



# Selfless Commitment to the Comfort of Others: A Critical Reading of “The Happy Prince” by Oscar Wilde

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## ABSTRACT

*In the short story ‘The Happy Prince’, Oscar Wilde uses all his imaginative powers to convey a universal message of charity through its protagonists, a chunk of lead turned into a statue of a human form, which sends the jewels and gold that furnish its body parts and outfit to the needy to recover them from various ails of poverty, and a swallow, who commits himself to carry out all the charitable missions he is assigned to by the statue. Finally, the Happy Prince loses its elegance as an object of beautification and material value and appears as an eyesore in the city while the Swallow falls dead unable to resist the cold and hunger. They become rubbish in the eyes of the city authorities but get sanctified through the intervention of Angels of the Paradise and God himself. The story conveys thus a heroic act of charity where one donates his body parts while the other donates his life for the well-being of the poor and needy. Although the story has a Christian basis, the character of the Happy Prince parallels that of Prince Siddhartha (who later became the Buddha) in his opinion about suffering and misery and his commitment to help others. While analysing Wilde’s application of allegory in the projection of his sense of charity and the coherence he maintains in combining reality and fantasy in storytelling with a didactic aim, the paper pays attention to his use of irony, sarcasm, and humour in achieving social criticism.*

**KEYWORDS:** Oscar Wilde, The Happy Prince, charity, poverty, loyalty, self-sacrifice, monument, authority, selflessness, mission

## INTRODUCTION

This paper concentrates on Oscar Wilde’s appreciation of generosity and charity in his short story “The Happy Prince”. It studies the development of the allegory in it where a statue and a swallow act as live humans in investigating the problems of poverty in the surroundings and working out timely solutions for them. The problems are of universal relevance as poverty affects all humans in societies ruled by consumerism, but the solutions, although of universal appeal, demand a very high degree of self-sacrifice that cannot be expected of every human. Both the Happy Prince and the Swallow prove to be individuals who cultivate their minds in such a way that they develop a moral stamina to go to any extreme to help others. They both meet their end in implementing the virtues they subliminally cultivate in exposure to reality. But they leave an imprint of generosity for everybody to value however ambitious it can be. The paper is mainly composed of a critical discussion with attention to its literary potential led under eleven sub-topics: 1) The Spectacular Happy Prince Monument, 2) Compliments and Condemnations Received, 3) The Heart-Broken Swallow, 4) The Swallow’s New Abode, 5) Happy Prince Revealing His Identity, 6) The Swallow’s First Mission, 7) The Swallow’s

Second Mission, 8) The Swallow’s Third Mission, 9) Leave-Taking After All Missions, 10) A Voluntary Offer to Keep Company, and 11) Proving Irreplaceable. Overall, the study tries to assess Wilde’s creativity and social awareness by analysing the short story from narratological, aesthetic, didactic, and moralistic perspectives in a trajectory developed from the text.

## The Spectacular Happy Prince Monument

Oscar Wilde introduces the Happy Prince as the monument of a prince who lived in the Sanssouci Palace in Potsdam near Berlin and died early in his life. The Sanssouci Palace in reality is the former summer palace of Frederick the Great, the King of Prussia, and is notable for the numerous temples and follies in the park (UNESCO NHK, 2014). No matter what its history is, in the short story, it is an imaginatively created piece of art standing just for ornamentation of the neoclassical marketplace of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century European city.

“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” (Wilde, 1888).

The statue is personified by using third-person masculine



pronouns (he, him, himself, and his) to refer to it throughout the narration. So, it is convenient to follow suit with Wilde and consider the Happy Prince a personage. The tallness of his pedestal and the richness of his look have made him a symbol of prestige that is meant to shine throughout the year. The gold on his body and outfit, the sapphires studded in the places of his eyes, and the ruby studded on his sword hilt signify his ceremonial presence in the city. The artist who created him seems to have faithfully followed the material-device equilibrium principle (Zhirmunsky, 1985: 268, 276) in using such rich materials to suit such rich techniques in the process of blowing life into a chunk of bronze that is meant to cheer up every visitor of the city, no matter what weather conditions and chaos the seasonal differences entail.

### **Compliments and Condemnations Received**

The genius of the artist who brought the Happy Prince into the world is made to live through the common people's admiration of him. Their comments are made from a variety of angles, depending on what they are and how they perceive his virtues. Wilde reports that "a sensible mother of a little boy who was crying for the moon" appreciates the contentment of the Happy Prince as a good quality for young children to cultivate. "The Happy Prince never dreams of crying for anything." While silently consoling children, the Happy Prince manages to cheer up grown-ups too, like the "disappointed man" who "gazed at the wonderful statue". He is given an angelic identity by "the Charity Children ... in their bright scarlet cloaks, and their clean white pinafores". Although the Happy Prince lives among the ordinary as a source of positive energy and inspiration, he is snubbed by the elite. The dispute over the Happy Prince that occurs between the Mathematics Master and the group of children suggests that the fantasy generated by this beautiful statue has no impact on the elite of the town. Wilde establishes this claim through the image of the Mathematics Master who "frowned and looked very severe" and "did not approve of children dreaming". The boastful vainglorious town councillor who ambitiously tries to demonstrate his bogus artistic taste as well as his mediocre practicality, compares the Happy Prince to a weather cock "beautiful" but "not quite so useful". Wilde shows that the hypocritical condemnation he makes this way is counterbalanced by the numerous compliments the Happy Prince receives from the common people by remaining the epitome of happiness.

### **The Heart-Broken Swallow**

The story becomes dramatic with the emergence of "a little Swallow" who, left alone quite unusually in this wintry weather, occupies the pedestal where the Happy Prince is standing. In terms of a brief narrative, Wilde provides a pathetic introduction to the broken-hearted swallow. Swallows are excellent flyers and use their flying skills to feed and attract a mate. Infatuated with the slender waist of a

Reed, this Swallow stays behind, while his friends have gone away to Egypt six weeks before, on their usual flight to escape from the winter. Reed is a passerine bird with a streaked brown head and is more streaked below. The Swallow and the Reed do not make a good couple at all because of their living habits. The Reed is a domestic bird, and the Swallow is a migrant. His summer-long attempt, made with various flying tricks, to convince her of his love stops when she joins her relations on their flight. He goes on courting her despite the other Swallows' warning, 'It is a ridiculous attachment ... she has no money and far too many relations...' Finally, he understands that the Reed is a domestic bird whereas he is a traveller, and they will not match each other. The Reed politely declines his invitation to join him to go the Pyramids as she remains attached to her home. As a late traveller trying to catch up with his group, the Swallow happens to fly across the city. On seeing the tall column, he decides to stay up there as 'it is a fine position with plenty of fresh air'. So, he alights just between the feet of the Happy Prince. Wilde uses the Swallow as a device to get the statue of the Happy Prince to become active as when he was alive. The story starts moving in the form of an allegory after this important reunion between the Swallow and the Happy Prince.

### **The Swallow's New Abode**

As he does with the statue of the Happy Prince, Wilde personifies the Swallow with due rhetoric. The Swallow's general sense of wealth and riches indicated through the warnings he receives from his relatives against his association with the Reed reflects on his discovery that the space between the Happy Prince's feet is lined with gold. 'I have a golden bedroom,' is an exclamation made in excitement and happiness rather than a passing remark. Yet Wilde does not forget the Swallow's bird nature. He depicts the sleeping habits of the Swallow, suggesting that "he was putting his head under his wing" as "he prepared to go to sleep". This achieves a distinction between the humans and the birds in their sleep which is one of the most essential activities in life. Again, his reaction to the tears from the statue efficiently compares him to a human. The bird's observation of the sky to find out how a drop of water fell on him suggests his sensitivity to the atmosphere as well as his sense of inquiry into what happens in his surroundings. His reflections on the cloudless sky, the "clear and bright" stars, the dreadful "climate in the north of Europe", Reed's attraction to the rain, and Reed's "selfishness" out of which she stayed back, all contribute to the characterization of the bird as an intelligent and reflective human. Mistaken that the tears from the statue are raindrops, he decides to suggest an attitude common to both humans and birds. When there is a threat to existence, it is better to leave that place. It is out of curiosity he looks up and finds that what he mistook for raindrops are tears from the statue.

"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" (Wilde, 1888).

Out of the charming Happy Prince, gold from top to toe, standing gracefully on the pedestal and shining in the moonlight, Wilde creates a picture of rich, iridescent beauty and inspiration. By this image of serenity, the sparkling tears dropping from his sapphire eyes are conferred with a sublime feeling of compassion. The Swallow's pity is out of the question as Wilde generates so much feeling through the form of the statue as well as the setting in which it is installed.

### **Happy Prince Revealing His Identity**

The narrative technique Wilde uses in terms of personification becomes effective in presenting complex emotional developments in the characters. Accordingly, the Happy Prince's tears do their task. So fast they have flown that they have already "drenched" the bird seeking shelter between the feet of the Happy Prince. The Swallow comes to feel that the Happy Prince is not simply an inanimate piece of bronze but a live person who feels the pulse of the poor people residing in the city in his purview.

"Who are you?"

"I am the Happy Prince..."

"Why are you weeping then?" (Wilde, 1888)

The dialogue between them projects a paradox through the confrontation between the elements of happiness and weeping in stages. Asked about the meaning of his tears, the Happy Prince makes a touching regretful confession to the luxurious life he led when he was alive.

"When I was alive and had a human heart ... 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" (Wilde, 1888).

The lifestyle he followed when he was alive and the confession to the disillusionment he had with seeing the suffering people are analogous to the episodes from the life of the Buddha, where during his *Bodhisattva* days, Prince Siddhartha determines to renounce his palatial life when he encounters the four omens of *samsara* - an old man, a sick man, a dead body, and an ascetic - which function as pieces

of a puzzle he has to solve with his super-intellectual powers (Anandamaithreya, 1985). The difference between them lies in the fact that Prince Siddhartha achieves the necessary intimation with the reality behind life when he is alive whereas the Happy Prince does it after death and his effigy has been installed on a pillar overlooking the quarters the poor occupy. The Happy Prince reveals that his heart, though made of lead, is about to burst with the pangs of sorrow he feels. The incalculable degree of compassion they both feel for the poor puts the Happy Prince and Prince Siddhartha on par with each other. The Happy Prince makes a lofty impression of himself on the Swallow, his interlocutor. The respect the Swallow feels for the Happy Prince, on listening to his confession, is significant in his decision not to embarrass the latter by asking him about the kind of metal of which his inner parts are made.

### **The Swallow's First Mission**

Because of the virtuous nature of the Happy Prince, the Swallow feels obliged towards him. The Happy Prince requests the Swallow to go on an errand. Wilde suggests the humility and pleasantness of the Happy Prince by describing his voice with the epithets "low" and "musical". As if he is groping for words, the prince repeats the term "far away" twice to imply the shock he feels from the sorrow of a poor woman unable to give an orange to her little son, who is crying for one in delirium. "Her face is thin and worn, and she has coarse, red hands, all pricked by the needle, for she is a seamstress." He appreciates the woman's struggle for existence in his study of her worn-out hands. There is an irony in the job she is engaged in right now. "She is embroidering passion flowers on a satin gown for the loveliest of the Queen's maids-of-honour to wear at the next Court-ball." In the real sense she is painstakingly labouring on the vanity of another woman. The woman described as "the loveliest of the Queen's maids-of-honour" is supposed to appear smart "at the next Court ball" in the "satin gown" being decorated by her. Wilde satirizes the injustice of how one woman shines in society at the expense of another woman. The noblewoman's worry is about the look of her dress while the seamstress's worry is about how to give some oranges to her son suffering from fever. The Happy Prince from his tall pedestal focuses his eyes upon her while many others take no notice of her sorrow. Out of great sympathy with the woman and her son, the Happy Prince makes a great plea to the Swallow:

"Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow, will you not bring her the ruby out of my sword-hilt? My feet are fastened to this pedestal, and I cannot move" (Wilde, 1888).

He pronounces the apostrophe "Swallow" thrice to make him feel that this errand is of utmost importance to him. Then very politely he requests the Swallow to take her "the ruby" out of his "sword hilt". The negative interrogative use of the auxiliary "will" in the second person suggests the Happy Prince feels highly obliged by the Swallow's positive response



he anticipates. As if to justify his appeal to the Swallow, he describes his inability to move because of being "fastened to the pedestal". Although he is a prince, he sounds unassuming in all the gestures he makes.

Wilde does not create an all-submissive character out of the Swallow. However respectful and sympathetic he feels with the Happy Prince, the Swallow has his priorities. His friends are waiting for him in Egypt. He is envious of them as they are right now in warm weather, "flying up and down the Nile, and talking to the large lotus flowers". He visualizes what sports they are doing and how they are getting ready to go to sleep in a pyramid where the mummy of a great king lies. He suggests he knows what finery is through his reference to "a chain of pale green jade" around the king's neck and takes the scintillating look of the Happy Prince for granted on noticing his interior is made of other metals. The disobedience and nonchalance of the Swallow urges the Happy Prince to repeat his request in the same fashion. This time there is a variation in his justification. "The boy is so thirsty, and the mother so sad." His sole intention is to quench the boy's thirst and soothe the mother's heart. The Swallow responds this time with an explanation for his repulsion about boys, referring to an unsuccessful attempt two boys made once to hit him with stones. While boasting about his invulnerability as a descendant from "a family famous for its agility" he condemns their disrespect for another living being. Nevertheless, on seeing the sad face of the Happy Prince, the little Swallow feels sorry for him. As a mark of respect for him, he offers to carry out the mission he is requested of.

Inspired by the Happy Prince's fervent gratification, "the Swallow picked out the great ruby from the Happy Prince's sword and flew away with it in his beak over the roofs of the town." The 18th-century ornate gothic architecture of the city and the ballroom music of the time accompany him throughout his flight. Wilde allows the bird to juxtapose the young noblewoman who is going to wear the ball dress being decorated by the seamstress and the Happy Prince making an invaluable donation for the happiness of the seamstress. While the noblewoman insensitively complains about the seamstress's laziness the Happy Prince prays for the seamstress's recovery from her sorrow. Against the vanity of the noblewoman the Happy Prince's virtue looks apart.

After the ostentatious limits of the city the Swallow enters an area of grotesque realities where "the poor house" is in "a ghetto". In the surroundings "the lanterns hanging to the masts of the ships" and "the old Jews bargaining with each other" suggest a cracker-barrel spectacle of mundane affairs of a harbour town. Out of loyalty to his new friend, the Swallow acts with great commitment. He enters the house and surveys the inside carefully.

"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" (Wilde, 1888).

The sorrow of the boy's struggle and the mother's tiredness have dominated the atmosphere. The Swallow places the ruby at the most appropriate place where the mother is definite to find it. On his own, he spends some time "fanning the boy's forehead with his wings" lulling him into a delicious slumber". Through the wings fluttering for the sake of the boy's comfort, the Swallow manifests the inspiration he drew from the Happy Prince who is a philanthropist par excellence. Once he feels satisfied with his mission, he returns to the Happy Prince to report what he has done. When the Swallow reveals his radiance and fitness to resist the cold, after the long flight, the Happy Prince interprets it because of the "good action" he carried out. In the mirth of the spiritual satisfaction, he derived from his act of charity, the swallow goes to sleep that night. This concludes his first mission for the sake of the Happy Prince. The comfort of a little boy is the result of the first donation the Happy Prince makes.

### **The Swallow's Second Mission**

When the day broke the Swallow "flew down to the river and had a bath". "What a remarkable phenomenon ... A swallow in winter!" The exclamation made by the Professor of Ornithology does not stop there but hits the newspaper headlines. In no time the Swallow becomes a celebrity as everyone starts reading the scientific article the professor wrote on him and talks about him in their conversations. Determined to go to Egypt where his friends are, the Swallow visits all the public monuments as if to give courtesy calls to them, and finally sits on top of the church steeple. Everywhere he gets fascinated by hearing the comments the sparrows make about him. 'What a distinguished stranger!' Thus, by emphasizing the unusualness of the Swallow's presence in this old German city covered with snow now, Wilde adds so much weight to the missions he has been carrying out for the Happy Prince.

The friendship the Swallow has entered with the Happy Prince is signified in his visit to the latter to say goodbye and to offer to carry out for him any commission in Egypt. The Happy Prince has a commission for the Swallow, but it is to be carried out within the city itself. Fixed to his pedestal, feeling utterly helpless, the Happy Prince earnestly pleads with the Swallow in the same tone as before to stay with him a night longer. In response, the Swallow relates his visualization of what his friends would be doing in Egypt now. The mythical statue of the river horse that couches among the bulrushes, the statue of God Memnon seated on a great granite throne, the clear sky with the stars shining, the emergence of the morning star and the yellow lions with eyes like green beryl roaring aloud and coming down to the water's edge at noon, provide a visual description of the adventures his friends are supposed to have during their flight over the Second Cataract

the following day. The ambitious programme awaiting him in Egypt suggests the enormity of the sacrifice he intends to make for the sake of his friendship with the Happy Prince. The Happy Prince makes his request in the following terms.

"Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow, ... far away across the city I see a young man in a garret. He is leaning over a desk covered with papers, and in a tumbler by his side, there is a bunch of withered violets. His hair is brown and crisp, his lips are red as a pomegranate, and he has large and dreamy eyes. He is trying to finish a play for the Director of the Theatre, but he is too cold to write any more. There is no fire in the grate, and hunger has made him faint" (Wilde, 1888).

Like before he pronounces the apostrophe "Swallow" thrice to make him feel how important this errand is for him. The young playwright is very much to suggest Wilde's own life as a prisoner "physically depleted, emotionally exhausted and flat broke" before he "died destitute in Paris at the age of 46" (Biography.com, 2014). The image of the workaholic playwright suffering from cold, hunger and fatigue touches the Swallow "who has a good heart". Wilde achieves humour out of the Swallow's overlooking that makes him offer the Happy Prince, 'Shall I take him another ruby?' This implies that the Swallow is ignorant of the very few possessions the Happy Prince has and presumes that he has a stock of jewels to throw away for the poor.

The Happy Prince's unexpected response this time introduces him as the *Bodhisattva* fulfilling *daana paramita*, the perquisite of giving to become a Buddha. In the Buddhist *Jataka Stories*, there are episodes where the *Bodhisattva* gives away his own eyes (Cowell, 1997).

"Alas! I have no ruby now ... my eyes are all that I have left. They are made of rare sapphires, which were brought out of India a thousand years ago. Pluck out one of them and take it to him. He will sell it to the jeweller, buy food and firewood, and finish his play.

"Dear Prince, ... I cannot do that'.

'Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow, ... do as I command you" (Wilde, 1888).

The sublime meaning of the gesture of generosity and sacrifice the Happy Prince makes here is highlighted through the reaction the Swallow makes. The Swallow weeps at the idea of plucking an eye from the statue and, in tears of sorrow, refuses to do so. The Happy Prince enjoys his authority in society and orders the Swallow to carry out his command.

Having plucked out the Happy Prince's eye, the Swallow finds his way to the student garret where "the young man had his head buried in his hands", places the beautiful sapphire on the withered violets, and watches his reaction from a distance. When the young man is up, he finds the jewel. Then he happily cries, 'I am beginning to be appreciated ... this

is from some great admirer. Now I can finish my play.' The Swallow's second mission for the Happy Prince culminates in the happiness of the young playwright, the resuscitation of whose spirit is to ensure not only his wellbeing but also the advancement of art, culture, and thinking of his land and nation. The Happy Prince's second donation is meant to cheer up an enterprising young man whose labour is meant to be the joy of many people.

### **The Swallow's Third Mission**

The day after his second mission the Swallow flies down to the harbour and perches on the mast of a large vessel. Although he cries that he is going to Egypt the sailors engaged in unloading big chests from it do not hear him. It is a dull day for him as he feels he is ignored by everybody. When he visits the Happy Prince to say goodbye for the second time, the Happy Prince, in the same humble tone as before, begs him to stay another day longer. In response, the Swallow warns how chilly and snowy the winter will be in that city in the days to come and relates how happy he can be in Egypt where it will be warm. He suggests temptations through his weather forecasts for Egypt where currently "the sun is warm on the green palm trees, and the crocodiles lie in the mud and look lazily about them". He portrays the jolly time he is looking forward to having with his friends in terms of excitement. "In Egypt, my companions are building a nest in the Temple of Baalbek, and the pink and white doves are watching them, and cooing to each other" (Wilde, 1888). Then he says his goodbye along with a promise not to forget him forever and to bring him the following spring two jewels to replace the ones he gave away. As a person of rich taste, he describes the quality of the replacements he has already promised. "The ruby shall be redder than a red rose, and the sapphire shall be as blue as the great sea." None of these things matter to the Happy Prince. He simply places his request, this time, regarding a poor girl in great agony.

"In the square below ... there stands a little match-girl. 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" (Wilde, 1888).

His sole intention is to release the poor match girl, barefooted and bareheaded, from the imminent punishment from her father as she must go home penniless after a whole day's struggle to sell matches. Shocked by the blindness the Happy Prince is supposed to suffer from, the Swallow refuses to pluck out his only eye that is remaining now. The Happy Prince insists as before, using his royal authority, that his command be carried out. 'Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow, ... do as I command you.' In utter reluctance, the Swallow removes the other eye and darts down with it in search of the girl. "He swooped past the match-girl, and slipped the jewel

into the palm of her hand." His performance is very much like that of an acrobat. The girl who has no notion about jewels takes it for a piece of glass. So she cries 'What a lovely bit of glass.' She is sure that she can evade punishment from her father with this exotic gift. The third mission of the Swallow finishes by this and he returns to the Happy Prince in appreciation of his unfathomable philanthropy that inspires unimaginable sacrifices.

### **A Voluntary Offer to Keep Company**

Out of a profound feeling of sympathy for a champion of extraordinary charity, the Swallow volunteers to stay with the Happy Prince permanently to compensate for his voluntary blindness. Satisfied with the missions the Swallow carried out for him, the Happy Prince does not want to keep him anymore. He demonstrates total renunciation in this gesture.

"No, little Swallow ... you must go away to Egypt."

"I will stay with you always" (Wilde, 1888).

This moving dialogue takes place between the poor Prince and the Swallow soon after the nightfall. In a paradoxical sense, Wilde uses the epithet 'poor' to describe the Happy Prince after his two sapphires and his ruby have gone. What he suggests in the real sense is its opposite. He has already enjoyed the grace of being a prince by giving away all that he has for the well-being of others. Instead of flying across the city, throughout the following day, the Swallow sits on the Happy Prince's shoulder and tells him stories of what he has seen in strange lands.

"He told him of the red ibises, who stand in long rows on the banks of the Nile, and catch goldfish in their beaks; of the Sphinx, who is as old as the world itself, and lives in the desert, and knows everything; of the merchants, who walk slowly by the side of their camels, and carry amber beads in their hands; of the King of the Mountains of the Moon, who is as black as ebony, and worships a large crystal; of the great green snake that sleeps in a palm-tree, and has twenty priests to feed it with honey-cakes; and of the pygmies who sail over a big lake on large flat leaves, and are always at war with the butterflies" (Wilde, 1888).

Wilde provides a fabulous list of story subjects to fill the ears of an enthusiastic listener and in the case of the Happy Prince, who is blind now, their impact would be much greater. Yet the Prince suggests something totally different. He wants to hear of suffering. How he puts this is interesting as it conveys the strange curiosity that lingers in him as to how people become victims of suffering. For him, suffering is the most marvellous of everything and misery is the most mysterious of everything.

"Dear little Swallow ... you tell me of marvellous things, but more marvellous than anything is the suffering of men and women. There is no Mystery so great as Misery.

Fly over my city, little Swallow, and tell me what you see there" (Wilde, 1888).

The Happy Prince sounds like another Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498), the Italian Dominican friar and preacher, who during the Renaissance denounced clerical corruption, despotic rule and the exploitation of the poor and made the most stringent enactments for the repression of vice and frivolity that led to the making of huge "bonfires of the vanities." (historyguide.org, 2004)

The reports the Prince receives through the Swallow on "the rich making merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars were sitting at the gates", "the white faces of starving children looking out listlessly at the black streets", the "two little boys ... lying in one another's arms to try and keep themselves warm" and, shouted by the Watchman, wandering "out into the rain" appear like caricatures of the rich and poor divide of Victorian England published in the British weekly *Punch*. (Punch Cartoons, 2014)

However, his curiosity about suffering and misery compares him to Prince Siddhartha, who renounced his palatial life, to find a permanent solution. He makes the following appeal to the Swallow as if to free himself of the last bit of wealth he has in his possession.

"I am covered with fine gold, ... you must take it off, leaf by leaf, and give it to my poor; the living always think that gold can make them happy" (Wilde, 1888).

Wilde dramatizes how the Happy Prince gets gradually denuded of the gold leaves on him and consequently how the poor children become happy after satisfying their hunger.

"Leaf after leaf of the fine gold the Swallow picked off, till the Happy Prince looked quite dull and grey. Leaf after leaf of the fine gold he brought to the poor, and the children's faces grew rosier, and they laughed and played games in the street. 'We have bread now' they cried" (Wilde, 1888).

Knowing the secret of their joy the Happy Prince accepts his dull look as a gift he received in return for the gold he gave away.

### **Leave Taking After All Missions**

With the advent of winter, the streets get filled with snow and frost and look like silver so bright and glistening. An element of horror springs from "the long icicles" that "like crystal daggers" hang down from the eaves of the houses and pervade the ghostly atmosphere. The people walk about in furs while the little boys skate on the ice. They are all conscious of the dangers of winter. It is now too late for the Swallow to start his flight to Egypt. Out of pure loyalty, the Swallow keeps himself tied to the Happy Prince, despite the biting cold. He satisfies his hunger with "the crumbs outside the baker's door" and resists the cold by "flapping his wings". Finally, when he feels, he is going to die, he flies up to the shoulder of the Prince and politely asks for permission to



kiss the latter's hand, by way of saying "goodbye". The Happy Prince, knowing he has nothing else to part with, readily approves of the Swallow's journey to Egypt. He acknowledges the Swallow's service for him by saying, 'You must kiss me on the lips, for I love you.'

"It is not to Egypt that I am going ... I am going to the House of Death. Death is the brother of Sleep, is he not?" (Wilde, 1888)

In the Swallow's response, Wilde alludes to the relationship between Hades and Hypnos as lords of the underworld in Greek mythology (Theoi, 2000). As he kisses the Happy Prince on the lips, he falls dead at his feet. Almost simultaneously, with a curious cracking sound from inside the statue, the leaden heart snaps right in two. The two mutual friends take leave of each other, emanating myriads of pathos. "It certainly was a dreadfully hard frost." Wilde describes the atmosphere in a curt sentence, implying the etherizing quality of winter. The image of the broken statue with the bird lying dead at its feet alludes to the painting "*The Wreck of the Hope*" by Casper David Friedrich (1774 -1840).

### Proving Irreplaceable

No sooner than the gold and the gems have gone away the Happy Prince has become an eyesore in the city, exemplifying exactly the myth of ostentation as beauty. The Mayor and the Town Councillors get agonized by his horrible look. They rank the Happy Prince with the mendicant population of the city. On seeing the dead Swallow, the first thing they do is to issue a decree against birds. Based on its ugliness, the Art Professor at the University recommends the removal of the statue. Proving his vanity in public, the Mayor orders the next statue which is going to stand on the pedestal would be of nobody else but of himself. This provokes a commotion among the Town Councillors, who all compete for the opportunity of modelling as a replacement for the Happy Prince. The overseer of the workmen cries in surprise, 'What a strange thing!' and points at the broken lead heart of the Happy Prince that has resisted so long all possible tricks they played to melt it in the furnace. "So, they threw it on a dust-heap where the dead Swallow was also lying." Thus, the two hearts: the heart of the Happy Prince and that of the Swallow join each other. As Wilde relates this makes the job of the Angels of Heaven easy to carry out God's command, 'Bring me the two most precious things in the city.' When the Angels bring Him "the leaden heart and the dead bird" God approves of their choice. 'You have rightly chosen, ... 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.' Both become sanctified in acknowledgement of the path of charity they follow. Under the concept of charity prescribed in Christianity, they have already achieved more than the maximum.

### CONCLUSION

Following the methodology suggested in the introduction, in the discussion conducted under eleven sub-topics, an

attempt is made to present a consummate account of Wilde's rationale for the short story. Accordingly, first, the historical, sociocultural, and aesthetic significance of the Happy Prince is demonstrated while maintaining his position as a monument. The compliments the Happy Prince receives from the common people and the condemnations he receives from the elite are considered to depict the class-based social stratification reflected in his social recognition. An emphasis is laid on the narratological significance of the companion the Happy Prince develops with the Swallow who, after a heartbreaking romantic misadventure with his dream sweetheart Reed, consigns himself to a lonely life and finds shelter between his feet. All three missions the Swallow carries out at the request of the Happy Prince are narrated with emphasis on the issues of poverty their beneficiaries suffer from. Wilde's allegation against the rich and poor divide in society is highlighted in each case. Using all these dramatic developments, an effort is made to show the Swallow's refinement in his thinking and his maturity in morality in his association with the Happy Prince as a significant aspect of his characters. His voluntary offer to keep company with the Happy Prince is interpreted as his elimination of all attachments to material belongings. The Swallow's death and the Happy Prince's removal both occur almost simultaneously marking the climax of the story. Through the commotion the town authorities make about modelling for a replacement for the Happy Prince monument, Wilde satirises the banality of the elite of the time.

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