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## Oscar, Nightingale, Rose

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Fairy tales have always featured astonishing transformations. A girl in rags suddenly finds herself in evening dress, headed in a golden coach toward the ball at a palace; a prince becomes a Beast and, thanks to the love of a Beauty, resumes at last his original form; an entire kingdom falls into a deathlike trance, but is awakened when one sleeping maiden is kissed. Oscar Wilde's own 'The Nightingale and the Rose', first published in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* in 1888, contains an equally remarkable moment, when blood drained from the heart of a bird enters a white rosebush and turns to red the petals of a single blossom.

No transformation in the literature of fairy tales was more dramatic, startling, or unforeseen, however, than the one that happened to Wilde himself in real life. In Spring 1895, he plummeted from a position of eminence in literary London and British Society, where he had mixed with Dukes, Duchesses, and even with the Prince of Wales, to previously unimaginable depths as a convicted criminal, imprisoned and sentenced to two years' hard labour. From leading a gloriously 'decadent' existence filled with luxuries (as well as a multitude of same-sex affairs), he plunged into a nightmare of deprivation and pain, confined to a cell and forced to abide by institutional rules meant to break his body and spirit alike.

'Oscar, Nightingale, Rose' reflects upon this fairy-tale-like turn of events, presenting Wilde first at the moment of composing one of the fantasies he published in 1888 and then at a later time of despair, when he is looking back at his fatal decision to become entangled with Lord Alfred Douglas, who was both the great love of his life and the ruin of it. In this poem, Wilde recognizes his writing of that earlier story as a foreshadowing but regrets nothing. Despite having been victimized by a philistine English public, he knows that someday he will be the victor for, Christlike, both he and his writings will eventually ascend.

Ultimately, of course, that change has come about. It is the most miraculous – and beautiful  
– of transformations.

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### Oscar, Nightingale, Rose

blowing a kiss to baby sons  
(a wave to wife is quite enough)  
shutting the study door behind  
drawing velvet curtains  
to blot out distracting sun  
lighting a gold-tipped cigarette –  
*abh, first morning smoke –*  
He  
writes about a bird who finds  
a student pining, yearning  
for a rose, a red rose only,  
to win the hand of  
a beloved girl  
(the bird must also be a *she* –  
that will explain the urge to  
sacrifice oneself)  
this nightingale will think  
*here is a lover true whom I shall*  
*help*  
resolving to incarnadine  
the sole white bloom of winter  
with her blood  
impale her body on  
a thorn while singing, pouring out  
aesthetic, perfect notes  
a hymn to Art, to Love  
her wondrous offering  
that the human world the masses  
refuse to understand or value  
she will not live  
to see  
the student toss her rose  
into the gutter  
heartsblood petals trampled  
by indifferent crowds  
  
and now the door  
is slammed  
that shuts him in a frigid cell  
his head is shaved

his uniform is stiff and  
dirty he is hungry weak  
exhausted with no books  
(except a Bible) forbidden pen or  
paper oh how often he goes back  
and thinks about that tale  
rewrites it in his head  
knowing He  
was nightingale  
who saw a student –  
Oxford undergraduate and Lord  
selfish careless beautiful –  
that he impaled himself ecstatically  
the thorn of Love had pierced and bound him  
to this fate  
his life incarnadined  
with suffering was thrown away and  
crushed lay trampled in  
the gutter  
by angry jeering masses  
yet  
would he have done the same again?  
He  
would  
assured that someday Art must  
rise again  
and so it has it did it rose and  
He  
rose too