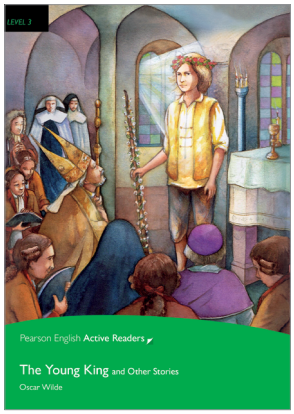
The Young King and Other Stories

Oscar Wilde



About the author

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born on 16 October 1854, in Dublin, Ireland. He went to Trinity College, Dublin, and then onto Magdalen College, Oxford to study classics. He was an exemplary student and won many literary prizes, and helped found the Aesthetic Movement, '*art for art's sake*' at Oxford. In 1884, Wilde married Constance Mary Lloyd (1858–1898) with whom he had two sons. Known for his biting wit, he became one of the most successful playwrights of late Victorian London, and one of the greatest celebrities of his day. Several of his plays continue to be widely performed. In 1895, Wilde was charged with gross indecency and was sent to prison for two years. Oscar Wilde died of meningitis in November 1900, and is buried in Paris, the city where he had spent the last, penniless years of his life.

Summary

Story 1 *The Young King*: When the young king is taken from the obscurity of his forest home to the palace, he is, at first, happy to wear the beautiful clothes that have been made for him. But after he dreams of the poor people struggling to make the clothes and even dying to get the jewels that are needed for them, he doesn't want them anymore. The people, however, do not want a king who does not look like a king. On the day of his coronation, the young king puts on his old clothes, takes up his old stick and puts on a crown of wild roses. He is jeered by the crowd as he walks to the church. While he is talking to the priest, a group of angry government officials come into the church and insist that he cannot be king. At that moment a shaft of sunlight comes through the windows and transforms his appearance into one far more beautiful than anyone has ever seen. The priest declares he has been crowned by somebody greater than himself, and is therefore king.

Story 2 *The Birthday of the Infanta*: The Infanta is the twelve-year-old daughter of the King of Spain. A big show is put on for her birthday with music, magicians and rides, but the funniest act is an ugly dancing dwarf. The Infanta throws him a rose, which he interprets as a sign of love. When he tries to find her in the palace he comes face to face with his own image in a mirror for the first time and realises that he is ugly and only used as an object for the Infanta to laugh at. When she comes into the room, she orders him to dance but he just lies on the floor. The doctor tells her that the dwarf has died of a broken heart.

Story 3 *The Happy Prince*: The Happy Prince is a statue of gold and jewels which looks down on a city, but he is not as happy as the people think. When a small bird takes shelter under the figure, she realises that the statue is crying. The prince explains that when he was alive he knew nothing of poverty and sadness, but now he can see it all around the city. The bird really should return to a warmer climate but she stays to help the prince. She takes a jewel from his belt and gives it to a poor dressmaker. Then the prince tells her to take one of his eyes, made of beautiful Indian stones, and give it to a poor writer. Then he tells her to take his other eye and give it to a poor girl. As the prince is now blind, the bird decides to stay with him. She dies of the cold, and the prince's metal heart cracks with sadness. The people pull the statue down and burn it, all except for the heart which refuses to burn. They throw this and the dead bird away. These are taken into heaven because they are the two best things in the city.

Story 4 *The Fisherman and his Soul*: One day a fisherman catches a beautiful mermaid in his net. He lets her go on the condition that she comes to him when he calls her and sings because her songs attract the fish. He falls in love, but to be with her he must first send his soul away. He consults a witch on how to do this and she tells him she will help if he dances with her that night on the mountain. She tells him he must cut away his shadow as the shadow is the body of the soul. His soul protests but is cut away and the fisherman is free to join the mermaid in the sea. After a year, the soul returns and tells the fisherman about a magic mirror he has to offer him in return for the fisherman taking back his soul. The

 © Pearson Education Limited 2015

The Young King and Other Stories

fisherman refuses. A year later, the soul returns again and offers the fisherman a priceless ring. Again, the fisherman declines. In the third year, the soul offers him a dancing girl. Knowing the mermaid has no feet and can't dance, he accepts the offer and man and soul are reunited. On their way to see the girl, the soul tells the fisherman to do bad things and to kill a man. He tries to cut his soul away for a second time, but this is impossible. He waits by the sea for years but the mermaid does not come. Then, one day the dead body of the mermaid is washed ashore. The grieving fisherman's heart breaks, the soul enters his heart, and the sea covers the fisherman.

Story 5 ***The Nightingale and the Rose*:** A young student is desperate to find a red rose to win the heart of a girl. A nightingale overhears him and sets out to find a red rose. She goes to the first rose tree but its flowers are white. The second tree's flowers are yellow and the third tree's flowers, which were red, have all died from the cold. However, the tree tells the bird that she can make a red rose if she is prepared to sing while piercing her heart with a thorn and letting her blood flow into the tree. She decides to do it. That night, she begins to sing and a rose opens on the tree. It is white and the bird has to press deeper against the thorn. The rose turns a beautiful red, but the bird doesn't see it. She is dead. The next day, the student finds the rose outside his window. He runs to the girl but she is not impressed by the rose as someone has already given her some fine jewels. He throws away the rose, and decides that love must be a stupid thing since it promises things it can't deliver, and it is not as valuable as learning useful things in books.

Story 6 ***The Star Child*:** A group of woodcutters find a small child in the forest, wrapped in a gold coat covered in stars. The child had fallen from the sky. One of the woodcutters decides to look after the boy, despite having many children of his own and being very poor. The child grows into a beautiful-looking boy, but he is mean and unkind to every one around him and believes he is superior. One day a beggar woman comes to the village and claims that the star child is her long lost son. He rejects her and sends her away. At this point, his good looks disappear and he is now an ugly boy. He vows to repent and find his mother. He searches for three years, and then one day he is bought by an old man and imprisoned in his house as a slave. The old man, who is really a magician, tells him to go and bring him a piece of white gold from the forest. With the help of a rabbit, he finds the gold but gives it to a starving man. The old man hits him, and orders him to bring a piece of yellow gold. This he finds too, but again he gives it to the starving man. This happens again with a piece of red gold. As he is walking through the streets, people comment on how beautiful he is and hail him as their new king. The star child says he is not because he is the son of a beggar woman. Finally he meets the king and queen, the king being the starving man he had given the gold to, and the queen his mother. He is crowned king, and every one is happy because he is a kind and generous king.

Story 7 ***The Selfish Giant*:** A giant returns home after seven years to find some children playing in his wonderful garden. He sends them away and builds a wall around the garden. When spring comes, there are flowers everywhere except in the giant's garden, which is cold and bare. One day, the giant looks out of his window and sees that his garden is full of children again and the trees full of flowers. He notices a small boy crying next to a tree that is still bare. He realises that he has behaved badly and goes out to talk to the children. They all run away from him except the small boy. The giant puts the boy in the tree, who kisses him, and the children come back. The small boy then disappears for years until one day the giant sees him with cuts on his hands and feet. The boy tells the giant that he wants him to come and play in his garden in the sky. Later, the children find the giant dead under the tree, covered in white flowers.

Background and themes

Religion: There are clear references to religion in Stories 1, 3 and 7. God crowns the Young King and receives the Happy Prince and the Selfish Giant into his kingdom.

Repentance: Salvation through repentance of one's sins is the theme of *The Star Child*, and to some extent *The Fisherman and his Soul*. By looking for his mother to say sorry, the Star Child becomes beautiful again and is crowned king. The fisherman is reunited with his love and finds salvation in death.

Love: The realisation of his ugliness, and therefore the impossibility of the Infanta returning his love, kills the dwarf. The nightingale's unselfish love of love itself and its fruit in the form of a beautiful rose, is both mortal and in vain.

 © Pearson Education Limited 2015

The Young King and Other Stories

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 **Research:** Tell the students that Oscar Wilde is a very important figure in literature and ask them to look for information on the Internet about him. The students prepare a short biography of Wilde and present it to the class. Tell them also to include some famous quotes.

Story 1

While reading (p. 2, after 'As he slept, he dreamed.')

2 **Discuss:** Put the students into small groups and ask them to talk about dreams. Consider the following questions: *Do you dream often? Do you dream in colour, or in black and white? Do you have the same dream many times? Do you have bad dreams? Do you think dreams can tell the future? What do dreams mean?*

Story 2

While reading (p. 10, after 'The Infanta has given me a white rose and she loves me.')

3 **Role play:** Put the students in pairs and ask them to act out a conversation between the dwarf and the Infanta. The dwarf tells her he wants to marry her and she gives him all the reasons why this is impossible. See the Discussion activities key for an example beginning to the conversation.

After reading

4 **Write and guess:** Put students in pairs and ask them to choose a short paragraph from Stories 1 and 2. Tell then to write it again, making five changes to words in the text. Students then read out their paragraphs to the other students, who have to identify the mistakes.

Story 3

After reading

5 **Pair work:** Write the following words on the board: *blue jewels, Egypt, dead flowers, a hole, eggs, beggar, fire*. Ask the students to talk and write in pairs to say how these words were used in Story 3.

Story 4

Before reading

6 **Group work:** Put the students in groups of four and write the word *Mermaid* on the board. Ask the students what the word means. Tell the students to think of what a mermaid looks like and to give you words that could be used to describe one. Then, ask them to think of any other mythical creatures they know and to describe them.

After reading

7 **Write and guess:** Write *The mermaid had green eyes.* on the board. Elicit which word is wrong from the students (blue, not green). Now students choose a sentence from Story 4 and rewrite it changing one word. Students talk to each other, reading out their sentences, and the other students have to identify and correct the mistake.

8 **Write:** Tell the students to imagine they are journalists on a local newspaper. The body of the fisherman and the mermaid has been found on the beach. Tell them to write an article describing the scene and giving possible explanations for what has happened.

Story 5

Before reading

9 **Game:** Tell the students that a nightingale is a type of bird. Then put them in small groups and give them five minutes to write down all the names of animals they know in English. The group with the longest list wins.

After reading

10 **Discuss:** The story is about love. Tell the students to talk about any books or films they know in which love is the central theme. Consider the following questions: *Do you like these stories/films? Do they usually have a sad or happy ending? Are the people usually very good looking? Are these stories like real life?*

Story 6

While reading (p. 50, after 'When he pushed a stick into the eyes of a little rabbit, they laughed.')

11 **Discuss:** Put the students in groups and ask them to talk about people's attitudes to animals in their country. Consider the following questions: *Do a lot of people keep animals as pets? What animals do they keep? Is it OK to use animals in sport? Is it OK to kill animals and not eat them? Do many people refuse to eat animals? Do people use animals to make clothes?*

After reading

12 **Write, ask and answer:** Write *Who did the star child throw stones at?* on the board and elicit the answer (A sick man). Now tell students to write similar questions about Story 6. Students then talk to each other in a group, asking and answering each other's questions.

Story 7

Before reading

13 **Group work:** Put the students in small groups and write the word *selfish* on the board. Make sure the students know the meaning. Then ask them to think of all the words we can use to describe a person's character. Put these on the board and add some of your own, explaining the meaning of the words. Students can then describe their own characters and those of people they know.

 © Pearson Education Limited 2015