

THE HAPPY PRINCE

- OSCAR WILDE

Summary & Theme

The story “The Happy Prince” has at least three themes. The first theme of the story is that outward beauty is nothing. It is just a show. The real beauties are love and sacrifices. The second theme is that love and sacrifice are two saving forces. The third theme is that there is great gap between the rich and the poor, the rulers and the masses.

When the happy prince is alive, he lives in a palace where sorrow is not allowed to enter. He lives a life of happiness. However, when he dies his courtiers set up his statue on a tall column.

The statue of the happy prince sees all the misery of the city. He weeps when he sees people in trouble. He wants to help them.

A swallow stays at the feet of the statue of the happy prince for the night. On happy prince’s request, he prolongs his stay and helps the poor with the ruby and the sapphires. When the happy prince cannot see any more, the swallow decides to stay with the happy prince forever. He helps the people with the gold covering of the happy prince. At the end, he dies frost. The heart of the happy prince also breaks.

Once, the mayor and the town councilors pass by the statue of the happy prince. They are shocked to see it without ruby, sapphires, and gold covering. It looks ugly without them. They pull it down and decide to make another statue. The heart of the happy prince not melt in the furnace and the workers throw it on the dust heap where the dead swallow is already lying. An angel comes and takes both the heart and the dead Swallow to God as two precious things.

Q. Discuss the THEME AND SUMMARY OF THE STORY – THE HAPPY PRINCE

1. FAIRY TALE:

No doubt, the story “The Happy Prince” is a fairy tale. In a fairy tale we find unreal characters like fairies, giants, witches and talking animals. It is a story, which is hard to believe. The events of a fairy tale do not happen in real life. The most important quality of a fairy tale is that it always has a happy conclusion.

When we read the story, we find that it is a perfect fairy tale. It fulfils all the requirements of a fairy tale. Firstly, we find two imaginary characters – a talking Swallow and a talking statue. In our daily life, we do not find such characters. Secondly, we see the statue of the Happy Prince shedding tears on the sufferings of the poor. He has sapphire eyes and a lead heart. However, he can see through these sapphire eyes and has love and sympathies for the poor in his lead heart. This is highly unbelievable and it does not happen in real life. A statue has no eyes and no heart.

Thirdly, we see that the Swallow first picks off ruby, sapphires, and then gold covering without any tools. This is also unbelievable. Fourthly, the end of the story is also fairy tale like. No doubt, the Swallow and the statue of the Happy Prince are dead and on the dust heap. However, this is not the real ending. The real ending is that the Swallow will always sing in the garden of Paradise and the Happy Prince will always praise God in the city of gold. This is quite a happy ending and fulfils the most important requirement of a fairy tale. Therefore, we can conclude that the story “The Happy Prince” is a perfect fairy tale.

2. POVERTY:

The writer has brought out poverty in a very beautiful manner. The son of the tailor is suffering from fever. He is thirsty and asking for oranges. However, she is a poor tailor. She cannot buy oranges for her son. She is embroidering passionflowers for the Queen's maids-of-honour. Her poverty is very touching. The poverty of the writers of the Victorian age has also been reflected very beautifully. The young writer is cold and hungry. Hunger has made him faint.

The little weeping match girl also depicts the poverty of the Victorian age. She has no shoes on her stockings, and her little head is bare. The beggars are sitting at the gates of the houses of the rich people. In dark lanes, there are children who have white starving faces. They are looking out listlessly at the black streets. People do not have their own houses go two little boys are lying under the archway of a bridge. It is cold so they are lying in one another's arm to keep themselves warm. They are very hungry.

Therefore, all these points suggest the poverty of the Victorian age.

3. Exploitation in the story "The Happy Prince"

The writer has brought out exploitation very beautifully. The people at court, the Jews, and the rich are exploiting the poor. The Mayor and the Town Councilors represent the exploitation of the power. The son of the seamstress is suffering from fever, but she cannot attend to him. She is embroidering passionflowers for the Queen's made-of-honour to wear at the next court-ball. The poor are working hard, but they cannot buy even oranges. This is the worst kind of exploitation.

On one side, some people are so poor that they are starving and on the other hand the rich are making merry and the Jews are weighing out money on copper scales. The writers of that time are also being exploited. They are cold and cold with hunger. The Mayor and the Town Councilors are exploiting their powers. Each one of them himself wants to have built statue. The Mayor even issues a proclamation that birds are not to be allowed to die there. This is purely an exploitation of power.

4. Hypocrisy in the story "The Happy Prince":

The writer has brought out hypocrisy in the story "The Happy Prince" in a very beautiful manner. One of the town councilors does not have artistic taste, but he wants to show that he has that artistic taste. He praises the beauty of the Happy Prince in the most inartistic way. He says that the statue is as beautiful as a weathercock. His simile shows how ignorant he is. He is so hypocrite that he adds that he is not quite useful for the fear of the people. Because in those days people believed that art must have had some usefulness, otherwise it was bad art.

The town councilors are the worst example of hypocrisy. They always agree with the Mayor just to get his favour. They are so hypocrites that they even repeat the words spoken by the Mayor. When the professor sees the Swallow, he writes a long letter to the local newspaper. It is full of so many words that people cannot understand it. However, they still quote it to each other just to show off.

This is how the writer shows the hypocrisy of the people.

5. Another theme of the story "The Happy Prince":

The story "The Happy Prince" has at least three themes. The first theme of the story is that outward beauty is nothing it is just a show. The real beauty is the love and sacrifice. The end of the story gives this idea.

The Happy Prince has a lead heart, but this heart is full of sympathies for the poor and the needy. He sacrifices his eyes and beauty just to help them. He gives away his gold covering bit by bit to the poor. Now without his eyes and gold covering, he looks so ugly that he is sent to furnace to melt. He has lost outward beauty, but with sacrifice and love, he has achieved spiritual beauty. God is pleased with him. After his death, he is taken to the city of gold where he will praise God forever.

The same happens with the Swallow. He sacrifices his life for the love of the Happy Prince. Nevertheless, he also achieves spiritual beauty. He will sing for evermore in God's garden of Paradise.

The second theme is that love and sacrifice are two saving forces. This world is full of poverty, hypocrisy, and exploitation. If there were no love and sacrifice, the world could not go on its axis. It is because of love and sacrifice that this life is going on. Therefore, it is true that love and sacrifice are two saving forces.

The third theme of the story is that there is great gap between the rich and the poor, the rulers and the masses. The Happy Prince did not know about the poor and their problems when he was alive. Therefore, it means that the rulers at that time did not know about the problems and the difficulties of the masses.

Q. Why does the Happy Prince weep?

The Happy Prince weeps because he cannot bear the sufferings and the miseries of the poor and the needy. He weeps because he has a very soft heart, although it is made of lead. This heart had nothing but the sympathies for the poor and the needy. The writer values this lead heart so much that he tells the reader that this heart does not melt in the furnace.

The Happy Prince used to live in the Palace of Sans-Souci. Sorrow was not allowed to enter the Palace. At that time, the Happy Prince did not know what tears were. In the daytime, he used to play with his companions in the garden. In the evening, he led the dance in the Great Hall. There was a very lofty wall around the garden. The Happy Prince did not know that what was beyond that wall. Inside this wall, everything was beautiful and he was very happy. His courtiers called him Happy Prince. After his death, his courtiers made his statue and set it up on a very tall column. Now from the height he can see all the ugliness and all the misery of the city. Therefore, he weeps because he has a very soft heart and he cannot stand the miseries of the people. It is because of this soft heart that he sacrifices his beauty and sapphire eyes.

When the Happy Prince gave away his sapphire eyes, he could not see any more. Therefore, he asked the Swallow to fly over his city and tell him what he saw there. The Swallow flew over the great city and reported to the Happy Prince what he saw.

He told the Happy Prince about the condition of the rich and the poor. The rich were making merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars were sitting at the gates. In the dark lanes, he saw the white faces of starving children. These children were so hungry that they were looking out listlessly at the black streets.

He told the Happy Prince a very miserable thing. He told him about the two boys who were hungry and homeless. These boys were lying under the archway of a bridge. They were cold so they were lying in one another's arms to keep themselves warm, but the watchman did not let those boys lie under the bridge either. He drove them out into the rain.

Therefore, the Swallow told the Happy Prince about the condition of the rich and the poor. The rich were hungry and homeless.

When the Happy Prince listened to this, he asked the Swallow to give his gold covering to the poor and the needy.

Q. The end of the story “The Happy Prince”.

The story “The Happy Prince” is a fairy tale and the end of a fairy tale is always happy. In a fairy tale characters face difficulties and they endanger their lives to get their desired goals. They face so many hardships that it appears that they cannot succeed. However, at the end they always succeed and live happily ever after.

In the story, “The Happy Prince” the end appears tragic. The Swallow and the Happy Prince both die and are thrown on a dust heap. However, this is not the real end of the story. The Swallow and the Happy Prince has sacrificed their lives to help the poor and the needy. God is happy with their sacrifices. Therefore, God rewards them and orders that the Swallow will sing in the garden of paradise and the Happy Prince will praise him.

Therefore, we see that this is quite a happy ending. It fulfills the most important requirement of a fairy tale. This end cannot be called a tragic end.

MY OPINION OF THE THEME

I think the main theme of the story is to ask what should be our response to suffering. The prince and swallow are initially not aware of it. The rich people choose to ignore it. A socialist response is to redistribute wealth from rich to poor, but Wilde considers this too materialistic (the living always think that gold can make them happy), and proposes a christian response: we must give all we have to those who are suffering, thereby achieving our own spiritual growth. Wilde's aesthetic philosophy is another theme as you point out: the relationship between virtue and beauty, the contrast between inner and outer beauty. And the backdrop is composed of colourful vignettes of victorian society.

But the best part is the ending. I can't agree that it must be happy: of the five stories published in the same volume, three have sad endings, and one (the selfish giant) is happy. I would say this one is ambiguous. Consider what the story would be like without these two sentences. The themes would still be fully developed, and there would still be no doubt the prince and swallow were the heroes of the story: a bit like the ending of the devoted friend. You could say that the ending is a rhetorical flourish, which lifts the readers emotions while highlighting the religious sub-text. On the other hand, you could say that the ending compares god's response to suffering unfavourably with that of the prince - he is the prince of the universe, aware of all the suffering, and yet does nothing: this is the problem of evil. The garden of paradise is like the Palace of Sans-Souci, and the prince and the bird have returned to the start of the story.