The Nightingale and the Rose

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF OSCAR WILDE

Now famous as much for his personal life as for his literary contributions, Oscar Wilde was born in 1854 in Dublin to Sir William Wilde and Jane Francesca Elgee, who was herself a poet. Under her influence, Wilde developed an appreciation for art and won academic scholarships first to Trinity College and later to Oxford. Wilde moved to London after completing his studies, where both his wit and his views on "art for art's sake" quickly attracted a following. His literary career began in 1881 with the publication of a volume of poetry but did not gain traction until the late 1880s; it was during this period that Wilde, drawing in part on the Irish folklore he had learned from his mother, wrote a collection of fairy tales that included "The Nightingale and the Rose." Wilde's success peaked in the early 1890s with works like The Picture of Dorian Gray, but scandal soon overshadowed his writing. Though married since 1884 to Constance Lloyd, Wilde had pursued several affairs with men throughout the 1880s and 90s. An ill-fated romance with Lord Alfred Douglas culminated in charges of "gross indecency," and Wilde was sentenced to two years' hard labor in 1895. Wilde left England following his release from prison but never truly recovered from the ordeal, dying in Paris in 1900.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The 19th century was a time of rapid change in England. Building off the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and the scientific method, thinkers like Charles Darwin challenged traditional beliefs about the origins and purpose of human life. Technological progress, meanwhile, sped up the Industrial Revolution, which in turn transformed societal attitudes toward wealth and consumption; the ability to mass produce goods, for instance, encouraged a culture of materialism. By the mid-to-late 1800s, philosophy and art arguably had begun to mirror these broader social trends. Utilitarianism, for instance, attempted to explain ethical problems in terms of function. According to thinkers like John Stuart Mill, something is "good" simply if it has a net positive effect, rather than because it has any inherently good properties. "The Nightingale and the Rose" (as well as Wilde's broader embrace of Aestheticism) is in some ways a reaction to all of these changes. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Wilde held out for the importance of intangible qualities like beauty in an increasingly rational and mechanized world.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In style, "The Nightingale and the Rose" draws heavily on European folklore and fairy tales, including the work of Hans Christian Andersen. Its satirical take on contemporary society, however, more closely resembles Wilde's later works—particularly comedies like The Importance of Being Earnest. The story is also a defense of the artistic school of "Aestheticism," which asserted that art and beauty are inherently valuable. In England, Wilde was the main spokesperson for this philosophy, but the movement also influenced writers like Algernon Swinburne; in his poem "A Ballad of Death," for instance, Swinburne refers to beauty as a "good deed." Finally, by upending the reader's expectations of what a fairy tale looks like, "The Nightingale and the Rose" is a precursor to many 20th-century re-workings of classic tales—for instance, Angela Carter's The Bloody Chamber, which gives traditional stories a feminist twist.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Nightingale and the Rose"
- **When Written:** 1880s
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1888
- **Literary Period:** Aestheticism
- **Genre:** Fairy tale, short story, satire
- **Setting:** A garden in an unspecified time and place
- **Climax:** The Nightingale dies just as she creates the perfect red rose
- **Antagonist:** The Student, as well as the larger value systems he embodies
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Cross-cultural Influences. Persian poetry and folklore tells a similar story of a nightingale staining a rose with its blood, but in this tradition, the rose itself is the object of the nightingale's love. British fascination with the Middle East and Asia was running high in the 19th century as a result of imperialism, and writers and artists frequently borrowed from or depicted these regions in their work (often, unfortunately, in deeply biased ways).

Literary Romance. During a 1982 tour of America, Wilde visited the American poet Walt Whitman at his home in Camden, New Jersey. Whitman was also rumored to have had relationships with men, and Wilde afterwards hinted that they had hooked up during his stay.

PLOT SUMMARY

While sitting in the branches of the Oak-tree, the Nightingale overhears the Student lamenting the fact that his sweetheart will not dance with him unless he brings her a **red rose**. The Nightingale sees in the young man a real-world example of the romance she sings about, and she thinks to herself how awe-inspiring and powerful love is. Impressed by the apparent depth of the Student's emotion, she decides to help him secure the girl's affections.

The Nightingale first flies to a White Rose-tree standing in the center of a plot of grass and asks him for a red rose. He tells her that all his roses are white, but advises her to find his brother, the Yellow Rose-tree standing next to a sun-dial. The Nightingale flies to him and is again disappointed. The Yellow Rose-tree in turn suggests that she visit his brother underneath the Student's window. This Rose-tree confirms that his roses are red, but adds that as it is wintertime, he cannot provide her with a blossom.

In despair, the Nightingale wonders aloud whether there is any way she can find a single red rose. Reluctantly, the Rose-tree tells her that her only option is to spend the night singing with one of his thorns in her heart. Her music will bring the flower into existence, and her blood will dye its petals red, but the process of impaling herself on the thorn will kill her. Although the thought of losing life's pleasures saddens the Nightingale, she concludes that the sacrifice will be worthwhile if done for love.

The Nightingale returns to the Student and attempts to tell him her plan, asking that he repay her by always being a true lover. The Student cannot understand the Nightingale's words, but the Oak-tree, saddened, asks her to sing a final song for him. She agrees, and the Student complains that her song lacks meaning and emotion before going home.

That evening, the Nightingale flies to the Rose-tree and allows the thorn to pierce her. She sings about love through the night, gradually pressing herself further onto the thorn. As she does so, a rose takes shape on the Tree, finally turning red when the thorn pierces the Nightingale's heart and kills her.

Later that day, the Student finds the red rose outside his window, but does not realize where it came from. Nevertheless, he picks it up and brings it to the girl, who is sitting outside her home spinning **silk**. The girl, though, rejects the gift, saying that she prefers the jewels she has received from a wealthy suitor. Angry, the Student throws the rose into the road and storms off, deciding that love is not worth the trouble. The story concludes with him opening a **book** and returning to his studies.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Nightingale – Although she dies before the story's conclusion, the Nightingale is the protagonist of "The Nightingale and the Rose." A romantic by nature, she has spent much of her life singing about love, waiting for the day she will encounter it in real life. When she overhears the Student lamenting his lovelorn state, she resolves to bring him the **red rose** he needs to secure the girl's affection, sacrificing her life to stain its petals red with her blood. The other characters fail to recognize this sacrifice, but the story as a whole vindicates the Nightingale's actions. In particular, her selfless nature and beautiful voice link her to two of the story's themes: the selfless nature of true love, and the intrinsic value of art. The Nightingale, in other words, is not only a character but also a symbol of the ideal lover and the ideal artist, both of whom give without expecting anything in return.

The Student – Initially a sympathetic character, the Student ultimately emerges as the antagonist of "The Nightingale and the Rose." By claiming to be deeply in love with the girl, the Student inspires the Nightingale to sacrifice her own life in a quest to bring him a **red rose**. When the girl rejects the flower, however, the Student carelessly tosses it into the road, concluding that love is a waste of time. This dishonors the one request the Nightingale has made of him—to be a true lover—but it is in keeping with his personality. Throughout the story, the Student reveals himself to be excessively preoccupied with rationality and practicality, to the point that he is literally unable to understand the Nightingale's emotional words to him. The Student, then, illustrates the pitfalls of extreme intellectualism; his need to understand everything in terms of rules and results blinds him to "useless" qualities like selflessness or beauty.

The Rose-tree – There are three rose-trees in "The Nightingale and the Rose," but only the one standing outside the Student's window plays a major role in the story. This is the tree that tells the Nightingale he can produce a **red rose**, but only at the cost of her own life. The Nightingale agrees, and spends the night singing with her breast pressed against one of the Rose-tree's thorns, slowly bringing life to a rose and dyeing it red with her blood. Despite his role in killing the Nightingale, the Rose-tree remains sympathetic, in part because he is one of the only characters who recognizes the Nightingale's sacrifice for what it is, speaking tenderly to her as she slowly impales herself on the thorn.

The girl – The girl appears only briefly in "The Nightingale and the Rose," but she is vital to the story's plot and themes. The daughter of the Professor, she embodies unfeeling materialism. Having told the Student that she will dance with him if he brings her a **red rose**, she later goes back on her word because

a wealthier suitor has provided her with jewels. The girl's surroundings further underscore her shallow nature, since the **silk** she is spinning and the toy dog she owns are both luxury commodities.

The Lizard – Like the Nightingale, the Lizard overhears the Student lamenting his unrequited love for the girl. The Lizard, however, is "a cynic," so he scoffs when he learns the Student is crying over a **red rose**. This foreshadows the ending of the story, when both the Student and the girl prove incapable of seeing the value of the rose as a symbol of sacrificial love.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Oak-tree – The Oak-tree is both a friend of the Nightingale and the place where she makes her home. Like the Rose-tree, the Oak-tree understands the seriousness of the Nightingale's intended sacrifice, and he begs her to sing one last song for him before she goes to her death.

The Professor – Although he never appears in the story, the Professor is a symbolically important character. Like the Student, the Professor has clear ties to academia and intellectualism. Interestingly, however, he is also the father of the girl, suggesting a link between the Student's "rational" worldview and the girl's materialism.

The White Rose-tree – This is the first tree the Nightingale visits on her search for a **red rose**. He does not have one, so he sends her to his brother, the Yellow Rose-tree.

The Yellow Rose-tree – This is the second tree the Nightingale visits on her search for a **red rose**. He does not have one, so he sends her to his brother, the Red Rose-tree.

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.

LOVE AND SACRIFICE

From start to finish, "The Nightingale and the Rose" is a story about the nature of love. Love is what the Student claims to feel for the girl, and it is also what inspires the Nightingale to sacrifice her life to create a **red rose**; doing so, she thinks, will help the Student win his sweetheart's affection. The fact that neither the Student nor the girl appreciates the Nightingale's sacrifice, however, complicates the story's meaning. In the end, Wilde suggests that true love *is* possible, but that much of what people commonly call love is shallow and self-interested.

The Student is a prime example of this self-absorption, the full extent of which only becomes clear at the end of the story; when the girl rejects his rose, he is quick to label her "ungrateful," and love in general "silly." In retrospect, however, it is clear that the Student's love was self-absorbed all along. While it is common for stylized literature (like fairy tales) to include dramatic monologues, the protestations of love that open "The Nightingale and the Rose" take on a stagey and attention-seeking quality in light of the story's ending. Wilde drops another similar hint when he describes the Student going back to his room and "think[ing] of his love." The ambiguous phrasing could simply mean that the Student is thinking about the girl, but it could also imply that he is narcissistically poring over his own emotional state. The girl, meanwhile, reveals herself to be equally self-centered when she exchanges the Student for a wealthier lover, leaving only the Nightingale to symbolize true, deep love.

The Nightingale, of course, is undeniably selfless. She is outwardly focused from the beginning, singing not about her own feelings, but about those of the "true lover" she dreams of meeting. Later, she flies from place to place attempting to find a red rose on someone else's behalf, her persistence standing in marked contrast to the Student's quickly-abandoned courtship. These small moments of altruism and self-denial culminate in her decision to sacrifice her life; death—the complete loss of selfhood—is the ultimate expression of selflessness. In fact, Wilde suggests that "perfect" love can exist only in death for precisely this reason. Because true love requires selflessness, death is its logical endpoint.

Ultimately, then, the fact that the Nightingale's sacrifice is based on a misreading of the Student's feelings doesn't alter the story's defense of love itself. By dying, the Nightingale herself proves the existence of true love, which the story suggests will outlive her: as she dies, the Nightingale sings about "Love that dies not in the tomb."

ART AND IDEALISM

Oscar Wilde is likely the most famous British writer associated with Aestheticism, a late 19th-century movement that championed "art for art's sake." In contrast to those who argued that the arts should address social issues or impart moral lessons, the Aesthetics contended that art's sole purpose was to be beautiful. This question about the nature and role of art forms the backdrop to "The Nightingale and the Rose," with the Nightingale and the Student embodying opposite sides of the debate.

Other than perhaps her selflessness, the Nightingale's defining characteristic is her beautiful voice, which she uses largely as a means of bringing pleasure to others; when the Oak-tree, for instance, requests one final song to remember the Nightingale by, she willingly complies, with a "voice...like water bubbling from a silver jar." Furthermore, to the extent that the Nightingale's songs are "about" anything, they are about ideals

rather than reality. Rather than singing about her own love (or any particular pair of lovers), the Nightingale sings about love in wholly abstract terms, using stock figures like "a boy and a girl" to trace a path from young love to passionate love to love that survives death. This idealism further underscores the link between the Nightingale's art and Aestheticism, since her songs have no obvious real-world application.

The Student, by contrast, believes that art should "do" something. In fact, he criticizes the Nightingale's song precisely because he sees it as useless and meaningless, saying that the Nightingale cares only about "style"—a common critique of Aestheticism. He even goes so far as to say her art is "selfish," presumably because it has no tangible impact on the world around her. This, of course, is untrue in a literal sense, since the Nightingale's song produces the **red rose** the Student will present to the girl. Still, it is tempting to agree with the Student's rejection of the Nightingale's song as doing no "practical good." The girl, after all, rejects the rose, and neither she nor the Student understand or appreciate the sacrifice the Nightingale has made. At the very least, the Nightingale's philosophy of art would appear to be misguided.

Digging deeper, however, it is clear that the Student's views on Aestheticism are being satirized. By the end of the story, Wilde has revealed the Student's "love" to be shallow and self-involved, which casts doubt on his claims about being able to recognize true "feeling" in art. Meanwhile, the description of the Nightingale's death reveals the intrinsic value of her art and actions. It is not simply that her songs are beautiful, but that, by sacrificing herself for love, the Nightingale makes the ideal love she sings about a reality in the world. Ultimately, then, the story suggests that art is self-justifying, because the artistic process itself embodies the ideals of art.

MATERIALISM, INTELLECTUALISM, AND EMOTION

Despite its fairy-tale setting, "The Nightingale and the Rose" engages with the real-world debates taking place in the late 1800s. The Enlightenment of the preceding century had inspired great confidence in humanity's ability to solve scientific, practical, and even moral problems with reason. Rapid industrialization (and the wealth it generated) lent further credence to these ideas by "proving" the success of 18th-century scientific innovation and free-market economics. Nevertheless, there was significant pushback against these trends throughout the 19th-century, particularly from writers and artists. In "The Nightingale and the Rose," Wilde develops his own critique of materialism and intellectualism, as these traits are embodied by the Student and the girl. Far from promoting a realistic worldview, these philosophies actually blind the story's characters to what is happening within and around them.

It is no coincidence that the Student is a student. Although the story begins with the Student loudly professing the depth of his feelings for the girl, it quickly becomes clear that he is more at ease with his studies than he is with emotions. When the Nightingale sings to the Oak-tree, for instance, the Student's response is one of cold rationalism; he jots down critical notes on what he takes to be the Nightingale's lack of genuine feeling. In fact, his assessment of the Nightingale could not be further from the truth, and it is the Student himself who lacks emotional depth. The Student's intellectualism, however, has distorted his ability to see the world clearly. Because he "only knows the things that are written down in books," the Student is quite literally incapable of understanding anyone whose guiding light is not reason—most notably the Nightingale, whose insistence that "Love is wiser than Philosophy" prioritizes an "irrational" emotion.

In this sense, "The Nightingale and the Rose" links the Student's hyper-rationality to the girl's materialism. Because he understands the world solely in terms of "practicality," the Student can't make sense of selfless behavior, which by definition does not benefit the person (or bird) practicing it. Significantly, the most obviously selfish and greedy character in the story—the girl—is the daughter of a professor; the implication is that rationality inevitably produces materialism if it is not tempered with emotion. Her rationale for rejecting the Student's **red rose** is, after all, logical: "Everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers."

Ultimately, however, Wilde suggests that the intertwined worldviews of intellectualism and materialism fail even on their own terms. While it is certainly the case that the Student and the girl consistently misread the emotional significance of the world around them (e.g. the rose and the Nightingale's song), it is equally clear that they lack self-knowledge. The story ends with the Student rejecting love as "impractical" and resolving to study metaphysics instead. Metaphysics, however, is arguably the branch of philosophy *least* concerned with practicality, since it involves abstract questions about mind vs. matter, the purpose of existence, and the nature of identity. The Student, then, does not appear to have a good grasp even on the philosophy he claims to support—a point further underscored by the fact that the book he pulls down to study is "dusty," implying that it does not see much use.

SYMBOLS

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

THE RED ROSE

Red roses are traditionally associated with romance, so it is not surprising that Wilde uses one

to symbolize true love in "The Nightingale and the Rose." Its significance, however, shifts over the context of the story. At first, the rose appears to represent the Student's love for the girl, since her refusal to dance with him unless he brings her the flower makes the flower into a piece of evidence that his feelings are genuine. By sacrificing her life to bring the Student a rose, the Nightingale further underscores this idea that the flower is an expression of true love; in fact, the Rose quite literally comes from the Nightingale's heart, because she uses her blood to stain it red. In the end, however, neither the Student nor the girl is able to appreciate the rose's symbolic significance. The girl, for instance, compares the rose unfavorably to the jewels she has received from another suitor, while the Student reacts angrily when the girl goes back on her promise to dance with him. This suggests that neither character ever truly saw the rose as a symbol of love, but rather as a kind of currency to buy someone's affection.

SILK

The blue silk the girl is winding is a symbol of her shallowness and materialism. Silk is a luxury fabric, so its appearance foreshadows the girl's rejection of the rose in favor of more monetarily valuable jewels. The color of the fabric is significant as well, because European artists have traditionally depicted the Virgin Mary draped in blue silk. In this case, however, the use of the color is ironic; Mary's blue robes typically signify her heavenly nature, but the girl in "The Nightingale and the Rose" is entirely worldly.

THE DUSTY BOOK

At the end of "The Nightingale and the Rose," the Student rejects loves and returns to studying metaphysics. The book he opens is dusty, which suggests that no one has read it in a long time. This undercuts the Student's claim that in studying philosophy, he will be engaging directly with practical, real-world matters (in fact, it is the Nightingale who, in praising the joys of life, reveals herself to be deeply immersed in the world around her). The book thus symbolizes the hollowness of the intellectualism the Student espouses.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Signet edition of *Complete Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* published in 2008.

The Nightingale and the Rose Quotes

❝ Here at last is a true lover…Night after night have I sung of him, though I knew him not: night after night have I told his story to the stars, and now I see him. His hair is as dark as the hyacinth-blossom, and his lips are as red as the rose of his desire.

Related Characters: The Nightingale (speaker), The Student

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

When the Nightingale first overhears the Student talking about his need for a red rose, she sees him as the embodiment of everything she sings about. Her remark that she sang about him even before meeting him even suggests that her songs have created this real-world manifestation of idealized love. In the end, of course, the Student will prove to be anything but a perfect lover, but this idea that art can make the ideal real is vindicated in the Nightingale's creation of the rose. Her physical description of the Student, meanwhile, further emphasizes her affinity with the world of art and symbols; unlike the Student, who tends to speak literally, the Nightingale frequently uses similes and other forms of figurative language.

❝ Surely Love is a wonderful thing. It is more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals. Pearls and pomegranates cannot buy it, nor is it set forth in the market-place. It may not be purchased of the merchants, nor can it be weighed out in the balance for gold.

Related Characters: The Nightingale (speaker), The girl

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

In light of the story's ending, the Nightingale's claim that love cannot be bought seems almost painfully ironic. In fact, the girl will eventually reject the red rose—a symbol of

love—in favor of one of the very objects the Nightingale lists in this passage: jewels. What's more, the girl defends her choice in explicitly monetary terms, saying that jewels are better than flowers because they cost more. That said, the capitalization in this passage implies that the Nightingale is thinking about love more as an abstract ideal rather than love as it is actually practiced in the world. In that sense, her claim is correct, as she herself will prove when she gives her life without gaining anything in exchange.

"He is weeping for a red rose," said the Nightingale.

"For a red rose?" they cried; "how very ridiculous!" and the little Lizard, who was something of a cynic, laughed outright.

Related Characters: The Lizard , The Nightingale (speaker), The Student

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

The Nightingale is not the only observer who notices the Student's unhappiness, but the Lizard—along with a butterfly and a flower—can't understand why anyone would cry over a rose. Wilde attributes this confusion to "cynicism"; because the Lizard sees the rose simply as a physical (and not very useful) object, he finds the Student's emotion absurd. In this sense, however, he actually *resembles* the equally "rational" and "practical" Student, who ultimately proves incapable of understanding the rose's meaning as a symbol of love and sacrifice. Instead, he views the rose as a tool, tossing it aside when he discovers that it can't do anything for him.

If you want a red rose...you must build it out of music by moonlight, and stain it with your own heart's-blood. You must sing to me with your breast against a thorn. All night long you must sing to me, and the thorn must pierce your heart, and your life-blood must flow into my veins, and become mine.

Related Characters: The Rose-tree (speaker), The Nightingale

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Although the Nightingale eventually succeeds in finding a tree who can provide her with a red rose, she quickly learns that creating the rose will require sacrificing her life. The passage, then, underscores the idea that true love is selfless—primarily in the sense that it is centered on the happiness of another, even at considerable cost to oneself. The Rose-tree's description of taking the Nightingale's blood into his own "veins," however, implies another way of thinking about love and self-sacrifice; if romantic love is a union or merging of two people, the emotion itself necessarily involves losing or giving up parts (or all) of oneself.

The process of creating the rose, however, is not only about love—it is also about art. In particular, the idea of "building" the rose from song reflects the story's broader ideas about the intrinsic value of art. By expressing an ideal, the Nightingale is also giving it a real (and, in this case, physical) presence in the world.

The Student looked up from the grass and listened, but he could not understand what the Nightingale was saying to him, for he only knew the things that are written down in books.

Related Characters: The Nightingale, The Student

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

When the Nightingale explains how she intends to get the Student his rose, the Student responds with literal incomprehension. Interestingly, Wilde attributes this to the Student's learning, suggesting that his knowledge and rationality are preventing him from grasping deeper emotional truths—most notably, the love that the Nightingale has just been extolling. The Student's intellectualism, in other words, is actually hindering his ability to understand the world around him (and especially the motivations of others). Relatedly, it is also impacting his ability to experience life fully and richly: one of the things

the Student can't understand is the Nightingale telling him to "be happy."

She has form...but has she got feeling? I am afraid not. In fact, she is like most artists; she is all style, without any sincerity. She would not sacrifice herself for others. She thinks merely of music, and everybody knows that the arts are selfish. Still, it must be admitted that she has some beautiful notes in her voice. What a pity it is that they do not mean anything, or do any practical good.

Related Characters: The Student (speaker), The Nightingale

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

The Student's response to the song the Nightingale sings for the Oak-tree is ironic on multiple levels. First, and most obviously, the Student's claim that the Nightingale is selfish runs counter to the entire plot of Wilde's story. The Student's misinterpretation of the Nightingale's song is therefore a fundamental misreading of her entire character—not to mention, of course, his own, since the story's conclusion suggests that it is he himself who lacks emotional "sincerity." His criticisms, though, are in keeping with those often leveled at Wilde himself (and other writers associated with Aestheticism), since the emphasis on "art for art's sake" seemed, to some people, to prioritize style over meaning or "practical good." In "The Nightingale and the Rose," however, Wilde suggests that this objection is misguided, because the beauty of the Nightingale's song (i.e. its style) is inseparable from the love that inspires it and is expressed within it.

Bitter, bitter was the pain, and wilder and wilder grew her song, for she sang of the Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb.

Related Characters: The Nightingale

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

As she sings the rose into existence, the Nightingale describes several different types or stages of love, culminating in the sacrificial love mentioned here. This process gives the symbolism of the rose an added layer: while red roses in general are popularly associated with romance, this *particular* rose is imbued with (and created by) all the kinds of love the Nightingale celebrates in her songs. That's nowhere clearer than in this passage, where the subject of the Nightingale's song mirrors, in real time, the sacrifice she herself is making.

The Nightingale's love is therefore "perfected by Death" partly in the sense that her death makes the perfect love she is singing about a reality—not only in her actions, but also in the symbol of the rose. In a broader sense, though, death "perfects" love because it is the most extreme act of selflessness possible—one that involves completely relinquishing self*hood*. That said, the passage also suggests that dying in this way gives the Nightingale a kind of immortality, since her love (and art) survive her—if only in Wilde's story.

What a wonderful piece of luck...here is a red rose! I have never seen any rose like it in all my life. It is so beautiful that I am sure it has a long Latin name.

Related Characters: The Student (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

The morning after the Nightingale's death, the Student wakes up to find the rose she has created on a branch outside his window. His response is disappointing. Juxtaposed with the Nightingale's death, the Student's words seem shallow and self-centered; given how miserable he had claimed to be just a day earlier, he ought to be overjoyed to find the rose, but he instead seems to take it as a mildly pleasant surprise. He also, of course, mistakenly attributes the appearance of the flower to "luck," further underscoring his inability to read the world around him. Most frustratingly of all, he takes the rose's beauty as a sign

that it must have a "long Latin name." This implies an inability to appreciate love (or art) on its own terms, since the Student needs to "translate" his enjoyment into rational and scientific language in order to justify it.

> The daughter of the Professor was sitting in the doorway winding blue silk on a reel, and her little dog was lying at her feet.

Related Characters: The girl

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

When the Student goes to see his sweetheart, he finds her spinning silk: a luxury good that hints at the girl's materialism. Its color, meanwhile, is an ironic nod to Christian iconography, where the Virgin Mary's blue silk robes evoke the sky (i.e. heaven). The girl's actions also bear a slight resemblance to the Nightingale's, with the spindle on the reel mirroring the thorn on the tree. Again, however, the parallel is ironic, since the girl soon reveals herself to be selfish and worldly.

This passage also reveals an unexpected link between the girl and the academic world the Student inhabits: the girl's father is a professor. Given that the girl rejects the Student on the grounds that he is "only a Student," this may seem surprising or unlikely at first glance. The story, however, seems to suggest that there is an underlying connection between the Student's (and, presumably, the Professor's) intellectualism and the girl's materialism. Perhaps, for instance, the Student's desire to explain everything in terms of usefulness and/or cause and effect tends to reduce love to a rational transaction where each person "gets" something.

> What a silly thing Love is...It is not half as useful as Logic, for it does not prove anything, and it is always telling one of things that are not going to happen, and making one believe things that are not true. In fact, it is quite unpractical, and...in this age to be practical is everything.

Related Characters: The Student (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

As the Student walks away from his argument with the girl, he swears off love altogether, betraying the Nightingale's request that he always be a "true lover." What's more, his reasons for abandoning love imply that he never really understood it in the first place, since he expects it to prove "useful" to him. This flies in the face of Wilde's depiction of love throughout the rest of the story, which suggests that the purest form of love is—like the Nightingale's—one that has no practical benefits to the person giving it.

As this passage makes clear, however, it is not *only* the Student who has failed to understand the meaning of love. For the first time in the story, Wilde breaks with fairy-tale convention by suggesting that "The Nightingale and the Rose" is set in a particular time period—namely, the modern era ("this age"). The Student's obsession with practicality is therefore a comment on all of society. Like many in late 19th-century England, the Student believes in a form of logic that denies the possibility of anything that is not tangible, practical, or rationally self-interested.

> So he returned to his room and pulled out a great dusty book, and began to read.

Related Characters: The Student

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

"The Nightingale and the Rose" ends with the Student retreating to his studies and poring over the "great dusty book." This is, first and foremost, a commentary on the Student's hypocrisy (or, at least, lack of self-knowledge): the Student claims to be interested only in what is "practical," but the material he is reading presumably can't be *very* practical, or it would have seen more recent use. The book's dustiness, however, also evokes images of death and decay, and therefore contrasts strongly with the Nightingale's earlier description of the joys of life. Unlike the Nightingale, who lovingly recalls watching the moon and smelling the flowers, the Student is completely isolated from everything

going on outside his room. This again undercuts his claim that he, rather than the Nightingale, is immersed in the real 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 NIGHTINGALE AND THE ROSE

As a Nightingale sits in her nest in an Oak-tree, she overhears a Student speaking mournfully about his sweetheart, who has said she will not dance with him unless he brings her a **red rose**. While the Nightingale watches, the Student begins to cry, lamenting the fact that all his learning is useless since it can't win him the girl's love. His beauty and sorrow, however, impress the Nightingale, who has spent all her life singing about an idealized "true lover."

The Student's first appearance in the story relies heavily on fairy-tale conventions that Wilde will later upend. His physical attractiveness and tearful declarations of love suggest that he is a quintessential romantic hero, so it is not hard to see why the Nightingale considers him the answer to her songs. In fact, it's almost as if her art has actually conjured an ideal lover into being. It is significant, however, that the Student also draws attention to his intellectualism, since this will ultimately prove to be more important to him than his feelings for the girl.

The Student continues to bemoan his unrequited love, imagining in great detail how the girl will pass him by at the Prince's ball unless he finds a **rose** for her. Meanwhile, the Nightingale reflects on how powerful and priceless a force love is. The other animals and plants in the vicinity, however, do not understand why the Student is crying over a rose.

In retrospect, the Student's lavish descriptions of how heartbroken he will be at the ball seem over-the-top. The Nightingale, however, sees the Student's self-absorption as an indication of how deep his feelings run, contrasting his "real" love with her happy songs. She also suggests that love is wonderful mostly because it has no material value, which is an idea Wilde will play with throughout the story; the girl's affections most definitely can *be bought, but it is not clear that those affections are what the Nightingale (or Wilde) means by "love."*

The Nightingale decides to help the Student, and flies to the center of the garden to speak to the White Rose-tree. She asks him for a **red rose**, but he tells her that he has none, and directs her to his brother by the sun-dial. Accordingly, the Nightingale visits the Yellow Rose-tree, but he also disappoints her, advising her to try the Rose-tree underneath the Student's window.

Fairy tales often obey the "rule of three," and this one fits the pattern. In this case, however, the fact that the Nightingale strikes out twice before finding a tree that can help her is also a way of demonstrating her persistence and dedication—both qualities the Student lacks.

When the Nightingale states her case to the Red Rose-tree, he confirms that his roses are red, but says that he cannot grow one in winter. The Nightingale presses him, however, and he eventually admits that there is a possible solution: by singing as she impales herself on one of his thorns, the Nightingale can bring a **rose** into bloom and dye it with her own blood. Although it pains the Nightingale to sacrifice the joys of life, she agrees to the Rose-tree's plan.

Red roses are symbolic of romantic love, so by having the Nightingale give up her own life to create one, Wilde begins to present an alternative to the Student's shallow feelings for the girl. From her description of the sensual pleasures of nature, it is clear that thee Nightingale enjoys life—much more, in fact, than the Student, who ends up shutting himself inside his room. Nevertheless, she is willing to sacrifice all of this for love—and not even her own, but someone else's. The fact that it is her "heart's-blood" that will dye the rose further underscores the connection between love and sacrifice, since hearts are symbols of both romance and life.

Her mind made up, the Nightingale flies back to the Student and tells him the good news, asking simply that he honor her sacrifice by being a true lover. The Student cannot understand what she is saying, but the Oak-tree asks her to sing one more song before she dies

When the Nightingale asks the Student to be a true lover, she explicitly compares love to intellectual pursuits (i.e. "Philosophy"), arguing that love is ultimately "wiser." The story immediately doubles-down on this idea with the Student's response, which is one of total incomprehension. Because the Nightingale's emotional language isn't in any of his books, he can't even hear her request, much less honor it.

After the Nightingale sings, the Student criticizes her performance, saying that it is stylistically impressive but emotionally shallow. He then returns to his home, where he falls into romantic reveries and, eventually, sleep.

The Student's reaction to the Nightingale's song lends further credence to the idea that his intellectualism is actually clouding his ability to see the world clearly. In a nod to criticisms made of Wilde himself, the Student complains that the Nightingale only cares about style, and that by not dealing with real-world issues or emotions, she is being self-indulgent. Clearly, however, nothing could be further from the truth: not only is the Nightingale singing to bring the Oak-tree happiness, but she is preparing to sacrifice her life for the Student's own benefit.

When evening falls, the Nightingale flies to the Rose-tree and perches against the thorn. As the Moon listens, she begins to sing about young love, causing a few indistinct petals to appear on the Tree.

Significantly, it is not enough for the Nightingale simply to give her life: to create the rose, she also has to sing. The fact that her song (i.e. her art) has a tangible effect on the real world is in one sense a very literal rejection of the Student's claims that art is useless. It is also, however, a statement about the intrinsic value of art, since Wilde depicts singing about love and the actual act of loving as one in the same thing.

Warning that day is fast approaching, the Rose-tree tells the Nightingale to press herself further onto the thorn. The Nightingale continues to sing, this time about mature, romantic love, and the **rose** begins to turn pink.

As the Nightingale continues to sing, it becomes clearer and clearer that she is dying not so much for any particular pair of lovers, but more for love as an ideal. Her songs trace a kind of hierarchy of love, moving from youthful infatuation through marriage to sacrificial love. Appropriately, it is only this last, highest form of love that can put the finishing touches on the rose.

The Rose-tree encourages the Nightingale to press closer one last time. Although rapidly weakening, she sings about sacrificial and undying love as all of nature listens on. The **rose** reddens, and the Rose-tree tries to tell the Nightingale that she has succeeded. Sadly, however, she is already dead.

The sexual imagery Wilde uses throughout the Nightingale's death scene culminates in this passage, with the rose "trembl[ing] in ecstasy" as the song reaches its conclusion. Ultimately, this underscores the idea that the Nightingale's sacrifice is an act of love—in fact, the act of love, since her death is a total sacrifice of selfhood, and therefore "selfless" in a very literal sense. Furthermore, the response of the world around her confirms the meaningfulness of her sacrifice, with even her "killer"—the Rose-tree—appreciating the beauty of her song and actions.

Hours later, the Student looks outside his window and sees the **rose**. Delighted, he says that it is the most beautiful flower he has ever seen, and that it must therefore have a complicated scientific name.

The Student's response to finding the rose, like his response to the Nightingale's song, foreshadows his ultimate shallowness. For one, he does not realize where the rose has come from, and he attributes finding it to a stroke of luck. Even more importantly, he proves incapable of recognizing the rose's beauty, either as a symbol of sacrifice or even simply as an aesthetically pleasing object; for the Student, this beauty only counts if it reflects a complex, intellectual concept.

The Student plucks the **rose** and takes it to the girl at her father's (the Professor's) house. When he arrives, the girl is sitting outside spinning **silk**, and the Student presents her with the flower, saying she will wear it that evening at the ball. The girl, however, objects that the rose does not match her dress, and that she in any case prefers the jewels she recently received from the Chamberlain's nephew.

The girl's callous rejection of the rose marks the major turning point in the story. Her preference for costly jewels blinds her to the symbolic significance of the rose, while her comment about matching the flower to her dress suggests that it is she—not the Nightingale—who is only concerned with surface appearance. The fact that the girl is spinning silk—a luxury good—further associates her with greed and consumerism. All in all, Wilde suggests that materialism (aided by extreme rationalism, in the form of the girl's father) has made fairy-tale happy endings impossible.

In response, the Student huffs that the girl is "ungrateful," and throws the **rose** into the street to be run over by a cart. The girl retorts that the Student is "rude," making fun of his relative poverty before storming into her house.

When the girl rejects him, the Student shows his true colors. Far from being the true lover the Nightingale hoped he would be, he quickly turns on the girl and calls her "ungrateful"—a comment that suggests he saw the rose not as a symbol of love, but as a way of "buying" his sweetheart. He therefore casually discards the flower once it is clear that it will not be useful to him. Meanwhile, the girl's reactions further emphasize the materialism underlying the entire interaction.

As the Student walks away, he thinks about how irrational and impractical love is and concludes that he would be better off devoting his time to studying philosophy. He therefore returns to his room and begins to read from an old **book**.

The Student's complaints about love get to the heart of Wilde's critique of rationalism and materialism. He rejects love on the grounds that it is impractical, arguing that it "make[s] one believe things that are not true." His decision to embrace abstract philosophy, however, implies that he is either not interested in practicality after all, or that he does not even understand the rationalism he himself is praising. Either way, the final image of the Student reading from a dusty (i.e. seldom used) book reveals the hollowness of the Student's worldview; far from being engaged with real-world matters, he is shut up alone in a room reading obscure theory.

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