



## **The Symbolic Meaning of Nightingale in *The Nightingale and the Rose* by Oscar Wilde**

Wei Ping

Associate professor in College of International Studies, Southwest University, Chong Qing, P.R. China  
E-mail: 987502117@qq.com

### **Abstract**

The Nightingale and the Rose is a fairy tale written by Oscar Wilde. Through the shaping of the nightingale in the book, Wilde built the nightingale as a singer of true love and embodiment of truth, kindness and beauty. In this paper, through taking a close look at the Symbolic meaning of the nightingale, reveals how the nightingale reflects Wilde's artistic ideals.

**Keywords:** Oscar Wilde; The Symbolic meaning; the Nightingale; The Nightingale and the Rose



## **I. Introduction of Oscar Wilde and *The Nightingale and the Rose***

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), a modern British aesthetic writer, lived in the middle and late 19th century. It was called the "end of the century" period, and was also regarded as the "golden period" by the British historians. At this time, precisely after the "industrial revolution", the rapid development of industry and commerce, the material world has undergone a drastic change that has never been seen before, and the "material supremacy" of money worship has permeated the entire society of Great Britain. In Wilde's time, people emphasized much on reality and reason so that they ignored love and beauty. With the thought that money is everything, people became the slave of power and money.

*The Nightingale and the Rose* is a fairy tale written by Oscar Wilde. It was first included in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* which was published in 1888 (Holland 61-62). The fairy tale tells a story about a nightingale. In order to get a red rose for the young student, the nightingale flew here and there, asking every Rose-tree she met. And she was finally told that the Rose-tree growing under the student's window would give her one. So she flew to it happily, but only being told that there was no red rose at all because the tree's veins had been chilled and so were its buds destroyed by the frost. The nightingale must build it out of music by moonlight and stain it with her own heart's blood. So at the price of her life, the nightingale succeeded getting a red rose. When the student brought the red rose to the girl he fell into, the girl refused him, saying that the flower didn't go with her dress and she had received some pearls and jewels from the Chamberlain's nephew. Complaining and angry, the young student threw the red rose into the street. As so, the flower built out of the nightingale's life was finally grinded under a cartwheel and fell into the gutter. The student whom the nightingale believed a true lover returned to philosophy and metaphysics with the thought that love is a silly thing.

## **II. The Symbolic meaning of Nightingale in *The Nightingale and the Rose***

The nightingale is mainly produced in Western Europe. It is petite and exquisite, with agile movements, clear and mellow sounds, charming timbre, and more lingering in the quiet and serene moon and night, so it is called the nightingale. The nightingale is a lovely and favorable image for the English writers. In the early period of the nineteenth century, the famous romantic poet John Keats wrote a long poem named *Ode to the Nightingale*. Through the nightingale's singing, this poem expresses people's longing for immortality and eternity of love. Wilde admires John Keats very much and is influenced by him to some extent. Naturally, here in *The Nightingale and the Rose*, Wilde adopts nightingale's traditional artistic image as the singer of true love and the embodiment of truth, kindness and beauty.

### **A. Singer of true love**

Wilde himself commented in a letter to his friend Thomas Hutchinson: "The Nightingale is the true lover, if there is one. She, at least, is Romance, and the Student and the girl are, like most of us, unworthy of Romance" (qtd. in Zhang Yunfang 43). So, for Wilde, the nightingale is the only true lover in the book who has a romantic soul, which indeed makes a remarkable contrast with the student and the girl, the representative of mankind. In this fairy tale, a principal theme that the materialistic civilization is the murder of true love and beauty is clearly displayed in the image of the nightingale. And Wilde, through the following aspects, successfully builds the image of the nightingale as a true lover.

On the one hand, Wilde compares the nightingale with other creatures and the girl to highlight the nightingale's praise of true love. At the beginning of the story when the young student is crying for having no red roses for his love, other creatures like the green lizard, the butterfly and



the daisy are laughing at him and think him ridiculous. Only the nightingale understands him and is willing to find him a red rose at any price. So she flies here and there looking for a red rose, only to be told that there is no red rose unless she builds it with her music and stain it with her own heart's blood. Although in many people's minds, it is unworthy to exchange a red rose with life, but to the nightingale, love is the best thing. And she is overjoyed to sing of the birth of love and passion in the heart of a boy and a girl. Nevertheless, when the student brings the red rose to his beloved girl, he is relentlessly refused by the girl because she has received some pearls and jewelries from the Chamberlain's nephew. And out of rage and hatred, the student throws the red rose onto the street like litter. Here Wilde criticizes the girl's vanity and laments over the death of the nightingale. The girl is so shallow, superficial and snobbish compared with the nightingale and is in fact the representative of evil in the worldly world. The contrast between the nightingale, her fellow creatures and the girl makes the image of the nightingale more remarkable and outstanding. She is the only one that knows love and would sacrifice everything for getting it.

On the other hand, Wilde describes the nightingale as a pilgrim of true love. In order to get a red rose for the young student, the nightingale bears a great pain and eventually sacrifices her life. But why would she give up her own life for a stranger without any hesitation? Here is the answer:

"Here indeed is the true lover," said the nightingale. "What I sing of, he suffers: what is joy to me, to him is pain. Surely Love is a wonderful thing. It is more precious than emerald, 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" (Wilde, *The Nightingale and the Rose* 2).

It is obvious that the nightingale regards love as something invaluable and she has a rooted faith in it. Her pursuit of true love gives her a philanthropic soul so that she would sacrifice her life for other people's happiness. Her death not only sublimates the value of her life but also defend the dignity of love. And in the process of her seeking for the red rose, she comes across two failures, one is the meeting with the white rose tree, another is with the yellow rose tree. However, she never thinks of giving up. At this point, the nightingale is very different from the student who does nothing to fight for his dream, but cry and complain about the reality and escape into the world of philosophy and metaphysics. Here Wilde fiercely criticizes the student's non-doing and eulogize the nightingale's constant pursue of love.

In fact, the nightingale's chase for love is Wilde's chase for art and his revolt against the cruel reality. In Wilde's times, the joy and comfort brought by money and material has penetrated people thoughts and seriously affected their values and outlook about the world. Few people still keep the purity of their heart from the evil reality. As he writes in *The Nightingale and the Rose*:

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 (5).

Here the red rose stands for pure love while the hostile environment stands for the cruel reality. The materialistic society has corrupted people's faith and values. So facing with such a situation where the money is worshiped, philistinism and the hypocritical morality prevail, Wilde seeks refuge in art. He separates art from the real life, hoping to refresh the society with pure art creation of extreme beauty. The nightingale is such a product of art. Besides, the nightingale is



created by the author's imagination. She is an untrue, made-up image which is beyond reality and far from life and the background is also a fabled one. All these reflect Wilde's aesthetic idea that art should be free of life.

### **B. Embodiment of truth, kindness and beauty**

Qualities like truth, kindness and beauty are the highest praise to people. Truth is to be the authentic self and be honest and earnest to others. Kindness, according to the *Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner's English Dictionary*, is the quality of being gentle, caring and helpful. A kind person not only gets good things done, but encourages others to do the same thing. And beauty is the state or quality of being beautiful, both physically and mentally. And in *The Nightingale and the Rose*, Wilde appeals to people to go after the truth, kindness and beauty of their heart through the shaping of the nightingale.

In the story, Wilde first presents us an authentic and kind-hearted image of the nightingale. She is an idealist as well as a practitioner of true love. She knows what she wants and what she dislikes. Though being laughed at and doubted by her companions, she sticks to her dream and faith. So when she heard the student's weeping for having no rose to satisfy his lover, she believes that the student is a true lover just like herself. Partly for realizing her own dream and partly out of sympathy and kindness, she help the student find a red rose by scarifying her life. And thus an image of great courage, sincerity and kindness is achieved. And it is because of her possess of those qualities that she is regarded as the embodiment of beauty.

But in this fairy tale, Wilde focuses on the tragic beauty of the nightingale's death (Hu and Wang 256). For most of us, death is something sad and miserable, but in Wilde's writings, death give people a sense of beauty. Many characters in his writings have very short but splendid life. In his eyes, the beauty of death will make a person immortal and make the value of beauty eternal. In fact, the death of the nightingale embodies Wilde's pursuit of truth, kindness and beauty.

The nightingale dies tragically but beautifully. It is a tragedy because her sacrifice is unworthy and meaningless. The student is never a true lover:

“What a silly thing Love is” said the Student as he walked away. “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 gonging to happen, and making one believes things that are not true” (Wilde, *The Nightingale and the Rose* 11-12).

He is ungrateful while he criticizes the girl as ungrateful. Meanwhile he does not know what true love is nor does he understand the nightingale. On the other hand, it is ridiculous that the rose exchanged by life is defeated by jewelry. Just as the girl said, “everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers” (Wilde, *The Nightingale and the Rose* 11). Here Wilde attacks the utilitarian society.

And it is beautiful because the nightingale dies nobly. The snobbish girl and the hypocritical student serve as a foil to the beauty of the nightingale. She dies for a noble course as refreshing the degraded society. As the solitary fighter for pure art, she is beautiful in appearance and in mind. Her death indeed makes her life respectable and immortal. Only those beautiful things that are cruelly destructed can give people a visual shock and heart quake. The formal beauty and emotional shock can create eternity.

As is discussed above, the nightingale is built as the embodiment of truth, kindness and beauty which are the most precious qualities one may have. But actually, it is impossible that such a perfect image exists in real life. So the nightingale is just an ideal image created by the



author's imagination, representing an extreme beauty of art creation, and those artists who keep a pure heart to art. Meanwhile truth, kindness and beauty represent pure art. Therefore, it can be concluded that Wilde's art creation of the nightingale is just the creation of beauty for pure art, which is the very explanation of art for art's sake.

#### IV. Conclusion

In Wilde's eyes, art has its own value and life and it should not be restrained by social reality or morality. And art creation should aim at nothing but creating beauty, meanwhile, he thinks that art anticipates life. In the story of *The Nightingale and the Rose*, with the nightingale's selfless assistance to the student and her death for getting the rose, Wilde built the nightingale as a singer of true love and embodiment of truth, kindness and beauty through contrasting the nightingale with other characters in this story. In this way, Wilde not only expresses his disgust at the dirty social reality but also his artistic ideals. In fact, to some extent, the nightingale is on behalf of Wilde himself and the ideal artists in Wilde's mind. The nightingale's pursuit of true love, truth, kindness and beauty is just Wilde's pursuit of pure art. From this image, one can not only see the hardships in the course of his pursuing of pure art but also the persistence of his pursuit.

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