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ENGLISH 170

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**THE NIGHTINGALE AND THE ROSE:**

**THE WASTED POTENTIAL OF LOVE**

In *The Nightingale and the Rose*, Oscar Wilde uses the nightingale's self-sacrifice for the obviously ungrateful student towards his equally ungrateful crush to show the transformative and eternal nature of love. The nightingale's sacrifice itself argues that acts of genuine love keep their significance and beauty, even when those actions become unappreciated or end in devastating heartbreak. The story's central theme, which is the little nightingale's ultimate self-sacrifice in the name of love, serves as commentary on the values of love and the belief that love itself, even when it ends painfully or is rejected, will always hold worth. There is an idea that pure love given, especially with the actions and the feelings that come alongside it, is never wasted even if the outcomes are negative. The nightingale's selfless actions throughout this story further prove that.

When starting off with the story itself, it is abundantly clear that the protagonist of this story, which is the little nightingale, sees love as a very beautiful thing and thus, seemingly as its ultimate purpose. The nightingale even goes as far as to think of love as a sacred cause that is worthy of its own life. In this short story, the nightingale has an unwavering dedication to the ideals of love and beauty. This was very apparent when it came to the student and how much the

bird *loved* and cared about the student. Within the story, the nightingale declares that, “*Surely Love is a wonderful thing. It is more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals.*”.

(Wilde) This especially demonstrates the nightingale’s idealistic view of love as something that is incredibly priceless. On the contrary, however, the humans have a different view of love in this story. The student and his love interest here seemingly represent the superficial and the selfish interpretations of love and how disposable people make love to be. The student is utterly infatuated by the professor’s daughter, who wishes for a red rose in exchange for her time and care. That is where the student’s dilemma comes in, because he does not have such a thing in exchange for all of that. This goes to show that both the student and the professor’s daughter both view love, or even anything adjacent to love such as affection and time, as something that can be transactional. Yet when the nightingale makes the ultimate sacrifice, what does the poor little creature get in return? The bird quite literally kills itself just so that the student could have a red rose to give to the girl, only for the rose to be rejected and thrown away in the end. Despite her sacrifice, the student trivializes the gift and throws the rose away: “*What a silly thing Love is!*”. (Wilde) This rejection emphasizes the fleeting and conditional nature of the student’s understanding of love. With all of this in mind, there is a clear contrast between the selflessness of the nightingale’s gift of love as opposed to the transactional view of love held by the girl and the student. In the end, though, the nightingale presumably dies while having no regrets towards its final decision.

The nightingale treats love as an eternal force. The force is a rather transcendent power that defies existence and surpasses the boundaries of time. Oscar Wilde captures this quality in the nightingale’s belief when she states that: “*Love is wiser than Philosophy, though she is wise,*

*and mightier than Power, though he is mighty.*” (Wilde) This declaration strengthens the idea of love being above intellectual reasoning and strength. Therefore, this emphasizes its enduring significance and universal authority. For the nightingale, love should not be confined to tangible rewards or immediate gratification and reciprocation. Rather, it is an idea worth every sacrifice, even her own life. Her actions, though supposedly wasted for absolutely nothing in the end, were performed for a student who neither understood nor appreciated the value of her beautiful gift. However, it should be known that this goes beyond the immediate circumstances of the story. Wilde uses this tragic irony to underscore a profound truth, with the truth being that the value of love should not lie in the response in which it draws out, but in the purity of the act itself. The nightingale’s willingness to give it her all even when it came at a great personal cost, reveals the depth of her character, thus portraying her as a symbol of selflessness and spiritual beauty. Her sacrifice, while obviously unreciprocated, becomes an eternal expression of devotion, transforming her fleeting existence into a moment of transcendent meaning. Even in death, the nightingale’s legacy goes on and she is remembered not for the rejection of her gift, but for the courage, passion, and undying faith that she demonstrated. Wilde suggests that this act of pouring one’s heart and soul out for love is far more memorable and meaningful than any rejection or indifference. The nightingale’s story challenges us to see love as inherently valuable and transformative. It asks us to acknowledge how capable it is of elevating the giver to a higher plane of existence and leaving a mark on the world. By loving so completely and unconditionally, the nightingale embodies love’s eternal and redemptive power. She proves that love, even when unreciprocated, is never truly wasted.

The actions of the nightingale challenges us to rethink the role of sacrifice in any caring and loving relationship, whether it is romantic love, platonic love, or love for a family member. Sacrifice, as greatly exemplified by the nightingale, becomes a measure of love's purity and depth, revealing its true nature as a selfless force. Her very act forces readers to consider the inherent value of love, which is beyond tangible rewards or acknowledgement. Wilde writes, "*Yet Love is better than Life, and what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a man?*". (Wilde) This thought allows us to reflect on the clear imbalance between the seriousness of love's power and the often limited capacity of others to understand or even reciprocate it. The nightingale's willingness to give up everything, even her life, emphasizes that love is at its most profound when it is unconditional and self-sacrificial. Through this point of view, Wilde illustrates that the true measure of love is not in what it receives but in what it gives. Through this giving, no matter how overlooked, misunderstood, or futile and useless, is transformative. Love has the power to enrich the giver as it does with whoever is receiving that love. It also grants the power to shape the world subtly, as well as inspiring others, even if the immediate outcomes appear rather disheartening and disappointing. In this case, that transformative power is love itself. With that, Wilde reminds us that love, in its purest form, is never ever truly wasted. The sacrifice stands as a testament of proof to the enduring impact of selfless and unconditional love, which goes beyond the fleeting appreciation of those who might fail to understand it.

In *The Nightingale and the Rose*, Oscar Wilde asserts that true love, embodied in the nightingale's actions and ultimate sacrifice, is never truly wasted. The bird's act of devotion, though unappreciated and unreciprocated by others, shows the transformative power of love. By emphasizing that the true value of love is inherent in its given, Wilde challenges the readers to

find beauty and meaning in love's sacrifices, no matter how painful or unrewarding they might be. This timeless lesson resonates deeply especially in an age where love is misinterpreted as lustful, materialistic, and transactional, thus reminding us that love, in its purest form, is not only a gift to others, but to ourselves.

***Book Citation:***

Wilde, Oscar. *The Nightingale and the Rose*. First published in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, 1888.