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## **Decadence and Murder in Oscar Wilde's Literature**

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Illustration: Moreau, Gustave. *Salome Dancing*, also known as *Salome Tattooed*, oil on canvas, 92 x 60 cm, Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris, 1874.

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## Introduction

*Modern morality consists in accepting the standard of one's age. I consider that for any man of culture to accept the standard of his age is a form of the grossest immorality. (The Picture of Dorian Gray 56)<sup>1</sup>*

Oscar Wilde's literary oeuvre, and his life too as Neil McKenna's *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* (2003) and Richard Ellmann's *Oscar Wilde* (1969) reveal, remain a perpetual source for intellectual and emotional engagement with the phenomenon of decadence. At the height of his career in the 1890s, Wilde established his decadence through his status as an inveterate aesthete and a flamboyant artist favoring impractical arts and beauty over rational instrumentality and functionality, after years of a flashy and flagrant lifestyle which included his festive student days, his infamous homosexual scandal, and the following law case involving his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas. Wilde's subsequent life including the decline of his marriage, the degradation of his eventual confinement to jail, and his miserable end in Paris highlights his fall from his previously decadent high standards and lifestyle. This fall – seen as “an artistic statement of its own” (Everett, qtd. in Schulman) – from the public eye and the loss of his position as a celebrity thus exhibit and reinforce Wilde's position as the resident decadent of the nineteenth century. Thanks to the decadence evident in his literature and life, Wilde is today easily recognized as a representative decadent writer and his decadent masterpieces remain to be some of the most widely read works of the nineteenth century, thus assigning to him a rich and everlasting legacy.

Many of Wilde's decadent characters end up committing murder and suicide. This issue raises questions about the correlation between decadence and such destructive impulses, as well as how Wilde's liberating moral outlook for the future against the standard of his age causes so many tragic fates. The fundament of this thesis is thus to investigate this decadence, with a

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<sup>1</sup> All references to Oscar Wilde's work are taken from *Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*, published by Wordsworth Editions Limited in 1997. Hereafter, all references will be given with the title of each individual work as well as the page reference within this collection.

special focus on how decadence can and does lead to murder due to overindulgence in intermediary concepts such as beauty, aesthetics, art, pleasure, and love in Wilde's literature. Decadence as a theme proves worthwhile to explore on account of its opposition to the main components of the contemporary world of the time, consisting of Queen Victoria's ideals of puritanism, family values, and Protestant work ethos, as well as the ways of street life and ordinary man. In addition, the radically different concerns and genres of the popular literature in the same timeframe, such as Samuel Smiles's ameliorative *Self-Help* (1859), Disraeli's polemical *Sybil – The Two Nations* (1845), Charlotte Brontë's romance *Jane Eyre* (1847), and George Eliot's realist *Middlemarch* (1871), made Wilde's decadent subject matter of choice stand out as a radical counterpoint in the literary scene of the Victorian era. Consequently, despite the broad scope of research done on decadence and Wilde's part in this movement, such as Karl Beckson's *Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890's* (1966), Alex Murray's *Decadence* (2020), and Kostas Boyiopoulos's *The Decadent Image* (2015), not many researchers have discussed the position of murder in decadence, especially with regards to Oscar Wilde's literature. As one of the main purposes of literature is to explore in fiction the dark side of reality, it can thus be assumed that decadent works such as Wilde's demonstrate the presumed danger of giving unrivaled significance to and overindulgence to the point of loss of control in ideals such as beauty and pleasure, which while on the surface might appear as harmless substitutes to the ugliness taking over the world, can lead to inevitable harm to the world and its inhabitants. The dramatic and beauty-worshipping silhouette of decadence looming over its respective works of art, in addition, depicts these conventionally negatively viewed behaviors as noble and commendable. After all, if one is to take one's own or another's life for any irrelevant and unattractive reason, this type of literature makes these grotesque actions done for higher purposes such as murder and suicide for the sake of love and art appear as tragically beautiful and deserving of mourning rather than punishment. Instances of such murder, for example Dorian's immoral murder of Basil and that of his own soul owing to the concept of beauty in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Salomé's murder of Jokanaan and the young Syrian's self-murder inspired by completely contradictory types of love in *Salomé*, and Cyril Graham's aesthetic suicide for the sake of art in 'The Portrait of Mr W.H', all nevertheless operate as exhibitions of murder as the eventual and final destination of decadence.

Decadence is “rooted in the Latin verb *decadēre*, formed by the root verb *cadēre* ‘to fall’ plus the prefix *de-* ‘down’” (Desmarais and Weir 3). This word has the dictionary definition of “the act or process of falling into an inferior condition or state; deterioration; decay” in its literal sense, and “moral or cultural decline as characterized by excessive indulgence in pleasure or luxury” in a more specifically literary sense. The decline being dealt with can be about the decline of Rome or (in this case), the decline of the Victorian society effectuated by the deterioration of intellectual excellence, the fall from moral standards and the loss of the elevated position of religion as well as the resulting disgraceful fall into secularism and immorality. Additionally, other noteworthy subcategories are the physical decline of health, which according to Friedrich Nietzsche, who claimed to be occupied most profoundly by “the problem of decadence” (qtd. in Desmarais and Weir 1), is considered the physiological aspect of decadence, as well as mental decline and psychological weakness, which are “the formula for decadence” (qtd. in More 187).

Decadence as a movement came into being in the nineteenth century in France and England as a reaction to the corruption, degradation, perversion, decline and degeneration (Cecchini 135) evident in society, which itself resulted in defying the bourgeois politics and conventions regarding the newly found modern progress, as well as indulging in dissolute behavior. This movement is characterized by “a delight in the perverse and artificial, a craving for new and complex sensations, [and] a desire to extend the boundaries of emotional and spiritual experience” (Baldick 13). In fact, for Nietzsche, whose definition of modern progress is going “step by step further into decadence” (qtd. in More 194) and whose model of decadence is based on central aspects of “weariness and disgust” (Golob 122-123), decadence is “any kind of saying no to life – decadence is whatever defies and negates life, the real, and the world” (Silk 594). Thus, the individual who is made to witness modernity and its inevitable unpleasant consequences, comes to harbor a hatred for the modern world and everything it entails, and begins to reject modern life and the way of modern man. This hatred in turn leads to the decadent man falling into a state of alienation, thus distancing himself from the natural world and its common people, and turning instead to artificial, unnatural, and exotic matters which become the only sources of pleasure for him. It is overindulgence in arts, aesthetics, beauty, and these unconventional desires, however, which leads to immorality. The decadent man, who already hates the world and has no attachments to it whatsoever, thus fails to see an issue in

bringing harm, either to said world or the people living in it, and even goes as far as committing murder for the sake of his obsessive beauty-based ideals.

The aforementioned decadent elements are depicted exceptionally well in Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À Rebours*, translated as *Against Nature* or *Against the Grain*, which is labeled as the breviary and the keystone of Decadence by Arthur Symons and Robert Baldick respectively. Huysmans himself in a decadent manner goes against the grain and abandons Zola's school of naturalism, rioting against the natural way of doing things and instead writing "something nobody has ever done before" (Huysmans, qtd. in Baldick 10). In this work, Huysmans creates "a type, representative not simply of a group, or of a generation, but of an entire epoch" (Baldick 13-14), with the very personification of this type being Duc Jean Floressas des Esseintes, the hero of the story, terribly affected by "a disgust inspired by the worries of life" (Huysmans, qtd. in Baldick 7). In describing his inspiration for the character of Des Esseintes, Huysmans lists the characteristics which are typical of the entire type this decadent man represents: a cultured, refined, wealthy man,

who has discovered in artificiality a specific for the disgust inspired by the worries of life and the American manners of his time, [...] winging his way to the land of dreams, seeking refuge in extravagant illusions, living alone and apart, far from the present-day world, in an atmosphere suggestive of more cordial epochs and less odious surroundings. (Huysmans, qtd. in Baldick 7)

*Against Nature*, due to its archetype-creating qualities, can thus be considered the dictionary of decadence, and Des Esseintes the prototype of the decadent man – a mirror reflecting perfectly the fundamental attributes that the decadent would thenceforth come to be known for. Accordingly, the first element which can be perceived and counted as the laying stone of the decadent's further personality and behavior is hatred of the world, nature, and everything in between. Huysmans's decadent hero, for whom trees are too monotonous and mountains and seas too commonplace, is an advocate of the belief that "nature [...] has had her day" (36). In addition, Des Esseintes, who cannot stand the "moral and cultural wasteland that was modern French life" (Desmarais 109), and who agrees with Schopenhauer in the idea of "the iniquity and rottenness of the world" and "the nullity of existence" (93), condemns birth per se and considers contraception and abortion a form of "saving an innocent creature from the misery of

life” (172), thusly representing the decadent perception and reaction toward the despair of the world and its hateful commonplace people, as well as a yearning for transcendence and death. In addition, Des Esseintes depicts how the hatred the decadent bear for the society and accepted ideas leads to them straying away from social norms and also hating everything which is considered mainstream and reminiscent of that society, as he unapologetically expresses a dislike for the “commonplace silhouette” (32) of his servant, as well as commonplace items such as Oriental rugs and fabrics (30). This hatred of the world he lives in and the mainstream people who are against art, literature, and decadent values, is also shown in Des Esseintes’ literary taste as he naturally shows a dismay toward literature depicting the modern life and society from which he is so desperately trying to escape, instead nostalgically yearning for another age (181). It is thus of no surprise that this absolute model of decadence becomes a framework for later decadent writers and especially Wilde, who about *Against Nature* claims, “the heavy odour of incense seemed to cling about its pages and to trouble the brain” (qtd. in Baldick 11).

Oscar Wilde, himself a certified decadent icon central to the English decadent tradition as the writer of acknowledgeably decadent masterpieces, in his essay, “The Decay of Lying”, expresses his own stance against nature with the words “[w]hat art really reveals to us is nature’s lack of design, [...] her absolutely unfinished condition” and “[a]rt is [...] our gallant attempt to teach nature her proper place”, while he, in addition, exposes his dislike of British people because of their commonplaceness, as they have “nothing curious or extraordinary about them” (921). Wilde goes on to use the help of Huysmans and Des Esseintes’ example in his own works to depict this dissatisfaction with the world and its belongings as the motivation and foundation behind the decadent’s consequent issues and involvements, as well as the need born within the decadent man to resort to other measures to numb the disgust inspired by the failure of a world he lives in. Wilde’s decadent main characters, namely Dorian Gray – who expresses his desire, like Huysmans and Des Esseintes, to go against nature and its rules in his own way – and Salomé, consequently take turns revealing their unhappiness with their contemporary worlds and unpleasant realities, as well as their helplessness at changing the situation. Wilde justifies this reaction in his essay, “The Soul of Man under Socialism” by claiming that while common people try to fix the hideousness they find themselves surrounded by, “the people who do most harm are the people who try to do most good” (1041). Therefore, the decadent man, much like the Dionysian man who Nietzsche explores, gets “a real glimpse into the essence of things”

(*The Birth of Tragedy* 29), has his eyes opened up to the reality of the world and simultaneously becomes aware that it would be ridiculous to expect to set right again a world which is out of joint (*The Birth of Tragedy* 29). Wilde, thus, praises the decadent, who are fortunate enough to be “either under no necessity to work for their living” or “enabled to choose the sphere of activity that is really congenial to them and gives them pleasure” (1042) for rightly avoiding the issue altogether and drowning themselves instead in a sea of the opposite – beauty and arts, which allows them a chance at blissful ignorance.

As a result of these discoveries and in what follows, the decadent man has no choice but to stay as far away from these irritations as possible, and instead live inactively in a bubble of his own and in a state of social alienation from the bothersome world and disagreeable people. Wilde’s decadent characters thus, follow the example of Des Esseintes, whose unsuccessful interactions with different groups he tries to fit into – namely his fellow nobles, young men of his age and station, men of letters, and free-thinkers – as well as his resulting dream of a “refined Thebaid, a desert hermitage equipped with all modern conveniences” (22), further attest to the decadent’s disappointment in commonplace people and their failure to reach the decadent requirements of a “twin soul, a mind free of commonplace ideas, welcoming silence as a boon, ingratitude as a relief, suspicion as a haven and a harbor” (213). Des Esseintes’ dissatisfaction with urban life, as well as the resulting fatigue, loneliness, disillusionment, and will to end it all but the lack of bravery to do so which lead to his voluntary removal of himself from society and his move to the suburbs of Paris in pursuit of solitude and living “alone and apart” (Huysmans, qtd. in Baldick 7) thus reveals the preferable fate of any other decadent man who would rather have no company than bad company. The decadent fate of alienation and a desire to be left alone and unbothered by commonplace people and their idiocy is clearly depicted in Wilde’s *Dorian Gray* – taught by the best thanks to *the yellow book* – who follows Des Esseintes’ path almost step by step and keeps to himself the more decadent he gets, *Salomé* who completely shuts out the unwanted male gaze on herself and settles on self-isolation, as well as the selfish giant, who builds a high wall around his castle to protect himself from the world and its distasteful people.

Hatred of nature and the world gives birth to the need for an escape. Escape from these unsatisfactory conditions, which first leads to the alienation of the decadent man, then manifests itself in turning to unnatural and artificial pleasures. The decadent man, represented first by Des Esseintes and then by Wilde’s characters, thus does not feel fulfilled by the ordinary things the



ordinary man indulges in; staying at a brothel or going to a restaurant simply does not suffice. Instead of living an ordinary life with his hands tied and his pleasures pre-decided for him, the decadent man resorts to indulging in “unnatural loves and perverse pleasures” (23) that albeit considered abnormal and at times unacceptable, nevertheless give him a touch of gratification that he desperately seeks and fails to find in the ordinary ways of life. Since nature’s uniformity is no longer admired and the common world is failing to cater to the needs and desires of the isolated individual, it is time for artifice to take the place of nature (37), and for the artificial to replace the natural. By turning to mechanical fish, artificially decorated turquoises, fake-looking flowers, and injections instead of food, all made in the hands of man, whom Des Esseintes calls “the master” (102) of Nature, the decadent attempt to substitute “the vision of a reality for the reality itself” (36) is depicted. Wilde thus borrows this idea for artificial sensation-seeking from Huysmans and gives to Dorian, his tribute to Des Esseintes, a similarly specialized interest in jewelry.

One form of this artificiality the decadent man indulges in is art and aestheticism, which “derives from aristocratic decadence” (Sinfield 94). According to Nietzsche, in “an inability to embrace and tolerate the tragic nature of life, one seeks refuge instead in an illusion of control where virtue, knowledge, and happiness neatly align” (Golob 122). Art thus functions both as this illusion of control, and as what Huysmans refers to as a “land of dreams” (Huysmans, qtd. in Baldick 7) – a portal giving the decadent man the ability to escape the reality of life through beautifying it. The hero of *Against Nature*, as the archetypal aesthete, illustrates this love for aesthetics, and by going against the grain of anything perceived as normal or natural, lives a life of refined aestheticism (Cecchini 140). The same fascination Des Esseintes shows in art forms such as the symbolic paintings of Salome by Gustave Moreau, which becomes an inspiration to Wilde in writing his own *Salomé*, is repeated neatly through Dorian Gray’s infatuation with the yellow book – ironically identified as *Against Nature* – as well as the three main characters of “The Portrait of Mr W.H.” turning this artwork into a matter of life and death. Therefore, the decadent man, in his escape from the concerns of the world, finds peace in aesthetic phenomena, rather than rigid nature and set-into-place rules and desires which are considered normal and natural. According to Nietzsche then, man finds himself in a helpless state when facing the absurdity of existence, and it is art that saves him (*The Birth of Tragedy* 28). The reason it is typical for a decadent man with escapist tendencies to be easily captivated by these illusions and dreams and fall into the trap of making them the priority of his life is

exactly that in addition to their offer of (at least temporary) extinguishment of the insufferable fire which is allegedly burning the world around the alienated individual, these beautiful ends also spoil him with the introduction to a warmer, cozier environment in which he gets to feel safe and untroubled.

This love for artificiality and art brings forth additionally the indulgence in all things beautiful. Nietzsche, while discussing the Greek, claims that their constant desire for beauty “arouse out of some lack, out of deprivation, out of melancholy, out of pain” (*The Birth of Tragedy* 5), and this can easily be the case for the modern decadent man as well. This decadent man sees so much ugliness in the world and its common practices that he cannot help but cling desperately, exaggeratedly and artificially, to anything beautiful he lays eyes on, unable to let go and falling deeper and deeper into this search for beauty. Des Esseintes and his faithful devotee, Dorian Gray, for example, in going against nature to find peculiarly beautiful flowers, investing in extravagant furnishing and decorating of their bachelor pads, and their glamorous taste in fashion, pay their dues to this decadent search for and attention to beauty. In addition, Des Esseintes is so focused on beauty that he only starts paying attention to his deteriorating health and the dangers of his decadent lifestyle when such signs emerge in his appearance. The fact that his declining beauty “alarmed him more than his weakness, more than the uncontrollable fits of vomiting that thwarted his every attempt at taking food, more than the depression into which he was gradually sinking” (206) highlights very well indulgence in beauty as well as what an important role it plays in a decadent man’s life, and elucidates the reason behind Dorian Gray’s success at lifelong decadence without a call for redemption as a result of his eternal youth and beauty. Artificiality and love for beautiful things, thus, can ultimately lead to an unhealthy obsession as well as futility, as shown in the case of these decadent heroes. What is initially perceived and used as a solution to decadence, as in the decline evident in the outside world, thus ends up becoming one of the causes of decadence, in the form of the decline of character into illusion and futility.

While Des Esseintes’ preferred antidote in his battle against nature and the world is art and artifice, each decadent character appears to have his own way of dealing with the shortcomings of the world. This same love for beauty and aesthetics, for example, reveals itself in the form of obsession with everlasting beauty and youth in the case of Dorian Gray. Wilde’s other decadent characters, such as Salomé and Cyril Graham, also come across a different concept in

the realm of beauty – decadent desire and art respectively – which brings them enough pleasure to drown in, prioritize in life, and forget the problems of the real world as a result of. These characters thus function as a channel delivering the beauty-worshipping words of Wilde – who himself was famous for his “utterly utter aesthetic sensibilities” (Fry xii) – that “[o]ne does not see anything until one sees its beauty” (“The Decay of Lying” 937). One such concept which receives special attention in decadent works is the idea of love and how the decadent often feel and express an excessive and overindulgent version of love toward their beloveds. Consequently, it is important to make a distinction between love as the decadent know and claim and the true and ideal love from which decadent love has fallen from. True love, which stems not from outer beauty but the inner beauty of the beloved and can rightfully take the title of love, resembles divine love – one that God manifests toward his creations, or Jesus toward God in the bible and Christianity, and involves selfless and unconditional feelings. On the other hand, the emotion that the decadent commonly identify (and confuse) as love and in which they end up overindulging, is often rather a deceiving and misinterpreted combination of corporal desire and lust centered on the beloved’s outer beauty. This love time and again proves to be superficial and fails to have deeper foundations than the lover’s obsession with beauty as well as his inability to avoid losing himself in this indulgence and the resulting delusion of this desire. While true lovers would strive to realize even the most dubious and severe demands of the beloved and would take extreme measures either in order to protect their beloveds or prove their love, decadent lovers present a rather conditional version of “love” dependent on reciprocation or favors from the beloved. In addition, while death for the sake of true love is not surprising but rather celebrated, as love and its truth are proven and perfected by death, decadent lovers take the opposite route and bring harm to their beloved when faced with unresponsiveness. In Wilde, while the instances of love Dorian Gray reveals, like everything else in his life, reeks of decadence, Sibyl and Basil’s love for Dorian proves to be genuine. In addition, *Salomé*’s story is one that perfectly demonstrates instances of this selfish, overindulgent, and beauty-based love, as well as its juxtaposition with ideal love.

Despite the fact that decadence can in many ways be a haven for alienated people to come to terms with or find an escape from the unbearable reality of the world, be consoled, and get to manifest their true desires through either artifice, beauty, or love, the example of dangerous and decadent love determines deleterious consequences and immorality as the fate of straying away from social norms and overindulgence in artificiality. This modern world ends up giving birth

to individuals whose souls are “tortured by the present, disgusted by the past, terrified and dismayed by the future” (148), with “insatiable appetites for luxury and perversion” (Desmarais 109). The modern man, thus, does not have much to lose and therefore not enough to hold him back from his inappropriate thoughts and behaviors. The decadent hero of *Against Nature*, for example, follows in the footsteps of his ancestors who had intermarried among themselves, continuing to indulge in “unnatural love-affairs and perverse pleasures” (23) thusly illustrating how the artificial and unnatural desires of the decadent man can at times be equally perverse. Wilde, who admits to having absolutely no interest in morality himself (*De Profundis* 1081) and claims that without sin “the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colorless” (“The Critic as Artist” 979), joins in this support of immorality. Accordingly Wilde declares that “[t]he possession of private property is very often extremely demoralizing” (“The Soul of Man under Socialism” 1043), thusly taking the blame off the decadent and justifying their immorality with the excuse of their wealth.

One pleasure, which in the religious and mainstream background of the Victorian era was considered highly immoral and unnatural and in which the decadent nevertheless audaciously indulged, is homosexuality. In the nineteenth century, it is said that “the aesthete was regarded as effeminate” (Sinfield 90) and the term effeminate “often connotes male-male desire” (Sinfield 93), a connotation which automatically appoints a homosexual identity to the decadent aesthete. After fictitious life takes the place of natural life, it develops in man “wants till then unknown” (Gautier 40), and Des Esseintes as a decadent hero demonstrates these wants in “a climactic feature of decadent aestheticism” (Sinfield 96), for a masculine female acrobat who gives him a portal for practicing his homosexual desires without directly participating in homosexual acts, as well as through a “mistrustful friendship” with a young boy, an experience which brings him unprecedented satisfaction mixed with distress, and evokes in him contemplations about sin. Therefore, homosexuality is one unconventional desire which reveals itself thanks to the love for artificiality the decadent man indulges in. In the writings of Oscar Wilde, who writes “in reaction to what we now term homophobia or heterosexism” and whose writing can be labeled “pro-homosexual or even gay” (Duffy 328), many of the homosexual instances of love illustrated happen to belong to the category of ideal love rather than decadent love. Therefore, Basil’s love for Dorian, the page of Herodias’ love for the young Syrian, as well as and most importantly those of the homoromantic couples in his fairytales “The Happy Prince” and “The Selfish Giant” all appear to be genuine, unconditional, selfless, and sacrificial,

thus creating a visible clash with some of the heterosexual decadent desires depicted. In this way, in addition to showcasing the hopelessness of homosexual love as well as the difficulty of its reciprocation and of the achievement of a happy ending, Wilde artfully parades the idealness of homosexual love as opposed to decadent desire. Wilde's fairytales, which first and foremost promote a distinct, constructionist reading based on "how people whom we might perceive to be homosexual [...] actually conceptualize their experiences and desires" (Duffy 328), rather than an essentialist "gay reading" of them involving looking for "gay characters" or for "celebration of gay love", accordingly attempt to ease the hatred directed at homosexuality and to arouse pity and acceptance for it instead. Furthermore, in his struggle against religious homophobia, Wilde, instead of shunning religion back, exhibits his admiration for Christ, puts him on the same pedestal as poets in *De Profundis*, and further refers to him as "the leader of all the lovers" and "a lover for whose love the whole world was too small" (1083), thus revealing his hopes for the immense love of such an infamous and selfless lover to be equally all-encompassing of homosexuals as well. Even though homosexuality is doomed to fail in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salomé*, Wilde, who believes the message of Christ to man to be "Be Thyself" ("The Soul of Man under Socialism" 1047) and "in the wake of his first homosexual experience – with Robert Ross in 1886" (Duffy 327), in a way uses the fairytale structure to deal with his own homosexuality by excusing love between two men, as well as promoting a kinder fate for homosexuals rather than the unquenchable fire of hell that Christianity promises. Therefore, although "the symbolic nature of the fairy tale allowed [Wilde] to write about his homoeroticism... in a veiled manner" (Zipes, qtd. in Kingston 43), his hope for divine pardon at the end uncovers Wilde's "developing homosexual identity and fear of social and divine retribution" (Kingston 47), as well as the attached guilt and insecurity. The result of Wilde's struggle and hopes is seen in "The Happy Prince" and "The Selfish Giant", then, where not only is homosexual love not punished by God, but it is rather rewarded, as this ideal love is recognized as precious and the homosexual lovers deemed worthy of heaven. The irrelevance of gender in the case of love is furthermore highlighted in both *Against Nature* and Wilde's works. Des Esseintes, who comes from a family that has undergone a degeneration "with the men becoming progressively less manly" (17), shows enchantment by "the agile, vigorous charms of a male", thus declining the social norms of heterosexuality and gender conformity. Thus, Des Esseintes once again becomes a sample for Wildean characters, as this gender-independent type of love is honored in Wilde's "The Happy Prince" with an

instance of true love between the statue of a prince and a bird perfectly denouncing the importance of gender in the realm of love.

Following pleasures considered immoral by Victorian standards, there is a (not so fine) line between innocent and innocuous indulgence in art and artificiality for the purpose of filling the emotional gap caused by modernity, and problematic consequences such as committing murder as a result or for the sake of such ideals. It is thus giving art and the illusionary world it has managed to swallow the decadent into unprecedented power to the point of loss of control that turns decadence into a danger rather than a harmless pastime. These means which are originally used as a way to escape thus end up being inescapable themselves. The individual loses the ability to tell the difference between this world of illusion and the real world around him, as well as the importance of each and to which he is supposed to give the power of controlling his life, and thus ends up unhinged and ready to take questionable, not reality-driven actions based on insignificant values. Cecchini claims that some aesthetic traits which are commonly associated with decadence are “the portrayal of depraved and hedonistic pleasures, an overall sense of corruption and erotic charge” (140). Therefore, having a deep hatred of the world and everything it entails makes it easy for the decadent man’s immorality and perversion to prompt morally corrupt and self-indulgent behavior which causes harm to the subjects of this hatred. Des Esseintes, for instance, indulges in torturing himself with reminders of his miserable childhood, as well as his gruesome collection of methods of torturing the human body. He in addition tortures humanity with his sadistic encouragement of a friend’s marriage only to watch it fall apart and his introduction of a young boy to prostitution in hopes of him turning into a burglar and eventually a murderer in order to afford repeating the experience, all in an act of revenge against the hideous society he lives in. Dorian Gray, unsurprisingly, complies by proving to be an adverse influence on his acquaintances, in addition to indirectly inspiring and directly participating in acts of murder. Salomé, whose inappropriate and unreciprocated decadent desire results in her utter blindness to reality and the possible consequences of her actions, follows along, proudly manifesting immorality and causing murders far and wide. These incidents bring to light how with the excuse of hating the world and through overindulgence in unnatural pleasures, one can cause irreversible harm to the world and its residents. Huysmans’ sharp affirmation that “is madness perhaps not necessarily the symptom of degradation, of collapse, of cultural decadence?” (6) clarifies how sadism and the subsequent consequences born out of immorality, such as murder, thus become a trait of decadence.

Murder hence frequently arrives as an unsurprising outcome of decadence and its joint immorality in many of Oscar Wilde's literary works. However, murder is redefined in decadence, as the decadent hero, with his fervent indulgence in arts, beauty, and pleasure, naturally comes to put such ideals on a pedestal and eliminate whatever (or, *whoever*) is in the way of him reaching full enjoyment of what to him truly matters. Therefore, with the amount of attention aesthetics receives from the decadent, it is of no surprise that other worldly preoccupations pale in significance. One of these matters which fails to appear of enough importance to the decadent is death and the taking of one's or another's life. Therefore, in the chaos of beauty and arts that the decadent hero finds himself needing to be submerged in, death does not make an impression as important and negative, but merely as a sacrifice which is to be made in the name and for the sake of keeping the existent aesthetic state alive. Types of death such as murder and suicide thus function solely as a means to maintaining the aesthetic and artistic status quo, and nothing marginally more meaningful. Therefore, aside from the lesson that delving far enough into the immorality involved in decadence will eventually result in murder, it is also perceivable that death, in general, is not viewed as a crucial enough matter. As proved by the example of Wilde's "The Portrait of Mr W.H.", love for art, for instance, excuses murder and takes the blame off the murderer, as art is long and valuable, as opposed to life which is short and meaningless on its own, with regards to which death also fails to be seen as a significant matter.

Another distinction to be made in the subject of decadence is between the types of murder committed among the decadent. Aside from the murder of other human beings inspired by the decadents' selfish and immoral behavior, suicide is yet another form of murder that the decadent can find themselves committing as a result of their overindulgence in beauty and pleasure and consequently their disregard for life and its value. Suicide, as self-murder, in which the soul and body of the individual is killed by himself, is thus the ultimate act of decadence, as well as the ultimate sin and immorality, as it is an act of violence against the creation of God and therefore based on the affective self-hatred, the ultimate fall from God's grace. Even though according to most religions, philosophers, and Victorian utilitarians, suicide is considered to be worse than murder of other human beings because of its unpunishable nature and direct damnation to hell, the act of suicide is nevertheless a form of murder that the decadent – namely Wilde's Sibyl Vane, the young Syrian, Cyril Graham, and the nightingale – inspired by, blind

prioritization of love, art and beauty, and a lack of belief in the significance of life without the aforementioned pleasures, thoughtlessly participate in.

The state the decadent man ultimately finds himself in, as exemplified by the decline of Des Esseintes' physical and mental health, can ironically only be improved by giving up his decadent and solitary lifestyle, rejoining the diseased society, and indulging in normal pleasures. While in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salomé*, the decadent protagonists refuse this proposal and cling tirelessly to their decadent lifestyle that leads to murder, suicide, and soul-killing consequences, Wilde's short stories put forward other possibilities. "The Portrait of Mr W.H." and "The Nightingale and the Rose", for instance, offer accounts of the abrupt and complete abandonment of decadence and the adherent sources of pleasure as advised. While the supposed main characters in these two stories manage to survive and avoid death and murder, their resulting unsightly fate as commonplace Victorian men of logic fails to appear desirable. "The Happy Prince", "The Selfish Giant", and "The Canterville Ghost", on the other hand, take a different stance and show instances of decadent characters who take a leap of spirit and love, attempt to invest in harmless ideal love and to be the carriers of beauty to the world, and thus manage to avoid the fate of the previous heroes. The protagonists of these fairytales, thus, despite sharing a similar fate of death in this world, nevertheless manage to encounter a rare instance of reciprocation of love before dying. Their deaths, as a result of the harmless and pure state they manage to achieve beforehand, are rewarded by the promise of a better afterlife instead of being followed by eternal damnation such as is the presumable case of immoral characters such as Dorian Gray and Salomé. Therefore, while *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salomé* are presented as severely decadent works overflowing with aesthetic indulgence, hatred of the world, and as a result, murder or suicide – either of which condemns the protagonists to severe infernal punishment – Wilde in these three fairytales, by ending on a metaphysical and redemptory note and in the violence-free death of the protagonists, at the very least spares the souls of these decadent characters and gives them a second chance, presumably in the next life. Wilde's decadence thus moves from an accentuation of disaffection with the ordinary world, aesthetic indulgence, and murder as discussed in the first two chapters towards presentations of decadence as more selfless, conciliatory, and redeeming in the last chapter.



# 1 Chapter One: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, marked time and again as “the epitome of the decadent work” (Emig 222), Dorian receives from Lord Henry “a book bound in yellow paper”, the cover of which is “slightly torn and the edges soiled” (87) and which is described as follows:

It was a novel without a plot, and with only one character, being, indeed, simply a psychological study of a certain young Parisian, who spent his life trying to realize in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own, [...] loving for their mere artificiality those renunciations that men have unwisely called virtue, as much as those natural rebellions that wise men still call sin. (88)

The book in question is commonly believed and admitted by Wilde at his Queensberry trial in 1895 to have been none other than Huysmans’ *Against Nature*, known as the pioneer of the decadent novel. *Against Nature*, however, is not merely a work that Wilde vaguely refers to, but rather one that becomes much more influential to the story as “Dorian Gray models his conduct on Des Esseintes” (Baldick 11). Thus, Dorian, himself a decadent hero, in an ironic crossover is given *Against Nature* to read, and naturally finds (or loses) himself in the character of Des Esseintes, the Parisian in question. The similarities between the two characters are manifold; it can be seen that Dorian, in a much similar manner to Des Esseintes, also shows discontent with the age he was born in, stating “[h]ow exquisite life had once been! [...] Even to read of the luxury of the dead was wonderful” (96), as well as finding beauty in artificiality and seeing sin as merely a form of rebellion against what is considered natural and normal. Dorian dipping his toes into various lines such as religion, perfumery, music, jewelry, and embroideries and “becoming absolutely absorbed for the moment in whatever he took up” (96) as a means of forgetting and escaping reality, is a reminder of Des Esseintes doing the exact same thing. In fact, chapter eleven of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reads like the chapters of *Against Nature* in which Des Esseintes relentlessly goes on about his different passions. The parallels between the character of Des Esseintes and himself do not pass by Dorian, and he comes to perceive Des Esseintes as “a kind of prefiguring type of himself” (89), identifying with the other hero so much that he believes the book is a representation of his own life, “written

before he had lived it” (89). The fact that Dorian is so captivated by this character and story that he ends up buying nine copies of the book, each bound in a different color to suit his various moods, is also by itself a decadent act showcasing his vanity and questionable priorities. In addition, this act is admittedly Des Esseintes-esque, as it is easily reminiscent of the hero of *Against Nature* having a series of niches with different colors in his drawing-room, each of which he would choose and read in, according to the “peculiar essence of the book which had taken his fancy” (Huysmans 26), thus making these two decadent heroes nearly indistinguishable.

Aside from the similarities the main character of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has with Des Esseintes – the original decadent hero – decadence can also be discerned everywhere else throughout the story. Hints of the first quality of decadence as mentioned in the introduction, which is hatred of nature and the natural, as well as the world and its common people, are scattered far and wide in the text. Both Dorian and his mentor, Lord Henry, who deems being natural the most irritating pose he knows (7), are at several points referred to as cynics – a group of people, according to *Oxford English Dictionary*, known for their “disposition to disbelieve in the sincerity or goodness of human motives and actions” who “express this by sneers and sarcasms”, an appropriate definition according to which these two characters’ disapproval of the general public and *their* vain preoccupations becomes clear. One issue which triggers this hatred and contributes to the superiority complex of the decadent is class, as the main characters in this story all seem to possess a social and economic class high enough to give them the leisure of focusing on beautiful albeit vain matters rather than what common people are involved in. Lord Henry is an aristocrat, Dorian the grandson of an aristocrat, and Basil is shown living a comfortable life as a painter. The three main characters, then, “freed from the activities and responsibilities that typically consumed the energies of middle-class men, [...] circulate freely within an aestheticized social space that they collectively define” (Cohen 806), a space which also highlights their dependence on a small company of like-minded individuals and their alienation from the masses. Therefore, the decadent man’s class-based inclinations are made clear by depicting the aristocracy and upper class through the sparkly lens of luxury, while they each take turns to make their disdain of the middle and lower class visible. Quite like Des Esseintes, Lord Henry ascribes his hatred of the “vulgar age filled with carnal pleasures and common aims” (28) to the middle classes – which “are not modern” (55) and not even ten per cent of whom live correctly – as well as its commonplace people whose words he never takes

notice of (53). In addition, he also believes that “crime belongs exclusively to the lower orders” (147), and that committing crime is to them what art is to the higher orders, “a method of procuring extraordinary sensations” (147). This statement thus reveals how different orders of birth allows for different preoccupations and how the decadence and aestheticism that the characters nonchalantly pursue is, albeit perhaps unknown to them, only available to them as an option due to their preexisting privilege and class. This point is proven quite flawlessly by Dorian’s example, whose initial description as “[...] quite forgot what he does – afraid he – doesn’t do anything” (9) quickly paints him as an ideal decadent protagonist: a young, beautiful man whose great wealth gives him a certain element of security (99), who does not have a typical job, and instead is said to play the piano, *or the violin*. (9; emphasis added). In addition, Dorian’s breakdown over having to age and one day lose his youth and beauty indicates what Glick appropriately terms “the decadent dandy’s effort to conquer nature” (Glick 337). After his disagreement with and disregard for the natural way of life, Dorian makes up his mind that instead, he is going to be the odd one out and go against nature, so as to escape conforming and being put in the same category as the rest of humanity. Dorian thus becomes the Nietzschean artist, not simply of a work of art, but of his own life, in order to make his existence bearable. In addition, Basil’s belief that “the commonest thing is delightful if one only hides it” (7), which causes him to hide his love for Dorian and the picture he has painted of him in fear of others seeing it and putting an end to a pleasure which is uniquely his, thus displays both a dislike of said commonplaceness as well as hopes of straying away from this quality of the English society – which he claims “is all wrong” (105). Additionally, upon first meeting Dorian, Lord Henry notes, “one felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world” (14); therefore, Dorian not having been a part of the common and despised world and people adds another layer to his beauty and makes him a respectable object of worship. Both these instances of exclusive secrecy thus further function as an imprint of the decadent disdain for the vulgarity and naturalness of the mass society, as well as the mainstreamization of what they consider theirs.

Consequently, the decadent characters who brashly divulge their disappointment in the world, its worldly people, and their typical and disagreeable ways, go on to illustrate how life should be lived and what values deserve importance. The decadent attempt at hiding the ugliness of the world by wearing a beautiful eye patch and sleeping soundly while the world is falling apart outside is thus depicted perfectly through Lord Henry’s lines, “[o]ne should sympathize with the colour, the beauty, the joy of life. The less said about life’s sores the better” (31).

Furthermore, this emphasized ideal of beauty, the supposed antidote for what the decadent wish to remain blind to, is highlighted first and foremost by this decadent guru, whose choice of his friend for their good looks (10), as “it is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances” (19), and whose claim that “beauty is the wonder of wonders” (19) perfectly summarize his love for beauty as well as his belief that one’s life is only valuable if and as long as one is beautiful. It is thus of no surprise that Dorian, with his youthful and apparently unprecedented beauty, becomes a subject of adoration and praise for all three decadent main characters, including Dorian himself. In addition, Lord Henry and Dorian are both labeled as Dandies, a word which according to *Oxford English Dictionary* is used for “[o]ne who studies above everything to dress elegantly and fashionably” and a conduct in which Dorian finds fascination as “an attempt to assert the absolute modernity of beauty” (91). The “fashionable young men” (66) in question in this story are said to never get up till two, are yet to be visible till five (25), and are shown spending their days dressing up, going to dinners with powerful men and influential women, and engaging in gossips. The dandy lifestyle, thus, is very much so in accord with decadence and the qualities commonly attributed to it, in complying with the indulgence in beauty and pleasure and making them the focus of one’s life.

Accordingly and in more ways than one, a love for beauty leads to vanity and vice versa. Lord Henry, after boasting that his enemies “are all men of some intellectual power” and that they all appreciate him, admits, “Is that very vain of me? I think it is rather vain” (10), and he additionally apologizes to Dorian for hurting his vanity by thinking him unable to commit a crime (147). Dorian, as always, follows in the footsteps of Lord Henry, and by claiming that “we live in an age when unnecessary things are our only necessities” (66), begins practicing “the serious study of the great aristocratic art of doing absolutely nothing” (25). He thus takes up a disregard for usefulness and leads a vain but extravagant and luxurious lifestyle “that is both an imitation of and homage to Des Esseintes” (Glick 336), and “explores the subjects of jewelry and tapestry as exhaustively as Huysmans’ hero studied perfumery and floriculture” (Baldick 11). In addition, Dorian’s indulgence in vain expenditures of beauty such as the “chased silver Louis-Quinze toilet-set” (66) and dressing-gowns of silk-embroidered cashmere wool (66), comes to inspire other young exquisites later in his life. Vanity, therefore, as both the cause and result of a love for beauty and oneself, becomes an obvious and consequent trait of decadence.

It makes sense that this vain search for beauty is accompanied by a love for arts. Accordingly, Lord Henry declares, “[B]eauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins. [...] Look at the successful men in any of the learned professions. How perfectly hideous they are!” (6). Therefore and according to him, entities of use and intellect are not the ones which exude beauty, and in line with Oscar Wilde’s own words which declare all art as quite useless (3), art thus becomes that measure which albeit useless, is nevertheless appreciated for its beauty, and thereby, art and beauty unite to become the measures of significance for the decadent man. Moreover, the respect with which Lord Henry reacts to Sibyl Vane’s manager for having gone bankrupt over a poet (58), since “[m]ost people become bankrupt through having invested too heavily in the prose of life. *To have ruined oneself over poetry is an honor*” (39; italics added) offers an exhibition of the decadent granting enough power to art to not only become the most important concept in life but also to do the honors of bringing ruination to them. Therefore, the eminence given to art is so great that doing damage to oneself or others with the excuse and for the sake of art and all things beautiful is considered noble rather than reckless and vain.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, subsequently and as Richard Ellmann claims in his renowned bibliography of Oscar Wilde, fills the need for an example of aestheticism that the [nineteen] eighties suffered for (Ellmann 288). Dorian himself is judged prematurely as “some brainless, beautiful creature, who should be always here in winter when we have no flowers to look at” (6), thus becoming a form of beautiful artifice that manages to replace flowers, a natural form of beauty, for both Lord Henry and Basil. Consequently, Basil as an artist, one who is deemed by Dorian to like his art more than his friends (21), naturally yearns for all things beautiful and is immediately awestruck by Dorian’s beauty – a beauty that makes him the center of Basil’s life both as an artist and as a man, and which functions as a form of art that Basil indulges and loses himself in. Basil thus refers to Dorian as all his art (10) and a motive in art (11), and Dorian for him functions as the inspiration for the best work of his life, as well as an entirely new manner in art (11), one that Basil’s life as an artist depends on (13). This prioritization of art and beauty is further illustrated by the love Dorian, who shows disinterest in obvious, ordinary women – who “ride in the park in the morning, and chatter at tea-parties in the afternoon” with their stereotyped smile, fashionable manner and lack of mystery (38) – claims for Sibyl Vane because of her beauty, the art she does so well, and the artist she is, as this allows Dorian “to aestheticize her in his imagination” (Ellmann 298). This love, however, proves to belong to the category of superficial, decadent desires, and despite Basil’s cry of “[l]ove is a

more wonderful thing than art” (60) and Sibyl’s “you are more to me than all art can ever be” (62), Dorian feels his love for Sibyl and the beauty he saw in her fade the very moment she reveals that she values life above art, as she fails at her art and starts appearing as “a commonplace, mediocre actress” (60). Dorian thus forgets his own words that “the man who could wrong her would be a beast, a beast without a heart” (55) and unable to see past Sibyl’s imperfect performance and loss of aesthetic value, starts his decadent journey of becoming a self-proclaimed beast.

Subsequently, thanks to Lord Henry making clear to him the wonder of youth, and Basil, the wonder of beauty (109), Dorian comes to the conclusion that “youth is the only thing worth having” and that “when one loses one’s good looks [...] one loses everything” (22). After this moment, and thanks to the decadent seeds Lord Henry plants in Dorian’s mind in hopes of watching them and Dorian’s decadence grow, Dorian’s life starts revolving around (his own) beauty and how to avoid losing this beauty which is supposedly his greatest asset and without which he is nothing. Just as Basil had fallen in love with Dorian, then, Dorian falls in love with the portrait of himself and its revelatory unchanging beauty. This artificial painting, with its power of giving permanence to man’s youth, a power which nature lacks, thus puts artifice in a superior position compared to nature and the naturally aging human body. As Glick claims in her essay “Turn-of-the-Century Decadence and Aestheticism”, Dorian’s solution in avoiding the supposedly inevitable loss of his youth and beauty is thus depending on “artifice as an aesthetic solution” (Glick 338). This artificial piece of art with its eternal and indestructible beauty thus becomes an object of infatuation and obsession for Dorian and the entity which singlehandedly decides his fate. In this way, art functions as the medium which gives the decadent hero a Nietzschean illusion of control, whether it be over his aging, fate, or nature, and therefore assists him in escaping reality and its ugly accompaniments through beautifying it and substituting that beautified version of reality for reality itself, as discussed in *Against Nature*. (36). By having his portrait age instead of himself while he hangs dearly onto his youth and beauty, Dorian, instead of simply playing along with nature’s rules and what it has in store for him, takes his fate into his own hands, gives reality to his dream of going against nature, as well as the decadent dream of becoming the master of nature.

The love for beauty and arts as the decadent man’s center of life and identity unsurprisingly refuses to remain harmless and inevitably leads to certain consequences and immoralities. To

begin with, an issue which ties the love for art and beauty to immorality is the non-moralized nature of the realm of “aesthetics”, which according to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is defined as “the philosophical study of beauty”; that is, aesthetics cannot be combined with morality as that would, in turn, subdue the artistic elements and aesthetics would then lose its luster. Therefore, aesthetics is amoral in its nature, and it is of no surprise that those whose main concern in life is aesthetics fail to grant much importance to morality. This indifference towards morals can easily be perceived in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as both Dorian and Lord Henry dedicate their lives to practicing aesthetics and create for themselves lives as decorative and extravagant as possible, and consequently, do not find it in themselves to associate with what is so inharmonious with the affairs they find interest in. In addition and in tune with the previous discussion about the importance of class in decadence, Dorian as a decadent hero of aristocratic origins also belongs to a social class that benefits from the Kantian privilege of “disinterestedness of aesthetic judgment”, which Rancière clarifies as “social classes which are less subjugated to the demands of immediate necessity can create a distance between need and desire” (Rancière 18). This disinterestedness signifies in a way that in front of the beauty that Dorian looks for in everything and perceives, other matters, such as the immorality seen in the world in general and in his own actions in particular are simply and almost unconsciously dismissed and ignored – an ignorance which is not a lack of knowledge but a “shift in the distribution of knowledge and ignorance” (Rancière 20). Aside from the amoral nature of aesthetics, it is thus Dorian’s aesthetic judgment that only gives value to the beauty available and visible in his life; consequently, unaesthetic issues such as moral concerns of sins and crimes are not included in his judgment and are rather conveniently shrugged off. In the case of Dorian then, a love for aesthetics is located somewhere deep within where normally an inherent ethical conscience would have been found. Therefore, from the moment Dorian’s eyes are opened to the importance of beauty and aesthetics in life, what his insides preach and warn him about are naturally altered as well. As a result, instead of going through life with his conscience making sure he is doing good and avoiding wrongdoings, Dorian’s beauty-blinded self makes him attracted to what is considered aesthetic and rejects the unappealing alternatives. Therefore, according to Manganiello, “by making ethics and aesthetics exchange places, Wilde reverses the usual hierarchy of value” (26); in this new and improved hierarchy, “sin no longer ravishes the beauty of the soul, as in the traditional view, but rather helps it to flourish” (Manganiello 26). As an entity that helps to create and add to the existing beauty, sin is thus no

longer perceived as immoral, but rather becomes one of the “higher ethics”, which according to Manganiello, Wilde translates as aesthetics. Wilde, who had been determined to find a justification for sin, thus finds it in art (Ellmann 310), and accordingly, Lord Henry and Dorian go on to “celebrates experience as an end in itself and the enjoyment of the intensely lived moment of beauty regardless of moral standpoints” (Manganiello 27).

Despite the protagonist status of Dorian and the fact that throughout the novel, he is the character who gets involved in the most instances of beauty-inspired immorality, his brutal and unsightly fate can once again be attributed to Lord Henry and his bewitching words and influence. Lord Henry, in practicing his own nonchalant decadence, looks at Dorian as an experimental subject and analyzes him and his reactions to his controversial words, vividly achieving pleasure from observing how he can be manipulated. This point is proven by Lord Henry’s words “I hope that Dorian Gray will make this girl his wife, passionately adore her for six months, and then suddenly become fascinated by someone else. He would be a wonderful study” (53) about Dorian’s engagement to Sibyl Vane. This claim thus showcases his wish for Dorian’s marriage to fail, just so he can see him turn into someone less blindly romantic and more decadent like himself, which in itself is a familiar reminder of Des Esseintes’ sadistic wish for his friend to get married, just so that he can watch their marriage fall apart. In addition, Lord Henry admits to finding pleasure in “playing on the lad’s unconscious egotism” (71) and watching Dorian change from an innocent beautiful boy to a more complex character, and despite Basil’s belief that Lord Henry is faking his cynicism and that he would not, in fact, want Dorian’s life to be spoiled, Lord Henry’s behavior and influence in this context nevertheless do admittedly possess sadistic qualities which prove his decadence, and the effect of which eventually manages to ruin Dorian triumphantly. In addition, Lord Henry, who establishes the insignificance of morality in his belief that “it is better to be beautiful than to be good” (135), practices this influence on Dorian by enlightening him with a new and improved decadent edition of immorality, which ironically and as previously discussed, allows for indulgence in what is typically considered immoral. He, who in his own words represents to Dorian all the sins he has never had the courage to commit (57), further goes on to put sinful behavior through a colorful, desirable lens for the impressionable Dorian by claiming that the grossest immorality is to accept the standard of one’s age (56) and that “[t]he only horrible thing in the world is *ennui*, [...] That is the one sin for which there is no forgiveness” (141). *Ennui* is defined by *Oxford Languages* as “a feeling of listlessness and dissatisfaction arising from a lack of



occupation or excitement”, which ultimately proves the importance of being occupied, by the pursuit of pleasure and beauty, and nothing remotely more useful. According to this view, thus, any other sin is easily forgivable and not to be worried about, other than failing to indulge in what pleases one as much as possible. Lord Henry’s consequent indulgence in immoral behavior and ideas, and his words “beautiful sins, like beautiful things, are the privilege of the rich” (56) and “no civilized man ever regrets a pleasure” (56) showcase his pride in sinning, as well as forgiving any corruption and sin in the interest of selfish pleasure.

Lord Henry’s words “[o]ne’s own life – that is the important thing. As for the lives of one’s neighbours, [...] they are not one’s concern” (56), hint to death and possibly murder as a possible and likely *outcome* of decadent immorality. Dorian, however, proves the severity of his decadence by *beginning* his immoral journey with the indirect murder of Sibyl Vane – the first major death that occurs in the story, which also brings with it the death of Dorian’s innocence and the beginning of his life as a conscious and nevertheless uncaring sinner. Sibyl’s death is in many ways tied to decadence and results from it, as it begins with Dorian’s rejection of her on the grounds of her no longer appealing to him aesthetically after having lost her actress persona – thus showcasing the importance of arts and aesthetics over anything else in Dorian’s life and how it is art and the pleasure he receives from it which direct his life and emotions. Therefore, after she puts on an unimpressive performance as Shakespeare’s Juliet, Sibyl loses her spark in Dorian’s eyes, who had only fallen in love with her for her artistic value and beauty, and not her real self as a human being separate from her art. Thereafter, Sibyl, like Juliet, goes on to take her own life, an action which again can be explained by progressive decadence. As discussed in the introduction, each decadent character has their own infatuation of choice that they prioritize in life and from which they personally gain the most pleasure. Accordingly, in Dorian’s case, the source of this pleasure is beauty, which is in many ways inspired by art, as in the portrait of him which reveals to him his own beauty, and Sibyl’s acting which brings to his attention the beauty of the actress in the various roles she plays. In Sibyl’s case, however, this pleasure derives from the love she receives from Dorian and which she is made to feel for him, which makes her eyes open to the reality of the world outside of her career. Consequently, it is no wonder that these characters lose their appetite for life entirely when they are deprived of their sources of pleasure and the one entity their lives are overtaken by. Sibyl, thus, sees no point in living further after Dorian makes it clear that he no longer loves her and that he cannot see her again. Since for Sibyl, this love comes to become the focal point of her life and without

it, life is not worth living, upon having lost contact with the most important matter in her life, she takes it upon herself to put an end to her then loveless, pleasure-less, and consequently meaningless life by committing suicide. Thereby, Sibyl showcases her decadent indifference to death and how little it matters in comparison with love and the fulfillment she had once received from experiencing it. Therefore, Sibyl, whose name is reminiscent of the Greek legend of “Sibyls” – female prophets in ancient times who were thought to utter the prophecies of a god – thusly becomes a prophet figure in this story and represents the prophetic example of divine love by revealing the sincerity and authenticity of the love she feels for Dorian. After falling in love with a nameless stranger and becoming yet another prisoner of Dorian’s good looks and inescapable charms, which make Dorian at once her whole and new world (49), Sibyl’s spiritual act of suicide further demonstrates the idealness of her love for Dorian, as well as its juxtaposition with the decadent and solely beauty and artistic-based “love” Dorian had claimed for her. Thus, Sibyl, whose ideal love for Dorian makes her value this love and life over art, leaves her fate to the decadent hands of Dorian, who in turn unintentionally triggers Sibyl’s suicide as well as the loss of his own moral soul.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* thus functions as the Exhibit A of the insignificance of death for the decadent as discussed in the introduction, and following Sibyl’s disregard for death and according to the decadent practice, Dorian shows how beauty and art are prioritized over essentially anything else, and how tragedies such as death simply and consequently fail to matter as much. This point highlights the belief shared by the decadent and the aesthete in the brevity of life and the longevity of art – that is, the fact that art is long and will outlast any human being and is therefore deserving of unparalleled respect whereas human life is relatively short and inconsequential, and can hence be treated with little to no care or respect. Aesthetics manifests itself in this scenario as a metaphysical and transcendental affair way above earthly concerns such as life and death. This belief thus constitutes the foundation of the way aesthetes proceed to behave in the short life they were given, and explains sufficiently why they put art on such a pedestal and why death for them pales in significance. In this story, the only issue which appears to bother Dorian about death is thus its contrast with beauty. Firstly, Dorian shows a dislike for getting old and one day dying, simply because it signifies that he would no longer be young and beautiful; his main concern then, rather than losing his *life*, is losing his *beauty*, as life without beauty would not be worth living after all. In addition, the one thing that gives Dorian discomfort about being involved in the death of others, is the signs these murders

leave on the face of his soul – the portrait. Rather than feeling guilt or disgust for having been the cause of someone’s death, then, he only shows annoyance at how these deaths take away from his (or rather, his portrait’s) beauty, once again proving the prioritization of beauty over death. Accordingly and based on the significance of aesthetics and the insignificance of death, it is perhaps preferable that since death is inescapable, it might as well encompass some level of beauty in one way or another. In other words and as discussed in the introduction, as human beings are all to die, they might as well die for an aesthetically pleasing cause rather than any other less beautiful reason. Therefore, Dorian gladly subscribes to Lord Henry’s aestheticization of death theory, and views death as at least unimportant and at most (if it is someone else’s death for his sake), beautiful. Consequently, after Sibyl’s death, Dorian refuses to take any responsibility, and remains, quite surprisingly to himself, unaffected. He in fact comments that the event seemed to him “far too wonderful for tears” (70) and “like a wonderful ending to a wonderful play” (71). Taking Lord Henry’s ever-helpful explanation of this phenomenon as “a tragedy that possesses artistic elements of beauty” (71), even in Sibyl’s death, Dorian manages to find beauty, “the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy”, a tragedy in which he took a great part, but by which he has not been wounded (71), which leads to him appreciating the way events ensued. Thereby, although an innocent soul has lost her life owing to him and his cruelty, Dorian fails to feel compassion toward her and the noble measures she resorted to, as he instead accuses Sibyl of having been selfish for killing herself because of him.

The narcissism Dorian finds in himself due to the love of his own beauty, therefore, is only the first immoral trap he gets involved in thanks to his newly-found obsession with beauty. Dorian’s wish of “[i]f it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old” (21) had admittedly and initially been out of a harmless desire to hide from his face the signs and hideousness of aging and loss of youth only to quench his thirst for beauty. However, it is after Sibyl kills herself for the love of him and because of his cruelty – by association making Dorian a murderer – that he comes to realize the other unappealing marks his portrait would be doomed to wear instead of him as a result of his indecent behavior and atrocity of sinning. Dorian’s subsequent life after his involvement in this indirect murder, interestingly enough, follows the marks of sin his portrait comes to wear in the artwork, thus verifying Wilde’s claim that “life imitates art” (“The Decay of Lying” 933). This extra feature hence gives Dorian the possibility and will to misbehave to his heart’s content and indulge not only in eternal youth but also in “infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins” (74), the shame of

which his portrait and not he would be bound to bear, thus making this portrait the perfect excuse for Dorian to lose himself in immorality without any visible repercussions. Wilde thus shows an instance of an artificial work of art taking over a living human being's life and becoming so significant as to allow for limitless immorality. This immorality can clearly be seen in the pleasure Dorian retrieves from examining "with a monstrous and terrible delight" (90) signs of age and sin apparent in his portrait, thusly becoming a man of "secret vices" (104) while his face remains ageless and innocent-looking. Dorian's words "perhaps in nearly every joy, as certainly in every pleasure, cruelty has its place" (89) unravel the underlying grounds to how the pleasure he finds in indulging in his own beauty naturally incorporates some level of cruelty. He thus sadistically rejoices in the fact that, unlike Des Esseintes, he would never have to dread looking into a mirror for fear of his decaying beauty, and merrily reads about the hero's tragic fate of losing "what in others, and in the world, he had most dearly valued" (89), a tragedy to which he cannot relate. Dorian is thus only *almost* saddened by noticing the damage time has on other beautiful things, his own exemption making him blind and carefree of what others and not him have to go through thanks to the natural process of time. By mocking the crudeness of his portrait, which becomes a reminder of the immorality he has been involved in, and picturing the very monstrosity with which he has decided to lead his life, Dorian additionally gives realization to the sadomasochist within him who enjoys seeing the corruption of his own soul. He thus takes his indulgence in pleasure as well as sadism one step further by practicing the same kind of influence Lord Henry had over him, over his other friends, and filling them with "a madness for pleasure" (105) and smiling about it, thusly turning into *un homme fatal* who "[has] been an evil influence to others, and [has] experienced a terrible joy in being so" (152). It comes to the point that Dorian becomes known for corrupting everyone he becomes intimate with, so that no one wants to be associated with his friends or the women he spends time with. After Sibyl, Dorian goes on to become the influence behind the suicide of other figures such as his young friends, to whom Dorian's friendship has quite literally been - according to Basil - fatal, an accusation in response to which Dorian simply smiles and refuses to take any blame for, and which once again showcases the nothingness of morality to him.

Homoeroticism, perhaps the scandalous phenomenon par excellence of the Victorian period, aggravates the aesthetic narcissism and murderous inclination of Dorian's decadence. To begin with, the fact that homosexuality is fundamentally and simultaneously against nature, the common world, and its intolerant beliefs, makes it a pleasure perfectly aligned with decadent

requirements. Additionally, according to the heteronormative ideals of the Victorian era and Christianity, homosexuality is considered to be useless not only because of its stance against the divine command but also due to its lack of procreation. This sense of futility and lack of practical and natural function thus results in homosexuality coinciding with aesthetics and in this way also becoming an attractive and fitting preoccupation for the decadent. Bernheimer believes that Dorian's self and identity are formulated through "the close connection between decadence and homosexuality" (Bernheimer 60), since the manner through which Dorian perceives himself is after all reliant on the erotic desire and verbal confirmation he receives from Basil and Lord Henry respectively. However, the main character of this story fails to be the representative of the homosexuality with which the novel is otherwise associated; instead, Dorian is the passive object of the homosexual desire of other men. Nevertheless, "the atmosphere of the story is saturated with homoerotic feeling and style" (Carrol 10), and the effeminate mannerisms of the characters, their preoccupation with the male beauty, as well as and especially Basil's unconcealed and rather brazen love for Dorian make up for the fragment Dorian leaves in the category of same-gender love. As hinted earlier, Basil claims Dorian became to him "the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream" (80), and in his own words, worships him, and Lord Henry fittingly refers to what Basil feels for Dorian as "a romance of art" (12). Wilde thus boldly depicts an instance of what Ellmann terms a previously "uncelebrated form of love" (Ellmann 288). As a result, it is of no surprise that Basil cannot allow the portrait he has painted of Dorian to be revealed to the public, perhaps for the fear that the "gross indecency" of his suppressed feelings for his male friend becomes evident; Basil's portrait thus comes to stand for the portrait of repressed homosexuality in the nineteenth century. This main instance of homosexuality in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, however, demonstrates the tragic fate commonly associated with this type of love in Wilde's works, as Basil's confession of his feelings toward Dorian fails to be reciprocated and Dorian heartlessly labels it as "not even a compliment" and "a disappointing confession" (82), declaring that they are friends and they should always remain so. Basil's love for Dorian nevertheless falls into the same category as Sibyl's love for Dorian because of its ideal rather than decadent nature, as he selflessly and non-demandingly continues his unreciprocated love, and as his "fascination with Dorian compromises his moral judgment" (Carrol 17), making him offer to protect his beloved's secret despite his acts of perversity.

After a pursuit of beauty and pleasure leads to immorality and sin, Dorian finds that “the memory of old sins could be destroyed by the madness of sins that were new” (128) which in turn leads to him becoming concentrated on evil with a soul hungry for rebellion (131-132). In addition, despite the pang of guilt he feels as a result of his first sin of unwantedly causing Sibyl’s suicide, his subsequent acts of immorality, due to their lack of power over what matters to him, become more effortless, natural, and impulsive. Regarding this matter, Bernheimer claims that these instances celebrate moral perversion as the essence of decadence, thus condemning Dorian as the representative of the decadent man for “his aestheticism, his self-indulgent narcissism, [and] his callous indifference to the suffering of others” (Bernheimer 59).

There are moments, psychologists tell us, when the passion for sin, or for what the world calls sin, so dominates a nature, that every fibre of the body, as every cell of the brain, seems to be instinct with fearful impulses. Men and women at such moments lose the freedom of their will. They move to their terrible end as automatons move, Choice is taken from them, and conscience is either killed, or, if it lives at all, lives but to give rebellion its fascination, and disobedience its charm. (131)

From the previous quote, the motive behind Dorian’s yearning for committing more and more sins becomes clear, as he perceives sin as simply a form of rebellion against what is considered normal, natural, and acceptable. Aside from refusing to accept any responsibility for Sibyl’s suicide, Dorian also goes on to claim “it was his beauty that had ruined him” (152) and that “it was the portrait that had done everything” (152), refusing to put any blame on himself. Dorian, who fails to put his everlasting youth to good use and instead finds himself immersed in evil and sin, accuses Basil of teaching him to be vain of his good looks (108) and finds within himself hatred as well as “mad passions of a hunted animal” (110) toward the painter. Hence, Dorian selfishly attributes all of his misery to the portrait, and by association, the painter behind it, and goes on to derive pleasure from sadistically showing Basil the deteriorating portrait and making him share the burden of its existence. The love for pleasure which has taken over Dorian’s personality soon clashes with Basil’s attempts to get him to pray for repentance – which paint Basil as a prophetic figure and which sound to Dorian like a threat to his everlasting youth and beauty, as well as the end of his pleasant days – and the immorality and sadism to which he is used at this point help lead him to stab Basil to death without flinching. Even though his once innocent obsession with beauty and pleasure leads to irreversible pain and damage to

those around him, however, Dorian's selfishness makes the death of Basil Hallward seem very little to him (153). Even the artist of the fateful portrait which had guaranteed Dorian unlimited beauty and pleasure is thus not spared from the decadent notion of choosing beauty over one's, or another's life. Therefore, Dorian audaciously chooses keeping his secret and maintaining his beauty, over friendship and human life, and in order to both punish his friend for bringing an ugly entity into his life, and to maintain his own beauty, he eliminates this objectively harmless figure from his life and the world alike. As Basil's death had been simply a means to the much greater end of preserving beauty, Dorian remains strangely calm afterward, and in fact winces "at the memory of all that *he* has suffered" (112; emphasis added), explicitly revealing how he does not feel a tinge of guilt for what he has done, and how he, in fact, considers *himself* the victim.

Dorian, who despite having committed a direct and gruesome act of murder, has enough peace of mind and control over his emotions to plan destroying the evidence and getting his story straight, after failing to manipulate Alan Campbell, his old friend, to destroy Basil's corpse for him, resorts to another instance of immorality – blackmailing him to get what he wants, at this point not even batting an eye. The note Dorian hands Alan, and which convinces Alan, in turn, to change his mind and agree to conduct a chemical "experiment" to dispose of Basil's body, is widely suspected to have been one containing the threatening message of outing Alan as a homosexual. Therefore, Dorian as a decadent character not only breaks the heart of Basil, who is enamored with him, but also proves to be a nuance to the other homosexual character in the story, who also goes on to take his own life not long after.

Despite the fact that Dorian's prayer is heard and fulfilled, and he gets to keep his beauty and youth intact while his portrait takes on the consequences of his questionable tactics, he is nevertheless unsatisfied with the imperfection of the piece of art he is in possession of, and which despite having been hidden in another room, is still present-day and night in his mind to remind him of the ugliness of his soul. Dorian's final attempt to right his wrongs by sparing a village girl from having her grace tarnished because of him proves difficult thanks to his hateful portrait flaunting more signs of cunningness than less as he had hoped, and he is instead forced to realize that "in hypocrisy he had worn the mask of goodness" (153). Similarly to the inspiration behind Basil's murder, then, it is Dorian's desire for uninterrupted beauty as well as his dismay of the unaesthetic eyesore which is his portrait that lead him to try to get rid of it

once and for all, so that he can live beautifully without the portrait bringing “melancholy across his passions” (154). Hoping to start a new life but nevertheless unwilling either to be burdened by his past or to confess to his sins and suffer from the adequate punishment, he decides instead to destroy the one evidence left against him, so that he can thenceforth enjoy his beauty confidently and with no worries:

As it [the knife] had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter’s work, and all that that meant. It would kill the past, and when that as dead he would be free. It would kill this monstrous soul-life, and without its hideous warnings he would be at peace. (154)

Hence, after continuously bringing destruction to his soul and sadistically watching its slow and steady degradation with no care, Dorian ultimately decides to discard of it altogether. The act of Dorian stabbing his own portrait, which is essentially the equivalent of his conscience and contains more of him and his soul than his actual physical fraud of a youthful body does, serves thus as yet another instance of murder in his hands, this time in the form of soul-murder as well as and unexpectedly, self-murder. This dramatic act subsequently leads to his portrait reclaiming its rightfully deserved youth and beauty and Dorian’s actual body finally becoming the representative bearer of the narrative of his life.

This novel thus displays the ultimate instance of art winning the battle against the nevertheless mortal man after having submitted him to perpetual declination, which accordingly makes *The Picture of Dorian Gray* “the aesthetic novel *par excellence*” (Ellmann 297) – not in exposing this doctrine but in exhibiting its dangers. Therefore, even though it might at first glance appear as if Dorian is superior to the portrait due to his unchanging beauty, this belief proves to have been a mere artful delusion. Dorian Gray, as the representative of the decadent man, who had trusted himself to art in accordance with Wilde’s promise that “[i]t is through Art and Art only that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence” (“The Critic as Artist” 995), ironically comes to become the victim of this art and its previously unadvertised dangers. It is thus a work of art, which leads first to Dorian’s ruination with its promise of hiding from his visible appearance the signs of immorality – ones which he otherwise would have at least attempted to avoid, even if only for the sake of not damaging the innocence and beauty visible on his face – and eventually, to his death. Despite Lord Henry’s wistful words that “[t]o have ruined oneself over poetry is an honor” (39), Dorian’s agonizing death and fate owing to art



possess no such verse, and are nowhere near as glorious. Thus, although Dorian's successful life of decadence as well as his unchanging beauty and youth might have been envied, his tragic fate that puts an untimely end to these triumphs is not. The obscure decline of Dorian's life into corruption, sin, and murder, as well as his harsh fate, can thus be attributed to "art that turns upon its original as son against father or man against God" (Ellmann 293), and equally, the power man willingly and wholeheartedly yields to decadent concepts of pleasure such as beauty and aesthetics.

## 2 Chapter Two: *Salomé*

*Salomé* is arguably one of Oscar Wilde's most decadent works with some of the highest numbers of both aesthetic elements as well as deaths, and it has been described as "the epitome of English Decadence", as the protagonist, Salomé, "represents the erotic, the exotic, the mysterious, the historical, the aesthetic, the deviant, the gratuitous, the narcissistic and the essence of death: in a word, she represents Decadence" (Schmidgall, qtd. in Sully 29). The provocative and tragic love story of *Salomé* issues obvious invitations to be interpreted within a large number of theoretical approaches, namely feminist theory and René Girard's theory of the sacred and structural mimesis of violence for Salomé's noteworthy resistance against the patriarchy, as well as psychological hermeneutics investigating human desire in a secular world. However, despite these valid possibilities, focusing on theory could also in a sense overshadow and disregard the decadent aesthetics in play. Thus, the emphasis here is put on the way Wilde's play illustrates perfectly how Salomé enacts the decadence precipitated upon her by her parents. Accordingly, Wilde tells the story of Salomé, the princess of Judaea and the daughter of Herodias, who is blinded by her beauty-based decadent desire for the lips of Jokanaan, the prophet isolated in the cistern of the palace. Salomé accordingly proceeds to put on an iconic and erotic dance performance for her step-father, Herod – who happens to harbor a similarly decadent infatuation with her – and subsequently, makes a ghastly boon of the prophet's head, thus instantiating strikingly the great lengths of immorality the decadent go to in order to successfully quench their thirst for beauty and pleasure.

The story of *Salomé* originates from the gospels of Mark 6 and Matthew 14 in the bible. Matthew 14 goes as follows:

**14** At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus,<sup>2</sup> and he said to his attendants, "This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him."

<sup>3</sup> Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife,<sup>4</sup> for John had been saying to him: "It is not lawful

for you to have her.”<sup>5</sup> Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered John a prophet.

<sup>6</sup> On Herod’s birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for the guests and pleased Herod so much <sup>7</sup> that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. <sup>8</sup> Prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.” <sup>9</sup> The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted <sup>10</sup> and had John beheaded in the prison. <sup>11</sup> His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother. <sup>12</sup> John’s disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.

According to Jordan’s discussion of this source in “Salome in the Middle Ages”, this nameless daughter of Herodias is identified as Salome in historian Josephus’ *The Antiquities of the Jews* (Jordan 7), and based on this account, the background of Wilde’s *Salomé* is made clearer. Thus, the reason for John the Baptist/Jokanaan’s imprisonment is revealed as having declared Herod and Herodias’s marriage unlawful, and according to Mark 6, Herod’s dismay about killing the prophet is further explained as “<sup>20</sup> Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him”. In the biblical story, Salome is shown dancing for the guests at Herod’s birthday banquet without ulterior motives and in fact, appears clueless as to what to ask for from Herod when it is time for her reward. Therefore, the credits of the idea of having John the Baptist’s head on a platter are given entirely to Herodias, who from the beginning “nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to” (Mark 6) due to Herod’s protection of him, instead of Salomé and her fatal desire for the prophet’s lips. Consequently, the biblical Salome, whose role “centers on her pleasing Herod with her dance” and who “simply responds to the male demands made upon her” (Skaggs 126) is shown docilely taking the head straight to her adulterous mother, with no apparent necrophiliac actions done to the severed head. Therefore, although Salome is depicted in Christian traditions as a monster as a result of her request for the execution of a reputed prophet and the serving up of his severed head (Jordan 9), the biblical Salome nevertheless pales in levels of immorality and grotesquerie when compared to “the personification of the lascivious woman, a temptress who lures men away from salvation” (Barr 73) of the *Salomé* that Wilde portrays.

Both the character and the story of Salome are lavishly enhanced by Wilde and gifted further appalling peculiarities in accordance with the decadent fall from religious sanctity to the secular mode of the fin de siècle. This original biblical story of Salome, thus, seemed to Wilde too “dry and colourless; without lavishness, extravagance or sin” (Carillo, qtd. in Sully 18), which is why he took it upon himself to modify the story so that it appeals to the imagination of a dreamer rather than the intellect of a scholar. Although Herod lusting after Salomé, and Salomé after Jokanaan make up the majority of the plot of Wilde’s play as well as the inspiration behind the subsequent decadent murders, neither of these acts of moral outrage is mentioned in the original biblical story. By changing the character of the passive child Salome of the bible and turning her from an albeit controversial but nevertheless obedient princess to a classic destructive and dangerous femme fatale of knowing evil and vicious intent (Bentley, qtd. in Kultermann 195), Wilde adds an unmistakable and glaring touch of decadence to the story. Therefore, Salomé – contrary to the etymological background of her name from the Hebrew “Shalom” which evokes tranquility – gets blinded by her chaotic desires and resorts to willful murder as well as overindulging in beauty, love, and lust, to the point that “she no longer [has] her origin in Biblical tradition” (Huysmans 66). Furthermore, in the original story, Salome is said to have simply danced for the guests and only pleased Herod as a result, and her provocative “Dance of the Seven Veils” which as a result turns her into an erotic symbol and adds immense aesthetic elements to the play is neither specified nor dwelled upon. Thus, this dance, which adds a level of savage seductiveness to Salomé’s character and transforms her image into a “symbolic incarnation of undying lust” is yet another decadent feature which was originated by Wilde and introduced to the story of Salome, thus turning Salomé’s dance from a performance for the guests to a private unveiling and striptease for Herod. By taking an originally biblical story and turning it into a savage disembowelment of religion, prophets, and prophecies, Wilde goes against the normative religious and Christian landscape of the Victorian era and instead brings to light how much more significant and engrossing other matters such as beauty and desire are. This taking of a biblical story out of its context, as a result, causes a fall from moral standards and divine perspectives and rather adds to the story non-religious, aesthetic purposes which in turn transform it into a decadent tale.

While Huysmans’ *Against Nature* is mentioned in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Salome is mentioned in *Against Nature* as the subject of the two paintings *Salomé Dansant* and

*L'Apparition* by Gustave Moreau that Des Esseintes has in his collection. About Salome, Huysmans writes:

“She had become, as it were, the symbolic incarnation of undying Lust, the Goddess of immortal Hysteria, the accursed Beauty exalted above all the other beauties by the catalepsy that hardens her flesh and steels her muscles, the monstrous Beast, indifferent, irresponsible, poisoning, like the Helen of ancient myth, everything that approaches her, everything that sees her, everything that she touches.” (Huysmans 65– 66)

Thus, Huysmans highlights Salome’s status as a favorite decadent figure and allocates to her the role of a beautiful and irresistible but destructive femme fatale. Petra Dierkes-Thrun claims in her book *Salome's Modernity* that “[i]n Huysmans’s novel, Moreau’s Salomés model a mixture of sexual transgression and quasi-metaphysical sublimity similar to that we find in Wilde’s Salomé, adding elements of horror and pathology that may have influenced Wilde as well” (Dierkes-Thrun 35). In addition and as Stone mentions in his book *Decadence and Modernism*, “Salome, delivers extended descriptions of her surroundings in the language of Decadence” – which can also easily be dubbed the language of Des Esseintes – “long passages of ornamental images linked by their metonymical relationship to the subject” (Stone 104). *Salomé*, which after *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is another work by Wilde inspired by *Against Nature*, was written originally in French, and interestingly enough, then translated into English by Lord Alfred Douglas, known as Wilde’s gay lover. In this play as well, which keeps up with the decadent theme and further strengthens it thanks to a savage and beauty-thirsty protagonist, common elements of decadence such as hatred of the world, the resulting alienation, the resort to aesthetics and beautiful sources of pleasure, specifically love and decadent desire, and the inevitable murderous immorality which follows can thus be discerned.

Kearns’ suggestion of “[...] sickness at the world, general skepticism, delight in perversion, and employment of crude humor and a belief in the superiority of human creativity over logic and the natural world” (Kearns 15) as the common characteristics of the decadent movement rightly establish *Salomé* as a decadent play. Accordingly, it is Wilde’s depiction of the decadent disagreement with contemporary religion which opens up the issue of hatred of the world and its common people, as well as their commonplace and set-into-stone beliefs. In the story, there is a visible “lack of authority and of social and political unity” which results in “disagreements

about even the most basic common truths and values” (Dierkes-Thrun 32). The first instance of such disagreement with the common world, its commonplace people, and their mundane problems is seen in the soldiers discussing different Jews and the way they dispute despite adhering to the same religion. The “general skepticism” that Kearns mentions is thus seen in the case of the representatives of different Jewish tribes depicted in the story, each of which is skeptical about different things: the existence of angels, the visibility of God, who can see him and how he works, the arrival of Messias, and what he is capable of. In addition, the Nubian mentions that fifty young men and a hundred maidens are sacrificed to their blood-thirsty gods every year, and that despite that, the gods are still very harsh to them. The other worshipped gods are said to be either driven out of the country, dead, or invisible. Thusly, the idea of believing in a deity which cannot be seen, and which calls for irrational blood sacrifices, is identified as altogether ridiculous, which in addition brings into question the entire concept of modern religion and the supposed god different religions blindly believe in. In addition, Jokanaan, the prophet, is viewed merely as a figure who utters a ridiculous thing or two once in a while, and thus prophets are represented as preposterous folk full of nonsense, and their prophecies as simply incomprehensible and absurd. Consequently, religion becomes a topic that is smoothly ridiculed in a decadent manner.

The disagreement the characters manifest toward both each other and the world and its common practices naturally brings upon the next decadent characteristic: alienation. The state of constant disagreement the different Jews in the story are seen in leads to them failing to form a united sect and instead acting as separate individuals. In addition, Jokanaan, aside from having his words labeled as gibberish, is said to have been quite literally isolated in a cistern; he is neither seen nor understood, and is left entirely on his own. Therefore, despite the number of characters present and vocal in the play, each and every one of them seems to display a certain level of alienation from the rest, on two levels; first, on the level of looking, and second, talking. As Stone claims, in this story “[t]he act of looking is not reciprocated and does not lead to a shared experience or increased mutual understanding; it rather trails off into a series of disjointed episodes of watching, a one-way act that is more solitary than communicative” (Stone 117). In addition and overall, it appears as if there are very few mutual conversations happening in the play, despite the fact that the characters are constantly talking to each other; it is as if most of said dialogues are directed to blocked ears, and as a result receive no response, or at least, not an appropriate one.

Accordingly, whereas the young Syrian and the page of Herodias are the two characters who open the play and are the first characters from whom speech is heard, they are both isolated and neither one of them manages to get a proper response from whom they direct their gaze toward, or to what they say. The pleas of the page of Herodias towards the young Syrian to stop looking at Salomé are completely disregarded by the captain, and so is his grievance for him – it is in fact almost as if this character does not exist and is not heard by anyone else, as if he is talking to a nonresponsive wall. On the other hand, the young Syrian is stuck in a very similar form of alienation, as he constantly stares at and tries to communicate with Salomé but is completely ignored by her. Once Salomé does recognize his existence and begins to talk to him, it is only to state what she desires, and not to hear what he has to say; in fact, everything the young Syrian says at this point also completely falls on deaf ears.

This isolation and alienation are also perceived in the case of the more central characters. Although Herod and Herodias are married, they do not strike the reader as a united pair but rather their own separate people. Herodias is left to her own devices to suffer the guilt of marrying her first husband and former king's brother by Jokanaan's constant reproaches, as well as from Salomé's disregard of her orders and her husband's constantly lingering gaze on her daughter. Herod simply only receives acknowledgment from his subjects, and his monologues about the moon and Salomé's beauty are either ignored or faced with backlash; he fails to receive respect from either Herodias or Salomé, and is left to contemplate his desires on his own. Furthermore, Salomé, despite being the center of attention and the object of desire, is nevertheless completely alone. She is forced to tolerate what Dierkes-Thrun labels as "the isolating look or gaze": "The other characters approach Salomé as a looking glass for their own narcissistic desires and needs, and yet they do not truly see her" (Dierkes-Thrun 20). Therefore, as a result of having the unwanted gaze of men on herself at all times, Salomé resorts to alienating herself from them – she blocks out the young Syrian and Herod's advances and comments about her beauty, only to be in turn shunned and alienated by the one man she desires.

As discussed in the introduction as well as exemplified in the first chapter, disappointment with the world and what common people are preoccupied with – namely religion – and being alienated trigger a need to find beauty and pleasure in unorthodox temptations which give a promise of meaning to the life of the otherwise disheartened and alienated decadent individual. In the story of *Salomé*, one central concept which establishes the journey of indulgence in

beauty, helps it develop well into the resulting immorality, and depicts perfectly the possibility and occurrence of murder at the end, is love. Love is a concept that is rather complicated to distinguish in decadent works in general and in *Salomé* in particular. Although many of the gazes and desires seen in the play might at first glance be misinterpreted and mislabeled as love, as an afterthought, they fail to amount to actual love for various reasons, and it would thus be more fitting to refer to these fervent sensations as “decadent desires” rather than love.

To begin with and as mentioned in the introduction, the idea of love as an ideal, abstract, and metaphysical concept which is being discussed here and which functions as a scale against which all instances of love are measured, is divine, altruistic, and “agapic”. Agapic love is an unconditional and selfless form of love exemplified in John 3.16 thusly: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”. Additionally and according to *Encyclopædia Britannica*, The New Testament allocates this love to “the fatherly love of God for humans, as well as the human reciprocal love for God” which ultimately “extends to the love of one’s fellow humans”. This original, divine, ideal, and religious love is thus set up by the example of God himself and the love he has for human beings, and is then followed by prophets and their love for both human beings and God. Jesus, in his act of sacrificing his life for the sins of humanity as a testimony of his true love for them and God, as well as Abraham proving his love and loyalty towards God by demonstrating a willingness to sacrifice his son, are both instances of this selfless ideal of love.

In *Salomé*, the character who is in charge of this type of divine love is Jokanaan, who as a prophet – and as a representative of all prophets – remains faithful to God despite years of imprisonment, and continues preaching the impropriety of the incestuous relationship between Herodias and Herod – who has killed his own brother and is now sleeping with said brother’s wife. Jokanaan hence acts as a guardian from the moral corruptive institution, one whose role is to command and guide human beings toward the right direction and to stop them from committing corrupt behavior. Therefore, he remains unfazed despite Salomé’s beauty and her intense lustful desire for him, and expresses disgust at being looked at, touched by, or spoken to by her. He, who proudly identifies as “the chosen of the Lord” and claims that he listens “but to the voice of the Lord God” (725), refers to Salomé as the daughter of Babylon, known for its sinfulness and the vulgarity of its women, and the daughter of Sodom, which according to The Old Testament was a city destroyed by God for its wickedness. Jokanaan, whose only beloved



is God and who is thus not tempted by the type of love the daughter of adultery and of an incestuous mother offers, instead adheres to his duty as a prophet to point to Jesus, who again symbolizes true love, and after preaching and instructing Salomé to find the Son of Man and repent for her sins, decides to curse her for her indecency. Jokanaan's eventual fate, murder in the hands of Salomé, further attests to his ideal, prophetic love for God and his loyalty to him as well as his beliefs, his death thus strengthening the authenticity of this love.

Another instance of this ideal love which is depicted in the story of *Salomé* by a decadent character and in a tragically beautiful way is the love the young Syrian illustrates for Salomé. The young Syrian's love is inclined more toward romantic rather than platonic love or one targeting God, and does involve him marveling at Salomé's beauty and comparing her to a flower, which thus paints the young Syrian as a decadent character. However, and despite the decadence of this lover, his love nevertheless does fulfill the fundamental requirements of true love, and thus comes upon as an example of ideal and selfless love. While the young Syrian does long for Salomé, he is shown being more than satisfied with a single glance from her and does not demand more. In fact, the young Syrian, who is hopelessly in love with Salomé, following her promise of sparing him a glance – and maybe even a smile! – goes on to go against the Tetrarch's orders and to great lengths in order to satisfy his beloved. In addition, the young Syrian does not blast his love for Salomé in a shameless and selfish manner, and the words he directs to her are rather warnings for her own good, which in the end fall on deaf ears. The young Syrian in this story can in fact be viewed as a Christ figure – one who after offering his unconditional love to his beloved and having to painfully stand back and witness her lose herself in sin, ends up sacrificing his life for Salomé and love, thus making his feelings appear pure and selfless enough to be deemed worthy of the title “love”.

Homosexuality is yet another decadent element in *Salomé* which radiates disagreement with nature and its heterosexual norms, as well as with the common world and its intolerance, instead advocating indulgence in what brings one pleasure rather than what is expected and accepted. The homoerotic theme running through *Salomé* is in addition in line with Wilde's categorization of homosexual love as ideal rather than decadent, and as an aesthetic rather than an immoral trait of decadence. Homosexual love is spotted in the case of the page of Herodias, who discloses his feelings for the young Syrian from the very beginning of the play by reacting unfavorably every time the young Syrian voices his amorous and longing thoughts regarding

Salomé. The representation of homosexuality in this story thus repeats the mantra of “[y]ou are always looking at her. You look at her too much” (719), and adds a threatening “[s]omething terrible might happen” (719) in an attempt to put a halt to hearing his “friend” talk about the princess so much and in such a manner. The page of Herodias expresses an inability to fathom why the young Syrian is so persistent in his obsession with Salomé even though he barely gets acknowledged by her. However, he fails to recognize that he, with the constant attention he gives to the young Syrian, how aware he is of what he is doing and whom he is looking at, as well as the fact that he does not manage to get a single reply out of his beloved throughout the entire story even though he constantly speaks to him, is very much in a parallel situation. After the young Syrian’s death, the page of Herodias, who is the only character who seems to notice or care, goes on to fondly reminisce that,

He was my brother, and nearer to me than a brother. I gave him a little box full of perfumes, and a ring of agate that he wore always on his hand. In the evening we used to walk by the river, among the almond trees, and he would tell me of the things of his country. He spoke ever very low. The sound of his voice was like the sound of the flute, of a flute player. Also he much loved to gaze at himself in the river. I used to reproach him for that. (727)

Although the page of Herodias claims that the young Syrian had been his “brother”, then, the type of tone he applies when talking about him points to him having had more intimate feelings for the young Syrian than brotherly or friendly love. Regardless, despite his homosexual and presumably at the time unacceptable and inappropriate gaze, there is no one to scold the page of Herodias for looking and longing, and as in other decadent works, homosexuality is not shunned. He, similarly to many of Oscar Wilde’s other homosexual characters, is instead left on his own with his unreciprocated desire and yearning, and although his homosexuality is not in any way scorned, it is not entertained either and he does not ultimately achieve a happy ending. This homosexual instance of love, however, much similar to the homosexual love Basil had harbored for Dorian in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, due to its selflessness and harmlessness, can be categorized as ideal, thus following the pattern of homosexual loves, despite their unfortunate fates, being ideal and genuine rather than decadent and superficial.

While the transcendent agapic love discussed thus far is the highest form of love, on the other hand and in opposition, there stands Eros, erotic love or decadent “love” – all vile, selfish, and lustful, and thus failing to reach the criteria for being deemed worthy of the title of love. This type of desire which first and foremost stems from and is based on attraction to physical beauty then, is merely a decline and fall from the ideal phenomenon of love, as well as a fall from Christianity, the bible, God, and the kind of love they advocate, which then accordingly shapes the main decadence and decline in *Salomé*. The decadent characters are thus seen losing themselves in more immoral and questionable practices of this entirely different type of love – one dominated mainly by lust and self-indulgence, and mixed with ulterior motives, one which can no longer be qualified as pure, innocent, or romantic love. This fall from the conventional Victorian and Puritan idea of love – which would be considered, to the decadent taste, too commonplace and mainstream to indulge in – and the following clashing dedication to perverse and selfish desires showcases how in decadent works *the ideal of love* can hardly ever be achieved, due to the very fact that the type of love perceived is almost always only decadent desire disguised as love.

Among the instances of love illustrated in the story, Herod and Salomé’s are evidently mixed with selfish intentions, as these two characters are blinded by a decadent search for beauty and are solely concerned with themselves and their personal pleasures. These characters, both powerful displayers of decadent desire, live according to Wilde’s very definition of selfishness as mentioned in “The Soul of Man under Socialism” – not only as they wish to live, but also expecting and demanding their objects of desire to live and behave according to their wishes. They thus brazenly pamper their inappropriate impulses without taking into consideration the emotions or approval of the beloved, or the dreadful consequences those around them constantly try to warn them about. Both Herod and Salomé are, on that account, guilty of letting their beloveds’ beauty mislead them, and are seen getting lost in the pleasure looking at them brings. Thus, Herod and Salomé’s supposed loves, which deny the ethical norms of pure and genuine love and showcase rather more degraded and sadistic tendencies, once carefully investigated, can be identified as lustful desires and drives born from dissipation and a decadent mentality.

To begin with, Herod’s lustful and immoral desire for Salomé follows this pattern of ungodliness, self-indulgence, and decadence, as it is distinctly inspired by Salomé’s beauty and

has no deeper or more sincere framework. The tetrarch, who is overtaken and inappropriately invested in the beauty of his very own step-daughter – whom he claims is “fairer than all the daughters of Judaea” (737) – professes his love for Salomé by saying “I have ever loved you. . . it may be that I have loved you too much” (737). Despite this claim and Herod’s following expression of interest in making Salomé his queen (735), his decadent desire likewise fails to be deemed worthy of receiving the title of love. Even though Herod offers to dedicate to Salomé anything she wishes for, this generosity is provoked by his sly need to satisfy his cravings, rather than unconditional and bountiful love. Herod further proves the conditional and greedy nature of his supposed “love” for Salomé by putting his power as the tetrarch to use in order to accomplish his own selfish desires and to get his step-daughter to return his longing gaze, by promising her money, jewels, and half of his kingdom. In his selfish pursuit of Salomé, Herod pays no mind either to her disinterest and exasperation, shown through her words, “[w]hy does the Tetrarch look at me all the while with his mole’s eyes under his shaking eyelids? It is strange that the husband of my mother looks at me like that” (721), or to Herodias’ scolding. Instead, he keeps his unwanted gaze upon Salomé despite her constant rejection of him, thus proving the self-indulgent, inconsiderate, and decadent nature of this ogling, which additionally leads to his subsequent subjection of her to alienation as a result of this discomfort.

Aside from beauty, another main form of aesthetics that is crucial both to the story and to Herod’s infatuation with Salomé is the dance he requests from her after being faced with Salomé’s rejection. Like the decadent character that he is, in order to achieve the type of aesthetics he desires in life, Herod does everything; asks Salomé for a dance, commands her to dance for him, and lastly “prays” her to dance for him. His insatiable appetite for this dance – the fulfillment of which would accordingly give Herod hope for the reciprocation of his feelings – makes him hastily and generously promise to do as Salomé wishes in return – going as far as swearing on his life, his crown, and his gods to give her whatever she desires, even to the half of his kingdom (735). Herod – who had been grievously troubled by Salomé’s beauty – later confesses to the inappropriateness of his particular and sexual desire for his step-daughter as well as having been aware of Salomé’s annoyance at it; this knowledge, however, fails to affect in any way Herod’s persistence on receiving this dance. Instead, he maintains the immorality involved in this incestuous and unrequited desire and remains committed to doing what gives him pleasure rather than what is considered right, thusly revealing his inconsiderate attitude toward his supposed beloved and consequently, the decadence of his desire.

Another prime example of this type of love based mainly on erotic desire, beginning simply with an instant infatuation with physical features, and seeking impatient gratification with no care about the possible consequences is exhibited through “Salome's perverse, necrophiliac love for Jokanaan and her erotic handling of his body (Fernbach 210)”, which perfectly portrays the degradation of love from its ideal state. Salomé, who had not been so enchanted by Jokanaan before knowing about his beauty, after catching a glimpse of him begins to claim that she is amorous of his body, enamored of his hair and craving his mouth. These statements thus promptly make it obvious that her desire is corporal and based purely on his physical beauty and nothing else, and that the love she insists she feels for Jokanaan is not for him necessarily, but for his body and beauty. The character of John the Baptist then, originally “an ascetic Jewish prophet known in Christianity as the forerunner of Jesus” (Strugnell), is in Salomé’s eyes and through her desire reduced to his looks and recognized only for his beauty and not his wise or cautionary words, thus showcasing an instance of human beings being degraded in decadence as a means to the ultimate end – which would be aesthetics and beauty. Salomé, however, unlike the young Syrian, cannot simply stand by and appreciate her beloved’s beauty. Instead and in her state of infatuation, she decides that she wants to touch his body and his hair, and kiss his mouth, thus expressing, much to Jokanaan’s dismay, “her unrelenting, passionate wish to physically take in his beauty at all costs” (Dierkes-Thrun 28). Being rejected by Jokanaan time and time again does nothing to put an end to Salomé’s feelings or even her desperate attempts to get what she wants, and in fact, it makes her determination to kiss him stronger than ever, as she goes from “[l]et me kiss thy mouth” to “I will kiss thy mouth” (726), staying completely untroubled by his constant and obvious disinterest. Therefore, despite claiming to be in love with Jokanaan, even in her expression of love Salomé completely disregards the unwillingness of Jokanaan to be any part of what she has in mind, and indulges only in satisfying her own thirst. It is thus Salomé’s selfish and uncaring attitude toward her supposed beloved which sets her acclaimed “love” apart from the young Syrian’s noble love, despite both of them being intrigued by beauty. The ideal of love is thus broken in the story of Salomé and Jokanaan, as an instance of the exact opposite of actual love, as defined earlier, is illustrated. Salomé’s purely physical, selfish, and decadent desire, as opposed to unconditional love which is given freely to the loved one no matter what, is conditional and dependent on Jokanaan’s beauty, and also contains egocentric demands from the beloved, the nonfulfillment of which leads to Salomé resorting to force to get what she desires.

Just as Herod is obsessed with seeing Salomé dance for him, then, Salomé is obsessed with kissing Jokanaan's mouth, and thus Salomé, induced by Herod, goes on to personate the carnality of decadence. After feeling helpless, reduced to a "visual object of pleasure" for the male eye (Bucknell 505) and unable to put an end to Herod's unwelcome advances, Salomé opts to deflect that very same structure of decadent desire and unwanted gaze upon Jokanaan. In this manner, then, "Wilde's perverse heroine and the decapitation she orders could stand for the subversion of patriarchal authority" (Fernbach 210). Therefore, Salomé begins to mirror Herod's actions, going as far as ordering for Jokanaan to be taken out of the cistern, so that she can directly place her longing gaze upon him and make him as uncomfortable as she has hitherto been. Jokanaan's exclamation of "[w]ho is this woman who is looking at me? I will not have her look at me. Wherefore doth she look at me with her golden eyes, under her gilded eyelids?" (725) is thus an uncanny reminder of Salomé's own speech regarding the way Herod looks at her, with the same sense of discomfort. Therefore, Salomé who had become "the symbolic incarnation of undying Lust, the Goddess of immortal Hysteria" (Huysmans 66), also strikes the reader as "the projection of the male gaze viewing itself in inverted form" (Bucknell 523). As a result, although Salomé's decadent desire for Jokanaan stems from catching sight of his beauty and falling in love with that beauty at first sight, its continuation and destination are rather built on her anger at having had to receive unpleasantly the same kind of attraction and interest from her step-father. Salomé thus makes the perhaps subconscious decision to imitate Herod's ways, in order to not only get what she wants but also to free herself from being the oppressed one for a change. Another reason for Salomé's choice of force and discomfort directed at Jokanaan in order to win his love and attention can be due to the fact that these inappropriate methods are all she has been exposed to, and thus, they have become for her the norm of how love should be expressed, as she has come to believe that the way to acquire love is to demand it. As her refusals of Herod's love had previously not been heard or accepted, she is thus immune to and unbothered by Jokanaan's lack of interest and reciprocation, and goes on to obtain what her heart desires while actively and successfully ignoring every word of protest coming either from her *désiré* or others. Even though Herod is to some extent conscious of the indecency of his actions and desires, Salomé on the other hand exhibits an entirely other level of ignorant selfishness and self-indulgence, as she remains blind to the feelings and rejections of Jokanaan to the very end. Therefore, Jokanaan's unwavering pleas for Salomé to stay away from him merely appear to reinforce her desire for him and his indomitable spirit,

and his powerlessness further gives her the courage to shamelessly express her aberrant lust for his lips and body.

Since the main narrative from which decadence falls – e.g. God’s sacrifice of his own son by crucifixion and Abraham’s willingness to do the same to Isaac – is full of love-inspired sacrifice and murder, it is of no surprise that decadence and the decadent are also caught up in a similar mimetic structure of love and murder. It is thus inexorable that the passion and blindness with which these decadent characters pursue beauty, pleasure, and their decadent desires eventually lead to them resorting to drastic measures in order to achieve their aesthetic ideal. Death and indications of it are therefore scattered everywhere throughout the text, starting at the very beginning of the play where the page of Herodias mentions that the moon seems like a dead woman rising from a tomb, looking for dead things (719) followed up by Jokanaan’s claim that he hears “in the palace the beating of the wings of the angel of death” (725). The first death that takes place in the story is that of the young Syrian, who blinded by love, dismisses the foreshadowing warnings of the page of Herodias, and demonstrates a case of unwavering love for Salomé throughout the play. After being ignored by Salomé for the majority of the time, and finally used by her to get another man, the young Syrian has finally had enough and takes it upon himself to put an end to his own life. For the young Syrian, who had harbored an unrequited love for the princess for however long and had seemed satisfied with simply being in her presence, then, it is seeing his beloved show interest in another man and quite audaciously so, as well as being left to suffer from the way she looks at and the words she speaks to her own beloved which lead to him reaching his limits. As a result of prioritizing his love for Salomé in life, the young Syrian behaves as if he is not left a choice but to kill himself, as if the pain caused by having to stand there and watch Salomé not only not return his feelings, but also express fierce and not to mention improper feelings for another man right in front of him is too much to bear, and not worth staying alive for. Thus, even though the young Syrian was recently made captain by the tetrarch, and through the eyes of an outsider should not have had any reason to so suddenly put an end to his seemingly worthwhile life, this act proves his status as a decadent character and his failure to see anything more important than love and his beloved in life. This act of murder, against himself, radiates decadence, as futile, preventable deaths thanks to either love, art, or ideals are a common and recurring theme in decadent works. The young Syrian, then, much like Sibyl in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, exemplifies how life without love is not worth living, as both these ideal lovers decide they are better off dead than having to face

their beloveds' cruel indifference toward them. While in Sibyl's case, Dorian does initially express some level of shock and sadness for her death, and eventually calls her act of suicide for the sake of his love selfish, Salomé remains unfazed and entirely unreactive to the news of the young Syrian's noble act inspired by her, and goes on to repeat her impudent desire to kiss Jokanaan instead. The witnesses of the young Syrian's death simply claim to be unaware of why he would do such a thing, and the Tetrarch, completely oblivious and uncaring of the noble intentions behind this act, casually and senselessly comments that "[i]t is ridiculous to kill oneself" (728), bringing to light how completely in vain the death of this individual has been. Thus, through the pattern of true lovers ultimately being sacrificed for the cause of love, Wilde demonstrates the destructiveness of true love – despite its perfection and selflessness – to the lover. Therefore, few lovers in Wilde's stories get to live happily ever after, "because few are allowed to live at all" (Jones 887).

While the young Syrian's act of suicide shines in its selflessness and verifies the ideality of his love for Salomé, the aforementioned instances of decadent "love" are contradictorily followed up by self-indulgent instances of murder of the supposed beloveds. For Salomé – who claims that Jokanaan had been the only man she had ever loved, and (because of the fact) that he had been beautiful – events occur in the simple succession of "I saw thee, Jokanaan, and I loved thee" (741). As a result of this desire based on beauty, Salomé loses her mind and Jokanaan unwillingly becomes the main focus of her life, as well as everything she can think about and all she wants, and thus she carries on delivering her lengthy, amorous monologues towards and about him and his beauty. Despite the fact that before laying eyes on him and seeing his beauty, to Salomé, Jokanaan had only been the strange hidden prophet saying incomprehensible phrases and terrible things about her mother, upon seeing him for the first time, he becomes the only man she does not consider hateful. Naturally, then, once the opportunity arises, Salomé does what she can to get him in order to satisfy her unquenchable thirst for his irresistible ideal beauty. What follows is Salomé's "pursuit of Beauty to its utter extreme, following it literally into murder and death" (Dierkes-Thrun 29), which is the final destination of the aestheticism in question, and what according to Dierkes-Thrun, makes *Salomé* most closely resemble *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. By insisting on wanting Jokanaan's head as her reward for dancing, rather than all the jewelry and other treats promised by Herod – which would have made a non-decadent commoner at least briefly reconsider the initial request – Salomé demonstrates her decadence as well as the resulting desire not for materialistic objects but for the transcendental



concepts decadence gives value to – namely beauty, pleasure, and the so-called love she feels for the prophet. For Salomé, since it is getting what she desires that provides her with the sought-after pleasure, offers of jewels, money, and half of Herod's kingdom, which are not what she desires and will therefore not bring along any pleasure to her, accordingly fail to impress her. Therefore, Salomé puts the fulfillment of desire and the achievement of pleasure in a higher order than insignificant and worldly matters such as money, life, death, and a foolish rejection or two. Since the severed head, unlike Jokanaan, offers a promise of what Salomé has been aching for – the ultimate satisfaction of a kiss – the reason behind her persistence on it becomes clear. As the pursuit of pleasure, according to Wilde, is exactly what “[makes] *Salomé* so like a piece of music and [binds] it together as a ballad” (*De Profundis* 1080), Salomé thus adheres to this principle of pleasure and proves not to care about Jokanaan necessarily, but about pleasure and what will provide her with pleasure.

Salomé's iconic declarations that “the mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death” and that “[l]ove only should one consider” (741) sum up her decadence and aestheticism, as well as her belief that for the cause of love, nothing is off-limits. As a result and according to her priorities, which can simply be reduced to love above anything else, she goes well and beyond to make Jokanaan hers and get the kiss that she so desperately desires. Since the mystery of death conveniently pales in comparison and fails to amount to anything against the tremendous love she claims to have in her heart for Jokanaan, his death for the sake of their union solely functions as a means to an end – a much greater end, and the only one that matters. Therefore, it is this perversion, prioritization of love and pleasure over life and death, and making hasty decisions as a result that causes S. Ellis to call Salomé “a heroine of decadence” (Ellis 9). Salomé, thus, in a grandly aesthetic gesture and despite her own dismay as well as her mother's disapproval, proceeds to wear seven veils as well as perfumes and puts on a performance. As Des Esseintes describes in *Against Nature*, then, “[w]ith a withdrawn, solemn, almost august expression on her face, she begins the lascivious dance which is to rouse the aged Herod's dormant senses; her breasts rise and fall, and nipples hardening at the touch of her whirling necklace”. In the process of this dance, Salomé is almost naked, as “in the heat of the dance her veils have fallen away and her brocade robe slipped on the floor, so that now she is clad only in wrought metals and translucent gems” (Huysmans 68). This exquisite description paints this dance as beautifully mesmerizing and erotically evocative and further highlights this aesthetic piece of art as an ideal decadent delight, thus justifying the tetrarch's unwitting promise to

reward Salomé for it bountifully. This lascivious dance, however, despite its aesthetic façade, functions as yet another means to an end – rather than art for art’s sake – since Salomé only does it in order to get what she desires, which turns out to be the head of Jokanaan on a silver charger, for her own pleasure and so that she can finally get her desperately-desired kiss once he is dead and helpless. Salomé in this regard then, is an artist; one who produces a form of art – the deadly Dance of the Seven Veils – and also simultaneously changes its aesthetic value in order to get closer to quenching her own personal aesthetic, or rather, romantic thirst. After Jokanaan’s death, despite expressing some discomfort about the way he is no longer looking at her or getting back at her with bitter remarks, Salomé nevertheless boldly says, “I am athirst for thy beauty; I am hungry for thy body; and neither wine nor fruits can appease my desire” (741) and rejoices in finally kissing his cold, bitter, blood-stained mouth. Salomé is so blinded by her desire that she mistakes the taste of blood and murder on Jokanaan’s mouth to be “the taste of love” (742), completely blocking out the part of reality where she had him killed, as well as exhibiting the very fine line separating love from murder. The fact that her beloved is now dead and merely a severed head in front of her, due to her embracement of immorality and perversion in the way of her ideals, does not stop Salomé from trying to quench her thirst, and her voice can be heard as she triumphantly pronounces, “I have kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan” (742).

Just as Salomé had followed Herod’s pattern of forcing his decadent desire on his beloved, Herod this time follows Salomé’s example of murdering the person she claimed to be in love with. Herod, who remembers very well that Jokanaan had claimed a misfortune would follow his death, shows signs of being scared and disturbed by the thought of death, constantly hearing the beating of vast wings (729) – presumably those of the angel of death – as well as forbidding the raising of the dead, believing “it would be terrible if the dead came back” (732). Even though he does everything in his power to avoid killing Jokanaan, by trying to bribe Salomé with beautiful jewels and peacocks – the exhaustive list and excessive details of which are reminiscent of Des Esseintes’ and Dorian’s collections of different objects – instead of the ill sight of the head of a man cut from his body, his efforts are to no avail. The beating of wings which Jokanaan deciphers as a foreshadowing of death thus comes to be followed by the murder of Salomé in the hands of Herod. Salomé’s death by Herod’s order includes hints of the motivations behind both previous deaths. Firstly, after repeatedly expressing interest in Salomé and commenting on her beauty, Herod fails to receive a desirable response from her, and his

offers of wine, fruit, and sitting next to him are one after another rejected by Salomé. Unlike the young Syrian, Herod does manage to get at least some sort of acknowledgment from the subject of his interest, and even gets his final wish, a dance, granted. However, and despite him being overly willing to give Salomé the half of his kingdom and the throne of her mother, he nevertheless fails to have his desire reciprocated. Much similarly to how the young Syrian, intoxicated by Salomé and her beauty commits the forbidden act of allowing her to see the prophet, Herod also ends up sacrificing the holy prophet for Salomé's sake. In the next parallel, it is when Herod sees and hears Salomé's loving words to Jokanaan as well as her chants of "I have kissed thy mouth" (742) that he can no longer bear the sight of his beloved not only not returning his feelings, but openly and immodestly expressing her own feelings towards the cut off head of another man. In the ultimate scene, however, Herod behaves more as Salomé had done when pushing the murder of Jokanaan, than the young Syrian and his innocent and selfless act of suicide. Herod grasps a completely different understanding of the concept of life being worthless without love; that is, in the lack of love, it is Salomé's life rather than his own which to him becomes worthless. Here, instead of taking his own life, since his love is not returned, he takes Salomé's, who no longer offers the promise of love to him. Therefore, just as Salomé could not tolerate Jokanaan's rejection and had him killed so she could achieve what she desired, Herod, in an act of rage and revenge, demands for Salomé to be killed, both to put an end to her rejecting him, and to punish her for the indecency of her behavior regarding Jokanaan. Therefore, since he no longer sees any chance of Salomé ever loving him, and since in Salomé's own words, "[l]ove only should one consider" (741), Salomé's life serves no more purpose for him, and hence, he cold-bloodedly changes his stance, calls her monstrous, and ultimately orders her murder. The decadence evident in Herod and Salomé's cases thus proves its danger, as while facing their unresponsive beloveds, these characters as opposed to ideal lovers, refuse to die a symbolic death for love, but rather turn their backs on said beloveds and coldheartedly and for their own pleasure take their lives instead.

Consequently, after using a biblical story and in this way reminding the reader of the ideal of divine love, Wilde elucidates the fundamental differences between such a metaphysical love and a more secular variation of love often seen in society. By lingering on this issue, Wilde points to decadence and its inevitable influence on love, as well as how invalid decadent "love" is. Therefore, in the story of *Salomé*, the fall of religion as well as a fall from religion is highlighted, so that it is as if there is no God, and no one can be bothered to listen to Jokanaan

remind them of him. This purposeful deviation thus not only ridicules religion as a whole but also the specific type of love that is approved of and considered worthy *by* religion, instead taking the contrary route and committing overindulgently to the complete opposite type of desire. The story, which demonstrates an instance of the betrayal of the spiritual ideal, by recklessly causing the death of a prophet – which represents both the death of religion as a whole as well as the death of true love – can thus serve as a cautionary tale of how everything can go wrong if one strays from the Christian ideal of love and falls into a state of decadence and decline.

Despite the seemingly dreadful ending of *Salomé*, however, the character of Salomé appears to promise an opportunity for the fulfillment of the decadent thirst for beauty, pleasure, and carnal desire. According to Dierkes-Thrun, “none of the major nineteenth-century Salome versions prior to Wilde’s included such a decadent tête-à-tête during which Salome earnestly addressed and then amorously possessed the severed head” (Dierkes-Thrun 44), and therefore this excessive decadent and quite literal thirst for beauty is added to the story by Wilde to further strengthen the aestheticism. This is perhaps done in an attempt to display a possibility for the achievement of blissful ecstasy, “not despite but because of erotic and aesthetic transgression and death” (Dierkes-Thrun 45); that is, a happy ending of sorts for the beauty-hungry aesthete who does not shy away in any means from obtaining what her heart desires. Salomé therefore ultimately asserts her independence and individual will and claims her ideal of beauty; as a result, her death does not take anything away from this accomplishment, and she dies a successful heroine of aesthetics. Rather than portraying the doom of aesthetic individualism then, Wilde here demonstrates Salomé’s death after she reaches the absolute height of her decadence, ecstasy, and triumph – and at this point, death, which was already insignificant to begin with, merely functions as the climax of Salomé’s decadent and aesthetic journey.

## 3 Chapter Three: Decadence Reincarnate

### 3.1 “The Portrait of Mr W.H.”

In “The Portrait of Mr W.H.”, which depicts a quest to solve the dilemma regarding the identity of the mysterious “onlie begetter” of William Shakespeare’s sonnets and serves as a homoerotic interpretation of said sonnets, Wilde takes further the issue of the decadent prioritization of beauty and arts and committing immorality and murder for this cause. In the novella, Erskine tells the narrator the story of Cyril Graham, an effeminate actor and Shakespeare enthusiast who in his attempt to solve this mystery, comes to the conclusion that the unknown narratee was Willie Hughes: a young Elizabethan actor in Shakespeare’s troupe who became the object of the writer’s erotic desire. In what follows, Cyril demonstrates the intensity of his passion as well as the inevitable consequences of such a decadent obsession with art by resorting to forgery and later, suicide, in order to prove the legitimacy of his artistic theory. While the narrator is next to fall for this theory and dedicate his time to proving it, he escapes succumbing to a similarly unpleasant fate by giving up on the theory prematurely, and it is then Erskine – who had held his non-believer status throughout most of the story – who becomes the next victim of this art-based theory as well as its resulting immorality.

Written in the late nineteenth century, “The Portrait of Mr W.H.” thus radiates traits of decadence far and wide. To begin with, the aforementioned three main characters – similarly to Dorian, Lord Henry, and Basil in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – prove to have the necessary foundation for being art-stricken decadents with the amount of time and leisure they seem to have on hand to spend on art and the unanswered questions of art. This freedom thus allows for the wilful choice of indulgence in aesthetic concepts such as sonnets and paintings, as well as the prioritization and viewing of said concepts as a matter of life and death. The emphasized significance of art and aesthetics in this story consequently causes the characters to devote everything they own to these matters in their predilection to transcend the quotidian and the mundane and ordinary life.

The elevated status of beauty in this story and the decadent movement likewise is made evident first and foremost by Cyril Graham, the originator of the fateful theory. This beautiful and beauty-obsessed character is described by Erskine as “the most splendid creature I ever saw, [...] nothing could exceed the grace of his movements, the charm of his manners” (223). This pretty and effeminate grandson of an aristocrat accordingly sets “an absurdly high value on personal appearance”, and attempts to prove “that it [is] better to be good-looking than to be good” (223) – a line previously heard nearly word for word by Lord Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In addition, he is said to never do any work (224), and the only two things which give pleasure to this character are said to be “poetry and acting” (223). These traits thus easily establish Cyril’s identity as a stereotypical decadent man, as well as function as a close reminder of Dorian Gray, his beauty, and his aristocratic, worry-free life of indulgence in beauty and art.

It is thus of no surprise that the “pretty” and “charming” actor of the girls’ parts of Shakespeare’s plays with the aforementioned beauty-seeking qualities semi-biasedly comes to the blind conclusion that the person Shakespeare was originally dedicating all his aesthetic and romantic sonnets to had been a fellow actor – one whose physical beauty had been “a vital factor in the development of [Shakespeare’s] dramatic art” (226) and whose effect on Shakespeare had inspired him to create the characters of Viola, Imogen, Juliet, Rosalind, Portia, Desdemona, and Cleopatra. For Cyril and with the parallels he sees between himself and Mr W.H., it is not necessarily difficult to imagine that a “boy-actor of great beauty” could have been the muse for Shakespeare’s “presentation of his noble heroines” (227); rather, it is quite sensible. Cyril thus presumes Shakespeare to have been a fellow beauty-worshipping decadent, who wrote his sonnets to a boy “whose physical beauty was such that it became the very cornerstone of [his] art” (226). As this theory has its basis in beauty and beauty is all that matters, Cyril thus requires no further proof and goes on to confidentially promote the “Willie Hughes” theory, a fitting name he conventionally comes upon for this actor. The amount of faith Cyril has in his own theory and the fact that he denies the need for any demonstrable or formal proof, rather trusting his spiritual and artistic sense – which he refers to as “internal evidence” – further highlights the decadence in play as well as the abandon of logic in favor of beauty-based creative instincts.

In addition, another concept which in this short story is aestheticized and romanticized rather than demoralized is homosexuality. Wilde, who later in his 1895 testimony claims that the

“Love that dare not speak its name” dictates and pervades the works of Shakespeare, thus proceeds to give an entrancing secondhand account of this love between Shakespeare and his very beloved. Published in 1889, a time when the act was referred to as “sodomy” or “buggery” and perceived with disgust and disgrace, Wilde tells the story of Mr W.H. with no such prejudice, and the work thus manifests rather as “a representation of homosexual desire that is only partly bound to the particular circumstances of Victorian reticence and fear” (Danson 980). This love, then, like “a contradiction almost beyond the reach of language”, is not shown as unnatural or perverted (Danson 979) and the nobility of it is instead admired. The characters are accordingly seen completely looking over the homosexual and at the time considered-perverse nature of this love, and depicting their sexual subjectivity by following instead the immense artistic features. With the significance dedicated to art, then, and as art goes against nature and is opposed to norms of sexual behavior (Kearns 15), support for presumably abnormal sexual behavior thus becomes quite evident in this work and its characters, who rather than dwelling upon the homosexual element, focus on who the lucky recipient of said sonnets is. This nonchalant attitude toward homosexuality and the toleration of it underline “Wilde's struggle to articulate a language for desire between men that escapes the pathologizing sexological discourse surrounding male same-sex desire in the late nineteenth century” (Friedman 600), as well as function as a means of putting into words his own law-forbidden erotic desires.

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, this blind obsession with aesthetics, art, and beauty refuses to remain harmless. Therefore, Cyril Graham, after devoting his life to Shakespeare's works and getting engrossed in his pursuit of the mysterious begetter of Shakespeare's sonnets, finds himself unable to find a safe way out, and in desperation, resorts to immorality. After Cyril's first method – pleading to Erskine to simply believe him and his theory of the existence of a person with such a name in such a time period without a need for physical proof – fails, he then turns to the immoral act of forging a painting of Willie Hughes, with his hand conveniently placed on a copy of *The Sonnets*. While the nameless narrator of the story, through his contemplation that artists should not be censured for forgery as that would essentially be confusing “an ethical problem with an aesthetical problem” (221) reveals his artistic bias and the decadent exculpation of immorality for the sake of aesthetics, this story nevertheless functions as a demonstration of how aesthetical problems can lead to, and in fact, can be the very cause of, ethical problems, and in a nutshell, how indulgence in beauty can and does inspire

immorality. Therefore, despite the fact that this forgery can be classified as “an artistic desire for perfect representation” (221) as well as a desire to clarify this representation, the original aesthetical problem of wanting to prove the identity of Mr W.H. thus motivates the realization of the ethical problem of committing forgery.

This forgery as a result of the exaggeration of the importance of Mr W.H.’s identity thus sets off a chain of poisonous consequences that the characters find and consequently lose themselves in. After the discovery of his forgery and his failure to earn Erskine’s approval, then, Cyril goes on to offer “his life as a sacrifice to the secret of the *Sonnets*” (230). His death for the sake of art and the truth of the identity of a fictional character imagined in Shakespeare’s art three hundred years before, thus fits into the category of decadent self-murders. The line “some of the blood splashed upon the frame of the picture, just where the name had been painted” (230) clearly illustrates both the decadence and the agonizing irony of Cyril’s death – a real person shedding his own blood over proving the existence of a figure whose existence cannot essentially be proven. While realistically, it should have been rather difficult to make Shakespeare and the identity of his lover-boy a matter of life and death to an unrelated individual living in a different century, Cyril Graham – with his decadent *ars longa, vita brevis* attitude – stubbornly and proudly manages to do just that. This death is viewed to have been in vain by Erskine, while the narrator believes that Cyril had “sacrificed his life to a great idea” (231), thus showcasing the attitude the decadent and the non-decadent hold toward such preventable decadent deaths.

Consequently, Cyril’s initial immorality and his eventual decadent death bring upon the decline of the other characters into similar patterns of destructive overindulgence. The next victim of the theory is Erskine, who at first resists the theory despite Cyril’s plea for him to “unlock the secret of Shakespeare’s heart” (230), and claims instead that “intellectually there is nothing to be said for it” (231). However, later and as a result of the letter full of evidence that the narrator composes – since he can “estimate the value of evidence” – Erskine is re-convinced, becomes the most devoted supporter of the theory, and cannot find it in himself to deny the supposed evidence anymore. Consequently, Erskine, who had come off as a more logical and down-to-earth character, claiming despite his friend’s sacrifice that “a thing is not necessarily true because a man dies for it” (231) and refusing to give in to the theory and the decadence that dealing with it called for, afterward vows to “devote his life to proving the theory” and “to do



justice to Cyril Graham's memory" (242). Thus, ultimately, Cyril achieves his desired reaction from Erskine, who ends up so far in his baseless faith in the theory that he believes the nonexistence of an Elizabethan actor by the name of Willie Hughes further proves his existence rather than contradict it, thus refusing any other possible interpretation of the sonnets other than the theory willed by his friend. While Cyril Graham's immorality of choice in his attempt to prove the legitimacy of what he believed in had been forgery and self-murder, Erskine on the other hand resorts to fake-labeling his death of consumption as suicide in an unethical attempt to achieve what he desires. In Erskine's "suicide note" that the narrator receives at the end of the story, much reminiscent of Cyril's final letter, Erskine blames himself and his "shallow scepticism and ignorant lack of faith" (242) for Cyril's death, and dishonestly seeks to guilt-trip the narrator into surrendering to the theory, which at this point is "stained with the blood of two lives" (242). Thus, Erskine, with his last breath proves unwilling to go without one final exaggerated, dramatic, and immoral act – of letting the narrator believe that he, like Cyril, is dying by his own hands for Willie Hughes's sake, in hopes of getting the narrator to further pursue the theory after his death: extra Cyril-esque, extra decadent.

The death of Cyril, encouraged by his decadent lifestyle and aesthetic preoccupations, aside from triggering the eventual mania Erskine finds himself in, additionally kindles the same type of sightless persistency in the narrator, who comes to believe that by insisting on the aesthetic theory in question, he can avoid letting Cyril's death be in vain. The narrator thus takes up the theory and allows it to take over his life, taking it upon himself to fill the gaps as best as he can, and deciding not to rest until he has made everyone recognize the validity of it. He attempts to restore Cyril to his proper place in literary history and to rescue "the honour of Shakespeare himself from the tedious memory of a commonplace intrigue" (240). The narrator, however, after this initial phase of devotion to Cyril Graham and the Willie Hughes theory, after weeks of studying the sonnets and a long letter to Erskine presenting his new and improved findings, comes to realize that by finding perfect expression for a passion, he had exhausted the passion itself, and that "emotional forces, like the forces of physical life, have their positive limitations" (241). The theory thus suddenly becomes to him a mere myth and an idle dream (241), and he quite abruptly gives up on it. As the narrator says, it was "silly enthusiasm", "the story of Cyril Graham's death", "romantic theory", "wonder and novelty of the idea" and "mere sentiment" (241) that had once made the theory appear valid to him; all matters that the decadent would gladly overindulge in, all the while ignoring logic and factual evidence.

From this moment on, the narrator demonstrates a control over his life and reason that the other characters in the peak of their decadence had lacked. Therefore, the narrator's declaration that "[w]hatever romance may have to say about the Willie Hughes theory, reason is dead against it" (241) reveals his sudden stance against the decadent prioritization of romance, beauty, and art over logic that Cyril, Erskine, and once he himself had been equally overtaken by. Thus and instead, he proceeds to demonstrate his transformed and now objective position regarding the importance of such decadent concepts in life. The last meeting between the narrator and Erskine, and the lines "he thought me shallow, I thought him foolish" (242) thus point to the switched viewpoints of these two characters. These lines further reveal the perception of the non-decadent – now represented by the narrator – who find such a strong liking to a subject as vain as beauty or art simply foolish, while they are thought of as shallow by the decadent who believe they have found the true matter to focus on in life, one that subdues the common man's mundane preoccupations.

The anti-decadent stance of the narrator is perfectly summed up with the line "to die for one's theological beliefs is the worst use a man can make of his life, but to die for a literary theory!" (242), which distinctly contradicts Lord Henry's "[t]o have ruined oneself over poetry is an honor" (39). The narrator's ridicule of the idea of death for the sake of a literary theory thus depicts his failure to fully grasp the decadent belief that there are far worse ways to lose one's life than for the admirable cause of a realm as mighty as art. This character's prioritization of logic and life over art, beauty, and pleasure thus leads to his settlement on the insipid and colorless life of a detached and unsympathetic Victorian man. Accordingly, the narrator, at the end of the story proceeds to impassively display the forged picture of Willie Hughes in his library for his artistic friends to see, thus remaining unfazed to the weight of the said "blood of two lives" (242) which the picture and the theory behind it carry.

However, even though the narrator manages to avoid the immorality and unfortunate end that Cyril and Erskine as representatives of decadence had found themselves in, he fails to strike the reader as the protagonist that he is supposed to be. Instead, it is Cyril Graham and his passionate act of sacrifice inspired by his decadently-charged beliefs that remain the most noteworthy and memorable in this story. Therefore, while the narrator's abandonment of decadence and its overwhelming delights does offer him a tranquil future presumably sans unethical endeavors and unsightly murders, his ordinary, stale, and soulless life as a living dead is not glamorized

and does not appear appealing. While Erskine and the narrator both fail to honor Cyril Graham's memory, "The Portrait of Mr W.H." as a story that undermines the anti-decadent pseudo-protagonist and elevates the noble pursuit of art and beauty over the unimaginative preoccupations of the modern man rightly brings justice to this decadent hero.

### **3.2 "The Nightingale and the Rose"**

While "The Portrait of Mr W.H." focalizes on the concept of art among other decadent fascinations, Oscar Wilde's "The Nightingale and the Rose" – which tells the story of a love-struck young student who is asked by his beloved for a red rose in return for a dance with her, and a nightingale who witnesses the lover's struggle and decides to sacrifice herself in order to produce such a rose for the sake of true love – addresses the issue of love, distinguishes between ideal and decadent "love", and ultimately offers another instance of the survival of a momentarily decadent character at the price of the abandonment of his passions and pleasures.

The shadow of decadence looms over the entire story, as a chase for beauty, pleasure, and love is immediately revealed with the young student's claim that his beloved has promised to fulfill his desire for a dance, only in exchange for a beautiful red rose. Since for the student, the successful realization of this dance would symbolize the acceptance and reciprocation of his love by the nameless girl, he, throughout the story, loses himself in a blind and decadent pursuit of this rose, the consequent dance, and the presumably accompanying love. Therefore, the young student's happiness becomes entirely dependent on his beloved and getting the dance that he desperately desires, as he continuously fantasizes about the beauty with which his beloved will be dancing, as well as the way she will be in his embrace. These thoughts thus offer to him an unprecedented beauty and pleasure compared to which having read "all that the wise men have written" (327) and owning all the secrets of philosophy amount to nothing. This dance and the student's contemplation about its beauty as well as his assumption that it brings with it the promise of love are in addition redolent of Herod's enthusiasm about receiving a dance from Salomé as well as his delusion in believing the dance would signify the reciprocation of his love. One difference, however, lies in the fact that the student, a man of logic, unlike Herod knows from the beginning the price he has to pay for this dance

Consequently, the young student's love for the girl likewise appears decadent and vastly contingent on the achievement of a condition – the dance. The young student does not give the impression of loving his beloved unconditionally and no matter what, but rather seems to have expectations that he needs her to meet. Even though he complains about the girl's request for a red rose, he fails to realize that he is in a similar situation, making a self-indulgent appeal to the girl in order to satisfy his own craving for pleasure. The young student, who “only knew the things that are written down in books”, blinded by his own selfish desires, in another decadent instance fails to notice the irony of his own selfishness as he labels all arts as selfish, senselessly going on a rant about how artists, including the nightingale, are all style and no sincerity or feeling (329). Ultimately, the young student – who only wants the girl because of the prospect of her fulfilling his selfish desires – once met with rejection, demonstrates the superficiality of his love, as he immediately changes his stance and decides that love is a silly, useless, and unpractical concept not worth dwelling upon.

Similarly, the love the nameless girl offers and deludes the young student with is entirely decadent in its own pursuit of beauty, and conditional on receiving an object of beauty. The young student's claim that without a red rose, the girl would have no heed of him, and would simply pass him by, breaking his heart without a care (327), and the fact that a single rose because of its beauty and rarity could have such a drastic influence on someone's behavior and feelings thus once again illuminate the decadence involved. She, in accordance with the decadent mentality, then, exhibits signs of insatiable craving for beauty and artificial but aesthetic materials, and her actions and feelings are determined by what will provide her with the most amount of beauty and pleasure. She ultimately comes to reject “the reddest rose in all the world” (330) because “everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers” (331), thus showcasing what love means to her and what gives her pleasure: not the actual feelings of love from a person or a worthless rose, but rather rare and expensive beauty.

On the other hand and according to Oscar Wilde in a commentary on his own work, the nightingale, who claims to understand the secret of the student's sorrow (328), is in this story “the true lover, if there is one” (qtd. in Puleo 85); she represents true love, and is essentially in love with *love itself*. She, impressed by the prospect of having finally found a true lover, one to whom she had sung night after night, though she knew him not, does everything in her power and ultimately sacrifices herself for the sake of what she assumes to be true love. What inspires

her passionate journey of producing a red rose is her unconditional love for true love itself, as well as the potential she sees in the young student as a “true lover”. Despite the fact that the true love she detects is directed not towards her but someone else, she nevertheless carries on to turn the dream of this love into reality. In this way then, she demonstrates an example of love that is both selfless and sacrificial. The nightingale’s claim that “[s]urely love is a wonderful thing. It is more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals. Pearls and pomegranates cannot buy it” (327) once again illustrates the reality and genuineness of her love as well as her naïve belief that any love is reminiscent of hers and as authentic. This claim also very noticeably clashes with the final claim of the young student’s beloved, who proves that jewels can in fact buy love – that is, once the love is decadent and based on self-indulgent desires.

This ideal lover, in an attempt to aid the young student in his journey to win “true love”, spares no effort; she goes as far as building a red rose by straining it with her own heart’s blood, with her breast against a thorn, singing all night long by the moonlight. The nightingale offering her life for the protection and realization of true love – which she treats as her ultimate, godly beloved – thus determines her status as the representative of prophets, with true, agapic love as her religion. Although the nightingale reflects that “death is a great price to pay for a red rose” (328), since the red rose in this case functions as a requisite for love, she comes to the conclusion that “[y]et love is better than life” (329). This declaration in turn juxtaposes with Salomé’s “the mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death” (741), as the nightingale prioritizes love over her own life, while Salomé chooses love over her beloved’s life. In addition, the nightingale sings of “the love that is perfected by death, of the love that dies not in the tomb” (330), thus showcasing how death as a result of love merely strengthens this love so that it is then elevated to an even more ideal level, and illustrating Wilde’s aestheticization of self-murder and use of death “as an iconic reward for the moral characters in his tales” (Jones 887). Wilde contemplates that “the gods are strange, and punish us for what is good and humane in us as much as for what is evil and perverse” (*De Profundis* 1075), and thus, death in Wilde’s works is “made attractive because of its sentimental sadness and its aesthetic appeal” (Edelson, qtd. in Puleo 79). By resolving to die for the sake of true love, the nightingale reinforces the truth of her own love, going on to further reveal her endearment for love, stating that love is wiser than philosophy and mightier than power, and that “flame-coloured are his wings, and coloured like flame is his body. His lips are sweet as honey, and his breath is like frankincense” (329). The nightingale’s only wish in return for this aesthetic sacrifice is for the young student

to be a true lover, which while put against the selfish, materialistic, and beauty-hungry requests of both the young student and his beloved, makes the nightingale stand out as an ideal lover, and her love as ideal love. In this way, Wilde attempts to reveal “the shallow values of the student and his sweetheart and the vain efforts of the nightingale as artist to change them” (Zipes, qtd. in Jones 885-6). In addition, the nightingale’s final song, which is a form of art, functions as a redeemer – both of true love, and of arts. With this song, she, however unknown to the young student, proves the usefulness of arts and how not all artists are selfish and impractical; that some, if and when inspired by true love, can be bursting with feelings and sincerity, and can easily, with the help of their art, sacrifice themselves for their beloveds as well. Similarly, true love also emerges as a form of art, which the young student is too immature to appreciate and therefore crudely rejects, and the nightingale sacrifices her life defending.

After the nightingale’s noble and decadent act of sacrifice for the sake of true love, however, and unknown to her, the student ends up getting rejected by his beloved and thus throws the nightingale’s hard-earned rose into the street, “where it fell into the gutter, and a cartwheel went over it” (331). This grievous fate for the symbol of the nightingale’s true love once again and after Sibyl and the young Syrian’s examples proves the fidelity and unappreciated nature of self-sacrifice for the ideal of love. Consequently, in opposition to the nightingale’s selfless, sacrificial, and prophetic qualities, the young student emerges as a heedless atheist who, blind to the nightingale’s sacrifice for him and her religion of true love, coldly disregards the entire idea of said religion as a waste of time. The young student finally declares:

What a silly thing love is! It is not half as useful as logic, for it does not prove anything, and it is always telling of things that are not going to happen. In fact, it is quite unpractical, and as in this age to be practical is everything, I shall go back to philosophy and study metaphysics. (331)

These lines thus indicate the end of the young student’s participation in a decadent and overindulgent lifestyle. Unlike the previous characters who saw their decadence through, such as Sibyl and the young Syrian committing suicide as a result of not having their love reciprocated, and Salomé and Herod murdering their beloveds for the very same reason, the young student adopts an alternative and previously unseen position regarding love. Thus, the young student, much like the narrator of “The Portrait of Mr W.H.” who abandons the Willie

Hughes theory, turns his back on his decadent infatuation with love and anticlimactically quits decadence. Similarly, although the young student's choice of philosophy, metaphysics, and logic over love and decadent excess functions as an escape from the probable decadent fate of immorality and murder, the stern and loveless life of reason he settles for fails to evoke envy. On the other hand, it is the nightingale who, after her passionate life and heart-wrenchingly beautiful death as an ideal lover is given prominence and takes her rightful place as the decadent heroine of this story.

### **3.3 “The Happy Prince”**

Similarly to “The Nightingale and the Rose”, Oscar Wilde’s “The Happy Prince” further concentrates on decadent characters’ pursuit of ideal love, this time by the statue of a prince and a swallow. Wilde, thus, through the imaginative spiritual union and sublime love of an inanimate and a natural being, delves deeper into the insignificance of gender in the face of true love, and additionally offers hope for the reciprocation of such a love as well as a kind afterlife for such lovers.

A decadent admiration for beauty and art is what sets off the story. To begin with, the statue of the Happy Prince is viewed reverently by the townspeople for the beautiful and angelic face of the prince. Additionally, a desire to be decadent is made evident in this story by the first character who expresses such an admiration – a town councillor who desires a reputation for having artistic taste. This character, however, undervalues this piece of art for it is “not quite so useful” (317), thus failing to recognize that “[a]s long as a thing is useful or necessary to us [...] it is outside the proper sphere of art” (“The Decay of Lying” 927). His example represents the decadent nightmare of commonplace people – the decadent wannabes – who attempt to fit in, yet do not have the proper extent of appreciation for what the decadent dedicate great value to, namely art for art’s sake. According to the common, non-decadent man whose main goal is to impress people of his fellow rank, then, a piece of art, no matter how beautiful, shall nevertheless be criticized for its impracticality.

The final conversation between the mayor and the town councilors further points to these characters following their “artistic taste” and their subsequent disregard for anything not aesthetically pleasing. Therefore, they decide that since the remainder of the statue of the Happy Prince – which even in all its glory, was classified as inutile to begin with – no longer holds any aesthetic value due to its loss of beauty, it is now a completely useless eyesore which should be removed at once. Although at the beginning of the story, the glorious and golden statue despite its technical uselessness, was nevertheless an object of envy and endearment for the common people of the town, at the end of the story, since this statue no longer serves an aesthetic purpose, it is brutally eliminated. This fading beauty turns *the* Happy Prince, once envied by all, into “little better than a beggar” (323), and leads to the destruction of his statue. The act of taking down the statue of the Happy Prince and melting it in a furnace can in addition be viewed as a type of murder by this group of pseudo-decadents – an *articide* inspired by their obsession with art and aesthetics, and their intolerance for anything inutile and beauty-less.

The sorrow of the Happy Prince is in addition entirely caused by the lack of beauty he is compelled to take in from his elevated position on the pedestal. For the beautiful Happy Prince, who has lived his entire life in the palace of Sans-Souci, isolated by walls from the outside world and its ugliness, having to face the ugliness and misery of his city is a punishment that makes him weep. Therefore, hatred of the common world is represented through both the Happy Prince and the swallow’s perspectives, who can look over the city and witness “the rich making merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars were sitting at the gates” (322), cold, hungry, and powerless. In what follows, the Happy Prince establishes his role as a Christ figure, to whom riches and pleasure seem to be “greater tragedies than poverty or sorrow” (*De Profundis* 1084), and who behaves according to Wilde’s interpretation of Jesus’s message that “[o]rdinary riches can be stolen from a man. Real riches cannot” (“The Soul of Man under Socialism” 1047). Thus, instead of ignoring the ugliness taking over the world, sinking in alienation, and blindly focusing on beauty, the Happy Prince goes on to share his own beauty with the townspeople by giving them each a beautiful piece of himself, since as he says, “the living always think that gold can make them happy” (322), thus demonstrating his moral intent and desire to be good. As a Christ figure would, then, and similarly to Sibyl Vane, the young Syrian, and the nightingale, the Happy Prince as a result of his altruistic love selflessly sacrifices himself for the happiness of others and gives away everything he has until he is left blind and naked, with nothing more to donate.



Aside from the prophetic love the Happy Prince expresses for his people, another instance of love represented in the story is the love the swallow claims for his supposed beloved, the reed. This love is decadent in its foundation being based on the reed's beauty and "slender waist" (317), which had managed to attract the swallow enough for him to fall in love at first sight and postpone his migration to Egypt "for he was in love with the most beautiful reed" (317). The absence of an ideal and divine sense in this love and it being a decadent and declined form of love is further strengthened with the way the swallow treats this love and his beloved. Accordingly, the swallow's love for the reed is expectant and conditional on her responsiveness – or the lack thereof, as he claims, "She has no conversation" (317) – and motion, which again, the reed fails to fulfill due to her domestic, attached and unmoving nature. The swallow moreover portrays the imperfection of this love with the jealousy and judgment he reveals in response to the reed's natural "relations" with the wind, blatantly accusing her of being a "coquette". Unlike other beauty-based instances of decadent love previously spotted in Wilde's works, such as Herod's infatuation with Salomé, and Salomé's with Jokanaan, which are pursued to the very end and typically end in immorality and murder, however, the swallow's shallow and superficial love for the reed does not last, and after receiving no response from her is anticlimactically abandoned in a close parallel to the young student's love for his beloved in "The Nightingale and the Rose".

The swallow who initially claims "I don't think I like boys" (319) and indulges instead in the beauty of the supposed lady reed, then comes to fall in love with the statue of the Happy Prince, thus establishing his position as a bisexual character and adding the decadent topic of homoeroticism to the story. Contrary to his first case of love and despite the fact that the Happy Prince is a subject of envy for everyone who lays eyes on him because of his beauty, the swallow's love for the Happy Prince does not stem from this beauty. In fact, upon first seeing the prince and deciding to sleep under the statue, the swallow does not note his beauty at all and is only preoccupied with having a warm and dry place to sleep, with the goldenness of his new bedroom simply being a bonus. It is in the process of assisting the prince to carry out his acts of kindness and giving his jewels and layers of gold to the townspeople in need, however, that the swallow begins to feel quite warm despite the generally cold weather. It is eventually this warm feeling inspired by the Happy Prince, as well as the prince's selflessness and generous heart which melt the swallow's own night after night, so that he surrenders and puts off his obligatory plans of migration for the sake of survival from the upcoming winter. This

love, when put in comparison with the superficial and beauty-based love the swallow had earlier claimed for the reed, shines in its sincerity and idealness. Here, instead of impulsively and blindly falling for the prince's outer beauty, the swallow, after witnessing the kind heart of the Happy Prince, falls for his inner beauty instead, thusly making their shared love appear more as sublime, sentimental, and therefore, true love. The Happy Prince, accordingly, expresses his own love for the swallow by asking him to leave for Egypt, despite his declaration that "you must kiss me on the lips, for I love you" (322), hence once again showing the idealness of his love as well as his selflessness, this time in love, as he would rather save the swallow's life than selfishly keep him by his side in the cold winter.

Consequently, the swallow time and again exhibits the genuineness of the love he has come to nurture for the prince by choosing to help him reach his goal of making his people happy rather than his own survival. In the end, this ideal lover demonstrates an ultimate act of sacrifice to the prince and his love for him by choosing to give up the freedom he is known for in order to stay with the blind prince despite the cold of the winter, which he knows will kill him, therefore replicating the decadent act of suicide for the sake of love. The swallow, traditionally associated with love and loyalty, thusly exhibits his prioritization of love over life, and how even though the winter cold might kill him, it will not affect their love. The homoeroticism reaches its peak moments before the swallow's death, as the swallow, with his last breath gives the prince a kiss on the lips before falling dead at his feet, their love thusly being perfected by death. Furthermore, while Kingston in her article "Homoeroticism and the Child in Wilde's Fairytales" argues against the homosexual nature of the tragic love depicted between the Happy Prince and the swallow, instead labeling it as "a strongly platonic friendship" (Kingston 51), the kiss on the lips and the shattering of the Happy Prince's leaden heart upon witnessing the swallow's death are clear indications of this homoeroticism.

Consequently, Wilde's Romeo and Juliet-inspired short story proposes a rare instance of the reciprocation of love in his works. Even though the swallow and the prince do not officially get to have a happy ending in this world, they do nevertheless manage to express their love to one another and die knowing their feelings were returned, which is seldom seen in Wilde's other stories. Despite the fact that the two characters end up dead at the end of the story, both the dead swallow and the infusible leaden heart of the Happy Prince are once again reunited on a dust-heap, and later taken to God by one of his angels as "the two most precious things in the

city” (323). In addition, “The Happy Prince” is one of the only stories by Wilde in which the characters are rewarded with something other than death for their moral deeds, as they are finally taken to heaven for their efforts. The reason the love between the Happy Prince and the swallow beats the other loves portrayed in Wilde’s works and manages to be fulfilled and reach a celestial happily-ever-after is thus directly related to the selfless, sacrificial, and therefore ideal nature of the love that these two characters share. Therefore, Wilde presents a guide to love through this noble couple, who prove that true love, as opposed to selfish, overindulgent, and beauty-blind decadent desire which ends in immorality and murder, once reciprocated, can end in a triumph.

This successful instance of love, upon closer examination, can be Wilde’s way of advocating a bisexual and genderless or rather, gender-independent love through the spiritual union of creatures that traditionally are not put together. By creating a love-line between the statue of a prince and a bird – two grammatically gender-neutral nouns – who due to the fairytale function of his story get a chance to communicate, Wilde assembles a compelling argument of how gender, or the lack thereof, should not and does not play a role in the love two beings can come to feel for one another. Their love, thus, is a metaphor for love’s boundless unpredictability and its miraculous power of bringing unity to the disparate, as it shows that love can happen to anyone and cannot be forced or stopped by predetermined rules. Therefore, even though both the Happy Prince and the swallow are identified with masculine pronouns, they could have as well been presented as inanimate and genderless beings simply finding sublime love in one another regardless of their assigned genders and what society believes to be the correct way of loving. By ascribing masculine pronouns to the swallow rather than either feminine or neutral ones, and by using the frame of a fairytale in which statues and birds can fall in love, Wilde further takes advantage of the opportunity to add a hint of homosexuality to the story. After all, compared to the unconventional love between such an unlikely duo, a love between a homosexual couple would then be nothing out of the ordinary and easily justifiable, and if the statue of a prince and a swallow can fall in love, so can two people of the same gender. In a way, the randomness of the pair takes attention away from their genders, and it is instead the harmony of their souls that shines through beyond their sexual identity and gender classifications.

“The Happy Prince”, which functions as “an anti-homophobic purification of gay love and a homophobic paean to gay sex” (Kopelson, qtd. in Kingston 43), in addition manifests as Wilde’s way of dealing with his own homosexuality, and his attempt to promote a kinder fate for the back-then commonly believed sinful act of immorality. Another point that makes this semi-happy ending even more extraordinary is thus the reciprocation and realization of homosexual love. While based on Wilde’s other stories, it appears as if homosexual love is constantly presented as one-sided and doomed to fail, the swallow and the Happy Prince become the first homosexual couple in Wilde’s stories to reach at least a moment of success at mutual love. By making a homosexual couple the representatives of ideal as well as reciprocated and successful love in this anti-Cinderella and anti-kiss-the frog story, in addition to sharing his hopes for the realization of homosexual love being possible, Wilde expertly puts homosexuality in a good light and in a way even advocates it by offering a wonderfully imaginative presentation of the potential of such a love. In a final justification of homosexuality, Wilde ends the story by claiming that the dead swallow and the heart of the Happy Prince, despite having partaken in homosexual activity, are acknowledged by God as “the two most precious things in the city” (323). God, in addition, goes on to announce that the swallow and the Happy Prince are to end up in Paradise and his “city of gold” (323) instead of hell – the commonly believed final destination of homosexuals in religious orthodoxy and Victorian prudery –, a celebration-worthy fate which gives homosexual lovers an equal chance at eternal bliss.

“The Happy Prince” thus, in retrospect functions as an emblem of Oscar Wilde’s legacy and his art, his devotion to aesthetics, his bi-gendered compassion, and the utter humanity he manages to perceive at the heart of decadence. This vindicatory tale of love regardless of gender or sexuality thus presents yet another example of decadent characters initially deep in their mindless consumption of beauty, who turn over a new leaf and indulge then instead in ever-aesthetic, consistent, amoral love for one another. Even though both protagonists’ agapic love for each other and humanity in general preoccupies them so greatly that they pay no mind to the possibility of death as their worldly fate, unlike the previous representatives of ideal love in Wilde’s stories, the swallow and the statue of the Happy Prince nevertheless do not get their hands dirty by direct participation in suicide. Therefore, while suicide is known in Christianity to be punishable by the flames of hell, and despite the sacrificial devotion visible in this story, these characters as a result of continuing their prioritization of ideal love in life without directly harming themselves or others successfully earn their way into heaven and manage to save their

souls. Their sublime homoerotic union thus indicates the humane, compassionate, and altruistic prospects available as a result of a change of heart in their decadent fascination of choice, and their subsequent harmless and amoral indulgence in what they desire.

### 3.4 “The Selfish Giant”

Wilde’s “The Selfish Giant” follows the example of “The Happy Prince” and through the story of a giant whose garden is deprived of all its beauty and suffers from a never-ending winter as a result of his selfishness, but is given a chance to repent with the help and a kiss from a little boy who functions as a Christ figure, offers another exhibition of the purificatory properties of ideal – and homosexual – love, the decadent change of heart, as well as the promise of a desirable afterlife as a result.

In the story of “The Selfish Giant”, self-indulgence and hatred of the common world and its people lead directly to death; in this case, however, instead of the usual trope of the death of a human being in the form of either murder or suicide, it is the death of nature and beauty which ironically follows. With the Garden of Eden as a distant backdrop, the story begins in an ideal state of beauty and peace, featuring beautiful flowers, trees full of blossoms and fruits, singing birds, and happy children. It is the giant’s return to his castle after a seven-year absence and promptly forcing out the children playing in his garden with the selfish claim that “[m]y own garden is my own garden” (335) which leads to his murder of this garden and brings about the deterioration and complete destruction of all its beauty. As a result of this selfishness, the giant’s garden, now encircled in high walls, is forgotten by the spring and deprived of beauty, and stays instead in a constant state of winter in which “the north wind and the hail, and the frost and the snow [dance] about through the trees” (336) while nature remains dead.

While “The Selfish Giant” might at first glance appear as a moral tale solely condemning selfishness and advocating the generosity and ever-helpful nature of Christian charity, upon deeper reflection, it emerges as an allegory for *homosexuality*, which was recognized by the Victorian mentality as a sin and a fall from grace and was therefore considered decadent. Accordingly, the giant can be regarded as an image of the homosexual in the mind of the

conventional Victorian, and a figure whose story is essentially a quotidian illustration of any other homosexual's experience. By presenting the representative character of homosexuality as a giant, a born antagonist often perceived as a stupid and violent monster evoking terror, Wilde tactfully hints at the way homosexuals in general are similarly perceived in the societal background of the time as giants – inhuman and unwelcome creatures from whom common people typically stay away.

The giant, whose seven-year stay with his “friend”, the Cornish ogre, further attests to his homosexuality, aware of his unfavorable reputation in society, ends up isolating himself in his castle, choosing to entirely stay away from people and their hostile stance toward him and his kind. It is thus also the giant's damnation to alienation which plants the seeds of selfishness within him and leads to him habitually and naturally shunning the children playing in his garden. Since he has been rejected from society due to his giant status, which stands for the stereotypical homosexual other, and has had to isolate in his own space, it is only natural that he does not want trespassers in his personal space to which he has been expelled. The giant, who is accustomed to isolating himself from the people who ostracize him, in order to protect himself from their judgment and interference in his life, settles on loneliness and builds a wall around his garden – which in itself is decadent in it being a decline and fall from the heterogendered Victorian society and the ideal, heterogeneous garden of Adam and Eve. Furthermore, the winter to which the giant's garden is condemned as a result of this selfishness and rejection of the outside world is yet another exhibition of homosexuals being sentenced to marginalization and having to endure further punishment for the alienation they are subjected to.

What reverses this state, gives a new life to nature and a new chance to the giant to be accepted and un-alienated is the return of the children, and more importantly the softening of the selfish giant's heart for a little boy who, unlike the other children, cannot climb the trees. After the assumptions of homosexuality linked with the giant, then, the love he claims to have for this little boy who kisses him in gratitude for his selfless act of helping him climb the tree, is an instance of such love portrayed in the story. The giant who is at once overtaken by the love that blossoms in his heart for this little boy, goes on to make this love, and not his previous hatred of the world, alienation, or selfishness the center of his life. He time and again reminisces about this boy and their delightful union, and it is thoughts of this boy and the happiness he has

brought into his life with him which replace the giant's former negative preoccupations, thus helping his decadence move from the previously mentioned attributes to an indulgence in love. Nevertheless, due to the little boy's young age and the nonsexual context of their encounter, it would not be fully appropriate to give the title "homosexual" to this union, and a milder term such as "homoromantic" or "homospiritual" would thus be more suitable. Furthermore, the nature of this same-gender solidary, which is based on intellectual activity and the bettering of both sides, broadens the view from merely corporal attraction and desire, and opens up a possibility for a more divine and ideal type of love. Therefore, in "The Selfish Giant", the ideal love which solves the giant's problem and brings beauty and peace back to his world is one between two male characters and stems from the boy's vitalizing kiss, which melts the giant's heart and with it the frost and snow in his garden, and thus quite literally gives a new life to them both. Upon the little boy's acceptance of the giant, the giant in turn opens his garden and consequently his heart to the outside world and the people he has been holding a grudge against. It is thus the giant's knocking down of the walls so that his garden "shall be the children's playground for ever and ever" (336), which allows not only the children to enter his garden, but symbolically also allows for more possibilities to enter his life – as he then gets a chance to escape the hostile environment he has been surrounding himself in – as well as a chance to finally, both literally and figuratively, warm himself up. With the little boy's help, kiss, and love, then, the once selfish giant's garden becomes the most beautiful garden the townspeople have ever seen, and he becomes the most beautiful and accepted version of himself.

In addition and as mentioned previously, aside from the giant's beloved little boy, it is the children as a whole who had similarly played a part in bringing spring and beauty back to the giant's garden. These children, thus, function as both bearers and bringers of beauty, as the giant contemplates, "I have many beautiful flowers, [...] but the children are the most beautiful flowers of all" (337). The giant who has undergone a change of heart and improved his decadent mentality then, instead of indulging in actual flowers as the materialistic decadent would, indulges instead in the symbolic beauty that these children bring into his life. These children, who are still innocent and have not yet received the negative influence of the grown-ups or incorporated their hateful attitude toward the giant and his homosexuality, are in addition the ones giving the giant a chance – and a second chance – and approaching him fearlessly and with no judgment. Wilde accordingly makes a statement by shedding light on the fact that disagreement with homosexuality and thinking of it as unnatural is a nonhereditary and rather

learned viewpoint from which children are exempted. These indiscriminating children are thus accordingly the witnesses of the giant's kind heart, as they realize that "the giant was not wicked any longer" (337) upon observing the giant's affection toward the little boy as well as the kiss they share, which once again depicts their nonchalance toward the display of love among two males.

In addition, Wilde adds an unexpected religious turn to the story by revealing that the little boy's hands and feet have been wounded by nails, thus alluding to him as a Christ-like figure who carries with him "the wounds of love" (338). Therefore, like Christ on his mission to save humanity from their sins, the boy in this one particular instance aids the giant in recognizing his selfishness and changing his ways, so that he can at the end follow him to *his* garden, "which is paradise" (338). Hence, in a profound moment that highlights Christ's unconditional love for humanity regardless of their sexual or romantic orientation, the boy-Christ not only does not refrain from helping and getting involved with a homosexual character, but also expresses love toward the giant in the giant's preferred method – same-gender solidarity. It is thus of no surprise that this character, similarly to Christ who more than anyone else in history "wakes in us that temper of wonder to which romance always appeals" (*De Profundis* 1081), easily settles in the giant's heart. Consequently, the boy-Christ, in a scene redolent of God taking the Happy Prince's heart and the swallow's body to heaven, gives the giant the authorization to enter paradise, despite and completely uncaring of his homosexuality. Thus, what is depicted in "The Selfish Giant" is an instance of Wilde modifying Christianity to suit his own needs, instead of rejecting it, and bringing to Christianity a kind of aesthetic impulse (Quintus 515). The little boy's acceptance of the giant thus stands for Christ's acceptance of homosexuality, and accordingly, the ideal love of Christian heterosexuality is homogenized. Since "[t]he Giant's act of expiation, his loving and being kissed by the boy, resembles the very 'sin' that Wilde would want to be forgiven for committing in his life" (Kotzin, qtd. in Kingston 49), instead of going against Christianity as a whole, Wilde attempts to justify homosexuality with religion and Christ's aid. Thus, the ending, which qualifies the giant for salvation thanks to his very act of love toward a boy (Kotzin, qtd. in Kingston 49), depicts Wilde's attempt at defending homosexuality as well as his hopes of being spared from the commonly-established inevitable punishment associated with "the love that dare not speak its name". In this story, similarly to "The Happy Prince", thus, rather than homosexuality being portrayed as a decline from the "ideal" heterosexual love or as a form of deterioration, it is rather suggested as a form of love



that has the opposite effect and status – one which allows the involved lovers a chance for elevation and transcendence, as well as a chance at redemption and salvation.

On another note, the people from whom the giant is wary of and the society he is forced to retreat from because of his unpopularity, could stand not only for the commonplace and homophobic people of the Victorian era, but also Christianity as a whole. Accordingly, Christianity, which is the tragedy Nietzsche discusses in *The Birth of Tragedy* because of its function as the carrier of alienation and discomfort to the decadent, is depicted as a decline from the vitalist, erotic, and unbound lifestyle of the ancient Greek civilization which would have been a warm and nurturing site for human vitalism and the homosexual individual. The giant's example reveals how as a result of having been shunned and scorned by religion and Christianity, homosexuals naturally find themselves withdrawing from such a faith and keeping instead to themselves in their own enclosed and separate societies either in the company of their same-minded peers, or in solitude. The little boy, then, with his Christ-like status, through his kiss, kindness, and acceptance of the giant manages to soften the giant's heart toward the concept of Christianity. This boy-Christ thus functions as an example of how it is not religion itself that is against homosexuality – as illustrated by Christ's sacrifice for *all* humankind – but rather, the mainstream world and people, as well as their faulty interpretations of religion, the credits to which, according to Wilde's claim that "[t]here is danger in popes" ("The Soul of Man under Socialism" 1061) can be given to the modern church and its corrupt leaders. Therefore, after receiving love and affection from a Christ-like figure, the homosexual representative, inspired by his own love for this character, decides to open up his heart to the ideal, nonjudgmental and tolerant religion that the Christ figure promotes. This love gives the giant a chance to convert, and by destroying the walls he has so selfishly and coldheartedly built around himself and his space, he shows his warming up to the idea of religion and its promise of loving him despite his homosexuality. The boy-Christ, successful in his mission of converting a faithless soul and bringing love and beauty into his life, eventually grants him access to the well-earned destination of believers like him, thus indicting that it is acceptance, kindness, and true love, and not heterosexuality, which grants one entry into Paradise. The giant following this Christ figure to his garden and later being found dead under the tree furthermore presents a meaningful interpretation of the Wildean trope of ironically rewarding the characters' good deeds with peremptory death (Jones 887). Like so, as the giant is introduced to true and ideal love and gets to fulfill this love as well, he can then peacefully leave this world and follow

his beloved to the land of eternal bliss and beauty – thus marking the utmost moment of this love being perfected.

The fact that Wilde himself “was probably a sufferer from gigantism” (Shaw, qtd. in Killeen 61) – both because he was “oversized and badly proportioned”, and a homosexual – as well as his depiction of his personal struggles within a homophobic Christian society and his hopeful aspirations for divine pardon for what religion considers a sin, make “The Selfish Giant” a work close to Wilde’s heart, as well as his personal favorite fairy tale. This story thus follows the pattern of decadent characters shifting their attention to indulgence in true love, as well as in turn being rewarded with reciprocated loves and blissful afterlives. It is plausible that the giant, with the amount of discrimination and alienation he had been subjected to, could have ended up committing more immoral acts than insisting on his selfishness, depriving innocent children of their play area, and threatening to “prosecute” them. He proves the possibility of this danger with his words, “[w]ho hath dared to wound thee? [...] tell me, that I may take my big sword and slay him” (337), thus pointing to his potential to turn into a murderer. However, the epiphany he reaches and his change of heart thanks to the boy-Christ and their mutual act of love and helping each other, present the giant with a once in a lifetime opportunity to benefit from the healing properties of true love rather than sink into immorally-charged instances of murder. As a result, even though the giant, similarly to the Happy Prince and his swallow, falls dead after the reception of a kiss and the reciprocation of his feelings, a happy afterlife in paradise is promised to him. This fairly happy ending thus once again reveals the beneficial side of decadence, as well as surrendering to and patient indulgence in true love.

### **3.5 “The Canterville Ghost”**

Oscar Wilde’s first published story, “The Canterville Ghost”, tells the story of the Ghost of Sir Simon de Canterville and his journey of haunting the Canterville Chase and its new residents, the pragmatic family of an American minister. Similarly to “The Happy Prince” and “The Selfish Giant”, this story features an instance of an immorally decadent character who turns over a new leaf and achieves salvation by replacing his perversity and murderous tendencies with true love and allowing this beneficial notion to seize and heal him.

To begin with, the Americans in this story are depicted as non-decadent and “natural”, as Lord Canterville observes “[y]ou are certainly very natural in America” (191). The entire family of the minister – Mr Hiram B. Otis – accordingly declares a disbelief in unnatural concepts such as ghosts, with the minister claiming “if there was such a thing as a ghost in Europe, we’d have it at home in a very short time in one of our public museums, or on the road as a show” (191). They thus illustrate this naturalness by their nonchalance and disinterest in the fact that “blood has been spilt” (193) in their new home, only showing concern about the remaining stain. The Americans also represent modernity, its unpleasant consequences, and the mainstream ignorance that the decadent generally show a hatred toward. They, coming from the modern cities of America, naturally declare their disbelief in an issue as ancient as ghosts and haunted houses, and shrug off the matter altogether. According to the Americans, ghosts, as unnatural creatures, belong to the pre-modern world and thus fail to scare modern people, who would supposedly even give a hundred thousand dollars “to have a family Ghost” (205). The Americans, inspired by their shallow and superficial belief in objective and perceptible matters, resort to “Pinkerton’s Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Detergent” (193) to remove the horrid sight of the blood-stain, so that they do not have to be reminded of the existence of a phenomenon that they, with their modern and natural viewpoint, cannot bring themselves to believe in.

Consequently, the most obvious feature of decadence clearly evident in this story is religion as it exists in the nineteenth century. In this case, then, the tale is that of an American *minister* – defined as a person authorized to conduct religious worship; member of the clergy; pastor – and his family, who each take turns exhibiting their unusual and incomplete faith, as well as an unwitting fall from grace. The way religion and the supposedly religious are depicted in “The Canterville Ghost”, then, is a humorous satire of religion in the Victorian era as well as its decline and the inferior state it has succumbed to. The fact that a minister, who is essentially at one of the highest ranks in modern religion, denies the existence of spiritual phenomena such as ghosts, consequently indicates a nonchalant renunciation of the entire spiritual realm which constitutes – or is supposed to constitute – the foundation of the belief of Christians on the basis of a faith in the Holy Spirit and the resurrection of Christ. This minister of divinity’s contradictory disbelief in ghosts and the spiritual realm upon which his belief is founded thus further attests to Wilde’s insightful and humorous remark that “in the English church a man succeeds, not through his capacity for belief but through his capacity for disbelief” (“The Soul

of Man under Socialism” 941), and works as a presentation of the utmost deterioration of religion. The members of the Otis family, thus, by denying the existence of the Canterville Ghost deny religion on the whole, and their subsequent refusal to issue significance to the Ghost and their resort to bullying him instead represents their undervaluation and bullying of religion. These characters then, who represent the ordinary religious people of the Victorian era, although supposedly religious, nevertheless find it difficult to keep awake at church (205) and in reality portray no sense of soul, spirituality, or transcendence, and fail to come off as true believers. In this way, Wilde not only demonstrates the fall of religion but also ridicules religion for what it has descended to.

On the other hand, the protagonist, the Canterville Ghost, is the representative of decadence in the story. To begin with, the existence of a ghost is a matter which stands against nature and the natural by itself, and which is reminiscent of the title of Huysmans’ decadent bible, *Against Nature*, as well as the decadent desire to contradict nature. Therefore, despite the minister’s claim that “the laws of nature are not going to be suspended for the British aristocracy” (191), the Ghost’s appearance does indeed lead to the suspension of the laws of nature. In addition, the descent of the Ghost from the metaphysical sphere to the lowly material world, and the fact that a metaphysical being is visiting earthlings below him is yet another decadent foundation of this story.

Another decadent element that the Ghost adds to the story is his prioritization of art as well as the integrated and inseparable immorality of this art. As Cognevich argues, “Sir Simon believes himself an artist, suggesting that his hauntings are in fact a form of art” (Cognevich 176) and therefore, the horrific characters that the Ghost dresses up as can be seen as a form of art, and his haunting tactics as aesthetic. The effort he puts into his various personas such as Spectre In Armour, the Suicide’s Skeleton, the Huntsman of Hogley Woods, and the Headless Earl, as well as the satisfaction he takes “not merely in harming others, but in doing so in a refined and creative way” (Cognevich 176) further shows his dedication to his art. The Ghost’s art of haunting thus becomes his entire life and the reason for his existence, as “[t]hrough art, he communicates, and by communicating, he is” (Cognevich 182). He, who declares “[i]t is absurd asking me to behave myself [...] I must rattle my chains, and groan through keyholes, and walk about at night [...] it is my only reason for existing” (204), thus shows his prioritization of this art in life and the insignificance of other matters such as morality or bringing harm to others, in

comparison. The Ghost furthermore reminisces “with the enthusiastic egotism of the true artist” (195) about his most celebrated performances and how many oblivious people he has successfully frightened into hysterics and brain fevers in his three-hundred-year long haunting career, thus demonstrating his pride in the immorality of his art. The Ghost’s art proves also to be destructive and fatal, as it has led to several of his targets ending their lives, such as Lord Canterville putting a knave of diamonds down his throat, a butler shooting himself, and lady Stutfield drowning herself as a result of the Ghost’s mischievous plays. The status of the Ghost as an ideal decadent murderer is thus established through all these indirect instances of murder as a ghost as well as the direct murder of his wife prior to his own first death. After making obvious his prioritization of art and the satisfaction he receives from succeeding at the linked immorality, the Ghost further demonstrates his persistence on the immoral nature of this art by falling into a state of dejection and illness when his art fails to harm or scare the American family. The Ghost, who despises the idea of his art falling under the category of impractical crafts – thus showing the weakening of his decadence for his inability to do art *for art’s sake* – upon not receiving his desired reaction from his audience, no longer considers his art worthy and begins to seek death instead. That is, similarly to Cyril Graham who prioritizes art as his source of pleasure in life, and similarly to Sibyl Vane and the young Syrian who upon the loss of their sources of pleasure, lose their appetites for life, once the Ghost fails at his art and is deprived of his decadent source of pleasure, he no longer sees a reason to live. Thus, the idealized and over-exaggerated platform the decadent dedicate to art and their similar infatuations, as well as how life pales into insignificance in comparison is highlighted.

Decadence is also seen in the decline of love presumably involved in Sir Simon and his wife’s marriage. The Ghost petulantly declares: “[m]y wife was very plain, never had my ruffs properly starched, and knew nothing about cookery” (204), and with regards to the housekeeper’s statement that “Sir Simon survived her nine years” (193), the reason behind Lady Eleanore de Canterville’s murder becomes somewhat transparent. Thus, Sir Simon whose claim of “[l]ove is stronger than Death is” (205) is easily reminiscent of Salomé’s “the mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death” (741), and who had gotten weary of his wife, her inadequateness, and the lack of love between them, thus fails to see any point in life without love. Therefore, since at that point, the love between the couple had died down and he no longer sees any sense in the existence of his wife, Sir Simon commits an act much similar to Herod’s: as if inspired directly by Herod’s interpretation of Salomé’s “[l]ove only should one considered”,

he proceeds to selfishly put an end to his wife's life and uselessness. The not-mentioned but presumably-once-existent love between Sir Simon and Lady Eleanore that had managed to keep them together for nine years hence falls into the category of decadent desires, which eventually and due to its dependence on trivial matters such as one's ability to cook a buck the correct way, suffers a fall and results in an immoral instance of murder.

On the other hand, the character who uniquely offers true love to the Ghost is *Virginia*, the minister's daughter and the only member of the Otis family who makes no effort to deny the Ghost his existence and validity, avoids bothering him, and even ultimately befriends him and sheds tears for him so that his sins will be forgiven and he can enter his beloved Garden of Death. Virginia, who coincidentally "was born in one of [...] London suburbs" (211) and thus lacks the American naturalness of her family, is also another character in this story who demonstrates several instances of decadence. To begin with and based on her name and status as the daughter of a minister, it is assumed that she is a pure, virgin girl – a supposed religious devotee with the presumable aspirations of one day later in life becoming a nun, and the bride of Jesus. By acknowledging the Ghost, then, Virginia metaphorically loses her secular virginity and openly accepts the existence of the metaphysical world that her family ignorantly disregards. In what follows, and according to her claim that the Ghost has shown her "what Life is, and what Death signifies, and why Love is stronger than both" (212), it can be concluded that after her introduction to ghosts and the holy world of true religion, there has occurred a metaphysical union between Virginia and the Canterville Ghost leading to her discovery of the concept of love and its importance. This knowledge, which causes Virginia to suspiciously blush at the memory and the prospect of one day having to explain it to her children, as a result, suggests the loss of her actual virginity and thus, her decline from innocence.

The union formed between Virginia and the Ghost, the two representatives of decadence in this story, appears as a genuine connection between two souls. The Ghost, who remembers Virginia as a pretty and gentle girl who has never insulted him (198) claims that love is always with Virginia (205). Virginia in return takes pity on the Ghost and selflessly agrees to weep for him and pray with him for his soul despite the fearful shapes and the wicked voices in the darkness (206) in an attempt to redeem him from his seemingly never-ending misery of carrying the sins he has committed due to his inability to die peacefully. Victoria is thus the true lover who gives her beloved the ultimate gift of all – death, which the Ghost contemplates, "[...] must be so

beautiful. To lie in the soft brown earth, with the grasses waving above one's head, and listen to silence. To have no yesterday, and no tomorrow. To forget time, to forget life, to be at peace" (205). Their relationship and especially Virginia's kindness toward the Ghost appear as a selfless, reconciliatory, and forgiving type, and Virginia furthermore represents a lover who goes to great extents for the sake of her beloved and with the sole intention of wanting what is best for him, without any selfish desire to keep the friendly ghost by her side. At the end of the story, it is Virginia – herself a prophet figure thanks to the ideal and selfless state of her love as well as her sacrifice – who gives reality to the old prophecy on the library window: After she weeps for the Ghost and prays for him, the withered almond tree blossoms and the Ghost is forgiven by God. Virginia's pure love for the Ghost and his following repentance thus purge him of the sins of his previously immoral lifestyle and secure him a delightful afterlife, and he is finally allowed to enter the Garden of Death. Thus, although the Ghost's worldly fate, similarly to the Happy Prince and his swallow, as well as the selfish giant's fates, ends in death, the aestheticization of death compared to life as well as the degradation of death compared to love, make the end of life followed by love the ideal destination of any decadent individual

"The Canterville Ghost" thus presents a familiar account of a character deep in his decadence, who is not only mindlessly and as a result of his blind indulgence in art and pleasure involved in immorality, but is also depicted taking pleasure and pride in that immorality itself, followed by an offer of hope for even such an extreme case of decadence. The Ghost, then, with the help of the angelic Virginia and thanks to the redeeming qualities of true love, changes his source of pleasure from his savage haunting tactics to the love Virginia offers him and is eventually rewarded with a peaceful death and afterlife. Virginia's selfless sacrifice of her own innocence for the sake of the Ghost's redemption and winning "a prayer from out the lips of sin", thus proves that true love, when done rightly and when reciprocated, can function as an amoral form of aesthetics – an adequate replacement to the perverse form of pleasure the decadent typically overindulge in, as well as a saving grace of their previously sinful soul.

## Conclusion

The decadent movement, associated with “idleness, immorality, aristocracy and aestheticism” (Sinfield 94) developed as a critique of urban modernity in the nineteenth century, and consequently, a disgust for poverty, overcrowding, and the common life, as well as the bourgeoisie attaining a higher status became a standard trait of the decadent man. These factors, which according to Huysmans in *Against Nature* called “for veils to clothe the naked truth” (29), then led the decadent man, unimpressed by nature and the natural elements and prospects of life to turn to “extravagant illusions” (7), human artistry and peculiar and queer pleasures.

The radical remonstrations against Victorian commonplaceness and deterioration – due to which the decadent man is given no choice but to “progress” deeper into his sickness (More 194) – depicted in Huysmans’ *Against Nature* and Nietzsche’s Dionysian repudiation of Christianity in *The Birth of Tragedy* are thus combined and given a new life in Oscar Wilde’s literature. Wilde, a chief aesthete himself, “whose ideal of life is inactivity” (Sinfield 95), uses decadence, which can also be “an attempt to sublimate the artist’s social alienation” (Doyle 19), in order to controvert English society. The decadence of art for art’s sake also serves as a contemptuous reaction to the established concerns and genres of Victorian literature, such as nature writing, realism, rosy romance, and self-help novels, which Wilde shows great disdain for in his essay “The Decay of Lying”. Consequently, Huysmans’ Des Esseintes, “a weakly aristocrat whose physical and moral decay symbolizes the decline of nineteenth-century bourgeois culture as well as the beginning of the decadent aesthetic” (Dierkes-Thrun 35), becomes Wilde’s model in the creation of his own decadent characters. Wilde, who was “moved by the attempt of Des Esseintes in *A Rebours* to construct an artistic world in which to live artistically” (Ellmann 294), creates such an ideal, aesthetic world for his protagonists, in which they can gleefully reside among their similar-minded aristocratic companions and close their eyes to the real world and its unaesthetic and therefore irrelevant issues. This world based on unconventional pleasures and desires that go against the grain of Victorian society thus becomes a safe haven for the decadent to practice their infatuation with beauty, pleasure, art, love, and desire.



Wilde's literature, in addition, works as a reminder of how despite art and pleasure's position as key vehicles in escaping the decadence which is the rotting Victorian society, devotion to aesthetic concerns and sensuous obsessions can present ethical controversy. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salomé*, the texts in focus in this thesis' first two chapters, Wilde demonstrates the most extreme cases and the previously hinted risks of decadence. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* exhibits how since "the costume of the nineteenth century is detestable", sin comes to be perceived as "the only colour element left in modern life" (23). Accordingly, *Salomé*, that "dramatizes the clash between the prophetic voice and the aesthetic eye, between moral injunction and sensual desire" (Greger 42), clearly illustrates that for the decadent, "[a]esthetics are higher than ethics" ("The Critic as Artist" 1015). What Wilde depicts in his portrayal of the overly decadent characters in these works then, is a lack of reason and logic – a blind and biased excessive immersion in aesthetic concerns, beautiful matters, and sexual pleasure, which unsurprisingly brings along a degree of immorality to the decadent individual who does not see or desire any limits to the fulfillment of his ideals.

Murder and self-murder are consequently showcased as the highest forms of immorality and the final outcome for the compassionate individual torn between his aesthetic cultivation, his human desire, and his quest for transcendence from the Victorian philistinism, loveless moralism, and spirit-deadening confinement of the society within which he lives. Murder is furthermore presented as the ultimate decadent act, an act committed at the height of one's decadence after the alienation of living in a society that constantly condemns morally and socially constitutive aspects of the decadent's individual integrity, and when every possible point of return has been passed. This fate is attentively characterized by Wilde's murderers who, far too deep in indulgence in their sources of pleasure, begin to perceive death as a justifiable means to the end of sublimation and spiritual transcendence. All instances of murder discussed in this thesis then ensue from decadence. Dorian's indirect murder of Sibyl Vane, the brutal murder of his dear friend, Basil, as well as the final murder of his own self and soul, are all inspired by his blindly decadent overindulgence and obsession with his own beauty, youth, and portrait, as well as his inability to draw the line between harmless appreciation of these matters and losing himself in immorality as a result. Additionally, *Salomé* and Herod's murders of their aestheticized, desired and begazed love objects also exude the same air of excess in decadent satisfactions. Even the innocent and noble sacrificial instances of Sibyl's self-murder in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the young Syrian's in *Salomé* are born out of a decadent

obsession with love as well as an overly romanticized version of their beloveds. Decadence, after allowing love to entirely take over the lives of these ideal but hopeless lovers, leads to their state of disillusionment and extreme sorrow, which has no solution but death. Death, murder, and suicide are thusly justified in these exceptionally and violently decadent chapters, as each of the characters values their aesthetically charged but nevertheless selfish and immoral desires more than life or death. Just as Dorian's prioritization of beauty and youth makes the lives of his acquaintances pale in significance, then, Salomé, Herod, Sibyl, and the young Syrian – all subscribers of Salomé's "[l]ove only should one consider" (741) theory and each blinded by different types of romantic love and sexual desire – fail to dedicate enough value to a matter as lowly as life and bring death either to their beloveds or to themselves without a second thought.

Whereas Dorian, as the representative of the blindly decadent characters in the first two chapters, "looked on evil simply as a mode through which he could realise his conception of the beautiful" (102), thus pointing to the best realization of aesthetic ideals to be through evil and transgression of conventional morals, Wilde's short stories, as discussed in the third chapter of this thesis, pose two other possibilities. In his short stories, Wilde illuminates a figurative line that separates the harmless characteristics of decadence such as passive hatred of the world, alienation, and love for beauty, art, aesthetics, or another person, from the often-following immorality and murder. Therefore, even though the main characters in these five different short stories subscribe to a generally decadent mindset and do at one point or another find themselves overly involved in pursuing decadent elements of pleasure, they all successfully manage to avoid the unsightly consequences that their fellow decadent characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salomé* suffer.

Unlike Des Esseintes, who is coerced by his doctor at the end of *Against Nature* to abandon his decadent lifestyle and go back into society if he wishes for the improvement of his life, the turned-over characters in Wilde's "The Portrait of Mr W.H." and "The Nightingale and the Rose" come to this conclusion by themselves. Therefore, they eagerly halt their involvement in decadence and overindulgence in their pleasure of choice and resort instead to logic – a concept unknown to the aforementioned decadent characters in the first two chapters – and as a result, manage to save their lives from a decadent death. Thus, after revealing the possible danger of getting lost in decadence without looking back, Wilde depicts the narrator and the young student

in “The Portrait of Mr W.H.” and “The Nightingale and the Rose” respectively going from this extreme to another, abruptly putting an end to their indulgence in what they consider on second thought to be inutile and futile, as well as underlining the hidden risks in such an obviously anti-decadent lifestyle. Whereas art and love respectively had been at one stage the focal point of the narrator and the student’s lives, as well as what had given their lives a purpose like no other, these characters cold-heartedly give up on the attractive life of boundless decadence and settle instead for the moderated quotidian life of a logical Victorian man. These characters, by anticlimactically abandoning their infatuations, might appear to escape murder – the final consequence of reckless decadence – but in reality, they get involved in yet another form of murder. Accordingly, they cause the premature death of Nietzschean vitalism, aesthetic engrossment, and the soul-consuming search for ecstatic intensity and spiritual transcendence, thus bursting the bubble of both themselves and the decadent aesthetes presented by Wilde. The narrator and the young student – perhaps unknown to themselves – thus kill their sources of joy and excitement in a suppressive Victorian society and what might frequently seem to be a bleak and dead-end universe. Therefore, although these characters survive decadence and are shown to be living a life of reason at the end, they are not envied. In fact, the narrator of “The Portrait of Mr W.H.” and the young student in “The Nightingale and the Rose” have their protagonist status and spotlight stolen by Cyril Graham and the nightingale respectively. Accordingly, it is Cyril’s hard-earned and influential portrait in the former short story and the nightingale in the latter that are mentioned in the titles. These supposed main characters, their state, and their apparently triumphant ends thus appear piteous when put in comparison with the noble sacrifices and the decadently fulfilled shorter lives of these two unlikely heroes.

Even though Dorian and Salomé, who represent the moribund moralism of the fin de siècle, are lost causes much like Victorian England, and the narrator and the student in “The Portrait of Mr W.H.” and “The Nightingale and the Rose” respectively come to favor the ineluctable demands of reason and social life over their passions, Wilde offers hope. After presenting the contradictory cases of a short-lived and immoral decadent lifestyle and an utterly passionless anti-decadent one, Wilde points out the agonizing deaths and the damnation of the souls of the former and the pathetic survival of the latter, and instead puts forward yet another possibility: for the decadent man to quite literally get the best of both worlds – to nevertheless indulge in his passions, without having to degrade to living a mainstream life, or suffering the severe repercussions. In the last three short stories discussed, the Happy Prince is said to have initially

lived an uncaring royal life of beauty while his people were suffering from poverty and hunger, the selfish giant a self-indulgent life of despising and distancing himself from people, and the Canterville Ghost a sadistic life of a murderer. However, all three characters come to tone down their initially selfish decadent fascinations and move their way over to a different decadent pursuit: that of ideal love. The prince, the giant, and the Ghost thus come to prioritize in life ideal love instead of their previous fixations, and thus get to benefit from the purificatory qualities of this elite love. These ideal lovers, however – unlike Sibyl, the young Syrian, and the nightingale – are not reckless and impulsive, but rather patient as they trust themselves to this love and eventually have their trust rewarded. Therefore, choosing logic over decadent self-indulgence, as shown in “The Portrait of Mr W.H.” and “The Nightingale and the Rose”, might save individuals from death and murder, but only at the high price of the loss of pleasure and passion. However, a decadent but not immorally-charged lifestyle allows these successful characters in “The Happy Prince”, “The Selfish Giant” and “The Canterville Ghost” a chance to nevertheless pamper their indulgent tendencies in their new enchantment of choice – ideal love – while they additionally manage to have their loves reciprocated and receive hopes of salvation.

While all of Wilde’s decadent protagonists do in one way or another get involved in murder, the difference between these murders, as well as what gives Wilde a chance to save the souls of at least some of them, lies in who or what these characters murder, and with what intention. Both Dorian and Salomé commit acts of direct as well as indirect murder, and as Dorian sells his soul in exchange for eternal youth and Salomé loses hers in getting her hands on the man she desires, both characters’ fates end in death and presumably, the excruciating afterlife of sinners and murderers. The narrator of “The Portrait of Mr W.H.” and the young student in “The Nightingale and the Rose” – who had brought about the death of decadence – with their insistence on logic allow the decadent and honorable deaths of Cyril Graham and Erskine, and the nightingale respectively to be in vain, and in this manner, kill these heroes one more time. On the other hand, the Happy Prince, the selfish giant, and the Canterville Ghost, who get a chance to indulge in love within the amoral realm of decadence, do share a similar fate of death. However, the difference between their heart-wrenching and noble deaths with the aforementioned instances of sheer murder lies in the passivity of these characters’ deaths, and the harmless nature of their lives. Therefore, even though the prince, the giant, and the Ghost

all accept wittingly their fate of death, these characters' souls are said to be found at peace after death in harmony with religious orthodoxy, biblical prophecy, and Christian martyrology.

Consequently, the short stories of Wilde, rather than functioning as a moral condemnation of decadence, appear instead as a guide for the decadent to escape the possible harsh consequences of their lifestyle. In the works discussed in this thesis, the decadent pursuit of art, aesthetics, beauty, and love is nonetheless deemed worthwhile, and decadent murders and suicides for the sake of such ideals are seen as justifiable or even noble. Therefore, Dorian and Salomé's deaths do not take away from their successful lives as decadent icons, and those of Sibyl Vane, the young Syrian, Cyril Graham, and the nightingale are applauded. However, Wilde in addition introduces an opportunity for both the realization of decadent pleasure and ideals in this life, and the continuation of this fulfillment into the next one. Thus, while Dorian Gray and Salomé's successful realization of their ideals is cut short due to their deaths and presumably pessimistic afterlives, Wilde's "The Happy Prince", "The Selfish Giant", and "The Canterville Ghost" grant the decadent main characters the prospect to enjoy the sensations they achieve in this life for longer, and possibly, forever.

Additionally, homosexuality is a decadent element suppressed and marginalized by religious and Victorian standards alike which is given special attention in Wilde's works in parallel with the aforementioned instances of love and death. Thereby, rather than presenting homosexual love and care as a fall from the typical, natural, and mainstream heterosexual love that the Victorian and Christian society of the time honored and advocated, Wilde highlights and elevates homosexuality and gay love. Basil in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the page of Herodias in *Salomé*, the Happy Prince and his swallow, and the selfish giant and his little boy-Christ in the fairytales, all depict different extents of this type of same-gender inclination and ideal love. Basil's unconditional, selfless, and harmless love for Dorian is rewarded by murder, and the ideal and undemanding love the page of Herodias hints toward the young Syrian shares a similarly dejected fate of receiving no acknowledgment or reciprocation, thus emphasizing the typical damnation of homosexual love. However, as "the telling of beautiful untrue things" is the proper aim of art ("The Decay of Lying" 943), it is in the kinder – and completely imaginary – world of fairy tales that Wilde demonstrates ideal unions between traditionally inconceivable couples and thus, homosexual characters are given a chance to achieve a happy ending of sorts. By giving realization to homosexual love only in the fairy tale structure and the achievement

of this love through untypical unions, Wilde further showcases how homosexual love can only ever be reciprocated under absurd and highly unrealistic and idealistic circumstances. “The Happy Prince” and “The Selfish Giant” nevertheless present to young children and adult readers alike the admirable compassion and love between two disparate lovers, which suggest a metaphor for the unseen and unheard of nature of the love between two people of the same gender. In addition, by giving homosexual characters such as the Happy Prince, the swallow, and the selfish giant a dreamlike opportunity to enter paradise despite their conventionally and religiously unaccepted type of love, Wilde reveals his hopes for tolerance as well as divine pardon.

The literary reputation of Oscar Wilde, who was “nationally famous before he had written a single memorable work – famous as an undergraduate, famous for being famous, and [...] for his exotic dress sense” (Fry xii) comprises of his decadent masterpiece *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in addition to his position as the “avatar of aestheticism” (Stalheim 1), which shortly after his death made him “the most widely read and translated English-language author in Europe after Shakespeare (Fry xv). As Stephen Fry contemplates in his article, “Playing Oscar”, “the name Oscar Wilde has become a logo”, and it can now be rather difficult to remember a time before this man – who stood for nothing less than art – was heard of (Fry xiii). Wilde’s literature was condemned as decadent by the Victorian custodians of culture; however, the compassion, love, care, and aesthetic concerns of Wilde’s aesthetics anticipated the modern world to come. Therefore, even though Wilde, with his “effeminate dandy-aesthete image” (Wilper 141), had faced disgrace, bankruptcy, and imprisonment in response to his decadent and self-indulgent lifestyle, scandals, and writings, the fact that “[t]he very sentiments and values which he was promoting so subversively in 1895 are precisely those which are so attractive to the youth of today” (Holland 45) marks the renown and admiration of Wilde as a figure and his literature as a whole in the modern day and age. In addition, Wilde’s unabashed depiction of gay love in his works makes him one of the founding fathers of modern gay literature (Dickinson 414), and through his homosexual identity as well as his homosexually charged writings, Wilde manages to become and remain a homosexual icon and “a saint to those whose recently legitimized sexuality needs its heroes and martyrs” (Fry xiv). Wilde’s principal main characters, who are effete, aesthetic, amoral, insouciant, and dandified, thus give off a queer ambiance “because our stereotypical notion of male homosexuality derives from Wilde, and our ideas about him” (Sinfield vii; emphasis added), thus bringing to light his influence over the world of

homoeroticism. In addition, Wilde's legacy has also made him "an almost messianic figure to those who want to show their allegiance to Art and Beauty" (Fry xiv). Wilde, through depicting decadent characters who "have no wider interests and aims" (Hegel 170) than their present object of desire – whether it be the concept of youth or the severed head of a prophet – manifests the inner freedom aesthetic concepts grant to the decadent to indulge in what they will. The carefree and undisturbed quality of Wilde's decadent characters, who "share the same blissfulness as the gods of Olympus" (Rancière 16) – "gods obeying the law of *epithumia*, the law of need and desire" (Rancière 17) – and who instead of great actions, commit to beautiful matters, is exactly what gives excellence to Wilde's art. Furthermore, Wilde's anti-establishment animus to basically everything Victorian champions literature's tendency to be novel, to challenge the moral, social, material, and conventional concerns of any society anywhere at any time. Wilde's literature thus contributes to the idea of literature's ungovernable autonomy, as an aesthetic realm per se that is not subjected to ethical imposition, not against but for decadence and the safe prosperity of the decadent.

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