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A Ray of Moonlight Falls: Casting Light on Oscar Wilde's Dissident Decadence

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Introduction
What Do We Mean When We Say Aestheticism and Decadence?

As the nineteenth century barreled toward its end, tensions were high throughout England and greater western Europe. The 1890s, known as the fin de siécle, signaled not only the end of a period rich with technological advances, but the beginning of something new—a decade of revolutionary political, cultural, and social movements that would change the way Victorians viewed their world. The 1890s ushered in the Decadent movement, emerging out of aestheticism and characterized by its dualities: its appreciation for the degenerate and the regenerate, the disembodied and the embodied, and the modernization of social structures and revitalization of ancient societies' love of art for art's sake.

It is hardly a surprise that the 1890s represented a decade charged with dualities. As Queen Victoria's reign slowly came to an end, Britain shifted from Victorianism to Modernism. The fabric of culture and society was altered irrevocably. In their introduction to *The Fin de Siécle: A Reader in Cultural History c. 1880-1900*, Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst succinctly capture this era of change: the 1890s were a time "when British cultural politics were caught between two ages, the Victorian and the modern; a time fraught with anxiety and with an exhilarating sense of possibility" (xiii). People were fascinated by the other. What was on the other side of the Channel that separated Britain from the rest of the world—both physically and emotionally? Where had all these artifacts come from that populated British museums? Ledger and Luckhurst reveal that "popular culture of the time was fascinated by exotic, imperial terrors––fantasies of reverse invasion by the French or Germans, the stirring of mummies in the British Museum as Egypt and the Sudan were annexed" (xiv). Questions began to arise about the empire. Had Britain overstepped? Can we justify colonization based on Darwinism? People were anxious about the present and, more pressingly, the future.

At the same time that colonial guilt took root, questions about gender politics and sexuality arose. The fin de siécle came "to be identified as the moment of emergence" (Ledger and Luckhurst xiv). Again, substantial dualities characterized the development of gender politics and theory. The New Woman, a feminist ideal that was embodied by women seeking radical change, emerged in the 1890s. The New Woman could "mark an image of sexual freedom and assertions of female independence…[but] could also mark an apocalyptic warning of the dangers of sexual degeneracy, the abandonment of motherhood, and consequent risk to the racial future of England" (Ledger and Luckhurst xvii). The Suffrage Movement became an international movement in the later Victorian era, defined by feminist concerns about gender equality and sexuality. Conversely, however, the 1890s gave way to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 in Britain, which criminalized gross acts of indecency between two men—it is also the act that imprisoned Oscar Wilde to hard labor in prison for two years. Although the Suffrage Movement eventually gained many women the right to vote in Britain in 1918, the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 was not repealed until 1956. There is not a better metaphor for the 1890s: Society took one step forward and three steps back.

The turbulent history of the 1890s gave birth to the Decadent movement. Drawing from elements of aestheticism, decadence first gained prominence in nineteenth-century France, specifically with Charles Baudelaire. An early proponent of decadence, Baudelaire even referred to himself as a decadent in an 1857 edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, a collection of his poetry. The term "decadence" eventually came to encompass social and political change in France through the appreciation of Aestheticism, and later in Great Britain. British authors reading French literature, such as Wilde himself, were fascinated by aestheticism and decadence, and the movements began to be featured prominently in British society. Whistler's "Ten o'Clock

Lecture," originally given in 1885 at the Prince's Hall in Piccadilly and later published in print, is one of the earliest defenses for the very heart of Aestheticism: art for art's sake. Whistler argues that the Victorian era scorned art: the Victorians felt they must ascribe a meaning to art, and that there must be a social or moral reason why art exists. Whistler rallies a cry, claiming "there *never* was an artistic period! There *never was* an art loving nation." Art is not confined to one period: it is inextricably linked to life. Just as art imitates life, life in turn imitates art. Whistler reveals that art was once life—when people would return from journeys or quests, they would drink "from the Artists goblets, fashioned cunningly—taking no note the while of the craftman's pride and understanding not his glory in his work—drinking, at the cup, not from choice, not from a consciousness that it was beautiful—but because, forsooth, there was none other!" (Whistler). Art was prevalent because it was necessary. Whistler divulges that "people lived in marvels of Art—and eat and drank out of masterpieces—for there was nothing to eat or drink out of" (Whistler). Art existed because it was needed. Humans took no notice of the splendor of their cups, or the beauty in their walls. No thought was given to beauty because all thought was given to craftsmanship. People innately appreciated art, without placing value or meaning to it.

In contrast, Whistler criticizes his age for its thought—its assumption that art may be appreciated only by teasing out its meaning. He claims that "the gentle circle of Art swarms with the intoxicated mob of mediocrity, whose leaders prate and council, and call aloud, where the Gods once spoke whisper" (Whistler). Art has been poisoned by those who argue about its meaning, who are too connected to the state and to the nation: "false again is the fabled link between the grandeur of Art, and the glories and virtues of the State—for Art feeds not upon the Nations—and people might be wiped from the face of the Earth but Art *is*" (Whistler). The

nineteenth century, known for its inventions, technologies, and social movements, has neglected art. The conflation of art with government and the rise of nationalism is wrong—Whistler spends much of his lecture harkening back to the Golden Age of Athens, when art was utilitarian and intrinsic to life itself. Art dripped from temples—sculpted marble statues lined the halls of the Parthenon, and adorned the streets of the Agora: and yet it was not a means for the Athenian government to affect or influence their people. Whistler contends that art has become a tactic for the government and the state—he cries, "how superhuman the self imposed task of the Nation" to link art and the state together. Art is not a method for the mob. It is a skill for the individual. She "cast[s] about for the man worthy of her love—and Art seeks the Artist alone" (Whistler). Art for art's sake, not the sake of the government or its people.

Whistler's lecture echoed throughout the 1890s, finding expression in some of the most canonical works produced in that decade. Whistler created a conversation about what aestheticism was. Have we neglected art? Have we conflated it with the nation? In his essay titled "The Decadent Movement in Literature" (1893), Arthur Symons expands upon Whistler's earlier grievances, drawing from Whistler's term of "aestheticism" to define "decadence." Drawing from Whistler's term of "aestheticism," or the act of disconnecting meaning from art, Symons then defines "decadence" as a movement drawing from the key elements of aestheticism. Replacing Whistler's vague symbol of "art" with the focused and specific technique of "literature," Symons defines decadence in literature as "an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity" (105). Symons continues, asserting that decadence is a "new and beautiful and interesting disease. Healthy we cannot call it, and healthy it does not wish to be considered" (105). Decadence is like a virus, infecting writers and thinkers alike. Symons claims

that the Victorian era has "grown over-luxurious, over-inquiring, too languid for the relief of action" (106). Similar to Whistler, Symons suggests that the Victorians foolishly tried to give art a purpose. They have attempted to attribute moral or social reasons to why we read or why we look at art, when there should not be one. On this foundation, Symons defines what decadence is in the late 1800s—he asserts that "to be a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul: that is the ideal of Decadence" (107). There are dualities to decadence: things are and they are not. It is at once "exquisite verse and delicately artificial prose" (Symons 107); it represents "artificial paradise" (109). The Decadent movement, to Symons, is beauty unhinged. There is something tragically wrong, and yet the human mind cannot help but be fascinated by it. It distorts, it brings the dead to life, it gives a voice to the disembodied—seemingly without any reason. Symons' definition of decadence informs the literature of the late Victorian era: *The Strange Case of Jekyll and Hyde*, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and of course, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* These novels and novellas point to a time wrought with duality, to an appreciation for the grotesque and for art, and depict an era on the precipice of something that is not quite right—or perhaps something that is very right.

Although meant to be a satire of the Decadent movement, Max Beerbohm's *A Defense of Cosmetics* (1894) captures the essence of Symons' argument. Beerbohm writes, "Artifice, sweetest exile, is come into her kingdom" (Beerbohm)—the appreciation for a purity of art has returned, and she has come into her own. Beerbohm announces that "the Victorian era has come to its end and the day of sancta simplicitas [holy simplicity, in Latin] is quite ended," expressing that decadence, and all of its campy glory, reigns over the Victorian era. He argues that the use of cosmetics is inherently art: "the painting of the face is the first kind of painting man can have known...to deny that "making-up" is an art...is absurd" (Beerbohm). To Beerbohm, art is not

stationary. It has become a living entity, finally combining life and art. He writes that the "lovely mask of enamel with its shadows of pink and tiny pencilled veins, what must lurk behind it? Of what treacherous mysteries may it not be the screen?" (Beerbohm). Not only is art a living, lovely mask, but it is treacherous. It is hiding the mysteries that the fin de siécle is obsessed with discovering. He continues, "Artifice is the strength of the world, and in that same mask of paint and powder, shadowed with vermeil tinct and most trimly pencilled, is woman's strength" (Beerbohm). Art is the weight of the world. It is a woman's strength, a mask both to block out and draw in the world. Beerbohm reveals that the Decadent movement bleeds into our everyday lives. No longer is it relegated to just art, or the appreciation of art. It affects us; it is a part of our identity.

Wilde's decadence blends all three of these ideologies. He believed in the commitment of aestheticism to art for art's sake, and that life imitates art. But the difference in his definition of decadence is that he ascribes social and political forces to it. Through the lens of decadence, Wilde folds in thoughts and actions about dissidence, resistance, and the very concept of being different from others. Thus, decadence becomes the politicized culmination of aestheticism. He pushes back on society itself, illustrating and proving that to be different is to be celebrated. Through his writings and musings, Wilde sustains both a creative and political atmosphere that permeates his every written word. His words touch one's core: "the popular cry of our time is 'Let us return to Life and Nature; they will recreate Art for us, and send the red blood coursing through her veins...Nature is always behind the age. And Life, she is the solvent that breaks up Art, the enemy that lays waste her house' ("The Decay of Lying" 223). Not only is it an ideology, it is a cry. It is a mark for something bigger than just words—Wilde's decadence will make change.

So how does one define decadence? Drawing from these three essays, it is clear that the movement was steeped in the appreciation of art. The French concept of decadence was compelling to those in Great Britain who had no single, certain idea what the next century would hold. As the Victorian era came to a close, the need to ascribe social or cultural purpose and meaning to art became secondary to the notion that art is purely art. Adherents to this idea believed that art must return to its Classical meaning, that art must merge with life. To define decadence, one must understand that the two are intrinsically linked—life represents art because life is art. Art breathes, it has a soul. Decadents believe that art contains multitudes—it has dualities, it has moral complexities. Although decadence enjoyed only a fleeting moment in Britain, its aftershocks still affect contemporary literature. Over a century later, we are still fascinated by Wilde's poetic prose, by the literature that emerged from this period of uncertainty. Decadence's heart still beats—it just beats quietly.

Chapter One
The Artist as Critic: Defining Wilde's Decadence

During the years of 1889 and 1890, Wilde wrote two dialogues, entitled "The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist." Not one to constrict himself to a single genre, Wilde employed the dialogue, a previously little used form, as a new medium to offer his political beliefs and views. In his aptly titled article "Criticism as Art: Form in Oscar Wilde's Critical Writings," Herbert Sussman argues that although "the form itself—the dialogue, the narrative frame, the self-conscious irony—is usually dismissed by critics as mere entertainment...Wilde is consciously working to create new forms of critical discourse through which he can adequately express his 'new views'" (Sussman). More than mere entertainment, the dialogues provided a new form to offer new and radical views. I argue that it is through his dialogues that Wilde first defines decadence, or what I call "Wildean decadence"—a decadence that extends beyond the limits of literature and art, politicizing the term that defined the late 1800s.

Published first in 1889, "The Decay of Lying" is Wilde's first step into the genre of the dialogue. As in all of Wilde's writings, the prose is poetic: there is not a single word out of place or metaphor omitted. As Sussman acknowledges, "in Wilde's works, then, intellectual discourse is "aestheticized," shown to be a form of art, not only as a means of giving form to feeling, but as evanescent, dependent upon the ceaseless, shifting flux of emotion" (Sussman). Not only do Wilde's dialogues reveal an intellectual and political belief previously uncodified, but they encapsulate the decadent prose that Wilde is known for. This prose is reflected in the beginning of this first dialogue—as Cyril, one of the two characters in this dialogue, comes in through an open window and exclaims, "there is a mist upon the woods, like the purple bloom upon a plum" ("The Decay of Lying" 215). Before introducing the key themes of this essay, Wilde sets up the ambiance of the scene, commenting on the weather and the adjacent woods. While other authors

of dialogues might skip these fleeting moments of poetic fiction, it is distinctly Wildean to lean into his artistic decadence and indulge in these distinctive details. The brief flash of poetic prose is the beauty and the decadence of the essay. His words are rare and special—as Walter Pater puts it, the prose burns with a hard, gemlike flame.[1]

After establishing the scene, Wilde begins to reveal his definition of decadence. Vivian, the dialogue's other character, is asked by Cyril to "go and lie on the grass, and smoke cigarettes, and enjoy Nature" ("The Decay of Lying" 215). In response, Vivian answers that he is "glad to say that I have entirely lost [the faculty to enjoy nature]" and that in his appreciation of Art, he has discovered that "what Art really reveals to us is Nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition" (215). Vivian continues, announcing that it is lucky that Nature is so imperfect because "as otherwise we should have had no art at all. Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place" (215). Here, Wilde reveals this first clause of his definition of decadence. Breaking away from nature, Wilde argues that it is art that shows us perfection, and it is art that teaches nature beauty and perfection. Bending towards the archetype of classical decadence, Wilde asserts here that life imitates art, and not vice versa. Sussman acknowledges this position in his article: he writes, "[In "The Decay of Lying"] the characters are masks for similarly antithetical mental possibilities present in Wilde. Cyril represents the sensibility given to setting reality in ordered intellectual formulations, Vivian the sensibility working to dissolve these assertions into mental impressions" (Sussman). In "The Decay of Lying," Wilde presents two possibilities for viewing reality. One, through Cyril, is the mandate of realism, ordered and formulaic, of seeing

[1] As made famous by his Conclusion to *The Renaissanc*e, Pater writes, "To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life." Pater's Conclusion has come to be known as one of the first and most prominent manifestos for aestheticism and decadence.

reality through nature instead of art. The other, through Vivian, is the artistic, decadent view of seeing reality through art.

Harkening back to the title of the dialogue, Vivian announces to Cyril that he is composing an essay called "The Decay of Lying: A Protest," in which Vivian attempts to demonstrate that the act of lying, or creating fiction, is shamefully dying out. He declares that "lying and poetry are both arts" and that "they require the most careful study, the most disinterested devotion" (218). Through his characters, Wilde claims that lying, or rather, fiction itself is a more artistic form than realism. Vivian contends that true fiction has fallen out of vogue—nowadays, authors are "writing novels which are so like life that no one can possibly believe in their probability...and if something cannot be done to check...our monstrous worship of facts, Art will become sterile, and Beauty will pass away from the land" (218). As his era shifts towards realism, Wilde calls this form a "modern vice" and that "there is such a thing as robbing a story of its reality by trying to make it too true" (218). Realist texts stray away from the mist upon the woods and the purple bloom upon a plum. Instead, realism has become obsessed with what actually transpired—the woods are foggy. Is Wilde's earlier sentence not more compelling than this new one? If no one writes like Wilde, engulfed in his decadence, will we forget that the woods looked like the purple bloom of a plum? Are we forever resigned to think of it as simply a misty wood? Wilde shows us that realist texts choke the beauty, and thus the art, out of life. Wilde continues, claiming that "the only real people are the people who never existed" (220). For Wilde, reality is not the true reality. In line with his first clause, it is not nature or the world that shows us the truth. Instead, it is through lying, fiction, and art that one gets to truth. Sussman agrees, continuing Wilde's argument by stating that even his choice of form is cognizant of Wilde's definition of decadence: he reveals that the dialogue is "a form

suggesting that intellectual formation is itself a type of artistic creation which, for a moment, fixes in the form of language the complex of mental sensations, or, in Wilde's terms, gives 'reality to every mood'" (Sussman). The dialogue is a form that breathes art as well as intellect. As Sussman argues, it is fitting that Wilde chose this form as his medium for his first exploratory definition of decadence.

In the latter half of "The Decay of Lying," Wilde continues his search for the essence of the decadent movement. He persists that "wherever we have returned to Life and Nature, our work has always become vulgar, common, and uninteresting" (225). Wilde argues that realist works are less interesting than artistic ones—instead of describing the extraordinary, the rare, and the special, realist texts depict common life and the ordinary. These works, according to Wilde, are rendered boring and uninteresting. He continues to describe modern art, arguing that there is no beauty in "its faithful and laborious realism" (225). Instead, the true beauty lies in the art of life—Wilde later insists that "Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself...she is a veil, rather than a mirror" (228). Art is beautiful because it shows us the beauty in the everyday. Instead of telling us, Art lies and carries us to a better and more fantastic place. Wilde finishes this section by directly telling his reader that "it is none the less true that Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life." It is not in life or nature that one finds true beauty, for this beauty is mundane. Wilde argues that one cannot find beauty in something that one sees daily. Instead, he believes in the beauty of art—in the surprising, the fantastic, and the grotesque. Cyril, provoking Vivian, asks for an example: the idea of life imitating art is too foreign to be understood at face value. Vivian complies, saying that "where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows...at present, people see fogs, not because there

are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects" (233). It is not because of nature that one recognizes the distinct color of fog, or the way it wisps around the edges of townhouses and street corners. Rather, it is because the artists of this generation have taught us through their mediums to see what fog looks like.

Additionally, Wilde asserts that even though society turns to art to see culture reflected, art does not always tell the truth. Using the Middle Ages as an example, he asks, "surely you don't imagine that the people of the Middle Ages bore any resemblance at all to the figures on mediaeval stained glass," instead revealing that "the fact is that we look back on the ages entirely through the medium of Art, and Art, very fortunately, has never once told us the truth" (235). Although art helps us remember what happened in our history, it glamorizes and distorts what reality was. It is this definition of reality and realism that Wilde adheres to. He announces that modernists "never paint what they see. They paint what the public sees, and the public never sees anything" (236). As Wilde stated earlier, the public cannot see reality, or even fog itself. They need to be transformed by art and artists themselves in order to perceive what is happening. Thus, the modernists and realists of Wilde's time cannot paint and reveal our true history.

Wilde closes this dialogue by articulating that "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art" (239). Reiterating what he has spent nearly twenty-three pages laying out, Wilde acknowledges that it is only through lying, and thus through art, that one can receive the truest form of reality. Circling back to his technique at the beginning of this essay, Wilde's last few words are ones of poetic prose. He writes, "let us go out on the terrace, where 'droops the milk-white peacock like a ghost', while the evening star 'washes the dusk with silver'" (239). Here, Wilde provides a prime example of lying as an art form. Of course, the moon does not droop milk-white, nor does it appear in reality as a ghost. But does not one get a

better sense of the moon in this description? Do we not fully understand what Wilde is getting at? The moon, in its effervescent milky-white glow, stretches across the sky like a ghostly peacock. Similarly, one gets a better sense of the evening star, which taints dusk with its silver fingers. It seems that this description of the moon and the evening star is more vivid than if Wilde were to write: "let us go out on the terrace, where the moon is bright and the evening star is silver." Here he proves that lying, or even stretching the truth, not only gives one a clearer sense of reality, but allows one to actually see. In Wilde's description of the evening, one can imagine what the moon looks like, whereas in a more plain description, the image of the moon lies flat on the page. Symons, in his article "The Decadent Movement in Literature," agrees with Wilde—he writes that decadence contains "qualities of perfect simplicity, perfect sanity, perfect proportion, the supreme qualities" (105). Replacing Symons' phrase "decadence" with "decadent literature," one can place his argument onto Wilde's oeuvre. Wilde's literature is perfect—and it is in this perfection that one is able to view the world in its true self.

Wilde's definition of decadence continues in his second dialogue, "The Critic as Artist." Although this dialogue was originally published in 1890 under the title "The True Function and Value of Criticism: with some Remarks on the Importance of Doing Nothing: a Dialogue," "The Critic as Artist" and "The Decay of Lying" were published together, along with "Pen, Pencil and Poison," in 1891. As in "The Decay of Lying," Wilde uses "The Critic as Artist" as a way to reveal his political and social beliefs. In this second dialogue, Wilde argues that "critical discourse is a work of art, a coherent fiction, rather than the typically Victorian statement of the speaker's beliefs" (Sussman). Extending Wilde's earlier argument that it is through art that one sees true reality, I argue that here Wilde shows that one can see true reality through criticism as art.

The dialogue begins again with two characters; however, in this iteration they are named Gilbert and Ernest. As in "The Decay of Lying," these characters reflect different modes of thought in Wilde's era. Ernest, as his name suggests, represents the traditional viewpoint of society. Contrastly, Gilbert mirrors the Wildean aesthetic viewpoint. Ernest begins by asking what the value of art-criticism is. He claims that "in the best days of art there were no art-critics" ("The Critic as Artist" 245), offering the ancient Greeks as an example of a society devoid of criticism. Ernest echoes his statement by saying that "no one came to trouble the artist at his work. No irresponsible chatter disturbed him. He was not worried by opinions" (247). Ernest argues that the ancient Greeks were free to practice art as they pleased because there was no system set up to critique them. There was no judgement or hierarchy for art because there was no one to judge.

Gilbert vehemently disagrees. He begins his statement by saying that it is "just to say that the Greeks were a nation of art-critics" and holds that the Greeks "invented the criticism of art just as they invented the criticism of everything else" (249). If one is to value the art and beauty of the ancient Greeks, then they must also value their criticism in turn. Ancient Athens brought about critical thought, political discourse, and civil disobedience. It was the birthplace of democracy. Athens held up criticism as an art. However, Whistler's "Ten o'Clock Lecture" contends that despite the Victorian era's fascination with ancient Athens, Athenian art was not valued during its artistic moment. Whistler explains that "from the Artists goblets, fashioned cunningly—taking no note the while of the craftsman's pride and understanding not his glory in his work—drinking, at the cup, not from choice, not from consciousness that it was beautiful—but because, forsooth, there was no other!" (Whistler). Although society now values Athenian art, and the goblet itself, during its historical moment the goblet was used for its utilitarian sake,

not for an artistic purpose. Whistler continues to argue that it is only after these societies have died out that we begin to appreciate their contribution to culture. In Wilde's "The Critic as Artist," Ernest too has fallen into the Victorian-era trap of ascribing too much beauty and value to the ancient societies. Ancient artists did not intentionally create the Parthenon as one of the world's greatest wonders. Instead, it was created out of necessity—the Athenians needed somewhere to pray to their patron goddess Athena, and there was a big open hill right in the center of Athens. This unintentional, utilitarian art left room for the critic to interpret the artist's work: as Gilbert argues, the Greeks "elaborated the criticism of language, considered in the light of the mere material of that art, to a point to which we, with our accentual system of reasonable or emotional emphasis, can barely if at all attain" (249). As Gilbert later tells Ernest, "it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms" (254). As we learned from "The Decay of Lying," the artist creates true reality. However, it is up to the critic to interpret and teach society how to see this truth—Gilbert tells Ernest that "it is the highest Criticism, for it criticizes not merely the individual work of art, but Beauty itself, and fills with wonder a form which the artist may have left void, or not understood, or understood incompletely" (264). The critic teaches us to understand art, just as the artist shows the critic what art really is.

Thus, the critic is inherently a political role. As Wilde's critic is a decadent, one who values art over life and lying over reality, Wilde's decadence is therefore politicized. Gilbert later declares that the critic's "object will not always be to explain the work of art. He may seek rather to deepen its mystery, to raise round it, and round its maker, that mist of wonder which is dear to both gods and worshippers alike" ("The Critic as Artist"). Not only is the critic obliged to reveal what the significance of a piece of art is, but they are given the opportunity to relate it back to society and to ascribe meaning to the piece. It is here that Wilde exposes the genuine definition

of ‘Wildean decadence.’ The critic’s interpretation of art is related back to society, swaying them either one way or another. By employing the critic to decipher and extend the meaning of art, the critic is given the power to influence one’s thoughts. This Wildean decadence permeates all of Wilde’s writings. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as one will see later in this thesis, features a critic who exemplifies Wilde’s decadence and uses his position in society to make his opinions known. In Wilde’s less canonical work *Salome*, one witnesses what happens when society lashes back at the critic. Even in Wilde’s fables, the critic and figure of Wildean decadence is persecuted for his political and social beliefs. Although Wilde’s decadence is a dangerous one, he declares that it is important to struggle on its behalf—even if the results are disastrous. Without Wilde’s decadence, the world is a flatter, less beautiful version of itself: his decadence allows one to see the world through his eyes, in bright, naturalistic colors. Wilde proves that to live without Wildean decadence is not to live at all—as Sussman says, Wilde gives “reality to every mood.”

Chapter Two
Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Decadence

At first glance, "The Happy Prince" is not typical of Oscar Wilde. Made famous for his plays, dialogues, and Gothic novel, Wilde also tried his hand at writing other genres such as poetry and children's fables. Despite the different modes, however, the key themes that Wilde explores in his literature remain consistent. A proponent of the Aesthetic movement of the late nineteenth century, Wilde's writing brims with ideas about how art teaches life and how art and nature are connected. He argues for art to return to nature in his dialogue "The Decay of Lying": "Let us return to Life and Nature; they will recreate Art for us, and send the red blood coursing through her veins...And as for Life, she is the solvent that breaks up Art, the enemy that lays waste her house" (223). Although Wilde argues that Life can be Art's antagonist, he gestures towards the idea that there is an intrinsic link amongst art, life, and nature. Drawing from claims in Chapter One, I argue that Wilde explores these interconnections in his children's fable "The Happy Prince," and displays how these three depend upon each other to champion what I have called "Wildean decadence."

The fable begins with a description of the Prince, blending together art, life, and nature. The Prince stands "high above the city," already alluding to his royalty and power, and is gilded "with thin leaves of fine gold," combining the Prince's royalty with natural imagery. As is true in children's fables, the Prince is not just a statue—he is personified and comes to life throughout the story. When the Swallow lands upon the statue, he notices that "the eyes of the Happy Prince [are] filled with tears, and tears [are] running down his golden cheeks" (29). As the Prince is crying, the tears fall upon his "golden cheeks," a reminder that the Prince is a work of art. The Swallow continues, saying that the Prince's "face [is] so beautiful in the moonlight that the little Swallow [is] filled with pity" (29). This diction is intentionally vague and does not refer to his

beauty as human or art—it solidifies the merging of life and art. Additionally, it is the tear rolling down the Prince's golden cheek that moves the Swallow to be filled with pity, and not the tear itself. There is something about the combination of life and art that moves the Swallow to be emotional. Scholar Morgan Fritz nods to this connection, saying "the continuing vitality of Wilde scholarship in part attests to the challenges Wilde's treatment of the relationship between society and artist (sometimes victim, sometimes master) poses to a comprehensive understanding, and to the rich possibilities for interpretation it offers" (286). Although Fritz is arguing for Wilde's broader relevance in our cultural moment, his argument is especially pertinent to Wilde's fairy tales. Undeniably, there is a relationship between society, or life, and art.

In "The Decay of Lying," Wilde argues "the public imagine that, because they are interested in their immediate surroundings, Art should be interested in them also, and should take them as her subject-matter. But the mere fact that they are interested in these things makes them unsuitable subjects for Art" (222). These sentiments are expressed as the fable progresses and the Happy Prince attempts to teach his city to appreciate art, through the combination of art, life, and nature. The citizens of the town seem to be in awe of the Prince, but not necessarily for the right reasons: "He [is] very much admired indeed. 'He is as beautiful as a weathercock,'" says one of the citizens who "wishe[s] to gain a reputation for having artistic tastes" (28). The citizen compares the Prince, who is described as made of gold, to a weathercock, something that is plain and utilitarian. Clearly, the citizen, who stands as a metaphor for the town itself, doesn't understand Art. Another citizen, a small boy, is scolded for "crying for the moon" (28). The mother admonishes her son by saying, "Why can't you be like the Happy Prince...The Happy Prince never dreams of crying for anything" (28). This direct reprimanding of a child's

imagination and appreciation for nature highlights the town's inability to appreciate nature, and thus art, as Wilde suggests they are intrinsically linked. Instead, the town is focused on the idea of art and how it will benefit them. The first citizen "wishe[s] to gain a reputation" (28) for his comments about the Prince's beauty. The Mathematical Master chides his students for remarking that the Prince looks like an angel. He claims, "How would you know?...you have never seen one" (28). Although the children answer that they have seen one, the Mathematical Master has not because, instead of valuing Art and Nature, he values logic. He cannot see past his profession. As Wilde writes in "The Decay of Lying," just because they think they are fit to be the subjects of art and to understand art does not mean that they truly are or do.

The Prince's best pupil is not the town: it is the small Swallow that lands on the Prince. When he first alights on the Prince's feet, he says to himself, "I have a golden bedroom" (29). Here, the Swallow conflates the concept of life and art. The golden bedroom represents life, as it is utilitarian and of use to the bird. But the bedroom is "golden," decorated and beautiful, a symbol of art. Additionally, the golden bedroom is contrasted with the "dark lanes" and "white faces of starving children looking listlessly at the black streets" (33). This juxtaposition of dark and light, or rich and poor, magnifies what scholar Carol Margaret Davidson writes: she claims that "the exploration of the alterity of subjectivity in Victorian Gothic fiction is usually directed towards social critique. A connection is often drawn between the public and private spheres...a character's self-estrangement is revealed to be the result of monster-making social institutions" (128). Here, Wilde offers a social critique of the town—the town values their image over their people. When the Swallow believes it begins to rain in the town, he is not shielded by the Prince, the town's prized possession. He exclaims, "What is the use of a statue if it cannot keep the rain off?...he determined to fly away" (29). At first, the Swallow views the Prince only as a utilitarian

object, something that the Swallow can use to benefit himself. He cannot see past his own thoughts and feelings yet in order to understand that the rain is in fact the tears of the Happy Prince. It is just before he is about to fly away that the Swallow realizes that the Prince is crying. Even when the Swallow asks why the Prince is crying, he makes it about himself. He asks, "Why are you weeping then...you have quite drenched me" (29). The Swallow is a reflection of the town and society at large, greedy and self-absorbed.

The Prince begins to tell the Swallow about his life when he was alive, revealing that he "did not know what tears were" and that "he never cared to ask what lay" beyond the palace walls (29), signaling that the Prince endured a change after his death. He had no thought for his town or his citizens. But the Prince has changed: "now that I am dead they have set me up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep" (29). His heart has turned to lead; he has become a work of art, and finally he knows what tears are. The Prince wishes to teach generosity and selflessness to the Swallow. He tells the Swallow that a boy is dying in his town and is "asking for oranges," but "his mother has nothing to give him but river water, so he is crying" (30). He asks the bird to bring a dying boy in his town a ruby off his sword, so that he perhaps may buy medicine or food. The Swallow at first refuses. He says, "I am waited for in Egypt" and that he "[doesn't] think [he likes] boys" (30), attempting to get out of the task. But the Prince finally convinces him and the Swallow takes the boy his ruby. When the Swallow returns, he tells the Prince, "It is curious...but I feel quite warm now, although it is so cold," to which the Prince replies, "That is because you have done a good action" (31). It is through the combination of the life of the boy, the nature of the bird himself, and the art of the Prince that the Swallow begins to learn his lesson.

As the fable continues, the Swallow tries to get out of the Prince's requests only to complete them at a gentle urging. When he takes to a young man the Prince's sapphire eye, "the young man had his head buried in his hands, so he did not hear the flutter of the bird's wings" and "he found the beautiful sapphire lying on the withered violets" (32). The natural imagery paired with the art of the Prince solidifies this connection between art and nature within the fable. However, the man cannot see the nature imagery and can reap the benefits of the art monetarily. Once again even though the Prince, and now the Swallow, are sacrificing aspects of themselves in order to save their town, the citizens cannot understand or appreciate the sacrifice. When the Prince asks the Swallow to "Fly over my city, little Swallow, and tell me what you see there" (33), the Swallow only sees suffering, destruction, and impending death. He "saw the rich making merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars were sitting at their gates. He flew into dark lanes, and saw the white faces of starving children looking out listlessly at black streets" (33). Despite all this suffering and disparity between the rich and the poor, however, the Prince still wants to give back to those suffering. It is here that the Swallow finally understands the message that the Prince has been trying to impart. Instead of going to Egypt as he was supposed to, the Swallow instead "grew colder and colder, but he would not leave the Prince, he loved him too well" (34). The Swallow "[falls] dead at [the Prince's] feet" (34), circling back to his first meeting with the Prince. When the Swallow dies, there is "a curious crack inside the statue...the fact is that the leaden heart had snapped right in two" (34). When the Swallow dies, the Prince dies. When nature dies, life and art die with it. Although scholar Jeff Nunokawa argues "Dandies like Oscar Wilde may have fashioned sophistication's signature style out of the cloth of ennui, but they did nothing to sever its attachment to the drabbest material of daily life, nothing to separate the been-there-done-that fatigue…of the basic grey matter of being tired" (358), I

disagree with his notion that Wilde did not appreciate the "basic grey matter" of utilitarian life. In his depiction of the Prince, it is clear that Wilde argues that it is not about what you wear, but rather how you act towards others. Nunokawa loses part of Wilde's philosophy by stating that he only appreciated the sophisticated style over the "drab" of daily life—in fact, it is in that drab of daily life that Wilde finds his "sophisticated" view on life.

Although Wilde's reader has come to understand the Prince's message, the townspeople still do not, highlighting Wilde's acts of dissidence through his literature. His characters remain oblivious while the reader realizes the meaning of the death of the Swallow and Prince. When the townspeople walk past the statue in the morning, the Town Councillor cries, "How shabby indeed!" and the Mayor remarks, "The ruby has fallen out of his sword, his eyes are gone...he is little better than a beggar!" (34). They pull down the statue of the Prince, decreeing, "As he is no longer beautiful he is no longer useful" (35), echoing the sentiments that Wilde expressed in "The Decay of Lying"—they do not understand art and thus are not good subjects for art. These sentiments are reflected at the end of the fable. The townspeople argue over who shall be the next statue. The narrator reveals, "When I last heard of them they were quarreling still" (35). The town cannot understand this art because they do not understandfollow the combination of art, nature, and life. They are not appreciating art for art's sake. Instead, they look upon art as a way of aggrandizing themselves in order to boost their reputation. In the last few lines of the fable, God tells his angels to "bring [him] the two most precious things in the city" (35), and the angels bring God the Prince's heart and the dead sparrow. God is pleased: he declares, "you have rightly chosen...for in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me" (35). God affirms the Prince's message—because the

Prince and the Swallow gave the greatest sacrifice by losing their lives to save others, they are able to enter Paradise.

Fritz offers a unique take on Wilde's fairy tales—although he agrees that there is a connection between society and art, he argues that Wilde's fairy tales offer a different view on his version of decadence. Fritz acknowledges that fairy tales "often create worlds in which protagonists persevere through nightmarish circumstances to arrive at harmonious, happy endings" (294), which the reader sees in the Swallow's sacrifice for the Prince. However, Fritz reveals that Wilde's stories differ from other fairy tales in that they portray a sadder reality. Quoting Richard Ellmann, a biographer of Wilde, Fritz writes, "Ellmann notes that '[the fairy tales'] occasional social satire is subordinated to a sadness unusual in fairy tales,' and that 'Wilde presents the stories like sacraments of a lost faith'" (294). One could argue that Wildean decadence reveals itself through Wilde's fairy tales. Straying away from fairy tale norms, Wilde offers a sadder take on the fable that is reminiscent of his view of the world. For Wilde, the world was not the happy place that is reflected in modern-day fairy tale endings. Throughout his life, Wilde was persecuted for being who he was—a lesson that fairy tales often preach to their readers. As scholar Ed Cohen writes, the trial of Oscar Wilde "had all the elements of a good drawing-room comedy...Wilde was portrayed as the corrupting artist who dragged young Alfred Douglas away from the realm of paternal solicitude down into the London underground, where homosexuality, blackmail, and male prostitution sucked the lifeblood of morality from his tender body" (801). Here, the key word is "portrayed." Wilde was not the corrupting artist that society depicted him as—they could not see past the superficial desires of high society, just as the townspeople cannot see past the prestige of being immortalized in a statue. Scholar Michael R. Doylen agrees: he writes that "in the place of Wilde's socially distinguished identifications as an

artist, as a man of material wealth, and as a husband and father, medical-legal institutions substituted the label 'sexual pervert'—which, as Wilde observed, became the primary connotation of his name" (553). All his other titles and accomplishments were cast aside as the public embraced a new image of Wilde: the sexual pervert and the criminal. The Swallow, who represents Wilde himself, must die at the end of the story because there is no place in this world for him: just as Wilde is exiled to France and stripped of his titles.

Wilde's fable "The Happy Prince" reminds one of the importance of Wildean decadence. The fable argues for art for art's sake and the idea that the true understanding of art comes from the appreciation of art, life, and nature in tandem with each other. When the Happy Prince finally teaches the Swallow the importance of self-sacrifice and generosity, he reveals that art has the power to affect the town and society at large. The world has the capacity to learn from aestheticism, if only they would listen to art, life, and nature. Through his writings, Wilde shows that to pursue Wildean decadence is inherently political—Wilde was persecuted for following his beliefs, as was the Swallow in "The Happy Prince." In a fairy tale such as this story, Wilde reveals that, although his version of decadence has the power to affect the world, the world is not yet ready to listen—a sentiment that Wilde later explores in his less canonical play *Salome,* which I delve into in Chapter Four of this thesis.

Chapter Three
The Ideas Within the Frame: The Creation of an Intellectual Aesthete

In his most canonical work *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and in his letter from prison "De Profundis," Wilde continues to advocate for Wildean decadence. In these two works, Wilde outlines the key differences between a false decadent and a true decadent, including the critical role that struggle plays in the "true" decadent's life. His writing leads to one conclusion: that although polite society might not be ready for the "true" decadent, its failure to embrace Wildean decadence necessarily deprives it of what Wilde believes to be the purest form of existence—a harmonious marriage of art and intellect.

Wilde delineates the difference between a "decadent" and a "Wildean decadent" in his letter to his friend Bosie, posthumously titled "De Profundis." Wilde describes how Bosie had "no motives in life. [He] had appetites merely. A motive is an intellectual aim" (46). Without such motives, Bosie and those like him are merely pseudo-decadents. Although Bosie might have had an appetite for and appreciation of art, Wilde sustained with Bosie "an unintellectual friendship, a friendship whose primary aim was not the creation and contemplation of beautiful things, to entirely dominate my life" (47). Here, Wilde reveals his version of a true Wildean decadent: one must both be creative and use one's mind to truly understand the art one creates, harkening back to Chapter's One assertion of the two ways to view reality. Clearly, Bosie represents Cyril's reality, while Wilde advocates for Vivian's reality.

Scholar Kevin Ohi seems to agree with these sentiments, quoting biographer Richard Ellmann on "De Profundis": "'Confessions,' Ohi writes, 'is a mode of pleasure for Wilde...his confessions are a splendid artifice. Every time he opens his closet..there is always something of the beautiful lie'" (124). As I have argued, Wilde's brand of decadence is distinctly political—his actions have intentions, and his posthumous confessions in "De Profundis" became a way for

Wilde to subvert his era's gender and sexuality expectations. Here, Ohi and Ellmann argue that even in his politicized confessions, there is an air of Wildean decadence—his confessions, as Ellmann puts it, are a splendid artifice.

Wilde continues to outline his terms for a true decadent as the letter progresses. He writes that "there is only one thing for me now, absolute Humility" and that "something hidden away in my nature, like a treasure in a field, is Humility" (101). But Wilde believes Bosie lacks such humility. He says to Bosie, "you had better come down into the dust and learn it beside me" (101). Bosie must get his hands dirty—like Wilde, who lived his entire life as an outsider, being an Irishman in England, Bosie must humble himself. Lastly, Wilde articulates the idea that one must suffer for life and art. He explains that "the secret of life is suffering" (110) and that "Love of some kind is the only possible explanation of the extraordinary amount of suffering that there is in the world" (111). Life, art, and love therefore help mold a person into his or her purest self. And sorrow is inherently connected to love: "if the worlds have indeed, as I have said, been built out of Sorrow, it has been by the hands of Love...Pleasure for the beautiful body, but Pain for the beautiful soul" (111). Wilde thinks that the true decadent, or the Wildean decadent, must experience suffering and understand that it helps perfect the soul. Through these terms, Wilde acknowledges that to participate in Wildean decadence is to be political: Wilde went to his grave in pursuit of his beliefs, never straying from them because the work was too hard. He went so far as to use his craft to posit his opinions, writing a note to his scorned love that eventually was published and given to the public. Bosie, on the other hand, gave Wilde up to his father when their secret, illegal relationship was revealed. Bosie does not represent the political, Wildean decadence.

These distinctions between the true and false decadent are echoed in Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* The novel is centered upon Dorian Gray, a vain man whose wish for "[himself] to be always young" and his portrait "to grow old" (67), instead of aging himself, is fulfilled. However, the book first focuses on Basil Hallward, a man described as "the artist himself" (49). Basil is seemingly enchanted with Dorian and paints his portrait, to which Dorian has an adverse reaction. As the novel progresses, Dorian casts Basil aside and grows closer to Lord Henry, a man who has a negative influence on Dorian. From the beginning, Lord Henry seems to consider Basil as a pseudo-decadent. Lord Henry says to Basil, "beauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins. Intellect is in itself a mode of exaggeration, and destroys the harmony of any face" (50), implying that Basil cannot grasp beauty or decadence because he thinks too much. According to Lord Henry, Basil is too intellectual to understand the tenets of Wildean decadence. Basil's response, however, recalls Wilde's struggle for decadence. He replies that "your rank and wealth, Harry; my brains, such as they are—my art, whatever it may be worth; Dorian Gray's good looks—we shall all suffer for what the gods have given us, suffer terribly" (51). Here, Wilde argues that decadence is not just appreciating art; rather, it is the act of creating art and understanding it. Basil continues later, revealing that "every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter...it is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the colored canvas, reveals himself" (52). Although the novel sets Lord Henry up to be the true decadent, Wilde suggests that it is instead Basil, the intellect and artist, who is the real Wildean decadent.

As noted above, Lord Henry's arrival tests Dorian and Basil's friendship. Basil is strangely fascinated with Dorian—when Lord Henry asks Basil for the name of the man in his portrait, Basil reveals to Lord Henry that "when I like people immensely I never tell their names

to any one. It is like surrendering a part of them. I have grown to love secrecy" (51). Although much of the friendship between Dorian and Basil seems to have taken place before the novel begins, there are allusions to its close nature. When Basil asks Lord Henry to leave, Dorian claims that he does not want him to go because "Basil is in one of his sulky moods; I can't bear him when he sulks" (60). This intimacy is revealed further when Wilde writes that "Basil Hallward's compliments had seemed to [Dorian] to be merely the charming exaggerations of friendship" (67). Clearly, these two were at one point spending most of their time together, especially because Basil was painting a portrait of Dorian. However, as soon as Lord Henry is introduced, Basil is forgotten. Dorian is much more attracted to Lord Henry's lifestyle and his musings. Dorian claims that, while he had listened to Basil's compliments, he had "forgotten them. They had not influenced his nature" (67). But then "[came] Lord Henry Wotton with his strange panegyric on youth, his terrible warning of its brevity. That had stirred him at the time" (67). Dorian is drawn into this pseudo-decadent, this man who pretends to know about art and decadence but is merely just an onlooker—not a creator.

As the novel continues, Dorian spends more of his time with Lord Henry and other unnamed men and less time with Basil. When they finally meet again, Dorian exclaims that "I have not seen you for ages" (157). Basil expresses his concern for Dorian's lifestyle, of his influence on others to lose "all sense of honour, of goodness, of purity" (160). Dorian scorns this accusation, saying, "Take care, Basil. You go too far" (160), but shows Basil the cursed portrait that has been destroying Dorian's life. Dorian can show only Basil, not Lord Henry. Dorian reveals that "he felt a terrible joy at the thought that some one else was to share his secret, and that the man who had painted the portrait that was the origin of all his shame was to be burdened for the rest of his life with the hideous memory of what he had done" (161). Because Basil

represents the true decadent, the intellectual as artist, it is only Basil who understands Dorian's predicament. Dorian cannot discuss this problem with Lord Henry; for example, when Dorian sees Lord Henry again, Lord Henry is inquisitive about Dorian's night. He asks, "Dorian, you ran off very early last night...What did you do afterwards?" (183), to which Dorian becomes extremely defensive. He exclaims, "You always want to know what one has been doing...I came in at half-past two...If you want any corroborative evidence on the subject you can ask [my servant]" (183). Lord Henry cannot understand because he is too concerned with the details, with the observation rather than the creation. Dorian can reveal his situation only to Basil, the maker and producer of art.

When Dorian finally brings Basil into the attic where the portrait is kept, Basil can hardly believe that it is the same picture. Only one thing confirms the truth: "in the left-hand corner was his own name, traced in long letters of bright vermilion" (163). The vermilion and the "gold in the thinning hair," as well as "the sodden eyes that had kept something of the loveliness of their blue" (163), reflect the decadent qualities of Basil's painting. There are parts of the painting that are redeemable—"the horror, whatever it was, had not yet entirely spoiled that marvellous beauty" (163). Thus, Basil still has the capacity to fix whatever is broken inside Dorian, perhaps with his artwork or with his prayers. When Dorian senses this fact, he "suddenly [has] an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward" and "rushed at [Basil], and dug the knife into the great vein that is behind the ear, crushing the man's head down on the table, and stabbing again and again" (165). Basil's struggle for decadence, and for his own life, demonstrates how Wilde's novel is written as an allegory of society's persecution and destruction of decadence. Dorian Gray personifies society, and Basil symbolizes the purest form of decadence. Society is not ready to accept Wildean decadence, mirroring the Swallow's

sacrifice in "The Happy Prince." Basil cannot survive Wilde's novel about the appreciation and celebration of Wildean decadence because society itself rejects it.

In direct contrast with Basil, Lord Henry is the "Bosie" of the novel, the false decadent. Lord Henry smokes a "heavy opium-tainted cigarette" (50) and Basil describes him as being "a very bad influence over all his friends" (61). Unlike Basil, Lord Henry does not create art or fundamentally appreciate it. Instead, he spends his days doing absolutely nothing. Even his wife does not know what he does: Lord Henry claims that the two of them never know where the other is. When they do meet up, they "tell each other the most absurd stories with the most serious faces" (51), perhaps lying to each other. He sustains an empty life. Additionally, Lord Henry is the corrupting force in Dorian Gray's life that sets him off track. Similarly to how Wilde blamed himself for allowing an unintellectual friendship to enter his life, these characters allow an identical relationship to occur. It is Lord Henry who first alerts Dorian to the passing of time. Lord Henry rants to Dorian, saying, "You will suffer horribly...Ah! realize your youth while you have it...For there is such a little time that your youth will last—such a little time" (65). It is only after this speech that Dorian begins to think about how "the life that was to make his soul would mar his body. He would become dreadful, hideous, and uncouth" (67). Lord Henry deeply influences Dorian's lifestyle after this interaction. At a dinner one night, Dorian is described as "[sitting] like one under a spell, smiles chasing each other over his lips, and wonder growing grave in his darkening eyes" (79). Lord Henry coerces Dorian, compelling him from the beginning to be the false decadent like himself. Towards the end of the novel, when Dorian already has murdered Basil and committed other atrocities, Lord Henry proclaims, "You cannot change to me, Dorian...You and I will always be friends" (210). Lord Henry's assertion that he

will always be friends with Dorian highlights his influence over Dorian's life. Akin to how Bosie negatively affected Wilde's life, Lord Henry propels Dorian down his destructive track.

Sibyl Vane, a woman whom Dorian Gray seemingly falls in love with, is the epitome of the intellectual decadent—much like Basil. Dorian first describes her as "a genius" (83) and reveals that she had "a little flower-like face, a small Greek head with plaited coils of dark-brown hair, eyes that were violet wells of passion, lips that were like the petals of a rose" (85). Not only is Sibyl described as intelligent, she is a gorgeous creature. This sentiment is extended when Dorian reveals that Sibyl "has not merely art, consummate art-instinct, in her, but she has personality also" (89). She commands both beauty and intellect. She embodies the true decadent. Dorian is enamoured; he laments to Lord Henry, "you once said to me that...beauty, mere beauty, could fill your eyes with tears...I could hardly see this girl for the mist of tears that came across me" (85). Dorian finishes his speech by exclaiming, "How different an actress is! Harry! why didn't you tell me that the only thing worth loving is an actress?" (86).

Both Basil and Sibyl are true creators of art—Basil as a painter and Sibyl as an actress. Dorian describes Sibyl to Lord Henry as "she regarded me merely as a person in a play" (88). She tells Dorian that "you look more like a prince. I must call you Prince Charming" (88). Not only is Sibyl an incredible actress, but she chooses to have her life imitate her art, a true ideal of Wildean decadence. Her appearance is constantly alluded to as having artistic qualities. When she blushes, "a rose shook in her blood and shadowed her cheeks" (93) and her voice is song-like, it "seemed to fall singly upon one's ear. Then it became a little louder, and sounded like a flute or a distant hautbois" (85). She is the living embodiment of life imitating art.

Sibyl continues to captivate Dorian through her acting. When speaking to Basil and Lord Henry, Dorian claims, "she is simply born an artist" and that she "shook like a white narcissus"

(104). He persists, announcing that "I have had the arms of Rosalind around me, and kissed Juliet on the mouth" (105). He is so enthralled with her because, to him, she represents the purest form of decadence: the creator and the maker of art itself. Dorian does not claim that he had *Sibyl's* arms around him, or that he kissed *Sibyl.* Instead, he has hugged and kissed art. This romanticization of art sets up a transgression of gender and sexuality norms in the novel. Ed Cohen writes that when Wilde's novel was first released, the "immediate critical response to *Dorian Gray* denounced the text's transgression of...class and gender ideologies that sustained the 'middle-class gentlemen': the novel was seen as 'decadent' both because of its 'distance from and rejection of middle-class life' and because 'it was not only dandiacal, it was feminine'" (802). Not only was Wilde depicting gender and sexuality in a more prominent way than other Victorian authors; his novel itself was considered "feminine." In a meta way, Wilde's own work subverted gender normalities of the time. Although one perceives gender and sexuality as repressed in the Victorian era, as Stephen Marcus argues in the introduction to *The Other Victorians,* the Victorians did think and write about gender and sexuality. Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* although more striking than other works of the period, showcases this gender performativity—both in Dorian's kissing of the art, in his relationship with Lord Arthur, and in the adoration that Basil has for Dorian.

Despite her intellect and ingenuity, Dorian ruins Sibyl. Her end is foreshadowed when she announces to her brother, "[Dorian] is going to be there and I am to play Juliet" (98). A subtle nod to the tragic death of Juliet at the end of Shakespeare's famous play *Romeo and Juliet*, from this point forward, Sibyl's life is grim. By falling for Dorian, she gets too caught up in the romance and neglects her acting and intellect. Although Dorian continues to appreciate her artistry—declaring that she "makes [the audience] as responsive as a violin" and that "they weep

and laugh as she wills them to do" (108)—he sees her only as her acting, not as Sibyl. He never describes her character or her personality. He praises only her beauty and her performances.

When Sibyl no longer performs as beautifully as she once did, Dorian cuts her off in a rage. Although Sibyl still "moved like a creature from a finer world," she "showed no sign of joy when her eyes rested on Romeo" (109). When she starts to speak, her voice has lost "all the life from the verse. It made the passion unreal" (109). For Dorian, Sibyl can no longer act convincingly. He claims that she "was simply bad art. She was a complete failure" (110). Dorian is extremely upset: when asked about Sibyl's performance, he declares, "last night she was a great artist. This evening she is merely a commonplace, mediocre actress" (110). Basil, the true Wildean decadent, responds to Dorian by admonishing, "Don't talk like that about any one you love, Dorian. Love is a more wonderful thing than Art." (110). Sibyl seems to agree with Basil, conveying to Dorian after the show that "before I knew you, acting was the one reality of my life...you taught me what reality really is" (112). She too values love over art. Despite both appreciating and creating art, they still value human emotions and experiences. It is not Sibyl's acting that has changed—the problem lies with Dorian. He does not believe her acting anymore, and thus to him she is no longer a good actor. Just as Basil could not survive because society was not ready for his decadence, Sibyl cannot survive the novel because she represents the same Wildean decadence.

But despite Sibyl viewing her acting as reality, Dorian thinks of her as a fantasy. As scholar Simon Joyce puts it, "Dorian's relationship with the actress Sibyl Vane condenses...attitudes towards the poor and represents an early—but flawed—attempt at converting social experience into aesthetic pleasures" (505). Here, Joyce argues that Dorian views his relationship with Sibyl as a means to bolster his social calendar. His flirtation with

Sibyl's playhouse, which Dorian himself describes as "an absurd little theatre, with great flaring gas-jets and gaudy play-bills" (84), proves that Dorian does not take this theatre seriously—it is a toy for him to play with, to observe as someone of a higher class might have the power to enact. Joyce continues, arguing that Sibyl's Shakespearean performance is "what enables Dorian to maintain a slummer's fantasy of love between the classes; as soon as she stops acting, he loses interest and leaves her to commit suicide over her departed 'Prince Charming'" (506). Here, Joyce proves that Dorian and Sibyl's relationship could never survive, for he viewed her and her performative space as fantastical and unreal. As soon as the fantasy is broken, Dorian is uninterested.

Thus, Sibyl dies two deaths: the first being her separation from Dorian and the second her actual death. With Dorian's proclamation that "You have killed my love" (112), her death is imminent. As she slowly realizes that Dorian is being serious, Sibyl is no longer described as a beautiful flower or with a melodic voice. She instead "grew white and trembled." She "clenched her hands together and her voice seemed to catch in her throat" (113). No longer a rose or a violet, she just "lay there like a trampled flower" (113). While she "crouched on the floor like a wounded thing," Dorian's "chiseled lips curled in exquisite disdain" (113). This first death, the death of Sibyl's love, is almost more tragic than her physical demise. She loses Dorian, but she also loses her art. She claims earlier that "I shall never act well again" (111); and with her acting gone as well as her love, Sibyl has nothing left. Her power and influence taken from her, she becomes a shell of the Wildean decadent that she once was. When Sibyl actually dies, Dorian hears about it from a second-hand source. Lord Henry comes into Dorian's house and reveals that "Sibyl Vane is dead" (120). He continues, revealing that "she had swallowed something by mistake," alluding to the possibility that Sibyl had committed suicide. Lord Henry divulges that

it “had either prussic acid or white lead in it...she seems to have died instantaneously” (121). If Dorian represents society, Sibyl depicts the purest form of decadence, as does Basil. Both Basil and Sibyl represent a version of decadence that society is not yet ready to accept and, in fact, seeks to destroy.

This is not to say that Dorian only represents a tainted society—that wouldn’t be giving Wilde enough credit, and the answer is perhaps a bit more complex than at first look. At the end of the novel, Dorian walks back through the streets of London, contemplating his life and what he has done with it. Regretting his deal with the devil, Dorian thinks, “Better for him that each sin of his life had brought its sure, swift penalty along with it” (211), rather than cooped up in his painting. Finally, Dorian begins to understand Wildean decadence and life itself. As he comes to terms with his sins, Dorian grabs the knife that killed Basil years before and declares, “as it 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 was dead he would be free” (214). Unlike the Swallow and the Happy Prince, Dorian chooses to die when he realizes that this world has no place for him. Understanding that he is part of the problem, Dorian sacrifices himself not because of his sins but in light of his sins. He takes responsibility for his actions, and in that way his decadence is politicized, and resembles Salome’s sacrifice in Chapter Four of this thesis.

Oscar Wilde believed in Wildean decadence despite—or perhaps because—society rejected it. As he grew older he began to recognize that there are two different aesthetes, both outlined in his letter “De Profundis”: the “false” decadent, one who is devoid of intellect and creation, and the “real” decadent, one who has both artistic talent and intellect. In “De Profundis,” Wilde writes that “I don’t regret a single moment having lived for pleasure” but that “to have continued the same life would have been wrong because it would have been limiting”

(113). Wilde further explains that this philosophy is woven into his work: "a great deal of it is hidden away in the note of doom that like a purple thread runs through the texture of *Dorian Gray*" (113). That "thread" not only ties together his works, but it binds Basil Hallward and Sibyl Vane. The destruction of these two true decadents at the hands of Dorian Gray (acting under the influence of Lord Henry, a false aesthete) serves as an allegory for Wilde's conclusion that his society rejected Wildean aestheticism and Wilde himself. Yet Wilde's suffering for his own art is a true example of the politicization of life imitating art, and makes it all the more relevant and meaningful as society continues to struggle to accept Wilde's distinctive understanding of decadence.

Chapter Four
The Moon is Shining Brightly: The Dissidence of Salome

Salome best exemplifies Oscar Wilde's concept of decadence. Wilde's play is based on the Biblical story of the daughter of Herodias, her dance before her stepfather Herod on his birthday, and her subsequent demand that John the Baptist be beheaded. Instead of adhering to the original text, however, Wilde reimagines the character of the daughter, naming her and focusing on the daughter's transgressions against the kingdom in pursuit of decadence. Drawing from key terms from Chapter One of this thesis, I will argue that Salome represents Wildean decadence, or Wilde's idea that "Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place" ("The Decay of Lying" 215). Salome is the art in her world, attempting to teach nature, or her society, both the place and power of art. In reimagining Salome, Wilde argues that the true meaning of decadence is the politicized movement for art and the reclaiming of one's own personal identity.

In the original Biblical story, the character of Salome is unnamed. First-century accounts refer to her as "the daughter of Herodias" and "the girl" (Mark 6:21-28), constructions that rob Salome of her individuality and render her simply as a representative of her gender. Wilde rejects this description. Not only does he name the play after her, but he describes her in the first line of dialogue. The Young Syrian exclaims, "How beautiful is the Princess Salome tonight" (Wilde 301), naming her and commenting on her beauty at the play's start. Additionally, Salome receives a title. Now she is the "Princess Salome," giving her agency within the palace as a woman.

Salome's gender is important throughout the play—although she is described with feminine pronouns, I argue that Salome represents both the New Woman, or the first-wave feminist, as well as the queer figure. As Judith Butler argues in her canonical work "Gender

Trouble," "If one 'is' a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive...because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts...as a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (6). Butler goes on to argue that feminism is not restricted to just women, as the term "woman" can signify other genders than just the female sex. Butler's framework suggests that, as a feminist icon, Salome represents both empowered femininity and queerness.

Salome becomes enchanted with John the Baptist, or Iokanaan the Prophet as Wilde renames him, which forces her to ponder what is actually art in this society. Iokanaan interprets prophecies—aligned with Whistler and his condemnation of the early Victorian definition of aestheticism, Iokanaan ascribes meaning to art and nature in the kingdom. Salome grows obsessed with him, misinterpreting Iokanaan's prophecies as art. In his dialogue "The Decay of Lying," Wilde writes, "Art makes us love Nature more than we loved her before...Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place" (215). Here, Wilde proclaims that to understand art is to appreciate nature. One can honor art purely only if one understands nature. Thus, Salome describes Iokaanan in natural images—she declares that his white body is like "the lilies of a field that the mower hath never mowed," and that "the roses in the garden of the Queen of Arabia are not so white as thy body" (309). She concludes her impassioned speech by pleading, "suffer me to touch thy body" (309). If Salome, a girl on the brink of her bloom and ripe in her sexuality, represents the true artist, Iokanaan represents the social constraints on her sexuality and her art. To Salome, Iokaanan is art in a world that fundamentally does not understand art. She likens his body to nature, specifically beautiful

flowers in the garden of a queen. Salome is the only figure in this kingdom who understands what it means to respect, and to make, art.

But Iokanaan immediately rebuffs her desires—as Whistler asserts, Iokanaan represents the wrong kind of aestheticism and, thus, cannot understand Salome's decadence. Iokanaan claims that "by woman came evil into the world" (309), refuting her sexuality and asserting that women brought the very concept of evil into the physical world, harkening back to ancient conceptions of Adam and Eve. Iokanaan does not understand Salome, and therefore does not understand the true meaning of art. Even though his prophecies seem akin to art to Salome, he is intrinsically linked to the state. He cannot—unlike Salome—encompass true decadence. Here, Wilde shows how society represses a woman's sexuality. Salome's transgressions cannot go unpunished—the kingdom will not stand for her crimes of sexuality. Unlike Iokanaan, Salome rebels against the kingdom, separating herself from the state. In an act of defiance, Salome asks to touch Iokaanan's hair and then eventually implores him to kiss her mouth. Each time, Iokanaan curses Salome and rejects her. He refuses to call her by her name, instead referring to her as "daughter of Babylon" and "daughter of Sodom" (309), two names that denote degenerate or even evil sexuality and immorality. Just by calling her a different name, Iokanaan steals her agency and her independence from her.

As the play unfolds, the stage directions indirectly refer to Salome, who is likened to the moon. Like Iokanaan, Salome is not named in these allusions. The directions explain, "The moon is shining brightly" (301), implying that Salome is light and pure. This reference is continued in the next lines of dialogue, when the Page of Herodias states, "Look at the moon...She is like a woman rising from a tomb" (301). Salome is the same, reanimated and finally coming to life, invigorated by her own independence. The moon, a symbol that typically refers to the purity or

serenity of a character, becomes tainted as the play progresses. Salome even refers to the moon, exclaiming, "How good to see the moon...I am sure she is a virgin. She has the beauty of a virgin. Yes, she is a virgin" (304). In the beginning of the play, Salome is just like the pure moon. She is a virgin, and has "never abandoned herself to men, like the other goddesses" (305). She is painted as the perfect princess, chaste and serene. Later, after Salome has discovered Iokanaan, and her nascent sexuality, her stepfather Herod comments that "The moon has a strange look tonight," continuing by observing "[the moon] is like a mad woman, a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers….She shows herself naked in the sky. She reels through the clouds like a drunken woman" (312). There is no question that Herod is referring to Salome here, not the moon. Something has changed within Salome. No longer is she "shining brightly" as she was in the beginning of the play. Now the moon, and Salome, have a strange look, reflecting Salome's infatuation with Iokanaan. Directly after this change in appearance, the moon is referred to as a corrupting force. When the First and Second Nazarenes are arguing with Herodias and Herod, Herodias confesses that "Those men are mad. They have looked too long on the moon" (316). In response to Salome's lust for Iokanaan, the moon is "polluted" just as the royal court views Salome as a pollution of Iokanaan. The men have looked at the moon, and/or Salome, for too long.

This pollution foreshadows the end of the play as Salome prepares the Dance of the Seven Veils. While Salome is being perfumed and clothed, Herod exclaims, "Ah! look at the moon! She has become red. She has become red as blood...now the moon has become as blood" (322). This blood-red moon represents the blood of Salome as she goes through her first menstruation; the cyclical nature of a woman's menstruation is bound with the cyclical tides of the moon—art tied inextricably to nature yet again. The moon, and Salome, are as one and can

no longer be pure. Donning her "womanly" garb, Salome is no longer the virginal princess that she once was. Before the dance begins, Herod says, "Thy little feet [Salome's feet] will be like white doves", only to quickly yell "No, no, she is going to dance on blood! There is blood spilt on the ground" (322). In this scene, Salome has finally grown into her womanhood. The blood on which she gracefully dances represents her first period as she sheds her purity, invoking the blood red taint of the moon. She dances upon it, as if "it were an evil omen" (322). In this final moment of defiance, Salome rejects the kingdom's conceptions of her innocence. Conversely, the blood also represents the blood of her naysayers, finally slain as Salome comes into her own. Her stepfather Herod reveals that the prophet, meaning Iokanaan, "prophesied that the moon would become as blood" (322). In upholding the prophecy of her beloved, Salome spins on the blood of those who doubted her. In a similar vein, scholar Udo Kultermann writes, "The Dance of the Seven Veils contains both the use of the female body exploiting the male gaze and the transformation of the earlier female dependencies to a new form of freedom, including its positive and negative aspects" (187). With the Dance of the Seven Veils, Salome dances away her sexual and emotional purity, exploiting the male gaze, and becomes a woman in the pursuit of decadence, distinctly separate from the state.

As the play concludes, Salome finally is granted her wish of "the head of Iokanaan" (323). Although she receives his head, her request frightens Herod. He demands, "I will not look at things, I will not suffer things to look at me," continuing by urging, "Hide the moon! Hide the stars...I begin to be afraid" (328). Now fully embracing her sexuality and femininity, Salome is a danger to look at. Like the moon and the stars, Salome must be hidden. After her dance and the tainted blood-red moon, she cannot be looked at as she was before. In stage directions, Wilde writes that "a great cloud crosses over the moon and conceals it completely" (328). Salome is

forced off stage, with only her voice to be heard from again. Like the moon, she has been concealed and the kingdom is attempting to take away her new-found sexual freedom. However, directly after these stage directions, Salome cries from off stage, "I have kissed thy mouth, Iokanaan" (329). It is in this moment that she fully becomes a political dissident. Scholar Petra Dierkes-Thrun also alludes to Salome as a political dissident, revealing that the 1988 film adaptation *Salome's Last Dance*, focusing on Salome's sexual trangressions, "offers a full-fledged interpretation of Salome as Wilde's aesthetic and sexual mask, presenting Salome as an overtly sexual and homoerotic drama." Dierkes-Thrun continues, the film "politicizes *Salome* by presenting it to the contemporary film audience as a testament to Wilde's rebellion against Victorian sexual prudery and moral hypocrisy, and it politicizes Wilde by making him a sexual and aesthetic martyr" (162). Extrapolating Dierkes-Thrun's theory from film to literature, one can see that Salome acts as political dissident in order to subvert Victorian sexual politics.

Continuing in this same vein, scholar Carol Margaret Davison writes that "Victorian middle-class society deemed sexuality to be the 'key determinant of personality'" and that "the Victorian era witnessed unprecedented socio-political changes that radically affected and destabilised the traditional gender roles and relations undergirding marriage and motherhood" (125). I argue that Salome represents this shift in gender roles and society's expectations of women—Wilde created a character that transcends not only the sexual politics of the time, but also social and gender norms. Salome is the embodiment of the woman who cannot be caged: the working woman, the promiscuous woman, and the New Woman. Additionally, under the aegis of feminism, Salome can represent the queer figure as well, mimicking Wilde's own history. In these ways, she represents the political force at the heart of Wilde's teachings. Scholar Amanda Fernbach agrees: "decadent men such as Beardsley [the illustrator of Wilde's *Salome*] and

Wilde, along with advocates of the New Woman and the many female novelists who, breaking convention, dared to depict women's sexuality, created a force that launched itself against the cultures of the late Victorian society" (196). Fernbach continues, asserting that "Wilde...has become synonymous with social, sexual, and aesthetic transgression" (196). Both Wilde, and implicitly Salome, are synonymous with radical change.

Although she is swept out of sight from the viewer at the end of the play, Salome kisses the mouth of Iokanaan off stage, proclaiming, "I have kissed thy mouth, Iokanaan" (329) and reclaims her sexuality once again. She is rewarded for her efforts—after she kisses Iokanaan, the stage directions read: "a ray of moonlight falls on Salome and illumines her" (329). Although both the moon and Salome are depicted as tainted, they reclaim their natures and emerge brighter and illuminated near the play's conclusion. With Iokanaan's kiss and her Dance of the Seven Veils, Salome transgresses against her kingdom, willing to sacrifice her life for her art and independence. She arises out of her dance as a political dissident in pursuit of the true meaning of decadence. Scholar Eibhar Walshe explains how Salome represents this transgression—he writes that many critics in the Victorian era were "drawn to Salome as a symbol of wild sensual perversity because, as Richard Ellmann comments, 'jaded by exaltations of nature and humanism, they inspected with something like relief of a biblical image of the unnatural'" (30) and that "Salome offends against a traditional system of male desire by articulating her own, independent desire for the body of the Prophet" (31). Thus, Salome represents a woman's sexuality, repressed in the Victorian era due to societal norms and expectations. Although she might represent the "unnatural," she is rooted in biblical stories, where one often finds lessons and meaning. Therefore, it can be argued that, in this retelling of Salome's story, Wilde is instructing his society to learn from Salome's perverse actions.

But Salome cannot remain in this play. Herod's kingdom is one of rules and order, and Salome represents the very opposite. Herod tells Salome that her "beauty has grievously troubled me, and I have looked at thee overmuch...One should not look at anything. Neither at things, nor at people should one look" (324). Earlier in the play, Herodias warns Herod, "you must not look at her [Salome], you are always looking at her" (311). Now that Salome has performed her art and reclaimed her sexuality, Herod cannot look at her anymore. She is too beautiful, too confident, and, thus, too dangerous. Her request for the head of Iokanaan, a man who represents the religiosity, the new laws, and order of the emergent state, is a step too far for this kingdom. Like Wilde in his own era, Salome represents something new and not understood, something foreign that must be snuffed out. Herod orders "kill that woman" (329), and Salome is crushed beneath the soldiers' shields, with the curtain falling down and covering the light of the moon. Fernbach references this moment of erasure in her article. She writes that "the decadent forces that defied Victorian sexual codes sent shock waves through proper society, which reacted promptly and severely" (197), alluding to Wilde's imprisonment for his sexuality. Fernbach continues, saying, "A similar backlash occurs in Wilde's *Salome*...in the final moments of *Salome*, the patriarchal sexual order is restored and other types of desire are eliminated" (197). This world, and Wilde's own world, is not ready for the decadence of Salome, or of Wilde.

In *Salome*, Wilde argues that to understand art, one must understand oneself. Throughout the play, Salome flourishes and blooms into her own independent self, culminating in the Dance of the Seven Veils. Salome is described as too beautiful to look at, a phrase that places blame on the woman, and not the man. In order to reclaim her identity, Salome performs a dance that draws every person's eye, asserting her femininity and sexuality. Once she grows into who she is meant to be, Salome sacrifices herself for her beliefs. Kultermann puts it beautifully: he writes

that Salome "can and has been seen at the same time as the femme fatale of old and new history and as the fighter of independence, freedom, and equality of the sexes" (187). Through these means, Salome becomes a political dissident, representing femininity and queerness without societal judgment or the kingdom's constraints, however briefly. In these ways, Salome becomes a mirror for Wilde himself. However, even though she realizes her potential, her world is not ready for her transgressions. She is written out of the play, sacrificing herself for her insurgent, yet brief, victory. Salome represents the purest form of Wilde's decadence. She uses art for her political motives, sacrificing herself for her beliefs, even if she herself will not be able to see the intended effects. Yet, as Petra Dierkes-Thrun argues, Wilde and Salome become sexual and aesthetic martyrs, leading to consequences that radiate beyond the borders of the play itself. Wilde's status as a political dissident, or martyr, is assured with "De Profundis," as I've examined in Chapter Three. And, in Salome's defiance of her kingdom, she becomes synonymous with Wilde as a sexual and political dissident. Both Salome and her creator, Wilde, imagine a new kind of art, a new kind of desire that will resonate with gender and feminist theory, criticism, and art to come. In this way, Salome has enacted changes in the social and political worlds she has inhabited.

Coda

More than a century after his death, Oscar Wilde's legacy endures. After his imprisonment for homosexuality, or "gross indecency," he was exiled to France. There, Wilde remained alone in Paris until his death. He never saw his family again. It was during this trial and imprisonment that Wilde wrote two of his most daunting and heartbreaking texts—"De Profundis," as I've already examined, and "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." His work indicates that this isolation brought Wilde's darkest moment. However, Wilde's ideas did not die with his physical body. Although his concept of the Wildean decadence might have been singular in his time, the notion of a political decadent did not remain confined to the 1890s. As scholar Kevin Ohi writes, "the appalling spectacle of Wilde's imprisonment...reminds us that ideas cannot fully escape the bodies that gave them birth" (123). Here, Ohi asserts that, despite Wilde's grotesque and terrible imprisonment, his ideas do not die out with him. Although Ohi is referring to Wilde's own body of work, one can easily apply this to literature in general. One can trace Wilde's influence throughout literary canons, from modernists like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce to the contemporary literature of Arundhati Roy. It is through these and other authors that one can see Wilde's flame of decadence, once again burning brightly after being nearly extinguished in his own era.

James Joyce, one of the most famous authors of the twentieth century, employs what I have called Wildean decadence, or a politicized aestheticism, throughout his oeuvre, but especially in the character of Stephen Dedalus. Throughout Joyce's work, the reader watches as Stephen grows up, from *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* to *Ulysses.* In his essay "Portrait of an Aesthete," scholar Emer Nolan writes, "Joyce...professes aestheticism, but does not write aestheticist literature...thus when an aesthete undertakes to write a novel, his aestheticism is not

revealed in the novel's formal construction" (291). I disagree with Nolan—what makes Joyce's texts distinctively a Wildean decadent is the novels' format and the notion that they are inherently political.

As Wilde does in his use of the dialogue, Joyce creates a new form in order to reveal his political and social beliefs to his readers. The first text depicting Stephen, *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, can even be seen as a play on words of Wilde's earlier text, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Both works feature a young artist growing into himself. However, what makes Joyce's work so distinct is his use of form. *Portrait* is set up so it evolves as Stephen grows older. The first line of the text reflects the dialogue of a baby, or perhaps a toddler—Joyce writes, "once upon a time there was a moocow coming down along the road" (*Portrait* 1). The vocabulary itself mirrors that of someone who is just beginning to speak—older people might choose to call the "moocow" simply a "cow." As Stephen begins to mature, Joyce chooses a more sophisticated style of prose. For instance, in *Ulysses*, Stephen thinks, "Parried again. He fears the lancet of my art as I fear that of his. The cold steel pen" (6). This vocabulary is a far cry from Stephen's earlier "moocow." But it is precisely this use of form that makes Joyce's work decadent. In Chapter One, we saw how Wilde's use of poetic prose was distinctly Wildean—while other authors might choose to leave something like "a mist upon the woods" out from the beginning of their dialogues ("The Decay of Lying" 215), Wilde's choice to keep it in reflects key components of Wildean decadence. Similarly, Joyce's choice of form, although rougher and less poetic than Wilde's prose, is in this same vein. It has become distinctly Joycean to change form and vocabulary as characters grow older. Despite Joyce using cruder images and harsher words, both Joyce and Wilde put care and thought into their level of prose. Although other authors employ this type of "poetic prose," Joyce is different—through his use of form and

language, Joyce reflects the same calculated wording that Wilde uses in his writing, specifically in his dialogues.

Additionally, Joyce's use of the political world as his backdrop mirrors Wildean decadence. Both *A Portrait of an Artist as Young Man* and *Ulysses* are rooted in the struggle for Irish independence. Identity is a significant theme in these works—Stephen becomes overwhelmed with Irish identity by the end of *Portrait* and flees to Paris, while Leopold Bloom struggles with his identity of a Jewish Irishman. Scholar Marjorie Howes argues that "in Joyce's works, the geographical mode of inscribing the problematic nation…[creates characters] who reject the conventional forms of national belonging offered to them by cultural nationalism only to find themselves drawn in some manner into alternative narratives of the nation" (327). The Ireland of these books is on the edge of independence—Stephen himself comes of age as Ireland metaphorically comes of age. Like Wilde, Joyce wraps political thought into his form. In these ways, Wildean decadence is alive and well in Joyce.

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* seems heavily influenced by Joyce's *Ulysses* and the understanding of art's power over life. Both novels depict a character throughout a single day of their lives, with a few major differences—Woolf's adaptation is set in post-Great War London and follows Clarissa Dalloway, an upper-class woman, preparing her house for a dinner party that evening. Woolf's use of Joyce's new form, one that sticks with the parameters of a single day, is also distinctly Wildean. By feminizing Joyce's work, Woolf shifts the politicization of Joyce's form from nationalism to sexism. Although *Mrs. Dalloway* details a woman setting up for a party, it is clear from the undertext of the novel that larger issues are at hand, reminiscent of Wilde's *Salome* in Chapter Four of this thesis. Toward the beginning of the novel, Woolf writes, "[Clarissa] felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged...she always had the feeling that it

was very, very dangerous to live even one day" (8). Here, Woolf reveals that time is askew in this novel. Although the story ostensibly addresses only one day in Clarissa's life, the prose stretches back in time to a period in which Clarissa wasn't just Mrs. Dalloway, but instead a vibrant girl discovering herself before the tragedy of the Great War. It is in these small moments of text that one can see the effects of the war. At first glance, a passage early on in the novel seems to indicate a bustling London day. However, a closer look at the passage reveals the first instance of Clarissa's intense feelings of loneliness and discontent. Clarissa contemplates that "for having lived in Westminster–how many years now?...one feels even in the midst of the traffic...a particular hush, or solemnity" and that when Big Ben strikes it is "first a warning, musical: then the hour, irrevocable" (4). Despite living in the city for twenty years, Clarissa still is silent, solemn, alone. Even though all around her the sounds of traffic and the city continue, she still feels separate. When Big Ben strikes, Clarissa describes it as musical and, when the hour rings, it's irrevocable. This hour, this specific moment in time, cannot be taken back.

Additionally, Clarissa's trauma from her past parallels that of Septimus, a veteran from the war. So stuck in his shell shock from the war and his past 'other' life, Septimus claims that "the world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames" and that it is he "who [is] blocking the way" (15). It is as if his wartime experiences froze his existence in 1914-18, robbing him of a present and a future. His preoccupation with the past severs his connection with his wife, Lucrezia. However, he is momentarily drawn out from his interiority when Lucrezia makes him look up in the sky. He claims that "it was plain enough, this beauty, this exquisite beauty, and tears filled his eyes as he looked at the smoke words" (21) and that they were "signalling their intention to provide him…with beauty, more beauty!" (22). Like Clarissa, Septimus is captivated by the beauty of this London day, capturing a place untouched by the

havoc wreaked by World War I. While Clarissa plans her party, Septimus is lost in his thoughts of the effects of the war. He thinks, "London has swallowed up many millions of young men called Smith: thought nothing of fantastic Christian names like Septimus" and that "there were experiences...such as change a face in two years from a pink innocent oval to a face lean, contracted, hostile" (84). He believes he's nothing special; there's no reason that Septimus survived the war over his comrades. He's a changed man, different than when he first was married. He was also swallowed up, but by the war, not London. However, even though he survived the war, perhaps now London will swallow him up, just like the other millions of Smiths it already has.

Similar to Wilde's writings, Woolf's novel is rooted in poetic prose and political dissidence. Women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were expected to be poised, domestic, and regal. While their men were away at war, the women tended to the home and the children—they were expected to be the nurturing and steady wife. But in *Mrs. Dalloway,* Woolf creates a character that subverts society's understanding of what women were allowed to be and feel after the war. Although Clarissa appears to be an average housewife, as the novel progresses it is clear to the reader that Clarissa is lost in the aftershocks of war, just like Septimus. In this way, Woolf uses her novel to reveal that women and men were both affected by the horrors of war—using Wildean decadence, Woolf employs her prose as a political tool and tactic in order to transgress against society's expectations of women.

Joyce and Woolf employ Wildean decadence in their formal choices; however, Arundahti Roy uses this decadence in the foundational ideas of her novel *The God of Small Things*. Roy uses the river that runs through Kerala as a bridge for political dissidence and poetic metaphors, harkening back to Wildean decadence. While everyone is sleeping, Ammu, the mother of Rahel

and Estha, and Velutha, an Untouchable who works for Ammu's family, have been crossing the river by Ammu's family's estate under the guise of night to be together. For them, the far shore of the river is the only place where they can be together. Because Velutha is an Untouchable in the caste system, Ammu is not allowed to touch him; their relationship is forbidden. The river is constantly referenced in Roy's description of their relationship. When Ammu first sees Velutha from the other side of the river, he "rose from the dark river" (315). She claims that "he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water" (316). Not only does the river represent a false hope for a new and better life for Ammu, but so does Velutha. He becomes one with the river, one with the false hope: "He stood before her with the river dripping from him" (316). As they explore intimacy, "the river pulsed through the darkness, shimmering like wild silk" (317). Similarly, Ammu becomes a symbol of false hope for Velutha. She, too, is equated to the river. Velutha claims that "She was as wide and deep as a river in spate" and that "He sailed on her waters" (318). Each character is like the river to the other—full of hope of a relationship that never can be because of history's forces, a relationship that ends in despair and stagnation. The illusion of Ammu and Velutha's relationship is broken when Ammu's family discovers the fact of their intimacy. Velutha's father, also an Untouchable, tells Ammu's aunt of "the story of the little boat that crossed the river night after night, and who was in it" (242). When their families discover their intimacy, Velutha and Ammu are forced to stop seeing each other. They cannot pursue a relationship barred by their society. Thus the river does not lead them to a new world waiting around the bend but instead back to where they started. Their lives don't move forward: they both stagnate, remaining the same: Velutha an Untouchable and Ammu unhappy in her life. They are captives of their history, just as Wilde was in his history: Velutha and Ammu are prisoners of

the caste system. Even though their relationship is banned in India, its waters run deep. Everything simply remains the same, ebbing and flowing cyclically.

Although Joyce, Woolf, and Roy have proven that one can interpret Wilde's decadence in both form and ideas, their works are not limited to the page. These writings have been adapted into other media, including film. And of the Wildean films, adaptations of *Salome* are particularly evocative of Wildean decadence. By placing Salome in the context of the modern world, Wilde's work trickles down into the contemporary canon. Scholar Petra Dierkes-Thrun writes that after the 1950s, two trends became prevalent in these depictions: "one is to enlist Wilde in contemporary antihomophobic projects...the other is to present Salome as a feminist icon by focusing on the liberating force of her excessive sexuality" (161). Ken Russell's *Salome's Last Dance*, set in 1892 London, "offers a full-fledged interpretation of Salome as Wilde's aesthetic and sexual mask, presenting Salome as an overtly sexual and homoerotic drama" (Dierkes-Thrun 162). Wilde's character of Dorian Gray has also appeared in modern television during the last few years—he is shown as a vain and beautiful bartender of Dorian's Gray Room in Netflix's "Chilling Adventures of Sabrina," most recently obsessing over a single pimple that appeared on his face. Although this adaptation of Wilde's character focuses on physical appearances instead of the true message of Wilde's novel, it is evident that modern society is still interested in what Wilde has to say to us and has to remind us about. Over a hundred years after his death and isolation, Wilde's work remains squarely in the public eye. His concept of decadence did not die with his body, as Ohi might have suggested. Instead, it has found a new place in the modern era.

Although adaptations are popular—and imitation is the highest form of flattery—it is in Wilde's texts themselves that one is able to most clearly see his argument. Through his dialogues

"The Critic as Artist" and "The Decay of Lying," his fairy tale "The Happy Prince," *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "De Profundis," and *Salome*, Wilde proves to the world that through an appreciation for art, life, and nature, one is able to push against society's expectations and live life the way they desire. Wilde was not given this opportunity in life: his society condemned him for living his true self, and jailed him for his actions. However, Wilde imagined freedom through his art. Within his prose, freedom begins to blossom. But our society is different. We have created space for those who did not previously have it—although our political climate might be fractured, marginalized individuals have gained many rights throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Wilde's work reminds us that there were others before us who had to struggle to live their lives freely—in the form of the Swallow, Salome, and Dorian Gray, Wilde has been killed for his beliefs in a society that does not allow them, proclaiming his political dissidence to his readers. We continue to appreciate Wilde's works and ideas because they exist outside of time and they persist: both politically important and poetically beautiful, they speak to us over the centuries because they point us to eternal truths.

Appendix A

Literature Review

A vibrant voice of the late nineteenth century, Oscar Wilde never shied away from dissent. His values and positions can be seen most clearly in his own writings. Through his dialogues, plays, and novel, Wilde uses his imaginative work to rally a cry for his definition of decadence, to represent and advance the political movements that Wilde felt most passionately about. These forces that Wilde upheld did not die out after the end of decadence—rather they remain pertinent and important to scholars in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The work that follows is a summary of the research I've completed for this thesis. I specifically searched for Wilde's reception history in order to better understand how his legacy continues on and what effect his work has had on our modern society.

Scholarship on Oscar Wilde and sexuality flourished after the 1970s. Sweeping the West in the early 1960s, second-wave feminism paved the way for scholars to think critically about sex in Wilde's writing. Michel Foucault, in his canonical work entitled *The History of Sexuality* (1978), expanded the discussion of sexuality in the Victorian era by introducing his theory of repression. Foucault writes, "on the subject of sex, silence became the rule" (3), "to say that sex is not repressed...is to risk falling into a sterile paradox" (8). He continues by arguing that although there was a Victorian silence on the topic of sex and sexuality itself, they did have and think about sex. Stephen Marcus, in his 1966 book *The Other Victorians,* was the first scholar to rethink sexuality in the Victorian era. He argued that the Victorians were indeed having sex, although the evidence is hidden amongst the metaphors and allusions in novels and poems. Wilde's writing emerged from this culture of repression and sexual promiscuity, prompting Wilde to write and experiment with Victorian ideals and beliefs about sex. Accordingly, Herbert

Sussman argues in his 1973 article that "Wilde is consciously working to create new forms of critical discourse through which he can adequately express his 'new views'" (109). Just as Wilde created the dialogue as a way to posit his new views and beliefs, the 1970s and '80s brought about new ways of thinking about Wilde's texts.

In the 1980s, scholars explored sexual desire—often dissident, or deviant (homosexual) desire—in Wilde's work. Ed Cohen in 1987 asserts that "Wilde's novel moves both with and athwart the late Victorian ideological practices that naturalized male heterosexuality" (805), arguing that Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* is both an autobiographical novel and details closeted male desire in the late Victorian era. One could argue that there was no space in the 1890s for public male desire, so Wilde resorted to that which he knew best: literature. In a separate but related vein, Paul Cartledge in 1989 wrote about Wilde's classicism. As a gay man, Wilde was enthralled by ancient Greece and Rome, given their practice of pederasty and their openness about homosexual desires. Cartledge wrote that Wilde chose his names very carefully, signaling Hellenistic times. The name "Dorian," for example, comes from the ancient Greek Dorians, who lived on the island of Crete. They were well known for their art and decadence: later, the Doric Order would be named after their unique architecture. As Cartledge asserts, it is no surprise that Wilde chose the name "Dorian" for his aesthetic, dandy character. Dorian reflects all that the Greek Dorians valued—luxury, art, and leisure.

In the 1990s, Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble*, opening a new pathway within gender and sexuality studies, and thus within scholarly critique of Wilde's works. Butler maintains that gender is performed and this performance has historically created a gender binary. She argues that society should break this binary so that gender and desire can be flexible and free-floating. Is this not what Wilde argues in his play *Salome?* Or in any of his characters? Most

of the faces that he imagines subvert our expectations of gender and push back on normalcy itself. Butler's theory of gender only reinforces what Wilde argued a century earlier. In 1992, Jeff Nunokawa wrote about homosexual desire in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, two years after Butler released her book on gender theory. Nunokawa wrote that in the characters' desire for each other in *Dorian Gray* one can "catch the early strains of an identity politics whose anthem will eventually become loud enough" (313). Nunokawa begins to posit that Wilde uses his texts as a way of building on gender and identity politics in the late 1890s. Nunokawa also wrote an article about the importance of ennui in Wildean writings, specifically in *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* Relating back to earlier discourse over the Dorian ideal of leisure, Nunokawa bridges the gap between the '80s and '90s. Michael Rabate's 1994 article connects James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*, writing how the texts both deal with sodomy: Rabate quotes Joyce in saying that "if [Wilde] had had the courage to develop the allusions in [*Picture*], it might have been better" (162). Joyce is angry that Wilde didn't name his perversions or choice of sexuality—interesting for a man who didn't name the perversions of his characters either. In 1998 Linda and Michael Hutcheon co-wrote an article about the male gaze in *Salome*. They claim that Salome gets her revenge in the Dance of the Seven Veils, further strengthening my argument of Salome as a political dissident. Eibhear Walshe's 1997 article details both Wilde's own sexuality and the character of Salome's sexuality. This discussion is particularly striking after Butler's discussion of gender performance and queer theory. As I argue in my thesis, Salome becomes another character that Wilde embodies—their shared sexuality reveals that gender performance is based on the individual, and not on what society expects. Michael Doylen's 1999 article focuses on Wilde's trial. He argues that Wilde's *De Profundis* and

subsequent trial were not the end of Wildean ideas, but rather just the beginning. Wilde's trial and persecution opened the gates for others who felt similarly.

The discussion of sexuality and politics in Wilde's work continues into the 2000s. Amanda Fernbach's 2001 article focuses on gender politics in *Salome*. Fernbach contends that after other scholars critiqued the figure of Wilde, he emerged as "synonymous with social, sexual, and aesthetic transgression" and that "this holds true for *Salome"* (196). Simon Joyce in 2002 reports about crime in the late 1890s and focuses on Wilde's trial. He argues that "the criminal as an intellectual or artistic genius...had become a conservative and reassuring notion by the end of the nineteenth century" (501). Is there something about the creative genius that is criminal? Must one be bad to be so good? Joyce explores this possible affinity in relation to Wilde. In 2006 Udo Kultermann explains eroticism in *Salome*, specifically after the 1890s. Kultermann uses historical context, mainly ancient Greek and Biblical, to discuss the role of eroticism in Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils. Petra Dierkes-Thrun in 2011 relates recent adaptations of *Salome* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* since the 1980s. She reveals that, although the movies she writes about successfully adapted Wilde's work, they didn't go far enough in their interpretations to understand Wilde's true message. Dierkes-Thrun also wrote in 2011 about Salome as a symbolist, decadent, and modern aesthete. She argues that Wilde was cognizant of the major intellectual and political movements of the late 1890s and that he crafted his play with these forces in mind. In 2012, Carol Margaret Davison wrote about Victorian Gothic and gender. She argues that, as the 1800s progressed, political movements began to align more closely with social movements. Her article strengthens my argument that Wilde was aware of how political his work was. Also in 2012, Daniel Orrells published an article about Classical reception, including a section on the connections of Wilde's Bosie to the Greek Hyacinth and

Classical allusions in *Dorian Gray*. In 2013, Morgan Fritz focused on Wilde's utopian view in *Dorian Gray* and *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, examining socialism under aestheticism and highlighting Wilde's own beliefs about decadence in politics.

I include this literature review as an appendix to my thesis not only to highlight the work that I have completed during my thesis year, but also to show that Wilde's writing created a genre of academic thought and critique. There is extensive writing and research on Wilde's work because he represented something new and different in an era where things were always new and different—along with the development of the train and the typewriter, Wilde advanced ideas about gender performance and sexual theory, despite their repression and incrimination at the time. I believe that it is important to see where Wilde came from, but also to see what his work has produced. Without his oeuvre, literature and society would be entirely different than they are today.

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