A PSYCHO-LITERARY QUEST FOR THE LIFE MEANING – OSCAR WILDE'S "THE FISHERMAN AND HIS SOUL"[1]

Abstract: "The Fisherman and His Soul" *is considered the most difficult of Oscar Wilde's fairy tales. In fact, it is less of a 'fairy tale' than it is a literary search hiding puzzling philosophical and psychological questions. A little bit didactic in its discourse, the story narrates a split quest – the happiness of the Fisherman's body and the journey of the Soul, chased from this body. The end of the story, seen usually as a transcendent moment, arises out of physical love rather than spiritual transformation and it seems that this is the author conclusion – a rejection of everything for the sake of an egocentric love.*

Keywords: *love, soul, failure.*

The Text

As many of Oscar Wilde's stories, *The Fisherman and His Soul* has raised many commentaries. And we talk here not as much about the literary interest which is natural but about the approaches from the theological zone or from the psychological and psychoanalysis ones. Here, we situate ourselves also in a non-literary field, attempting a deciphering of the message contained in the story, a message that is personal, belonging to the author and aiming to extensions and larger influences.

From the beginning one can say that Wilde's intention is related to a certain philosophy of life, to a proposal concerning the meaning of this life. Actually, the title itself indicates the fact that the reference field is a transcendent one.

Here there is a synopsis of the story plot: A young Fisherman catches a princess Mermaid and wants to marry her. She shows him that the major obstacle is his human soul. Therefore, he thinks how could remove this soul. In order to achieve this, he goes to the Priest, then to the merchants, in the market. But the Priest violently refuses him, claiming that a soul is the most precious human possession, while the merchants refuse to buy the soul, which is worthless. Finally, a Witch teaches him how to cut his shadow with a viper-skin knife, liberating in this way, his body from his soul. Despite the Soul's desperate imploring, the Fisherman refuses to get it back. He also refuses the Soul's request to receive at least the heart, in order to allay his fears in the world. But the Fisherman needs his heart for loving the Mermaid. For three years the Soul travels in different directions, every year coming back, bringing an important gift to his former master: a mirror of wisdom and a ring of richness, together with the proposal of a re-unifying the body and soul. Every time he is rejected. But in the third year, the Fisherman accepts the proposal, in order to see a woman dancing barefooted, in a city. On their way, the Soul pushes his master to a negative conduct: to steal a silver cup, beat a child, attack and rob the man in whose home he was a guest.

The Soul is inclined to evil things because he has not a heart. The Fisherman tries to cut his soul away, but this is not possible, anymore. He decides to return to the sea. Reaching the seashore, the Mermaid does not answer his calls and after years, he sees her dead body floating. Confessing his sins to her dead body, he embraces it and lets the sea waves to sink them both. Finding the two lifeless lovers, the Priest has them buried in a dry field, uttering curses upon them. Three years later, some strange flowers

[1] Magdalena Dumitrana, University of Piteşti, mdumitrana@yahoo.com.

BDD-A5946 © 2011 Universitatea din Piteşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:48 UTC)

grow on that parcel and are brought to the Priest; he is emotionally moved by them and blesses the field, the sea and all the living beings, preaching about God's love.

This is a very short account of the tale of the Fisherman. A deeper analysis of the story events will reveal aspects that could have a special, even hidden meaning.

The Names

No doubt, Wilde expresses in this tale a personal search. On the other side, it is obvious that he raises his ideas to a higher level of abstraction, by the exclusive use of the symbols and general representations. For this purpose, the characters' names are utilized. They are not individual names; they do not specifically identify an object or a living being, but represent categories. These categories seem to be all, symbols of the inner reality, externalized by separate personages. Thus, each character has a generic name, written with a capital letter as any other proper name. So, we have a Fisherman, a Mermaid, a Soul, a Priest, and a Witch, all of them identified by a common noun transformed in a proper one. Obviously, Wilde conveys the feeling that, what he experiences, suffers and expresses are all, things that are experienced and suffered by every human being. By this, he shows that not the uniqueness is his desire but the opposite. His hypersensitivity defends aggression by means of the shield of the shared experience; in this way is obtained the assurance that the personal experience is a correct one, "statistically proved – due to this, a possible feeling of guilt does not find its place, anymore. Here we could place also the final blessing of the Priest.

On the other side, the pride of an individual experience is satisfied from the very beginning. The Hero catches in his net a special being, a mermaid. Even more, she is not a common mermaid but the unique daughter of a King of the Sea. Therefore, he and only he enjoys the blessing of a such special relation. Apart from this topic but in a way related to it, it is worth to observe, even in passing, the fact that, among the multitude of the "capital letter" characters, there is a category that is not individualized by this- it is the category of the merchants. Either there is about the merchants to whom he tries to sale his soul or the merchants who shelters him in his house, all of them are mentioned as common noun. Should be this an omission? Hard to believe. Should it be the expression of a certain attitude of rejection of this category? Again, not very likely, because the story speaks about bad merchants and also, about the good ones. We do not know why, but it is something that is to be observed.

The Temptation

In fact, there are two serious temptations addressed to the Fisherman, both of them entering quite the same category – the one of the carnal desire.

The first temptation is called "love" and represents the increasing desire for the Mermaid's inaccessibility. In order to get close to her the Fisherman brings his soul into play. Once the desire is satisfied, the male character becomes vulnerable to other temptations, in fact, belonging to the same category. He steadfastly refuses the mirror of wisdom and the ring of the richness. But on the other side, he is very interested in a dancing girl for which reason he leaves his Mermaid. In a way, Fisherman's behaviour expresses a kind of "glory and decline": of his aspiration: he aims at something beyond human, at something miraculous and impossible; his wish is so strong that he is able to touch and even grasp the magical gift but at the same time his upper limit is reached and collapses at the initial level, of the bodily desire. This time, the object of his want is the

BDD-A5946 © 2011 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:48 UTC)

opposite of the miracle. Fascinated of the account about a professional's erotic dance, Fisherman starts to find her, pushed by the same ardour. Nothing peculiar –let's remember that he had already performed an erotic dance with Witch in exchange of her help in getting rid of his Soul. The symbolism of these dances is transparent: the total union of the bodies and this is something that obviously, misses in the Mermaid situation.

Imagining a ladder of spirituality, one can follow Fisherman's slipping down, toward the ground. The Mermaid belongs to the non-earth world, to another element and she lives fully normal in an environment that is absolutely miraculous to a terrestrial. It is the world behind the heavy horizon of the mud. More than that, Mermaid has not legs, therefore, no sexual organs in the way humans understand this. Her body is "transcendent". Thus, it is difficult to imagine a full sexual nearness between a sea inhabitant and one from earth. One could suppose therefore that Fisherman's love is pure, lacking the sexual urges that characterize the common people. The longing for transcendence is visible and the energy of the sexual desire is sublimated in the energy leading to his own condition surpassing.

On the other side, the means used for reaching his aim are not spiritual but "deviant" from transcendence. We talk about the appeal to the Witch. He cannot invoke the ignorance excuse. Fisherman knows exactly whom he calls: "My desire is but for a little thing.[....] yet hath the Priest been wroth with me, and driven me forth. It is but a little thing, and the merchants have mocked me and denied me. Therefore am I come to thee, though men call thee evil, and whatever be the price I shall pay it." (*op. cit.,* p. 290)

The wish is not really small and the witch herself tries to persuade him to not renounce his soul. The effort is in vain. On the other side, however, Fisherman is not able to pay for this service. His offer (his entire wealth: his pained boat, nets, the wattled house and even more, five pieces of gold) is infinitely poorer than the goods the witch can get through her craft and with her Master's help: the Master she serves is richer than all the kings of this world.

There is however something for which Fisherman can be useful – he must dance with the beautiful witch in the Sabbath night, because He will be there. Again a moment when the fisherman refuses to understand what he knows too well. He seems to ignore Witch's evasive answer and accepts gladly her vow of fulfilling his wish . "By the hoofs of the goat I swear it. " (*op. cit.,*p.291) she says and again, the Fisherman seems not to hear. Witch is in fact sincere in her actions; the only difference being the fate of the Soul-he should not be just chased away but directed to the Master. That He appears at the Sabbath midnight celebration, trying to drum up the Fisherman. This is a third temptation, one could say or rather, a clarification of the exchange that Fisherman must accept in the madness of his desire. We could say that he is saved by his unconsciousness, as almost without realizing, he makes the sign of the cross, spoiling the wizarding feast.

One could think that the incident made Fisherman wiser. But no, he forces the witch to help him in order to abandon his soul. The same negative determination animates him when he cuts and chases his Soul away, or when refusing to give the heart when his Soul asks for it, in order to have courage in a dangerous and troubled world; because, he affirms in an absolute platitude: my heart is not mine anymore, it is of my love. It is strange this separation: heart-soul, about which will discuss later. The self-denial could construed in the sin-key (obviously by the participation in Sabbath) but also, could be interpreted in the symbolic of the ascension ways –renouncing Ego, the

BDD-A5946 © 2011 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:48 UTC)

mundane urges is fundamental in mystics, either Eastern or Western. One can speculate in this field, but it seems more than clear the fact that the desire of the transcending of the world has rather an horizontal characteristic than a vertical one; it seems to be more a need for a change, adventure, for "strong" sensations. The descent is finally, total. Fisherman renounces the miraculous acquisition for re-experiencing the mundane pleasures; he leaves his mermaid for a girl in an inn, dancing with her feet naked, or rather, for a story about a dancing girl because everything is proved to be an illusion, a lie in the network of the temptations weaved by the revengeful Soul. Once the ideal abandoned for pursuing a derisory objective, the only horizon of Fisherman is the loss, the total failure and finally, death.

The Soul

Some of the story analysis consider that here, the Soul is the true hero. Of course, from a certain point of view, this is possible. It is true that the Soul "moves" a lot and made Fisherman to move, also, but he does not represent the node of the story neither his autonomous activity is essential for the narrative texture. The important elements of his actions are only reactions to Fisherman's behaviour. Also, the actual presence in the story is a limited one-he appears late enough and leaves earlier in comparison with the Fisherman. Of course, this argument is of a minor importance but this is the fact. If we refer to the separate existence of the Soul as presented by Wilde, then the most adequate name is Alter Ego. An argument is precisely the author's description.

"Get thee gone, for I have no need of thee, cried the young Fisherman, and he took the little knife with its handle of green viper's skin, and cut away his shadow from around his feet, and it rose up and stood before him and it was even as himself." (*op. cit.,* p. 293)

The Fisherman is not even aware of the role of his Soul until the moment when this Soul appears as an obstacle on the way of his desire. Only then he (unconsciously) asks himself: What means a Soul? The answers in total opposition, obtained from the Priest and merchants are not satisfactory so he settles himself the problem: he denies the Soul's existence, despite the contrary evidence: "Of what use is my soul to me? I cannot see it. I may not touch it. I do not know it." (*op. cit.,* p. 289) The desire to get rid of the useless thing increases when, being outside of the body, the Soul shows himself as being the Fisherman's twin. Being afraid of his shadow, the Fisherman is afraid actually, of himself. From now on, it follows a battle with himself, the Fisherman rejecting any proposal coming from the Soul. The hatred for the Soul can be translated as hatred for himself. We can suppose, again, that the Fisherman knows that what he wants and does is wrong. What was unconsciously a wish to change himself (union with the mermaid, the experience of a totally different condition) becomes a conscious struggle against the voice which puts the truth before his eyes. As the Fisherman's sentiment of self-rejection is stronger and brutal (from "Thou hast done me no evil, but I have no need of thee" (*op. cit.,* p. 293) to "Get thee gone...and let me see thy face no more" (*op. cit.,* p. 294) until the stabbing act (in fact, a suicide), the more the Soul's reaction of hate and revenge (the reaction of the opposition of the unconscious) appears more aggressive. In other words, passing from metaphor to the psychological reality, the process of self-destruction is more obvious.

Initially, the Soul advances mundane temptations: the mirror of wisdom, the ring of the richness, the dancing girl; at the moment when the Soul manages to hang

BDD-A5946 © 2011 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:48 UTC)

again to the body, he makes the Fisherman to execute immoral actions: to steal a silver cup and throw it after that (stealing for pleasure, to beat a child (abuse of the weak), the attempted hilling and robbery of his benefactor. All of them are gratuitous actions through which the Soul aims to equalize the Fisherman with himself, as an autonomous perpetrator of sins, during the period of three years of desperate wandering. Finally, the awakening comes. As he takes part in Sabbath and in the last minute unconsciously refuses to worship the Evil One, the same becoming almost a killer, the Fisherman does not go to the end with the murder. But, this time, not his will but perhaps the lucky star of the merchant has obstructed the fulfilment of the sin. Now it is the moment when he asks his Soul: "Why did you impel me to kill?" In translation, this is: "What has made me to kill somebody?' And ascertains that all these deeds are profoundly repugnant to him: "...for all that thou hast made me do I hate. Thee also I hate, and I bid thee tell me wherefore thou hast wrought with me in this wise." (*op. cit.,* p.304)

We translate again:" I hate these deeds; I hate myself for having done them! What is going on with me, why I am doing things that in fact, I reject" The Soul reminds him indirectly that he possesses another "organ" that remained unused: "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." (*ibidem*) In other words: "Why did I listen my negative impulses, when my heart was telling me that it was wrong?" Finally, the Fisherman (Wilde) reaches a conclusion: the Soul he has is an evil one and unfortunately there is no possibility to be chased away. However, he can fight against him because indeed, he has a heart upon which he can rely. He decides to live an ascetic life: he closes his lips with a seal of silence and ties his hands with a rope. The feet are free because he has to do a reverse journey, to return to the place he departed. He lives in a house of wattles pronouncing the Mermaid's name as a kind of mantra. After two years of waiting, the Soul, failing in the presentation of the diverse temptations, tries to gain, this time by the seduction of the positive action. He encourages his former master to act with mercy, charity, to remove the pains of the world, only to make the Fisherman not thinking about the Mermaid. He is a jealous soul. Even now, however, the Fisherman cannot be persuaded. We know no longer what to think. If his love for the Mermaid protects him from all the evils, what kind of love can be that which holds him back for doing good? Is it perhaps the madness of love or the Fisherman is alike his Soul, egoist and egocentric?

Defeated in his attempts, the Soul, which now dwells in the Fisherman's body, asks for the full unity and asks the permission to join the heart, too. Although getting permission, because now, the Fisherman becoming strong by ignoring temptations, does not hate him any more, the Soul cannot manage to enter the heart, to be one with him as before. His love for the Mermaid has petrified the Fisherman's heart and did not leave any opening. But the Soul's suffering does not stop here.

The Mermaid's body is brought ashore and the Fisherman, aggrieved, confesses himself to the dead one. He feels the waves becoming closer, he knows that the death is near and wants that (an indirect suicide) and in this disorder in feelings, he does not want to here the Soul's cries of help, which is abandoned again: "Flee away, for I am afraid, seeing that thy heart is closed against me by reason of the greatness of thy love." (*op. cit*., p.307) Again, the same complaint to the Fisherman who, at the moment he decided to unite with the Mermaid has separated the unity of his own being in several parts, spreading and neglecting them. There is the autonomous action of the Soul to regain the unity (redemption?); finding a fissure on the surface of the Fisherman's afflicted heart, he enters and fully unifies as in old times. This approach of

BDD-A5946 © 2011 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:48 UTC)

the human being's components (though confuse) has its source in Wilde's interest in the Catholic religion and theology. In the context of the explanation of this topic, the reference point is St. Paul: "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless..." (1 Thess.5,23) or "...For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful/What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also; I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also." (1Cor.,14,14-15), etc. There is no need to enter theological details. Some authors, on the basis of the analysis of the Greek words/concepts, consider that the human structure is tripartite, others, on the basis of the same texts, adopts the bipartite thesis. Certainly, Wilde adopts the first variant and constructs the intra-human relation as a soul-heart connection. Actually, he is not so far away from the significations derived from St. Paul, because "heart" (*lev* in Hebrew) in the Old Testament means the inner person, the seat of the emotions, thoughts and will. There is no in Wilde any differentiation between what we would cal "soul" in a psychological sense and "soul" in a spiritual context. The body is both, the vehicle of the heart and the soul and the horizon along which they move is a mundane one and not transcendent, whatever was initially, the author's intention. It seems that we have here rather a divided personality with strong impulses, mainly destructive. The independent Soul, as a partner/twin has the role to underline this struggle with disordered attractions and rejections. On the other side, the Soul should be content by separating from the body, because it is proved to have miraculous powers and is indestructible. Nevertheless, he fights desperately for the re-unification with the week body. The fact that close to the moment of death of the body, the Soul finally succeeds in reuniting has no importance; it is rather an artifice aiming to offer a less destructive final and some hope. It is again perhaps, about the theological zone concerning the resurrection of the dead: "But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you."(St. Paul, Rom. ,8, 11-12) This is what actually the Fisherman tries to do by his final asceticism, what the Soul manages to do in the second before death: to reunite what it was separated and obtain at least the forgiveness if not the redemption. Perhaps this is the explanation of the last blessing of the priest who has cursed the Fisherman and who, amazed by the beauty of the flowers growing on the field were the bodies of the two lovers were buried, praise love as being God's true name

Love

This sub-chapter will be more than short; because, although the entire story seems to be dedicated to love, one can ask as did the Soul: "And what is love, that thou shouldst set this high store upon it?" (O. Wilde, 1986, p. 306) The Fisherman's attraction to the Mermaid is understandable; beauty, youth and most of all, that something, different and intangible. It is also understandable the Witch's attraction to the young Fisherman. More than that, it seems that here we have a genuine love. Though her task is to take the Fisherman's soul or to determine him to lose the Soul in a way or another, the Witch tries to persuade the young man to keep his soul. It is also understandable, the Fisherman's attraction towards the dancing girl- more precise to her feet, fascinating moving. Could ever be a more obvious erotic symbol? Everything that Wilde calls love appears eventually to be eroticism, stubborn desire, a turbid urge. In what kind of situation somebody, mad of love, wants with such intensity to abandon his

BDD-A5946 © 2011 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:48 UTC)

soul? What kind of situation makes somebody to persist in this kind of love without caring about anything else? Finally, in what situation love can petrify somebody's heart? "Alas! cried his Soul, I can find no place of entrance, so compassed about with love is this heart of thine." (*op. cit*., p.307) One can answer to these questions in only one way. It is about a profound negative and destructive feeling pushing to thoughtless acts, pushing finally to felony, murder or suicide. Or, this is actually what the Fisherman performs with all his strength, against the warning of his own intuition. This sentiment of the desire of dissolution may correspond to a deepening in a profound sin, a sin considered as such by the society, by the religion and theology and even by the hero himself.

It is of notoriety the different sexual inclination that Wilde discovers later in his life. But it is. But it is totally incomprehensible why he made public this inclination, destroying his social and professional status, his family and finally, destroying himself. Among the characters more or less involved in the erotic texture of the story, only one awakens in Fisherman a similar sentiment of destruction and self-destruction that Wilde experiences as what he calls love in the Greek acceptation. This personage is the Mermaid. If one remembers that the lower part of her body lacks the female anatomic organ. In the story also, the upper part with secondary sexual organs is more than neglected, therefore, one can ask rightly, if we are dealing here with a woman. It is quite possible that the Mermaid, an exclusive symbol of the temptation, to hide actually a male being, and the fish tail to be neither more or less, than a falus. So, though from one end to another of the story Wilde is talking about love, let us not be deceived by this word –it contains in fact a pure eroticism, overwhelming and uncontrollable.

Some Last Commentaries

No doubt, *The Fisherman and His Soul* is not a metaphoric tale but neither a story with a well-defined message. It does not seem either a consciously encoded writing, hiding intentionally facts that need however to be expressed. The story seems rather with a wandering in a thicket of feelings, desires and feeblenesses, driving to implacable, to error. It is like a call of the crepuscular, of the no-day no-night shadows, call which dominates the Fisherman/Wilde: "The world is wide, and thee is Heaven also, and Hell, and that dim twilight house that lies between..." (*op. cit*., p.293) The house is the symbol of the Soul, clear explained in the New Testament (Jung will come much later). The house collapses, the being inside violently separates from it, with fear, with hate, almost. They partially reunite due to the fatigue and indulgence coming from pain and disappointment, reunite totally only in the moment of the supreme extinction. But there is not as it was in the beginning. Finally it seems difficult even to assert if this struggling creature really has existed, if still exists in a coagulated form or simply, has dissipated in flowers and waves. The most probable, this is so what happened: the symbol of the flowers that have astonished by the miracle of their appearance, affirms this supposition. But again, this is not that sure. The need of the liturgy, the need of forgiveness cried by the Fisherman/Wilde through the Priest who speaks about love, open the possibility that perhaps, the ultimate confession to the dead one, has gained the hope (the redemption hope?). Nevertheless, the Fisherman assumes the good and the evil and finds himself as the only responsible for failures, errors and losses:

> The gods had given me almost everything. But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease. I amused myself with being a *flâneur*, a dandy, a man of fashion. I surrounded myself with the smaller natures and the

BDD-A5946 © 2011 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:48 UTC)

> meaner minds. I became the spendthrift of my own genius, and to waste an eternal youth gave me a curious joy. Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in the search for new sensation. What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion. Desire, at the end, was a malady, or a madness, or both. I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber one has some day to cry aloud on the housetop. I ceased to be lord over myself. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace. There is only one thing for me now, absolute humility. (De Profundis)

Here the analysis stops. The above lines were written long after the Fisherman was dissolved by the sea. At the time of the tale, Wilde still spoke of joy, though the sound of the shell of his conscious, an ignored prophet, was already foreboded a predictable end. But it is also certain that, inside of this total destruction, Wilde senses with genius, the ascetics' wisdom: the total renunciation, total loss constitute the only way to the Life:

> It is the last thing left in me, and the best: the ultimate discovery at which I have arrived, the starting-point for a fresh development. It has come to me right out of myself, so I know that it has come at the proper time. It could not have come before, nor later. Had any one told me of it, I would have rejected it. Had it been brought to me, I would have refused it. As I found it, I want to keep it. I must do so. It is the one thing that has in it the elements of life, of a new life, *Vita Nuova* for me. Of all things it is the strangest. One cannot acquire it, except by surrendering everything that one has. It is only when one has lost all things, that one knows that one possesses it. *(ibidem*)

Bibliography

* * * ,*The Holy Bible*, Authorized King James Version, Oxford University Press
Wilde, O., The Fisherman and his Soul, in *The Complete Illustrated Works of Oscar Wilde*, Bounty Books, London, 1986
Wilde, O., Pescarul şi Sufletul său, în *Toate povestirile*, Compania, Bucureşti, 2005.

Electronic Resources

Wilde, O., De Profundis, www.gutenberg.org/files/921/921-h/921-h.htm, consulted at 19.06.2011.

BDD-A5946 © 2011 Universitatea din Piteşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:48 UTC)