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Between Love, Mortality, and the Delicacy of Meaning: A Biblical Reading of Oscar Wilde's *The Nightingale and the Rose*

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Abstract

Oscar Wilde's The Nightingale and the Rose is usually seen as a fairy tale about love and sacrifice. This paper argues that the story also explores mortality by showing how uncertain human desires are compared with the certainty of death. Through the red rose, the Nightingale, the Student, and the Professor's daughter, Wilde shows how hopes can fade quickly when they depend on changing feelings, social status, or material things. The story is compared to the Book of Job, where human life is like a flower that soon fades, and Ecclesiastes 3.19-20, where people and animals share the same breath and return to dust. These biblical references help explain the rose's short life, the Nightingale's choice to die, and why the human characters do not understand sacrifice.

The article also argues that Wilde does not make goodness meaningless just because it is not rewarded. The difference between the Nightingale's real sacrifice and the Student's pride raises an ethical question: people cannot control how long their actions last or how others see them, but they are still responsible for the values they choose. Death is certain, but the meanings we give to love, knowledge, beauty, and usefulness are always changing.

Keywords: death, mortality, existential crisis, vanity, transience, knowledge, sacrifice, ambiguity, artificiality

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Introduction

Oscar Wilde's short story *The Nightingale and the Rose* is often seen as a children's tale about love and art. This paper looks at how the story explores death and life's unpredictability through its symbols and plot. The symbols suggest that life is short and fragile, which invites comparison with biblical verses. Ecclesiastes and Job focus on death, the shortness of life, and the limits of human control—ideas that also appear in Wilde's story. In Job, suffering removes any sense of safety and makes death feel close. In Ecclesiastes, the speaker says that human efforts often seem pointless because of time and death. Wilde turns these ideas into a fable where a bird gives its life to create a flower, only for the flower to be rejected.

The Nightingale and the Rose serves as the timeless reminder of such heartfelt sacrifices. The sacrifice of Nightingale considered as the selfless sacrifice within the story. The red rose provide the student to move ahead but the woman considers jewels more expensive than rose she rejects both the student and red rose . The discontented student throws the red rose in to the gutter because he was guilty. Through this story author shows the disparities of Victorian society where love often depended on materialistic things in society (Soomro and Sethar 5).

The Nightingale and the Student show two ways of dealing with life's uncertainty: the Nightingale stays true to her ideals, while the Student changes his values when things go wrong. This paper uses biblical ideas about mortality to interpret these differences. The story is not simply about love; it also criticises materialism, shallow thinking, and the desire to control life. In this view, death is certain, but life's meaning depends on how people respond to uncertainty.

Wilde asserts that the Victorian mind-set claims that happiness is attainable through accumulating signs of affluence and he ironically mocks this notion of happiness which is entitled to commodified objects. To him, happiness is defined through a strict sense of Christian morality and Christ-like love and kindness. His aesthetic views are entangled with morality and he fails to celebrate art for art's sake. Moreover, this study asserts that Wilde is aware of the dominant language games, and his application of the technical language game for the Prince, the Nightingale, and the Swallow is in debt to his monolithic morality or his opportunistic character. At last, Wilde refuses to celebrate beauty if morality is absent and in this way, his aesthetic concerns become rather contradictory (Poorghorban 51).

Love, Sacrifice, and Misrecognition

In *The Nightingale and the Rose*, the Nightingale sacrifices her life by pressing her breast against a thorn to produce a red rose during winter. She prioritizes love over life and ultimately dies for the Student's romantic pursuit. The following morning, the tree presents the red rose imbued with the Nightingale's sacrifice—to the Student, who offers it to the Professor's daughter. She rejects the gesture, valuing wealth and pleasure above sentiment, stating, "everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers" (Wilde). The girl's preference for jewels over the rose, and material wealth over a symbolic act of love, prompts the Student to withdraw

into logic rather than embrace sacrifice. These decisions show how social values shape individual concerns. The Nightingale's passion goes unnoticed, and the rose, created through her self-sacrifice, is discarded. This disregard is compounded by the Student's earlier inability to comprehend the bird's song; he perceives its form but dismisses its emotional meaning and utility (Wilde). The rose embodies different meanings for each character: selfless love for the Nightingale, a romantic instrument for the Student, and an object of lesser value than jewels for the girl. Its destruction demonstrates the rapid creation, misinterpretation, and loss of meaning. Wilde associates sacrifice amid unpredictability, suggesting that even genuine, costly actions may remain unrecognized or unrewarded. "Born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not" (Job 14.1-2). The red rose thus acts as a central symbol of the inescapable mortality of human existence. As the biblical passage indicates, human life is as precarious as a flower's brief existence. The flower's beauty and fragrance cannot prevent its inevitable decline. Wilde intensifies this analogy by depicting the rose's entire lifespan within a single day: created at night, discovered at noon, rejected soon after, and ultimately crushed in the street.

Human life also moves from beginning to end, and we cannot control when or how death comes. Job's comparison does not deny the flower's beauty; it shows that beauty is part of its short life. In the same way, the rose's fragility makes the Nightingale's sacrifice urgent and the human characters' indifference sad. Good deeds might be remembered, but the story does not promise that anyone will. The Student never learns what the Nightingale has done. The rose stands for both the brightness of life and the fact that death always ends it.

The rose is created beautifully, but it ends up in the gutter. In the same way, people are born, but their bodies will return to dust. Death is certain, even if we do not know when or how it will come. Knowing this should make life feel more meaningful, not hopeless. The red rose matters not because the Student uses it for a moment, but because it holds another creature's purpose, pain, and life. The girl's quick rejection and the Student's choice to leave the rose behind show a lack of respect for the Nightingale's sacrifice. Still, the story gives neither character immediate punishment. Instead, the cartwheel erases the sign of sacrifice.

Just as the rose's life ends in a few hours, people's lives are also short, and everyone must face the world's harshness without knowing when death will come. The rose is more than a symbol of love; it shows how brief and fragile life is. The girl seeks wealth, and the Student turns to knowledge, but both will eventually die. Their choices cannot save them from death. The rose's sudden, simple end reveals what people often try to ignore: death is certain, but its timing is always a surprise. The sad ending reminds us to face life's surprises, especially death. The rose brings together the ideas of life and death: it is beautiful because it is alive, but its beauty comes from sacrifice. The girl promises to dance with the Student if he brings her a red rose, and the Student forgets his sadness when he finds the flower. Still, neither of them keeps the emotional promise they made. They do not become "fragrant" like

the rose because they do not turn beauty into good actions. The image of the cart wheel crushing the flower shows the power and finality of death (Wilde). At the same time, the scene highlights human choices: the girl's rejection and the Student's anger put the rose in harm's way. Uncertainty comes not just from death, but also from changing minds, mistakes, and social pressure. No one can avoid death, but everyone is responsible for what they do before it comes. Wilde shifts the rose from a symbol of love to a sign of life's fragility, showing how unstable our meanings can be.

The Nightingale, Ecclesiastes, and the Equality of Death

For that which be falleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again. (Eccles. 3.19-20)

The speaker of Ecclesiastes, often thought to be King Solomon, says that people are no better than animals when it comes to death. The verses show that both humans and animals have breath, both die, and both return to dust. This idea challenges human pride and the belief that intelligence, status, or wealth can make life last longer. People may be different from animals because of self-awareness and moral choices, but everyone faces the same end. Death removes the physical differences between living things and creates a harsh equality. Wilde reinforces this idea by giving the Nightingale more emotional depth than the human Student. The bird feels sorrow, thinks, chooses, and acts, while the Student does not notice what is happening around him. Death makes their bodies equal, but their lives are not the same in a moral sense. The Nightingale dies for a belief; the Student lives on without understanding it. Ecclesiastes shows that death is certain for all, but Wilde's story keeps an ethical difference between how living beings act. Ale and the Rose" explores mortality in a way that is similar to Ecclesiastes.

The Nightingale shows human feelings and the ability to make choices. After hearing the Student's sadness, she cannot ignore his pain and asks three rose trees for help. The last tree tells her that she can make a red rose only if she sings all night with her breast against a thorn, staining the flower with her own blood. The Nightingale agrees, saying, "Death is a great price to pay for a red rose," but also believes that "Love is better than Life" (Wilde). From a practical view, her sacrifice seems wasted because it neither wins the dance nor changes the Student. But calling it meaningless would be using the Student's narrow idea of usefulness. The bird's action is sincere, even if no one notices. Wilde shows this through irony: the Student hears the Nightingale but cannot understand her because he only knows "the things that are written down in books" (Wilde). His education cannot help him see a real sacrifice. The Nightingale's death shows both the emptiness of seeking recognition and the chance for real commitment in a short life. The rose and the Nightingale may go unnoticed, but they reveal how empty it is to judge value by price, status, or usefulness. Mortality makes things temporary, and being misunderstood makes

moral success uncertain.

Ecclesiastes addresses uncertainty by calling life vain but also advising people "to do good" while they live (Eccles. 3.12). Wilde's story agrees with this advice but complicates it. The Nightingale chooses to do good for the Student and for the idea of love, but both choices end in her unnoticed death. Neither the Student nor anyone else truly sees her sacrifice. This lack of reward raises a hard question: does goodness matter if it is destroyed and forgotten? The story does not give a clear answer. It shows that results are always uncertain, but it lets readers see a value that the characters miss. The Nightingale's goodness is not proven by social success; it is shown by her steady nature, which is different from the Student's changing mind. The Student first chooses love, then knowledge, using each to escape disappointment instead of to live. Both the Nightingale and the Student will die, but their common mortality does not erase the difference between giving to others and protecting oneself. In this way, knowing that death is certain makes moral responsibility even more important. Since no one can control what happens next, goodness cannot wait for perfect conditions.

Knowledge, Materialism, and Ontological Uncertainty

The speaker of Ecclesiastes is usually seen as a wise king who points out the limits of what people can achieve. Wilde creates a similar but smaller crisis in the Student, who turns back to knowledge after giving up on love. He says that love "is not half as useful as Logic" because it proves nothing and makes people believe things that are not true (Wilde). This choice is not real intellectual growth; it is a way to avoid feeling embarrassed. Earlier, the Student also misunderstands the Nightingale, thinking she is "all style, without any sincerity" and "would not sacrifice herself for others" (Wilde). This is ironic because the bird is about to make that very sacrifice. The Student's knowledge can name things but cannot see feelings, responsibility, or the cost of beauty. The Nightingale also changes her actions, moving from searching for a rose to giving her own life, but her change shows deeper commitment. The Student's change is just swapping one belief for another.

Life's uncertainty arises not only from changing intentions but also from the intrinsic limits of human understanding. The same rose appears sacred to the Nightingale, fortuitous to the Student, unfashionable to the girl, and ultimately worthless in the gutter. Wilde interrogates whether utility is an appropriate metric for evaluating art, love, or existence. The narrative exposes the inadequacy of knowledge devoid of sympathy. Both the Nightingale and the Student are mortal, yet the story's irony resides in their differing capacities to comprehend life before death. The Professor's daughter further exemplifies uncertainty: her commitments shift with trends, wealth, and social standing. She consents to dance only under certain conditions and alters her decision when presented with jewels by the Chamberlain's nephew. She justifies her choice by referencing cost and highlighting the Student's lack of silver shoe buckles compared to his wealthier rival (Wilde). Although her response is materialistic, the Student similarly commodifies love,

treating the rose as a transactional object. Both characters reduce love to an exchange: the girl values jewels, and the Student offers flowers. Only the Nightingale acts selflessly, giving without expectation, despite her mistaken belief that the Student is a "true lover" (Wilde). This distinction illustrates the instability of human relationships, where commitments depend on appearance, status, chance, and convenience. The biblical assertion that all return to dust renders the pursuit of status futile, as wealth cannot forestall death (Ecclesiastes 3.20). Wilde's critique goes beyond material possessions or knowledge to encompass mindsets that substitute care for others with valuation by price, labels, and utility. The rose, though fragrant and coveted, reminds us of mortality. As Job's verse suggests, human life resembles a flower's transient existence. In an instant, the rose's splendour vanishes, reduced to dust in the gutter; human death may likewise occur without dignity or ceremony. Nevertheless, the rose does not simply signify life's futility; it also embodies the effort to maintain beauty and virtue amid instability. The Nightingale reinforces this message: her generosity goes unrecognised, yet her ethical stance persists distinctly. While neither goodness nor pleasure can avert biological death, they are not morally equivalent.

Ecclesiastes equalises the Student and the Nightingale as mortal creatures who share breath and return to dust. Wilde simultaneously distinguishes them through attention, courage, and constancy. The Student boasts of philosophy but fails to understand the living creature before him, while the Nightingale's imperfect understanding produces complete devotion. Mortality is the ultimate truth of embodied existence; therefore, life is uncertain with its sudden pleasures, pressures, reversals, and losses, whereas death is certain in all its mystery. Through the rose, thorn, blood, books, jewels, and dusty room, Wilde turns a fairy tale about romantic disappointment into a meditation on the fragile construction of human meaning.

Conclusion

At the end of the story, Wilde brings the Student back to a "great dusty book" after he gives up on love (Wilde). This return from philosophy to desire and back again shows that he has learned facts but not wisdom. He lives on while the Nightingale dies, but just surviving is not a moral success. Job and Ecclesiastes help explain this irony. Job's image of the flower shows how short both the rose's and human life are; Ecclesiastes' idea of returning to dust links the Nightingale, the Student, and the girl as all sharing the same fate. The red rose brings together both biblical lessons in one object, whose beauty, pain, rejection, and destruction all happen in a single day. The certainty of death does not make all choices equal. Instead, it shows how important it is to choose carefully. The Nightingale's sacrifice does not succeed practically, but it shows what real commitment looks like. The Student and the Professor's daughter show the opposite: their beliefs and promises change with convenience, status, and usefulness. The story's crisis is not only about death, but also about how hard it is to find meaning before death comes. People cannot control whether their love is returned, their art is understood, or their goodness is remembered; they also cannot avoid death. Wilde leaves it to readers to

see what his characters cannot: life is urgent and meaningful because its results are uncertain and its end is sure.

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