airy princess and the cost of love.

A king and queen have no children, and this upsets the king. He decides “to be cross with his wife about it. But she [bears] it all like a good patient queen as she was” (MacDonald 2). Although he grows angry with her, she remains gracious. Soon enough she gives him a daughter, but when it comes time to christen her, the king forgets to invite his sister, Princess Makemnoit. She is a “sour, spiteful” witch, and shows up without an invitation (4). She curses the baby princess to always float—to be devoid of gravity itself. This frustrates the king. He claims that the floating baby “can’t be [theirs]” before the queen, “who was much cleverer than the king,” points out that the baby has been cursed (10).

One day, the queen opens a window, and a strong gust of wind carries away the baby princess, but they soon find her under a bush. From then on, they start being extremely cautious. The princess grows to reach the age of seventeen, light bodied as well as light spirited—she laughs at everything, even others’ sorrow.

She soon discovers that “whatever she only [holds] in her hands [retains] its downward tendency,” allowing her to float back down to the ground (26). Her greatest love is being in water. That is the only place in which she does not float, and can enjoy a sense of freedom. Meanwhile, a prince comes searching for a princess. He hears her laughing but mistakes it for screaming, and rushes in to save her only to cause her to fly away. She returns to the ground furious, and he immediately falls in love. They jump back into the lake together—her first time experiencing the sensation of falling—and she thoroughly enjoys it. The princess acts “more modest and maidenly in the water than out of it” (69).

However, Princess Makemnoit causes the lake to dry up out of spite. The people of the kingdom discover that the only way to bring back the water is for a man to willingly sacrifice himself. The prince hears this and decides to make the sacrifice, for “she will die if [he does not] do it, and life will be nothing to [him] without her” (85). He requests that the

princess keep him company as he dies, and she obliges. Although indifferent at first, she grows more and more concerned as the water begins to cover his face, and shrieks and pulls him out. All night long she sits with him, and at last she cries for the first time in her life.

As she weeps, it rains harder than it has ever rained. The waters return with the apparent death of the prince, and the lake grows full to overflowing with the onslaught of rain. Eventually the princess calms down, only to discover that she has regained her gravity. The prince revives, teaches her to walk, and they marry and live happily ever after. The witch, of course, meets her demise.

This story contains several traditional elements of fairy tales, of course. There is the royalty, and the bitter witch who curses their offspring in the mode of *Sleeping Beauty*. There is the young princess with hair “as golden as morning” and eyes of “serene blue” (21, 48). There is the handsome prince who falls in love at first sight and dies for true love, the vanquishing of the villain, and the marriage at the end. The tale even opens with the phrase “once upon a time.” However, MacDonald also reverses many of these elements in surprising ways to make his theological points.

For instance, he glorifies the queen and satirizes the king. Perhaps most significantly, he also gives the queen a voice. The narrator takes a sarcastic tone when describing the king: “The king tried to have patience, but he succeeded very badly. It was more than he deserved, therefore, when, at last, the queen gave him a daughter” (3). In a moment rich with symbolism, the king says to his queen, “I beg your pardon my love; I did not hear you” (11). MacDonald fills the fairy tale with moments that demonstrate the queen’s wisdom and the king’s foolishness. This goes against the tradition of a heroic king and an invisible queen.

Perhaps the most blatant way MacDonald reverses stereotypes is by putting the prince and the princess on equal terms. Rather than focusing the entire storyline on the prince and

only developing his character, MacDonald also makes the princess believably complex and uses her character to comment on social affairs. One way he achieves this is through religious imagery. MacDonald fills the climactic scene with solemnity and symbolism, appropriate for such a momentous occasion. For example, the princess offers biscuits and wine to the prince, a seemingly simple meal at first. However, consider illustrator Maurice Sendak's famous 1969 interpretation of the scene:



Sendak's rendition calls attention to the symbolic sacrifice and sacrament MacDonald attributes to the prince and princess. For instance, the biscuits and wine, and the attitude in which the princess holds them, bear a striking resemblance to the communion meal in Christian churches. Thus, the prince symbolically shares in Christ's offering of His body and blood, just as the prince himself offers his own body and blood. The princess, though offering rather than partaking in this meal, also shares in its symbolism. Moments later in the story, she risks her own life to drag the prince to safety. Her dive also suggests baptism in a sense: she plunges beneath deep waters and returns a different person. Her tears also baptize her,

returning her from metaphorical death. The waters also close over the prince's head and he later returns from death to life. MacDonald's religious imagery serves to unite both prince and princess—neither is superior to the other.

This sense of equality between the princess and prince serves as MacDonald's theological commentary on Victorian gender roles. Just as he gives the queen a powerful voice, he allows the princess to save the day along with the prince. The prince sacrifices himself for his true love in stereotypical fairy tale fashion. However, the princess chooses to dive in after him, and her tears save his life as well as her kingdom. A happy ending could not have happened without the sacrifices of both characters. Instead of the outcome depending on a prince's saving a princess, MacDonald chooses to have the princess save herself. In doing so, he shows women that they, too, can have as much agency as men.

Although the princess saves herself at the close of the story, MacDonald uses her behavior at the beginning to ridicule thoughtlessness. He does not do so in a patronizing way. Rather, he uses her seemingly vapid personality to emphasize her redemption and to demonstrate the value of education for women. MacDonald, an educator himself and an ardent supporter of women's suffrage, found an outlet through his fairy tale to teach readers the importance of educating all British adults. Educated women would have a better capacity to grasp theological and societal issues, to understand the problems of the world and discuss them with the same fervor as their male counterparts.

At the outset, the princess represents the dangers of refusing to learn. The queen says to her, "Now be serious, my dear, for once," to which the princess replies, "No thank you, mamma; I had rather not" (MacDonald 31-32). While she is not refusing book learning, she is nonetheless refusing to learn common sense and the ways of the world. MacDonald argues

for the importance of both types of learning. Christian girls in particular needed more knowledge about the world in general, as well as a stronger foundation in the Christian faith.

Women of his time did not have the educational opportunities that men had, and thus did not have the same chance to expand their intellectual, spiritual, and social lives. Liza Picard writes that “it was assumed that a girl would marry and that therefore she had no need of a formal education, as long as she could look beautiful, entertain her husband’s guests, and produce a reasonable number of children. ‘Accomplishments’ such as playing the piano, singing and flower-arranging were all-important.” The training that young girls received usually centered around learning to read and write, and then mastering some artistic skill. Slight as this schooling was, only the wealthy could afford it, so poor and middle-class women often received no formal education at all. It was only towards the close of the Victorian era that England began to open colleges for women. The major universities, Oxford and Cambridge, would not admit women until the twentieth century. Thinkers like MacDonald saw these closed doors as tragic. As a theologian, MacDonald rejected the notion of a woman’s sole purpose being childbearing. Instead, he focused on their God-given intellectual capacities—capacities which, if developed through education, could be used for God’s glory.

The story closes with a powerful metaphor for education—the prince teaching the princess how to walk. After she loses her emotional lack of gravity by crying, she loses her physical lack of gravity and must learn how to walk. The narrator notes that “it was a long time before she got reconciled to walking” (MacDonald 109). But the prince does teach her and she does learn. Now that the princess has gained a real education, she is fully developed and happy. This correlates with MacDonald’s calling for reforming educational opportunities for women. He demonstrates through the princess that women are also good for thinking, itself a spiritual activity.

Equality, or at least educational equality, resonates throughout *The Light Princess* as a theme. The narrator notes at the end of the story that the princess “preferred to have the prince jump in with her” (109). This creates a strong sense of equality. Neither character has power over the other, and they go through life hand in hand. To MacDonald, though, a woman with an education serves as a far better partner. The fact that MacDonald gives voices to his female characters and gives them the same opportunities as his male characters becomes almost revolutionary when readers consider the historical context. John Ruskin (1819-1900), a friend of MacDonald who wrote at the same time, reveals the popular way of regarding women: “[Home], then, I believe to be...the woman’s true place and power. But do you not see that, to fulfill this, she must—as far as one can use such terms of a human creature—be incapable of error? So far as she rules, all must be right, or nothing is. She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise” (“Of Queens’ Gardens” 1615-1616). In other words, Victorian men held women to an unattainable ideal. Men like Ruskin expected them to act like angels rather than humans with thoughts and feelings of their own.

Before its publication, MacDonald allowed Ruskin to preview *The Light Princess*. He received a lengthy letter from Ruskin critiquing it:

I have been lingering over *The Light Princess*, trying to analyze the various qualities of mind which you show in it. I am certain it will not do for the public in its present form; owing first, to some of its virtues; that you see too deeply into things to be able to laugh nicely—you cannot laugh in any exuberant or infectious manner—and the parts which are intended to be laughable are weak. Secondly, it is too long and there is a curious mixture of tempers in it—of which we will talk—it wants the severest compression. Then lastly, it is too amorous throughout—and in some temperaments would be

quite mischievous—you are too pure-minded yourself to see this—but I assure you the swimming scenes and love scenes would be to many children seriously harmful. Not that they would have to be cut out—but to be done in a simpler and less telling way. (“To George MacDonald.” 22 July 1863)

In other words, Ruskin finds *The Light Princess* both too serious and too scandalous. The fact that the prince and princess swim together goes against Ruskin’s sense of propriety.

Furthermore, Ruskin does not seem to approve of the symbolism and themes throughout, finding them too serious and heavy-handed. Ruskin’s problems with the story serve to emphasize just how controversial the issue of gender equality was: Ruskin thinks the progressive scenes in it would harm children. He believes that women do not need to think, whereas MacDonald believes that the ability to think leads to deeper spirituality.

What can modern readers learn from *The Light Princess*, though? We can learn empathy, for one thing, and sacrifice. The story can also cause us to question how we treat others. Do we view people as burdens, like broken objects to protect? Or do we look at others with love, and find beauty in the ordinary aspects of life? This fairy tale reminds us of the important role that women play. It reinforces the value of education for all people, and calls for society to treat each person with dignity. In understanding the political and cultural contexts in which MacDonald wrote it, we can begin to appreciate its transcendent messages.

The Happy Prince in an Unhappy World: Oscar Wilde and the Late Victorians

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) is still known today as one of England's most influential and controversial writers. Famous for works such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), Wilde helped change the face of late Victorian literature and society itself. He inserts himself into his stories—Wilde is the Happy Prince, seeing the ugliness of his world but striving to better it. His fairy tales, with his customary sarcasm and realism, not only give readers a glimpse into the late Victorian age but also into human nature as a whole.

Before we discuss Wilde's fairy tales, we must examine his life and his unconventional interactions with his audience. Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland, on October 16, 1854. Interestingly, he had a rocky relationship with his mother at the beginning of his life. Robert Harborough Sherard writes that Mrs. Wilde "had earnestly desired that the child should be a girl," and after his birth "refused to admit that her new child was a boy. She used to treat him, to speak of him as a girl, and as long as it was possible to do so, she dressed him like one" (5, 6). Nevertheless, Wilde led an apparently happy childhood, and "for his parents he ever felt the deepest affection and respect" (Sherard 6). Perhaps he wrote so well for children because he had such a pleasant childhood himself.



A modern view of Wilde's childhood home. Courtesy of author.

Growing up, Wilde exhibited a gift for learning languages, which led him to discover fairy tales early in his life. According to Sherard, Wilde “taught himself German so thoroughly that afterwards the whole of German literature was open to him” (31). Perhaps it was his skill in German that led him to purchase *Grimm’s Complete Fairy Tales* as part of his 119-book personal library (Beckford). His familiarity with classic fairy tales provides an explanation of his own talent in creating modern fairy tales. Wilde was also “a perfect grammarian and an excellent logician” who displayed both rationality and impulsiveness (Sherard 34). After attending Trinity College in Dublin, he went on to Magdalen College at Oxford University. He went on to write wildly popular plays and novels, marry, and start a family. Wilde managed to stay in the public eye due to the shocking nature of his writings and of his personal life.



Magdalen, Wilde’s college at Oxford. Courtesy of author.

Wilde’s works were controversial, and the public adored them. Like MacDonald, Wilde uses thinly veiled allegories of social commentary. Both his writings and his life, according to Tim Youngs, disturbed the fragile class system in which he lived (166). The Industrial Revolution half a century before had created a “profound social change: the formation of a new class of workers” (“The Victorian Age: Topics”). In other words, the

distinct lines between rich and poor continually grew more blurred. Thanks to authors like Charles Dickens, the distinction between England's classes began slowly deteriorating, and Wilde helped contribute to this phenomenon.

His works were biting and sarcastic. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for instance, serves as perhaps the best example of Wilde interacting with and satirizing his audience. In his unique and extremely humorous way, he presents a comedy of errors based solely around the expectations of Victorian ladies and gentlemen. Wilde's "life and writing act as a vehicle from which one can observe the changing class landscape of Britain" (Youngs 166). Times were changing rapidly with the rise of the middle class, and Wilde fought to bring about change in a more speedy and potent way.

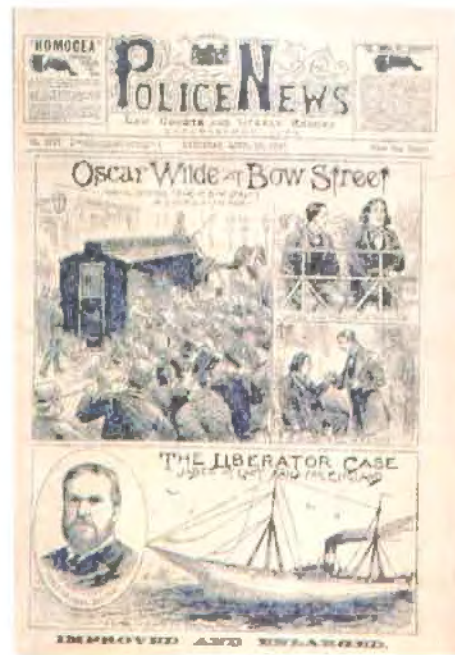
With the onset of the 1890s, the spirit of England itself began to shift—helped along, of course, by Oscar Wilde. In fact, "melancholy, not gaiety, [was] characteristic of its spirit. Artists of the nineties, representing the aesthetic movement, were very much aware of living at the end of a great century and often cultivated a deliberately *fin de siècle* ('end of century') pose" (Greenblatt, "The Victorian Age" 1030). Wilde himself exhibits this pessimism and inserts it into his writings.

He directly reacts to the injustices that he sees in his society. His writings, for the most part, are not explicitly melancholy—they do not demonstrate a sense of hopelessness, loneliness, depression, or any other connotation of the word. However, the attitude is implied. Comedies and serious works alike contain a great deal of biting satire. His "wit, with its irony and parody, is born of, and exploits, this disjunction [between the classes]" (Youngs 166). Furthermore, Wilde is both middle class and Irish, two characteristics that held somewhat negative connotations. According to Kathryn Hughes, members of the middle class lived under a cloud of anxieties, as it increasingly "became important to position people according

to their exact place in the social hierarchy.” And Roger Swift and Sheridan Gilley write that many Victorians in England saw the Irish as outsiders, “lumped together as an undifferentiated mass” (130). This historical context demonstrates the societal pressure that Wilde faced. In his writing, what may seem lighthearted may in fact be a relentless attack on British culture.

He interacted with his society in another way that came across as somewhat rebellious: by helping women get published. As women began to intensify the suffrage movement and thrust themselves more into the spotlight, they found that a change in their culture would not come about easily. Margaret D. Stetz points out that “women writers had to rely upon male contacts in pursuing careers” (518). Wilde took advantage of this opportunity and “served as a source of literary commissions... [and] played the role, too, of an unpaid literary advisor” (Stets 518). Just as MacDonald rejected the idea that women should not receive an education, Wilde rejected the idea that women should not be published. He used his influence not only to create strong female characters, but also to help strong females in real life gain recognition for their talents.

Wilde, like so many of his characters, also rebelled in his personal life. Although he had married Constance Lloyd in 1884 and had produced two sons with her, he “began an affair with Lord Alfred Douglas, nicknamed ‘Bosie,’” in 1891 (“Oscar Wilde”). The affair carried on until 1895. In February of that year, Douglas’s father, the Marquis of Queensberry, “left Wilde a calling-card provocatively addressed to a ‘posing sodomite,’” and Wilde sued him for libel (“Oscar Wilde On Trial”). However, Wilde’s plan backfired. Just a few days later, he found himself on trial for indecency, a punishable offense until the 1960s, and on the cover of *The Police News* (“Oscar Wilde On Trial”). Despite the fact that 1895 was the year of the premier of his most well-known play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, it was also the year that marked his downfall.

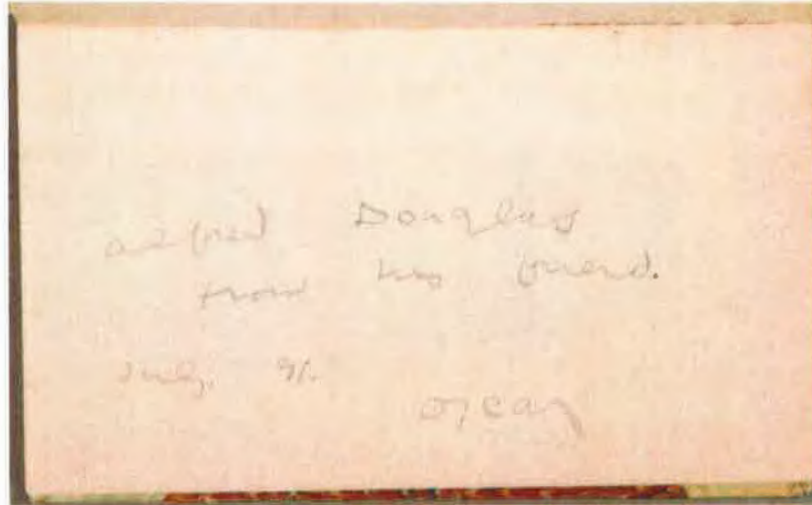


The front page of The Police News at the time of Wilde's trial.

The public, particularly women, rejected Wilde once they discovered his homosexuality. They had admired his work for going against the norm, but that was fiction; they expected Wilde's real life to conform. There are multiple reasons for their rescission of praise, the most obvious being disgust at his crime. However,

Homophobia alone is not the whole story of why some women condemned Oscar Wilde or passed lightly over his downfall... There was a greater emotional identification with Constance Lloyd Wilde, as well as a tendency to feel for her as the supposedly injured party who, through her husband's actions, had lost her social position and economic stability for herself and her children. This feeling would have been just as true had the cause been financial impropriety or an allegation of treason, rather than an offense against statutes forbidding sex between men. (Stetz 520-521)

In other words, women tended to feel repulsed by Wilde's behavior because it left his wife with no one to take care of her. As previously discussed, women had almost no rights. Although the suffrage movement was gaining momentum, women still could not manage on their own. Wilde's conviction seemed to proclaim a lack of empathy and care for his wife, as if he put his desires over the well-being of his family.



A note from Wilde to Bosie in "The Poems of James Thomson." Courtesy of Gerald Cloud.

Previously, women had held a great deal of respect for Wilde; he acted as their advocate. Stetz points out that Wilde even published a magazine for women, *The Woman's World* (517). Their faith in him diminished along with his health. As Wilde began his hard labor in prison, he gradually grew ill. An article in an 1895 *British Medical Journal* issue described his health as good and refutes claims that he had been in the infirmary ("The Health of Oscar Wilde"). However, the same article also paints a grim picture of life in a Victorian prison: "When once the prison doors close on a prisoner he is cut off from the world, and nothing that can be said can either aggravate or lighten his punishment" ("The Health of Oscar Wilde"). This allows audiences to better understand the ordeal that Wilde went through, and gives a reason for his behavior upon his release. Two years later, "his health [was] irrevocably damaged and his reputation ruined," and he traveled Europe for his

remaining three years (“Oscar Wilde”). He no longer shone as brightly, nor produced works that left England in a daze, nor interacted with his own countrymen. He died in Paris in 1900. Despite the tragic turn that his life took, however, he still remains one of the greatest and wittiest British writers, who could dish out both scathing satires and insightful fairy tales.



Oscar Wilde's grave in Paris. Courtesy of author.

Tricks of the Trade: The Creation of *The Happy Prince*

The Happy Prince is perhaps the most well-known of Oscar Wilde's fairy tales. Published at the height of Wilde's career in 1888, it tells the story of a friendship between a statue and a swallow. Although Wilde writes in a style and tone aimed more at younger audiences, the tale still contains the fierce wit and satirical commentary on society for which Wilde was known, ultimately acting as a reflection of society.

The story opens with a description of a beautiful statue known as the Happy Prince. He “was gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold, for eyes he had two bright sapphires, and a large red ruby glowed on his sword-hilt” (Wilde 297). Everyone in the town admires his beauty and the happiness that he represents.

One day, a swallow flies into town. His friends are in Egypt for the winter, and he is in the process of joining them. He was in love with a reed and had stayed behind to court her. However, as “she was too attached to her home,” the swallow angrily left her and began the journey to Egypt (298). He chooses the statue of the Happy Prince as a beautiful and comfortable place to sleep for a night. Just as he falls asleep, though, “a large drop of water” awakens him (298). This happens twice more, and then the swallow realizes that they are not raindrops; they are the tears of the Happy Prince.

Ironically, the Happy Prince is weeping. The swallow, moved by pity, asks him the reason for his tears. The Happy Prince tells him that he used to be human. He “lived in the palace of Sans-Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter,” and spent his days playing within the walls of the palace, never thinking to inquire about the outside world (298). He lived and died surrounded by pleasure and beauty. He tells the swallow, “now that I am dead they have set me up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep” (298). He now sees the misery that he ignored when alive, and it breaks his heart.

He tells the swallow that he can see a mother with a sick child. She is a seamstress but is very poor, and has nothing to give her son to help him get better. The Happy Prince asks the swallow to pluck out his ruby and give it to the mother. The swallow argues, saying that he must meet his friends in Egypt. He gives in to the request, though, and flies across the city. After giving the ruby away and fanning the feverish boy with his wings, he returns to the statue feeling “quite warm, although it is so cold” (300). That comes from doing a good deed, the Happy Prince tells him.

In the morning the swallow tries to start for Egypt again, but the Prince recruits him to give one of his sapphires to a cold and hungry student writing a play. The bird reluctantly

plucks out one of the Prince's eyes and drops it in the room of the young playwright. The cycle repeats itself when the swallow returns: the Prince asks him to pluck out his last sapphire and give it to a match-girl who has ruined her matches. He knows that the girl's "father will beat her if she does not bring home some money," and would rather give his remaining eye to her (301). The swallow does as the Prince wishes. But this time, he refuses to leave the Prince to join his friends in Egypt. "You are blind now," he tells the Happy Prince, "so I will stay with you always" (301). And he keeps his promise.

The swallow amuses the Prince with tales of Egypt, but the Happy Prince is still far from happy. He tells the swallow that "more marvelous than anything is the suffering of men and of women. There is no Mystery so great as Misery" (302). He asks the swallow to fly over the city and tell him what he sees. The swallow sees hypocrisy, hunger, cold, and exploitation. When he receives this knowledge, the Prince commands the Swallow to pluck off his golden leaves and give them to his people. The swallow obeys.

Winter progresses, but instead of migrating, the swallow stays with his Happy Prince. The cold takes its toll, though, and the swallow dies. As he falls down dead at the Prince's feet, a loud crack resounds. The Prince's "leaden heart had snapped right in two" (303). The next day, the mayor and two of his workers notice that the Happy Prince has grown dull and that a dead bird lies on the statue. They tear it down and melt it, but the heart will not melt. They toss it on a dust-heap with the dead swallow. The story concludes with a change of scene: "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" (303). God is pleased with their choice and says that the swallow and the Happy Prince will live with Him and praise Him forever.

Like many of Wilde's works, this tale ends both sadly and happily. It is heavy, focusing on misery and poverty, and concludes with the deaths of the two main characters. However, the Swallow and Prince get their rewards. Despite their saturation in the town's unhappiness, they share a deep friendship with each other and learn love. They die, but get to live eternally in paradise. Hope, ultimately, proves to be their greatest reward.

Although Wilde evokes a fairy tale atmosphere, the setting clearly echoes Wilde's own time. Despite the weeping statue and talking bird, the setting looks remarkably like Late Victorian-era England. Due to the Industrial Revolution roughly a century before the publication of *The Happy Prince*, Britain's cities rapidly became cramped, dirty, and increasingly filled with hopelessness, even in the nicer parts like Wilde's childhood home in Dublin. Wilde's firsthand experience in crowded, dirty cities likely made it easier for him to evoke such a gritty atmosphere.

One aspect of urban life that Wilde knew well was pollution, which affected both wealthy and poor sections of major cities. London in particular experienced heavy fog and smog, which in turn entered fiction set in London (Plotz). Some Londoners viewed it as mirroring the city's prevalent immorality to create literal and metaphorical darkness. Furthermore, with the establishment of a new working class, "wages were extremely low, hours very long—fourteen hours a day, or even more... Families lived in horribly crowded, unsanitary housing" ("Industrialism—Progress or Decline?"). Although this began in the 1830s, the problem continued well into Wilde's day. In fact, "in the last decade of the nineteenth century London's population expanded to four million, which spurred a high demand for cheap housing" (Diniejko). Slums had already existed, but the population explosion led to the rapid creation of more. One problem that slums created was an increase in crime. 1888, the year that Wilde published *The Happy Prince*, was also the year in which Jack the Ripper began his attacks.



A modern view of the Dublin street on which Wilde lived as a child. Courtesy of author.

The unnamed city in *The Happy Prince* could easily be London. The majority of characters that make an appearance sound like impoverished Londoners: a seamstress with an ill little boy, a cold and hungry aspiring playwright, a match-girl with no clothing and an abusive father. When the swallow flies over the city to report to the Prince what he sees, he describes “the white faces of starving children” and “two little boys [that are] lying in one another’s arms to try and keep themselves warm” (302). The Prince and the swallow see nothing but misery, which Wilde describes all too realistically.

Several of the human characters demonstrate the shallowness that characterized many Victorians. For the most part, “well-off Victorians were ignorant or pretended to be ignorant of the subhuman slum life, and many, who heard about it, believed that the slums were the outcome of laziness, sin and vice of the lower classes” (Diniejko). In essence, the wealthy ignored the plight of the poor and saw the dirtiness of the slums as a moral judgement. *The Happy Prince* contains this element of society as well. The Prince himself demonstrates this way of thinking when he was alive, physically separated from all unhappiness. When the

swallow flies to the poor seamstress, he overhears a young rich girl tell her lover that she “ordered passion-flowers to be embroidered on [her dress]; but the seamstresses are so lazy” (299). This snippet of conversation, easily passed over when reading, reveals how self-consumed the rich are. The young woman cares only about her own comfort. When the swallow carries out his inspection, the first thing he notices is “the rich making merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars [are] sitting at the gates” (302). Readers could easily miss the condemnation of the rich when, in fact, it drives the plot.

The tale mirrors society in more ways than its subtle attack on the class system. Wilde’s short descriptions of minor characters mock the frivolities of the majority of people. One town councilor “[wishes] to gain a reputation for having artistic tastes” but “[fears] lest people should think him unpractical, which he really was not” (297). A group of charity children speak of dreaming of angels, at which their “Mathematical Master [frowns] and [looks] very severe, for he did not approve of children dreaming” (297). An ornithology professor notices the swallow and publishes a letter in the town newspaper, which everyone reads and quotes, as “it was full of so many words that they could not understand” (298). Even the characters who receive gifts from the Happy Prince are not spared satire. The student exclaims that he “[is] beginning to be appreciated,” and the little match-girl merely calls her sapphire “a lovely bit of glass” (301). None of these come across as evil, but rather as silly. Ingratitude and pride are common characteristics of humans, and the math teacher’s severity seems especially Victorian.

Why did Oscar Wilde use such a realistic setting for a fairy tale, then? Just as in his other works, his main objective is to hold up a mirror to society. He means to engage with his audience. Young or old, rich or poor, each reader can see him- or herself in *The Happy Prince*. Part of Wilde’s brilliance is how he refuses to restrain his satire for any group of people. Granted, the rich are satirized rather more harshly. This comes across not only in *The*

Happy Prince, but also in more adult works like *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Wilde also satirizes the lower classes, albeit with more sympathy. *The Happy Prince* in particular points out how even the poor can demonstrate ingratitude and pride. However, to Wilde, these are minor sins compared with the upper class's exploitation of the lower. He serves as a cultural critic.

Perhaps Wilde chose to tell this story in fairy tale format to reach children—to warn them not to grow up filled with vanity, selfishness, and lack of sympathy. Each character exemplifies different life lessons. From the Happy Prince, children can learn not to turn away from the poor right in front of them. From the swallow, they can learn to be giving, and not to be consumed with the imperial pride that so prevailed in English society, represented in context by the swallow's desire to reach Egypt. From the receivers of the jewels, they can learn true gratitude. From the mayor and councilors, they can learn that beauty does not depend on outward appearances, as the Late Victorians seemed to think it did. These lessons do not apply only to children—adults can see them as well.

In fact, the beauty of *The Happy Prince* lies not only in how it applies to all ages and classes, but also in how its historical details enhance the messages. This tale is still remarkably relevant today, more than a century after its publication. Poverty and shallowness are timeless. One can apply the story to 21st century America just as easily as one can apply it to Wilde's original audience. We still have a gap between rich and poor, and we still obsess over appearances. *The Happy Prince*, although his most popular fairy tale, never gained popularity quite to the extent that some of Wilde's other works did. This does not make it irrelevant, though. There have been four different adaptations of it recently: two musicals, a song, and an operetta. The most popular of these adaptations was a musical by Sue Casson, which had successful runs in London, Edinburgh, and Dublin from 2012-2014 (“A Production History”). Adapting this fairy tale to a musical allows the story to reach more

audiences, just as Disney's adaptations of *Cinderella* did. People can listen to songs such as "One Word and a Wave," "Tricks of the Trade," and "Swallow's Lament" for an introduction to Wilde's tale ("A Production History"). If anything, it is beginning to gain rather than lose popularity.

It is popular because the message matters; it needs retelling every so often. Audiences need to be reminded to look past appearances and to look outside of themselves. Oscar Wilde refused to stay hidden and to be tame, so it makes sense that his works would continue to reverberate across the world even after his death. After all, despite technological advances, people have not fundamentally changed since he wrote his fairy tale. At the end of *The Happy Prince*, an art professor declares that "as [the Prince] is no longer beautiful he is no longer useful," a sentiment that sounds awfully similar to the modern American way of thinking (301). Just as in 1888 London, beauty still motivates people. We shut our eyes to the messiness of the world and the messiness of ourselves. This particular tale has such an impact because it goes against the instinct to look after ourselves and no one else.

Children and adults, Victorians and millennials, must relearn this lesson several times. That is the ultimate genius of this fairy tale: its application to all time periods and all walks of life. As Wilde himself said, his fairy tales "are studies in prose, put for Romance's sake into a fanciful form; meant partly for children, and partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy, and who find in simplicity a subtle strangeness."¹

¹ Found by the author on an uncited notecard in Ulysses Rare Books, Dublin, Ireland.

The Curator of Stories: Beatrix Potter

Perhaps the most well-known British children's author of all time is Beatrix Potter (1866-1943). Her works and life have inspired television shows, movies, and even ballets. Countless children still read her books, such as *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin* (1903) and the enduringly popular *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1901). Potter was more than just a writer of fairy tales—she was also a clever businesswoman, a successful farmer, a talented painter, and an avid mycologist (a person who studies fungi). To understand the influence of her writings, we must understand her background and the times in which she lived. Beatrix Potter wrote her children's tales for an audience that was beginning to know decadence, flamboyance, and more freedoms. Thus, she does not romanticize her world, but rather paints her surroundings realistically.

Potter was born in London on July 28, 1866. Her mother and father “were both members of wealthy families whose fortunes had been made through the phenomenal success of the Lancashire cotton industry in the 19th century” (“Beatrix Potter: Image & Reality” 2). She grew up in luxury, but never attended school:

Beatrix was educated at home by tutors. One, a Miss Hammond, realizing that she had an exceptional gift, recommended that the Potters engage a drawing teacher. So in 1878 at the age of twelve and for the next five years, she took lessons in drawing and painting. At thirteen she sat a first examination in which she was rated excellent and repeated the feat the next year. (“Beatrix Potter: Image & Reality” 25)

Although her education was not “formal,” she found both talent and interest in art. Her pictures of the natural world, particularly animals, helped her gain an interest in science. Because she was “intellectually restless and keenly observant of both nature and society, her

artistic skills and imagination drew her to a fascination with fungi” (“Beatrix Potter: Image & Reality” 40). A nanny may have also contributed to this interest. At one point in her childhood “she had a Scottish nanny who spun tales of fairies and fairy rings [rings of mushrooms]; therefore it is perhaps not surprising that she developed an interest in fungi” (“Beatrix Potter: Image & Reality” 13). Her talents in drawing and science become even more remarkable when we remember that she never formally studied these subjects. Because Potter was a young woman living in the Victorian age, she did not receive training in the science that interested her.

In 1895, Potter began to study fungi intensively. Instead of merely painting them, “she developed a curiosity about germination” (“Beatrix Potter: Image & Reality” 15). She became fascinated with the scientific aspect of fungi—how they reproduce, why they are located where they are, and similar questions. She even wrote a highly technical paper on the subject that unfortunately was never presented:

Beatrix Potter’s mycological work has sometimes been overstated, but there were flashes of real insight... Overall her work was a remarkable achievement for which it is difficult to find a parallel. Her work on description and classification is acknowledged and still referred to today. Sadly, because that paper was never published, her research cannot be acknowledged. (“Beatrix Potter: Image & Reality” 23)

Her incredible attention to detail also manifests itself in her drawings. From 1890, she found success illustrating cards. She and her brother had six designs published during the Christmas season of 1890, and sold nine drawings to Nister & Co. four years later (“Beatrix Potter: Image & Reality” 26). Potter saw details that no one else cared to see, as her drawings of

minute fungi demonstrate. This reveals the attention to detail that would later characterize her stories.

One of the most significant facts about Potter is how her life spans several different eras. She grew up during the latter half of the Victorian age, wrote her tales during the Edwardian age, and lived out the rest of her life during the Georgian age. She experienced four different rulers with four different sets of values, and had to adapt to the times. However, because I wish to focus on the audience for her fairy tales, I will discuss the Edwardian and early Georgian eras.

Edward, eldest son of Victoria, ascended the throne when his mother died in 1901. When Edward became king, he “stamped his extrovert and self-indulgent character upon [the first decade of the twentieth century]. The wealthy made it a vulgar age of conspicuous enjoyment” (Greenblatt, “The Twentieth Century and After” 1891). In opposition to the conservatism and propriety of the previous era, the Edwardian age ushered in rights for women and for the lower classes. Generally,

Edwardian as a term applied to English cultural history suggests a period in which the social and economic stabilities of the Victorian age—country houses with numerous servants, a flourishing and confident middle class, a strict hierarchy of social classes—remained unimpaired, though on the level of ideas a sense of change and liberation existed. (Greenblatt, “The Twentieth Century and After” 1891).

In other words, this period looked similar to the Victorian period on the outside, but was characterized by the stirrings of radical change. The poor “were treated as humans and not some machines,” and there were even “talks of granting women equal status [counterpart to]

men and [granting] them the right to vote” (“Edwardian Era Society”). The Edwardian age took these stirrings and began the process of making them realities.

The Edwardian age officially came to an end upon Edward’s death in 1910, and his son George took the throne. The Georgian age served as a continuation of the Edwardian era, though perhaps slightly subdued. The first few years of his rule served as “a temporary equilibrium between Victorian earnestness and Edwardian flashiness; in retrospect the Georgian period seems peculiarly golden” (Greenblatt, “The Twentieth Century and After,” 1891). The English saw their society as glorious: moving forward, prosperous, and luxurious. However, all of this changed in 1914.

Potter wrote the fairy tale on which I will focus in 1914, the year in which World War I began. England was in the middle of the golden Georgian age, but “despite its wealth, power, and global influence, the British Empire was less secure than it appeared. Other countries were now challenging Britain. On mainland Europe, old rivalries and new ambitions created tensions” (*World War I*). All of these tensions exploded with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in June 1914, and due to old alliances, half of Europe had declared war on the other half within two months.

As with many wars, most people believed it would end quickly. The English had little fear of marching off to war:

After the outbreak of war in August 1914, Britain began to raise a huge volunteer citizens’ army. Lord Kitchener, the new war minister, spearheaded an extraordinary public campaign to recruit volunteers into this New Army. Unlike most people, Kitchener believed this would be a long war. And Britain could no longer just rely on its small, professional army... In just eight weeks,

over three-quarters of a million men in Britain had joined up. Thousands more would come from Britain's empire. (*World War I*)

These men were ordinary people who had no formal army training. Mainly due to a sense of loyalty, they left their normal jobs—jobs as farmers, policemen, doctors, and such—to fight on the Continent. This held extreme significance for the whole of British society, as the only men left were too young, too old, or too disabled in some way to fight. However, “the war acted as a unifying force. Millions of British men, women, and children who could not fight looked for other ways to support their nation's cause. People donated money to the thousands of war charities set up across Britain and the Empire” (*World War I*). The nation had to come together to protect itself.

Of course, as the war progressed, England and the rest of Europe quickly became disillusioned. This was due to the intense violence of the war: out of the seven million men who went to Europe to fight in August, one million had been killed by the end of that same year (*World War I*). Both sides created new weapons capable of unprecedented destruction. Trench warfare was introduced. In the end, “neither side achieved a decisive victory. The horrific number of casualties caused by modern weapons came as a terrible shock. War crimes against civilians made the horror worse” (*World War I*). Both sides consented to an armistice in November 1918, with Europe almost completely destroyed.

Because England, as well as the rest of Europe, had to rebuild itself after the war ended, women like Beatrix Potter got a chance to experience a small degree of power. After all, “with nearly nine million soldiers killed (one in five of those who fought) and survivors afflicted with prolonged physical and mental suffering,” society could not remain the same (“Representing the Great War”). Potter spent the rest of her life in a nation trying to learn how to recover from seemingly senseless destruction. I would argue that she wrote *The Tale*

of *Kitty-In-Boots* for her nation going into war. Rather than writing “once upon a time,” she seems to write “once upon a *particular* time.” This tale intends to reconcile the imaginations of children with wartime. After all, she too had been affected by the war merely by being an English citizen, as “civilian artists now found they had an authentic, lived experience of war they could express” (“Representing the Great War”). Because civilians had also experienced attacks on their homes, like the Zeppelin bombings, they could convert their feelings into art. This led to a massive change in subject and tone in post-World War I literature. Cynicism began to characterize works produced in this period.

Potter changed along with the times. It was not because she succumbed to the disillusionment of society, but because she found other priorities, such as making a living. She “produced three new titles in 1917/18 to help keep Frederick Warne, her publisher, afloat after a huge fraud by one of the Warne brothers. She produced only a further eight volumes over the next twenty-five years, including two for the American market” (“Beatrix Potter: Image and Reality” 28). However, both she and her audience were different from their pre-war selves. Britain was no longer an idealistic nation living in a “golden age,” and Potter herself wanted to focus more on farming.

Although she remained a lover of children’s books and even managed her own business based off her character Peter Rabbit, she turned her attention back to the natural world after the war ended. This time, she focused on more than mycology:

From 1913 when she married, she settled down to becoming a Lake District farmer, and in due course, became a successful prize-winning sheep-breeder. From 1930, by now in her sixties, she took upon herself the task of saving the Lake District and set about it in the way that she...believed was right. As an elderly lady, she assembled and managed a huge estate of farms and property

all in a spirit of stewardship for future generations. (“Beatrix Potter: Image & Reality” 43)

Her Lake District home had priority and she focused all her efforts on land. Furthermore, “her letters show that writing and illustrating had become a chore,” particularly soon after her 1913 marriage (“Beatrix Potter: Image & Reality” 30). Although she never, by all accounts, regretted her earlier choice to write, it no longer held the same appeal. She continued farming and working to preserve the Lake District until her death on December 22, 1943.

For a woman who enjoyed such popularity, Potter managed to lead a relatively quiet life. Upon her death, “the newspaper notice said, ‘No mourning, no flowers, no letters’ ... She died as she had wished to live, quietly and without fuss” (“Beatrix Potter: Image & Reality” 42). She lived a life of quiet solitude and reflection. However, this did not mean she was ignorant or willfully naive. Interestingly,

Her journal shows that she was alive to the affairs of the world and politics of the day and with family friends like John Bright [English politician and orator], she would have been well informed. But this never appears to have translated into views of any sort, on, for example, the position of women in Victorian society or women’s suffrage. If anything, her views tended to be conservative with an acceptance of her position. (“Beatrix Potter: Image & Reality” 42)

Potter was independent, though. Her life exemplifies the idea of a modern businesswoman. The influence she exerted, and still exerts, on England and on children’s literature makes her a person the world will not soon forget. She seamlessly wove her times into her writings, and *The Tale of Kitty-In-Boots* provides an excellent example of this mingling of fact and fiction.

Kitty-In-Boots and the Feminists

The Tale of Kitty-In-Boots is Beatrix Potter's only posthumously published work. Potter wrote it in 1914, but it did not see publication until 2016. There are no reasons given as to why she never published it in her lifetime.

This tale tells the story of a beautiful black cat named Kitty, although she “[calls] herself Miss Catherine St. Quintin” (Potter). Though her owner locks her in a wash-house at night to keep her safe, Kitty enjoys going out at night dressed in a men's jacket and boots. Her friend Winkiepeeps sneaks in and takes her place.

One night, Winkiepeeps tells Kitty that Slimmy Jimmy and John Stoat-Ferret want to borrow the air-gun that Kitty keeps at the house of Cheesebox. Furious, Kitty goes to Cheesebox and gets her gun, much to the despair of Cheesebox. Kitty, it seems, is a terrible shot. The whole neighborhood knows it, and she proves their point by accidentally shooting a hole through Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle's laundry. Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle calls Kitty “sir,” seeing only an animal in men's clothing, and Kitty “[is] rather flattered to be mistaken for a sportsman.” Kitty then goes out in search of mice.

Kitty watches a rabbit chase Slimmy Jimmy and John Stoats-Ferret, and eventually follows the rabbit herself. She tries to jump over a wall, but her feet get caught in a trap set by Mr. Tod the fox. She sits for a very long time, until Mr. Tod appears. He begins to taunt her, opening a bag of assorted furs, including the tail of a black cat. She points her gun at him, and after arguing with her all day, Mr. Tod leaves. He had left his bag of fur, and Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle comes out of it. She does not recognize Kitty at first. Kitty explains who she is, and Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle agrees to help her get out of the trap. Kitty has to leave her boots in the trap, losing a toe in the process.

She walks home, where she has a scuffle with Winkiepeeps, who has been impersonating her during her absence. Kitty decides to alter her way of life, remaining “a little lame; but it was an elegant limp; and she found quite enough occupation about the yard catching mice and rats.” Furthermore, she begins to associate only with respectable village cats.

Although Potter wrote this story at age forty-eight, the idea for it had taken root thirty years prior. She writes,

There was another story in the paper a week or so since. A gentleman had a favorite cat whom he taught to sit at the dinner table where it behaved very well. He was in the habit of putting any scraps he left onto the cat’s plate. One day puss did not take his place punctually, but presently appeared with two mice, one of which it placed on its master’s plate, the other on its own.

(Beatrix’s journal, January 27th, 1884)

This seems to be the beginnings of *The Tale of Kitty-In-Boots*. Potter having had the idea at age eighteen, she adapts the tale to her day as a more mature woman.

Perhaps the blatant purpose the tale serves is to critique World War I. The story’s narrator writes that “except for the pride of carrying a gun, it was only poor sport.” This certainly sounds like a description of the sporadic first battles of the war and the frenzied rush to sign up to fight. Potter likely had strong feelings about the thousands of young men hurrying to the Continent. Furthermore, an episode later in *The Tale of Kitty-In-Boots* reads remarkably like an analogy for the war:

She [Kitty] ran forward and met—not a mouse—but a large white ferret, rubbing its head, while another brown ferret in gaiters dropped off the top of the wall, and wrenched the precious air-gun out of Miss Kitty’s hands,

exclaiming, 'Give us that there gun! You ain't fit to carry a gun! What do you mean by shooting my cousin Slimmy Jimmy? Give us your pellets this minute!'

When we read this with the historical context in mind, this scene stands out as a cry against the violence of the World War I. Kitty has thoughtlessly shot the wrong creature. Both ferrets grow angry, one because of his injury and the other because he has watched his cousin get hurt. The unharmed ferret could represent the British citizens at home. He calls for Kitty's gun to be taken away, and seems even more angry about the violence than Slimmy Jimmy does.

The ferret's accusation that Kitty "ain't fit to carry a gun" also resonates on a feminist level. Potter herself claimed indifference to the suffrage issue, "[preferring] the life of a gentlewoman, surrounded by servants, never allowed out without a chaperone, and engaging in the gentle pursuits of painting, fossil collecting, and visiting," and the journal she kept shows no views on "the position of women in Victorian society or women's suffrage. If anything her views tended to be conservative with an acceptance of her position" ("Beatrix Potter: Image & Reality" 42). Potter never directly stated her views on women's rights. She married William Heelis in 1913—just a year before she wrote *The Tale of Kitty-In-Boots*—and it seems unlikely that she would have expressed any feminist views to her new husband. "Beatrix Potter: Image & Reality" also states that "William had a steadying influence on his talented, opinionated, determined, if slightly eccentric, wife" (9). Modern readers can assume that her reluctance to identify with the suffrage movement stemmed from a desire to please the men around her and to keep up the lifestyle she was accustomed to living. However, despite the fact that Potter was not involved with women's suffrage, I would argue that she was nonetheless a feminist. One has only to look at *The Tale of Kitty-In-Boots* for evidence.

The story is not merely about war as an abstract, violent concept. At the core of this tale is the connection of women to the war effort. Kitty, after all, enjoys being called “sir” and feels “rather flattered to be mistaken for a sportsman.” When men left to go fight in 1914, women got involved with the war effort at home. Millions of women took up men’s jobs and “eroded the distinction between civilian women and the men who went off to save the country” (“Representing the Great War”). Women finally had opportunities that had long been denied them.

Many men, though, did not approve of this new order. They disliked women joining their ranks of power, and although the war “opened up a wider range of occupations to female workers and hastened the collapse of traditional women’s employment,” women never received high wages, and did not even gain the right to vote until 1928 (Bourke). This mindset comes across in *The Tale of Kitty-In-Boots* when the brown ferret tells Kitty that she “ain’t fit to carry a gun.” Part of the brown ferret’s disgust refers to the meaninglessness of war violence, but part of it demonstrates an anti-feminist chauvinism. Because Kitty is female, she is not fit to take up a male’s role. In fact, Kitty’s gender plays a significant role in the story. Potter could have chosen to make her a tomcat, as in the more popular tale of Puss-in-Boots. However, rather than creating a hero, she elected to create a heroine. Although Potter claimed to have no opinion on women’s rights, these factors in this particular story demonstrate otherwise.

Potter’s tale also resonates with modern readers for similar reasons. It came out in September 2016 after publisher Jo Hanks “found a reference to it in an out-of-print Potter biography” and later located “three manuscripts...in the Victoria and Albert Museum archive, handwritten in school notebooks” (“Beatrix Potter Story Discovered”). Potter did intend to publish it in 1914, and even began illustrations. According to her letters, “she had wanted to finish the story but ‘interruptions began’, including the First World War, her marriage and

illness” (“Beatrix Potter Story Discovered”). More than 100 years later, it was “published by Frederick Warne & Co, Potter's original publisher” (“Beatrix Potter Story Discovered”). No information exists as to why she never returned to this story, or how it remained hidden for so long.



Potter's original illustration. Courtesy of Frederick Warne & Co./The V&A Museum

The Tale of Kitty-In-Boots was published in a period of a great deal of tension about wars, gun violence, and feminism. We can learn from Kitty's story. There was and is controversy over relations with the Middle East and the place of women in today's society. Kitty teaches us the value of equality and the dangers of violence and overambition. Thanks to Beatrix Potter, we can understand the significance World War I played in the lives of ordinary citizens worldwide, as well as its implications for people a century later. Despite its senseless violence, the war began a new way of life for the modern world. Furthermore, Potter's fairy tales demonstrate how real life can mingle with fantasy to create an entirely new type of story—one that has a specific audience in mind, serving as a cultural artifact that transcends time and place.

Conclusion: Ever After

In 1909, English writer and theologian G.K. Chesterton published a collection of essays entitled *Tremendous Trifles*. One of these essays, "The Red Angel," tells of a woman reprimanding Chesterton for praising fairy tales, saying that fairy tales frightened children too much. Chesterton comes to his own defense and eloquently defends the value of having children read these stories:

Fairy tales do not give the child his first idea of a bogey. What fairy tales give the child is his first clear idea of the possible defeat of the bogey. The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon. Exactly what the fairy tale does is this: it accustoms him for a series of clear pictures to the idea that these limitless terrors had a limit, that these shapeless enemies have enemies in the knights of God, that there is something in the universe more mystical than darkness, and stronger than strong fear. (Chesterton 75-76)

The gift of fairy tales is that they allow us to believe that good really will triumph and that we can defeat monsters. It is why humans have had a fascination with these stories for thousands of years, and why this fascination continues to this very minute.

When examining fairy tales, we must always keep in mind that they apply to everyone, not just children. According to J.R.R. Tolkien's 1947 essay "On Fairy-stories," "fairy-stories should not be *especially* associated with children. They are associated with them: naturally, because children are human and fairy-stories are a natural human taste" (56). We should not discredit these stories because young children grow up knowing them; in fact, there must be inherent value in them for that reason alone. Why do we grow up hearing about Cinderella or Snow White or Rapunzel? I would offer that we know these stories from

childhood because they teach us how to grow up well. Some writers may package these tales in a format that children can easily grasp, but that does not mean adults should discount their value. We do not stop learning from fairy tales once we reach adulthood. For example, consider the popularity of Stephen Sondheim's 1987 musical *Into the Woods*. It transmutes stories from Perrault and Grimm into a new entity, one that appeals to modern audiences. Despite its darkness and grittiness, this musical has continued in notoriety for over thirty years. In a way, *Into the Woods* serves as an adult Disney movie. Viewers learn the same lessons, but the context seems more realistic.

Tolkien continues to list and describe the literary value of fairy tales for adults. He believes they offer four specific merits: "Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, and Consolation" (59). Fantasy means stimulating the imagination, recovery means developing a clearer sense of self, escape means visiting other worlds, and consolation means achieving a happy ending (Tolkien 60, 67, 69, 75). These aspects of fairy tales hold a great deal of significance because they imply that these stories are not just for the young; they have suddenly become relevant, even crucial, for the old as well. Adults must relearn how to use their imaginations in order to understand the world.

Imagination leads to escapism, which appears to be of high importance. Escape does not merely consist of fleeing something bad—it is far more nuanced and significant. In the modern world,

Escape is evidently as a rule very practical, and may even be heroic. In real life it is difficult to blame it, unless it fails; in criticism it would seem to be the worse the better it succeeds. Evidently we are faced by a misuse of words, and also by a confusion of thought. Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do

so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls?... In using escape in this way the critics have chosen the wrong word, and, what is more, they are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter. (Tolkien 69)

In other words, the idea of an escape has a negative connotation for no real reason. People have twisted the word “escape” to mean shirking a punishment, exhibiting laziness, or choosing selfishness over responsibility. Tolkien thinks otherwise. Real life, he points out, is much like a jail. What is so bad about imagining oneself elsewhere—a prisoner at home, a villager in the big city, a college student on an adventure? Tolkien also cites other versions of escape, such as running from “hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice, death,” and even industrialism (73). Reading, he suggests, allows a momentary escape from these troubles, and shows readers that they could indeed overcome adversities.

One of the many things that make fairy tales remarkable is how made-up worlds mirror real life—how a world that does not exist can teach us so much about our own. We see this throughout Tolkien, both in “On Fairy-stories” and in his *Lord of the Rings* universe, but he was not the first to introduce the idea of a fairy-world seeming more real than reality. That very idea appears in *Tremendous Trifles*. Chesterton asks,

Can you not see...that fairy tales in their essence are quite solid and straightforward; but that this everlasting fiction about modern life is in its nature essentially incredible? Folk-lore means that the soul is sane, but that the universe is wild and full of marvels. Realism means that the world is dull and full of routine, but that the soul is sick and screaming. The problem of the fairy tale is—what will a healthy man do with a fantastic world? The problem

of the modern world is—what will a madman do with a dull world?

(Chesterton 73)

Essentially, fairy tales can come across as more believable than real life. In fairy tales, at least according to Chesterton, people can see the world as it truly exists, not mired in the routines and prejudices and boredoms that obscure their vision. We as humans long for something more.

For Tolkien, this longing for more points to Christ. Even greater than the desire to escape boredom and pain “is the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death” (Tolkien 74). People do not want to die, nor see their loved ones die. Many fairy tales feature instances of characters cheating death. Snow White’s prince wakes her with a kiss, and Sleeping Beauty’s prince does the same. This directly correlates with Tolkien’s principle of Consolation, or a happy ending. Although this idea is not unique to Tolkien, he was the first to create a word for it. He writes,

Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of Fairy-story. Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses this opposite—I will call it *Eucatastrophe*. The *eucatastrophic* tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function... It is the mark of a good fairy-story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, no matter how fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the ‘turn’ comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art. (75-76)

This all-important happy ending, whether or not it stems from overcoming death, is what defines a good fairy tale by Tolkien’s standards. A good ending is one that happens after the

occurrence of pain, one that evokes an emotional response from the audience. It is, in a sense, a Christian ending.

Cinderella, *The Light Princess*, *The Happy Prince*, and *The Tale of Kitty-In-Boots* all demonstrate eucatastrophic endings. *Cinderella*, in the four versions that I examined, must go through trials to gain her happy ending. She leads a terrible life with her stepfamily, but the “turn” that Tolkien describes does come. Her union with the Prince seems to make her suffering worthwhile. In a blatant example of eucatastrophe, the prince and princess of *The Light Princess* must sacrifice their lives to save each other. The princess does not think the prince will recover, but he does, and only then do they get their happy ending. *The Happy Prince*, at first glance, seems to end badly. But it is eucatastrophic as well—the Happy Prince and the swallow find happiness in each other, and learn to love others. They lived well before they died, and they get their reward, making their deaths all the more beautiful. Finally, *Kitty-In-Boots* has to learn hard and painful lessons before she can truly appreciate her life.

Tolkien’s idea of eucatastrophe makes sense when readers remember that he himself was a Christian. Joseph Loconte writes that, although Tolkien grew disillusioned with the modern world after fighting in World War I, “his Catholic faith remained intact” (109). He went against the norm in sticking to his beliefs—not only had post-war England largely abandoned belief in God, but the few believers who remained were mostly Protestant. Similarly, Chesterton was also a devout Catholic. He advocated for the poor and the common, and “defended Christianity and the Catholic faith” in a world of increasing skepticism (Ahlquist). Both men also influenced C.S. Lewis to convert to Christianity, Tolkien directly and Chesterton indirectly (Lewis 216, Ahlquist). Clearly Catholicism played a major role in the lives and writings of both authors. When considering their works, especially their beliefs on good and evil, we should bear their faith in mind.

The epilogue to “On Fairy-stories” describes how God uses man’s intrinsic tendency to tell stories as a way for the story of the gospel to spread. In fact, the Bible “embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. [The gospels] contain many marvels—peculiarly artistic, beautiful, and moving...and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe,” meaning the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ (Tolkien 78). In other words, Christ’s death serves as an example of the greatest escape of all, and also creates a way for each person to still live after his or her own physical death. I agree with Tolkien. Just as fairy tales start out as a way for us to teach children lessons that they do not fully comprehend, viewing the gospel through the lens of eucatastrophe is a way for humans to begin grasping ideas that are divine. This happens at a particular time—or within a particular context—but it also has ongoing implications for audiences outside of such original context.

Ultimately, fairy tales help us know ourselves. They help us know our struggles, our humanity, and our spiritual needs. Loconte sums it up well: “Presented as fantasies, these stories are intended to soften our modern prejudices and speak into our imagination. They thus allow us to rediscover truths about ourselves and our world that may otherwise lay hidden” (137-138). That is the reason for the enduring popularity of fairy tales. They are not frivolous, nor are they merely for children: without them, we as humans would have a far more fragile grasp on understanding the world in which we live. I believe that when we see a floating princess, a talking statue, or a cross-dressing cat, we can see ourselves, as well as the world around us, more clearly. Fairy tales teach us that the eucatastrophe is the best part. We must hold onto hope to live joyfully ever after, twice upon a time.

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