The Happy Prince

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF OSCAR WILDE

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland and educated at both Trinity College, Dublin and Oxford. His mother, Jane Wilde, was a poet who wrote under the name "Speranza," or hope, and his father, Sir William Wilde, was an ear surgeon. Wilde was baptized in a local Anglican church and remained dedicated to the Christian faith throughout his lifetime, in spite of the eccentricities of other aspects of his lifestyle. He was known for his dedication to the aesthetic movement, having published papers on aesthetic morality as early as 1874—he lauded decadence and the value of art for its own sake, a theme that recurred in his plays and fiction. However, Wilde also identified as a socialist, and published an essay called "The Soul of Man under Socialism" outlining his beliefs. Wilde married Constance Lloyd in 1884, whose annual allowance helped fund his luxurious style of living. The couple had two sons together, but their relationship was rocked by Wilde beginning to undertake homosexual relationships with other men, beginning with the journalist and art critic Robert Ross. Allusions, both subtle and explicit, to homosexuality began to recur in Wilde's works—whole sections of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* were censored prior to publication, due to their scandalous content, and reviewers still described the finished book as excessively decadent and even unclean. Ultimately, Wilde was put on trial in 1895 for gross indecency; after his conviction, he served two years in prison before moving into exile in France, where he ultimately passed away at the age of 46.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The peak of Wilde's literary career, as well as his trial and death, coincided with the final years of the Victorian Period. Victorian England saw radical and drastic changes in many areas, from technological developments to scientific discoveries and shifts in social norms. Charles Darwin published his findings on evolution in *On the Origin of Species* in the middle of the century, around the same time that Karl Marx published the *Communist Manifesto* and *Capital* in Germany. These texts, among other developments in philosophy, rocked the established norms in Western Europe, prompting revolutions against inequality as well as atheistic movements. The London Underground was built in the 1850s, along with the first telegraph systems, drastically accelerating the movement of goods, people, and information. Wilde was born into this world in flux and rose to fame during the transition to modernism—the Victorians were known for strict social norms, from the temperance movement to devout anti-sodomy laws and the medical insistence on female hysteria. Although Wilde and his friend group paved the way for the loosening and shifting of social values that really blossomed in the interwar period (the 1920s and 30s), he perished in exile without truly witnessing these changes.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Wilde drew inspiration for "The Happy Prince" in part from the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen, which function both as forms of social criticism and stories for children. The genre of children's literature began during the Victorian period in England around the time of Wilde's birth, with the publication of novels like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll and *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson. Another contemporary would be Rudyard Kipling, whose stories and verses for children, including *The Jungle Book*, contain stories with deeper themes such as abandonment or freedom. Later works that similarly reflect Christian religious themes include C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* series. For other texts that reflect critically on the impoverishment and social stratification rife in urban settings in Western Europe, look to Charles Dickens (for example, *Oliver Twist*), Thomas Hardy (*Jude the Obscure*), Émile Zola (*Les Rougon-Macquart*, but particularly *Germinal*), or many of the works by George Orwell (*Down and Out in Paris and London*, *The Road to Wigan Pier*).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Happy Prince
- **When Written:** 1880s
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1888
- **Literary Period:** Victorian Literature, Aestheticism
- **Genre:** Children's Literature, Fairy Tale
- **Setting:** An unnamed town
- **Climax:** The Swallow and Prince kiss before the Swallow perishes from cold, and the Prince's lead heart cracks.
- **Antagonist:** Poverty, Inequality
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

The Happy Prince. Rupert Everett directed a biographical drama about the life of Oscar Wilde (whom he also played in the film), which was released in 2018. The film focuses on the final, tragic years of Wilde's life, when he lived in exile after being convicted for "gross indecency" due to his homosexuality. As in the story, the name "The Happy Prince" therefore bears a strong irony.

Kiss of Death. Oscar Wilde is buried in a tomb decorated with a Sphinx in the Pere Lachaise Cemetery in Paris. Every year, fans of his work and life flock to his grave to leave lipstick-kisses on the tomb—although a glass barrier added by the government in 2011 makes that practice perhaps prohibitive.

PLOT SUMMARY

A Swallow delays his trip to **Egypt** for the winter because he falls in love with a Reed—upon giving up that romance, he flies past a town where he happens to settle on a pedestal underneath a gilded statue. This statue, the Happy Prince, speaks to the Swallow about all of the poverty and suffering—especially the suffering of **children**—that he sees in the town from his high perch. He begs the Swallow to assist him in relieving some of that suffering by delivering the valuables from his person to those in need.

First, the Swallow delivers the ruby from the Happy Prince's sword-hilt to a seamstress struggling to feed her sick son. One of the statue's sapphire eyes goes to a playwright freezing in his garret, and the other to a young match-girl whose father would beat her if she came home empty-handed. As the Sparrow has come to love the Happy Prince, he opts to remain by his side after the loss of his eyes makes him blind, and tells him stories of Egypt to keep his world vibrant as the winter gets colder.

Ultimately, the winter grows too cold and the Sparrow realizes that death is looming—he confesses his love to the Happy Prince and the two exchange a kiss. The Sparrow perishes and the Happy Prince's **lead heart** cracks.

Later, the Mayor and Town Councillors walk by the statue. Disturbed by its shabbiness, they decide to have it melted and remade. Since the lead heart won't melt, however, it gets tossed on a dust-heap with the Sparrow's body. God asks one of his angels to deliver the two most precious things in the city, which turn out to be the corpse and the broken heart. He promises an eternity in Paradise in exchange for the brave sacrifices of the Prince and the Sparrow.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Happy Prince – The Happy Prince is both the protagonist of this story and its namesake. Once a sheltered prince who led a life of pleasure, the Happy Prince was turned into a gilded statue upon his death and placed upon a pedestal overlooking his town. The Prince is described as exceedingly beautiful with golden skin, sapphires for eyes, and a ruby on his sword-hilt. Although his external beauty impresses everyone around him, he sees that beauty as only skin-deep; his true worth lies in his compassion for his townspeople and his willingness to sacrifice for them. The Happy Prince suffers, however, due to his sympathy for all of the misery he can see from his high perch. The "happiness" of this name is thus ironic, as the Prince describes having only experienced a false happiness in his previous life of pleasure, when he was ignorant of the true misery surrounding him. The Prince is ultimately a Christ-like figure, looking over humanity and sacrificing his life to alleviate their pain. Descriptions of the Prince also allude to classical understandings of wisdom and mentorship. The figure of the Prince, with his eloquent rhetoric and affinity for morally upstanding behavior, represents classical Greek and Roman ideals—in particular, the relationship that he develops with the younger Swallow alludes to classical mentor/mentee relationships.

The Swallow – The other protagonist of "The Happy Prince," the Swallow, is a bird en route to **Egypt** for the winter. His trip is initially delayed due to his temporary passion for a Reed, foreshadowing to the thematic importance of love in this story. Although he wants to join his companions in the sunny land of Egypt, he begins to love the Happy Prince and remains in the town to help him deliver jewels and gold to townspeople in need. Although not as selfless as the Happy Prince—he repeatedly emphasizes his desire to leave and enjoy all of the beautiful things abroad—the Swallow comes to love the Prince and understand the value of doing good. In the mentor/mentee relationship developed between the pair, the Swallow plays the role of a younger mentee who needs to be set on the right track—at the start, he expresses trepidation at delaying his own pleasure for others, speaking in the context of the typical Victorian ideals Wilde criticizes throughout the story. However, his love for the Prince helps him grow and proves that moral behavior can be learned. In the end, the Swallow makes the ultimate sacrifice out of love—because the Prince goes blind after giving away his sapphire eyes, the Swallow decides to stay by his side forever, even though he knows that remaining through the winter will mean certain death. This sacrifice ultimately lands him a place in Paradise for eternity, reinforcing the story's moral that anyone can change and choose to do good instead of acting selfishly.

The Reed – Although she appears relatively briefly in the story, the Reed still has an important role. The Sparrow initially falls in love with her for her slenderness and beauty and delays his migration to warmer territory in order to wait for the Reed. However, all his friends disapprove due to her poverty and having so many relations. She decides not to travel with the Sparrow, which ends their relationship and drives him away to the town where he meets the Happy Prince. However brief, this romance sets the stage for the romantic love between the Sparrow and the Prince. The ill-fated love between the Reed and the Sparrow also introduces the theme of judging falsely by appearances and the negativity of gossip and peer judgment.

The Little Match-Girl – A young girl selling matches on a street

corner whose father beats her if she does not return with sufficient money. Having dropped her matches, she appears to be in a tragic situation until the Happy Prince sacrifices his other sapphire eye to help her. Though she plays a relatively small role in the story, the narrator emphasizes her youth and innocence in contrast with the evil and neglectful adults that populate the town.

God – God appears in the very last lines of the story to rescue the Sparrow's body and the Happy Prince's **leaden heart** and to promise them eternity in Paradise for their sacrifices. Although his mention is brief, God cements both the theme of Christianity and proves explicitly that the narrative takes the side of compassion over corruption and sacrifice over greed.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Woman in the Poor House – A seamstress sewing passion-flowers on a satin gown for one of the Queen's maids-of-honor. Too poor to purchase an orange for her ill son, this woman inspires the Happy Prince to give away the ruby from his sword-hilt.

The Playwright – A young man writing plays in his garret (an attic room with a hole in the roof). He struggles to combat cold and hunger until the Happy Prince gives up one of his sapphire eyes to help him.

The Mayor – Although he only appears at the very conclusion of the story, the Mayor's narcissistic attitude epitomizes the problems of power. He wants the Happy Prince melted down and recast in his own image, and he wants to issue a proclamation banning birds from dying in public.

The Town Councillors – Often discussed in the collective, the Town Councillors represent the deepest corruption in this city. Obsessed with their reputations, they ignore anything that doesn't appear beautiful or beneficial for their self-promotion.

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.

BEAUTY AND MORALITY

Oscar Wilde was notably committed to aesthetic and the aesthetic movement—associated with the mantra "Art for Art's sake"—and this theme recurs throughout his literary works. The titular protagonist of "The Happy Prince" is himself a statue meant to decorate the city, and through him, the story explores the relationship between art and usefulness. However, "The Happy Prince" also demonstrates the darker sides of society's obsession with beauty—that is, the extreme poverty and social inequality required to support decadent lifestyles for those living at the top of society. This turn to morality resonates with Victorian values while still condemning that society for its hypocrisy.

The initial description of the Happy Prince focuses on his aesthetic beauty: he is "gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold," has eyes of "two bright sapphires," and on his sword-hilt "a large red ruby glowed." Although these descriptions focus on his outer beauty, the word "gilded" reveals that such beauty is superficial. Similarly, although the Prince's name is "happy," he weeps upon his tall column when the Swallow first meets him; the Prince's name thus also disguises—or, perhaps, gilds—reality. The Prince goes on to describe to the Swallow his childhood in a palace "where sorrow is not allowed to enter," where he was carefree because everything was "so beautiful." They called him the Happy Prince, and he said he was happy "if pleasure be happiness." True happiness, this quote hints, differs from pleasure, while beauty often hinges on obscuring suffering.

Indeed, the happiness of the Prince's childhood was the happiness of ignorance. After dying and becoming a statue, he says, "they have set me up here so high I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my **heart is made of lead** yet I cannot choose but weep." The city, then, only seemed beautiful to the Prince when disguised by high walls—that is, when he couldn't see the suffering that existed alongside his own pleasure. Beauty, at least in a shallow, physical sense, is thus tied to deceit and even cruel indifference.

Every time the Prince identifies someone living in poverty, meanwhile, the cause of their suffering ties back to some object of beauty. A seamstress living in the poorhouse embroiders "passion-flowers on a satin gown for the loveliest of the Queen's maids-of-honour," while her own little boy lies ill with a fever. Although he wants oranges, his mother "has nothing to give him but river water." The tragedy of their situation is deepened by the luxury goods she is working so hard to produce—not only will she not be attending any balls herself, but her work to add flowers to this satin gown does not earn enough money to even buy oranges or medicine for her sick son.

Later, a young playwright "is trying to finish a play for the Director of the Theatre" but cannot move from cold—"there is no fire in the grate, and hunger has made him faint." Even the town's arts and culture are driven by deep social inequalities. Here, as in the Prince's childhood palace, beauty is built on the backs of poor townspeople yet essentially masks their suffering.

Importantly, Wilde's story doesn't disavow beauty altogether. Instead, it critiques the fixation on outer beauty at the expense of compassion and also rejects the equation of such beauty

with innate value. When the Prince readily gives up his beauty, in the form of his jewels, to help the poor, he is relieving himself of that which previously brought him such pleasure—and in the process, redistributing some of its power.

Notably, the jewels' grandeur in and of itself proves less impressive than their simple usefulness. When the playwright finds a sapphire on his desk, for instance, he doesn't marvel at this item "brought out of India a thousand years ago"; he merely celebrates his work being appreciated. When the match-girl finds a jewel, she says, "What a lovely bit of glass" before running "home laughing." This emphasizes that, however lovely, the jewel is ultimately nothing more than a trinket; the true value of the jewels lie in their ability to protect the match-girl from her cruel father's beatings, or to provide the playwright with much needed food, firewood, and moral support to, in turn, produce more beauty himself via his art.

In keeping with this complication of the idea that external beauty connotes inherent worth, it is the ugliest part of the statue—his leaden, broken heart—that leads him to the highest reward. At first, the Town Councillors dismiss the "shabby" statue as "little better than a beggar," and pull him down, saying "as he is no longer beautiful he is no longer useful." This confirms the overriding opinion among this privileged class of people that outer beauty is what imbues things with value. However, because the Prince's heart doesn't "melt in the furnace," it's thrown "on a dust-heap where the dead Swallow [is] also lying."

Though the Happy Prince has lost all outer beauty, and with it all his use and value in some people's eyes, his heart's refusal to melt demonstrates a durability and steadfastness that stems from inner goodness. That's why, when God asks one of his angels for "the two most precious things in the city," these items turn out to be the dead Swallow and the leaden heart. This conclusion proves that true value and external appearances are not always the same—the most precious things sometimes come disguised as the ugliest.

LOVE AND COMPASSION

Many of Oscar Wilde's works contain allusions to homosexuality, in large part due to his own sexual preferences—he was famously put on trial and imprisoned in 1895 for his homosexuality, as Victorian society at the time was still notoriously conservative. In "The Happy Prince," love—arguably including homosexual love—forms the central motivations for the protagonists. In contrast, narcissism drives the story's main antagonists and leads people to make judgements about others—judgements that benefit their own worldview but cause moral impoverishment. Love and compassion, in turn, combat the devastating consequences of the status quo. As the story presents an extremely positive perspective on love and compassion, it also defends homosexuality as a positive form of love.

The Happy Prince's compassion for the townspeople and the Swallow's love for the Prince motivate their heroics. When the Prince initially describes his transformation into a statue, he outlines the feeling of compassion that seeing the townspeople's suffering awoke in him. As he says, "they have set me up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my **heart is made of lead** yet I cannot choose but weep." Seeing suffering leads him to weep, a clear proof of the compassion that will come to motivate him.

Although the Swallow starts out with more selfish motivations, the Prince evokes a similar sense of compassion in the bird. The Swallow at first expresses the desire to leave for the warmth of **Egypt**, but the Prince looks "so sad that the little Swallow" ends up promising to stay and act as messenger despite the cold. The allusion to the cold foreshadows the scale of sacrifice that remaining will demand from the Sparrow—it will eventually grow so cold that he will perish. However, the Sparrow's compassion pushes him to overcome his fears in the name of helping both the Prince and those the Prince cares about.

Actions born of compassion also notably lead to personal feelings of pleasure. When the Swallow returns to tell the Prince about his success in helping distribute his jewels to those in need, he remarks, "It is curious [...] but I feel quite warm now, although it is so cold." The Prince replies, "That is because you have done a good action." The story draws a direct connection between seeing suffering to compassion and from acts of compassion to feeling good about oneself.

The Swallow's love for the Happy Prince also alludes to homosexuality, ultimately affirming it as a positive form of love and catalyst for compassion. Non-human characters throughout the story are gendered. For example, the Swallow had initially delayed his trip to Egypt for "he was in love with the most beautiful Reed," yet he soon "felt lonely and began to tire of his lady-love." Though the two characters are not human, their relations match a traditionally heterosexual pairing and present the Swallow as a creature in search of a romantic partner. When the Swallow initially meets the Prince, he sees him weeping and is "filled with pity." He continues to delay his trip to Egypt to help the Prince, and ultimately promises "I will stay with you always" once the Prince is left blind. The extremity of this dedication and lifelong promise exceeds the bounds of platonic love—it also shows the ways that compassion can result in and harmonize with love.

The scene of the Swallow's death, in turn, exposes the reciprocal love between the Prince and the Swallow. As winter comes and the Swallow begins to freeze, "he would not leave the Prince, he loved him too well." He bids farewell and asks to kiss the Prince's hand, but the Prince replies, "you must kiss me on the lips, for I love you." In the end, he kisses the Happy Prince and "[falls] down dead at his feet," after which "a curious crack sounded inside the statue [...] the leaden heart had snapped right in two." Not only does this death scene include a

confession of love—the heartbreak that the Prince undergoes resembles similar conclusions in other heterosexual fairy tales, where love and heartbreak take on a mythical scope. Their love forms the heart of their ethical actions, which leads to a deep defense of the moral purity of homosexuality (in stark contrast to the strict homophobic norms popular at that time in Victorian England).

In the end, Wilde uses this story both as a subtle defense of homosexuality and a more direct proclamation of the centrality of love and compassion in human affairs. Love trumps all other values in this fairytale universe, from materialistic to artistic. Whereas beauty generates shallow pleasures, love leads directly to the eternal—to the kinds of actions that warrant praise from God, in this case. These conclusions, while quite optimistic on the surface, carry real nuance in the context of the difficulties that Wilde faced for his own sexuality—homosexuality would not have been seen as a theme appropriate for **children**, let alone a subject of proper morality.

POVERTY, INEQUALITY, AND GREED

Oscar Wilde was a proclaimed socialist and lived in London during a time when millions of the impoverished residents risked dying of starvation. At other points, he wrote texts like "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" outlining anarchistic beliefs and a criticism of charity as opposite to a socialist reordering of society. According to "The Happy Prince," the majority of humanity leads lives of great misery and suffering in order to support the greed of the few with money and power. The greed of the wealthy causes immense suffering, and this story takes a scathing stance against the state of inequality that forces so many people into lives of destitution and hardship. Because problems of corruption extend so widely throughout the empowered classes in society, remedies to this inequality require acknowledging the flaws in their values.

The politicians and individuals responsible for the town's welfare use their power for selfish and corrupt reasons, instead of fulfilling their duties to serve the wider community. Wilde portrays the Town Councillors in the most negative light. At the start of the story, they are presented as people with selfish motivations, like the Councillor "who wished to gain a reputation for having artistic tastes." This emphasis on his reputation betrays both a narcissism and a shallowness underpinning his desires—not only does the Councillor disregard his political responsibilities, his relationship to art is also borne only of appearances.

A strain of corruption and superficiality extends into the academic realm as well. When a professor of Ornithology decides to write a long letter about the Swallow, "Every one quoted it, it was full of so many words that they could not understand." Rather than seeking out knowledge, both the Professor and the people citing him focus only on their reputations and the appearance of intelligence.

Even the teachers and policemen responsible for **children** disregard their suffering. A Mathematical Master scolds the Charity Children "for he did not approve of children dreaming." Later, in winter, "two little boys were lying in one another's arms to try and keep themselves warm." When they complain of hunger, a passing Watchman merely shouts in reply, "You must not lie here." In both of these instances, the very people entrusted with social welfare choose to disregard the innocent suffering of children out of their own spite.

In contrast to the portrayal of politicians as cruel, the suffering townspeople appear hardworking and innocent. The Prince has no interest in superficial stories or appearances—even when the Swallow tries to distract him with positive stories, he says, "you tell me of marvelous things, but more marvelous than anything is the suffering of men and women. There is no Mystery so great as Misery." This quote simultaneously establishes misery as the story's focus and targets the behavior and blindness of all of the town's officials who are able to disregard that misery.

In the winter, the Swallow flew "and saw the rich making merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars were sitting at the gates." Although the rich could look right outside and see the suffering, they remain ignorant of it—which seems almost impossible, given the proximity that the Swallow describes. After the Swallow dies and the Prince's **heart** breaks, the Mayor remarks, "how shabby the Happy Prince looks!" Even worse, "How shabby indeed!" cried the Town Councillors, who always agreed with the Mayor." The Mayor calls the Prince a "beggar" and deplores the dead bird at his feet, saying, "We must really issue a proclamation that birds are not to be allowed to die here." To the very end, these figures appear ridiculous in their cold-heartedness and superficiality.

The selfishness and shortsightedness shown by privileged individuals in this story reveal the deep flaws behind hubris and conceit. Human greed and obsession with appearances result in evil and true ugliness. These corrupt tendencies extend to all parts of society, from education to politics to art and justice—counteracting them requires that all people open their eyes to the realities "at the gates." Although Wilde was a proponent of a decadent and wealthy lifestyle, this story demonstrates his consciousness of the costs that can be wrought by profound inequality. Ultimately, those who choose to ignore the brutal realities outside their doorsteps ought to be condemned, as the most important questions humanity struggles with involve suffering.

RELIGION

Wilde was a dedicated Christian throughout his life, and religious themes run through "The Happy Prince." The titular Happy Prince represents a

Christlike figure who supports analogous teachings to those of Christian parables. Much like Christ in the Bible, the Happy Prince chooses to sacrifice himself to alleviate the sufferings of the poor and downtrodden. Ultimately, God rewards the Prince in paradise, confirming both the narrative's religious subtext and the Christian roots of the Happy Prince's values. Although the intended parallels between the narrative and Christianity lie in its values, the story also portrays other religions using stereotypes. In doing so, religious values in "The Happy Prince" sometimes fall flat. Ultimately, the intended religious influences in this story teach one to value making sacrifices for those who are oppressed by poverty and cannot advocate for themselves.

The story draws clear thematic parallels to biblical teachings, centered on its Christlike central figure. The heroic statue in "The Happy Prince" spends the story sacrificing his beauty to save the citizens of the town from poverty. The statue gives up the ruby from his sword-hilt for the seamstress and one of his sapphire eyes for the playwright, and even gives up his other eye for "a little match-girl" who "has no shoes or stockings" and will be beaten by her father if she comes home with no money.

The Bible includes many examples encouraging great sacrifice—from Jesus giving his life on the cross to an old widow sacrificing her last two coins in Luke's gospel. In this story, as in the Bible, the wealthy end up greedy and corrupt whereas those living in poverty are industrious and generous. The Christian God himself appears at the end of this story, in fact. He asks one of the angels to bring "the two most precious things in the city," and says the angel has "rightly chosen" for bringing "the **leaden heart** and the dead bird," for "in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me." The Happy Prince receives the gift of eternity in paradise for his sacrifice, which confirms the importance that the narrative places on trying to protect and save people oppressed by poverty.

Despite the altruistic roots of its Christian moral teaching, the story also shows its loyalty to Christianity through its treatment of other religions. Many of the Swallow's stories about **Egypt** paint an exoticized picture of the country's culture and values. He describes how "on a great granite throne sits the God Memnon. All night long he watches the stars, and when the morning star shines he utters one cry of joy, and then he is silent." He also cites his companions as "building a nest in the Temple of Baalbec." These references to Egyptian religion do not provide an accurate picture of their faith, but rather some exotic color to situate the story's town as Western and Christian in contrast.

Even depictions of other religions in the town contain stereotypes. In a short cameo, Wilde describes an arguably anti-Semitic—but certainly stereotypical—scene in Jewish ghetto. The Swallow "passed over the Ghetto, and saw the old Jews bargaining with each other, and weighing out money in copper scales." The association between Judaism and moneylending has a long history in European literature, and these anti-Semitic stereotypes led to prejudice and violence at various points in history, from the Crusades to the Holocaust.

While the story's religiosity primarily shines through its moral dedication to combat poverty, there is a darker undercurrent. On the one hand, Wilde presents a parable of Christian teachings of compassion, martyrdom, and care for the oppression of the poor. On the other hand, there is some hypocrisy in the story itself—for a story that condemns judgment, especially appearance-based judgment, the matter of religion remains mired in stereotype. In this case, Wilde's intended evocations of religion—Christianity, specifically—clash with his treatments of other religions.

SYMBOLS

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

THE LEAD HEART

The Happy Prince has a heart made of lead, which breaks when his beloved Swallow dies of the cold. At first, this lead heart appears to emphasize the superficiality of the Prince's beauty, though it later comes to symbolize the steadfast nature of love. In the beginning of the story, the lead heart reveals that the gold decorating the Prince's outside does not carry through his insides. This advises one to avoid judging by appearances, as they can be deceitful. However, as beauty comes to represent illusion and even corruption or deception itself throughout the story, the ugliness of the lead heart does not prevent it from engendering compassion and goodness—as the Prince himself declares, "though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep." Unlike in many other fairy tales, such as *Snow White*, Wilde does not support the conventional pairings of beauty with goodness and ugliness with evil. This inversion truly centers on the heart, at once the least objectively valuable and most truly precious part of the Happy Prince.

Although town officials try to melt the heart down and repurpose it with the rest of the statue, it refuses to melt. And when at the end of the story God asks for the two most precious things in the city to be brought to him, the lead heart, although broken, ends up being one of them. The lead heart thus ultimately represents both the steadfastness of true love and the value of compassion. By refusing to melt, the heart also indicates that some things persist beyond one's own life—that is, that there exist values greater than the sum of a life.

EGYPT

Although this story is set in an unknown city in the northwest of Europe (likely London), the Swallow's desire to migrate to Egypt and his many stories about the country turn it into a powerful and evocative symbol of shallow, fleeting pleasure. The Swallow describes Egypt using rich imagery, noting "the yellow lions" with their "eyes like green beryls," as well as "pink and white doves" cooing at the Temple of Baalbec and the "King of the Mountains of the Moon, who is as black as ebony, and worships a large crystal." The Swallow uses this exotic imagery to contrast Egypt with the privation, cold, and dirtiness he sees in this European city. It should be noted that these images are consistently racializing and othering, as they treat Egypt as a setting symbolic for its beautiful natural resources and alien religious tradition as opposed to an equivalent civilization.

However, this imagery represents the force of the Swallow's desire to live for himself and for pleasure—Egypt does not exist as a place for him, but rather a series of aesthetic or artistic images that can bring pure pleasure. As the Prince criticizes the connection between pleasure and happiness and dismisses these marvels as less powerful than human misery, Egypt comes to represent a pleasure-seeking mindset that blinds one to what truly bears importance in the world, just as the Palace of Sans-Souci blinded the Prince during his lifetime, because "everything about [him] was so beautiful." The Prince's ambivalence towards pleasure colors any interpretation of the Swallow's magnificent stories about Egypt—what seems on the surface to be a positive description turns out to be dangerously superficial. Egypt thus further represents escape from one's own local context and the possibility of perpetuating in ignorance. As the Swallow's flock had already migrated there, it also stands for collective decisions and a group mentality—even peer pressure—rather than individualism.

CHILDREN

Wilde frequently uses children and youth as a symbol of innocence and goodness in "The Happy Prince." The Prince only intercedes on behalf of children or young people—he chooses the seamstress due to her need to care for her sick son and emphasizes the youth of both the playwright and the little match-girl. On various occasions, children make poignant observations about their suffering only to be rebuffed by an adult (who technically should be responsible for their welfare). As the father beats the match-girl, so does the mathematical master resent the charity children he should teach. At one point, two children sleeping under a bridge in winter exclaim "how hungry we are!" only to have a watchman shouts back at them, "you should not lie here!"

Wilde invokes children as a symbol of innocence in order to emphasize the corrupting force of society—evil is not born, but taught. Furthermore, as these children are innocent they cannot deserve any of the suffering or misery they are forced to undergo—that children are forced to suffer exposes the toxicity at the root of civilization. This type of invocation of children to expose corruption has a long history in literature—a resonant example would be the speech by Ivan Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, where his horror at the suffering of children shakes the foundation of his faith in God. For Wilde, children make the ultimate symbol for suffering, as their freshness and youth preclude any possibility of guilt.

QUOTES

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

The Happy Prince Quotes

"High above the city, on a tall column, stood the statue of the Happy Prince. He was gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold, for eyes he had two bright sapphires, and a large red ruby glowed on his sword-hilt. He was very much admired indeed. "He is as beautiful as a weathercock," remarked one of the Town Councillors who wished to gain a reputation for having artistic tastes; "only not quite so useful," he added, fearing lest people should think him unpractical...

Related Characters: The Town Councillors (speaker), The Happy Prince

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

"The Happy Prince" opens with this description of a statue on a high pedestal overlooking the city. This highlights the Prince's significance not only as the story's namesake, but also as its central focus. His position on such a high column symbolically foreshadows the moral heights that he reaches later in the story. By describing his beautiful external features first—the gold leaf and the jewels—the narration ascribes a certain amount of significance to them. Nonetheless, the plot that follows shows that the jewels and gold leaf are merely superficial and unimportant—it is the Prince's moral character (encapsulated by his leaden heart) that really matters. The compliment paid by the Town Councillor already hints at an ambivalence towards external

beauty, since the councillor is not sure whether to value beauty or use more. It's notable that he seems silly and superficial, since his opinions don't seem deeply felt, but rather put on in order to impress others.

"The eyes of the Happy Prince were filled with tears, and tears were running down his golden cheeks. His face was so beautiful in the moonlight that the little Swallow was filled with pity. "Who are you?" he said: "I am the Happy Prince." "Why are you weeping then?" asked the Swallow; "you have quite drenched me."

Related Characters: The Swallow, The Happy Prince (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

The Swallow lands underneath the statue of the Happy Prince to take shelter overnight—however, he is surprised to be soaked by the Happy Prince's tears. These tears reveal his true sorrow and the irony of his name—though he should be happy, the Prince is truly sad. The simple inversion of his name grows more complicated when one reflects on the Prince's external beauty and the admiration that he receives from passersby—if his name disguises a deeper truth about him, it indicates that other aspects of his cheerful and beautiful appearance might be disguising something deeper and more profound.

The compassion that the Swallow feels here is still connected to the Prince's beauty, and to his own comfort—although he notices that the Prince weeps, the swallow still focuses on the fact that the tears have "drenched" him completely, rather than feeling compassion for the possible source of the tears. This moment foreshadows in part the romantic love that will grow between the pair. However, it also indicates the relative naiveté of the Swallow, who still has flawed Victorian values, as opposed to the empathetic selflessness of the Happy Prince.

"When I was alive and had a human heart," answered the statue, "I did not know what tears were, for I lived in the Palace of Sans Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter. In the daytime I played with my companions in the garden, and in the evening, I led the dance in the Great Hall. Round the garden ran a very lofty wall, but I never cared to ask what lay beyond it, everything about me was so beautiful. My courtiers called me the Happy Prince, and happy indeed I was, if pleasure be happiness. So I lived, and so I died. And now that I am dead they have set me up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep."

Related Characters: The Happy Prince (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

The Happy Prince decides to tell the Sparrow of his past as a human prince who lived in the Palace of San Souci in Potsdam, in order to explain his tears. He received the name "Happy Prince" during his lifetime, and he explains that the moniker reflects the life of pleasure that he led back then—however, he now questions whether pleasure and happiness are the same thing at all. The beautiful things that he describes (dances, gardens, life at court) belong to high civilized society, but the Prince now realizes the emptiness in them. He was able to live in blissful ignorance behind the high walls of the palace, but now that he resides on a tall column overlooking the city, he cannot ignore the misery and inequality that fill the town. For the Prince, to see this misery is to feel compassion for the people suffering—he has undergone a spiritual transformation in his death. This makes him a figure like Christ, who dedicates his being to the acknowledgement and eradication of the suffering of others.

He passed over the river, and saw the lanterns hanging to the masts of the ships. He passed over the Ghetto, and saw the old Jews bargaining with each other, and weighing out money in copper scales. At last he came to the poor house and looked in. The boy was tossing feverishly on his bed, and the mother had fallen asleep, she was so tired. In he hopped, and laid the great ruby on the table beside the woman's thimble. Then he flew gently round the bed, fanning the boy's forehead with his wings. 'How cool I feel," said the boy, "I must be getting better"; and he sank into a delicious slumber.

Related Characters: The Swallow

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

The Sparrow has just agreed to deliver a ruby to the seamstress sewing passion-flowers on the dress of one of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting. The dress represents a socially-recognized form of superficial beauty, and will be worn at a fine event. By connecting the production of a beautiful object with the suffering of a child, Wilde ascribes a negative cost to beauty. This anecdote reveals the positive effect that doing a good deed has on the Swallow's character. Swallow already shows a sign of moral development when he creates cool air for the feverish boy with his wings—he could have dropped off the jewel and flown away, but this action shows the birth of his own feeling of compassion. In flying over the town, the Sparrow describes what he sees, and the description of the Jews weighing out money has very stereotypical and anti-Semitic connotations. This is a key moment, as the story's first Christian moral lesson coincides with an instance of its own ignorance.

"I am waited for in Egypt," answered the Swallow. "Tomorrow my friends will fly up to the Second Cataract. The river-horse couches there among the bulrushes, and on a great granite throne sits the God Memnon. All night long he watches the stars, and when the morning star shines he utters one cry of joy, and then he is silent. At noon the yellow lions come down to the water's edge to drink. They have eyes like green beryls, and their roar is louder than the roar of the cataract."

Related Characters: The Swallow (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 35-36

Explanation and Analysis

After the Swallow returns from delivering the ruby, the Prince asks him to stay another night and the Swallow refuses, giving this alluring description of Egypt as his reason to leave. The images he chooses are full of vibrant colors and sounds, indicating a textured and pleasurable world—a beautiful one. However, at this point in the story the reader knows to be cautious of anything too beautiful and to wonder what darker undercurrent might be hiding behind it.

In this case, a shadow overcasts the exoticized description of the Egyptian religion—this description of Memnon, while compelling, ultimately disrespects the religious tradition, as it is meant to represent the Swallow's selfishness. To choose Egypt would be to choose pleasure, rather than make a serious moral commitment to end suffering—the image of Memnon exists just to add some color to a tantalizing image, rather than describe a real religious tradition or viable alternative. Egypt is a symbol, here, and a symbol of the beautiful, pleasurable place much like the Palace of Sans Souci was for the Happy Prince during his lifetime.

"In the square below," said the Happy Prince, "there stands a little matchgirl. She has let her matches fall in the gutter, and they are all spoiled. Her father will beat her if she does not bring home some money, and she is crying. She has no shoes or stockings, and her little head is bare. Pluck out my other eye, and give it to her, and her father will not beat her." "I will stay with you one night longer," said the Swallow, "but I cannot pluck out your eye. You would be quite blind then." "Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow," said the Prince, "do as I command you," So he plucked out the Prince's other eye, and darted down with it. He swooped past the match-girl, and slipped the jewel into the palm of her hand. "What a lovely bit of glass," cried the little girl; and she ran home, laughing. Then the Swallow came back to the Prince. "You are blind now," he said 'so I will stay with you always."

Related Characters: The Swallow, The Happy Prince (speaker), The Little Match-Girl

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

By this point, the Swallow has already delivered the ruby from the Prince's sword-hilt to the seamstress and his first sapphire eye to a young playwright. The matchgirl represents the final test of the Swallow's loyalty and his moral transformation, as to help her requires a large sacrifice from his beloved Prince. He ultimately agrees, proving both his spiritual growth and the depth of his love for the Prince—that he decides to remain in the city, without being asked, indicates true love on his part, as swallows cannot survive in cold temperatures.

The Prince's willingness to give up his sight is tied to the match-girl's youth. She is a mere child, and the narrator emphasizes her youth and pitiable state in order to evoke a sense of her innocence and the true cruelty of the corruption that rules this city. It also ties to his stature as a Christ-figure; the "do as I command you" language that he employs is a direct allusion to Biblical language—Christ tells his disciples "you are my friends if you do what I command you." Only unbridled greed could create a city with so much wealth where children are starving in the streets. When the match-girl sees the sapphire, she describes it laughingly as a "lovely piece of glass." This slight dismissal makes light of a social obsession with expensive jewels, which ultimately just resemble colored glass.

"Dear little Swallow," said the Prince, "you tell me of marvellous things, but more marvellous than anything is the suffering of men and of women. There is no Mystery so great as Misery. Fly over my city, little Swallow, and tell me what you see there." So the Swallow flew over the great city, and saw the rich making merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars were sitting at the gates. He flew into dark lanes, and saw the white faces of starving children looking out listlessly at the black streets. Under the archway of a bridge two little boys were lying in one another's arms to try and keep themselves warm. "How hungry we are!" they said. "You must not lie here," shouted the Watchman, and they wandered out into the rain.

Related Characters: The Happy Prince (speaker), The Swallow

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

The Swallow decides to stay with the Prince out of love, and he tells the Prince many marvelous stories of his worldly adventures to provide distraction and entertainment. However, the Happy Prince has no interest in beautiful stories and distraction—as he says, he finds the harsh truth more compelling than any lovely fantasy. The truth that the Swallow uncovers seals the connection between extreme wealth and extreme poverty—the rich making merry in their warm homes contrasts the individuals forced to beg outside their gates. While inside they enjoy warmth and brightness, outside innocent children suffer in the dark.

The very man assigned to protect the city—the Watchman—tells the children to quit loitering as they complain of their hunger. This moment is crucial in identifying one of the dangers in preferring aesthetic and beautiful objects, since to make the street beautiful again only requires removing the suffering children from view, even as they continue to suffer. Creating a more just and safe world requires caring about more than appearances, which the people in this town do not.

But at last he knew that he was going to die. He had just strength to fly up to the Prince's shoulder once more. "Good-bye, dear Prince!" he murmured, "will you let me kiss your hand?" "I am glad that you are going to Egypt at last, little Swallow," said the Prince, "You have stayed too long here; but you must kiss me on the lips, for I love you."

Related Characters: The Happy Prince, The Swallow (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Winter arrives in the town and the Swallow still remains. Prior to this moment, he delivered the last of the gold leaf from the Prince's skin to hungry children and tried in vain to

keep himself warm by flapping his wings. However, he realizes that he is going to die—an unusually dark conclusion for a children's tale. The kiss and declaration that the two exchange in this poignant moment of death confirms the homosexual connection between the pair of them.

Wilde considered this story a parallel of his own life, where he initially married a woman (Constance Lloyd) but then began to explore relationships with other men. In the Victorian period, homosexual relationships were extremely stigmatized and even illegal, to the point that Wilde himself was placed on trial for obscene behavior and imprisoned. By embedding positive representations of homosexual relationships in his works, Wilde is validating both his own lifestyle and his belief in the central importance of love in human life.

❝ At that moment a curious crack sounded inside the statue, as if something had broken. The fact is that the leaden heart had snapped right in two.

Related Characters: The Happy Prince

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Right before this, the Swallow kissed the Prince on the lips and fell down dead at his feet. The lead heart breaking serves a couple of different purposes in this moment. It reveals the depth of the love that the Happy Prince had for the Swallow and how that love differed from his compassion for the townspeople—whereas he wept for their suffering, his own heart breaks at the loss of his companion. At the beginning, the lead heart was used to show that the Prince was not golden all the way through—the narrative emphasized the ugliness and simplicity of the heart, and even the Sparrow reacted with negative surprise to it. Now, however, the heart proves to be the most beautiful part of him after all. In the end, appearances can be deceiving.

❝ Early the next morning the Mayor was walking in the square below in company with the Town Councillors. As they passed the column he looked up at the statue: "Dear me! how shabby the Happy Prince looks!" he said. "How shabby indeed!" cried the Town Councillors, who always agreed with the Mayor; and they went up to look at it.

Related Characters: The Town Councillors , The Mayor (speaker), The Happy Prince

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

Both the Swallow and the Prince have perished, but they remain on the high column, visible to passersby. In a moment parallel to the very beginning of the story, where a town councilor walked by and remarked on the beauty of the statue, the mayor and town councilors now observe his relative shabbiness. Their obsession with appearances and reputations falls even flatter this time, as the reader now knows the poignant reasons behind the statue's shabby looks. The mayor and councilors come off as both greedy and ignorant for their complete inability to recognize the true worth of the Happy Prince. They show no compassion for the sacrifices he has made, preferring to criticize the unpleasant sight that he now brings to the city.

❝ So they pulled down the statue of the Happy Prince. "As he is no longer beautiful he is no longer useful," said the Art Professor at the University.

Related Characters: The Happy Prince

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

After the politicians decide to get rid of the Happy Prince, even the art professor decides to weigh in on the decision. This moment also refers back to the beginning of the story, where the Town Councilor criticized the Happy Prince for being less useful than a weathercock, even though he was beautiful. The statement that the loss of his beauty coincides with the loss of his usefulness is ironic, as it was his very willingness to sacrifice that beauty that permitted the Happy Prince to save starving and freezing citizens from a miserable fate. Once again, the narrative portrays a lack of

compassion as ridiculous—however, importantly, not only rich aristocrats and corrupt politicians succumb to this poisoned worldview. Even an art professor shares and propagates it, showing how easy it is for greedy and negative perspectives to infiltrate a community.

"What a strange thing!" said the overseer of the workmen at the foundry. "This broken lead heart will not melt in the furnace. We must throw it away." So they threw it on a dust-heap where the dead Swallow was also lying. "Bring me the two most precious things in the city," said God to one of His Angels; and the Angel brought Him the leaden heart and the dead bird. "You have rightly chosen," said God, "for in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me."

Related Characters: God (speaker), The Swallow, The Happy Prince

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

The politicians wanted to melt down the statue of the Happy Prince and have him recast in one of their images—however, the lead heart refuses to melt. The lead heart represents both the Prince's love for the Sparrow and his steadfastness as a character. Although the overseer chooses to throw it away onto a dust-heap, that just demonstrates further how blind all of the townspeople are to true value. God calls the broken heart, along with the body of the Sparrow, the two most precious items in the city (against all odds, as readers know that the city also contains jewels and fine dresses, plays and professors and all kinds of other examples of refined civilization). In the end, all of the pleasures offered by civilization have only a temporary lifespan, and only compassion leads to lasting value, particularly the willingness to sacrifice in order to help others. The appearance of God turns this story from fairy tale to parable, leaving the reader with the impression that the lessons about care and compassion ought to apply to one's own life.

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 HAPPY PRINCE

The gilded statue of the Happy Prince stands on a pedestal overlooking a town. Covered in gold leaf with sapphires for eyes and a ruby on his sword-hilt, the statue receives admiration from all passersby, including town councilors who want to foster a reputation for artistic tastes.

This establishes both the prominence of the Happy Prince in the city and the admiration he receives. However, that reputation stems from superficial places—first of all, the statue is "gilded," meaning that gold leaf has been added only to the surface. Secondly, the councilors care too much about their reputations, revealing their narcissism. This beginning sets up the central themes of greed and the superficiality of beauty, which the later plot will elaborate.

A Swallow flies over the city on his way to **Egypt**. He had been delayed after falling in love with a Reed, attracted to her slender waist and gracefulness. When she wouldn't accompany his travels, the Swallow left alone, but ended up stopping under the statue of the Happy Prince to rest.

The Swallow's backstory with the Reed establishes the centrality of romantic love as a theme in this story. However, his love for the Reed was also based on artificial qualities—her external beauty—rather than a deeper connection the two shared. His aspirations toward Egypt continue to show a relative selfishness on the part of the Swallow, as he puts his own needs and desires over either the health of his relationship or any loftier goals.

Surprised at what he takes to be rainfall on a clear night, the Swallow realizes that the Happy Prince has been crying. They introduce themselves, and the Happy Prince describes his childhood in a gated palace, when he lived in San Souci and played in a walled garden—a time full of superficial pleasures when he was ignorant of the suffering in his city. The Swallow is surprised to learn that the Statue is not made of solid gold, but he agrees to help the Happy Prince after he describes his pity for a seamstress sewing passion-flowers on the satin gown of a lady in waiting. She lives in the poor house and cannot care for her sick son, so the Swallow agrees to deliver the ruby from the Prince's sword hilt to her.

Although the Prince bears an epithet describing his "happiness," these tears and the story he subsequently tells show that this name is merely ironic. The Swallow's initial surprise that the Prince's beauty exists only on the surface shows his naivety—like the Prince in his boyhood, the Swallow fixates on superficial pleasures and beauty and cannot see beyond the surface. Nevertheless, he experiences pity—the first stage of compassion—for the Prince, and agrees to help him serve this seamstress. She represents the real irony of the town's poverty, as her job is to beautify the world for the aristocrats, but she does not earn enough in doing so to protect her sick son.

On the way to deliver the ruby, the Swallow sees "old Jews bargaining with each other." He delivers the ruby and stays in order to cool the feverish boy by flapping his wings. After delivering the ruby, the Swallow returns and describes feeling "quite warm" in spite of the cold, due to his good deed. He still intends to go to **Egypt** and describes to the Happy Prince what marvels await him there, from the river-horses to the God Memnon on his great granite throne. Nevertheless, the Prince begs him to stay and help a young playwright freezing in his garret. The man needs to finish a play for the theater director but has become too cold. In the end, the Swallow agrees to stay another night and plucks out one of the Prince's sapphire eyes to deliver to the young man.

The observation of Jews bargaining betrays a more negative aspect of the story's Christian roots, as it depicts a very stereotypical and anti-Semitic picture of Jewish individuals. However, the Swallow's decision to help the boy in addition to delivering the ruby shows a positive spiritual transformation in him. In the Classical period, relationships between older and younger men existed which were both marked as romantic and pedagogical—Wilde clearly models the pairing of the Swallow and Happy Prince after these relationships, as the Swallow begins to receive a moral education (learning that it feels good to help others) from following the Prince's requests. This first task has not completely diverted him from his plans to go to Egypt, where he paints an exotic picture of their fauna and religious traditions. This, combined with the Prince's compassionate desires to assist the downtrodden townspeople, strengthen the story's connection to Christian values. However, this time a playwright requires assistance, which indicates that even the artistic world succumbs to inequality and corruption—the very people producing art for the elite class languish in poverty.

The Swallow returns once more to bid farewell to the Happy Prince, who pleads with him to deliver his other sapphire eye to a little match-girl who has dropped her matches. Without any help, the **child**'s father will beat her. The Swallow agrees and promises also to remain in the town by the Prince's side forever, as he cannot bear to leave him alone and blind on his pedestal.

This third instance of the Prince's compassion reaches a climax of his willingness to sacrifice everything—even his ability to see—for the good of others. The victim in this case makes up the picture of innocence: a young girl undeserving of the suffering that has befallen her. The Swallow's transformation into a morally upright being also culminates here in his promise to remain by the Prince's side. This great act of sacrifice—as the Swallow knows he won't survive the winter—proves the depth of his love and loyalty to the Prince.

The Swallow sits on the Prince's shoulder and recounts tales of **Egypt** and faraway lands. He tells of the red ibises on the Nile, the Sphinx, "who is as old as the world itself," and a great green snake who "has twenty priests to feed it with honey cakes." Though the Prince calls these stories "marvelous," he asks for tales of the suffering townspeople instead, as "there is no Mystery so great as Misery."

The Swallow tries to use these tales of art and beauty to distract the Prince and to improve his life now that he can no longer see. However, the most magnificent tales fail to resonate with the Prince, who prefers a harsh reality to beautiful fantasy. The reality they confront replaces mystery with misery—the real world is full of injustice and inequality, and one ought to treat knowledge of that as more valuable than ignorance and fantasy. This decision emphasizes the moral teachings at the heart of this story, while also connecting art with a desire for escapism and for luxury.

The Swallow flies over the city and reports of the rich making merry while beggars starve at their gates, including **young boys** trying to warm themselves under a bridge while a passing Watchman tries to clear them out. Upon hearing these tales, the Prince wishes to distribute the fine gold leaf gilding him, to alleviate some of this misery. The Swallow agrees to help him and he delivers sheets of gold leaf to the children. While the Prince grows "dull and grey," the "children's faces grew rosier and they laughed and played games in the street."

Winter has just begun in this northern European town, making the contrast between the rich and the poor all the more acute—whereas the wealthy can celebrate and feast in warmth, those without resources suffer in the most unbearable conditions. Although those inside could be accused of mere ignorance, the Watchman who chastises the starving boys betrays his duty and displays gross corruption. While his job ought to entail protecting the weak, when faced with innocent children he chooses to admonish them for loitering—indicating that he would prefer empty streets and the appearance of peace to actually solving the problems caused by inequality. The Prince, of course, opts to sacrifice the very last of his finery—his golden skin—to feed the starving children, and this time the Swallow helps him without complaining, which indicates that his moral education is complete.

Winter finally arrives, and the Swallow grows far too cold. Knowing that only limited time remains to him, he asks to kiss the Prince's hand. Instead, the Prince says, "you must kiss me on the lips, for I love you." The Swallow does so and falls down dead at his feet, at which point the Prince's **leaden heart** "snap[s] right in two."

This moment, which had been foreshadowed all along, marks the tragic climax of the story. The Swallow dies due to his love of the Prince and his refusal to move somewhere warmer for the duration of winter, but he receives one final kiss. In the inverse of the healing fairy tale kiss of true love—as seen in Sleeping Beauty or Snow White—the final kiss does not save the Swallow, but rather precedes his and the Prince's deaths. As dark as this ending might be, the kiss that the pair shares and their simultaneous tragic deaths illuminate how true and profound their connection was—the very tragedy of this moment highlights its worth.

The next morning, the Mayor spots the grey statue with the dead Swallow at its feet and complains of its shabbiness. The Town Councillors agree, calling the statue "little better than a beggar," and they decide to have the Happy Prince melted down and recast into a new statue (though they fight as to whom he should represent—the Mayor wishes a statue of himself, but each of the town councillors think it should be of them instead). The Art Professor at the University goes so far as to say, "as he is no longer beautiful he is no longer useful."

For any reader of this story, the arrogance that the Mayor and Councillors display here is simply ridiculous—they make light of the enormous and touching sacrifices that the Swallow and Prince have made for the betterment of the town, and instead notice only that the Prince no longer appears beautiful on the outside. To emphasize their shallowness, they fight over whom the new statue should represent, caring only for their own reputations, and showing no regard for any other concerns or considerations. Their lack of compassion in comparison to the grand sacrifices of the Swallow and Prince marks them as antagonists in this story. Significantly, this problem extends past the government and into the university: the art professor claims that the statue lost his usefulness with his beauty, even though any reader knows that the Happy Prince's real value was embedded in his compassionate heart and giving character.

The overseer of the workmen at the foundry melts down the statue but notes with shock that the broken **lead heart** refuses to melt. Giving up, he tosses the heart aside on a dust-heap along with the body of the Swallow. Soon after, God asks one of his Angels to bring the "two most precious things in the city." The Angel brings the leaden heart and the dead bird, and God agrees that he had rightly chosen. The Happy Prince and the Swallow would be rewarded eternally in Paradise for their compassion and sacrifice.

The attempt to melt the leaden heart serves two purposes. It drives home the ignorance and inferiority of the townspeople, who wish to destroy the most valuable entities in the town—not out of evil or malice, but out of unfiltered ignorance. Second, it highlights the heart's symbolic heft. In not melting, it proves to be steadfast and loyal—almost magical in its durability, the heart persists while all of the jewels and finery that were so admired disappear. God confirms this value in his final appearance when he chooses to reward both the Swallow and Prince with an eternity in Paradise. In this moment, the fairy tale alludes to Biblical parables. Whereas earthly pleasures disappear, actions undertaken out of compassion last.

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