Religious Instabilities in Oscar Wilde's Poetry

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Abstract

Wilde's poetry abounds with religious instabilities which show the poet fluctuating between Christianity and paganism. The poet is in a perpetual state of change. In one phase, the speaker in the poems is a wanderer, in another, he is a remorse-stricken repentant. In some other poems, the speaker is a pilgrim who sees and speaks to Christ and Mary. The poet's interest in Christianity wanes gradually till the poet revolts against Christianity.

The poet is attracted to paganism with its Greek mythological deities. The more he is attracted to paganism, the more his interest in Christianity wanes. Once again, however, the poet loses interest in paganism. He even revolts against Greek deities. Few years before his death, the poet returns to Christianity following the example of Jesus Christ, the great sufferer and bearer of pain.

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الاضطرابات الدينية في شعر أوسكار وايلد

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الملخص

يركز هذا البحث على الاضطرابات الدينية التي يزخر بها شعر أوسكار وايلد. فالشاعر يلزم المسيحية دينا تارة و الوثنية تارة اخرى. فنراه في شعره من طور الى طور يتقلب. فالشاعر في حين هو المتخبط الهائم على غير هدى تتخبطه السبل، و حينا اخر هو ذا النفس اللوامة، يعض أنامل الندم على ما فرط منه و ما فرط فيه تجاه ربه و دينه. في طور جديد، نرى الشاعر في دور الحاج التائب تتكشف له تجليات تجعله كناسك مقرب تفتحت له أبواب السماوات و وأزيلت دونه الحجب فهو يرى المسيح و يتحدث الى مريم البتول.

يلوح معتقد الوثنية أمام الشاعر الذي سرعان ما ينجذب الى الوثنية بكل ما فيها. فمن قبل، أثناء دراسته بالجامعة، لاحت له الالهة التي تزخر بها الأساطير الاغريقية فانجذب نحوها، لكنه الان في علاقة طردية يبتعد عن المسيحية تارة فيقترب من الوثنية أخرى. و ها هو الشاعر يتشبث بالوثنية و يتعبد لأربابها. ما يلبث الشاعر أن يصل في الى ذروة الاستمساك بالوثنية حتى يبدأ المنحنى في الانخفاض مرة أخرى مثلما حدث مع المسيحية من قبل. يتلاشى الاهتمام بالوثنية شيئا فشيئا. قبيل نهاية حياته، يعود الشاعر الى المسيحية تارة أخرى كما توضح رائعته الشعرية 'قصيدة سجن ردنج القصصية'.

Few readers of English literature may be acquainted with Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) as a poet; fewer still may be familiar with the religious instabilities and anxieties underlying his poetic *oeuvre*. The reason for this is not difficult to figure out: Wilde's poetry has been discarded on the grounds of the severe criticisms and attacks it has received since Wilde's own time. These included accusations of dependence (Raby, *Oscar* 23), imitation, insincerity, borrowings (Robbins 23), and even plagiarisms (Robbins 10). As one critic observes, critics have been "too busy casting stones at Wilde" (Pearce 17). This has, unfortunately, blinded critics who have been satisfied with repeating others' opinions without themselves trying to read and explore that production by way of reassessment or rereading. One has just to think of such other poets as John Keats (1795-1821), Lord Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) and Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), among others, to realise how a poet can be victimised by critics. Wilde, it is to be remembered, is no exception in this respect, and he himself was well aware of that. As John Sloan explains, "In his last days, writing only to friends, Wilde believed that his artistic achievement would finally be recognised by future generations" (29).

Wilde's versatility as a magnate literary figure should, however, be acclaimed. Few English men of letters would really compete with the multi-faceted talent of Wilde as a man of letters. In addition to being a poet, Wilde was a prominent, witty playwright, a creative short story writer, an outstanding, aesthetic novelist, an innovative fairy tale writer, a crafted essayist and an eminent critic. Profoundly influential on his time as he was, Wilde, duly enough, turned into a legend and icon of the last two decades of nineteenth-century English literature; such was, so to speak, the age of Oscar Wilde as M. Cadden and M. Jensen assert in their book *Oscar Wilde: A Writer for the Nineties* (7).

Significantly enough, Wilde started and ended his literary career as a poet. His debut on the literary arena, in 1878, was as a poet when he won the prestigious Newdigate Prize at Oxford University for his long poem 'Ravenna', a prize that was previously awarded to Matthew Arnold, in 1843. Furthermore, Wilde's six-hundred-fifty-four-line poem 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', is the

poetic masterpiece that brought Wilde's very prolific literary career to a close twenty years later, in 1898. The poem is a genuine piece of writing that asserts Wilde's poetic craftsmanship.

In 1881, Oscar Wilde published *Poems*, his first volume of verse including sixty one poems. The volume was published at Wilde's own expense. Wilde sent copies of it to prominent poets of the time including W. B. Yeats (1865-1939), Matthew Arnold (1822-1888). Though the reception of the volume was mixed, in one single year, the volume was reprinted five times in England and three times in America and sold really well in both countries; "the start [was] more than promising" (Varty 76). That Oscar Wilde managed to make his name as a poet among such paramount names of the time as Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-92), Algernon C. Swinburne (1837-1909), Matthew Arnold, Edward Fitzgerald (1809-83) and Robert Browning (1812-89), among others, makes the demand clear for a reconsidering of the real caliber of Wilde as a poet.

This paper, as the title makes clear, aims at exploring and analysing the religious instabilities in Oscar Wilde's poetry. A survey of the books and the academic research conducted on Wilde's works would significantly show that Wilde has thoroughly been studied as a playwright and a novelist. Wilde's essays and critiques have, in turn, been applied to support or detract critics' views on his dramas and single novel masterpiece, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). The one corner of the paramount Wilde literary edifice that has really been kept out of the limelight is his poetry. Essentially, though, Wilde's poetic output reveals sides of the writer that need to be explored. As one critic has noted about *Poems*, Wilde's first volume of verse, published in 1881:

> The *Poems* seem a very long way from the works for which Wilde is most famous. But they inaugurate a number of themes, tropes, perspectives and writing habits to which he would return in different ways for the rest of his writing career. (Robbins 41)

This paper proposes to identify and analyse religious instabilities in Wilde's poetry which are believed to be weighty and essential to understanding Wilde as a poet. As one critic observes, "From the beginning of his career, [Wilde] wrote poems as a

conventional Victorian, expressing moral…and religious attitudes expected in serious art" (Raby, *Cambridge* 57). Another critic, Joseph Pearce, commented on the "religious sonnets and verse" (134) that stand out as Kleig light in Wilde's *Poems* (134).

To start with, three events in Wilde's life can be entrusted to the outpouring of the poet's poetic flow. These are two journeys: one to Rome and another to Greece, and a two-year prison sentence with hard labour that Wilde spent in Reading Gaol. Wilde's poetry, so to speak, was mainly written in response to these three poet-making events.

In 1875, Wilde visited Italy: Florence, Bologna, Venice and Milan. The poet got deeply touched by Roman Catholicism and the result was a good number of religious poems such as 'Sonnet on Approaching Italy', 'Italia', 'Ave Maria Gratia Plena', San Miniato', which reveal the poet's flirtation with Roman Catholicism. Two years later, in the summer of 1877, Wilde visited Ravenna in Italy, while on his way to visit Greece. The visit proved to be profoundly inspiring to the poet. Such a visit had a more far-reaching influence on the poet. 'Ravenna', Wilde's prize-winning poem, was the poet's response to visiting that ancient Italian city of that name. More importantly, that inspiring trip to Greece aroused the poet's deep interest in Greek gods and mythology, especially Pan and paganism with its Greek mythology. The great enthusiasm about Roman Catholicism aroused by the poet's previous visit to Rome was now substituted by a steadier interest, even belief in paganism. Poems such as 'Charmides', 'Pan' and 'The Sphinx' give highlight of the poet's reactions to such a visit to Greece. Last but not least, 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', Wilde's "unforgettable" (Brown 105) poetic masterpiece, was Wilde's response to the third of these experiences, i. e. his imprisonment.

To start with, Wilde is one of the most controversial poets in English literature. Surprisingly enough, from the very beginning of his literary career as a poet, Wilde makes clear his religious instability. In the poem entitled 'Humanitad', the poet reveals his religious discontent as he admits, "I whose wretched soul / Takes discontent to be its paramour" (*Works* 678). This can easily be interpreted as "spiritual restlessness" as one critic asserts (Raby,

Oscar 15), but, in fact, Wilde's indeterminate and fluctuating religious stance was deliberately adopted. Wilde himself, it is to be remembered, liked such, so to speak, a halo of controversy to be always there surrounding his name. His "inordinate desire for paradox" has become a distinguishing mark of his literary career (Legouis 1276). He liked the idea of being one thing and its opposite at the very same time. Wilde himself once said, "there was nothing I said or did that did not make people wonder" (Raby, *Oscar* 135-6). Deliberately enough, he added to the already fervent debates about him. To give one example, he said, "in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true" (Sloan 167). This must be taken seriously enough when reading Wilde's poetry, where the poet never constantly or even consistently embraces any religious belief.

As Wilde's poetry makes clear, the poet never stuck fully to any belief. It is, thus, really difficult to decide on or identify the poet's religious stance. Critics have found this baffling and confusing. Robbins, for example, spoke of the difficulty of pursuing Wilde's line of thought as revealed in Wilde's poetry. Robbins, further, explains that "part of the problem for contemporary reader is that the volume does not reflect a coherent set of values expressed by a consistent poetic *persona*" (24). In his turn, John Sloan, in his book *Oscar Wilde*, must have had such contradictions underlying Wilde's religious stance as revealed in Wilde's poetry in mind as he subtly commented on the restlessness underlying Wilde's poetry (167).

II
Christianity in Oscar Wilde's Poetry

Wilde's visit to Italy aroused a touching religious sense in the poet that went through a whole range of development in the poet's, so to speak, Italy poems. The gamut goes from one extreme to another. Thus, while poems such as 'Helas' and 'The Burden of the Itys', for example, reveal the poet's realisation of his state of loss due to having been away from God and religion, others, such as 'Easter Day' and 'Quia Multum Amavi', show a remorse-stricken speaker. The poet's deep religiosity and enthusiasm as a Christian loom large in such poems as 'Sonnet: On the Massacre of the Christians in Bulgaria', 'Ravenna' and 'Sonnet on Approaching Italy'. This last poem, for instance, is one "which passionately invokes an image burning in the speaker's soul when he reaches the Alps: Italia" (Raby, *Cambridge* 58). Wilde was well aware of the drastic changes that characterise his religious endeavor. In one of his poems, Wilde importantly asks, "do I change?" (678).

It is interesting to remark that the speaker in all of these poems uses the first person singular pronoun 'I', which makes the poems highly lyrical, and hence personal, i.e. the speaker in the poems can easily be identified with the poet, Wilde himself. Indeed, this can further be supported by the fact that many of the poems, 'Sonnet on Approaching Italy', 'San Miniato', 'Ave Maria Gratia Plena' and 'Italia' for instance, well-arranged by Wilde, are in sonnet form and can be read sequentially to illuminate one phase of development or another. Surprisingly, the whole *oeuvre* can, somehow, be looked at as sequentially arranged to reveal the poet's religious endeavor.

Wilde's poetry presents a variety of phases of religious development, or, rather, "drifting[s]" (631), as the poet himself would call them, which can remarkably speak volumes of the poet's religious restlessness. In 'Helas', the poet says:

> To drift with every passion till my soul
> Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play,
> Is it for this that I have given away
> Mine ancient wisdom, and austere control? (599)

The poem reveals the poet's regret for loss of religious guidance and

the spiritual restlessness that ensued. 'Helas!' is the French word for alas. In 'The Burden of the Itys', the poet says, "it is I, / Drifting with every wind on the wide sea of misery" (631). The word "drift" recurrently appears all through Wilde's poetry till it is recognised as an overwhelming image. "Drifting", thus, turns into a unifying image, a motif that crosses and recrosses all through the poet's *oeuvre* functioning as an element of internal unity in Wilde's poetry. "drifting[s]", thus, echo all through Wilde's poetry. Such "drifting[s]" are not the poet's only, but the universe's as well. Readers, thus, come across images of "drifting cloud" (275), "drifting mist" (636), "drifting cordage" (649), "drifting foam" (658), "drift of snow" (676), "a white moon [that] drifts across the shimmering sky" (631), "a white mist [that] drifts across the shroud" (693) and the "moon [that] drifts like silken butterflies" (697). All such images and the like connote a spiritually wandering and restless soul.

The poet-as-wanderer image is importantly employed by the poet to depict the state of loss he experienced. The speaker in 'Easter Day' is a sad one whose heart aches since he can find rest nowhere and, thus, suffers from a great state of loss. Remorse-stricken as he is, the speaker thinks of himself to be the most miserable creature:

> My heart stole back across wide wastes of years
> To One who wandered by a lonely sea,
> And sought in vain for any place of rest:
> 'Foxes have holes, and every bird its nest.
> I, only I, must wander wearily,
> And bruise my feet, and drink wine salt with tears.'
> (619)

Elsewhere, the poet elaborates further on this sense remorse that traces him like a foe, "remorse… / Tread[s] on my heels with all his retinue, (673). The above quotation is the sestet of a sonnet the octave of which provides the background to the poet's spiritual anxiety and suffering. The beginning of the poem provides an image of the people in church who "knelt upon the ground with awe" and that of the Pope whom the speaker saw borne on the necks of men while, "in splendour and in light the Pope passed home" (619). Out of the whole congregation in the church, the poet is struck by the

idea that he is the odd one out, and this adds greatly to his sense of misery and spiritual anguish.

The poem above strikes a tone similar to that in Coleridge's 'Work Without Hope' in which the poet, despairingly, discovers the purposefulness of the lives of creatures around himself. The speaker in Coleridge's poem is the only idle thing in a world replete with livelihood and hope:

> All Nature seems at work. Slugs leave their lair—
> The bees are stirring—birds are on the wing—
> And Winter slumbering in the open air,
> Wears on his smiling face a dream of Spring!
> And I the while, the sole unbusy thing,
> Nor honey make, nor pair, nor build, nor sing.
> (Hughes 184)

A sense of loss and remorse overwhelms the wanderer in Wilde's early poetry. Some of Wilde's early poems show a sinful speaker blaming himself for having been away from God. In 'Panthea', for instance, the poet says that he "lie[s] weeping for some sweet sad sin, some dead delight" (667). The speaker is overwhelmed by a sense of sadness even though sin was sweet the time it was committed. Furthermore, the poet describes the "sin" oxymoronically as "sweet sad" one which exposes the torn and instable psyche of the poet. The way the poet interweaves sounds as the alliterative sibilant /s/ sound in the above quotation shows Wilde's dexterity and adroitness in manipulating sounds, an important characteristic of Wilde's poetry in general.

Still, the speaker in 'Panthea' is overwhelmed by his "endless" sins and, thus, seeks God's mercy and pardon:

> For our high Gods have sick and wearied grown
> Of all our endless sins, our vain endeavour
> For wasted days of youth to make atone
> By pain or prayer or priest, and never, never,
> Hearken they now to either good or ill,
> But send their rain upon the just and the unjust at will.
> (666-7)

The poet's sense of loss and despair is even asserted by the poet's disillusionment of the fact that he has wasted his life in vain,

"Ah! Can it be / We have lived our lives in a land of dreams! / How sad it seems" (674).

The archetypal image of a ship lost on a wide, shoreless ocean is repeatedly employed by the poet to represent the poet's own state of spiritual restlessness.

> O ship that shakes on the desolate sea!
> O ship with the wet, white sail!
> Put in, put in, to the port to me! (693).

The idea presented above has its counterpart in the poet's 'My Voice', as the poet laments that his days of innocence and purity are gone, "now the white sails of our ship are furled, / And spent the lading of our argosy" (675). In this poem, the poet reflects on such times, mostly childhood ones, when he was at ease. Such were times of innocence that are now gone and unattainable and the poet is now in a vortex of tumultuous and agonizing thoughts. At such earlier times the poet was never far away from God; he could even confide secrets in God:

> Surely there was a time I might have trod
> The sunlit heights, and from life's dissonance
> Struck one clear chord to reach the ears of God: (599)

The poem reveals the speaker's deep sorrow for having been drifted away from the secure harbour of religion. Before the poem comes to a close, the poet wonders if such past times are dead, "Is that time dead?", asks the poet. Torn by "sin and shame", as he confesses in 'San Miniato', the poet says that his "heart is weary of this life" (614). Away from God, "all good things have perished utterly", as the poet asserts in 'E Tenebris'. In such a poem, the speaker, having realised that his life's endeavor has been spent in vain, invokes Christ for rescue:

> Come down, O Christ, and help me! reach Thy hand,
> For I am drowning in a stormier sea
> Than Simon on Thy lake of Galilee:
> The wine of life is spilt upon the sand,
> My heart is as some famine-murdered land
> Whence all good things have perished utterly,
> And well I know my soul in Hell must lie
> If I this night before God's throne should stand. (619)

Following the phase of the poet's observing of himself as a ship lost on a wide, rough ocean, and as a drowning man crying for help, there followed another phase in which the poet felt more at ease because of the sobriety and composure achieved through an awakening sense of religion and a realisation of God's mercy. Such a phase is best represented through the image of the poet as a pilgrim who seeks divine guidance and pardon.

The poet-as-pilgrim image proliferates significantly throughout Wilde's poetry. From the very starting poem, 'Ravenna', the poet is represented as a pilgrim. The poet, thus, speaks of "Holy" Ravenna, the destination of his journey, in such a sacred diction that helps readers infer that he is no such a mere traveller inasmuch as Ravenna itself is not such a mere tourist sight. This same image, of the poet as pilgrim, looms large in a number of Wilde's Italy poems foremost among which is 'Rome Unvisited' in which the poet speaks of his visit as pilgrimage, "all my pilgrimage is done" and of himself as:

> A pilgrim from the northern seas—
> What joy for me to seek alone
> The wondrous temple and the throne
> Of him who holds the awful keys! (617)

In 'Ravenna', the poet's heart leaps passionately as the poet reaches the sacred shrine of Ravenna:

> I stood within Ravenna's walls at last!
> O how my heart with boyish passion burned,
> When far away across the sedge and mere
> I saw that Holy City rising clear,
> Crowned with her crown of towers!—On and on
> I galloped, racing with the setting sun,
> And ere the crimson after-glow was passed,
> I stood within Ravenna's walls at last! (592-3)

Elsewhere, the poet speaks of his "feet [that] are sore with travelling" (637). This accounts for Raby's describing of Wilde as "Odyssey" (*Oscar* 24). The journey, it should be remembered, is primarily a spiritual one. From this standpoint, Wilde's poetry can be said to reveal a pilgrim's progress, even if the pilgrim sometimes falters, drifts or even though he sometimes goes astray.

The pilgrim-sanctuary relationship is asserted in Wilde’s Italy poems. Such a sonnet sequence provides a mosaic of the poet’s experience. ‘Ravenna’, ‘Sonnet on Approaching Italy’, ‘San Miniato’, ‘Italia’ and ‘Rome Unvisited’ are important poems in this respect. ‘Ravenna’ is particularly believed to be of central importance to Wilde’s poetry as it represents the microcosm of Wilde’s poetic macrocosm. The poem is basically about the great religious and historic glories of the city, which are now mere relics of a bygone past.

Prior to coming to grips with this poem, however, a word about the city of Ravenna can be helpful with unveiling the poet’s being that deeply impressed by such a shrine. Located in north-east Italy, Ravenna was the seat of the Roman Empire, and thus, the centre of Roman Catholicism, in the 5th century and then of Byzantine Italy until the 8th century. It is, thus, “the Queen of double Empires” (597) as the poet speaks of it. Religiously speaking, the city has a unique collection of early Christian mosaics and monumental buildings including the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, the Neonian Baptistery, the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, the Arian Baptistery, the Archiepiscopal Chapel, the Mausoleum of Theodoric, the Church of San Vitale and the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe that were constructed in the 5th and 6th centuries (unesco.org).

The poet is aware of the great past that sanctuary preserves:

> O lone Ravenna! Many a tale is told
> Of thy great glories in the days of old:
> Two thousand years have passed since thou didst see
> Cæsar ride forth to royal victory.

Allusions are an important feature of Wilde’s poetry. Allusions serve a number of functions in Wilde’s poetry, foremost among which is the poet’s aggrandizing of the glorious past of Europe, as ‘Ravenna’, for instance, makes clear. Furthermore, the poet’s close association with the past is affirmed. In addition, comparisons between the grand past and the lifeless, still present are always summoned and brought into question.

The pilgrim-sanctuary relationship is further asserted in ‘Sonnet on Approaching Italy’ in which the poet acknowledges that

he “wept to see the land so fair” (614). The poet also says that such was a “prize” he has looked forward to achieving for his whole life, “I came / And saw the land for which my life had yearned, / I laughed as one who some great prize had earned” (614). More specific details of the journey are even provided in poems such as ‘San Miniato’, ‘Ave Maria Gratia Plena’ and ‘Italia’. In the first of these, ‘San Miniato’, the poet describes how he climbed the mountain side, “up to the holy house of God” where the heavens were seen “opened wide, / And throned upon the crescent moon / The Virginal white Queen of Grace, / Mary” (614).

‘Rome Unvisited’ is one more poem in which “Wilde regards his journey to Italy as a ‘pilgrimage’” (Raby, *Cambridge* 58). The journey was not completed, as the title states, due to lack of money. The poem, however, aggrandizes Rome, a metonym of Italy and Roman Catholicism, as a blessed land:

And here I set my face towards home,
For all my pilgrimage is done,
Although, methinks, yon blood-red sun
Marshals the way to Holy Rome.
……………………………….
O Roma, Roma, at thy feet
I lay this barren gift of song!
For, ah! the way is steep and long
That leads unto thy sacred street. (616)

The solemnity, reverence as well as the diction the poet addresses Rome with make the poem sound more like a supplication, hymn or prayer. In part Four of the poem, the poet, hermit-like, implores God to “teach my lips a song to sing” and wishes God would help him rid his heart of the cares and fears that encompasses it. The richly religious diction, “God”, “pilgrimage”, “Holy”, “Blessed”, “Mother”, “sacred street”, “kneel”, “Temple”, “priest and holy Cardinal”, “God-anointed King”, “altar of the shrine” are highly connotative of the poet’s sense of religious devotion. In the lines that bring the poem to a close, the speaker expresses his wish to call “upon the holy name / Of Him” (618). The poet’s spiritual elevation, followed in turn by revelation, is undoubted. The poet asks Mary to let him see her face (614) and wonders why Jesus “doth hide His

face" (617). Such was so thrilling a trip that, describing it to one of his Oxford friends, Wilde wrote, "This is an era in my life, a crisis. I wish I could look into the seeds of time and see what is coming" (Raby *Cambridge* 58). Indeed, the poet's remarkable spiritual indulgence revealed in this poem and the like make Wilde comparable to such deeply religious poets as Gerard Manley Hopkins and John Milton.

Wilde's poetry shows how keen the poet was on giving an account of all about his religiously touching trip to Italy. It is interesting to notice that in his poems about the visit to Italy, the poet does not only express his feelings and emotions, but he also associates such emotions with the sanctuaries he visited. Place names: Turin, Florence, Venice, Arona, Monte Mario, etc., are provided underneath each of such poems. The "Holy City" (91) of Ravenna is such a sacred destination due to its religious importance. Further, it is in Ravenna that the poet observes "God's seamless veil of blue" (592). Even when clouds cluster together, "in the west the circling clouds had spun / A royal robe, which some great God might wear" (691).

The image of Mary, Christ's mother, "Mother without blot or stain" (616), looms in many of Wilde's poems. In 'Rome Unvisited', the poet reflects on the impeccability, infallibility and chastity of "Mother of Christ":

O Blessed Lady, who dost hold
  Upon the seven hills thy reign!
  O Mother without blot or stain,
Crowned with bright crowns of triple gold! (616)

That the poet apostrophises "Blessed Lady" reveals a sense of proximity. Here, as elsewhere, allusions add a depth to the poem. It has been explained that Wilde's poetry surges with allusions. It is important here to assert that Mary is the only perfect and unimpeachable figure in Wilde's poetry. Importantly, the poet always refers to her with such an awe and reverence unparalleled all through his poetry.

Jesus Christ, in turn, appears importantly in a number of Wilde's poems. In his 'Sonnet: Written in Holy Week at Genoa', the speaker expresses his sorrow for not being able to be in the Holy city

of Rome on Easter Sunday. Further, the poet reflects on the question of crucifixion saying that, “Jesus the son of Mary has been slain” (616) and urges Christians to go and, “fill His sepulchre with flowers” (616). The poem, “recalls the death of Jesus during Holy Week” (Raby, *Cambridge* 58). ‘Ave Maria Gratia Plena’ is another poem about Jesus Christ. In this poem the poet’s wish of seeing a “scene of wondrous glory” is fulfilled:

> Was this His coming! I had hoped to see
> A scene of wondrous glory, as was told
> Of some great God who in a rain of gold
> Broke open bars and fell on Danae… (615)

One particular poem of Wilde’s reveals the poet’s passionate, religious enthusiasm and devotion more than any other, i.e. ‘Sonnet: On the Massacre of the Christians in Bulgaria’. In this poem, Wilde’s enthusiasm as a Christian reaches its climactic point. The poem refers to what is historically referred to as “Batak massacre” of 1876, i.e., one year after Wilde’s visit to Italy. The Wikipedia entry of the event reads, “Batak massacre refers to the massacre of Bulgarians in Batak by Ottoman irregular troops in 1876 at the beginning of the April Uprising. The number of victims ranges from 1,200 to 7,000, depending on the source (wikipedia.org). The poem clearly exposes the poet’s fears that Islam would triumph over Christianity. Syntactically, the poem exposes the poet’s overwhelming fears and anxieties. The poem is a Petrarchan sonnet: the octave poses four questions and the sestet raises four exclamations.

It would be undermining of the poem’s value to boil the meaning of the sonnet down to a cry of help by a “Christian” poet. The importance of the poem consists, in addition, in that the poet brings the essence of Christianity into question as the speaker in the poem calls upon Jesus Christ to rescue Christianity lest it should be conquered by Islam. The poem starts with the speaker asking if Christ is, indeed, alive or if he is dead and entombed in his sepulchre. The argument proceeds that if Christ is dead, then his “Rising” was only a dream. If Christ were really alive, it is argued, how could he lend deaf ears to the moans and groans of Christians killed in Bulgaria, as the poem makes clear. Even more, how could

Christ let down the cries and imploring of priests. Sorrowfully, the poet cries, "The priests who call upon Thy name are slain" (604). As the poem proceeds, the poet reveals his increasingly overwhelming worries, as a fervent, enthusiastic Christian about Christianity being overshadowed and overpowered by Islam:

> Come down, O Son of God! Incestuous gloom
> Curtains the land, and through the starless night
> Over Thy Cross a Crescent moon I see!
> If Thou in very truth didst burst the tomb
> Come down, O Son of Man! and show Thy might
> Lest Mahomet be crowned instead of Thee! (604)

Invocations of Jesus Christ, allusions to "Christ" and "Mahomet", and symbols of the "Cross" and the "Crescent" make the poem, undoubtedly, deeply religious.

Touring Ravenna, the poet is shocked by the city that is now lifelessly "still! No sound of life or joy" (593). With its deserted and desolate buildings, Ravanna is comparable to the town Keats describes in his poem 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. The speaker in Keats's poem asks:

> What little town by river or sea shore,
> Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
> Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
> And, little town, thy streets for evermore
> Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
> Why thou art desolate, can e'er return. (Harrison 331)

The deteriorating state of Christianity, as observed by the poet, is importantly dwelt on in 'Ravenna'. The city of Ravenna, as the poem makes clear, epitomises Roman Catholicism. Present-time Ravenna is diametrically opposed with the glorious history of its past:

> How lone this palace is; how grey the walls!
> No minstrel now wakes echoes in these halls.
> The broken chain lies rusting on the door,
> And noisome weeds have split the marble floor:
> Here lurks the snake, and here the lizards run
> By the stone lions blinking in the sun. (593)
> ……………………………………...

O fallen! fallen! from thy high estate,
O city trammelled in the toils of Fate,
Doth nought remain of all thy glorious days,
But a dull shield, a crown of withered bays! (597)

The recurrent shifts in using tenses, i. e. from the present to the past and back to the present, is significantly used in the poem. In section *Three* of the poem, for instance, an important shift is made from the past “The lips that flushed with passionate love and scorn / The lips that sang of Heaven and Hell” (593), suggestive of the past central religious position of the city, to the present tense in the sections that follow, as in the example above. Such shifting is an important poetic technique as it sets the two images of the city in sharp contrast against each other.

In addition, the carefully selected negative diction the poet describes present-time Ravenna in is important to consider. T the city is now “fallen”. The diction exposes the deplorable, declining and gloomy state of such a place that has turned into a “lone”, “grey”, “broken”, “rusting” and “withered” spot. The image of the “weeds [that] have split the marble floor” is rich in connotations foremost among which being that of separation between people and religion. Metaphorically speaking, the image suggests absence of frequenters and, therefore, the desolate and dolorous state of the city temples at the present time. This, in its turn, implies the gap existing now between people and religion, and therefore, between people and God. Such temples that abounded with priests and worshippers that frequented such temples are now inhabited by snakes lurking in such a now-desolately lifeless spot. The connotative implications of the “snake”, reminding of the serpent in the story of Adam and Eve, should not escape attention. Biblically speaking, it was in its disguise as a serpent (snake) that Satan managed to tempt Eve into eating the fruit from the forbidden tree, after failing to do so in other disguises including that of a Cormorant one time and a cherub another. The snake was punished by “the Son” by being condemned never to walk upright for having allowed Satan to disguise in its body. So, the once-paradisal Ravenna is now inhabited by snakes. Such a reading can, further, be supported by the very word “fallen” which was used to describe Adam and Eve after their expulsion out

of the Garden of Eden.

This is, actually, diametrically opposed with the splendid state of ancient, glorious Ravenna. The poet goes on expressing deep sorrow over the one-time great city of Ravenna that is now lying as soulless relics:

…Ravenna, better loved than all,
Thy ruined palaces are but a pall
That hides thy fallen greatness. (596)

As the poem proceeds, the poet does mournfully announces the death of the city. He apostrophises:

O fair! O sad! O Queen uncomforted!
In ruined loveliness thou liest dead (595)

All through the poem, the speaker, in an elegiac tone, reveals an awareness of the rich and fascinating history underlying that spot.

Another phase of Wilde's, so to speak, religious development followed. Such was a phase marked mainly by its skepticism and loss of belief in Christianity, as the poems 'Humanitad', 'In the Forest', 'Panthea' and 'At Verona' make clear. There came times when the poet realised that religion could not be of help to him (Brown 101). When, in one of the poems, the poet calls upon Jesus for help and his request is not answered, the poet, cynically, guesses that' "He sleeps" (619). The simple present tense "sleeps" suggests that this is a habit of God, i.e. "He" is indifferent to the imploring of worshippers. This is further asserted in the poem entitled 'In the Forest' in which the poet says, "God sleeps" (668).

In 'Humanitad', the poet distrusts religious rituals:

To burn with one clear flame, to stand erect
In natural honour, not to bend the knee
In profitless prostrations whose effect
Is by itself condemned … (678)

In 'In the Forest', the poet asserts the futility of religion in its entirety. Overwhelmed by guilt and despair, the poet says that he is wearied of every temple since his prayers are unanswered. Importantly, the poem does not show remorse or thoughts of repentance on the part of the speaker:

O we are wearied of this sense of guilt,
Wearied of pleasure's paramour despair,

Wearied of every temple we have built,
Wearied of every right, unanswered prayer,
For man is weak; God sleeps: and heaven is high:
One fiery-coloured moment: one great love; and lo!
we die. (668)

In 'Humanitad', the poet asks whether "God or Fate / Is our enemy" (668). This is a great change on the poet's side since, in this poem, the poet raises the possibility of God being his enemy. The idea is even further developed in 'At Verona', as will be pointed out. There came times when the poet completely lost belief in Christianity. One critic, Julia P. Brown, noted that, "For both Wilde and Nietzsche, there is no divine Providence at work in the world" (101). In 'At Verona', one of Wilde's later poems, the poet blasphemously says:

'Curse God and die: what better hope than this?
He hath forgotten thee in all the bliss
Of his gold city, and eternal day'—
Nay peace: behind my prison's blinded bars
I do possess what none can take away
My love, and all the glory of the stars. (671)

As clear, the poet's infatuation with Christianity, as revealed in the poems above, did not last long. Another phase followed in which the poet's deep interest in Roman Catholicism waned and was displaced by another in paganism.

The quotation above marks the end of one phase, i.e. belief in Christianity, and the beginning of another in which the poet came to adopt paganism in Christianity stead. The poet, thus, drifted from Christianity to paganism in the hope of achieving spiritual guidance and composure, through "the old Greek serenity" (685).

III
Paganism in Oscar Wilde's Poetry

In 1878, Wilde visited Greece with J. P. Mahaffy, his former Trinity College tutor who accompanied him also during his first trip to Italy. Wilde was so much impressed by the journey to Greece. The poet's drifting to paganism, that had remained a mere idea for years, was now seriously triggered by this visit. To be more accurate, Mahaffy redirected Wilde's religious eagerness for paganism. He is reported to have said, "No, Oscar, we cannot let you become a Catholic…but we will make you a good pagan. [Thus,] Wilde had come round under the influence of the moment from Popery to paganism" (Pearce 95). The use of the word "Popery" is noticeably derogatory here (Sykes 859). It shows that Roman Catholicism is now belittled. The poet, it is to be noticed, had already had an interest in paganism as a student at Trinity during which years he excelled in Greek language and mythology. In 'The Garden of Eros', the poet confesses of "my soul's idolatry!" (608). Pearce says, "The temptation to forsake Rome for the pagan pleasures of Greece was playing on Wilde's mind" (94). Pearce's is a subtle note since it points to an important orientation that can be traced in Wilde's, so to speak, Greece poems, specifically speaking, Hedonism which is a school of thought that argues that pleasure is the primary or most important intrinsic good. In such poems of paganism, the poet mixes the sacred with the mundane and the profaned, and the religious with the secular, an idea that reaches its culmination point in 'Charmides', as will be explained.

It is true, thus, that the poet so much aspired for such a visit. In 'Impression de Voyage', for instance, the poet is surprised that, "I stood upon the soil of Greece at last" (662). On visiting Greece, the poet's interest in paganism was all-kindled to the extent that the poet himself was astonished he has radically changed as he did. The poet's drifting from Christianity to paganism is expressed in a number of poems including 'Ravenna', 'The Burden of Itys', 'Apologia', 'Impression de Voyage', 'Pan', 'Charmides' and 'Humanitad'. Such poems represent a vortex of ideas on paganism essential to understanding Wilde as a poet.

'Ravenna' is a prism-like poem. Written in 1877, the poem is

a transitional one in the sense that it indicates the poet's early religious interests; it, thus, marks a shift of belief from Christianity to paganism. Further, chronologically, the poem was written between the poet's two trips, one to Italy, another to Greece. With its three-hundred-forty-two lines, divided into seven sections, the poem notably reveals Wilde's poetic interests which have proved essential to understanding the poet. 'Ravenna' is, undoubtedly, one of Wilde's most intricate poems to figure out. One of the reasons why the poem is difficult to access is the poet's stark fluctuation between Christianity and paganism. The importance of this poem consists largely, thus, in that it is revealing of Wilde's religious instabilities. Importantly, 'Ravenna' looks at religion through the Christianity-Paganism binoculars, i.e. the poem reveals the poet's concern about both creeds, or, to be more specific, a gradual shift of interest from Christianity to Paganism. A meticulous reading of Ravenna, can, thus, usher us importantly into Wilde's religious anxieties. The poem can, broadly speaking, be divided into two sections: parts *One* to *Four* present the poet's thoughts on Christianity and parts *Five* to *Seven* reveal the poet's interest in paganism. Placed at the beginning of the volume, 'Ravenna' is intended to arouse readers' anticipations as for the religious pursuit endeavoured by the poet. This, indeed, leaves the reader stunned and bemused, raising endless questions as for the poet's religious creed. Indeed, one can hardly expect to find such ambivalence, or rather, self-contradiction in such a stark way among any of the English poets. With Wilde, as a special case in point, however, such contradictions should not, indeed, be that astonishing as he himself believed that contradictions underlie all aspects of our lives.

In part Five of 'Ravenna', the poet shifts importantly from Christianity to Paganism, which the poet esteems as counterpart to, even a substitute of, Christianity. The poet, thus, tells us how he "wandered through the woods in wild delight" (594) enjoying the freedom in the woods more than all else, "O waving trees, O forest liberty!" (595) he exclaims in part Five of the poem. In his book, *Oscar Wilde,* Peter Raby importantly explains that, "the freedom of paganism is set against the restrictions of Christianity" (*Oscar* 25). There in the woods, he enjoys the freedom unattainable elsewhere;

and there amid the reeds, he can identify and encounter gods people have stopped believing in:

> Within your haunts at least a man is free,
> And half forgets the weary world of strife:
> The blood flows hotter, and a sense of life
> Wakes i' the quickening veins, while once again
> The woods are filled with gods we fancied slain.
> Long time I watched, and surely hoped to see
> Some goat-foot Pan make merry minstrelsy
> Amid the reeds! Some startled Dryad-maid
> In girlish flight! (595)

In most of his longer poems, such as 'The Burden of Itys', 'Humanitad', 'Charmides' and 'The Sphinx', Wilde dwells on the theme of paganism. In 'The Burden of Itys', the poet finds it really "strange" he has wholeheartedly changed from Christianity to paganism, "strange, a year ago / I knelt before some crimson Cardinal" (624). In the same poem, the poet asserts that Greek gods are not far away from him.

> Endymion is not far away;
> 'Tis I, 'tis I, whose soul is as the reed
> Which has no message of its own to play,
> So pipes another's bidding, it is I,
> Drifting with every wind on the wide sea of misery.
> (631)

Such, so to speak, drifting of soul, can be traced in many other poems. It is freedom, in the broad sense of the word, that the poet liked most about paganism. "All the forest sang of liberty" (672), admits the poet. Elsewhere, in 'Humanitad', the poet remembers:

> There was a time when any common bird
> Could make me sing in unison, a time
> When all the strings of boyish life were stirred
> To quick response or more melodious rhyme
> By every forest idyll. (678)

'Pan: Double Villanelle' is an important poem of paganism in which the poet pays homage to Pan:

O goat-foot God of Arcady!
This modern world is grey and old,
And what remains to us of thee?
No more the shepherd lads in glee
Throw apples at thy wattled fold,
O goat-foot God of Arcady!
………………………………
Though many an unsung elegy
Sleeps in the reeds our rivers hold,
O goat-foot God of Arcady!
Ah, what remains to us of thee?
…………………………………
Then blow some trumpet loud and free,
And give thine oaten pipe away,
Ah, leave the hills of Arcady!
This modern world hath need of thee! (703-4)

The poet remarkably uses the device of verbal repetition to create an incantatory, song-like effect. Pan is a much celebrated figure in Wilde's poetry. References to Pan proliferate all through Wilde's poetry. Invoked in this poem and apostrophised in many others, Pan and his "reeds" are essentially important to Wilde's Greece poems. Pan echoes all through Wilde's Greece poems, and the reeds, in turn, associated with Pan in most of such poems. In Greek religion and mythology, Pan is the god of the wild, shepherds and flocks, nature of mountain wilds and rustic music, and companion of the nymphs. Located in Arcady, Pan is also god of "fields, groves, and wooded glens; because of this, Pan is connected to fertility and the season of spring". Pan was worshipped in natural settings like caves. Etymologically, "pan", in Greek, means, "to pleasure" (Greekmythology.com). It was believed that Pan chased nymphs and dryads in order to seduce them. Due to his ugly appearance, half human half goat, however, he was always ignored. In turn, the "reed[s]" are closely associated with Pan. The "reed[s]" are mentioned around forty times in Wilde's poetry. According to the myth:

> One day [Pan] came across a beautiful girl called Syrinx. He tried to seduce her, but she managed to

> run away. Followed by the god, she sought refuge among her sisters, who transformed her into a reed. When the wind started blowing, a melody was produced. Pan, not knowing which reed Syrinx was transformed into, took seven or nine of them and tied them side by side in decreasing lengths, thus, creating his musical instrument that bore the name of the nymph. (Greekmythology.com)

The poem above stresses the idea that the world, as the poet believes, has turned dull and dreary as a result of being away from Pan. Pan lies at the centre of the poet's thoughts of paganism. In 'The Garden of Eros', another long poem of Wilde's, the poet would assume to play the role of Pan, since Pan is old enough now:

> I will cut a reed by yonder spring
> And make the wood-gods jealous, and old Pan
> Wonder what young intruder dares to sing
> In these still haunts, where never foot of man
> Should tread at evening, lest he chance to spy
> The marble limbs of Artemis and all her company.
> (608)

'Charmides', /□kɑ ːrmɪ di ːz/, is another Wilde's poem of paganism. The title may be an allusion to Plato's eponymous, philosophical dialogue Charmides, a youth, of unsurpassed beauty whom Socrates engages in a conversation about the meaning of *sophrosyne*, a Greek word usually translated into English as temperance, self-control, or restraint. The longest of Wilde's poems, 'Charmides' has six hundred-sixty-six lines. The poem is a ballad that tells a shocking story. Charmides is an ancient Greek sailor who is overwhelmed by a forbidden perverse passion for a statue of goddess Athena. He hides in her temple until it is completely dark and makes passionate love to her effigy:

> off his brow he tossed the clustering hair,
> And from his limbs he throw the cloak away;
> For whom would not such love make desperate?
> And nigher came, and touched her throat, and with hands violate

> Undid the cuirass, and the crocus gown,
> And bared the breasts of polished ivory,
> Till from the waist the peplos falling down
> Left visible the secret mystery
> Which to no lover will Athena show,
> The grand cool flanks, the crescent thighs,
> The bossy hills of snow. (641)

Virgin goddess Athena is outraged by such a sacrilegious act and decides to revenge profaning her virginity. When the sailor goes back on board the ship, Athena appears to him, this time in the shape of her emblem, the owl, and tempts him to walk on the water and, suddenly, leaves him to drown. Robbins believes this, on Wilde's side, to be, "a virtually blasphemous allusion to one of Christ's miracles" (31). He, further, paphrases the story the poem tells interestingly as follows:

> The sailor's body is washed ashore by the agency of the sea-gods and mermaids, and is discovered by a Dryad who promptly falls in love with the spectacularly lovely corpse. The Dryad spends the night with the body, believing that Charmides is merely sleeping, and the description of his body fetishizes his male beauty. Her love causes, in turn, another tragedy. The Dryad is dedicated to Artemis, a second virgin goddess. When she discovers her handmaid *in flagrante* with Charmides' body, she kills the unnamed nymph, in a scene filled with displaced sexual violence. The longed-for penetration of heterosexual desire is replaced by the death blow of Artemis's arrow… The Dryad dies embracing the corpse of her departed beloved. Although the 'lovers' are now dead the story is not over; in other words it goes on beyond its conventional and appropriate end point. Venus, goddess of love, takes pity on the thwarted passions of sailor and Dryad. She petitions Proserpine to ask her husband to admit them to Hades with their passions still intact: that is, they are permitted to enter the afterlife without passing

> through the waters of the Lethe (which causes forgetfulness), and so they do not forget how to feel. When the petition is granted, Charmides and his nymph are united in a sensual embrace for all eternity. (31-2)

Despite the fact that Wilde's later poems reveal the poet's remarkable infatuation with paganism, there came times when the poet lost interest in paganism; "I had no joy in Nature", says the poet, in 'The Artist's Dream' (710), and realised even that his labour has been lost. In one of his last poems, 'To L. L.', the poet regrets he has lost his life in mere vain; "You have only wasted your life" (702) says the poet. Elsewhere, the poet asserts, "I shall not live in vain" (690). Two poems before 'To L. L.', in the highly symbolic poem 'In the Forest', the poet expresses the idea of having followed a nightingale, i.e. mostly symbolising Pan himself, into the forest but the speaker got lost there not knowing "which I should follow, / Shadow or song!" (700). Significantly enough, the poet tells us that the experience took place at "twilight" which means the poet's vision was only murky throughout that endeavour. Late enough, however, the poet came to realise that the bird he has followed only misled him and that all his pursuit has vainly led him into loss; rather, he was himself snared instead.

It was only late in his life, though, that Wilde came to realise that even paganism could not provide him with the spiritual guidance and rest he had aspired for. In 'Humanitad', he wonders if it would be better to "spend my days within the voiceless cave of misery" and realises that "I pass into a life more barren, more austere" (679). Late enough did the poet come to realise that he has taken the wrong path by following a helpless God:

> Nay! for perchance that poppy-crownèd god
> Is like the watcher by a sick man's bed
> Who talks of sleep but gives it not; his rod
> Hath lost its virtue, and, when all is said,
> Death is too rude, too obvious a key
> To solve one single secret in a life's philosophy.
> (679)

To take the point a step beyond, the idea of rejecting, and

even revolting against paganism, is dwelt on in a number of other poems. There came times when the poet revolted against paganism, as he did previously with Christianity. He is, thus, "wearied of idolatry" (673), as he announces in 'Quia Multum Amavi', meaning 'Dear Heart'. In 'Canzonet', the poet asserts that "Pan is not here, / And will not come again" (699). It is characteristic of Wilde's later poems in general that the poet rids himself of pagan beliefs. In one poem after another, the poet announces the death of pagan gods. "Hylas is dead" (699), announces the poet in 'Canzonet', and in 'The Sphinx', the poet speaks of "dead divinities" (720). In 'Santa Decca', likewise, the poet announces that, "The Gods are dead: no longer do we bring / To grey-eyed Pallas Crowns of olive leaves"; Pallas is Athens goddess of wisdom, courage and inspiration. More importantly, in the same poem, the poet goes on to announce that, "Pan is dead…Great Pan is dead" (661). So, after such a long journey among Greek deities, the poet came to realise that he achieved nothing of the spiritual rest or composure he had aspired for.

IV
'The Ballad of Reading Gaol'
A Return to Christianity

'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' is the poem that brings Wilde's literary career to a close. The poem has largely been acclaimed by admirers and detractors alike. As one critic observed about the poem, "Wilde found in the realities of his misery the inspiration of his most powerful lines and of the only moving words which he ever wrote" (Legouis 1273). The poem was published in 1898, two years before Wilde's own death, with the author's name as C. 3. 3, Wilde's number in Reading Gaol. "Wilde is remembered best…", some critics believe, "for the humiliating end to his career when he was sentenced to two years hard labour for homosexual offences" (Carter 285). It was loss of social position, as some critics believe, that put an end to Wilde's literary career. It is right that Wilde spent the last two years of his life as an outcast, a vagabond, as Wilde himself said. Describing the hanging of 'C. T. W.' for the murder of his wife, the poem "protests inhumane prison conditions" (Netzley, 267).

Generally considered to be Wilde's best poem, 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' represents an important turning point in Wilde's religious pursuit. Religion is importantly brought into question all through the poem. In prison, Wilde returned anew to Christianity. This is referred to by Joseph Pearce who noted that, "there were hints of Wilde's own spiritual conversion within [prison's] walls" (365). Prison, as the poet experienced it, is "Hell" and its high walls are intended to hide such Hell from Christ. "Ironically," explains John Sloan, "in the poem, the prison walls are seen as man's attempt to blur and conceal their created Hell from Christ" (133):

> every prison that men build
> Is built with bricks of shame,
> And bound with bars lest Christ should see
> How men their brothers maim.
> With bars they blur the gracious moon,
> And blind the goodly sun:
> And they do well to hide their Hell,
> For in it things are done

That Son of God nor son of Man
Ever should look upon! (739-740)

Furthermore, the poem abounds with what can be called the Wilde-Christ identifications, in which the poet takes upon himself the suffering and the pain that ensues for no real sin of his own. Following the example of Christ, the poet does this readily. The poem, thus, highlights the idea of Wilde's identifying himself with Jesus Christ. More often than not, the poet draws upon the similarities between himself and God / Christ. This becomes remarkably clear, particularly, when Wilde develops ideas of suffering and pain. In addition, he willingly accepts pain and suffering as a means of purgation and an essential step to perfection. Sloan asserts that, "Wilde connects Christ's acceptance of pain to realisation of perfection" (27). In prison, the poet came to realise that Christ is there, in prison, to relieve the pains of the tortured, behind bars. Christ-like, the poet is now no more than a "soul in pain" (726). Wilde wrote to one of his friends that "it was when I was in the depths of suffering that I wrote my poem" (Pearce 381).

The idea of salvation is, in its turn, importantly introduced. The poet is now an ardent seeker of mercy and salvation, and, therefore, he calls on the Christ "Saviour" (732), "Son of God" (740) repeatedly:

I walked, with other souls in pain,
Within another ring,
And was wondering if the man had done
A great or little thing,
When a voice behind me whispered low,
'That fellow's got to swing.'
Dear Christ! the very prison walls
Suddenly seemed to reel,
And the sky above my head became
Like a casque of scorching steel;
And, though I was a soul in pain,
My pain I could not feel. (725-6)

The greatest change about this return to Christianity is in the poet's realisation of Jesus Crit. As realised by the poet, Christ is now bearer of pain, a sufferer and a Saviour. To the poet, Christ is now an

example of perfect divinity. The poet's spiritual rest and composure, as can be inferred, was finally achieved in prison, despite the deep suffering. The poet's spiritual journey is now concluded with the poet's spiritual returen to Christianity. In his book *Oscar Wilde,* John Sloan gives the following account of Wilde's death:

> On 29 November [1900], the day before [Wilde's] death, Robert Ross went in search of a priest, having vowed to bring a priest to him when he was dying. After great difficulty he found Father Cuthbert Dunne, a Dubliner then attached to the Passionist Order, who came at once to the hotel and administered baptism and the last rites. Wilde died at about 5:30 the following morning. Requiem mass was said for him at Saint-Germain-des-Pres, and he was buried at Bagneux cemetery on on 3 December with Douglas among the fourteen mourners present. (30)

V
Conclusion

Religious instabilities underlie all of Wilde's poetic oeuvre. Religion was an essential preoccupation to the poet whose life, as Wilde's poetry makes clear, was marked by turbulent adventures in religion. The poet's religious pursuit, as the paper shows, was a laborious one. The poet's religious adventures in Christianity did not bring the poet the spiritual rest and composure he aspired for. He, therefore, turned to paganism in the hope of finding some spiritual guidance. In its turn, the poet's endeavour in paganism proved, finally, to be a failure. In prison, the poet returned anew to Christianity, as a devoted Christian this time. His last poem, 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', reveal a big change on the side of the poet as he came to think of Jesus Christ as God, Saviour, sufferer and bearer of pain.

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