

AESTHETICISM AND ART NOUVEAU IN OSCAR WILDE'S *SALOMÉ*

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Abstract: *Focusing on Oscar Wilde's play Salomé, the paper aims to discuss and analyse the literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and its connection to the artistic tendencies of the period. Wilde wrote the play in 1893, at the very start of the period in art known as Art Nouveau, characterized by the extensive use of symbols and sinuous line as means of expression and artistic delving into the realm of the unconscious. The paper takes on Salomé as a paradigm of symbolist and aesthetic literature and examines how the symbols and literary devices in the play create a language that reflects the "new vocabulary" of Art Nouveau, contained, among other places, in Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations featured in the first English edition of Salomé in 1894.*

Keywords: *aestheticism, Art Nouveau, symbolism, stylistics*

1. Introduction. The literature of the late 19th and early 20th century as the context for Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*

When trying to situate Wilde in English and world literature, there is little or no room for disputing the fact that Wilde was the leading figure of English aestheticism, a movement that promoted art made for its own sake, with the artist as the creator and revealer of beauty. Beauty that has no educative or useful purpose was seen as the ultimate goal set before the artist. The creation of art was not to have didactic, social or moral pretensions; it "need only fulfill possibilities of beauty inherent in any art form" and as such produce effect, mood or a sensation in the consumer (Quintus 1980: 560). "Vice and virtue are to the artist material for an art", asserts Wilde in the Preface to his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, stating thus that artist's sole obligation is to conform to the aesthetic norms, regardless of the social or ethical implications that their work of art may have. In the same preface, Wilde labels any kind of "ethical sympathy" as "an unpardonable mannerism of style", and the only acceptable classification of literature are the books that are "well written, or badly written." A well written book can express anything, and for those who find "beautiful meanings" in "beautiful things" that may at the same time be blasphemous, decadent or immoral, "there is hope" (Wilde 1994: 5).

In short, at the end of the nineteenth century, French and English aesthetes wanted to see art removed from the production of critical meaning. It is interesting to note that, although denying the socio-political aspect, it was precisely this aspect that brought about the rise of modernism and Aestheticism as one of its movements. Art for art's sake, as a change in the literary canon at the end of the nineteenth century, came about as a result of weariness with obsolescent realist conventions. The prose of realism reflected and reinforced the strongly held beliefs of Victorian society, and, in its effort to defy them, aestheticism as part of

modernism focused solely on “the free expression of the imagination” (Quintus 1980: 561). In his paper “The Moral Implications of Oscar Wilde's Aestheticism”, however, calling attention to Albert Guérard’s study *Art for Art's Sake*, Quintus deems it to be “perhaps the only major study devoted to the subject” (idem: 559). In his study, Guérard contends that the principles underlying art for art’s sake “can never be completely accepted or exercised”, as they would inevitably “separate art from thought”, noting that literature is “the least amenable to such a goal” (ibid.). Quintus quotes R. V. Johnson, who, in his essay on aestheticism, says that “it does not follow... that the work of art may not embody and communicate insight into life” (ibid.). According to Quintus, it is especially Wilde’s work that, despite the flamboyant denial, cannot be observed without taking into account its moral aspect. In *Intentions*, Wilde also stresses the importance of a work of art being able to show the “true ethical import” of the facts of life:

But the artist, who accepts the facts of life, and yet transforms them into shapes of beauty, and makes them vehicles of pity or of awe, and shows their colour-element, and their wonder, and their true ethical import also, and builds out of them a world more real than reality itself, and of loftier and more noble import – who shall set limits to him? (Wilde 2018: 88)

It appears that, according to Wilde, any kind of “ethical sympathy”, an interference of moral principles and prejudices of the given social context in the creation of a work of art, discourages its “true ethical import” ever to show. In order for it to show, the artist must accept the facts of life and transform them into art (“into shapes of beauty”) in the way that makes them “vehicles of pity or of awe”. Only that way will “their colour-element, and their wonder, and their true ethical import” manifest. The “colour” and the “wonder” come from the transformation of bare facts into art – into something higher. In *Intentions*, Wilde also mentions the “higher ethics” that he links closely to Sin as “an essential element of progress”, insisting that “(w)ithout it the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colourless” (idem: 60). Such statements added to the general perception of the literature of Aestheticism as immoral and irreverent. However we may argue that by Sin, Wilde meant the “curiosity” that he mentions further in the text, and by that, the curiosity for forms of life that can be transfigured into colourful and wondrous art.

All of the above resonates profoundly in Wilde’s *Salomé*, a play that can be seen as the literary embodiment of the English aesthetes’ artistic ideals and the source of the Victorians’ utmost consternation, its main protagonist being one of the most notorious Biblical female characters. Originally written in French at the beginning of the last decade of the 19th century during Wilde’s stay in Paris, the play’s London première was banned due to the then forbidden depiction of biblical characters on stage. The play was perceived as “an arrangement in blood and ferocity, morbid, bizarre, repulsive [...]” (quoting *The Times*, Donohue 1997: 123), but part of *Salomé*’s infamy lies in Aubrey Beardsley’s Art Nouveau illustrations featured in the first English edition of the play in 1894.

2. The art of the late 19th and early 20th century as the context for artistic and stylistic analysis of Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé*

Art Nouveau is the movement that appeared during the flourishing of historicism as an instrument of the newly rich bourgeois class endeavouring to

establish their place in the social hierarchy. Similarly, the artists of the Art Nouveau movement sought creative freedom for themselves and liberation from the strict rules of historicism and the art academies. They made use of new materials and technological advances, placing themselves with the new bourgeois class at the centre of the art revolution, which included everything from painting, sculpture, architecture, and applied arts to literature, music and dance (Sikošek 2018: 9).

The name and specific characteristics of the art movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries varied from country to country: Jugendstil in Germany, Vienna Secession in Austria, Art Nouveau in France and Belgium etc., but everywhere “like any art style, it expressed an attitude towards life” (Hofstätter 1983: 7). In that sense, Escritt (2013: 7) points out that “[i]f Art Nouveau saw itself as a reaction against an aesthetically corrupt century, it was also a product of it”. Unlike the continental countries, where Art Nouveau appeared abruptly “as a concrete expression of social conscience”, and as the artistic revolution overthrowing “the lingering romantic tradition of the nineteenth century” (Lenning 1951: 3), the new art in England had slowly taken shape since 1848 through the ideals of The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Aesthetic Movement, and Symbolist Movement. Fascinated with the nature and freed from the pressure of the traditional canon, artists sought inspiration in pre-Renaissance art, Japanese graphics, folk art such as wood engraving and embroidery, as well as medieval architecture. In this paper, the name Art Nouveau will be used, bearing in mind the fact that it is used in the publications and official documents of UNESCO. The line became the main means of expression in the fine and applied arts, as opposed to the strictness of a clearly prescribed structure in the arts of previous centuries. The line liberated the artists, allowed them greater creativity and expressiveness.

Aubrey Beardsley is the most significant representative of Art Nouveau in England, and his importance for *Salomé* lies in Oscar Wilde’s choice of Beardsley as the illustrator of the English edition of the play. He was a pioneer of the new movement who “invented a new vocabulary of sinuous line and sly eroticism” (Allen 2020). Wilde’s dedication clearly illustrates how similarly they responded to the challenges of Victorian society with rebellion: “For Aubrey – for the only artist who, beside myself, knows what the dance of the seven veils is, and can see that invisible dance. Oscar” (Gertner Zatlín 2016). Beardsley died young of tuberculosis, and Sikošek compares the shortness of his life to the shortness of the Art Nouveau movement, in the sense that they came to prominence abruptly, lasted briefly, but left an indelible mark and paved the way to what we now know as Modern Art (Sikošek 2018: 9). Beardsley’s illustrations in *Salomé* state clearly the belief of the artists of the period in interdisciplinary artistic collaboration “as another milestone in the symbolist attempt to forge a new language” (Gerould 2009: 84). The concept of various arts working together in unity was strongly upheld by the Symbolists, and they “sought to bring about such a fusion of the arts by pursuing dual or multiple vocations and by collaborating with other artists” (ibid.). However, the idea of the fusion, in this case, of art and literature becomes even more exciting when observing how the text of *Salomé* assumes an organic, sinuous form that stems from the interplay of symbols, tropes and figures, which will be further discussed in chapters three and four.

3. Symbolism in *Salomé*

The use of symbols in literature can be seen as yet another manner in which literature distances itself from realistic representation. In the “Introduction” to *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, Arthur Symons (1908: 2) cites Comte Goblet d'Alviella who says that a symbol “might be defined as a representation which does not aim at being a reproduction”. When contemplating the emergence of symbolism in the nineteenth century, Symons sees it as appearing after the era of “the re-arrangement of material things”, after which “comes the turn of the soul”, and the literature that springs out is one “in which the visible world is no longer a reality, and the unseen world no longer a dream” (idem: 4). Such literature was reactionary towards the absence of the spiritual in literature. However, Oscar Wilde cautions those eager to delve into symbol and meaning, contending, in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, that those who go beneath the surface must be aware of the danger it involves.

Salomé is regarded as Wilde’s “most self-consciously symbolist and aesthetic play” (Russ 2011: 37), even as the only fully symbolist work at the British fin de siècle (Denisoff 2007: 40). From the first sentences of the play, the reader is drawn into the hypnotic and ominous atmosphere of Herod’s palace. *Salomé* takes place at a time which represents the decline of Roman civilization and, in the context of the art of decadence to which it belongs, it indicates the decline of the established political and social system of the nineteenth century. To the aristocracy of the late nineteenth century, the new social tendencies might have appeared as alarming as to the tetrarch Herod Antipas and his entourage: the aristocracy is being stripped off its impregnable position of power whereas the bourgeoisie (the *nouveau riche*) is finding its place in high society, economically and politically as well as through art (Art Nouveau). In “Decadence and Aestheticism”, Denisoff underlines that the play’s “androgynous characters, sexual violence and setting in a decadent kingdom [...] affirm the work’s position within the decadent tradition” (ibid.). The social changes towards the end of the nineteenth century brought about the sexual liberation of women, who, according to Marshall, became sexually articulate as never before. It is in the choice and examination of a mythic figure such as Salomé, alongside late-Victorian men and women, that Marshall (2007: 6-7) sees a consuming interest in “questions of sex and its articulation, its political realisation, and its communal implications”.

One of the most striking symbols that we encounter in *Salomé* is the moon. J. C. Cooper’s *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* explains the moon as generally perceived as the symbol of female power, of the intuitive, the irrational and the subjective (Kuper 1986: 104, the Serbo-Croatian edition). The personal pronoun used in the text for the moon is *she*, and at the very beginning of the play, the moon is compared to “a woman rising from a tomb”, as if “she was looking for dead things” (Wilde 1996: 1). Female power as well as sexual power is traditionally linked to the dark side of nature, which is also something that J. C. Cooper states in his above-mentioned work. The moon’s presence in the darkness of the night, in which a princess will ask for the head of a saint, is further intensified by the words denoting lightness and fadedness: Salomé is *pale*, her *feet are of silver*, she has *little white doves for feet*, her *little white hands are fluttering like doves [...] they are like white butterflies*, she is like a *silver flower* etc. When the young Syrian and Herodias’ page talk about her, the image of Salomé’s paleness is effected in a triple gradation: “She is like *the shadow of a white rose* in

a mirror of silver” (idem: 2). However, the Art Nouveau imagery also recognizes the moon and paleness as the symbols of chastity, which might introduce some confusion as regards the already mentioned understanding of the moon as the symbol of the female sexual power. There is a lot in Art Nouveau that relies on the suggestiveness of symbols, which gives rise to complexity in a literary or art piece. One of the examples in Art Nouveau is the delicateness of the portrayal of women that appear both innocent and sexual, and it is interesting to note this duality in Salomé. She perceives both the moon and Jokanaan’s character as something inherently chaste – speaking of them, she speaks of herself. It is only after the fearful and prejudiced rejection Salomé suffers on the part of Jokanaan that she becomes ruthless in her feelings and actions.

In the case of Salomé’s character, female sexual articulation is strongly linked to what we might call a highly personal reason, which modernism in general favours over cultural norms. When Herod reacts to Salomé’s demand for Jokanaan’s head as her mother’s scheme, and disparages Salomé for being Herodias’s pawn, Salomé replies “It is not my mother’s voice that I heed”, and then she asserts: “It is for mine own pleasure that I ask the head of Jokanaan in a silver charger” (idem: 29). In her review of Petra Dierkes-Thrun’s work *Salomé’s Modernity* and its unceasing influence on modernist and postmodernist art, Ellis Hanson (2012: 490) says that this pronouncement of Salomé’s “may well be Wilde’s most original contribution to the aesthetics of transgression”. By transgression, we here understand an aberration from traditional norms, a departure that implies a search, through psychological insight, for a truth existing beyond these norms.

The departure from the social canon in everyday life corresponded to the distancing from realistic representation in literature, which takes us to the beginning of this chapter and the emphasis on symbols as conveyers of the “higher order of the spirit”, beyond the material world (Gerould 2009: 80). The art and literature of decadence and aestheticism yearned for the disruption of old structures so that they could construct new, intricate forms by an elaborate interweaving of symbols and thus create a new, ordered universe. In that sense, the artists of this era, which was “the first manifestation of modernism that challenged modernity” (ibid.), never strived for the destruction of past forms *per se*, but for “a reclamation of large bodies of secret knowledge and reconciliation of older, forgotten wisdom with the latest perceptions and insights” (idem: 81). As Gerould puts it, the Symbolists “reinterpreted myths eclectically and subjectively and created new mythologies that were intensely personal, subjective, and mysterious. Alive and contemporary, myth became an embodiment of wisdom and prophecy for the present age as bearers of secret meaning” (idem: 82).

4. The organic line of Art Nouveau in the text of *Salomé*

A stylistic analysis of *Salomé* is profoundly linked to the symbolism of the play. In *Symbolist Legacy*, Gerould (2009: 80) points out that symbolist work was essentially seeking “reconnections with ‘lost’ pasts rich in associations, analogies, and resonances”. What is modern about the symbolist vision is not a mimetic representation of the contemporary world, but the “apprehension of underlying patterns beneath the surface” (idem: 81). The building of atmosphere in *Salomé* is executed to a large extent through comparisons and repetitions, and it is the resonances of these inner patterns that produce the gradation of the atmosphere of

ill omens and death. The comparisons and repetitions lead to a regularity of rhythm, creating a linguistic expression that suits the emotional tone of the play. The regularity does not suggest monotony, but the uncontrollable force of the irrational and the unconscious that will realize itself into a tragic outcome. Although a drama play, the force of rhythmic workings in *Salomé* reminds us of some of those in poetry; in his essay “Oscar Wilde’s Poetry as Art History”, Roditi (1946: 323) deems Wilde’s *Salomé* “a play written in elaborately ornate prose, as a poem, a drama in lyrical prose” and all his later works “the sensuous and elaborately fin-de-siècle arabesques” (idem: 324), which is a clear allusion to the art of Art Nouveau. Roditi sees simplicity in Wilde’s work and his diction

purged of much of the florid descriptiveness and rich vocabulary of the earlier poems, allow[ing] each word of common conversation, clear and vivid again, loaded with thought or emotion, to transcend, in the strict economy of rhythm and syntax, its usually blurred or vague meaning. (idem: 328-329)

In the art and literature that no longer strive for realistic representation, clarity, in Roditi’s view, is attained through “the strict economy of rhythm and syntax”. Such economy produced a form capable of what Gerould calls “spiritual immersion”. If, according to the symbolists, “[t]he deep structure of the human mind corresponds to the deep structure of the universe” (Gerould 2009: 81), the language also required structures whose combination of words, sentences, and paragraphs as rhythmic units, in combination with symbols, provided associations for archetypal themes. Spiritual immersion was not possible with mimetic representation, and new modernist mythologies were in fact the new archetypal models. As new mythologies were “intensely personal, subjective, and mysterious”, they were also “alive and contemporary” (idem: 82), as this was the only way to convey the truths that were new and relevant to the age, but still deeply mythical.

The motives of nature were profusely used in Art Nouveau iconography. Defying mimetic imitation, the long, sinuous line of Art Nouveau found its full realisation in plant and animal patterns, in which it ruled all other elements, such as form, texture, space, and colour. The line could be “elegant and graceful or infused with a powerfully rhythmic and whiplike force” (Encyclopaedia Britannica: Internet), permeating the piece of art (and literature, if we remember the Symbolists’ belief in the fusion of arts and Roditi’s understanding of Wilde’s work as deeply connected to Art Nouveau) in such a manner as to create continuity and the connection between structure and ornament. In such a way, the meaning emanating from the underlying patterns beneath the surface that Gerould talks about was produced. The text of *Salomé* brims with comparisons, the majority of which have the images of nature as their elements. The play opens with as many as seven comparisons connected to the moon in only four dialogue exchanges that the young Syrian and Herodias’ page have (two by the young Syrian and two by Herodias’ page); the already mentioned comparison “She is like the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver” contains a flower. The Princess’s white hands are compared to doves and butterflies, whereas she compares Jokanaan’s eyes to “the black caverns of Egypt in which the dragons make their lairs”, “the black lakes troubled by fantastic moons” (Wilde 1996: 10), his body to “the lilies of a field that the mower hath never mowed”, “snows that lie on the mountains of Judea” (idem: 11), but also to “a plastered wall, where vipers have crawled”, his hair to “clusters

of grapes that hang from the vine-trees of Edom in the land of Edomites” (idem: 12), etc. The comparisons, often contained in repetitive patterns throughout the play, evoke vividly the staple images of the Art Nouveau style.

The repetitions come in various forms. To name just a few, the subtle persuasion that Salomé uses in her communication with the young Syrian is effected by means of anaphoric repetition: “*Thou wilt do this thing for me*, wilt thou not, Narraboth? *Thou wilt do this thing for me*. I have ever been kind to thee. *Thou wilt do it for me*” (idem: 8). This part of the play is an example of anaphora that extends to repetitions of not only neighbouring sentences, but also consecutive lines spoken by Salomé; namely, while persuading the young Syrian to bring out the prophet so that she can look at him, in their dialogue exchange Salomé begins all three consecutive addresses to the young Syrian by saying: “*Thou wilt do this thing for me*”, until the young Syrian finally concedes. The famous lines *I will kiss thy mouth*, *Jokanaan* and *Suffer me to kiss thy mouth* are repeated by Salomé as many as nine times. Alongside anaphora, the play also exhibits a similar device which is epiphoric repetition, a repetition of a sequence of words at the end of the clauses that follow one another, as well as repetitions of entire sentences uttered by the same person. When Jokanaan starts insulting Herodias, Salomé understands who he is talking about and reacts:

Salomé: *It is of my mother that he is speaking.*

The young Syrian: Oh no, Princess.

Salomé: Yes; *it is of my mother that he is speaking.* (idem: 9)

The repetitions in the text of the play entail the use of the diacope device, with intervening words or groups of words between the repeated phrases or clauses so as to enhance the emotion. Speaking of his infatuation with Salomé, Herod admits: “*Thy beauty has troubled me. Thy beauty has grievously troubled me*, and I have looked at thee overmuch”, or when he says: “Salomé, thou knowest my *white peacocks, my beautiful white peacocks*” (idem: 27) Intense effect is created as well by what we might call the examples of reverse anadiplosis; instead of having a sentence in which the second clause begins with the same word or group of words which mark the end of the previous clause, the repeating word or a group of words is distributed at the beginning of the first clause and the end of the second clause. When Herod becomes afraid of Salomé’s demand, she reminds him: “*You have sworn an oath*, Herod. Forget not that *you have sworn an oath*” (idem: 29). One of the striking examples is the distribution of one of the most significant adjectives in the play, the adjective *pale*: “How *pale* the Princess is! Never have I seen her so *pale*” (idem: 2), a sentence uttered by the young Syrian. Aside from the repetition of the adjective *pale* in the succeeding sentences, the rhythmic pattern of the entire play is intensified by the repetition of the exact combination of these two sentences further in the text.

Perhaps the most striking rhythmic quality of the play lies in the fact that repetitions do not work solely within succeeding sentences or paragraphs, but throughout the whole text; namely, words and phrases that we find in one segment reoccur, at a regular or irregular pace, in other segments of the play. The rhythmic line formed by their reoccurrences and permeating the text bears closeness to the organic line of the Art Nouveau style. *Salomé*’s short, seemingly flat sentences (especially pronounced in the French original, while the English translation has some archaic lexis and tone) combine together to bring forth the hypnotically mysterious tale of the infamous princess.

5. Conclusion

Although seen as an ultimate aesthetic and symbolic work that renounces social critique and didactic intentions, it can be said that *Salomé* is a vivid example of Wilde's vision of art as a transformative force that still shows "true ethical import". *Salomé* is most often seen as a fin-de-siècle tackling of post-Victorian female liberation and predatory feminine sexuality as a consequence, without much attention being paid to the fact that, apart from Jokanaan, this story has another victim – Salomé herself. Without any explicit pretensions of social engagement and moral thought (and language), in *Salomé*, Wilde also manages to tell the story of a maiden turned monster, a young virgin whose beauty, familial ties and social status make her a victim of sexual objectification and emotional rejection, with a tragic end. Wilde's language in the play, the interweaving of symbols, tropes and figures, is an exemplary stylistic fusion of literature and art of the period, turning the text of *Salomé* into an organic Art Nouveau whole.

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