

The Happy Prince

by Oscar Wilde

Focus Spot

Character Sketch:

1. The Happy Prince:

The Happy Prince is not only the protagonist of this story and but also its namesake. He was once a sheltered prince who led a life of pleasure, and never knew what sadness or grief was.

Upon his death the Happy Prince has now turned into a gilded statue and placed upon a pedestal overlooking the town where he earlier lived in a high-walled palace. The Prince has been described as exceedingly beautiful with golden skin, sapphires for eyes, and a ruby on his sword-hilt.

Even though his external beauty impresses everyone around him, he now realizes that his beauty is only skin-deep. He feels empathetic towards the townspeople and realizes his true worth lies in his compassion for his townspeople and his willingness to sacrifice for them. The Happy Prince suffers due to his sympathy for all of the misery he can see from his high perch.

The “happiness” indicated in his 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 depicted as a Christ-like figure, looking over humanity and sacrificing his existence 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.

2. The Swallow:

The other protagonist of “The Happy Prince,” is the Swallow, a tiny bird on its way 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. Though he wants to join his companions in the sunny land of Egypt, he begins to care for the Happy Prince and remains in the town to help him deliver jewels and gold to townspeople in need.

In Spite of not being 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 gradually understands the value of good deeds. In the mentor/mentee relationship that developed between the Happy Prince and the Swallow, the little bird plays the role of a younger mentee who needs to be set on the right track.

At the beginning, he expresses trepidation at delaying his own pleasure for others, speaking in the context of the typical Victorian ideals that Wilde criticized throughout the story. However,

his love for the Prince helps him grow, overcome his own selfish interests and proves that moral behavior can be learned.

At the end, we witness the Swallow making the ultimate sacrifice out of his love—as 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 in this cold town through the winter will certainly lead to his 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.