The Fisherman and His Soul

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF OSCAR WILDE

Oscar Wilde was born to very illustrious parents; his father, Sir William Wilde, was Ireland's leading eye and ear surgeon, and his mother was a revolutionary poet and expert on Celtic folklore who wrote under the pseudonym "Speranza." Wilde was extremely scholarly in his own right, attending both Trinity College, Dublin, and Magdalen College, Oxford. His talent as a poet was first noted when he won the Newdigate Prize in 1878. In 1882, he spent a year travelling and lecturing through America and Canada and became a spokesperson for the Aesthetic movement in England, which advocated art for art's sake. This notion, as well as Wilde's belief that art is inherently amoral, would go on to become a recurring theme throughout his work. Another central theme in many of his works is the exposure of a secret and the disgrace that follows. Although Wilde was gay, he was married to Constance Lloyd from 1884 to 1898, and together they had two children, Cyril and Vyvyan. While Wilde's greatest successes while he was alive came from his society comedies, his reputation today is largely based on his only novel *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (1891). His other best-known works were all written in the last decade of his life and include "Lady Windermere's Fan" (1892), "Salome" (1893), and "The Importance of Being Earnest" (1895). Wilde was imprisoned for homosexuality from 1895 to 1897, and immediately following his release he went to France where he attempted to resuscitate his literary career. Unfortunately, he only managed to write "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" in 1898 before dying suddenly of what is now often believed to have been meningitis in 1900.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

At the time Wilde was writing "The Fisherman and His Soul," the literary movement of Aestheticism was at its strongest. Aestheticism promoted the idea of art for art's sake and often demonstrated a rich, decadent style that can be seen in Wilde's fairytales. In 1885, the Criminal Law Amendment Act, outlawing sex between men, was passed, and Wilde's rejection of the interference of church and state in personal life can be seen in Wilde's portrayal of the Fisherman and the Mermaid as being pursued and punished for their love. Due to the fact that women had begun to fill various non-traditional roles during the American Revolution (1775-1783), it was during Wilde's travels in America that he was first alerted to the feminist cause. America was far ahead of England in terms of women's rights at the time, and when Wilde returned from America to England, be brought with him a spirit of American feminism that would influence his politics and journalism. In 1887, he was hired as editor of the failing magazine *Woman's World*. He edited the magazine for two years, during which time he not only turned the publication around but also further insisted that it "deal not merely with what women wear, but with what they think, and what they feel."

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Fisherman and His Soul" is part of the short story collection *A House of Pomegranates*. Although these stories are fairytales, Wilde noted that they were not intended for children, and each presents imaginative treatments of Christian themes. "The Happy Prince" and "The Selfish Giant" are perhaps Wilde's best-known short stories that deal with morality through depictions of human folly, wisdom, and virtuous behavior. Wilde was also a devout fan of the English Romantic poet John Keats, whose beliefs that beauty lies in opposition, and that there is a close connection between love and pain (as outlines in his "Ode To Melancholy"), can be seen in "The Fisherman and his Soul." American Romantic poet Walt Whitman was another important influence for Wilde, in particular through his works incorporating both transcendentalism and realism, such as *Leaves as Grass*. This matter-of-fact intermingling of the supernatural with the real world is a key element of "The Fisherman and His Soul." More specifically, "The Fisherman and His Soul" was written in response to Hans Christian Andersen's famous fairytale "The Little Mermaid," a story in which a mermaid is willing to give up her life under the sea to be with the man she loves. Wilde, of course, inverted this story so that it is the young human man who makes sacrifices in the name of love. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson are also important comparisons, as they each portray a supernatural figure as a kind of doppelganger who functions as a mirror image or dark shadow of the protagonist.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Fisherman and His Soul
- **When Written:** 1888
- **When Published:** 1891
- **Literary Period:** Aestheticism
- **Genre:** Fairytale
- **Setting:** An unnamed coastal village
- **Climax:** Realizing that the Mermaid has died of heartbreak, the Fisherman clings to her corpse and drowns in the sea, at which point the Soul re-enters his heart
- **Antagonist:** The Soul

- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Royal Pardon. In 2017, under The Turing Law, Wilde was among the 50,000 men posthumously pardoned after having been criminalized for homosexuality.

Princess. "The Fisherman and His Soul" is dedicated to H.S.H. Alice, the Princess of Monaco, whom Wilde met at a dinner in London in 1891.

PLOT SUMMARY

Every evening the Fisherman goes out to sea and throws his nets into the water. One evening, he accidentally catches a sleeping Mermaid, and refuses to let her go unless she promises to return whenever he calls so that she can sing for him and help him catch fish. The Mermaid agrees, and every evening she returns to sing. Soon the Fisherman falls in love with the Mermaid and asks her to marry him. The Mermaid, however, replies that she can only be with him if he sends away his soul, as the Sea-folk are soulless.

The Fisherman seeks guidance on how to rid himself of his soul from the Priest, who is appalled and tells him the "love of the body is vile," adamantly refusing to help him. The Fisherman then goes to the Witch, who is similarly aghast at the idea. Nonetheless, after attempting to make the Fisherman take part in a strange Satanic ritual, she reluctantly tells him how to cut away his shadow, which is in fact the body of his soul.

As the Fisherman makes his way to the shore to perform the spell the Witch has described, his Soul begins to call out to him, begging not to be sent away. When it becomes clear that the Fisherman is determined to be with the Mermaid at whatever cost, the Soul then begs not to be sent out into the world without a **heart**. The Fisherman also denies him this. The Soul, however, says they must meet again, and that he will return to the same place every year.

After the first year is over, the Soul returns and calls the Fisherman up out of the sea. The Soul describes at length his journeys to the East where he obtained the Mirror of Wisdom, telling the Fisherman how he then hid in a valley "but a day's journey from this place" and suggesting that the Fisherman come and take the mirror so that he "shalt be wiser than all the wise men." The Fisherman, however, is unmoved, simply saying, "Love is better than Wisdom."

After the second year, the Soul again returns and recounts his travels, this time to the South where he obtained the Ring of Riches which he has also hidden in the valley. Again, he says the Fisherman should come and take the ring so that "the world's riches shall be thine." Once more the Fisherman is not to be tempted, replying, "Love is better than Riches." After the third year when the Soul returns, he describes an inn in a city where a veiled girl dances in bare feet. This causes the Fisherman to reflect on how the Mermaid has no feet and cannot dance, following which he feels "a great desire." He decides to temporarily reunite with his Soul so that he can go and see the dancing girl.

The Fisherman and his Soul set out together, and after two days travelling they come to a city, where the Soul tells the Fisherman to take and hide a silver cup. On the evening of the third day they come to a city where the Soul tells the Fisherman to strike a child, and finally in the third city the Soul instructs the Fisherman to kill a merchant. Each time, the Fisherman does what the Soul tells him, and afterwards asks why the Soul instructed him to do an evil thing. Eventually, the Soul explains that because he was sent out into the world without a heart, he has learned to do and love evil things. The Fisherman now tries to send his Soul away again but finds that he's unable to do so.

The next day, the Fisherman is determined to go back to the sea and confess his sins to the Mermaid. When they reach the shore, however, the Mermaid won't respond to the Fisherman's calls. Nonetheless, the Fisherman builds a house and for a year goes out every day calls to her. All the while, the Soul tries to tempt him with both evil and good deeds. After the second year, the Sea-folk bring the dead body of the Mermaid up onto the shore. The distraught Fisherman clings to her body, and at the moment his heart breaks the Soul manages to get back inside. The Fisherman drowns soon after.

The following morning the Priest comes to bless the sea but refuses to do so when he sees the bodies of the Mermaid and the Fisherman lying together. He remains adamant that their love is cursed and tells the people to bury them in an unmarked grave in the corner of the Field of the Fullers.

On a holy day three years later, the Priest enters the chapel and sees strange **flowers** covering the altar. Overcome by their curious beauty and smell, he finds he no longer wants to speak of the wrath of God, but "of the God whose name is Love." After giving mass, he learns that the strange flowers have grown out of the Fisherman and the Mermaid's grave. The next morning, he goes out and blesses all "the things in God's world," so that "the people were filled with joy and wonder."

CHARACTERS

The Fisherman — The protagonist of the story, the titular Fisherman accidentally catches the Mermaid in his net while fishing one evening. He is reluctant to let her go, only doing so on the condition that she return every day to sing for him in order to help him catch fish. Following this arrangement, it doesn't take long for the Fisherman to fall in love with the Mermaid. Indeed, his love for her is so strong he is willing to give up his Soul in order to be with her, and he goes to great

lengths to make this sacrifice. After he has managed to send away his Soul so that he can live with the Sea-folk, his Soul returns once a year and tries to tempt him with wisdom and riches, both of which the Fisherman resists. Ultimately, however, when the Soul describes a veiled girl dancing in bare feet in a nearby town, the Fisherman falls prey to carnal temptation. Having left the Mermaid to travel to see the dancing girl, he performs evil and cruel acts under instruction from his Soul. Unable to detach from his Soul a second time, he cannot return to the Mermaid. Though Wilde doesn't state the Fisherman's age, he is described as young and often behaves in an innocent or naïve way, as when he readily accepts that he must give up his soul, when he is tricked by the Witch into taking part in a Satanic ritual, and when commits the evil acts the Soul tells him to, only questioning them afterwards. However, he seems to finally realize the repercussions of his actions when the Sea-folk bring him the dead body of the Mermaid. The Fisherman drowns while clutching her corpse in despair. The end of the story suggests he has been forgiven and has been reunited with his love in death, as strange and beautiful **flowers** grow out of their unmarked grave.

The Soul — After the Witch has told The Fisherman how to send away his soul so that he can be with the Mermaid, the Soul becomes a character in his own right. When the Soul first begins to speak to the Fisherman, it is to beg the Fisherman not to send him away. When the Fisherman refuses and insists on separating himself from his Soul, his Soul than implores the Fisherman to at least not send him away without a **heart**. This the Fisherman also refuses. Nonetheless, the Soul is hopeful that he will one day be rejoined with his master and insists that on returning to see the Fisherman at the end of each year. When he does so, he attempts to convince the Fisherman to leave the Mermaid by tempting him with wisdom and riches. When he eventually succeeds, and the Fisherman agrees to temporarily reunite with him, the Soul instructs the Fisherman to commit cruel acts, including murder. In this way, the reader learns that, having travelled around the world without a heart, the Soul has become "an evil soul." Up until the end of the story, the Soul is desperate to be permanently reunited with the Fisherman, and continually tries tempt him with good and evil deeds alike. Although the Soul ultimately does manage to re-enter the Fisherman's heart, this only occurs in the few moments before the Fisherman drowns, shortly after his heart has broken following the death of the Mermaid.

The Mermaid — The unnamed Mermaid is the object of the Fisherman's affections, and though she is absent for most of the story she is integral to its development. When the Fisherman asks the Mermaid to marry him, she tells him she can only be with him if he gives up his Soul, and on account of his love for he readily decides to do so. Following this, for three years they live happily together in the sea. When the Fisherman is eventually tempted by his Soul to go back into the world, however, he commits a series of evil acts and finds he can no longer separate himself from his Soul, which prevent him from later returning to the Mermaid. The Mermaid subsequently dies, perhaps of heartbreak, and her body is brought up out of the sea by the Sea-folk. As the Fisherman clutches her dead body in despair he drowns, and both of their bodies are placed in an unmarked grave.

The Priest — For the majority of the story the Priest is an aggressive and stern character, whose devotion to God prevents him from appreciating love in all its forms and from embracing all of God's creatures on earth. He refuses to help the Fisherman to send away his Soul so that he can be with the Mermaid, instead vehemently declaring romantic love "vile." By the end of the story, however, he undergoes a kind of spiritual transformation after encountering the **flowers** that have grown out of the Fisherman and the Mermaid's grave, and blesses "all the thing's in God's world."

The Witch — Once the Fisherman realizes the Priest will not help him send away his Soul so that he can be with the Mermaid, he goes to the Witch and asks for her help. At first it seems that the Witch will deceive the Fisherman, as she tries to trick him into partaking in a ritual involving the devil. Although she is reluctant to do so, it is ultimately the Witch who tells the Fisherman how to get rid of his soul.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE POWER OF LOVE

Love drives the titular protagonist's actions throughout Oscar Wilde's "The Fisherman and His Soul," the story of a young Fisherman who falls in love with a Mermaid. Upon asking her to marry him, the Mermaid replies that if the Fisherman is to live with her in the sea he must first rid himself of his Soul, as the Sea-folk are themselves soulless. Notably, then, romantic love is immediately depicted as something that requires immense sacrifice. This ambivalence regarding romantic love continues to develop as the story unfolds; though the Fisherman rejects wisdom and riches in favor of being with the Mermaid, he also is so consumed by his love for her that he rejects opportunities to help the needy or even let his own Soul back into his **heart**. Interwoven with repeated claims regarding love's strength are also suggestions that love does not always result in positive outcomes, and can indeed have disastrous, tragic consequences. At the same time, however, love is shown to be a

transformative force with the potential to engender acceptance and destroy judgmental cruelty. Wilde's story thus ultimately presents love as a powerful, all-consuming force—for better and for worse.

The first hint of some uncertainty around the trustworthiness of romantic love comes early in the story, when, after the Fisherman professes his feelings to the Mermaid, she tells him, "If only thou wouldst send away thy human soul, then I could love thee." Immediately, it seems the Mermaid's love is not unconditional; instead, it requires a disproportionate sacrifice on the Fisherman's part. Notably, this is an inversion of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," the famous fairytale that inspired Wilde's story, in which a young female mermaid is forced to give up her voice for the love of a human man. In either case, intense love results in a distinct loss of self.

Of course, this also results in a loss of selfishness—or at least, a loss of desire for anything apart from that love. On the one hand, this can be positive. For instance, the Fisherman repeatedly rejects offers of wealth and power in the name of love. Having sought out the Witch, she makes clear that she can give him anything he might desire, offering him an abundance of fish and treasure, the attention of the Queen, and the ability to conquer his enemies. The Fisherman, however, is entirely consumed with love for the Mermaid and finds no allure in these artificial temptations. This resilience to temptation is repeatedly accentuated when, after he has separated from his Soul and united with the Mermaid, his Soul visits him and relays lengthy, sumptuous descriptions of the treasures he could possess if only he were willing to leave his love behind. The sensuous quality of the language the Soul employs in relaying the Mirror of Wisdom and the Ring of Riches implicitly suggests opulence and plentitude, and makes love seem all the more powerful as the Fisherman is completely unmoved. He remains certain that his love for the Mermaid trumps anything the Soul has to offer. This series of refusals emphasizes love's ability to overwhelm other desires and temptations, with the Fisherman dedicating himself entirely to pursuing this one goal.

The Fisherman's intense love, however, borders on blinding obsession. When the Soul, upon being separated from the Fisherman, begs to be given a **heart**, the Fisherman replies, "With what should I love my love if I gave thee my heart?" So consumed is the Fisherman by his focused, romantic love that he cannot spare any of his heart for his own Soul. As a direct result, the Soul becomes evil, explaining that because he has been out in the world without a heart, he has "learned to do all these things and love them." Later, after having been rejoined with the Fisherman, the Soul asks to be let into his master's heart; the Fisherman agrees, yet his heart remains so full of love for the Mermaid that here is no space for the Soul—and without a heart, the Soul cannot be redeemed. It is only at the end of the story, after the Mermaid dies and the Fisherman's heart subsequently breaks, that the Soul can re-enter the heart and "be one with him as before."

This suggest the danger inherent to love, while also—somewhat paradoxically—underscoring that it is needed for basic acts of decency and kindness. Wilde seems to suggest that the Fisherman's decision to prioritize his narrow, *romantic* love for the Mermaid has resulted in evil and cruel acts and even death, and so—while the importance of romantic love is ultimately upheld—the story questions the extent to which it should be prioritized.

At the end of the story, however, it is clear that love—specifically the romantic love between the Fisherman and the Mermaid—can indeed wield a positive power. After the Fisherman the Mermaid have both died, the white **flowers** that have grown out of their unmarked graves have a spiritually transformative effect on the Priest; he no longer wishes to speak "of the wrath of God, but of the God whose name is Love." Wilde seems to suggest that the romantic love between the Fisherman and the Mermaid has had a powerful impact on the Priest, whose change of heart causes him to embrace not only humans but *all* of God's creatures. Wilde seems here to be making a comment that the notion of God as depicted in the Old Testament—a vengeful god who expects unfaltering love and loyalty—should perhaps be reconsidered in favor of God as he is represented in the New Testament—that is, as immensely loving and benevolent.

In this way, love is depicted in various guises, and as having both negative and positive outcomes. While Wilde's treatment of romantic love remains ambivalent throughout, ultimately love endures and is celebrated beyond all else. By using the format of the fairytale, Wilde presents a partly celebratory and partly cautionary story; the Fisherman is with the Mermaid and love has won the day, but not in the way the Fisherman intended. While he hoped he and the Mermaid would be together, their lasting unison has proven possible only in death. Love has indeed conquered all, but not with tragedy.

TEMPTATION, CORRUPTION, AND EVIL

After the Fisherman separates himself from his Soul so that he can live with the Mermaid, once a year for three years the Soul returns from traveling the world to try and tempt him to leave his love. The first two times, the Soul does this with very long and highly detailed stories of wisdom and riches, and each time the Fisherman is unmoved and happily returns to the Mermaid. It doesn't take long, however, for the Fisherman to be tempted by the image of a woman dancing barefoot, and he agrees to travel to see her dancing with the Soul. Following this, the Soul instructs the Fisherman to perform evil acts. Wilde here presents an interesting version of corruption; once the Fisherman has been rejoined with his Soul, his behavior doesn't improve as one might expect. Rather, the Fisherman commits cruel deeds he would never have considered before. Furthermore, because he

has rejoined with his Soul and the Witch's spell won't work a second time, he is unable to return to the Mermaid. In this way, his Soul has corrupted the Fisherman's relationship with the Mermaid, and acts as a barrier between the Fisherman and his heart's desires. Even once the Fisherman has realized the consequences of his actions, namely that he and the Mermaid can no longer be together, he proves impervious to further temptation. The Soul, now unable to tempt the Fisherman with evil deeds, tries to tempt him with good ones. By not only showing the Soul as a source of corruption but also demonstrating the multitude of forms temptation can take, Wilde presents evil as a pervasive presence in the world. Interestingly, Wilde pushes this suggestion further; not only is evil somewhat inevitable, it also contributes to an overall sense of balance and harmony.

The Soul first attempts to tempt the Fisherman with objectively appealing things: wisdom and wealth. Having first returned to the seashore after a year away, the Soul tells the Fisherman of his journey to the East, to "the city of Illel" where he obtained the Mirror of Wisdom. He tells the Fisherman that "they who possess this mirror know everything" and that he has hidden it in a cave. The Fisherman, however, simply replies "Love is better than Wisdom [...] and the little Mermaid loves me." When the soul returns at the second year, he relays an equally long story regarding his travels to the South to the city of "Ashter" where he obtained the Ring of Riches. Again, he tells the Fisherman that he has hidden it "in a cave that is but a day's journey from this place," and that "he who has this Ring is richer than all the kings of the world." Again, however, the Fisherman simply states, "Love is better than riches." Wilde seems to be making a comment on the strength of the Fisherman's love by demonstrating that he's impervious to temptation. The extreme length and detail of the Soul's descriptions also underline how difficult it will be to lure the Fisherman away from the Mermaid.

When the Soul returns after the third year is over, however, he describes a girl dancing barefoot, whose feet "moved over the carpet like little white pigeons," and it doesn't take long for the Fisherman to be overwhelmed by "a great desire." Given the extreme nature of the Soul's previous attempts, it seems implausible that the Fisherman would be so easily tempted by a dancing woman. However, this particular description seems to tempt the Fisherman so effectively because "the little Mermaid had no feet and could not dance." In this way, Wilde seems to suggest that it is a specifically carnal temptation that has convinced the Fisherman to venture away from the Mermaid. Indeed, of all the temptations the Fisherman is faced with—intellectual, material, and carnal—it seems a temptation of the flesh is the only one to have any effect, echoing the Priest's earlier statement that "the love of the body is vile," as it is carnal temptation that he is ultimately vulnerable to.

Having finally successfully tempted the Fisherman to leave the Mermaid, the Soul now sets about corrupting him by instructing him to commit three increasingly evil acts. The Soul first bids the Fisherman to steal a silver cup, then to "smite" a child, and then, finally, to kill a merchant who invites the Fisherman to stay in his home. Each time the Fisherman asks the Soul why he has instructed him to do an evil thing, and eventually the Soul replies, "When thou didst send me forth into the world thou gavest me no **heart**, so I learned to do all these things and love them."

In this way, Wilde suggests that as the Soul was corrupted by the world, he has now corrupted the Fisherman. This further implies that evil is not an inherent trait but rather a learned behavior, and that even a symbol of purity such as the human soul can become evil and accustomed to sin. When the Fisherman and his Soul return to the sea shore, it becomes clear that the Soul, in tricking the Fisherman into permanently rejoining with him has succeeded in separating the Fisherman because he cannot now return to the Sea-folk. Again, Wilde seems to present the Soul as a corruptive influence.

Even now, the Soul continues to tempt the Fisherman, reflecting, "I have tempted my master with evil, and his love is stronger than I am. I will tempt him now with good..." Following this, the Soul describes scenes of poverty and suffering that he and the Fisherman might "go forth and mend" together. This inclusion underscores how desperate the Soul is to tempt the Fisherman, and that temptation does not always signify evil behavior.

Interestingly, however, Wilde suggests that the Soul's corruptive acts ultimately result in a degree of harmony. After the Fisherman and the Mermaid have been apart for some years, the Sea-folk bring the Mermaid's corpse to the shore and the Fisherman drowns while clutching her corpse. From their unmarked grave there grow white **flowers** that are used to decorate the altar, and that have a powerful effect on the Priest, who now blesses "All the things in God's world," which in turn causes the people to become "filled with joy and wonder." The concept of a positive outcome stemming from an act of sin pertains to the Latin phrase *felix culpa*; *felix* meaning "happy," "lucky," or "blessed," and *culpa* meaning "fault" or "fall." In a Catholic context, this phrase refers to the series of unfortunate events that eventually led to the loss of innocence in the Garden of Eden—essentially a negative event that had a positive outcome, namely Christian redemption. In this way, Wilde makes a very particular claim regarding the role of temptation and corruption in the story, as while evil acts have been committed a kind of balance has been achieved.

By presenting temptation in various guises and positioning the Soul as the ultimate source of corruption, Wilde seems to suggest evil and temptation are inevitable, if not necessary, as such acts can ultimately result in positive outcomes and contribute to an overall sense of balance and order in the world. The story also demonstrates that corruption can often come from within. Ultimately, although the story doesn't

deliver an explicit moral message, it rejects easy definitions of temptation, corruption, and sin, and presents an expanded, nuanced version of how these things function in the world.

TRANSFORMATION AND THE DOPPELGANGER

Once the Fisherman has fallen in love with the Mermaid and has agreed to do away with his Soul in order to be with her, supernatural and spiritual changes take place within multiple characters. Following the Fisherman's separation from his Soul, he can now live in the sea with the Sea-folk, and the Soul himself becomes a separate entity independent of his master, eventually taking on the role of a doppelganger; he is a mirror image of the Fisherman and pursues a different set of desires. On a subtler level, a spiritual transformation takes place within the Priest at the end of the story, as he seems to accept and even celebrate the love between the Fisherman and the Mermaid. In this way, instances of literal, metaphorical, and spiritual transformation abound over the course of the fairy tale. These changes demonstrate the complexity of the human condition, as various characters in the story prove capable of both good and evil, cruelty and kindness. Through these stark transformations, Wilde ultimately suggests that all human beings are susceptible to radical, unpredictable transformation, whether it happens gradually or all at once.

At first, it seems the most startling transformation to take place within the story will be the Fisherman's decision to separate himself from his soul and live with the Sea-folk in the ocean. This physical, bodily change isn't described in any literal way, but once the Fisherman has cut away his Soul, the Sea-folk come to the seashore to greet him, and the Fisherman sinks "into the depths of the sea." As such, it is clear that the Fisherman has undergone some kind of change so that he can live underwater. The Fisherman, however, does not demonstrate any other notable changes; he remains loyal to the Mermaid and entirely fixated on his love for her.

Indeed, far more dramatic and startling is Wilde's treatment of the Soul's slow transformation into an evil, corrupt soul. By the end of the story, the Soul has come to represent malicious intent so fully that he functions as a kind of doppelganger. This transformation proves especially powerful as it subverts the traditional notion of the human soul as a symbol of purity and kindness. Importantly, this metamorphosis does not take place immediately. Once separated from the Fisherman, the Soul becomes an entirely separate character within the story who can travel around the world, harboring desires and intentions that are completely at odds with those of the Fisherman. It is only after three years spent out in the world without a **heart** that the Soul becomes an "evil soul," an alteration that becomes evident when he instructs the Fisherman to commit three cruel acts. In this way, the Soul becomes a doppelganger, a figure traditionally understood as a malicious "double" who signals bad luck. The Soul now represents not only the Fisherman's shadow self but the darker side of human nature. Wilde thus makes a powerful suggestion that even the human soul is susceptible to negative transformation, underscoring no matter how fully a character seems to embody one set of values, they can often, given the right conditions, come to represent their exact opposite. (The doppelganger theme is also a key element of Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Importantly, however, in this novel it is Dorian Gray's actions that corrupt his soul, whereas in "The Fisherman and His Soul," it is the Soul who manages to corrupt the Fisherman.) In this way, Wilde seems to suggest not only that these characters hold the potential to be both good and evil, but that extreme and irrevocable change can occur in slow and unspectacular ways.

As the story comes to a close, the spiritual transformation experienced by the Priest is in some ways both the most powerful and also the subtlest, affirming both the potential for extreme transformation and exploring the ways in which it takes hold. At the beginning of the story, the Priest is disgusted by the Fisherman's love for the Mermaid: he tells the Fisherman that the love of the body is vile, and that supernatural creatures such as the Sea-folk are "accursed." So heated is his disdain for the love between the Fisherman and the Mermaid, that when the Priest sees them both lying dead in the surf, he refuses to "bless the sea nor anything that is in it," and gives instructions that they be buried in the corner of a field with "no mark above them." Three years later, however, he enters the chapel and find strange **flowers** covering the altar. These flowers have such an effect on him that "he spake not of the wrath of God, but of the God whose name is Love," before learning that the flowers have grown out of the Fisherman and Mermaid's unmarked grave. The following morning, he "blessed the sea, and all the wild things that are in it."

Wilde thus depicts a positive, transformative effect on the Priest, who now worships "the God whose name is love" and has come to extol the virtues he scorned at the beginning of the story, namely an unconditional love for all creatures. Given Wilde's interest in Christian morality, it seems plausible that the Priest's transformative change of heart is a metaphor for a change from the Old to New Testament, as Christians believe the New Testament supersedes and fulfills Old Testament. Specifically, the transformation from the Old to New Testament is the change from a God of wrath to a God of mercy. The image of the flowers that grow up out of the unmarked grave could also be interpreted as a direct metaphor for transformation, as the bodies of the Fisherman and the Mermaid seem to have literally seeded these white flowers.

Over the course of the story, transformation occurs at various times and on different levels. The development of the Soul into a separate character and then into a kind of doppelganger

emphasizes that transformation can occur in detrimental and potentially harmful ways. Ultimately, Wilde makes clear that no character is insusceptible to change, and indeed can undergo a kind of metamorphosis that changes their relationship with the world. Regardless of whether these transformations are positive or negative, they result in lasting, uncontrollable, and unforeseen repercussions.

CHRISTIANITY, MORALITY, AND THE SOUL

Upon falling in love with the Mermaid and learning that he must give up his Soul in order to be with her, the Fisherman visits the Priest to seek his advice. The Priest, however, is completely appalled by his decision and responds aggressively to his suggestion that he give up his soul. Furthermore, he is disgusted by the fact that the Fisherman has fallen in love with the Mermaid because she is an "ungodly" creature. By portraying the Priest as critical not only of the Fisherman's desire to separate from his soul but also the love he feels for the Mermaid, Wilde introduces notions of Christian values and morality early on in the story. Indeed, the Priest's admonishing and tempestuous behavior seems to be a comment on the moral standards upheld by the Old Testament, which call for blind loyalty and devotion to God. While not necessarily written to encourage faith or advocate any specific interpretation of Christianity, there are strong biblical undertones to "The Fisherman and His Soul" and an ongoing concern with what constitutes moral behavior.

It is evident from the outset of the story that "The Fisherman and His Soul" is underpinned by Christian concepts. The style of the story itself is highly reminiscent of the Bible; the language is archaic, there is repetition of phrases and events, the events themselves have a mystic quality, and things often occur in threes or over a period of three years. Over the course of the story, moral and immoral behavior are debated in a way similar to how such questions are presented in Christian scripture, namely through prolonged anecdotes or parables.

Nonetheless, Wilde creates a complex portrait of amoral behavior not entirely in keeping with Christian teachings. Most notably, over the course of the story the Soul become increasingly immoral. Indeed, Wilde describes him as transforming into an "evil soul." The human soul, of course, is one of the core aspects of Christianity; it is the immortal part of a person that goes to heaven after death, to be reunited with God. Wilde's decision to upturn the conventional understanding of the human soul as an emblem of purity and goodness, instead depicting the Soul as susceptible to corruption and capable of evil acts, is one of the key ways in which he avoids drawing a clear line between moral and immoral behavior. In this way, Wilde demonstrates that immorality can come in unexpected forms, and that even the most traditional understandings of such behavior should be questioned. Wilde didn't agree with how Christianity treated homosexuals during his lifetime, and this can perhaps be connected to his reluctance to unquestioningly accept the tenets of Christian doctrine. This suggestion is underscored by the tragic deaths of the Fisherman and the Mermaid, which seem linked to the lack of acceptance they have experienced as lovers, and their love being unfairly considered sinful.

Although Wilde is critical of some elements of Christin morality, the story closes with the message that the Christian tenets of forgiveness and mercy are valuable and worthy. The **white flowers** that grow out of the unmarked grave of the Fisherman and the Mermaid are placed on the local chapel's altar, suggesting that the Fisherman has been forgiven and embraced by God.

As it's the Fisherman's sin and subsequent suffering that ultimately brings him back to God, Wilde seems to be making a comparison between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. It's generally understood that the Old Testament focuses on the wrath of God against sinners, while the New Testament emphasizes the grace of God toward sinners. For Christians, the New Testament supersedes and fulfills Old Testament, and, given Wilde's interest in Christian morality, it seems plausible he is arguing for a development from Old Testament values toward New Testament values, as can be seen in the Priest's speaking the word of wrath to one of love. Following his coming into contact with the flowers, the Priest gives mass and finds he cannot speak to the people of the wrath of God. Rather, he speaks "of the God whose name is love" and moves both himself and the congregation to tears. This suggestion that there has been a shift in the Priest's moral compass compounded by his decision to bless "All the things in God's world," which also seems to be an explicit rejection of a judgmental version of Christianity that excludes "ungodly" creatures. This rejection signals a belief that the New Testament morals of unconditional love and acceptance are more compatible with human relationships and happiness than those of the Old Testament, namely judgement and vengeance. In this way, Wilde closes the story with positive references to the Christian principle of mercy, an aspect especially valued by the New Testament. Ultimately, "The Fisherman and His Soul", emphasizing the importance the Christian tenets of mercy, forgiveness and acceptance, and asserts moral behavior as rooted in decency and compassion.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE HEART

The heart symbolizes love in all forms. Over the course of the story, it comes to demonstrate the importance and power not only of romantic love, but of love for one's fellow humans in the form of goodness and compassion. The development of the heart as a symbol begins after the Fisherman has separated from his Soul so that he can be with the Mermaid; when the Soul then begs the Fisherman not to send him out into the world without a heart, the Fisherman adamantly refuses, stating his heart is taken up with love for the Mermaid. Later, once the Fisherman and his Soul have reunited, it transpires that the Soul has become evil because he has been out in the world witnessing the cruel deeds; without a heart to help him feel compassion, he has learned to both do and love evil things and has lost his moral compass. This points to the importance of the heart as a ward against the cruelty of the world and underscores the immense positive power of love in the story. Toward the end of the tale the Fisherman gives his Soul permission to re-enter his heart, hoping that doing so will remedy the Soul's evil nature. Yet the Soul finds that the Fisherman's heart is so entirely taken up with love for the Mermaid that he "can find no place of entrance." This, then, would suggest that love has the potential to not simply be a powerful force for good, but also to blind individuals to the rest of the world. Indeed, it is only when his heart breaks with despair over the Mermaid's death that the Soul can get back inside, just as the Fisherman himself is drowning. In this way, as the heart comes to symbolize the importance of multiple kinds of love, while also suggesting that one prioritizes romantic love at their own peril.

THE FLOWERS

The white flowers that appear at the end of the story represent the importance acceptance and are a direct rejection of the Priest's initial vision of a judgmental God. Three years after the Fisherman and the Mermaid have been buried together in an unmarked grave, the Priest enters the chapel and finds "strange flowers" have been used to decorate the altar. He is troubled by their beauty, "and their odour was sweet in his nostrils, and he felt glad, and understood not why he was glad." Following this, when the Priest gives mass, "he spake not of the wrath of God, but of the God whose name is Love," and both he and the people are moved to tears. After the mass, the deacons tell him that the flowers have grown out of the ground where the Fisherman and the Mermaid are buried, and thus it seems the love between the Fisherman and the Mermaid has transformed into these flowers growing out of their grave. Furthermore, as the color white generally represents purity and innocence, the flowers also symbolize the purity of their love. Though the story professes some ambivalence about romantic love overall, the flowers undeniably speak to the transformative potential of such love. As a result of his encounter with the flowers, the Priest comes to embrace not only the love that the Fisherman and the Mermaid shared but all of the creatures in God's kingdom. As such, the symbol of the flowers is used to convey a message about the importance of acceptance and harmony at the end of the story, suggesting that genuine love can, in turn, encourage such feelings in others.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Thrift Editions edition of *The Happy Prince and Other Fairy Tales* published in 2012.

The Fisherman and His Soul Quotes

"Of what use is my soul to me? I cannot see It. I may not touch it. I do not know it. Surely I will send it away from me, and much gladness shall be mine."

Related Characters: The Fisherman (speaker), The Mermaid, The Soul

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears toward the beginning of the story, immediately after the Mermaid has stated that she can only be with the Fisherman if he agrees to part with his Soul. These lines are especially notable because they raise a question of value—both material and immaterial—that will recur throughout the rest of the story. In particular, the Fisherman attributes no value whatsoever to his soul because he cannot physically apprehend it, and views it merely as an obstacle to be overcome in pursuit of romantic love. There is also a marked degree of naivete on the Fisherman's part, as he foresees no problems arising from his decision. These lines, indeed, set the plot of the story in motion, and the ramifications of this line of thinking will continue to unfold and cause conflict as the Fisherman blindly pursue his goal.

"The love of the body is vile," cried the Priest [...] "and vile and evil are the pagan things God suffers to wander through His world. Accursed be the Fauns of the woodland, and accursed by the singers of the sea! They are lost [...] For them there is no heaven or nor hell, and in neither shall they praise God's name."

Related Characters: The Priest (speaker), The Mermaid, The Fisherman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

These lines take place when the Fisherman seeks advice from the Priest as to how to send away his Soul so that he can be with his beloved, the Mermaid. This passage is important because it demonstrates the aggression with which the Priest conducts himself, an attitude that seems to be a critique of a certain version of Christianity, namely the exclusivist and admonishing approach advocated in the Old Testament. Importantly, the Priest discounts the Fisherman's love for the Mermaid on two counts: not only is love of the body "vile," but because the Mermaid is a supernatural creature she is "accursed." In this way, Wilde suggests that this particular version of Christianity is incompatible with romantic love, and furthermore that the standards it holds love to are unfair, or even entirely unattainable.

Now when the young Fisherman heard the words of his Soul, he remembered that the little Mermaid had no feet and could not dance. And a great desire came over him, and he said to himself, "It is but a day's journey, and I can return to my love," and he laughed, and stood up in the shallow water, and strode towards the shore.

Related Characters: The Fisherman (speaker), The Soul, The Mermaid

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

This section takes place after the Fisherman has spent two years in the sea with the Mermaid, during which time his Soul has failed to tempt him with prolonged and highly detailed descriptions of wisdom and riches. Indeed, the Fisherman proves impervious to these descriptions, stating each time that "Love is better" than all of the things the Soul tries to tempt him with. The fact that he is so quickly and easily tempted by the image of a girl dancing in her bare feet is, then, highly suggestive. It seems to represent a carnal temptation, and given that it has such a strong effect on the Fisherman, Wilde seems to be implying that it is often the most basic temptations that are the most effective and dangerous.

"When thou didst send me forth into the world thou gavest me no heart, so I learned to do all these things and love them."

Related Characters: The Soul (speaker), The Fisherman

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

After the Soul has successfully tempted the Fisherman to temporarily leave the Mermaid, the Soul takes him to three cities in tandem. In each one, he instructs the Fisherman to commit an increasingly evil act, and when the Fisherman becomes distressed and demands answers for why he must do these things, the Soul replies that causing such a prolonged period of time in the world without a heart has irreparably changed him. Wilde here seems to be making a strong case for the importance of love where all human relationships are concerned, not only romantic ones. Seeing as the Soul has been spending time in the world without the means to feel compassion and common decency, he is now so corrupted that he has become an evil soul. By suggesting that even the human soul, a paragon of purity of goodness, can become cruel and malicious, Wilde makes a strong case regarding the nature of evil, suggesting that no one is immune to corruption. Furthermore, because the Fisherman commits evil acts under instruction from his Soul, it appears that evil can often have an unexpected source, even coming from within.

> And when he had robed himself with his robes, and entered in and bowed himself before the altar, he saw that the altar was covered with strange flowers that never had been seen before [...] But the beauty of the white flowers troubled him, and their odour was sweet in his nostrils, and there came another word into his lips, and he spake not of the wrath of God, but of the God whose name is Love. And why he so spake, he knew not [...] And in the morning [...] he went forth [...] and blessed the sea, and all the wild things that are in it [...] All the things in God's world he blessed, and the people were filled with joy and wonder.

Related Characters: The Mermaid, The Fisherman, The Priest

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

The white flowers and their impact on the Priest are crucial to the story's ending. Three years have passed since the Priest came across the dead bodies of the Mermaid and the Fisherman in the surf and refused to bless the sea, insisting the lovers be buried in an unmarked grave. When he encounters the flowers in the chapel, they cause an extreme shift in his temperament. This seems to mark a transition from the values of the Old Testament, which details a vengeful God who demands blind allegiance and loyalty, to those of the New Testament, in which God is more accepting, tender, and forgiving. Importantly, the Priest experiences the effect of the flowers before realizing they have come from the Fisherman and the Mermaid's grave. The Priest is now moved to embrace all creatures, which creates a profound sense of harmony, and in turn causes his congregation experience great happiness. In this way, Wilde ends the story with a suggestion that in order to be compatible with romantic love and happiness, religion must demonstrate a degree of acceptance and refrain from judgement. Specifically, the ending of the story might be interpreted as suggesting not only that the Old Testament and its morals are out of keeping with basic human needs and the nature of loving relationships, but that once love in its various forms is accepted, there are wide-reaching and hugely beneficial effects.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE FISHERMAN AND HIS SOUL

The young Fisherman goes out fishing every evening, and the success of his catch depends on which way the wind is blowing. One evening after he casts out his net, he notes it's extremely heavy, and then realizes he has accidentally caught a little Mermaid, who is fast asleep. He observes her appearance in detail, and finds her so beautiful that he is "filled with wonder." He then leans over the boat to clasp her in his arms. This causes the Mermaid to wake up and realize she's been captured; she begins to weep and asks the Fisherman to let her go. The Fisherman agrees on the condition that whenever he calls for her she will come and sing for him, "for the fish delight to listen to the song of the Sea-folk" and his nets will be full. The Mermaid agrees, and so the Fisherman lets her go.

As this is a fairytale, the fact that the mermaid is a supernatural creature is not presented as unusual. Rather, it is her beauty that entrances the Fisherman and makes him reluctant to let her go. Importantly, the Fisherman only agrees to release the Mermaid on the condition she returns to sing for him every day. Although they will later fall in love and the story will portray power of love to bring harmony to the world, it is notable that their relationship is built on a power balance and a promise the Mermaid is forced to make. Promises, as well as the repercussions of failing to keep them, will recur throughout the story.

Now the Fisherman catches a huge amount of fish every evening because the Mermaid comes to sing for him. The song she sings is about all the creatures, natural and supernatural alike, who live in the sea. Each day, her song becomes sweeter to the Fisherman's ears, so that eventually he forgets his fishing entirely and has "no care of his craft." Entranced by the Mermaid, he tells her that he loves her and asks her to marry him, to which the Mermaid replies that she could only love him if he sends away his soul. The Fisherman readily agrees to do so, saying that his soul is without value, and asks the Mermaid how he can send it away. The Mermaid responds that she doesn't know because "the Sea-folk have no souls."

The Mermaid's song embraces all manner of creatures. This inclusive way of looking at the world will prove in stark contrast to the harsh, exclusivist beliefs of the Priest. Once the Fisherman has fallen in love with the Mermaid, he abandons his livelihood, which was previously the most important thing to him and the basis of his identity. The Fisherman handles so lightly his decision to give up is soul that is seems he has not fully considered the consequences. Importantly, the Mermaid does not return the Fisherman's love at first; rather, she immediately makes it clear that they can only be together if the Fisherman makes this grand sacrifice. While the Fisherman previously held the Mermaid captive in a physical way, the Mermaid now holds the power because the Fisherman will do anything to be with her. Wilde's decision to place obstacles in the way of their love is a typical trope of fairytales, but the Mermaid's seeming indifference introduces an interesting degree of ambivalence around romantic love and the sacrifices people might feel compelled to make in its name.

Early the next morning, the Fisherman goes to the Priest and asks him how he can send away his soul so that he can be with the Mermaid. The Priest is appalled at the request because "the soul is the noblest part of man." The Priest then goes on to describe how the Sea-folk and Fauna are lost because they are without souls, to which the Fisherman responds "what doth my soul profit me, if it stand between me and the thing that I love?" The Priest, however, will only tell him that "The love of the body is vile" and repeats that the supernatural creatures are "Accursed," before sending him away.

The Fisherman's desire to give up his soul is handled in a very literal and matter-of-fact way. Considering that Christianity views the soul as the thing that separates humans from the rest of the creatures on earth, it is unsurprising that the Priest rebuffs the Fisherman. The level of aggression with which the Priest responds, however, is perhaps a critique of Christianity. Not only is the Priest shocked by the Fisherman's decision, after all, but he refuses to engage in meaningful conversation over the Fisherman's decision. Even when the Fisherman demonstrates genuine confusion, the Priest does not offer any explanation or spiritual counsel; he carries on in an admonishing tone and turns aggressive, expecting the Fisherman to simply do as he's told. With this, Wilde is possibly suggesting that Christian values as outlined in the Old Testament, specifically blind faith and loyalty to God, often manifest harshly, and are incompatible with romantic love.

The Fisherman now goes to the marketplace where he meets some merchants to whom he tries to sell his soul, but they reply that a man's soul "is not worth a clipped piece of silver." The Fisherman reflects on how strange it is that the Priest has told him the soul is the most valuable thing imaginable, while the merchants have told him the opposite.

The value of the soul is again called into question matter-of-factly. The Fisherman cannot understand how the Priest can attribute such value to his soul while the merchants view it as almost worthless. Two kinds of value are being pitted against one another: immaterial, spiritual value and material, worldly value. While the Fisherman remains confused, Wilde seems to suggest that the value of the soul is relative and depends entirely on the subjective opinion of the observer. If the soul does have a value, it is an intangible one that the merchants and the Fisherman either do not understand or do not rate as important.

The Fisherman wanders to the shore and wonders what he should do. Remembering there is a young Witch who dwells in a nearby cave, the Fisherman quickly makes his way toward her. The Witch offers him fish, treasures, and the love of the Queen, telling him "But I have a price [...] thou shalt pay me a price." When the Fisherman says he desires to send his soul away, she becomes pale and tells him "that is a terrible thing to do," though she asks what he will give her in return. The Fisherman finds the Witch can't be tempted with "gold nor silver," but that she wants him to dance with her that night, saying, "It is a Sabbath, and He will be there." The Fisherman asks "Who is He of whom thou speakest?" but she refuses to answer. The Fisherman runs back to the town "filled with a great joy."

The Witch makes clear that she can provide the Fisherman with virtually anything he might desire, offering him both material and immaterial wealth so long as he can pay the price. Even the Witch, however, is reluctant to tell the Fisherman how to give up his soul, and again the soul is portrayed as having an inherent value the Fisherman has not yet considered. As far as the Fisherman is concerned, it is simply an obstacle between him and his love for the Mermaid. Although the Witch decides to help him, her decision has sinister undertones. Indeed, the reference to a male figure who will appear on the Sabbath suggests that, as she is a witch, her intention is to involve the Fisherman in some sort of Satanic ritual. In this way, Wilde reiterates that the Fisherman's decision to part with his soul is a perilous one.

That evening, the Fisherman climbs the mountain, and witches come flying through the air at midnight. When the young Witch arrives, she leads the Fisherman into the moonlight where they begin to dance. A man dressed in a suit of black velvet appears on a horse, and he is "strangely pale" and "weary." When the Witch leads the Fisherman toward the suited man, the Fisherman, "without knowing why he did it," makes the sign of the Cross and "calle[s] upon the holy name." The witches scream and fly away, and the man whistles for a horse that whisks him away. The Witch is distressed and has to be forced to tell the Fisherman how to send away his soul, which is by cutting away his shadow with a knife.

This passage strongly hints that the man in the suit is the devil—not only does he appear on the Sabbath to be worshipped by witches, he arrives on a horse and is dressed in black. It seems possible, given the nature of the ritual and the fact that the male figure is "weary," that the Fisherman is being tricked into partaking in a ritual which will rejuvenate the devil. When the Fisherman is lead towards this man, his instinct is to make the sign of the cross and to call upon God. Even though the Fisherman has previously disavowed the value of the soul, he nonetheless displays an instinctive connection to Christianity and uses it to protect himself. The effect this has on both the man and the witches underscores their evil nature. Interestingly, despite the Witch's seeming plan to trick the Fisherman, she is still hesitant to tell him how to send away his soul, implying that doing so would be unwise. As such, Wilde implies that if the Fisherman does manage to send away his soul, there will be drastic consequences.

The Fisherman now makes his way toward the shore while his Soul calls out to him. At first the Soul begs the Fisherman not to send him away, and then asks that if he is indeed to be sent away, he not be sent away without a **heart**. The Fisherman denies each of his requests; the Soul tells the Fisherman they must meet again, and that he will come back to the same place every year.

The Soul now becomes a character in his own right, and begins to develop his own agency and desires, which are increasingly in conflict with those of the Fisherman. The Fisherman is unmoved by his Soul's alarm at being sent away, especially without a heart. This underscores how consumed he is with love for the Mermaid, and how she has become his sole priority.

The Soul returns a year later and calls the Fisherman to the shore. The Soul recounts his travels to the East where he obtained the Mirror of Wisdom. He then explains that he has hidden the mirror in a valley, and says, "Do but suffer me to enter into thee again […] and thou shalt be wiser than all the wise men." The Fisherman promptly replies that "Love is better than Wisdom" before plunging back into the sea. The following year, the Soul returns and again recounts his travels to the South where he found the Ring of Riches, which he has also hidden in the valley. Again, he tells the Fisherman "Come…and take it, and the world's riches shall be thine." In response, the Fisherman says, "Love is better than riches."

This section marks the beginning of the Soul's drawn-out attempts to tempt the Fisherman into leaving the Mermaid. Wilde's decision to dedicate so much of the story to the Soul's recounting of his travels indicates both how desperate the Soul is to be reunited with the Fisherman but also how impervious the Fisherman is to temptation. This is emphasized by the level of detail and the lavish language the Soul employs; the Soul is determined to tempt the Fisherman, but he seems entirely immune to worldly and material temptation. Even after these prolonged descriptions, the Fisherman instantly replies that his love for the Mermaid is superior than anything the Soul might have to offer.

At the end of the third year, the Soul returns and describes an inn where a girl dances in her bare feet, telling the Fisherman that "the city in which she dances is but a day's journey." The Fisherman remembers that the Mermaid has no feet and cannot dance, and feels a great desire come over him. He reasons that "It is but a day's journey, and I can return to my love," before emerging from the water and reuniting with his Soul.

Given the detailed and sensual quality of the Soul's previous descriptions, it's surprising that the Fisherman is so quickly tempted by the image of a girl dancing in her bare feet. Indeed, it seems what truly tempts the Fisherman is the simple fact that this girl has feet and can dance, while the Mermaid has no feet and cannot. In this way, it is a superficial and carnal image that tempts the Fisherman, and Wilde seems to suggest that temptations of this nature are the most corrupt and alluring.

The Fisherman and his Soul set out together and two days later come to a city. Although it's not the city the Soul has described, they enter it, and shortly thereafter the Soul instructs the Fisherman to take and hide a silver cup. After they leave the city, the Fisherman asks why the Soul told him to do "an evil thing," and his Soul tells him "be at peace." They come to another city where the Soul tells the Fisherman to beat a child; again, the Fisherman complies and is told to "be at peace." Next, they come to a third city where a merchant offers the Fisherman his guest-chamber to sleep in. Three hours before dawn, the Soul tells the Fisherman to "slay him, and take from him his gold." Once the Fisherman has killed the merchant, he and the Soul flee through a garden of pomegranates.

It quickly becomes evident that the Soul has not been entirely truthful with the Fisherman. In fact, the Soul has no qualms about leading his master astray and instructs him to commit three increasingly cruel and evil acts that ultimately culminate in murder. By showing the Soul's repeated instructions and the Fisherman's continuing compliance and confusion, Wilde makes clear that the Soul has become a corruptive force. In fact, the Soul is now so corrupt that he functions as a dark mirror image of the Fisherman, and might be interpreted as a kind of doppelganger. Given the story's focus on the concept of the human soul, it seems the inclusion of pomegranates might be an allusion to immortality, as the fruit is generally understood to be a symbol of life and rebirth on account of its abundance of seeds. In addition, many biblical scholars believe that the forbidden fruit that Adam and Eve eat in the Garden of Eden is not an apple but a pomegranate, thus infusing this passage with biblical undertones.

The Fisherman asks the Soul why he told him to murder the merchant, saying "Surely thou art evil." Again the Soul tells the Fisherman to "be at peace," but this time the Fisherman replies, "all that thou hast made me to do I hate." The Soul answers, "When thou didst send me forth into the world thou gavest me no **heart**, so I learned to do all these things and love them." The Soul then tries to lure the Fisherman to another city, and the Fisherman tries once more to separate himself from his soul before learning that the spell the Witch gave him no longer works.

The Fisherman is now forced to reckon with his previous decision to send his Soul out into the world without a heart. As the Soul specifically states it is the absence of a heart that caused him to become evil, Wilde seems to be making a comment that the heart should not be reserved for romantic love alone. Rather, the heart should be thought of in terms of compassion for fellow humans, and so is important for all relationships. The Fisherman's following realization that he cannot send his Soul away for a second time heightens the dramatic tension of this scene, as it becomes clear that the Fisherman is now irrevocably reunited with his Soul and so separated from his love.

The following morning, the Fisherman states that he will bind his hands and close his lips so that he cannot do the Soul's bidding or speak his words. He also expresses his desperate desire to be reunited with the Mermaid. The Soul attempts to distract him with descriptions of other fairer women, but the Fisherman says he will not "do any of the wickedness that it sought to make him do." The Fisherman makes his way back to the shore and calls for the Mermaid, while the Soul tries to tempt with the "Valley of Pleasure." Realizing that the Mermaid is not answering his call, the Fisherman builds himself "a house of wattles" and spends a year calling for the Mermaid while the Soul continues to tempt him.

The Fisherman is unable to accept the repercussions of his decisions and is determined to reunite with the Mermaid. His Soul's continued attempts to tempt the Fisherman once more prove futile. It seems the Fisherman has learned his lesson, because he is no longer tempted by more carnal pleasures as suggested by the "Valley of Pleasure," and the Soul cannot cease trying to tempt him away from the Mermaid. A kind of stalemate forms as both the Fisherman and his Soul are dedicated to their separate and conflicting tasks.

Eventually, realizing that the Fisherman's love for the Mermaid is stronger than evil, the Soul decides "I will tempt him now with good, and it may be that he will come with me." Following this, the Soul describes scenes of suffering such as Famine and the Plague to the Fisherman, but these also fail to tempt him away from the shore. When the second year is over, the Soul says, "I will tempt thee no longer, but I pray thee to suffer me to enter thy **heart**." The Fisherman agrees, but his heart is so "compassed about with love" that the Soul cannot find a way inside.

The Soul is so desperate to find some way to draw the Fisherman away from the shore that he attempts to tempt him with good deeds instead of evil ones. In this way, Wilde makes clear that it's not the nature of the individual temptations, but the Soul's unyielding desire to tempt the Fisherman away from the Mermaid that is important. After two years, it transpires that the Fisherman cannot even grant the Soul access to his heart. It is now entirely clear that his love for the Mermaid has caused him the Fisherman to lose control at a very fundamental level.

As the Fisherman and the Soul realize the Soul cannot gain entry into the Fisherman's **heart**, the Sea-folk bring the dead body of the Mermaid up into the surf. The Fisherman flings himself down upon her corpse, becoming increasingly distressed and professing his love to the Mermaid. The Soul begs the Fisherman to leave the surf but he refuses, and at the moment his heart breaks, the Soul finds a way inside. The Fisherman is covered by the waves and drowns while clutching the Mermaid's corpse.

Wilde again treats the concept of heartbreak quite literally; once the Fisherman's heart is broken, the Soul can gain physical entry and they are reunited. The fact that the Fisherman and his Soul are reunited only moments before the Fisherman drowns, and that the Fisherman and the Mermaid are reunited only in death, creates an effective tone of tragedy: the individual characters have attained their desires, but at a terrible price. The Fisherman has been reunited with the Mermaid and the Soul has been reunited with the Fisherman, but only in death. This scene also brings several of the story's themes to a close, as the effects of Fisherman's banishing his Soul, and the Soul's resulting temptation of the Fisherman have come to a dramatic climax.

The next morning, the Priest comes down to bless the sea, but seeing the drowned Fisherman clutching the body of the little Mermaid, refuses to do so. He then tells the people to bury them in an unmarked corner of the Field of the Fullers. Three years later, on a holy day, the Priest enters the chapel and sees that it was covered with strange **white flowers** that he has never seen before, "and their odour was sweet in his nostrils, and he felt glad, and understood not why he was glad."

Even the death of the Fisherman and the Mermaid fails to move the Priest, who is still driven by judgmental ideals and refuses to acknowledge the love between them. As the color white is generally understood to represent purity, the white flowers suggest some sort of cleansing process has begun to take hold. This is compounded by the almost magical effect the flowers have on the Priest, as he is overcome with a positivity that he doesn't know the source of.

When the people come to the chapel, the Priest finds he cannot speak "of the wrath of God, but of the God whose name is Love." Afterwards, he asks where the strange **flowers** have come from, and is told they "come from the corner of Fullers' Field." The Priest trembles and goes back to his house to pray; the next morning, he goes to the shore to bless the sea and "All the things in God's world."

While the Priest has yet to grasp his own change in temperament, the reader understands that the flowers catalyzed this shift from "wrath" to "love." When it transpires that the flowers have grown from the Fisherman and the Mermaid's unmarked grave, the Priest realizes he has been affected by the love of which he was previously so judgmental. Seeing as he decides to bless "All the things in God's world," it seems he now accepts love in all the forms it may take, and so the story ends with a powerful statement regarding the enduring power of love.

HOW TO CITE

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