

The power of objectification in salome



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In *Salome*, Oscar Wilde's short drama, the protagonist Salome is objectified into an idealized sex symbol by her male admirers. To see how, a reader must consider descriptions of Salome as an ethereal body, expressions of lustful desire directed at her, and the illumination of her entire body in the final scene. Through the depiction of her body as a glorified jewel, Salome accepts her innate sexual power and becomes the embodiment of carnal wants, allowing her to manipulate her father into presenting her with the head of the play's antagonist, Iokanaan.

The character of the Young Syrian describes Salome like a treasured object through recurring celestial diction and an allusion to the moon. When first introduced to readers, Salome is described by the Young Syrian, "Never have I seen her so pale. She is like the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver...She is like a silver flower" (Wilde 4). Salome is portrayed as being extremely pale, which readers can infer as an allusion to a corpse.

Contrastingly, she is compared to a flower, a common literary archetype for beauty. By having both the essence of death and beauty, Salome is depicted as somewhat supernatural in looks. The "white rose in a mirror of silver" creates an image of the rose, a pale object of beauty, standing in the reflection of itself. This can be extended to Salome and her own reflection, acting as an embodiment of vanity and her cold, mystic beauty. The only colors are white and silver, causing an achromatic effect over the picture of Salome. This, when combined with the repetition of the color silver, establishes the lack of warmth in her character. Like a silver object, she is gleaming in allure, but is equally cold. Her coldness can be perceived as a direct effect of her objectification; because she is viewed as purely a physical

delicacy, she can no longer be fully human, and therefore she loses her human-like warmth to become a strange, yet beautiful, shadow of a person. She must find her identity through her body alone because it is the quality of her regarded with most value. Following this description of Salome's character, the audience is informed of the moon as looking like " a little silver flower. She is cold and chaste" (Wilde 9). The reference to the flower and the cold is seen again here, connecting Salome's strange beauty to the moon's. The moon is referred to as a " she", furthering this representation of Salome's body as a celestial entity. Salome's essence is inhuman from the perception of her admirers, represented by this recurring comparison to the moon. She has been epitomized as a sacred jewel for the eyes of those around her. By describing her body in a worshiping fashion, Salome is objectified as symbol of supernatural beauty, thus causing her to accept an identity as an embodiment of other's earthly wants.

Through her father's expression of sexual desire for Salome, she continues to be characterized as an object of lust, thus learning to accept this role and use her ability to kill the play's antagonist, Iokanaan. Salome questions her father's incestuous demanding of her to dance: " It is strange that the husband of my mother looks at me like that. I know not what it means. Of a truth I know it too well" (Wilde 8). She cannot escape the carnal craving in the eyes of the people who watch her. Even Salome's stepfather perceives her as solely a sexual being. She is accustomed to this, shown by the phrase " Of a truth I know it too well". She is too familiar with her own objectification; by being recognized purely through physicality, she is forced to find identity as a sex icon. She manipulates other's erotic desires to her

own advantage, viewing her sexuality as an innate power. This is seen through her agreement to dance for her father's entertainment in exchange for a promised favor. "I will dance for you, Tetrarch" (Wilde 34), she says. "I ask of you the head of Iokanaan" (Wilde 39). Salome is manipulating her stepfather's incestuous lust to her own advantage in order to seek the item she desires most: the head of Iokanaan. By dancing, she exploits her sexuality to achieve control over her father, thus epitomizing herself as the ultimate sexual object in order to gain power. The decapitation of Iokanaan elicits a sexual response in Salome, emphasized by the illumination of her entire body just moments before the drama's end.

Upon receiving his head, Salome exclaims, "I will bite it with my teeth as one bites a ripe fruit. Yes, I will kiss thy mouth, Iokanaan" (Wilde 43). She reacts with a sexual fervor in comparing her kiss to biting "a ripe fruit". It is voracious in tone, representing an extraordinary hunger in her lust. She chooses to "bite it with my teeth", creating an animal-like quality in her desire. Through a beastlike desire, it is shown that Salome loses her human identity outside of her sexuality. She repeats the phrase, "I will kiss thy mouth" several times throughout the section, showing her fixation on obtaining Iokanaan's kiss, whether dead or alive. She is almost possessed in eroticism; by becoming completely enthralled in her sexuality, Salome accepts her position as an objectified idol. In the play's final lines, the moon illuminates Salome while she holds the severed head. Wilde writes, "A ray of moonlight falls on Salome and illumines her" (Wilde 45). The glowing effect of the moonlight on Salome creates heavenly imagery. It can be perceived as a

halo-like brilliance that showcases her body as a divine being. Again, a celestial tone overarches the scene through the returning lunar reference.

In this moment, where Salome has exhausted her sexuality the most, her entire body is highlighted to show the divinity with which her body is regarded by both herself and others. As she basks in the moonlight, it becomes apparent to the audience that Salome learns to accept her own objectification, using this as advantage to get her way. Here and elsewhere, Salome's ethereal diction, expressions of intense lust, and illumination of the body depict Salome as the ultimate objectification, teaching her to use the power in her sexuality, and allowing her to control the drama's plot in decapitating Iokanaan.