The Selfish Giant

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF OSCAR WILDE

Born to Anglo-Irish parents in Dublin, Oscar Wilde distinguished himself intellectually from a young age. Before he even attended college, he had acquired fluency in French and German—and at Oxford University, he proved to be a Classicist of considerable merit. At Oxford, he met the literary critic Walter Pater, then a professor of Classics, through whom he became associated with the Aesthetic Movement. Aestheticism was an intellectual movement which held that the aesthetic value of art, "art for art's sake," should be considered more highly than its social or political content. Under this philosophy, Wilde wrote a book of *Poems* (1881) and gave many lectures, going on tour throughout the United States and Canada. Upon returning to London, he found further success as a literary critic, beginning with book reviews in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. In 1884, he married Constance Lloyd, and in 1886, the pair had two children. *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), containing "The Selfish Giant," was likely influenced by Wilde's young children—though by that time his marriage had already begun to unravel, largely owing to the fact that he was, in actuality, a homosexual man. The 1890s, the last decade of Oscar Wilde's life, were his most prolific period as an artist and critic. During this time, he wrote such famous works as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), "The Critic as Artist" (1891), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *Salomé* (1894), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). His career and life were cut short, however, by accusations that he was a "sodomite." Wilde sued for libel, yet the evidence turned against him, and he was soon afterward tried and convicted for "gross indecency." After his imprisonment, he composed *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1987). Wilde spent the remaining years of his life in France, where he succumbed to meningitis at age 46.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Selfish Giant" appears in a collection with several other new "fairy tales" written by Oscar Wilde, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888). Of these, the story closest to "The Selfish Giant" is "The Happy Prince," about a sentient statue who aids the poor of the community by giving up the valuable materials of his own body, piece by piece. Like "The Selfish Giant" it is a story of Christian charity, with the additional theme of self-sacrifice. Both of these stories, as well as their companions in the collection, draw upon the fairy tales of Hans Christian Anderson, which also deliver social and moral lessons to young children through much the same kind of discourse. Animals talk, humans exist alongside fantasy creatures, and a cosmic moral order prevails over all. As the 20th century dawned, stories inspired by fairy tales, with a particular focus on children, became a mainstream trend in fiction. J.M. Barrie wrote *The Little White Bird* (1902), *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (1906), and *Peter Pan; or, the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* (1911) all about his character Peter Pan, a mischievous little boy who became a fairy after a long separation from his family. The romanticized childhood of "The Selfish Giant," and all the warm idealism surrounding it, had by this time developed into nostalgia and yearning for childhood. This feeling was certainly present in earlier literature, such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), but Wilde and Barrie are more representative of the general progression in this particular trend's literary themes.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Selfish Giant
- **When Written:** The late 1880s
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1888
- **Literary Period:** Late Victorian Period
- **Genre:** Short Story, Fairy Tale, Allegory
- **Setting:** The Giant's property and the surrounding neighborhood
- **Climax:** The Giant knocks down the wall around his garden, and welcomes the children back inside.
- **Antagonist:** The Giant's Selfishness, The Forces of Winter
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

The Giant Onscreen. "The Selfish Giant" has had many animated adaptations. The most famous of these is the 1971 animated short directed by Peter Sander, which was nominated for an Academy Award—but a quick internet search reveals countless animations of Wilde's tale, in dozens of languages, designed as stories for children and early language-learners.

The Children Formerly Known As Wilde. After Oscar Wilde was convicted of "gross indecency," Constance Lloyd changed her and her children's last name to Holland. Vyvyan Holland recounts in his biography, *Son of Oscar Wilde* (1954), that his father was very devoted to his and his brother's happiness, yet the boys' maternal family prevented them from ever seeing Wilde after the conviction.

PLOT SUMMARY

Every day after school, a group of local children play in the Giant's **garden**. There they enjoy fresh fruit, beautiful flowers, and sweetly singing birds, as well as a comfortable open space for their play. Their idyllic playtime does not last, however—the Giant returns home from a seven-year vacation, and in his shock and outrage at finding intruders in his garden, drives the children away. Selfishly, he proclaims that the only person who should play in his garden is himself, and he enforces this with a high brick wall around his property. On this wall he hangs a sign which reads, "TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED."

The children, despondent, try playing in the street instead, but to no avail. They find themselves continually drawn to the garden where they used to play, and they spend their afternoons simply loitering around the walls, wishing they could return to how things used to be. The Giant, meanwhile, is also miserable, because his property is locked in a perpetual winter. Spring, Summer, and Autumn, displeased by the Giant's selfishness, withdraw from the garden entirely, leaving it to the forces of Winter to make their new playground. The Snow, the Frost, the North Wind, and the Hail make mischief all over the Giant's property, disturbing his peace and keeping his garden lying dormant year-round.

After about a year of this terrible winter, the Giant is awoken by the sound of a linnet singing outside his window. He looks out to see that he children have returned to the garden, having sneaked inside through a hole in the wall. They have brought springtime with them, and the garden is flourishing once more.

Moved by this sight, the Giant realizes the error of his ways and wishes to make amends to the children. He spies a poor little boy in the furthest corner of the garden, crying as he fails to climb **the tree** there. The child's misery is so intense that it remains winter in that small part of the garden. His heart melting with pity, the Giant approaches—inadvertently driving the other children away, as they still fear him—and places the child up in the tree's high branches. No sooner than he does this, the tree blossoms all over, and the little boy kisses the Giant affectionately. The other children, realizing that the Giant now means no harm, return to the garden, ecstatic.

The Giant knocks down the wall around his garden, and thenceforth his property is open to the neighborhood children. Every day after their lessons, the children go to their new friend's garden for hours of play.

Over time, the Giant comes to cherish the children far more than anything he owns, even his garden. He has benefited from their friendship, and in his old age he finds no greater pleasure than watching them play from the comfort of his armchair. He never stops wondering, however, what happened to his first little friend, the boy who embraced and kissed him. This child has never been seen since.

The Giant finally receives his answer when, one morning, he sees the child once more beside the tree in his garden—the child is evidently no older than he had once been, and the tree has been transformed into gold and silver. The boy's hands and feet have been wounded by nails driven through them, and after an initial moment of confusion the Giant realizes that this is no ordinary child, but the Christ Child. Christ commends the Giant for his kindness of years ago, and for the life of kindness he'd lived since. As reward, he welcomes him into Paradise. That afternoon, the children discover the Giant's body beneath the tree, covered in white blossoms.

CHARACTERS

The Giant – The main character of the story, the titular selfish giant owns a **garden** where local children have taken to playing while he is away on an extended vacation. At the beginning of the story, the Giant is selfish and hardhearted; he drives the children out of his garden upon discovering them there, and he builds a high wall to keep them out. Spring, Summer, and Autumn leave the garden as well, repulsed by the Giant's selfishness, leaving only the forces of Winter—the North Wind, the Snow, the Frost, and the Hail—to inhabit it year-round. For months thereafter, the Giant is miserable, unable to understand why Spring will not come. Springtime only returns to the garden when the children sneak inside to play. Softened by the months he spent deprived of warmth and cheer, the Giant realizes that he brought the winter upon himself with his selfishness, and immediately he wishes to make amends. His first gesture of kindness is to a little boy in the far corner of the garden, who is crying because he can't climb the **tree** there. The Giant raises the boy up into the tree, which at once bursts into bloom as the child embraces the Giant, kissing him. With this act, the Giant warms the rest of the children to him, and he knocks down the wall so as to share his garden with them forevermore. In the years that follow, as the Giant ages, his heart softens further still. He comes to cherish the children far more than the garden itself. Even so, he wishes that he could once again meet the little boy who kissed him, whom he loves best of all. The Giant's wish is granted only in his twilight years, when he is very old and feeble—the boy appears in the corner of the garden, transfigured, revealing himself to be the Christ Child. He then welcomes the Giant into heaven as reward for his kindness. This arc of redemption, from selfish sinner to selfless neighbor, ending in eternal Paradise, illustrates the Christian promise of redemption. The Giant's character is meant to teach this moral lesson as simply and straightforwardly as possible.

The Children – The children in the story are a group of local kids who play in the Giant's **garden** after school. Innocent and sweet, they attract the goodwill of nature—they are loved by the birds, the trees, and even the seasons themselves. Spring,

Summer, and Autumn bless the children's playtime with good weather and cheer, sharing in their joy. When the Giant returns home from an extended vacation and cruelly drives the children out of his garden, the warmer seasons follow them out, leaving only Winter to inhabit the Giant's property year-round. Only when the children later manage to sneak through a hole in the wall does Winter thaw into Spring, so that the children can once again enjoy the garden. This entire sequence—Autumn into Winter, Winter into Spring, all following the children's movements—speaks to the children's innate power to transform the world around them, simply by virtue of their innocence. Beyond changing the garden for the better, they change the Giant himself. The sight of their renewed happiness is enough to melt the Giant's heart and make him see the error of his ways. Immediately he works to make amends. Initially the children flee from his approach, but his first kind gesture—raising a little boy into a **tree** that he had been trying to climb—warms them to him immediately. Wilde suggests that in their innocence, children are keenly perceptive to a person's true nature, and so these children can forgive the Giant quite readily. After the Giant knocks down the wall around his garden, the children play there ever after, treasured by their new friend. Looking at the story from a structural standpoint, the children provide the framework for the Giant's redemption; they create the situation which brings about change in him, and their wellbeing is the barometer for the Giant's moral progress. The story resolves with the children in a harmonious relationship with their giant neighbor, showing that he has truly redeemed himself.

The Little Boy – The little boy in the story is Christ in disguise, and he assumes this form so as to offer the Giant a chance at redemption. The Christ Child first appears among the many children who sneak back inside the Giant's **garden** through the hole in the wall, anonymous in the crowd. He is singled out not by his divine nature, which he conceals, but by the fact that he is the only child not enjoying the springtime. He huddles in the farthest corner of the garden, where the winter weather remains, crying because he is too small to climb the nearby **tree**. The Giant, eager to atone for his hardheartedness, raises the boy up into the tree—which at once bursts into bloom, as the child kisses his newfound friend. This act is how the Giant demonstrates his goodwill towards the children, and it begins about his reformation—and it happens, unbeknownst to the Giant, according to Christ's grand design. The idea that all-powerful beings test humankind by disguising themselves as ordinary mortals is a very old one, at least as old as the Greek myth of Baucis and Philemon, an elderly couple who unknowingly host the god Zeus for dinner. The Christ Child's first interaction with the Giant follows this age-old plot, while also hearkening to the famous Biblical passage, Matthew 25:40: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." It underscores the Christian theme that a person's behavior towards their neighbor, and especially towards children and the poor, is a metric of their moral standing. At the end of the story, the Christ Child reveals his true identity—the wounds of the Crucifixion appear on his hands and feet, and the tree he had once tried to climb, symbolic of the cross, is transfigured in gold and silver. This is how he shows the Giant that his kindness to the children has redeemed his soul, and after this he welcomes the Giant into Paradise.

Spring, Summer, and Autumn – Spring, Summer, and Autumn are the seasons personified. At the beginning of the story, they bless the Giant's **garden** with good weather—until he ousts the children from his garden, at which point they leave, repulsed by the Giant's selfishness. The seasons' disfavor shows that the Giant's selfish ways go against the natural order and thus deserve punishment from above.

The Forces of Winter – The personified forces of Winter are the Snow, the Frost, the North Wind, and the Hail. They take residence in the Giant's **garden** because Spring, Summer, and Autumn have left it (along with the children), thus allowing an indefinitely long Winter to take their place. Though the Snow, Frost, Hail, and North Wind harbor no malice against the Giant, they delight in causing wintry mayhem around his home, damaging his property and making him miserable. This is the Giant's just punishment for being selfish and keeping his garden only to himself, showing that sin naturally brings consequences against the sinner.

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.

CHRISTIAN CHARITY

"The Selfish Giant" is a lesson in Christian charity, as the titular Giant learns how to let go of his self-interest and love others. The Christian concept of "charity" is distinct from the common modern sense of the word, which has to do with money or aid for the disadvantaged. Christian charity, or *caritas* in Latin, refers to a perfectly unselfish kind of love. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines Charity as "the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for His own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God," but Wilde presents the Giant's selfish ways as the complete opposite of this kind of charity. At the beginning of the story, the Giant returns to his castle after a seven-year absence and is furious to find that a children have been playing in his **garden**. In his extreme selfishness, the Giant goes to great lengths to keep the children out—but having done

so, he grows miserable. He only knows happiness once he has learned to love the children as his neighbors, and only through this unselfish love does he earn entry into Paradise. Through the Giant's reformation, Wilde argues that there is not only a reward to charity, but a moral imperative to practice it. He underscores this point by framing the matter in Christian terms, as a conflict between wealthy and poor, adult and child, neighbor and neighbor.

The children are uniquely positioned to be the subjects of charity, in the Catholic sense of the word. Through them, Wilde very deliberately constructs the narrative framework for a parable about specifically this kind of charity. First of all, these children are quite literally the Giant's neighbors: they attend school near his castle, and they play in his garden every day after lessons. The word "neighbor" occupies a very important place in Christian thought. It refers not just to people living in close proximity to oneself, but to people potentially impacted by one's actions, who are therefore owed kindness and love. In creating this fable about Christian love, writing on a level that even young children can comprehend, Wilde makes a point to present the Giant's "spiritual neighbors" as his literal, actual neighbors. He leaves no ambiguity about the matter.

The second indication that the children are subjects of Christian charity has to do simply with the fact that these are *children* with whom the Giant is dealing. This is a reference on Wilde's part to the famous biblical passage, Matthew 19:14: "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." In the Gospels of the New Testament, Jesus Christ points to children—and one's behavior towards children—as a moral example. The way a person treats children, the weakest and most innocent members of a community, is indicative of that person's moral character, and kindness to children allows someone to learn the childlike qualities that allow them to enter heaven: openness, kindness, trust, and generosity. By having the Giant interact only with children, Wilde brings this Christian argument to the forefront of the story.

This culminates in the revelation that the little boy who once tried to climb the Giant's **tree** is actually the Christ Child, Jesus himself in the form of a child. The "wounds of Love" on his hands and feet, evidently left by nails, identify him as such. For the Giant's kindness, the Christ Child welcomes him into Paradise. This ending underscores the value of charity in an eternal, spiritual sense. Of all the children who visited his garden, the Giant is said to have "loved him [Christ] the best," and longed to see him again. This precisely mirrors how the virtue of Charity is outlined in Catholic theology: supreme love of God which then prompts love for one's neighbor. It is love for Christ which leads the Giant to love all the other children, and this in turn merits his eternal reward.

Bearing this in mind, Wilde's reader can easily see how the Giant is written to reflect the Christian virtue of charity—first as a negative example, the very opposite of charity, and then as a positive example. True to the story's title, the character begins as "a very selfish Giant," keeping the neighborhood children out of his garden simply because it is his. The Giant's sole justification for walling off his garden is that, as he puts it, "My own garden is my own garden [...] and I will allow nobody to play in it but myself." He thinks only of his rights as the owner of the property, failing to consider the just application of those rights. The sign he places on the wall, "TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED," speaks to this—as it is simply preposterous that anyone would prosecute a child.

The sight of the children returned to his garden—and specifically the sight of one miserable child in the corner, the boy revealed to be Christ in the end—is what changes the Giant's stubborn, selfish ways. He is moved to a perfectly unselfish act of kindness, helping the boy climb a tree, and this one act cascades into other acts of charity towards his young neighbors. The Giant breaks down the wall, opens his garden to the children, and cherishes their company for years afterward. In other words, love of Jesus Christ begins the Giant's new life of charity to those around him, just as described in the Catholic Catechism.

The story is a very short and simple one, spanning only a few pages in any edition, yet this is because Wilde was molding it as closely as he could to the theological definition of charity. His aim was to communicate this Christian lesson in a clear, earnest, straightforward manner, such that anyone of any age could grasp it.

DIVINE PROVIDENCE

Divine Providence is a Christian theological concept that is fundamental to understanding the logic of "The Selfish Giant." Divine Providence, or simply "Providence," is the belief in a world justly ordered by God. It states that the natural world, from plants to animals to weather, exists in accordance with God's will, and that God will intervene through nature if he deems it just. Oscar Wilde presents this idea through a kind of fairy tale logic—the trees, the Spring, Summer, and Autumn, and the forces of Winter all speak as if they were sentient people—yet it remains faithful at its core to Christian values and thought. Nature smiles upon the children and the **garden**, and the natural course of seasons is shown to be pleasant and good. The Giant's selfishness, however, brings an unnaturally long winter upon his home, as the divine order of the universe punishes him for his hardhearted ways. In more general terms, the natural world around the Giant's garden changes according to what he deserves morally, which reflects both the Giant's character and the idea of Providence. Through the Giant and the garden's twinned transformations, Wilde argues that the natural world abides by God's just will, meting out punishments and rewards as they are due.

When the Giant returns to his property after many years' absence, the natural order of the seasons is disrupted—a harsh winter settles upon the garden, staying well past the natural span of the season, because his cold-hearted nature deserves only cold and misery in kind. Before his arrival, though, the garden is an idyllic paradise, complete with "soft green grass," "beautiful flowers like stars," birds singing sweetly, and so on. The peach trees, which blossom in "pink and pearl" before bearing "rich fruit" through the autumn, show that each change of seasons brings new joys to the garden. Moved by this natural splendor, the children rejoice, "How happy we are here!" This echoes the recurring line in the Book of Genesis, "God saw that it was good," which follows each of God's creations as he looks upon them. In the Christian tradition on which "The Selfish Giant" is founded, humans, like their creator, find happiness in nature's beauty. This belief is foundational to the idea of Divine Providence.

When the Giant returns home and drives the children away, the garden's beauty and bounty also vanish, further supporting the idea that the natural world submits to God's just will. As the children flee, and so do the songbirds—and this, in turn, leads the trees to "[forget] to blossom." The warmer seasons keep away because the Giant is, in the Autumn's words, "too selfish" to deserve good weather. The Giant's selfishness attracts only cold, harsh, unseasonable weather. The North Wind, invited into the garden by the Snow and the Frost, calls it "a delightful spot," and invites the Hail as well. In themselves, these forces are not malicious, nor do they show any intent to punish the Giant, but nonetheless they are drawn to his cold heart as the other seasons were drawn to the children's joy. It is simply their nature to avoid warmth and seek cold. In other words, the long, miserable winter is merely the natural consequence of the Giant's bad behavior—yet this natural order is itself willed by God. Punishment for a selfish heart is built into the very fabric of nature that God created.

However, just as punishment is built into the natural order, so too is reward—as evidenced by the blossoming of spring when the Giant mends his ways. The children bring good weather back to the garden when they sneak inside, but it is specifically Giant's loving gesture towards the Christ Child which dispels the long winter for good. One corner of the garden remains trapped in winter until the Giant, of his own free will, helps the little boy who is struggling to climb a **tree** there. It should be noted that when the other children notice the Giant's approach, they flee, and "the garden [becomes] Winter again." Only when the Giant raises the boy Christ into the tree do the springtime blossoms return again. This is the moment at which the good weather becomes the consequence of the Giant's character, not just the children's. In the years that follow, as the Giant welcomes the children into his garden each day, the garden resembles its former state. It blossoms with flowers, and birdsong is heard overhead. Nature returns to its normal course because of the Giant's kindness, and he enjoys its bounty and beauty as rewards. Once again, God's justice manifests through the natural world.

At every stage of the story, this cycle of retribution comes about through the natural world, in accordance with the Christian doctrine of Divine Providence. Though Wilde personifies the plants, birds, weather, and seasons, their activities still abide by a sense of cosmic justice, at the head of which is Jesus Christ. "The Selfish Giant," like many fairy tales and religious parables, teaches its reader that their actions and attitudes have moral weight, and that a higher power will reward or punish them accordingly.

REDEMPTION

The theme of redemption occupies a special and distinct place in "The Selfish Giant." The redemptive arc of the Giant's character is what drives the plot forward—but more than this, redemption of the soul is a core promise of Christianity, and Wilde's fairy tale communicates this promise in clear and decidedly Christian terms. At the end of the story, the first child the Giant befriended, the little boy, is revealed to be the Christ Child, identifiable by the wounds of his Crucifixion. He offers the Giant eternal life in Paradise as reward for overcoming his selfishness and letting the children play in his **garden**. Thus the Giant's spirit moves on to a happy afterlife, following Jesus Christ. Christianity teaches that anyone who repents of their sins can earn eternal reward in heaven, and "The Selfish Giant" illustrates precisely this idea through the titular Giant.

For a person to be redeemed, they must first be a sinner; redemption comes in the acknowledgment of sin, followed by genuine contrition for it. Wilde sets up the Giant as an example of this very process: the character goes from selfishness to kindness, with recognition of his selfishness as the crucial middle step between these points. First Wilde establishes that the Giant's sin is selfishness. The title, "The Selfish Giant," is already straightforward enough, but it is only the first of many explicit signposts. After the Giant builds his wall, declaring, "My own garden is my own garden," the narrator simply states outright: "He was a very selfish Giant." Later he is called "the Selfish Giant" in the body of the text, and the personified Autumn says of him, "He is too selfish." Over and over, in the style of most fables with morals, the singular point of the Giant's selfishness is pressed. Then, when the Giant realizes the error of his ways, he identifies his sin and the reason behind his suffering: "'How selfish I have been!' he said: 'Now I know why Spring would not come here.'" As the narrator remarks, "He was really very sorry for what he had done." This sequence of thoughts closely follows the Catholic concept of contrition. In Catholic theology, a truly repentant person first feels recognition, then guilt, then contrition—a feeling which is not just remorse for one's sins, but also abhorrence for the sin. In

the Catholic sacrament of Penance, the contrite person then performs some action which makes up for the sins they have committed, and redeems their soul. True to this, the Giant's next thought is to undo the bad effects of his selfishness: "I will put that poor little boy on the top of the **tree**, and then I will knock down the wall, and my garden shall be the children's playground for ever and ever."

The redemption of the Giant's soul takes an even more explicitly Christian tone at the story's end, when the Christ Child welcomes him into heaven. This scene references two major points of Catholic doctrine, both of them having to do with the redemption of souls. The appearance of Jesus Christ before the Giant is likely a reference to Catholic teachings on the Second Coming. The Catholic Church teaches that at the end of the world, Christ will return in the flesh, and bring all the dead back to life, to live in a heaven that is physical as well spiritual. Although the Giant's body dies and remains dead, the physical presence of Christ before the dying seems to recall the Catholic doctrine.

More importantly, the tree in the Giant's garden is a stand-in for the cross, a Christian symbol of universal redemption. "Tree" is often used as a poetic term for the cross or crucifix, and the appearance of the Christ Child beside the Giant's tree leaves little doubt that this is Wilde's intent here. Nearly all Christian denominations view Christ's self-sacrifice upon the cross as a redemptive act on the behalf of all people. They teach that this act freed all people from the certainty of death, and granted them the chance to enter heaven by rejecting sin. The tree in the Giant's garden takes on all this symbolic meaning when context—the boy Christ, the wounds on his hands and feet, the tree's gold bark and silver fruit like the adornments of Catholic crucifixes—identifies it as the cross. The once-selfish Giant's redemption is completed in front of a symbol for humankind's supreme redemption.

THE POWER OF CHILDREN

Children occupy a special place in the discussion posed by "The Selfish Giant." By the late 19th century, it had become common opinion among Victorians that children are naturally disposed to goodness, not wickedness—and in "The Selfish Giant," Wilde proposes that this natural goodness can have a transformative effect on the world. By opening their eyes to the simple perspective of children, and by using their needs as a moral compass, adults can make a fair, kind, just world. The Giant does exactly this when he realizes how his selfishness has harmed the children and makes amends to them by opening his **garden** to all. Even before this moment, however, the children show an almost magical power to effect goodness in the world, even the natural world. This, together with the appearance of Christ as a child—in the form of the little boy—suggests that the purity of children is a heavenly gift, and that children have the capacity to be powerful transformers of the corrupt world around them.

It's significant that the Giant becomes kinder *solely* because of the children's innocence, goodness, and helplessness. After an unnaturally long winter, the Giant is roused from his bed by the sound of birdsong outside his window, and overjoyed at the sights of springtime—but when he spies the one corner of the garden where it is still winter, and the little boy suffering there, "his heart [melts]," and he realizes that his selfishness is what brought the winter in the first place. Pity for the children—and especially that tiny child in the corner, who is struggling to climb into **a tree**—is what sets him on the path to redemption, and encourages him to intervene. The Giant is inspired by this child who "stretched out his two arms and flung them round the Giant's neck, and kissed him" in a gesture of innocent affection. The children forgive the Giant as readily as they ran from him, accepting his reformed nature once he has shown it. In return, the Giant breaks down walls, both physical and emotional, opening himself up to new friendships. Spending time with the children in the years to come, the Giant only benefits further, and he comes to appreciate the children as far more precious than any property he owns. As he remarks in his twilight years, "I have many beautiful flowers [...] but the children are the most beautiful flowers of all." Judging by this drastic change in the Giant's character, it seems that children have some innate power to foster good in the world—that this is some special quality inherent to being a child. Wilde argues that this is a holy, almost supernatural quality.

Furthermore, pleasant weather comes and goes with the children, and the animals and plants respond to them more directly than they ever respond to the Giant, again suggesting that children have an almost supernatural goodness to them. The birds sing specifically for the benefit of the children, because the children stop to listen. The tree in the still-wintry corner of the Giant's garden even talks to the boy who is stuck there, and "[bends] its branches down as low as it could" for the child's benefit. Wherever the natural world is most like a fairy tale, it is around the children. Through these miraculous changes that follow in the children's wake—not just the state of the Giant's garden, but also his personality and the state of his soul—Wilde illustrates how children, simply by virtue of their gentleness and innocence, are imbued with a profound power to improve the world around them.

Still more tellingly, Christ disguises himself as a child to the Giant, and maintains this form even when he reveals his true divine nature. The appearance of the Christ Child transforms the tree with "lovely white blossoms," golden bark, and silver fruit, not unlike the Transfiguration of Christ in the Christian Gospels. Just as these goodhearted children alter the people and the world around them, so too does the appearance of the most good, most holy child alter the world in kind. Christ welcomes the Giant into Paradise while wearing this appearance—and as heaven is commonly understood in

Christianity to be spiritual model of Christ's future kingdom on Earth, the reader can infer that this boy Christ symbolizes the childlike qualities of innocence, openness, and kindness that will characterize his kingdom.

SYMBOLS

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

THE GIANT'S GARDEN

The Giant's garden mirrors the state of his soul—and, in a broader sense, symbolizes the journey that a person's soul undertakes in order to find redemption. Before the Giant returns home from his seven-year vacation, his garden reflects only the innocence of the children who play there. Like the biblical Garden of Eden, it remains pristine, tended only by the will of nature—yet far from being overgrown and wild, the garden remains orderly and peaceful. It is beautiful, bountiful, and safe, all for the benefit of the children. When the Giant arrives home, he selfishly drives out the children from his garden, and raises a high wall around the property to keep them out. This also drains the garden of warmth and life, as Spring, Summer, and Autumn follow the children out, leaving only the forces of Winter to occupy the place. The Giant's cold-hearted nature, which permits no relationships to grow between him and his neighbors, manifests in the actual cold that settles upon the garden, which keeps all the trees and flowers dormant. He cannot enjoy the natural goodness of the garden because he has spurned the natural goodness within himself and within the children.

The children bring springtime back to the garden when they sneak inside the wall, but only while they are present; when the Giant approaches, the children flee in fear, and it immediately becomes Winter again in the garden. Though the Giant has by this time realized the error of his ways ("How selfish I have been!"), he has yet to atone for his selfish behavior. The natural order of seasons only returns permanently when the Giant performs a genuine act of kindness that runs contrary to his earlier selfishness. When he helps the little boy—Christ in disguise—into **the tree** in the corner of his garden, the tree bursts into blossom all at once. Thenceforth, the Giant enjoys the garden alongside the children, because he *deserves* it.

Furthermore, by embracing the children as his friends, the Giant also embraces the childlike qualities by which the children themselves merit such blessings from nature—trust, love, openness, and generosity. These are qualities which the Christian Gospels encourage as pathways to heaven. Wilde's story conforms to this view, as the Christ Child explicitly welcomes the Giant into the garden of Paradise as reward for sharing his earthly garden with the children.

THE TREE

The tree in the corner of the Giant's **garden** is a marker of the little boy's true identity as Christ and a symbol of the redemption he offers to all sinners. In Christian theology, Jesus Christ's Crucifixion is the act by which he redeemed all humankind for all their sins, across all of time. As stated in 1 Peter 2:24, "he himself [Christ] bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness." This particular passage is notable because "cross" is just as often translated as "tree," a common metonym for the cross. Wilde uses the tree in the Giant's garden in this same way—because it is by raising the Christ Child into this tree that the Giant begins to be redeemed. The other children fled from the Giant just before this moment; the only one who remained was the little boy who was, in fact, Christ in disguise. Only through the opportunity presented by Christ is the Giant able to demonstrate his goodwill to the children and atone for his actions.

The symbol of the tree is developed further in the story's end, when the Christ Child reveals his true identity to the Giant. The boy appears transfigured, with the wounds of the crucifixion on his hands and feet—and behind him, the tree is also transformed, with white flowers, silver fruit, and golden branches. Wilde's use of precious metals here references devotional crosses and crucifixes, which in Catholic tradition especially were heavily ornamented with such valuable metals and materials. The ornamentation is meant to honor Christ's redemptive sacrifice upon the cross—which is to say, to honor the redemption of humanity which already took place. It is meant to honor the *completed sacrifice*. This is mirrored in the final scene of "The Selfish Giant," because the Giant has by this point already been redeemed. The beautiful tree behind the Christ Child symbolizes the Giant's complete redemption, for which he is then rewarded by eternal life in Paradise.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Evergreen Classics edition of *The Happy Prince and Other Fairy Tales* published in 2012.

The Selfish Giant Quotes

❝ The birds sat on top of the trees and sang so sweetly that the children used to stop their games in order to listen to them. "How happy we are here!" they cried to each other.

Related Characters: The Children (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

This moment, which occurs at the very beginning of the story, establishes the local children's relationship to the Giant's garden, as well as to nature itself. The children go to the neighboring garden to play every day after school—and not only do they delight in the natural beauty there, they also seem to be a natural part of the scene. As the story unfolds, Wilde shows how the children enjoy a special relationship with the natural world, bringing joy to the birds and trees and flowers as much as these living things bring joy to the children.

The children's remark—"How happy we are here!"—foreshadows the moment when they are removed from the garden, and their exclamation shifts to the past tense, "How happy we were there!" This sentiment of loss and nostalgia reflects the scene painted in the Book of Genesis of the Garden of Eden, the earthly paradise in which the first humans lived happily without sin. Just as the children are cast out from the garden, so too were Adam and Eve—though it's important to note that in Wilde's story, it's the Giant, not the children, who is the sinful one. But for now, the children's blissful happiness and the garden's lushness both point back to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden prior to original sin, which paints the children as pure and innocent.

> "My own garden is my own garden," said the Giant; "any one can understand that, and I will allow nobody to play in it but myself."

Related Characters: The Giant (speaker), The Children

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

The Giant says this as he expels the children from his garden, having just discovered them there upon returning home from a long vacation. This is the moment which establishes the Giant's selfish character and sets the story's conflict in motion. The Giant thinks only of his property, and his reasoning is purely selfish and decidedly petty. After all, it is unlikely that he, an adult with a hardened demeanor, would ever actually *play* in his garden—he simply wishes that no one else occupy his property, for no reason beyond the fact that it is his. In fact, he even seems smug about kicking the children out—though soon he will realize that nothing is more gratifying than openhearted generosity.

"The Selfish Giant" is a didactic story, a fable meant to teach children right from wrong. Given this overarching purpose, it seems that the Giant's behavior is likely an exaggerated mirror of certain behaviors that young readers might see in the nursery or on the playground. Readers can see their peers—or perhaps even themselves—modeled in the Giant's selfishness and petty stubbornness, which makes the Giant's plight and eventual transformation all the more personal and impactful for the reader.

> Only in the garden of the Selfish Giant was it still winter. The birds did not care to sing in it as there were no children, and the trees forgot to blossom. Once a beautiful flower put its head out from the grass, but when it saw the notice-board it felt so sorry for the children that it slipped back into the ground again, and went off to sleep.

Related Characters: The Forces of Winter, The Giant, The Children

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

This passage takes place after the children have been banned from the Giant's garden, and springtime has come throughout the country—except on the Giant's property, where it remains winter because none of the other seasons will tolerate his selfish ways. This moment is the first time the trees, birds, and flowers are given thought, will, and agency of their own. This further develops the fairy tale setting that Wilde has chosen, where seemingly everything is personified and sentient, all for the purpose of making the story's allegory clearer. The garden flora and fauna are not omniscient narrators or mouthpieces for Wilde, but they nonetheless prove crucially important to developing the characters' situation and its moral implications. Here, they show that the children, not the Giant, are deserving of the garden's beauty and comfort. Elsewhere in the story, the

seasons signal important characters like the little boy who turns out to be the Christ Child, or else provide a touch of whimsy to a scene. The scene in which the little boy struggles to climb a tree—and the tree, in turn, reaches its branches downwards and calls out to the boy—is at once touching and sympathetic, but also makes clear that this story is set in a whimsical fairy tale context rather than a realistic one.

"I cannot understand why the Spring is so late in coming," said the Selfish Giant, as he sat at the window and looked out at his cold white garden; "I hope there will be a change in the weather."

Related Characters: The Giant (speaker), Spring, Summer, and Autumn, The Forces of Winter

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Looking upon his empty garden long after kicking the children out of it, the Giant finds himself unable to understand why it hasn't yet returned to its healthy springtime state—instead, the personified forces of Winter (the North Wind, the Snow, the Frost, and the Hail) have come to stay, and they don't seem like they'll budge any time soon. Fittingly, it is only the cold, harsh elements that can tolerate the Giant's own cold and harsh selfishness.

The particular phrasing of this line, "I cannot understand," is an inversion of the Giant's earlier declaration, "My own garden is my own garden; any one can understand that." Despite having clear view of the garden and the circumstances around the long winter, the Giant himself cannot see the evident truth of the situation. He sees only the selfish falsehood he has come to believe: that he should keep his garden entirely to himself, and that he is perfectly in the right to do so. He waits passively for the seasons to change, not realizing that this requires action from him. As the story goes on to show, redemption requires an act of penance and atonement, and this in turn requires that the sinner recognize their actions as sinful. At this point in the story, the Giant lacks the self-awareness to initiate this process, and so he sits idly while his punishment continues, unaware that it is, in fact, punishment.

The Autumn gave golden fruit to every garden, but to the Giant's garden she gave none. "He is too selfish," she said. So it was always Winter there, and the North Wind, and the Hail, and the Frost, and the Snow danced about through the trees.

Related Characters: Spring, Summer, and Autumn, The Giant

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes after the Giant expresses his confusion about the long winter that has fallen upon his garden, which came about because he selfishly kept his property to himself, driving the children away and even raising a wall to keep them out. He is too selfish to deserve any company except for the equally cold and hostile forces of Winter—and not only does this line from the Autumn confirm this fact, it also shows that the Giant's misery is an intentional punishment from beings greater than he. Wilde has yet to introduce any overtly Christian motifs at this point, but this passage nonetheless introduces a moral and spiritual relationship that is decidedly Christian in character: the relationship between a sinner and a righteous spirit. The Giant is being punished for his moral shortcomings by forces that don't exist completely in the physical world, but rather as spirits or gods who control nature from on high. The justice being administered is not civic, but cosmic in nature. As the story continues to unfold, this theme becomes more overtly Christian in tone and content, culminating in the Christ Child inviting the Giant into heaven after changing his ways.

One morning the Giant was lying awake in bed when he heard some lovely music. It sounded so sweet to his ears that he thought it must be the King's musicians passing by. It was really only a little linnet singing outside his window, but it was so long since he had heard a bird sing in his garden that it seemed to him to be the most beautiful music in the world.

Related Characters: Spring, Summer, and Autumn, The Giant

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This moment takes place after the Giant has suffered for quite a long time—it is implied to have been at least a year—while the winter rages around his home, blanketing his garden and slowly ruining his house. He has been so long deprived of birdsong that it now sounds like glorious music fit for a king. This sentiment reflects the Christian idea of purgative suffering: that suffering purifies a person of their sin and orients them towards God. Having lain miserably in bed for an untold amount of time, cold and isolated, the Giant is much more appreciative of the goodness of nature.

Also contributing to the story's increasingly Christian tone is the idea that the linnet's song sounds like "the King's musicians." Though on the surface this is simply a continuation of the story's fairy tale setting, as most English fairy tales are styled with Medieval trappings like kings and knights, it also carries the implicit notion that there is a heavenly king for whom the very birds are musicians. This foreshadows the revelation of the Christ Child at the end of the story, when he appears with all of nature's splendor around him.

It also bears mentioning that in "The Devoted Friend," another story in the collection containing "The Selfish Giant," Wilde situates a linnet as the narrator. In the frame story surrounding the main story, the linnet is trying to instruct a selfish water-rat in the true nature of friendship—but unlike the Giant, who hears a linnet's song and awakens to new feelings, the water-rat remains stubbornly set in his ways. Similarly, "The Happy Prince," for which the collection is named, features a swallow as its protagonist. In any case, it seems that little birds, linnets in particular, are an important motif for Wilde, representing the sweet and pleasant side of nature.

❝ "How selfish I have been!" he said; "now I know why the Spring would not come here. I will put that poor little boy on the top of the tree, and then I will knock down the wall, and my garden shall be the children's playground for ever and ever." He was really very sorry for what he had done.

Related Characters: The Giant (speaker), Spring, Summer, and Autumn, The Children

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the Giant has just witnessed the return of springtime to his garden, all because the children have sneaked back inside through a hole in the wall. Their presence invited back the warm weather, the flowers, the animals, and so on; all are overjoyed to have the children back in their midst. Even the flowers are laughing with glee at the return of their little friends, which emphasizes the close connection between the goodness of nature and the natural goodness of the children. However, one corner of the garden remains steeped in Winter. A little boy is huddled there, crying, too small to climb into the tree there, and it is implied that his sadness is what keeps the winter there. That a small part of the garden is still stuck in Winter's grasp also seems to point to the idea that the Giant has yet to be fully redeemed—he has repented and committed himself to changing his ways, but he has yet to act on it.

This scene provides the Giant with all the information he has thus far been missing: that the weather in the garden correlates not necessarily to the time of year, but to the character of the garden's occupants, and that the children, not the Giant himself, have brought the return of Spring. Once he sees the lines of cause and effect between himself, the children, and the seasons, he finally understands that his selfishness is what kept Spring away and in turn made him so miserable. This is the moment at which the Giant begins to redeem himself. He sees the little boy's sadness—and rather than turning away from his opportunity to be a good neighbor, as before, he takes it upon himself to help the children.

Of course, it is later revealed that this opportunity was the intentional design of Jesus, disguised as the little boy, who likely wished to test the Giant now that he has seen the error of his ways. In the Catholic doctrine that forms this story's moral bedrock, a person is forgiven of their sin through penance, a specially prescribed action which atones for the sin externally and purifies the sinner internally. Given the very active presence that God has throughout this story, the reader could surmise that by staying behind while the other children flee, the disguised Christ is offering the Giant an opportunity to perform an act of penance.

❝ "It is your garden now, little children," said the Giant, and he took a great axe and knocked down the wall. And when the people were going to market at twelve o'clock they found the Giant playing with the children in the most beautiful garden they had ever seen.

Related Characters: The Giant (speaker), The Children

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

After helping the little boy into the tree—an act that shows the other children that the Giant has mended his ways and no longer harbors any ill will toward them—the Giant gives his garden over to the children and plays with them all afternoon. This passage reflects a return to the idyllic state of things established in the beginning of the story. In fact, it is an improvement upon the way the story began, as the Giant himself is now welcomed into the fold of the children's bliss and the garden's beauty. Whereas before the children played only among themselves, now they play with their friend, the Giant; whereas before the garden was exceptionally nice, now it is "the most beautiful garden [the townsfolk] had ever seen." This is the final part of the story's turning point, and it begins with the Giant's unselfish gesture of opening his garden forevermore.

> "I have many beautiful flowers," he said; "but the children are the most beautiful flowers of all."

Related Characters: The Giant (speaker), The Children

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4-5

Explanation and Analysis

The Giant expresses this sentiment after many years of the children's companionship, having grown old playing with them in his garden. He makes this remark as he watches them play from his armchair, content simply to enjoy their company. This quote demonstrates just how far the Giant has progressed from his selfish and miserly starting point at the beginning of the story. Whereas before he valued his garden much more highly than he valued his neighbors, the children—for no other reason than that the garden was his—now he weighs his garden's delights against the children in all their goodness, and he finds the children much more beautiful. The Giant's core values have shifted; they are now oriented towards people rather than possessions, and openhearted generosity rather than callous selfishness.

Also noteworthy here is the Giant's new appreciation of beauty. Before the long winter, when he is coldhearted and selfish, the Giant never once remarks upon his garden's beauty. The very components of his garden—the peach trees, the flowers, the lawn, and so on—are all clearly intended to be aesthetically pleasing, but at first the Giant only cares that the elements of the garden are all his. Here, in the latter part of the story, he values beauty itself far more than he values his possession of that beauty. After all, the children's beautiful nature is not his to possess; he can only appreciate it, and now he is quite happy to do so. This way of thinking takes somewhat after the Romantics, writers like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, by whom Wilde and other late Victorians were deeply influenced.

> [T]he child smiled on the Giant, and said to him, "You let me play once in your garden, to-day you shall come with me to my garden, which is Paradise."

Related Characters: The Little Boy (speaker), The Giant

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Having made his divine nature known through a miraculous appearance in the garden, the Christ Child (disguised as a little boy) speaks these words of comfort to the Giant, welcoming him into heaven for his good deeds and changed heart. The symbolic parallels between the Giant's garden and the biblical Garden of Eden are again brought into view here and compounded by parallels to heaven and the promised kingdom of Christ.

This moment also shows how love for one's neighbor leads to love for God, and vice-versa, a piece of Christian theology that rests at the center of this story. The Giant's love for the little boy opened him up to love for all the children—and in turn, his love for them showed him the way to heaven and to God. The eternal reward that the Christ Child here extends to the Giant is the culmination of Wilde's lesson on Christian charity. Without this final scene, the cosmic order that governs the rest of the story would be vague and somewhat directionless, having no ultimate purpose to the

charity and love it advocates in the world.

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 SELFISH GIANT

Every afternoon after school, the children go to the Giant's **garden** to play. This is their favorite spot in the neighborhood. The garden is spacious and green, brimming with peach trees, beautiful flowers, and birdsong, and it makes the children very happy.

In the story's Christian allegory, the Giant's garden is analogous to the biblical Garden of Eden, the idyllic paradise where humans first came into being. The creation myth in the Book of Genesis describes Adam and Eve, the first humans, as innocent and naive, lacking all knowledge of good and evil. Many Christian writers see parallels between childhood—a time when such moral distinctions as "good" or "evil" are hazy—and the state of humanity in Eden, before their Fall. Wilde clearly follows in this literary tradition, placing the innocent children in a garden setting from which they are about to be expelled.

One day, however, the Giant returns home from a long vacation—he had spent the past seven years visiting a friend of his, an ogre, leaving his own property unattended. When he discovers the children playing in his **garden**, he angrily drives them out. "My own garden is my own garden," he declares, "[…] any one can understand that, and I will allow nobody to play in it but myself." The Giant then constructs a high wall around his garden, on which he hangs a sign which reads, "TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED."

This moment establishes the Giant's selfishness as his defining characteristic, as well as the source of the story's conflict. The wall he raises is a symbol of the emotional barrier he maintains between himself and the children, which prevents him from forming any kind of relationship with them. The sign, meanwhile, speaks to how unreasonable his selfishness is—only a truly cynical person would take legal action against children.

Despondent, the children are forced to find another place to play. They try playing in the street, but it is rocky and dusty—so they return to the Giant's property and spend their afternoons wandering aimlessly around the high wall, reminiscing sadly about the **garden** and how happy it used to make them.

Continuing the implicit comparison to the Garden of Eden, here Wilde shows the harsh world outside the garden, where the earth is hard and unyielding. Crucially, however, the children do not deserve this hardship; it is the Giant's sin which expelled them from their paradise.

When Spring arrives, the Giant's **garden** remains trapped in Winter, as all the trappings of springtime—the birds, the trees, the flowers, and so on—feel sorry for the children, and they refuse to appear while their little friends are absent.

The harsh, long-winded winter weather is the consequence of the Giant's selfishness. By rejecting the children, the Giant has unknowingly rejected the other good and natural things which once resided in his garden.

Only the forces of Winter are pleased by this turn events, and they make the **garden** their new home throughout the year. The Snow and the Frost blanket everything in white; the North Wind blows all about, knocking down the Giant's chimney-pots; the Hail dances atop the castle roof, damaging it, and then flings himself about the garden.

Just as the Giant's selfishness drives out warmth and cheer, it attracts only cold, inhospitable weather. The implicit comparison between the coldhearted Giant and the wintry weather around him is straightforward enough. In broader terms, however, this section also suggests a system of cosmic justice at work, punishing the Giant in a way that fits his sin.

Meanwhile, Spring, Summer, and Autumn all refuse to appear, on account of the Giant's selfishness, and the Giant is left cold, miserable, and confused. "I cannot understand why the Spring is so late in coming," he says, adding, "I hope there will be a change in the weather."

This moment establishes a clear cause-and-effect relationship between the Giant's selfishness and his present suffering: the warm seasons do not return precisely because he is too selfish. The Giant's inability to see this line of causality shows that he is not yet ready to atone for what he did—and it also suggests that redemption is not easily achievable without some kind of moral guidance. No one has shown the Giant the error of his ways, and so he cannot see the error at all. This moment also harkens back to his earlier claim that "My own garden is my own garden, […] any one can understand that." With this, the Giant frames his own standards of property and propriety as universal and expects others to see them as a plain matter of fact, but when faced with the actual *laws of the universe, by his own admission he "cannot understand" why Spring does not come to his garden.*


One morning, the Giant hears what sounds like lovely music outside his window, and "so sweet to his ears that he thought it must be the King's musicians passing by." It is actually a linnet chirping its song, yet the time the Giant has spent without hearing birdsong has made it sound incomparably beautiful to him. Then the Giant hears that the forces of Winter have stopped their assault on his home, and he smells the aroma of flowers wafting in through the window. Spring seems to have arrived at last.

The Giant has been so long deprived of good weather that he now truly appreciates its value. This follows from the Christian idea that suffering has purifying, redemptive power. Suffering a long penance makes goodness feel all the sweeter, and it makes one all the more eager to participate in it. Since the long winter was the direct result of the Giant's selfishness, and was uniquely suited to his sin, it can be considered a "penance" in this context; clearly it has had the intended psychological effect of a penance. A linnet also appears in Wilde's "The Devoted Friend," another fairytale story that deals with selfishness, generosity, and friendship.


Upon looking outside, the Giant sees "a most wonderful sight." Spring has indeed returned to his **garden**—because the children have also returned. They crept inside through a hole in the wall, much to the delight of the birds and the trees, and are now enjoying the garden as they once did. Winter remains only in the far corner of the garden, where a little boy, too small to climb **the tree** there, is left crying with no one to help him.

Not only does this moment show the cosmic order at work, sending just rewards to those who deserve them, but it also shows the transformative power that children can have on the world. Simply by virtue of their purity and goodness, the children have brought springtime back to the garden. The Giant himself does not deserve this, but the children's good nature outweighs the Giant's bad behavior, and so the garden has returned to its natural state.


Moved by this scene, "the Giant's heart melt[s]," and he understands at once that his selfishness is what kept Spring away. Immediately he vows to make amends: "I will put that poor little boy on top of the tree, and then I will knock down the wall, and my **garden** shall be the children's playground for ever and ever."

The sight of the children's return was the missing piece of information that kept the Giant from understanding that he himself was the cause of the long winter. The sudden change in seasons prompts the Giant to compare himself to the children, which causes him to reflect upon his shortcomings and realize that he has been selfish. This exemplifies the biblical lesson from Matthew 19:14: "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." Without even realizing it, the children improve the Giant morally. Had he allowed them into his garden and into his life, as in the passage, he never would have suffered as he did.

As the Giant enters the **garden**, all of the children flee from him in fear, and the garden instantly grows icy and cold. Only the little boy in the corner remains, because his eyes are so full of tears that he can't see the Giant. The Giant approaches him quietly from behind, gently picks him up, and places him in **the tree**. At once the tree blossoms all over, birds sing, and the little boy kisses the Giant in thanks.

This is the moment in which the Giant atones for his wrongdoing in the eyes of heaven. Before he helps the little boy into the tree, the Giant's approach scares of the children and re-invites winter weather into the garden—but as soon as he performs this unselfish gesture, the world responds by blossoming into spring once more, just as it does for the children. The Giant has earned the approval of the cosmic powers that have thus far only punished him.

Seeing this, the children realize that the Giant now means well. They return to the **garden**, bringing Spring with them. The Giant declares, "It is your garden now, little children," and he knocks down the wall with his axe. All that day, the children played in the garden with their new friend, the Giant.

The 19th-century belief in the innate goodness of children also yielded the belief that children have a natural internal sense for good or malicious intent, otherwise known as discernment. This scene clearly follows from that line of thought, as the children are immediately able to sense the Giant's good intent and forgive him.

As the children bid him farewell that evening, the Giant asks after the little boy who had kissed him, having grown especially fond of him. The children simply respond that they don't know where he went, where he lives, or even who he is—they've never seen him before. This saddens the Giant, and although he sees the children every afternoon thenceforth, and enjoys their company, thoughts of his "first little friend" still linger in his mind.

This moment foreshadows the story's ending and the little boy's return. It also proceeds from the Catholic concept of charity: love for God above all, which in turn provokes love for one's neighbor. The Giant loves the little boy best of all, and this relationship is what begins his broader friendship with the other children.

Years pass, and the Giant comes to cherish the children more than the **garden** itself, calling them "the most beautiful flowers of all." In his old age, he enjoys the children's company from the comfort of an armchair, content to watch them play.

The Giant's character has greatly developed since his first appearance, and it shows in how he now values the children far above his possessions. He once loved the garden because it was his, but now he values the children because of their innate goodness and beauty. His self-interest is no longer a part of how he assigns value to the world.

One morning in Winter—which he no longer hates, "for he knew that it was merely the Spring asleep"—the Giant awakes to a miraculous sight. **The tree** in the farthest corner of the garden has transformed, bearing white blossoms and silver fruit on its now-golden branches. Beneath the tree is none other than the little boy who once tried to climb it, evidently no older than he had been then.

This is the first sign that the little boy is not what he seems. His appearance in this passage, seemingly still the same age as years ago, is itself a miracle—but in addition to this, the tree's transformation is far beyond what the neighborhood children brought about earlier in the story. At this point in the story, the tree builds into a symbol of the cross, and its adornment with gold and silver seems to mirror ornate Catholic crucifixes.

Overjoyed, the Giant rushes down to meet his friend, yet stops when he sees that the little boy's hands and feet bear wounds, evidently from nails that had pierced them through. Enraged that someone would dare wound a child, let alone his first and dearest friend, the Giant vows to strike the culprit down with his sword—but the child bids him peace. "Nay," he says, "but these are the wounds of Love." At this moment, the Giant realizes that he is in the presence of no ordinary child. "Who art thou?" he asks, reverently kneeling before the boy.

The wounds of Christ's Crucifixion, called the Stigmata of Christ in the Christian tradition, are the clearest identifying marker that the boy receives without being named outright as Jesus Christ. They are distinctive enough that the Giant, upon recognizing what they signify, at once kneels reverently before the boy. Sometimes the Stigmata do not signify Jesus Christ himself, but a merely a holy person—but even so, this is clearly someone to whom the Giant should show respect.

The little boy does not answer the Giant directly, but rather says, "You let me play once in **your garden**, today you shall come with me to my garden, which is Paradise." When the children visit the Giant that afternoon, they find his body lying beneath **the tree**, covered in its white blossoms.

The story's ending completes the Giant's character arc and the Christian allegory told through him. In the Christian framework that Wilde sets in place, the reward of heaven is what holds the story's moral center in place. It gives legitimacy to the Giant's kind actions beyond what any mere social reward can provide. It is the surest, clearest sign that generosity and love are the right moral path, and that the world operates according to a just cosmic order. Furthermore, that the little boy talks of "my garden, which is Paradise" seems to point to both Eden and heaven, which is further evidence that he is the Christ Child. This point is made all the clearer when the Giant dies that day under the tree—symbolic of the Cross—covered in white blossoms, a color that commonly symbolizes purity.

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