

## A Tale of Passion and Prophets: Wilde's Aestheticism in *Salome*



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## Introduction

Known for his provocative and witty style, both in literature and in life, Oscar Wilde remains one of the most celebrated Irish writers. Among his most well-known works are his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and his play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In addition, Wilde is famous for being a staunch supporter of the aesthetic movement. The aesthetic motto of “art for art’s sake” summarises the belief that art does not have to serve a specific purpose: art stands out purely for its beauty. The aesthetic movement defied the Victorian obsession with duty, and advocated the creation of art to please the senses rather than serve a function. As one of the most vocal aesthetes of his time, Wilde wrote a large number of critical essays devoted to his views on art, art criticism, and their role in society. In addition, Wilde put his ideals into practice by infusing his aesthetic theory into his own works. This thesis’ purpose is to analyse one of Wilde’s works within the framework of the aesthetic ideas he proposed himself, to answer the question whether or not this work adheres to his own requirements for aesthetic art.

To gain a comprehensive grasp of Wilde’s theories, an analysis of his critical essays is vital. For the purpose of this thesis the discussion will be centred around two of his most well-known and most thorough essays: *The Critic as Artist*, which deals with art criticism and its role in society, and *The Decay of Lying*, which deals with aestheticism and art. These two essays, published in the collection *Intentions* in 1891, give an accurate insight into Wilde’s views on aestheticism in art and society. Wilde’s aesthetic ideals described in his critical essays will then be used as an analytical framework for one of Wilde’s plays: *Salome*.

*Salome*, originally written in French and later translated into English, was chosen as the text to be discussed because of its thoroughly expressive nature. Aestheticism encourages works of art to stimulate the recipient’s senses as much as possible, and *Salome* is

characterised by its many descriptions, images, and symbols of smells and colours. In addition, Wilde's aestheticism frequently clashed with Victorian ideals, and this aspect of Wilde's philosophy is felt perhaps most strongly in *Salome's* reception: it was banned from the stage by the Lord Chamberlain, forcing Wilde to move the production to France. *Salome* is also the play that engages most strongly with the Victorians' religious morality: the play's unconventional depiction of biblical characters is central to its controversial nature. The combination of its expressive style and its clash with Victorian ethics makes it a prime piece to be analysed in light of Wilde's theories.

Due to Wilde's status as one of the most beloved Irish writers, much has been written about him and his work. However, while both the subject of Wilde's theories and *Salome* frequently show up in academic writing on Wilde, they are rarely directly linked. Richard Ellmann's *The Artist as Critic* is a collection of Wilde's critical essays, and while Wilde's sources and political position are discussed his criticism is not connected with his own work. Karl Beckson's *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* is a collection of reviews of Wilde's works, and therefore focuses on the reception of the text, not its connection to Wilde's critical writing. Frederick S. Roden's *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies* does discuss Wilde's aesthetic ideals and his style of writing, but these two aspects are discussed separately, not in clear connection with each other. Kerry Powell's *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* discusses *Salome* in light of the decision to ban it, but while Wilde's controversial treatment of the biblical subject matter is discussed, his critical ideas on morality are not. Katharine Worth's *Oscar Wilde* focuses on the performance of Wilde's plays in the theatre, but does not discuss his critical work. Finally, while Rodney Shewan's *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* does briefly discuss *Salome* in light of Wilde's philosophy, the comparison is based on Wilde's other literary works, not his critical writing. In other words,

what is missing is a comprehensive analysis of *Salome*'s adherence to Wilde's own aesthetic ideals as described in his critical writing, a void that this thesis will attempt to fill.

The thesis will be divided into two parts: an analysis of Wilde's *The Critic as Artist* and *The Decay of Lying*, and an analysis of *Salome* in light of the first chapter's findings. The first chapter will discuss Wilde's aesthetic ideas on the subject of art itself, as well as his views on Victorianisms and Victorian society, both of which are vital parts of Wilde's critical theory. The purpose of this first chapter is to answer the question what the core ideas of Wilde's aestheticism are. The second chapter will then discuss how *Salome* positioned itself in regard to Victorian ethics, and how it makes use of aesthetic literary devices that Wilde identified in his essays. The question to be answered in this chapter is to what degree Wilde's critical ideas can be seen back in *Salome*. The conclusion will combine the findings from both chapters to answer the following question: to what degree does *Salome* exhibit the different aesthetic ideals as outlined by Wilde in his critical writing?

## Chapter 1

Oscar Wilde wrote a large number of articles and essays detailing his ideas about politics, art, religion and ethics. This chapter will focus on two essays from the collection *Intentions*, which was published in 1891: *The Critic as Artist*, originally published the year before, and *The Decay of Lying*, originally published in 1889. These two essays, both of which take the form of platonic dialogues, focus on different aspects of Wilde's theory: *The Decay of Lying* discusses Wilde's views on art and aestheticism, while *The Critic as Artist* discusses art criticism in the context of the political and moral climate of the late nineteenth century. In these essays Wilde's personas, Vivian and Gilbert respectively, explain their ideas to their friends, Cyril and Ernest. Cyril and Ernest function as a substitute for the critical reader, by continuously inquiring as to what their friend's statements exactly mean as well as providing some predictable responses for Wilde to react to. Chapter 1.1 will discuss Wilde's views on Victorian societal norms, while chapter 1.2 will focus on his discussion of aesthetic artistry.

While a detailed analysis of the different sources of Wilde's vision on art is beyond the scope of this thesis, some of his most important inspirations do deserve mention. Like many aesthetes, Wilde draws on the principles of Théophile Gautier's *l'art pour l'art*. Walter Pater was a major influence on Wilde, Pater being referred to as "the most perfect master of English prose now creating amongst us" in *The Critic as Artist* (Ellmann 351). The views of Matthew Arnold can be found in Wilde's Work, so much so that Pater, in his discussion of *Intentions*, lauded Wilde for continuing "more perhaps than any other writer, the brilliant critical work of Matthew Arnold" (qtd. in Ellmann xi). Works by Aristotle, Plato and Socrates are mentioned, being representations of the nation of art-critics that Wilde longs for in *The*

*Critic as Artist*. Finally, many of Wilde's critical statements are adaptations of John Ruskin's ideas, even though some of Ruskin's viewpoints clashed with aesthetic philosophy, such as his "demands that the arts have political and social relevance" (Landow, "Ruskin" par 1).

### Chapter 1.1

One of Wilde's purposes was to distance himself from common Victorian viewpoints. As Richard Ellmann states in the introduction to *The Artist as Critic*, his collection of Wilde's critical writing, Wilde's writing shows that he "... thought of himself as a voice of the age to be, rather than of the one that was fading" (xi). This statement is strengthened by Wilde's insistence that one's socio-political background does not have to influence one's writing, but rather that one's writing influences one's way of life. This idea is summarised in *The Critic as Artist*, where Wilde remarks that "it is not the moment that makes the man, but the man who creates the age" (Ellmann 356). Wilde thus felt no reason to stick to the literary conventions of his time, and instead saw himself as a harbinger of a new time, and a new vision on art. Wilde did realise that this detachment from everyday Victorian reality made him a dreamer. A dreamer ran into problems in Victorian society, as his love for emotion for the sake of emotion and his disregard for duty meant that he would often face the question "What are you doing?", even though Wilde felt that "'What are you thinking?' is the only question that any single civilized being should ever be allowed to whisper to another" (Ellmann 381). At the very end of *The Critic as Artist*, Wilde returns to the notion of being a dreamer, as he states that "a dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world" (Ellmann 407). Once again Wilde firmly positions himself as a visionary of the new dawn, with the accompanying punishment in the form of becoming a social outcast in the eyes of Victorian morals. It is also interesting to note moonlight being identified as the guiding light for a dreamer, an image that becomes a running theme in *Salome*.

Three aspects of Victorian society that came under attack from Wilde were its moral obsession with duty and purpose, its rigid class-based social system, and its religious focus on avoiding sin. Victorian purpose, the idea of duty towards your neighbour as found in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, has nothing to do with art in Wilde's mind, as he comments on the Victorian social development by saying that "[w]e try to improve the conditions of the race by means of good air, free sunlight, wholesome water, and hideous bare buildings for the better housing of the lower orders. But these things merely produce health, they do not produce beauty" (Ellmann 308). In literature, too, Wilde objects to the Victorian obsession with purpose. In fact, in *The Critic as Artist* Gilbert remarks that "[n]o poet sings because he must sing. At least, no great poet does. A great poet sings because he chooses to sing" (Ellmann 355). Wilde stresses that art is useless, though useless here does not mean that it has no value, but that its value is not in its use. As stated by Peter Lamarque in his essay "The Uselessness of Art": "Wilde's point is that there are higher values than utilitarian values, and artistic value is among those higher values" (206). On the subject of class distinction, Wilde's position is very clear: in *The Decay of Lying* Vivian explains that "[i]t is a humiliating confession, but we are all of us made out of the same stuff" (Ellmann 297), and he trivialises the class system by stating that "if a writer insists upon analysing the upper classes, he might just as well write of match-girls and costermongers at once" (Ellmann 297). However, it was not the idea of a distinction between people that Wilde was opposed to; it was the fact that this decision was usually based on family name and financial standing. He felt that people should instead be distinguished by their understanding of aestheticism, as Allison Pease notes when she explains that "espousing aesthetic ideas and living aesthetically were still signs of upward mobility and a claim to an elite realm not based on birth or inheritance" (Roden 97). Finally, Wilde is very clear about his views on the terms sin and

virtue, two key elements of Victorian society. In *The Critic as Artist*, Wilde explains that sin is nothing to denounce or shy away from:

What is termed Sin is an essential element of progress. Without it the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colourless. By its curiosity, Sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from monotony of type. In its rejection of the current notions about morality, it is one with the higher ethics. (Ellmann 360)

Wilde specifically draws attention to these current notions about morality, highlighting his belief that what Victorian society depicts as virtuous is in fact of lower ethical standing. He proceeds to direct his arrows at a few of the most well-respected Victorian virtues - Chastity, Charity, Self-denial and Self-sacrifice – to explain how these aspects of human behaviour are in no way pure or virtuous, and if anything proof of our sinful development. Wilde later explains that “all the arts are immoral” because they do not concern themselves with the right or wrong of actions: “the aim of art is simply to create a mood” (Ellmann 385).

Another aspect of Victorian life that Wilde criticises is the public school system. Victorian public schools were characterised by their warped priorities: instead of helping the lower class children escape poverty, boarding schools “had become means of upward mobility, not for the poor, but for the upper-middle classes, who wished to move their children into the aristocracy” (Landow, “Public Schools” par. 2). These schools did little to stimulate literary and cultural education, and many of the greatest writers of the Victorian era, including Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling and indeed Oscar Wilde himself, never attended public schools. Wilde trivializes the Victorian obsession with this artistically lacking system in *The Critic as Artist*, where Gilbert states that “[e]ducation is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught” (Ellmann 349).

## Chapter 1.2

Wilde's aestheticism resisted the Victorian love for literary realism, made popular principally by the works of Balzac. In *The Decay of Lying* he denounces this trend as "this false ideal of our time" (Ellmann 294), and states that lying is a form of art as much as poetry is. Wilde explains that art "has never once told us the truth" (Ellmann 316), and that convincing the reader has nothing to do with truthful depiction and everything to do with style. Wilde even states that realism could hardly be called literature, because "[i]n literature we require distinction, charm, beauty, and imaginative power. We don't want to be harrowed and disgusted with an account of the doings of the lower orders" (Ellmann 296). In fact, Wilde goes so far as to describe realism as detrimental to one's artistic merit: "No great artist ever sees things as they really are. If he did, he would cease to be an artist" (Ellmann 315). It is interesting to note, however, that Wilde did appreciate reading Balzac's work, though Balzac is often cited as the founder of the French realist movement. In fact, Wilde does not actually consider Balzac a realist, as he states that Balzac "...is no more a realist than Holbein was. He created life, he did not copy it" (Ellmann 299). Just in case any Victorian writer, realist or otherwise, reading *The Decay of Lying* missed Wilde's opinion on the realistic movement, he makes his stance even clearer in Vivian's final summary, where he states that "[a]s a method Realism is a complete failure, and the two things that every artist should avoid are modernity of form and modernity of subject-matter. To us, who live in the nineteenth century, any century is a suitable subject for art except our own" (Ellmann 319). This passage, however, is a prime example of Wilde's love for overstating his case in order to prove himself a rebel. After all, many of Wilde's works were society plays set in the nineteenth century, which seems to contradict his statements here. However, while works like *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband* might belong to Realism in their depiction of everyday activities, Wilde's habitual subversion of Victorian ethics make his works stand apart from other realist

writings. In addition, the subject of the second part of this thesis, *Salome*, follows Wilde's statements more closely.

One of the most well-known statements about Wilde's view on literature, presented as one of the main conclusions of *The Decay of Lying*, is his belief that "Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life" (Ellmann 307). Wilde states that this relationship moves through three distinct phases. A work of art begins as beautiful and pleasant, with no purpose other than to stimulate the imagination. Life then tries to enter this artistic realm, and is refashioned by art into a more artistic form, though the barrier of beauty remains between them. However, Life eventually overpowers Art and "drives Art out into the wilderness" (Ellmann 301). Wilde presents Art as a multitude of ways of expression, and in its thoughtless desire to imitate Art Life "seizes on them and uses them, even if they be to her own hurt" (Ellmann 311). Wilde exemplifies this relation by discussing Shakespeare: the lack of blank verse in favour of prose and characterisation in Shakespeare's later plays is seen by Wilde as "Life calling for an echo of her own voice, and rejecting the intervention of beautiful style, through which alone should Life be suffered to find expression" (Ellmann 302).

Wilde sees rhythm as one of the most important aspects of aesthetically pleasing literature. In *The Critic as Artist* he explains that the Greeks, who after all had "much keener aesthetic instinct" (Ellmann 350), judged prose almost as if it was a piece of music. Wilde laments the effect printing has had on making literature more commonly available, as he finds that "there has been a tendency in literature to appeal more and more to the eye, and less and less to the ear which is really the sense which, from the standpoint of pure art, it should seek to please, and by whose canons of pleasure it should abide always" (Ellmann 350-351). Wilde also mentions the importance of repetition: he explains that one of life's greatest deficiencies is "its sordid security, the fact that one can never repeat exactly the same emotion" (Ellmann 375). In art, a certain scene or description can fill the reader with anger or love for someone

they do not personally know, and this emotion will be the same every time the image reappears.

Wilde's aestheticism is brought to the forefront when he describes beauty as the most important message or meaning of any work of art. In fact, the reflection on and understanding of beauty lies at the core of true criticism, and is what can make the critic just as artistic as the original artist. Wilde describes beauty as "[having] as many meanings as man has moods. Beauty is the symbol of symbols. Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing. When it shows us itself, it shows us the whole fiery-coloured world" (Ellmann 368).

Wilde was not just an aesthetic writer but also made use of symbolism. Symbolism and imagery were ways for Wilde to create an atmosphere, literary devices to paint the picture. Rodney Shewan, in his *Art and Egotism*, describes Wilde's imagery as "by nature atmospheric or decorative rather than dialectical" and states that his "[i]magery ... is generally reserved for fixing a mood, and consequently offers a very shaky basis for diagnostic techniques" (2). Another technique employed by Wilde to create an atmosphere is synesthesia, or expressing one sensory perception in another. In *The Critic as Artist* Wilde explains that this technique is so effective because of the power of words:

Words have not merely music as sweet as that of viol and lute, colour as rich and vivid as any that makes lovely for us the canvas of the Venetian or the Spaniard, and plastic form no less sure and certain than that which reveals itself in marble or bronze, but thought and passion and spirituality are theirs also, and theirs indeed alone. (Ellmann 354)

On the subject of criticism, Wilde is of the opinion that the subject of a work of art is of no importance. A true artist, or a truly artistic critic, can create beautiful works based on the most trivial of subjects. In *The Critic as Artist* he states that "[t]o an artist so creative as the critic, what does subject-matter signify? No more and no less than it does to the novelist

and the painter. Like them, he can find his motives everywhere” (Ellmann 364-65). Wilde also states that a critic should not be concerned with the meaning of the author, and should focus on the beauty of a work of art. A true critic should consider “art not as expressive but as impressive purely” (Ellmann 366). Should the subject of meaning come up, a critic must realise that the meaning of the author is irrelevant. After all, one of the greatest aspects of art is that it means something different to everyone, or as Wilde puts it, “...the meaning of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it” (Ellmann 367). The resulting variation of critical opinions is a good thing, a sign of true art, as Wilde explains in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* when he states that “[w]hen critics disagree, the artist is in accord with himself” (qtd. in Shewan 3). In addition, Wilde feels that a critic can never be unbiased, because to understand art you must absorb it fully and stop trying to form an emotionally detached opinion. In fact, Wilde describes an unbiased opinion as “absolutely valueless”, and denounces the self-proclaimed fair critic because a “man who sees both sides of a question, is a man who sees absolutely nothing at all” (Ellmann 392).

Wilde’s view on criticism clashed immensely with the critical norm of the Victorian era: while Wilde saw beauty and style as the most important elements of art, Victorian critics employed reviews based on sincerity, which “for the Victorians, implied moral earnestness and fidelity to ‘inner’ feeling” (Beckson 1). Since Wilde saw lying as an important skill for any artist, and defied the popular Victorian moral truisms, it comes as no surprise that his works were frequently panned by non-aesthetic critics. His paradoxical style and confusing metaphors were considered by many to distract from the message, one reviewer of *Intentions* stating that “[m]aking every allowance for Mr. Wilde’s tiresome way of expressing himself, one cannot extract anything of much value from these two papers” (Beckson 93). Note the use of the word value here; Wilde would argue that the value does not purely lie in its message,

but also in the complicated form of expression itself. Not all reviewers missed this point, though positive reviews came mostly from fellow aesthetes like symbolist Arthur Symons, who pointed out in his review that “[m]r. Wilde is much too brilliant to be ever believed; he is much too witty to be ever taken seriously” (Beckson 94).

## Chapter 2

This second chapter will discuss *Salome*, one of Wilde's most well-known works. Specifically, the focus will be on the aspects of Wilde's critical writing that can be found in the play. Wilde's theories as discussed in the first chapter, specifically from *The Critic as Artist* and *The Decay of Lying*, mostly deal with two subjects: Wilde's denouncement of certain aspects of the Victorian ethical code, such as its religious obsessions and its clearly defined social duties, and Wilde's aesthetic ideals regarding matters such as beauty, rhythm and symbols. Chapter 2.1 will first discuss how the play clashes with Victorian society, including its treatment of biblical characters. The thesis then moves to chapter 2.2, which will discuss some of the aesthetic ideals of Wilde that can be found in the play, such as its symbolism and rhythm. In chapter 2.3, the play's ban and critical reception will be discussed.

### Chapter 2.1

Wilde's tendency to distance himself from the Victorian ethical code is clear within *Salome*, as blatant eroticism and forms of transgressive love clashing with Victorian society are running themes throughout. The Page of Herodias loves the Young Syrian, a homoerotic desire in a time when such a thing was not spoken of. The Young Syrian loves Salome, but ends up taking his own life when she continues to pursue another man. Salome lusts after Iokanaan, and not only does she make her sexual desires perfectly clear, she also subverts Victorian gender roles by taking the initiative and even punishing Iokanaan for denying her. All three of them are either directly or silently rebuffed by the one they desire most. In addition, the language used by these characters to describe their loved ones becomes more sensual as the play progresses. The Page of Herodias never directly expresses himself, only reprimanding the Young Syrian for looking at Salome. The Young Syrian does compliment Salome, but never uses overtly sensual language, preferring intricate descriptions such as "a narcissus trembling in the wind" (Wilde 8) and "dove of all doves" (18). When Salome starts

expressing her desire for Iokanaan, however, her language is much more direct and much more sensual. Her first description of his body is “like a thin ivory statue” (14), bringing to mind images of Michelangelo’s David. Salome’s three attempts at seducing Iokanaan use language and similes just as flowery as those employed by the Young Syrian, but each of her monologues end with a request to “touch thy body”, “touch thy hair”, and “kiss thy mouth” (16-17). In addition, her language draws heavily from the Song of Songs, further strengthening the controversial nature of the play by having Salome express her erotic desire in such biblical language. Her language becomes even more explicit when she obtains the head of Iokanaan, as she specifically mentions that she is “hungry for thy body”, and even finishes by stating that “I was a virgin, and thou didst take my virginity from me. I was chaste, and thou didst fill my veins with fire” (44). In other words, she feels that her experience with Iokanaan was so passionate that it took her virginity. As stated by Rodney Shewan in *Art and Egotism*, the language of intimacy shines through because as “[c]limax to a century of largely prudish artistic solipsism, *Salomé* is, among other things, an orgasmic metaphor through which the unspeakable erupts in brief and devastating triumph” (135). This element of sensuality in language also ties in with Wilde’s notion of the power of words. As mentioned in the first part of this thesis, Wilde felt that thought and passion were solely aspects of words. This idea returns in *Salome*: even though she never got a true intimate moment with Iokanaan, Salome feels that the power of his words and her descriptions of his appearance were enough to make her lose her virginity.

In her discussion of Wilde’s plays, Katharine Worth notes that “[a]ll the plays except *The Importance of Being Earnest* ... have a strong emotional thrust towards a sacrificial climax in which love triumphs over baser passions like the desire for revenge ...” (7). This statement ties in with the notion of beauty as the most important meaning of art. Characters in *Salome* fall in love with the thing they find most strikingly beautiful, and love indeed shows

itself to be the most powerful force. The Young Syrian loves Salome, frequently mentioning how beautiful she is, before eventually sacrificing himself when he realises she is obsessed with another man. Salome in turn falls in love with Iokanaan, repeatedly describing his beautiful features, and ends up sacrificing everything for his love, stating that “love hath a bitter taste” before being killed (Wilde 45). A subversion, however, seems to take place at the very end of the play: Herod, who has been in love with Salome throughout the play, is so shocked by her cruelty that he orders her death. However, even this final act can be seen as one fuelled by love: Herod attempts to turn off all the light so he will not have to look at Salome anymore, but a ray of moonlight illuminates her. Herod’s final command can thus be seen as an admission that he cannot escape his feelings for Salome, and her death becomes not just an expression of Herod’s fear, but also another sacrifice in the name of love.

One of Wilde’s major departures from more traditional interpretations of the story is his treatment of Salome: his Salome is much more independent and seductive than her biblical incarnation, and she determinedly pursues her erotic desires. While Wilde’s Salome is indeed more forceful in her actions, it is interesting to note that Wilde still treats her as a victim, as someone controlled by emotion. Her passionate quest for Iokanaan’s love is fuelled not by an ulterior motive, as Herodias seems to believe, but by passionate desire. Katharine Worth notes that she becomes a “tragic daughter of passion” (56), who loses control as she is “overwhelmed by the first passion she experiences: it is instantaneous and irrevocable” (55). It is love and beauty that cause the dramatic outcome, not the characters themselves.

Another aspect of the story where Wilde deviates from more traditional interpretations is in the character of Iokanaan. Instead of a humble and wise man who merely preaches the truth, Wilde’s Iokanaan is an arrogant man who is deliberately offensive to the other characters. Iokanaan greets an intrigued Salome by stating that “I will not have her look at me”, and warns her not to come “near the chosen of the Lord” (Wilde 15). After her

passionate praise of his hair, he rebukes her by warning her: “Touch me not. Profane not the temple of the Lord God” (17). Rodney Shewan notes that “[h]is self-esteem is unattractive, almost blasphemous”, and that “[w]ith his bombast, his priggishness, and his prurient anatomisation of Herodias, he can hardly be taken seriously as the voice of the new spiritual kingdom” (136). This is a telling example of Wilde’s vision of religious ethics so central to Victorian society: by changing the purest character of the more traditional interpretations into such an unlikeable character, he indirectly challenges biblical notions of good and bad behaviour.

## Chapter 2.2

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Wilde drew a parallel between having emotion for the sake of emotion, and being a dreamer guided by moonlight. These qualities, seen by Wilde as a defiance of the Victorian obsession with duty, become a recurring piece of imagery in *Salome*. Characters in the play see different things in the moon, and how they see the moon reflects their dreams or provides foreshadowing for the rest of the play. The Young Syrian, pining for Salome, describes the moon as a “princess who has little white doves for feet” (Wilde 3), making it clear to the audience that he cannot get his beloved out of his head. The Page of Herodias, jealous and worried, describes the moon as “like a dead woman. One might fancy she was looking for dead things” (3), expressing his fear of losing his loved one, as well as foreshadowing developments at the ending of the play. When Salome sees the moon, she describes her as a virgin who “has never defiled herself” (9), which shows her youthful innocence at that point. Herod describes the moon as “quite naked” and “like a mad woman, a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers” (20), which contrasts his sexual nature with Salome’s innocence at the start of the play. Later on, he foreshadows future events when he now sees that the moon “has become red as blood” (36). Not all major characters see anything in the moon, however: Iokanaan is so focussed on his prophesising that he does not

even notice the moon, and Herodias merely states that “the moon is like the moon, that is all” (20). In fact, Herodias shows herself to be completely incapable of grasping anything supernatural: she scoffs at her husband’s repeated warnings of the sound of beating wings, and denies the existence of prophets and miracles. She even tells Herod that he has “a dreamer’s look. You must not dream. It is only sick people who dream” (27). Iokanaan and especially Herodias can be seen as almost Victorian: they are so occupied with their religious and political duties that they have no time to dream. This is mirrored in Herodias’ belief that Salome was helping her silence Iokanaan, incapable of seeing that Salome merely pursued him guided by, as Wilde put it, emotion for the sake of emotion.

Rhythm and repetition, identified by Wilde in *The Critic as Artist* as important aspects of aesthetic art, are found throughout the play. Some recurring sentences include the Page’s many variations of “you must not look at her”, descriptions of Salome and the moon all beginning with “she is like ..”, Salome seducing the Young Syrian with many repetitions of “thou wilt do this thing for me”, Salome’s constant repetition of “Suffer me to kiss thy mouth”, and the many variations of “dance for me” and “I will not dance”. Wilde uses rhythm as a way to convey emotion, or the lack thereof. Exchanges that are descriptive rather than emotive are frequently delivered in short and repetitive sentences, such as the following exchange:

FIRST SOLDIER. The Tetrarch has a sombre aspect.

SECOND SOLDIER. Yes; he has a sombre aspect.

FIRST SOLDIER. He is looking at something.

SECOND SOLDIER. He is looking at some one.

FIRST SOLDIER. At whom is he looking?

SECOND SOLDIER. I cannot tell. (Wilde 4)

As characters get more emotional, however, their language becomes more floral and their monologues grow longer. A good example of this style is Salome's triple attempt at courting Iokanaan. Not only do her speeches about his body, hair, and mouth increase in length, the sentences are also rhythmically swifter and more erratic, to show Salome's passionate desperation: "It is réd | dér thán | thê féet | óf thê dóves | whò in | hábit | thê tém | plès ànd | àre féd | bý thê priésts |" (17). A similar technique is used in Herod's final speeches, his offerings to Salome coming in an increasingly larger and more emotional delivery. When he finally capitulates, the repetitions in his monologue are also used to highlight his disturbed spirit:

Who has taken my ring? There was a ring on my right hand. Who has drunk my wine?

There was wine in my cup. It was full of wine. (42)

Salome's final monologue constantly repeats the phrase "I have kissed thy mouth" (45), this being not just a repetition within the monologue but also an echo of her earlier repetitions. The final line, Herod's "Kill that woman!" (45), is a direct emotion not expressed in any character's speeches before, and can be seen as a way to silence all the continuous repetitions, making it a fitting final line for the play.

Wilde's love for symbolism as a vehicle to create moods is shown throughout *Salome*. In addition to the central symbol of the moon as a representation of each character's desires, many more symbols show up to create an atmosphere and foreshadow events. Salome describes Iokanaan's eyes as "black holes" and "black caverns" (Wilde 14), creating a feeling of emotional emptiness, and possibly blindness. She later describes his tongue as akin to a snake spitting venom, symbolising his harsh words. Both Iokanaan and Herod keep hearing the wings of angels of death, creating a sense of impending doom. The colours white, red and black are important symbols throughout the play: Salome praises Iokanaan based on these three colours, the moon goes from white to red to dark, and Salome herself goes through these phases, from innocence to passion to death. The red blood, red moon and cold wind are

identified by Herod as ill omens, symbols of disaster. Herod even reaches the point where he is physically hurt by his rose wreath due to its colour being similar to blood, at which point he tries to reassure himself by stating that “[i]t is not wise to find symbols in everything that one sees. It makes life too full of terrors” (35). This reassurance does not help him, however, as by the end of the play he is completely overwhelmed by all the symbols of death he perceives. Katharine Worth also highlights Wilde’s frequent usage of a veil, and removal thereof, as a symbol of emotional expression, stating that with her dance of the seven veils “Salomé is then perhaps offering not just a view of the naked body but of the soul or innermost being” (66-67). This image reappears in Herod’s final attempt at dissuading Salome from killing Iokanaan, when he offers her the veil of the sanctuary as a desperate final attempt at covering her up, and restoring the *status quo ante*.

Synesthesia, an important aspect of symbolist writing, is frequently used in *Salome*. While the tendency to describe colours in detail is found throughout the play, such as Herodias’ description as “she who wears a black mitre sewed with pearls, and whose hair is powdered with blue dust” (Wilde 5), and the wines being identified as “purple like the cloak of Caesar”, “yellow as gold” and “red as blood” (5), colours and objects are also described in terms of sound and sensation. Examples include Salome describing Iokanaan’s hair as blacker than “[t]he silence that dwells in the forest” and his mouth as redder than “[t]he red blasts of trumpets that herald the approach of kings, and make afraid the enemy” (17), Herod’s opals being described as “burn[ing] always, with a flame that is cold as ice, opals that make sad men’s minds, and are afraid of the shadows” (41), and Salome describing Iokanaan’s voice as a “censer that scattered strange perfumes” (44).

A related phenomenon to synesthesia is the notion of combining as many sensory expressions as possible into one scene. The most striking example of this technique is the famous dance of the seven veils. Not only is this a combination of theatre and dance, Salome

also makes special mention of her perfumes, adding the element of smell. In addition, Wilde left no stage directions as to how the dance should be performed, giving the director and actress great freedom in adding elements of colour and sound as well. This type of theatre, referred to within the symbolist movement as total theatre, fits perfectly within Wilde's vision of the theatre as "the meeting place of all the arts" (Worth 53).

### Chapter 2.3

The clash between Wilde's style of writing and Victorian society is felt most strongly in the inevitable decision to ban it from the stage. Wilde originally planned to perform *Salome* on the London stage, but the Lord Chamberlain prevented its performance. The official reason for banning it was the biblical nature of the play, though this alone was unlikely to have been enough to warrant a ban, since "in *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith*, Pinero got away with having a Bible thrown into the fire" (Powell 34). It is more likely that the sexual nature of the play, and its subversion of moral and gender roles as described at the start of this chapter, is what caused the true outrage. Not only does Salome, described in the bible as a subdued follower of her mother, actively pursue a sexual relationship with Iokanaan, Kerry Powell also notes that she "pursues 'sex for sex's sake, without purpose or production'" (34), production here referring to reproduction as the religious purpose of consummation. Once again, Wilde's rejection of Victorian purpose lies at the basis of the play, and is likely the reason that he had to move his play to France to get it staged.

Reviewers of *Salome* mostly sided with the Lord Chamberlain's decision. A reviewer of the text in *The Times* derided the play as "an arrangement in blood and ferocity, morbid, *bizarre*, repulsive, and very offensive in its adaptation of scriptural phraseology to situations the reverse of sacred" (Beckson 133). A critic of the *Pall Mall Gazette* criticised the play for being unoriginal and copied from other writers. The critic also added that the value of the play is not at all increased by the original text's French language, though it might count as "a

success in linguistics” and a “proof of elegance and taste”, and that only less intelligent readers could be swayed by “its tricks of colour and odour and simile” (137). Wilde, however, would argue that elegance, taste and linguistic success are exactly what make this play a work of art, and that those readers swayed by the colours and similes are the only ones who have successfully absorbed the play. Just as with *Intentions*, the only critics who truly valued *Salome* were aesthetic critics. One year before he would write an English translation of the French text, Lord Alfred Douglas wrote a review in *Spirit Lamp* in which he argued that one should listen to the musical quality of the play in order to fully absorb it. He also parodies the thoroughly English, and thus Victorian, obsession with morbidity and health found in other reviews, concluding that the only people that will truly appreciate *Salome*’s artistic merit are “the less violently and aggressively healthy, those who are healthy to live and do not live to be healthy” (140).

## Conclusion

In the first chapter, it was argued that Wilde's aestheticism primarily deals with two subjects: his opinions on Victorian society and morality, and his ideas about what constitutes art. Wilde saw himself as a representative of a new age, an age in which dreaming would be central to experience emotion for the sake of emotion. Three aspects of Victorian society that Wilde criticised were discussed in the first part of the chapter. Firstly, the Victorian obsession with duty and purpose, which Wilde felt had nothing to do with his most beloved parameter of taste: beauty. Secondly, the Victorian focus on socioeconomic class distinction, Wilde arguing that aesthetic understanding would be a more valuable tool for judging someone. Thirdly, Wilde denounced the Victorian ideas about morality and sin, as he deemed sin a sign of progress, and the arts as inherently immoral.

On the subject of art itself, Wilde took issue with the popularity of realism in literature during his time, stating that an artist has no business describing events exactly as they are, and that the nineteenth century was not an appropriate subject for nineteenth century artists. He also became famous for his statement that "Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life" (Ellmann 307). This theory, describing the way Wilde considered the influence between life and art, became an important notion of his aestheticism. Chapter 1.2 also discussed some more practical aspects of aesthetic art that Wilde identified. Wilde considered rhythm and repetition to be central aspects of aesthetic art: repetition allowed one to experience the exact same emotion multiple times, and rhythm allowed the audience to listen to a work of art to absorb it, which Wilde felt was the way the Greeks used to judge art in their nation of art-critics. Wilde also considered symbolism and synesthesia to be phenomenal ways to create an atmosphere, as he felt that words are capable of stimulating every sense. In addition, he identified beauty as the most important symbol, as beauty has just as many faces as we have feelings. Wilde also explained that the subject matter and meaning of a work of art

is of no concern, as it should mean whatever the audience feels when engaging with it.

Finally, Wilde felt that a polarising critical reception is proof that the artist has done well, as true art evokes no fair or unbiased response.

In the second chapter, Wilde's societal and literary ideals were used as a framework in light of which to analyse his play *Salome*. As in the first chapter, the two major themes were *Salome*'s treatment of Victorian moral ideals, and its handling of Wilde's aesthetic literary devices. On the first subject, it was noted in chapter 2.1 how many of the romances throughout the play are transgressive forms of love from the perspective of Victorian morals, such as a homoerotic yearning and a woman taking full control of her erotic desires. Wilde does not shy away from highly sexual language delivered in a biblical register, further showing his deliberate engagement with the Victorian ethical code. In addition, Wilde makes some controversial adjustments to the characters from the biblical story: his Salome is a much more independent and forceful woman, and his Iokanaan becomes an arrogant and dismissive bigot. Furthermore, Wilde's notion of beauty as the ultimate message of art is a major theme in the play, as most of the characters are obsessed with whatever they deem most beautiful, even if such desires are morally wrong from a Victorian perspective.

Wilde's literary requirements for aesthetic art were also shown to appear throughout the play. As mentioned previously, beauty indeed becomes the symbol of symbols, as the moon shows the characters' desires, whether good or bad, reminiscent of his statement that beauty "reveals everything, because it expresses nothing" (Ellmann 368). Symbolism in general is found throughout the play: Iokanaan's features, the beating of wings, and the colours white, red, and black are all symbols which constantly reappear, used for both creating moods and foreshadowing events. In the same vein, synesthesia is found throughout the characters' monologues, and total theatre is employed in the mysterious dance of the seven veils. In addition, rhythm and repetition are used to convey emotion and show the

mental state of the characters. Finally, chapter 2.3 argued that while the aesthetic literary qualities popularised the play with aesthetes, the clash with the Victorian ethical code and religious doctrine was of such severity that the ban by the Lord Chamberlain was inevitable.

In the introduction, the central question put forward to be answered was to what degree *Salome* adhered to Wilde's own guidelines on aesthetic artistry. After reviewing the aforementioned analyses in the two chapters, my evidence suggests that *Salome* follows Wilde's theory to a very high degree. Not only does the play defy the traditional contemporary setting common to even Wilde's own works, it also engages Victorian social and religious customs in every way Wilde argued it should, and makes use of the literary devices Wilde identified as most vital for aesthetic art. Even its critical reception followed the trend Wilde argued it should: it was highly polarising, and did not seem to lend itself to unbiased and emotionally balanced reviews. In summary, *Salome* followed Wilde's critical theory to such an extent that it could be considered a comprehensive expression of Wilde's aestheticism.

After having analysed one of Wilde's plays in light of his critical essays, a proposed follow-up thesis subject would be to perform a similar analysis of his other works, such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and comparing the conclusions with this thesis' findings. A question that could be raised is if any of Wilde's works are more truthful to his theories than others, if any play follows his aestheticism perfectly, or if any of them subvert many of his critical statements. An additional suggestion for further research would be to focus on other critical essays by Wilde, such as *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, and analyse to what extent these ideas can be seen back in Wilde's plays.

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