The Devoted Friend

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF OSCAR WILDE

The child of well-off Irish parents, Oscar Wilde studied the classics at Trinity College in Dublin at the age of seventeen and matriculated to Magdalen College, University of Oxford, three years later. At Magdalen, Wilde's studies remained classically focused, but his eye was nevertheless caught by the emerging decadent movement and aestheticism, the late-nineteenth-century movement in England that advocated "art for art's sake." His best-known works include his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (1891), and the comedic play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). During his lifetime, he was known for his witty aphorisms, eccentric taste in clothing, and, of course, the infamous court action surrounding his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas. In 1895, he was tried and found guilty by the state of having committed sodomy—homosexuality was, at the time, criminal. He was sentenced to two years of hard labor. Wilde's time in prison was at odds with his previous, posh life, and he did not fare well there. After his imprisonment ended in 1897, he sailed to France and never returned to England, dying in Paris of meningitis just three years later.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The events of "The Devoted Friend" take place in a fictional world; nevertheless, the certain contents of the tale—namely, the depiction of class and exploitation—relate to issues with the social structure of Victorian England. During the Victorian era, the rich would often take advantage of the poor, like the Miller exploits Hans. The upper class consisted of landowners who hired lower-class workers to perform manual labor, often in brutal and unsanitary conditions. Many workers resorted to opium and alcohol to cope with the difficulty of life. Wilde, as a socialist, was most likely inspired by these issues when he wrote "The Devoted Friend." A few years after publishing "The Devoted Friend," Wilde penned an essay called "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," which illustrates his socialist worldview.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Devoted Friend" belongs to a collection of fairytales entitled *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (sometimes called *The Happy Prince and Other Stories*), published in 1888. Wilde published another collection of fairy tales in 1891, *A House of Pomegranates*. Other examples of fairytales published in the nineteenth century include the various works of Hans Christian Anderson, such as "The Emperor's New Clothes," "The Little Mermaid," and "The Ugly Duckling." The presence of a moral in "The Devoted Friend" demonstrates that Wilde was most likely influenced by the basic materials in the Aesopic tradition and the fables of Jean de la Fontaine.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Devoted Friend
- **When Written:** Unknown
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1888
- **Literary Period:** Victorian
- **Genre:** Fairytale, Satire
- **Setting:** Pond (frame story), Countryside (central story)
- **Climax:** Little Hans drowns while doing yet another favor for the Miller.
- **Antagonist:** The Miller
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Witticisms and Criticisms. At the end of the tale, when the Linnet tells the Water-rat that his story has a moral, the Water-rat gives a disdainful response: "I think you should have told me that before you began. If you had done so, I certainly would not have listened to you; in fact, I should have said 'Pooh,' like the critic." With this, Wilde implies that critics haughtily condemn works before they've even read them.

PLOT SUMMARY

"The Devoted Friend" is a fairytale that operates as a story within a story. In the frame story, a Linnet, a Duck, and a Water-rat gather around a pond. The Water-rat declares of knowing "nothing in the world that is either nobler or rarer than a devoted friendship." When asked what this kind of friendship consists of, the Water-rat explains that it involves his friends being wholeheartedly devoted to him. The Linnet asks what the Water-rat would do for his friends in return, but the Water-rat doesn't understand what the Linnet is talking about. Thus, the Linnet decides to tell a story on the subject of friendship.

The interior story, told by the Linnet, depicts the relationship between a poor, innocent peasant named Hans and a rich tradesman named the Miller. At the beginning of the story, the reader learns that the Miller claims to be Hans's devoted friend, and continually visits and takes flowers from Hans's **garden**. When winter descends, the Miller does not visit Hans, choosing to sit in the comfort of his home with his wife and son while Hans suffers greatly and sells various personal

possessions for bread.

When spring comes, the Miller visits Hans again and begins to exploit Hans in various ways. Although the Miller claims that he will very generously give Hans his **wheelbarrow**, he admits that the wheelbarrow is extremely damaged, and the reader never actually sees this wheelbarrow pass into Hans's hands. When Hans exclaims that he has a single piece of wood he could use to repair said wheelbarrow, the Miller selfishly takes the wood for himself, declaring that it was just the thing he's been needing to patch his roof.

Later, the Miller convinces Hans to carry a sack flour to the market, mend his barn-roof, and drive his sheep to the mountain. All the while, the Miller espouses beautiful, wise-sounding things about the nature of friendship and generosity. During this period of working for the Miller, Hans is prevented from tending his garden. Hans simply consoles himself with "the reflection that the Miller was his best friend," and continues to work away for the Miller.

One night, the Miller's son falls off a ladder and hurts himself. The Miller asks Hans to fetch the doctor, despite a storm that rages outside, and refuses to give Hans his lantern. Hans successfully fetches the doctor, but on the way back, loses his way on the moor and drowns in a hole. Hans's body is found the next day. At Hans's funeral, the Miller serves as chief mourner and shows no remorse for his actions, and instead laments that there is not one to take his broken wheelbarrow.

Back in the frame story, the Water-rat is upset that the Linnet does not tell what became of the Miller. The Linnet responds that it is evident the Water-rat did not understand the moral of the story, and the Water-rat, appalled that the story had a moral at all, huffily returns his hole. Both the Duck and the narrator affirm that telling a story with a moral is "dangerous."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Little Hans – Hans is the protagonist in the Linnet's tale. He is an innocent, good-natured peasant who believes himself to be the Miller's best friend. He is a peasant belonging to the working class—he lives in a tiny cottage and spends all his time working in his **garden**, growing beautiful flowers that he can sell at the market. Hans is generous and naïve: he works tirelessly for the Miller and fails to realize that his so-called best friend is exploiting him. Wilde also shows Hans is also very eager to learn: "So little Hans worked away for the Miller, and the Miller said all kinds of beautiful things about friendship, which Hans took down in a notebook, and used to read over at night, for he was a very good scholar." This innocence and eagerness renders Hans as a childlike figure. Hans does not change over the course of the fairytale and dies as innocent as he was at the beginning of the story. Through Hans's story, Wilde demonstrates the dangers of being too innocent in a less-than-innocent world. Hans receives neither reward for his good nature nor justice for the exploitation he experienced under the Miller, making his death all the more tragic.

Hugh the Miller – The Miller is the antagonist in the Linnet's tale. He is a rich, exploitative merchant who manipulates Hans into performing labor in the name of friendship. The Miller is an incredibly wealthy man—"he had a hundred sacks of flour stored away in his mill, and six milch cows, and a large flock of woolly sheep"—but he doesn't share his wealth with his so-called friend. While little Hans suffers through the winter with very little to eat, the Miller stays in his comfortable home with his wife and son, with a pinewood fire and plenty of food and drink. The Miller not only freely takes flowers and produce from Hans's **garden**, but also requests Hans to perform difficult chores for him throughout the story. And though he offers Hans a broken **wheelbarrow**—openly applauding himself for his generosity—this object never manifests in the story. The Miller's requests grow more and more unreasonable as the story progresses, showing there is no limit to how much he is willing to exploit little Hans. The Miller's final request is for Hans to fetch the doctor for the Miller's son during a storm in the middle of the night. Despite the already preposterous nature of this request, the Miller refuses to give Hans his lantern for guidance during the storm, indirectly causing Hans's death.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Linnet – The Linnet narrates the story of Hans and the Miller. He tells the story in order to show the Water-rat the dangers of one-sided friendships, but the Water-rat refuses to pick up on this moral.

The Water-rat – The Water-rat, along with the Duck, is the audience to the Linnet. He appears to sympathize with the Miller; the Water-rat also has a very lopsided view of friendship and, like the Miller, has many "beautiful sentiments" about friendship and life.

The Miller's Wife – The Miller's wife appears to share all of the Miller's ideas and supports his exploitation of Hans. She constantly lavishes her husband with praise, applauding him for his wise sayings about friendship and life.

The Miller's Son – The Miller's son sympathizes with Hans but is chastised by the Miller for this sympathy.

The Duck – The Duck, along with the Water-rat, is the audience to the Linnet.

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.

INNOCENCE AND FRIENDSHIP

In Oscar Wilde's "The Devoted Friend," a bird called a Linnet tells a story to an unagreeable, self-righteous Water-rat. The story the Linnet spins is a satirical fairytale in which the rich and self-important Hugh the Miller convinces the poor, innocent little Hans to perform various chores for him in the name of devoted friendship. Oscar Wilde wrote during the Victorian era, a time when innocence was generally portrayed as a redemptive, desirable trait. In line with this, Little Hans, the very picture of sweetness and selflessness, is delighted to do all sorts of errands and chores to help his so-called best friend and is oblivious to the fact that the Miller never does anything for him in return. Throughout the story, though, little Hans's childlike innocence allows the Miller to exploit him again and again, and ultimately leads to the young boy's miserable death. Through little Hans's tragic end, Wilde demonstrates that naivety, while charming, can be dangerous, and that true friendship is built on reciprocity—not exploitation.

The so-called friendship between the Miller and little Hans is extremely lopsided: the Miller continuously hoodwinks Hans into giving things or performing chores in the name of friendship, and Hans—wanting desperately to be a good and loyal friend—remains gullible through each deception. At one point in the story, to explain for taking so much from Hans's garden, the Miller tells the young boy that "real friends should have everything in common." Hans simply accepts this with a smile and feels proud of "having a friend with such noble ideas." At one point, Hans politely declines the Miller's request to carry a sack of flour to the market, declaring regretfully that he is far too busy to help. The Miller responds by saying, "considering that I am going to give you my **wheelbarrow** it is rather unfriendly of you to refuse." The horrified little Hans declares "I wouldn't be unfriendly for the whole world!" before eagerly departing for the market with the Miller's flour. Wilde notes that "the neighbours thought it strange that the rich Miller never gave little Hans anything in return," yet little Hans himself remains oblivious to this. He only feels the innocent happiness of sharing with a friend and doesn't realize that his friend isn't sharing the fruits of his own labor.

Despite little Hans's innocent and generous nature, he dies a terrible death. In other words, his innocence was more than for naught—it was dangerous. There is no justice for Hans in the end. Towards the end of the tale, the Miller asks Hans to fetch the doctor for his injured son. Hans proclaims, "I take it quite as a compliment your coming to me, and I will start off at once." He even agrees to go without a lantern. Hans, in his steadfast innocence, has yet to notice the Miller's deception despite all that has happened to him before this final request. He dies as innocent and as eager to please as he was in the beginning. Hans dies trudging back home in the vicious storm: "At last he lost his way, and wandered off on the moor, which was a very dangerous place, as it was full of deep holes, and there poor little Hans was drowned. His body was found the next day by some goatherds, floating in a great pool of water, and was brought back by them to the village." His death goes unnoticed by his "friend," the Miller. He dies cold, alone, and, for all his generosity, forgotten. His innocence is unrewarded. At Hans's funeral, the Miller ironically serves as chief mourner. The Miller feels no remorse and continues to be as selfish as before. At the funeral, he states that "as I was his best friend [...] it is only fair that I should have the best place." At the inn after the funeral, the Miller enjoys spiced wine and sweetcakes while talking about how he doesn't know what to do with his wheelbarrow now—the one he had said he was going to give to Hans but never did—lamenting that "one certainly suffers for being generous." He does not mention all that Hans has done for him. Indeed, it seems he does not even remember. Hans's innocence and generosity has come to nothing, as he never had a true friendship with the Miller.

In "The Devoted Friend," innocence coupled with an unbalanced friendship leads to injustice and suffering. With each reiteration of the Miller's exploitation of Hans, the reader grows more wary of Hans's innocence. Indeed, it seems that in this fairytale, innocence can be equated with foolishness. In the "friendship" between the Miller and Hans, readers may find the Miller's selfishness frustrating, but Hans's innocence proves equally disappointing. Wilde does not reward Hans for his innocence; rather, Hans is punished. It is not that innocence per se is a negative personality trait, but that in a less-than-innocent world, innocence can often lead to disastrous consequences.

STORYTELLING, LANGUAGE, AND MORALITY

When the Linnet concludes its story about Hans and the Miller, the Water-rat is outraged at the idea that the story contained a moral—even though the Water-rat doesn't know what, exactly, that moral was, he is still furious at the mere thought of it. After the Water-rat storms away, the Linnet declares, "I am rather afraid that I have annoyed him [...] The face is that I told him a story with a moral." Voicing the story's overarching message, the Duck replies, "Ah! That is always a very dangerous thing to do." The narrator also chimes in, noting, "And I quite agreed with her." This passage gestures to the role that lessons and morals play in the story more broadly. In fact, "The Devoted Friend" is brimming with moral guidance, either spread straightforwardly through the spoken word or couched in a story. Ultimately, "The Devoted Friend" demonstrates that though storytelling and language can be

used to convey morals, such morals are not necessarily correct and should not be blindly accepted or rejected.

The inner story of "The Devoted Friend" is peppered with moral teachings, most of which are spread by the self-righteous Miller, who frequently makes grand, sweeping statements about everything from laziness to friendship. The most conspicuous moralizer in the story, the Miller makes many moralizing comments to little Hans, from "real friends should have everything in common" to "friendship never forgets." He constantly teaches little Hans not to be selfish: at one point in the story, when Hans says he is too busy to help the Miller with his chores, the Miller tells him "that considering I am going to give you my **wheelbarrow** it is rather unfriendly of you to refuse." Although the Miller never gives little Hans anything and doesn't practice the unselfishness that he advocates, he is still a wellspring for moral teachings.

The Miller's most devoted listener is little Hans. He clings to the Miller's every word and accepts all of his moral teachings as truth—which eventually proves fatal. Through the character of Hans, Wilde teaches readers to beware of blindly accepting morals. When the Miller tells little Hans, "I should have thought that friendship, true friendship, was quite free from selfishness of any kind," little Hans enthusiastically accepts this statement with "My dear friend, my best friend [...] you are welcome to all the flowers in my **garden**. I would much sooner have your good opinion than my silver buttons, any day." Hans maintain this attitude of blind acceptance throughout the story: "So little Hans worked away for the Miller, and the Miller said all kinds of beautiful things about friendship, which Hans took down in a notebook, and used to read over at night, for he was a very good scholar." He tries his best to practice what the Miller teaches, without realizing the Miller's hypocritical tendencies. Little Hans dies an unfortunate death, due to his blind devotion to the Miller. When the Miller's son falls and hurts himself, the Miller tells Hans to fetch the doctor, despite the vicious storm brewing outside. Furthermore, the Miller refuses to give Hans his lantern. This causes Hans to lose his way, fall into a hole on the moor, and drown. Through this, Wilde demonstrates that blind acceptance of seemingly beautiful morals can have disastrous consequences.

The outer story—that of the Linnet and the Water-rat—speaks to the way that storytelling is a more subtle vehicle for moral teaching. However, while Hans's character arc showed the dangers of accepting moral guidance unflinchingly, the Water-rat's shows that rejecting moral teachings can be just as bad. When the Water-rat pompously declares that he defines friendship as someone being wholly devoted to him, the Linnet resolves to tell the Water-rat a story to highlight the dangers of this line of thinking: "'Let me tell you a story on the subject,' said the Linnet. 'Is the story about me?' asked the Water-rat. [...] 'It is applicable to you,' answered the Linnet." The Linnet's response here points to the way that stories can act as vehicles for moral teachings. Knowing that the Water-rat is unagreeable and obtuse—and wouldn't be receptive to direct criticism or moral guidance—the Linnet couches a moral (that friendship based on one-sided devotion is dangerous) inside a story. While the Water-rat doesn't give in to the dangers of blindly accepting moral teachings, he responds in an equally unhelpful way. After the Linnet has concluded the story and admitted that it did, in fact, have a moral underpinning it, the Water-rat grows furious. "I think you should have told me that before you began," he says. "If you had done so, I certainly would not have listened to you." As the Water-rat is clearly an unlikable, unsavory character, it seems fitting that he refuses to engage very deeply in a discussion about morals. Although the Linnet hasn't even told him what the moral is, the Water-rat is willing to reject that moral teaching outright, refusing to change his ways or see things differently. Thus, while blindly accepting morals is dangerous, blindly rejecting them can be just as harmful.

Fairytales and fables are known for having a moral of sorts and children are often encouraged to accept them. Wilde warns against this acceptance through the moral of his own story: do not blindly accept the morals that others preach. However, the outer story of the animals reveals that simply rejecting the morals that other people teach won't do, either. In charting the dangers of these two extremes, Wilde seems to be advocating for another approach: thinking critically and thoughtfully about morals in order to adopt only those which a person feels are truly right.

CLASS AND EXPLOITATION

There is a clear socioeconomic gap between little Hans and the Miller: little Hans is a poor villager, while the Miller is a rich tradesman. Despite his wealth, the Miller remains greedy and continues to take from Hans and extract the poor man's labor, even though Hans has close to nothing. Furthermore, the Miller demonstrates no qualms about his exploitation of Hans, nor is he punished for it. Through this narrative of exploitation, Wilde demonstrates that the rich are often able to successfully capitalize on the poor without facing any backlash for their actions.

Wilde makes it clear that the Miller is much wealthier than little Hans and that they belong to different classes. When the Linnet begins his tale, he tells the Water-rat, "I don't think [little Hans] was distinguished at all, except for his kind heart, and his funny, round, good-humoured face." Little Hans "lived in a tiny cottage all by himself, and every day he worked in his **garden**." On the other hand, the Miller "had a hundred sacks of flour stored away in his mill, and six milch cows, and a large flock of woolly sheep." In terms of commercial value, the Miller's assets far surpass the beautiful flowers in little Hans's garden. The winter months are "a very bad time" for little Hans; having "no money at all to buy bread with," Hans is forced to sell the silver buttons from his Sunday coat, his silver chain, his big pipe, and

his wheelbarrow. In contrast to little Hans, the Miller spends his winter conversing with his son and wife, who "sat in her comfortable armchair by the big pinewood fire" with her "large glass of warm ale." While the Miller enjoys these amenities, little Hans "suffer[s] a good deal from cold and hunger, and often ha[s] to go to bed without any supper but a few dried pears or some hard nuts." From this, readers see that little Hans earns his bread from day to day, while the Miller is wealthy enough to enjoy periods of leisure.

The Miller, despite his wealth, still manipulates the poor Hans into giving up property and labor, and Hans receives no compensation for his efforts. At the beginning of the fairytale, the Miller takes freely from Hans's garden: "Indeed, so devoted was the Miller to little Hans, that he would never go by his garden without leaning over the wall and plucking a large nosegay, or a handful of sweet herbs, or filling his pockets with plums and cherries if it was the fruit season." Later on, the Miller takes a plank from Hans to repair the roof of the Miller's own barn as well as a basketful of flowers that Hans was going to sell at the market. The Miller, despite his many possessions, always wants more. His greediness leads him to take even from those who are much less fortunate than he is. The Miller also manipulates Hans into giving free labor throughout the course of the fairytale. Hans takes the Miller's sack of flour to the market, mends his barn-roof, drives his sheep to the mountain, and, quite fatally, fetches the doctor for his son during a storm. The Miller "was always coming round and sending [Hans] off on long errands, or getting him to help at the mill," so little Hans never has time to look after his flowers. The Miller promises Hans a **broken wheelbarrow** as payment—a useless form of compensation, considering that he took the plank of wood Hans would need to repair the wheelbarrow—but the Miller never follows through on this meager act of generosity.

The Miller is not punished for his unjust treatment of Hans. Through this, Wilde shows that those belonging to the upper classes can often manipulate the lower classes for their own benefit and remain at ease about their actions. Although the Miller's actions lead to the death of little Hans, he still serves the honorable role of chief mourner at Hans's funeral. He even declares, "As I was [Hans's] best friend [...] it is only fair that I should have the best place." No one in the village appears to dispute this claim. The Miller also evades punishment on an emotional level, as he shows no guilt regarding Hans's death. Indeed, there is even a sentiment of blame in the Miller's last words in the fairytale. When the Blacksmith remarks that "Little Hans is certainly a great loss to everyone," the Miller makes a heartless reply: "A great loss to me at any rate [...] why, I had as good as given him my wheelbarrow, and now I really don't know what to do with it. It is very much in my way at home, and it is in such bad repair that I could not get anything for it if I sold it. I will certainly take care not to give away anything again. One certainly suffers for being generous." It is as if the Miller blames Hans for dying and not taking the unwanted wheelbarrow. There is no hint of a guilty conscience anywhere in his words—the Miller has not the vaguest inclination of towards remorse.

Ultimately, the fairytale stands as a matter-of-fact portrayal of how the upper classes (represented by the Miller) can manipulate the lower classes (represented by Hans), with neither party aware of the exploitation that is happening. The story ends on a bleak note, as Wilde resists from providing any sort of solution. There is neither guilt nor punishment for the rich manipulator—such is the way things are in this world.

SYMBOLS

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

HANS'S GARDEN

Hans's garden represents little Hans's lifeblood. Hans works dutifully in his garden every day, and he sells his flowers to make a meager living. Despite his poverty, Hans is rich in flowers: "In all the country-side there was no garden so lovely as his. Sweet-Williams grew there, and Gilly-Flowers, and Shepherds'-purses, and Fair-maids of France." Thus, when the Miller selfishly plucks flowers from the garden, justifying his actions by claiming that real friends must share everything, the Miller is actually cheating Hans out of his livelihood. There are no limits to the Miller's exploitation: by the end of the tale, the garden is depleted, and Hans is dead. The garden, like Hans, is beautiful in its innocence, but easily taken advantage of.

THE BROKEN WHEELBARROW

The Miller offers Hans a broken wheelbarrow as a token of their friendship, which comes to represent the broken friendship between the two men. The Miller declares, "Hans [...] I will give you my wheelbarrow. It is not in very good repair, indeed, one side is gone, and there is something wrong with the wheel-spokes, but in spite of that I will give it to you." The Miller then proceeds to selfishly take a plank of wood from Hans to mend his own barn-roof, the very plank that Hans would need to repair the broken wheelbarrow. Throughout the story, the Miller speaks of offering his wheelbarrow and his friendship to Hans but never acts on these offers: the wheelbarrow never manifests in the fairytale, and the Miller never shows Hans any genuine devotion. The broken wheelbarrow and the Miller's exploitation of Hans also serve as an ironic counterpoint to the Miller's lofty words about generosity and friendship.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Publications edition of *The Happy Prince and Other Fairy Tales* published in 2001.

The Devoted Friend Quotes

"And what, pray, Is your idea of the duties of a devoted friend?" asked a green Linnet [...]

"What a silly question!" cried the Water-rat. "I should expect my devoted friend to be devoted to me, of course."

"And what would you do in return?" said the little bird, swinging upon a silver spray, and flapping his tiny wings.

"I don't understand you," answered the Water-rat.

Related Characters: The Water-rat, The Linnet (speaker), The Duck

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19-20

Explanation and Analysis

After the Water-rat expresses his esteem for devoted friendship to the Duck, the Linnet joins their conversation and asks the Water-rat for his opinion on what constitutes a devoted friendship. The Water-rat expects his devoted friend "to be devoted to me, of course," but fails to see devoted friendship as a mutual rather than one-sided relationship. This is shown through the fact that he does not understand the Linnet's question regarding what he would do in return for his friend. The Water-rat's idea of devoted friendship foreshadows that of the Miller: the wealthy Miller expects Hans, as his "best friend," to show unconditional devotion and generosity, yet never does anything in return for his poor friend. The Water-rat and the Miller have similar ideas with regards to devoted friendship, and in this way, seem to be comparable characters. This parallelism leads readers to immediately associate the Miller in the Linnet's tale with the unscrupulous Water-rat of the frame story.

"Little Hans had a great many friends, but the most devoted friend of all was big Hugh the Miller. Indeed, so devoted was the rich Miller to little Hans, that he would never go by his garden without leaning over the wall and plucking a large nosegay, or a handful of sweet herbs, or filling his pockets with plums and cherries if it was the fruit season."

Related Characters: The Linnet (speaker), Hugh the Miller, Little Hans

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Immediately after introducing little Hans, a kindly but poor peasant, the Linnet introduces his supposed "most devoted friend," Hugh the Miller. The epithets given to Hans and the Miller—"little" and "big"—serve as indications for their respective positions in society: where Hans is occupies a miniscule place in the village's socioeconomic scene, the Miller occupies a large space, as a wealthy tradesman. The narrative offers ostensible proof for the Miller's devotion to Hans in the form of his exploitation of Han's garden: the Miller continuously takes flowers and produce from the garden without compensating his poor little friend. This sort of paradoxical logic indicates that the narrative is a sort of satire. This satire, in turn, leads readers to question whether Hans actually "had a great many friends," or if these so-called friends are just like the Miller and use the name of friendship to exploit Hans.

"Sometimes, indeed, the neighbours thought it strange that the rich Miller never gave little Hans anything in return, though he had a hundred sacks of flour stored away in his mill, and six milch cows, and a large flock of woolly sheep; but Hans never troubled his head about these things, and nothing gave him greater pleasure than to listen to all the wonderful things the Miller used to say about the unselfishness of true friendship."

Related Characters: The Linnet (speaker), Little Hans

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

The Miller's exploitation of Hans is obvious enough so that the neighbors notice it, yet Hans himself remains oblivious. Through disclosing the Miller's extensive possessions, the Linnet paints a stark contrast between the wealthy Miller and little Hans, who only has his tiny cottage and garden. It appears that the Miller's wealth, given its visibility, is quite

obvious to everyone in the village, no doubt including Hans. However, Hans, does not register this socioeconomic gap between himself and the Miller as a reason to not share the flowers in his garden. Instead, he continues to listen to "all the wonderful things the Miller used to say about the unselfishness of friendship" without realizing the hypocrisy of his wealthy friend. It would be misguided to attribute Hans's oblivion to stupidity or something of the like; rather, his oblivion comes from his complete trust in his "best friend," an inability to believe that the Miller would ever do him any wrong. In other words, Hans's oblivion is a consequence of his innocence.

❝ "'You are certainly very thoughtful about others,' answered the Wife, as she sat in her comfortable armchair by the big pinewood fire; 'very thoughtful indeed. It is quite a treat to hear you talk about friendship. I am sure the clergyman himself could not say such beautiful things as you do, though he does live in a threestoried house, and wear a gold ring on his little finger.'"

Related Characters: The Linnet, The Miller's Wife (speaker), Hugh the Miller

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

The Miller's wife shows unabashed support for her husband, heaping praise upon him for his words on friendship and failing to point out that he's not actually "thoughtful about others" in practice. In this way, the Miller's wife is complicit in her husband's exploitation of Hans. Like the Miller, she feels no guilt sitting "in her comfortable armchair by the big pinewood fire" as little Hans suffers from cold and hunger.

The Miller's wife appears to have a twisted moral standard: she equates wealth to goodness. Her comment regarding the clergyman suggests that he ought to be able to say beautiful things because he lives in a three-story house and wears a gold ring, not because he is a man of God. In other words, the clergyman ought to be able to demonstrate goodness because of his wealth. In light of this warped moral standard, readers can see that the Miller's wife most likely agrees with everything the Miller says because of his socioeconomic success: the Miller is wealthy, and therefore, he must be right.

The description of the clergyman is also a sharp social criticism on Wilde's part, as he suggests that what people say and do are very different things; through his profession, the clergyman implicitly claims to be a follower of God—and obedient to all that this entails, like showing humility, helping the poor, not being greedy, and so on. But through his towering house and gold jewelry, the clergyman sends the message that, like the Miller, he doesn't practice what he preaches.

❝ "Every good storyteller nowadays starts with the end, and then goes on to the beginning, and concludes with the middle. That is the new method. I heard all about it the other day from a critic who was walking round the pond with a young man. He spoke of the matter at great length, and I am sure he must have been right, for he had blue spectacles and a bald head, and whenever the young man made any remark, he always answered 'Pooh!'"

Related Characters: The Water-rat (speaker), The Duck, The Linnet

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

At the middle of the fairytale, after the exchange between the Miller and his family members, the narrator temporarily returns to the frame story. When the Water-rat asks the Linnet whether the story ended, the Linnet answers that it has only begun. In response, the Water-rat launches into what he perceives to be proper, fashionable storytelling. The Water-rat's notion of a good story is based solely on the advice of a man that the Water-rat perceives as knowledgeable. The Water-rat believes that the man's blue spectacles, bald head, and condescending manner—in other words, his aura of upper-class refinement—make him a credible source.

The Water-rat's blind belief in this critic mirrors the Miller's wife's blind belief in her husband: the Water-rat believes the critic only because of his appearance and arrogance, while the Miller's wife believes her husband because he is wealthy. In this way, we see that little Hans is not the only character in the fairytale prone to blind acceptance. Blind acceptance of words can have many outcomes, some of which are dangerous: in Hans's case, it leads to suffering; in the Miller's wife's case, it leads to complicity in wrongdoing; in the Water-rat's case, it leads to critical ignorance.

"'Hans,' said the Miller, 'I will give you my wheelbarrow. It is not in very good repair, indeed, one side is gone, and there is something wrong with the wheel-spokes, but in spite of that I will give it to you. I know it is very generous of me, and a great many people would think me extremely foolish for parting with it, but I am not like the rest of the world. I think that generosity is the essence of friendship, and, besides, I have got a new wheelbarrow for myself. Yes, you may set your mind at ease, I will give you my wheelbarrow.'"

Related Characters: Hugh the Miller, The Linnet (speaker), Little Hans

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Hans had a difficult winter and had to sell many possessions, including his wheelbarrow, in order to buy bread. He tells this to the Miller when the latter comes to visit in spring, and the Miller offers Hans his old, broken wheelbarrow. To say that the wheelbarrow "is not in very good repair" is an understatement: with one side missing and nonfunctional wheel-spokes, the wheelbarrow is essentially useless. Furthermore, the Miller already has a new wheelbarrow and has no use for this broken one; thus, in giving this broken wheelbarrow to Hans, there is really no generosity to speak of. The Miller's offer of the wheelbarrow contrasts with Hans's offer of his flowers. The wheelbarrow is essentially garbage for the Miller, while Hans's flowers form the poor peasant's very livelihood. In terms of generosity, the Miller evidently has different standards for Hans and himself. He never praises Hans for being generous, though Hans consistently gives him valuable property and free labor; yet here, the Miller arrogantly considers himself to be very generous for offloading garbage onto his so-called friend.

"'My dear friend, my best friend,' cried little Hans, 'you are welcome to all the flowers in my garden. I would much sooner have your good opinion than my silver buttons, any day.'"

Related Characters: Little Hans, The Linnet (speaker), Hugh the Miller

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Hans displays a certain reluctance when the Miller asks for a basketful of flowers, as he was planning to sell them at the market. At this point, Hans has already given the Miller many flowers, as well as a plank of wood which Hans could have used to repair the broken wheelbarrow. However, when the Miller accuses Hans of being selfish, Hans immediately offers up more flowers. Indeed, Hans declares to the Miller, "you are welcome to all the flowers in my garden." In other words, Hans values the Miller's happiness over his own livelihood. Hans's devotion to the Miller is reinforced by Hans's claim that he'd sooner have his friend's good opinion than his some of most precious possessions. Hans's declaration of devotion and actions contrasts with the Miller's offer of the wheelbarrow. Hans's does not think himself to be generous, though he is offering the Miller his most valuable possessions. In fact, he does not think of himself at all—to a fault, he thinks only of his friendship with the Miller and the Miller's satisfaction.

"So little Hans worked away for the Miller, and the Miller said all kinds of beautiful things about friendship, which Hans took down in a notebook, and used to read over at night, for he was a very good scholar."

Related Characters: The Linnet (speaker), Hugh the Miller, Little Hans

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Hans continues to work for the Miller despite having greatly suffered multiple times from complying with the demands of his rich friend. He also continues to listen to the Miller's lessons and take them to heart. The Linnet describes Hans as "a very good scholar," indicating that he easily learns and accepts all the Miller's teachings regarding the "beautiful things about friendship." Hans goes as far as to write these teachings down and review them. Still, he fails to realize that the Miller does not practice what he teaches and, in fact, does quite the opposite. Hans himself seems

have different standards of friendship for himself and the Miller. In this way, the two characters are rather similar, as the Miller also expects less from himself than from Hans. This dynamic creates a thoroughly lopsided friendship in which one character gives and gives while the other perpetually takes.

> "'As I was his best friend,' said the Miller, 'it is only fair that I should have the best place,' so he walked at the head of the procession in a long black cloak, and every now and then he wiped his eyes with a big pocket-handkerchief."

Related Characters: Hugh the Miller, The Linnet (speaker), Little Hans

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

After Hans dies a terrible, lonely death, the Miller serves as chief mourner at Hans's funeral. The Miller still considers himself to be Hans's "best friend" and feels no guilt regarding Hans's death, despite being the person who indirectly caused it. No one in the village appears to resent the Miller for his actions, either, so the Miller's manipulation of Hans goes unpunished. Even at Hans's funeral, the Miller still exhibits supreme selfishness: "it is only fair that I should have the best place," he declares arrogantly. He doesn't even mourn his deceased friend, as he is too busy thinking of himself. The Linnet notes that "every now and then [the Miller] wiped his eyes with a big pocket-handkerchief," but deliberately refrains from saying that the Miller was indeed crying. The performative gesture with the handkerchief coupled with the Miller's self-centered words about having the best place renders the Miller the opposite of a devoted friend. The Miller does not care for little Hans at all, even after the peasant's death.

> "I am rather afraid that I have annoyed him," answered the Linnet. "The fact is that I told him a story with a moral."
>
> "Ah! that is always a very dangerous thing to do," said the Duck.
>
> And I quite agree with her.

Related Characters: The Duck, The Linnet (speaker), The Water-rat

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

When the Water-rat finds out that the Linnet's story has a moral, he is disgusted and dives back into his hole, leading to this conversation between the Linnet and the Duck. It is necessary to note the difference between the Water-rat's reaction and the Duck's reaction: where the Water-rat runs away from the moral, the Duck wisely remarks that spreading morals can be dangerous. The narrator of the story (who may or may not be Wilde himself) agrees with the Duck, indicating that the moral of "The Devoted Friend" is, in fact, about the danger of morals. Though blindly accepting beautiful morals can lead to suffering, as in the case of Hans, refusing to accept them altogether can lead a person to become a crass and selfish human being, as in the case of the Miller and the Water-rat. Instead, the story implies that a more nuanced approach—thinking critically and carefully about moral teachings before accepting or rejecting them—is best.

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 DEVOTED FRIEND

One day, an old Water-rat comes out of his hole and sees a Duck teaching her ducklings how to stand on their heads in water. "You will never be in the best society unless you can stand on your heads," she calls out to her ducklings, who flatly ignore her. The Water-rat and the Duck begin to talk, and the former declares his esteem for "devoted friendship." Overhearing their conversations, a Linnet asks the Water-rat what he thinks devoted friendship consists of. The Water-rat haughtily replies: "What a silly question! [...] I should expect my devoted friend to be devoted to me, of course!"

The narrative begins with talking animals, hinting that the story is most likely a work of children's literature. Yet, these anthropomorphic animals voice lofty ideas about "the best society" and "devoted friendship," showing more sophisticated preoccupations than characters seen in typical children's stories. Furthermore, the style of the narrative is rather satirical. From this, readers can gather than the story is intended for adults as well as children.

The Linnet asks the Water-rat what he would do for his so-called devoted friend in return. The Water-rat claims to not understand the question, so the Linnet decides to tell the Water-rat a story about friendship. The Water-rat asks eagerly if the story is about him, to which the Linnet replies, "It is applicable to you."

The inquisitive Linnet appears to be wiser than the selfish Water-rat, who does not understand that devoted friendship should be mutual. This preps readers to see the Linnet as a sort of authority figure, a reliable storyteller. When the Linnet begins telling his tale, readers can also see that the narrative operates as a story-within-a-story.

The Linnet begins his tale by introducing Hans, a poor, kindly peasant who lives in a tiny cottage with a beautiful **garden**. Hans works in his garden every day, and his flowers are known for their exceptional beauty. Hans's "most devoted friend" is a rich Miller, named big Hugh. The Miller regularly walks by Hans's cottage and takes flowers from the garden, declaring that "Real friends should have everything in common." Hans simply smiles and agrees. The neighbors think it's odd that the Miller, despite his wealth, never gives Hans anything in return. Hans never notices this, though, and instead delights in the wise and beautiful things the Miller says "about the unselfishness of true friendship."

From the Linnet's introduction of the two main characters—Hans and the Miller—readers can already guess that Hans is the protagonist while the Miller is the antagonist. The Miller, despite his wealth, unreservedly takes from Hans's garden without offering anything in return. Readers can also begin to see Hans's damning innocence; unlike his shrewder neighbors, the kindly peasant does not find it strange in the slightest that the Miller never gives him anything in return for his generosity.

Winter comes. Since he has no flowers to sell at the market, Hans suffers from cold and hunger. The Miller never visits Hans and instead sits in his warm home with his wife and son, enjoying ample food and drink. The Miller claims to his family that there is no use visiting Hans, as "when people are in trouble they should be left alone and not be bothered by visitors." He plans to see Hans in the spring, when Hans will once again have flowers to give to the Miller. The Miller's wife lavishes praise on her husband, telling him that he is "certainly very thoughtful about others," and that it's "quite a treat" to listen to all the wise things he has to say. When the Miller's son asks after Hans and offers to share his own food with the peasant, the Miller scolds him, saying that such a gesture would "spoil" Hans's good nature.

The lack of visits during wintertime proves that the Miller does not actually care for little Hans. The Miller, in his selfishness and lack of concern, shows himself to be a complete hypocrite. Though having said previously that "real friends should have everything in common," he shares neither warmth nor food with the cold and hungry Hans. The Miller's wife shows herself to be either thoughtlessly devoted to her husband or just as selfish as him. The Miller goes as far as to extinguish any potential for generosity in his son, showing the extent of his selfishness.

"How well you talk!" the Miller's wife declares. The Miller affirms that talking well is much harder and "finer" than "acting well," which many people know how to do. The Water-rat interjects, asking the Linnet if that is the end of the story. When the Linnet says that was just the beginning, the Water-rat scoffs that it is all the rage nowadays to start a story with the end, move on to the beginning, and end with the middle—he knows because he heard a very refined, spectacled man say so the other day by the pond. Nevertheless, the Water-rat encourages the Linnet to continue the story. The Water-rat likes the Miller an awful lot because he, too, has "all kinds of beautiful sentiments" like the Miller does.

The last exchange between the Miller and his wife prior to switching back to the frame story highlights the story's satirical style—it is generally considered that acting well is more difficult than talking well. The Water-rat's sympathy with the Miller aligns the two characters: like the Water-rat, the Miller does not understand that friendship entails devotion from both parties.

Spring comes, and the Miller goes to visit Hans. When Hans admits that he thought the Miller had forgotten him, the Miller denies this vehemently and lectures Hans about how "friendship never forgets." Hans tells the Miller he had to sell many possessions, including a wheelbarrow, in order to have money for food during the wintertime. He now has to buy his belongings back by selling flowers. The Miller offers Hans his broken **wheelbarrow**; even though it is in very bad shape, the Miller declares that he is being extremely generous in giving it to Hans, as "generosity is the essence of friendship." Hans is grateful and exclaims that he has one spare plank of wood that he could use to repair this wheelbarrow. The Miller instead takes the plank of wood to mend his own barn-roof, as well as a large basket of flowers from Hans's **garden**.

The Miller's lectures about how "friendship never forgets" and how "generosity is the essence of friendship" highlights his utter hypocrisy. The Miller's offer of a broken wheelbarrow forms a stark contrast with the flowers that Hans offers him: the Miller offers to give Hans his trash while Hans gives the Miller the best of what he owns, which is his sole source of income. At this point in the story, it becomes clear that Hans is innocent and friendly to a fault. Hans does not find it unfair that the Miller takes away his plank of wood, even though it was the only thing he had that could be used to repair the broken wheelbarrow and make it usable.

The next day, the Miller visits Hans's cottage and asks Hans to take a sack of flour to the market for him. When Hans responds regretfully that he is too busy to help, the Miller accuses him of being "unfriendly," especially as the Miller is to give him a **wheelbarrow**. Hans is horrified by this accusation and immediately takes the sack of flour to the market. The trip is long and difficult, but he manages to sell the flour for a good price and returns home exhausted.

From this interaction, readers can see that the innocent Hans is also quite idealistic: he values his good name and the Miller's opinion of him over worldlier things. For Hans, friendship with the Miller is more important than tending the flowers in his garden, and, consequently, more important than his own livelihood.

The following day, the Miller visits Hans again early in the morning. When he sees Hans sleeping, he accuses him of being lazy and asks him to mend his barn-roof. Hans agrees, afraid that he might again come across as "unfriendly" if he refuses. When Hans finishes the job, the Miller declares happily, "Ah! [...] there is no work so delightful as the work one does for others." The next day, the Miller has Hans drive his sheep in to the mountain. The Miller continues to assign Hans chores, preventing Hans from working in his **garden**. Hans remains eager to please the Miller.

The Miller continues to exploit Hans, and Hans continues to passively accept this exploitation. Although readers likely find the Miller's selfishness to be frustrating, Hans's innocence may seem all the more aggravating. Both Hans and his garden suffer at the hands of the Miller, yet Hans remains eager to be a good friend—it's clear, by this point in the story, that Hans is the devoted friend of the story's title. Hans never seems to register the Miller's hypocrisy, despite always listening to all his beautiful, albeit empty, sayings.

One night, during a storm, the Miller visits Hans and tells him to fetch the doctor, as the Miller's son hurt himself falling from a ladder. Hans asks if he can borrow the Miller's lantern to guide the way in the darkness, but the Miller refuses, citing that the lantern is new. Hans sets off in the dark and successfully reaches the doctor. Unfortunately, Hans gets lost on the moor on the way back, as he has no light to guide him. He falls into a deep hole and drowns. His body is found the next day by some passing goatherds.

The Miller's selfishness culminates in his last errand for Hans; he not only makes an unreasonable request, but also refuses to give Hans the proper resources to accomplish the task at hand. Hans's cold, lonely, and tragic death shows that all his generosity has been for naught. Furthermore, the Miller does not even bother to go look for his missing friend—Hans's body is found by strangers and purely by chance.

After Hans's body is brought back the village, the villagers hold a funeral. As the chief mourner, the Miller laments that he has no one to give his broken **wheelbarrow** now that Hans is dead, and that he wouldn't get a cent for it if he tried to sell it. Declaring that he will never "give away anything again," the Miller exclaims that "One certainly suffers for being generous!"

This tale of Hans and the Miller ends in the Miller's triumph: the Miller gets the honorable position of chief mourner at Hans's funeral. As seen by the Miller's comment about his broken wheelbarrow, he feels no guilt regarding Hans's death. The Miller receives no punishment for his wrongdoing, and Hans receives no justice. Furthermore, although the Miller is suggesting that he *is the one who suffered for being generous, it's clear that he never was generous nor is he truly suffering now—Hans was the one who was unflinchingly generous at every turn and paid for that selflessness with his life.*

After a pause, the Water-rat asks what became of the Miller, and the Linnet responds that the Water-rat did not understand the moral of the story. The Water-rat is horrified the story had a moral at all and dives back into his hole. A few minutes later, the Linnet tells the Duck that the Water-rat ran off because he told him a story with a moral. The Duck is understanding and affirms that telling a story with a moral "is always a very dangerous thing to do." The narrator has the final word, adding, "And I quite agree with her."

The end of the tale returns to the frame story and comments on the danger of moral teachings. On the one hand, blindly accepting the morals one is taught, as in the case of Hans in the Linnet's tale, can have disastrous consequences—Hans eagerly lapped up everything the Miller said about friendship being selfless and generous, which led to Hans's death. On the other hand, not accepting any moral instruction, as in the case of the hypocritical Miller and the Water-rat, can lead to selfishness and exploitation.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Liu, Sarah. "*The Devoted Friend*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 20 Jun 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Liu, Sarah. "*The Devoted Friend*." LitCharts LLC, June 20, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-devoted-friend.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Devoted Friend* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Wilde, Oscar. The Devoted Friend. Dover Publications. 2001.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Wilde, Oscar. The Devoted Friend. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications. 2001.