

# WILDE'S ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE

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## RESUMO

Este artigo tem por objetivo articular a teoria da metaficção a uma análise do conto "The Nightingale and the Rose", de Oscar Wilde. Em nossa leitura crítica do conto, analisamos como e em quais instâncias a condição artística da narrativa enquanto produto ou artifício se materializou a partir do uso de diferentes recursos de criação metaficcionais. Percebemos, assim, uma intencionalidade paródica que ordenou a construção narrativa do conto wildeano, permitindo uma recodificação da tradição clássica de contos de fadas, levando-nos a refletir sobre questões não comumente encontradas em tal tradição, a exemplo da função da arte e do papel desempenhado pelo artista. Utilizamos como referenciais teóricos os autores Waugh (1984), Hutcheon (2000), Killen (2007), entre outros.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Metaficção, Paródia, Conto de fadas, Wilde.

## ABSTRACT

This paper aims at articulating the theory of metafiction with an analysis of Oscar Wilde's "The Nightingale and the Rose". In our critical reading of Wilde's fairy tale, we analyzed the instances in which the artistic composition was made especially visible within the work of art, through the materialization of different metafictional creative devices. We could notice a parodic intent that ordered the short story's narrative construction, thus, recoding the classical tradition of fairy-tale writings, which led us to reflect on questions not usually found in this tradition, such as the function of art and the role played by the artist. Our analysis is supported by theorists such as Waugh (1984), Hutcheon (2000), Killen (2007), among others.

**KEYWORDS:** Metafiction, Parody, Fairy-tales, Wilde.

Even though Oscar Wilde's fairy tales remain somewhat marginal in Wilde Studies (KILLEN, 2007), these narratives are very interesting and certainly deserving of critical appreciation. Our choice and fascination for "The Nightingale and the Rose", for instance, may be explained by how the short story, as a piece of literature and work of art, could comment on and contain different levels of artistic discourse within itself, the same way it can be very moving at the level of the story-telling. In our analysis of the fairy tale, we will examine how the experience of reading and attributing meaning to the short story is widened once it was constructed as a parody to a classical tradition of fairy tales, just like we will scrutinize the presence of classical forms of dialogue (poetry and music) and Wilde's development of a philosophy of art particular to the narrative.

In general terms, the meta status in a piece of literature may be achieved through different creative strategies. The occurrence of *mise en abyme*, in which there are frame narratives, the existence of narratees and/or writers, or even direct dialogical digressions are instances which illustrate this mode of literary writing. More often, though, the ontological status of a text will be signaled by the presence of parody, in which "in the background of the author's work will stand another text, against which the new creation will be measured" (HUTCHEON, 1978, p. 201). The presence of two or more texts or discourses in parody allow us to agree with Hutcheon's argument according to which, "imitating art more than life, parody self-consciously and self-critically recognizes its own nature" (HUTCHEON, 2000, p. 27) [...] "a form of inter-art discourse" (HUTCHEON, 2000, p. 2).

The creative strategies cited above are all characteristic of a type of writing that has been termed as *metafiction*. According to Waugh (1984), "metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (WAUGH, 1984, p. 1). Waugh articulates the metafictional phenomenon to a literary practice, but we might also find metafictional elements in all other forms of artistic expression. In Krause's (2010) research, he sought and analyzed creative metafictional strategies in different artistic forms, such as literary narrative

(Cortázar, Machado de Assis), theater (Shakespeare), cinema (Hitchcock, Coutinho), painting (Magritte), and lithography (Escher), which allowed the theorist to define metafiction as a self-referential aesthetic phenomenon, through which fiction duplicates itself from within, when talking about or containing itself (KRAUSE, 2010).

When we consider the presence of metalinguistic and metafictional elements within a piece of literature, we find that this will lead us to the realm of literary language study itself, thus evidencing a level of language above the ordinary use of words for referential purposes. In literary texts, it means that the linguistic strategies used to compose the text will be exposed, resulting in a kind of writing which “consistently displays its conventionality, which explicitly and overtly lays bare its condition of artifice” (WAUGH, 1984, p. 4). The language to which metalanguage refers may be “either the registers of everyday discourse or, more usually, the ‘language’ of the literary system itself, including the conventions of the novel as a whole or a particular form of that genre” (WAUGH, 1984, p. 4).

In order to develop a metafictional reading of “The Nightingale and the Rose”, a few aspects of the short story must be considered, such as the dialogues held with music and poetry as well as the development of a philosophy of art and the examination of the role of the artist. Even though these are, by themselves, creative metafictional strategies within the story, by enabling us to regard each of them separately in their specificity, they also feature as part of a larger parodic intent towards a classical tradition of fairy-tale writing, for they are strange elements to this tradition incorporated in Wilde’s narrative.

Right from the beginning, the reader is immersed in a characteristic atmosphere in fairy tales: the set is about a student in a grove, the theme concerns young romantic love, the characterization of the Nightingale and the Student, who are named after what they are or represent, and the personification of a bird (who looks and wonders) consist of an amount of creative strategies that point, both to us and to Wilde’s contemporary readers, to the so called fairy-tale literary tradition. As a parodic text, Wilde’s fairy tale was constructed by a *mélange* of elements from the parodied form and/or by the inclusion of new ones. Being re-dimensioned, the compositional

elements will go through a process of re-contextualization. As far as this issue is concerned, Hutcheon (2000) believes that parody is not a matter of nostalgic imitation of past models, being, instead, a stylistic confrontation, a modern recoding which establishes difference at the heart of similarity. Playing with similarity and difference, the parodic text “both deviates from an aesthetic norm and includes that norm within itself as backgrounded material” (HUTCHEON, 2000, p. 44).

In the story, the misty-eyed Student lamented the lack of a red rose: “Ah, on what little things does happiness depend! I have read all that the wise men have written, and all the secrets of philosophy are mine, yet for want of a red rose is my life made wretched” (WILDE, 1994, p. 23). One of the metafictional creative strategies in Wilde's narrative is the existence of a poetic discourse spread throughout the text. Taking the instances about the Student's voice into account, we may notice that his discourse prioritizes language for referential purposes, being constructed similarly to the philosophical and metaphysical discourses of which the young Student claims to be a reader.

In opposition to the referential use of language developed by the Student, we have the highly poetical discourse of the Nightingale. Right after hearing the Student's complaints, we read:

“Here at last is a true lover,” said the Nightingale. “Night after night have I sung of him, though I knew him not: night after night have I told his story to the stars, and now I see him. His hair is dark as the hyacinth-blossom, and his lips are red as the rose of his desire; but passion has made his face like pale ivory and sorrow has set her seal upon his brow” (WILDE, 1994, p. 23-4).

Jakobson (1960, p. 358) defines the poetic or aesthetic function of language as being the one “that projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination”. We are aware that when any text is written, the words are selected and then, they are disposed in an order we call diction. Literary texts such as “The Nightingale and the Rose”, however, differ from the everyday forms of communication for they are structured out of a special use of language, out of a precise projection of the axis of selection into the axis of combination. For readers of

literary texts, it means that a specific sentence in a literary work could only have been written the way it was, for a change in one of its elements or order would mean a change in the meaning(s) that could be apprehended from it.

In literary texts, there is a predominance of the poetic function of language over the other ones. Reading the Nightingale's speech above, however, we may see that the poetic function, characteristic of literary works, was taken to another, more advanced level, for we are able to see, only in this excerpt, repetition ("night after night"), inversion ("night after night have I sung of him"), metaphor ("his lips are red as the rose of his desire"), and personification ("told his story to the stars"). Besides, the sentences are also carefully structured and balanced, thus resembling verses. Such an exuberant use of poetical language signals to the artistic nature of the Nightingale, which voices the artist's perspective in the narrative. Also, once the poetic function is based on a special and unique use of language, the readers of Wilde's fairy tales will very likely veer into the method in which this language was framed and shaped, increasing a metafictional self-consciousness in relation to the linguistic code out of which the prose was constructed: the reader becomes aware that the narrative scene, then, is not only ordered by a sequence of actions, but also by sequences of elaborated diction.

If we were dealing with a narrative that was designed according to a classical tradition of fairy tales, the Nightingale would probably act as the Student's assistant, helping him to complete a ritual and obtain the magical object that would end his perturbation. This would not be possible, however, in Wilde's tale, for the Student is not able to decode the linguistic input of the Nightingale. Even though she can freely communicate both with other non-human characters (such as the trees, lizards and butterflies) and with the Student, he, on the other hand, cannot understand her speech and singing: "The Student looked up from the grass, and listened, but he could not understand what the Nightingale was saying to him, for he only knew the things that are written down in books" (WILDE, 1994, p. 27).

The existence of two or more levels for creating and interpreting linguistic codes within the short story reflects and contributes to the formal double-coded

nature of the parodic text, provided that it establishes new interpretive possibilities at the parody's pragmatic dimension. In this sense, a possible reading for this special use of language and its functions in Wilde's narrative is the development of a form of criticism towards the Student's inability to understand the natural, wondrous language of the Nightingale, being the Student here metonymically understood as the Victorian society, which sponsored a practical and utilitarian view of the world.

After hearing yet again the Student complaining about the lack of a red rose, we read the following words by the Nightingale:

Here indeed is the true lover. [...] 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 emeralds, 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, 1994, p. 24).

The anaphora "here [...] is the true lover" enhances the poetic nature of the Nightingale's speech, as well as her innocent certainty that the Student is a true lover. Also, the repetition of the phrases "what I" and "what is", adds to the rhythm with which the whole sentence is composed, and strongly resembles the construction of verses, and not of a narrative prose.

It is also very interesting to notice, in the passage above, the passion with which the Nightingale, as an artist, sings of Love. Claiming that it cannot be bought or compared to gold and precious gemstones, we see that, as an artist, the Nightingale values immensely the matter that serves her as inspiration, in a clear opposition to the idea of love widespread in a society that valued practicality and materialism. Taking the end of the short story into account, we may consider this passage as structurally ironical, for the Student and the Professor's Daughter not only align with a practical and materialistic view of "love", but also eschew and throw the product of the Nightingale's art and sacrifice into the gutter.

The Nightingale is likely the most important symbol in Wilde's narrative, for it embodies music, poetry and love. Choosing this species of bird to represent an artist

was certainly not a random choice, once there is a substantial literary tradition that employs nightingales as artists, poets and birds of love. Ferber (1999) argues that the nightingale has had the most spectacular career of all literary birds, for it has appeared in many thousands of poems from Homer to the twentieth century, and in ancient times it acquired an almost formulaic meaning as the bird of spring, of night, and of mourning. Later, through its link to spring and night, it also became a bird of love. The nightingale also became a metaphor for a poet, as any bird that could sing did as well, but the nightingale came to be considered as such as early as Hesiod. The nightingale has also had a strong footprint in the English literary tradition; Shelley, for instance, wrote: "A Poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why" (SHELLEY apud FERBER, 1999, p. 139). Also Keats (in "Ode to a Nightingale") and Wilde himself (in "The Burden of Itys") wrote poems inspired in the bird.

Wilde's anthropomorphic Nightingale in "The Nightingale and the Rose" who, bringing resonances of many prior literary nightingales within herself, could not stand passively before the Student's love qualms: "Suddenly she spread her brown wings for flight, and soared into the air. She passed through the grove like a shadow, and like a shadow she sailed across the garden" (WILDE, 1994, p. 25). She, then, underwent a ritualistic process typical of fairy tales. One at a turn, she addresses three different Rose-trees, and three times we read the same sequence of two paragraphs, which advance the idea of ritual: "'Give me a red rose', she cried, 'and I will sing you my sweetest song'. / But the Tree shook its head" (WILDE, 1994, p. 25-6). Only on the third Rose-tree the Nightingale sees a possibility of obtaining a red rose. After a harsh winter, this third Rose-tree is not supposed to produce a red rose for another year, for it has frost veins and buds. We discover, however, that there is one and only way for the red rose to come to life:

If you want a red rose, [...] you must build it out of music by moonlight, and stain it with your own heart's-blood. You must sing to me with your breast against a thorn. All night long you must sing to me, and the thorn must pierce your heart, and your life-blood must flow into my veins, and become mine (WILDE, 1994, p. 26).

If the Nightingale were to perform such an action, her death would be inevitable. So, she ponders what to do:

Death is a great price to pay for a red rose, [...] and Life is very dear to all. It is pleasant to sit in the green wood, and to watch the Sun in his chariot of gold, and the Moon in her chariot of pearl. Sweet is the scent of the hawthorn, and sweet are the bluebells that hide in the valley, and the heather that blows on the hill. Yet Love is better than Life, and what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a man? (WILDE, 1994, p. 27).

The moments in which the reader directly accesses the Nightingale's voice are the ones in which the poetic nature of language is made the most explicit. In the passage above, once again the special selection and combination of the linguistic elements draw a metafictional attention to the code of language itself. McCormack (1997), considering Wilde's characteristics as a writer of fairy tales, argues that a central element in his narratives is a preference for "a fracture between plot and discourse, in which action is suspended indefinitely for a kind of logorrhea, to the extent that the only interest of the tale is an engagement of language with itself as a kind of pure verbal decoration" (McCORMACK, 1997, p. 103). We must agree with McCormack that a great attention is paid to language (to the point it works as a metafictional mark in the narrative), but not to the point of saying there is language only for the sake of language, for one of the most powerful aspects of Wilde's tales is how the language, special as it is, can relate to the (human) experiences it represents. Such a close relation between language and experience is especially clear when we hear the Nightingale's voice, which sounds particularly honest and truthful.

The Nightingale flies back to the grove where the Student is still lying on the grass and tells him that he does not need to worry anymore, for she will build him a red rose "out of music by moonlight, and stain it with [her] own heart's-blood" (WILDE, 1994, p. 27). The Student could not understand her words, but the Oak-tree could, and asked her to sing one last time, for he was very fond of her:

So the Nightingale sang to the Oak-tree, and her voice was like water bubbling from a silver jar.

When she had finished her song the Student got up, and pulled a note-book and a lead-pencil out of his pocket.

“She has form,” he said to himself, as he walked away through the grove - “that cannot be denied to her; but has she got feeling? I am afraid not. In fact, she is like most artists; she is all style, without any sincerity. She would not sacrifice herself for others. She thinks merely of music, and everybody knows that the arts are selfish. Still, it must be admitted that she has some beautiful notes in her voice. What a pity it is that they do not mean any practical good” (WILDE, 1994, p. 28).

It is clear to us that the Student cannot understand neither the Nightingale’s language nor her art. He tries, instead, to examine the Nightingale’s song and fails miserably, for he is caught up in a purely formal analysis of her art. Such an attempt is not a mere representation of the Student’s poor interpretive abilities, but also one of the passages of the story in which irony is more clearly manifested. Irony, according to Hutcheon (1995), differs from other polysemic literary creative strategies (such as metaphor) because it has sharp edges that can be used to cut deep into its target. In his narrative, Wilde directs his ironical criticism not only to a single character, for the Student is a metonymical representative of the society in which he belongs. Wilde’s criticism, then, is used to undermine the arguments of such a society, which tried to include and make arts suit in the utilitarian practices it much esteemed. The series of arguments that the Student has composed are rendered unacceptable as they run dry of feeling, of sincerity, being full of selfishness.

As previously mentioned, ritualistic processes are characteristic of the fairy-tale tradition, especially those concerning one’s obtaining a magical object. In “The Nightingale and the Rose”, this ritual is reworked, acquiring different and more important tones, for it leads to the Nightingale’s (or the artist’s) self-sacrifice. During the ritual, the already existing poetic and dramatic dimensions are heightened to the extreme by the Nightingale’s growing pain as she sings louder and louder while pressing her breast closer to the thorn. There are three different moments during the Nightingale’s singing: first, she sang of the love between a boy and a girl, then she sang of “the birth of passion in the soul of a man and a maid” (WILDE, 1994, p. 29). As the pain grew bitter and bitter and “wilder and wilder grew her song, [...] she sang of the

Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb" (WILDE, 1994, p. 29).

Each one of these moments also represents a stage in the development of the rose: when the Nightingale sang of the love between a boy and a girl, a marvelous rose blossomed, "silver as the wings of the dawn" (WILDE, 1994, p. 29). The pale characteristic of the rose indicates the inconclusiveness, the uncertainty of the love between a boy and a girl, in a similar manner to that of the Student and the Professor's Daughter. When the Nightingale sang of the passion between a man and a maid, only "a delicate flush of pink came into the leaves of the rose" (WILDE, 1994, p. 29). Only when the Nightingale sang of a deep, transcendental kind of love, a "Love that is perfected by Death, [...] that dies not in the tomb" (WILDE, 1994, p. 29), [the] "rose became crimson, like the rose of the eastern sky" (WILDE, 1994, p. 29).

In order to create the perfect rose, the Nightingale had to sing up to her death in an artistic expression that had to sound perfect as well. The color red is also a very important symbol in the narrative, and had already been referred to previously in the short story as the color that represented love, passion: "[...] and his lips are red as the rose of his desire" (WILDE, 1994, p. 24); "Flame-coloured are his [Love's] wings, and coloured like flame is his body" (WILDE, 1994, p. 27). The fact that the Nightingale was able to create a perfect rose, which was a perfect red rose, attests both to how perfectly she could perform her art, but, most importantly, to how passionate she felt about it. It was only because of the Nightingale's position as a very passionate artist that the magical creation of the red rose was made possible, for "only a Nightingale's heart's-blood can crimson the heart of a rose" (WILDE, 1994, p. 29).

The Nightingale's heart's-blood, being able to reach and change the nature of the rose's heart, works as a metaphor for how an honest, passionate artistic creation can touch the hearts of people who read it. We would expect, then, that the Nightingale's artistic creation, her singing of a deep, transcendental kind of love, would reverberate throughout the narrative, disrupting, changing the nature of the practical, materialistic world in which the Student and the Professor's Daughter lived. Our hope is destroyed by the final events of the narrative, when we read:

“You said that you would dance with me if I brought you a red rose,” cried the Student. “Here is the reddest rose in all the world. You will wear it to-night next your heart, and as we dance together it will tell you how I love you.”

But the girl frowned.

“I am afraid it will not go with my dress,” she answered; “and, besides, the Chamberlain’s nephew has sent me some real jewels, and everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers.”

“Well, upon my word, you are very ungrateful,” said the Student angrily; and he threw the rose into the street, where it fell into the gutter, and a cart-wheel went over it (WILDE, 1994, p. 30-1).

The hypothetically civilized world apparently drags the Nightingale’s message as well as her powerful, passionate and perfect work of art into the gutter, in the name of its materialistic and practical impulses. Once again, irony is made present, turning its critical edges towards the Student, the Professor’s Daughter, and the society from which they come, for the Student’s assertion of ingratitude is subverted, making us reflect upon who (else), indeed, is ungrateful.

The apparent silencing of the Nightingale’s voice that we mentioned seems to be further resumed at the end of the narrative:

“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 going to happen, and making one believe things that are not true. In fact, it is quite unpractical, and, as in this age to be practical is everything, I shall go back to Philosophy and study Metaphysics.”

So he returned to his room and pulled out a great dusty book, and began to read (WILDE, 1994, p. 31).

The lack of a happy ending in the short story works both to promote Wilde’s parodic intent towards the fairy-tale tradition and to strengthen the social criticism towards a materialistic and utilitarian society. One could probably think that the social criticism may have somehow lost its power due to the unhappy ending subverting the elements of the fairy-tale tradition. In our perception, these creative options work as a way to intensify the social criticism, especially when we consider that other structural elements of fairy tales also acquire new connotations under the parodic light. The fact that the Student does not have a name, for instance, can be articulated with the

character's shallow nature. His shallowness is representative of his adamant trust and willingness to believe only in what he can find in books. Reading Wilde's story, we come to understand that the knowledge that we may find in books is useless if dissociated from knowledge of life, love and from an understanding of the power of imagination.

Oscar Wilde played with two levels of reality in "The Nightingale and the Rose". So, if, on the one hand, we have the Student and the Professor's Daughter as representatives of a pragmatic, materialistic and shallow universe, on the other one, we find the Nightingale and the Rose, as representatives of imagination, sensibility and art. As readers, we tend to align with the imaginative dimension of the short story and its characters, being that the reason why we are shocked with what happens to the rose, final product of the Nightingale's art and sacrifice.

Interpreting the meaning of the Nightingale's sacrifice is decisive to one's understanding the story. Shewan (2007), for instance, argues that we are left with two alternative inferences to account for the Nightingale's sacrifice: "that self-sacrifice for altruistic motives is futile and wasteful, or that self-sacrifice in pursuit of a personal vision [...] is as egotistical as any other form of self-realisation" (SHEWAN apud KILLEN, 2007). If we were to agree with the critic's argument, we would be acting as the Student, who was not able to recognize the wondrous, extraordinary, and transcendental significance of the appearance of the red rose.

In reality, the fact that the Nightingale's sacrifice was not noticed by the Student and his utilitarian society does not mar her incredible deed, for she was able to "produce a beautiful creation that embodies the perfection of artistic self-sacrifice" (KILLEN, 2007, p. 42). In this sense, we may understand the Nightingale's sacrifice as a way Wilde finds to foster his philosophy of art in the short story. In this, we may notice a defense of art's autonomy and value apart from usefulness and practicality. Similarly, the role played by the Nightingale is central to understanding the implications of such a philosophy of art in the narrative, for, as the representative of the artist, she is able to find the proper means so as to illuminate the artistic beauty – represented by art, music, poetry, love –, in opposition to the darker colors of a society marked by

materialistic and utilitarian interests. All things considered, we find “The Nightingale and the Rose” as probably the most artistic among all of Wilde's fairy tales. In this manner, we may only assume that, in such a narrative, the Nightingale's voice and art are not and cannot be silenced, for they function as a beacon of light and hope in a world where arts are very much needed.

In conclusion, even though we sought to analyze the instances of literary self-reflexivity, we hope that our analysis of the “The Nightingale and the Rose” may point out that when it comes to metafictional texts, there is much more than just literature's self-perusal. For, in the fairy tale we analyzed, the Nightingale's self-sacrifice invites the readers to contemplate her actions with awe and reverence, which cannot be shaken even after the subversion of the traditional happy ending in fairy tales. Such feeling of reverence for the protagonist's condition and deeds ultimately influences the audience into taking an aesthetic and political stand against the maintenance of the social status quo, demanding, as in the old folktales, the substance of life to be changed, even if this substance is art itself, as seen in “The Nightingale and the Rose”.

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