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THE SYMBOLIST AND DECADENT ELEMENTS
IN THE LYRICAL DRAMAS OF OSCAR WILDE

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Chapter I
Oscar Wilde and the Decadent Nineties

The terms decadence, aestheticism, and art for art's sake have been used interchangeably to describe the movement in literature that flowered during the 1890's in England. Despite the fact that the English aesthetes and decadents were a relatively small group, they were vocal and colorful. Many contributed to the numerous aesthetic and semi-aesthetic periodicals with such titles as The Chameleon, The Butterfly, The Rose Leaf, and The Hobby Horse. In this way the decadents presented the new trends in art and literature to the general public. In London during the 1890's the literary taverns were full of these decadent artists who met frequently to discuss the new trends in art and literature.

Karl Beckson gives the English aesthetes and decadents credit for "their determination to transform their lives into works of art and center the meaning of life in private vision in order to resist a civilization intent on debasing the imagination and thus making men less human." The time for an aesthetic movement was ripe, for during the latter part of the nineteenth century, there was a general tendency to aesthetically conceive of life as something to be lived with passion and imagination, with beauty and poetry, which is in fact the opposite of actual life.... During this time, according to Mario Praz, the ideal life was one which strives after the distinction, and with it the harmony, of all its forms and does not admit the pathological preference and supremacy of one single form over all the others, which are equally necessary each in its own particular capacity...."
This aesthetic conception of life provided fertile ground in which the theory of art for art's sake, or decadence, could grow. This theory criticized all literary inspiration dictated by ethical ideals as being the result of intrusions of the practical. It destroyed the barriers that had dammed up the morbid tendencies of Romantic sensibility and led to the progressive cooling of the passionate quality with which the first of the Romantics had invested morbid themes. Ultimately, the whole decadent movement crystallized into set fashion and lifeless decoration.

Helen Zagona makes some interesting observations about the decadents' philosophy. She points out that the decadents were rebelling against "the excessively utilitarian preoccupations of an era when the values of the bourgeoisie were seen to be overrunning the sacred domain of art." The decadents distrusted the capacity of the reigning social and political powers to regenerate humanity with social and political reform. Yet, despite the fact that the decadents were idealists at heart, they were not Romantic enough to believe in the people and the innate possibilities hidden in them. Therefore, the decadent artists such as Wilde often directed their energies towards the cultivation of beauty, and they tended to put as much distance as possible between their art and practical reality.

William York Tindall says that the ultimate origins of the doctrine of art for art's sake can be found in the German Romantic philosophers as well as in the works of Keats and Poe. Tindall states further that the writers who were isolated from society, such as Christina Rossetti, revived Keats and wrote without social or moral purpose. Desolated by the ugliness around him, William Morris, a craftsman, designer, and poet, attempted to restore beauty to useful things. Morris founded a firm which would bring beauty into Victorian homes. By establishing a factory which concentrated
on putting out the best quality of beauty in its merchandise, he gave impe-
tus to the art for art's sake movement. Likewise, Charles Baudelaire in
his poems and in his preface to the works of Poe, and Gustave Flaubert in
his novels, illustrated or recommended the theory of art for art's sake.\textsuperscript{10}

However, the major decadent figures who influenced Oscar Wilde the
most were Walter Pater in England and Maurice Maeterlinck in France. A
study of Oscar Wilde's \textit{Salome} is not complete without making some obser-
vations about both Pater and Maeterlinck's influence on Wilde. In fact,
it was Pater in his \textit{Studies in the History of the Renaissance} (1873) who
summarized the thinking of his German, French, and English predecessors
with a prose style that was in itself a good argument for the cause of
art for art's sake.\textsuperscript{11} Oscar Wilde was one of the young men at Oxford who
read Pater's books and followed him as a disciple. It was not surprising
that Pater, who is considered the leader of the aesthetic movement, had a
definite influence on Wilde when the latter was a student at Oxford.

Albert C. Baugh notes that Pater was a hypersensuous person, who had a
poignant awareness of the brevity of life which directed his thoughts to-
wards Cyrenaicism. Cyrenaicism is a philosophy which advocates filling
each passing moment with intense experience to achieve success in life.
However, as Baugh points out, "this passionate apprehension of beauty and
the sense of its fleetingness do not bring happiness."\textsuperscript{12} A troubling
unwholesomeness can be found in the works of both Wilde and Pater. Thus,
Pater, being an intellectual, provided the theory of decadence which Wilde
and others added to and adapted for their own purposes.

Pater was a skeptic who was disillusioned by all certainties except
his own senses and perceptions. According to Tindall, he was responsible
for the critical habit of the aesthetes being generally impressionistic.
Pater believed that the aesthetic critic should look for pleasurable sensations, each unique in the fairer forms of art.\textsuperscript{13} Pater said that the aim of the aesthetic critic was to know his "impression" as it really was. For Pater it mattered little what the book or picture was. The only question that Pater asked was, "What is it to me?"\textsuperscript{14}

In one of his dialogues, "The Critic as Artist," in \textit{Intentions}, Wilde repeats Pater's ideas and exaggerates them. Wilde says that the aesthetic critic does not analyze or relate the history of an object. Rather, on the basis of his impression, exploiting his own personality, he creates a new work of art, often better than the original object.\textsuperscript{15} According to Tindall, Wilde thought that only a poet could be a critic. Whether the artist or critic can be considered decadent depends on certain factors. Tindall defines the decadent critic or decadent poet, saying:

\begin{quote}
A literary tradition, having exhausted its normal possibilities, invites three courses. The poet may imitate the perfect impression of his predecessors, in which case he is dead. He may start a new tradition, but this is permitted to few and only with the help, apparently, of social change. Or, keeping within the limits of the old tradition, he may make it extraordinary. This poet is decadent.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Tindall further states that Wilde's originality rested with his style. Wilde's style included "paradox, reversal of popular saying and epigram" which gave new point to old doctrine.\textsuperscript{18}

Some of the more striking characteristics of the decadent movement have been mentioned by Baugh. They are: that life should be lived in the spirit of art, but that art pursued for its own sake does contribute to the ethical nature of man; that the artist must see an object as it is; that the aesthetic function is to discover and analyze each particular
manifestation of beauty; and, above all, that manner is more important than matter. In revolt against the contemporary standards of taste and morality, and more fundamentally at contemporary society, the works of the decadent writers like Wilde portray the bizarre and unwholesome aspects of man's existence.\(^{19}\)

Maurice Maeterlinck, who was a member of the French symbolist movement in literature, also liked to portray the strange and incomprehensible side of man. Since he wrote some years before Wilde, he had a great deal of influence upon Wilde. Montrose J. Moses notes that "Maeterlinck's chief contribution to modern drama has been his insistence upon depicting man's attitude in the presence of eternity and mystery...to attempt to unveil the eternal character hidden under the accidental characteristics of the lover, father, and the husband."\(^{20}\) As Moses points out, the real meaning of life lies behind the word. Therefore, it is easy to understand why Maeterlinck represented the spiritual restlessness of an age which is conscious of unseen forces, yet which is not certain of its expression or its direction.\(^{21}\)

According to Moses, Maeterlinck was schooled in "emotional romanticism." The fact that Maeterlinck would strictly adhere to one mood, and persist therein to such a great an extent, caused his critics to deplore his gloom and refer to him as decadent. In his misty marionette dramas, Maeterlinck proved that the unseen is potent and largely revealed by the value of speech and by the quiet inevibility of the scene.\(^{22}\)

As Moses further points out, man's outward life is but a symbol of his inner life.\(^{23}\) And just as man's outward scientific probing enriches humanity's knowledge of the unknown, so did Maeterlinck's experiences in life cause him to evolve his dramatic theory along experimental lines.
This stems from the fact that he was not a dogmatist and that he was not much troubled by the dramaturgic laws of Aristotle. Instead, his theory of drama changed with his own personal changes, for he considered the man and the artist one. Because Maeterlinck emphasized the mysterious and unfathomable side of man, it is evident that his influence on Wilde's lyrical dramas lies in "the simplicity of dialogue, the iterations and reverberations of the leading motives, the evocation of the atmosphere and the imminence of doom." These characteristics from Maeterlinck appear most strongly in Salome.

Oscar Wilde was certainly the most conspicuous member of the decadent movement because of "the story of his rise to the dizzy summit of success and of his catastrophic fall." For historians, Oscar Wilde is the symbol of the decadent movement. Wilde's position in the aesthetic or decadent movement can be seen if one takes a look at his theories on life and art. Arthur Ganz comments that "Wilde, along with many others, had rejected the mores of the ordinary middle-class society of his time, and in his case the isolation of this position was undoubtedly intensified by his sexual eccentricity." Ganz also points out that Wilde, like many other writers of the decadent period, was "torn between a distaste for the values of the society about him and a simultaneous desire to be accepted and praised by it." This conflict is obvious in Wilde's lyrical dramas, which tend to express opposing and contradictory points of view—the Philistine and "dandiacal" points of view. According to Ganz, "the Philistine may insist that his heart has remained pure, but he admits that he has sinned and asks society for pardon." The dandy, however, refuses to acknowledge his sin, but instead, he creates a set of standards by which he indicts society itself.
Like Wilde, the dandy substitutes aesthetic values for moral values.

Richard Ellmann states that "Wilde... premised the superiority of the imagination to the faculties of reason and observation." This assertion is related to Ganz' definition of the dandy because it is reasonable to assume that aesthetic values can be related to the imagination while moral values can be related to reason. Ellmann also states that Wilde considered life inferior to art and believed that life was an imperfect imitation of a supernal world of forms. Wilde conceived of art as something that inseminated life with its images. James Joyce accused Wilde of deceiving himself into thinking that he was the bearer of the good news of neo-paganism to an enslaved people. Wilde's restless thoughts about man being able to reach the divine only through a sense of separation and loss called sin is characteristic of the decadent philosophy. Frances Winwar quotes Wilde as saying: "One can fancy an intense personality being created out of sin."

Winwar also makes some interesting observations about Wilde's aesthetic theories. For example, she notes that Wilde did not think that moral judgments should be applied to art or history. In fact, he scorned petty morality, and after 1886 he surrendered himself to the subliminal urges of his inverted nature which seemed to break down the psychological barrier between conception and accomplishment. His biographer, Hesketh Pearson, attributes the aesthetic effects that Wilde produced to his own personal radiance of spirit, vitality, exuberance, love of pleasure and giving pleasure, and his strange personality. Pearson's description of Wilde's personality clarifies Winwar's ideas about his aesthetic theories. Not only did Wilde put these aesthetic theories into practice in his lyrical dramas, but also he accepted them as a code for his personal behavior.

In fact, if one looks at the development of Wilde's decadent drama,
Salome, one can see the personal struggle that Wilde faced when the reigning social and political powers opposed the publication of Salome in England. How Wilde reacted to this opposition provides one with a striking example of how Wilde accepted his aesthetic theories as a code for his personal behavior. Pearson says that Wilde had first regarded Salome as a "jeu d'esprit" --a slight parable which he had turned into a play. While Maeterlinck and other French writers praised Salome, the English critics condemned it with ferocity. Just as one might suspect, Wilde parodied the play in the company of friends; but in the true decadent spirit, he went to the other extreme when the English condemned it, and he claimed that it was a poetic and dramatic masterpiece. Wilde met opposition in June, 1892, when the Lord Chamberlain refused him a license to produce the play in England on the basis of an ancient law aimed at suppressing Catholic mystery plays. The Lord Chamberlain objected to Salome on the grounds that Wilde had based the drama on an episode from the Gospels of Matthew and Mark and that he had introduced biblical characters into the play. Wilde summed up his attitude toward the suppression of Salome, saying: "The insult in the suppression of Salome is an insult to the stage as a form of art, and not to me." After Salome was turned down, Wilde decided to leave England and go to France. He considered Englishmen to be essentially anti-artistic and narrow-minded. Thus, the French version of Salome was published in February, 1893, and it was not until a year later that John Lane published the English translation in London.

In conclusion, it is interesting to note how changes in the theater itself during the latter part of the nineteenth century affected the techniques that Wilde used in both his earlier lyrical dramas and in Salome.
Jay B. Hubbell states that one of the characteristics of the late nineteenth century drama was its high degree of organization and specialization. He goes on to explain that

the owner of the theater is not usually the manager; the manager is not usually his own producer; the producer rarely acts parts; and the playwright is now almost never an actor. Even the actors are highly specialized; and there is a bewildering array of stage-hands, carpenters, electricians, and mechanical experts.\textsuperscript{40}

Even the stage itself changed after the middle of the nineteenth century. Modern methods of lighting gave almost perfect visual illusions, but the new picture-frame stage seemed to isolate the actors from the audience.\textsuperscript{41} Also the picture-frame stage partly explains the tendency of late nineteenth century drama towards realism rather than romance. It was too difficult and too expensive to make numerous and elaborate set changes such as were found in romantic plays.\textsuperscript{42} However, this tendency toward realism, as Hubbell further states, suited the decadents such as Wilde. They preferred to use a single set and give it symbolic significances. Also, the emphasis shifted from plot to diction. Even though the plots of Wilde's lyrical dramas often touch that which is melodramatic or farcical, they are redeemed from mediocrity by good technique and extraordinary brilliance of dialogue.\textsuperscript{43}

Wilde's technique lends itself to the use of symbolism because by its very nature symbolism calls for a "more poetic treatment of language to evoke emotion, atmosphere, and character."\textsuperscript{44} The symbolists and the decadents tended to explore the world of myth, legend, and the inner experience of man in their artistic works. Wilde, according to Barrett Clark, wanted to reveal himself as a "witty, scintillating, and perverse" artist in so far as his brilliant and somewhat superficial mind would permit.\textsuperscript{45}
Chapter II
Characteristics of the Symbolist Drama

It is important to define the symbolist drama as a genre with its own individual characteristics which make it distinct from other types of drama. John Gassner describes the symbolist drama as a deliberate repudiation of the overwhelming preoccupation with representational reality in the nineteenth century theater. They symbolists turned away from the canon of literal realism and the dependence of dramatic action on material circumstances and events. They set forth a freer, more imaginative concept of the drama, in keeping with a new awareness of the role of dream, reverie, and mystical experience in art.¹

Rather than describe external events per se, the symbolist dramatist replaced anecdotal statements and linear narratives with suggestiveness and mood creation. The symbolist drama tended to be stylistically indirect and evocative. As a rule there was little or no plot action. Following the outlines for symbolist poetry, the symbolist dramatist sought to present the mystery of being and the presence of the infinite in the finite—not directly and literally, but through analogies and correspondences. The symbolist dramatists used music as well as visual arts to create a mood of suggestiveness and evocation in their plays.²

Gassner points out that for many symbolist drama restored the drama to its religious and ceremonial function. Not only were words and images endowed with magical power, but also the theater became "a temple in which both actor and audience participated in the celebration of a sacred rite."³

The mid-nineteenth century French poet Théodore de Banville adumbrated
the poetic tradition that Stephane Mallarme, the leading theoretician and poet of the symbolist movement, later developed. Banville urged the restoration of centrality of poetry in the theater and wanted to see music, mime, and language fused in order that the stage might be invested with magical and evocative power. Gassner says:

Banville wanted a detheatricalized stage in which language would be wedded to dream and fantasy without any necessary conformity to literal events. The new lyric drama would fuse song and ode with dramatic dialogue.4

Mallarme followed Banville's formula when he wrote "Herodiade." Mallarme's injunction reads as follows: "Depict, not the object, but the effect which it produces."5 Because of Mallarme's dramatic theory, it is not surprising to find that he employed indirection, suggestion, and mood-creation in his writing.

Another writer associated with the French symbolists, Maurice Maeterlinck, who has previously been mentioned as a direct influence on Wilde, also used suggestiveness, mystery, magic, and spirituality in his writings. He believed that only through correspondences and analogies could man grasp the mysteries of the universe. Maeterlinck saw the importance of employing suggestive, allusive, and obscure language when he wrote. It is interesting to note that the most successful symbolist plays are lyrical dramas—brief compressed moments of mystical intuition and revelation.6

Gassner points out that one of the problems that symbolist playwrights faced was how to assimilate lyricism within a dramatic action. According to Gassner, excessive lyricism is one of the common weaknesses of symbo—
list drama. It is important to remember, however, that mistiness and suggestiveness are not in themselves undramatic. Because the symbolists were preoccupied with the invisible and occult, visible representation was made difficult. Thus, the lyrical quality of the characters' speeches created the atmosphere. When the symbolist playwrights were able to avoid excessive lyricism, they "lent immediacy and vividness to figurative representations of spiritual reality." 7

From the previously mentioned origins came the lyrical drama of the decadents such as Wilde's *Salome*. It is interesting to note the various characteristics of this type of drama and to see just how Wilde incorporated them into his own lyrical dramas. Edouard Roditi, an authority on the lyrical drama (better known as the symbolist drama) points out several striking characteristics: a tendency to stir rather than purge the passions of the audience, a notable simplicity in the nature of the characters themselves, a decrease in thoughts and sentiments (dianoia) of the characters that had once guided the drama to a cartharsis, an increase in elements of plot, a reliance on exalted diction to generate a lyrical atmosphere, and concentration on unwholesome and bizarre subject-matter. 8

It is interesting to note Roditi's observations in relation to Wilde's works. According to Roditi, the Greek dramatic ideal of ancient tragedy, which consisted of purging the spectator's passions through pity and fear, did not suit the purposes of a decadent dramatist such as Wilde. The decadents discovered that if individual speech were aimed more immediately at the audience and less at the characters of the drama, it suited the sophisticated audience of the 1890's better. 9 Thus, the lyrical drama tended to stir rather than to purge the passions of the audience.

Another important characteristic of the lyrical drama is exemplified
by the way in which Wilde's characters speak. Roditi says that because the individual speech is aimed more immediately at the audience rather than at the characters, the characters' utterances become increasingly lyrical or rhetorical, and the element of dianoia (the thoughts and attitudes that had once guided the play of passions and facilitated the catharsis) became less important. In addition, the characters become less complex, more typical, and less individual. In the lyrical drama the characters' actions are no longer guided and their passions are no longer aroused by the speeches of other characters. In keeping with the unwholesomeness that prevailed in decadent literature, the characters of the lyrical drama often illustrated a single passion or obsession, referred to as an "idée fixe." ¹⁰

Thus, the lyrical drama differs from the Greek tragedy in which the characters illustrate some unique complex of passions that is dominated by a tragic flaw or ruling passion.¹¹ Replacing the dianoia of the traditional Greek tragedies, more elements of plot such as conflicting interests, recognition-scenes, reversing situations, and surprising incidents of one sort or another occur in the lyrical drama. By relying on its diction to generate a lyrical atmosphere, the lyrical drama is able to raise its plot above the level of a mere problem-play. Thus the exalted diction of Salome stirs rather than purges the passions of the audience. ¹²

Wilde's contribution to the lyrical drama is evident if one studies several examples of his works in this area. One of Wilde's earliest lyrical dramas is The Duchess of Padua. According to Archibald Henderson, this play contains the tender lyricism, the gorgeous imagery, and the glow of youthful fire which characterizes the lyrical drama.¹³ Henderson points out that Wilde was merely experimenting with the lyrical drama when he
wrote *The Duchess of Padua*, but that the play is effective on stage nevertheless. Wilde’s setting for the play in the sixteenth century was effective because that century was noted for its tears and terror, poetry and passion, madness and blood, all of which lent themselves to being re-created in the decadent lyrical drama. *The Duchess of Padua*, with its violent transitional moods of romantic passion, was indeed representative of the decadent state of mind that Wilde exhibited.\(^1\)

In five acts Wilde tells the story of the love of the Duchess and Guido Ferranti, a young man sworn to avenge the inhuman murder of his noble father at the hands of the heartless old Duke. The Duke’s wife, Beatrice (the Duchess of Padua), falls in love with Guido, even though he has sworn to kill her husband. As soon as Beatrice and Guido have confessed their love for each other, a pre-arranged message reaches Guido that the hour to strike down the Duke has come. Beatrice herself murders the Duke; but after Guido rejects her love, she denounces him as the assassin. However, she is filled with conflicting fears, and after visiting Guido in his cell, she finally takes poison because of her spiritual agony. Guido has falsely confessed that he is the murderer, and when he realizes the Duchess’ “inner essential nobility” of character, he vows his undying love and kills himself with his dagger. Henderson points out that even though Wilde’s play is mimetic, it still displays real power in instrumentation of feeling and in the temperamental and passionate shades of its mood.\(^2\)

Another of Wilde’s lyrical dramas, *Vera*, or *The Nihilists*, portrays the struggle of Vera, a nihilist, and her lover, the Czarevitch. The Czarevitch sympathizes with his people, but he is torn between his love for Vera and his duty to the Empire. Assuming that he does not love her,
Vera decides to assassinate the Czarevitch and assume the position of the Czar herself. When Vera finds out that the Czarevitch does love her, she kills herself with the dagger meant for her lover and tosses it to the raving conspirators standing below the balcony. As she throws the dagger, she cries: "I have saved Russia!" Like The Duchess of Padua, Vera depicts the tears and terror, poetry and passion, and the madness and blood that are representative of the decadents' perversity and unwholesomeness. However, as Roditi points out, in writing these two early lyrical dramas Wilde did not perfect the genre. The characters seem pitted against each other like ornamental figures on a mantel-piece, changing their minds or abandoning set poses with the grotesque abruptness of automata obeying a puppet-master's decision.

In writing A Florentine Tragedy, which he never finished, Wilde employed many of the same devices found in the two earlier dramas, but he refined the genre by unifying the plot in one act. According to Roditi, this indicates that A Florentine Tragedy belongs in the same class with Salome and illustrates what Wilde might have achieved if he had written any lyrical dramas during his last years in Paris. Similar to his earlier lyrical dramas, the unwholesome perverse spirit of the decadents prevails in its theme. The heroine, Bianca, falls in love with her suitor, then out of love with him, and then in love with her husband, all in one long act. Bianca's husband discovers that she is beautiful only when her suitor makes love to her, and Bianca never considers her husband strong or attractive until he murders her suitor in her presence and at her instigation. Just before her husband kills her suitor, Bianca falsely declares to her suitor: "Your image will be with me always." Thus, the unwholesomeness and perversity of the drama resemble complete madness.
When Wilde wrote the original, French, version of Salome in 1891, his
diction had attained the level of the sublime which by its very nature
stirs rather than purges the passions of the audience. Wilde's temptress,
Salome, the Princess of Judea, is a passionate morbid creature. She stirs
the passions of her step-father as well as those of the Young Syrian
soldier, who slays himself in her presence because she has shown interest
in the prophet Iokanaan. Even though Salome has always been chaste in
her life, her passion for the prophet's body is intense to the point of
madness. There is an element of perversity in the mere fact that a virgin
should experience such an intense passion for a melancholy prophet.

It is interesting to note what Arthur Symons says about Wilde's
concept of passion. Symons says that passion for Wilde was a thing to be
talked about with elaborate and colored words. These vivid words tend to
suggest rather than state the imagery intended; but more important, they
stir rather than purge the passions of the audience, which is the purpose
of the lyrical drama.

Salome is a striking example of Wilde's skill in creating the lyrical
drama because he does rely on exalted diction to stir the audience's
passions. For example, when Iokanaan meets Salome for the first time as
he is brought forth from the cistern, he addresses the audience instead
of speaking to her. The fact that he addresses no one in particular
emphasizes the exalted nature of his speech. He says:

Where is he whose cup of abominations
is now full? Where is he, who in a robe
of silver shall one day die in the face
of all the people? Bid him come forth,
that he may hear the voice of him who hath
cried in the waste places and in the houses
of kings.

As Roditi points out, Iokanaan remains rigidly apocalyptic while Salome
becomes more and more dominated by her "idée fixe"—that is, her desire for the prophet's body.

Because Wilde was writing a lyrical drama, he did not portray Salome's desire as a passion that is stirred within her by the "dianoia" of the drama, but rather as a fit that comes upon her suddenly. She speaks of the beauty of Iokanaan's body but the prophet rejects her advances. As soon as he does, she declares that his body is hideous. In her next speech to Iokanaan, Salome says: "It is of thy hair that I am enamoured."²³ Again rejected, she finds his hair hideous. In her following speech, Salome says: "It is thy mouth that I desire, Iokanaan."²⁴ As Roditi has observed, throughout the scene of Salome and the prophet's meeting, each one of her speeches comes as another stanza in a lyrical poem in a sort of ballad-like development whose stages are not determined by any argument of Iokanaan's refusals, but by Wilde's mere rejection of an element of plot.²⁵

The final stanza of Salome, whose progression is one of plot and lyrical atmosphere, but not of shifting passion, comes at the end of the play in an extraordinary monologue that Salome herself utters as she kisses the lips of the dead prophet. Salome orders the prophet's death because he has rejected her. Salome says: "Ah, thou wouldst not suffer me to kiss thy mouth, Iokanaan."²⁶ Roditi notes that, there is little dianoia, no psychological progression, no cartharsis of passion through pity and fear, but a curiously emphatic and repetitive lyricism, a sado-masochistic intensity which, through many of the devices of lyrical poetry, inspires admiration and horror.²⁷

In the case of a lyrical drama such as Salome in which the character is unable to illustrate conflicting passions or in which conflicts of will
are reduced to elements of plot, all of the characters in the drama tend to use the same type of rhetoric or lyricism. To avoid monotony and vary the drama's diction, the author may provide each character with typical epigrams and imagery.  

This is indeed true of Salome. For example, Herodias' Page constantly warns the Young Syrian not to gaze at Salome, lest something evil befall; the Young Syrian repeatedly compares Salome with the moon; and Herod again and again states that he hears the ominous beating of the wings of the angel of death.

Roditi states that one of the distinguishing factors of the lyrical drama, whether it is tragic or comic, is that it seems to make less demand upon plot than did the ancient tragedy. The same plot can be used for both the lyrical tragedy and the lyrical comedy, except that comedy demands a happy ending and tragedy an unhappy one. Whether fantastic or gruesome, the plot does not need to be complex or to conform to any very definite model. Thus, Wilde found that a plot as simple as that of Salome suited his purposes better than one as complex and full of incidents as that of his earlier lyrical drama, Vera.

As Roditi points out, the lyrical drama, both structurally and historically, is similar to the short story—particularly the macabre or fantastic tale. In fact, both genres require an author with the same king of talents. In his prose poems and lyrical dramas, Wilde devoted his talents to the fantastic. Roditi says that in writing Salome, Wilde attained a prose style that was masterfully self-conscious, fully aware of all its own powers and its aims.
Chapter III
Major Symbols in Salome

According to William York Tindall, Salome is Wilde's most thoroughly symbolist work and also the most successful approximation of symbolism at that time in England. In addition to the various symbolist techniques such as childish words, overtones, and silences, Wilde also made extraordinary use of individual symbols. Even though Wilde probably did not know all of the traditional meanings of symbols that such authorities as J. E. Cirlot and C. E. Gaskell have analyzed in their dictionaries, Wilde no doubt used these symbols intuitively. At any rate, the symbols that Wilde used do possess traditional meanings, along with their individual meanings in particular contexts. It is interesting to note the major symbols that Wilde employed in writing Salome.

The major symbols in Salome are those related to Salome, the prophet Iokanaan, and Salome's step-father, Herod. The most striking symbol associated with Salome is the moon. The moon symbolism can be broken down into the following parts: general association between Salome and the moon and woman (Salome), similarity of the princess (Salome) and the moon, likeness of the virgin (Salome) and the moon, the lustfulness of a woman searching for lovers related to the strange aspect of the moon, and finally the death imagery interwoven with the moon symbolism.

As the play begins, the moon is shining brightly in the Palace of Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch of Judaea. The Young Syrian, who is Captain of the Guard, comments upon the beauty of Salome, Herod's step-daughter.
By juxtaposing the image of a beautiful woman and the image of the moon, the moon clearly becomes a feminine symbol. According to J. E. Cirlot, "man from the earliest times, has been aware of the relationship between the moon and the tides, and of the more mysterious connection between the lunar cycle and the physiological cycle of woman." A. H. Krappe, along with Charles Darwin, believes that this follows from the fact that animal life originated in the watery deeps and that this origin imparted a rhythm to life which has lasted for millions of years. Thus, the moon becomes the "Master of Woman." Cirlot notes that in the days when patriarchy superseded matriarchy, the moon became a feminine symbol and the sun became a masculine symbol.

The Young Syrian says that the moon is "like a little princess whose eyes are eyes of amber. Through the clouds of muslin she is smiling like a little Princess." By using repetition in comparing the moon with a feminine character, Wilde makes the analogy more obvious, Salome is a princess in actuality, and the moon is described as a princess. Thus, one finds repeated use of a nature symbol -- the moon -- to describe Salome herself.

The image of a virgin is also associated both with the moon and Salome. In fact, when Salome speaks of the moon, she says:

> How good to see the moon! She is like a little piece of money, a little silver flower. She is cold and chaste. I am sure she is a virgin. Yes, she is a virgin. She has never abandoned herself to men, like the other goddesses.

The Young Syrian is the first character to describe Salome in terms of her pale purity. Salome in turn has compared the moon to a silver flower.
Such imagery never lets the reader forget that the moon and Salome, through separate entities, are symbolic of one another.

The strange aspect of the moon is compared to a mad woman searching for lovers. Just before the prophet Iokanaan comes out of the cistern and speaks to the audience, the Page of Herodias observes that the moon looks strange. The Young Syrian also notices that the moon has "a strange aspect." The following description of the moon by the Tetrarch not only substantiates the concept of the strange appearance of the moon but also vividly describes the character of Salome herself.

The moon has a strange look to-night. Has she not a strange look? She is like a mad woman, a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers. She is naked too. She is quite naked. The clouds are seeking to clothe her nakedness, but she will not let them. She shows herself naked in the sky. She reels through the clouds like a drunken woman...I am sure she is looking for lovers...

Just as the moon seems like a mad woman searching for lovers, so does Salome seek Iokanaan's love. Salome is obsessed with her desire to kiss the mouth of Iokanaan. Thus, the kiss itself becomes symbolic of Salome and her perverse nature. Despite repeated warnings by Iokanaan against her course of action, Salome persists in her desire for the prophet's kiss. Frances Winwar describes Salome's desire as being as "bloody-red as the sword of passion that has ravished her chill chastity." The kiss, which is symbolic of Salome's lust for the prophet, becomes her raison d'être, and her desire becomes a deadly obsession. Winwar points out that when the prophet repulses Salome, "ardor and revulsion seize upon
her, until love becomes hate and hate love, and the object of her lubri-
city at once wonderful and horrible." 10

The death imagery associated with the moon is obvious if one remembers
that the moon parallels Salome herself. The image of death represented by
the moon prepares the audience for three deaths that occur during the play:
those of the Young Syrian, the prophet, and Salome. The page who serves
Herodias, Salome's mother, says that the "moon is like a woman rising from
the tomb...Like a dead woman...Looking for dead things." 11 This gives the
audience a preview of the deaths of Salome and Iokanaan. The dead thing
that the woman (Salome) seeks is Iokanaan's head. The prophet as well as
Herod, Salome's step-father, makes references to hearing the beating of
wings of the angel of death. The Young Syrian has also warned Salome that
some great misfortune would occur if Iokanaan were brought out of the
cistern. The great misfortune ironically turns out to be his own death,
for when the Young Syrian sees that Salome is interested in the prophet,
he kills himself.

The cloud crossing the moon as Salome holds the head of the dead
prophet is also an image of death. The association between the cloud and
death is obvious if one looks at the symbolism that Gaston Bachelard has
associated with the cloud. Bachelard concludes that the cloud is a sym-
bollic messenger -- in this case a messenger of death (Iokanaan's death). 12

In addition to the moon the color white is another major symbol
associated with Salome. This is evident when the Young Syrian describes
Salome as a dove that has strayed because the dove is usually considered
a guileless bird. White, in turn, is a symbol of purity. Salome, how-
ever, is far from being guileless in her determination to have Iokanaan's
head. Like a dove that has strayed, Salome also leaves her purity behind
as she becomes obsessed with her lust for Iokanaan. However, it is possible that if Salome had never seen the prophet, she would have remained a guileless creature. Salome leaves the banquet because she cannot tolerate the arguments over foolish ceremonies among the Jews from Jerusalem, the barbarians who become drunk and clumsy, "the Greeks from Smyrna with painted eyes and painted cheeks," the silent and subtle Egyptians with their long jade nails and russet cloaks, and the Romans who are brutal and coarse. Therefore, her values do not seem misplaced at the beginning of the drama. It is only after she sees the prophet that she seems to become an incarnation of madness and wickedness rather than a guileless creature like the dove.

Salome is also depicted as "the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver." White not only symbolizes purity, but also in alchemy white is an inferior and therefore, more feminine color than red. Red is the color that one usually associates with the rose. The fact that Wilde says that Salome is like "the shadow of a white rose" instead of merely like a white rose is significant because among primitive peoples the Sun was considered the light of the spirit. Thus, a shadow was believed to be the negative "double" and the evil or base side. As Sir J. G. Frazer has noted, the primitive often regards his shadow, or his reflection in water or in a mirror, as his soul or a vital part of himself. Therefore, there is an element of evil in Salome's purity. The fact that it is "a mirror of silver" is also significant because silver is the metal corresponding to the moon. For Max Scheler and other philosophers, the mirror is related to thought in so far as thought is the instrument of self-contemplation as well as the reflection of the universe. In turn, this links mirror-
symbolism with water as a reflector and with the Narcissus myth. 18

Discussing the symbolism associated with the mirror, Cirlot says that the mirror

is a surface which reproduces images and in a way contains and absorbs them. In legend and folklore, it is frequently invested with a magic quality—a mere hypertrophic version of its fundamental meaning. In this way it serves to invoke apparitions by conjuring up again the images which it has received at some time in the past, or by annihilating distances when it reflects what was once an object facing it and now is far removed. This fluctuation between the 'absent' mirror and the 'peopled' mirror lends it to a kind of phasing, feminine in implication, and hence—like the fan—it is related to moon-symbolism. Further evidence that the mirror is lunar is afforded by its reflecting and passive characteristics, for it receives images as the moon receives the light of the sun. Again, its close relationship to the moon is demonstrated by the fact that among primitives, it was seen as a symbol of the multiplicity of the soul: of its mobility and its ability to adapt itself to those objects which 'visit' it and retain its 'interest.' 19

Thus, Wilde displays his cleverness by using related symbols in his lyrical drama. There is no haphazard network of unrelated symbols in Salome.

The Young Syrian refers to Salome as a narcissus trembling in the wind, thereby introducing another symbolic element associated with Salome. According to Joachim Gasquet, the Narcissus myth comments that "the world is an immense Narcissus in the act of contemplating itself," so the Narcissus becomes a symbol of a self-contemplative, introverted,
and self-sufficient attitude. It is evident that Salome becomes so involved in her own thoughts and desires that she pays no attention to what is going on around her. She becomes totally self-absorbed with her lust and passion for Iokanaan.

It is interesting to note that Herod's desire to see Salome dance has an integral part in the symbolism of the play. According to Cirlot, the dance is one of the most ancient forms of magic. "Every dance is a pantomine of metamorphosis (and so calls for a mask to facilitate and conceal the transformation), which seeks to change the dancer into a god, a demon or some other chosen form of existence." Salome's own metamorphosis of character becomes obvious after she dances for Herod. The dance that she performs is called "the dance of the seven veils" which is traditionally thought of as a strip-tease. It is only after she dances that one realizes that Salome will seek revenge on Iokanaan because he has refused to look at her.

Iokanaan points out just how changed Salome is when he refers to her as a wanton woman. Begging her to stop looking at him, the prophet says:

Back! daughter of Babylon! Come not near the chosen of the Lord. Thy mother hath filled the earth with the wine of her iniquities, and the cry of her sinning hath come up even to the ears of God....Daughter of Sodom, come not near me! But cover thy face with a veil, and scatter ashes upon thine head, and get thee to the desert, and seek out the Son of Man.

According to Cirlot, Babylon is a cultural symbol which represents an image of a fallen and corrupt existence—the opposite of the Heavenly
Jerusalem and of Paradise. In Revelation (xvii, 2) Babylon is described as "the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird." Iokanaan's dislike for Salome probably stems from the fact that her mother, Herodias, married her first husband's brother, Herod, after the first husband had been imprisoned by Herod in the cistern for twelve years. Because he did not die of natural causes, Herod's brother was finally strangled after his many years of imprisonment. Iokanaan sees both Herodias and Salome as wanton women having the same evil habits. Iokanaan tells Salome to cover her face with a veil because the veil signifies the concealment of her true nature. Likewise, the prophet commands Salome "to scatter ashes upon her head"; and ashes, while expressive of an ending, represent a new beginning. The prophet implies that if Salome does go into the desert and seek "the Son of Man," the beginning of a life free from sin and lust may be possible. Iokanaan believes that evil is brought into the world by woman. Thus, Iokanaan adds the images of Babylon, the veil, and ashes to the symbolism associated with Salome.

At this point, it is interesting to note the various symbols associated with the prophet Iokanaan. As the drama begins, the prophet is in a cistern or dark hole. Because the dark hole is Iokanaan's home, it is associated with him. It becomes even more significant because Iokanaan has claimed to be from another world, and according to Cirlot, the hole on a spiritual plane is symbolic of the 'opening' of this world onto the other world. As a symbol of heaven, the hole stands specifically for the passage from the spatial to the non-spatial and from the temporal to the non-temporal existence. The other characters in the drama are mortals despite the fact that their behavior is abnormal, but there is some question as to whether or not Iokanaan is a holy man—a saint—who
has seen God. Salome describes Iokanaan's eyes as "black holes burned by torches in a tapestry of Tyre" and as "lairs." Concerning his eyes, Salome says: "They are like the black lakes troubled by fantastic moons...."

The color most frequently associated with the prophet is black. Cirlot asserts that the color black denotes *penitence* in Mediaeval Christian art. Because Iokanaan frightens the Tetrarch with his prophecies, he has been placed in the black (cistern). Wilde emphasized the image of the hole as a place of enclosure by having Salome describe the prophet's eyes as "black caverns." The emphasis is put on Iokanaan's eyes because he claims to be able to see into the future, and his eyes are black because he sees eventual doom. Iokanaan has said that "the sun shall become black like sackcloth of hair, and the moon shall become like blood, and the stars of the heaven shall fall upon the earth like unripe figs...." It is little wonder that Salome describes his eyes as "terrible." Traditionally, black represents that which is evil or treacherous.

Salome, in describing the prophet, associates the symbols of destruction and treachery with him. Since Iokanaan displays nothing but contempt for Salome, she describes his hair as "a knot of serpents coiled around (his) neck." Because her passion is not reciprocated, Salome tells Iokanaan that he has the "body of a leper" and that his body is like "a plastered wall, where vipers have crawled,...where scorpions have made their nest." As Cirlot points out, a wall expresses the ideas of impotence and decay. While the serpent symbolizes forces of destruction, the scorpion is emblematic of treachery. Salome's ambivalent attitude toward the prophet results from the fact that unrequited love often turns
It is interesting to note that Salome compares the prophet's hair to a "cluster of black grapes." It is reasonable to assume that Salome sees Iokanaan as a symbol of sacrifice because the Lamb of God is often portrayed between thorns and bunches of grapes. As the lyrical drama progresses, it becomes clear that Iokanaan's life will be sacrificed because of Salome's insane obsession to possess his mouth. Iokanaan reproaches Salome saying: "Profane not the temple of the Lord God...." Salome responds to Iokanaan by saying that his hair is "like a crown of thorns." According to Cirlot, the thorn emphasizes the conjunction between ideas of existence and non-existence, ecstasy and anguish, and pleasure and pain. Because Salome speaks of his hair as a "crown of thorns," an element of the evil characteristic of all things that are multiple, is added to the basic symbolism of the thorn. The image of the "crown of thorns" supports Frances Winwar's assertion (previously mentioned) that Salome's love for the prophet becomes hate and that the prophet becomes both wonderful and horrible at once.

The symbolism associated with Salome's idée fixe -- her desire to kiss Iokanaan's mouth -- is significant. Salome describes Iokanaan's mouth as "a band of scarlet on a tower of ivory." Salome emphasizes the fact that his mouth is redder than the pomegranates and reiterates the significance of the color by comparing his mouth to a "branch of coral that fishers have found in the twilight of the sea." Cirlot notes that the Greeks believed that the pomegranate sprang from the blood of Dionysos. The color red is associated with blood, wounds, death-throes, and sublimation. Certainly, Iokanaan's thoughts are of a
sublime nature, but more important he is doomed to suffer wounds and death because he has rejected Salome. The "coral," which is an aquatic tree, is also red in color. Again, the relationship to blood is obvious because the Greeks thought that coral grew out of drops of blood from the Gorgon Medusa. It is also significant that red is associated with the surging and tearing emotions of love, and it is Iokanaan's mouth that stirs Salome's passions.

Iokanaan makes references to hearing the beating of the wings of the angel of death. Cirlot says that the Gnostics were the source of the symbolism associated with the wings of the angel of death. The Gnostics were members of a partly religious and partly philosophical movement of pre-Christian times. They had several doctrines, but a central one states that only through knowledge can men become free. The Gnostics represented the angel of death as a winged foot crushing a butterfly. Thus, the butterfly becomes a symbol of life. Related to the symbol of the "angel of death" is the mythic belief that the moon's invisible phase corresponds to death in man. Certain traditional beliefs associated with reincarnation maintain that the dead go to the moon and return from the moon. This stems from the fact that the moon disappears from heaven for three nights and is reborn on the forth day. Salome's step-father, Herod, also contributes to this death symbolism by making frequent references to hearing the beating of wings.

Because of the imagery associated with Herod, the Tetrarch of Judaea, this characterization is also rich and complex. In fact, Wilde uses imagery as a means of expressing characterization throughout the play. In describing Herod, the prophet says that he is "clothed in scarlet and purple," that he holds a "golden cup full of his blasphemies," and that he
will be "eaten of worms." 48 The fact that Iokanaan associates "worms" with Herod is appropriate because, according to Jung, the worm is a libidinal figure which kills instead of giving life. This stems from the worm's underground associations, its base characteristics and its connection with death and with the biological stages of dissolution. 49

It is evident that Herod has been responsible for his brother's death just as he later becomes responsible for Salome's death, after she forces him to keep his oath and have Iokanaan killed.

The color red is associated with Herod, as well as with the prophet. Red is associated with the Tetrarch's wine and with spilled blood, and also in regard to the moon. Herod becomes drunk, seems to be on the verge of insanity, and sees the moon as blood red—reflecting the prediction of the prophet.

Symbolism also enriches the portrayal of Herod's attitudes toward Salome. Herod looks at Salome in a lustful manner and insists that she dance for him. This disturbs his wife, Herodias, but Herod is obsessed with his desire to see Salome dance. The fact that Herod worries about how pale Salome looks and that he wants to eat "ripe fruits" and drink wine with her is significant. According to Cirlot, ripe fruits symbolize earthly desires. 50 While wine usually is associated with blood and sacrifice, it also represents youth and eternal life. 51 Herod's interest in Salome suggests that he relives his own youth by looking at Salome in a passionate manner.

Herod slips on the blood of the Young Syrian, who has slain himself, and he says that it is an evil omen. Cirlot associates spilt blood with sacrifice. 52 If one uses one's imagination while reading about Herod's
slipping on the Young Syrian's blood, one can picture the amorphous shapes made by the blots and stains of blood on the ground. Thus, not only does the blood itself become a symbol but so do the blots and stains associated with blood. Cirlot makes a point of mentioning the fact that blots and stains may be identified with other shapes often related to the passage of time, and they allude to ideas of the transitory nature of man and his ultimate death.\textsuperscript{53}

The symbolism of blots and stains is also associated with the symbolism of clouds.\textsuperscript{54} In his stage directions near the end of the play, just before Herod gives the order for the soldiers to kill Salome, Wilde wrote:

\begin{quote}
The slaves put out the torches. The stars disappear. A great cloud crosses the moon and conceals it completely. The stage becomes quite dark. The Tetrarch begins to climb the staircases.\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

Again it is important to remember Helen Zagona's assertion that Wilde uses the moon throughout the drama to reflect the moods and dispositions of the principal characters and to set the atmosphere of imminent tragedy.\textsuperscript{56} By having a great cloud cross the moon just before Herod gives his order to have Salome killed, Wilde connects the symbolism of the spilt blood and the cloud. The cloud crossing the moon sets the atmosphere for Salome's death.

However, it is the ray of moonlight which falls upon Salome, and illumines her so that Herod sees her holding the prophet's head, that causes Herod to order her death. The Tetrarch cannot "contain his surging horror and resentment any longer."\textsuperscript{57} Again the moon is related to the symbolism of death. In ancient Christian symbolism the cloud was synony-
mous with the prophet. Just as the prophet dies, so does the cloud across the moon in its journey to death. It is also relevant that Wilde has the stars disappear, because stars represent a light shining in the darkness. According to Cirlot, the stars are symbols of the forces of the spirit struggling against the forces of darkness.

Thus Wilde has made extensive use of symbols, especially in association with the principal characters, in order to make this drama exceedingly rich in its meanings and implications. Although Wilde probably was not consciously aware of all the implications of these symbols, and although he probably selected and employed them intuitively, it is interesting to see that the various traditional meanings and connotations of his images tend to form coherent patterns. These patterns clearly add to the complexity and richness of this remarkable example of symbolist drama; and these patterns also add to the significance of the strictly decadent aspects of the drama, as is shown in the following chapter.
According to Barrett Clark, Oscar Wilde wanted to be as witty, scintillating, and perverse as his brilliant and somewhat superficial mind would permit. Clark says that Wilde wrote to please himself, shock his friends and enemies, amuse his public, and make money.¹ Much in Wilde's life was decadent in the worse sense of the term, and in his writing the decadent spirit prevailed. According to Archibald Henderson, Wilde in writing Salome "focuses attention upon abnormal and lascivious states of feeling, indicative of (his) own degeneracy."² Henderson also says that it is significant to note that Salome was the one play that Wilde did not write for the stage but which is "a true drama in the most real sense, bearing the stamp of the conviction of the real artist."³ Henderson considers Salome Wilde's "one dramatic achievement of real genius, an individual and unique literary creation."⁴ Because the decadent element in Salome is striking, it is important to analyze not only the decadent nature of Salome's character but also the techniques that Wilde used to present it.

In Salome Wilde's characters themselves are representative of the perversely decadent spirit itself. The characters in Salome are symbolic of the malady of the morbid age. For example, as Helen Zagona points out, Salome herself is the "perfect prototype of the ultra-symbolist and decadent hero."⁵ Zagona describes her as a young woman, who is disgusted by the lack of impetus in her life and by her surroundings, which includes such things as the constant bickering of the Jewish sects and the soldiers' glances.
Concerning Salome, Zagona says that she is "the child-woman living the self-sufficiency of her adolescence and about to inherit the insatiable cravings of humanity." Wilde has the Young Syrian describe Salome in such a way as to suggest her decadent nature. He says: "She is like a dove that has strayed.... She is like a silver flower...." "Her little white hands are fluttering like doves...." The words "strayed" and "fluttering" create the image of an unstable and unwholesome person characteristic of the decadents themselves.

Perhaps, one of the most vividly decadent descriptions of Salome has been suggested by Henderson. He says:

She is unmoved at first by any strangely perverse, nameless passion for the forbidden. But as in a dream, a memory of forgotten, yet half-divined reality, erotic passion wakens under the spell of Iokanaan's presence, and his scorn, his anathemas, his objurgations rouse to life and to revolt within her the dormant instincts of a Herodias. She will sing the swan song of her soul in the paean of the dance, and for the sake of revenge so ensnare the plastic Herod in the meshes of her perilous and dissolving beauty that he can refuse her nothing — even though it were the half of his kingdom.

The theme of the woman scorned was not new to the decadents, but the means by which Wilde created his heroine were unique. As Henderson points out, lust, scorn, revenge and death all meet in the kiss of Salome. It is important to trace Salome's behavior throughout the lyrical drama in order to understand just how "decadent" her personality is.

At the beginning of the drama, one sees a young princess who displays her restlessness by leaving the disorderly revelry of the banquet for the clear air of the terrace. By portraying Salome's agitation, Wilde prepares
the audience for her ultimate desire for Iokanaan's body. In her state of restlessness, Salome seems quite detached from reality -- from the people and things around her. The young Syrian addresses Salome, but she ignores him. The following passage demonstrates just how detached Salome is at the beginning of the drama.

The Young Syr. Will you be seated, Princess.

Salome. How good to see the moon!...

As Zagona points out, Salome's disinterested responses are directed only to the remote moon as she views the moon narcissistically in terms of herself. The first sign of interest in what is going on around her occurs when Salome hears the prophet cry out:

Behold! the Lord hath come. The Son of Man is at hand. The centaurs have hidden themselves in the rivers, and the nymphs have left the rivers, and are lying beneath the leaves in the forests.

Salome decides that the prophet has a strange voice, and she desires to speak with him. Even though the soldiers warn Salome that Herod allows no one to speak with the prophet, Salome persists in her desire. After the soldiers refuse to bring Iokanaan forth from the cistern, Salome turns to the Young Syrian, who because he loves her, is powerless to do anything but gratify her wishes. It is the Young Syrian Narraboth, who gives the fatal order to bring forth Iokanaan from the cistern. Thus, Salome in true decadent fashion has ignored conventional considerations in the pursuit of her own pleasures.

Because Iokanaan is absorbed with "the Word of Heaven," he pays no
attention to her. His disinterestedness merely excites Salome's interest, but she carries her fascination to such an extreme that it becomes monstrous. Extremism, of course, is typical of the decadents, and it is not surprising that Salome's fascination changes into an overpowering desire for the prophet's body.

The Young Syrian begs Salome to go inside and stop talking to the prophet, but Salome ignores him. After he has heard Salome express her lust for the prophet's body, the Young Syrian cannot stand it any longer, so he kills himself. As Zagona points out, Salome's single-mindedness assumes a monstrous aspect when she persists in her attentions to Iokanaan, without so much as a glance down at the body of Narraboth. The following passage clearly shows just how obsessed with Iokanaan Salome has become.

First Soldier: Princess, the young captain has just slain himself.

Salome: Suffer me to kiss thy mouth, Iokanaan.

Iokanaan: Art thou not afraid, daughter of Herodias? Did I not tell thee that I had heard in the palace the beating of the wings of the angel of death, and hath he not come, the angel of death?

Salome: Suffer me to kiss thy mouth.

Iokanaan: Daughter of adultery, there is but one who can save thee. It is He of whom I spake. Go seek Him. He is in a boat on the sea of Galilee, and He talketh with His disciples. Kneel down on the shore of the sea, and call unto Him by His name. When He cometh to thee, and to all who call on Him He cometh, bow thyself at His feet and ask of Him the remission of thy sins.

Salome: Suffer me to kiss thy mouth.
Iokanaan: Cursed be thou! daughter of an incestuous mother, be thou accursed!

Salome: I will kiss thy mouth, Iokanaan. 14

Iokanaan refused to look at Salome and returns to the cistern.

According to Epifanio San Juan, Wilde accentuates Salome's ill-omened narcissism and her convulsive depravities. In addition, San Juan says that Salome's disengaged quality separates Wilde's heroine from her prototypes in the Bible, in a painting by Moreau, and in literary works of Huysmans and Flaubert - all of which deal with the legend of Salome. From the legend of Salome in the previously mentioned sources, Wilde takes only Herod's feast and Salome's dance. Wilde frees Salome from her mother's sway so that it is her own perverse and unwholesome behavior that emanates from the drama. 15 San Juan makes some interesting observations about Salome's character which are beneficial in supporting the idea that she is a decadent personality:

Her consciousness works on sensory material; sensuous qualities possess her bodily and spiritually... She gains an integration of self only by nourishing and satisfying the will of the ego to dominate the world. 16

San Juan says that Wilde's own conception of Salome's character is one of poisonous malice and careless cruel passion. This critic also describes Salome's beauty as "inhumanly immature," and he asserts that Salome evokes the presence of diabolic powers by wanting to possess Iokanaan's body. Because she is obsessed with her pursuit of a sublime illusion, she elicits the awed response which the decadents and Wilde in particular wanted. Just as the decadents did themselves, so does Salome
seek to transcend her bodily desires by negating the limits of the human condition. Like the decadents Salome finds that the satisfaction of her erotic drives is beyond what the brief pleasures of Earth can afford.\textsuperscript{17}

The decadents were keenly aware of how transitory the pleasures of this world are, and therefore, they sought to fill each moment to capacity. Therein, lies the reason that the behavior of the decadents consistently tended toward extremism of one form or another. It was not unusual for them to find that their desires often exceeded the finitude of the circumstances in which they existed. Like Salome, the decadents often found themselves caught in a painful snare because satisfying their personal needs did not lie in the realm of reality.

Because Salome has not returned to the banquet as he commanded, Herod, along with his wife, Herodias, and the members of the Court, comes outside to find Salome. Noticing that Salome is very pale, Herod offers her wine and ripe fruits, which she refuses. Herod tells Salome that he will give her Herodias' throne, but Salome refuses, saying that she is not tired. The Jews, the Nazarenes, along with Herod and Herodias, debate about the identity of the prophet in the cistern while the voice of Iokanaan is heard above the sounds of the crowd. Herodias thinks that the prophet is referring to her when he says:

Ah! The wanton one! The harlot! Ah! the daughter of Babylon with her golden eyes and her gilded eyelids! Thus saith the Lord God! Let there come up against her a multitude of men. Let the people take stones and stone her.\textsuperscript{18}

However, it seems much more likely that Iokanaan is referring to Salome because he continues saying:
Let the captains of the hosts pierce her with their swords, let them crush her beneath their shields.\textsuperscript{17}

This, of course, is what actually happens to Salome at the end of the drama, and Wilde skillfully prepared the audience for Salome's ultimate doom.

However, it is Herod's request that Salome dance for him that precipitates the ultimate tragedy in the play. Just before Herod asks Salome to dance, Iokanaan says:

\begin{quote}
In that day the sun shall become black like sackcloth of hair, and the moon shall become like blood, and the stars of the heaven shall fall upon the earth like unripe figs that fall from the fig-tree, and the kings of the earth shall be afraid.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

At first Salome refuses to dance, but she finally agrees to do so when Herod says, "If thou dancest for me thou mayest ask of me what thou wilt, and I will give it thee."\textsuperscript{21}

Before she dances for Herod, Salome waits for her slaves to bring her perfume and the seven veils. Since the slaves remove her sandals, Salome will dance in the same blood that Herod slipped upon -- the blood of the Young Syrian. Because the "dance of the seven veils" is traditionally thought of as a strip-tease, it is an appropriate dance for the young decadent heroine to perform. The fact that Salome anoints herself with perfumes is also significant because perfumes call to mind the sensual material world which is characteristic of the decadents. There is an element of the perverse in the fact that Salome dances with naked feet on the spilt blood of the Young Syrian, who had loved her. As Holbrook Jackson points out, Wilde tried to stimulate suppressed feelings by means of what is
strange and rare in art and luxury... and to tune the senses and the mind
to a preposterous key. Wilde certainly achieved this goal during the
dance scene and in the moments that follow the dance.

After Salome dances she demands the head of Iokanaan, but Herod
refuses, thinking that Salome has been swayed by her mother, Herodias.
Actually, Salome has not been influenced by her mother, but Herodias agrees
with Salome's request because she thinks that the prophet has said unspeak-
able things against her. In the moments that follow, Herod proceeds to
offer Salome almost anything if she will only retract her request for the
prophet's head. Herod names things that he will give Salome, and as
Jackson points out, there is something sinister about Herod's offerings
to Salome. The following excerpts show just how materialistic Herod is
himself and how he attempts to appeal to the decadent side of Salome's
personality.

I have an emerald, a great emerald and
round, that the minion of Caesar has
sent unto me. When thou lookest through
this emerald thou canst see that which
passeth afar off... It is the largest
emerald in the whole world. Thou wilt
take that, will thou not? 

Salome, thou knowst my white peacocks... that walk in the garden between the myrtles
and the tall cypress-trees. Their beaks
are gilded with gold, and the grains that
they eat are smeared with gold, and their
feet are stained with purple... I will give
thee fifty of my peacocks. They will follow
thee whithersoever thou goest, and in the
midst of them thou wilt be like unto the
moon in the midst of a great white cloud.
I have a collar of pearls, set in four rows. They are like unto moons chained with rays of silver. They are even as half a hundred moons caught in a golden net... I have amethysts of two kinds; one that is black like wine, and one that is red like wine that one has coloured with water. I have topazes yellow as are the eyes of tigers, and topazes that are pink as the eyes of a woodpigeon, and green topazes that are as the eyes of cats. I have opals that burn always, with a flame that is cold as ice... I have onyxes like the eyeballs of a dead woman... I have chrysolites and beryls, and chrysoprases and rubies; I have sardonyx and hyacinth stones, and stones of chalcedony, and I will give them all unto thee, all, and other things will I add to them.26

Salome, however, shows no interest in any of Herod's riches and responds to each group of offerings saying: "Give me the head of Iokanaan!"27

Richard Ellmann sums up Salome's character well when he says that she evinces her appetite for strange experiences by desiring to kiss the mouth of her disembodied lover. Ellmann states further that Salome desires a relationship with the prophet that is at once totally sensual and totally mystical. Ellmann pictures Salome as one who embodies a totally perverse sensuality and a diseased mind.28

When the Negro executioner brings forth the head of Iokanaan on a silver shield, Salome seizes the head, and her following speech demonstrates just how thoroughly perverse and diseased her mind has become. She says:

Ah! thou wouldst not suffer me to kiss thy mouth, Iokanaan. Well! I will kiss it now. I will bite it with my teeth as one bites a ripe fruit. Yes, I will kiss thy mouth, Iokanaan.... Ah! I will kiss it now... But wherefore dost thou not look at me, Iokanaan? Thine eyes that were so terrible, so full
of rage and scorn, are shut now. Wherefore are they shut? Open thine eyes! Lift up thine eyelids, Iokanaan!...
And thy tongue, that was like a red snake darting poison, it moves no more, it speaks no words, Iokanaan, that scarlet viper that spat its venom upon me. It is strange, is it not? Thou wouldst have none of me, Iokanaan. Thou didst bear thyself toward me as to a harlot, as to a woman that is a wanton, to me, Salome, daughter of Herodias, Princess of Judæa! Well, I still live, but thou art dead, and thy head belongs to me....I can throw it to the dogs and to the birds of the air.... Ah, Iokanaan, Iokanaan, thou wert the man that I loved alone among men! All other men were hateful to me. But thou wert beautiful!...Well, thou hast seen thy God, Iokanaan, but me, me, thou didst never see, If thou hadst seen me thou hadst loved me, I saw thee, and I loved thee....I love thee yet, Iokanaan....I am athirst for thy beauty; I am hungry for thy body; and neither wine nor apples can appease my desire....Neither the floods nor the great waters can quench my passion.29

As San Juan points out, in the character of Salome—in one who hungers for carnal possession of the prophet—Wilde captured a sense of beauty in ugliness. Primarily, it is Salome herself who imposes the tight organization on the play and its singleness of impact. Her rhapsodic invocations to Iokanaan are a virtual embodiment of the sublime.30 Roditi discusses the techniques that Wilde employed in presenting decadent elements in his works during the time that he evolved as a prose artist. It is interesting to note some of these techniques. How his techniques improved over a period of time is also a subject of interest for Roditi as well as for the student concerned with Wilde and his era. If one compares "the lyrical prose of Vera with its whirring infernal machine of a plot barely concealed by the unconvincing program-
music of its Elizabethanisms and the infinitely more subtle atmosphere of Salome's verbal music, one can readily see how Wilde evolved as a skillful prose artist. By comparing the following two quotes, it is obvious that Roditi is correct in his assertion that the latter is more subtle and technically more skillful. Michael, a young peasant boy who is in love with Vera, and who is also a nihilist himself, describes her, saying:

She is as hard to capture as a she-wolf is, and twice as dangerous; besides, she is well disguised.

This lyrical prose bears little resemblance to the following description.
The Young Syrian who is in love with Salome describes her saying:

The Princess has hidden her face behind her fan! Her little white hands are fluttering like doves that fly to their dove-cots. They are like white butterflies. They are just like white butterflies.

As Roditi points out, it is the skillfully contrived monotony of repetition and of well-matched imagery, in the elaborate and colored words, that achieves the spell-binding effect of an incantation in Wilde's lyrical drama, Salome. A good example of this skillfully contrived monotony of repetition that Roditi is talking about is evident in the following speech, in which Salome is asking the Young Syrian to release Iokanaan from the cistern.

She says:

Thou wilt do this thing for me, Narraboth. Thou knowest that thou wilt do this thing for me.
And on the morrow when I shall pass
in my litter by the bridge of the
idolbuyers, I will look at thee through
the muslin veils. I will look at thee,
Narraboth, it may be I will smile at
thee. Look at me, Narraboth, look at
me. Ahi! thou knowest that thou wilt
do what I ask of thee. Thou knowest
it...I know that thou wilt do this
thing.\textsuperscript{35}

Wilde's unique use of elaborate and colored words is evident if
one looks at the following speech of Salome as she tells Iokanaan how
he appears to her. Salome says:

> I am amorous of thy body, Iokanaan!
> Thy body is white, like the lilies
> of a field that the mower hath never
> mowed. Thy body is white like the
> snows that lie on the mountains of
> Judaea, and come down into the
> valleys. The roses in the garden of
> the Queen of Arabia are not so white
> as thy body. Neither the roses of the
garden of the Queen of Arabia, the
garden of spices of the Queen of Arabia,
nor the fleet of the dawn when they
light on the leaves, nor the breast of
the moon when she lies on the breast of
the sea...There is nothing in the
world so white as thy body. Suffer me
to touch thy body.\textsuperscript{36}

The passage above not only displays Wilde's use of colorful words, but
also his cleverly contrived monotony of repetition and his well-matched
imagery. The effect is nothing less than spell-binding.

As Roditi points out, the plot of \textit{Salome} is much simpler than that
of either of his earlier lyrical dramas, \textit{Vera} or \textit{The Duchess of Padua}.
\textit{Salome} relies on its lyrical quality and on the atmosphere generated by
its style and diction rather than on plot detail to facilitate the reader's
understanding of the events that occur throughout the play. \textit{Salome}'s
style and diction which, as expressions of Wilde's nature temperam- 
et or genius, are both more original and more effective than those of his earlier lyrical dramas, which did contain a great deal more plot detail. 37

Since the complexity of plot decreases in Wilde's later work, Salome, it is not surprising that the complexity of atmosphere in the play increases. Because Wilde has stripped the plot of Salome down to the point that it is little more than a parable or legend, the drama depends even more on its diction than the lyrical drama usually does. 38 Of course, the quality of the diction that Wilde uses in Salome is the deciding factor in judging the genius of his work. Traditionally, the ancient Greek tragedy depended on both characterization and its element of dianoia within the framework of an elaborate plot setting in order to purge the audience's passions. Wilde, however, found a substitute for the dianoia in the sublime elements that he incorporated in his staging and diction. Instead of purging the audience's passions, Wilde employed exalted language in Salome and thereby stirred the audience's passions. 39

Roditi points out that an interest in magic, religious mysteries, and Gnostic or Early Christian beliefs was prominent in the antiquarian scholarship of Oscar Wilde and the French decadents:

In discovering the beauty of such poetry— as the early Latin Chorus or the popular songs of the ancient world and its magi- cal formulae and incantations, the scholars and esthetes of the last decades of the Nineteenth Century had to reject many of the critical principles of Classicism. In their stead, they relied on the sublime and concluded that it resided to a great extent, in such poetry, in the hallucinatory power of the vivid description of objective intensity of repetition and of strict patterns of syn- tax. It is significant in this respect,
that the earliest known discussion of
the sublime should be that of Longinus,
an Asiatic Greek of the post-classical
era — an era in which the cultured
Greeks had begun to understand and
appreciate the thought and art of such
'barbarians' as the Egyptians and the
Hebrews; and that Longinus should even
quote the Book of Genesis as an example
of the sublime, which no critic in
Periclean Athens would have deigned to
do. 40

The decadents and symbolists, who are often referred to as the later
Romantics, developed "a new poetics" which entailed the use of "vividly
descriptive writing," plus "obsessive rhythms and alliterations or imagery." 41
The poet and reader were able to communicate through the magic or madness of
some element which transcended reason — through the sublime. Roditi consi-
ders that which is vividly descriptive, hallucinatory, obsessively repe-
titive, and rhythmical to be the chief devices of the sublime. 42

Wilde contributed to this new art of poetry when he wrote "the declama-
tory prose—poetry of Salome." 43 Wilde used obsessive patterns of
repetitions and descriptions of a hallucinatory quality. Herod's following
description of the moon is a good example of Wilde's skillful use of
repetition and hallucinatory descriptions:

The moon has a strange look tonight.
Has she not a strange look? She is
like a mad woman, a mad woman who is
seeking everywhere for lovers. She
is naked too. She is quite naked.
The clouds are seeking to clothe her
nakedness, but she will not let them.
She shows herself naked in the sky.
She reels through the clouds like a
drunken woman....I am sure she is
looking for lovers. Does she not
reel like a drunken woman? She is
like a mad woman, is she not? 44
As Roditi points out, Wilde conveys Herod's obsessive melancholia by using repetitions and depicts Herod's nature by using imagery that is symbolic of the Tetrarch. Not only the moon but also Salome when she dances embodies Herod's obsession.

Roditi claims that Wilde borrowed "the esthetics of prose poetry" from Baudelaire and from one of his less experimental followers, Pierre Louÿs. Wilde's other source was in "the vast Biblical and Satanic literature of Romanticism." Roditi notes that Longinus identified the sublime, on the one hand, with the communication of the poet's own moral virtues or those of his topic, and, on the other hand, with the rhetorical devices which allow art to imitate the beauties of nature. In fact, these rhetorical devices allow the artist to reproduce "in abrupt or disordered syntax, the abruptness or disorder of the passions or the scene described." It is interesting to note that Wilde was one of the first writers to apply Longinus' theories in English.

It is Roditi's opinion that Wilde achieved the sublime in his writing not by the richness of what he described but by the way he described it. For example, the sublime elements in Wilde seem to emanate from the artist's vivid descriptions of contrasts, from his more firmly guided dialectic than that of the earlier dramas, and from a greater unity of plot or singleness of purpose in the narrative's atmosphere. The sublime elements in Wilde are representative of the decadent spirit because the sublime elements in Salome awaken the emotions, and there is something awe-inspiring about Wilde's conception of beauty in ugliness. Referring to Wilde's achievement in creating, Henderson says:
Like Poe, like Baudelaire, like Maeterlinck, Wilde revealed with masterful if meretricious artistry, the beautiful in the horrible...

Salome is a fevered dream, a poignant picture -- it is like one of those excursions into the macabre with which Wilde succeeded in fascinating the Parisians... In it one discerns the revolting decadence of an age when vice was no prejudice and sensuality no shame; we hear the resonance of lawless passion, and the reverberations of obscure, half-divined emotions.

To create the sublime effect, Wilde also uses synesthesia and hyperbolic elements in his works. A striking example of synesthesia can be seen in the following invocation to the dead prophet by Salome:

"Thy voice was a censer that scattered strange perfumes, and when I looked on thee I heard a strange music."

San Juan also discusses Wilde's technique in creating the sublime effect in Salome. He says that Salome's manner of address tends to be circular and densely metaphoric and represents perfectly the oracular style which stimulates strong emotion. Speaking to the prophet, Salome says:

"I am amorous of thy body, Iokanaan! thy body is white like the lilies of a field that the mower hath never mowed."

Juan asserts that Wilde combines brutality and delicate grace in Salome's lofty, sensuous invocations to the prophet. The drama's energy stems from Wilde's use of a pattern of utterances in which conscious and unconscious motivations heighten and clarify one another. A good example of this design can be seen in the long, previously-quoted sequence in which
Herod promises Salome a variety of things if she will only free him from his oath to give her whatever she desires.

In *Salome*, the characters tend to be isolated from one another, being superficially connected to the main episode: Herod's feast. The result of this isolation is that there is a certain strangeness in the individual voices that the audience hears which reinforce the fact that the context of their talk is but vaguely implied. The following ritualized scene supports Juan's view.

Salome: Suffer me to kiss thy mouth.

Iokanaan: Never! daughter of Babylon! Daughter of Sodom! Never!

Salome: I will kiss thy mouth, Iokanaan.

The Young Syrian: look not at this man, look not at him!

Salome: I will kiss thy mouth, Iokanaan.56

Wilde brings *Salome* to an impressive end with Herod's words: "Kill that woman!"57 Salome has been malicious and obstinate in her request for the head of Iokanaan. Her impatience and sadistic eroticism are totally unwholesome, and Herod realizes that Salome has become monstrous. He says:

In truth, what she has done is a great crime. I am sure that it is a grime against some unknown God.58

As Zagona points out, Herod's fear and horror grow until he can no longer face the universe. In his attempt to hide from the forces which must
surely bring retribution for Salome's monstrous crime, Herod cries out for darkness and anonymity. At that point the slaves put out their torches, the stars disappear, and a great cloud crosses the moon, concealing it completely. As the Tetrarch begins to climb the staircase in total darkness, the voice of Salome can be heard. She says:

Ah! I have kissed thy mouth, Iokanaan, I have kissed thy mouth. There was a bitter taste on thy lips. Was it the taste of blood? Nay, but perchance it was the taste of love...They say that love hath a bitter taste...But what matter? What matter? I have kissed thy mouth, Iokanaan, I have kissed thy mouth.

This is more than Herod can stand, and just as a ray of moonlight falls on Salome and illumines her, he turns around and sees the monstrous woman. When the Tetrarch gives the order, the soldiers crush Salome beneath their shields.

In conclusion, the decadent element in Salome is made obvious by Wilde's use of hallucinatory speech which builds up to a crescendo of violence as the play ends with Salome's death. Violence and brutality are intermixed with lyrical beauty at the end of the play. This combination increases the intensity of emotion and builds up tension so that the play seems to end in an explosion. Wilde's skillful juxtaposition of lyrical beauty and violence is obvious if one looks at the final speech by Salome herself. Wilde's use of repetition in these lines, gives the lines lyrical beauty despite the perversity and brutality that lie hidden in the meaning of Salome's words. Because a cloud has crossed the moon, the stage is in total darkness and only the voice of Salome
can be heard in the darkness. This increases the ominous feeling that Wilde had led up to throughout the play in the speeches of the Young Syrian and Herodias. Thus, with the death of Salome, the curtain falls on a truly remarkable example of symbolist and decadent drama.
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A Brief Autobiography

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