The Nightingale and the Rose

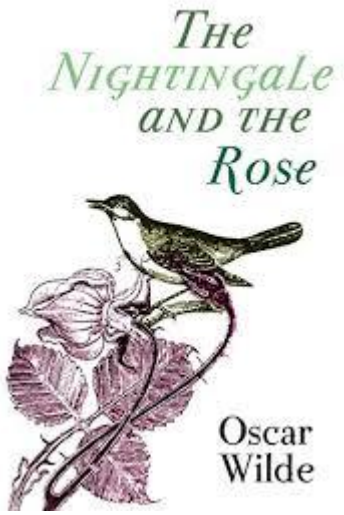
by

Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde was born in 1854 in Dublin to Sir William Wilde and Jane Francesca Elgee, who was herself a poet. Under her influence, Wilde developed an appreciation for art and won academic scholarships first to Trinity College and later to Oxford. Wilde moved to London after completing his studies, where both his wit and his views on "art for art's sake" quickly attracted a following. His literary career began in 1881 with the publication of a volume of poetry but did not gain traction until the late 1880s; it was during this period that Wilde, drawing in part on the Irish folklore he had learned from his mother, wrote a collection of fairy tales that included "The Nightingale and the Rose." Wilde's success peaked in the early 1890s with works like The Picture of Dorian Gray.

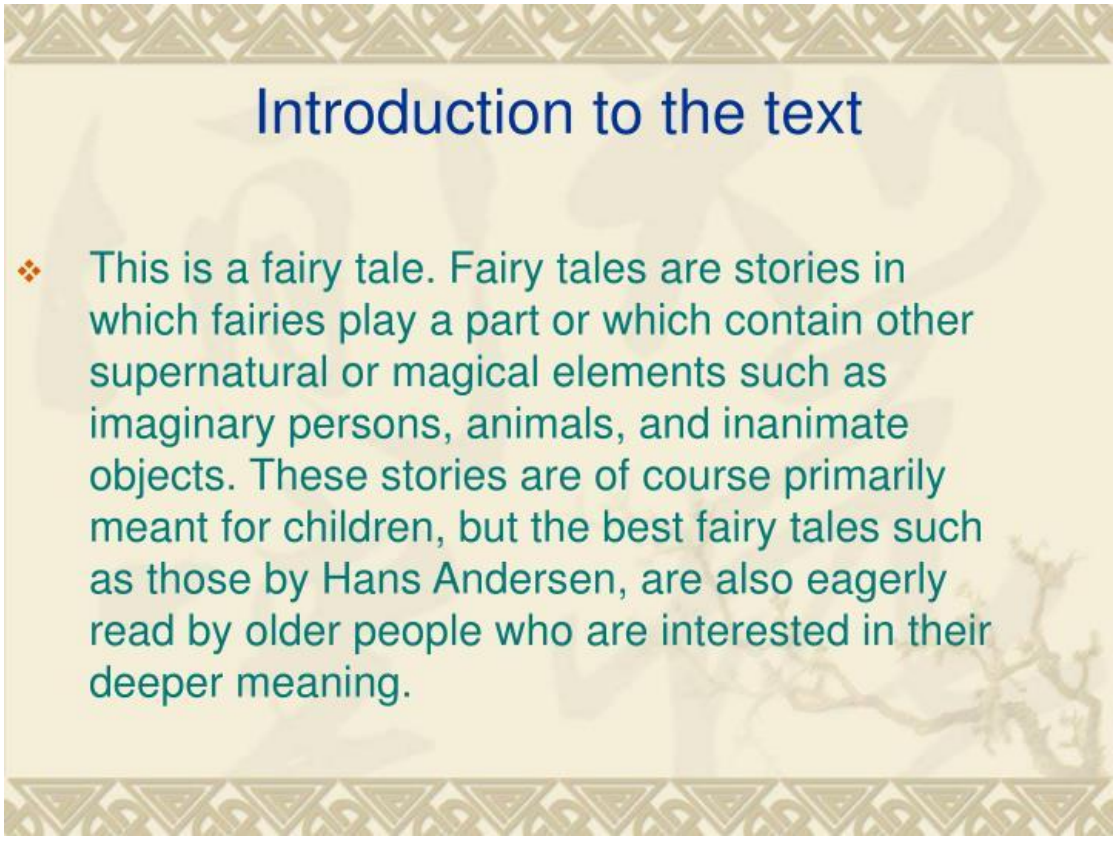
Historical Context

The 19th century was a time of rapid change in England. Building off the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and the scientific method, thinkers like Charles Darwin challenged traditional beliefs about the origins and purpose of human life. Technological progress, meanwhile, sped up the Industrial Revolution, which in turn transformed societal attitudes toward wealth and consumption; the ability to mass produce goods, for instance, encouraged a culture of materialism. By the mid-to-late 1800s, philosophy and art arguably had begun to mirror these broader social trends. Utilitarianism, for instance, attempted to explain ethical problems in terms of function. According to thinkers like John Stuart Mill, something is "good" simply if it has a net positive effect, rather than because it has any inherently good properties. "The Nightingale and the Rose" (as well as Wilde's broader embrace of Aestheticism) is in some ways a reaction to all of these changes. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Wilde held out for the importance of intangible qualities like beauty in an increasingly rational and mechanized world.



Key Facts about *The Nightingale and the Rose*

- **Full Title:** "The Nightingale and the Rose"
- **When Written:** 1880s
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1888
- **Literary Period:** Aestheticism
- **Genre:** Fairy tale, short story, satire
- **Setting:** A garden in an unspecified time and place
- **Climax:** The Nightingale dies just as she creates the perfect red rose
- **Antagonist:** The Student, as well as the larger value systems he embodies
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient



The Nightingale and the Rose

While sitting in the branches of the Oak-tree, the Nightingale overhears the Student lamenting the fact that his sweetheart will not dance with him unless he brings her a red rose. The Nightingale sees in the young man a real-world example of the romance she sings about, and she thinks to herself how awe-inspiring and powerful love is. Impressed by the apparent depth of the Student's emotion, she decides to help him secure the girl's affections.

The Nightingale first flies to a White Rose-tree standing in the center of a plot of grass and asks him for a red rose. He tells her that all his roses are white, but advises her to find his brother, the Yellow Rose-tree standing next to a sun-dial. The Nightingale flies to him and is again disappointed. The Yellow Rose-tree in turn suggests that she visit his brother underneath the Student's window. This Rose-tree confirms that his roses

are red, but adds that as it is wintertime, he cannot provide her with a blossom.

In despair, the Nightingale wonders aloud whether there is any way she can find a single red rose. Reluctantly, the Rose-tree tells her that her only option is to spend the night singing with one of his thorns in her heart. Her music will bring the flower into existence, and her blood will dye its petals red, but the process of impaling herself on the thorn will kill her. Although the thought of losing life's pleasures saddens the Nightingale, she concludes that the sacrifice will be worthwhile if done for love.

The Nightingale returns to the Student and attempts to tell him her plan, asking that he repay her by always being a true lover. The Student cannot understand the Nightingale's words, but the Oak-tree, saddened, asks her to sing a final song for him. She agrees, and the Student complains that her song lacks meaning and emotion before going home.

That evening, the Nightingale flies to the Rose-tree and allows the thorn to pierce her. She sings about love through the night, gradually pressing herself further onto the thorn. As she does so, a rose takes shape on the Tree, finally turning red when the thorn pierces the Nightingale's heart and kills her.

Later that day, the Student finds the red rose outside his window, but does not realize where it came from. Nevertheless, he picks it up and brings it to the girl, who is sitting outside her home spinning silk. The girl, though, rejects the gift, saying that she prefers the jewels she has received from a wealthy suitor. Angry, the Student throws the rose into the road and storms off, deciding that love is not worth the trouble. The story concludes with him opening a book and returning to his studies.

Summary and Analysis

- As a Nightingale sits in her nest in an Oak-tree, she overhears a Student speaking mournfully about his sweetheart, who has said she will not dance with him unless he brings her a red rose. While the Nightingale watches, the Student begins to cry, lamenting the fact that all his learning is useless since it can't win him the girl's love. His beauty and sorrow, however, impress the Nightingale, who has spent all her life singing about an idealized "true lover."

- The Student's first appearance in the story relies heavily on fairy-tale conventions that Wilde will later upend. His physical attractiveness and tearful declarations of love suggest that he is a quintessential romantic hero, so it is not hard to see why the Nightingale considers him the answer to her songs. In fact, it's almost as if her art has actually conjured an ideal lover into being. It is significant, however, that the Student also draws attention to his intellectualism, since this will ultimately prove to be more important to him than his feelings for the girl.

- The Student continues to bemoan his unrequited love, imagining in great detail how the girl will pass him by at the Prince's ball unless he finds a rose for her. Meanwhile,the Nightingale reflects on how powerful and priceless a force love is. The other animals and plants in the vicinity, however, do not understand why the Student is crying over a rose.

- In retrospect, the Student's lavish descriptions of how heartbroken he will be at the ball seem over-the-top. The Nightingale, however, sees the Student's self-absorption as an indication of how deep his feelings run, contrasting his "real" love with her happy songs. She also suggests that love is wonderful mostly because it has no material value, which is an idea Wilde will play with throughout the story; the girl's affections most definitely *can* be bought, but it is not clear that those affections are what the Nightingale (or Wilde) means by "love."

- The Nightingale decides to help the Student, and flies to the center of the garden to speak to the White Rose-tree. She asks him for a red rose, but he tells her that he has none, and directs her to his brother by the sun-dial. Accordingly, the

Nightingale visits the Yellow Rose-tree, but he also disappoints her, advising her to try the Rose-tree underneath the Student's window.

- Fairy tales often obey the "rule of three," and this one fits the pattern. In this case, however, the fact that the Nightingale strikes out twice before finding a tree that can help her is also a way of demonstrating her persistence and dedication—both qualities the Student lacks.

- When the Nightingale states her case to the Red Rose-tree, he confirms that his roses are red, but says that he cannot grow one in winter. The Nightingale presses him, however, and he eventually admits that there is a possible solution: by singing as she impales herself on one of his thorns, the Nightingale can bring a rose into bloom and dye it with her own blood. Although it pains the Nightingale to sacrifice the joys of life, she agrees to the Rose-tree's plan.

- Red roses are symbolic of romantic love, so by having the Nightingale give up her own life to create one, Wilde begins to present an alternative to the Student's shallow feelings for the girl. From her description of the sensual pleasures of nature, it is clear that thee Nightingale enjoys life—much more, in fact, than the Student, who ends up shutting himself inside his room. Nevertheless, she is willing to sacrifice all of this for love—and not even her own, but someone else's. The fact that it is her "heart's-blood" that will dye the rose further underscores the connection between love and sacrifice, since hearts are symbols of both romance and life.

- Her mind made up, the Nightingale flies back to the Student and tells him the good news, asking simply that he honor her sacrifice by being a true lover. The Student cannot understand what she is saying, but the Oak-tree asks her to sing one more song before she dies

- When the Nightingale asks the Student to be a true lover, she explicitly compares love to intellectual pursuits (i.e. "Philosophy"), arguing that love is ultimately "wiser." The story immediately doubles-down on this idea with the Student's response, which is one of total incomprehension. Because the Nightingale's emotional language isn't in any of his books, he can't even hear her request, much less honor it.

- After the Nightingale sings, the Student criticizes her performance, saying that it is stylistically impressive but emotionally shallow. He then returns to his home, where he falls into romantic reveries and, eventually, sleep.

- The Student's reaction to the Nightingale's song lends further credence to the idea that his intellectualism is actually clouding his ability to see the world clearly. In a nod to criticisms made of Wilde himself, the Student complains that the Nightingale only cares about style, and that by not dealing with real-world issues or emotions, she is being self-indulgent. Clearly, however, nothing could be further from the truth: not only is the Nightingale singing to bring the Oak-tree happiness, but she is preparing to sacrifice her life for the Student's own benefit.

- When evening falls, the Nightingale flies to the Rose-tree and perches against the thorn. As the Moon listens, she begins to sing about young love, causing a few indistinct petals to appear on the Tree.

- Significantly, it is not enough for the Nightingale simply to give her life: to create the rose, she also has to sing. The fact that her song (i.e. her art) has a tangible effect on the real world is in one sense a very literal rejection of the Student's claims that art is useless. It is also, however, a statement about the intrinsic value of art, since Wilde depicts singing about love and the actual act of loving as one in the same thing.

- Warning that day is fast approaching, the Rose-tree tells the Nightingale to press herself further onto the thorn. The Nightingale continues to sing, this time about mature, romantic love, and the rose begins to turn pink.

- As the Nightingale continues to sing, it becomes clearer and clearer that she is dying not so much for any particular pair of lovers, but more for love as an ideal. Her songs trace a kind of hierarchy of love, moving from youthful infatuation through marriage to sacrificial love. Appropriately, it is only this last, highest form of love that can put the finishing touches on the rose.

- The Rose-tree encourages the Nightingale to press closer one last time. Although rapidly weakening, she sings about sacrificial and undying love as all of nature listens on. The rose reddens, and the Rose-tree tries to tell the Nightingale that she has succeeded. Sadly, however, she is already dead.

- The imagery Wilde uses throughout the Nightingale's death scene culminates in this passage, with the rose "trembl[ing] in ecstasy" as the song reaches its conclusion. Ultimately, this underscores the idea that the Nightingale's sacrifice is an act of love— since her death is a total sacrifice of selfhood, and therefore "selfless" in a

very literal sense. Furthermore, the response of the world around her confirms the meaningfulness of her sacrifice, with even her "killer"—the Rose-tree—appreciating the beauty of her song and actions.

- Hours later, the Student looks outside his window and sees the rose. Delighted, he says that it is the most beautiful flower he has ever seen, and that it must therefore have a complicated scientific name.

- The Student's response to finding the rose, like his response to the Nightingale's song, foreshadows his ultimate shallowness. For one, he does not realize where the rose has come from, and he attributes finding it to a stroke of luck. Even more importantly, he proves incapable of recognizing the rose's beauty, either as a symbol of sacrifice or even simply as an aesthetically pleasing object; for the Student, this beauty only counts if it reflects a complex, intellectual concept.

- The Student plucks the rose and takes it to the girl at her father's (the Professor's) house. When he arrives, the girl is sitting outside spinning silk, and the Student presents her with the flower, saying she will wear it that evening at the ball. The girl, however, objects that the rose does not match her dress, and that she in any case prefers the jewels she recently received from the Chamberlain's nephew.

- The girl's callous rejection of the rose marks the major turning point in the story. Her preference for costly jewels blinds her to the symbolic significance of the rose, while her comment about matching the flower to her dress suggests that it is she—not the Nightingale—who is only concerned with surface appearance. The fact that the girl is spinning silk—a luxury good—further associates her with greed and consumerism. All in all, Wilde suggests that materialism (aided by extreme rationalism, in the form of the girl's father) has made fairy-tale happy endings impossible.

- In response, the Student huffs that the girl is "ungrateful," and throws the rose into the street to be run over by a cart. The girl retorts that the Student is "rude," making fun of his relative poverty before storming into her house.

- When the girl rejects him, the Student shows his true colors. Far from being the true lover the Nightingale hoped he would be, he quickly turns on the girl and calls her "ungrateful"—a comment that suggests he saw the rose not as a symbol of love, but as a way of "buying" his sweetheart. He therefore casually discards the flower once it is clear that it will not be useful to him. Meanwhile,

the girl's reactions further emphasize the materialism underlying the entire interaction.

- As the Student walks away, he thinks about how irrational and impractical love is and concludes that he would be better off devoting his time to studying philosophy. He therefore returns to his room and begins to read from an old book.

- The Student's complaints about love get to the heart of Wilde's critique of rationalism and materialism. He rejects love on the grounds that it is impractical, arguing that it "make[s] one believe things that are not true." His decision to embrace abstract philosophy, however, implies that he is either not interested in practicality after all, or that he does not even understand the rationalism he himself is praising. Either way, the final image of the Student reading from a dusty (i.e. seldom used) book reveals the hollowness of the Student's worldview; far from being engaged with real-world matters, he is shut up alone in a room reading obscure theory.

Themes

Love and Sacrifice

From start to finish, "The Nightingale and the Rose" is a story about the nature of love. Love is what the Student claims to feel for the girl, and it is also what inspires the Nightingale to sacrifice her life to create a red rose; doing so, she thinks, will help the Student win his sweetheart's affection. The fact that neither the Student nor the girl appreciates the Nightingale's sacrifice, however, complicates the story's meaning. In the end, Wilde suggests that true love is possible, but that much of what people commonly call love is shallow and self-interested.

The Student is a prime example of this self-absorption, the full extent of which only becomes clear at the end of the story; when the girl rejects his rose, he is quick to label her "ungrateful," and love in general "silly." In retrospect, however, it is clear that the Student's love was self-absorbed all along. While it is common for stylized literature (like fairy tales) to include dramatic monologues, the protestations of love that open "The Nightingale and the Rose" take on a stagey and attention-seeking quality in light of the story's ending. Wilde drops another similar hint when he describes the Student going back to his room and "think[ing] of his love." The ambiguous phrasing could simply mean that the Student is thinking about the girl, but it could also imply that he is narcissistically poring over his own emotional state. The girl, meanwhile, reveals herself to be equally self-centered when she exchanges the Student for a wealthier lover, leaving only the Nightingale to symbolize true, deep love.

The Nightingale, of course, is undeniably selfless. She is outwardly focused from the beginning, singing not about her own feelings, but about those of the "true lover" she dreams of meeting. Later, she flies from place to place attempting to find a red rose on someone else's behalf, her persistence standing in marked contrast to the Student's quickly-abandoned courtship. These small moments of altruism and self-denial culminate in her decision to sacrifice her life; death—the complete loss of selfhood—is the ultimate expression of selflessness. In fact, Wilde suggests that "perfect" love can exist only in death for

precisely this reason. Because true love requires selflessness, death is its logical endpoint.

Ultimately, then, the fact that the Nightingale's sacrifice is based on a misreading of the Student's feelings doesn't alter the story's defense of love itself. By dying, the Nightingale herself proves the existence of true love, which the story suggests will outlive her: as she dies, the Nightingale sings about "Love that dies not in the tomb."

Art and Idealism

Oscar Wilde is likely the most famous British writer associated with Aestheticism, a late 19th-century movement that championed "art for art's sake." In contrast to those who argued that the arts should address social issues or impart moral lessons, the Aesthetics contended that art's sole purpose was to be beautiful. This question about the nature and role of art forms the backdrop to "The Nightingale and the Rose," with the Nightingale andthe Student embodying opposite sides of the debate.

Other than perhaps her selflessness, the Nightingale's defining characteristic is her beautiful voice, which she uses largely as a means of bringing pleasure to others; when the Oak-tree, for instance, requests one final song to remember the Nightingale by, she willingly complies, with a "voice…like water bubbling from a silver jar." Furthermore, to the extent that the Nightingale's songs are "about" anything, they are about ideals rather than reality. Rather than singing about her own love (or any particular pair of lovers), the Nightingale sings about love in wholly abstract terms, using stock figures like "a boy and a girl" to trace a path from young love to passionate love to love that survives death. This idealism further underscores the link between the Nightingale's art and Aestheticism, since her songs have no obvious real-world application.

The Student, by contrast, believes that art should "do" something. In fact, he criticizes the Nightingale's song precisely because he sees it as useless and meaningless, saying that the Nightingale cares only about "style"—a common critique of Aestheticism. He even goes so far as to say her art is "selfish," presumably because it has no tangible impact on the world around her. This, of course, is untrue in a literal sense, since the Nightingale's song produces the red rose the Student will

present to the girl. Still, it is tempting to agree with the Student's rejection of the Nightingale's song as doing no "practical good." The girl, after all, rejects the rose, and neither she nor the Student understand or appreciate the sacrifice the Nightingale has made. At the very least, the Nightingale's philosophy of art would appear to be misguided.

Digging deeper, however, it is clear that the Student's views on Aestheticism are being satirized. By the end of the story, Wilde has revealed the Student's "love" to be shallow and self-involved, which casts doubt on his claims about being able to recognize true "feeling" in art. Meanwhile, the description of the Nightingale's death reveals the intrinsic value of her art and actions. It is not simply that her songs are beautiful, but that, by sacrificing herself for love, the Nightingale makes the ideal love she sings about a reality in the world. Ultimately, then, the story suggests that art is self-justifying, because the artistic process itself embodies the ideals of art.

Materialism, Intellectualism, and Emotion

Despite its fairy-tale setting, "The Nightingale and the Rose" engages with the real-world debates taking place in the late 1800s. The Enlightenment of the preceding century had inspired great confidence in humanity's ability to solve scientific, practical, and even moral problems with reason. Rapid industrialization (and the wealth it generated) lent further credence to these ideas by "proving" the success of 18th-century scientific innovation and free-market economics. Nevertheless, there was significant pushback against these trends throughout the 19th-century, particularly from writers and artists. In "The Nightingale and the Rose," Wilde develops his own critique of materialism and intellectualism, as these traits are embodied by the Student and the girl. Far from promoting a realistic worldview, these philosophies actually blind the story's characters to what is happening within and around them.

It is no coincidence that the Student is a student. Although the story begins with the Student loudly professing the depth of his feelings for the girl, it quickly becomes clear that he is more at ease with his studies than he is with emotions. When the Nightingale sings to the Oak-tree, for instance, the Student's response is one of cold rationalism; he jots down critical notes on what he takes to be the

Nightingale's lack of genuine feeling. In fact, his assessment of the Nightingale could not be further from the truth, and it is the Student himself who lacks emotional depth. The Student's intellectualism, however, has distorted his ability to see the world clearly. Because he "only knows the things that are written down in books," the Student is quite literally incapable of understanding anyone whose guiding light is not reason—most notably the Nightingale, whose insistence that "Love is wiser than Philosophy" prioritizes an "irrational" emotion.

In this sense, "The Nightingale and the Rose" links the Student's hyper-rationality to the girl's materialism. Because he understands the world solely in terms of "practicality," the Student can't make sense of selfless behavior, which by definition does not benefit the person (or bird) practicing it. Significantly, the most obviously selfish and greedy character in the story—the girl—is the daughter of a professor; the implication is that rationality inevitably produces materialism if it is not tempered with emotion. Her rationale for rejecting the Student's red rose is, after all, logical: "Everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers."

Ultimately, however, Wilde suggests that the intertwined worldviews of intellectualism and materialism fail even on their own terms. While it is certainly the case that the Student and the girl consistently misread the emotional significance of the world around them (e.g. the rose and the Nightingale's song), it is equally clear that they lack self-knowledge. The story ends with the Student rejecting love as "impractical" and resolving to study metaphysics instead. Metaphysics, however, is arguably the branch of philosophy *least* concerned with practicality, since it involves abstract questions about mind vs. matter, the purpose of existence, and the nature of identity. The Student, then, does not appear to have a good grasp even on the philosophy he claims to support—a point further underscored by the fact that the book he pulls down to study is "dusty," implying that it does not see much use.

Symbols

The Red Rose

Red roses are traditionally associated with romance, so it is not surprising that Wilde uses one to symbolize true love in "The Nightingale and the Rose." Its significance, however, shifts over the context of the story. At first, the rose appears to represent the Student's love for the girl, since her refusal to dance with him unless he brings her the flower makes the flower into a piece of evidence that his feelings are genuine. By sacrificing her life to bring the Student a rose, the Nightingale further underscores this idea that the flower is an expression of true love; in fact, the Rose quite literally comes from the Nightingale's heart, because she uses her blood to stain it red. In the end, however, neither the Student nor the girl is able to appreciate the rose's symbolic significance. The girl, for instance, compares the rose unfavorably to the jewels she has received from another suitor, while the Student reacts angrily when the girl goes back on her promise to dance with him. This suggests that neither character ever truly saw the rose as a symbol of love, but rather as a kind of currency to buy someone's affection.

Silk

The blue silk the girl is winding is a symbol of her shallowness and materialism. Silk is a luxury fabric, so its appearance foreshadows the girl's rejection of the rose in favor of more monetarily valuable jewels. The color of the fabric is significant as well, because European artists have traditionally depicted the Virgin Mary draped in blue silk. In this case, however, the use of the color is ironic; Mary's blue robes

typically signify her heavenly nature, but the girl in "The Nightingale and the Rose" is entirely worldly.

The Dusty Book

At the end of "The Nightingale and the Rose," the Student rejects loves and returns to studying metaphysics. The book he opens is dusty, which suggests that no one has read it in a long time. This undercuts the Student's claim that in studying philosophy, he will be engaging directly with practical, real-world matters (in fact, it is the Nightingale who, in praising the joys of life, reveals herself to be deeply immersed in the world around her). The book thus symbolizes the hollowness of the intellectualism the Student espouses.

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