The beheading of John in the vision of Oscar Wilde

“The door to soul consciousness remains closed, as long as we live from the known, from the old knowing. Because the ‘known knowledge’ is like a veil, like a door, which hides the unknown from us.”

In the Biblical story about the beheading of John, there are seven veils.
Many contemporary Rosicrucian writings often refer to the Johannine consciousness or the ‘John’ phase. We can see that phase as the manifestation of a consciousness on the earthly plane that provides insight into the purpose of being human. It is however, not the intention to remain on that level of consciousness without further change, but it is important to live from it, for living from it will bring about the change where eventually ‘John’ will meet ‘Jesus’.

That is the birth of the higher consciousness. John has then completed his task. The Bible gives us an extensive account of the baptism of Jesus by John. However, Johns’ death is only mentioned in passing, for he was beheaded at the request of the stepdaughter of the king as thanks for a dance with seven veils.

Despite the apparent casual mention and rather lurid Biblical description, there is a deeper spiritual significance behind this whole event. Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) wrote the play *Salomé* on that subject in 1891, the thread of which we would like to broadly follow below.

Phillipus Herod is married to Herodias. They have a daughter, Salome. Antipas Herod, his brother or stepbrother according to some sources, tempts Herodias to leave Phillipus and go with him. They are happy together. Salome grows up to be a beautiful young woman.

Meanwhile, John preaches in the desert. Antipas wants to stay informed about what is happening in his lands and invites John to his palace. Antipas respects the wisdom of the desert preacher. However, John blames him for his adulterous way of life, which is resented by Herodias for she fears to be turned away, and therefore plans to banish John. She seizes the opportunity when Antipas asks her daughter to do the dance with the seven veils at his birthday party. Antipas swears an oath to allow Salome to ask for whatever she wants if the dance is successful. Salome consults her mother who contrives to ask for John’s head to avoid being sent away.

Antipas is furious when he has to meet Salome’s demand, but does what she asks because of his oath and the possible loss of face. He has Johns’ head bought to her on a silver platter, a symbol of purity, a clear conscience, good intentions and kindness. By this he wants to indicate that he has killed an innocent.

In order to understand the deeper meaning behind this story, we can start but
approaching the hidden meanings of the names of the characters.

The name John stands for ‘the one who is gifted by God’; Philipus stands for ‘a lover of horses’; Salome for ‘the peaceful’; Antipas for ‘like a father’; while Herodias and Herod stand for being ‘courageous and brave’.

When we approach the story from these perspectives, it takes on a surprising turn. We are suddenly faced with some contradictions, as the protagonists’ names no longer appear to match their roles in the story.

For instance, how can Salome, which in Hebrew means ‘the kingdom of peace’, be reconciled with her demands for the head of John, which is not exactly a peaceful act? How can Herodias, whose name means ‘brave’, be seen as courageous, after the treacherous and cowardly act of manipulating her own child to ask for the preachers head?

Antipas, whose surname is Herod, displays a dichotomy of character and therefore a dual contradiction. On the one hand his surname, Herod, means brave, yet he hides behind the decapitation in order to not lose face, while his first name, Antipas, which is supposed to embody a fatherly figure, encourages Salome to dance the dance of the seven veils, which points more to an act of perversion than fatherly love.

How can we reconcile the contradiction of the head of John being presented on a silver platter, when we know that silver stands for purity, a clear conscience, good intentions and kindness? What is the meaning behind all this?

**The lofty meaning of a cruel story**

There must be a hidden meaning behind this cruel story? Oscar Wilde states in his play that Salome is 15 years old. 1 and 5. She dances the dance of the 7 veils. Here we see the combination of the numbers 1, 5 and 7, indicating the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is clear that from this that we are touching on something special here, so let us continue with our deeper analysis.

When we look at the symbolism of the seven veils, this can indicate the seven brain cavities, or the seven chambers of the heart, however in this instance they are not represented here, as we are concerned with the ‘head’ of John.

As Salome dances her dance of the seven veils, they fall one by one, indicating that the Johannine man will gradually see through the true nature of thinking step by step.
So as the veils that envelop the head sanctuary drop one by one, the ‘reward’ is the beheading, and the mind calms down. Peace enters the thinking faculty and Salome, the peaceful, is finished.

As we saw before, Oscar Wilde states that Salome is 15 years old. The number 1 can also represent unity or a one pointed focus, and the 5 can represent the new soul. So we see that Salome as the new soul, accomplishes the work. The personality must have the courage to make this happen, the courage to drop the seven veils, the courage and bravery of Herodias.

Salome is the daughter of Herodias. Peace is the daughter, the result of bravery. It takes a lot of courage to carefully observe one’s own thinking and the resulting action life, and to draw consequences from it. All of this can only happen if it is accompanied by purity, good intentions and kind heartedness. Kind heartedness must also be applied to oneself.

As the veils fall the two sides of our being rise up, because both good and evil are aspects that maintain our old earthly life. To see and live through the process of lifting the veils requires kindness to oneself and not allowing oneself to fall into self pity or self blame.

If we approach this story from another viewpoint we can see that every character can be considered as a separate aspect of the human being on the path, representing a different level of consciousness.

We start with Phillipus, the ‘horse man’, a symbol of the earthly mind. He is perfectly happy in this world. From a Gnostic viewpoint, this is completely analogous to the sentiment, ‘people with horses have heaven on earth, but when they die, there is little to inherit’. Phillipus is the person who is completely focused on earthly matters, one who is not at all concerned with the deeper questions of life. He lets life carry him on without question, and lets ‘God’s water run over God’s field’ as the saying goes. He quickly disappears from the story because other aspects of consciousness emerge.

Herodias, his wife, his opposite pole, longs for a higher purpose in life. The Spirit Spark radiates a longing for a unity with the Spirit, a longing that is a rudimentary expression of a higher consciousness, and which does not allow the nature born man, Phillipus, to find peace in his life. As a result, Phillipus must disappear from the scene and Antipas must come to the fore. Phillipus is, as it were, transformed into Antipas.

Antipas now takes on a completely different role. He recognizes Salome as the new
soul and asks her to reveal herself, to pull aside the veils that enclose the new thinking faculty, the new consciousness.

However, Salome cannot help, but rather asks for the head of John. Salome, the new soul, cannot reveal itself until the veils encompassing the head sanctuary are removed. As long as the old thinking is not seen as a limiting factor on the spiritual path, no matter how necessary it is, true insight cannot be gained.

When such insight has grown through the dance of Salome, John realizes that his role has been fulfilled. He understands that he has to disappear to give Salome, the new soul every opportunity to continue to grow. He inwardly recognizes and acknowledges the presence of the new soul, and he sacrifices himself of his own free will.

So what seems to be a cruel, blood thirsty story, suddenly takes on a very lofty spiritual meaning. The earthly consciousness, John, which has reached the limits of its potential, willingly gives way to the new consciousness, the new soul consciousness.

So in summary we can say that that the door to the new soul consciousness will remain closed as long as we live from the old earthly consciousness, as long as we are guided only by what is ‘known’. For it is the ‘known’ that is the veil, the door, that hides the unknown from us. When through insight, we have removed the seven veils and ‘beheaded’ our old thinking, a door will open, a door to the new soul consciousness full of glorious new perspectives.

1. Oscar Wilde, Salomé, A Tragedy in One Act, 1894