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# ENGLISH

## THE SELFISH GIANT



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## ***The Selfish Giant*, by Oscar Wilde**

*The Selfish Giant* is a short story written by Oscar Wilde involving a giant who does not allow children to play in his garden. The major connection to discovery revolves around the shift in the Giant's attitude as he relishes the folly of his ways. Like much of Wilde's works, the characterisation and atmosphere of the story heavily leans on aesthetic considerations with goodness represented in positive images and badness in negative. A major theme to look out for and keep in mind is contrast, as contrast is the device that best creates Wilde's message.

### A Children's Story

*The Selfish Giant* first appeared in a collection of tales for children and thus shares many similarities and conventions of children's narratives. The major aspect is the coda: Wilde's story has a clear message of selflessness and virtue that presents itself throughout. The ending too reinforces this. When analysing the text it is important to keep this in mind. Wilde not only explores moral discoveries within his characters, but since it's a text for children, it is meant to guide the readers towards these discoveries for themselves. The audience is meant to walk away having grasped and internalised the moral of the story, and this is reinforced by the authoritative voice of a third person, omniscient narrator.

The other impact of it being a children's story is it is meant to be somewhat rhetorical. This connects with the earlier mention of Wilde's emphasis on aesthetics. Children are not going to grasp abstract reasoning or arguments in favour of selflessness, and thus the case must be made by associating positivity and good consequences with virtue and negative consequences with vice. This should be kept in mind, as it is a further example of how Wilde positions his audience to see and accept his conclusion.

1. While discovery is a big theme within the text, Wilde is also concerned with this discovery being shared by the reader too. How does Wilde's language influence our reading of the text, and do we ourselves make any discoveries?

### Analysis

The story begins with the children playing in the garden due to the Giant's absence (who is visiting his friend, the Cornish Ogre). Immediately Wilde establishes a picture of gaiety and cheerfulness through a variety of techniques. Alliteration and sibilance<sup>1</sup> is frequent in the second paragraph, such

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<sup>1</sup> These are aesthetic devices: often they do not affect the meaning of the text, but they are heavily used in poetry in particular to create a pleasing sensation when spoken.

as “**large lovely**”, “**green grass**”, “**pink and pearl**” and “**sang so sweetly**”. Colour is a motif which recurs frequently in different ways throughout the text, but is introduced here as a way to paint a pretty picture: green, peach, pink and pearl all contributing. Simile also appears in “**beautiful flowers like stars**”, and finally the children themselves profess their happiness with exclamations. Wilde has set up a very positive picture for the Giant to come and ruin.

Following the Giant’s return, the contrast is immediately apparent: the “**soft green grass**” and “**beautiful flowers**” with all their colours are replaced by the “**very dusty**” road “**full of hard stones**”. And instead of crying about how happy they are in exclamation, they dully reminisce on how happy there *were*.

The negativity follows during the paragraphs detailing the eternal winter: personification is heavily used to create an image of mournful flowers and trees but most of all to introduce the malicious Snow and Frost and Hail and Northern Wind. The sensuous imagery continues, describing the unpleasant roars and rattling, but the largest motif again is colour. The garden, which was previously colourful, was now covered in a “**great white cloak**” with the “**trees silver**”; the Hail’s dressed in dull “**grey**” with a “**breath like ice**”.

The giant’s realisation of his selfishness comes a little after halfway when he smells a “**delicious perfume**” and hears a “**little linnets singing**”. Through the hole in the wall, the returning children brought with them the garden of before: the trees again are personified, this time covering “**themselves with blossoms**” and “**waving their arms gently**”; the flowers “**were looking up through the green grass and laughing**”; and the contrast with the portion of the garden still in winter is made clear.

Just like the snow, the Giant’s heart “**melted**” and he comes to a realisation about his selfish ways.

1. Unsurprisingly for a children’s story, the message is spelled out explicitly for the audience. However what do we learn about discovery at this point in the story? How does the discovery about the consequences of his selfishness force the Giant to change his ways? Do all discoveries lead to change, and if so are all discoveries necessarily positive like the one here?
2. Are you surprised by the Giant’s willingness to accept responsibility and change his mind so quickly? Compare it with the characters in your set text. Do we need an open mind to make or notice discoveries? Would it be possible for an even meaner Giant to have been unable to admit he was wrong, shoo the children from his garden and turn his back to the discovery? What does that tell you about the role of the discoverer in discoveries?

The conclusion of the story is heavily religious, possibly owing to its 19<sup>th</sup> century English context. The Giant knocks down his wall and lets all the children play, befriending the lot of them and being welcomed by the trees and birds and such. However the one child he has a close friendship with never returns.

As it turns out, the child is a representation of Jesus Christ. One day many years later, the child returns by himself (unaged) with the wounds of the stigmata.<sup>2</sup> The Giant's language also changes to old English, an allusion to the Bible.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the words 'Love' and 'Paradise' are capitalised, indicating that these aren't general uses of the term (e.g. my holiday was paradise!) but the specific uses referring to God's love and the Kingdom of Heaven. The Giant dies "**covered with white blossoms**", having ascended to Heaven to with the Christ Child.

This portion of the text has a number of smaller and larger discoveries. The two smaller ones are spelled out by the text itself. First, the Giant comes to realise his fortune and regards, with metaphor, the children as "**the most beautiful flowers of all**". Second, upon the disappearance of the Spring, he changes his attitude towards the Winter. "**He did not hate the Winter now, for he knew it was merely the Spring asleep, and the flowers were resting**". This is in stark contrast to how Wilde constructed the relationship earlier in the story and represents the growth and maturation of the Giant. He has finally realised the importance of friendship and giving (emphasising the Christian theme) as well as a more measured, less hedonistic view of nature.

But the big discovery is reserved for him finally reconnecting with the boy he put into the tree: this not only brings the Giant's story to an end but is critically important to the message the audience receives. It is meant to be a reaffirmation of the Christian principles this story is based on, the ultimate reassurance that virtue is preferable to vice and that the troubles of this world will be forgotten and rewarded in the next. Again, this is represented with the regal colours of the golden branches and silver fruit. This message may not carry over into as multicultural a society as we're now adjusted to, but even without the religious ideas one can still speak of Wilde wanting to represent friendship, selflessness and virtue as desirable attributes to strive for and which would be rewarded.

3. Is discovery tied to growth and maturation of the individual? Discoveries can bring about change in both our external world and internal thoughts, and the Giant in the story develops as a character over the course of his discoveries. Is this what discoveries do? Do all of them do this, even if their results are negative?

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<sup>2</sup> These are the wounds of Jesus on the cross: nail holes in both palms and his feet.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the Ten Commandments are most often written as "Thou shalt not..."

Funnily enough, some versions of the story online (especially on children's websites) omit the final section with the child, ending the story after the Giant knocks down the wall and plays with the children.