

"The Happy Man's Shirt" – An Italian tale

Told by Italo Calvino, translated by George Martin (from the *Elements of Literature*)

A king had an only son that he thought the world of. But this prince was always unhappy. He would spend days on end at his window staring into space.

"What on earth do you lack?" asked the king. "What's wrong with you?"

"I don't even know myself, Father."

"Are you in love? If there's a particular girl you fancy, tell me, and I'll arrange for you to marry her, no matter whether she's the daughter of the most powerful king on earth or the poorest peasant girl alive!"

"No, Father, I'm not in love."

The king issued a decree, and from every corner of the earth came the most learned philosophers, doctors, and professors. The king showed them the prince and asked for their advice. The wise men withdrew to think, then returned to the king. "Majesty, we have given the matter close thought and we have studied the stars. Here's what you must do. Look for a happy man who's happy through and through, and exchange your son's shirt for his."

That same day the king sent ambassadors to all parts of the world in search of the happy man.

A priest was taken to the king. "Are you happy?" asked the king.

"Yes, indeed, Majesty."

"Find. How would you like to be my bishop?"

"Oh, Majesty, if only it were so!"

"Away with you! Get out of my sight! I'm seeking a man who's happy just as he is, not one who's trying to better his lot."

This the search resumed, and before long the king was told about a neighboring king, who everybody said was a truly happy man. He had a wife as good as she was beautiful and a whole slew of children. He had conquered all his enemies, and his country was at peace. Again hopeful, the king immediately sent ambassadors to him to ask for his shirt.

The neighboring king received the ambassadors and said, "Yes, indeed, I have everything anybody could possibly want. But at the same time I worry because I'll have to die one day and leave it all. I can't sleep at night for worrying about that!" The ambassadors thought it wiser to go home without this man's shirt.

At his wit's end, the king went hunting. He fired at a hare but only wounded it, and the hare scampered away on three legs. The king pursued it, leaving the hunting party far behind him. Out in the open field he heard a man singing a refrain. The king stopped in his tracks. "Whoever sings like that is bound to be happy!" The song led him into the vineyard, where he found a young man singing and pruning the vines.

"Good day, Majesty," said the youth. "So early and already out in the country?"

"Bless you! Would you like me to take you to the capital? You will be my friend."

"Much obliged, Majesty, but I wouldn't even consider it. I wouldn't even change places with the Pope."

"Why not? Such a fine young man like you . . ."

"No, no, I tell you. I'm content with just what I have and want nothing more."

"A happy man at last!" thought the king. "Listen, young man. Do me a favor."
"With all my heart, Majesty, if I can."

"Wait just a minute," said the king, who, unable to contain his joy any longer, ran to get his retinue. "Come with me! My son is saved! My son is saved! And he took them to the young man. "My dear lad," he began, "I'll give you whatever you want! But give me . . . give me . . ."

"What, Majesty?"

"My son is dying! Only you can save him. Come here!"

The king grabbed him and started unbuttoning the youth's jacket. All of a sudden he stopped, and his arms fell to his sides.

The happy man wore no shirt.

1. Which pair of words **best** describes the king's feelings for his son?
 - a. anger and frustration
 - b. confusion and depression
 - c. affection and irritation
 - d. love and concern
2. The unhappy man is a prince. What might his position in life symbolize in the folk tale?
 - a. respect
 - b. pride
 - c. wealth
 - d. romance
3. The wise men tell the king that his son should wear a happy man's shirt. What does wearing someone else's shirt symbolize?
 - a. looking like someone else
 - b. being someone else
 - c. complimenting someone
 - d. feeling superior to someone
4. What might the character of the priest symbolize?
 - a. flattery
 - b. modesty
 - c. ambition
 - d. hopefulness
5. What is similar about these two characters: the prince and the neighboring king?
 - a. Both seem to have everything they could want, but neither is content.
 - b. Both are in love, but they are still not happy.
 - c. Both worry about dying, which makes them unhappy.
 - d. Both are sad, and neither knows why.
6. Why does king think that the young man who sings as he works is happy?

- a. He is polite.
- b. He is satisfied with his life.
- c. He is healthy and young.
- d. He enjoys working outdoors in the country.

7. What does the happy man's lack of a shirt symbolize?

- a. External things cannot create happiness.
- b. True happiness does not exist in the real world.
- c. The man will soon experience unhappiness.
- d. The man does not understand what happiness is.

8. Which statement **best** expresses the theme, or moral, of the folktale?

- a. People should not rely on others to help them solve their problems.
- b. It is difficult to know what other people are truly thinking.
- c. True happiness must come from within you.
- d. Although you may fail to attain your goals at first, you should not give up.

9. The symbols in this folk tale might appeal to us in part because they--

- a. make the setting of the story vivid.
- b. give the narrator a distinct personality.
- c. contribute to the meaning and emotional impact of the story.
- d. provide information about the author's life.

10. Which word **best** describes the tone of the folk tale?

- a. optimistic
- b. pessimistic
- c. sympathetic
- d. ironic

Constructed Response

Allegory is a literary device in which characters, settings, or events symbolize ideas and concepts. In what way can this tale be seen as an allegory? Support your response with **two** examples from the text.