# FANTASY AS A MODE IN BRITISH AND IRISH LITERARY DECADENCE, 1885–1925

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# ABSTRACT

This Ph.D. thesis investigates the use of fantasy by British and Irish 'Decadent' authors and illustrators, including Oscar Wilde, Max Beerbohm, Aubrey Beardsley, 'Vernon Lee' (Violet Paget), Ernest Dowson, and Charles Ricketts.  Furthermore, this study  demonstrates why fantasy was an apposite form for literary Decadence, which is defined in this thesis as a supra-generic mode characterized by its anti-mimetic impulse, its view of language as autonomous and artificial, its frequent use of parody and pastiche, and its transgression of boundaries between art forms.  Literary Decadence in the United Kingdom derives its view of autonomous language from Anglo-German Romantic philology and literature, consequently being distinguished from French Decadence by its resistance to realism and Naturalism, which assume language's power to signify the 'real world'.  Understanding language to be inorganic, Decadent writers blithely countermand notions of linguistic fitness and employ devices such as catachresis, paradox, and tautology, which in turn emphasize the self-referentiality of Decadent texts.  Fantasy furthers the Decadent argument about language because works of fantasy bear no specific relationship to 'reality'; they can express anything evocable within language, as J.R.R. Tolkien demonstrates with his example of "the green sun" (a phrase that can exist independent of the sun's actually being green).  The thesis argues that fantasy's usefulness in underscoring arguments about linguistic autonomy explains its widespread presence in Decadent prose and visual art, especially in genres that had become associated with realism and Naturalism, such as the novel (Chapter 1), the short story (Chapter 3), drama (Chapter 4), and textual illustration (Chapter 2).  The thesis also analyzes Decadents' use of a wholly non-realistic genre, the fairy tale (see Chapter 5), in order to delineate the consequences of their use of fantasy for the construction of character and gender within their texts.

**1. Candidate's declarations:**

I, Jeremiah Romano Mercurio, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 76,300 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

I was admitted as a research student in September 2006 and as a candidate for the degree of Ph.D. in September 2007; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between September 2006 and August 2010.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# A NOTE ON THE TEXT

Please note that I have employed standard American English spelling throughout the thesis, except in all quotations from primary and secondary sources, which preserve the spelling and punctuation of the author.  Readers will also note that I have used the revised and expanded 1891 edition of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in all chapters except for Chapters Three and Six, which outline the milieu of periodical publishing in the late-nineteenth century; thus, for those chapters I have elected to use the 1890 version, published in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, which places Wilde's work firmly within *fin-de-siècle* periodical culture, to which he also contributed as a poet, short story writer, reviewer, essayist, and as editor of *The Woman's World*  (1887–1889).  For all the other chapters I have chosen the 1891 edition, published by Ward, Lock, and Company, but not because it represents a 'final' version of the work.  In the third volume of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford University Press), Joseph Bristow warns against seeing the 1891 edition as embodying Wilde's final intentions:

> There are strong arguments that suggest in the case where two works share the same title textual editors need to concentrate less on what they assume to be an author's definitive or ultimate intention and focus more on the editorial conventions and procedures though which an edition was mediated before it reached a specific market.  In other words, by fixing attention on the mediation of distinct editions scholars can comprehend more fully why *The Picture of Dorian Gray* names two works that appeared in publications as different as an inexpensive literary monthly sold to thousands and a handsomely bound and designed single volume produced in much smaller print-runs.[1]

Nonetheless, I have selected the 1891 edition of the novel for the other chapters in my thesis because, even though it might not represent Wilde's ultimate intentions and incorporates editorial choices imposed both by the conventions of Ward, Lock, & Co. and by the negative public reaction to the more (homo)erotically-charged passages in the *Lippincott's* version, it still provides more material from which to draw (twenty chapters versus thirteen), develops several scenes that magnify the hesitation between the real and the fantastic, and constitutes Wilde's last (different, but not final) envisioning of the text.

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[1] Joseph Bristow, Introduction, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, vol. 3: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: *The 1890 and 1891 Texts*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), pp. xi–lx, xxxi

# Introduction

# Breaking from the Prison-House of Realism

> Nor will [the liar] be welcomed by society alone.  Art, breaking from the prison-house of realism, will run to greet him, and will kiss his false, beautiful lips, knowing that he alone is in possession of the great secret of all her manifestations, the secret that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style.
> —Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying' (1891)[1]

> *Sa nature consiste à n'être pas naturel.*
> —François Joachim Édouard Coppée, 'Avec les Poètes' (1894)[2]

## The Predominance of Fantasy in Decadence

A central question motivates this thesis: Why does the prose fiction and graphic art of *fin-de-siècle* British and Irish Decadents, starting from the early publications of Oscar Wilde in the 1880s to later works by Max Beerbohm and Charles Ricketts in the late 1910s and early 1920s, predominately take the form of fantasy?

The initial observation that fantasy predominates in British and Irish Decadence depends on a general consensus among scholars that the writers and artists discussed herein—Wilde, Beerbohm, Ricketts, Aubrey Beardsley, 'Vernon Lee' (Violet Paget), and Ernest Dowson—constitute many of the figures who are most often associated with English-language Decadence.  This opinion reinforces the characterizations of contemporary, frequently hostile, commentators on Decadence, who described most, if

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[1] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', in *Intentions* (London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1891), pp. 1-55, 28–29

[2] Coppée, 'Avec les Poètes', in *Mon Franc parler* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1894), pp. 160–170, 164; 'His [the Decadent's] nature consists in not being natural' (my translation).

not all, of these writers and artists as 'decadent' or 'Decadent'.[3]  For example, Max

Nordau, whose *Degeneration* (1892) excoriates practically every avant-garde

development of the later nineteenth century, argues that the traits of 'decadentism'—

artificiality, an art-for-art's-sake attitude, 'ego-mania'—find 'their English representative

among the "Æsthetes", the chief of whom is Oscar Wilde'.[4]  In order to answer the

question about why fantasy predominates in Decadent writing and illustration, however,

this thesis has first had to answer a number of preliminary questions, including: What is

the precise meaning of Decadence? (Is a precise definition of Decadence even possible?)

Does its particular instantiation in the United Kingdom differ from its counterpart in

France (often described as the model for British and Irish Decadence)? If so, to what

degree?  Furthermore, what does 'fantasy' mean as an aesthetic approach?  Does one type

of fantasy appear more frequently in Decadent writing and visual art than another?

Faced with these questions, this thesis has had to formulate working definitions of

both 'literary Decadence' and 'fantasy'.  The task of defining Decadence and fantasy is

complicated by diverse critical opinion, which has historically been, and continues to be,

divided about the precise definition of either term.  The working definition of Decadence

in this thesis is, therefore, derived from multiple sources: from close readings of critical

and creative texts by those authors and artists whom scholars generally include in the

canon of British and Irish Decadence, and from a situating of these readings within the

robust tradition of critical debate—both contemporary and modern—about Decadence in

general.  Thus, in trying to explain the preponderance of fantasy in Decadent prose fiction

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[3] The use of the lower-case 'd' versus the capital 'D' distinguishes here, and throughout the thesis, between a pejorative label denoting moral corruption or biological degeneration and the set of aesthetic traits that comprises literary Decadence.

[4] Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, trans. by anon. (London: Heinemann, 1895; New York: Appleton, 1895; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 317

and graphic art, this thesis contributes to the understanding of Decadence by expanding and elaborating on its meaning in English-language texts.  In turn, this effort reveals important differences between Decadence in France and the United Kingdom, and the juxtaposition of the two traditions sharpens the definition of Decadence in the context of Great Britain and Ireland.

Overall, the thesis accomplishes three main tasks.  First, building on previous critics' definitions of Decadence, especially those explicitly delineated by Arthur Symons, Linda Dowling, Chris Snodgrass, and John R. Reed (and those implicitly outlined by the Decadent authors and artists themselves), the thesis offers an expanded definition of Decadence as an aesthetic *mode*, rather than simply or strictly an artistic or literary movement.  'Mode' as it is used in this thesis is a 'critical term [. . .] designating a broad but identifiable kind of literary method, mood, or manner that is not tied exclusively to a particular form or genre'.[5]  As this thesis demonstrates, the Decadent mode pervades multiple genres—the novel, the short story, the essay, book illustration, the stage play, and the fairy tale—and is characterized primarily by: its self-consciousness; its anti-mimetic impulse, which is engendered by an understanding of language as autonomous; its use of parody and pastiche in order to emphasize its artificiality; and its transgression of the boundaries between various art forms, especially as this is conducted through a redefining of various practices of aesthetic production and consumption—'illustration', reading, writing, and so on.  Other literary modes, such as

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[5] Chris Baldick, 'Mode', in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* in *Literature Online* <http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk> [accessed 15 January 2011].  'Form', in this understanding, generally relates to the structure of a particular work, while 'genre' is a 'recognizable and established category of written work employing such common conventions as will prevent readers or audiences from mistaking it for another kind' (Baldick, 'Genre', in *The Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* in *Literature Online* <http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk> [accessed 15 January 2011]).  Examples of 'genre' include 'the novel' and 'the fairy tale'

Symbolism, Impressionism, or Thackeray's parodic manner of writing, share many of the same traits, but Decadent writing and graphic art is distinguished from these other approaches by the particular combination of traits enumerated above, and by a blissful and unfettered indulgence in language's autonomy.  Symbolism, for example, is a self-conscious response to language's inability to signify.  However, as elucidated by theorists such as Jean Moréas and Arthur Symons, the Symbolist response is conducted with an oblique 'hope that our convention is indeed the reflection rather than merely the sign of that unseen reality'.[6]  British and Irish Decadents harbor no such hope and are untroubled by this position, happily taking as their staring point the anti-mimetic quality of language itself.

Secondly, in crafting a working definition of the Decadent mode, this thesis further distinguishes British and Irish Decadent production from its French Decadent precursors.  More than a mere reflection of French Decadent texts, British and Irish Decadent writing and illustration reacts against the realist, Naturalist, and even Symbolist influences that shaped French Decadence in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Decadence in the United Kingdom draws equally on French aesthetic production and on Anglo-German Romanticism, specifically on its understanding of language as an autonomous systems of signs, and on its development of Gothic fiction.  (A direct example of the latter influence is Wilde's familial relationship with Charles Robert Maturin, his maternal great-uncle and author of the Gothic masterpiece *Melmoth the Wanderer* [1820].)  French Decadence's debt to (especially) Naturalism and realism encourages its focus on 'real life' and its more sordid aspects, although this also occasionally develops into an exploration of merely unusual phenomena.  On the other

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[6] Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1899), p. 4

hand, Anglo-German Romantic and Idealist theories of language and literature, from which English-language Decadence borrows much, help define British and Irish Decadent texts as centrally characterized by their anti-mimetic impulse and ontological free-play.  Dowling and other scholars have traced an explicit development from German Romantic conceptions of autonomous language, frequently mediated through writers such as Coleridge and Carlyle, to British and Irish Decadence, and this study utilizes Dowling's work as a starting point for defining Decadence in the United Kingdom.

Lastly, the thesis answers its motivating question about the prevalence of fantasy in British Decadence by arguing that fantasy and 'the fantastic'—both as trans-generic impulses and as specific genres—are apposite forms for literary Decadence precisely because they are self-consciously literary and dependent on the autonomy of language. Fantasy's counter-mimetic nature supports the Decadent view of aesthetic production as a matter of *invention* rather than of *reflection*, a position embodied forcefully by this introduction's first epigraph, which comes from Wilde's 'The Decay of Lying'.  Moreover, the ambiguity and fluidity inherent to fantasy (broadly defined) makes it an ideal vehicle for interrogating and dismantling traditional dichotomies of surface and depth, life and art, the authentic and artificial, natural and unnatural behavior, identity and representation.

The correlation between fantasy and Decadence that this thesis explores has previously been attested to in isolated comments scattered throughout numerous critical studies of Decadence and in at least two sustained efforts to link Decadence and fantasy thematically: Catherine Rancy's full-length monograph, *Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre, 1890-1914* (1982), and the journal *Wormwood* (2003–present), edited by

Mark Valentine and described in its subtitle as being dedicated to '[l]iterature of the

fantastic, supernatural and decadent'.[7]  Rancy's text is largely a thematic exploration of

Decadence and fantasy's intersection, an examination of:

> [D]es mythes décadents tel qu'ils apparaissent dans le fantastique—Pan, la
> "femme fatale", l'Ephèbe—, et de leurs significations multiples—la recherche de
> la Beauté, la quête des origines, le conflit de l'Ange et de la Bête, la Beauté
> maudite'.[8]

*Wormwood*'s approach also tends to be thematic and concerned primarily with

Continental-European Decadence: '[the editors] are especially interested in contributions

about European authors whose work maybe less well known to anglophone readers'.[9]

Both Rancy's work and *Wormwood* draw useful connections between fantasy and

Decadence, but rely largely on the texts' subject matter to make these comparisons.

Unlike these works, this thesis is the first full-length study to assert that fantasy's affinity

with Decadence, especially British and Irish Decadence, is the result of structural,

ontological, and stylistic resemblances, the two forms being historically connected

through a shared development from Romantic to post-Romantic literature and criticism.

The introduction traces this progression by comparing the evolving meanings of 'fantasy'

and 'Decadence' in critical discourse from the early-nineteenth century to the present and

by placing key works of British Decadence in the context of genre; it does so to outline

late-Victorian aesthetic debates about the *ideal* and the *real* and to map out the place of

Decadent authors and artists within them.  Specifically, the thesis investigates Decadence

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[7] *Wormwood: Literature of the Fantastic, Supernatural and Decadent*, ed. by Mark Valentine (Spring 2010), t.p.

[8] Catherine Rancy, *Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre, 1890–1914* (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1982), p. 1; 'Decadent myths such as they appear in the fantastique—Pan, the "femme fatale", the Ephebe—, and of their multiple meanings—the search for Beauty, the quest for origins, the conflict of the Angel and Beast, the cursed Beauty' (my translation).

[9] The Tartarus Press, *Wormwood* Page, Editorial, editor Mark Valentine, at <http://freepages.pavilion.net/tartarus/wormwood.htm#editorial> [accessed 13 February 2010]

in the genres most employed by realist and Naturalist writers and visual artists. The

exploration of these genres, which include the novel (chapter one), textual illustration

(chapter two), the short story (chapter three), and drama (chapter four), serves to outline

the challenges, both direct and indirect, posed by British and Irish Decadents to the

representational aims of realist and Naturalist fiction and illustration.

Exploring Decadent constructions of identity and truth, the final chapter (chapter

five) pursues another important avenue of investigation parallel to the study's general

exploration of Decadence and fantasy as aesthetic phenomena. This chapter examines a

genre (the fairy tale) whose anti-mimetic quality, at least with respect to its content, was

uncontested, but which served as an instrument for childhood socialization and

commonly sought to define identity in fixed ways inconsistent with the ontological free-

play imagined by Decadent texts. Chapters one and four also focus heavily on

ontological representations; however, discussions of Decadence and identity pervade the

entire thesis, which uncovers the epistemological and ontological assumptions underlying

Decadence by contextualizing Decadent writers and artists within contemporary literary,

ideological, and cultural discussions of identity and reality. Emerging from Decadence's

anti-mimetic impulse, Decadent configurations of character and its relationship to the

external world inherit a free-play and ambiguity imagined by the Decadent understanding

of language. Indeed, the 'empirical' world and identity become conflated with language.

For example, François Coppée's seemingly paradoxical declaration that the Decadent's

nature is to be unnatural (the second epigraph heading this introduction) emphasizes that

identity is affirmed as constructed and artificial, a hypothesis borne out by close analysis

of Decadent texts. Moreover, as several critics, including Talia Schaffer, convincingly

show, this ontological view is not only a product of Decadent linguistic positions, but is also an inheritance from the field of popular women's writing.  For instance, Shaffer argues that the novels of 'Ouida' (Maria Louise Ramé), in particular, provided a model for anti-mimetic literary discourse: 'in her "facile aphorisms", her witty epigrams, Ouida pioneered a new form of discourse that eluded the demands of realism'.[10]  By dint of their philosophical positions and their use of radical literary methods derived from the tradition of female aestheticism, Decadent writers, both male and female, create texts that countermand realism not only as an aesthetic mode, but also as an epistemological or ontological position.  These writers and artists challenge static constructions of character, class, and gender, reconfiguring them as fluid and malleable through the use of fantasy and a direct interrogation of 'the real'.

The rest of this introduction begins by elaborating on the meaning of Decadence, differentiating between its French and English-language incarnations, and then proceeds further to explore the critical literature on British and Irish Decadence, juxtaposing these scholarly accounts and definitions with theorizations of fantasy and the fantastic in an effort to demonstrate the affinities between the two.  The comparisons of critical traditions begin by identifying what kind of aesthetic phenomenon theorists have described Decadence and fantasy as being.  The introduction then devotes sections to several other aspects of fantasy and Decadence prominent within the theorizations of both, specifically tracing similarities between fantasy's and Decadence's etymological and literary histories, between their respective conceptions of language, between each mode's critique of 'the real', and between their configurations of time.  These comparisons

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[10] Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), p. 124

establish the affinities between fantasy and Decadence, underscore their frequently

shared position in literary discourse, and highlight important aspects of the close textual

readings that will follow.  Finally, the introduction provides an explanation for the thesis'

exclusion of poetry, arguing that poetic language provokes in the reader no expectation of

signification and is, therefore, irrelevant to a discussion of fantasy as a formal literary and

artistic term, which is largely defined by its opposition to mimetic expression.

      As stated above, this thesis relies on the work of Dowling, Snodgrass, Symons,

Reed, and others, as a critical framework for defining English-language Decadence.

With respect to fantasy and the fantastic, the thesis employs definitions developed in

Tzvetan Todorov's foundational text *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary

Genre* (1970; first translated into English 1973) and the tradition of fantasy criticism that

emerges from that text.  This study concludes that fantasy, like Decadence, depends on a

self-conscious literariness and an acknowledgment of the disjunction between signifier

and signified.  As Rosemary Jackson argues, fantasy is a form that 'pushes towards an

area of non-signification'.[11]  Although this thesis follows well-established critical

traditions defining both Decadence and fantasy, it diverges from these traditions by

tracing the presence of fantasy within Decadence and by identifying literary self-

consciousness as the defining trait of both Decadence and fantasy.

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[11] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 41

**The Problem of Meaning: Decadence in Great Britain, Ireland, and France**

This thesis has already briefly summarized its working definition of Decadence, but because the word 'Decadence' is 'annoyingly resistant to definition',[12] as David Weir observes, it is important first to elaborate on its meaning and to determine which works qualify as Decadent texts. The history of the word and the history of its application to a particular literary movement of the late-nineteenth century—with which this thesis is primarily concerned—make it difficult to define, existing in both instances as a label of reprobation and a badge of honor. This study will return shortly to the problem of ambiguity in Decadence, exploring the term's etymology and usage in popular, pseudo-scientific, and critical environments from the Victorian *fin de siècle* onwards, but a brief overview of the differences between Decadence in the United Kingdom and its immediate precursor in France will serve to focus this discussion on the specific mode of writing and illustration practiced in Great Britain and Ireland and to delimit the boundaries of a term sometimes applied to authors as diverse and asynchronous as Petronious and Vladimir Nabokov.[13]

In applying the term 'Decadent' to any particular set of authors and artists, one encounters the added problem of placing the movement within a specific geographic context or literary tradition. Literary critics have long described Decadence as a pan-European movement, originating in mid-nineteenth-century France with authors such as Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire (albeit coalescing as a movement only in the

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[12] David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 1
[13] See, for example: Gordon Willis Williams, *Change and Decline: Roman Literature in the Early Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Will Norman, '*Lolita*'s "Time Leaks" and Transatlantic Decadence', *European Journal of American Culture* 28 (July 2009), pp. 185–204

1880s) and appearing in later and lesser incarnations across Europe.[14] Within this narrative—and in spite of the cosmopolitanism of the writers associated with it—British Decadence is often characterized, as in Brian Stableford's formulation, as 'a pale shadow of French Decadence',[15] a victim of British stodginess and moral sensitivity. The ostensible inferiority of British Decadence underscores its indebtedness to French models, and undoubtedly, as Kirsten MacLeod asserts, 'studies of British Decadence must invariably account for its French origins'.[16] Oscar Wilde provides a contemporary acknowledgement of this fact in his assertion to W. E. Henley that 'to learn how to write English prose I have studied the prose of France',[17] suggesting the large degree to which British Decadent writers learned from French models.

Instead of taking this debt to French Decadence as a liability and a sign of its etiolation (however ironic), this study posits that British Decadence represents a self-conscious ingestion of French Decadent literary style and aims that placed at its core the very act of co-optation. The degree to which British authors and artists invoked French Decadent works is evidenced by the number of allusions to them in English-language texts. Instead of constituting plagiarisms, these allusions—and the stylistic echoes through which they are communicated—form the raw material out of which British Decadents created, if not a movement, then at least a coherent mode of writing. Like the idealized critic in Wilde's 'The Critic as Artist', British and Irish Decadents achieved a

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[14] For notable studies that view Decadence largely as a French phenomenon, see: John R. Reed, *Decadent Style* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1985); Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*, ed. by Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2002).

[15] Brian Stableford, *Glorious Perversity* ([Rockville, MD]: Wildside Press, 2006), p. 108

[16] Kirsten MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence: High Art, Popular Writing, and the* Fin de Siècle (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), p. 1

[17] Oscar Wilde, Letter to W. E. Henley (December 1888), in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), pp. 372–373, 372

more refined and conspicuously literary mode by creating narratives from and about other texts.

The active co-opting of texts in service of an anti-mimetic impulse moves beyond the central definition of Decadence in France.  Paul Bourget (1852–1935) offers a famous and concise definition of French Decadence, quoted later by Havelock Ellis to describe the style of Joris-Karl Huysmans:

> A style of decadence is one in which the unity of the book is decomposed to give place to the independence of the page, in which the page is decomposed to give place to the independence of the phrase, and the phrase to give place to the independence of the word.[18]

This definition adequately captures the autonomy of each syntactical and grammatical unit and allies French Decadent ideas of language with those of British and Irish Decadents.  However, critics have often translated this autonomy in the context of French literature and art as a stultifying, static, and isolating phenomenon.  For example, John R. Reed describes the reader's experience of Flaubert's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1874) as an imposed attempt to conceive of an order among the 'apparently random, atomized details of the seemingly discontinuous chapters'.[19]  British and Irish Decadent writing, on the other hand, assumes the autonomy of language without the consternation this causes in earlier French writing.  Benefiting from the anxious debates about unity and style in French literary discourse, British and Irish Decadents, particularly starting with Wilde, blithely accept the autonomy of language and put it to immediate literary use. Furthermore, the biological metaphor from which this conception of style is derived returns the Decadent manner of French aesthetic production to a preoccupation with life and health, leading to a model of creativity that is of a 'morbid, melancholy, refined,

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[18] Qtd. in Havelock Ellis, *Affirmations*, 2nd edn. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), p. 180
[19] Reed, *Decadent Style*, p. 30

sensual kind'.[20]  In Bourget's analogy, the text as a whole unit is similar to an ecosystem

in which the victory of subordinate organisms over beings higher in the ecological

hierarchy destroys the system's overarching order.  British and Irish Decadents largely

ignore the questions of biological fitness, embracing, instead, the autonomy of  language

and literature—modeling their aesthetic theories on literature and literary theory,

including French Decadent literature, rather than turning to biological metaphors.  (These

metaphors can, and are, themselves turned into literary material in English-language

Decadence, but they are largely emptied of their scientific significance.[21])

British and Irish Decadents not only incorporate the canon of French Decadence

into their own aesthetic practice, but they also draw additional power from indigenous

traditions of Aestheticism and English-language prose fiction more generally, deploying

an elaborate and overwrought style and locating that style within the context of Gothic,

romantic, and fantastical fiction prevalent in English-language literary heritage from

Horace Walpole to the Brontës and Robert Louis Stevenson.  This study highlights the

fabric of literary allusions pervading British and Irish Decadent texts in order to

demonstrate the central role such raw material plays and to show how this material is

used self-consciously to achieve literary aims different from those of many French

writers, underscoring all the more the anti-mimetic quality of Decadent writing in the

United Kingdom.  In particular, British and Irish Decadent writers adhered to a view of

language inconsistent with the aims of French realism and Naturalism—especially

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[20] Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*, p. 10

[21] Actively engaged with emerging scientific theories, Vernon Lee represents one counterexample to this claim.  See Shafquat Towheed, 'The Creative Evolution of Scientific Paradigms: Vernon Lee and the Debate over the Hereditary Transmission of Acquire Characteristics', *Victorian Studies* 49 (Autumn 2006), pp. 33–61

realism's concern with 'registering what the world looks like'[22] and Naturalism's

positivism and its 'scientific' approach to composition.  French Decadent writers

themselves were sometimes at odds with the aspirations of realism and Naturalism, as

evidenced by a fantastical work such as Villiers de l'Isle Adam's *L'Ève future* (1890).

However, many French Decadents and their progenitors, such as Gustave Flaubert, the

Goncourt brothers, and even Huysmans, authored key works of realism and Naturalism.

The latter writer's novel *À Rebours* (1884), a work that Arthur Symons called the

'quintessence of contemporary Decadence',[23] was preceded in Huysmans' oeuvre by the

story of a prostitute's life, *Marthe: histoire d'une fille* (1876), which Symons called

'Naturalism in its earliest and most pitiless stage'.[24]  With the exception of George Moore,

who utilized both Decadent and Naturalistic modes borrowed from French models,[25]

British and Irish Decadent writers wrote almost exclusively in modes of fantasy.  More

than a duplication of French Decadence in the United Kingdom, British and Irish

Decadence inherited a tradition of English-language fantasy and an understanding of

language borrowed from German Romanticism that anchored British Decadence more

firmly in the literary than its French counterpart.  Furthermore, it incorporated and

parodied French Decadence specifically as a way to demonstrate its own artificiality.

This study's focus on British and Irish writers reconfigures a broader definition of

Decadence and sets Decadence in the United Kingdom in dialogue with other Decadent

traditions.

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[22] Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2005), p. 16
[23] Arthur Symons, 'J. K. Huysmans', *Fortnightly Review* 51 (March 1892), pp. 402–414, 404
[24] Symons, 'J. K. Huysmans', p. 404
[25] Moore's *Mike Fletcher* (1889) and *Esther Waters* (1894) are two respective examples.

**Mode and Genre**

Amid continued critical controversy about which kind of artistic phenomena Decadence and fantasy represent, this thesis has defined the former as a supra-generic *literary mode* and the latter as both a mode—or broad aesthetic impulse—and a specific genre, a subgenre of which is 'the fantastic'.  'Mode' has been briefly defined already in this introduction, but Rosemary Jackson's description of mode as a 'language' that 'provides a range of possibilities out of which various combinations produce different kinds of fiction in different historical situations'[26] indicates its broad application, especially with respect to fantasy, the context for her definition.  Although Decadence and fantasy can both be aptly described as modes, each functions *as a mode* in different ways.  Unlike fantasy, the Decadent mode is generally more historically anchored, tied to a more-or-less coherent movement active during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century.  Some critics have sought to extend Decadence's application beyond this narrow period,[27] which is a legitimate effort given Decadence's status as a literary mode, but most studies of Decadence are limited, if not strictly to the 1890s, then to the time period roughly twenty years before and after the turn of the twentieth century.  This fact does not preclude the Decadent mode's presence in post-nineteenth-century literature, but later instances of its use typically retain strong associations with the period from which it originates.[28]

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[26] Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 7

[27] For example, see Brian Burton, 'Derek Mahon: "A decadent who lived to tell the story"', in *Decadences: Morality and Aesthetics in British Literature*, ed. by Paul Fox (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2006), pp. 373–393

[28] The work of Angela Carter might be offered as an example of this kind of fiction.

Regardless of its broad or narrow application, Decadence as a mode differs from fantasy in that the latter *depends* on the autonomy of language to create its narratives, while the former *is* an expression of autonomous language, embodying it without making any specific reference to an external world, real or imagined.  The inherent imprecision of 'mode' as a critical term is apparent in the juxtaposition of Decadence and fantasy, but the ambiguity of Decadence is partly attributable to the initial difficulty critics have faced in determining what kind of aesthetic phenomenon it represents.  For example, Jean Pierrot labels it an 'esthetic' because it was not only 'confined to literature', but also 'bore fruit in the work of contemporary painters such as Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon'.[29]  In *Decadent Style* (1985), John R. Reed employs the term 'style' both as an acknowledgement of the importance of that word for Decadent writers—notably Pater— and as a way to trace Decadence's existence in multiple art forms from literature to the visual arts to music.

Both Pierrot and Reed emphasize Decadence's presence in several art forms partly because of the centrality of French Decadence in their definitions.  British and Irish Decadence existed in both literature and the visual arts, specifically graphic art, but the close attention to language in Decadence compelled these writers and artists to privilege literature as their chosen medium and to view other media through the lens of the literary. For example, Wilde developed Pater's idea of *Anders-streben* into a polemic that reconfigures *literature* as the art to which all others aspire:

> [T]he material that painter or sculptor uses is meagre in comparison with that of words.  Words have not merely music as sweet as that of viol and lute, colour as rich and vivid as any that makes lovely for us the canvas of the Venetian or the

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[29] Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination, 1880–1900*, trans. by Derek Coltman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 9

Spaniard, and plastic form no less sure and certain than that which reveals itself in marble or in bronze.[30]

Following Chris Snodgrass, Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, and others, this thesis asserts that Decadent visual artists in the United Kingdom strove paradoxically to be literary as they participated with Decadent writers in turning to literary virtue the discovery by linguistic science of the autonomy of language. The graphic work by Beardsley, Beerbohm, and Ricketts underscores this argument. Their work is literary beyond simple allusiveness, characterized further by a self-conscious preoccupation with the literary and a thorough engagement with literature, appearing almost exclusively as textual illustration in books and periodicals. Moreover, these textual illustrations converged with the literary texts themselves on a typographical level—aestheticizing the book, page, word, and letter and entering into dialogue with the textual narratives through various literary modes such as parody and impression. Decadent authors colluded with their illustrators and book designers in this regard, and the letters between Wilde and his illustrators, especially Ricketts and Beardsley, reveal the conscious convergence of word and image in Decadence. The trend toward literariness in Decadence and the blurring of the distinction between text and image suggest that *mode*, as opposed to 'style' or 'aesthetic', is the term most applicable to the creations of British Decadents, connoting *literariness* by its widespread usage in literary criticism, but also suggesting the movement between art forms implied by its status as a musical term.

While Decadence as a mode inhabits multiple genres—such as those considered in this thesis—it lacks the formal subgenres that fantasy possesses. In order to delineate 'fantasy' fully as a critical term, one must more precisely distinguish between fantasy as a

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[30] Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', in *Intentions* (London: James R. Osgood McIlvaine, 1891), pp. 93–213, 119

mode and the genres in which this mode operates.  Critics of fantasy use the terms

'fantasy', 'fantastic', 'the fantastic' with little regularity, often employing more than one

meaning within any given text.  One of the more helpful attempts to clarify this confusion

is Neil Cornwell's *The Literary Fantastic* (1990), which places Todorov's definition of

'the fantastic' as a genre at the center of its argument, but which also tries to categorize

other uses of fantasy—specifically as a literary impulse or mode—as well as to take into

account the criticisms of Todorov that have appeared since its translation into English in

1973.

Cornwell argues that fantasy 'denotes a wider concept—be it called a "mode", an

"impulse" of equivalent value to mimesis, or a trans-generic literary quality ever present

to some degree'.[31]  In this configuration, fantasy is a broad concept that can appear in

more or less limited ways within any given work of art or fiction.  Cornwell also allows

for some use of fantasy to mean use of the imagination, but his conception of fantasy as

mode or impulse is more closely related to this thesis' use of 'fantasy'.  The introduction's

initial observation that Decadent prose fiction almost exclusively employs fantasy, then,

can be restated to claim that these texts utilized fantasy as a mode.  Northrop Frye, whose

theory of modes in *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) is generally the starting point for

any discussion of the term clarifies this concept further and situates it on a spectrum from

fantasy to mimesis: 'Our survey of fictional modes has [. . .] shown us that the mimetic

tendency itself, the tendency to verisimilitude and accuracy of description, is one of the

two poles of literature'.[32]  Frye defines the pole opposite to realism as 'myth', suggesting

that he views this as the most anti-mimetic mode.  Cornwell, too, identifies myth as the

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[31] Neil Cornwell, *The Literary Fantastic*: *From Gothic to Postmodernism* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 31
[32] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957), p. 51

antithesis to mimesis, but Attebery identifies this pole as fantasy instead of myth,[33] which

suggests that, in his view, fantasy is the farthest point from mimesis.  Whether myth or

fantasy represents the pole opposite mimesis matters less than the understanding that

fantasy as a mode is defined by the space it occupies on a continuum between the

mimesis and anti-mimesis.  This understanding, in turn, guides this thesis, frames its use

of 'mode' as a critical term, and informs its definition of fantasy.

Another way to construct a sharper definition of fantasy is to examine those

genres and subgenres which it would have to include.  For one, it would have to include

formulaic fantasy, which Attebery defines as 'a form of popular escapist literature that

combines stock characters and devices—wizards, dragons, magic swords, and the like—

into a predictable plot'.[34]  It would also include both Todorov's genres of 'the marvelous'

and 'the fantastic'.  Todorov defines the marvelous as a genre 'characterized by the mere

presence of supernatural events, without implicating the reaction they provoke in the

characters'.[35]  This genre would include fairy tales, and works of 'Romance/Fantasy',[36] as

Cornwell terms them, which are works whose action unfolds in a world distinct from

ours, including Tolkienesque fantasies, those of William Morris, and certain science

fiction works.  The genre would also include what Cornwell calls 'What if?' stories,

which are works in which one aspect of reality is changed in an otherwise realistic text,

such as Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Gogol's *The Nose*, to use Cornwell's examples.[37]

Beerbohm's and Wilde's fairy tales, and Beardsley's *Under the Hill* would all be examples

[33] Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992), p. 3
[34] Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, p. 1
[35] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. by Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975), p. 47
[36] Cornwell, *The Literary Fantastic*, p. 40
[37] Cornwell, *The Literary Fantastic*, p. 40

of the marvelous.  From this brief catalog of fantasy genres and sub-genres alone, it is

apparent that the fantastic mode is a necessary trait of numerous literary frameworks and

formulae.  Although this study will not focus on an exploration of various fantasy sub-

genres, the conception of fantasy as a mode is important for an understanding of

Decadence because it identifies fantasy as primarily literary and it highlights the function

of fantasy that will be explored throughout the subsequent chapters in this thesis.

Furthermore, in spite of some remaining ambiguity in the term, the attempt to clarify its

meaning demonstrates affinities between Decadence and fantasy, notably ambiguity

itself, which will be explored in the next section.

**Etymology: Language and Ambiguity**

The confusion about Decadence's precise meaning as an aesthetic term is partly

generated by the word's etymology, and this ambiguity is shared by the word 'fantasy' and

its derivatives.  Indeed, there are few terms in the study of English-language literature

whose definitions are more highly contested and misunderstood than 'Decadence' and

'fantasy'.  As many critics have recognized, Decadence is an intractably difficult term to

define, being described by admirers and detractors alike as lacking 'precise meaning',[38]

promoting 'shifting nebulous ideas',[39] and being a 'a chameleon changing color while you

stare at it'.[40]  For a more precise definition of 'decadence', one might turn to the *Oxford*

*English Dictionary*, which defines it as 'the process of falling away or declining', further

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[38] Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, p. 8
[39] Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, p. 300
[40] Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1979), p. 9

noting that the term is 'applied to a particular period of decline in art, literature, etc.';[41]

however, the term's application to several artistic and historical periods (for example,

Latin decadence) has undoubtedly contributed to its being misunderstood when applied to

the *fin-de-siècle* British movement called Decadence.  Additionally, the fact that the term

was borrowed from a discipline other than literature—that of historical studies—further

complicates its use as a literary term, leading one critic, Walter Strauss, to ask in a review

in 1984: 'Why should anyone persist in using the term "decadence" in literary or critical

discourse', considering that it has '*no genuine literary status*, nor does it contain stylistic

or formal characteristics that would give the term either uniqueness or utility'.[42]  Like this

study, later critical works dispute that Decadence has no unique stylistic or formal

characteristics, but Strauss's apprehension in using the term is at least suggestive of the

difficulty involved.

More recent writers have further revised the definition of literary Decadence.  For

example, Dowling's *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (1986)

characterizes Decadence as a literary phenomenon that attempts to turn 'to literary

advantage' what seemed the 'bleak implications of the new linguistic science [as imported

from German philology]: the idea that written language, the literary tongue of the great

English writers, was simply another dead language in relation to living speech'.[43]  Yet

another, more recent critic, Paul Fox, while not denying Dowling's insights, shifts the

focus of Decadence to its conception of time: '"Decadent" artists were consciously

seeking a temporal model that opposed the weight of history along with its expectations

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[41] *Oxford English Dictionary* on-line [accessed 1 January 2010]
[42] Walter A. Strauss, Review of *The Decadent Imagination, 1880-1900*, by Jean Pierrot, trans. by Derek Coltman, *SubStance* 13 (1984), pp. 146-149, 146
[43] Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p. xv

for the future [. . .] and proposed art as contrary to, and a redemption from, time'.[44]

Though stressing different aspects of Decadence, Dowling's and Fox's definitions have at least sought the precision of which Walter Strauss thought the term incapable; however, this precision is undermined by the continued popular uses of the term 'decadence' to denote excessive self-indulgence and turpitude, further obfuscating its literary definition. In order to be comprehensive, any definition of literary Decadence must reconcile itself with the term's demotic usage. For example, Richard Gilman, quoting C. E. M. Joad, argues that 'What those who speak of a "decadent" society or a "decadent" person mean must have something in common with what is meant when they speak of "decadent" literature';[45] but Gilman, who admits that 'there is some truth to this', asserts that any truth 'is diminishing as the word splits more and more sharply into its academic and popular usages'.[46] Indeed, it is considerably difficult to find any similarities between recent academic and popular uses of Decadence, a term that allows scholarly definitions to become more precise, but that also requires—if it is not to be confused with its popular meaning—a clear distinction between the terms, such as in the use of the capital 'D' (which this thesis employs) or the use of the complete phrase 'literary decadence'. Even these measures do not eliminate the confusion engendered by the term's contested meaning in both academic and popular contexts.

The definition of fantasy has been the subject of academic and popular debate no less than that of Decadence. Prior to the nineteenth century, 'fantasy' was often employed pejoratively. As Stephen Prickett asserts about the early uses of the word fantasy in

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[44] Paul Fox, 'A Moment's Fixation: Aesthetic Time and Dialectical Progress', in *Decadences: Morality and Aesthetics in British Literature*, ed. by Paul Fox (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2006), pp. 173–196, 177
[45] C. E. M. Joad, *Decadence: A Philosophical Inquiry* (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1949), p. 58
[46] Gilman, *The Strange Life of an Epithet*, p. 153

English, 'the tone of these early uses of the word is often semi-contemptuous, implying

delusion, hallucination, or simply wishful thinking'.[47]  Some vestiges of this attitude still

remain, (appearing, for example, in some criticism of the Harry Potter books), but in

general reclamations of fantasy since the nineteenth century have divested the term of

negative connotations and have largely equated it with imagination, which Prickett claims

shares the same etymological root as fantasy.  He argues that 'from [fantasy's] earliest

usages in English the word has been associated with two related ones, *imagination* and

*fancy*—which share the same Greek root as *fantasy*'.[48]  Of course, Coleridge adamantly

distinguished imagination from fancy and, in so doing, rescued that term from roughly

the same negative connotations, elevating imagination to a god-like power of creation,

while demoting fancy to simple imitation.  W. R. Irwin has argued that, if one looks at

more than just the final chapter of *Biographia Literaria*, he will find that '[e]lsewhere

[Coleridge] did grant that the fancy can operate organically as well as mechanically [. . .]

that the difference between the two can be one of degree and operation as well as of kind,

that there can be an equal co-functioning of the two'.[49]  It is wise to be cautious about

claiming definitively to know Coleridge's opinion of fancy in relation to the imagination,

especially given that John Ruskin, one of Oscar Wilde's teachers and major influences,

admonished readers to see Coleridge's distinction as 'insignificant'.[50]  Nonetheless,

Coleridge's famous (and infamous) distinction between imagination and fancy in the

*Biographia* has exerted a large influence and has shaped much of the debate about

imagination, fancy, and fantasy that has followed.  His distinction defines (primary)

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[47] Stephen Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy*, 2nd edn. (Waco: Baylor UP, 2005), p. 5
[48] Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy*, p. 5
[49] W. R. Irwin, 'From Fancy to Fantasy: Coleridge and Beyond', in *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art*, ed. by Roger C. Schlobin (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 36–55, 38
[50] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. 2, revised edn. (Orpington, Kent: George Allen, 1883), p. 2

imagination as 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I

AM',[51] and furthermore asserts that:

> The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the
> order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by that empirical
> phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE.  But equally
> with the ordinary memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the
> law of association.[52]

That there has been so much debate about the meaning of imagination, fancy and fantasy

before, but especially after, Coleridge testifies to the confusion that has surrounded these

terms.  This confusion has contributed not a little to the lack of agreement among

contemporary critics of fantasy, who offer contradictory definitions of fantasy as a

formula and a genre,[53] fantasy as a mode,[54] fantasy as the imagination, fantasy as an

'impulse',[55] 'the fantastic' as a genre distinct from fantasy,[56] and so on.  The fact that both

Decadence and fantasy have been misunderstood does not, by itself, imply any

connection between the two; however, it does suggest that there may be a trait common

to both that contributes to their definitions' ambiguity.  This ambiguity and fluidity in the

meaning of both terms represents less a semantic liability than a product of the free-play

and open-endedness implicit in the concepts themselves.


**Overlapping Definitions: Decadence and Fantasy**


Todorov is most concerned in *The Fantastic* with the defining of that specific,

eponymous genre, and he describes the bordering genres—the uncanny and the

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[51] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, 2 vols. (London: Rest Fenner, 1817), I, pp. 295–296

[52] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, p. 296

[53] See Brian Attebery, 'Fantasy as Mode, Genre, Formula', *Strategies of Fantasy*, pp. 1–17.

[54] See Rosemary Jackson, 'The Fantastic as a Mode', *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, pp. 13–60.

[55] See Colin Manlove, *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1983).

[56] See, among others, Todorov, 'Definition of the Fantastic', *The Fantastic*, pp. 24–40.

marvelous—only as a way of delimiting 'the fantastic'.  His definition of the fantastic,

although it has been attacked on many occasions since its publication, provides the best

sense of why fantasy in general might have appealed so much to Decadent writers:

> The fantastic requires the fulfillment of three conditions.  First, the text must
> oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living
> persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the
> events described.  Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character;
> thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time
> the hesitation is represented it becomes one of the themes of the work [. . .] Third,
> the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject
> allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations.  These three requirements do not
> have an equal value.  The first and the third actually constitute the genre.[57]

Todorov's first requirement for the fantastic—that it create a hesitation between natural

and supernatural explanations—recalls some of the definitions of Decadence that Arthur

Symons provides in 'The Decadent Movement in Literature'.  Describing Maeterlinck's

drama, Symons asserts that:

> [I]t is a drama which appeals directly to the sensations [. . .] playing its variations
> upon the very nerves themselves.  The "vague spiritual fear" which it creates out
> of our nervous apprehension is unlike anything that has ever been done before,
> even by Hoffmann, even by Poe.  It is an effect of atmosphere—an atmosphere in
> which outlines change and become mysterious.[58]

In describing Maeterlinck's Decadence, Symons approaches Todorov's definition of the

fantastic.  Unlike Symons, Todorov does not characterize his 'hesitation' as a sense of

fear; however, Symons' language evokes the same indeterminacy: 'vague', 'nervous

apprehension', 'outlines change and become mysterious'.  It is also significant that

Symons mentions Hoffmann and Poe as two progenitors of Decadent literature because

they are often credited with the creation of the fantastic genre.  Todorov largely excludes

Poe's works from the fantastic, putting them into the marvelous or uncanny, but he admits

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[57] Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 33
[58] Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 87 (November 1893), pp. 858–867, 865

that 'Poe remains very close to the authors of the fantastic both in his themes and in the technique that he applies'.[59]  It would be difficult not to see Poe as central to this genre since, even in Todorov's estimation, his work spans the uncanny to the marvelous—between which is only the fantastic (following Todorov's model).  Hoffmann, too, is significant because Todorov describes his *oeuvre* as 'constitut[ing] a virtual repertory of fantastic themes'.[60]  Furthermore, Symons' discussion of Huysmans' *À Rebours* (1884) approximates Todorov's definition.  He describes Des Esseintes' enervation, instigated by a surfeit of experiences and an over-refinement of his tastes, as a moment of hesitation roughly analogous to the hesitation between fantasy and reality: 'at last, exhausted by these spiritual and sensory debauches in the delights of the artificial, he is left [. . .] with a brief, doubtful choice before him—madness or death, or else a return to nature, to the normal life'.[61]  The choice Des Esseintes ultimately faces is between 'real life' or an escape from it (into madness or death).

Whereas Symon's definition of Decadence parallels definitions of the fantastic, Todorov's own descriptions of the fantastic approximate definitions of Decadence.  For example, Todorov argues that 'the fantastic has what at first glance appears to be a tautological function: it permits the description of a fantastic universe, one that has no reality outside language; the description and what is described are not of a different nature'.[62]  He asserts that the fantastic *appears* to function tautologically, but he also argues that such a reading ignores literature's themes, its 'semantic aspect'.[63]  Decadent conceptions of literature, however, blithely disregard thematic concerns by turning

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[59] Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 48
[60] Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 103
[61] Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', p. 866
[62] Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 92
[63] Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 93

literariness into the prevailing thematic concern.  Embracing language's autonomy and

self-referentiality, Decadence restores—or asserts—fantasy's tautological function.

Todorov himself comes close to admitting this point in his discussion of figurative

language and the fantastic:

> If the fantastic constantly makes use of rhetorical figures it is because it
> originates in them.  The supernatural is born of language, it is both its
> consequence and its proof; not only do the devil and vampires exist only in words,
> but language alone enable us to conceive what is always absent: the
> supernatural.[64]

Wilde's argument against realism in 'The Decay of Lying' is often echoed by Todorov's

discussions of literary language and its freedom from tests of truth.  Wilde declares that

'[t]hings are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the

Arts that have influenced us'.[65]  In this construction, the only test of truth is its

correspondence to other works of art, without which one could not 'see' anything else.

One must see other objects as art, and fantasy is the form that best enables readers to do

this because fantasy fails to signify in the external world.  This would explain why 'The

Decay of Lying' culminates in a dream of a future in which the world is consumed by 'the

marvelous', in which the hesitation between the Real and the Supernatural is dissolved:

> The solid stolid British intellect lies in the desert sands like the Sphinx in
> Flaubert's *marvellous* tale, and *fantasy*, *La Chimère*, dances round it, and calls to
> it with her false, flute-toned voice.  It may not hear her now, but surely some day,
> when we are all bored to death with the commonplace character of modern
> fiction, it will hearken to her and try to borrow her wings.
>      And when that day dawns, or sunset reddens how joyous we shall all be!
> Facts will be regarded as discreditable, Truth will be found mourning over her
> fetters, and Romance, with her temper of wonder, will return to the land.  The
> very aspect of the world will change to our startled eyes.  Out of the sea will rise
> Behemoth and Leviathan, and sail round the high-pooped galleys [. . .] Dragons
> will wander about the waste places, and the phoenix will soar from her nest of fire
> into the air.  We shall lay our hands upon the basilisk, and see the jewel in the

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[64] Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 82
[65] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p. 40

> toad's head.  Champing his gilded oats, the Hippogriff will stand in our stalls, and over our heads will float the Blue Bird singing of beautiful and impossible things [my emphases].[66]

This passage is simultaneously Wilde's polemical assertion of fantasy's primacy to art and literature and a self-conscious deployment of literary allusions, which reinforces that assertion and situates literary Decadence at the forefront of an imagined cultural movement toward fantasy.

Within this passage, Wilde invokes literature and art from various time periods and styles, catachrestically incorporating allusions to works of high seriousness and classicism within a style characterized by wry offhandedness and Camp excess.  Wilde's bringing together of so many varying artistic allusions and styles demonstrates, not only the equivalence of all aesthetic objects (independent of time or place), but it also illustrates the free-play of language that is derived from and necessary to Decadence and fantasy.  He begins by evoking French Decadence as a femme fatale to British art, citing both Flaubert's *Salammbô* (1862) and a common French Decadent trope, *La Chimère*, which appears notably in Nerval's collection of poems *Les Chimères* (1854) and Gustave Moreau's unfinished painting also called *Les Chimères* (1880).  Like Pater's *Marius*, Flaubert's novel purports to be an historical account (a depiction of Carthage in the aftermath of its wars with Rome), but, also like the imagined past in *Marius*, Flaubert's past has little connection with 'real' history, despite Flaubert's apparent intentions.  Moreover, Salammbô's haunting of Matho's dreams in the novel makes her a femme fatale and links her to French Decadent notions of femmes fatales in general, who were, as Jean Pierrot explains, 'indelibly associated with a rising fashion for a certain kind of exoticism in which we find mingled, in varying proportions, a concern for exact historical

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[66] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', pp. 51-52

reconstitution, as in *Salammbô,* and a desire for escape into the nowhere land of dreams'.[67]  Flaubert's *concern* for 'exact historical reconstitution' does not translate into an exact historical reconstitution, as has been shown, but Wilde dismisses the historical aspects of *Salammbô* anyway and exalts in the novel's 'nowhere land of dreams'.  Wilde explicitly labels *Salammbô* a 'marvellous' tale, using the term in roughly the same way that he uses the term romance; that is to say, he is using the term to mean mystery and imagination—the powers of fantasy.[68]  Moreau also discusses the femme fatale as a representation of fantasy in a commentary on his own painting *Les Chimères*:

> Cette Île des rêves fantastiques renferme toutes les formes de la passion, de la fantaisie, du caprice chez la femme.  La femme dans son essence première, l'être inconscient, folle de l'inconnue, du mystère, éprise du mal sous la forme de séduction perverse et diabolique.[69]

In Moreau's understanding of women, one can see both why critics like Bram Dijkstra would question Decadence's potential for subverting gender norms and why French Decadence, in particular, is characterized as having a preoccupation with 'evil'.[70]  Wilde, however, divests his femme fatale of evil in the above passage by attributing to fantasy the qualities of an angel—'her wings'.  Wilde has largely stripped the symbol of the femme fatale, a charged symbol in late-Victorian cultural and pseudo-scientific discourse, down to the essence of fantasy.  This is not to say that Wilde's own use of the femme fatale is not fraught with political baggage, but, in the context of his spirited defense of

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[67] Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination*, p. 38

[68] In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Ward, Lock, and Co., 1891), for example, Wilde discusses mysticism's 'marvellous power of making common things strange to us' (p. 198).

[69] Gustave Moreau, *Écrits sur l'art*, ed. by Peter Cooke, 2 vols. (Fontfroide: Fata Morgana, 2002), I, p. 123; 'This island of fantastic dreams embraces all the forms of passion, fantasy, and caprice in woman, in her primal essence, a being without thought, crazed with a desire for the unknown, for mystery, in love with evil in the form of perverse and diabolical seduction' (translated by Derek Coltman, in Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination*, p. 128).

[70] Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), p. ix

'lying', it serves to show that it is the Decadent femme fatale's perceived penchant for fantasy that most concerns Wilde.

Wilde continues in this passage to draw in and equate works of art, particularly anti-mimetic examples, with each other. Like Moreau, who takes from Mallarmé's third letter on the London Exposition the two ideas of 'the assemblage of material of "every" race and epoch, and the quality of fantasy',[71] Wilde combines literary tradition with the idea of fantasy. In addition to works of French Decadence, Wilde alludes to other works of literary and visual art, all of them fantastical in nature. He refers to Madame d'Aulnoy's fairly tale 'L'Oiseau bleu', which had been collected by Andrew Lang in *The Green Fairy Book* (1892). D'Aulnoy's *contes des fées* in general began as tales for a 'refined adult readership',[72] but became, in the nineteenth century, 'absorbed into the corpus of traditional children's tales'.[73] Her influence over children's literature was immense, and her tales, with their 'combination of fantasy with critical irony and a deft, allusive style',[74] prefigure Wilde's own fantastical and densely allusive tales. Wilde also alludes to the Hippogriff, a mythical creature appearing notably in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1532), which Gustave Doré illustrated in 1877, including many images of hippogriffs among his illustrations. Wilde also refers to the myth of the 'jewel in the toad's head', debunked in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (first published in 1646) by Thomas Browne, who labels the 'toad-stone' as something which 'may be doubted whether it be of

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[71] Rae Beth Gordon, 'Aboli Bibelot? The Influence of the Decorative Arts on Stéphane Mallarmé and Gustave Moreau', *Art Journal* 45 (Summer 1985), pp. 105-112, 105
[72] David Blamires, 'From Madame d'Aulnoy to Mother Bunch: Popularity and the Fairy Tale', in *Popular Children's Literature in Britain*, ed. by Julia Briggs, Dennis Butts, and M. O. Grenby (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 69–86, 79
[73] Blamires, p. 78
[74] Blamires, p. 86

existency',[75] and famously alluded to in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (registered 1600).

In that play, the character of Duke Senior, who has been banished by his brother to the

Forest of Arden, exhorts the lords who have been exiled with him to cheer up, to see

how:

> Sweet are the uses of adversity;
> Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
> Wears yet a precious jewel in his head[76]

He further encourages his companions to:

> Find tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
> Sermons in stones, and good in everything.[77]

The Duke not only desires to imagine his situation as better than it is, thereby endorsing

an imaginative interpretation of 'reality', but he also metaphorically transforms nature into

artifice, reading natural phenomena as part of a literary and cultural discourse (turning,

for instance, 'running brooks' into books).  Wilde alludes to this last line earlier in his

essay, borrowing the phrase 'sermons in stones' in order to argue that Wordsworth's

poetics was not derived from Nature: 'He found in stones the sermons he had already

hidden there'.[78]  Wilde posits fantasy both as the way individuals perceive the world and

as the mode in which they describe it.  Because language is autonomous, as Wilde

implies, the world is seemingly constructed by human beings, and a self-conscious

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[75] Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica: Or, Enquiries into Very Many Received Tenents, and Commonly Presumed Truths* (London: Printed by T. H. for Edward Dod, 1646), p. 137

[76] William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, in *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, ed. by Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke, 3 vols. (London: Cassell, Peter, & Galpin, 1864–1868), I, pp. 421–476, 434; Thomas Wright suggests this edition of Shakespeare's plays as one of two that Wilde would have known: 'We do not know the precise moment the boy entered the fiery-coloured world of the Bard's plays, nor can we identify the specific volume that provided a portal into it.  Speranza may have read to him from the 1833 edition of Shakespeare's works contained in Sir William's library, or perhaps she used the three-volume illustrated Cassell edition that later formed part of Wilde's adult library' (Wright, *Oscar's Books* [London: Chatto & Windus, 2008], p. 35).

[77] Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, p. 434

[78] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p. 21

creation of a world is simply another way of describing the mode of fantasy.  In this sense, fantasy paradoxically becomes realism in that it most accurately describes the 'real life' of individuals.  Unlike realism, fantasy as a mode is not circumscribed by standards of objective truth; thus, for Decadent writers and illustrators, realism cannot lay equal claim to being able to represent the 'real'.  This fact partly explains why fantasy is such an ideal form for literary Decadence, and the following sections will further elaborate on the affinities between Decadence and fantasy, exploring the conception of language in both and investigating further ramifications of their similar theoretical underpinnings.

**Language in Decadence and Fantasy**

The changing and evolving meanings of fantasy and Decadence reflect the aspect of central importance to Decadence in the United Kingdom: the understanding that language itself is an autonomous set of signs.  Dowling's *Language and Decadence* was a seminal text in the redefining of Decadence to emphasize its focus on language as an autonomous construct, reversing the trend symbolized by scholars such as Rupert Croft-Cooke, who defined Decadence as a preoccupation with moral decay:

> All debauch is ridiculous in enactment or description for it is a sentimental aggrandizement of natural appetite.  The glutton, the drunk, the lecher with bizarre proclivities—each is a figure of comedy and should be seen as such.  When the writer takes seriously what is no more than excess or eccentricity, greeting it with raptures or exalting it to the status of a satanic evil, his work itself becomes pornographic, morbid or merely silly.  This is the literature of Decadence.[79]

Dowling admits that there is a small amount of truth in this conception of Decadence, but argues that 'the truth of this older view of Decadence is that of rumor or gossip, a truth

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[79] Rupert Croft-Cooke, *Feasting with Panthers: A New Consideration of Some Late Victorian Writers* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), p. 1

doomed to exhaust itself in the mere telling'.[80]  Replacing this 'older view' is 'a more serious view of Decadence as a cult of artifice in art and literature, an impulse or movement defined by what Michael Riffaterre has called its 'ostentation of artifice'.[81] Dowling calls Decadence at various points in her book an 'impulse', 'movement', 'counterpoetics', 'critique', and 'mode'.[82]  Indeed, Decadence functions on all these levels, but it is important for a generalized understanding of Decadent fantasy to determine the precise meaning of these terms—insofar as this is possible—and exactly how Decadence functions as each.  What is essential to all of these functions is a definition of Decadence as an acceptance of the English language as a 'dead language', connoting not only a corrupted, artificial language, but also one marked by 'refinement, after-thought, and reflection'.[83]  For example, Pater attempts 'to establish a new mode of writing on [English's] very morbidity, dissolving the antagonistic opposition between philology and literature in a new vision of the writer as a sort of philologist or scholar of words'.[84]  The result of this attempt is 'linguistic self-consciousness'[85] and autonomy, the apotheosis of which, Dowling argues, is Beardsley's *Under the Hill*, which 'shows the way the world looks when it is perceived to be wholly made of language'.[86]  Dowling's definition, however, is not entirely new; rather, it returns to Symons' earlier definition of Decadence in 'The Decadent Movement' and values his descriptions of Decadent style, the 'intense

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[80] Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p. ix
[81] Michael Riffaterre, 'Decadent Features in Maeterlinck's Poetry', *Language and Style* 7 (Winter 1974), pp. 3–19, 15
[82] Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p. ix ('impulse' and 'movement'), p. x ('counterpoetics' and 'critique'), and p. 16 ('mode')
[83] Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p. 150
[84] Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p. 111
[85] Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p. 146
[86] Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p. 148

self-consciousness [and] over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement',[87] over his

assertions of Decadence's 'spiritual and moral perversity'.[88]

**Fantasy and Decadence as Critiques of the 'Real'**

Dowling defines Decadence as a 'counterpoetics of disruption and parody and stylistic

derangement', which is a critique, as she says, 'not so much of Wordsworthian nature as

of the metaphysics involved in any sentimental notion of a simple world of grass and

trees and flowers'.[89]  This world of 'grass and trees and flowers' becomes mediated

through language—and inaccessible except through it—so that any attempts to go

directly to nature are futile.  This revised relationship to the 'real world' calls into

question the project of obtaining objective knowledge, and, furthermore, highlights the

arbitrariness of relationships that might otherwise be taken as natural.  Aubrey Beardsley,

perhaps, does this most explicitly.  As Dowling argues:

> Where Pater's etymologizing implied a deeper connection or coherence between
> word and idea, Beardsley's catachresis dispenses with such notions of ideal fitness
> in the name of free linguistic play.  Where Pater, attending to the historical 'laws'
> or customs of linguistic usage, declines to modify 'laughter' with 'atrocious',
> Beardsley, perceiving the synchronic independence of language from all customs
> except irreducibly syntactic ones, blithely couples the two words.[90]

Although Chris Snodgrass argues that Decadents remained 'committed to noumenal truth,

canonical tradition and a poetics that named essentialist correspondences', he also echoes

what Dowling asserts about Decadence's (specifically Beardsley's) ability to critique

tradition and the search for objective knowledge:

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[87] Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', pp. 858
[88] Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', pp. 859
[89] Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p. x
[90] Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p. 147

> [T]hese artists nonetheless felt themselves on the precipice of a world of modernist uncertainty and relativity, a world whose language would be described as an arbitrary system of signs blindly obeying impersonal phonological rules.[91]

Snodgrass pinpoints an inherent ambivalence within Decadence—one that moves between the privileging of at least one aesthetic or metaphysical certainty (in Beardsley's case, the 'preeminence of style') and, as Snodgrass says, 'the unhinging of hermeneutic certainty'.[92]  But Snodgrass' understanding of Decadence as linguistic relativity frees language to perform parodic and critical functions with respect to 'reality' and the 'real world'.  Moreover, Dowling undercuts her own description of Pater's adherence to linguistic customs by demonstrating how Pater's 'aesthetic of delay', as she calls it, reveals the arbitrariness and autonomy of language:

> The conclusiveness, the cognitive clinching achieved by placing the strong phrase in the last position Pater willingly dispenses with or, we may say, subverts, because the two following subject phrases do not at once establish their relationship to the verb and object, but instead trail rather mysteriously and indeterminately after.[93]

Pater's linguistic trailing off, thus, allows for an indeterminacy of meaning that develops into the more or less complete free-play of language evidenced in the work of later Decadents such as Wilde, Beardsley and Beerbohm.

As a mode antithetical to notions of organic language, Decadence registers language as wholly artificial and stands in opposition to formulations that join language with national consciousness or any conception of *Volksstimme*:

> Herder's notion of the *Volksstimme*, identifying language as it did with the living speech of a people, was in the first instance to generate that emphasis on spoken dialects that led to a new comparative philology, and much later to motivate those

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[91] Chris Snodgrass, 'Decadent Parodies: Aubrey Beardsley's Caricature of Meaning', in *Fin de Siècle/Fin du Globe*: *Fears and Fantasies of the Late Nineteenth Century*, ed. by John Stokes (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 178–209, 178
[92] Snodgrass, 'Decadent Parodies', p. 205
[93] Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p. 130

phonological investigations that, as in the studies of the Neogrammarians, led to the theory of language as a wholly autonomous system.[94]

Decadent texts deny connections between language and national character, undermining Wordsworth's formulation of the 'real language of men'.[95]  Dowling even undermines the accepted interpretation of Wordsworth's phrase, citing Don H. Bialostosky's argument that Wordsworth means 'real' in the way David Hartley understood 'real'—as 'words connected with the sensations received from *things*',[96] which would free 'real' in this sense from any connection to spirit or national character.  In its artificiality, Decadence stands in opposition to an idea of language as connected to a 'real' or natural world.

Similarly, fantasy depends on the arbitrary quality of language, the ability to combine modifiers and substantives to create concepts that have no connection to 'the real world'.  J. R. R. Tolkien identifies this ability as a first step in the creating of fantasy: 'Anyone inheriting the fantastic device of human language can say *the green sun*'.[97] Tolkien is using 'fantastic' in an adjectival way, which this thesis will largely avoid since it creates too much confusion between 'the fantastic' genre as defined by Todorov and the more general use of fantastic to describe the workings of the imagination.  Keeping this distinction in mind, one can see that what Tolkien says about fantasy's being a function of language demonstrates how closely allied fantasy is with literary Decadence.  Tolkien warns that the basic process of separating and recombining normal syntactic pairings is 'not enough':[98] '[t]o make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible [. . .] will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a

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[94] Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, pp. xiv-xv
[95] Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems*, 2 vols. (London: printed for T. N. Longman & O. Rees, by Biggs and Cottle, 1802), I, p. i
[96] Qtd. in Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p. 17
[97] J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin Books, 1964), p. 45
[98] Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, p. 45

kind of elvish craft'.[99]  Tolkien's conception of Secondary Worlds—worlds created in

literature that follow their own logic and which demand belief on the reader's part—also

fits with the notion of autonomy in language.  Syntactical formulations do not have to

conform to any external reality so long as the internal logic of the narrative is obeyed.

Brian Attebery questions this view of fantasy, arguing that:

> Fantasy without mimesis would be a purely artificial invention, without
> recognizable objects or actions.  Even if such a completely fantastic story could
> be written, no one could read it with any understanding or pleasure [. . .] We
> must have some solid ground to stand on, some point of contact, if only with the
> language in which the story is communicated.[100]

However, this view fails to account for the fact that in fantasy individual words retain

meaning by association with their normally mimetic values, but they are defamiliarized

through fantastical and catachrestic parataxis.  In other words, the recombinational

process of fantasy as described by Tolkien disrupts the relationship between signifier and

signified.  Decadent fantasy is both pastiche and parody of realist discourse; it borrows a

sometimes-familiar vocabulary but undermines its mimetic value by demonstrating its

self-contained and self-referential character.  More than creating a Tolkienesque

'Secondary World', Decadent fantasy renders the familiar unfamiliar and the real

fantastical.  Decadent texts generate meaning from an internal, but artificial, cohesion,

derived from the internal logic of language rather than from a theory of correspondence.

Within this internal discourse, Decadent writing deploys vocabularies that further erode

mimetic value, borrowing foreign words without marking them as such and creating

neologisms in an effort to emphasize its artificiality.

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[99] Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, p. 45
[100] Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, pp. 3–4

**Time in Decadence and Fantasy**

Through their use of language, Decadence and fantasy function as critiques of the natural

and the 'real', and the implications of this emerge in a similar deconstruction of time and

space within both fantastic and Decadent texts.  Atemporality as a function of

autonomous language unites Decadence and fantasy, which is evidenced by a comparison

of critical discussions of time within both kinds of texts.  For example, Rosemary Jackson

describes fantasy's ability to challenge, undermine, and recreate perceived limits of time

and space:

> Classical unities of space, time and character are threatened with dissolution in
> fantastic texts.  Perspective art and three-dimensionality no longer hold as ground
> rules: parameters of the field of vision tend towards indeterminacy. [. . .]
>      Chronological time is similarly exploded, with time past, present and
> future losing their historical sequence and tending towards a suspension, an
> eternal present.[101]

Fantasy's 'exploding' of time and its movement toward an all-encompassing present

resemble the configuration of time within Aestheticism and Decadence.  Wilde

demonstrates this fact by his own assertion of an eternal present in art: 'to the poet all

times and places are one; the stuff he deals with is eternal and eternally the same [. . .] for

him there is but one time, the artistic moment'.[102]  Decadent configurations of time

pertain not only to narrative structures, but also to sentence-level syntax.  As Paul Fox

asserts, for example, Wilde's use of puns 'effects a reversal of expectation that plays with

contemporary critical views of meaningful linear progress'.[103]  The privileging of part

over whole in Decadent texts further underscores their non-linear conception of time.

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[101] Jackson, *Fantasy*, pp. 46–47
[102] Wilde, 'The English Renaissance of Art', in *Miscellanies* (London: Methuen, 1908), pp. 241–277, 258; from *The First Collected Edition of the Works of Oscar Wilde*, 15 vols., ed. by Robert Ross (London: Methuen, 1908)
[103] Fox, 'A Moment's Fixation', p. 182

Fox provides the example of Beardsley's *Venus and Tannhäuser*, which rewrites, '[w]ith very little plot, Wagner's version of the story'.[104]  In doing so, Beardsley creates 'less a dramatic narrative than a documentation of detail where the language employed pays clear homage to Paterian euphuism'.[105]  As Linda Dowling describes, Pater's own use of euphuism disrupts linearity:

> Pater [. . .] puts off the moment of cognitive closure [. . .] And he does this not simply by writing long sentences, but by so structuring his sentences as to thwart— at times even to the point of disruption—our usual expectations of English syntax.[106]

By refusing to follow the expected linearity of English syntax, Pater emphasizes the nonlinearity of time and the conscious creation of a Decadent present.  Angela Leighton argues that this particular nonlinearity in Pater is not a standing still, but rather a 'flux' of isolated moments proceeding rhythmically, 'moment by moment',[107] neither forming a narrative, nor fixing a literary tableau.  Pater's configuration of time as a flux bears directly on language and 'undermines purpose, identity, [and] certainty',[108] 'leav[ing] language going on long after its actual content has died'.[109]  Even Pater's compositional process, which involved his writing drafts 'on alternate lines, leaving space for revisions and additions',[110] highlights, as Fox argues, 'the interstitial spaces between literary moments, which become moments themselves as they are filled by Pater'.[111]  The evocation of 'interstitial spaces' in Fox's essay and in Rosemary Jackson's description of time and space within fantasy should not be seen as coincidental; rather, the fact that

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[104] Fox, 'A Moment's Fixation', p. 186
[105] Fox, 'A Moment's Fixation', p. 186
[106] Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p. 130
[107] Angela Leighton, 'Pater's Music', *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 14 (Fall 2005), pp. 67–79, 71
[108] Leighton, 'Pater's Music', p. 71
[109] Leighton, 'Pater's Music', p. 72
[110] Leighton, 'Pater's Music', p. 69
[111] Fox, 'A Moment's Fixation', p. 183

Decadence and fantasy both seek out these interstices is indicative of shared linguistic

assumptions, further emphasizing fantasy's usefulness as a form for literary Decadence.


**Genre and Fantasy: The Exclusion of Poetry**


The genres considered in this thesis are united by their shared experience of being

loci of debate between realism and fantasy and, therefore, productive sites of resistance

for Decadent authors, who sought to challenge the pervasiveness of realism in these

specific genres.  For example, realist and Naturalist authors deployed the novel in service

of their aesthetic aims to the point which the novel became nearly synonymous with these

modes.  Dominated by 'realist' authors such as Balzac, Flaubert,[112] and George Eliot, the

novel came to represent an antithesis to the older form of the 'romance', distinguished

from the latter by its efforts to represent life accurately.  Henry James substantiates this

point by asserting that the novel's only abiding goal is to 'represent life' through an ever-

renewed engagement with 'reality'.[113]  The number of novelists Wilde challenges in 'The

Decay of Lying' further attests to the novel's appropriation by realist and Naturalist

authors, but Wilde's attack centers mostly on the latter, especially Zola: 'The difference

between such a book as M. Zola's *L'Assommoir* and Balzac's *Illusions Perdues* is the

difference between unimaginative realism and imaginative reality'.[114]  Wilde isolates

even Robert Louis Stevenson (whom Wilde calls 'that delightful master of delicate and

[112] Although Flaubert vehemently denied being a realist, claiming in a letter to George Sand that 'j'exècre ce qu'on est convenu d'appeler le *réalisme*, bien qu'on m'en fasse un des pontifes' (Flaubert to Sand, [6 February 1876], in *Correspondance*, ed. by Eugène Fasquelle, 4 vols. [Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1889], IV, p. 230); 'I execrate what is conventionally called "realism", even though I'm regarded as one of its high priests' (translated by Francis Steegmuller, in Gustave Flaubert, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert, 1857–1880* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982], p. 231).

[113] Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction', in *Partial Portraits* (London: Macmillan, 1888), pp. 375–408, 378; this phrase was 'compete with life' when the article first appeared in *Longman's Magazine* 4 (September 1884), pp. 502–521, 503

[114] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p. 17

fanciful prose'[115]) for critique because he employs a 'scientific' approach in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886): 'the transformation of Dr. Jekyll reads dangerously like an experiment out of [the medical journal] the *Lancet*'.[116]  Stevenson's novel serves as a model for Wilde's own, which suggests that *Dorian Gray* should be read not only as a direct response to the rise of realism and Naturalism in the novel,[117] but also as an antidote to the tendencies engendered by these movements, which he sees infiltrating even otherwise 'fantastic' narratives like Stevenson's.  (Alan Campbell's disposal of Basil Hallward's body in *Dorian Gray*—in which the artist is literally eradicated—might be read as a parody of Stevenson's 'scientific' approach.)

Other media and other genres besides the novel also served as sites of debate between realism and fantasy.  Indeed, as Peter Brooks argues, realist style was a phenomenon first identified within the medium of painting:

> [R]ealism as a critical and polemical term comes into the culture, in the early 1850s, to characterize painting—that of Courbet in particular—and then by extension is taken to describe a literary style.[118]

Enabled by a nineteenth-century increase in pictorial journalism, graphic artists also began to illustrate in a realist style.  As Kooistra argues, for example, W. H. Boot, art editor for *The Strand*, solicited Sidney Paget to illustrate Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* in a style that would 'be associated with the pictorial reportage of contemporary events'.[119]  Similar, but arguably less pervasive attempts to establish a realist or Naturalist tradition within other genres include Zola's promotion of Naturalism in drama.  Hoping to

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[115] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p. 10
[116] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p. 10
[117] Wilde says in the preface to the 1891 edition that 'All art is at once surface and symbol.' (*The Fortnightly Review* 49 [March 1891], pp. 480–481, 481)—a definition that relates directly to Todorov's definition of the fantastic discussed below.
[118] Brooks, *Realist Vision*, p. 16
[119] Kooistra, *The Artist as Critic: Bitextuality in* Fin-de-Siècle *Illustrated Books* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), p. 60

achieve in dramatic form what he accomplished in the novel, Zola declares in 'Le

Naturalisme au Théâtre' (1880) that:

> J'attends enfin que l'évolution faite dans le roman s'achève au théâtre, que l'on y
> revienne à la source même de la science et de l'art modernes, à l'etude de la
> nature, à l'anatomie de l'homme, à la peinture de la vie, dans un procès-verbal
> exact, d'autant plus original et puissant, que personne encore n'a osé le risquer sur
> les planches.[120]

Lastly, like the novel, the short story also came to embody a prose form dominated by

realist and Naturalist writers, most notably Maupassant.  The final genre considered in

this study, the fairy tale, differs from the preceding four in that it is largely defined by the

presence of the supernatural, but the literary fairy tale, in particular, has been an

instrument for childhood socialization, frequently reinforcing traditional behavioral

norms and coding them as 'natural'.  Decadent writers, therefore, have utilized the fairy

tale as a mechanism to further their attack on realism and Naturalism, undermining

constructions of the 'real' by revealing the constructedness of identity and the self-

consciousness of narratives designed for imagined, (narratologically) innocent readers.

    Conspicuously absent from this thesis is a discussion of poetry, a seemingly

counterintuitive omission given the close association between poetry and Decadence

symbolized by the prominence of poets such as Symons, John Gray, Lionel Johnson,

Dowson, and Wilde himself in the Decadent canon.  This study forgoes an analysis of

fantasy and Decadent poetry, however, for two reasons.  The first is because nineteenth-

century debates about realism rarely engaged with the term 'poetry', focusing instead on

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[120] Zola, 'Le Naturalisme au théâtre', in *Le Roman expérimental* (Paris: Charpentier, 1880), pp. 109–156,
143; 'I am waiting, finally, until the evolution accomplished in the novel takes place on the stage; until they
return to the source of science and modern arts, to the study of nature, to the anatomy of man, to the
painting of life, in an exact reproduction, more original and powerful than anyone has so far dared to place
upon the boards' (translated by Belle M. Sherman, in Émile Zola, *The Experimental Novel and Other
Essays* [New York: Cassell, 1893], p. 143).

discussions of *poetic literature* in general.  The second, and more important, reason that

this study excludes a discussion of poetry is because poetic language is external to the

categories of real and ideal.  As Todorov argues, prose possesses an ostensibly mimetic

function absent from poetic language:

> The representative aspect prevails in a certain part of literature which it is
> convenient to designate by the term *fiction*, whereas *poetry* rejects this aptitude to
> evoke and represent [. . .] Today it is generally agreed that poetic images are not
> descriptive, that they are to be read quite literally, on the level of the verbal chain
> they constitute, not even on that of their reference.  The poetic image is a
> combination of words, not of things, and it is pointless, even harmful, to translate
> this combination into sensory terms'.[121]

The rhetorical figures in poetry are to be read solely as linguistic combinations, not as

words that refer to an external reality.  Because poetic language is already constructed as

artificial and autonomous and, furthermore, displays a literary self-consciousness, the

effort by Decadent writers and artists to reveal the anti-mimetic underpinning of language

and literature is irrelevant to poetry.  In other words, poetry precludes fantasy.  Instead,

according to Todorov, fantasy and the fantastic exist *between* poetry, which is a system of

non-signifying signs, and allegory, which is the opposite of poetry insofar as allegory

effaces the signifier and focuses attention on external referents only.  Later critics have

questioned both Todorov's definition of the allegorical and of the poetic,[122] but his

schema is useful for defining those parameters within which Decadent prose fiction and

illustration fall.

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[121]  Todorov, *The Fantastic*, pp. 59–60
[122] For a critique of Todorov's definition of the allegorical, see Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), pp. 68–71.  For a critique of the poetic, see *The Poetic Fantastic: Studies in an Evolving Genre*, ed. by Patrick D. Murphy and Vernon Hyles (Westport: Greenwood, 1989).

**Conclusion**

From Oscar Wilde's fairy tales and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) to Aubrey Beardsley's *Under the Hill* (1896) to Max Beerbohm's short fiction and *Zuleika Dobson* (begun 1898;[123] published 1911) to Charles Ricketts' illustrations and Vernon Lee's fantastic tales, Decadent prose fiction and illustration consistently employed fantasy to underscore Decadence's own artificiality and self-consciousness. In part, Decadent writers and illustrators were utilizing fantasy in their work because of a general increase in its popularity in the United Kingdom and an increasing development of the form, as heralded by the works of Lewis Carroll and George MacDonald. However, more than just participating in an historical moment sympathetic to fantastic modes, Decadent authors and artists adopted fantasy as an expression of their linguistic and literary positions, grounded in notions of autonomous language. Marshalling genres in which the literary debates about realism and fantasy were being conducted, Decadent writers staked out literary ground in support of the latter and signified their linguistic, epistemological, and ontological assumptions. The following chapters investigate Decadent uses of fantasy within each of these genres in order to redefine Decadence in Great Britain and Ireland as being fundamentally dependant on fantastic modes. Moreover, the close readings provided herein elaborate on each author's particular understanding and uses of fantasy. By doing so, the close readings also trace a literary-historical development in the uses of fantasy and the understanding of language as they shift from Wilde's early efforts in the 1880s to later work by Beerbohm and Ricketts.

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[123] See N. John Hall, *Max Beerbohm: A Kind of a Life* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2002), p. 133.

# Chapter I

## Exquisite Fantasy: Reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Zuleika Dobson*

The ancient historians gave us delightful fiction in the form of fact; the modern novelist presents us with dull facts under the guise of fiction.
                    —Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying' (1891)[1]

The only real people are the people who never existed, and if a novelist is base enough to go to life for his personages he should at least pretend that they are creations, and not boast of them as copies.
                    —Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying' (1891)[2]

[La Gioconda's] is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions.
                    —Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (1873)[3]

'So [Carlotta Grisi] remains, hovering betwixt two elements; a creature exquisitely ambiguous, being neither aërial nor of the earth'.
                    —Max Beerbohm, '"Carlotta Grisi"' (1909)[4]

The novel is a notoriously difficult genre to define. In the context of this thesis, genre refers to a class of texts (literary or otherwise) with a common set of conventions or features, which, in turn, create expectations in the reader about the character, and possibly content, of works in that genre. The difficulty in describing the particular genre of the novel, as Mikhail Bakhtin argues, is that it is the 'sole genre that continues to develop, that is yet uncompleted'.[5] The novel continues to incorporate and be informed by 'extraliterary genres': the 'genres of everyday life' and 'ideological genres'.[6] It is from these various genres and the novel's historical and geographic contact with the world at

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[1] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', in *Intentions* (London: James R. Osgood McIlvaine & Co., 1891), pp. 1–55, 8

[2] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p. 14

[3] Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1873), p. 118

[4] Beerbohm, '"Carlotta Grisi": A Coloured Print', *Yet Again* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1909), pp. 307–309, 308

[5] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 3

[6] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 33

large that the novel's 'heteroglossia',[7] the multitude of stratified and multifarious voices, is

derived.  The multitude of voices in the novel would seem to make it an ideal vehicle for

literary Decadence, which posits identity as complex and varied.  However, as the

introduction has suggested,  the novel has become associated in literary scholarship with

the aims of realism, perhaps to a greater degree than any other genre.  The novel's

perpetual contact with extra-literary discourse undoubtedly contributes to this association.

Decadence as a mode is an anti-mimetic, self-conscious method of aesthetic expression

that insists on the autonomy of language, the inter-connectedness of different art forms,

and most often takes artistic expression as its content and subject.  The Decadent mode

can permeate and inhabit various genres, but its self-contained literariness is what makes

the novel an unlikely genre in which it could thrive.  Nonetheless, as this chapter argues,

the Decadent novel is a form of the genre that deploys a multitude of varied voices and

methods of expression, but which ultimately exposes these various languages as instances

of aesthetic expression, rather than examples of extra-literary or extra-artistic language.

Although this chapter will examine two examples of the Decadent novel, the

novel was and continues frequently, but not exclusively, to be characterized as an ideal

genre for literary realism.  Nineteenth-century realist and, later, Naturalist writers

deployed the novel as a category of writing germane to their aims of objectivity, mimesis,

and positivism, and it is the codified norms of this literary tradition that remain the

novel's 'dominant stylization up to the present time'.[8]  As Peter Brooks argues:

> Once a radical gesture, breaking with tradition, realism becomes so much the
> expected mode of the novel that even today we tend to think of it as the norm
> from which other modes—magical realism, science fiction, fantasy,

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[7] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 263
[8] Cecil Jenkins, 'Realism and the Novel Form', in *The Monster in the Mirror: Studies in Nineteenth-Century Realism*, ed. by D. A. Williams (Oxford: Oxford UP for the University of Hull, 1978), pp. 1–16, 5

metafictions—are variants or deviants. That is, we eventually came to regard the styles of representing the world pioneered by such as Balzac, Dickens, Gustave Flaubert, George Eliot as standard, what we expected fiction to be.[9]

Decadent novelists, however, at least in the United Kingdom, positioned themselves antithetically to this now-entrenched development. Without explicitly connecting Decadence with fantasy, David Weir asserts that Decadent novels, on some level, preclude the use of realism and Naturalist modes:

> The novel in the hands of the decadent writer, generally speaking, places less value on the conventional devices of realism and naturalism than on the effects of language itself, and, as we shall see, the epithet *decadent* comes to be applied to certain novels for their "failure" to adhere to the aesthetic dictates of realism or to the conventions of some established genre (such as the historical novel, the naturalistic novel, the portrait novel, and so on).[10]

Weir rightly identifies the anti-mimetic stance of Decadent writers and artists as a product of their view of autonomous language. 'The poesis of language itself', as Weir argues, 'subverts the mimetic effort by interfering with it',[11] and Decadent novelists use the genre as a venue for demonstrating this linguistic quality. Decadent novels not only provide anti-mimetic counterexamples to the realist tradition, but they necessarily challenge the aesthetic, epistemological, and ontological assumptions of realism in general. Nature, gender, and aesthetic phenomena, mediated through language, are as disconnected from 'reality' as language itself, a condition attested to and put to aesthetic use by Decadent novelists. This chapter will examine two examples of English-language Decadent novels from the turn of the nineteenth century, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890; revised and reprinted 1891) and Max Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson* (1911), in order to explore the function of language and fantasy within those texts and to

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[9] Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2005), p. 5

[10] David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 15

[11] Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, p. 15

map out its effect on the ontological representations therein, especially the representation

of gender.

Although the nineteenth century engendered the realist novel as it is recognized

today, the end of that century witnessed a backlash against the dominance of realism in

the novel—a sentiment palpable in the first two epigraphs that begin this chapter.  Anne

H. Wharton documents the turn against realism in a review of Wilde's *Dorian Gray*:

> Much of the success of such romance-writing [for example, by Stevenson,
> Haggard, Marion Crawford, Mrs. Oliphant] rests upon the rebound, natural to
> humanity, from intense realism to extreme ideality; more, perhaps, upon the fact
> that this age which is grossly material is also deeply spiritual.  With these two
> facts well in view, Mr. Oscar Wilde has fallen into line, and entered the lists with
> some of the most successful masters of fiction.  In his novel "The Picture of
> Dorian Gray", written for the July *Lippincott's*, Mr. Wilde, like Balzac and the
> authors of "Faust" and "John Inglesant", presents to us the drama of a human soul,
> while, like Gautier and About, he surrounds his utterly impossible story with a
> richness and depth of coloring and a grace and airiness of expression that make
> the perusal of its pages an artistic delight.
>      If Mr. Wilde's romance resembles the productions of some of the writers
> of the French school in its reality and tone, it still more strongly resembles Mr.
> Stevenson's most powerfully wrought fairy-tale, "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde".[12]

Wharton's assertion that *Dorian Gray* more closely resembles Stevenson's 'fairy-tale' than

it does realistic and Naturalistic writing is borne out by the juxtaposition of art and nature

within the novel's first few pages of descriptive prose, which serves to circumscribe the

limits of what is possible throughout the rest of the text and to expose the novel's anti-

mimetic foundations.

At first, the novel's opening paragraph appears to be an elaborate nature sketch,

seemingly setting the stage for a novel primarily concerned with an attention to natural

detail.  For example, Wilde describes 'the odour of roses', 'the light summer wind [. . .]

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[12] Anne H. Wharton, 'A Revulsion from Realism', *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* (September 1890), pp.
409–412, 409

amidst the trees', the 'scent of lilac', and the 'perfume of the pink-flowering thorn'.[13]

Despite calling it a 'tale of the impossible',[14] Wharton is also misled by the novel's

opening paragraphs.  For instance, she wonders whether the novel's world—'in which the

laburnum hangs out yellow clusters in June, and the clematis robes itself with purple

stars'[15]—does not make *Dorian Gray* 'quite as true to nature as to art'.[16]  A more modern

critic, Hans Rindisbacher, similarly argues that these opening lines, 'by means of the

olfactory [create] an ambiance [. . .] of aesthetic purity and natural sensuality'.[17]  Rather

than undergird nature, however, Wilde's 'natural' phenomena deconstruct it, and a closer

inspection of the novel's opening paragraphs reveals this fact.

Firstly, Basil Hallward's and Lord Henry's experience of these natural phenomena

occurs within the context of the painter Hallward's studio, so that the flora and fauna

described by Wilde is filtered through a locus of artistic creation (the studio), where

Hallward translates life (Dorian) into art (his portrait).  The flowers' scents are not

detected outdoors in nature, for instance, but come instead 'through the open door' into

Hallward's studio.[18]  Moreover, Hallward's studio is not the studio of a painter who tries

faithfully to capture nature; rather, the text proceeds to demonstrate that the painter has a

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[13] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Ward, Lock, and Co., 1891), p. 1
[14] Anne H. Wharton, 'A Revulsion from Realism', *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* (September 1890), pp. 409–412, 410
[15] Wharton, 'A Revulsion from Realism', p. 410
[16] Wharton, 'A Revulsion from Realism', p. 410
[17] Hans J. Rindisbacher, *The Smell of Books: A Cultural-Historical Study of Olfactory Perception in Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 191.  For more detailed discussions of Victorian flower imagery, see Philip Knight, *Flower Poetics in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986) and Beverly Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995).
[18] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 1

taste for the exotic.[19]  For example, Hallward's decor, described in the next paragraph,

indicates very clearly that it is from an anti-mimetic, Orientalist perspective that nature is

interpreted: 'From the corner of the divan of Persian saddlebags on which he was lying

[. . .] Lord Henry Wotton could just catch the gleam of the honey-sweet and honey-

coloured blossoms of a laburnum'.[20]

Not only is nature being filtered and interpreted through a highly artificial

environment, but the particular combination of floral scents and the blooming of the

specific flowers that Wilde describes could coincide only in the spring, which contradicts

Lord Henry's assertion to Hallward that it is summer: 'Days in summer', he says, 'are apt

to linger'.[21]  This contradiction between the state of the flowers and Lord Henry's claim

that it is summer enacts the Decadent understanding of time as an eternal present.  By

asserting that summer days could be longer than other days, Lord Henry further distorts

time and underscores the fantastical world in which he exists.  Both time and nature are

distorted in the novel, a direct attack by Wilde on realistic depictions of both.  Instead of

constructing a faithfully recreated landscape, Wilde transforms the natural phenomena he

describes into part of what Suzanne Nalbantian calls a 'new lexicon of artifice-like

signifiers drawn from nature itself'.[22]  Wilde performs this transformation elsewhere in

his *oeuvre*, namely in 'The Critic as Artist', in which Gilbert exclaims: 'How exquisite

these single daffodils are!  They seem to be made of amber and cool ivory.  The are like

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[19] Donald Lawler says in a note on the text that 'the exotic decor is a reproduction of Charles Ricketts's studio in London, where Wilde was a frequent visitor' (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Donald L. Lawler [New York: Norton, 1988], p. 1n); Ricketts, in addition to illustrating many of Wilde's texts, was also a collector of Japanese art, and many of his own paintings and illustrations portray fantastical scenes.
[20] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 1
[21] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 17
[22] Suzanne Nalbantian, *Seeds of Decadence in the Late Nineteenth-Century Novel: A Crisis in Values* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), p. 7

Greek things of the best period'.[23]  Here Wilde equates the daffodils (famous as symbols

of the poetic imagination from William Wordsworth's 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud')

with works of visual art, a comparison amplified by his use of the adjective 'exquisite',

which is a keyword in Aestheticism signifying pleasure and conscious artistic effort.

Throughout Wilde's body of work, he uses literary allusion (such as the daffodils) or

parody and pastiche (such as his mock-natural opening paragraph) to highlight the

artificiality and self-referentiality of Decadent texts.

One particular flower from the novel's opening passage, the laburnum, resonates

with literary signification more than the other flowers and further undermines the

seemingly 'natural' quality of the novel's opening salvo.  For example, the laburnum

appears as a literary symbol in several Romantic and Victorian works preceding *Dorian

Gray*, namely Keats' *Poems* (1817) and Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850),[24] two works

with which Wilde would have been intimately familiar.  In particular, the novel's opening

passage strongly resembles the confusion between nature and artifice in Keats' epistle 'To

George Felton Mathew':

> But might I now each passing moment give
> To the coy muse, with me she would not live
> In this dark city, nor would condescend
> 'Mid contradictions her delights to lend.
> Should e'er the fine−eyed maid to me be kind,
> Ah! surely it must be whene'er I find
> Some flowery spot, sequester'd, wild, romantic,
> That often must have seen a poet frantic;
> Where oaks, that erst the Druid knew, are growing,
> And flowers, the glory of one day, are blowing;
> Where the dark−leav'd laburnum's drooping clusters
> Reflect athwart the stream their yellow lustres,

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[23] Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', p. 99

[24] The stanza from *In Memoriam* (verse LXXXI) reads: 'Bring orchis, bring the fox-glove spire, / The little speedwell's darling blue, / Deep tulips dashed with fiery dew, / Laburnums, dropping-wells of fire'. (*In Memoriam* [Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1850], p. 119).

> And intertwined the cassia's arms unite,
> With its own drooping buds, but very white.
> Where on one side are covert branches hung,
> 'Mong which the nightingales have always sung
> In leafy quiet; where to pry, aloof,
> Atween the pillars of the sylvan roof,
> Would be to find where violet beds were nestling,
> And where the bee with cowslip bells was wrestling.
> There must be too a ruin dark, and gloomy,
> To say "joy not too much in all that's bloomy".[25]

Wilde's floral descriptions and his evocation of the 'sullen murmur of the bees shouldering their way through the long unmown grass'[26] compellingly conjure up the world of Keats' poem, if not the poem itself, with its 'bloomy' imagery and its depiction of a 'bee with cowslip bells [. . .] wrestling'.  One might argue, too, that Wilde consciously uses Keats' poem, especially its reference to the laburnum (and its association with poison), to portend the 'ruin dark' that unfolds within *Dorian Gray* and to emphasize the juxtaposition of art and nature within the novel.  Like Keats' poem, Wilde's novel blurs the distinction between art and nature.  Keats conflates the two in his description of the 'pillars of the sylvan roof', which utilizes a metaphor of architecture in the depiction of a natural phenomenon.  He also does so through his identification with the nightingale, both in this poem and in his famous 'Ode to a Nightingale'.  Keats emphasizes the symbolic power of a natural creature, the nightingale, which served as a common Romantic trope of poetic power.  Wilde's seeming allusion to Keats' poem further reinforces the anti-mimetic quality of *Dorian Gray*, both by engaging with the question about nature and art raised by Keats and by self-referentially alluding to other works of art rather than to 'real' phenomena.

One other detail from the opening of *Dorian Gray* that evokes Keats' poem is the

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[25] John Keats, 'To George Felton Mathew', in *Poems* (London: C. & J. Ollier, 1817), pp. 53–58, 55-56
[26] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 2

contrast between a rural and an urban environment.  Whereas Keats compares pastoral

with urban settings to privilege the inspirational quality of the former, Wilde simply uses

the city as a poetic device in a manner similar to the way he has employed images of

nature.  Wilde describes the noise of London in the opening paragraphs of his novel to

signal the danger latent in Dorian's future, but the city serves the same purpose as the

laburnum.  In point of fact, the urban (artificial) and 'natural' environments are often

interchangeable in Wilde's work.  For instance, Lord Henry notices from inside

Hallward's studio 'the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitt[ing] across the long

tussore-silk curtains' [which] produce a 'kind of momentary Japanese effect [making Lord

Henry] think of those pallid jade-faced painters of Tokio'.[27] An echo of this observation is

found in 'The Decay of Lying':

> [I]f you desire to see a Japanese effect, you will not behave like a tourist and go to
> Tokio.  On the contrary, you will stay at home, and steep yourself in the work of
> certain Japanese artists, and then, when you have absorbed the spirit of their style,
> and caught their imaginative manner of vision, you will go some afternoon and sit
> in the Park or stroll down Piccadilly, and if you cannot see an absolutely Japanese
> effect there, you will not see it anywhere.[28]

In both *Dorian Gray* and 'The Decay of Lying', Wilde makes the city (in this case,

Tokyo) a product of the poetic imagination as much as the natural imagery that he

ultimately reveals to be artificial.  Rather than fret about the ruinous effects of 'this dark

city', as Keats does, Wilde blithely accepts any environment or subject as conducive to

poetic inspiration.  As he says in the preface to *Dorian Gray*, 'No artist is ever morbid.

The artist can express everything'.[29]

The perimeters of what is possible within the novel, therefore, are drawn only by

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[27] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 1–2
[28] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', pp. 46-47
[29] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. vi

the limits of artistic expression.  Since 'the artist can express everything', in effect there

are no limits to what can take place within *Dorian Gray*.  Unconstrained by the dictates

of probability or possibility, *Dorian Gray* is unsurprisingly a work of fantasy and,

specifically, a work of 'the fantastic' as Todorov has described that genre.  *Dorian Gray*

recreates Todorov's understanding of the 'hesitation' between the real and supernatural in

both conventional and surprising ways:

> The fantastic [. . .] lasts only as long as a certain hesitation: a hesitation common to
> reader and character, who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives
> from "reality" as it exists in the common opinion.[30]

Wilde preserves this hesitation between the merely uncanny (which resolves into the

'real') and the supernatural in Dorian's responses to the transformations his portrait

undergoes, and these moments conform to Todorov's definition of the fantastic.  For

instance, Wilde describes how Dorian, after he has rejected Sibyl Vane because of her

poor performance, notices the change in his portrait:

> [Dorian] rubbed his eyes, and came close to the picture, and examined it again.
> There were no signs of any change when he looked into the actual painting, and yet
> there was no doubt that the whole expression had altered.[31]

That doubt quickly returns, however, and Dorian soon questions his own perception: 'No;

it was merely an illusion wrought on the troubled senses'.[32]  These moments of hesitation

are conventional aspects of the fantastic as described by Todorov, but what makes the

novel an unconventional work of the fantastic is its larger epistemological and

ontological framework.  Todorov's definition of the fantastic relies on two more-or-less

well-defined poles: the real and the supernatural.  Alternatively, Wilde's novel construes

the 'real' as a product of subjective perception.  The images of nature at the beginning of

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[30] Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 41
[31] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 133–134
[32] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 135

the novel are all described from the perspective of the artist and the artist's (Hallward's)

studio.  In the sense that the 'real' indicates an objective reality, the natural and the real

are already subjective constructions.  Wilde has argued, as mentioned in the introduction

to this thesis, that one's perception is a product of his or her cultural education—the 'Arts

that have influenced us'.[33]  Thus, *Dorian Gray* is fantastical in a much broader sense of

the term; a hesitation between the 'real' and the supernatural pervades the novel because,

in its epistemology, the 'real' and the 'supernatural' are constructions of the artist's or

individual's subjective perspective.  The novel might alternate between seemingly

realistic and fantastic modes of fiction, but the potential for explicit fantasy pervades the

text.  Todorov asserts that '*only* poetry rejects representation, but *all* literature escapes the

category of the true and the false'.[34]  However, Decadent prose fantasy, especially as

represented by *Dorian Gray*, escapes the categories of true and false *and* real and unreal

by showing truth and reality to be subjective constructions.

What one might call Wilde's subjective idealism, that is, his argument that the

world is created in the mind of the individual, has important consequences for

characterization in literature.  Another way to express this concept, and a useful way to

frame Todorov's notion of hesitation, is Adam Phillips' concept of 'flirtation', which he

posits as an 'irremediable'[35] relationship to 'people and ideas',[36] and which, he argues,

resists fixed signification: 'Flirtation keeps things in play, and by doing so lets us get to

know them in different ways.  It allows us the fascination of what is unconvincing'.[37]

The connection between fantasy and flirtation seems self-evident given that Phillips

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[33] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p. 40
[34] Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 83
[35] Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994), p. xii
[36] Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation*, p. xii
[37] Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation*, p. xii

defines the latter as an approach which keeps the fantastical (the 'unconvincing') in play.

*Dorian Gray* structures the representation of character and identity in an equally fluid

way.  For example, the dualism (between body and soul) that defines Dorian after his

soul is severed from his outward appearance blurs the distinction between his status as a

person and as a work of art.  Not only is *Dorian Gray* fantastical, then, in the sense that

Dorian stays supernaturally young, but the novel is also a depiction of open-ended

identity.  That is, the characters in the novel neither adhere to laws of the physical world,

nor do they conform to realistic or consistent expressions of personhood.  In another oft-

quoted passage, Wilde has Dorian:

> [W]onder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a
> thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence.  To him, man was a being
> with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore
> within itself strange legacies of thought and passion.[38]

Insofar as realism in literature dictates that characters maintain a uniform personality

throughout, characters in realistic texts do not have 'myriad' lives open to them.

Decadent ontology suggests that fantasy is the apposite form for Decadent writing,

because fantasy best indicates the ontological freedom—the flirtation—implicit in

Decadence.

Seemingly very different from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Max Beerbohm's

*Zuleika Dobson* is another important example of how the Decadent novel, with its

conflation of nature and art and its 'unrealistic' configuration of character, tends toward

fantasy.  Although published later than most 'Decadent' fiction, *Zuleika* was started by

Beerbohm in 1898, and, more importantly, it epitomizes the Decadent mode as much as

Wilde's only novel.  As intimated earlier in this chapter and in the introduction, the

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[38] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 212

Decadent mode is defined partly by its anti-realist impulse and its understanding of

language as autonomous, two attributes that consequently render concepts such as time

(as shown earlier with *Dorian Gray*), nature, identity, and even the boundaries between

different categories of aesthetic expression as elastic formulations.  *Zuleika*'s manner of

characterization, its conflation of real and ideal, the autonomous quality of its language—

wedding disparate literary modes and styles without hesitation—and its comic inversion

of traditional 'love story' plotting mark it as a thoroughly Decadent text and a canonical

work of fantasy.  In a note to the 1947 edition of the novel, Beerbohm himself described

it as 'just a fantasy',[39] and in an earlier letter to Reggie Turner, responding to Turner's

claim that 'the exquisite reality of some of [the novel] occasionally makes the exquisite

fantasy of the tragedy too poignant',[40] he asserts that '[i]t never occurred to me that I was

giving to the characters anything in the nature of a *real*, as opposed to a fantastical-

humorous, reality'.[41]  That Beerbohm proposes a 'fantastical-humorous' reality is itself

telling.  The paradoxical notion of fantastical reality and the tautological conjecture of a

'real' reality both emphasize that 'reality' for Beerbohm is a condition of the novel.  In

other words, 'real' and 'fantastical' signify stylistic choices rather than relationships to the

external world.  By 'exquisite', Turner might have meant that the reality and fantasy of the

novel emoted too much for him, but Beerbohm's reading (or perhaps misreading) of

Turner's letter transforms 'exquisite' into a synonym for 'constructed' by shifting the

emphasis of the letter from the novel's effect to the author's design.

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[39] Beerbohm, 'Note', in *Zuleika Dobson or An Oxford Love Story* (London: Heinemann, 1947), p. [i]
[40] Qtd. in Beerbohm, *Letters to Reggie Turner*, ed. by Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1964), p. 208n
[41] Beerbohm, Letter to Reggie Turner (3 November 1911), in *Letters to Reggie Turner*, pp. 208–211, 209

In *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), E. M. Forster reinforces Beerbohm's assessment of the novel as primarily fantastical, including it as one of his chief examples of fantasy and describing it as a 'superb theme for a fantasy',[42] in which Beerbohm has 'borrowed or created a number of supernatural machines'.[43]  Beerbohm seems to contradict his earlier assessment of the novel, however, in the same preface to the 1947 edition of *Zuleika*.  He asserts therein that 'all fantasy should have a solid basis in reality'.[44]  He also proclaims in his obituary for Aubrey Beardsley (1898) that '[a]ll the greatest fantastic art postulates the power to see things, unerringly, as they are'.[45]  These seeming contradictions are resolved, however, when one understands the conflation of art and reality that underlies *Zuleika Dobson*, a conflation that is similar to the one demonstrated by *Dorian Gray*.

Whereas Wilde undermines the apparent realism of *Dorian Gray* by indirectly, yet continually, showing the constructedness of reality, Beerbohm openly admits to confounding purposefully the separation between reality and fantasy.  Beerbohm most directly does this in his explanation for why he, as narrator, has access to the thoughts of his characters while purportedly writing a history of the 'real' events that make up the plot.  Of course, these events are fictions in the first place—and all the more obviously fictions because they are so comically exaggerated—but Beerbohm's explanation reveals the relationship between realism and fantasy in the novel.  He explains that 'I said that I was Clio's servant.  And I felt, when I said it, that you looked at me dubiously'.[46]  He acknowledges that the novel cannot be a history if he has access to the characters'

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[42] E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1927), p. 171
[43] Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 171
[44] Beerbohm, 'Note', *Zuleika Dobson*, p. [i]
[45] Beerbohm, 'Aubrey Beardsley', *The Idler* 13 (May 1898), pp. 538–546, 546
[46] Max Beerbohm, *Zuleika Dobson, Or An Oxford Love Story* (London: Heinemann, 1911), p. 178; Beerbohm, *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson*, intro. by N. John Hall (London: Yale UP, 2002), p. 178.  (The latter is a facsimile of the Heinemann first edition, so all subsequent page references to *Zuleika* apply to both the first and the illustrated edition reproduced by N. John Hall.)

interiority, but he provides a fantastical explanation. Beerbohm tells the reader that he

has the ability to see inside his characters because the muse of History had a secret love

of novels. She dislikes histories because, as Beerbohm tells us, '[i]t seemed to her that

her own servants worked from without at a mass of dry details which might as well be

forgotten'.[47] We are told that she liked one of her 'servants', Herodotus, because, even

though he wrongly 'mix[ed] up facts and fancies',[48] 'the romantic element in him appealed

to her'.[49] Despite his romanticism, Herodotus is not presented as a viable model because

there is no way to distinguish fact from fiction in his work. In the sub-narrative that

Beerbohm relates, Clio is given the chance to have a perfect blend of history and fiction

in exchange for giving Zeus, who has romantically pursued Clio by assuming the form of

various novels and one work of history, what he desires. Zeus grants this privilege only

once, arguing that if he granted the privilege permanently, then 'the demand for novels

would cease forthwith, and many thousands of hard-working, deserving men and women

would be thrown out of employment'.[50] Seizing on her only chance to give one of her

servants the powers of the novelist, Clio then 'selected [Beerbohm] because she knew

[him] to be honest, sober, and capable, and no stranger to Oxford'.[51] Beerbohm finds

himself immediately thereafter before Zeus, who confers on him the powers of the

novelist. Beerbohm's 'sober', though light, style of narrating this particular backstory

conflicts sharply with the thoroughly fantastical world of his novel. Beerbohm's turn at

playing historian is made all the more comic by the ironic fact that Clio dismisses

Herodotus as inadequate because he confuses truth and fiction, yet Beerbohm similarly

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[47] Beerbohm, *Zuleika Dobson*, p. 179
[48] Beerbohm, *Zuleika Dobson*, p. 180
[49] Beerbohm, *Zuleika Dobson*, p. 179
[50] Beerbohm, *Zuleika Dobson*, p. 183
[51] Beerbohm, *Zuleika Dobson*, p. 183

blurs the distinction between real and unreal, solemnly asserting that an obvious and ridiculous 'fancy' (the story about Clio) is truth.  What seems like an unsustainable juxtaposition of style and content (a comic story told with high seriousness about Zeus' conferring the powers of the novelist) is, however, precisely indicative of the greater aesthetic and philosophical precepts of the novel.  The 'truth' of *Zuleika* is neither conveyed through any particular statement by the author, even though Beerbohm himself appears repeatedly, often directly addressing the reader, nor is it suggested through one narrative approach.  Instead, the consistent parodying of literary modes, the shifting from one style to another, indicates a radical break from realist style, in terms of both language and characterization.  Wilde's narrative approach differs from Beerbohm's insofar as Wilde's style in *Dorian Gray* is more or less consistent with the novel's content, but both writers assume language's autonomy and additionally argue for the 'realism' of fantasy, in spite of the paradox therein.  Beerbohm confuses history and fiction in *Zuleika* to demonstrate both that history is a partial, subjective mode, and that fantasy is more 'real' to some degree since it opens up more avenues of existence for the characters and provides more narrative approaches for the author to employ in his revealing of the psychological, epistemological, ontological and aesthetic 'truth' of any given work of literature.  Of course, it is important for one to remember that Beerbohm's (and Wilde's) understanding of 'truth' configures it as a matter of style, open for reinterpretation.

In *Dorian Gray*, the character of Dorian best reveals the ontological consequences of Decadence's subjective idealism and its use of fantasy.  For example, the doppelgänger motif illustrates the multiplicity of individual identity by presenting two aspects of Dorian that radically diverge from each other shortly after their literal differentiation.

Furthermore, the motif inverts the common understanding of depth and surface,

transforming a two-dimensional canvas into the vessel of Dorian's soul, and reducing

Dorian himself to surface.  In spite of *Dorian Gray*'s ostensible moral, however, the novel

does not condemn surface.  Indeed, Lord Henry repeatedly praises surface, asserting, for

instance, that '[i]t is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances'.[52]  Instead of

devaluing surface and generating a moral that warns against shallowness, the novel

argues against dualistic configurations of identity that separate surface and depth.  At

another point in the novel, Dorian rhapsodizes on his love for Sibyl Vane, and Lord

Henry responds that this will be only the first love of many.  Dorian replies, 'Do you

think my nature so shallow?', to which Lord Henry answers, 'No; I think your nature so

deep'.[53]  In Lord Henry's explanation of this remark, he reveals that what provides depth

is not strength of feeling, but variety.  In so doing, Lord Henry further emphasizes that

identity is not immutable, but open.  He reinforces this interpretation by arguing that 'the

people who love only once in their lives are really the shallow people.  What they call

their loyalty, and their fidelity, I call either the lethargy of custom or their lack of

imagination'.[54]  What is important in Lord Henry's explanation is that depth is created by

'flirtation', by narratological and ontological indeterminacy.  It would be easy to read this

fact as a critique of the construction of self within the works of Naturalist writers.

Fantasy positions itself in opposition to a fixed reality; therefore, the fantastical quality of

*Dorian Gray* reinforces Wilde's attempt to leave open what categorizes 'the real'.  As Jean

Pierrot explains, discussing fantasy as 'the world of dreams':

> The world of dreams is indeed the exact opposite both of the reality that the

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[52] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 33
[53] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 72
[54] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 72

naturalist writers had deliberately restricted themselves to depicting, a visible, concrete, and usually either monotonous or appalling reality, and of the positivist spirit that had been dominating not only scientific research but also artistic creation for the past few decades [prior to the 1890s].[55]

In truth, Wilde inverts the meaning of surface to signify, not a limited set of observable data and personality traits, but a set of infinite possibilities played out within, but not limited to, the visible realm.

Wilde's fantastical construction of character in *Dorian Gray* seems contradictory to the claims of some critics, such as Rita Felski, who have argued that Wilde presents a definite and negative (potentially misogynistic) portrayal of female characters in *Dorian Gray* and elsewhere. Many of these critics have centered their attacks on the contrast between the figures of Dorian and Sybil in Wilde's novel. For instance, Felski argues that Dorian's character is a fantastical and ontologically ambiguous representation, created by Wilde's literary self-referentiality. Dorian is, as Felski argues, 'defined as a product of various textual influences—Hallward's painting, the "evil book," Wotton's aphorisms',[56] which renders his character 'indeterminate and unstable'.[57] However, Felski also argues that the undermining of the organic subject, as exemplified by Dorian's character, is not a gender-neutral process. Instead, she asserts that Wilde's 'repudiation of vulgarity'[58] recasts gender boundaries into the categories of vulgar and refined:

> The parodic consciousness [of the aesthete] freely subverts a number of oppositions, including [. . .] traditional distinctions between masculinity and femininity; this act of subversion, however, both presumes and reinforces a primary division between the refined and the vulgar, a division that separates the

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[55] Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination 1880-1900*, trans. by Derek Coltman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 183

[56] Rita Felski, 'The Counterdiscourse of the Feminine in Three Texts by Wilde, Huysmans, and Sacher-Masoch', *PMLA* 106 (October 1991), pp. 1094-1105, 1096-1097

[57] Felski, 'Counterdiscourse of the Feminine', p. 1097

[58] Felski, 'Counterdiscourse of the Feminine', p. 1099

self-conscious aesthete from the common and sentimental herd, which is by definition incapable of this kind of irony.[59]

Using an argument put forth by Andreas Huyssen, Felski goes on to show how mass culture has been coded as both feminine and inferior by 'the vanguard consciousness of male modernism'.[60]  Citing *Madame Bovary* (serialized 1856; republished 1857) as 'one of the founding texts of modernism',[61] Huyssen uses the novel to emphasize that in the work of male 'modernists': 'woman [. . .] is positioned as reader of inferior literature—subjective, emotional and passive'.[62]  Felski applies this reading to Wilde's text and attempts to show how women are consistently characterized as sentimental and vulgar throughout *Dorian Gray*.  To this end, she cites what Dorian says about women being 'limited to their century' with '[n]o glamour ever transfigur[ing] them',[63] and again quotes Dorian's claim that women live 'on their emotions.  They only [think] of their emotions'.[64]  Dorian's remarks echo what Felski asserts is the male characterization of women as sentimental and vulgar.

Felski's interpretation of the text depends somewhat on her equating Dorian's or Lord Henry's opinions with the novel's overall position on gender.  This equating of the characters' opinions with Wilde's own is supported, in part, by statements Wilde made about his relationship to the characters.  Notably, Wilde identified himself with Basil, Dorian and Lord Henry in an 1894 letter to Ralph Payne: '[*Dorian Gray*] contains much of me in it: Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me:

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[59] Felski, 'Counterdiscourse of the Feminine', p. 1100
[60] Felski, 'Counterdiscourse of the Feminine', p. 1100
[61] Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), p. 44; Huyssen extends the meaning of 'modernism' to include mid-19th century texts that embody the 'culture of modernity', as he calls it, which for him is characterized by 'a volatile relationship between high art and mass culture' (*After the Great Divide*, p. vii).
[62] Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, p. 46
[63] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 75
[64] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 135

Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps'.[65]  Even though Wilde's letter

asserts his affinity with the characters, each identification posits an ambiguous

relationship between author and character: Basil is what Wilde *thinks* he is; Lord Henry

what the world *thinks* he is; and Dorian what he would *like* to be (but obviously is not).

To assume that any one of the characters speaks for Wilde or that any one of their

opinions can stand in for the novel's overall message would be a misconception in light of

this reading.  Moreover, Wilde reinforces in his letter to Payne his belief in what

Jonathan Dollimore calls a 'decentred subjectivity',[66] or what Dorian terms human beings'

'complex multiform'[67] nature.  By associating himself with three characters, Wilde

emphasizes the impossibility of limiting the subject, showing how it broadly fractures

into its essence ('what I am'), reception ('what the world thinks I am') and intentionality or

desire ('what I would like to be')—fracturing even further within each of these categories.

Within the context of this ontological indeterminacy, it would be especially difficult for

one to construct a coherent ideological stance from any one of Dorian's declarations, just

as it would be difficult to infer Wilde's own ideological stance on the basis of one or two

of his epigrams (although this is frequently done).

　　　　While acknowledging some of these apparent difficulties in the tracing of

Dorian's (and the novel's) representation of gender politics, Felski adheres to a reading of

the text as misogynistic because she argues that the novel ultimately rejects the moral

pronouncement condemning Dorian at the end of *Dorian Gray*.  Taking the ending and

its moral seriously, however, complicates an equating of Dorian's opinions about women

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[65] Wilde, Letter to Ralph Payne (12 February 1894), in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 585

[66] Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), p. 70

[67] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 212

(and his treatment of them) with the novel's overarching perspective on gender. By proposing that the ending is negated by the novel as a whole, Felski makes a point similar to the one that Rachel Bowlby makes in *Shopping with Freud* (1993), in which Bowlby asserts that the proliferation of modes within the text precludes a serious interpretation of the text as a morality tale:

> In that it incorporates and alludes to many disparate levels and styles of writing, *Dorian Gray* effectively sets them all at a distance. It becomes like a sample catalogue of literary forms which by arbitrary juxtaposition lose all connection with the notion of a unifying theme or action and its corresponding genre. Suggesting no privileged forms in terms of which to interpret the others, the novel reduces the morality plot to pastiche.[68]

Bowlby correctly identifies the multiple and multifarious modes of writing within the text, but she reads the novel's moral as a simple pastiche—specifically of 'sensation' fiction. Pastiche is, indeed, an important aspect of Wilde's writing, but an examination of his entire *oeuvre* reveals consistent parallels that serve to reinforce the clear 'moral' of the novel, one on which Wilde himself insists in several letters. This moral is not one obvious from a reading of *Dorian Gray* as a simple morality tale. Such a moral would suggest that Dorian rightly pays for the particular sins he commits throughout the novel. As opposed to this obvious moral, the morality plot of *Dorian Gray* demonstrates the impossibility of separating surface and depth. Indeed, Wilde's work, as Dollimore and others have pointed out, denies traditional depth to its characters. Instead, depth and surface are conflated: depth *is* surface, and vice versa. The qualities of Dorian and his portrait are transferred back onto one another at the end of the novel because Dorian (ironically) has been attempting to live as if he possessed no soul, no depth, and his portrait has become a vessel of his soul. The irony of Dorian's portrait acting as his soul

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[68] Rachel Bowlby, *Shopping with Freud* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 21–22

is not undermined by the ending; depth and surface do not return to their 'proper' places.

Rather, Dorian's soul must reveal itself on the surface of his body, thereby reemphasizing

the inseparability of the two, and preserving the paradox (the equating of portrait and

soul) that sustains the narrative.  The shifting of the surface of his soul back onto Dorian's

body mimics the irresolution that the text demands of the reader—the fantastic hesitation.

Wilde insists that his 'obvious' moral is 'that all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings

its punishment',[69] and in Dorian's case his excess primarily takes the form of his

renunciation.  In other words, he denies depth, and this in turn leads to a life of excessive

surface.  This is not the only example of excess and renunciation in the novel, as Wilde

points out,[70] but it is the most pervasive one and the one that symbolically stands in for

all the others.

Felski's substitution of Dorian's position on gender for the novel's own position,

then, cannot rely upon a reading that dismisses the novel's ending as irrelevant.  She

argues that *Dorian Gray*'s:

> [A]cute linguistic self-consciousness manifests itself in elaborate descriptions, in
> parodies and borrowings from such texts as *Against the Grain* and Pater's *Studies
> in the History of the Renaissance*, and above all in the aphorisms and paradoxes
> that implicitly subvert the novel's ostensible moral ending.[71]

The 'ostensible' moral ending (the one suggested by the form of the Victorian morality

tale), however, is not the obvious moral drawn from the type of versatile reading

encouraged by the text.  Furthermore, the legitimate moral ending betokens Dorian's (and

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[69] Wilde, Letter to the Editor of the *Daily Chronicle* (30 June 1890), in *Complete Letters*, pp. 435–436, 435
[70] Wilde asserts in a letter to the *St James's Gazette* (26 June 1890) that '[t]he painter, Basil Hallward,
worshipping physical beauty far too much, as most painters do, dies by the hand of one in whose soul he
has created a monstrous and absurd vanity.  Dorian Gray, having led a life of mere sensation and pleasure,
tries to kill conscience, and at that moment kills himself.  Lord Henry Wotton seeks to be merely the
spectator of life.  He finds that those who reject the battle are more deeply wounded than those who take
part in it' (*Complete Letters*, pp. 429–431, 430).
[71] Felski, 'Counterdiscourse of the Feminine', p. 1099

Lord Henry's, and Basil Hallward's) unreliability as a spokesperson for Wilde's own

views and for the views of the novel in general.  Dorian's refusal to accept his own 'depth'

(in light of Wilde's notion of depth) prevents his seeing the full range of identities that

Sybil Vane might possess.  As Rachel Bowlby argues, he rightly perceives the 'sexual,

historical and imagistic mobility of [Sybil's] artistic persona',[72] but he does not see the

persona of Sybil's that is roughly equivalent to the persona he himself attempts to deny by

hiding his portrait.  He is happy to 'find [his] wife in Shakespeare's plays',[73] with her

'[l]ips that Shakespeare taught to speak [and which have] whispered their secret in [his]

ear'.[74]  He boasts of having had 'the arms of Rosalind around [him]' and of having 'kissed

Juliet on the mouth',[75] but he is unprepared for an incarnation of Sybil who exists outside

of Shakespeare.  For her part, Sybil abandons ontological free-play, as Bowlby argues,

for 'the deadly third-rateness of finding a true, consistent self'.[76]  The mistake both of

them seem to make is to limit themselves in terms of what identities and poses they can

assume.  Sybil desires an authentic self, but much of Wilde's work argues against such a

conception.  Dorian denies any depth, which Wilde also portrays as impossible.  They

limit themselves and are also quick to limit each other: Dorian is unable to see Sybil

outside of Shakespeare, and Sybil herself is quick to label Dorian 'Prince Charming'.

Lord Henry says later in the text that 'From a label there is no escape!',[77] which makes

apparent both Dorian's and Sybil's mistake.  Of course, Sybil is forced into creating a

label for Dorian because he does not reveal his name, but the power dynamic that makes

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[72] Bowlby, *Shopping with Freud*, p. 11
[73] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 112
[74] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 112–113
[75] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 113
[76] Bowlby, *Shopping with Freud*, p. 11
[77] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 290

that possible has more to do with class than gender.  It is also clear that Dorian does not want to limit himself by revealing his name—he plays at being a spectator—but as Wilde says in an earlier-quoted letter, 'those who reject the battle are more deeply wounded than those who take part in it',[78] a truth evidenced by Dorian's reaction to Sybil's conversion. Wilde's admonition further weakens Felski's reading of the text as one that promotes 'a disinterested contemplation of the world as an aesthetic phenomenon', one whose '"objectivity" of scientific discourse relies [. . .] on metaphors of subjugating and dominating a feminized nature'.[79]  Along with Wilde's emphasis that the novel's moral discourages disinterested observation, the novel's philosophical position of subjective idealism, which constitutes 'reality' as a product of perception, denies that *Dorian Gray* promotes any fixed analysis of the world as aesthetic phenomenon.

Felski correctly observes how 'Dorian Gray and Henry Wotton prefer to reduce the actress Sybil Vane to a collection of dramatic performances, a collection of texts acknowledged to be more real than the performer herself',[80] but the implication of her analysis is that the 'performer herself' *is* more real than her performances.  The meaning of 'real' in this context, however, is unclear.  Reality in Wilde's *oeuvre* is often conflated with 'the ideal'; in fact, it is often the presence of fantasy that qualifies something as real. Just as Basil and Lord Henry correctly view Dorian as a self-consciously created work of art, they also correctly perceive Sybil Vane as a collection of texts.  Where they fail is in their not perceiving Sybil as a collection of performances that *includes* the performance of Sybil herself (as opposed to the characters she plays only).  After performing badly because she denigrates her acting as a false reality, Sybil asserts that she now understands

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[78] Wilde, Letter to Editor of the *St James's Gazette* (26 June 1890), in *Complete Letters*, p. 430
[79] Felski, 'Counterdiscourse of the Feminine', p. 1102
[80] Felski, 'Counterdiscourse of the Feminine', p. 1102

what 'reality really' is.  In other words, she denies the reality of her acting in language

reminiscent of the philosopher's as he returns to the world of shadows in Plato's *Republic*

(a starting point, as Peter Brooks notes, in a 'very old line of critique of realism'[81]):

> You had brought me something higher, something of which all art is but a
> reflection.  You had made me understand what love really is [. . .] I have grown
> sick of shadows.  You are more to me than all art can ever be.  What have I to do
> with the puppets of a play?[82]

Importantly, though, the experience of the figure in Plato's allegory is the experience of

the ideal made real.  Ideality and reality become one after Sybil's (or the philosopher's)

experience of the ideal.  She continues her explanation for her poor performance:

'Suddenly it dawned on my soul what it all meant.  The knowledge was exquisite to me',[83]

and it is clear from this that she has experienced, as Plato has Socrates say, 'the whole

soul [. . .] turned round from the world of becoming into that of being'.[84]  Wilde's use of

the term 'exquisite' is also significant for it implies, not that Sybil has acquired an

understanding of 'the real' *as opposed* to the ideal, but rather that she has come to

understand, even if in a vague sense, the *conflation* of the real and ideal, the

inseparability of the two.  In other words, love has made Dorian more valuable to her

'than all art can ever be', but Dorian himself is the embodiment of surface and explicitly a

literary character: 'Prince Charming' (who is also a literal painting).  Just as Plato's figure

in the allegory of the cave struggles to adjust his eyes to the sight of the real, so, too, does

Sybil not fully realize the inseparability of her performances from her 'genuine' self.  For

Plato, the ideal is the real, just as in Wilde's work illusion in art is reality.  Wilde seems

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[81] Brooks, *Realist Vision*, p. 7

[82] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 127

[83] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 128

[84] Plato, *The Republic*, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. and intro. by B. Jowett, 5 vols., 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1875), III, pp. 193–519, 404.  Thomas Wright explains that 'Benjamin Jowett's 1875 English translation of the dialogues was probably the most dear to Wilde' (*Oscar's Books* [London: Chatto & Windus, 2008], p. 85).

willfully to distort Plato's philosophy in his own, and sees it as being completed by

Hegel's understanding of the truth of contraries.  As Wilde says in the conclusion to 'The

Truth of Masks':

> For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth.  A Truth in art is that whose
> contradictory is also true. And just as it is only in art−criticism, and through it,
> that we can apprehend the Platonic theory of ideas, so it is only in art−criticism,
> and through it, that we can realize Hegel's system of contraries. The truths of
> metaphysics are the truths of masks.[85]

Interpreted in this light, Sybil Vane is seen as neither sentimental nor unsophisticated;

instead, she is revealed to be partially blinded by her sudden realization of the ideal,

which in no way makes her inferior to Dorian, who also fails to understand 'the real's'

relationship to illusion.

The intrusion of the real into Sybil's 'artificial' life also alludes—perhaps more

directly—to Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' (1833; revised 1842), in which the

eponymous lady, living in her tower, sees:

> [. . .] moving thro' a mirror clear
> That hangs before her all the year,
> Shadows of the world appear.[86]

The Platonic language here is apparent, and, like Plato's cave-dweller, the Lady of Shalott

longs to escape her world of illusions: she is, Tennyson writes, 'half-sick of shadows'.[87]

Whether she wants to elude the curse with which she is threatened 'if she stay'[88] in her

world of fantasy or whether she truly longs to escape her unreal environment is

immaterial because she is faced with a false dilemma.  In other words, the 'shadows' of

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[85] Wilde, 'The Truth of Masks', in *Intentions* (London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1891), pp. 217-258, 258

[86] Lord Alfred Tennyson, 'The Lady of Shalott', *Poems*, 2 vols. (London: Edward Moxon, 1842), I, pp. 77–86, 79–80

[87] Tennyson, 'The Lady of Shalott', p. 81

[88] Tennyson, 'The Lady of Shalott', p. 79

which she is 'half sick' confront her both within and outside of her tower.  As Erik Gray argues, 'if the Lady's hope in breaking away from her loom is to escape the companionship of mere images [. . .] then we can say with assurance that Lancelot is precisely the wrong choice of love-object'.[89]  Gray refers to Herbert Tucker's characterization of Lancelot, whose song provokes the Lady of Shalott to embrace her curse: 'Lancelot is no presence, but pure representation: a man of mirrors, a signifier as hollow as the song he sings'.[90]  Gray assumes that the Lady of Shalott chooses the wrong love-object, but one might argue that that this intrusion of the 'real'—that is, Lancelot himself—embodies the inability of art (the Lady of Shalott's fantasy world) to have access to the real.  In other words, language imposes a barrier between the self and 'reality' by virtue of the distance between signifier and signified—as Tucker's comments make clear.  The inner and outer worlds of Tennyson's poem perform the conflation of real and ideal discussed above, revealing the alignment between Sybil's experience in *Dorian Gray* and the Lady of Shalott's in this poem.  Moreover, the allusion to Tennyson in *Dorian Gray* is yet another example of Wilde's fashioning of literary texts out of the raw material of other literature—reinforcing his (and Tennyson's) point about the conflation of the real and ideal.

The Lady of Shalott's sexual awakening (or what some critics have interpreted as such), embodied by her leaving the tower, is a (complicatedly) liberatory gesture, one that seems unlike any of Sybil's actions in Wilde's novel.  *Dorian Gray*'s homosocial environment affords its female characters few opportunities to engage in similar liberatory gestures and they, consequently, lack opportunities to counter Dorian's and

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[89] Erik Gray, 'Getting It Wrong in "The Lady of Shalott"', *Victorian Poetry* 47 (Spring 2009), pp. 45–59, 49
[90] Herbert Tucker, *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988), p. 112

Lord Henry's disparaging epigrams about women. The portrayal of Sybil Vane (as well as, perhaps, the Duchess of Monmouth toward the end of the text) provides at least one counterexample. Looking at Lord Henry's remarks about women—as opposed to Dorian's—one sees that Lord Henry better perceives the novel's equating of surface and depth. One of Lord Henry's seemingly more egregious remarks underscores both that he does not view all women as sentimental, and that he understands the proper relationship of depth and surface. He advises Dorian: 'Never marry a woman with straw-coloured hair [. . .] Because they are so sentimental'.[91] That Lord Henry feels the need to distinguish women with 'straw-coloured hair' presumes that those women without straw-coloured hair are not, or at least not as, sentimental. It additionally connects sentimentality with surface (with hair color), and thus properly conflates the two, whereas Dorian struggles to make any connection between surface and depth. Dorian shows a lack of self-understanding when he responds to Lord Henry's remark by saying: 'But I like sentimental people'.[92] He is clearly unaware of his inability to handle Sybil's one display of sentimentality. Moreover, Lord Henry reveals himself to be rather sentimental after his wife leaves him, asking Dorian to 'play Chopin' to him because: '[t]he man with whom my wife ran away played Chopin exquisitely. Poor Victoria! I was very fond of her. The house is rather lonely without her'.[93] Lord Henry's use of the word exquisitely infuses his statement with a sense of unreality, but his remark reads nonetheless like a genuine statement of feeling, even if it is quickly covered up by another detached observation. Under the weight of the preceding evidence, then, it seems unlikely that Felski's argument about *Dorian Gray*'s reinscribing gender boundaries by constructing a

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[91] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 68–69
[92] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 69
[93] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 316

gendered relationship between the vulgar and refined is applicable. Ultimately, Wilde's

novel constructs a fantastical world which renders nature as artificial and character as

constructed. Appropriated as a vehicle for the depiction of reality, the novel genre has

frequently been employed to represent life; however, both Sybil's and Dorian's life in

*Dorian Gray* depends literally on their continued status as *objects d'art* and as

performers. Having abandoned her acting, Sybil cannot go on living. Attempting to

eliminate his portrait, Dorian murders himself.

Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson* also seems at first to provide examples of female

characters who are sentimental and incapable of detached aesthetic appreciation, but the

novel's construction of identity is no less fantastical and self-referential than *Dorian

Gray*'s. Zuleika's lack of skill in performing her magic tricks is the most obvious

example of this characterization. In spite of the novel's ostensibly conservative

representations of class and gender, one is surprised to find in *Zuleika* an undoing of

fixed identity even more radical than Wilde's. Through his stylistic catachreses, his

emptying the text of all depth, his particular selections of scenes to illustrate within his

illustrated edition ('improv[ed]',[94] as Beerbohm would have preferred to call it) of the

text, and the final equating of Zuleika with her grandfather, Beerbohm creates a narrative

environment in which ontological free-play is guaranteed.

Even more than the descriptions of women in *Dorian Gray*, the description of

Zuleika's skill as a magician seems to suggest that women are incapable of conscious

aesthetic appreciation:

> I cannot claim for her that she had a genuine passion for her art. The true conjurer
> finds his guerdon in the consciousness of work done perfectly and for its own
> sake. Lucre and applause are not necessary to him. If he were set down, with the

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[94] Qtd. in N. John Hall, Introduction, *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson*, p. [xiv]

materials of his art, on a desert island, he would yet be quite happy.  He would not cease to produce the barber's pole from his mouth.  To the indifferent winds he would still speak his patter, and even in the last throes of starvations would not eat his live rabbit or his gold-fish.  Zuleika, on a desert island, would have spent most of her time looking for a man's foot-print.  She was, indeed, far too human a creature to care much for art.[95]

It is significant that Beerbohm relates this information to the reader himself.  Unlike *Dorian Gray*, in which Dorian, Lord Henry, and Basil can all be confused for Wilde himself, *Zuleika Dobson* is narrated in the first person directly by Beerbohm, who, as Lawrence Danson argues, continually makes us 'aware of the characters' absurd dependence on the least reliable narrator, Max Beerbohm'.[96]  Felski's argument conflates Dorian and Lord Henry's comments with Wilde's own opinions, but it would be impossible to make a similar conflation in Beerbohm's novel where there is no slippage between character and narrator.  The more radical undoing of identity and faithful representation of 'reality' in *Zuleika* stems from the unreliability of not just the narrator, but the author, too, since they are one and the same.  Beerbohm is not consistently unreliable, though, and this intermittent reliability prevents the reader from ever concretizing an image of Beerbohm the character or author.  Beerbohm's assessment of Zuleika's skill as a magician (in a literal sense) is seemingly fair, but his comment that Zuleika is 'far too human [. . .] to care much for art' is perhaps one of the most misleading things the narrator could say, and it misleads on several levels.  To begin with, Beerbohm's assertion that Zuleika is 'too human a creature' contradicts the very obvious fact that Zuleika is herself far more a self-conscious creation, a collection of literary modes, than anything that could be considered real.  In Beerbohm's correspondence with Reggie Turner about the novel, Beerbohm says, 'Certainly I wanted them [the characters]

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[95] Beerbohm, *Zuleika Dobson*, pp. 13-14
[96] Lawrence Danson, *Max Beerbohm and the Act of Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), p. 115

to *behave like* real people',[97] but it is obvious from what he says that he has never

imagined them as real people in the least.  That Beerbohm intended Zuleika to be 'too

human', then, seems unlikely.  Furthermore, it is clear from Zuleika's character that she

exists as a collection of modes:

> What we see in Beerbohm's conjuration of Zuleika are the various languages, now
> made "the object of representation", that give us the illusion of Zuleika.  She
> manifests herself as a sort of disappearing act; what her disappearance reveals is
> the language itself, which is the real object represented.[98]

Zuleika shifts from expressing high romance to melodrama.  Because Zuleika exists as

language itself, not possessing, as Edmund Wilson complains, even 'the two-dimensional

kind of life [. . .] that is possible within a comic convention',[99] she is deprived of any

psychic depth and, therefore, cannot play the role of the 'genuine' Zuleika the way Sybil

Vane takes on her role as the 'real' Sybil Vane.

Even Beerbohm's physical description of Zuleika reaffirms that she is a work of

art rather than a 'human' character:

> For the rest, her features were not at all original.  They seemed to have been
> derived rather from a gallimaufry of familiar models.  From Madame la Marquise
> de Saint-Ouen came the shapely tilt of the nose.  The mouth was a mere replica of
> Cupid's bow [. . .] No apple-tree, no wall of peaches, had not been robbed, nor
> any Tyrian rose-garden, for the glory of Miss Dobson's cheeks.  Her neck was
> imitation-marble.[100]

It is important to realize from this description that Zuleika is not just a work of art, but a

hodgepodge of imitations, some of which are imitations of already artificial models: her

mouth is a 'mere replica of Cupid's bow'.  Again, that her mouth should be only a replica

of Cupid's bow further underscores the fact that her power over the students does not

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[97] Beerbohm, Letter to Reggie Turner (3 November 1911), in *Letters to Reggie Turner*, p. 209
[98] Danson, *Max Beerbohm and the Act of Writing*, p. 126
[99] Edmund Wilson, 'An Analysis of Max Beerbohm', in *Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Co., 1950), pp. 431–441, 435
[100] Beerbohm, *Zuleika Dobson*, pp. 9–10

come from any authentic source of power within her (other than that of parody), but from her ability to imitate a genuine source of power.  Also, the fact that these 'familiar models' are so different stylistically and that they are models from nature, art and mythology mirrors the stylistic catachreses, the extreme heteroglossia, of the novel itself. In fact, Lawrence Danson identifies Zuleika as the novelistic voice within the text: 'Her mode [. . .] derives largely from that of the conventional modern romance (whether stage melodrama or novel) with its pretensions to realism'.[101]  Danson's identification of the novel and the stage melodrama with 'pretensions to realism' is an especially important distinction in *Zuleika*.  Not only is the novel's realism undercut by its characters' lack of psychic depth, but the characters are also identified with language, with specific literary modes such as the 'modern romance', as demonstrated above, and with 'epic', as shown below. The autonomy and free-play of language, furthermore, reconstitutes the construction of character itself as malleable.

The Duke is also revealed to be just another literary mode, albeit one that does not so readily admit the heteroglossia of the novelistic mode.  Danson argues that 'his mode is more obviously fantastic', adding '[h]e is epic, she is novel'.[102]  The unity of the Duke's epic mode contrasts starkly with Zuleika's and adds to the novel's parody of that mode. Again, as Danson notes, 'The Duke is hopeless in the democratic, polyglot world of the novel-as-parody';[103] the implied unity and grandeur of the epic mode contrast sharply with the novelistic modes represented by Zuleika.  The Duke is no less purely a construction, an embodiment of language without any concrete reality, which is evidenced by his physical descriptions.  For example, Beerbohm describes Zuleika's

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[101] Danson, *Max Beerbohm and the Act of Writing*, p. 119
[102] Danson, *Max Beerbohm and the Act of Writing*, p. 119
[103] Danson, *Max Beerbohm and the Act of Writing*, p. 125

studying 'every lineament of [the Duke's] pale and perfect face—the brow from which

bronze-coloured hair rose in tiers of burnished ripples; the large steel-coloured eyes, with

their carven lids; the carven nose, and the plastic lips'.[104]  The Duke displays the epic

mode through his dress, speech and behavior as well, but it is important to note that his

physical description reveals that he is a conscious creation rather than any sort of realistic

character.  Like Zuleika, he is revealed to be an artistic mode and nothing more, although

he lacks even the superficially realistic elements that go into Zuleika's composition.  In

the context of the novel, both characters are revealed to be products of fantasy, but the

fact that the Duke is the more fantastical of the two, a claim whose implications for

gender this thesis will return to shortly, provides a further commentary on the relationship

between fantasy and Decadence.

The epic listing employed by Beerbohm in describing the Duke involves the

'lavish catalogue of ornaments', a 'decadent mode of the 'eighties and early 'nineties',

which became 'native to Wilde's fairy tales and to *Dorian Gray*'.[105]  In turn, the Duke's

character demonstrates the importance of fantasy for Decadence.  The fact that the Duke

seems ultimately unequal to the 'gallimaufry'[106] of Zuleika's many modes, coupled with

the obvious parodying of the Decadent mode, seems to suggest that Beerbohm is

undermining that mode; however, there appears to be no mode free from parody within

the novel—parody is the meta-mode of *Zuleika*.  Furthermore, Beerbohm parodies the

Decadent mode, but parody itself is already an essential element of Decadence: Wilde's

fairy tales are largely parodies of Hans Christian Andersen's tales; Beardsley's

illustrations for *Salomé* parody both Wilde and his play; Beerbohm's illustrations, like

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[104] Beerbohm, *Zuleika Dobson*, p. 28
[105] Danson, *Max Beerbohm and the Act of Writing*, p. 120
[106] Beerbohm, *Zuleika Dobson*, p. 10

Beardsley's, often parody his own text.  For example, the illustration depicting a winged, fairy-like Beerbohm crowning the statues of the emperors (**figure 1**) for giving 'such warning as they could'[107] to Oxford is not only an example of how the illustrations often depict hypothetical or fantastical scenes, but the wavy and rough lines of the crown-points also underscore the fact that this is a parodic crowning.  Beerbohm is giving credit to the emperors for their warning that could never have had any real effect.  Above all, though, the novel is a self- (and self-conscious) parody—a parody in the Decadent mode.

To say that *Zuleika Dobson* is a work of Decadent fantasy, privileging that mode above others, suggests that there is a hierarchy of modes in an otherwise democratic mix of styles.  Labeling the novel as a work of Decadent fantasy also suggests that the text might reinscribe a hierarchy that genders modes (the novelistic as feminine, the epic or fantastic as masculine) and privileges the masculine; however, *Zuleika Dobson* is not a ranking of styles, but is rather an enlarging of the definition of the Decadent mode.  It is the Duke's coming to terms with Zuleika and the modes she represents that facilitates this broadening of the Decadent novel.  Zuleika's ability to shift between modes is representative of the free-play of Decadent fiction, and the novel itself is an example of just how far this autonomy can be expressed in a Decadent text.  *Dorian Gray*, while itself demonstrating a wide variety of modes and a free movement between them, does not go as far as *Zuleika Dobson* in terms of self-parody or the sheer variety of modes employed therein.  Wilde's text is a work of the fantastic, as defined by Todorov, in which there still exists a hesitation (albeit with the poles being defined differently from Todorov's definitions) between the real and the supernatural.  Beerbohm's text contains no such hesitation, and a variety of literary modes proliferates as a result.  Rather than

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[107] Beerbohm, *Zuleika Dobson*, p. 5

disparaging Zuleika and what she represents, Beerbohm celebrates the freedom she

represents, going so far as to identify Zuleika's literary style with his own.  He has

Zuleika say, in response to the Duke's remark to her that she 'has what is called "the

literary flavour"': 'Ah, that is an unfortunate trick which I caught from a writer, a Mr.

Beerbohm, who once sat next to me at dinner somewhere'.[108]  That Beerbohm identifies

Zuleika's way of speech with his own certainly does not suggest a hierarchy unfavorable

to female characters.  Furthermore, Zuleika's identification with her grandfather at the

end of the novel, when she discovers that they are, in spite of the 'great span of years'

between them, 'so wonderfully alike',[109] demonstrates that Zuleika's mode cannot simply

be coded as feminine since Beerbohm has identified it with himself and with the Warden.

Even if the mode is labeled feminine—which Beerbohm would surely resist—it cannot

be said to stand in an inferior position to the 'masculine' literary modes in the text.

Beerbohm does not hesitate to adopt any literary mode, a freedom granted to his enlarged

conception of the Decadent mode, which emphasizes, even more than Wilde's fiction,

that mobility is the essence of Decadence.  As he walks to the river, the Duke does not

quite understand the language of the personified 'lilac and laburnum', which '[make]

lovely [. . .] the railed pathway to Christ Church meadow',[110] but Beerbohm is unlimited

in his ability to shift modes and perspectives, speaking as the Duke *and* the 'lilac and

laburnum', fantastically personified by Beerbohm and clearly indicative of the lilac and

laburnum from the beginning of *Dorian Gray*.  Beerbohm enacts a happy collusion of

Wildean Decadence and nature, not only revealed as artificial (as Wilde shows), but also

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[108] Beerbohm, *Zuleika Dobson*, p. 100
[109] Beerbohm, *Zuleika Dobson*, p. 339
[110] Beerbohm, *Zuleika Dobson*, p. 92

shown as something to be fantastically inhabited, broadening the limits of possibility for

literary Decadence.
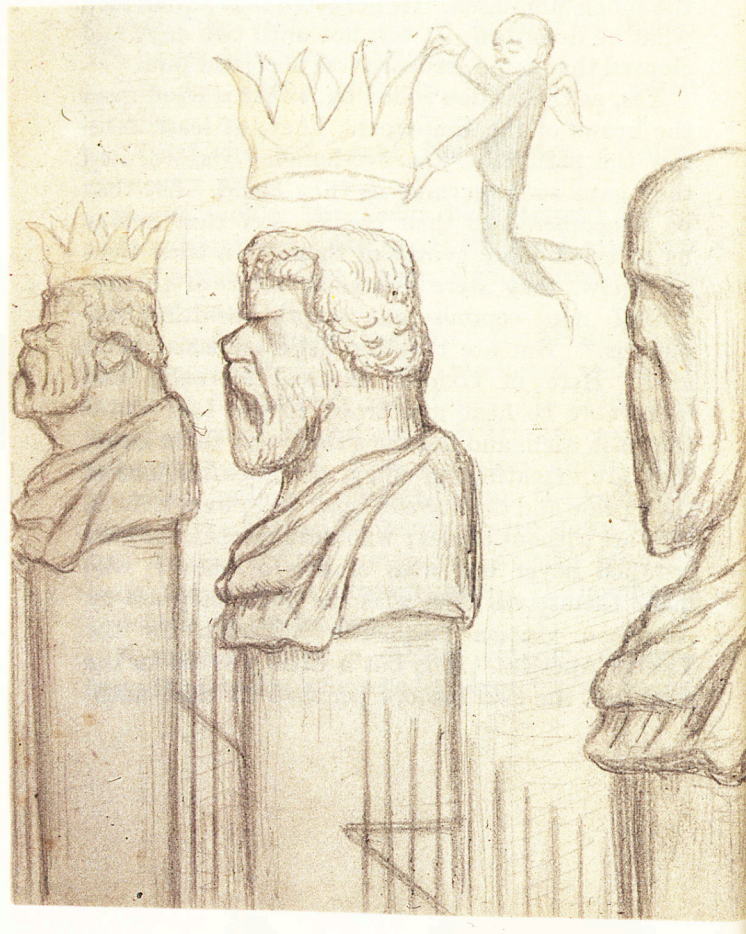
Figure 1 **Reprinted from *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985)**
**Reproduced with kind permission of Berlin Associates**

# Chapter II

# The Art of Decadent Illustration

[L]e besoin de ne plus voir de tableaux représentant l'effigie humaine tâchant à Paris entre quatre murs, ou errant en quête d'argent par les rues, était devenu pour lui plus despotique.

—J.-K. Huysmans, *À Rebours* (1884)[1]

[Beardsley] brought a strangely new personality to English art, and was a master in his way of fantastic grace, and the charm of the unreal.

—Oscar Wilde, Letter to More Adey (1896)[2]

Max Beerbohm's proclamation that he belonged to the 'Beardsley Period',[3] with its implication that Beardsley was central to an understanding of Decadence and the *fin de siècle*, is a critical commonplace reiterated throughout the historical reception of Decadence and, in particular, Beardsley's works.  For example, Chris Snodgrass asserts that 'no other figure emblematized to such a degree the striking complexities of the Victorian Decadence',[4] and Stanley Weintraub maintains that he 'remains a vital part of our perception of the 1890s'.[5]  Beardsley's centrality to Decadence suggests, in turn, the primacy of illustration in the definition of British and Irish Decadence.  Moreover, illustration's key role in the defining of Decadence emphasizes the vital role of publishers

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[1] J.-K. Huysmans, *À Rebours* (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1884), p. 70; '[T]he need to see no longer pictures representing the human figure toiling away in Paris between four walls, or roaming the streets in quest of money, grew more overpowering' (translated by Margaret Mauldon, in Huysmans, *Against Nature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), p. 44).

[2] Oscar Wilde, Letter to More Adey (25 September 1896), *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis, pp. 664–666, 666

[3] Max Beerbohm, 'Diminuendo', in *The Works of Max Beerbohm* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1896), pp. 147–160, 160

[4] Chris Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley, Dandy of the Grotesque* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), p. 4.  Some of Beardsley's later illustrations, particularly for *The Rape of the Lock*, adopt a seemingly more realistic style; this apparent turn to realism is addressed more adequately in this chapter's discussion of Beardsley's *The Fruit Bearers*.

[5] Stanley Weintraub, Review: 'Artifice & Text in the 1890s', *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920* 53 (2010), pp. 95–98, 95

and periodical culture in Decadence's construction.  Graphic content was a crucial aspect

of book production for the publishers most instrumental in shaping Decadence: John

Lane, Elkin Mathews, and Leonard Smithers.  For instance, Beardsley's designs for The

Bodley Head's Keynotes series had 'much to do with its popularity'[6] and prompted Lane

to proceed with the series only 'on the condition that Beardsley would continue to design

the succeeding volumes in the mode of [George Egerton's] *Keynotes*'.[7]  As art editor for

*The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*, two magazines often cited as (not exclusively) vehicles

of Decadence and Aestheticism, Beardsley also did much to situate illustration as central

to Decadence; Laurel Brake, for example, describes *The Savoy* as 'a journal in which

illustration plays an equally important role as the letterpress', and she argues,

furthermore, that, in *The Savoy*'s case, 'the illustrations as a group [. . .] would clinch the

argument for decadence [within the magazine]'.[8]  The conflation of Beardsley and

Decadence in the public mind not only yoked illustration to Decadence, but also tied

fantasy to both through the blatantly anti-realist style of his pictures, which Snodgrass

labels 'visual equivalents of such unsettling aesthetic manifestos as Oscar Wilde's "The

Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist"'.[9]  Literally inscribing onto the Bodley Head

books their aesthetic tenor, Beardsley's covers augment the fact that few of those books

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[6] James G. Nelson, *The Early Nineties: A View from the Bodley Head* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1971), p. 263
[7] Nelson, *The Early Nineties*, p. 263
[8] Laurel Brake, *Subjugated Knowledges: Journalism, Gender, and Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York UP, 1994), p. 161.  Brake's claim about the equality of text and image is made by Arthur Symons in his editorial note for the third number: '[*The Savoy*'s] only aim is to offer its readers letterpress which is literature, and illustrations which are art' (Symons, Editorial Note, *The Savoy* [July 1896], p. [7]).  Symons offers another view of *The Savoy*'s Decadence, however, in his editorial note to the first number: 'We are not Realists, or Romanticists, or Decadents' (Symons, Editorial Note, *The Savoy* [January 1896], p. [5]).  In spite of Symons' claim to the contrary, *The Savoy* displays all the signs of a Decadent production.
[9] Snodgrass, *Dandy of the Grotesque*, p. 4

had the 'faintest taint of realism or naturalism about [them]'.[10]  This chapter is an attempt

to elaborate on the connections between Decadence, illustration, and fantasy, to explain

why those connections exist, and to delineate the stylistic implications of their

conjunction for Decadent graphic work, specifically the work of Beardsley, Beerbohm,

and Charles Ricketts.

The prevalence of illustration in the corpus of Decadent creative work is also

partly attributable to a general proliferation of published illustrated texts at the end of the

nineteenth century.  Lorraine Janzen Kooistra reveals the extent of this abundance: 'As

the century drew to a close, the demand for illustrations had become so great that few

books were published without some pictorial content'.[11]  Several factors conspired to

make the Victorian *fin de siècle* a particularly fertile time for graphic art, including the

growing prominence of illustrated journalism in the nineteenth century and illustration's

subsequent emergence as a distinct craft, two factors identified by Joseph Pennell in a

lecture from *The Illustration of Books* (1896):

> The art of illustration, or rather the existence of illustration as a separate craft, and
> of illustrators as a distinct body of craftsmen, is virtually the growth of this
> century, more properly of the last sixty years since the invention of illustrated
> journalism.[12]

Pennell underestimates the history of illustrated journalism, which in England dates from

the 'time of the [English] Civil War',[13] continuing from the '*Mercurius Civicus* of 1643

[through] *The Illustrated London News* and *The Graphic* of 1888'[14] and beyond.  Only in

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[10] Nelson, *The Early Nineties*, p. 264
[11] Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, *The Artist as Critic*: *Bitextuality in* Fin-de-Siècle *Illustrated Books* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1995), p. 1
[12] Joseph Pennell, *The Illustration of Books: A Manual for the Use of Students, Notes for a Course of Lectures at the Slade School, University College* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1896), p. 7
[13] C. N. Williamson, 'Illustrated Journalism in England: Its Rise—I', *The Magazine of Art* (January 1889), pp. 104–108, 104
[14] Williamson, 'Illustrated Journalism in England', p. 104

the nineteenth century, however, did illustrated journalism become widespread, and this

rise was itself 'allied to the adoption of mechanized reproduction techniques'.[15]

Beardsley's career was heavily indebted to these processes, notably line and halftone,[16]

and Ian Fletcher attributes to them Beardsley's 'rapid fame'.[17]  Furthermore, Fletcher

asserts that:

> Beardsley's career began a year or two after these processes [line and halftone]
> were established and he was [therefore] not tied by early training, convention, or
> ideology like William Morris to the wood engraving or the wood block.[18]

Able to trust that his drawings would be reasonably well reproduced as a result of these

processes, Beardsley was free to focus on the drawings themselves rather than each step

in their engraving.  Despite the fact, as Fletcher notes, that the drawings lose something

in their reproduction,[19] Beardsley was able to disseminate his works quickly and with

relative fidelity to his original designs.

Although he trained as an engraver and was a proponent of the Arts and Crafts

Movement, with its particular emphasis on traditional craftsmanship, Charles Ricketts'

early career was also shaped by the rise of photomechanical reproduction: 'Ricketts's and

Shannon's earliest work to be published indeed consisted of pen-and-ink drawings

reproduced by line block'.[20]  The illustration considered here, one Ricketts did for Oscar

Wilde's *Poems in Prose*, marks a return to his pen-and-ink work and demonstrates the

continued influence of these techniques even for later Decadent illustration.  The other

illustrator considered in this chapter, Max Beerbohm, worked primarily in watercolors,

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[15] Gerry Beegan, *The Mass Image: A Social History of Photomechanical Reproduction in Victorian London* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), p. 8
[16] For more on these processes, see: Beegan, *The Mass Image*, pp. 7–16, and Ian Fletcher, *Aubrey Beardsley* (Boston: Twayne, 1987), p. [v]
[17] Fletcher, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. [iv]
[18] Fletcher, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. [v]
[19] Fletcher, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. [vi]
[20] J. G. P. Delaney, *Charles Ricketts: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), p. 29

which is what the illustrations for his special copy of *Zuleika Dobson* (discussed later in the chapter) mostly are.  Hand-drawn by Beerbohm and never reproduced in his lifetime, they are nonetheless accessible now through a facsimile edition edited by N. John Hall (1985).

The renaissance of illustration in the 1890s is also partly attributable to the revival of printing and its influence over the publishing firms and book designers associated with literary Decadence.  In particular, The Bodley Head's prevailing aesthetic was a product of Aestheticism's principles of design, influenced by the theories and works of artists such as Morris, D. G. Rossetti, and Burne-Jones.  This influence is also apparent in the work that Ricketts produced for Osgood, McIlvaine & Co, publisher of a number of Wilde's works designed by Ricketts, and his own Vale Press (1896–1904).  Leonard Smithers, too, adopts these Aestheticist and Decadent practices, and his career offers some continuity between the Bodley Head aesthetic and his own, largely because he employs many of the authors and artists looking for work in the aftermath of the Wilde trials.  Illustrators such as Charles Condor, William Thomas Horton, Anthony Mario Ludovici, and Beardsley were given work, especially Beardsley who served as Smithers' chief illustrator and as art editor for *The Savoy*, a magazine which, as James G. Nelson describes, 'provid[ed] work and a forum for the *avant-garde* poets, prose writers, and artists of the Nineties who found themselves pariahs in a post-Wildean society hostile in the extreme to themselves and their art'.[21]  Smithers possessed a 'great interest'[22] in the illustrated book, making it a 'prominent feature of [his] publishing career',[23] so illustration

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[21] James G. Nelson, *Publisher to the Decadents: Leonard Smithers in the Careers of Beardsley, Wilde, Dowson* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State UP, 2000), p. 97
[22] Nelson, *Publisher to the Decadents*, p. 4
[23] Nelson, *Publisher to the Decadents*, p. 4

remained a prominent feature in Decadent literature, at least until Smithers' decline in

health and subsequent death in 1907.  The two illustrated texts examined herein that were

published after 1907 exemplify—by the fact that they remained unpublished in their

creators' lifetimes—the shift in cultural attitudes about illustrated fiction.  Beerbohm's

*Zuleika Dobson* (1911) was published by Heinemann without illustrations (these were

first printed with the text only in 1985),[24] and Ricketts' illustrations for Wilde's *Poems in*

*Prose* (c. 1924) remain unpublished as a set to this day.

The prominent influence of British Aestheticism on Decadent illustrators is an

important counterweight to the impulse of some critics whose pan-European definitions

of Decadent art obscure important differences between national traditions.[25]  These critics

cite thematic parallels between British Decadents and Continental-European artists such

as Moreau, Rops, Redon, and Fernand Khnopff.  While there exist real affinities between

these artists and illustrators such as Beardsley, Ricketts, and Beerbohm, the greater

emphasis on illustrated books in Great Britain alters the character of British Decadent

art.[26]  Mario Praz is one such critic, who argues that Rops, 'together with Moreau, is the

artist most representative of the Decadent Movement'.[27]  Rops is usually cited by critics

(such as Linda Zatlin) as an important influence on Beardsley, but, in spite of similarities,

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[24] In the case of *Zuleika Dobson*, however, Heineman was eager to have Beerbohm's illustrations.  After receiving a medallion of Zuleika for Heinemann's 1947 edition of the novel, the publisher wrote to Beerbohm expressing appreciation for the watercolor: 'It is more than I hoped for [. . .] It will give the book a collectors' value' (qtd. in N. John Hall, Introduction, *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson* [New Haven: Yale UP, 1985], pp. [i]–[xvi], [ii]).

[25] See, for example: John R. Reed's chapter 'Decadent Art' in *Decadent Style* (1985), pp. 128–185; Camille Paglia's chapter 'Apollo Daemonized' in *Sexual Personae* (1990), pp. 489–511, Bram Djikstra's *Idols of Perversity* (1986), and Charles Bernheimer's *Decadent Subjects* (2002), particularly the chapter titled 'Visions of Salome', pp. 104–138.

[26] Gustave Doré (1832–1883) might be cited as one Continental European artist whose career was largely defined by his book illustrations, but his illustrations are not stylistically Decadent *per se*, in spite of the fact that they often intersect with Decadent authors and themes.

[27] Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. by Angus Davidson, 2nd edn. (London: Oxford UP, 1951), p. 369

Beardsley's work is characterized by a greater (almost exclusive) emphasis on book illustration.  Rops' works were more often than Beardsley's designed as independent etchings, drawings, and paintings, and even his graphic work had a limited circulation, usually confined to pornographic illustration.[28]  Moreau, the other artist whom Praz identifies as central to Decadence, also shares much in common with British Decadent artists, especially his 'literariness' (as elaborated on below), his privileging of part over whole, and his deployment of fantasy—Symons calls him 'the mathematician of the fantastic'.[29]  Praz is also not alone in his estimation of Moreau's importance; John R. Reed argues that 'Gustave Moreau [. . .] is the painter most clearly identified with Decadence in art, and correctly so'.[30]  In spite of the affinities between British Decadent artists and Moreau, however, the latter's works differ from those of British Decadents' in that they, like Rops', were designed as independent works, removed from the production methods of book design and illustrated journalism.  Like the work of Beardsley, Moreau's art is deeply engaged with literature, in its themes and allusions,[31] and in its interpretive demands: '[Moreau's art] draws its subjects from works of literature but also [. . .] calls

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[28] See Linda Zatlin, 'Félicien Rops and Aubrey Beardsley: The Naked and the Nude', in *Reconsidering Aubrey Beardsley*, ed. by Robert Langenfeld (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), pp. 167–205, 201. In Robert Ross' book on Beardsley, he dismisses all together the influence of (the Belgian artist) Rops and other artists working in France: 'Beardsley contrived a style long before he came across any modern French illustration' (Ross, *Aubrey Beardsley* [London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1909], p. 40).  Linda Zatlin has attempted to reassert Rops' influence, arguing that Ross sought to protect Beardsley from 'Rops's reputation' as an illustrator of pornographic books ('Félician Rops and Aubrey Beardsley', p. 167).  She also cites a letter from Beardsley to Leonard Smithers (December 1896), in which Beardsley expresses a desire to purchase 'a Rops' (Beardsley, *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, ed. by Henry Maas, J. L. Duncan, and W. G. Good [Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1970], p. 223).  Ross' assertion, though, is that Rops was not a *formative* influence on Beardsley, which is not contradicted by Beardsley's letter to Smithers, written in December 1896, slightly more than a year before his death in March 1898.

[29] Arthur Symons, *Studies in Seven Arts* (London: Archibald Constable, 1906), p. 78

[30] John R. Reed, *Decadent Style*, p. 130; Reed concludes this sentence, however, by saying that Moreau is usually identified with Decadence for the wrong reasons, arguing that 'all too often this identification depends upon his themes and subjects rather than on his style' (p. 130).

[31] For example, Peter Cooke asserts that Moreau's paintings, especially *Jupiter et Sémélé* (1895), are examples of 'the textually dependent genre of mythological history painting' (Cooke, 'Text and Image, Allegory and Symbol in Gustave Moreau's *Jupiter et Sémélé*', in *Symbolism, Decadence and the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness [Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000], pp. 122–143, 127).

upon the viewer to interpret the various elements of his compositions'.[32]  British

Decadent illustration can be similarly described, but it, unlike Moreau's work, is

inextricable from the processes of textual reproduction and its physical presence on the

page.


**Image and text: the renegotiated relationship**


What made Decadent illustration, especially in Great Britain, different from other

modes of illustration was its reformulation of the illustrator's role *vis-à-vis* the written

text.  This reconfiguration establishes illustration as an act of critical interpretation,

rejecting the illustrator's traditionally subservient position and liberating illustration from

the dictates of fidelity to both the written text and stylistic realism.  In other words,

Decadent graphic artists adopted illustrational strategies that allowed them to be faithful

interpreters, but also permitted them to elaborate on, challenge, or otherwise diverge from

the literary text.  'Approach[ing] the task of illustration through the sensibilities of a

reader',[33] Beardsley ideally embodies this renegotiated relationship:

> So great was [Beardsley's] respect for the achievements both of graphic art and of
> literature, that he was willing to entertain simultaneously every permutation of
> relationship between them, from absolute dependence to complete autonomy.[34]

Decadent illustration ranges from literal interpretation, or what Lorraine Janzen Kooistra

calls the 'quotation' strategy of illustration,[35] to elaborate, meta-textual exegeses.  Just as

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[32] Reed, *Decadent Style*, p. 133
[33] Nicholas Frankel, 'Aubrey Beardsley "Embroiders" the Literary Text', in *The Victorian Illustrated Book*, ed. by Richard Maxwell (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002), pp. 259–296, 259
[34] Margaret Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner, 'Aubrey Beardsley in the 1990s', *Victorian Studies* 42 (January 1999), pp. 289-302, 297
[35] Kooistra, *The Artist as Critic*, p. 15

Beardsley's illustrations were 'rarely literal',[36] Decadent illustration generally displays

progressive strategies of response such as those identified by Kooistra: 'impression',

'parody', 'answering', and 'cross-dressing'.[37]  The first of these strategies emphasizes

'critical interpretation and decorative embellishment'[38] over literal illustration.  The

second, 'parody', is a method in which the image is thoroughly imbued with the verbal

text, but which maintains its independent critical position.  'Answering' is a model in

which illustration is 'both narrative and ornamental'[39] and serves to form a unified whole

with the text.  Lastly, 'cross-dressing' is a strategy in which illustration and verbal text

seek to become the other, blurring the boundary between the two.  In all of these

strategies, which identify various aspects of Decadent illustration, illustration's

divergence from the verbal text is paramount.

This divergence, though, was not a new phenomenon.  For example, Sybille

Pantazzi reveals the frequency with which publishers commissioned authors to create

texts for already-completed images: 'the matching of text to preexisting pictures was [. . .]

a wide-spread practice which continued late into the 19th century'.[40]  Additionally, the

universality of images also suggested to some the primacy of picture over text.  As *Le

Journal Illustré* argued in its first issue: 'Engraving speaks all languages, it is understood

by all nationalities'.[41]  Laurel Brake suggests yet another way in which illustration was

used to dilute the dominant position of the author; discussing the presence of Decadent

material in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, she argues that 'there is an unmistakable

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[36] Frankel, 'Aubrey Beardsley "Embroiders" the Literary Text', p. 260
[37] Kooistra, *The Artist as Critic*, p. 14
[38] Kooistra, *The Artist as Critic*, p. 17
[39] Kooistra, *The Artist as Critic*, p. 20
[40] Sybille Pantazzi, 'Author and Illustrator: Images in Confrontation', *A History of Book Illustration: 29 Points of View*, ed. by Bill Katz (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1994), pp. 585–600, 586
[41] Qtd. in Paul Jobling and David Crowley, *Graphic Design: Reproduction and Representation since 1800* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996), p. 25

effort to domesticate and gentrify this material by way of illustrations'.[42]  One example

she provides is the publication of Verlaine's poem 'Mon Dieu m'a dit' in *McClure's*

accompanied by 'a sentimental illustration—familial and religious—which occupies

three-quarters of the page'.[43]

Decadent authors and illustrators largely avoided these three conditions by their

working with (generally) sympathetic publishers, illustrating their own work or the work

of other authors to whom they were sympathetic, and eschewing the 'universal' pictorial

language of realism, preferring fantasy as a mode that challenged viewers and defied easy

categorization.  Moreover, Decadent artists and authors sought to dismantle the formal

barriers between decorative art and writing, adopting a strategy similar to Kooistra's

'cross-dressing' model.  For instance, as Frankel argues, Wilde's published texts aspired

toward the visual arts:

> Filled with ornament and illustration, bound in vellum and silk, the earliest
> editions of Wilde's writings almost without exception embody what their author
> called "the imaginative beauty of design", and in some ways have more in
> common with the visual arts than with literature considered as a form of
> expression.[44]

Moving in the opposite direction, Beardsley's graphic work expressed a literate and

literary quality that demanded to be 'read' by its audience, and Beardsley himself worked

hard to establish himself as a writer, 'preferr[ing] to think of himself as a man of letters'.[45]

The movement by Decadent authors and illustrators toward the others' art is a recognition

that both word and image are dependent on textual form.  As Frankel argues, the 'physical

and material forms in which we encounter language necessarily condition our

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[42] Brake, *Subjugated Knowledges*, p. 118
[43] Brake, *Subjugated Knowledges*, p. 119
[44] Frankel, *Oscar Wilde's Decorated Books* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), pp. 3–4
[45] Frankel, 'Aubrey Beardsley "Embroiders" the Literary Text', p. 259

understanding',[46] an observation no less true for illustration, which 'can only exist in a textual condition'.[47]  Writing's and illustration's dependence on the material form of the book or journal helps to explain why all three artists considered in this chapter sought to establish themselves as authors and illustrators.  As complementary practices manifesting themselves in the material text, literature and illustration are aspects of the same *authoring* process, a fact that would have been apparent to self-conscious artists such as Beardsley, Beerbohm, and Ricketts.  Exemplifying this point, Beardsley sought to establish his literary reputation with *Under the Hill*, two illustrations from which are considered here.  As N. John Hall asserts, Beerbohm was 'equally well known in two arts',[48] and his illustrated copy of *Zuleika Dobson* displays him at his best in both realms.  Lastly, Ricketts was also an author and illustrator, producing, for example, combined works of text and image in *Beyond the Threshold* (1929) and in his drawings for Wilde's *Poems in Prose*, the texts of which he reworked and re-authored in *Oscar Wilde: Recollections* (1932).

The attention paid by Decadent authors and illustrators to material form, in turn, had stylistic implications for their respective and overlapping practices, leading both kinds of practitioners into more self-consciously literary and anti-mimetic work.  For authors, the result was a fastidious concern for layout and typography, exemplified, for example, by Beerbohm, who was an 'intimidating fanatic about the details of his books'.[49]  For illustrators, it meant a 'respect for the two-dimensional plane of the flat page',[50] an attitude, Kooistra argues, learned from Japanese art.  The collapsing of signifier and

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[46] Frankel, 'Aubrey Beardsley "Embroiders" the Literary Text', p. 268
[47] Frankel, 'Aubrey Beardsley "Embroiders" the Literary Text', p. 268
[48] Hall, Introduction, *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson*, p. [i]
[49] N. John Hall, *Max Beerbohm: A Kind of a Life* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2002), p. 133
[50] Kooistra, *The Artist as Critic*, p. 27

signified, truth and mask, form and content in Decadent art encouraged these illustrators to abandon the Pre-Raphaelite 'predisposition to realistic interpretation within a decorative context'[51] and to embrace the anti-realist impulses of Japanese wood-block prints.  Ideologically consistent with Decadent conceptions of autonomous language, fantasy served the same function for illustrators, highlighting the artificiality of the page and deploying it for artistic gain.  The advantageousness of this approach is evident in the proliferation of Decadent illustrated texts and in the abundance of fantastic illustrations generally; as Brigid Peppin argues, 'It was in the realms of fantasy that illustration reached its highest levels'.[52]

Defined as a radical strategy of design with an ever-changing relationship to the literary text, Decadent art challenges the traditional meaning of 'illustration', generally understood as literal illustration.  Beardsley was certainly aware of this problematic assumption, evidenced by his use of alternative terms: 'embellished' (*Morte D'Arthur*), 'pictured' (*Salomé*), and 'embroidered' (*The Rape of the Lock*).  As defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'to illustrate' is from the Latin *illustrare*, which is 'to light up, clear up, elucidate, [or] embellish'[53]—a fairly accurate description of the act of illustration, even in its more radical incarnations.  This chapter will, thus, retain the term, but with the caveat that Beardsley's renaming of the term, as Frankel argues, places emphasis on the 'activity of the illustrator rather than the immanence of illustration',[54] and, 'insofar as the term *illustration* has any use, it bears more on the totality of the text than its does on any

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[51] Kooistra, *The Artist as Critic*, p. 28

[52] Brigid Peppin, *Fantasy: The Golden Age of Fantastic Illustration* (New York: New American Library, 1976), p. 7

[53] *OED* on-line [accessed 12 May 2010]

[54] Frankel, 'Aubrey Beardsley "Embroiders" the Literary Text', p. 262

given moment'.[55]  Defined, thus, as a relationship more than a product, illustration

becomes characterized by an essential transmutability, a movement between text and

image, and from image to image.  Meaning in Decadent illustration, both inter-textually

and intra-textually, ceases to be fixed, and its figures become, in Chris Snodgrass' words,

'a void [. . .] through which each alternative meaning passes, in turn, oscillating, with no

one meaning establishing supremacy'.[56]  This dissociation of image from text, or at least

the disruption of a necessary relationship between the two, is an important aspect of

Decadent illustration contributing to its fantastical quality, implicating literality in

general through its countermanding of literal interpretation.

The sense of restless movement evoked by Snodgrass and Frankel, however, runs

counter to definitions of Decadent art put forth by Camille Paglia, Reed, and other critics

who view Decadent art as fundamentally *static*.  For example, in *Sexual Personae*, Paglia

employs phrases such as 'Decadent stasis'[57] (in reference to Whistler's *Arrangement in

Gray and Black*), and contrasts to 'High Romantic energy', the 'Late Romantic stasis' of

Pre-Raphaelite painting.[58]  Paglia employs 'Pre-Raphaelite' synonymously with

'Decadent' because the former fits her (implied) definition of the latter, which, in David

Weir's words, is 'alternately Apollonian and Dionysian, male and female, uncontrolled

and disciplined, profuse and precise'.[59]  In other words, Paglia defines Decadence as a

nebulous concourse for competing forces, which sometimes coexist and sometimes

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[55] Frankel, 'Aubrey Beardsley "Embroiders" the Literary Text', p. 262

[56] Chris Snodgrass, 'Beardsley's Oscillating Spaces: Play, Paradox, and the Grotesque', in *Reconsidering Aubrey Beardsley*, ed. by Robert Langenfeld (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), p. 33

[57] Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (London: Yale UP, 1990), p. 505

[58] Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, p. 490

[59] David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 2

alternate.  This definition allows her, in spite of her insistence on Decadence's static

quality, to describe how:

> Pre-Raphaelite art, like Mannerism, disturbingly avoids pictorial focus.  Our eye
> is not automatically guided to the human figures but is *forced to wander* [my
> emphasis] over the microscopic detail.[60]

Content and style that forces the eye 'to wander' surely cannot embody stasis.  Yet Paglia

quickly returns to her description of Decadence as stasis, describing 'Decadent frozen

tableau[x]'.[61]  Paglia's back-and-forth, however, serves only to undermine her argument.

Reed engenders these same contradictions in his definition.  For example, he describes

Moreau's paintings as 'often depict[ing] static conflicts of opposed but related powers

(Oedipus and the Sphinx, Hercules and the Hydra)'.[62]  Since he has labeled Moreau the

quintessential Decadent, one must assume that the stasis he describes in Moreau is

applicable to all Decadent art; however, Reed's discussion of Beardsley's illustrations

undermines this definition.  For example, he refers to Beardsley's 'turbulent'[63] and 'hairpin

serpentine'[64] line and the 'restless agitation achieved by elaborate detail'.[65]  He elaborates

further: 'His designs tease and tantalize, offering no rest for the eye'.[66]  The drawings'

power to coerce the eye from one detail to another is detected by both Paglia and Reed,

and it is this power that underscores the movement inherent in Decadent illustration.

   Beardsley's centrality to any definition of Decadent illustration has been by now

well established.  Among his most well-known designs are the ones he created for

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[60] Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, p. 490
[61] Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, p. 490
[62] Reed, *Decadent Style*, p. 137
[63] Reed, *Decadent Style*, p. 159
[64] Reed, *Decadent Style*, p. 161
[65] Reed, *Decadent Style*, p. 161
[66] Reed, *Decadent Style*, p. 168

Wilde's *Salomé*, but *Under the Hill*[67] and its accompanying illustrations best demonstrate

Beardsley's theories of the relationship between image and text, reinforcing, furthermore,

that fantasy is an essential mode to both. Free from any questions about Beardsley's

personal relationship to Wilde, *Under the Hill* establishes that the attributes of his *Salomé*

illustrations are essential qualities of British Decadent illustration in general. In fact,

Mario Praz, who points to Moreau and Rops as the essential Decadent artists, also says of

Beardsley's novel that the 'essence of the English decadent school is contained in the

forty odd pages of [. . .] *Under the Hill*'.[68] Praz is largely referring to Beardsley's prose in

this remark,[69] but one might extrapolate from this, and add that *Under the Hill*, in its

juxtaposition of image and text, most effectively epitomizes, not just British Decadent

prose, but also British Decadent illustration.

Since Beardsley died before completing his romance, neither the text nor the

illustrations are complete. If one counts the two drawings for 'The Ballad of a Barber'—

intended to form part of *Under the Hill*, but published separately in *The Savoy*—then

there are more than ten illustrations to the text.[70] These illustrations, in Stetz and Lasner's

phrase again, run the gamut from 'dependence to [. . .] autonomy'. For example, *The

Ascension of Saint Rose of Lima* (**figure 2**) illustrates the text, but the moment it

represents is merely one thought in an extended list of thoughts the Abbé Franfreluche

(hereafter referred to as Tannhäuser) entertains upon waking in Venusberg. He thought

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[67] The novel was titled *Under the Hill* in *The Savoy* and in John Lane's 1904 posthumous collection of Beardsley's writings, but the novel was called *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* in a prospectus of books printed in *Belles Lettres* (1894).

[68] Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, p. 342

[69] He does compare *Under the Hill* to the *Hypnerotomachia* (1499), suggesting that he means the prose and illustrations; however, Praz never explicitly discusses the relationship between the two texts' illustrations.

[70] Emma Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism in the 1890s* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), p. 6

'[o]f Saint Rose',[71] but the reader is also told that he thought 'of a hundred other things'.[72]

His thoughts range from seemingly material objects—'a pair of blonde trousers', the

'opening of Racine's *Britannicus*', a 'strange pamphlet [. . .] called *A Plea for the*

*Domestication of the Unicorn*'[73]—to flights of pure fantasy or abstraction—Saint Rose's

ascension and 'love'.  These moments, too, are revealed to be purely literary.  Saint Rose's

ascension, rather than remaining simply a reverie, becomes *textualized* and

contextualized by the addition of a footnote, which implores the reader to consult 'Mother

Ursula's *Ineffable and Miraculous Life of the Flower of Lima*'.[74]  Beardsley ascends to

ever-greater heights of self-reference and artificiality.  Mother Ursula's text is non-

existent; Snodgrass calls it an 'all too "precious," and utterly bogus footnote'.[75]  Not only

does Beardsley fictionalize an apparatus symbolizing textual authority (the footnote), but

he extends the ruse by quoting Mother Ursula: '"Truly [. . .] to chronicle the girlhood of

this holy virgin makes as delicate a task as to trace the forms of some slim, sensitive

plant, whose lightness, sweetness, and simplicity defy and trouble the most cunning

pencil"'.[76]  Here Beardsley appears to be commenting on his own illustration of Saint

Rose; his 'cunning pencil'[77] employed to trace those same qualities he lists.  The lightness

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[71] Aubrey Beardsley, *Under the Hill: A Romantic Story*, *The Savoy* (April 1896), pp. 187–196, 187
[72] Beardsley, *Under the Hill*, *The Savoy* (April 1896), p. 191
[73] Beardsley, *Under the Hill*, *The Savoy* (April 1896), pp. 187–188; these 'material' objects themselves are almost exclusively works of literature (or art), and should not be considered as counterpoints (grounded in the 'real world') to the other, fantastical thoughts he has.  A further level of literariness is also added by realizing that the reference to Racine's *Britannicus* is a self-conscious allusion to the structure of Beardsley's own text, since the thoughts and actions of the title character in *Britannicus* do nothing to propel forward the plot, which is a meta-textual commentary on Tannhäuser's own thoughts, circulating in a self-contained fictional world.
[74] Beardsley, *Under the Hill*, *The Savoy* (April 1896), p. 188n
[75] Snodgrass, *Dandy of the Grotesque*, p. 24
[76] Beardsley, *Under the Hill*, *The Savoy* (April 1896), p. 188
[77] For a explanation of Beardsley drawing method, particularly how he sketched in pencil first, see Stephen Calloway, 'A Note on Aubrey Beardsley's Working Methods', *Aubrey Beardsley* (London: V&A Publications, 1998), p. 220, and Robert Ross, *Aubrey Beardsley* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1909), pp. 38–39

is also apparent in the act of ascension itself, but this is countermanded by the bulky and

very European style of dress, pinned in the back by a rose.  It is Saint Mary, whose

billowy robes spread across the page, who best exemplifies this 'lightness'; yet this, too, is

undone by the contrast of black and white, with Saint Rose in the 'light' hue of white, and

Mary in 'heavy' black robes.  Not only does Beardsley's footnote appear to refer to his

own illustration, it also purposefully conflates and confuses writing and illustration,

trading on the ambiguity created by suggesting both writing and illustration with his

phrase 'cunning pencil'.

Stylistically, *Saint Rose* differs from some of the other illustrations to *Under the

Hill* insofar as its debts to Beardsley's *Salomé*-era, *Japonisme*[78] aesthetic are apparent.

By displaying elements of Japanese art, Beardsley's drawing signals its anti-mimetic

tenor.  Specifically, the illustration adopts an asymmetrical layout, exhibits Beardsley's

signature use of blank space, and (at least with regard to Saint Rose and the Madonna)

restricts itself to two-dimensional design.  Additionally, the floating figures of Saint Rose

and Mary evoke the floating figures from the *Salomé* drawings, displaying another trait

borrowed from Japanese woodcut design.  Whereas the *Salomé* illustrations floated for

reasons unrelated to the text, however, *Saint Rose* faithfully illustrates the textual

reference to Saint Rose's ascension.  Because Beardsley authored the text, though, he is

responsible for the literary and artistic choice to depict Saint Rose's ascension, choosing

in both instances to embody a moment of supernatural flight.  Furthermore, the drawing's

perspective amplifies its artificiality.  Unlike other famous illustrations of ascension,

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[78] Zatlin defines *Japonisme* as a 'mingling of Japanese with Western stylistic idioms' (*Beardsley,
Japonisme, and the Perversion of the Victorian Ideal* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997], p. 35).

especially Titian's *Assunta* (1516–1518)[79] and Rubens' *The Assumption of the Virgin*

(completed in 1626),[80] Beardsley's illustration is from a perspective level to and directly

facing Saint Rose and Mary, rather than from underneath.  The two virgins are floating

high above the ground, as evidenced by their disproportional size compared with the

landscape, placing the viewer in a similarly impossible position.  Not only do the

illustration's *Japonisme* style and fantastical perspective announce its artificiality, but the

drawing's combination of styles also emphasizes its status as an aesthetic object.  For

example, the three-dimensionality of the more realistically rendered landscape is

contrasted with the two-dimensionality of Saint Rose and Mary, undercutting the mimetic

claims of three-dimensional landscape representation by exposing its status as an

aesthetic choice.  Lastly, the Madonna, modeled in part on the side-altar sculpture of the

Madonna of Victory at the Brompton Oratory according to Snodgrass,[81] evokes a baroque

style through her elaborate crown and halo.  No less ostentatiously artificial than

Japanese design, baroque and rococo styles are redolent of fantasy.

Significantly different in style, *The Fruit Bearers* (**figure 3**) uses a much denser,

eighteenth-century aesthetic.  In both its technique and its relationship to the text,

however, it is just as fantastical as *Saint Rose*.  To begin with, *The Fruit Bearers*' 'dense

stippling and other elaborate ornamentation'[82] transforms the depicted scene into one of

almost-abstract design.  Brigid Brophy notes, furthermore, that the figures in the drawing

are themselves more suggestive of *objets d'art* than the individuals they are meant to

represent: '[t]he cloven-hoof feet of the leading fruit bearer [. . .] are almost goat feet of

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[79] Altarpiece at the Basilica de Santa Maria Goriosa dei Frari in Venice
[80] Altarpiece at the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekathedraal in Antwerp
[81] Snodgrass, *Dandy of the Grotesque*, p. 24
[82] Snodgrass, 'Decadent Parodies: Aubrey Beardsley's Caricature of Meaning', in *Fin de Siècle/Fin du Globe*, ed. by John Stokes (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pp. 178–209, 201

rococo and Regency furniture'.[83]  Secondly, the illustration amalgamates varied artistic styles and transforms them into a multivalent decorative pattern.  The perspective of the terrace, for example, recalls the collapsing of space between foreground and background in medieval painting, while the trellis of roses suggests elaborate Pre-Raphaelite borders. Beardsley's commingling and re-appropriation of styles from aesthetic history serves further to emphasize his own artificial style.

In addition to a highly artificial style, *The Fruit Bearers* shares with *Saint Rose* its relationship to the novella's prose in that it illustrates a moment from the text, but the importance of this moment to the whole novella seems marginal.  Identifying which moment the drawing is meant to illustrate is itself difficult, partly because of the text's incompleteness and varied publication history, but also because of its inherent ambiguity. For instance, in both *The Savoy* and John Lane's 1904 edition, the drawing is located within chapter three, but the scene it appears to illustrate most is the footnote describing the ballet 'Bacchanals of Sporion', which appears in chapter four of those same editions. This footnote becomes chapter five in Smithers' 1907 edition, which is derived from Beardsley's unfinished manuscript (and from which the illustrations are omitted).  In John Glassco's 1959 edition, which he 'complete[s]',[84] the footnote also becomes chapter five. Furthermore, Glassco places *The Fruit Bearers* at the end of chapter five, suggesting that he reads the drawing as a depiction of the ballet.  Glassco's reading seems accurate because a key scene of the ballet is the marching of a 'troop of satyrs [. . .] bearing in their hands nuts and green boughs and flowers and roots, and whatsoever the forest yielded, to

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[83] Brophy, *Black and White: A Portrait of Aubrey Beardsley* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), p. 46
[84] Aubrey Beardsley and John Glassco, *Under the Hill* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 8

heap upon the altar of the mysterious Pan'.[85]  The illustration's lead fruit bearer is, indeed,

a satyr carrying what appears to be fruit and gourds.  Smithers' 1907 edition, however,

complicates this reading.  Whereas the footnote in *The Savoy* consists solely of Marquis

de Vandésir's impressions of the ballet,[86] Smithers' version includes a frame narrative in

which Venus' retinue prepares to watch a performance of the ballet:

> After the fruits and fresh wines had been brought in by a troop of woodland
> creatures, decked with green leaves and all sorts of Spring flowers, the candles in
> the orchestra were lit, and in another moment the musicians bustled into their
> places.[87]

This description is a doubling of the ballet's action, mimicking the satyrs' march.  *The*

*Fruit Bearers* title, along with the fact that the satyr, indeed, carries fruit in the drawing,

strongly suggests that this is the textual moment that the drawing illustrates rather than

the ballet itself, which does not explicitly mention fruit.  However, Beardsley

purposefully confuses and conflates the two scenes, creating parallel narratives that

underscore the novella's self-containment and artificiality.  The work of art (the ballet) is

performed within another work of art (the novella), which itself amalgamates pastiches

and parodies of numerous other texts.  As Matthew Potolsky argues, '[s]imply by writing

a version of Tannhäuser [. . .] Beardsley evokes a constellation of predecessors',[88]

including 'Heine, Wagner, Baudelaire, Morris, Swinburne, [and] Pater'.[89]  The ambiguous

and myriad referentiality of *The Fruit Bearers* generates a perpetual oscillation between

interpretations.

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[85] Beardsley, *Under the Hill*, *The Savoy* (April 1896), p. 188n
[86] Beardsley, *Under the Hill*, *The Savoy*, p. 188
[87] Beardsley, *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser: A Romantic Novel* (London: [Leonard Smithers], 1907), p. 47
[88] Potolsky, 'The Decadent Counterpublic', *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, 48 (November 2007) <http://www.erudit.org/revue/ravon/2007/v/n48/017444ar.html> [accessed 22 July 2010] (para. 16 of 25)
[89] Potolsky, 'The Decadent Counterpublic', (para. 11 of 25)

Not only does *The Fruit Bearers* purposefully equivocate between the ballet and its frame narrative, but its placement within chapter three in *The Savoy* version cannot be dismissed as accidental either, assuming that, at least with regard to the magazine's first number, Beardsley exerted some influence over the layout. Furthermore, according to the note Smithers appended to the end of chapter four in *The Savoy*, Beardsley had planned another illustration for the 'Bacchanals of Sporion'. This fact suggests that *The Fruit Bearers* was not intended to illustrate the ballet scene: 'owing to Mr. Beardsley's illness he has been unable to finish one of his full-page drawings to Chapter IV. of "Under the Hill," *i.e.,* "The Bacchanals of Sporion"'.[90] One might assume, then, that Beardsley, indeed, meant for *The Fruit Bearers* to illustrate, as Ian Fletcher argues, 'the banquet scene from chapter 3'.[91] If this drawing is meant to illustrate the banquet scene, however, it does not do so in any literal way. In fact, chapter three begins with a description of the terrace, which is present in the illustration, but the 'bearers' go unmentioned. Instead, there is a 'huge bronze fountain with three basins'.[92] The third of these basins, Beardsley writes, is 'held by a group of grotesquely attenuated satyrs'.[93] One must assume that these satyrs are sculptures rather than the seemingly active figures in the illustration; however, one might also interpret the figures themselves as static supports for the bowls or basins that they are holding overhead. The drawing and the text are individually ambiguous, a situation exacerbated by the image-text relationship. For instance, if the satyr is, indeed, a sculpture rather than a living figure, then it still does not accurately represent the basin element described by Beardsley as being held up by a

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[90] Smithers, Publisher's Note, *The Savoy* (April 1896), p. [197]
[91] Fletcher, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 151
[92] Beardsley, *Under the Hill*, in *The Savoy*, p. 165
[93] Beardsley, *Under the Hill*, in *The Savoy*, p. 165

*group* of satyrs.  A more plausible explanation for the drawing is that the satyr is

functioning as a signifier in various capacities throughout the illustrations and the written

text, but in each instance, rather than signifying something in the 'real world', the satyr

represents an artifact or aspect of a design.  The satyr figure appears elsewhere in chapter

three, for instance, as a 'circlet of satyrs'[94] painted around a breast.  Satyrs repeatedly

appear as design elements in the fabric of the novella's prose and pictures, and their

reiterations underscore the fact that signifiers within the text—the satyrs being just one

example—refer only to other aspects of the novella and not to an external world.

The  stylistic and linguistic back-and-forth present in theses illustrations and their

textual environment forms just one part of the 'play' inherent in the text.  Linda Dowling

elaborates on this play.  She first identifies the gender and sexual free-play generated by

the text: 'The mock-heroic reductionism of Beardsley's tale is intent, not simply on

reducing all behavior to sexual behavior—the premise of pornography—but on revealing

all behavior, including sex, as play'.[95]  In part, Beardsley does this by filtering all

behavior into language and linguistic performance.  Even his illustrations, according to

Dowling, participate in this linguistic performance.  She continues: 'Beardsley's is a

textual world, inscribed and superinscribed with decorative motifs [. . .] The ubiquitous

decorative motifs, moreover, are to be "read" as texts, for the inhabitants of Venus's

underworld all amuse themselves by', and she quotes *Under the Hill* here, '"finding a

delightful meaning in the fall of festoon, turn of twig and twist of branch . . . [or] what

thing was intended by a certain arrangement of roses"'.[96]  Unlike Moreau's work, which

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[94] Beardsley, *Under the Hill, The Savoy*, p. 169
[95] Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986), p. 145
[96] Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p. 146

demands to be read because it breaks into separate and disparate parts, Beardsley's

graphic work demands to be read because his images inhabit a linguistic world (the

Venusberg, in this case).  Meaning in the texts Beardsley illustrates is generated by the

relationship between word and image to the degree which the images themselves become

linguistic signifiers.  As Kooistra argues, '[m]eaning is the product of language, and

exists in the dialogic relations between [among other things] image and text'.[97]  It is in

such a linguistic world in which Beardsley blithely ignores notions of linguistic 'fitness'

and in which the importance, or ineluctability, of linguistic, ontological, and graphic

ambiguity becomes paramount.


**Max Beerbohm, *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson***


Beerbohm's watercolor drawings for his only finished novel, *Zuleika Dobson*, are

further examples of Decadent illustrations that renegotiate the relationship between image

and text.  Although the novel first appeared in 1911, the illustrated version of *Zuleika* was

never published in the author's lifetime.  Instead, what N. John Hall has titled *The

Illustrated Zuleika Dobson* (first published in 1985) is a facsimile of Beerbohm's 'special

copy'[98] of the book.  During the two months after the novel's publication in October,

Beerbohm drew eighty watercolor drawings (twenty of them full-page illustrations) into a

published copy of text.[99]  In addition to the drawings, Beerbohm added 'photographs',

'prints', 'newspaper clippings', and other additions, most of which did not make it into

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[97] Kooistra, *The Artist as Critic*, p. 234
[98] Hall, Introduction, *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson*, p. [iii]
[99] Hall, Introduction, *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson*, p. [ii]

Hall's facsimile version.[100]  Regaling his friends and family with the book, Beerbohm

nonetheless never sought to have it published as a whole.

One reason for Beerbohm's reluctance to publish the illustrated copy of his book

might be his ostensible reservation about the publishing of illustrated fiction in general.

This hesitancy manifested itself in a number of ways: in the stipulation in his contract

with Heinemann, which stated that no illustrated copy of *Zuleika Dobson* could be

printed without his consent;[101] in Beerbohm's decision to illustrate the text only after it

was published; and in published remarks he made about his opposition to illustrated

fiction.  One example is a 1900 review of a stage adaptation of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*:

> I do not like to read a novel in an illustrated edition.  The process is
> uncomplimentary either to the author or to myself [. . .] If I cannot see the
> characters in a novel, then they are not worth seeing.  If I can see them, then any
> other man's definite presentment of them seems to be an act of impertinence to
> myself and of impiety to the author.[102]

Because Beerbohm is the author and illustrator of *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson*,

however, the question of impiety toward the author becomes irrelevant.  Other factors

encourage one to dismiss his injunctions against illustrated fiction.  For instance,

Beerbohm agreed to supply a frontispiece depicting Zuleika for the 1946 reprint of the

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[100] Hall, Introduction, *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson*, p. [xiv]

[101] Hall, *Max Beerbohm: A Kind of a Life*, p. 137

[102] Beerbohm, 'Tess', in *Around Theatres* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953), pp. 65-68, 65.  Another instance of Beerbohm's disapproving of illustrated fiction is found in his copy of Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (London: Brentano's, 1926), housed in the Beerbohm Collection, Merton College, Oxford University (archives no. 3.116).  As the title page states, this copy is 'intimately illustrated by Ralph Barton', and nearly all of these drawings are fervently penciled out by Beerbohm, who adds a note on the title page: 'the book explains itself perfectly and delightfully.  It needs no illustrations.  And its realism is contradicted and bedevilled by the dreadful little would-be funny pictures foisted in'.  Beerbohm's objection here is to illustrations that seek to 'explain' the text in which they are printed, and his opposition to 'realism' as a mode   Furthermore, this quotation is an apt description of what Beerbohm achieves by illustrating *Zuleika*, suggesting that 'contradict[ing] and bedevill[ing]' realism is an activity Beerbohm supports in the first place.

novel, in addition to his supplying illustrations for several other works.[103]  One of these

other works was the inclusion of six drawings appended to the American version of *Seven*

*Men* (1920), which Beerbohm justified by offering these drawings in case he failed for

'lack of literary art, to make actual to the reader an image of this or that man described'.[104]

N. John Hall warns readers, though, that 'one can't take literally anything of this sort that

Max says',[105] which might reasonably be extended to Beerbohm's injunction against

illustrated fiction in general (especially when one considers Beerbohm's frequently

paradoxical stance on the issue).

> Beerbohm continues his argument in the same review of *Tess*:
>
> If my first reading of a novel is done from an illustrated edition, I cannot see the
> characters for myself: my imagination is paralysed, and I can see them only as
> they are shown in the pictures [. . .] No embodiment, howsoever nearly
> accurate, of a mental image can ever satisfy me, can do anything but offend me.
> The mind's eye and the body's see too differently.  The mind's eye sees many
> things which cannot appear in a picture.  It sees things moving and in three
> dimensions.  Also, it is blind to many trivialities of detail which cannot be omitted
> in an actual picture.  It does not say "There is no high-light on the toe of the hero's
> boots"; for the hero's boots do not occur to it.  But in a picture a hero must wear
> boots, and there must, accordingly, be a high-light on the toe; else the eye of the
> body would be offended.[106]

It is somewhat ironic, though, that he would choose to single out a 'hero's boots' to focus

on, considering that feet in his caricatures tend to taper into non-existence, or are large,

ungainly globs; as Sanford Schwartz argues, Beerbohm's 'boots [. . .] at first seem plainly

crude but [. . .] in time make us realize how much Beerbohm's pictures are pervaded by a

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[103] Some further examples include Beerbohm's illustrations for a stage adaptation of his fairy tale 'The
Happy Hypocrite' (first published in *The Yellow Book* [October 1896], pp. 11–44) and agreed to a request in
1952 for Osbert Lancaster to paint twelve scenes from the novel for the Randolph Hotel, Oxford, even
going so far as to send sketches of the characters and suggest scenes for illustration (see N. John Hall, *Max
Beerbohm: A Kind of a Life*, p. 242)
[104] Beerbohm, 'Appendix', *Seven Men* (New York: Knopf, 1924), p. 220
[105] Hall, Introduction, *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson*, p. [ii]
[106] Beerbohm, 'Tess', pp. 65-66

neatly expressed clumpiness'.[107]  No matter how neatly expressed, clumpiness does not

connote anything close to the 'definite presentment' Beerbohm warns against; rather, it

contributes to the vision expressed in Beerbohm's corpus of graphic work, which

Schwartz describes as a 'vision of a race of rubberoids, contorting themselves in the

beautifully minimal, palely drawn, deliberately cardboard-thin settings he liked to

include'.[108]  In such a vision, representations of characters, real or imagined, never

threaten to solidify into any concrete or definite images, which could restrict the free-play

of the reader's imagination.  Instead, Beerbohm's caricatures, his illustrations for *Zuleika*

included, open up further possibilities for the free-play of imagination and demand a

greater movement inter-textually and inter-pictorially.

Beerbohm's view of illustrated fiction explains why it was not until 1985 that N.

John Hall, with some hesitation,[109] published *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson*.  Since then

the audience for the illustrated novel has been much wider than Beerbohm and the select

few to whom he showed the original.  The question of whether or not the illustrations

interfere with the free-play of the reader's imagination, thus, becomes relevant once more.

A number of the drawings are representations of the characters themselves: twenty of

Zuleika—plus one of her lips alone—and fifteen of (at least some part of) the Duke of

Dorset, along with drawings of many minor characters.  Beerbohm, therefore, seems to

be providing the reader with 'definite presentment[s]' of the characters; however, a closer

examination of the illustrations reveals that they work against providing any definite

presentment of the characters.  Sanford Schwartz's understanding of Beerbohm's vision as

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[107] Sanford Schwartz, 'The Tiny Grandeur of Max Beerbohm', *The New York Review of Books* 50 (13 February 2003), pp. 8-10, 10
[108] Schwartz, 'The Tiny Grandeur of Max Beerbohm', p. 10
[109] Hall, *Max Beerbohm: A Kind of a Life*, p. 138

being one of a 'race of rubberoids' reveals one way that the illustrations work against

concretization in the readers' minds. Beerbohm's drawings are frequently visually fluid

sketches, rather than concrete representations of human form, and the way he manages to

turn his subjects into such pliable, contorted figures is through exaggeration. In 'The

Spirit of Caricature' (1901), he defines caricature as 'the art of exaggerating, without fear

or favour, the peculiarities of this or that human body, for the mere sake of

exaggeration'.[110] He adds that one of the two reasons caricatures are unpopular is that

they do not look like the subjects they are supposed to represent. The demand for

verisimilitude, especially in illustrated journalism, was a common one, but it misses the

point of caricature as Beerbohm defines it: 'caricaturists [. . .] are in some sort students of

human character through the human form'.[111] He argues elsewhere, in regard to his own

method of caricature, that he '*saw* [his] subjects, not in their presence, but afterwards, in

[his] memory, when [he] sat down to draw them'.[112] Caricature, then, both eschews

physical resemblance and seeks, instead, to depict the 'spiritual' truth of the subject. In

doing this, as Beerbohm explains, 'caricature [. . .] demands acute imaginations from its

beholders'.[113] The subject in caricature is entirely transformed: 'not only must every line

and curve of him have been tampered with: the fashion of his clothes must have been re-

cut [. . .] His complexion, too, and the colour of his hair must have been changed [. . .]

And he will stand there wholly transformed'.[114] What is caricatured, then, is so

transformed that to recall the original subject after having seen it so altered requires an

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[110] Beerbohm, 'The Spirit of Caricature', in *A Variety of Things* (London: Heinemann, 1953), pp. 139-149, 143
[111] Beerbohm, Introduction, *The Portrait Drawings of William Rothenstein 1889-1925* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1926), pp. xi–xiv, xii
[112] Beerbohm, *The Letters of Max Beerbohm, 1892-1956*, ed. by Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Norton, 1988), p. 235
[113] Beerbohm, 'The Spirit of Caricature', p. 143
[114] Beerbohm, 'The Spirit of Caricature', p. 147

act of imagination, one which contravenes the closing off of imagination expected by

illustrations that pose as accurate representations of their subjects.  Therefore,

Beerbohm's 'caricatures' of his novel's characters, instead of standing in for whatever

images the reader extracts from the prose of the text, actually create a multiplicity of

representations in addition to, rather than in place of, those formed by the verbal

descriptions of a character.

It would at first seem incongruous to discuss drawings of fictional characters as

caricatures, since the act of exaggeration would imply a subject with a set of finite

features to exaggerate.  To exaggerate the features of a fictional character is to create an

additional level of artifice, especially considering that the characters in the novel are not

characters in any conventional sense, but, instead, are embodiments of stylistic modes.

For instance, Lawrence Danson argues that Zuleika's voice embodies a literary mode that

'derives largely from that of the conventional modern romance (whether stage melodrama

or novel) with its pretensions to realism', while the Duke of Dorset is revealed to be

another literary mode: 'his mode is more obviously fantastic'.[115]  Danson concludes, as

quoted in the previous chapter, that the Duke is epic while Zuleika is novel.  Caricaturing

these literary modes removes them even further from faithful representations of 'real'

characters, and looking at some representative caricatures of Zuleika and of the Duke

reveals how just how far removed they are.

Of all the characters in the novel, Zuleika would seem to be the one whose

depiction would require the most accuracy; 'any false step here were fatal',[116] N. John

Hall argues, since it is Zuleika's beauty that sends nearly the entire undergraduate body of

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[115] Danson, *Max Beerbohm and the Act of Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), p. 119
[116] Hall, Introduction, *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson*, p. [iv]

Oxford to its death.  However, Hall asserts that 'to have drawn a photographically realistic woman would of course have been entirely wrong'.[117]  Clearly it would be impossible to draw the superlatively beautiful Zuleika accurately, since she is an idealized notion of beauty; therefore, the drawings of Zuleika are already precluded from being replicas of Zuleika as described in the text.  Hall, though, states in his introduction that, the drawings are 'precise visual embodiments of Max's prose', adding that 'if one reads the appropriate text and looks at the drawing and turns back to the text, one finds a nearly perfect reciprocity, a relation such as Hillis Miller sees in connection with Dickens and Cruikshank'.[118]  Hillis Miller describes this relationship as 'an oscillation or shimmering of meaning in which neither [picture nor text] can be said to be prior',[119] and even in the construction of *Zuleika Dobson* this might have been true, since Beerbohm would often sketch his characters in the manuscripts of his works (and elsewhere), leading Hall to speculate that 'it is even conceivable that Max drew some similar version of Zuleika in the margin of the manuscript before describing her in the text'.[120]  This reciprocity between image and text, however, is not one of direct illustration.  When the text describes Zuleika's neck, for instance, as 'imitation-marble'[121]—already a doubly artificial description—one cannot find in any of the drawings a corresponding illustration.

The reciprocity between image and word is not one in which each expands on the other.  In the case of Zuleika's neck, the drawings work dialogically to create an impossible picture in the reader's mind of a neck, artificial, stiff and solid, yet fluid and often stretched out in the 'rubberoid' fashion described by Schwartz.  For example, the

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[117] Hall, Introduction, *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson*, p. [iv]
[118] Hall, Introduction, *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson*, p. [iii]
[119] J. Hillis Miller, *Victorian Subjects* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 155
[120] Hall, Introduction, *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson*, p. [v]
[121] Beerbohm, *Zuleika Dobson*, p. 10

full-page illustration of Zuleika's performing her conjuring tricks for the undergraduates

(**figure 4**), in which she is holding the Magic Canister, depicts Zuleika's body grotesquely

elongated, her neck stretched and thinned beyond any shape imaginable in marble.

Instead of suggesting marble, her body and, by extension, her bodice (**figure 5**) are

visually linked to the drawing of the egg in the 'Demon Egg-Cup' (**figure 6**) by the

graphic match between the two images.  The verbal description of this textual moment

does not correspond to the drawing of Zuleika's conjuring trick any more than the general

description of Zuleika earlier in the novel.  In fact, the text offers competing physical

descriptions; Beerbohm describes 'how she might have seemed to a casual observer':

> Hither and thither she fared, her neck and arms gleaming white from the luminous
> blackness of her dress, in the luminous blueness of the night.  At a distance, she
> might have been a wraith; or a breeze made visible; a vagrom breeze, warm and
> delicate, and in league with death.[122]

Yet this description is already negated in the text by the Duke's perception of her: to him,

the reader is told, 'there was nothing weird about her: she was radiantly a woman; a

goddess; and his first and last love'.[123]  The textual descriptions polarize Zuleika as either

wraith or goddess, delicate or robust.  The drawing of her, while incorporating some of

these aspects, undermines them at the same time.  The 'luminous' blackness of her dress

and the 'luminous' blueness of the night blend into a pale wash of gray, which also shades

and dulls the 'gleaming white' of her skin.  Furthermore, it negates the 'radiance' of the

Duke's description.  The illustration reconciles the color contrast of the verbal

description(s) and simultaneously inverts that contrast into a more-or-less uniformly

colored caricature.

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[122] Beerbohm, *Zuleika Dobson*, p. 164
[123] Beerbohm, *Zuleika Dobson*, p. 164

The drawing also negates Beerbohm's description of Zuleika as a delicate breeze.

The heavy shading present all along the right of Zuleika's dress might portend death, and,

thus, be consistent with Beerbohm's description, but the heavy application of the pencil

lends a weight to the dress which anchors Zuleika, depriving her of the power of a

goddess and challenging the description of her as a breeze.  Both text and illustration

work conjointly to undo any fixed notions of identity.  The text makes direct illustration

impossible to begin with by presenting competing descriptions, and then the illustration

contravenes both of them.  In doing so, the image does not come to replace the textual

descriptions.  Not only is the illustration stylistically dialectical—contrasting Beerbohm's

fluid, curving lines with intentional clumpiness—but, read in conjunction with the

caption (an excerpt of the Duke's introduction of Zuleika, which reads: 'she had earned

the esteem of the whole civilized world'), it becomes impossible to extract one prevailing

image of Zuleika.  With the text offering competing descriptions, the illustration

dialectically undoing itself, the drawing so sharply contrasting with a caption that was an

insincere statement on the part of the Duke in the first place (he rates Zuleika as a

mediocre talent at best), and the interaction between image and text continually creating

and disassembling the figure of Zuleika, it becomes apparent that the reciprocity between

image and text that Hall notes is not a reciprocity that builds toward an enlarged

understanding of the character depicted—if, indeed, the drawing is, as this one is, of an

actual character present in the novel (and many are not)—but instead is a relationship that

deconstructs and parodies the other.  Hall is not precisely correct when he suggests that

the text illustrates the drawings and vice versa. 'Illustrate' in this sense has the

connotation of the 'definite presentment' of which Beerbohm disapproves; instead, the

novel—prose and drawings—epitomizes the Decadent mode, which Linda Dowling describes as a 'counterpoetics of disruption and parody and stylistic derangement'.[124] She adds to this that, 'The world as it [. . .] survives in Decadent writing is [. . .] a belated world, a place of hesitations and contrarieties and exhaustions'.[125] Decadent illustration compounds the hesitations, contrarieties and exhaustions of the world as it is presented in Decadent prose by undercutting the seemingly more concrete world available to what Beerbohm calls the body's eye, which perceives a visible world that appears static and solid, but which, translated into the verbal world, is much more easily circumnavigated by the mind's eye.

The illustrations of the Duke, no less than those of Zuleika, undermine fixed interpretation of both the text and the Duke's character. At first glance, one might assume otherwise because the illustrations largely possess the same graphic style as his other drawings. (In fact, essentially all of Beerbohm's oeuvre is stylistically similar.) This consistency of design might seem at odds with the wide variety of literary modes employed throughout the novel, suggesting that, if not the pictures of Zuleika, then at least the drawings of the Duke impart the definite presentment of character that Beerbohm had warned against. However, both an inter-illustrational reading of the images and a close examination of Beerbohm's line itself reveal that consistency of style among multiple drawings does not translate into graphic stasis within any one drawing. For example, the illustration depicting Zuleika's pouring of a jug of water onto the Duke's head (**figure 7**) demonstrates the free-play of Beerbohm's style. The background is composed entirely of curving lines, some representing the water, and the others the night.

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[124] Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p. x
[125] Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p. x

The lines explode away from the Duke's upturned face in a starburst that exemplifies

motion.  Underneath the lines of water coming off of the Duke, dark lines swoop down in

a curve parallel to the tilt of the Duke's body, but in a direction that jars with the

movement of the water.  The Duke himself approximates a line, one that completes an s-

curve with the falling water.  In the entire drawing, excluding the borders, one struggles

to find any straight line.  Not only is the use of such curving lines reminiscent of

Beardsley's flowing lines—and those of the *art nouveau* artists he inspired—but it is a

hallmark of Beerbohm's style that nearly every reviewer of *The Illustrated Zuleika*

*Dobson* has mentioned, even when, as they almost always do, those reviews fails to

mention any other aspect of Beerbohm's style.  For example, Sanford Schwartz, in the

only review that addresses Beerbohm's graphic style at any length, describes Beerbohm's

'exuberantly expressive sense of line'.[126]  Writing in the *Sewanee Review*, Sam Pickering

also notes how Beerbohm's 'lines curve flowingly', although Pickering longs, in the face

of the mass suicide, 'for a little cold angularity'.[127]  This, of course, misses the very point

of the novel and the point of Beerbohm's graphic style.  The tragedy of the novel is

counteracted by the comedy of the novel and drained of heartrending force by the lack of

psychic depth in the characters.  'Cold angularity' would both give unwanted weight to

the necessarily light form of the novel, and would countermand the curvilinear style that

connotes malleability and mobility, and which implies continuation of the image beyond

its physical borders.

The fluidity apparent in the illustration of the Duke's being splashed with water

should not be forgotten when looking at the other caricatures of the Duke.  Other

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[126] Schwartz, 'The Tiny Grandeur of Max Beerbohm', p. 10

[127] Sam Pickering, 'Zuleika Dobson at Seventy-Five', *Sewanee Review* 94 (Summer 1986), pp. lix-lx, lx

illustrations of the Duke might lack the overtly fluid lines, but each is still an obvious

caricature and, read intertextually with the other illustrations, reveals the protean qualities

of the Duke, whose body changes from drawing to drawing.  The hyperbolically haughty

face, the elongated fingers and the pencil-thin body—which seems to inflate and deflate

in accord with the Duke's ego—all work against any consistent presentation of the Duke.

The full-page illustration of the Duke in his Knight of the Garter regalia (**figure 8**) is no

less an exaggeration than the drawing of his being splashed with water.  The haughty face

is the same with the overstated bridge of the nose, but the body, visible in part from the

waist down, seems to have expanded.  The angularity of the column behind the Duke is

balanced by the flowing lines of the Duke's cape.  The bold (for Beerbohm) washes of

blue and mulberry contrast sharply with the dull grays and browns of the drawing in

which the Duke is splashed with water.  All of this continues to point to a strategy of

illustration that is self-consciously constructed in the way that a dandy constructs his

wardrobe: consistently styled yet ever advertising its status as artifice, and, hence, its

potential for change.  By adopting this strategy, Beerbohm prevents the images from

standing in for the characters' verbal descriptions.

Avoiding static modes of illustration, Beerbohm succeeds in preserving the

imaginative free-play of the reader.  The choice of subjects for him to illustrate similarly

preserves aesthetic free-play.  While many of the drawings are of the characters, there are

also a large number of drawings depicting fantastical, tangential, or non-existent scenes

from the text.  The Duke threatens to call the police, in one instance, which warrants a

full-page illustration of Zuleika's being taken away by a police officer (**figure 9**).  The

drawing's caption, 'Some such vision as Zuleika may have for a moment had', denotes

that this is an entirely hypothetical depiction.  Two pages later, after a wish that *l'esprit de l'escalier* befall the Duke, Beerbohm depicts an embodied *l'esprit de'escalier* walking down the stairs (**figure 10**).  An off-hand remark earlier in the novel, about how 'if [the true conjuror] were set down, with the materials of his art, on a desert island, he would be quite happy',[128] affords the opportunity for a drawing of a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat wearing a hula skirt on a deserted island (**figure 11**).  There are also other caricatures that are purposefully incomplete.  Two back-to-back illustrations of Zuleika supplicating at the Duke's feet (**figures 12 and 13**) both depict an image in which the Duke's upper body and Zuleika's head and feet have been omitted from the frame.  This partial illustration deemphasizes the specific features of each character, creating metonymic representations that preserve more free-play in imagining the characters.  Still other caricatures are seemingly straightforward depictions of important fantastical moments: the illustration of Beerbohm with fairy wings crowning the busts of the Emperors and the illustration of the gods on Mount Olympus are two such examples.

**Charles Ricketts, 'The Disciple'**

The last example of Decadent illustration considered here is one pen-and-ink drawing from a set of illustrations Charles Ricketts' produced to accompany Wilde's *Poems in Prose*.  Wilde published six prose poems in the July 1894 edition of *The Fortnightly Review*,[129] and Ricketts shortly thereafter began sketches—which he later

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[128] Beerbohm, *Zuleika Dobson*, p. 14
[129] These six prose poems are: 'The House of Judgment', 'The Disciple', 'The Artist', 'The Doer of Good', 'The Master', and 'The Teacher of Wisdom'.  Versions of two of the prose poems appeared earlier in *The Spirit Lamp*; 'The House of Judgment' appeared in vol. III, no. 2 (17 February 1893), pp. 52–53, and 'The Disciple' appeared in vol. IV, no. 2 (6 June 1893), pp. 49–50.

described as 'amorphous' and 'particularly cursive'—to illustrate the prose poems.[130]  A

1924 letter from Gordon Bottomley to Ricketts reveals that Ricketts had originally

intended to produce an independent volume of his drawings paired with Wilde's text, but

he had not completed the project by 1924 when Ricketts resumed work on the sketches:

Bottomley implores Ricketts 'to publish the whole set with the text [of the prose poems]

in the way you planned thirty years ago'.[131]  Ricketts never completed the edition of his

illustrations with Wilde's prose poems, but he did produce nine pen-and-ink

illustrations[132]—one for each of the six prose poems Wilde published, with two designs

and three drawings for 'The Doer of Good' and an additional sketch of three dancing

figures, which might have been intended to serve as a frontispiece.[133]  The space

constraints of this chapter require a focus on just one of these illustrations, but 'The

Disciple' (**figure 14**) is a representative drawing, one that fully captures Ricketts'

Decadent strategies of illustration.

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[130] Ricketts to Gordon Bottomley, 27 July 1918 (London, British Library, Add MS 61718).  Ricketts wrote to Gordon Bottomley earlier in the month, asking: '[D]id I tell you I found a batch of old Vale scraps, tracings and drawings, published and unpublished, for the *Dial* of 1889 [for] *Daphis and Chloe*, *The Sphinx*, and for Wilde's *Poems in Prose*—the latter were found before Egypt, put away, and then forgotten[?]' (Ricketts to Bottomley, July 1918 [BL Add MS 61718]).  It is difficult to know to what extent these 'scrawls' formed the basis for the later drawings completed around 1924.  After completing the latter, he wrote to Gordon Bottomley: 'Recently I executed eight drawings in my old manner illustrating Wilde's Poems in Prose' (Ricketts to Bottomley, 13 June 1924 [BL Add MS 61719]).

[131] Ricketts' precise intentions for publishing these illustrations are unclear, although Gordon Bottomley reveals in a letter to Ricketts that the latter had planned to publish the text and images together: 'The only thing I need to be perfectly content is to hear that you mean to publish the whole set with the text [. . .] in the way you planned thirty years ago' (Bottomley to Ricketts, 29 July 1924 [BL Add MS 58091]).

[132] Eight more-or-less-finished illustrations and one sketch.

[133] The sequence of the illustrations' composition and Ricketts' intended order for them in any book he may have planned to publish is difficult to determine.  Also, one page from the album is torn out, and on the stub T. Sturge Moore (signed 'T.S.M.') has written: 'taken out *The Thinker in Bronze* [*The Artist*] 10/13/32'; it is unclear whether or not this drawing has been returned.  *The Artist* is affixed by tape to a stub from which it appears detached, suggesting that this might be the removed illustration reinserted and attached to a different stub.  It could also be the illustration that Ricketts presented to Gordon Bottomley, which Bottomley had framed and which is also held at Tullie House along with the album (Ricketts to Bottomley, 13 June 1924 [BL Add MS 61719]).  Otherwise, there exists another illustration for 'The Artist', but this seems unlikely given that Ricketts records completing only eight illustrations (Ricketts to Bottomley, 13 June 1924 [BL Add MS 61719]).

In many ways, Wilde's 'The Disciple' is already an ideal text for Ricketts'
progressive method of illustration. Having appeared in two different versions published
by Wilde, this prose poem has a publication history that captures the quality of
reinvention inherent in the oral tale as a form and in Wilde's tale in particular. Not only
did Wilde recite and publish 'The Disciple' multiple times, but other writers recorded the
tale in their own publications; Gide, for example, reprints the prose poem in his
recollections of Wilde. 'The Disciple' is itself a reinterpretation and parody of Ovid's
retelling of the Narcissus and Echo myth in *Metamorphoses*, also a highly parodic text,
which diverges from, undermines, reorders, and re-contextualizes the Greek myths from
which it draws. Ricketts' embellishments and commentary on Wilde's prose poem, in
turn, recreate Wilde's improvisations on the text in speech and in print. Although
Ricketts' illustration for Wilde's text is progressive in its reconfiguration of the
relationship between image and text, its illustrational strategy adopts the same approach
to story-telling embodied by Ovid and Wilde; Ricketts becomes a third bard, making his
strategy of design germane, rather than antagonistic, to the spirit of Wilde's prose poem.

Ricketts' illustration for 'The Disciple' cites from the text, inserts material of
Ricketts' own invention, incorporates aspects of the prose poem from unrecorded
recitations, draws in material from other prose poems by Wilde, and critiques the
character of Wilde himself. A brief summary of Wilde's tale compared with Ricketts'
corresponding illustration will highlight the way the latter diverges from the text. The
prose poem retells the story of Narcissus from the perspective of the pool in which
Narcissus would admire his reflection. The narrative begins at the point of Narcissus'
death and captures the reaction of the Oreads and the pool. Seeing that the pool has

turned into a 'cup of salt tears', and assuming that the pool, most of all, admires Narcissus

because it had continually witnessed the latter's beauty, the Oreads attempt to sympathise

with the pool: 'We do not wonder that you should mourn in this manner for Narcissus, so

beautiful was he'.[134]  However, the pool is actually unaware of Narcissus' beauty,

explaining that 'I loved Narcissus because [. . .] in the mirror of his eyes I saw ever my

own beauty mirrored'.[135] Wilde contravenes readers' expectations by disrupting the tale's

anticipated narrative trajectory, emphasizing the subjective nature of artistic reception (in

this case, the appreciation of Narcissus' beauty) and demonstrating that even long-

established myths remain subject to reinterpretation.

Ricketts continues this process of inversion and critique by embellishing further on

the tale.  Upon seeing the illustration, the viewer is immediately struck by a key

difference between the image and text: the presence of the centaur, which appears to the

left of Narcissus.  This centaur makes no appearance in any version of 'The Disciple', nor

does it appear in Ovid's tale of Narcissus.  Ricketts imports the centaur from another of

Wilde's prose poems, 'The Poet', unpublished by Wilde but retold by Ricketts in his

*Oscar Wilde: Recollections* (1932).[136]  In that prose poem, a man recounts invented

stories about his encountering mermaids, fauns, centaurs and various other mythological

creatures.  One day he actually sees these creatures and is thereafter unable to tell any

more stories.  Claiming to quote Wilde, Ricketts describes the man's experience of the

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[134] Wilde, 'The Disciple', *The Fortnightly Review* 56 (July 1894), pp. 23–24, 23.  (Unless otherwise noted, all quotations will be from this edition.)

[135] Wilde, 'The Disciple', pp. 23–24

[136] Although no known version of 'The Poet' was published by Wilde, he did claim to be bringing it out 'in a Paris magazine above [his] own signature' (Letter to Aimée Lowther (August 1899), in *Complete Letters,* pp. 1163–1164, 1163).  A partial manuscript exists: see Wilde, *Complete Works*, Vol. 1: *Poems and Poems in Prose*, ed. by Bobby Fong and Karl Beckson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 217–218.  Wilde also explains that the cave where 'The Teacher of Wisdom' resides in the eponymous prose poem is 'a cavern in which a Centaur had once dwelt' ('The Teacher of Wisdom', p. 27).

centaur: '[it] peeped at him behind a hollow rock'.[137]  The centaur in his illustration for

'The Disciple' is performing this precise action, which suggests (in the absence of other

antecedents) that it is the same centaur from 'The Poet'.  While Deirdre Toomey describes

how 'this tale, and in particular the motif of the centaur slowly turning his head, obsessed

Ricketts', the inclusion of the centaur in this illustration is more than a product of his

obsession.[138]  Firstly, its presence in an illustration for 'The Disciple' creates an inter-

textual dialogue.  The oral tradition itself carries on this dialogue with other tales,

borrowing frames and devices and employing them in unexpected contexts.  The

centaur's inclusion does precisely this, expanding the narratological reference of the

illustration in the same way that prose poems do.  Furthermore, the centaur had a special

meaning for Ricketts.  Lamenting Gide's omission of the centaur in his retelling of the

tale, Ricketts explains:

> Strangely enough Gide omits the episode of the centaur, yet this detail has
> remained vivid in my memory, for Wilde, by an almost imperceptible turn of the
> head, when speaking, conjured up the movement of the receding creature.[139]

That the centaur's movement reminds Ricketts of Wilde's own movement 'when speaking'

implies that the centaur is itself an emblem of orality, an embodiment of Wilde's story-

telling.  It invokes the oral within a purely pictorial form by personifying the act of

speaking and alluding to the story-teller—Wilde himself.

The centaur's  inclusion stands in for orality, myth, and inter-textuality, but it also

marks the illustration as parody, a pastiche of Wilde's story-telling in the language of

illustration. This parody extends to a personal critique of Wilde and his reputation for

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[137] Ricketts, *Oscar Wilde: Recollections* (Bloomsbury [London]: Nonesuch, 1932), p. 18
[138] Deirdre Toomey, 'The Story-Teller at Fault: Oscar Wilde and Irish Orality', in *Wilde the Irishman*, ed. by Jerusha McCormack (London: Yale UP, 1998), pp. 24–35, 32
[139] Ricketts, *Oscar Wilde: Recollections*, p. 17

lasciviousness, which he acquired notably after his trials.  Although sympathetic to
Wilde's homosexuality, Ricketts disapproved of his friend's more flamboyant behaviour.
His association of Wilde with the centaur underscores this judgment.  By representing
Wilde as a centaur, Ricketts also locates the former within a specific tradition of visual
art from which the latter had a number of models for his own centaur.  J. G. P. Delaney
argues that 'the general inspiration [for Ricketts to employ centaurs in his work] was the
numerous classical and Renaissance depictions he must have seen in the Louvre and the
British Museum'.[140]  In particular, Ricketts must have had in mind Botticelli's *Pallas and
the Centaur* (c. 1482), in which Pallas Athena tames a centaur, who signifies man's baser
nature, and Gustave Moreau's *Dead Poet Borne by a Centaur* (c. 1890), in which the
image of poet and centaur are directly linked.[141]  The symbol of the centaur, then, is
polysemous to a large degree, allowing Ricketts to represent Wilde—and by extension
story-telling—within the content of the illustration itself, to parody Wilde and his more
extreme behavior (subverting Wilde's moral authority), to subsume a metaphor of orality
within the context of graphic art (challenging the supremacy of the written—or spoken—
text in word/image relationships), and to practice a form of literary criticism that
juxtaposes multiple prose poems (specifically 'The Poet' and several versions of 'The
Disciple') within the context of a single illustration.

Another, less ostensible, aspect of Ricketts' illustration that redefines the
relationship between image and text is his figuring of Narcissus and the reflection pool.
Narcissus' presence in the illustration is itself a divergence from the text, since both
printed versions of the prose poem (from *The Spirit Lamp* and *The Fortnightly Review*)

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[140] Delaney, *Charles Ricketts*, p. 147
[141] Botticelli's *Pallas and the Centaur* was reproduced, along with T. Sturge Moore's ekphrasis on the
painting, in the art journal co-edited by Charles Shannon, *The Pageant* 1 (1896), p. 227

begin 'when Narcissus died'.[142]  A sceptical viewer might argue that Narcissus is already

dead in the illustration, his left arm hanging lifelessly over a stone.  His right arm,

though, is positioned in a way difficult to maintain without effort.  The same is true for

the position of his body.  A more likely reading, then, is that Ricketts intended an

anachronistic, trans-temporal reading of the illustration.  A similar trans-temporality

pervades the history of the oral tale, transforming tales across multiple recitations and

story-tellers.  Positioning himself as a story-teller, Ricketts' inserts an analepsis absent

from the text, which begins only after Narcissus' death.  This analepsis allows Ricketts to

comment on Wilde's story by reincarnating Narcissus while omitting the reflection of his

face from the pool—a central aspect of the myth.  While part of Narcissus' arm and,

perhaps, part of his lower body are discernible in the pool, his face, including the eyes

with which he gazed at his reflection, are rendered invisible by the illustration's

perspective.  The effect of this removal of Narcissus' face from the illustration is that—at

least in the context of Ricketts' drawing—the pool is unaware, or at least indirectly

aware, of Narcissus' presence.  For the viewer to witness Narcissus' visage in the pool

would be to imply that the pool *sees* him, but Wilde's inversion of the myth is to turn the

pool into another Narcissus, valuing Narcissus because his eyes cast back the pool's own

reflection.  Ricketts radically departs from Wilde's story only to reinforce it in ways

unimagined by the text.

    As demonstrated throughout this chapter, illustration was a central activity of

British Decadence both in terms of the concerns of the authors and artists themselves and

in terms of the public construction of Decadence's meaning.  Decadent illustration is

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[142] Wilde, 'The Disciple', p. 23; for *The Spirit Lamp* version, see 'The Disciple', *The Spirit Lamp* (6 June 1893), p. 49

defined largely by its resistance to static forms and fixed interpretation, its predisposition to fantasy based on a respect for the two-dimensionality of the page, and its reformulation of the relationship between author and illustrator, one that is centered in an understanding of both illustration and writing as textually dependent forms, and that frequently manifests itself as a desire on the part of Decadent artists to serve as both author and designer.  A product of a culture shaped by illustrated journalism's influence and the revival of printing, Decadence emphasizes the material condition of the book, a focus that unites the efforts of book designers and authors.  The concerns of Decadent artists helped redefine the very meaning of 'illustration' and allied their efforts with those of Decadent authors more generally.  Decadent illustrators adopted, no less than Decadent writers, the fantastic modes engendered by Decadent conceptions of language, and they did so, in part, because of the role the drawings had in shaping the meaning of Decadent texts and because of the literariness that these illustrators made central to their work.

Figure 2  **Aubrey Beardsley, *The Ascension of St. Rose of Lima*, Reprinted from *The Savoy* (April 1896), p. 189, EP85.Sa955, Houghton Library, Harvard University**



Figure 3  **Aubrey Beardsley, *The Fruit Bearers*, Reprinted from *The Savoy* (January 1896), p. 167, EP85.Sa955, Houghton Library, Harvard University**

Figure 5  **Detail from Figure 4**



Figure 6  **Detail  from Figure 4**

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the empty jug roll over on the carpet. Then she
stood tense, crouching, her hands to her mouth,
her eyes askance, as much as to say "Now I've
done it!" She listened hard, holding her breath.
In the stillness of the night was a faint sound of
dripping water, and presently of footsteps going
away. Then stillness unbroken.

Figure 7  **Reprinted from *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson*
(New Haven: Yale UP, 1985); Reproduced with kind
permission of Berlin Associates**



Figure 8  **Reprinted from *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson*
(New Haven: Yale UP, 1985); Reproduced with kind
permission of Berlin Associates**

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sense of proportion, as you rashly bade me, and then hardened my heart at sight of you as you are. One of a number ? Yes, and a quite unlovable unit. So I am all right again. And now, where is Balliol ? Far from here ? "

" No," he answered, choking a little, as might a card-player who, having been dealt a splendid hand, and having played it with flawless skill, has yet—damn it !—lost the odd trick. " Balliol is quite near. At the end of this street in fact. I can show it to you from the front-door."

Yes, he had controlled himself. But this, he furiously felt, did not make him look the less a fool. What ought he to have *said*? He prayed, as he followed the victorious young woman downstairs, that *l'esprit de l'escalier* might befall him. Alas, it did not.

" By the way," she said, when he had shown her where Balliol lay, " have you told anybody that you aren't dying just for me ? "

" No," he answered, " I have preferred not to."

" Then officially, as it were, and in the eyes of the world, you die for me ? Then all's well that ends well. Shall we say good-bye here ? I shall be on the Judas Barge ; but I suppose there will be a crush, as yesterday ? "

" Sure to be. There always is on the last night of the Eights, you know. Good-bye."

" Good-bye, little John—small John," she cried across her shoulder, having the last word.

*Some such vision as Zuleika may have for a moment had.*
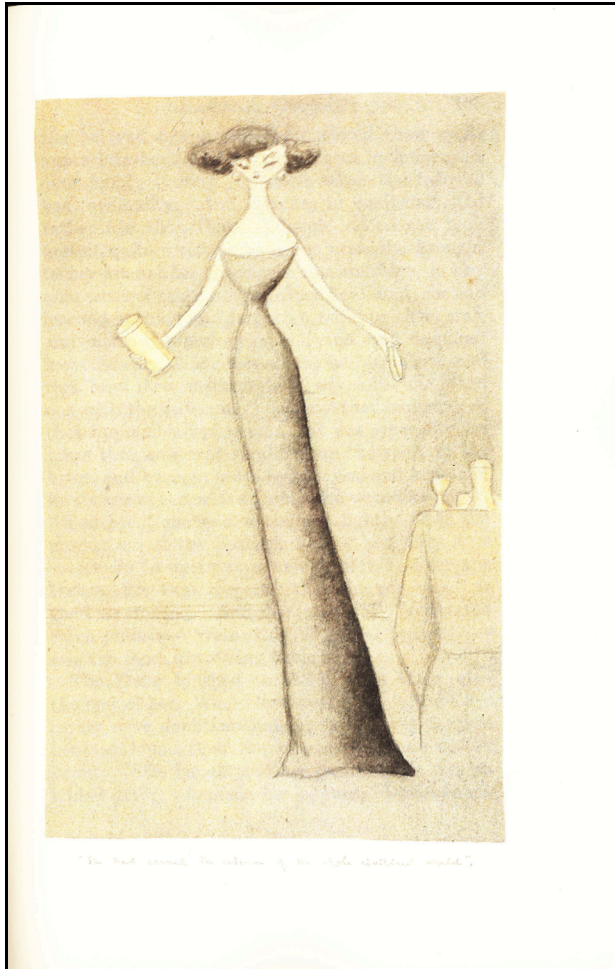
*L'Esprit de l'Escalier*

Figure 9  **Reprinted from *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985); Reproduced with kind permission of Berlin Associates**
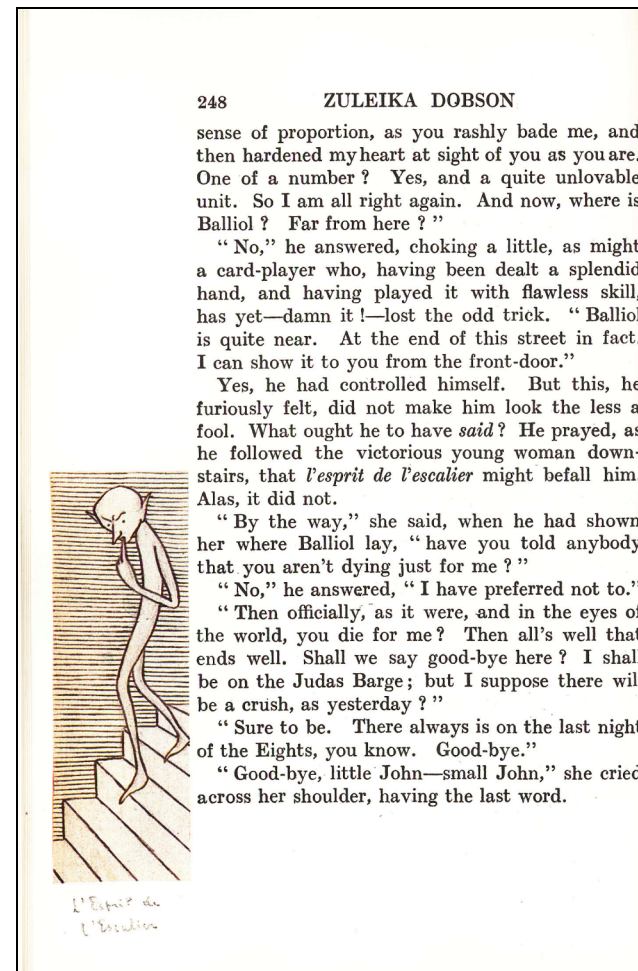
Figure 10  **Reprinted from *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985); Reproduced with kind permission of Berlin Associates**

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its own sake. Lucre and applause are not necessary to him. If he were set down, with the materials of his art, on a desert island, he would yet be quite happy. He would not cease to produce the barber's-pole from his mouth. To the indifferent winds he would still speak his patter, and even in the last throes of starvation would not eat his live rabbit or his gold-fish. Zuleika, on a desert island, would have spent most of her time in looking for a man's foot-print. She was, indeed, far too human a creature to care much for art. I do not say that she took her work lightly. She thought she had genius, and she liked to be told that this was so. But mainly she loved her work as a means of mere self-display. The frank admiration which, into whatsoever house she entered, the grown-up sons flashed on her; their eagerness to see her to the door; their impressive way of putting her into her omnibus—these were the things she revelled in. She was a nymph to whom men's admiration was the greater part of life. By day, whenever she went into the streets, she was conscious that no man passed her without a stare; and this consciousness gave a sharp zest to her outings. Sometimes she was followed to her door—crude flattery which she was too innocent to fear. Even when she went into the haberdasher's to make some little purchase of tape or riband, or into the grocer's—for she was an epicure in her humble way—to buy a tin of

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well brought-up. What likelier than that the daughter of Mrs. Batch, that worthy soul, had been well brought up?

Here, at any rate, was the chance of a new element in his life, or rather in his death. Here, possibly, was a maiden to mourn him. He would lunch in his rooms.

With a farewell look at Nellie's miniature, he took the medicine-bottle from the table, and went quickly out. The heavens had grown steadily darker and darker, the air more sulphurous and baleful. And the High had a strangely woebegone look, being all forsaken by youth, in this hour of luncheon. Even so would its look be all to-morrow, thought the Duke, and for many morrows. Well, he had done what he could. He was free now to brighten a little his own last hours. He hastened on, eager to see the landlady's daughter. He wondered what she was like, and whether she really loved him.

As he threw open the door of his sitting-room, he was aware of a rustle, a rush, a cry. In another instant, he was aware of Zuleika Dobson at his feet, at his knees, clasping him to her, sobbing, laughing, sobbing.

Figure 11  **Reprinted from *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985); Reproduced with kind permission of Berlin Associates**

Figure 12  **Reprinted from *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985); Reproduced with kind permission of Berlin Associates**
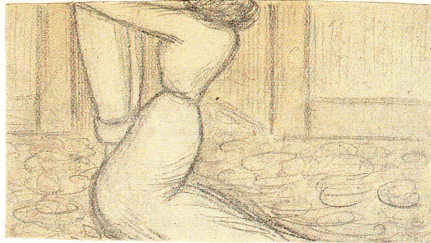
FOR what happened a few moments later you must not blame him. Some measure of force was the only way out of an impossible situation. It was in vain that he commanded the young lady to let go: she did but cling the closer. It was in vain that he tried to disentangle himself of her by standing first on one foot, then on the other, and veering sharply on his heel: she did but sway as though hinged to him. He had no choice but to grasp her by the wrists, cast her aside, and step clear of her into the room.

Her hat, gauzily basking with a pair of long white gloves on one of his arm-chairs, proclaimed that she had come to stay.

Nor did she rise. Propped on one elbow, with heaving bosom and parted lips, she seemed to be trying to realise what had been done to her. Through her undried tears her eyes shone up to him.

He asked: "To what am I indebted for this visit?"

"Ah, say that again!" she murmured. "Your voice is music."

He repeated his question.

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Figure 13  **Reprinted from *The Illustrated Zuleika Dobson* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985); Reproduced with kind permission of Berlin Associates**

Figure 14 **Charles Ricketts, *Illustration for Oscar Wilde's 'The Disciple'*, n.d.. Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle.  Pen, ink and Chinese white, 23.2 x 15.2cm. CALMG: 1971.85.35A.15. (Image courtesy of Tullie House Museum & Art Gallery; Reproduced by kind permission of the copyright holders, Leonie Sturge-Moore and Charmian O'Neil.)**

# Chapter III

## The Decadent Short Story

> [T]he novelist may be commonplace, he may bend his best energies to the photographic reproduction of the actual; if he show us a cross-section of real life we are content; but the writer of Short-stories must have originality and ingenuity.  If to compression, originality, and ingenuity he add also a touch of fantasy, so much the better.
> —Brander Matthews, *The Philosophy of the Short Story* (1901)[1]

The short story merits special attention in any consideration of Decadence, not only because of the form's prevalence in Decadent literature and the Victorian *fin de siècle* more generally, but also because its characteristics differ in important ways from those of other prose-fiction forms.  A number of critics have disputed that the short story is substantively different from other prose forms, except in its length; Norman Friedman, for example, claims not 'really [to] believe there is any such thing as *the* short story more specific than "a short fictional narrative in prose"'.[2]  Other critics, however, locate the form's defining traits in its mythopoeic quality, a product both of its economy of language and its literary heritage as an ancestor of myth and biblical tale-telling.  For instance, Charles E. May emphasizes the increased tension between realism and fantasy in the short story as a way to distinguish between it and the novel because 'the story's shortness demands an aesthetic rather than a natural or essential form and because the short story remains closer to its ancestry in mythic story structure than the novel does'.[3]  It might appear ironic, then, that the form became an ostensibly successful vehicle for realist

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[1] Brander Matthews, *The Philosophy of the Short-Story* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1901), p. 23
[2] Norman Friedman, 'Recent Short Story Theories: Problems in Definition', in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, ed. by Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989), pp. 13–31, 29
[3] Charles E. May, 'Metaphoric Motivation in Short Fiction: "In the Beginning Was the Story"', in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, pp. 62–73, 66

writers in the nineteenth century, a development countered by Decadent writers through

the adoption of fantastic modes and parodic deconstructions of realist fictions and

realistic story-interpretations.  The stories considered in this chapter challenge the

conventions of realism by stressing the artificiality of language and literature, by

exploiting the inherently mythopoeic and fantastical structure of the short story, and by

parodying specific and notable examples of realist fiction.

A relatively brief history of the modern short story's development will serve to

illuminate its debts to mythic traditions and the fantasy genre, elucidating, furthermore,

the state of the short-story form as encountered by Decadent writers at the end of the

nineteenth century.  The short story as a distinct genre—differentiated from the

mythopoeic tale and other short narrative forms—was largely a nineteenth-century

phenomenon, rooted in the eighteenth century (in the short narrative pieces of *The Tatler*

and *The Spectator*, for example).  Not until the middle to late 1800s, however, did 'short

story' emerge as a distinct critical term—that is, as a term useful for the critical analysis

of the modern form.[4]  1873 is the year of the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s first recorded

instance of the term 'short story',[5] which, as Wendell Harris notes, emerged from a

number of alternative terms for short fictional prose works in the eighteenth and early-

nineteenth centuries.[6]  As Harris and Paul March-Russell argue, before the 'short story'

became a clearly defined genre, these competing terms rarely denoted specific traits of

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[4] Tim Killick, discussing the short-story form (not the critical term), explains that 'The nineteenth century, it is generally agreed, witnessed the birth of the modern short story, but critics are still far from unanimous when isolating the exact moment of flux' (*British Short Fiction in the Early Nineteenth Century: The Rise of the Tale* [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008], p. 6).
[5] *OED* on-line [accessed on 26 May 2009]
[6] See Harris, *British Short Fiction in the Nineteenth Century: A Literary and Bibliographic Guide* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1979), p. 10.

the genre.[7]  Only after the specific traits of the short story had been established and

reinforced throughout the nineteenth century could a critical distinction between 'short

stories' and other genres be made.

Poe was the first writer to theorize the short story at any length, and his influence

on Decadent authors, along with his position as a leading fantasist, emphasize the close

relationship between the short story genre and fantasy.  According to his definition, the

short story's main feature is its unified treatment of one event short enough to be read in a

single sitting: its 'certain unique or single *effect*',[8] requiring no more than 'a half-hour to

one or two hours in its perusal'.[9]  This strict demarcation of the genre's boundaries

informs Todorov's definition of the fantastic, which 'apropos of Poe [. . .] represents an

experience of limits'.[10]  Poe's definition guided *fin-de-siècle* definitions of the form[11] and

'remain[s] key'[12] to modern short-story theory.  Expanding on Poe's foundation, however,

twentieth-century critics sought to find more acute distinctions between the short story

and other short narrative forms.  In *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), for instance,

Northrop Frye offers one such distinction between the 'short story' and the 'tale'—the

term perhaps most employed in Anglophone cultures to describe the genre that would

develop into the short story and persist as a separate genre.  Frye identifies the tale as a

short fictional form 'bear[ing] the same relation to the full romance that the stories of

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[7] See Harris, *British Short Fiction in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 10, and March-Russell, *The Short Story: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009), p. 2.

[8] Edgar Allan Poe, Review of *Twice-Told Tales*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Graham's Magazine* (May 1842), pp. 298–300, 298–299

[9] Poe, Review of *Twice-Told Tales*, p. 298

[10] Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 93

[11] See, for example, Henry James, 'The Story-Teller at Large: Mr. Henry Harland', *The Fortnightly Review* 63 (April 1898), pp. 650–654, 653

[12] Shaw, *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction*, p. 9.  It is worth noting, however, that Poe's theories had limited influence in the United Kingdom prior to the *fin de siècle*; as Harold Orel argues: 'Poe's no-nonsense views on what a short story should do were not much discussed, and certainly not subscribed to, by Victorian authors for most of the [nineteenth] century' (*The Victorian Short Story: Development and Triumph of a Literary Genre* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986], p. 3).

Chekhov or Katherine Mansfield do to the novel'.[13]  He defines the difference between

romances and novels (and, by extension, tales and short stories) as one in which the

author of the former 'does not attempt to create "real people" so much as stylized figures

which expand into psychological archetypes',[14] and in which the author of the latter 'deals

with personality, with characters wearing their *personae* or social masks'.[15]  (He is quick

to add, however, that '[t]he forms of prose fiction are mixed'[16] and, therefore, cannot be

unequivocally described as romance or novel, tale or short story.)  In spite of Frye's

caveat, his distinction hints at a shift from fantasy ('stylized figures') to realism

('personality') that takes place alongside the shift in prevalence from tale to short story.

As the short story develops throughout the nineteenth century, the genre increasingly

takes on connotations of realism, culminating in a clash between idealists and realists in

the 1890s that ends, as William C. Frierson describes, in 'a partial victory for the "New

Realists"'.[17]  Charles E. May also notes this development in the nineteenth century, but he

places the origin of the shift much earlier, starting with the focus on everyday life in *The

Decameron* (c. 1349–1351), and moving dialectically toward the realism, signaled by a

work such as Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener' (1853), that 'dominated the form's

development for much of the latter half of the nineteenth century'.[18]

Irrespective of the short story's development into a medium for realism, the

genre's debt to fantastic modes is evident from its inception.  In Germany, where the form

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[13] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957), p. 305

[14] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 304

[15] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 305

[16] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 305

[17] William C. Frierson, 'The English Controversy over Realism in Fiction 1885–1895', *PMLA* 43 (June 1928), pp. 533–550, 533.  As Arthur Waugh explains, the 'New Realists' were 'eagerly concerned [with nothing so much] as the fidelity of their art to life'; however, they defined realism in a new way and sought a 'New Realism of the emotions, as contrasted with the conventional realism of conditions and environment' (Waugh, 'The New Realism', *Fortnightly Review* [May 1916], pp. 849–858, 850).

[18] Charles E. May, *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice* (New York: Twayne, 1995), p. 8

first developed, authors such as Goethe, Tieck, Hoffman, and Heinrich von Kleist often

composed fantastic stories, drawing 'heavily on folkloric and oriental storytelling

traditions in their *Novellen* [short tales]'.[19]  In fact, Todorov uses Hoffman's tales as

examples of a whole range of fantasy genres, specifically employing 'Princess Brambilla'

(1820) as a consistent example of the fantastic.  These German models influenced the

form's British progenitors, including Dickens and Wilkie Collins.  As Rosemary Ashton

demonstrates, German Romantic writers were disseminated in the United Kingdom via

translations by writers such as Robert Pierce Gillies (1788–1858), Coleridge, and Carlyle.

The latter two authors, in particular, 'influenced a generation'[20] and created, '[i]n spite of

false starts [. . .] an important continuity of interest during the period between 1800 and

1850'.[21]  Other national literary traditions produced early examples of the genre that were

similarly fantastic, especially, to give a few examples, in the United States (Irving,

Hawthorne, and [again] Poe), Russia (Pushkin and Gogol), and France (Cazotte and

Mérimée).  In the case of the French short story, its debt to fantasy is evident in the most

common French term for the genre, '*conte*', which evokes its association with the term

*conte de fées* (fairy tales), imbuing *'conte'* itself with 'a strong flavor of the unreal or the

supernatural'.[22]

      In spite of the early association between *contes* and fantasy, the French short story

developed over the course of the nineteenth century into a vehicle for realism and

Naturalism.  Moreover, the dominance of the short story in France, which Henry James

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[19] Killick, *British Short Fiction in the Early Nineteenth Century*, p. 13
[20] Rosemary Ashton, *The German Idea: Four English Writers and the Reception of German Thought, 1800–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980), p. 25
[21] Ashton, *The German Idea*, p. 25
[22] Murray Sachs, Introduction, *The French Short Story in the Nineteenth Century: A Critical Anthology* (London: Oxford UP, 1969), pp. 3–13, 13

called 'the land of [the short story's] great prosperity',[23] reinforced an association between the genre and realist modes outside of France, including the United Kingdom. In particular, the writer most connected with the form was Maupassant, who epitomized the author whose career was made largely by his short stories, even though he 'never ceased trying to write a great novel, as though he feared the short story were an inadequate basis for enduring literary fame'.[24] H. G. Wells emphatically declared the extent of Maupassant's identification with the genre: 'The short story was Maupassant'.[25] Even to the British public, Maupassant symbolized the genre. As Winnie Chan explains, 'In the 1890s, it was a matter of form even for periodicals catering to very wide readerships to invoke Maupassant, and so a general public associated the name, if not his work, with the short story'.[26]

Of course, Maupassant did not invent the modern genre and was not the first to use it as medium for realist expression. He himself emerges from a tradition of realism within the short story initiated (notably) by Balzac's various short stories, Turgenev's *Zapiski okhotnika* (1852),[27] and Flaubert's *Trois Contes* (1877), but these authors were known as much for their novels as for their short stories. More than these other authors, the figure of Maupassant creates in the public mind a correlation between realism or

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[23] James, 'Guy de Maupassant', *The Fortnightly Review* 43 (March 1888), pp. 364–386, 374

[24] Sachs, Introduction, *The French Short Story*, p. 12

[25] Wells, 'Introduction', *Country of the Blind*, p. vii; Tolstoy offers another example of how Maupassant was associated with the genre and valued as a short story writer: 'had he left us nothing but his novels, his life would be valuable only as a striking example of a brilliant gift ruined by the false surroundings in which it developed [. . .] But, happily, Guy de Maupassant wrote short stories also' (Tolstoy, 'Guy de Maupassant', trans. by Charles Johnston, *Arena* 11 [December 1894], pp. 15–26, 23).

[26] Winnie Chan, *The Economy of the Short Story in British Periodicals of the 1890s* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 57

[27] First translated into French in an unauthorized edition by Ernest Charrière in 1854; later translated into English as *A Sportsman's Sketches*. Turgenev wrote much of the collection while living abroad in Paris, returned to Russia before its publication, and later relocated to France, where he spent the last part of his life and was acquainted with many leading French intellectuals, including Maupassant. For a list of French translations of Turgenev's work, see Waddington, 'A Bibliography of French Translations from the Works of I. S. Turgenev, 1854–1885', *The Slavic and East European Review* 58 (January 1980), pp. 76–98.

Naturalism and the short story, even though his stories employed both Naturalist and fantastic modes; 'Boule de Suif' (1880) and 'Le Horla' (1885–1886) are respectively a prominent example of each.[28]  The dissonance between Maupassant's reputation as a realist author and his use of various modes is indicative of the tension between realism and fantasy identified by May, as mentioned earlier in this chapter; however, Maupassant symbolized realism and Naturalism more than fantasy to a late-nineteenth-century readership.[29]  Subsequently, the short story itself evoked realism and Naturalism more than fantasy to a *fin-de-siècle* audience.

The identification of the short story with Maupassant has led both contemporary and modern critics to read British and Irish efforts in the genre through the standards of Maupassant's achievement.  This is a fate similar to that of British Decadent writing in general, which has largely been read within the framework of French Decadence: 'In characterising the literature of the 1890s, literary historians have tended to use descriptions, explanatory models, and even metaphors which have been derived in the first instance from French literary history'.[30]  With respect to British and Irish short stories, and to British and Irish Decadent writing in general, this trend has created a distorted understanding of indigenous developments within the United Kingdom and, in particular, has served to deemphasize the broader influence of fantasy on Anglophone writers.  Earlier British and Irish progenitors such as Dickens, Collins, and Le Fanu, established a tradition more indebted to the 'ghost stories' and Romantic 'tales' than their

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[28] Although Arthur Symons maintained that Maupassant was concerned mainly with 'the animal side of life', with 'le horla' being 'the soul of the materialist, vindicating itself against the self-confidence of the body' (Symons, Introduction, *Guy de Maupassant*, trans. by George Burnham Ives [London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1903], pp. ix–xix, xv).

[29] For example, Tolstoy identifies Maupassant's 'true talent' as 'the power of discerning reality' ('Guy de Maupassant', p. 23).

[30] Ian Small, 'Literary Radicalism in the British Fin de Siècle', in *Fin de Siècle/Fin du Globe*, ed. by John Stokes (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 210–219, 210

later French counterparts.  Even though, as Deborah Thomas explains, Dickens' stories

had 'little in common with more modern concepts of the term "short story" with its

connotations [. . .] of rigidly plotted tightness and compression',[31] he and other mid-

nineteenth-century writers contributed to the development of later nineteenth-century

short stories.  The omission of these authors from critical accounts of the English-

language short story partly accounts for realism's centrality to late-Victorian theories of

the genre, but a reemphasis on the role of these authors counterbalances the notions that

the United Kingdom had no indigenous models and that French Naturalism and realism

had always prevailed in the modern form.[32]

The rush to attribute developments in the short story to French authors, however,

was not universal.  For instance, the Anglo-American author and editor Henry Harland

argued that Maupassant's influence was exaggerated:

> It is common in England to speak of Guy de Maupassant as [quoting Anatole
> France] "the prince of short story writers"; and a prince of short story writers
> Guy de Maupassant in all truth was.  But we have princes in our own country.[33]

Harland names one prince, the American expatriate Henry James, and points to his work,

including contributions to *The Yellow Book*, as having a large influence on the

development of the short story in Britain.  Critics have commonly asserted, though, that

before James reading practices in Great Britain favored novels over short-story

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[31] Deborah A. Thomas, *Dickens and the Short Story* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), p. 2

[32] One might argue, of course, that *Sketches by Boz*'s focus on the everyday prefigured the journalistic realism of later writers such as Gissing.  However, the tradition of ghost stories and fantastic tales, ranging from Defoe's 'A True Relation of the Apparition of Mrs Veal' (1706) through Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843) to the 'phantasies' of Lewis Carroll (1832–1898) and George MacDonald (1824–1905) in the latter half of the nineteenth century, provides evidence of a strong, anti-mimetic tradition in British short fiction.

[33] Harland, Henry, 'Concerning the Short Story', *The Academy* (5 June 1897), pp. 6–7, 6

collections.[34]  For example, Brander Mathews asserts that 'in the British magazine the

serial Novel is the one thing of consequence',[35] and Valerie Shaw notes that the three-

volume novel dominated the market in Great Britain until 'one-volume novels started to

displace the multi-volumed and serialized fiction which dominated the market until the

mid-nineties'.[36]  Shaw slightly overstates the case, though, overlooking the earlier

periodical culture that promoted both serialized novels and short fiction.[37]  In fact, it is

the growing number of periodicals and the concomitant increase of short fiction

throughout the nineteenth century that sets the stage for the proliferation of short stories

in the 1890s, described by H. G. Wells as a time when '[s]hort stories broke out

everywhere'.[38]  The history of nineteenth-century periodical culture suggests that the

explosion of short stories that Wells describes was not an 'outbreak', *per se*, but a result of

the measured, albeit rapid, increase in periodicals from the middle of the century until the

end, the scope of which Reginia Gagnier intimates:

> When Max Nordau sought the etiology of fin-de-siècle exhaustion, one of his
> factors was the proliferation of periodicals, and he cited the 500 percent increase
> between 1840 and 1890.  Recent bibliographies suggest that the increase was
> much higher.[39]

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[34] This point is validated by several respondents to an article by 'E. A. B.' (Arnold Bennett), 'Some Fallacies about the Short Story', *The Academy and Literature* (11 October 1902), pp. 396–397; (18 October 1902), pp. 420–421.  One of the respondents, William Andrews, in his capacity as 'chief librarian of a large and successful subscription library [Hull Literary Club]', asserts that 'We usually get from twenty to sixty copies of a popular novel, as our readers want books as soon as issued.  Six is the greatest number of a volume of short stories we have had in circulation.  Forty copies are usually in circulation of a well-known lady's novel, but the same author published a collection of short stories and two copies met all our requirements' (*The Academy and Literature* [18 October 1902], p. 425)

[35] Brander Matthews, *The Philosophy of the Short Story* (New York: Longmans, 1901), p. 56.  Critical opinion about the short story was not unified at the time of Matthews' book, which was savaged, for example, by an anonymous reviewer in *The Academy* (30 March 1901), pp. 287–288.

[36] Valerie Shaw, *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (London: Longman, 1983), p. 5

[37] An example of a serial that promoted short stories is *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (1817–1980), which displayed from early on a 'commitment to short fiction' (Killick, *British Short Fiction in the Early Nineteenth Century*, p. 24)

[38] H. G. Wells, Introduction, *The Country of the Blind* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1913), pp. iii–ix, v

[39] Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1987), pp. 55-56

The formation of the Decadent short story, then, was intricately interwoven with the expanding market generated by the proliferation of periodicals and small presses in the 1890s, and the strong presence of realism and Naturalism within this market led Decadent authors to counter the implicit realism emergent in the new genre.  Holbrook Jackson describes the backlash, not just from Decadent short-story writers, but also from the English-language practitioners of realism: 'the modernists who were caught in the impulsion towards French realism soon saw the insufficiency of the most carefully observed facts unless they were clothed with the stuff of the imagination and the soul'.[40]

Given its association with French realism and Naturalism and the fact that one of its abiding traits in critical definitions is its unity of design, the short story seems particularly unsuitable to Decadent writers, whose catachrestic, shifting, tautological and 'nebulous' prose continually undoes uniformity and consistent design.  In fact, John R. Reed argues that, '[b]eyond a consideration of themes, it is not easy to discuss Decadent style in the short story'.[41]  However, an analysis of specific Decadent short stories, starting with Ernest Dowson's 'Apple Blossom in Brittany' and including Wilde's 'Lady Alroy' (later re-titled 'Sphinxes without Secrets'), Beerbohm's 'Enoch Soames', and Vernon Lee's 'Virgin of the Seven Daggers', will reveal how well-suited the short story is for Decadent aesthetics and for an attack on the assumptions of realism embedded in a number of nineteenth-century literary genres.  Reed's difficulty in discussing Decadent style in the short story is partly a product of his definition of Decadent fiction more generally, which depends upon his identifying stasis and 'atomization' as essential

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[40] Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Grant Richards, 1913), p. 279
[41] John R. Reed, 'Decadent Style and the Short Story', *Victorians Institute Journal* 11 (1982–83), pp. 1–12, 1; much of this essay is reprinted in Reed's *Decadent Style* (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1985), pp. 64–70.

elements of Decadent style.  These two traits are opposed to the individual story's unity

of design, so Reed looks for Decadent style across multiple stories: 'Applied to the short

story, decadent style builds from the use of recurrent motifs and themes through an entire

collection, thus creating a new esthetic unit'.[42]  His definition of Decadence as a

'dissolving, not a cohering art'[43] has some application to Decadent stylistics, but his focus

on story collections ignores *fin-de-siècle* practices of short-fiction publishing and

imagines continuity across stories published at different times and for magazines with

diverse audiences.

Moreover, Reed's focus on story collections requires him, as he admits, to focus

on thematic elements across the stories, which reveals the challenges such an approach

poses for his categorizing the stories as *stylistically* Decadent.  In *Decadent Style*, Reed

seeks to explain 'how style is related to the material it treats',[44] but his reading of

Decadent short stories suggests that he reads this 'material' as (on some level)

representational, as reflecting the 'real world' at least insofar as realism and Naturalism

attempt to do so: '[Decadence] employs techniques of Realism or Naturalism to convey

extreme aesthetic conditions'.[45]  His reading of Ernest Dowson's[46] stories confirms that

this is his method; he argues that 'Dowson pictures individuals who to a great extent

evoke the torturing frustrations they endure'.[47]  Dowson's 'Apple Blossom in Brittany',

published in *The Yellow Book* (October 1894), ostensibly meets Reed's criterion that

Decadent fiction 'depend[s] upon a sustained tension of anticipation culminating in an

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[42] Reed, 'Decadent Style and the Short Story', p. 1

[43] Reed, 'Decadent Style and the Short Story', p. 2

[44] Reed, *Decadent Style*, p. *xiii*

[45] Reed, 'Decadent Style and the Short Story', p. 2

[46] Dowson's centrality to Decadence is affirmed by R. K. R. Thornton, who asserts 'Everyone agrees that Ernest Dowson was central to the Decadence' (*The Decadent Dilemma* [London: Edward Arnold, 1983], p. 71).

[47] Reed, 'Decadent Style and the Short Story', p. 5

incomplete or unsatisfying conclusion'.[48]  In fact, Osbert Burdett interprets this story, and

all of the stories collected in *Dilemmas* (1895), as examples of pessimistic 'realism',

equating Dowson with Crackanthorpe: 'Both were realists [who] desire[d] to depict life as

it occurs, without romantic disguises'.[49]  A closer analysis of the text, however, reveals

that it centers, not such much on the 'real-life' frustrations of the protagonist, but on an

intellectual contemplation of the relationship between aesthete and aesthetic object that

effaces real-life confrontations and explores scholarly and mystical questions using a

densely allusive fabric of literary language.

        The narrative structure of 'Apple Blossom in Brittany' depends on Reed's notion

of 'sustained tension of anticipation'.  The narrator, Benedict Campion, spends most of

the story fantasizing about marrying his sixteen- to seventeen-year-old ward, Marie-

Ursule, only to urge her ultimately to join a convent.  Campion justifies this self-denial

by saying:

> He felt at once and finally, that he acquiesced in it; that any other ending to his
> love had been an impossible grossness, and that to lose her in just that fashion was
> the only way in which he could keep her always.  And his acquiescence was
> without bitterness, and attended only by that indefinable sadness which to a man
> of his temper was but the last refinement of pleasure.  He had renounced, but he
> had triumphed; for it seemed to him that his renunciation would be an aegis to
> him always against the sordid facts of life, a protest against the vulgarity of
> instinct, the tyranny of institutions.  And he thought of the girl's life, as it should
> be, with a tender appreciation—as of something precious laid away in lavender.[50]

Rather than being a straightforward expression of Campion's resolution and concomitant

self-denial, however, this passage ventriloquizes several authors to whom Dowson was

indebted and evokes a complex nexus of literary and historical allusions, creating, as

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[48] Reed, *Decadent Style*, p. 23
[49] Osbert Burdett, *The Beardsley Period: An Essay in Perspective* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1925),
p. 235
[50] Ernest Dowson, 'Apple Blossom in Brittany', *The Yellow Book* (October 1894), pp. 93–109, 109

Osbert Burdett describes Beardsley's *Under the Hill*, a 'mince-pie of prose'.[51]  To begin

with, Campion's assessment that his renunciation is 'that indefinable sadness' which to a

man like him is 'the last refinement of pleasure' parallels Arthur Symons' description of

Decadence as 'an over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement'.[52]  The language of the

passage also suggests Walter Pater's description of the 'well-known effect of a beautiful

object, kept constantly before the eye in a story or poem, of keeping sensation well

awake, and giving a certain air of refinement to all the scenes into which it enters'.[53]  The

'beautiful object' in Dowson's story is 'the girl's life', which Campion keeps before him,

contemplating it as a spiritual object and an *objet d'art*.  Campion himself is already

identified in the text as an 'Englishman of letters',[54] who lives 'chiefly in books and in the

past'; he is a 'man of ripe knowledge, of impeccable taste; [. . .] a born editor of choice

reprints, of inaccessible classics'.[55]  In short, Campion is an archetypal aesthete, a

'Decadent suitor',[56] as Monica Borg and R. K. R. Thornton label him, embodying the

habits of the scholar and the close proximity of scholarly, spiritual, and erotic interest.

This characterization is reinforced by the multiplicity of allusions embedded in Benedict

Campion's name: the papal name of Benedict, linking him to St Benedict of Nursia (480–

547 A.D.) called the father of Western monasticism, and to the traits of specific popes,

such as Benedict XII (c. 1280–1342), the 'drunken pope'; St Edmund Campion (1540–

1581), an Oxford scholar martyred by Queen Elizabeth I for refusing to renounce his

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[51] Burdett, *The Beardsley Period*, p. 193

[52] Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 87 (November 1893), pp. 858-867, 858–859

[53] Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, p. 6; Pater is discussing the effect of two cups in a thirteenth-century French story, 'Li Amitiez de Ami et Amile'.

[54] Dowson, 'Apple Blossom', p. 98

[55] Dowson, 'Apple Blossom', p. 102

[56] Monica Borg and R. K. R. Thornton, Introduction, *Ernest Dowson: Collected Shorter Fiction*, by Ernest Dowson, ed. by Monica Borg and R. K. R. Thornton (Birmingham: Birmingham UP, 2003), pp. ix–xxviii, xxvi

Catholic faith; Thomas Campion (1567–1620), English poet and composer (one with whom Campion would have been familiar, being himself 'an authority—the greatest, upon the literature and the life [. . .] of the seventeenth century'[57]); and 'campion' or 'pink', a flower of the Caryophyllaceæ family, which has long symbolized virginity in the language of flowers and in the history of devotional paintings.

This last allusion explicitly links Campion to the figure of St Ursula, for whom Ursule is named, doing so by connecting him with a painting from Vittore Carpaccio's cycle *The Dream of St Ursula* (1495), in which a dianthus (genus of 'pinks') appears in the right rear window.  In turn, this allusion ties Campion to John Ruskin's watercolor reproductions of the painting (1876–1877),[58] which he used in his teaching, and to Ruskin's published analyses of the painting and the legend of Ursula in *Fors Clavigera* (between October 1876 and February 1877).  In one letter (25 December 1876) from *Fors*, Ruskin's fixation with Ursula leads to his imagining a literal interaction with her: 'Last night, St. Ursula sent me her dianthus "out of her bedroom window, with her love"'.[59]  As his biographer Tim Hilton explains, Ruskin's sustained focus on Carpaccio's Ursula cycle during this time transformed St Ursula into a 'central rather than an incidental symbol in Ruskin's reading of Venetian Christianity'.[60]  Furthermore, he began

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[57] Dowson, 'Apple Blossom', p. 102.  In a letter to Arthur Moore (22 March 1896), Dowson mentions Thomas Campion's *Fifty Songs*, which he calls a '17th century thing', in a reference to John Gray's edition of the book (Vale Press, 1896), in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, ed. by Desmond Flower and Henry Maas (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1967), p. 348.

[58] Now held at the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford (Accession number: WA.RS.WAL.09)

[59] John Ruskin, Letter LXXIV (25 December 1876), in *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain*, 8 vols. (Orpington, Kent: George Allen, 1871–1884), VII, pp. 25–56, 25

[60] Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin: The Later Years* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000), p. 341

to associate Ursula with Rose La Touche (1848-1875), with whom Ruskin had been

obsessively preoccupied, proposing to her in 1866, and who had died on 25 May 1875.[61]

The multiplicity of connections drawn by Ruskin between the saint, Carpaccio's

painting, and Rose La Touche resembles the prolific symbolism of Dowson's Marie-

Ursule.  This symbolism is present in Campion's identification of his ward as 'something

precious laid away in lavender',[62] a simile that associates Mare-Ursule with a corpse, a

bride, and an artifact, referring to the practices of putting lavender blossoms over the

recently dead to mask the stench, to the inclusion of lavender in bridal trousseaux, and to

the use of lavender in clothes storage respectively.  She is like the dead Rose La Touche,

beatified by Campion, consecrated by death but at the same time remaining an intensely

desired Other and a literal *object d'art*.  Ruskin imagines that Ursula is Rose La Touche;

Dowson similarly connects his Marie-Ursule with St Ursula and a host of literary and

artistic antecedents.  Framed as a protection 'against the sordid facts of life', Campion's

renunciation of marriage signifies the story's stance against realist and Naturalist

interpretations.  Campion describes his renunciation as an 'aegis to him [. . .] against the

sordid facts of life, a protest against the vulgarity of instinct, the tyranny of institutions'.[63]

This pronouncement stands in opposition to Zola's call for the 'romancier[s]

expérimentateur[s]'[64] to be the ones who 'accepte les faits prouvés, qui montre dans

l'homme et dans la société le mécanisme des phénomènes dont la science, et qui ne fait

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[61] The association between Ursula's dianthus and Rose La Touche may have been suggested partly by Lady Castletown's connection with the La Touches, who lived near the Castle town residence in Ireland; see Van Akin Burd, Introductory Essay, *Christmas Story: John Ruskin's Venetian Letters of 1876–1877*, by John Ruskin, ed. by Van Akin Burd (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990), p. 164.

[62] Dowson, 'Apple Blossom', p. 109

[63] Dowson, 'Apple Blossom', p. 109

[64] Émile Zola, 'Le Roman expérimental', in *Le Roman expérimental* (1880), pp. 1–53, 52; 'experimental novelist' (my translation)

intervenir son sentiment personnel'.[65]  In fact, Campion directly and explicitly renounces

Zola's aesthetics, saying that his love of the seventeenth century has imbued him with a

'sense of remote hostility [to]: Democracy, the Salvation Army, [and] the novels of M.

Zola'.[66]

Yet another critique of realism is implicit in the story's pastiche of Balzac's novel

*Ursule Mirouët* (1841).[67]  In the novel, Dr Minoret is in a position very similar to

Campion's in 'Apple Blossom in Brittany'.  Minoret is a medical doctor and to some

extent a man of letters—counting as friends 'déistes, [les] encyclopédistes, sensualistes,

matérialistes [. . .] les riches philosophes de ce temps'[68]—who is charged with caring for

and being godfather to his wife's half-brother's daughter, Ursule.  Ursule becomes a

'pieuse et mystique jeune fille',[69] much like Dowson's Marie-Ursule, whom the Curé

describes as a 'mystical little girl'.[70]  Like Campion, Minoret must care for a young girl

(similarly named) on the cusp of marriageability and is faced with the decision to marry

that girl himself.  In Minoret's case, his decision is easy.  He rules out his marrying her

because he believes his potential lifespan is limited; he is 'capable de vivre encore quinze

ans',[71] which is also a concern of Campion's: 'the best part of my life is behind me'.[72]  The

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[65] Zola, 'Le Roman expérimental', p. 52; 'must strictly accept determined facts, hazard about them no personal sentiments [. . .] go all the way in accepting the ground won by science' (translated by George J. Becker, in *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, ed. by George J. Becker (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1963), p. 194).

[66] Dowson, 'Apple Blossom', p. 102

[67] Dowson admits that he 'esteem[s] Balzac much' and is 'gradually working [his] way through the Comédie Humanine' (Dowson, Letter to Charles Sayle [November 1889], *New Letters from Ernest Dowson*, ed. by Desmond Flower [Andoversford: The Whittington Press, 1984], pp. 13–14, 14).

[68] Honoré de Balzac, *Ursule Mirouët*, 2 vols. (Paris: Hippolyte Souverain, 1842), I, p. 53; 'the deists, encyclopedists, sensualists, materialists [. . .] the wealthy philosophers of that day' (translated by Clara Bell, in *Ursule Mirouët*, by Honoré de Balzac [London: J. M. Dent, 1895], p. 19).  (All subsequent translations of *Ursule Mirouët* will be from this edition.)

[69] Balzac, *Ursule Mirouët*, I, p. 151; 'pious and mystical young creature' (p. 58)

[70] Dowson, 'Apple Blossom', p. 104

[71] Balzac, *Ursule Mirouét*, I, p. 251; '[he] may live fifteen years yet' (p. 99)

[72] Dowson, 'Apple Blossom', p. 99

parallels between Balzac's novel and Dowson's story might bespeak the latter's

identification with the tradition of French realism; however, Dowson undoubtedly would

have been familiar with Wilde's assessment of Balzac in 'The Decay of Lying', wherein

he undermines Balzac's position as the father of French realism: 'The difference between

such a book as M. Zola's *L'Assommoir* and Balzac's *Illusions Perdues* is the difference

between unimaginative realism and imaginative reality'.[73]  Wilde goes even further and

says that 'Balzac is no more a realist than Holbein was.  He created life, he did not copy

it'.[74]  Wilde's dismissal of Balzac as a realist underscores the importance of not

interpreting Marie-Ursule as a realistic character.  *Ursule Mirouët* itself is concerned with

Romantic traditions and spiritual topicalities that undermine its realistic qualities,

something noted by George Saintsbury in his preface to the 1895 English translation: 'the

machinery of dreams, hypnotism, Swedenborgianism, and what not, which Balzac,

following one of his well-known manias, chose to work into the book, [cannot] be said to

add very largely to its verisimilitude'.[75]  Notably, the novel depicts Dr Minoret's

conversion from an 'anti-Mesmerist' to a firm believer after witnessing someone 'dans le

sommeil somnambulique'[76] mentally traverse the distance from Paris to Nemours in order

to report on Ursule.  As Balzac describes, she is in a state in which 'l'être intérieur dégagé

de toutes les entraves apportées à l'exercice de ses facultés par la nature visible, se

promène dans le monde que nous nommons invisible à tort'.[77]  Previously not a religious

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[73] Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', in *Intentions* (London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1891), pp. 1–55, 17

[74] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p. 18

[75] George Saintsbury, Preface, *Ursule Mirouët*, by Honoré de Balzac, trans. by Clara Bell (London: J. M. Dent, 1895), pp. ix–xiii, ix

[76] Balzac, *Ursule Mirouët*, I, p. 182; 'in a magnetic sleep' (p. 71)

[77] Balzac, *Ursule Mirouët*, I, p. 182; 'the inner being, set free from the fetters by which visible nature hinders the full exercise of its faculties, wanders though the world which we erroneously call invisible' (p. 71)

man, having 'une telle horreur'[78] of priests and a 'répugnance pour ce qu'il appelait les

mômeries de l'église,[79] Dr Minoret becomes a pious believer in what amounts to the

novel's complete conflation of the supernatural and the realistic; as the curé in *Ursule*

*Mirouët*, Abbé Chaperon, says, '[t]out ce que Dieu fait est naturel'.[80]

Dowson's story utilizes *Ursule Mirouët* as a 'realist' novel that subverts strict

realism through an explicit critique of materialism, but the novel's religiosity is not

adopted by the story.  Although a devout Catholic himself, 'taking definite steps towards

Catholicism', according to his biographer Jad Adams, '[a]s early as summer 1890',[81]

Dowson possessed a faith that had as much to do with his love of beauty as it did with his

spiritualism: 'There is more than a little in the jib that many artists converted not because

they found Catholicism more spiritually true than other forms of faith, but just more

beautiful'.[82]  As has often been noted, many other Decadent writers and artists converted

to Catholicism for the same reasons, and the spiritualism pervading Dowson's story

embodies the type of Catholicism described by Ellis Hanson in *Decadence and*

*Catholicism* (1997):

> The sheer excess of the Church—its archaic splendor, the weight of its history,
> the elaborate embroidery of its robes, the labyrinthine mysteries of its symbolism,
> the elephantine exquisiteness by which is performs its daily miracles—has always
> made it an aesthetic and fetishistic object of wonder.[83]

The fact that Campion, unlike Dr Minoret, does not convert to Christianity in 'Apple

Blossom' emphasizes that the story does not endorse a simple, sentimental religiosity.

This is borne out in Campion's relationship to Marie-Ursule, which is less one of

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[78] Balzac, *Ursule Mirouët*, I, p. 28; 'such a horror' (p. 9)
[79] Balzac, *Ursule Mirouët*, I, p. 139; 'repugnance for what he called Church mummeries' (p. 53)
[80] Balzac, *Ursule Mirouët*, II, p. 268; 'All that God does is natural' (p. 230)
[81] Jad Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine: The Life of Ernest Dowson, Poet and Decadent* (New York:
I. B. Tauris, 2000), p. 52
[82] Adams, *Madder Music*, p. 52
[83] Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997), p. 6

appreciation for her spiritual decision than one of appreciation for her as an aesthetic object and for the appositeness of her decision read in the context of art.  This point is emphasized by the repeated descriptions of both Marie-Ursule's decision and the landscape of Ploumariel as works of art.  For example, Campion notes the 'pictorial fitness'[84] of Marie-Ursule's decision.  When making her decision, Marie-Ursule also evokes Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and its description of life that can never 'bid the Spring adieu'[85] by describing life at the Ursuline convent as never changing: 'one day is like another.  They can never be very sad, you know'.[86]  Furthermore, Campion recurrently and literally frames the landscape of the fictional Ploumariel: 'look[ing] through the little square of window at the sad-coloured Breton country'.[87]  His scopophilic perspective engenders many photographic landscapes centered on Marie-Ursule, such as the Crucifixion/Assumption scenes in the story's final pages.  Yet another example is the curé's exclamation: '*Craque*! it is a betrothal, and a *trousseau*, and not the habit of religion, that [Marie-Ursule] is full of',[88] which might allude to *craquelure*, the network of fine cracks in a painting's varnish or paint.  Lastly, Marie-Ursule pictorially fixes a prelapsarian scene, retarding the narrative of the Fall, when she breaks off an apple blossom, saying 'there will be apples and apples—always enough apples.  But I like the blossom best'.[89]  The story can be read as a transfixion of youth and innocence or an expression of the 'adoration of the girlchild',[90] which Dowson shared with Ruskin; the

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[84] Dowson, 'Apple Blossom', p. 109
[85] John Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1820), pp. 113–116, 114
[86] Dowson, 'Apple Blossom', p. 107
[87] Dowson, 'Apple Blossom', p. 105
[88] Dowson, 'Apple Blossom', p. 104
[89] Dowson, 'Apple Blossom', p. 106
[90] Adams, *Madder Music*, p. 55

former's infatuation with Adelaide Foltinowicz[91] parallels the latter's obsession with Rose

La Touche (and Effie Gray before that). But a purely biographical reading ignores the

story's self-consciously literary, pictorial, and inter-textual design. Dowson's use of

Ruskin's biography is in the service of his conflating the real and the supernatural,

inseparable in Ruskin's deluded mind, and indivisible in the legend of St Ursula, which

has long been suspected of being apocryphal, removed by the Roman reform of the

calendar in 1969,[92] but historically elusive long before then as suggested by Ruskin's own

comments on the legend:

> [Of] St. Ursula, by no industry of my good scholars, and none has been refused, can I find the slightest material trace. Under scholarly investigation, she vanishes utterly into the stars and æther [. . .] Not a relic, not a word, remains of her, as what Mr. John Stuart Mill calls "a utility embodied in a material object".[93]

Ruskin even goes so far as to say that Carpaccio's faith is best expressed in his meditation

on the imaginary saint (and, by extension, all things imaginary): 'if he did not actually

believe that the princess [Ursula] and angels ever were, at least he heartily wished there

had been such persons, and could be. Now this is the first step to real faith'.[94] Dowson's

story can now been seen to fit well within the literary and artistic tradition centered on St

Ursula, which sees her, in the words of Saintsbury's complaint about Balzac's Ursule, as

'very nice; but [. . .] not very human'.[95]

Neither an autobiographical or biographical story, nor an homage to the tradition

of French realism, 'Apple Blossom in Brittany' is an expression of British Decadent anti-

mimetic fiction. It is a pastiche and parody of French realism, employing Gallicisms and

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[91] Who was eleven years old when Dowson met her in November 1889; see Adams, *Madder Music*, p. 29.
[92] See David Hugh Farmer, 'Ursula and Companions', in *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992), pp. 473–474, 474.
[93] Ruskin, Letter LXXI (4 October 1876), in *Fors Clavigera*, VI, pp. 339–376, 341. On behalf of Ruskin, James Reddie Anderson collated the legends of St Ursula, printed in Ruskin's Letter LXXI, pp. 350–357.
[94] Ruskin, Letter LXXI, in *Fors Clavigera*, VI, p. 343
[95] Saintsbury, Preface, *Ursule Mirouët*, p. ix

a superficially realistic plot to undercut fiction's representational claims and emphasize

language's artificial quality.  Gestures toward the French realist tradition elude easy

interpretation, with Dowson's allusions to *Ursule Mirouët*, for example, having the effect

of reconfirming the supernatural (through Balzac's plot) and deflecting back to the

tradition of British fiction, about which Saintsbury complains (partly because of the

novel's fantastic and 'overdone' aspects): 'The whole scheme, indeed, of *Ursule Mirouët*

[. . .] is far more that of an English novel than of a French'.[96]  The short story's setting in

Brittany has the same effect, locating the story in France, but in a Celtic part of the

country, appropriate because of Dowson's affection for the place,[97] but primarily

important because of its centrality to European Decadence, British fiction, and the myth

of St Ursula, the English princess married in Brittany.

Oscar Wilde's 'Lady Alroy' (1887)[98] is another ostensibly realistic short story

whose ideological and aesthetic aims run counter to its surface realism.  In fact, Wilde's

story performs and deconstructs the conventions of realist and 'sensation' fiction through

parody, specifically of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862)[99] and more

generally of sensation fiction's generic conventions as epitomized by the above and by

Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1859–1860).  Wilde's implicit connecting of realist

aesthetics with sensation fiction contravenes many critical accounts, such as Lyn Pykett's,

which trace the development of the latter genre beginning with its origin in gothic

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[96] Saintsbury, Preface, *Ursule Mirouët*, p. x

[97] See Adams, *Madder Music*, p. 37

[98] Published in *The World: A Journal for Men and Women* (25 May 1887), pp. 18–19 (674–675); republished as 'The Sphinx without a Secret', in *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime & Other Stories* (London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1891), pp. 75–87

[99]  Wilde and Braddon were personally acquainted; Natalie Houston notes that 'Braddon's diaries from this period [1880s–1890s] record numerous social engagements with Oscar Wilde' (Introduction, *Lady Audley's Secret*, by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, ed. by Natalie M. Houston [Peterborough: Broadview, 2003], pp. 9–29, 16).  Wilde's title might also allude to Benjamin Disraeli's *Alroy* (1833).

romance: '"Gothic traces" were embedded [. . .] in the sensation novel which dominated

the bestseller lists and critical columns in the early 1860s'.[100] Margaret Oliphant (1828–

1897), however, explicitly separates sensation fiction from the fantastic, at least in Wilkie

Collins' *The Woman in White*:

> Not so much as a single occult agency is employed in the structure of his tale. Its
> power arises from no overstraining of nature: —the artist shows no love of
> mystery for mystery's sake [. . .] His plot is astute and deeply-laid, but never
> weird or ghastly [. . .] His effects are produced by common human acts,
> performed by recognisable human agents, whose motives are never inscrutable,
> and whose line of conduct is always more or less consistent.[101]

Henry James made this same assessment of Collins, calling his 'mysteries [. . .] stern

reality'.[102] The realistic aspect of sensation fiction is what Wilde isolates in his parody,

which is why Rodney Shewan argues against reading Lady Alroy as a traditional 'heroine'

of sensation fiction: 'The whiff of Wilkie Collins is a false scent: the suspect is merely a

living exponent of Wildean mythopoeia fighting the good fight of fancy against

annihilating fact'.[103]

'Lady Alroy' is divided into what Bruce Bashford labels the 'outer' and 'inner

story'.[104] In the former, Lord Gerald Murchison recounts to his old Oxford classmate, the

narrator of the outer frame story, his infatuation with Lady Alroy and his subsequent

suspicion of her after seeing her enter 'a sort of place for letting lodgings'.[105] The story of

Murchison's infatuation and suspicion makes up the 'inner story', in which Murchison

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[100] Lyn Pykett, 'Sensation and the Fantastic in the Victorian Novel', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Deirdre David (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), pp. 192–211, 192–193
[101] Margaret Oliphant, 'Sensation Novels', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 91 (May 1862), pp. 564–584, 566
[102] James, 'Miss Braddon', *The Nation* (9 November 1865), pp. 593–594, 593
[103] Shewan, Rodney, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 26
[104] Bruce Bashford, '"Thinking in Stories": Oscar Wilde's "The Sphinx without a Secret"', *The Oscholars* 4 (October/November 2007), <http://www.oscholarship.com/TO/Archive/Forty-two/And_I/AND%20I.htm#_%60Thinking_in_Stories%60> [accessed 27 July 2009] (paragraph 7 of 12)
[105] Oscar Wilde, 'Lady Alroy', p. 19

doggedly pursues 'the truth' in a way evocative of how Wilde describes Mauppasant's

method in 'The Decay of Lying': '[he] strips life of the few poor rags that still cover her,

and shows us foul sore and festering wound'.[106]  Realist and sensation-fiction conventions

about fact-finding lead Murchison to expect a sordid 'truth'—the 'foul sore'—behind Lady

Alroy's *rendez-vous* and to make accusations that lead ultimately to her suicide.

Murchison's method is also the same as Robert Audley's in *Lady Audley's Secret*, the

principal model for Wilde's story.  In Braddon's novel, Robert Audley reconnects with

George Talboys, a former Eton classmate, upon the latter's return from Australia, which

is also the time Talboys learns of his wife's death.[107]  Shortly after the two men encounter

Audley's uncle's new wife, George Talboys disappears; then, in a convention of sensation

fiction partly established by Braddon, Robert Audley refashions himself into an amateur

detective, determined to uncover the truth about his friend's disappearance.  Wilde's

Murchison is similarly determined to discover Lady Alroy's secret and confirm his

suspicions about her having a romantic affair.  His dedication to the truth is

uncompromising: he exclaims, 'I cannot love where I cannot trust';[108] he complains of

being 'sick and tired of the incessant secrecy' that Lady Alroy imposes on his visits;[109]

and he asks her exasperatedly, 'Can't you tell the truth?'.[110]  Nineteenth-century realist

fiction frequently reduced 'truth' to candor about life's sordid details (which is why

Decadent and realist fiction are sometimes confused in critical discourse), and

Murchison's 'realism' assumes precisely this form.  He remains skeptical about Lady

Alroy's intentions even after he confronts her, is told by Lady Alroy that there is 'nothing

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[106] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p. 12
[107] The conceit of reunion between two classmates frames both *Lady Audley's Secret* and 'Lady Alroy'.
[108] Wilde, 'Lady Alroy', p. 18
[109] Wilde, 'Lady Alroy', p. 18
[110] Wilde, 'Lady Alroy', p. 19

to tell',[111] and learns from her landlady that when Lady Alroy came to her rooms she

'simply sat in the drawing-room [. . .] and sometimes had tea'.[112]  (Significantly, this line

is changed in the version republished in *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* to '*reading books,*

*and sometimes [having] tea [my emphasis]*'.[113])  Murchison's final words, the concluding

ones of the story, reverberate with multiple meanings: 'I wonder'.[114]  These words signify

his skepticism and indicate that he continues to 'read' in the wrong genre; that is,

Murchison is unsatisfied with the 'truth' as he has discovered it because it does not

conform to the conventions of sensation fiction.  They also resonate ironically, as a false

*thaumaston* (employing the Aristotelian term meaning the element of surprise or

wonder), because 'wonder' in the sense of 'to marvel'[115] is precisely that of which he is

incapable.  His pursuit of the truth unmasks Lady Alroy's constructed fiction and reveals

a mundane fact, proving, as Shewan explains, 'Wilde's contention that "Nowadays it is

only the unreadable that occurs"'.[116]

In some respect, Wilde's story also functions as a model for *The Picture of Dorian*

*Gray*, and a comparison of the two narratives reveals part of the short story's machinery.

'Lady Alroy' was first published in *The World* on 25 May 1887 and *Dorian Gray* first

appeared three years later on 20 June 1890 in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*.  Like 'Lady

Alroy', *Dorian Gray* alludes to and plays with aspects of *Lady Audley's Secret*, which is

one source for the idea of a fantastical portrait capable of revealing its sitter's inner life.

George Talboys and Robert Audley inspect the portrait of Lady Audley:

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[111] Wilde, 'Lady Alroy', p. 19
[112] Wilde, 'Lady Alroy', p. 19
[113] Wilde, 'The Sphinx without a Secret', in *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime & Other Stories*, p. 87
[114] Wilde, 'Lady Alroy', p. 19
[115] *Oxford English Dictionary* on-line [accessed 22 July 2010]: in various senses, marvel connotes 'miracle'.
[116] Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism*, p. 26

> No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have so exaggerated every attribute of that delicate face as to give a lurid brightness to the blonde complexion, and a strange, sinister light to the deep blue eyes.  No one but a pre-Raphaelite could have given to that pretty pouting mouth the hard and almost wicked look it had in the portrait.
>
> It was so like, and yet so unlike.  It was as if you had burned strange-coloured fires before my lady's face, and by their influence brought out new lines and new expressions never seen in it before.  The perfection of feature, the brilliancy of colouring, were there; but I suppose the painter had copied quaint medieval monstrosities until his brain had grown bewildered, for my lady, in his portrait of her, had something of the aspect of a beautiful fiend.[117]

With his 'singular devotion to the minute accidents of [his subject], including [. . .] every excess of sharpness and deformity',[118] the Pre-Raphaelite portraitist reveals Lady Audley's inner character.  Through Dorian's marvelously-granted wish, Basil Hallward's portrait reveals the same about Dorian Gray's soul:

> As he was passing through the library towards the door of his bedroom, his eye fell upon the portrait Basil Hallward had painted of him.  He started back in surprise, and then went over to it and examined it.  In the dim arrested light that struggled through the cream-colored silk blinds, the face seemed to him to be a little changed.  The expression looked different.  One would have said that there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth.  It was certainly curious.
>
> He turned round, and, walking to the window, drew the blinds up.  The bright dawn flooded the room, and swept the fantastic shadows into dusky corners, where they lay shuddering.  But the strange expression that he had noticed in the face of the portrait seemed to linger there, to be more intensified even.  The quivering, ardent sunlight showed him the lines of cruelty round the mouth as clearly as if he had been looking into a mirror after he had done some dreadful thing.[119]

The uncanny aspect of Lady Audley's picture, its sinister quality, finds its confirmation in reality (Lady Audley's genuine depravity); in *Dorian Gray*, the portrait is unequivocally supernatural, in spite of the ultimate return to its original state.  'Lady Alroy' is a bridge between these two termini, eschewing the supernatural but also undermining realist interpretations by emphasizing Wilde's program of fashioning stories out of other

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[117] Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *The Sixpenny Magazine* (1 April 1862), pp. 475–490, 479
[118] Anon., 'Exhibition of the Royal Academy', *The Times* (3 May 1851), p. 8
[119] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* (July 1890), pp. 1–100, 41–42

literature rather than turning to life for his plots and characters. The implicit critique of

realist interpretation in 'Lady Alroy' becomes explicit in *Dorian Gray*; thus, a

retrospective reading of the parallels between the two texts illuminates Wilde's

mythopoeic intentions in 'Lady Alroy'. For example, Murchison and Dorian both say

'terrible things' to their (potential) fiancées, who both subsequently commit suicide. Lord

Henry Wotton's claim in *Dorian Gray* that women are 'Sphynxes without secrets'[120] finds

its antecedent, more narrowly applied, in 'Lady Alroy's' narrator's contention that Alroy

was 'merely a Sphinx without a secret'.[121] This juxtaposition of Wilde's novel and his

short story reveals two important connections. First, the linking of Lady Alroy with Sybil

Vane reveals that Lady Alroy, like Sybil Vane, is meant to function as a work of art and

performance. Her status as a literary and artistic creation is further confirmed by Alroy's

imagining herself to be 'a heroine',[122] suggesting that she is self-consciously playing the

role of a character in a work of fiction, and by the narrator's description of her as 'the

Gioconda in sables', connecting her to both Braddon's Lady Audley, described in the

novel as being 'wrapped in the very sables which Robert Audley had brought from

Russia',[123] and to Walter Pater's famous meditation on Leonardo da Vinci's *La Gioconda*

(1503–1506), in which its subject (generally agreed to be Lisa Gherardini) is described as

being 'a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh—the deposit, little cell by cell, of

strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions'.[124] Pater's *Gioconda* is

much more erotically charged than Wilde's Lady Alroy, but Pater's emphasis on reading

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[120] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Ward, Lock, and Co., 1891), p. 295; this line is absent from the *Lippincott's* edition of the text.
[121] Wilde, 'Lady Alroy', p. 19
[122] Wilde, 'Lady Alroy', p. 19
[123] Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret, The Sixpenny Magazine* (June 1862), pp. 193–207, 196
[124] Walter Pater, 'Notes on Leonardo da Vinci', *The Fortnightly Review* 35 (1 November 1869), pp. 494–508, 506; Pater retains this wording in the last edition (fourth) that he corrected of *The Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1893).

*La Gioconda*'s surface and finding there the depths of 'thoughts' and 'passions'—'the beauty wrought [. . .] upon the flesh'—indicates the proper reading of Lady Alroy, who resists Gerald's attempts to read below the surface.  Unlike Pater's *Gioconda*, upon whom is etched 'All the thoughts and experiences of the world',[125] Lady Alroy is emptied of substance, but this highlights, all the more, that she is a fictional character, and one who is not in a realistic narrative, but rather in a work of self-conscious artifice.  She has no 'debauched reality',[126] but is instead a flat character, a type more apt to inhabit works of fantasy than realism.  The narrator ironically states that Lady Alroy's beauty is 'psychological, not plastic',[127] but, devoid of psychological depth, the characters in Wilde's story can possess nothing except plastic beauty.  These flat characters parody the conventions of realism, while the story simultaneously constructs a narrative from reassembled realist motifs.

The story's second important connection to *Dorian Gray* is its construction of Lady Alroy as a Decadent muse.  Evoking the fatal 'yellow book' of *Dorian Gray*, Lady Alroy is first spotted in, as Murchison says, a 'little yellow brougham'.[128]  This carriage, the reader is told, 'attracted [his] attention',[129] leading him to look inside, whereupon he sees Lady Alroy's face, framed, like *La Giaconda*, as a canvas for Decadent interpretation.  As a text to be read, Lady Alroy functions as the 'textual marker for the multiple misreadings that in varying degrees, Decadent narratives self-consciously and

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[125] Pater, 'Notes on Leonardo da Vinci', p. 506
[126] Jarlath Killeen, *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde: Catholicism, Folklore and Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), p. 41
[127] Wilde, 'Lady Alroy', p. 18
[128] Wilde, 'Lady Alroy', p. 18
[129] Wilde, 'Lady Alroy', p. 18

intentionally invited from their readers'.[130]  Her face, Murchison says, 'fascinated me

immediately',[131] his language resembling Dorian's in *Dorian Gray*, in which he says to

Lord Henry: 'That book you sent me [the yellow book] so fascinated me that I forgot

what the time was'.[132]  Both Dorian Gray and Lord Murchison are, as the *Oxford English

Dictionary* defines 'fascinate', affected 'by witchcraft or magic'.[133]  The supernatural

connotation of 'fascinate' implies a fundamental connection between the act of reading

and fantasy; that is, the act of reading in 'Lady Alroy' and *Dorian Gray* is recast by Wilde

as the state of being under the influence of supernatural powers.  Lady Alroy is a purely

textual construction, and a fantastical one at that.  Her appeal, as Murchison says, is a

'consequence' of her mystery, but this mystery results not from hidden psychological

depths, but arises simply from an absence of language, an omission.  Basil Hallward says

in *Dorian Gray*: 'You know how I love secrecy.  It is the only thing that can make

modern life wonderful or mysterious to us.  The commonest thing is delightful if one only

hides it'.[134]  It is suggestive that this is spoken by Basil, the painter, who attempts to

conceal Dorian's name from Lord Henry. Basil's secret is nothing more than Dorian's

name, but naming for Wilde implies limitation.  'Lady Alroy' ostensibly incriminates the

eponymous 'heroine' for not possessing 'a secret', but this alternative reading makes Lord

Murchison culpable for searching in the 'real world' for Lady Alroy's 'genuine' secret.

Wilde's story, then, indicts Lord Murchison rather than Lady Alroy.  In doing so, Wilde

more broadly indicts the perceived hold realism had on the short story in the late-

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[130] Shafquat Towheed, 'Containing the Poisonous Text: Decadent Readers, Reading Decadence', in *Decadences*, ed. by Paul Fox (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2006), pp. 1–31, 26
[131] Wilde, 'Lady Alroy', p. 18
[132] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Lippincott's*, p. 64
[133] *OED* on-line [accessed 27 May 2010]
[134] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Lippincott's*, p. 5

nineteenth century. From within the short story, Wilde makes the same attack on realism

that he does in 'The Decay of Lying', wherein he asserts that 'what is interesting about

people in good society [. . .] is the mask that each one of them wears, not the reality that

lies behind the mask'.[135] Remove the mask, and 'Sooner or later one comes to that

dreadful universal thing called human nature'.[136] 'Lady Alroy' is an instruction manual

for reading and creating short stories, and the first injunction is against realism.

Max Beerbohm's short story, 'Enoch Soames: A Memory of the Eighteen-

Nineties' (written between 1914-1915;[137] published in 1916[138]) takes the construction of a

purely textual world to its logical limits. No attempt is made to distinguish at all between

'real' and fictional texts, since texts of any sort are equally incapable of signifying in any

objective way—that is to say, language is an autonomous construct, without any

correlation to objective 'reality', and thus all texts are works of fiction. The story is told

from the perspective of Beerbohm himself, who is the seventh of the *Seven Men* in his

story collection. At first glance, this authorial presence seems to lend weight to the

reality of the story, but Beerbohm is almost invariably present in his prose, often as a

fictional character. Beerbohm appears a number of times in *Zuleika Dobson* (1911), but

his presence only underscores the fantasy of the novel. As previously noted, he interacts

with Clio, the muse of history, and appears in an illustration as a fairy crowning the busts

of the emperors' statues at Oxford (**figure 1**). So, too, in 'Enoch Soames', Beerbohm's

presence, especially when juxtaposed with the more fantastical flights of fancy in the

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[135] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p. 14
[136] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p. 15
[137] David Cecil, *Max: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 341n
[138] The story first appeared in the United States in *The Century Magazine* 92 (May 1916), pp. 1–19, and in the United Kingdom in *The Cornhill Magazine* 40 (June 1916), pp. 717–742; repr. in *Seven Men* (London: Heinemann, 1919), pp. 3–48

story, emphasizes, rather than detracts from, the fantasy of the story. Beerbohm's

interactions with the Devil and his letter to the Queen in support of Soames are just two

examples of Beerbohm's participation in the fantasy of the story. As Paul Fox argues,

'[t]he self-referentiality of "Enoch Soames" is the narrative substantiation of Wilde's

aesthetic formula that "Art never expresses anything but itself"'.[139]

Perhaps more than Beerbohm's presence, the appearance of 'real' texts within the

story creates an atmosphere of scholarly authority. This is something that has been

continued by a *Critical Heritage* edition (1997) and a *Bibliography of Enoch Soames*

(1999) compiled by Mark Samuels Lasner.[140] The first 'real' text the reader encounters is

Holbrook Jackson's *The Eighteen-Nineties* (1913), dedicated (in real life) to Max

Beerbohm, but in which he searches (in the story) in vain for Enoch Soames' entry.

Other texts and authors quickly accumulate: Edmond de Goncourt, Mallarmé's *L'Apres-*

*midi d'un faune*, *The Poems of Shelley*, *The Yellow Book*, *The Savoy*, *The Saturday*

*Review* (for which Beerbohm served as drama critic, 1898–1910), and *The Time*

*Machine*. These 'real' texts inhabit the story with as much authority (or with less, in some

instances) as Enoch Soames' *Negations* and *Fungoids* and T. K. Nupton's book on

Soames. 'Real' events such as Will Rothenstein's 1893 visit to Oxford contribute further

to making the story seem real. 'Real' places, too, such as the Café Royal and Kensington

Gardens, populate the story, and this further suggests that Beerbohm strives to create a

realistic environment.

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[139] Paul Fox, 'On the *Fin de Siècle* Margin: Justifying the Texts of T. K. Nupton, Max Beerbohm and Enoch Soames', in *Double Vision: Literary Palimpsests of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. by Darby Lewes (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008), pp. 163–172, 168

[140] *Enoch Soames: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by David Colvin and Edward Maggs (London: Cypher at Maggs Brothers, 2001); Mark Samuels Lasner, *A Bibliography of Enoch Soames (1862–1897)* (Oxford: Rivendale Press, 1999)

These real texts, people, and places, however, do not lend documentary substance

to the story.  Instead, the fantastical moments completely dissolve the realistic elements.

Fantasy is not undone by the presence of realism in a story; in other words, the presence

of realistic detail does not preclude the appearance of the marvelous.  Realism, on the

other hand, is not sustainable after the introduction of supernatural elements.  The story

indubitably ceases to be realistic with the appearance of the Devil, even though his

entrance is treated subtly and in a matter-of-fact manner.  Nouns that would otherwise

denote Satan are muted by being employed adjectively.  At the Restaurant du Vingtième

Siècle, Beerbohm spots Satan, but describes him thus: 'a tall, flashy, rather

Mephistophelian man whom I had seen from time to time in the domino-room and

elsewhere'.[141]  Beerbohm transforms him from Mephistopheles into 'Mephistophelian', an

oxymoronic construction that highlights his fictiveness and adds an additional layer of

familiarity by giving him a regular presence in the lives of Soames and Beerbohm, the

latter of whom sees Mephistopheles 'from time to time'.  Beerbohm later concludes,

'Decidedly, he was sinister',[142] but this, too, diffuses the Devil's potency.  When the Devil

finally does reveal himself, Beerbohm is not frightened, but laughs instead.  He says, 'I

couldn't help it: I laughed.  I tried not to, I knew there was nothing to laugh at, my

rudeness shamed me; but—I laughed with increasing volume'.[143]  Beerbohm does not

laugh because he is incredulous.  He accepts, quite readily, that this is indeed the Devil,

but in a story patched together by various texts and modes, the Devil's presence is an

over-used literary device, one that is particularly clichéd in the *fin de siècle*.  In some

sense, Beerbohm is too familiar with the Faustian theme and the Devil-as-character and,

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[141] Max Beerbohm, 'Enoch Soames', *Century*, p. 9; *Cornhill*, p. 728
[142] Beerbohm, 'Enoch Soames', *Century*, p. 10; *Cornhill*, p. 729
[143] Beerbohm, 'Enoch Soames', *Century*, p. 12; *Cornhill*, p. 731

consequently, does not recognize the impending danger to Soames. The more

vehemently Beerbohm argues for Soames' existence as a real person, the more apparent it

is that he is not. Even Soames' proleptic trip to the British Museum's Reading Room in

1997 is underscored as being an allusion to H. G. Wells' novel. Beerbohm tries to

intervene on Soames' behalf, saying to the Devil: 'But—"The Time Machine" is a

delightful book, don't you think? So entirely original!'.[144] The Devil responds, 'You are

pleased to sneer [. . .] but it is one thing to write about an impossible machine; it is a quite

other thing to be a Supernatural Power'.[145] The Devil's remark devalues the literary as

opposed to the 'real', but Beerbohm reaffirms the superiority of the literary by asserting:

'All the same, I had scored'.[146] Beerbohm as a character, narrator and author understands

that by identifying the literary antecedents of the Devil's power he has revealed that

power to be mostly literary. Decadent fiction repeatedly employs the supernatural to

emphasize its anti-mimetic position, but the supernatural, in this story, does not have

potency beyond the text.

Vernon Lee's 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers: A Moorish Ghost Story of the

Seventeenth Century' was first published in French as 'La Madone aux sept glaives' in

*Feuilleton du journal des débats du Samedi* (February 1896); republished in English in

two parts of *The English Review* (January and February 1909);[147] and published again in

*For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (1927).[148] This story is different from the three

discussed above in that it is ostensibly a parody and critique of a 'real' or historical

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[144] Beerbohm, 'Enoch Soames', *Century*, p. 13; *Cornhill*, p. 733
[145] Beerbohm, 'Enoch Soames', *Century*, p. 13; *Cornhill*, p. 733
[146] Beerbohm, 'Enoch Soames', *Century*, p. 13; *Cornhill*, p. 733
[147] Vernon Lee, 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers: A Moorish Ghost Story of the Seventeenth Century', *The English Review* 1 (January 1909), pp. 223–233; (February 1909), pp. 453–465
[148] Vernon Lee, 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers', in *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (London: John Lane, 1927), pp. 95–140

religious and cultural belief system (Spanish Counter-Reformation culture) rather than of

a literary form.  Lee suggests this in her preface addressed to Maurice Baring (to whom

*For Maurice* is dedicated), in which she describes her 'detestation for all that Counter-

Reformation and especially Spanish cultus of death, damnation, tears and wounds'.[149]

The central plot of the story concerns Don Juan Gusman del Pulgar—not the 'wicked but

irresistible Mozartian Don', as Vineta Colby explains, 'nor the guileless Byronic Don, but

an arrogant, ruthless seducer and murderer'[150]—who attempts through necromancy and

coercion to attain a sleeping Infanta and her treasures.  The Infanta requires Don Juan to

affirm that she is 'the most beautiful thing [he had] ever beheld',[151] but he is bound by an

earlier oath to the Virgin of the Seven Daggers that states he 'will maintain before all men

and all the Gods of Olympus that no lady was ever so fair as our Lady of the Seven

Daggers of Grenada'.[152]  Consequently, the Infanta's Chief Eunuch orders Don Juan

killed, and his soul is saved only by that devotion to the Virgin of the Seven Daggers.

What makes this story Decadent is its adoption of a Wildean aesthetic, evident in

the highly artificial language and dense layers of allusions, which prompt Catherine

Maxwell and Patricia Pulham to label it a 'decidedly Decadent fantastic tale'.[153]  In fact,

the story is a work of overt fantasy in the vein of epic descents into the underworld,

(epitomized by Odysseus' descent in Book XI of the *Odyssey*), touching on 'the fantastic'

only when the narration shifts into free indirect discourse following Don Juan's

decapitation, ironically providing the reader access to Don Juan's inner thoughts.  The

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[149] Vernon Lee, Introduction, *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1927), pp. ix–li, xviii
[150] Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2003), p. 242
[151] Lee, 'Virgin of the Seven Daggers', p. 458
[152] Lee, 'Virgin of the Seven Daggers', p. 225
[153] Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham, Introduction, *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Maxwell and Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 1–20, 19n

narrative hesitates at this point between a fantastical explanation and resolution into

Todorov's category of the uncanny; Don Juan imagines that his journey to the Infanta and

his subsequent death had 'all been a dream—perhaps a delusion induced by the vile

fumigations of that filthy ruffian of a renegade Jew [Baruch, who helps him reach the

Infanta through necromancy]'.[154]  He and the reader are soon thereafter disabused of that

notion, though, when Don Juan sees his corpse stretched out on a bier.  Subsequently, as

a reward for his loyalty to the Virgin of the Seven Daggers, Don Juan ascends to greet the

Virgin in heaven, and the story returns to a mode of fantasy.  This return to fantasy is a

deliberate alteration of the story of Don Miguel de Mañara, the seventeenth-century

nobleman on whom the legend of Don Juan is based.  There are two versions of this

legend; the one from which Lee derives her tale is merely uncanny:

> In the first version [of his life] he is rich and frivolous.  He repents of his sins and
> enters the religious order, the Caridad, after meeting a funeral procession where
> he sees a corpse he thinks looks exactly like himself, reading this as a warning.[155]

Lee's version of the tale removes its uncanny aspect, mining the legend for literary ends

and deflating its religious import.  This becomes all the more clear from the coda she

attaches after Don Juan's ascension.  The coda begins in the form of a letter from Spanish

poet and dramatist Don Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600–1681) addressed to a

seemingly fictional 'Archpriest Morales', to whom authorship of the story is ascribed

(whether as a written text or oral tale is unclear).  In the letter, Calderón imagines writing

the story in 'the shape of a play', which would 'outshine' his religious drama *El

Purgatorio de San Patricio* (1628) and 'touch the heart of the most stubborn'.[156]

However, Calderón is undermined as a narrative voice, through both his obvious

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[154] Lee, 'Virgin of the Seven Daggers', p. 461
[155] Vernon Lee, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, ed. by Maxwell and Pulham, p. 247n
[156] Lee, 'Virgin of the Seven Daggers', p. 465

misinterpretation of Don Juan's story, which, as opposed to touching the most stubborn

hearts, reinforces Don Juan's immoral behavior, and through what is presumably Lee's

authorial intrusion after Calderón's narrative ends, in which she humbles herself by

apologizing for having to write this story with 'unworthy modern hands' (because

Calderón's age prevents his doing so).[157]

With the addition of the story's last paragraph, Lee reinforces the self-conscious,

parodic, and fantastical aspects of this tale (perhaps a better term than 'short story' for

such a deliberately anachronistic piece).  Lee shifts from religious parody, signaled by the

preface, to literary parody, undermining the fictitious (although plausible) opinions of the

poet and dramatist, Calderón, and expanding on a literary theme with a long tradition,

beginning with Tirso de Molina's *The Seducer of Seville* (1630), and continuing through

Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1787), Byron's *Don Juan* (1819–1824), and Lee's own previous

use of a Don Juan figure in *Juvenilia* (1887).  Lee's treatment of this theme is a literary

exercise directly in dialogue with the story's precursors, using irony to undermine that

tradition, but also escaping the direct moral imperatives of satire by confusing truth and

fiction throughout.  Not only does Lee's epistolary coda assume the mask of veracity and

literary authority (while masking other inventions such as Archpriest Morales), but she

also confuses and conflates fact and fiction throughout, mixing, for example, real and

invented virgins in Don Juan's list of those whom he has not held above the Virgin of the

Seven Daggers: the real (or at least traditional) Our Lady of Paradise, Our Lady of Mount

Carmel, Our Lady of St. Luke in Bologna, and Our Lady of the Pillar are listed along

with the fictional Our Lady of Swift Help and Our Lady of the Slipper of Famagosta.

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[157] Lee, 'Virgin of the Seven Daggers', p. 465

All four short stories considered here, then, self-consciously deconstruct Naturalism, literary realism and 'reality' itself. By emphasizing their status as literary texts—through pastiche, parody, and allusion—these stories satirize realistic modes and underscore the free-play central to Decadent conceptions of language and literary form. By challenging the underlying claims of Naturalism and realism to 'represent' life, Decadent short stories stress their own literariness and refute the efforts by realist and Naturalist writers to mimic life through generic conventions, more broadly undercutting the implied mimesis of realistic modes. The short story is an ideal forum for this challenge because of the prevalence of realism in the genre (partly a result of its association with Maupassant) and because of historical tension between realism and fantasy in the short-story form.

# Chapter IV

# Filaments of Fantasy: Towards a Theory of Decadent Drama

> Take the case of the English drama.  At first in the hands of the monks Dramatic Art was abstract, decorative, and mythological.  Then she enlisted Life in her service, and using some of life's external forms, she created an entirely new race of beings, whose sorrows were more terrible than any sorrow man has ever felt, whose joys were keener than lover's joys, who had the rage of the Titans and the calm of the gods, who had monstrous and marvellous sins, monstrous and marvellous virtues.  To them she gave a language different from that of actual use [. . .] But life soon shattered the perfection of the form.
> —Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying' (1891)[1]

> Art, and art only, can make archæology beautiful; and the theatric art can use it most directly and most vividly, for it can combine in one exquisite presentation the illusion of actual life with the wonder of the unreal world.
> —Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist' (1891)[2]

Any attempt by critics to analyze the relationship between fantasy and English-language Decadent drama must first confront the considerable difficulty in defining and identifying examples of the latter.  As a result, this chapter will work largely to develop a theory of Decadent drama, first by enumerating the problems inherent in such a task, and then by generating a theory from two examples that most frequently exemplify a Decadent aesthetic.  Close analyses of two Decadent texts will then serve to illustrate the inextricability of fantasy from definitions of Decadent drama.

**Definitional Challenges**:

The defining of Decadent drama in Great Britain and Ireland confronts at least six specific challenges.  To begin with, the term 'Decadent' was repeatedly applied to drama

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[1] Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', in *Intentions* (London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1891), pp. 1–55, 22–23

[2] Oscar Wilde, 'The Truth of Masks', in *Intentions*, (London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1891), pp. 215–258, 235

in the late-nineteenth century but rarely as a label to denote works of British and Irish

drama possessing the traits of self-conscious literariness and artificiality derived from an

understanding of language's autonomy.  Secondly, those few contemporary critics who

did use the term to refer to aesthetic aspects of English-language drama, such as Arthur

Symons, did so in idiosyncratic ways or in ways that placed Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) as

central to Decadent drama.  The seemingly outsized influence of Ibsen on British and

Irish playwrights, specifically on the coterie of Decadent authors examined in this thesis,

leads to critics' underestimation of indigenous developments and their important

divergences from Ibsen.  Thirdly, modern scholars have remained reluctant to use the

term with regard to late-Victorian drama, a phenomenon which seems partly attributable

to a paucity of examples; for instance, Wilde was one of the few Decadent authors who

was also prominently a playwright.   This lack of examples is itself the fourth challenge

complicating the definition of Decadent drama.  A fifth obstacle arises from the placing

or acknowledgment of Wilde's plays as central to any potential definition of Decadent

drama.  In so doing, one must also acknowledge that Wilde's theater criticism is often in

opposition to the implicit aesthetic aims of his plays.  Last is the problem presented by

any structuralist, genre-focused approach to the theater, which emphasizes the textual and

literary conditions of drama to the exclusion of its staging and performative aspects, a

practice discouraged by many dramatic critics.[3]  In spite of these challenges, two plays by

the most prominent British or Irish Decadent, Oscar Wilde, are clear examples of

Decadent drama: *Salomé* (1894) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), both of

which unequivocally demonstrate the importance of fantasy to Decadence.

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[3] To underscore this chapter's focus on textual aspects of Decadent plays, rather than on staging, performance, and so on, the term 'drama' will be employed throughout.

The first, and perhaps most obvious, definitional challenge is that turn-of-the-century critics typically applied 'decadent' to drama as a pejorative term connoting physical degeneration or moral decline rather than as a description of a play's avant-garde stylistics. Examples of this usage include James Earnest Baker's attempt to 'distance [Philip Massinger] from the time when the Elizabethan drama became quite decadent', which emphasizes (among other things) the 'stately' versification and 'ethical interest' of Massinger's plays.[4] Another example is Florence Bell's defense of the stage against anxieties about 'decadent' art's promulgation voiced by Samuel Smith, who asserted that 'a decadent drama and a decadent literature will produce a decadent nation'.[5] One last example is William Archer's (1856–1924) similar defense of *fin-de-siècle* theater against accusations of 'decadence': 'it must be declared [. . .] that the drama is neither decadent nor moribund; that, on the contrary, it shows stirrings of healthy life on every hand'.[6]

In each of the above cases, 'decadence' denotes a moral, imperial, or physical decline, but it seems ironic that so many critics felt compelled to defend the theater against accusations of its being 'decadent' when one considers that the British stage had just witnessed a renaissance of native drama in the nineties—something that accounts for the vigor with which Bell, Archer, and others defended the stage. As numerous critics have noted, however, a common perception by writers and critics in Great Britain was that, from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the mid-1880s, English drama had not come into its own as an original, vital, indigenous enterprise. For example, Henry

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[4] Baker's comments appeared in a paper read to the Elizabethan Society on 4 June 1890 and reported in *The Academy* ('Meetings of Societies', *The Academy* [June 1890], p. 430).
[5] Qtd. in Florence Bell, 'On the Influence of the Stage', *The Monthly Review* 1 (October 1900), pp. 112–125, 117
[6] William Archer, 'What Can Be Done for the Drama?', *Anglo-Saxon Review: A Quarterly Miscellany* 4 (March 1900), pp. 223–242, 224

James noted in 1879 that 'the English stage has probably never been so bad as it is at present'.[7]  That same year, after the Comédie Française's visit to the Gaity Theatre, Arnold lamented that 'we in England have no modern drama at all'.[8]  In 1945, Max Beerbohm looked back at the period and concurred with Arnold and James: 'In my very young days [the British theater] was mostly something adapted from the French, and had suffered greatly in the Channel crossing'.[9]  Even as playwriting developed in the United Kingdom after 1880, it tended to take the form of farce (two prominent examples being Arthur Wing Pinero's *The Magistrate* [1885] and Brandon Thomas' *Charley's Aunt* [1892]) or was indebted to the innovations of Henrik Ibsen, who was being championed (notably) by William Archer, George Bernard Shaw, and J. T. Grein.[10]  According to Kerry Powell, the 1889 London performance of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, 'along with the frequent appearances of Sarah Bernhardt beginning a decade earlier, lent the stage an intellectual and aesthetic excitement that was missing'[11] when Arnold and James bewailed the fallow state of British drama.  The excitement generated by Ibsen and Bernhardt rejuvenated British theater in a way that countermands critics' suggestions of general 'decadence' in the theater insofar as it is applied to its vitality.  Bernhardt's influence was primarily on the performative aspects of the theater and, thus, will be largely outside the concerns of this thesis, which focuses on the textual manifestations of

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[7] Henry James [signed XX], 'The London Theatres', *The Nation* (12 June 1879), pp. 400–401, 400
[8] Matthew Arnold, 'The French Play in London', *The Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review* 6 (August 1879), pp. 228–243, 238
[9] Max Beerbohm, 'Playgoing', in *Mainly on the Air* (London: Heinemann, 1957), pp. 63–70, 66
[10] See Archer's *About the Theatre: Essays and Studies* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1886) and Shaw's *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (London: W. Scott, 1891)
[11] Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), p. 2

Decadent drama.[12]  Ibsen's influence, on the other hand, directly shaped the content and

style of English-language playwriting; however, that influence also continues to obscure

the achievements of British and Irish dramatists and, furthermore, obfuscates the meaning

of Decadent drama because of the close association between Ibsen and Decadence in the

*fin de siècle*.

Ibsen's place in the late-nineteenth century discourse on Decadence, even among

sympathetic critics, is a second challenge to the defining of Decadent drama.  In

particular, Ibsen's moral seriousness, along with his development of the 'social drama'

genre, suggest little that is stylistically similar to other Decadent texts, as defined by this

thesis.  More frequently than not, contemporary critics seemed to identify Ibsen as

'decadent' because of the thematic content of his plays, especially his willingness to

engage with 'woman-with-a-past' heroines.  Shaw is largely responsible for this reading

of Ibsen: his energetic 'advocacy in the 1890s swept Ibsen's play into more general

debates, tending to focus contemporary response on the shocking ideas Ibsen apparently

advocated, rather than his dramaturgy'.[13]  Explicitly connecting 'decadence' with Ibsen,

Arthur Waugh inveighs against 'decadent' writers whose frankness in depicting sexuality,

disease, pregnancy, and similar topics leads to Waugh's plea for artists to 'assume the

habit of reticence'.[14]  Waugh undoubtedly has Ibsen in mind, explicitly invoking the

character of Hedda Gabler.  Hubert Crackanthorpe's response to Waugh's article in *The*

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[12] One might, of course, argue that Bernhardt is intimately complicit in the textual production of Decadent drama, at least insofar as some have argued that she is the inspiration for Wilde's *Salomé.*  For example, see Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, pp. 33–54; for a counterargument, see Tydeman and Price, pp. 12–13, 23–24. John Stokes argues more diplomatically: 'Whether Wilde had Bernhardt specifically in mind when he wrote the play is uncertain' (Stokes, *The French Actress and Her English Audience* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005], p. 148).

[13] Katherine Newey, 'Ibsen in the English Theatre in the *Fin de Siècle*', in *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama, 1880–2005*, ed. by Mary Luckhurst (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 35–47, 37

[14] Arthur Waugh, 'Reticence in Literature', *The Yellow Book* (April 1894), pp. 201–219, 219

*Yellow Book* makes the allusion to Ibsen even clearer, mocking Waugh's indictment of

'decadent' writers:

> Decadence, decadence: you are all decadent nowadays.  Ibsen, Degas, and the
> New English Art Club; Zola, Oscar Wilde, and the Second Mrs. Tanqueray; Mr
> Richard Le Gallienne is hoist with his own petard; even the British playwright has
> not escaped the taint'.[15]

The inclusion in this list, not only of Ibsen, but also of artists as varied as Degas and

Pinero, British Impressionist painters and Zola (not to mention Wilde) suggests that

'decadence' applied in this way reveals very little about what was common to these artists

and even less about what makes the current canon of Decadent literature (including

Wilde) 'decadent' in stylistic or even thematic terms.  Arthur Symons advances further

towards a concrete definition of Decadent literature in 'The Decadent Movement in

Literature', but his inclusion of Ibsen as one of the most representative figures of

Decadence works against a clear understanding of Decadent drama.  For example, he

relates how 'Ibsen has lately developed a personal kind of Impressionism (in *Hedda

Gabler*) and of Symbolism (in *The Master Builder*)',[16] identifying Ibsen with what he

earlier labels 'the two main branches of that [Decadent] movement'.[17]   The use of

'Decadent' as a label in both of these examples, however, is loose—employed 'as a

reproach or hurled back as a defiance',[18] rarely used with any precise meaning.

The third challenge to the defining of Decadent drama is the fact that, like late-

Victorian critics, few modern critics employ the 'Decadent' label, and when they do it is

usually applied either to signify the themes of—and an obsession with—degeneration, or

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[15] Hubert Crackanthorpe, 'Reticence in Literature: Some Roundabout Remarks', *The Yellow Book* (July 1894), pp. 259–269, 266

[16] Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 87 (November 1893), pp. 858–867, 866

[17] Symons, 'The Decadent Movement', p. 859

[18] Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1899), p. 8

is otherwise used with little consistency.  For instance, Robert W. Rix argues that *Salomé*

is an example of 'Decadent Drama',[19] but one reason for his using this label is the play's

setting during the 'Roman Empire in its decline'.[20]  According to Rix, other 'Decadent'

attributes of the play include: its capturing of the 'spiritual and religious dejection of

modernity',[21] particularly God's death; a more general 'fascination with death';[22] and a

preoccupation with 'depravity, unnatural perversion and sexual deviance'.[23]  In his

definition of Decadent drama, Rix misses the opportunity to connect the thematic

concerns listed above with the structural elements he has enumerated in his essay before

he moves on to define Decadent drama.  These stylistic and structural elements include

Wilde's 'playful engagement with generic conventions and modes of literary

production',[24] particularly his 'plagiarising [of] a well-established aesthetics'[25] and

deliberate 'framing [of] his verbal style so that the play would be recognized as belonging

to a particular *genre* [the Symbolist play]'.[26]  Rix ultimately makes the play a drama

about the dangers of Decadence: 'It shows the pursuit of a Decadent life as abortive and

finally wrong'.[27]  However, it is Rix's initial, and outdated, definition of Decadence that

leads him to this reading of the play, which he sees as a self-conscious allegory of

Wilde's own life.  Instead of recognizing the play as an embodiment of the stylistic and

structural concerns central to British literary Decadence, Rix reinforces older conflations

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[19] Robert W. Rix, '*Salomé* and the *fin du globe*: Oscar Wilde's Decadent Tragedy', in *Fin de Siècle/New Beginnings*, ed. by Ib Johansen (Aarhus: Aarhus UP, 2000), pp. 94–123, 100
[20] Rix, '*Salomé* and the *fin du globe*', p. 100
[21] Rix, '*Salomé* and the *fin du globe*', p. 101
[22] Rix, '*Salomé* and the *fin du globe*', p. 101
[23] Rix, '*Salomé* and the *fin du globe*', p. 102
[24] Rix, '*Salomé* and the *fin du globe*', p. 95
[25] Rix, '*Salomé* and the *fin du globe*', p. 98
[26] Rix, '*Salomé* and the *fin du globe*', p. 99
[27] Rix, '*Salomé* and the *fin du globe*', p. 119

of degeneration and 'decadence', thereby offering little insight into Decadent drama as a

literary category in its own right.

Jean Chothia and John Stokes are two other modern critics who associate

Decadence with the theater.  In Chothia's case, however, her focus is on performance

history, which leads her to argue that 'decadence *almost* [my emphasis] touched English

theatre with *Salomé*'.[28]  Chothia offers no explicit definition of Decadent drama, and her

implicit definition emphasizes the themes and staging of *Salomé*, which she describes as

'this venture into eroticism and death', whose 'severed head theme, symbolism and use of

dance [. . .] informed a spate of [subsequent] plays'.[29]  In spite of her focus on theatrical

history, Chothia acknowledges that:

> [A]wareness of the play in England was [. . .] stimulated more by the association
> with Bernhardt and by Beardsley's scandalous illustrations for the 1894 English
> translation, than regret for its disappearance from the stage.[30]

Unwittingly, Chothia reveals the importance of *Salomé* as a *textual* production, giving

renewed focus to the 1894 translation with its controversial illustrations.  She does

describe the play as having a 'curiously stilted syntax, [which] gives a uniformity to the

dialogue and a remoteness to the characterisation',[31] but she does not explicitly connect

this with Decadent drama as differentiated from Symbolist drama.  In his essay on

Eleonora Duse, Stokes also discusses 'Decadent Theatre'.[32]  Like Chothia's, his approach

is largely preoccupied with aspects of performance and staging, but he is specifically

concerned to show how the actress (Duse, in this case) attempts to achieve the Decadent

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[28] Jean Chothia, *English Drama of the Early Modern Period, 1890–1940* (London: Longman, 1996), p. 38
[29] Chothia, *English Drama*, p. 39
[30] Chothia, *English Drama*, p. 39
[31] Chothia, *English Drama*, pp. 38–39
[32] John Stokes, 'The Legend of Duse', in *Decadence and the 1890s*, ed. by Ian Fletcher (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), pp. 151–171, 151

ideal of being a 'disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul'.[33]  In other words,

the figure of Duse coalesces around her public *image*, which projects the existence of a

private self while at the same time leaving it elusive.  Stokes' interrogation of Duse's

public persona leads to his focusing in this essay more on issues of performance than on

Decadent texts.  Decadent theater in Stoke's argument is the successful balance between

the public and private filtered through a hypostasized moment on the stage.  While

Stoke's theorization of Decadent theater in his essay on Duse is a useful explanation of

performed Decadence, it neither offers a classification of Decadent dramatic texts, nor

does it work to identify specific examples of Decadent plays—only interpretations of

plays.  Elsewhere, especially in *Resistible Theatres* (1972), Stokes elaborates on more

textual issues of Decadent drama, although he does not do so by name.

The labeling of drama and the theater as Decadent by these three critics is

unusual.  Most modern critics have avoided the term, and the infrequency with which

'Decadent drama' is used in critical discourse is surprising because at least one critic, M.

H. Abrams, has called Wilde's *Salomé* a 'representative' literary production of British

Decadence.[34]  Of all the candidates for inclusion into the canon of British and Irish

Decadent drama, *Salomé* is, indeed, the one most mentioned.  However, the attention paid

to *Salomé* misleads critics in two ways.  First, *Salomé* is a dense pastiche and parody of

its literary precursors, especially Decadent and Symbolist drama from Continental

Europe, blurring the distinctions between the play and its models.  Of course, the biblical

story of John the Baptist's beheading is the original source material for *Salomé*, but the

story had been reworked numerous times before Wilde wrote his own version of the

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[33] Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement', p. 867
[34] M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th edn. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1999), p. 55

story.  Rix identifies some of these precursors as being Heine's 'Atta Troll' (1841), J. C.

Heywood's *Salome, the Daughter of Herodias* (1862),[35] Mallarmé's *Hérodiade* (1866),

Banville's 'La Danseuse' (1870), and 'Hérodiade' (1874), Flaubert's 'Hérodias' (1877), and

Paul Milliet and Henri Grémont's opera *Hérodiade* (1881).[36]  One might add Jules

Laforgue's *Moralités Légendaires* (1887) to this list.  Maeterlinck's *La Princesse Maleine*

(1889) has also long been considered by critics as an important influence on the style of

Wilde's play,[37] but the number of literary models for Wilde's play are too numerous to

detail individually: '[t]he intertextual history of the Salome story is so complex as to

make any account of Wilde's precise influences highly problematic'.[38]  The place of

Wilde's *Salomé* in the long line of works reimagining the story of John the Baptists'

beheading and in European Decadent literature more generally has obscured the

difference between these works and Wilde's, which puts to literary use the same history

of which it is a part.  Wilde, in fact, makes the use of literary precursors central to the

style and structure of his play.  Praz argues that 'Wilde's play resemble[s] a parody of the

whole of the material used by the Decadents and of the stammering mannerism of

Maeterlinck's dramas',[39] further arguing that it is as a parody that the play comes closest

to being a masterpiece.

 Associating *Salomé*'s 'decadent' and 'Symbolist' themes too closely with its

literary style, critics have also frequently failed to separate the two and, therefore, have

been unable to identify other examples of British and Irish Decadent drama that do not

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[35] Reviewed by Wilde in 'The Poet's Corner', *Pall Mall Gazette* (15 February 1888), pp. 2–3
[36] Rix, '*Salomé* and the *fin du globe*', p. 98
[37] In addition to Rix and Chothia, who both acknowledge this influence, see Peter Raby, *Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), p. 105.
[38] William Tydeman and Steven Price, *Salome* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), p. 12
[39] Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. by Angus Davidson, 2nd edn. (London: Oxford UP, 1951), p. 298

share *Salomé*'s themes.  *The Importance of Being Earnest* is one example of a play that

deploys a Decadent stylistics, but avoids the stereotypically Decadent themes of death,

degeneration, and decay.  The absence of these themes leads some critics to deny outright

that *Earnest* possesses any Decadent traits.  For example, Russell Jackson argues that

'notably absent' from the play is 'self-conscious decadence'.[40]  Jackson seems to imply

that 'decadence' denotes a moral perversity, arguing, for instance, that the 'overtly

"decadent" vein' exemplified by Sir Robert Chiltern's corrupt past in *An Ideal Husband* is

'entirely absent from [*Earnest*]'.[41]  Unsurprisingly, contemporary reviewers also failed to

describe the play as Decadent, although some—most famously William Archer—found it

generally unclassifiable.  Regardless of critics' failure to identify the Decadent aspects of

*Earnest*, the play epitomizes a Decadent mode of writing no less than *Salomé*, as this

chapter will argue.  Even accepting that *Earnest* and *Salomé* are representative examples

of Irish and British Decadent drama, one still struggles to identify other examples (at

least in prose), and this shortage is a fourth challenge to the defining of Decadent drama,

especially because both plays are by the same playwright.  Nonetheless, this chapter aims

to juxtapose close readings of *Earnest* and *Salomé* in order to theorize Decadent drama

and to understand a genre to which critics might add other examples.

       The fact that Wilde is the author of the two plays most likely to be included in a

canon of English-language Decadent drama presents a fifth challenge to the defining of

Decadent drama.  The problem arises specifically from the contrast between Wilde's

dramatic criticism and his dramaturgy.  Wilde's dramatic criticism developed largely

under the influence of E. W. Godwin (1833–1886), whose theories of theatrical

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[40] Russell Jackson, '*The Importance of Being Earnest*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed.
by Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), pp. 161–177, 166
[41] Jackson, '*The Importance of Being Earnest*', p. 167

production displayed an overriding concern for material and historical accuracy: for the

'archaeology' of costume and stage design.  Godwin's 'archaeology' of the stage is a

'science that clothes and reanimates the dead'; the archaeologist's purpose is 'to bring

before us those old times, to make history a reality'.[42]  Wilde employed these theories

throughout a series of reviews and essays in the 1880s, notably in 'Shakespeare and Stage

Costume' (1885), 'Shakespeare on Scenery' (1885), '*As You Like It* at Coombe House'

(1885), '*The Cenci*' (1886) and '*Helena in Troas*' (1886), among others.  Wilde's

indebtedness to Godwin in his dramatic criticism suggests that his ideas about theater

were informed by the principles of Aestheticism rather than those of Decadence.[43]  In

other words, Wilde appears to be concerned more about the accurate staging of plays

rather than a self-conscious literariness that deconstructs the real.

Even in these early essays, however, Wilde resists interpreting Godwin as a

realist.  In 'Helena in Troas', Wilde argues that:

> Mr. Godwin is something more than a mere antiquarian.  He takes the facts of
> archæology, but he converts them into artistic and dramatic effects, and the
> historical accuracy, that underlies the visible shapes of beauty that he presents to
> us, is not by any means the distinguishing quality of the completed work of art.[44]

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[42] E. W. Godwin, 'Archaeology on the stage. Part 1', *Dramatic Review* (8 February 1885), pp. 19–20, 19
[43] Controversies about the precise definitions of Aestheticism and Decadence continue in current scholarly debates about these movements, but this thesis takes as its starting point Linda Dowling's definition of Decadence, quoted earlier, as a movement that 'emerged from a linguistic crisis' [Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin De Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986), p. xi], in which written language—literary language—came to be seen as 'simply another dead language in relation to living speech' [*Language and Decadence*, p. xv].  Aestheticism as a movement in Great Britain—embodied by such figures as Morris, Swinburne, and Rossetti—largely predates the acquiescence to this crisis—an acquiescence best verbalized by Pater's 'Conclusion' to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) and first demonstrated by his *Marius the Epicurean* (1885).  Aestheticism and Decadence in Great Britain share a number of traits, not least of which is an art-for-art's-sake credo, but it is only with the set of young men whom Pater was afraid to influence with his 'Conclusion' that a generation—a movement—turns its attention to 'bestow[ing] a belated and paradoxical vitality on a literary language that linguistic science had declared to be dead' [Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p. xv].
[44] Wilde, Review of *Helena in Troas*, by John Todhunter, *Dramatic Review* (22 May 1886), pp. 161–162, 161

Not only does Wilde argue against the reading of Godwin's work as realist, but he also

shifts away from the latter's archaeological realism by the time he reprints 'Shakespeare

and Stage Costume', retitled 'The Truth of Masks: A Note on Illusion', in *Intentions*

(1891).  'Shakespeare and Stage Costume' is a Godwinian defense of Shakespeare's

'archaeologically' correct costume, but, by the time of its reprinting, Wilde had made

some key alterations (including its new title), which converted the essay from a defense

of Godwin to a polemic against realism in costume and stage design.  Lawrence Danson

argues that Wilde has abandoned his Godwinian principles all together by the time of his

attack on realism in *Intentions*:

> The more sweeping attack [by Wilde] on the failure of realism impugns not only
> the method of Zola but of Godwin: the pursuit of historical accuracy would be just
> a higher-class version of the suicidal longing to find real life by imitating rather
> than creating.[45]

Signaling this change is Wilde's abandonment of 'anomalous'[46] terms such as *accuracy*

and *fidelity* in favor of terms that redefine the goal of stage design as fantasy and

imagination.  Famously, Wilde subjoined a final caveat to the 1891 version of the essay:

'There is much [in this essay] with which I entirely disagree'.[47]  Here he directly

countermands his earlier adherence to stage 'archaeology', but he also enacts a subtler and

more obscure revision: 'wherever the fatally tainted word "realism" or its cognates

appeared, Wilde changed the word to "illusion"'.[48]  The newly appended subtitle, 'A Note

on Illusion', signals this change more directly.  The change in Wilde's thinking mapped

out by his revisions to 'Shakespeare and Stage Costume' underscores Wilde's general re-

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[45] Lawrence Danson, 'Wilde in Arden, or the Masks of Truth', *Modern Drama* 37 (Spring 1994), pp. 12–33, 16
[46] Danson, 'Wilde in Arden', p. 15
[47] Wilde, 'The Truth of Masks', p. 257
[48] Danson, 'Wilde in Arden', pp. 16–17

envisioning of drama, a revision of his thinking apparent in several of the plays he wrote

after *Intentions*.  Thus, what appeared to be a problem in defining Decadent drama,

Wilde's adherence to an anti-Decadent realism, is revealed to be largely irrelevant to the

writing of Wilde's major plays.

    For some critics such as Chothia and Stokes, the inseparability of literary

composition and theatrical production in dramatic criticism appears self-evident, and it is

this critical opinion that is the sixth and last obstacle to the defining of Decadent drama.

Other critics such as Nicholas Frankel, however, argue that a focus on the textuality of

Wilde's plays is not misguided and might, in fact, command more primacy in critical

accounts:

> [T]he play [in general] depends on its dissemination in the form of texts, whether
> reading editions, acting editions, or typescripts, in order that it may be performed
> or read at all.  Though textuality is by no means the only defining property of
> Wilde's great play [*Earnest*], it nonetheless shares with other literary phenomena
> a textuality without which it would be difficult to speak of it in the first place.
> Like all cultural phenomena, plays are not abstractions.  They depend on textual
> instruments for their very existence.[49]

While one might propose a theory of Decadent theatrical production by examining, for

example, Charles Ricketts' stage designs for *Salomé*, the self-conscious literariness of

Decadence suggests that a play's Decadent attributes adhere most fully in its textual

incarnation(s).  This is particularly true for the English-language edition of *Salomé*,

which, as some critics have suggested,[50] Wilde never seriously expected to be staged in

Great Britain.[51]  Whether he expected the play to be staged or not, it is the 1894 edition

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[49] Nicholas Frankel, *Oscar Wilde's Decorated Books* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 13

[50] For example, William Archer calls the Lord Chamberlain's refusal to issue the play a license for performance 'absolutely inevitable' (Archer, 'Mr. Oscar Wilde's New Play', *Black and White: A Weekly Illustrated Record and Review* [11 March 1893], p. 290).

[51] Tydeman and Price offer a more balanced view: 'Whether or not Wilde envisaged live stage production for his play from the outset can never be resolved' (*Wilde: Salome*, p. 19).

published by Mathews and Lane and containing Beardsley's illustrations that remains its

definitive mode of transmission for English-language readers.  Furthermore, Beardsley's

illustrations have a particular dialectic importance to the overall meaning of Wilde's text:

> However one chooses to read them, Beardsley's creative efforts graphically
> augment the multiplicity that marks Wilde's artistic endeavors.  They widen the
> paradigm for perceiving *Salome* with an added pluralism unanticipated by
> conventional modes of reading.[52]

Gillespie convincingly agues for the importance of Beardsley's drawings in the

construction of the play's meaning, but he also reveals the importance of reading to

Decadent texts.  Reading's primacy in the construction of Decadent drama emphasizes the

importance of textuality (and intertextuality) to Wilde's plays.  Shafquat Towheed makes

a similar point about Decadent texts' meaning being constructed through their demands

on an implied reader: 'The Decadent text required a decadent reader',[53] who, according to

Towheed, is a re-reader who privileges part over whole and ignores linear progression.

This act of reading denies an overall meaning to Decadent texts, but it also assumes the

importance of the printed text.

Despite Decadent drama's propensity toward the textual, Wilde was deeply

involved in the theater, and many of his plays appear to navigate between the demands of

the stage and of the text.  Some of Beerbohm's remarks on style and theater suggest that

the degree to which a play concedes to the demands of staging is largely determined by

genre.  In '"Style" and the Stage' (1900), Beerbohm argues that the acting of a play limits

its stylistic range:

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[52] Michael Patrick Gillespie, *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), p. 139
[53] Shafquat Towheed, 'Containing the Poisonous Text: Decadent Readers, Reading Decadence', in *Decadences*, ed. by Paul Fox (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2006) pp. 1–31, 26

> Dialogue spoken on the stage must be composed in a natural and un-literary manner.  Every character in an acted play has a voice, has gestures and tricks of face; he must say the kind of things that he would say in real life, and not the kind of things that he would write if he were a modern stylist addressing the public through print.[54]

The stage, then, seems antithetical to Decadent literature because dialogue must be 'natural' and true to life.  It is perhaps for this reason that Wilde complains to George Alexander (1858–1918) about his not being able to 'get my people real'[55] while composing *Lady Windermere's Fan*.  Beerbohm qualifies the above statement, however, by saying that there are two conditions in which the dramatist is freed from avoiding 'style'—in other words, two genres in which the demands of realism do not apply.  The first condition pertains when the dramatist is writing 'poetic drama', in which:

> [T]he mimes must, of course, express themselves beautifully and unnaturally.  The stylist may let himself go there, may be (objectively) a stylist to his heart's content, inasmuch as our illusion is not wooed from the plane of realism.[56]

One can interpret realism in this case, not as stylistic realism, but 'a human interest and a semblance of truth'[57] that procures for the characters a 'willing suspension of disbelief',[58] which itself is Coleridge's method of justifying the use of fantastic and non-realistic modes.

The second condition Beerbohm identifies pertains when the dramatist is writing a farce: 'there is another *non-realistic* [my emphasis] form in which the stylist may give us (objective) style—the form of farce'.[59]  According to Beerbohm, 'style is essential' in

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[54] Max Beerbohm, '"Style" and the Stage', *Saturday Review* 90 (27 October 1900), pp. 516–518, 517
[55] Wilde, Letter to George Alexander (2 February 1891), in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), pp. 463–464, 463
[56] Beerbohm, '"Style" and the Stage', p. 517
[57] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, 2 vols. [in one] (London: Rest Fenner, 1817), II, p. 2
[58] Coleridge, *Biographia*, p. 2
[59] Beerbohm, '"Style" and the Stage', p. 517

poetic drama, and in farce 'it is an added grace, an intensification of the fun'.[60]  As an

example of the latter, Beerbohm presents a scene between Mrs. Vandeleur and her

husband in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Rajah's Diamond* (1878), in which:

> [W]e have the emotions of rage and horror, contempt and defiance, beautifully
> expressed in terms of a fantastic style, and it is the contrast between the speeches
> and the characters that makes the scene immortally delicious.[61]

Farce depends on a sharp contrast between character and speech, and the farce writer who

can make 'an absurd and absurdly-situated character express himself in terms of

exquisite, elaborate gravity'[62] draws this distinction most sharply.  What distinguishes

Decadent farce from other forms of farce is that, while the contrast between character and

speech is heightened in both, Decadent farce ultimately collapses the space between

character and speech, revealing speech, performance, and character to be functions of

language.  As this chapter later argues, *Earnest* is the epitome of Decadent farce in this

vein.  The other example considered herein, *Salomé*, is a poetic drama, but one not

necessarily in the sense of a play in verse (although it does approach verse in its rhythms

and repetitions), but in the sense of a play, in Arthur Symons words, in which 'nature no

longer exists'.[63]

The connection between Decadent theater and fantasy has been largely

unexplored in secondary literature, but so has the connection between fantasy and theater

more generally.  With the exception of a few scattered journal articles,[64] a couple of

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[60] Beerbohm, '"Style" and the Stage', p. 517
[61] Beerbohm, '"Style" and the Stage', p. 517
[62] Beerbohm, '"Style" and the Stage', p. 517
[63] Arthur Symons, 'Pantomime and the Poetic Drama', in *Studies in Seven Arts* (London: Archibald Constable, 1906), pp. 381–384, 382
[64] For example, see Julius Krgarlitski, 'The Fantastic in Theater and Cinema', *Extrapolation* 22 (1981), pp. 5–12

monographs focused on a single playwright,[65] and one full-length collection of essays,

there exists almost no criticism on fantasy as a mode in modern drama.  Patrick D.

Murphy's introduction to the one collection of essays, *Staging the Impossible* (1992),

helps to explain why: 'an amazing number of viewers suffer under the impression that

drama means realism',[66] which has 'come to set the standards for evaluating the quality of

a dramatic performance'.[67]  This association of realism with drama began in the

nineteenth century, but Murphy emphasizes that even during the time of realism's

ascendancy in the theater, anti-realist strains of drama have existed and continue to exist

alongside and underneath mainstream dramatic realism.  In spite of being marginalized as

a mode, fantasy (or the fantastic) continues to be a 'significant mode of representation in

the modern drama of Western Europe and North America'.[68]

Murphy offers one definition of fantastic drama as being a form concerned 'with

the inadequacy of the referential dimension of language and with the failure of mimesis

to capture the depth of reality rather than merely mirroring its surface appearance'.[69]  This

definition comes close to a definition of Decadence, although Murphy's dichotomy of

depth and surface diverges from Decadents' conflation of the two.  Nonetheless, like the

relationship between fantasy and Decadence in other literary forms, the relationship

between fantasy and Decadent drama underscores the overlap between the definitions of

each.  It is unsurprising, then, that the first article in Murphy's collection is dedicated to

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[65] For example, Irene Eynat-Confino, *On the Uses of the Fantastic in Modern Theatre: Cocteau, Oedipus, and the Monster* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008)
[66] Patrick D. Murphy, Introduction, *Staging the Impossible: The Fantastic Mode in Modern Drama*, ed. by Patrick D. Murphy (London: Greenwood Press, 1992), pp. 1–14, 1
[67] Murphy, Introduction, *Staging the Impossible*, p. 2
[68] Murphy, Introduction, *Staging the Impossible*, p. 2
[69] Murphy, Introduction, *Staging the Impossible*, p. 4

showing how Wilde's comedies are works of dramatic fantasy.  The article's author,

Susan Taylor Jacobs, argues that Wilde, 'skeptical of epistemologies',[70] employed:

> [F]antastic techniques, particularly those underscoring epistemological questions,
> although for him problems of knowing the phenomenological world were less
> interesting than problems of understanding a literary text.[71]

In fact, Wilde makes epistemological questions equivalent to literary criticism, creating

self-contained literary worlds, and blurring the distinction between external phenomena

and their literary signifiers.  As Taylor and Murphy suggest, fantasy is a device that

Wilde employs to further his agenda of constructing self-contained literary worlds that

reveal the artificiality of language itself.  By extension, fantasy becomes a means to

achieve the aesthetic goals of all (potential) Decadent dramatists.


### *The Importance of Being Earnest*:


Upon first inspection, *The Importance of Being Earnest* appears neither Decadent

nor fantastical.  The play's action is fluid; its dialogue seems natural, not stilted or

artificial.  No supernatural or uncanny mechanism motivates or enters into the text.  In

spite of these appearances, *Earnest* epitomizes Decadent drama by its self-conscious

artificiality, both in action and in language, its critique and deconstruction of reality,

especially insofar as it shows the constructedness of 'reality' and identity, and its dense

allusiveness, which underscores the play's self-contained literariness.

*Earnest* is an example of the genre of farce, a dramatic form of comedy common

in the late-nineteenth century that makes extensive use of improbable plots, stock

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[70] Susan Taylor Jacobs, 'When Formula Seizes Form: Oscar Wilde's Comedies', in *Staging the Impossible: The Fantastic Mode in Modern Drama*, pp. 15–29, 15
[71] Jacobs, 'When Formula Seizes Form', p. 15

characters, wordplay, and physical humor, and whose anti-realist impulses have been highlighted by Beerbohm's comments above.  The play, however, is much more than a farce, as William Archer's review of *Earnest* in *The World* demonstrates.  Decadent drama's tendency to recycle literary conventions and texts in the service of its own creative forces makes it difficult for critics to limit these texts to one genre.  For example, Archer argues that the play's 'theme, in other hands, would have made a capital farce; but "farce" is far too gross and commonplace a word to apply to such an iridescent filament of fantasy'.[72]  A more recent critic, Peter Raby, makes a similar observation: 'Wilde, while embracing the "low" form of farce [. . . ] triumphantly transformed it into a glittering and unique artifice'.[73]  Archer and Raby identify *Earnest* as a fantasy in part because Wilde's play is not content merely to ridicule and interrogate its characters' behavior.  Going beyond conventional farce, Wilde challenges epistemologies and contests the ontological grounds for coherent identity.  But, more than a simple parody or critique, *Earnest* engages with specific examples of farce and manipulates its conventions, along with other literary conventions, in order to generate its own generic categories.  Famously, Archer describes Wilde's play as one 'which raises no principle, whether of art or morals, creates its own canons and conventions, and is nothing but an absolutely willful expression of a irrepressibly witty personality'.[74]

One of the ways that *Earnest* goes beyond the category of farce is by employing that genre's typically ironic juxtaposition of speech (the characters' gravitas) and action (the absurdity of the farcical situation into which they are placed) to comment on the

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[72] William Archer, '"The Importance of Being Earnest" – "Thorough-Bred" – "An M.P.'s Wife"', in *The Theatrical 'World' of 1893–1895*, 3 vols. (London: W. Scott, 1894–1896), III, pp. 56–62, 57
[73] Peter Raby, *The Importance of Being Earnest: A Reader's Companion* (New York: Twayne, 1995), p. 8
[74] Archer, '"The Importance of Being Earnest"', p. 57

distance between language and 'reality'.  That is, the typical and mutual contradictions

between speech and action, from which farce derives its humor, are resolved by Wilde's

closing of the gap between signifier and signifier in *Earnest*.  As Erika Meier explains,

'Throughout the play the dialogue is carefully finished and arranged so that its

exquisiteness stands in ironic contrast to the actual sense of the words'.[75]  The play's

implicitly paradoxical, punning title and subtitle also highlight this aspect: *The*

*Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*.  Typically in farce, a

character's *earnestness* (defined as sincere moral intention) toward trivial matters is

ridiculed in accordance with behavioral norms.  Wilde's play, however, adopts a Camp

aesthetic that condones seriousness toward trivial affairs, thereby transgressing, not only

moral, but also linguistic boundaries, insofar as the standard definitions of 'trivial' and

'serious' are disregarded: Camp 'dethrone[s] the serious [. . .] More precisely, Camp

involves a new, more complex relation to the "the serious".  One can be serious about the

frivolous, frivolous about the serious'.[76]  Algernon performs this seriousness when, at one

of the tensest moments of the play, he devotes his attention to the eating of muffins.

Appalled, Jack asks him how he can eat muffins so calmly under these circumstances, to

which Algernon replies, 'One should always eat muffins quite calmly.  It is the only way

to eat them'.[77]  When Jack asks how he can eat them at all at such a moment, Algernon

responds, 'When I am in trouble, eating is the only thing that consoles me.  Indeed, when

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[75] Erika Meier, *Realism and Reality: The Function of the Stage Directions in the New Drama from Thomas William Robertson to George Bernard Shaw* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1967), p. 191

[76] Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Dell, 1966), pp. 275–292, 288

[77] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1899), p. 114

I am in really great trouble [. . .] I refuse everything except food and drink'.[78]  Algernon's

solemn attitude towards eating muffins achieves Beerbohm's touchstone for great farce: a

sharp contrast between 'absurd and absurdly-situated characters' and the gravity of their

speech, but the speech's wit goes beyond farce by highlighting the constructedness and

artificiality of Algernon's words.

It is precisely this aspect of *Earnest* to which George Bernard Shaw objects in his

review of the play.  He identifies the muffin-eating scene (among others) as existing on

'the farcical plane',[79] but he criticizes the play because instances such as these do not

involve 'characters who had, like Don Quixote, convinced us of their reality and obtained

some hold on our sympathy'.[80]  Shaw rightly identifies the *fantastical* nature of the

characters.  Their lack of reality is exemplified by the interchangeability of names and

identities in the play: Algernon and Jack both assume other names—Bunbury (Algernon)

and Ernest (both).  Without a fixed identity, the characters remain ontologically

evasive,[81] a quality purposefully amplified by their flatness.  Shaw's review continues to

lament the audience's broken 'belief in the humanity of the play'[82] and to regret that the

audience is 'thrown back on the force and daintiness of [the play's] wit'.[83]  However, the

emptying of the characters of human depth and their reduction to linguistic formulations,

which Shaw objects to, is exactly what makes the play Decadent.  This point is reinforced

by the fact that, in addition to their destabilized names and identities, the physical

attributes of characters within the play are open to revision.  For example, Algernon asks

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[78] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 114

[79] Shaw, 'An Old New Play and a New Old One', *Saturday Review* 79 (23 February 1895), pp. 249–251, 250

[80] Shaw, 'An Old New Play and a New Old One', p. 250

[81] Algernon complains that 'it isn't easy to be anything now-a-days' (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 19).

[82] Shaw, 'An Old New Play and a New Old One', p. 250

[83] Shaw, 'An Old New Play and a New Old One', p. 250

Jack, having read the inscription in Jack's cigarette case from his ward Cecily, 'But why does she call herself little Cecily if she is your aunt and lives in Tunbridge Wells?', to which Jack replies:

> My dear fellow, what on earth is there in that? Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. That is a matter that surely an aunt may be allowed to decide for herself. You seem to think that every aunt should be exactly like your aunt! That is absurd![84]

Even a fixed quality such as a character's height is malleable. Categories of 'natural' or 'true' have little or no meaning within *Earnest*, which, true to its Camp aesthetic, displays its 'love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration'.[85]

Possessing a minimum of stage directions and set requirements, the play, even on a material level, becomes a self-contained world of linguistic signs, infrequently referring beyond the level of language to the outside world. Not only are characters exposed as products of language, but material objects are also revealed to be texts, whose value and function depend on their status as such. For example, Jack's cigarette lighter becomes a text (through its inscription) that Algernon reads, prompting Jack to declare: 'It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case'.[86] The hand-bag in which Jack is left in the Victoria-station cloakroom also functions as a text, having Miss Prism's initials on the lock, where 'in an extravagant mood [she] had had them placed'.[87] Props are texts in *Earnest*, and, in a world entirely encompassed by language, language itself can acquire the attributes of material objects. Language—German in particular—functions as costume (unflattering) and adornment. For example, Cecily complains to Miss Prism

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[84] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 11
[85] Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', p. 275
[86] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 10
[87] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 146

about her German lessons: '[German] isn't at all a becoming language.  I know perfectly

well that I look quite plain after my German lesson'.[88]

Furthermore, the natural world is revealed to be textual, both through a systematic

portrayal of nature as domestic space and through Miss Prism's and Dr. Chasuble's use of

nature as metaphor.  The first and only outdoors scene of the play occurs at the beginning

of the second act.  Several aspects of this scene, however, signify domestic space.  To

begin with, the presence of the two women, Cecily and Miss Prism (and, later,

Gwendolyn), marks the setting as artificial insofar as Victorian domestic spaces are

coded as feminine.  The fact that Miss Prism is giving Cecily lessons outdoors is another

(although not absolute) signifier of interior space.  The 'outdoors' is itself a misleading

term in this context: the setting of act two is only 'out of doors' on a literal level.  The

play does not open up onto a vast and wild landscape, but instead takes place within the

carefully circumscribed and manicured environment of an English garden, complete with

'[b]asket chairs, and a table covered with books'.[89]  Miss Prism's and Dr. Chasuble's

reciprocal flirting and punning is yet another way nature is revealed to be artificial in the

play.  As Wilde argues in 'The Decay of Lying', '[a]t twilight nature becomes a

wonderfully suggestive effect, and is not without loveliness, though perhaps its chief use

is to illustrate quotations from the poets'.[90]  On a farcical level, Miss Prism and Dr.

Chasuble use nature in the same way; their *double entendres* subsume natural phenomena

within a discourse of love poetry.  For example, Dr. Chasuble proclaims to Cecily, 'Were

I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, I would hang upon her lips', which he

qualifies after a glare from Miss Prism: 'I spoke metaphorically.—My metaphor was

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[88] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 55
[89] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 55
[90] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p. 55

drawn from bees'.[91]  Miss Prism similarly puns: 'Maturity can always be depended on.

Ripeness can be trusted.  Young women are green'.[92]  After Dr. Chasuble starts at this,

Miss Prism clarifies: 'I spoke horticulturally.  My metaphor was drawn from fruits'.[93]

These *double entendres* not only draw nature into metaphorical language, but they also

highlight the artificiality of language in the first place.  *Double entendres* demonstrate the

multiple significations of any given signifier, and thereby disrupt notions of linguistic

fitness, naturalness, stability, and univalency.

*Earnest* amplifies its linguistic self-containment even further by underscoring its

literary self-referentiality.  In other words, Wilde demonstrates that the play not only fails

to refer to an external reality, but also almost wholly avoids any discourse except literary

discourse.  By refashioning other literary texts and turning them into the fabric of his

play, Wilde creates a drama out of the dramatic works of his day.  For example, Kerry

Powell, in a chapter titled 'Algernon's Other Brother's', calls *Earnest* a 'shameless

ingathering of devices which characterized Victorian farce',[94] naming W. Lestocq and E.

M. Robson's *The Foundling* (first performed in 1894) and Charles H. E. Brookfield and

F. C. Philips's *Godpapa* (1891) as just two farces from which Wilde borrowed.  John

Stokes more succinctly describes *Earnest* as built on the 'rich bedrock of farce'.[95]

Contemporary reviewers also noted this quality of the play.  For instance, Archer argues

that devices such as Algernon's and Jack's 'Bunburying' escapades 'have done duty in

many a French vaudeville and English adaptation', but Archer also argues that 'Wilde's

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[91] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 60
[92] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 69
[93] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 69
[94] Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), p. 124
[95] Stokes, *Oscar Wilde: Myths, Miracles, and Imitations* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), p. 37

humour transmutes them into something entirely new and individual'.[96]  This

transmutation of texts into new, original works is a principle Wilde espouses in 'The

Critic as Artist':

> For just as the great artists, from Homer and Æschylus, down to Shakespeare and
> Keats, did not go directly to life for their subject−matter, but sought for it in myth,
> and legend, and ancient tale, so the critic [or artist, in this case] deals with materials
> that others have, as it were, purified for him, and to which imaginative form and
> colour have been already added.[97]

To construct his own, Wilde uses the raw material of other plays, especially farces such

as *The Foundling* and *Godpapa*, but also 'serious' social drama such as Ibsen's *Hedda*

*Gabler*, from which Wilde takes the confusion of baby and manuscript.[98]  In Ibsen's play,

Mrs. Elvsted tells Ejlert Lövborg that his destruction of the manuscript they worked on

together 'will present itself to me [all my life] as if you had killed a little child'.[99]

Borrowing this confusion between baby and book from Ibsen is both parody and

pastiche; the moral seriousness of Ibsen's play is hollowed out and undercut, but *Earnest*

acquires its own seriousness (about triviality) by participating in a dialogue between less

highbrow genres, such as farce, and the work of a playwright whose influence over 1890s

British theater is hard to overestimate.  Farce and social drama merge in *Earnest*,

exploding each genre yet participating in both.  Archer's description of the play as a

'filament of fantasy' is *à propos* because, like simulacra, the play calls forth its own

categories and its own images of characters who could not exist outside of language.

This reason is also why the play is, indeed, Decadent: it not only refuses to reflect a

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[96] Archer, '"The Importance of Being Earnest"', p. 58
[97] Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', in *Intentions*, pp. 93–213, 137
[98] Among others, Reginia Gagnier makes this point in *Idylls of the Marketplace* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1987),
p. 112; Anne Varty makes a similar point in *A Preface to Oscar Wilde* (London: Longman, 1998), p. 201.
[99] Henrik Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler: A Drama in Four Acts*, trans. by Edmund Gosse (London: Heinemann,
1891), p. 183

reality outside the play, but it also denies that literature can reflect that reality.  Other

critics have also thought fantasy an apt word to describe the play: Beerbohm asserts that

the characters spoke 'the language of high comedy, twisted into fantasy';[100] and Archibald

Henderson argues that 'nowhere more clearly than in Wilde's own plays do we find the

purposed divorce of art from life'.[101]  *Earnest* participates in the recombinatory process of

fantasy, not only breaking down smaller units such as clichés and rearranging them in

surprising ways, but also synthesizing different authors and styles, making from them a

self-contained, artificial, and mosaic-patterned play.[102]

Wilde emphasizes the textuality of his play, but, as a dramatic work intended for

stage production, *Earnest* is also shaped by expectations about performance.  Language

and performance come together in the form of speech acts, which destabilize meaning

and dramatize the gaps between signifiers and what they signify.  Viewed through this

conception of performativity, Wilde's characters do not gain an aspect of fixed reality via

their actions or speech.  Their identities are destabilized all the more by Wilde's

configuration of the performed self.  This configuration has consequences for sexual and

gender identities in the play, an effect theorized at length by Judith Butler.  For example,

Butler argues that:

> When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of
> sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man*
> and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and
> *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.[103]

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[100] Beerbohm, 'The Importance of Being Earnest', pp. 188–191, 190
[101] Archibald Henderson, 'The Dramas of Oscar Wilde', *Arena* 37 (August 1907), pp. 134–139, 134
[102] In an unsigned review from *The Pall Mall Gazette*, *Salomé* is described in the same terms: '[It] is a mosaic.  Mr. Wilde has many masters, and the influence of each master asserts itself in his pages as stripes of different colours assert themselves in stuffs from the East' (*Pall Mall Gazette* [27 February 1893], p. 3).
[103] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 10

In terms of sexuality, Butler also sees a free-play of identity, a phenomenon prominently

dramatized within homosexual cultures: 'gender practices within gay and lesbian cultures

often thematize "the natural" in parodic contexts that bring into relief the performative

construction of an original and true sex'.[104]  Thus, what is natural is signified by what is

performed or artificial; nature itself is inseparable from the individual perception of

nature, which is in turn colored by that which is socially constructed.  Wilde asserts a

similar principle in 'The Decay of Lying': 'Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of

style'.[105]  Algernon also conveys this idea in a conversation between him and Cecily:

> ALGERNON: What a perfect angel you are, Cecily.
> CECILY:  You dear romantic boy [. . .] I hope your hair curls naturally,
>          does it?
> ALGERNON:  Yes, darling, with a little help from others.[106]

Algernon's equating of nature with that which has 'a little help from others' indicates both

his and Wilde's perception of true identity.  Algernon is clearly making truth a matter of

style, confirming what Wilde elaborates on in 'The Decay of Lying': 'Nature is no great

mother who has borne us.  She is our creation'.[107]

The fact that the characters in *Earnest* never question absurd claims (such as

Jack's about his aunt's height) further shows that each accepts the performed as real.  This

is most apparent in the scene in which Cecily reveals to Algernon that they have been

engaged even though they had not met before:

> ALGERNON: [. . .] I love you Cecily.  You will marry me, won't you?
> CECILY:  You silly boy!  Of course.  Why, we have been engaged for the last
> three months.
> ALGERNON:  For the last three months?
> CECILY:  Yes, it will be exactly three months on Thursday.

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[104] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. xxix
[105] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p. 29
[106] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 90
[107] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p. 40

> ALGERNON:  But how did we become engaged?
> CECILY:  Well, ever since dear Uncle Jack first confessed to us that he had a
> younger brother who was very wicked and bad, you of course have
> formed the chief topic of conversation between myself and Miss Prism.
> And of course a man who is much talked about is always very
> attractive [. . .] I daresay it was foolish of me, but I fell in love with
> you, Earnest.
> ALGERNON:  Darling!  And when was the engagement actually settled?
> CECILY:  On the 14th of February last.  Worn out by your entire ignorance of
> my existence, I determined to end the matter one way or the other, and
> after a long struggle with myself I accepted you under this dear old
> tree here.  The next day I bought this little ring in your name, and this
> is the little bangle with the true lovers' knot I promised you always to
> wear.[108]

To be earnest in this play is to take the trivial seriously (and vice versa).  In the above scene, Algernon does not appeal to any conception of objective truth.  The engagement becomes true for Cecily through the performance of it, even if it does not correspond to 'reality', which is evidenced by the fact that Algernon's absence presents no obstacle to Cecily's making him her fiancé.  And Algernon, upon discovering that he has been engaged without knowing it, does not dispute the engagement; instead, he mimics 'Art' (Cecily's story) in the same way Wilde recounts in 'The Decay of Lying': 'Paradox though it may seem [. . .] it is none the less true that Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life',[109] and he goes on to ask, '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?'.[110]  The engagement scene enacts exactly this scenario, wherein Cecily has imagined—and performed—the engagement, and then objective reality (life) catches up to what Cecily has already imagined and makes it true.

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[108] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, pp. 87–88
[109] Wilde, 'Decay of Lying', pp. 31–32
[110] Wilde, 'Decay of Lying', p. 40

Repeatedly throughout the play Wilde makes nature subservient to art, and he

performs much of this inversion through the reversal of gender roles.  For example, Jack's

proposal to Gwendolen subverts gender expectations attached to marriage proposals.

Jack's reticence and timidity is highlighted by his stammering.  He says, the stage

directions indicating (nervously), 'Miss Fairfax, ever since I met you I have admired you

more than any girl . . . I have ever met since . . . I met you'[111]—the ellipses and the

doubling back on himself heighten the effect.  Gwendolen responds to this, without any

hint of reticence and, in fact, with a good bit of bluntness: 'Yes, I am quite aware of the

fact.  And I often wish that in public, at any rate, you had been more demonstrative'.[112]

This kind of forwardness would have challenged the established notions of decorum for

women.  The late-Victorian resistance to New Woman writers, who promoted female

independence and fought against traditional gender roles, and some critics' (such as Max

Nordau's) insistence that such reversals of gender roles signaled an evolutionary

degeneration testify to the public's opposition to the behaviors exemplified by

Gwendolen's character.  Wilde's political move here is not so much to take up the cause

of the New Woman (the source of an ongoing debate amongst Wilde scholars); rather, his

separation of gender from sex is a logical extension of his freeing art from its mimetic

status.  Wilde's reversals of gender roles become the locus of Wilde's radical inversion of

art and nature.  If something as fixed as gender roles can be altered at will so easily, then

the argument that gender roles are 'natural' begins to unravel.

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[111] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 25
[112] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 26

Within Jack's proposal scene, the performative nature of gender roles is demonstrated beyond a doubt.  Gwendolyn is unwilling to accept Jack's proposal without the performance of it.  In response to his asking 'may I propose to you now?', she says:

> I think it would be an admirable opportunity.  And to spare you any possible disappointment, Mr. Worthing, I think it only fair to tell you quite frankly beforehand that I am fully determined to accept you.[113]

For Jack, the whole matter is settled after this, because both of their intentions are known.  But Gwendolen insists upon the performance of it.  'Gwendolen!', Jack exclaims after she has told him she plans to accept his proposal, indicating that the matter is settled.  Gwendolen replies, 'Yes, Mr. Worthing, what have you got to say to me?'.  Jack says:

> JACK:  You know what I have to say to you.
> GWENDOLEN:  Yes, but you don't say it.
> JACK:  Gwendolen, will you marry me?
> GWENDOLEN:  Of course I will, darling.  How long you have been about it![114]

Even though Gwendolen thinks their engagement is a matter of course, she still insists on Jack's performing it, which devalues intention and privileges performance above all else.

Gender roles are also reversed through Lady Bracknell's 'masculine' posing.  For example, she asserts herself over Jack in the proposal scene, partly because of the prerogatives of age, her status as a dowager, and her relationship to Gwendolen, but at no other point in the play is she demure or retiring, as her gender role would dictate.   Dr. Chasuble, for instance, enters Jack's house in act three, proclaiming 'Everything is quite ready for the christenings'.[115]  Lady Bracknell, quite indignantly and without decorum, asks: 'The christenings, sir!  Is not that somewhat premature?'.[116]  Again, here Lady Bracknell has the privilege of class, but that fact does not entirely account for her

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[113] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 29
[114] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 29
[115] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 140
[116] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 140

behavior.  There is no other character in the play who is more powerful or assertive than Lady Bracknell, consequently allowing her to assume a position of patriarchal authority.

Yet another scene that demonstrates this gender reversal centers on Cecily and Gwendolen's confrontation after their discovery that they are both seemingly engaged to Earnest.  While Jack's confrontations with Algernon devolve into decidedly un-masculine farcical tiffs over the proper time and method of eating muffins, Gwendolen and Cecily's confrontation is, though no less farcical, conducted with much more of what might be coded as masculine bravado and directness.  For example, after briefly maintaining the appearance of decorum, Gwendolyn says to Cecily: 'If the poor fellow [Earnest] has been entrapped into any foolish promise I shall consider it my duty to rescue him at once, and with a firm hand'.[117]  That Gwendolen should rescue Jack is itself a reversal of traditional roles, which takes agency away from Jack; furthermore, that she intends to do it with a 'firm' hand runs counter to notions of delicacy prescribed for female gender roles.  Cecily, for her part, is no less aggressive: 'Do you suggest, Miss Fairfax, that I entrapped Earnest into an engagement?  How dare you?  This is no time for wearing the shallow mask of manners.  When I see a spade I call it a spade'.  Cecily even goes so far as to give Gwendolen four lumps of sugar when she has asked for none, and to give her a large slice of cake, when she has asked for bread and butter.  After this provocation, Gwendolen directly confronts Cecily; in so doing, she explicitly communicates Victorian behavioral norms to the audience and demonstrates, through irony, how neither woman has followed these dictates:

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[117] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 101

> You have filled my tea with lumps of sugar, and though I asked most distinctly
> for bread and butter, you have given me cake.  I am known for the  gentleness of
> my disposition, and the extraordinary sweetness of my nature, but I warn you,
> Miss Cardew, you may go too far.[118]

Gwendolyn emphasizes that the expectations for feminine behavior are  'gentleness' and 'sweetness', but the irony of her assertion is barely concealed.  Algernon's effeminate concern for his cuffs while eating muffins exhibits his resistance to his 'natural' gender role, which would dictate that he be manly and stolid in the face of disappointment, rather than agitated and self-concerned.  Both Gwendolyn and Cecily's aggression show them reversing their 'natural' gender roles.  The women's placement outdoors, in a properly masculine space, and the men's indoors, in the feminized domestic sphere, underscore the inverted gender roles.  The purpose of both of these reversals is to telegraph, as Wilde does continually throughout the play, the artificiality of behavior.

By deploying paradox, refined epigrammatic wit, and the raw material of literary history, among other devices, Wilde fashions *Earnest* into a play that denies the objective reality of behavior, action, external phenomena, identity, and so on.  As Susan Taylor Jacobs argues, 'The play's artificiality and its exaggeration of style and structure, joined to its psychological improbabilities, produce a ludic, fantasy world in which undefined personality may be mutable and, therefore, freely creative'.[119]  *Earnest*'s free-play of linguistic signs both reduces epistemological and ontological problems to literary ones, and, in so doing, further emphasizes the artificiality of knowledge and identity.

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[118] Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 105
[119] Jacobs, 'When Formula Seizes Form', p. 23

*Salomé*:

In some ways, *Salomé* is more obviously a Decadent text, a poetic drama centered on themes of female sexual power and morbid obsession, which at first glance appears to have little in common with *The Importance of Being Earnest*. For instance, *Salomé* was first published in French,[120] in the vein of Symbolist theater embodied by Maeterlinck's dramatic work, and was denied a license for performance in Great Britain. The play was, therefore, first performed at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in Paris (11 February 1896) and not performed in the United Kingdom until 10 May 1905, when it was staged at the Bijou Theatre in London.[121] On the other hand, *Earnest* was a play written in a popular genre (farce) and performed at the St. James's Theatre (14 February 1895) to great acclaim. Peter Raby describes its first-night reception as the 'most enthusiastic [. . .] of Wilde's career'.[122] In spite of the plays' superficial differences and varied performance histories, what both texts have in common is a Decadent aesthetic that emphasizes their self-contained literariness and artificiality and their polemical defense of and deep engagement with modes of fantasy.

Like *Earnest*, *Salomé* works to collapse the distance between signifier and signified (or to disregard the signified all together) by achieving the highest levels of self-

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[120] Kerry Powell persuasively argues that the language of *Salomé* does not affect its interpretation: 'Even if *Salomé* were to have been performed in English in London, the jeweled artifice of Wilde's language, its fantastic repetitions, and its disconnected dialogue would have thrown off an effect akin to a performance in a foreign language. In other words, the effect of estrangement that *Salomé* produces from language itself—from the sound of it, its meaningfulness, and communicative potential—is part of the texture of the play itself, regardless of the language it is performed in or whether the audience is English or French' (Powell, *Acting Wilde: Victorian Sexuality, Theatre, and Oscar Wilde* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009], p. 60).

[121] This production was a private performance. *Salomé*'s first public performance was at the Savoy Theatre on 5 October 1931.

[122] Peter Raby, *The Importance of Being Earnest*: *A Reader's Companion* (New York: Twayne, 1995), p. 40. Unfortunately, the play's run was cut short by Wilde trials and imprisonment.

referentiality.  As has already been demonstrated in this chapter, *Salomé* is highly

allusive and is comprised of literary material previously worked by numerous literary

hands.  Whereas *Earnest* interrogates the notion of 'true' identity by demonstrating the

artificiality of ostensibly realistic characters and speech, *Salomé* embraces an

unapologetically and obviously artificial language.  Moreover, as Heidi Hartwig argues,

*Salomé* seeks to eliminate the distance between words and gestures, 'dislodg[ing] action

from its strong association with the physical body, its labor, and its products', and

distinguishing literature as the 'imaginative act *par excellence*'.[123]  For Wilde, literature

becomes action; therefore, action itself is disassociated from its context in the 'real' world.

　　Several critics have identified the tension between word and action as central to

*Salomé*.  Reviewing the first English production of the play, Beerbohm, for example,

expressed how its performance worked to inoculate the spectator against the action of the

drama: 'not even the best acting and the best stage-management could make this play so

good to see as it is good to read'.[124]  Elaborating on this comment, he argues that the play

is 'too horrible for definite and corporeal presentment.  It should be seen only through the

haze of our imagination'.[125]  Hartwig offers a reason other than *Salomé*'s horribleness to

explain the play's unstageability.  While implying that *Salomé* works better as a text than

as a performance, she asserts that the play's reduction of action to language is what makes

it unstageable.  Indicative of the play's unstageablity is its lack of action and plot:

Hartwig finds the action of the play to be sparse and the plot, 'were we to subtract the

three essential actions—Salomé's dance, Iokanaan's beheading, and Salomé's death—

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[123] Heidi Hartwig, 'Dancing for an Oath: *Salomé*'s Revaluation of Word and Gesture', *Modern Drama* 45 (Spring 2002), pp. 23–34, 23

[124] Max Beerbohm, '"Salomé"', in *Around Theatres* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953), pp. 377–380, 377

[125] Beerbohm, '"Salomé"', p. 378

consist[ing] almost entirely of speech acts'.[126]  Furthermore, Hartwig finds that even the

actions of the play, as few in number as they are, are all 'shown to be products of

linguistic acts'.[127]  In other words, a causal chain is created, moving from figurative

language to the language of intentionality and performance, and ending in 'actualized

performance'.[128]

Hartwig's understanding of the continuum from metaphoric language to language

of intention to action illuminates the mechanism of the play's plot; in other words, 'action'

and agency in *Salomé* are ultimately derived from metaphoric language.  As Hartwig

notes, it is the crisis in drama, brought on by 'the demotion of speech as secondary and

supplementary to "action"',[129] that the play dramatizes most effectively.  Hartwig even

speculates that the capacity of the play's language 'to assess and relate to the actual

world'[130] is exhausted by the 'real world's' inability to provide an adequate number of

references.  Wilde seems to warn against reaching this point when he has Vivian protest

against action in 'The Decay of Lying': 'Who wants to be consistent? The dullard and the

doctrinaire, the tedious people who carry out their principles to the bitter end of action, to the

*reductio ad absurdum* of practice'.[131]  Salomé complains at the end of the play that '[t]here

was a bitter taste on [Iokanaan's] lips',[132] which might be the 'bitter end of action' to which

Wilde refers.  Ultimately, it is from within figurative language that 'action' is renewed in the

play, manifesting itself in endlessly shifting metaphors.  The most persistent of these

metaphors is that of the moon.  The moon's signifying of so many things within the play

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[126] Hartwig, 'Dancing for an Oath', p. 26
[127] Hartwig, 'Dancing for an Oath', p. 27
[128] Hartwig, 'Dancing for an Oath', p. 30
[129] Hartwig, 'Dancing for an Oath', p. 34
[130] Hartwig, 'Dancing for an Oath', p. 29
[131] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p. 5
[132] Wilde, *Salomé: A Tragedy in One Act*, trans. by Lord Alfred B. Douglas (London: Elkin Mathews & John Lane, 1894), p. 66

does not amount to a thorough exploration of all the things it might suggest.  Instead, it is

a way of demonstrating the autonomy of language—if the moon can signify so many

things, then the word 'moon' does not have a fixed essence.  An abridged list of things to

which the moon is compared in *Salomé* includes: 'a woman rising from a tomb',[133] 'a little

princess who wears a yellow veil',[134] 'a little piece of money',[135] 'a virgin',[136] 'a mad

woman',[137] and 'a drunken woman'.[138]  The moon's status as a linguistic sign rather than a

definite, if obscure, symbol is shown by Herodias' tautology 'the moon is like the

moon'.[139]  Herodias' tautology does not lack linguistic fitness compared with the other

similes above because even the similes that do not appear tautological refer back to

characters within the play, namely Salomé herself, who acts as and is 'a little princess', 'a

virgin', 'a mad woman', and 'a drunken woman' throughout the play.  The metaphors and

similes used to describe Iokanaan also refer to the moon: 'He is like an image of silver';[140]

'like a moonbeam, like a shaft of silver'.[141]  Even Beardsley's frontispiece, in which Wilde

appears as the moon, underscores this self-referentiality.  As 'parodies twice over'[142] (and,

one might argue, thrice or more over), Beardsley's illustrations reinforce the play's self-

contained quality and second Wilde's efforts to 'undercut bourgeois Victorian notions of

"nature", and particularly, "natural" desire and gender identity'.[143]  *The Woman in the*

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[133] Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 1
[134] Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 1
[135] Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 11
[136] Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 11
[137] Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 28
[138] Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 28
[139] Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 28
[140] Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 19
[141] Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 19
[142] Chris Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley: Dandy of the Grotesque* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), p. 275
[143] Snodgrass, *Dandy of the Grotesque*, p. 276

*Moon*, Beardsley's frontispiece, achieves this by creating an 'almost universal confusion regarding [its] characters'.[144]

The one element in the play likely to undermine the assertion that Wilde's play is purely textual is Salomé's 'dance of the seven veils', a pivotal moment of action divorced from speech. Her dance, however, cannot be rendered through physical performance if one takes seriously Wilde's dedication to Beardsley in an autographed gift copy presented to the artist: 'for the only artist who, besides myself, knows what the dance of seven veils is, and can see that invisible dance'.[145] In other words, Wilde asserts that only Beardsley can render the dance visible, and Beardsley's graphic art itself displays a literariness that would, in turn, reconvert the dance back into a textual aspect of the play. Wilde's own stage directions gloss over the action of the dance and state simply: '[she] dances the dance of the seven veils'.[146] Without more detailed instruction, definite action is hindered and the performer of the dance is left with a gesture that is 'non-causal', since it is not the dance that earns Salomé Iokanaan's head. Instead, Salomé's dance earns her the speech act that will create action: 'If thou dancest for me thou mayest ask of me what thou wilt, and I will give it thee',[147] Herod says to his step-daughter. *Salomé* demonstrates the generative (and fantastical) aspect of language, which creates phenomena through new and arbitrary linguistic pairings. These pairings do not create real-world phenomena but merely generate a proliferation of other speech acts. Insofar as speech leads to action— and it is speech alone which engenders action in the play—action itself leads to inaction

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[144] Snodgrass, *Dandy of the Grotesque*, p. 276
[145] Qtd. in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 578. The dedication is taken from the copy of *Salomé: drame en un acte* (1893) housed in the Goldsmiths' Library of the University of London (classmark: [S.L.] I [Wilde – 1893]).
[146] Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 54
[147] Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 49

and an erasure of phenomena.  Salomé's language of intentionality ('I will kiss thy mouth,

Iokanann'[148]) becomes the present perfect ('I have kissed thy mouth'[149]), at which point all

the metaphors (the torches, stars, and moon) are effaced from the play as a result of

Herod's order: 'The slaves put out the torches.  The stars disappear.  A great cloud crosses

the moon and conceals it completely.  The stage becomes quite dark'.[150]  Herod retains

the authority to create action because he remains 'slave of [his] word'[151] and not of the

fruits of action.  It is precisely Salomé's and Herodias' insistence on action that

undermines their ability to effect it, and it is the source of misunderstanding between

Herod and Herodias.  Herod accuses his wife of being sterile, to which she replies that

she already has a child and must, therefore, not be the sterile one.  Unmoved by her logic,

Herod insists: 'Peace, woman!  I say that you are sterile'.[152]  In fact, when Herod demands

fruit earlier in the play—'Bring me ripe fruits'[153]—the very next sentence is a stage

direction indicating that '[f]ruits are brought',[154] suggesting that it is Herod who is fertile.

Salomé's use of the present perfect tense at the end of the play, while signaling her loss of

agency (via a loss of imagination), does not precede the loss of light[155] (the snuffing out

of torches, stars, and moon); rather, it is Herodias whose speech act precipitates the

darkening of the stage.  Immediately before the lights go out, she says, 'I am well pleased

with my daughter.  She has done well.  And I would stay here now'.[156]  She transitions

from present progressive to present perfect to conditional perfect without a dependent

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[148] Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 64
[149] Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 66
[150] Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 66
[151] Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 52
[152] Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 48
[153] Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 32
[154] Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 32
[155] In fact, she is illuminated by a ray of moonlight at the very end.
[156] Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 66

clause, semantically and syntactically neutered.  She commands silence frequently

throughout the play, but it is language only that engenders action.

Residing at the supposed intersection of word and gesture, drama makes this

relationship central to its own production.  Decadent drama, as exemplified by *Salomé*

and *Earnest,* is a vigorous interrogation of this intersection that demotes the physicality

of stage production—action, stage design, props, actors' bodies, identities, gestures, and

so on—reconfiguring physicality as a product of textual design and distancing itself from

an association with the 'real' engendered by the link between tangibility and realism.  By

highlighting its own artificiality, whether as a refashioned tapestry of its artistic

precursors or as example of exquisitely refined speech, the Decadent play emphasizes

that fantasy is the mode most consistent with its aesthetic aims.  In spite of the few

examples of Decadent drama in English, the two plays considered here confirm the

affinities between fantasy and Decadent drama and demonstrate that the former is central

to the latter.

# Chapter V

## Marvelous Masks in the Fairy Tales of Wilde, Beerbohm, and Lee

> No doubt there will always be critics who, like a certain writer in the *Saturday
> Review*, will gravely censure the teller of fairy tales for his defective knowledge
> of natural history, who will measure imaginative work by their own lack of any
> imaginative faculty.
>
> –Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying' (1891)[1]

Several critics, such as Catherine Maxwell, Patricia Pulham, and Jerusha

McCormack, have argued that the fairy-tale genre served Decadent authors as a 'means of

camouflaging ideas which readers might otherwise reject if presented in unadorned

prose'.[2]  In this understanding, fairy tales often serve to mask coded tales of sexual

inversion, gender transgression, political subversion, or, in more recent readings,

expressions of nationalistic identification.[3]  Such approaches frequently reduce fairy tales

to productive 'quarr[ies] for biographical speculation'.[4]  In spite of any potential for

biographical reading, the literary fairy tale operates as an ideal vehicle for Decadent

aesthetics, specifically because of the genre's indisputably fantastical quality and its

historical usage in the shaping of adolescent identity.  As traditional instruments to

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[1] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', in *Intentions* (London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1891), pp. 1-55,
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[2] Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham, Introduction, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, by Vernon
Lee, ed. by Maxwell and Pulham (Peterborough: Broadview, 2006), pp. 9–27, 16.  Jerusha McCormack
argues that Wilde's fairy tales explore three 'fissures in Wilde's own complex fate: as Irishman turned
English; dandy become father; husband converted to illicit lover' (McCormack, 'Wilde's fiction(s)', in *The
Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997], pp. 96–117, 102).  See also
Burdett Gardner's *The Lesbian Imagination (Victorian Style): A Psychological and Critical Study of
"Vernon Lee"* (New York: Garland, 1987), which examines Lee's stories for their insights into her
lesbianism.

[3] This is particularly true of Wilde's fairy tales.  Examples include: Christopher S. Nassaar, *Into the Demon
Universe: A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1974); Gary Schmidgall *The
Stranger Wilde: Interpreting Oscar* (New York: Dutton, 1994); and Jarlath Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of
Oscar Wilde* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), among many others.

[4] Neil Sammells, *Wilde Style: The Plays and Prose of Oscar Wilde* (Harlow: Longman, 2000), p. 10

inculcate behavioral norms and to prepare children for 'real-life' social roles, fairy tales

also enable Decadent authors to demonstrate the artificiality of character and the 'real

world', turning otherwise allegorical narratives into expressions of fantasy and literary

self-referentiality.  Moreover, Decadent fairy tales engender an intertexual dialogue

among Decadent authors and, in so doing, examine the question of Decadent identity

itself.  This chapter compares fairy tales by three Decadent authors—Wilde, Beerbohm,

and Lee—and argues that each one deploys the genre, and the fantasy mode in general, in

order to undermine realistic and naturalistic configurations of character and

epistemological 'reality'.

Definitions of fairy tales typically begin with Vladímir Propp's seminal study of

folktale genres *Morphology of the Folktale* (first translated into English in 1958), which

identifies the forms of the fairy tale by analyzing its component plot elements.  Another

common starting point for fairy-tale critics is the structuralist or semiotic approach

exemplified by Claude Lévi-Strauss and Algirdas-Julien Greimas.[5]  Lévi-Strauss, in

particular, critiques what he perceives as the shortcomings of Propp's syntagmatic

approach in favor of his proposed 'paradigmatic' reading analyzing the (usually) binary

oppositions inherent in myth.[6]  Neither the formalist nor the structuralist approach,

however, adequately reveals the genre's essence.  As Jack Zipes rightly argues,

definitions:

> [B]ased on the morphological study of [. . .] Propp or the semiotic practice of
> Algirdas-Julien Greimas [. . .] provide no overall methodological framework for

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[5] See, for example, Lévi-Strauss, 'Structure and Form: Reflections on a Work by Vladimir Propp', trans. by Monique Layton, in V. IA. Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, ed. by Anatoly Liberman, trans. by Ariadna Y. Martin and Richard P. Martin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 167–188.  See also, Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, trans. by Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer, and Alan Velie (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

[6] For a summary and analysis of Propp-Lévi-Strass debate, see Alan Dundes, 'Binary Opposition in Myth: The Propp/Lévi-Strauss Debate in Retrospect', *Western Folklore* 56 (Winter 1997), pp. 39–48

locating and grasping the essence of the genre, the substance of the symbolic act as it took form to intervene in the institutionalized literary discourse of society.[7]

Zipes and other critics identify this 'essence' as being a 'sense of wonder',[8] the action of which engenders a postulation of hypothetical, fantastical worlds and an interrogation of the 'real world'. Marina Warner repeats this assertion, arguing that fairy-tale 'wonders [. . .] disrupt the apprehensible world in order to open spaces for dreaming alternatives'.[9] Both Zipes and Warner identify a contravention of realist discourse as an essential aspect of the genre, and writers on fantasy have generally classified the fairy tale as a fantasy genre. For example, Todorov labels the genre as one in which 'supernatural events [. . .] provoke no surprise'.[10] Specifically, he categorizes fairy tales as a sub-genre of the 'marvelous',[11] which, as opposed to 'the fantastic', is a genre Todorov defines as one in which the supernatural interpretation of fantastic phenomena prevails. As a broad category, fantasy encompasses the 'genre' that Todorov labels 'the marvelous', which is partly why Eric Rabkin describes the fairy tale as 'one of the most fantastic genres'.[12]

The *literary* fairy tale, in particular, as opposed to the folktale, a form grounded in oral culture, has historically been employed as an instrument of childhood socialization: fairy tales have been 'attempt[s] to condition or "colonise" the child reader'.[13] Rachael Cameron elaborates on this point, arguing that fairy tales' original function as

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[7] Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization*, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 4

[8] Zipes, *When Dreams Come True: Classical Fairy Tales and Their Tradition*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 5

[9] Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), p. xx

[10] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. by Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975), p. 54

[11] Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 54

[12] Eric S. Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976), p. 54

[13] Rachael Cameron, 'Oscar Wilde's "The Young King": The Fairy Tale as Countermemory', *Australian Folklore* 17 (November 2002), pp. 53–67, 55

entertainment was superseded by the aims of politically conservative forces: 'while fairy

tales for children were originally intended to function as diversion and amusement, social

and political influences again altered the genre when its didactic and pedagogic functions

were emphasised much more'.[14]  The use of fairy tales to instruct and morally guide

children transformed an indisputably fantastical genre into a type of allegory whose

meaning, in its most restrictive sense, is a 'proposition with a double meaning, but whose

literal meaning has been entirely effaced'.[15]  The closer fairy tales move toward allegory,

the less space there is in which 'the fantastic can exist'.[16]  The tension between the

impulse toward edifying allegory and the genre's roots in fantasy and myth are

encapsulated adroitly by Dickens, who described them as 'nurseries of fancy',[17] framing

them as vehicles of both socialization and imagination.  Those fairy tales existing at the

furthest remove from allegory preserve the ontological free-play inherent, as Rosemary

Jackson argues, to the fantastic mode in general.  Because fantasy 'express[es] a desire

for the imaginary',[18] it tends to privilege an imaginative role-playing that is contrary to

the civilizing tendencies of politically conservative tales:

> Unlike the symbolic, the imaginary is inhabited by an infinite number of selves
> preceding socialization, before the ego is produced within a social frame.  These
> selves allow an infinite, unnamable potential to emerge, one which a fixed sense
> of character excludes in advance.[19]

Fairy tales have the potential to afford the imagined child space in which to posit

different self-identities, but his or her choices are more strongly guided in conservative

and allegorical tales.  As opposed to many earlier, eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-

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[14] Cameron, 'Oscar Wilde's "The Young King": The Fairy Tale as Countermemory', p. 56
[15] Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 62
[16] Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 64
[17] Charles Dickens, 'Frauds on the Fairies', *Household Worlds* (1 October 1853), pp. 97–100, 97
[18] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 91
[19] Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 91

century writers of the literary fairy tale, some later nineteenth-century authors such as

George MacDonald began to utilize the genre for its transgressive potential; they began

'to open up and subvert traditional socialization by posing infinite textual possibilities for

the subjects/readers to define themselves against the background of finite choices

proposed by society.[20]  Decadent fairy-tale authors privileged these fantastical aspects of

fairy tales while simultaneously ironizing their allegorical uses in order to demonstrate

the artificiality of character and characterization.  The fairy tales by Wilde, Lee, and

Beerbohm considered in this chapter all employ the literary fairy-tale genre and engage

with its tradition to construct thoroughly fantastical texts.

'The Young King' is one example of a fairy tale that has been consistently read as

an allegory of Wilde's homosexual or nationalistic politics, but which, upon closer

analysis, is principally an expression of the independence and artificiality of artistic

production.  The tale first appeared in the Christmas 1888 issue of *The Lady's Pictorial*

and was later included in his second published collection of fairy tales, *A House of*

*Pomegranates* (1891).[21]  In a letter to *The Pall Mall Gazette* defending the latter book,

Wilde identifies his target audience as being neither children nor adults.  In other words,

he emphasizes his text's self-referentiality by stressing his indifference to its audience: 'in

building this *House of Pomegranates* I had about as much intention of pleasing the

British child as I had of pleasing the British public'.[22]  His statement is a subtle shift from

the assertion he made with regard to his first fairy-tale collection, *The Happy Prince and*

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[20] Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, p. 100
[21] Wilde, 'The Young King', *Lady's Pictorial: A Newspaper for the Home* (Christmas 1888), pp. 1–5; repr. in *A House of Pomegranates* (London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1891), pp. 1–26.  All subsequent quotations will be from the *Lady's Pictorial* version.
[22] Wilde, Letter to the Editor of *The Pall Mall Gazette* (December 1891), in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 503

*Other Tales* (1888), which Wilde directs to both children and adults.[23]  Like the rest of

Wilde's tales from *A House of Pomegranates*, 'The Young King' transforms a

traditionally didactic genre into a deconstruction of 'the real'.

Wilde's tale centers on a sixteen-year-old prince as he prepares for his elaborate

and richly ornamented coronation.  Possessing a 'strange passion for beauty',[24] the

prospective king is overcome with excitement for the lavish ceremony and its

accompanying habiliments.  However, on the night before he is to become king, he

experiences three revelatory dreams depicting the human suffering necessary to create his

robe, crown, and scepter.  Transformed by his dreams, he rejects these objects and

proceeds, despite the objections of his entire kingdom, to his coronation outfitted as a

peasant.  Inside the cathedral where he is to be crowned, the young king is transfigured

by his conversion in a spiritual and metaphorical investiture.

Ostensibly, 'The Young King' parallels the political message of Wilde's 'The Soul

of Man Under Socialism', which espouses the views of William Morris-inspired, late-

Victorian British socialism.  Wilde's fairy tale undoubtedly shares with Wilde's essay its

Fabianism.  However, 'The Soul of Man' is itself more than a simple assertion of socialist

doctrine: 'The understanding of its implications depends on a grasp of the formal verbal

techniques and the logic of the imagination which Wilde brought to bear on the

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[23] Wilde defines his audience for *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* as such in a letter to G. H. Kersley (15 June 1888): 'They are studies in prose [. . .] meant partly for children, and partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy' (*Complete Letters*, p. 352).  Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small argue that this shift signals a change only in the marketing strategy employed by Wilde and his publishers rather than a significant change in form (*Oscar Wilde's Profession Writing and the Culture Industry in the Late Nineteenth Century* [Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000], p. 81).  For a counterargument, see Michelle Ruggaber, 'Wilde's *The Happy Prince* and *A House of Pomegranates*: Bedtime Stories for Grown-Ups', *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920* 46 (2003), pp. 140–153
[24] Wilde, 'The Young King', p. 2

exposition of abstract thought'.[25]  Published in the same year as *Intentions*, *A House of Pomegranates* also embodies many of the aesthetic theories Wilde promotes in 'The Decay of Lying' and 'The Critic as Artist'.  As Neil Sammells argues, the fairy tales' synchronicity with the essays of *Intentions* suggests that the former are allied with the 'anti-naturalistic aesthetic theories' of the latter.[26]  Indeed, 'The Young King' is not only a rejection of exploitative production, but is also, and more emphatically, a reaffirmation of art and artificiality.  As Margaret Stetz argues, it 'revels paradoxically in the very ornaments that it condemns on moral grounds'.[27]

As is the case with much of his fiction, Wilde's fairy tale debunks 'the natural' and 'the real' by self-consciously demonstrating its own artificiality.  First of all, Wilde's tales adopt and satirize the styles of other fairy-tale writers.  From the moment of their first publication, reviewers noted that the tales were, as one phrased it, 'somewhat after the manner of Hans [Christian] Anderson'.[28]  This same reviewer identified further models such as the Countess d'Aulnoy's fairy tales, Swinburne, and even Wilde's own *Dorian Gray*,[29] while other critics have focused on his debts to the Irish folktale tradition, very familiar to Wilde through his parents' collecting of them.[30]  Of course, an obvious and central model is New Testament parable and, specifically, the King James Bible, from which Wilde borrows aspects of his language, narrative structure, and moral message.  Still other sources that inform Wilde's tale include the legend of Tannhäuser, alluded to at

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[25] Epifanio San Juan, Jr., *The Art of Oscar Wilde* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1967), p. 5

[26] Sammells, *Wilde Style*, p. 10

[27] Stetz, 'The Snake Lady and the Bruised Bodley Head: Vernon Lee and Oscar Wilde in the *Yellow Book*', *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 112–122, 115

[28] Anon., Review of *A House of Pomegranates*, by Oscar Wilde, *The Pall Mall Gazette* (30 November 1891), p. 3

[29] Anon., Review of *A House of Pomegranates*, p. 3

[30] For example, see Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, p. 6.  See also, Jane Francesca Wilde, *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms, and Superstitions of Ireland*, 2 vols. (London: Ward and Downey, 1887)

the end of the tale: 'The dead staff blossomed, and bare lilies that were whiter than pearls'.[31]  Even Wilde's self-plagiarism, the reappearance of lines in 'The Young King' that were used elsewhere in his *oeuvre*, underscores Wilde's highly refined—hence, artificial—language.  For example, the line 'Poverty creeps through our sunless lanes' from *The Lady's Pictorial* version of 'The Young King' (revised as 'through our sunless lanes creeps Poverty' for *A House of Pomegranates*) appeared previously, as Josephine Guy and Ian Small demonstrate, in 'Humanitad' from *Poems* (1881), in Act II of *The Duchess of Padua* (1883), and in 'The Critic as Artist' (1891).[32]  Between the line's first appearance in 'Humanitad' and its last in *A House of Pomegranates*, it underwent multiple revisions, reinforcing Guy and Small's assertion that the 'elements of Wilde's writing that he most often repeated are unsurprisingly those he laboured hardest to perfect'.[33]

Another aspect of the tale that underscores its artificiality is its overabundance of detail, the Decadent catalogs reminiscent of those in Huysmans' *À rebours* and similar to those in *Dorian Gray*.  The reviewer from *The Pall Mall Gazette* likens Wilde's tale to the 'catalogue of a high art furniture dealer'[34] and explicitly contrasts the tale's '*bric-à-brac*' with traditional fairy-tale content: 'the more natural among [children] would certainly prefer Hansel and Grethel's sugar-house to any amount of Mr. Wilde's rich tapestries and "velvet canopies"'.[35]  The *Pall Mall*'s reviewer isolates the inventories of *objets d'art* as a specific aspect of the tale that makes it anti-naturalistic.  Moreover, he or she identifies the catalogs themselves as having a central importance to Wilde's fairy tales rather than a tangential existence as mere props.  Unlike d'Aulnoy's lists of 'sumptuary

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[31] Wilde, 'The Young King', pp. 4–5
[32] Guy and Small, *Oscar Wilde's Profession*, p. 262
[33] Guy and Small, *Oscar Wilde's Profession*, p. 264
[34] Anon., Review of *A House of Pomegranates*, p. 3
[35] Anon., Review of *A House of Pomegranates*, p. 3

detail',[36] which served as 'stage-scenery'[37] for her characters, Wilde's physical objects are central actors in the fairy tales. The passage that critics, both contemporary and modern, have offered as being exemplary of Wilde's lavish detail is the description of the young king's room:

> The walls were hung with rich tapestries representing the Triumph of Beauty. A large press, inlaid with agate and lapis-lazuli, filled one corner, and facing the window stood a curiously-wrought cabinet with lacquer panels of powdered and mosaiced gold, on which were placed some delicate goblets of Venetian glass, and a cup of dark-veined onyx. Pale poppies were broidered on the silk coverlet of the bed, as though they had fallen from the tired hands of sleep, and tall reeds of fluted ivory bare up the velvet canopy, from which great tufts of ostrich plumes sprang, like white foam, to the pallid silver of the fretted ceiling.[38]

These beautiful objects represent more than an exhaustively detailed description of the young king's physical surroundings. The palace's *objects d'art* foster the prince's development, instigate his transformation from goatherd's son to king, and serve as a sort of 'anodyne from pain'.[39] Wilde's catalogs take on central importance in the tale because it is through them that the young king perceives the world and constructs his own identity.

The intricate detail of 'The Young King' is a part of the tale's larger effort to make of its prose style an 'exercise in artificial display'.[40] As Anne Varty argues, in the tales of *A House of Pomegranates*, '[c]omposition, mood and tone are foregrounded by archaic sentence structure, specialised diction and a deliberate patterning of adventure, forcing storyline and moral into positions of secondary importance'.[41] Wilde's self-conscious use of language, in fact, creates the tale's narrative trajectory. Beginning at the young king's

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[36] Anon., Review of *A House of Pomegranates*, p. 3
[37] Anon., Review of *A House of Pomegranates*, p. 3
[38] Wilde, 'The Young King', p. 2
[39] Wilde, 'The Young King', p. 2
[40] Anne Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde* (London: Longman, 1998), p. 97
[41] Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde*, p. 97

point of least refinement, the tale moves from apparently concrete language into pure

abstraction.  As opposed to an allegorical reading of the tale, which imagines the young

king's apotheosis as a symbolic representation of the king's resolve to rule righteously and

abandon his dedication to material art, attention to Wilde's language reveals that the end

endorses, even more strongly, the language of art and artifice.  The tale's language offers

no suggestion that the transfigured king will 'return to the "real" world to be transformed,

and to transform those around him'.[42]  On the contrary, Wilde's language establishes a

continuity between the tale's beginning and end.  For example, he juxtaposes the robe that

'had been fashioned for his pleasure' with the 'tissued robe' that the 'sunbeams wove

round him'.[43]  In the description of each robe, the verb suggests a similar act of artistic

creation: 'fashioned' and 'wove'.  Moreover, the tale's ending amplifies the language of

art, which crescendos as the young king is symbolically crowned: 'In the fair raiment of a

king he stood before them, and the organ pealed out its music, and the trumpeters blew

upon their trumpets, and the singing boys sang'.[44]  The linguistic frame of reference

narrows to the point of tautology—'singing boys sang'—invoking a world of autonomous

language.  Even the association between Christ and the young king does not transcend the

artificiality of the prose.  In fact, as Nassaar argues, 'Christ is connected [in the fairy tale]

with beautiful art objects.  Wilde [. . .] dissolves all differences between Christ and the

highest manifestation of the artistic impulse'.[45]  Working against allegorical or simply

didactic interpretations, 'The Young King' reveals itself to be a work of pure fantasy.

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[42] Jody Price, *"A Map with Utopia": Oscar Wilde's Theory for Social Transformation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), p. 63
[43] Wilde, 'The Young King', p. 4
[44] Wilde, 'The Young King', p. 5
[45] Chistopher S. Nassaar, *Into the Demon Universe: A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1974), p. 26

A last, and important, aspect of 'The Young King' that reinforces its fantastical quality is its construction of identity. Many critics who discuss this fairy tale have sought to uncover in it an essentialist allegory about one or another of Wilde's identities, particularly a homosexual or Irish persona. For example, Gary Schmidgall investigates Wilde's fairy tales in order to 'discover more about the "radical" behind the masks',[46] arguing that 'The Young King', in particular, is a 'distinctly more transgressive [. . .] assertion of homosexual themes'[47] than some of Wilde's other tales. Zipes also argues that 'The Young King' is 'undoubtedly a homoerotic portrayal of an idealized lover'.[48] Both Schmidgall's and Zipes' critical methods in reading the story, though, rely on a form of the intentional fallacy that posits Wilde's gay identity and reads the tale through that interpretive lens. Other critics, such as Alan Sinfield have made problematic any readings that assume an anachronistic and coherent 'gay' identity as configured in later, twentieth-century conceptions. Sinfield historicizes Wilde's homosexual identity and shows that the modern understanding of homosexual identity itself has been largely influenced by the figure of Wilde and the spectacle of his trials for gross indecency.[49] The search for coherent gay themes in Wilde's fairy tales, therefore, centers on a (then) non-existent construction and, furthermore, contravenes Wilde's own assertion that a 'mask tells us more than a face'.[50]

Instead of creating in his fairy tale a character with ontological fixity, Wilde invests the young king with a performative identity. Rather than reverting to a state of

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[46] Schmidgall, *The Stranger Wilde: Interpreting Oscar* (New York: Dutton, 1994), p. xvi

[47] Schmidgall, *The Stranger Wilde*, p. 161

[48] Zipes, *When Dreams Come True*, p. 172

[49] Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994)

[50] Wilde, 'Pen, Pencil, and Poison: A Study in Green', in *Intentions* (London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1891), pp. 57–91, 64

noble savagery at the end of the tale, the young king demonstrates an evolving persona self-consciously transformed at successive intervals throughout the tale. Wilde encourages readers to interpret the young king's identity as fixed at various points only to undermine those interpretations repeatedly. For instance, the young king's 'wild-eyed and open-mouthed'[51] appearance and tendency 'to chafe at the tedious Court ceremonies'[52] suggest that his upbringing as a goatherd's son has imbued him with certain unalterable (rustic) traits. The young king's pastoral rearing, however, does not connote univocally 'natural' manners; instead, the descriptions of the prince as a wild and untamed 'brown woodland Faun'[53] appear to root his identity in myth more than in nature, specifically in the myth of Pan or his Roman counterpart, Faunus. In fact, the descriptions of the young king's father vividly evoke Pan: 'a stranger [. . .] who, by the wonderful magic of his lute-playing, had made the young Princess love him'.[54] The young king's 'natural manners' are also complicated by his father's other possible identity: 'an artist from Florence [. . .] who had suddenly disappeared from the Palace, leaving his work in the Cathedral unfinished'.[55] In *A House of Pomegranates*, Wilde changes the city from Florence to Rimini, which suggests that in the later version Wilde might have consciously evoked the Renaissance artist Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), whom he would have known from Vasari's *Le Vite della più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori* (1550), and who was commissioned by the condottiero, nobleman, and art patron Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta to reconstruct a thirteenth-century Gothic church in Rimini into a mausoleum for him and his lover (and later wife) Isotta degli Atti. The cathedral, now known as the

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[51] Wilde, 'The Young King', p. 1
[52] Wilde, 'The Young King', p. 2
[53] Wilde, 'The Young King', p. 1
[54] Wilde, 'The Young King', p. 1
[55] Wilde, 'The Young King', p. 1

Tempio Malatestiano, was never completed, neither by Alberti nor by Matteo di Andrea

de'Pasti, to whom the project was later assigned, which suggests the strong similarity

between the young king's father, whose own work on a cathedral is left incomplete, and

Alberti (or, possibly, de'Pasti).  The cathedral itself is a strong visual metaphor for the

young king's ambiguous identity.  An unfinished Christian cathedral, it is a palimpsest of

various modes, further imbued with pagan connotations by Pope Pius II, Malatesta's

enemy, who described the Tempio Malatestiano as 'full of pagan images'[56] and unsuitable

for Christian worship.  The cathedral evokes the ambiguity generated by the young king's

identification with both Pan and Christ, emphasizing the mutability and equivocality of

his character and ironically duplicating the mysterious identity of the young king's father,

who might not be associated with the Tempio Malatestiano at all (that is, he might be a

Pan figure instead).

Wilde complicates a reading of the young king as 'naturally' rustic, but he also

problematizes readings of the fairy tale that configure the young king's identity as

biologically determined.  In other words, the young king is neither the simple goatherd,

nor the genetic heir to his father's artistic personality.  The inheritance from his father

would presumably be the passion for beauty that has 'so great an influence over [the

young king's] life',[57] but this only manifests itself from the 'very first moment of his

*recognition* [as heir to the throne; my emphasis]'.[58]  The young king's passion for beauty

appears to be more of a self-identification with his lineage than the expression of a latent

biological trait.  The same is true of his potential to lead, which manifests itself as a

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[56] Qtd. in David Watkin, 'Architecture', in *The Legacy of Rome: A New Appraisal*, ed. by Richard Jenkyns (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992), pp. 329–366, 341
[57] Wilde, 'The Young King', p. 2
[58] Wilde, 'The Young King', p. 2

transformation brought about by his three dreams rather than as an atavistic expression of his grandfather's leadership qualities.  In fact, the fairy tale's opening paragraph dispels any notion that natural traits are condoned by the court: his courtiers retire from the young king's chamber in order 'to receive a few last lessons from the Professor of Etiquette; there being some of them who had still quite natural manners, which in a courtier is [. . .] a very grave offence'.[59]  Rather than promote a model of static identity, Wilde, as Judith Butler describes Divine's performance in John Water's *Female Trouble* (1974), destabilizes the 'very distinctions between the natural and artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer'.[60]

Another common critical approach to 'The Young King' and Wilde's fairy tales in general has been to examine the texts for what they reveal about Wilde's national identity. Biographical considerations of Wilde have benefited in recent years from the renewed emphasis on his Irishness by critics such as Richard Pine, Owen Dudley, and Jarlath Killeen, but this strategy has been somewhat less productive as an interpretive instrument through which to read Wilde's work.  Many of these commentaries have focused on the fairy tales as a rich vein of political and nationalistic allegory; however, these strictly allegorical readings contradict the fantastical interpretations that the tales themselves endorse.  For instance, Richard Pine reads 'The Young King' as a parable about Irish suffering during the Famine and the regenerative potential thereafter: 'The redemptive quality of the young King's true poverty and humility might speak for all those whose degradation under the Famine had been noted by [Wilde's parents]'.[61]  Jarlath Killeen also

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[59] Wilde, 'The Young King', p. 1
[60] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. x
[61] Richard Pine, *The Thief of Reason: Oscar Wilde and Modern Ireland* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), p. 178

reads the tale allegorically as an expression of the Irish experience under colonial rule: he

argues that the young king's mesmerization serves as a 'warning about the hypnotic

effects of the [British] empire on new [Irish] recruits'.[62]  In both cases, Pine and Killeen

overlay an allegorical interpretation on a tale that, at the end, resolves into an ostensibly

transcendent, yet wholly self-contained and artificial world.

Wilde's fairy tale employs a richly intertextual dialogue, among other devices, in

order to create a self-conscious work of literary fantasy.  Other Decadent writers

continued and expanded on Wilde's method by composing fairy tales that not only mimic

Wilde's Decadent aesthetic but also parody Wilde himself and his tales in particular.

Two prominent examples of this type are Lee's 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' (July

1896) and Beerbohm's 'The Happy Hypocrite' (October 1896), both published in *The

Yellow Book*.  Like 'The Young King', Beerbohm's and Lee's tales are highly allusive and

borrow heavily from literary tradition for their language and narrative structures,

although both authors add at least one additional layer of refinement and self-awareness

to Wilde's own self-referentiality by building on the latter's fairy tales.  Lee and

Beerbohm not only engage with Wilde and his tales, but they also enter into a dialogue

with a vibrant fairy-tale vein within *fin-de-siècle* periodical culture, which had also been

fruitful for other Decadent writers, including John Gray and Laurence Houseman.[63]  In so

doing, they furthermore entered contemporary literary debates about Decadence,

defending the Decadent aesthetic by adopting a thoroughly Wildean mode for use in a

genre that Wilde had also used to advance his literary theories.  Lastly, Lee's and

Beerbohm's choice of the fairy tale places them within contemporary debates about

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[62] Jarlath Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 109
[63] See Gray, 'The Great Worm', *The Dial* 1 (June 1893), pp. 69–78, and Houseman, 'The Blue Moon', *Butterfly* (May 1899), pp. 89–98

identity instigated by Wilde's trials. Their fairy tales use the genre to explore questions

of identity and to deconstruct realist literary characterization.

Lee's fairy tale is engaged with Wilde and the Decadent mode of writing on

several levels. Margaret Stetz argues a similar point: '[the tale] uses readily identifiable

Wildean literary tropes throughout'.[64] In particular, she cites 'The Young King' and 'The

Birthday of the Infanta' as two texts to which 'Prince Alberic' is 'brimming with

allusions'.[65] The character of Prince Alberic resembles, in many ways, the young king,

especially insofar as both characters begin as rustic-natured, sixteen-year-old heirs to

their respective thrones, who receive their training and socialization through a careful

study of art. Among the works of art from which the young king draws inspiration are

the tapestries depicting the Triumph of Beauty, which itself parallels the young king's

story. Prince Alberic's life is similarly predicted by a tapestry, representing his ancestor

Alberic the Blonde and the Snake Lady Oriana, which the prince feels possesses an

'inexhaustible charm'.[66] More than a parallel to Alberic's life, the tapestry both predicts

and prescribes Alberic's maturation, which occupies much of the story's narrative. The

prince's grandfather, Duke Balthasar, orders Alberic's tapestry removed and replaced with

one representing 'Susanna and the Elders'. Outraged by this act, Alberic destroys the new

tapestry and is consequently exiled from his palace. Sent to the nearly ruined Castle of

Sparkling Waters, the ancestral center of his family's royal line, Alberic proceeds to

inhabit the world represented by the tapestry of his ancestor and the Snake Lady, who

assumes human form for one hour per day at sunset. Summoned back to the Red Palace

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[64] Margaret Stetz, 'The Snake Lady and the Bruised Bodley Head: Vernon Lee and Oscar Wilde in the *Yellow Book*', in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), p. 113
[65] Stetz, 'The Snake Lady and the Bruised Bodley Head', p. 116
[66] Vernon Lee, 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady', *The Yellow Book: An Illustrated Quarterly* 10 (July 1896), pp. 289-344, 291

when his grandfather's finances fail, Alberic becomes a potentially lucrative asset to be

married off to the daughter of a wealthy merchant.  However, Alberic brings the Snake

Lady, in her ophidian form, back to the palace with him, refusing to acquiesce to his

grandfather's plans for his marriage.  Ultimately, the duke and his counselors discover the

snake and kill it, leading to Prince Alberic's death 'a fortnight later'.[67]

Animated by supernatural forces, 'Prince Alberic' presents 'as rich and exotic a

realm of fantasy as Vernon Lee ever created'.[68]  The narrative code of the tapestry, as

Ruth Robbins argues, 'guides us to accept the code at the furthest remove from the real'.[69]

Caroline Sumpter describes the tale as 'us[ing] both the notion of the child primitive and

fairy-tale typology as a frame around which to weave a distinctly decadent fantasy'.[70]

Most of the narrative of Lee's tale assumes the form of a *Bildungsroman* centered on the

prince's maturation.  His education and development is accomplished, not with the help

of typical societal forces, but with the help of the Snake Lady, who is the 'imprisoned

[. . .] Fairy Oriana'.[71]  It is through Oriana's intercessions that Alberic matures into the

'full-grown and gallant-looking youth'[72] that he becomes.  The fact that the tale

encourages a sympathetic reading of Oriana suggests that the reader is encouraged also to

endorse a fantastical rather than a merely allegorical reading of the story.  Moreover, the

story's language reinforces such a reading.  The tale's 'elaborate and sensuous [Wildean]

aesthetic style'[73] militates against any realist interpretation of the text.  As Burdett

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[67] Lee, 'Prince Alberic', p. 343

[68] Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), p. 227

[69] Ruth Robbins, 'Vernon Lee: Decadent Woman?', in *Fin de Siècle/Fin du Globe: Fears and Fantasies of the Late Nineteenth Century*, ed. by John Stokes (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pp. 139–161, 155

[70] Sumpter, *The Victorian Press and the Fairy Tale* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), p. 141

[71] Lee, 'Prince Alberic', p. 319

[72] Lee, 'Prince Alberic', p. 315

[73] Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham, Introduction, *Hauntings*, by Vernon Lee, p. 16

Gardner asserts, the 'style [of the story] is everywhere loaded with an unhealthy excess of color and jewelled ornament'.[74]  Nowhere is this more true than in the descriptions of Duke Balthasar's palace:

> Its roof was ingeniously inlaid with oyster shells, forming elegant patterns, among which you could plainly distinguish some colossal satyrs; the sides were built of rockery, and in its depths, disposed in a most natural and tasteful manner, was a herd of lifesize animals all carved out of various precious marbles.[75]

Lee's baroque language is grotesque in the sense that it exaggerates meaning beyond its simple representational function.

A counterargument to this fantastical reading of the text might emphasize the fact that Lee's most stylistically Decadent passages are those which describe the Duke or his palace (both of which become indistinguishable to Alberic[76]).  Because the Duke so strongly resembles Wilde, one might argue that Lee's language is simply a parody of Wilde's own Decadent style.  Greatly concerned with his appearing young, the Duke evokes the figure of Dorian Gray.  In point of fact, referring to Alberic, he declares, 'Poor child! he was born old, and I shall die young!'.[77]  This not only describes Dorian's trajectory in Wilde's novel, but it also echoes Lord Illingworth's aphorism in *A Woman of No Importance*: 'The soul is born old but grows young'.[78]  Lee had parodied Wilde before—as Posthlethwaite in *Miss Brown* (1884)—so one might read her language as effective satire using Wilde's own style against a caricature of him.  However, the Duke does not unequivocally embody Wilde's character.  For instance, he demonstrates a very un-Wildean opposition to childhood imagination: 'he reproved the folly of feeding the

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[74] Gardner, *The Lesbian Imagination*, p. 21
[75] Lee, 'Prince Alberic', p. 296
[76] Alberic, Lee writes, 'came to identify the Duke and the Palace as the personification and visible manifestation of each other' ('Prince Alberic', p. 295).
[77] Vernon Lee, 'Prince Alberic', pp. 332–333
[78] Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1894), p. 36

thoughts of youth on improbable events'.[79]  Furthermore, the Castle of Sparkling Waters,

the symbolic foil to the Duke and his Decadent excess, is described in ornate language

similar to Lee's description of the Red Palace:

> The great gold balls of oranges, and the delicate yellow lemons, stood out among
> their glossy green against the deep blue of the sea; the long bunches of grapes,
> hung, filled with sunshine, like clusters of rubies and jacinths and topazes, from
> the trellis which patterned the pale blue sky.[80]

In general, 'Prince Alberic' partakes too enthusiastically in highly artificial language to be

considered a serious critique of Wilde or Wildean aesthetics: 'There is an ironic

contradiction between the story's theme and its manner: the protest against rococo artifice

is expressed in a style bedecked in ormolu'.[81]

Margaret Stetz is one critic who argues that 'Prince Alberic' is not a parody of

Wilde, but rather an expression of solidarity with him.  Instead of viewing the tale as an

endorsement of Wildean fantasy, though, Stetz interprets Lee's 'passionate defense of

over-the-top Wildean aesthetic writing' and its grounding in *fin-de-siècle* journalistic and

literary discourse as proof of the story's realism:

> It is certainly a fairy tale, though not "pure" at all, in the sense of existing wholly
> in the realm of the fantastic or in relation solely to folk traditions.  Instead, it is a
> tale rich with borrowing from contemporary, late-nineteenth-century sources,
> constructed purposefully to be in dialogue with Wilde's *A House of
> Pomegranates*.[82]

The tale's topicality, however, does not negate the fantasy of the text.  Fantasy as a mode

is partly an expression of a text's level of mimesis, and 'Prince Alberic' is a thoroughly

self-contained world, not only in the sense that it creates its own imaginary world, but

also insofar as its allusions to outside literary texts and figures refer only to the material

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[79] Lee, 'Prince Alberic', p. 290
[80] Lee, 'Prince Alberic', p. 302
[81] Gardner, *The Lesbian Imagination*, p. 21
[82] Stetz, 'The Snake Lady and the Bruised Bodley Head', p. 116

from which Lee's tale is fashioned.  In other words, the tale is so thoroughly infused with

Wilde and Wildean language (and, to a lesser extent, the work of other writers) that

references to the 'real' Wilde do not reflect a connection with an external reality.  In fact,

Stetz has unwittingly recreated this thesis' definition of Decadent fantasy, which is a

fantastical text circumscribed almost entirely by literary discourse.

   Having dispatched the above two counterarguments, one might still argue that

Lee's tale alludes frequently to real historical events and figures and, thus, is not pure

fantasy.  Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham make this same argument: 'In spite of

its fairy tale appearance "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" is full of allusions to

authentic historical and political referents'.[83]  Despite these occasional real-world

intrusions, Lee's tale more often than not assumes a pseudo-historical style in order to

ground her narrative within a specific chronology.  Rather than lending realism to the

story, however, the inclusion of real-world facts and mock-historical language serves to

undermine the authority of realist discourse.  For example, the tale's opening paragraph

prepares the reader for a scholarly historical narrative:

> In the year 1701, the Duchy of Luna became united to the Italian dominions of the
> Holy Roman Empire, owing to the extinction of its famous ducal house in the
> persons of Duke Balthasar Maria and of his grandson Alberic, who should have
> been third of the name.  Under this dry historical fact lies hidden the strange story
> of Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady.[84]

Despite this ostensibly historical exposition, Lee is creating from these 'dry historical

fact[s]' a 'pure fabrication'.[85]  The story's history is 'fictional',[86] as Ruth Robbins argues,

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[83] Maxwell and Pulham, Introduction, *Hauntings*, by Vernon Lee, p. 17
[84] Lee, 'Prince Alberic', p. 289
[85] Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography*, p. 227
[86] Robbins, 'Vernon Lee: Decadent Woman?', p. 153

and so the date of the Duchy's demise is 'necessarily an apocryphal construct'.[87]  In the

vein of her acknowledged mentor, Pater, Lee designs elaborate fictions in the style of

scholarly histories.  This gesture underscores all the more forcefully the constructedness

of reality and the artificiality of language.  In this context, references to real persons and

events, of which there are several, do not lend authenticity to Lee's tale; rather, they serve

to distort the boundary between fact and fiction.[88]

More frequently than she refers to historical, political, or ecclesiastical figures,

however, Lee alludes to other artists and literary works.  Like Wilde, she marshals her

voracious reading habits to weave a dense fabric of allusion to literature and visual art,

emphasizing the tale's place within a larger creative tradition.  Poets and authors to which

Lee refers include: the painter Charles Le Brun (1619–1690), poet Matteo Maria Boiardo

(c. 1434–1494), sculptor Benvenuto Cellini (1500–1571), and poet Torquato Tasso

(1544–1595), among many others.  Oriana herself is a composite of numerous literary

sources:

> In her early reading Vernon Lee had encountered numerous enchanted snake
> ladies, from the classical Medusa to Coleridge's Christabel and Keat's Lamia.  But
> for the innocent and benevolent snake her closest source was probably
> Hoffmann.[89]

Colby specifically identifies Hoffmann's Serpentina from 'Der goldene Topf' (1814) as a

model for Lee's Snake Lady.  Even many of the 'historical' figures Lee has included in

her tale are often alluded to for their own literary endeavors.  For instance, Turpin, the

Archbishop of Rheims was the author of an 'influential history of Charlemagne and the

Frankish chief Orlando', which Maxwell and Pulham describe as 'somewhat fantastic' and

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[87] Robbins, 'Vernon Lee: Decadent Woman?', p. 153
[88] For example, Turpin, Archbishop of Rheims (d. 800).  Maxwell and Pulham have identified many of
Lee's allusions in the footnotes to their Broadview edition of *Hauntings*.
[89] Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography*, p. 230

as helping to 'inspire the great mediaeval and Renaissance romances' about the two leaders.[90]  All of Lee's 'stylized historical references',[91] then, appear to serve in the creation of a specific literary style and to set her tale in dialogue with the literary tradition appropriate to that style and with contemporary literary debate.

More than Lee's allusive literary style, the narrative of 'Prince Alberic' affirms a reading of the fairy tale as pure fantasy.  A seemingly historical frame encloses the fantastical story of Alberic's maturation, which one might read as a privileging of the 'real over the fictive',[92] but the first half of that frame, the exposition, has already been revealed to be an invention.  Moreover, the central fantasy, the story of the tapestry, residually persists in the story's ending in the form of literal pieces of the tapestry refashioned into the fabric of 'certain chairs and curtains'[93] in the Red Palace's porter's lodge.  In spite of its persistence, the tapestry's fantasy world exists in a semi-defeated state by the story's end, having suffered through the literal death of Oriana, at the hands of the Duke's counselors, and the seemingly self-inflicted death of Alberic.  The tale, however, encourages the reader to view the tapestry world as 'more valuable than the forces which defeat it'.[94]  In the end, the fantasy to which Alberic clings is both endorsed by the moral sympathy with Alberic engendered by the text and is revealed to be a victory over the crude economic materialism of the Duke.

The fairy tale's central fantasy also preempts any allegorical reading of the tale. The tapestry collapses the distance between its surface and external reality.  Alberic

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[90] Maxwell and Pulham, *Hauntings*, by Vernon Lee, p. 184n
[91] Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual* (Athens: Ohio UP, 2003), p. 153
[92] Robbins, 'Vernon Lee: Decadent Woman?', p. 154
[93] Lee, 'Prince Alberic', p. 344
[94] Robbins, 'Vernon Lee: Decadent Woman?', p. 156

experiences this collapse himself in a moment of hesitation that Todorov might identify with the fantastic.  After being exiled to the Castle of Sparkling Waters, the prince asks himself: 'had the tapestry been removed to this spot, and become a reality in which he himself was running about?'.[95]  This hesitation is soon resolved as Alberic develops the 'growing sense [. . .] that the tapestry had become the whole world'.[96]  The confusion between the tapestry and the real world begins even earlier for Alberic, starting with his childhood confinement to the Red Palace and its gardens.  Without direct access to the outside world, Alberic is 'usually satisfied with seeing the plants and animals in the tapestry, and look[s] forward to seeing the real things when he should be grown up'.[97]  Even those phenomena which Alberic can experience from the palace—the vistas visible from the palace, for instance—he first experiences within the tapestry: '[t]here were mountains, and the sea with ships; and these first made him care to go on to the topmost palace terrace and look at the real mountains and the sea beyond the roofs and gardens'.[98]  Alberic is most fascinated with the rabbits in the tapestry.  He desires a 'live rabbit of [his] own',[99] but must settle for an opportunity to see a dead one, which has been brought into the palace.  By the time the prince arrives, however, he is too late; the rabbit has already been skinned.  Alberic is horrified, but less because of the gruesomeness of the skinned rabbit and more because the rabbit does not correspond to those in the tapestry.  The disconnect between signifier and signified is the real source of his horror, suggesting that external reality is that from which one recoils and to which one does not have genuine access.  Alberic is cheered later when he sees rabbits at the Castle of Sparkling

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[95] Lee, 'Prince Alberic', p. 300
[96] Lee, 'Prince Alberic', p. 301
[97] Lee, 'Prince Alberic', p. 291
[98] Lee, 'Prince Alberic', p. 292
[99] Lee, 'Prince Alberic', p. 292

Waters that *do* correspond to those in the tapestry.  In many ways, external reality does

not exist for Alberic unless he has experienced it within the tapestry first, an

epistemological stance reminiscent of Wilde's claim that nature is always experienced

through aesthetically determined sensibilities.[100]  In an allegorical reading of 'Prince

Alberic', the 'real' world of the Castle of Sparkling Waters would efface the signifying

tapestry world.  Instead, the opposite happens: the tapestry becomes an autonomous sign

divorced from 'reality', reasserting the story's literal interpretation over its metaphorical

one.  Even a reading of the tale that interprets the Duke and his counselors' attack on

Alberic's dream-world as a violent reassertion of external reality is subject to the

counterargument that the tapestry's fantastical world persists, if only in the form of chair

cushions and curtains.

One final way in which Lee's tale ensures its fantastical interpretation is in its

construction of the characters' identities.  The Duke has already been shown largely to be

a caricature of Wilde and a composite of Wildean poses.  His reality is a literary reality

only.  The Duke's counselors, too, are largely stock characters and conflations of different

models taken from Wilde's 'The Birthday of the Infanta', which are themselves

conflations of historical and literary characters.  For example, the Dwarf in 'Prince

Alberic' plans to tell the King, should Alberic die prematurely, that he has killed the

prince with poison (henbane) 'taken through a pair of perfumed gloves'.[101]  This method

evokes Catherine de'Medici's rumored murder of Jeanne d'Albret,[102] but the Dwarf

himself  (who 'preferred to appear active in favour of the King of Spain'[103]) recalls the

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[100] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p. 40
[101] Lee, 'Prince Alberic', p. 305
[102] A story retold in *La Reine Margot* (1845) by Alexandre Dumas, père.
[103] Lee, 'Prince Alberic', p. 305

Dwarf from 'The Birthday of the Infanta', in which Don Pedro of Aragon has allegedly

killed the Queen with a 'pair of poisoned gloves'.[104]  Lee's use of the poisoned-gloves

legend might be a direct reference to Catherine de'Medici, but her demonstrated

engagement with Wilde's fairy tales elsewhere in 'Prince Alberic' suggests that, at least in

part, she intends her allusion to Wilde's tale.  Like the Duke and his counselors, Oriana

has also been shown to be a composite of literary precursors, although Lee expands the

Snake Lady's characterization by portraying her as a benevolent being.  Lee's positive

reading of her Lamia character might work to counteract 'unrealistic' depictions of strong

women (specifically New Women) as 'bisexual, masculinized, cradle-robbing

creature[s]',[105] the common representation of lamiae in classical mythology, but Oriana is

undoubtedly a supernatural creature without a fixed identity, literally changing between

the shape of a woman and of a snake.  Lee amplifies Oriana's ambiguous identity by

drawing attention to her androgynous constitution, emphasizing, in Robbins' words, 'this

aberrant depiction of woman and phallus conflated'.[106]  The Snake Lady's hermaphroditic

quality serves as a parallel to Prince Alberic's own androgynous nature.  Lee describes

the prince's figure as 'at once manly and delicate, and full of grace and vigour of

movement'.[107]  Because fairy tales often serve as instruments of childhood socialization,

frequently meant to reinforce gender and sexual norms, the prince's androgyny is all the

more suggestive.  Alberic is the story's imagined child and his socialization is central to

the tale's anticipated didactic purpose.  The fact that his identity is construed as a fluid

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[104] Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta', in *A House of Pomegranates* (London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1891) pp. 27–61, 32.  Wilde conflates historical and literary figures, purposefully confusing Don Pedro of Aragon (himself a character in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*) with Catherine of Aragon, and, consequently, with Catherine de'Medici.

[105] Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), p. 309

[106] Robbins, 'Vernon Lee: Decadent Woman?', p. 156

[107] Lee, 'Prince Alberic', p. 307

balance between feminine and masculine impulses, then, underscores his anti-naturalistic characterization.

Another fairy tale that engages intertextually with Wilde's work and that appears during the time of his imprisonment is Beerbohm's 'The Happy Hypocrite'.  Beerbohm's tale is set in the time of the Regency, a historical specificity (as in Lee's fairy tale) that belies the tale's overwhelmingly fantastical quality and augments its challenge to realism and linguistic representation by ironically undercutting its textual authority.  The story centers on the figure of Lord George Hell, a depraved nobleman whose infatuation with the young and sweet-natured stage performer, Jenny Mere, prompts him to wear the literal mask of a saint, both to hide his own sin-wrecked face and to fulfill Jenny's requirement that she marry only '[t]hat man, whose face is wonderful as are the faces of the saints'.[108]  Having renounced his wealth and his formerly wicked life, Lord George moves to a country cottage with Jenny, but a jilted former lover, La Gambogi, finds him and tears off his mask to expose his true identity.  To his own surprise, Lord George's face itself has become like a saint's, conforming to the mask, and Jenny is all the more in love with him as a result.

The tale is a parody of Wilde, 'lampoon[ing] *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Wilde's fascination with masks, in the manner of a Wildean fairy tale'.[109]  Lawrence Danson is more explicit about the specifics of Beerbohm's lampooning: the fairy tale 'uses Wilde to parody Wilde: the style of the wry, sentimental-sophisticated fairy tales of

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[108] Beerbohm, 'The Happy Hypocrite', p. 19
[109] Angela Kingston, *Oscar Wilde as a Character in Victorian Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. 118

*The Happy Prince* undercuts the matter of *Dorian Gray*'.[110]  Wilde himself recognized

the relationship between his novel and Beerbohm's tale, writing to Beerbohm that '[t]he

implied and accepted recognition of *Dorian Gray* in the story cheers me'.[111]  Beerbohm

was well-suited to the task of parodying Wilde, having a 'natural susceptibility to the

idiosyncrasies of his thought and style, and a sympathetic understanding of his

personality'.[112]  There are, however, important differences between the two works.

Whereas Dorian's 'mask' (the eternally youthful face for which he wished) is eroded by

his immorality in Wilde's novel, Beerbohm's fairy tale inverts the relationship and makes

the mask an agent for good.[113]  Furthermore, Beerbohm uses much more of Wilde's

*oeuvre* in his parody, mimicking not only the fairy tales and *Dorian Gray*, but also the

plays, especially *The Importance of Being Earnest*.  In essence, Beerbohm achieves for

his fairy tale a level of fantasy and artificiality that surpasses even Wilde's work.  Like

Wilde, Beerbohm fashions his fairy tale out of pre-existing literature.  Unlike Wilde,

however, Beerbohm's fairy-tale world is smaller and more self-contained, relying heavily

on Wilde's works for its style and content and foregoing the fairy tale's normally timeless

setting for one that is located in the nineteenth century—both its literal setting in the

Regency period and the *fin-de-siècle* setting evoked by allusions to contemporary literary

and cultural concerns and a by stereotypically nineteenth-century paratextual apparatus

(namely, his footnotes).

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[110] Danson, *Max Beerbohm and the Act of Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), p. 79.  John Felstiner identifies yet another source for Beerbohm's tale: 'A close model for this tale existed in Wilde's parable (circulated but not published) about a wicked, ugly girl who buys a mask for a dance, charms a young man, takes off the mask and is beautiful' (Felstiner, *The Lies of Art: Max Beerbohm's Parody and Caricature* [New York: Knopf, 1972], p. 50).

[111] Wilde, Letter to Max Beerbohm (c. 28 May 1897), in *Complete Letters*, pp. 856–857, 856

[112] J. G. Riewald, 'Max Beerbohm and Oscar Wilde', *The Surprise of Excellence: Modern Essays on Max Beerbohm*, ed. by J. G. Riewald (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1974), pp. 47–64, 48

[113] Although, as Beerbohm told S. N. Behrman, 'Lord George lived *up* to the mask' (Behrman, *Conversation with Max* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1960), p. 248

'The Happy Hypocrite' also differs from Wilde's work insofar as it theorizes

identity within the text as completely a matter of surface.  For example, Wilde constructs

a performative identity in his fiction and essays, but he also posits in 'The Decay of

Lying' an essentialist, albeit undifferentiated, human nature:

> It is a humiliating confession, but we are all of us made out of the same stuff [. . .]
> Where we differ from each other is purely in accidentals: in dress, manner, tone
> of voice, religious opinions, personal appearance, tricks of habit, and the like [. . .]
> Sooner or later one comes to that dreadful universal thing called human nature.[114]

Even *Dorian Gray*, which focuses so explicitly on issues of surface and depth, hinges on

a kind of dualism between Dorian's body and soul.  'The Happy Hypocrite', however, is

so thoroughly fantastical that it denies, as least implicitly, any depth of characterization.

Christopher Lane perceives the same difference between Wilde's work and 'The Happy

Hypocrite': Wilde 'demonstrated that identity is a performance that the subject can alter

and revise according to its will';[115] in Beerbohm's fairy tale, on the other hand, 'George's

mask [. . .] rescinds all links between personality and psychic depth'.[116]  In fact,

Beerbohm not only denies a link between surface and depth, but he also empties his

characters of any depth at all, so that the link between the two becomes immaterial.  The

young king in Wilde's tale transforms in response to external stimuli, but also according

to his own will.  Beerbohm's characters, however, are simply players in a drama of

interactive masks, acting and being acted upon without regard to any autonomous subject.

The characters' lack of depth in 'The Happy Hypocrite' is perhaps best

exemplified by their lack of free will.  This determinism is embodied by the figure of the

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[114] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', pp. 14–15
[115] Christopher Lane, 'Framing Fear, Reading Designs: The Homosexual Art of Painting in James, Wilde, and Beerbohm', *English Literary History* 61 (Winter 1994), pp. 923-954, 950
[116] Lane, 'Framing Fear', p. 948

Merry Dwarf, who is revealed to be Sagittarius or Cupid.[117] Upon his first appearance in the story, the Dwarf is performing at the same theater as Jenny Mere. His act consists of his performing 'antics' and singing 'a pretty song about lovers',[118] in addition to a demonstration of his archery skills. By means of his love song, or at least by way of contrast between his ostentatious act and Jenny's sympathetic one, the Dwarf might appear to prepare Lord George for Jenny's follow-up performance and Lord George's subsequent infatuation. The Dwarf's performance might, in this reading, parallel the art that the young king studies, engendering his transformation. One might also connect the Dwarf's or Jenny's performance with Sybil Vane's performance in *Dorian Gray*. Sybil's initial performances inspire Dorian's affection, but Jenny's performance is poor: 'She was very young and did not dance very well'.[119] Sybil's acting suffers only after she has fallen in love with Dorian, but Jenny is never an adept performer. What makes Lord George fall in love with her, then, is not her skill as an artist but an arrow from the Dwarf's bow: 'Of a sudden, something shot sharp into [Lord George's] heart. In pain he sprang to his feet and, as he turned, he seemed to see a winged and laughing child, in whose hand was a bow'.[120] This description of the Dwarf emphasizes his resemblance to Cupid, making his arrow the indisputable agent of Lord George's infatuation.

The other characters' behavior is similarly determined by external forces. For instance, Jenny Mere explicitly proclaims that she can only give her love freely: 'my love [. . .] is my own, nor can it be ever torn from me, but given, as true love must needs be

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[117] Lord George shouts '*Bravo Saggitaro!*' after the Dwarf's performance (p. 15), but Beerbohm's drawing *The Yellow Dwarf*, which immediately precedes 'The Happy Hypocrite' in *The Yellow Book* (p. [7]), does not depict a centaur, nor does it depict a putto, although the Dwarf more closely resembles Cupid than Sagittarius. In either case, the Dwarf performs the role of both Sagittarius and Cupid in Beerbohm's tale.
[118] Beerbohm, 'The Happy Hypocrite', p. 15
[119] Beerbohm, 'The Happy Hypocrite', p. 17
[120] Beerbohm, 'The Happy Hypocrite', p. 17

given, freely'.[121]  Her actions, however, are already limited by her language.  She asserts

that she can marry only '[t]hat man'[122] who has a saintly face.  Instead of using the

indefinite article—'*a*' man—she reveals that the decision to give her heart away is not her

own: she is limited to that specific man whose face is saintly.  Moreover, her language

exposes this fairy-tale world as one solely of surface and appearance.  She insists on a

saint's *face*, rather than on a saint, and argues that Lord George's face '*mirrors* [. . .] true

love [my emphasis]',[123] but is a 'tarnished mirror'.[124]  For Jenny, the economy of love is

conducted purely as a matter of surface appearances.  Even Jenny's own face, as La

Gambogi declares to Lord George later in the tale, is merely a façade: 'Your wife's mask

[. . .] is even better than yours'.[125]  This level of close analysis, however, is unnecessary

because Jenny's acceptance of Lord George's proposal of marriage is enacted by another

of the Dwarf's arrows: 'Suddenly there perched astride the bough of a tree, at her side,

that winged and laughing child, in whose hand was a bow.  Before Lord George could

warn her, an arrow had flashed down and vanished in her heart, and Cupid had flown

away'.[126]  Like Lord George, Jenny does not possess free will.  Nor does La Gambogi,

who appears to have earlier been the victim of another of the Dwarf's arrows.  The Dwarf

admits meeting La Gambogi 'many years ago',[127] which suggests that his arrow was

responsible for her infatuation with Lord George.  Additionally, La Gambogi's 'dark,

Italian nature, her passion of revenge',[128] implies that her behavior is more fated by the

scripts of Italian operas and *commedia dell'arte* than by her own desires.  None of the

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[121] Beerbohm, 'The Happy Hypocrite', p. 19
[122] Beerbohm, 'The Happy Hypocrite', p. 19
[123] Beerbohm, 'The Happy Hypocrite', p. 19
[124] Beerbohm, 'The Happy Hypocrite', p. 19
[125] Beerbohm, 'The Happy Hypocrite', p. 42
[126] Beerbohm, 'The Happy Hypocrite', p. 30
[127] Beerbohm, 'The Happy Hypocrite', p. 16
[128] Beerbohm, 'The Happy Hypocrite', p. 28

characters seems, then, to possess more than a two-dimensionality.  They are proper

characters for fantasy, resistant to allegorical interpretation because allegory implies a

double-meaning in which the real-world antecedents efface the literary signifiers.  In

Beerbohm's tale, the characters are signifiers only.

The fact that the characters are unsuitable as allegorical signifiers because they do

not correspond to 'real' people or events also renders any reading of the tale as a religious

allegory meaningless.  Beerbohm misleadingly employs the narrative structure of biblical

fable and religious conversion.  The wicked Lord George Hell renounces temptation and

seeks an Eden (the country cottage) from which he must cast out the serpent (La

Gambogi),[129] but this parabolic structure is more a literary device than a religious story

with serious moral intent.  For instance, Lord George Hell's rechristening as George

Heaven is an empty conversion, a trading of one mask for another: 'George Hell was

dead, and his name had died with him.  So he dipped a pen in the ink and wrote "George

Heaven", *for want of a better name* [emphasis mine]'.[130]  The conversion from Hell to

Heaven is rendered casual here rather than causal; Heaven would be Lord George's

logical choice, but he denies its appositeness.  Beerbohm selects the names Heaven and

Hell, however, because they are echoes from *Dorian Gray*, in which Dorian exclaims:

'Each of us has Heaven and Hell in him'.[131]  The names, then, are part of the parody and

not signs of real conversion.  Furthermore, as Robert Viscusi argues, Lord George might

be a sign of Beerbohm's borrowing of narrative tropes from Dante: 'Beerbohm stuffs the

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[129] Lord George dismisses La Gambogi at the end of the tale: 'Serpent [. . .] crawl from our Eden' (p. 42).
[130] Beerbohm, 'The Happy Hypocrite', p. 35
[131] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* 46 (July 1890), pp. 1–100, 83;
*The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Ward, Lock, and Co., 1891), p. 234

Inferno into Lord George's ample vest'.[132]  If Beerbohm borrows from Dante, though, he

does so by emptying that framework of its moral seriousness.  The mock-heroic language

of the 'Eucharistic' eating of buns make this clear:

> Yes! he [Lord George], the famous toper and *gourmet* of St. James's, relished this
> homely fare, as it passed through the insensible lips of his mask to his palate.  He
> seemed to rise, from the consumption of his bun, a better man.[133]

This scene alludes to the muffin-eating scence from Wilde's *Earnest*, wherein Wilde

'reduce[s] wickedness to childishness and the sins of his characters to the lust of buns'.[134]

Beerbohm marshals yet another Wildean text, one even less ostensibly moralistic than

*Dorian Gray*, to highlight his own text's linguistic and ontological free-play.  Ultimately,

it is impossible to invest Lord George's conversion with any seriousness because, as in

*Earnest*, his wickedness is only mock evil in the first place.  Beerbohm assures the reader

that 'none [. . .] was half so wicked as Lord George Hell',[135] but he is largely guilty only

of 'playing at games' past bed-time, eating and drinking 'far more than was good for him',

and possessing a 'fondness for fine clothes'.[136]  This sort of naughtiness is, in James

Kincaid's phrase, 'goodness with a wink'.[137]  Beerbohm emphatically demonstrates that

'The Happy Hypocrite' is a work of fantasy, free from the danger of any realist or

allegorical reading.  The real sin of exploitation revealed to the young king in Wilde's tale

is absent from this tale.

Beerbohm's fairy tale is thoroughly a work of self-conscious fiction and fantasy,

and he makes this most clear by stressing that story's plot is controlled by the artist.  In

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[132] Robert Viscusi, *Max Beerbohm, or The Dandy Dante: Rereading with Mirrors* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1986), p. 81
[133] Beerbohm, 'The Happy Hypocrite', p. 35
[134] Danson, *Max Beerbohm and the Act of Writing*, p. 81
[135] Beerbohm, 'The Happy Hypocrite', p. 11
[136] Beerbohm, 'The Happy Hypocrite', p. 11
[137] James R. Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 247

the broadest sense, this artist is Beerbohm himself, but, within the context of the play, he

is Mr. Aeneas, the mask maker, whose status as an artist is underscored repeatedly.  He

is, for instance, called a 'great artist [. . .] patronised by several crowned heads and not a

few of the nobility'.[138]  It is Mr. Aeneas' mask that enables the plot and facilitates the

tale's 'moral'.  Like *Zuleika Dobson*, 'The Happy Hypocrite' takes a fate-controlled model

of human relations similar to that of *The Iliad* (a connection suggested by Mr. Aeneas'

name).  The tale's other characters are simply actors in Beerbohm's drama.  The Dwarf is

a performer who is described at one point a 'homuncle',[139] which, in one sense of the

word, is an artificially made dwarf.[140]  The Dwarf, then, is himself a creation.  The story's

central character, Lord George, is also a performer, an actor, which is indicated by the

fairy tale's title.  A 'hypocrite' in the modern sense is one 'who falsely professes to be

virtuously or religiously inclined',[141] but the fairy tale's *dénouement*, in which Lord

George's face is revealed to be identical to his saintly mask, demonstrates that he is not a

hypocrite in this sense.  In point of fact, Beerbohm stresses that 'never, never did [Lord

George] try to conceal his wrong-doing'.[142]  Instead, the tale reinforces the etymological

meaning of 'hypocrite' as 'an actor on the stage'.[143]

By crafting an intertextual fairy tale out of the same literary material he parodies,

by negating allegorical readings and emphasizing his characters' status as literary and

linguistic signs, Beerbohm demonstrates that fantasy is the apposite mode for literary

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[138] Beerbohm, 'The Happy Hypocrite', p. 21
[139] Beerbohm, 'The Happy Hypocrite', p. 15
[140] The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites one example of this usage from Henry More's *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus, or a Discourse of the Nature, Causes, Kinds, and Cure of Enthusiasme* (1656): 'there is an artificiall way of making an Homunculus, and that the Fairies of the woods, Nymphs and Giants themselves had some such originall' (*OED* on-line [accessed 15 July 2010]).
[141] *OED* on-line [accessed 15 July 2010]
[142] Beerbohm, 'The Happy Hypocrite', p. 11
[143] *OED* on-line [accessed 15 July 2010]

Decadence.  Read as a history of one Decadent genre, the development from Wilde's

fairy tales to Lee's and Beebohm's distills the essence of Decadent fantasy, revealing that

Decadent authors increasingly adopt anti-mimetic modes as a product of their self-

referential literariness and their understanding of language as an autonomous construct.

# Conclusion

This thesis began with an observation about the prevalence of fantasy in the works of British and Irish Decadent writers and visual artists. That observation relied on an established, yet occasionally contested, canon of Decadent literary and artistic texts. Having offered close readings of prose, visual, and dramatic works, this thesis has justified the inclusion of these particular texts in the canon of British and Irish Decadence, but it has also reinterpreted the definition of Decadence and mapped out an understanding of Decadent production that expands and clarifies existing critical analysis. In particular, it has defined Decadence as a mode of aesthetic expression characterized by a fantastical, anti-mimetic impulse that assumes the autonomy and non-signification of language. The Decadent mode is further defined by a self-aware appropriation of literary and artistic history, and it employs techniques such as parody and pastiche, in which literature and art are themselves often the subjects, so that Decadent writing and illustration become meta-commentaries on aesthetic production.

Moreover, Decadent texts achieve ever-greater levels of self-consciousness and artificiality by re-working the content of already highly artificial forms of expression, including the work of French Decadents and British Aesthetes. The purposeful appropriation of its own literary precursors constitutes, not only the effort by British and Irish Decadents to fabricate their own texts using perpetually refined and 'artificial' material, but also a contravention of traditional means of aesthetic production. The acts of reading, 'illustrating', performing, writing, and composing are recast in Decadent texts in ways that confuse the previously established boundaries between each practice. For example, Beardsley, Ricketts, and Beerbohm use their illustrations to illuminate their

accompanying texts, but their drawings also offer new interpretations of those works, expanding, undermining, ignoring, or otherwise re-interpreting the written texts.  In various texts, such as Dowson's 'Apple Blossom in Brittany', *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and Lee's 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady', the reading of other texts becomes a primary vehicle of composition for both authors and characters.  The breaking down of barriers between these practices also engenders a deconstruction of the boundaries between specific art forms, turning Beardsley's illustrations, for example, into literary texts that demand to be 'read' through their narrational, typographical, and iconographic assertions of meaning.

In general, Decadent texts have adopted fantasy as a method of demonstrating the autonomy of language, and fantasy's fluidity and ambiguity facilitate an interrogation of identity and 'reality'.  Fantasy and 'the fantastic' directly confront what is constituted as the 'real world' in various aesthetic, scientific, psychological, and sociological discourses, and calls into question human beings' ability to access the real world through language. Moreover, Wilde and other Decadents employ fantasy in order to assert, not only the non-signification of language, but also the generative power of artistic endeavor, a power they attribute to the fact that all experience is mediated through sensory data, itself shaped by aesthetic experience and expressed in language.  Freed from any need (or ability) to reflect reality, Decadent writers and artists created a mode of expression that celebrated the autonomy of language.  From the inclusion of explicitly fantastical or supernatural literary devices to the use, on a syntactical and grammatical level, of devices such as catachresis and tautology, Decadent texts announce their unwillingness and inability to

signify beyond their own aesthetic discourses or to adhere to prescriptions for 'organic' composition.

In each chapter following the introduction, the thesis has offered close readings of individual texts and examined the relationship between Decadence and specific genres, which served as loci for various aesthetic debates about art and life, surface and depth, identity and performance, among other topics.  In each of these different genres, and specifically through a self-conscious interaction with genre, Decadent writers and artists developed a highly artificial language that deploys fantasy in order to exploit for literary gain the understanding of language as an autonomous system of signs.  Undergirded by their theorization of language as inorganic and anti-mimetic, British and Irish Decadent writers and artists further explored the construction of identity within these genres, opening up alternative readings of character by analyzing it within the framework of fantastical structures.  Genres such as the novel and the fairy tale served explicitly as contested sites of socialization, moral proselytizing, and identity formation, and Decadent writers and artists used these genres to dispute what they conceived as being fixed and misleading constructions of 'reality'.

As the thesis has shown throughout each chapter, the writers and artists discussed herein employed aesthetic strategies that responded to the various formal properties of each genre and exploited these properties for their own ends.  The discussion of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Zuleika Dobson* in chapter one, for example, interpreted each text as a challenge to the nineteenth-century association, especially in France, between the novel genre and realism and Naturalism.  In particular, *Dorian Gray* uses the novel's multi-vocal structure to invoke various genres, sub-genres, and literary methods,

ultimately undercutting those ostensibly mimetic categories of expression—such as
nature writing—and revealing the artificiality and constructedness of all literary modes.
Moreover, *Dorian Gray* analyzes the construction of gender and identity more generally
through its lens of autonomous language and configures each as being constituted by
various literary and artistic depictions, implying that identity is a malleable and
ambiguous concept.  This chapter similarly demonstrates that *Zuleika Dobson* is a
purposeful and fantastical amalgamation of various literary voices and structures
fabricated to emphasize the novel's design as an autonomous literary and artistic exercise.

      Chapter two has argued that textual illustration was the dominant genre of British
and Irish Decadent visual art and that Beardsley's aesthetic practice, in particular, most
visibly represented Decadent illustrational practice to the late-Victorian public.  This
artistic approach, largely shared by Beerbohm and Ricketts, is defined by its
renegotiation of the relationship between word and image.  These illustrators' 'flirtatious'
approach to the written text serves to elevate illustration as an equal partner in textual
authorship and to reveal the ambiguous border between the practices of illustration and
writing.  All three illustrators parody the written text, translate it into the language of
their visual medium, and add to its narrative content.  Decadent illustration explicitly
thematizes and interrogates the relationship between author and illustrator (even when
they are the same person, as is in *Zuleika Dobson* and *Under the Hill*).  Fantasy assists
Decadent illustrators by making explicit their resistance to static and 'realistic' figuration
and to faithful interpretations of written texts.  Fantasy further aids Decadent illustrators
by implying a freedom in the choice of illustrational strategies and demanding an anti-
mimetic thrust that encourages digression from the established text.  Beardsley's

illustrations for his novel *Under the Hill* have offered one example of a Decadent

illustrational method in which Beardsley's drawings chart narrative pathways

unanticipated by the novel's prose, making the illustrations essential elements in the

storytelling enterprise.  Beerbohm's illustrations for *Zuleika Dobson* have presented

another example of Decadent illustration in which his drawings shift between faithful and

impressionistic representation, antagonizing the written narrative by sometimes

emphasizing digressive or trivial narrative moments and by establishing a dialogical

relationship between image and text.  Lastly, the thesis has shown that Ricketts'

illustration for Wilde's prose poem 'The Disciple' enacts a fervent rebuttal to Wilde's

devaluing of illustration's expressive power.  In challenging Wilde, Ricketts utilizes the

avant-garde strategies of impressionistic and parodic illustration, while also replicating

the expressive power on display in Wilde's oral tale.  As in Beerbohm's and Beardsley's

illustrations, Ricketts' drawing offers a self-conscious exploration of illustration and

narrative meaning, defies authorial intent, but also expands the definition of illustration

by embodying the same level of elasticity, mobility, and autonomy as Wilde's prose

poem.

Chapter three has explored four authors' use of the Decadent mode within the

short-story genre, which, like the novel, had come to represent a literary category

germane to realism and Naturalism.  All four texts discussed in this chapter, Dowson's

'Apple Blossom in Brittany', Wilde's 'Lady Alroy', Beerbohm's 'Enoch Soames', and Lee's

'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers', are self-conscious interactions with specific literary

precursors and movements that transcribe the act of reading into a method of literary

composition.  Furthermore, these transcriptions re-emphasize the literariness of these

narratives by revealing them to be constructed from, and in dialogue with, other literary

texts. Dowson's story re-works Balzac's *Ursule Mirouët* and comments on Ruskin's

interpretations of Carpaccio's *The Dream of St Ursula*, incorporating commentary on and

allusions to diverse texts into a narrative on aesthetic experience and the act of reading.

Dowson's story also highlights the anti-mimetic aspects of Balzac's fiction, and, in so

doing, reinterprets the realist tradition as non-representational. Wilde's story directly

parodies the conventions of sensation fiction, particularly as embodied by Braddon's

*Lady Audley's Secret*, and encourages reading practices that do not look for meaning

outside of the text. At the same time, Wilde constructs a story that is itself a highly

artificial exercise that utilizes other literature as its subject and content. Beerbohm's story

is a self-aware lampooning of Decadent tropes that employs those same tropes and the

Decadent mode of writing in general to implicate itself in its own critique, fashioning a

world of language and literary practices from which there is no escape. Beerbohm's

presence in the story only serves to underscore his purposeful textual entanglement.

Lastly, Lee's story is a self-conscious reworking of literary tradition that enlists a dense,

artificial, and allusive language, along with explicitly fantastical modes and perspectives,

to create a thoroughly Decadent story.

Chapter four has attempted to develop a theory of Decadent drama focused on

close analyses of two written dramatic texts. The chapter elaborates on six primary

challenges to the development of such a theory, but it ultimately offers Wilde's *Salomé*

and *The Importance of Being Earnest* as two potential examples of Decadent drama.

Although these are very dissimilar plays with radically different performance histories,

they are both united by their use of fantasy and the Decadent mode, characterized in these

plays as an emphasis on speech and material props as purely literary devices.  As the

chapter has shown, characters in *Earnest* continually and self-consciously refer to the

artificiality of their speech, gestures, and environments.  Furthermore, the performative

and textual nature of identity constitutes both the play's theme and the essence of its

characters' interactions.  Lastly, the play builds on and refines a tradition of farce, taking

as its raw material the content and structure of other plays.  *Salomé* also continually

underscores the artificiality and anti-mimetic quality of its speech, both through its

characters' highly unnatural speech, derived from Maeterlinck's plays and the language of

the King James Bible (among other sources), and through the self-referentiality of that

speech, which repeatedly fails to signify beyond the scope of the play itself, and which

collapses the distance between language and action, further divorcing even the material

objects (bodies) in the play to linguistic utterances.

Chapter five has investigated Decadent uses of the fairy tale as a genre in which

questions of authenticity, identity, truth, and reality can be fruitfully explored.  The fairy

tale is a genre that in the nineteenth century increasingly took childhood socialization as

an explicit theme and motive and had, furthermore, come to be defined by the use of

supernatural or other anti-mimetic devices.  Wilde's 'The Young King' transforms what is

ostensibly a religious parable into a dense, inter-textual, and highly artificial narrative

that precludes interpretations of the young king's identity as fixed and natural.  Lee's

'Prince Alberic' self-consciously responds to Wilde's fairy tales, including 'The Young

King', creating a highly allusive text that imitates and critiques Wilde, among other

writers, deploys a dense, artificial language, and explores thematically the same

conflation of life and art played out in the tale's inter-textual dialogue.  Lastly,

Beerbohm's 'The Happy Hypocrite' parodies and inverts Wilde's *Dorian Gray* and other

Wildean texts, while also unabashedly collapsing all distance between the literary and

'the real'.  The tale's dénouement, which reveals Lord George's mask and his face to be

the same, dramatizes the same conflation of signifier and signified that the text's language

demonstrates throughout.  Beerbohm's tale summarily renders immaterial questions about

surface and depth, authenticity and performance, reinforcing the Decadent understanding

of identity as constructed.  All three fairy tales utilize the same Decadent mode present

throughout the texts in each genre here described, emphasizing, once again, that the

Decadent mode can inhabit multiple genres and undercut mimetic representations

engendered by those same genres—either through an explicit utilization of fantasy or

through a revealing of the text's language as derived almost entirely from pre-existing

aesthetic discourse.

As this study has suggested throughout, the readings provided herein insinuate

other avenues for further scholarly inquiry, both into the Decadent milieu covered in this

thesis and into subsequent aesthetic movements whose connection with British and Irish

Decadence has been little explored.  In general, this thesis fills an important gap in the

study of fantasy between mid-Victorian fantasists such as Lewis Carroll and George

MacDonald and twentieth-century fantasy authors such as Tolkien and C. S. Lewis.  This

gap is apparent, for example, in a work such as William Gray's *Fantasy, Myth and the*

*Measure of Truth* (2010),[1] which admittedly focuses on the mythopoeic tradition, but

which gives little attention to the influential coterie of Decadent fantasists.  The thesis has

also attempted to point the reader in the direction of more obscure Decadent texts, such as

those by John Gray and Laurence Houseman, and the insights offered here could be

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[1] Gray, *Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010)

expanded further into the works of writers such as 'Michael Field', Frederick Rolfe, Eric

Stenbock, Arthur Machen, M. P. Shiel, and others.  Twentieth-century inheritors of the

Decadent tradition such as Sidney Sime, Kay Nielson, and Harry Clarke would also

benefit from greater contextualization with their Decadent precursors.  Some of this

activity has already begun to take place with the exhibition of fantasy illustration at

Dulwich Picture Gallery and the subsequently published catalogue titled *The Age of*

*Enchantment*,[2] which explores the use of fantasy by Beardsley and those illustrators who

were influenced by him.  The Decadent afterlives have been numerous,[3] and a renewed

focus on fantasy, specifically as theorized by Decadent writers and artists, will provide

new perspectives on these works of art and literature.  Literary Decadence's influence has

reached beyond individual and idiosyncratic writers and artists, and the connections

among Decadence, Modernism, and Postmodernism, for example, although explored to

some extent, could benefit from a more extensive fleshing out and a grounding in the

debate between fantasy and realism in which Decadent writers so actively engaged.

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[2] See Rodney Engen, *The Age of Enchantment: Beardsley, Dulac and their Contemporaries 1890–1930* (London: Scala and Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2007)
[3] See, for example, Robert Kiely, *Reverse Tradition: Postmodern Fictions and the Nineteenth Century Novel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993), and Dianne F. Sadoff and John Kucich, *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000)

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