

The Rose's Price: The Danger of the Rose in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "The Nightingale and the Rose"

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the complicated symbolism of a rose as an important symbol in the short story "The Nightingale and the Rose" and the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. While a rose is traditionally a universal symbol of love and beauty and could be described as so in Wilde's work, this research argues that Wilde uses roses to represent the consequences of chasing unrealistic desires and beauty. Through comparing two works by Oscar Wilde, this paper examines how the rose is used to show the moral and mental decline of Dorian Gray, who pursues beauty at the expense of his morals. The rose is also used as a symbol of meaningless suffering in the case of the Nightingale, who sacrifices her life because of her hope of a true lover. By analyzing these texts, this paper reveals how Wilde's rose serves different purposes: it ornaments the characters' aesthetic ideas while also foreshadowing their inevitable demise. Ultimately, the rose acts as a cautionary symbol. It suggests that the pursuit of perfect beauty and idealistic love often leads to emotional trauma and moral destruction.

INTRODUCTION

Wilde's rose is more than a symbol of love and beauty; it is the problem within desiring love and beauty to be perfect. It represents how projecting desire onto those we find beautiful has tragic consequences, and contains the path to emotionally and morally destructive choices. Roses in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reveal how Dorian's vanity sacrifices morally correct choices, leading to his and others' demise. While Wilde does use roses to describe Dorian's youthful features, they symbolize something darker: his mental and moral decline [1, p43]. Additionally, roses describe the beauty and talent of Dorian's love interest Sibyl Vane. But the rose reflects more than her beauty and their love, it reveals how Sibyl is trapped in the vain eye of Dorian Gray [2].

Roses in "The Nightingale and the Rose" symbolize sacrificial love in a contrasting way to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In this short story, roses reflect how pursuing idealistic love results in meaningless suffering. The rose does not represent love, but the pain and needless sacrifice in the pursuit of idealistic

love [3, p79]. In both "The Nightingale and the Rose" and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the rose symbolizes a perfect dream shattered by the story's end. Dorian Gray's youth is shattered by his stabbing of the portrait, Sibyl Vane sacrifices her life when Dorian says he no longer loves her, and the Nightingale's hope for true love dies in pursuit of the rose. This paper explores the different ways roses serve as symbols of love between these two texts, and interprets the complicated meaning of Wilde's rose.

POSITIONING THIS PERSPECTIVE

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, flowers reflect the emotional states of characters throughout the novel, and John J. Pappas connects how Dorian Gray treats flowers to Dorian's inner decline. The novel starts with Dorian observing and respecting flowers in the garden, then ends with him crushing flowers and wearing them as ornaments in his button hole. While the flowers mentioned during those specific moments aren't roses, the analysis of flowers reflecting inner decline connects to this paper's central argument. The transition to peace with nature to violence against it represents the change within Dorian. As he feels pain within himself, he is pushed to expel it onto delicate, or inanimate objects. Additionally, while Pappas does imply that Basil's murder could be a cause for Dorian's decline, he does not specify other causes.

The Narcissus flower symbolizes a similar decline in Dorian, stemming from the beginning of the novel. Patrick Duggan compares Dorian to the myth of Narcissus, where the god Narcissus drowns after diving into a river chasing his own reflection. Pappas says that the mentioning of the Narcissus shows what "is perversely self-centered and ultimately self-destructive in human nature" [1, p42]. Much like Narcissus, Dorian also dies in a self-centered nature, after the portrait confined how he lived. He couldn't free himself from the trap of the portrait, much like how the god couldn't free himself from the reflection of the river. It is this self-centered devotion to his appearance which confines Dorian's life within the portrait, and this is represented through flowers in the novel.

The confinement of Dorian's life in the portrait contributes to Dorian's immoral choices. Duggan writes about how Dorian only lives in order to bring pleasure to himself, and this brings consequences. He is so focused on what will benefit him that as the novel continues he loses sight of anything else. However, Duggan does not provide an example of consequences of living immorally, purely focused on the pursuit of pleasure.

In contrast, Regina Puelo does provide a consequence that occurs after an extreme pursuit of pleasure: death. Puelo discusses in Oscar Wilde's short stories there are two lovers in a relationship, one that pursues love and the other that pursues pleasure: the "eager and selfless lover pursues an unresponsive love object. The true lover is destroyed" [3, p80]. The true lover gets hurt or dies because of the other, even though they are acting selflessly and making the morally correct choice. The lover who pursues pleasure also faces harm, but as a result of sacrificing love for pleasure. This is the case in "The Nightingale and the Rose," when the Nightingale dies in pursuit of the rose. It can also be applied to *The*

Picture of Dorian Gray, where Dorian dies by stabbing the portrait after sacrificing living a life free of the portrait's confinement.

This paper elaborates on key ideas of human nature being reflected through floral language, such as morality and the punishment of lovers who seek an ideal love. The shortage of research on floral language within Oscar Wilde's work, and specifically the shortage of research on roses is a gap this paper fills. This paper contains ideas such as beauty and love through one comprehensible symbol: Wilde's rose. Even though the rose is used a generous amount in Wilde's works *The Picture Of Dorian Gray* and "The Nightingale and the Rose," it remains relatively overlooked [1, p37].

DORIAN GRAY'S PATH: FROM YOUTH TO CORRUPTION

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, roses are not only firmly connected to Dorian's youth, but also the portrait which inspires Dorian's obsession with beauty. The book opens to Basil Hallward's art studio, which "was filled with the rich odor of roses" [4, p1]. Roses are immediately connected to this scene, and soon the portrait. The "rich odor" coincides with the tireless work Basil put into creating the beautiful portrait. Lord Henry, the man who takes Dorian under his wing, describes the portrait like a "young Adonis, who looks as if he was made of ivory and rose-leaves ... he is a Narcissus" [4, p2]. Especially coming from Lord Henry, connecting Dorian to a Narcissus foreshadows what Dorian becomes later in the novel. The use of "rose-leaves," rather than roses, is a particularly strange depiction. Being made of the leaves rather than the flower itself could show something missing within Dorian, like personal growth. His appearance is missing a liveliness that would come from a full rose; he is only ivory and leaves.

Lord Henry tries to convince Dorian to value and savor his youth, but clinging to youth prevents the ability to grow and mature [2]. While Lord Henry's words and influence slowly affect Dorian's mind, his wrongdoings are hidden by the portrait. As Patrick Duggan emphasizes, "Dorian enjoys a life of eternal youth, with only his portrait aging in parallel with Dorian's immorality; so, as Dorian sinks into the depths of narcissism, he maintains his external beauty, and his portrait degenerates instead" [2]. While the portrait protects his youth, it acts as a catalyst to his downfall. Going further than "sink[ing] into the depths of narcissism," the consequences that come out of Dorian's downfall is losing a respectable life. Instead of growing into adulthood and maturing as a character, he remains in a childish, malicious youth. After Dorian brutally rejects his lover Sibyl Vane, the first signs of change show on the portrait. Dorian comes to the realization that the portrait's "gold would wither into gray. Its red and white roses would die. For every sin that he committed, a stain would fleck and wreck its fairness" [4, p58]. The only flowers mentioned within the portrait are roses, and they are the only concrete evidence besides Dorian's picture that document his wrongdoings. While over time the changes to his face are slight, the roses and the loss of their fullness and life are more exaggerated, and directly connected to his immoral behavior.

Dorian commits more harm to others throughout the book because a sense of confident irresponsibility is given from the portrait [2]. Even if he does wrong, his youth and beauty will stay perfect while the

portrait bears the consequences. Roses are clearly connected to Dorian's "rose-red youth" and "rose-white boyhood" as described by Lord Henry. The comparison between red youth and white boyhood represents a before and after. The boyhood is Dorian's previous story: white, innocent, and pure. "Boyhood" refers to the time before the portrait was painted. After the portrait is painted, Dorian transitions from boyhood to an eternal youth. His youth is described as "rose-red," a color dramatically different from white and associated with danger. The shift from white to red, innocence to corruption is evident by Dorian's progressively more harmful actions accumulating throughout the novel. Duggan emphasizes Dorian's attitude that is "indifferent to consequence and altogether amoral," which accumulates through Dorian's sacrifice of a moral-driven life to one in love with the idea of youth. The rose could represent an illusion, or a deep but realistically unobtainable desire [2].

The moral transgressions Dorian commits often have roses associated with them, further representing the rose's connection to violence. When Dorian is reflecting on Sibyl Vane's tragic death, he says "'So I have murdered Sibyl Vane,' ... 'murdered her as certainly as if I had cut her little throat with a knife. And the roses are not less lovely for all that'" [4, p65]. Thinking back to how the "red and white roses would die" within the portrait for Dorian's wrongdoings, the only reason why the roses "are not less lovely" even in the face of death is that they are dying within the portrait but are maintained externally like Dorian's youth. Dorian's morals are clearly being degraded, as he acts nonchalant in the face of Sibyl's death, but the result of this degradation is hidden away within the portrait. A beautiful red rose is used by Wilde as a symbol to represent the siren song of immortality and youth, when in reality all it does is temporarily stop Dorian from aging. It convinces him to break moral codes and justifies harm to everyone around him, but listening to these desires led to nothing but the internal destruction of Dorian and his morals.

SIBYL VANE'S VAIN LOVE

One of the most emotionally violent and immoral acts Dorian commits is through his relationship with Sibyl Vane, whose appearance and talent as an actress is represented through the rose. Dorian first meets Sibyl after he stumbles into a performance of *Romeo & Juliet*. Sibyl is playing Juliet, a known young, feminine character. Dorian describes her appearance with floral language, saying "a girl, hardly seventeen years of age, with a little flower-like face, ... lips that were like the petals of a rose" [4, p34]. It can be reasonably assumed that it is her youth that gives her flower-like features, as Dorian's youth is also associated with florals. Her "flower-like face," and lips "like the petals of a rose" immediately gives Sibyl a gentle, almost fragile persona. It is Sibyl's beauty and talent that causes Dorian to fall "too much in love" [4, p31]. The rose could connect their shared dream of a happy love story.

To Dorian, Sibyl becomes a "pale rose" because he has no knowledge that brings color and life to her face. Dorian continues to see Sibyl through her performances as different characters, and in this way, doesn't truly know her. After a conversation between Dorian and Sibyl, they "kissed each other... all my life had been narrowed to one perfect point of rose-colored joy" [4, p46]. Dorian's fulfillment doesn't come from understanding Sibyl, but simply a kiss. Bypassing steps to true intimacy gives the moment a

hollowness. This further connects the rose to a dream, a deep desire for an intimate relationship but not a realistic manifestation of one.

The rose represents the destructive ending of Dorian and Sibyl's relationship, caused by Dorian's vanity but also Sibyl's own sacrifice of her career. Moments before Sibyl gives her worst (and last) performance, the ending of Dorian and Sibyl's relationship is foreshadowed. Sibyl is described as a "shadow of a rose in a mirror of silver" [4, p50]. When Sibyl was performing at her full abilities, she was a fuller, brighter rose and not reduced to a shadow. But it is not just her relationship with Dorian which causes her to shrink, but Sibyl herself. In giving all of herself into her relationship with Dorian she is sacrificing her career and her livelihood. The rose reveals the damage done to Sibyl, later shown in more depth through her suicide.

After the performance, Sibyl and Dorian argue. As Dorian walks home from this aggressive argument, he passes a "long line of boys carrying crates of striped tulips, and of yellow and red roses" [4, p56]. Pappas comments on this scene, arguing that "he has been recalled to his better self by these flowers" [1, p41], and that they inspire him to make things right with Sibyl. But Dorian never goes to make things right with Sibyl, and his lack of action disproves Pappas' idea that the roses fully recalled his better self. In fact, all they did was put a fleeting idea into Dorian's mind that he could change. They represented a small image of what Dorian could have done if he had not become so morally degraded.

Sibyl's suicide after Dorian tells her he doesn't love her was the final manifestation of Sibyl's commitment to Dorian. She was driven to this by the breaking of her dream, a fairy tale love story: "She had known the reality of love. "When she knew its unreality, she died, as Juliet might have died" [4, p75]. The unreality mentioned created a final loss in morality within Sibyl herself. By sacrificing herself to her dreams through taking her own life, Sibyl transitions from desiring a role as Dorian's partner to becoming an art object [1, p41]. It is only in her suicide that she is inanimate, immortalized in death. The rose symbolizes a different form of immortality than Dorian's; Sibyl is frozen in time after giving herself up to shattered dreams.

After Dorian hears the news that Sibyl Vane committed suicide and quickly comes to terms with it. While discussing the matter with Lord Henry, Dorian concludes that he himself "murdered Sibyl Vane, ... and the roses are not less lovely for all that" [4, p65]. Dorian has mentally justified Sibyl's death, despite his major role. The birds only sing just as happily in Dorian's garden, a small detail that shows the only one spared from anguish was himself. Here the roses symbolize a skewed perspective. Dorian views the roses as "not less lovely" because he has separated himself from Sibyl's death. The fact that Dorian pays attention to something mundane such as roses rather than the intensely personal suicide shows Dorian's inability to feel sympathy for others. The roses are a symbol of pain and grief, something Dorian does not feel because of his declined moral state.

THE NIGHTINGALE AND IDEALISTIC LOVE

In contrast to the lack of sympathy in Dorian, in "The Nightingale and the Rose" the Nightingale selflessly sacrifices her life to grant a student's wish. The short story opens with a young student's desire to pursue a woman, saying "'She said that she would dance with me if I brought her red roses,' ... 'but in all my garden there is no red rose'" [5, p13]. Here the red rose symbolizes the potential of a beautiful, growing love. It acts as an invitation into something more. It is also the beginning of the Nightingale's dream for the student. Because the Nightingale becomes attached to this dream, she quickly concludes that the student is "a true lover" despite the fact that the student has already given up his search for a red rose. The rose reflects some of the Nightingale's naivety towards the blinding capabilities of infatuation.

The Nightingale's pursuit of an idealistic dream is represented through the red rose. When the Nightingale hears the gruesome terms which she must pay for the red rose, she thinks that "'death is a great price to pay for a red rose,' ... 'Love is better than life, and what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a man?'" [5, p16]. The Nightingale justifies her sacrifice, blinded by projections of her own desires. The rose shows how the Nightingale is contained by desires, unable to value even her own life. Regina Puleo emphasizes that "true love, by Wilde's standard, ... is selfless, but also destructive to the lover and inconsequential to the object of one's desire" [3, p85]. The Nightingale's belief that the student's love is true acts as a shield, protecting her from mental destruction. It is this distinction that separates the Nightingale's sacrifice from suicide. She believes that she is doing good, and therefore the rose could show that these dreams protect the Nightingale from the reality of her actions.

The ultimate uselessness of the Nightingale's sacrifice shows how the rose symbolizes the harm and hollowness in idealized love. The Nightingale sings while making her sacrifice to the red rose bush, and her songs and the descriptions of the rose are all of love. But for love to be born, the Nightingale must die. She "sang of the Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb. And the marvellous rose became crimson ... crimson as a ruby was the heart" [5, p17]. She is singing of her own fate, as she is the only one who dies in this story. This represents how the Nightingale is truly infatuated with the idea of love, and she takes these hopes to her tomb. It is in this way that the bird's innocence is preserved. Once the student finds the rose he eagerly brings it to his lover. It is rejected and ends up crushed under a wheel in the street, and the emotional sacrifice from the Nightingale is ultimately useless. The rose represents the futility of pursuing idealistic love and pure infatuation [3, p79]. While the Nightingale does not suffer in her death, it is the reader who suffers watching a pure-hearted creature's life wasted for a meaningless rose. The rose represents a deep anguish, and the tragedy in believing in something so unreliable.

OVERLAPS BETWEEN *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY* AND "THE NIGHTINGALE AND THE ROSE"

There are many parallels in the way that Oscar Wilde uses roses as a descriptor between "The Nightingale and the Rose" and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In both texts the character's lips are repeatedly described as rose-red. Dorian describes Sibyl as having "lips that were like petals of a rose" [4, p34] and the Nightingale describes the student having "lips [as] red as the rose of his desire" [5, p13]. Both descriptions are used for characters in fragile states: Sibyl in her innocence, and the student torn by grief. Dorian described Sibyl right before her last performance as having "a faint blush, like the shadow of a rose in a mirror of silver," [4, p50] and during the Nightingale's sacrifice the rose is also described as "the shadow of a rose in a mirror of silver" [5, p17]. These similes are employed in opposite ways. For Sibyl, her awful performance suggests that the rose could be losing its full brightness because her effort is decreasing. For the Nightingale, however, the rose is coming to its full potential and blooming. Then again, as the rose ends up being crushed, the blooming of the rose is an illusion, or a false ending. Therefore for both these texts the rose is an illusion of perfection.

Dorian Gray and the Nightingale both chase works of art, and both end in tragic consequences. Dorian chases Sibyl because he loves her talent as an actress and her beauty. She represents a work of art that he wants to acquire. But after acquiring the art he was so mindlessly chasing, he commits his first act of depravity which traumatizes Sibyl to the point she takes her own life. The Nightingale acts in a similar way, but the result is her own demise rather than her work of art. The Nightingale chases the work of art that is the rose for the student, but once the rose is acquired it means the death of the Nightingale. While the act was selfless in the moment, it was ultimately meaningless as the love didn't come to fruition. These characters, blinded by their own desires, face death.

Sibyl and the Nightingale are controlled and contained through their love, which leads to their ultimate demise. The Nightingale made it her final mission to fulfill the wishes of who she deemed the "true lover." She is unknowingly controlled by the notion that love is more important than life. If the Nightingale hadn't sacrificed herself for the student, she could have aided all the creatures around her with her selflessness. If she hadn't confined herself to this path of dying for the rose, she would have been able to leave a greater legacy than a rose taken for granted. Sibyl faces a similar problem. She was a greatly talented actress, even if she was trapped in a contract with a poor theater. She loses her art when she meets Dorian and believes it's true love. In a way she is freed by love, as she no longer feels fulfilled by acting and wants to live in reality. But because of the love she carried for Dorian and how important she allowed him to be to her, his rejection of her caused her suicide. If she hadn't been so deeply involved in this dream of love with Dorian she could have escaped acting in other ways.

CONCLUSION

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "The Nightingale and the Rose," Oscar Wilde uses the rose as a symbol of projected desire and the unavoidable tragedies that follow when those desires fall through. While the rose first represented the pursuit of idealized love and beauty, it further revealed the danger of mistaking dreams and illusion for reality. Through *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "The Nightingale and the Rose," Wilde suggests that a carefree or limitless devotion to beauty, art, or infatuation can lead to moral and emotional destruction. By associating these complex themes within a seemingly small symbol (the rose), Wilde represents the depth of his critique of human desire. Understanding the significance of these smaller details not only deepens further interpretation of Wilde's work, but also provides a broader warning: pursuing desires without reflection can have lasting and often tragic consequences.

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