

# Self-salvation and Self-destruction of the Madwoman: A Psychoanalytic Study of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*

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**Abstract:** Oscar Wilde's *Salome* achieves the acme of aestheticism with its shocking tragedy. The role of *Salome* itself, as a triple symbol of "lust, sin and purity", has become a thought-provoking symbol in literature, music, painting and other fields, all affecting the heartstrings of future recipients. This article will utilize the research method of psychoanalysis to figure out how *Salome*, like a madwoman, breaks free from the cage with spiritual force and falls into the predicament of subjectivity from three aspects: *Salome*'s personality structure, moon prototype and color image. In this process, the richer connotation of aestheticism also surfaced.

## 1. Introduction

Oscar Wilde is the representative of British Aestheticism. His aesthetic view of "art for art's sake" as well as his profound attainments in literary creation have exerted a far-reaching impact on future generations. As the only tragedy created by Wilde, *Salome* contains complex contradictions, numerous crazy discourse and dazzling symbolic images, suffused with an uncanny and ghastly smell of death. These internal complexities are entangled with the defamiliarized irrational speeches, showing an immense artistic tension, which is a rebellion against the traditional aesthetics based on rationalism and moralism.

Ever since the 20th century, psychoanalytic theory has gradually penetrated from the fields of medicine and psychology to literature and art, inspiring so many artists and humanists to sneak into the innermost part of human emotions. It has become a powerful tool for deeply analyzing the motives of characters' behavior and their internal universe, which is of great significance for comprehending artistic works. Nowadays, many scholars in both China and abroad have studied *Salome* from the perspective of psychoanalysis, most of which are based on Freud's classical psychoanalysis. However, classical psychoanalysis has the limitations of focusing too much on the sick part of the characters and their early experiences. In Freudian interpretation, *Salome*'s madness becomes a manifestation of dissociative neurosis, and the unbridled pursuit of Iokanaan is only a suppressed perversion of the Electra complex - *Salome* is reduced to a patient who has no consciousness or options but a person driven by the twisted past and instinct. This may lead to the obscuration of some significant meanings in *Salome*. As the center of the whole play and even a classic female image noted in the whole literary history, protagonist *Salome* possesses not only seductive beauty or pure insanity, she, as a whole, must not be insulated from her thoughts.

The concern about the profound symbolic meaning behind the seemingly crazy behavior in *Salome* can be reinterpreted with the help of Jung's analytical psychology, Lacan's structuralist psychoanalysis and Kohut's self-psychology. To explore *Salome*'s spirituality from the perspective of an individual, a subject, but not a prisoner of instinct or a psychopath, it can be found that *Salome* has experienced the loss and reorganization of the subject. In the process of the outburst of torturous self-consciousness, she is questing for a new and private morality and beauty beyond the meaning of life.

## 2. Soberness behind Madness: An Analysis of Salome's Personality Structure

Just as Wilde deems that art should be independent of the empirical world, Salome, as the embodiment of art, also lives in a transcendental world. This is particularly evident in Salome's insane discourse.

It is the physical desire that Salome expresses to Iokanaan, but her words exude a strong sense of sacred and inviolable morality and immediately slide from encomium to disgust, such as from the "white" and flawless body to "a whited sepulchre, full of loathsome things" or from the black hair like "the long black nights, when the moon hides her face, when the stars are afraid", to the "crown of thorns" and "a knot of serpents coiled round thy neck".... This undoubtedly forms a confusing paradox. It seems that Iokanaan's body does not exist for real; it is a mere illusion that can vary at Salome's will, spiritual sustenance that loads her hankering for a sheer inner world. A sublime internal image enables her to liberate from Herod's fatuousness and obscenity and the hypocritical real world.

Since then, no matter how Iokanaan expressed his detest for Salome, she has been persistently repeating, "Suffer me to kiss thy mouth" or "I will kiss thy mouth". Such a morbid state is totally beyond the logic of any dialogues. Salome's words are preposterous, completely isolated, and seemingly are not communication between two people, but rather her personal mental flow experience. On the contrary, when she begged the young Syrian to send for Iokanaan or asked Herod for Iokanaan's head, her conversational logic suddenly became coherent, reflecting a strong purposiveness. In such a sharp contrast, Iokanaan's special significance to Salome can be further demonstrated: he awakened Salome, thus making her raving hysterically and utterly immersed in the spirit of her own, and any other objects have never activated this part of her. Only with Iokanaan, she could sink into the spiritual realm of her absolute ideal, where lust and madness were all superficial phenomena, just like Dionysus: behind the brutality is the burst of divinity.

This interpretation is not farfetched. John Beebe pointed out that among the eight psychological types generalized by Jung, extroverted sensation (Se) represented by sensual experience is the inferior function of Salome, which falls on the animus archetype. In contrast, introverted intuition (Ni) is Salome's hero, achieving an advanced cognition of objective reality in the form of image. Jung believes that for people dominated by introverted intuition (Ni), "the strengthening of intuition often leads to an extreme alienation between individuals and reality, and their extroverted sensation (Se), as an unconscious personality, maintains primitive and uncivilized." Salome is just like this. Spiritually, from her language as the representation, she shows the madness divorced from the real environment; instinctively, her dancing in a pool of blood, her obstinate claim for Iokanaan's head and other behaviors involved in external sensory experience is also full of primitive impulse, barbarism and even violence.

Nevertheless, as an introvert, although Salome's intuition may be caused by the stimulation of the external object, what she really cares about is not the extrinsic factors, but what releases from his interior- Just as the play says: "Your body is like the snow that lies on the mountains of Judea, and come down into the valleys.... There is nothing in the world so white as thy body. Suffer me to touch the body."

What Salome desire to "touch" is not Iokanaan's "body", but his detached, future-oriented faith in pure morality. Perhaps this is exactly the idealized self that Salome has rooted from the depth of her mind but has never been expected. This may also be Salome's ideal self, deeply rooted in her heart and it has never been seen or expected. After all, in that dark and absurd palace, she can only be expected to be a delicate woman who serves to satisfy Herod's lust, a shallow young girl with a beautiful face.

The spiritual significance behind Salome's madness is precisely reflected in her internal resemblance with Iokanaan. After Iokanaan's death, Salome whined to the corpse that "Thou didst put upon thine eyes the covering your him who would see his God", but "didst never see me" who was deep in infatuation. However, this is exactly what Iokanaan and Salome have in common. Jung believes that "the most typical representatives of Introverted Intuition users are artists, including prophets", that is, Iokanaan and Salome are likely to have the same personality spine. They "have nothing to do with reality and tradition, and are confined in a world full of primitive images." The

prophet Iokanaan is immersed in his faith and isolated from the real object, just as Salome, as the artistic embodiment of Wilde, is immersed in her illusion and separated from the external environment. When Salome finally kissed Iokanaan's lips in the dark, a transcendental image was completely presented. At this moment, she completed the martyrdom of the ideal and the profound spiritual encounter with the prophet.

### 3. Power in Madness: An Interpretation of Salome and the "Moon"

The Latin for "Moon" is "Luna", while the same root word "lunatic" means psychotic and insanity". Inspired by the moon, people produce intriguing ideas, but it can also lead to craziness. Waned moon goddess has the secret power to cause sudden death and slowly makes life move towards aging and death. The moon image in *Salome* is also grotesque and variant, showing rich psychological connotation and emotional projection.

At first, when Salome completely ignored the corpse of the young Syrian officer and stood beside the pool of blood and repeated to Iokanaan "I will kiss thy mouth" repeatedly, the moon looked "a madwoman who is seeking everywhere for lovers", "She is naked too."

This is from Herod's perspective, and his eroticized understanding of the moon is his emotional projection of Salome. Although for the first time he felt a faint doubt from the so-called "madness", it didn't matter. In his eyes, Salome was still just a frivolous role reposing his flesh desire. Yet then, when Salome stepped on the pool of blood barefoot and was ready to dance, the moon "has become red as blood", carrying a sense of insanity, bloodlust, brutal- She has been totally crazy in her fanaticism. She is no longer the manipulated "dove that has strayed", nor the "narcissus trembling in the wind" that carries the narcissism of the Syrian officer. Her power has become so overwhelming that no one dares to tamper with it

And when Salome finally held Iokanaan's head and gibbered passionately in full view of the public, Herod felt his daughter's terror thoroughly. He shouted in panic: "Put out the torches! Hide the moon!" This was all meant to be ironic- Herod grossly underestimated Salome's energy. She has become an out-of-control madwoman, a menacing fighter who can turn a king into a clown.

Salome's madness, which disgusted Iokanaan, frightened Herod, and was unbearable to the young Syrian, was, in essence, the awakening of her subject consciousness. Her resistance to the secular power symbolized by King Herod and her crazy possession of the religious morality represented by the prophet Iokanaan have gone beyond the rules of the symbolic order.

Unconventionally and shockingly, she is trumpeting her recognition of an active and new female identity- not the "dead woman who is seeking to cover herself with shroud", not the evil "daughter of Babylon" engraved by her "incestuous mother", nor the libidinal object to be stared by men.

What is even more rebellious is Salome's image perception of the prophet Iokanaan. In Salome's eyes, Iokanaan "is chaste as the moon is", like "a moonbeam, a shaft of silver", and his flesh must be "cold as ivory". To be noteworthy, the moon is a very feminine image. As the American psychology, M. Ethel Harting pointed out in his *moon myth*: "In both contemporary and classical poetry, the moon represents the divinity, the principle of women, from the myths and legends of unknown ages." Iokanaan morphed into a chaste and feminine character in such words, while Salome boldly placed lust on such a symbol of chastity and asceticism. In addition to that, Salome also used the lilies, snows, roses, clusters of grapes, pomegranate, vermilion, coral and other natural things to describe all parts of his body, thus dismembered John into an entirely passive symbol, with no initiatives and served only to be looked at like a natural thing. This is undoubtedly a kind of rebellion and subversion. Salome not only actively circumvented the fate of being reduced to anorectic body satisfying the desire of the other but also made the Iokanaan "fell victim to" the object of her gaze.

Finally, "a ray of moonlight falls on Salome and illuminations her", seeming to be the highlight to witness the heroine's leisurely death. Salome went to her doom unflinchingly in the moonbeam, and the sudden burst of rebellious spirit condensed at this moment.

#### 4. Madness as madness itself: Salome and color images

The main color tone of *Salome* has experienced the transformation from white to red, and the images of Salome, Iokanaan and the moon shrouded in the main tone have shared a high degree of unity.

White is the holiest color in Christianity. Salome in white context is puny and weak, with a pale face like "the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver". The moon under Salome's gaze is chaste, "like a little piece of money, a little silver flower" and "has the beauty of a virgin". John's body was also as holy as snow, untainted by worldly desires. Among all those white images, Salome is associated with the moon and the prophet Iokanaan in the characteristic of divinity - as mentioned in the first part, holiness is Salome's ideal self, and this self-image is gradually clarified in her close encounter with the moon and Iokanaan. Previously, King Herod, as a father, had been incapable of playing the role of idealized self-object. Instead, he squeezed the holiness into nowhere with his pornographic mole's eyes. Therefore, Salome fled from the banquet in search of new self-objects to mirror herself, namely the moon and Iokanaan, while both the moon and Iokanaan represent moral perfection, at least in Salome's eye. Her spirit is ensconced in this perfect symbol- In the process of fusing with the sacred symbol, she was also able to confirm her holiness and absorb mental strengths from it.

The red world is sanguinary and violent, inundated with desire and bleeding. Salome dances barefoot on blood with her lip scarlet; the moon was now "red as blood"; the petals were "like stains of blood on the cloth"; and Iokanaan's body image became more and more erotic: his lips were like the bow that "painted with vermilion and tipped with coral", and his tongue was like a "red viper spat its venom"... These are the process of the externalization of Salome's desire, as well as her self-image. In order to validate herself further, she must move towards extreme integration with the idealized objects in order to gain security and power. Nevertheless, Iokanaan's refusal led to the failure of integration, thereupon Salome chose to resort to bloody means, and a kiss on his gory head pushed this destructive power to the extreme.

This is a tragedy of perishing together. Although Salome endowed madness with spiritual elements or constructive purposes, to achieve the aim via such means can only be reduced to vanity. Through the admiration for Iokanaan, Salome appealed to the accusation of despicable secularity and the yearning for perfect morality, but it was ultimately impossible to express morality by killing. She also cleanses the aesthetic euphoria and the sublime "guilt" in her shocking madness, but she eventually cannot approach divinity through animal nature after all. The original life force of Salome naturally contains the factors of rebellion and rebirth, but it can only breed destruction and death under such uncontrolled conditions.

In the end, madness can only be madness itself. On the one hand, the exaltation of self-consciousness does not necessarily lead to the self-confirmation of the subject, but may only aggravate the existential anxiety, which leads Salome to escape the freedom of self-awareness by means of abuse and destruction. On the other hand, the failure of idealized defense leads to disillusionment, and the last bloody kiss is just some kind of self-deception. She has never even had a real connection and integration with the object- her perception of the object is always a projection of her image, the object does not exist but only her narcissism in the mirror image. How can the subject consciousness trapped in self-reference not slide into the abyss of the subject?

#### 5. The Epilogue

In the interweaving of lust and morality, madness and sobriety, we can also see the richer connotation of aestheticism- The aestheticism advocated by Oscar Wilde "does not attempt to abandon conscience, he advocates a higher form of morality that has become instinctive." In the Victorian era when instrumental rationality prevailed, utilitarian art was rampant, and the Philistines in the cloak of morality were vulgar and selfish, seemed to have died long ago. In this context, Salome's resistance and her loyalty to pure morality represent the reflection and indictment of the established culture. However, after reflection and deconstruction, human beings are confronted with emptiness and nothingness. Salome failed to construct a "new relationship", just as aestheticism failed to shape a new

social order in the Victorian era. "Pure art" or "pure morality" without interest or reliance on any other is so fragile that it can only remain in the spiritual home of human dreams. In this way, aestheticism itself breeds a tragedy of disillusionment -- it is not "immoral", nor "dissolving morality", but shows a moral quest and dilemma. It is not simply an indulgence in beauty (sensuous pleasure), nor does it dwell on ugliness (sin and pain are also sacred), but a witness to the degradation of beautiful things. It is such tragic tension that makes Salome become a classic symbol in the history of literature.

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