**The Nightingale and the Rose by Oscar Wilde - Analysis**

1. This is a fairy tale. Fairy tales are stories in which fairies play a part or which contain other supernatural or magical elements such as imaginary persons, animals, and inanimate objects. These stories are of course primarily meant for children, but the best fairy tales such as those by Hans Andersen, are also eagerly read by older people who are interested in their deeper meaning.

2. The plot of the story is very simple. A young student thought that he was madly in love with the professor's daughter. He felt miserable because he could not find a single red rose in the whole garden to give to his love, and he knew that without the rose she would not agree to dance with him in the ball to be given by the prince the next day. The Nightingale overheard this and was deeply touched by what she believed was the expression of the young man's true love. So she decided to help the young man, but she was told that the only way to get a red rose in this cold winter was for her to build it out of her music and her heart's blood. The Nightingale of course also valued her life, but she was ready to lay down her own life for the happiness of the young couple. She therefore did what she was told to do. The next morning, the most beautiful red rose appeared, but the Nightingale was found dead under the rose-tree. Not knowing what it had cost to produce the rose, the student thought that he was very lucky to find this flower and he immediately plucked it and ran to the professor's daughter. The professor's daughter, however, turned him down because she had already agreed to dance with the Chamberlain's nephew who had given her precious stones. The student was very angry, so he threw the rose away and returned to his reading.

This is a touching story of love, but not the love between the young student and the professor's daughter, because neither of them understood what true love is. The girl was interested only in power and money, and the young man, in what he con­sidered practical. The only person who understood love, treasured love, and was ready to sacrifice her life for love was the Nightingale. For her love is eternal mu­sic, love is the most precious thing: even more precious than life itself, and true love is always in the giving rather than in the taking.

The story however, contains some veiled comments on life. In fact, as is often the case, the author is very much an actor in this little drama. Like Hans Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling" in which the author's childhood was clearly reflec­ted, in this story, there are also things that remind us of the author's life. Oscar Wilde advocated the idea of art for art's sake, and for this he was much criticized. So what the student said about the Nightingale's music ("It has form, but no feel­ings") could be viewed as a sarcastic response to the author's critics. Wilde seemed to be saying here that he was like the Nightingale, singing song after song, produ­cing love and beauty with blood from his heart, and yet the world was too stupid to understand and appreciate him.

3. Fairy tales have a few interesting features:

1) The frequent use of personification

This is self-evident because it is the very definition of fairy tales. In this story, the rose-trees, the lizard, the daisy, the butterfly, the oak, the moon, and of course the Nightingale are all personified.

2) The symbolic meaning given to words

The rose of course is the symbol of love, but many things mentioned in the text also stand for something, including the lizard, daisy, and butterfly, which the author used on more than one occasions to stand for certain char­acter types.

3) The vivid, simple narration, which is typical of the oral tradition of fairy tales

4) The repetitive pattern used

A typical fairy tale would often have a sequence of three episodes or three steps or three people. It might go something like this: Once upon a time, there were three sisters. The first was ugly, and the second was stu­pid, but the third was both pretty and clever. They would then marry three men. The first two were invariably obscenely rich whereas the third was al­ways poor. Then they were for some reason sent to look for some treasure. The first two failed and the third succeeded, but he only succeeded in his third attempt after overcoming many difficulties...

Let the students discuss whether the same pattern is followed in this text.

**Detailed Study of the Text**

Part One

1. From her nest... the Nightingale... looked out through the leaves and won­dered.

The bird is here personified, hence the capitalization. The Red Rose, the Lizard*,* etc. are cap­italized for the same reason.

2. "Ah, I have read all that the wise men have written... my life is made wretch­ed.

Notice the sarcastic tone of the author when he had the Student refer to the "wise men". As a champion for "art for art's sake", the author argues that one should not paint or write for fi­nancial , political or religious reasons. He therefore keeps poking fun at the Student, the pro­fessor, the dusty heavy books, logic, philosophy, intellect, and metaphysics. Many people however reject this view. They do not believe it possible to have such a thing as art for art's sake. "Art for art's sake," said Somerset Maugham, "makes no more sense than gin for gin's sake. " The artist's works, being part of his human activities, must be guided by his sense of moral responsibility, by what he conceives to be true, good and beautiful.

**for want of:** for the lack of

e.g. For want of a better word, let's call it Me-firstism. (As I can't think of a better word, let's call it Me-firstism.)

For want of something better to do she decided to try gardening. (As she could not find anything more interesting to do, she decided to try gardening.)

3. "Here at last is a true lover," said the Nightingale. "Night after night have I sung of him, and now I see him."

Notice the inverted order.

**sing of him:** to sing about him

**lover:** a person who loves. In modern English, it is often used to mean "mistress".

4. "The Prince gives a ball tomorrow night, ... and my love will be there. "

**give a ball:** to give a dancing party

Notice the use of the present indefinite tense for expressing the future. Notice also the use of "give" in the sense of "organize" in the following: to give a reception; to give a banquet, to give a cocktail party; to give a press conference; to give a dance.

**"Ball"** here refers to a large formal occasion at which people dance.

**my love:** my sweetheart. The word "love" here is used as a term of endearment as in:

My love is like a red, red rose.

Newly sprung in spring.

—Robert Burns (1759—1796)

5. "... so I shall sit lonely and my heart will break."

"Lonely" here is an adjective, used as a subject complement, or as part of the complex sub­ject.

6. emeralds and opals

different kinds of gems or precious stones including ruby, diamond, emerald, sapphire, opal, jade

7. "The musicians will play upon their stringed instruments, ... and my love will dance to the sound of the harp and the violin. "

**stringed instruments:** Musical instruments can be divided into stringed instruments,

percussion, instruments and wind instruments.

**dance to the sound of the harp:** dance according to the sound of the harp, e. g.

The snake would then dance to the music.

The soldiers marched through the square to the drumbeat.

8. "But with me she will not dance, for I have no red rose to give her," and he flung himself down on the grass,...

**for:** When used as a conjunction, it means "because", but it is now considered quite formal, and it is not as strong as "because", therefore in adverbial clauses of reason, "because" is al­ways used. Like "and" and "but", "for" is used in coordinate clauses. **flung himself down on the grass:** threw himself down on the grass

9. ... fluttering about

flying by a quick, light flapping of the wings

10. ... and the little Lizard, who was something of a cynic, laughed outright.

**something of a cynic:** a cynic without fully deserving the name, e. g.

He is something of an economist among us because his grandfather used to own a little store.

She is something of a dentist in our village although the method she uses is quite crude.

**cynic;** a cynical person; a person who believes that everybody is motivated by selfishness

**laughed outright:** laughed out loud; burst out laughing

11. But the Nightingale understood the Student's sorrow and sat silent in the oak-tree.

**sat silent:** "Silent" here is again part of the complex subject.

**in the Oak-tree:** Notice the use of "in" instead of "on" here. The use of "in" suggests that it is a large tree for a little bird like the Nightingale.

Part two

12. Suddenly she spread her brown wings for flight, and soared into the air.

**night:** noun of "to fly". It can also be used as the noun of "flee". **soar:** to fly upward quickly

13. grass-plot

The word "plot" can mean many things in different contexts. Make students check in the dictionary and decide which suits the context here. (Here it means a small piece of ground used for a special purpose.)

14. "Give me a red rose, ... and I will sing you my sweetest song."

Refresh students' memory of the use of "and" here which means "as a result of this". More examples:

One step forward, and he would fall down the cliff.

Come late again, and you are fired.

Give it one little push, and it will collapse.

"Sweet" could refer to taste, smell, or sound. Ask students to translate the following phra­ses into Chinese: sweet air; sweet song; sweet music; sweet wine; sweet flowers; sweet cake; sweet smile; sweet temper; sweet lady; sweet water.

15. "My roses are yellow, .. .as yellow as the hair of the mermaiden, and yello­wer than the daffodil that blooms in the meadow. "

**mermaiden (also mermaid):** a fabled creature of the sea with the head and upper body of a woman and the tail of a fish

**blooms in the meadow:** bears flowers in the meadow

Bloom, when used as a noun, usually refers to the flower of plants admired mainly for their flowers.

The roses are in full bloom now.

The sun shone bright and the meadows were in bloom.

Compare with "blossom" which usually refers to the flower of fruit trees.

16. "... and redder than the great fans of coral ."

Notice the metaphorical use of the word "fan", which refers to anything resembling a fan.

**More examples:**The mouth of a river; the foot of the page; the northern face of the mountain; the limbs of a tree; the eye of a needle; the nose of a plane; an arm of the sea; the tail of a comet; the teeth of a saw

17. "But the winter has chilled my veins, and the frost has nipped my buds, and the storm has broken my branches, and I shall have no roses at all this year."

**chill:** to freeze; to numb; to lower the temperature

**chilly *(adj.***)**:** cold

**nip the buds:** to stop the growth of the buds

**nip it in the bud:** to prevent sth. from becoming a problem by stopping it as soon as it starts, **e.g.**

Their policy was to throw the first person who dared to protest openly into prison so as to nip it in the bud.

You must take immediate action and nip it in the bud. Otherwise this economic slow­down could easily snowball into a serious recession.

Notice the use of "and" again in this sentence. The first two "and"s mean "also" or "in addi­tion to" whereas the last "and" means "as a result".

18. "One red rose is all that I want, ...only one red rose! Is there no way by which I can get it?"

When used as the object of the verb or preposition of the relative clause, the relative pronoun "that" is usually left out, especially in informal English. Notice that when the relative pro­noun is the object of a preposition and the preposition is placed before the relative pronoun as often the case in formal style, only "which" is used, and not "that". More examples:

There near the beautiful pond, he built himself a little cabin in which he lived for three years.

The importance of agriculture is something on which we all seem to agree.

19. "If you want a red rose, .. .you must build it out of music by moonlight, and •tain it with your own heart's blood. "

**out of music:** using music as the material, e. g.

This chair is made out of hardwood.

You can't build a big house out of sand.

We can't produce anything out of nothing.

**stain:** color; to dye; to tarnish

1. "... what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a man?"

Another example of a rhetorical question—a question in form, but a statement in meaning. This sentence means: The heart of a bird is nothing compared to the heart of a man. In other words, for the Nightingale, the Student's love is much more important than her life.

**21. ... swept over the garden...**

...moved quickly over the garden...

Observe how the word "sweep" and its derivatives are used in the following:

A new broom always sweeps the room clean, (proverb) A terrible storm swept across the whole city.

The general's eyes swept over the soldiers and gave the order to attack.

You can't say they are all corrupt. That's too sweeping. There might be a few exceptions.

22. "Be happy, ... you shall have your red rose."

The modal verb "shall" is used here to convey a solemn promise. It is used to say that some­thing will definitely happen. Notice that this usage is considered formal and old-fashioned.

**23. The Student looked up from the grass, and listened, but he could not understand what the Nightingale was saying to him.**

Why couldn't the Student understand what the Nightingale was saying to him? Obviously, it was not because he could not understand bird language, but rather because he could not understand true love.

**24. ... and her voice was like water bubbling from a silver jar.**

"Water bubbling" is used here as the complex object of the preposition "like".

25. "She has form ... she is all style without any sincerity."

"Form" is the design, pattern, or structure as opposed to the substance. In music, it refers to such things as melody, rhythm, and harmony.

Notice the irony when the Student say) that the Nightingale has no feelings. His comments on the Nightingale's music remind us of what people said about Oscar Wilde's views on art. Notice the use of "all" in the sentence "It's all style". It means "apart from style, there ii nothing else". More examples:

He is as strong as a horse. He is all muscle.

Don't listen to him. It's all stuff and nonsense.

He was all hot air. A lot of beautiful words, but completely meaningless.

The second time she saw him she was all smile because she knew the man had power.

**26. ... and after a time, he fell asleep.**

In modern English we would say "after some time" or "after a moment". Notice the irony in how the Student could fall asleep so quickly.

Part three

27. And on the topmost spray of the Rose-tree there blossomed a marvelous rose,...

"Spray" here means a small branch bearing buds, flowers or berries.

Notice that the subject of this sentence is "rose" and the predicate is the intransitive verb "blossomed”

28. a delicate flush of pink

When used to refer to color, "delicate" means "soft, subdued, or faint".

**29. ...a fierce pang of pain shot through her.**

a pang: a sudden sharp pain shoot through: to pass through swiftly

30. ... the Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb.

... the love that grows and grows until they die, and of the love that will live in eternity. "... the love that dies not in the tomb" is old-fashioned. In modern English, it should be "... the love that does not die in the tomb".

31. the girdle of petals

**girdle:** a belt or something like a belt worn at the waist. Here it means a band of red color round the middle of the petals.

32. .. .a**film came over her eyes.**

film: a thin covering or coating

33. ...lingered on in the sky.

.. tried to delay the departure? stayed in the sky, reluctant to leave or move on

**34. .. .trembled all over with ecstasy,...** (HEB ) ecstasy; intense delight all over: everywhere or all parts of one's body, e. g.

He was sweating all over. / She was shuddering all over. / I was aching all over.

35. .. .for she was lying dead in the long grass,...

Notice the use of "in" rather than "on" to emphasize the tallness and thickness of the grass.

Part four

36. "... it will not go with my dress,"

**go with my dress:** to match my dress; to be harmonious with my dress

Another example; This furniture does not go with the color of these walls.

37. the Chamberlain

The official who manages the household of the king. Here, it refers to a high-ranking official in general.

38. "Well, upon my word, you are very ungrateful,"...

Notice the irony. The Student accused the girl of being ungrateful without realizing that he was no better.

39. "In fact it is quite unpractical, and as in this age ... I shall go back to Philo­sophy. "

Notice the different uses of the word "as" in this paragraph. It means "because" here, and in the previous sentence, it means "when" or "while".

**unpractical:** also "impractical"