

A moral tale: religion and instruction in "the happy prince"

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



The Happy Prince by Oscar Wilde tells the story of a personified gold statue that used to be alive, that slowly sacrifices himself in order to lessen the suffering of others. He asks the help of a bird, who also ends up sacrificing his life in order to fulfill the moral mission of the statue. For their sacrifices, God grants them an eternal spot in his “ garden” and his “ city of gold”. This story is a moral tale that reflects on the nature of happiness and the most moral way to conduct oneself—happiness comes from altruism, and the “ best” people sacrifice themselves for the sake of others.

In the beginning of the story, the people of the city see the Happy Prince, the statue, as beautiful and happy. However, the statue cries because he sees all of the suffering in the city—he is not happy the way that people in the city view him, suggesting that the reasons that the city believe he is happy do not bring him true happiness. For example, “ sad men looked at the statue and said, ‘ I am glad that someone in the world is happy.’ However, the statue explains to the bird he meets that when he was alive, “ I was called the Happy Prince. I was pleased with my little world. Now I am dead, and they have put me up here. I can see all the unhappiness of my city. My heart now is made of a cheap metal. But even that poor heart can feel, and so I cry.” The Happy Prince aches because of the suffering of the world, despite the way he was happy and ignorant of this in his past life. The bird says to himself in response to this, “ He is not all gold—he is only gold on the outside.” This represents that the way that the Happy Prince found happiness in his past life was superficial, because it did nothing to alleviate the suffering of the world. Although he appears happy to outsiders, his soul is tormented because he finally understands the pain of the world.

The bird dies and the Happy Prince is thrown out, but God accepts them into his paradise, which suggests a religious lesson in addition to a moral one—people should sacrifice themselves for others while on Earth in order to find happiness and to live in paradise after death. The Happy Prince slowly destroys himself for the sake of helping other people. He asks the bird to take the jewels and stones from his body, and then finally asks the bird to take the gold off his body and give it to the people of the city. He makes these sacrifices because sacrificing himself like this is the only thing that feels fulfilling to him, he cannot feel happiness while he has riches that other people do not. The bird sacrifices himself by helping—he needs to go to Egypt for the winter, but dies in the cold because he chooses to help the Happy Prince instead. At the very end of the short story, the Happy Prince's heart, which is all that is left of him, is thrown away by workmen along with the bird's body. However, God rewards this sacrifice. He asks his servants, "Bring me the two best things in the city," and the servants bring him the Prince's broken heart and the dead bird's body. Thus, God allows them to live in eternal paradise. Without the religious component to the story, the reader may have questioned whether the sacrifices that the Happy Prince and the bird made were worth it. After all, they both gave their lives, and they may not have made much of a difference in the overall living standard of the city. Their sacrifices on Earth were not recognized—the workmen threw out the bird and what was left of the Happy Prince. However, God ultimately rewarded these sacrifices.

The lesson of The Happy Prince is clear: Sacrificing oneself for others is a moral and religious duty. The Happy Prince began his life being happy because of the riches of his life, but soon realized that he could not be happy while others suffered. The bird he met helped in his sacrifice, and both of them gave their lives. These deeds were not rewarded on Earth, although they made the lives of others easier, and they did not receive any sort of recognition for their sacrifices until God recognized them. The intent of this story is for the reader to draw parallels to their own lives—a person should not do good deeds because they want to be rewarded, they should do them because it is the right thing to do, and that God will ultimately reward this moral behavior.