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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.

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 –
abb, 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