Chapter 2

Mask Speaks more than the Face:
Symbolic Manifestation of Same-Sex Pairing

“All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril”

(The Picture of Dorian Gray 6).

The various mechanisms of the return of the repressed can be explained using different methods of psychology like Id psychology and Ego psychology. Id psychology or Instinct psychology focuses on the role of sexual instincts as the driving force of a person’s life. Its principles are fixed in the notion that the work of art is the secret embodiment of the author’s unconscious desires:

The unconscious is thought of as close to the bodily sources of the pressure of need, from which libido derives, with its power to invade and transform experience, particularly in dream and fantasy. Its ability to mask itself thus enables it to appear in disguised form in activities where in the sexual origin is apparently unrecognisable, and only to be decoded with difficulty, even though the feeling they give rise to loses none of its intensity by such disguise. (Wright 37)

Freud proposes that the repressed desires and wishes which are normally prevented from surfacing into the conscious mind, take the form of images or symbols which have social permission for representation. Thus the repressed desires find outlet from the unconscious element of mind in disguise of images and symbols.
‘Symbolism’ is quite typical of psychoanalytic interpretation. The unconscious cannot speak directly and hence does so through images and symbols.

The pairing of same-sex in Oscar Wilde’s works comes across as a mechanism to liberate the libidinal desires of his unconscious. Representation of explicit same-sex pairing may sometimes raise moral disputes from the society. Hence Wilde, or more precisely his unconscious, devised another mechanism to find an outlet for his repressed desires. ‘All art is at once surface and symbol’, he (Wilde) would affirm and his own tales point the truth of this (Pearson 218). Wilde thus tries to liberate his unconscious desires through different symbolic manifestations of same-sex pairing. In the plot he uses some every day object which represents, stands for or suggests homosexuality. The disambiguation of such objects makes homosexual reading of the work possible. Symbolic representation gives the freedom to discuss the theme of homosexuality, but in disguise. There are no explicit same-sex pairs in some of the plots, but the images used as symbols attribute homosexuality to certain same-sex pairs. Sedgwick argues that Wilde had good reason to mask his same-sex passion in his works:

For Wilde, in 1891 a young man with a very great deal to lose who was trying to embody his own talents and desires in a self-contradictory male-homosocial terrain where too much was not enough but, at the same time, anything at all might be too much, the collapse of the homo/hetero with self/other must also have been attractive for the protective/expressive camouflage it offered to distinctly gay content.

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Art fulfils the secret wishes of the mind by making use of strategies in order to overcome the resistance of consciousness: “Work is done by the dreamer and the artist
in order to transform their primitive desires into culturally acceptable meaning” (Wright 28). What is implied by Freud’s notion of symbolism is that “the whole world can be observed narcissistically, the sexual drives that can attach themselves to anything the senses perceive” (Wright 41). Frederick Crews in his book, *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne’s Psychological Themes* observes that “the images and symbols are condensations and displacements of the libidinal impulse” (Wright 48). To put it in Wilde’s own words, “an idea is of no value till it becomes incarnate and is made an image” (Ghosal 56).

Oscar Wilde’s short stories, “The Remarkable Rocket”, “The Canterville Ghost”, and “The Selfish Giant”; his plays *Salome*, and *An Ideal Husband*; his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; and some of his poems are subjected to interpretations based on Id psychological model to explore the ways in which the repressed desires return. In these works for instance, Wilde employs symbols like ‘Rocket’ or ‘Ghost’, which have social permission for representation in literature, in order to speak about certain repressed desires which are normally prevented from getting projected into the conscious realm. Symbolisation is a process in which “some neutral objects stand for, or allude to, some aspect of sexual life or those persons connected with it...” (Storr 45). Homosexuality becomes one among the different significations of the text, though in the guise of some ordinary objects which are symbolic manifestations of same-sex pairing. A symbol means something which has a representative function. Anthony Storr observes that: “Freudian symbols’ are popularly supposed to be objects occurring in dreams or phantasies which represent the genitals. Thus, hollow containers, like caves or handbags, may symbolize the female genitals; while swords, umbrellas, or pencils may be taken as indicating the penis” (48).
In the short stories “The Selfish Giant” and “The Remarkable Rocket” the symbolic manifestation of same-sex pairing works on the principle of psychoanalysis which attribute phallic connotation to tall and erect objects.

In the fairy tale, “The Remarkable Rocket” the repressed material in the unconscious finds an outlet through the paring of two unimportant characters. In the story it functions on two different levels. The first part of the story establishes the representation of the Remarkable Rocket as a phallic symbol, which is typical of Freudian interpretation of attributing sexual connotation to objects. In the second phase the phallic symbol is shown to have possessing power only in association with the male-male bonding in the story.

“The Remarkable Rocket” is often regarded as a parody of aristocratic pride and masculine conceit. The story is basically about the marriage of a wealthy prince and a Russian princess who are madly in love with each other. Ostentatious preparations are made for their wedding to make it a huge celebration. It is said that the major attraction of the ceremony is its grand fireworks. Since the princess has never witnessed a firework in her life the prince is excited to show it to her. Though the fireworks in the story are inanimate objects, they are attributed human traits, the most important being their ability to talk with each other.

As the narration progresses the focus of the story shifts from the prince and princess to the fireworks. There is a Rocket among the fireworks who considers himself ‘remarkable’. He is arrogant, pompous and egoist. He tries to assert his superiority over other crackers by boasting about his special features. While talking to other crackers the Remarkable Rocket goes emotional and bursts into tears. As a result he goes wet before he is lit and becomes too damp to catch fire. The servants
dispose of him over the castle walls and he lands in a swamp. The Rocket does not realize that he has been thrown out. Instead he believes that he is being given time to recover his strength before being lit.

It is then that two boys come to the spot. While collecting wood to make a fire they mistake the rocket for a piece of kindling. Much to the Rocket’s resentment, they place him on their fire. Eventually he dries up enough to ignite and explode. Unfortunately it happens in the middle of the day, and no one sees the display except a startled goose. And the story ends with the explosion of the Remarkable Rocket who still believes that he has created a great impression.

The Remarkable Rocket assumes phallic dimensions symbolically, in the very beginning itself when the marriage of prince and princess comes under the scanner. The firework is considered to be the highlight of the ceremony and it is planned to be set off in the midnight. It is also said that the ‘virgin’ bride has never seen a firework in her life and is waiting to see it on the day of her marriage.

The last item on the programme was a grand display of fireworks, to be let off exactly at midnight. The little Princess had never seen a firework in her life...

‘What are fireworks like? She asked the Prince, one morning, as she was walking on the terrace.

‘They are like the Aurora Borealis’... ‘only much more natural’... You must certainly see them’. (“The Remarkable Rocket” 36)
Her ignorance about the fireworks signifies her chastity. Being a ‘loyal and chaste’ bride she waits to see the firework on the day of her marriage only. Her anticipation makes the image all the more powerful. The Rocket himself claims that the Prince is lucky to have the Rocket let off on the day of his marriage: “‘How fortunate it is for the King’s son’ he remarked, ‘that he is to be married on the day on which I am to be let off. Really, if it had been arranged beforehand, it could not have turned out better for him’…” (37). The Rocket assumes a superior position among other crackers. He is so important that his inefficiency may adversely affect the marital life of the Prince and the Princess. It attributes a symbolic association between the efficiency of the Rocket and the Prince’s potency. Hence, the Rocket’s malfunction on the wedding night suggests the Prince’s disappointment in making love with the Princess. The Rocket himself makes a valid observation about the matter:

...‘Suppose, for instance, anything happened to me to-night, what a misfortune that would be for every one! The Prince and Princess would never be happy again, their whole married life would be spoiled; and as for the King, I know he would not get over it. Really, when I begin to reflect on the importance of my position, I am almost moved to tears’.

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An exploration of the parapraxis is possible in the second phase of the story where the application of the phallic symbol on two different types of relationships shows apparently two contrasting results. While the Remarkable Rocket proves itself a failure in the relationship between a male and a female, it successfully explodes when associated with the two little boys. Wilde seems to have unconsciously favoured a male-male bonding, where the Rocket effectively explodes. Though the explosion of
the rocket in the presence of the pair of boys stands symbolic of same-sex love, it also hints at Wilde’s interest in pederasty.

In the case of the bonding between the Prince and the Princess (male-female), the Rocket is found to be desperately futile. On the wedding night, at the stroke of midnight when the fireworks begin, the Remarkable Rocket eagerly waits to get himself let off, but in vain. “Everyone was a great success except the Remarkable Rocket” (41). He is labelled as a ‘Bad Rocket’ and soon finds himself in the ditch: “The next day the workmen came to put everything tidy...Then one of them caught sight of him...and he threw him over the wall into the ditch” (41).

The situation is just the opposite when the Rocket comes to the possession of the two boys (male-male). They pick the Rocket out of the ditch and decide to put it into the fire to boil their kettle. Soon the Rocket catches fire: “The Rocket was very damp, so he took a long time to burn. At last, however, the fire caught him” (45). The language used for the description of the final explosion of the Remarkable Rocket is packed with sexual connotations or sexual innuendo. The words are carefully selected to suggest erection, orgasmic pleasure and ejaculation.

‘Now I am going off!’ he cried, and he made himself very stiff and straight. ‘I know I shall go much higher than the stars, much higher than the moon, much higher than the sun. In fact, I shall go so high that-

Fizz! Fizz! Fizz! and he went straight up into the air.

‘Delightful!’ he cried, ‘I shall go on like this for ever. What a success I am!’
But nobody saw him.

Then he began to feel a curious tingling sensation all over him.

‘Now I am going to explode’, he cried. ‘I shall set the whole world on fire, and make such a noise, that nobody will talk about anything else for a year’. And he certainly did explode. Bang! Bang! went the gunpowder. There was no doubt about it. (45)

Where the Remarkable Rocket stands for phallic symbol it fails in a heterosexual relationship and proves itself successful when associated with a male-male bonding. The Rocket is thus used as a powerful phallic symbol to discuss the theme of homosexuality. The ‘innocent’ rocket image poses no threat to the moral codes of Victorian society, and hence its representation in literature is acceptable. Wilde makes use of this innocent image as a means to communicate a forbidden desire which is denied manifestation in the conscious realm of mind.

Similarly, in “The Selfish Giant” same-sex pairing attains its symbolic signification when phallic connotations are attributed to a tree trunk. The religious background of the story is only a pretext to discuss the theme of pederasty.

“The Selfish Giant” is a fantasy story about a giant who learns compassion from the innocence of children. The giant has a beautiful garden where children could play each day after school. The giant was away for seven years to visit one of his friends. When he returns he is infuriated to see the children trespassing. So he builds a huge wall around his garden and keeps a sign board reading TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED. The spring comes, but in the giant’s garden winter remains. One day the children enter the garden through a hole in the wall, and a linnet is found
singing with flowers in full bloom all around. The children have brought spring back
to his garden. The giant is moved by the sight and helps a little crying boy climb a
tree. As the years pass the giant grows old and watches the children play in his
garden. One day he sees that boy again under the same tree with wounds of love on
his hands and feet. Later children find the giant lying dead under the tree covered in
white blossom.

Wilde breaks the conventional expectations of a fairy tale by addressing his
story to parents more than children. The subversion of conventions challenges moral
values of the society. This strategy of reversal can be seen in both the thematic
concerns and formal structures of Wilde’s stories, which makes them a subtly
unconventional.

In “The Selfish Giant”, the role of the child is to educate the giant into
the art of good parenting, and the giant’s reward for learning the values
of tolerance and altruism is a divine death-bed revelation: the child he
has cared for becomes mysteriously and magically transformed into an
image of Christ offering His hand to lead the giant to heaven... all of
this represents a thoroughgoing if simple reversal of the conventional
fairy tale form, for Wilde’s stories run directly counter to the
nineteenth century tradition of moral tales for children that emphasise
the role of parents in educating recalcitrant children into the norms and
values of adult culture. (Small xv-xvi)

In this story again there is a play of the unconscious where the libidinal urges
take the form of accepted literary images. Hence the significant religious imagery acts
as a cover up to conceal the homosexual undertones in the story. An interpretation of
the story made in the light of Id psychology opens up the possibilities of implied paedophilic references. As stated in the case of “The Remarkable Rocket,” an important subject often considered while talking about Wilde and his works is the influence of pederasty, a relationship between an adult man and an adolescent boy. Chris Bartle has observed the strong pederastic identity of Wilde’s character when he emphasised “the need to consider the pederastic nature of Wilde’s Eros as opposed to the homosexual one” (87). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has also pointed out that “Wilde’s own eros was most closely tuned to the note of... pederastic love” (57). Philippe Jullian, in his biography of Oscar Wilde narrates an incident from Wilde’s school days which emphasises Wilde’s interest in and affection for small boys. Jullian has cited the reference from Wilde’s biographer, Frank Harris.

According to him (Frank Harris), Oscar confided that he often went for walks with a boy a little younger than himself who listened agape to his improvisation: ‘My friend had a wonderful gift for listening’, he said. When the time came for him to leave school for good, Oscar did not disguise his joy. ‘You seem to be glad to go’, said the friend, asking if he could accompany Oscar to the railway station. On arrival there, the boy stayed in the compartment until the whistle sounded for the train to leave, where upon he took Oscar’s head in his hands and kissed him on the mouth. Oscar sat there in amazement. ‘This is love: this is what he meant – love. I was trembling all over. For a long while I sat, unable to think, all shaken with wonder and remorse’. (31)

The story is about a Giant and his beautiful garden. There is no blossom in the Giant’s garden when spring comes all around. His garden alone remains barren with snow covered grass and frozen trees. The sterility of the land connotes to the Giant’s
impotency. There is no change in the weather and in the Giant’s condition. “His breath was like ice” (“The Selfish Giant” 20); and nothing warms him up. Suddenly spring comes to his garden with the arrival of the children. Children have brought spring to his garden and potency to his life.

He notices a small boy who wants to climb a tree. The tree trunk is a phallic symbol with sexual implications. The Giant helps the child mount the tree and the tree breaks at once into blossom. The image of child mounting the tree trunk and helping it bloom reinforces the sexual connotations in the story. The Giant and the small boy constitute the same-sex pair, connected with the symbolic image of the tree trunk.

He was so small that he could not reach up to the branches of the tree, and he was wandering all around it, crying bitterly... And the Giant’s heart melted as he looked out. ‘How Selfish I have been!’ he said, ‘Now I know why the spring would not come here. I will put that poor little boy on top of the tree...’ And the Giant stole up behind him and took him gently in his hand, and put him up into the tree. And the tree broke at once into blossom, and the birds came and sang on it, and the little boy stretched out his two arms and flung them round the Giant’s neck and kissed him. (21)

The symbolic signification of the tree trunk becomes highly ironic in the religious background of the story. Freud, while explaining the mechanism of ‘Sublimation’ has identified the use of religious themes as an escape of the repressed from forbidden sphere: “A similar process is that of sublimation, whereby the repressed material is promoted into something grander or is disguised as something
noble. For instance, sexual urges may be given sublimated expression in the form of intense religious experiences or longings” (Barry 93).

Wilson Knight observes that “Christ is a key to Wilde’s life” (147). His interest “increased every year until at length he almost identified himself with Christ and often spoke in parables” (147).

When the Giant recognises the role of children in bringing back spring he allows them to play with him. The little boy remains his favourite. “The Giant loved him the best because he had kissed him” (“The Selfish Giant” 22); but the little boy soon disappears and the Giant feels so sad. He longs for his first little friend and says “how I would like to see him!” (22). He grows old and stops playing with them, but happily watches them playing.

The climax of the story is highly paradoxical in the sense that it is packed with religious as well as sexual images. The child comes again to the garden, this time with wounds of love on his hands and feet. This image of child reminds us of Christ with wounds of love and sacrifice on his hands and feet. The divine entity has come to beckon the Giant to Paradise, suggesting Giant’s death and entry to heaven. The Giant’s wickedness is forgiven with the divine intervention. The religious aura, thus is a pretext in the story to cover up its sexual undertones because the climax is as symbolic as it is religious.

It is on a winter morning that the little child makes his second visit. His arrival has again brought blossom to his garden. “In the farthest corner of the garden was a tree quite covered with lovely white blossom. Its branches were all golden and silver fruit hung down from them, and underneath it stood the little boy he had loved” (22). The final image of the Giant “all covered with white blossom” (22) represents his
potency. Though it is winter around he alone enjoys blossom. The child’s return has given him potency and peaceful death. Moreover, the description of the tree with its golden branches and silver fruits, and its blooming in winter evokes the picture of a well decorated Christmas tree, fortifying the religious imagery. Moreover, the roots of the Christmas tree can be traced back to the pagan customs of tree worship which was practiced by the ancient pagan communities in Europe; it was translated as a Christian tradition by way of the Scandinavian customs of adorning their houses and barns with evergreens around the New Year to keep away the devil and also by setting up a tree during Christmas for birds. This was further observed by the Germans by placing a Yule tree at an entrance or inside the house during the midwinter holidays (Encyclopaedia Britannica). The paradoxical interlacing of the pagan and the Christian seems to represent Wilde’s own sexual orientation and also the fear of the moralizing forces of his time. Both desire and the fear of exhibiting it seem to conflict in his unconscious.

Again, in his poem “Le Jardin des Tuileries” Wilde gives subjective expression of the Giant’s experience. He speaks about how he enjoyed the company of young children around him. The poet’s identification with the Giant can be traced in the poem where he gives an account of similar experience:

Ah! Cruel tree! If I were you,

And children climbed me, for their sake

Though it be winter I would break

Into spring blossoms white and blue! (116)
While narrating the simple story of the Giant, Wilde unconsciously leaves space for a homosexual reading of the text. Here again he makes use of sexual symbols to take the repressed desires out of the unconscious realm. Though written in a religious backdrop the story acquires a different meaning with its powerful symbolic signification.

Attribution of homosexuality in human as well as non-human entities is yet another method employed by Wilde to give symbolic rendering of same-sex pairing in his works. “Symbols are treated by Freud as predominantly serving the function of concealment, or of making the anatomical aspects of sexuality more acceptable” (Storr 49). Chremamorphism is in function in the process of attributing homosexuality in the Ghost and Salome. “If personification is the technique of giving inanimate human characteristics, Chremamorphism is giving characteristics of an object to a person” (“Chremamorphism”). Here, the features of homosexuality are given to the ‘Ghost’ and ‘Salome’ in “The Canterville Ghost” and Salome respectively.

Gothic literature occupies a prominent space in the Victorian literary world. Hence, handling a forbidden feeling like homosexuality becomes easier under the pretext of an accepted literary image like ghost. Wilde has beautifully exploited the possibilities of symbolic manifestation of homosexuality through the image of a ghost in his short story “The Canterville Ghost”. Ghost stories amazingly appeal to the mass audience underscoring its cultural relevance worldwide. Reason and logic willingly refrain from the realm of the supernatural giving way to the play of imagination. Though often written in a way to be scary and frightening ghost stories serve some other purposes as well. Morality tales and comedies are instances. Attempts have always been made to dig out the possible parallel readings in popular ghost stories. In certain cases, while assuming the form of a ghost story on the surface level, it
implicitly draws attention to some gruesome social injustices. The vengeance of the ghost may thus get reverberated as the uproar of the wretched of the society. Julia Briggs in her essay “The Ghost Story” observes that the ghost story is the product of a divided society

... So the ghost story, with its many symbolisms of a world within us, beyond us or looming out of the past to our destruction, continues to be a potent and living literary form, offering its readers a serious and even self-reflexive message as well as the thrill of fear, and will continue to do so, as long as human life is terminated by the mystery of death, and the working of nature and our own minds remain opaque to us. (Briggs 143)

Oscar Wilde’s “The Canterville Ghost” is ironically one of his funniest short stories. He paints an unconventional ghost that breaks all the traditional concepts of a ghost. The comic discrepancy between manners and morals is a common theme in many of Wilde’s Society Comedies. The plot of “The Canterville Ghost” works on a similar kind of inversion. It is the evil avenging ghost which turns out to be the hero, and the members of family become villains. The implication is that criminal behaviour is produced by society’s lack of moral imagination and sympathy – a theme Wilde was to take up in his essay “The Soul of Man under Socialism” and, in relation to his own imprisonment, in De Profundis. Unlike the deadly ghosts of many ghost stories here we have a suffering ghost whose attempts to frighten the Otis family always go futile. He is ridiculed, insulted and even tortured by the Otis family, especially the twins. The ghost has succeeded in frightening the members of the Canterville family, but this modern American family of Mr. Otis is not affected by the menacing stories about the ghost. When Lord Canterville warns Mr. Otis about the
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The ghost feared by the British aristocracy symbolises homosexuality, a social threat that challenged Victorian moral codes. “The Canterville Ghost” thus becomes a literary piece showcasing Victorian society’s homophobia. The story seems to underscore a conflict between the old and new world orders in the sense that the Canterville family and the people related to it stand for the hard core Victorian morality and the Otis family who moved to the castle represents an ideal pragmatic family capable of accepting alternative sexual orientations.

Suppressed desires in the unconscious often take distorted forms in literature thus getting projected to the so called forbidden social space. The Canterville ghost is such an image that takes secondary signification in the symbolic realm. The fear of ghost thus symbolically signifies Victorian apprehensions about a homoerotic culture.

The gothic elements of the story get projected when the people of Canterville castle are subjected to encounters with the ghost. Their fear gets manifested when they narrate their experiences related to the ghost. In the beginning of the story Lord Canterville recollects the incidents that led his family flee from their own castle:

‘We have not cared to live in the place ourselves,’ said Lord Canterville, ‘since my grand-aunt, the Dowager Duchess of Bolton,
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was frightened into a fit, from which she never really recovered, by two skeleton hands being placed on her shoulders as she was dressing for dinner, and I feel bound to tell you, Mr. Otis, that the ghost has been seen by several living members of my family, as well as by the rector of the Parish, the Rev. Augustus Dampier, who is a fellow of King’s College, Cambridge. After the unfortunate accident to the Duchess, none of our younger servants would stay with us, and Lady Canterville often got very little sleep at night, in consequence of the mysterious noises that came from the corridor and library’. (206)

When Washington Otis cleaned the blood stain from the floor a terrible flash of lightening lit up the sombre room. Mrs. Umney, the house keeper fainted when she heard the fearful thunder, while the Otis family just blamed the monstrous climate. Mrs. Umney’s awareness about the deadly nature of the ghost justifies her fear. It is mentioned in the story that she was extremely upset and sternly warned Mr. Otis to be aware of an upcoming trouble: “‘I have seen things with my own eyes, sir’ she said, ‘that would make any Christian’s hair stand on end, and many and many a night I have not closed my eyes in sleep for the awful things that are done here’” (209).

Her reference to ‘any Christian’ hints at how the ghost challenges the moral and spiritual values of England. Homosexuality has evidently been a threat to Christianity. Victorian apprehensions regarding homosexuality become apparent again when the ghost speaks about Madame de Tremouillac while recollecting how he succeeded in frightening the people of Canterville.

...He thought of the Dowager Duchess, whom he had frightened into a fit as she stood before the glass in her lace and diamonds; of the four housemaids, who had gone off into hysterics when he merely grinned
at them through the curtains of one of the spare bedrooms; of the rector of the parish, whose candle he had blown out as he was coming late one night from the library, and who had been under the care of Sir William Gull ever since, a perfect martyr to nervous disorder; and of Old Madame de Tremouillac, who having wakened up one morning early and seen a skeleton seated in an armchair by the fire reading her diary, had been confined to her bed for six weeks with an attack of brain fever, and on her recovery, had become reconciled to the Church, and broken off her connection with that notorious sceptic Monsieur de Voltaire. (212)

It is significant to note that Madame de Tremouillac’s encounter with the ghost reconciled her to the Church breaking her connection with a free thinker like Monsieur de Voltaire, obviously because of the skeleton being out of the closet. Evidently the ‘fear of ghost’ seems to make one morally and spiritually more committed. Her moral awareness saved her from the social threat and brought her close to religion. Religion is definitely a social factor that plays a key role in the cultural repression of homosexuality as a perversion.

The most striking suggestion of homophobia occurs in the description of Lady Barbara’s uneasiness with the ghost:

...he had so frightened pretty Lady Barbara Modish by means of it, that she suddenly broke off her engagement with the present Lord Canterville’s grandfather, and ran away to Gretna Green with handsome Jack Castleton, declaring that nothing in the world would induce her to marry into a family that allowed such a horrible phantom to walk up and down the terrace at twilight. Poor Jack was afterwards
shot in a duel by Lord Canterville on Wandsworth Common, and Lady Barbara died of a broken heart at Tunbridge Wells before the year was out, so, in every way, it had been a great success. (219)

Her disgust in getting married into a family where a ‘horrible phantom’ dwells made her run away with Jack Castleton. When the matter of marriage is in question, alternative sexual orientation becomes a real social threat.

Otis family on the other hand represents an ideal world, though then a utopia, where homosexuality is considered a normal phenomenon. ‘America’ has to be taken as a euphemistic connotation for a ‘dream land’ where alternative sexual orientations are considered normal. Mr. Otis is ready to buy the ghost, if there is any, along with the furniture. He says he comes from a ‘modern country’ and so is not worried about the ghost. For the Otis family the blood stain on the library floor which is meant to frighten them is just an ordinary stain that can be removed using Pinkerton’s Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Detergent. When the ghost appears in his ‘terrible aspect’ before Mr. Otis he is least frightened and gives a practical solution to the noise produced as the ghost walk around. Upon hearing the clanking noises in the hallway, Mr Otis promptly gets out of bed and pragmatically offers the ghost Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator to oil his chains.

‘My dear sir’ said Mr. Otis, ‘I really must insist on your oiling those chains, and have brought you for that purpose a small bottle of the Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator. It is said to be completely efficacious upon one application, and there are several testimonials to that effect on the wrapper from some of our most eminent native divines. I shall be happy to supply you with more should you require it.’ With these words the United States Minister laid the bottle down
on a marble table, and, closing his door, retired to rest. For a moment
the Canterville ghost stood quite motionless in natural indignation; ...

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The reference to the lubricator is also highly suggestive. The sexual undertones
associated with the oil and Mr. Otis’s practical solution cannot be missed. His
progressive mind and the solution he offers to lessen the clanking noise is again a
process of acceptance of the forbidden by habitual conditioning. He is ready to supply
the ghost with more of ‘it’. Moreover the reference to the chains indicates societal
curtailment of alternate sexual orientation and the process of oiling may also be
considered as the normalising of such forbidden acts. The taboo associated with
homosexuality is again creatively concealed by Wilde.

“The Canterville Ghost” is aptly subtitled ‘A Hylo-idealistic Romance’. Hylo
idealism is a philosophical position that seems quite a strange concept as far as a ghost
story is concerned. Here it refers to the marvellously pragmatic Otis family. Their
pragmatism looks odd in a social situation like the one that existed in the England of
Victorian era. But it offers a romantic outlook of how different the attitude towards
life could be.

Virginia, Mr. Otis’ daughter is different from everyone else in the family. She
does not dismiss the ghost. Unlike her parents and brothers she is a bit afraid of the
ghost. “The only person who did not enter into the joke was little Virginia, who, for
some unexplained reason, was always a good deal distressed at the sight of the blood-
stain, and very nearly cried in the morning it was emerald green” (213). She is more
an English lady who respects moral values. At times she has “a sweet Puritan gravity,
captured from some old New England ancestor” (223). Mr. Otis himself exclaims that
his daughter has a different temperament. He tries to give an explanation for why his daughter is different from other members of the family:

“... For my own part, I confess I am a good deal surprised to find a child of mine expressing sympathy with medievalism in any form, and can only account for it by the fact that Virginia was born in one of your London suburbs shortly after Mrs. Otis had returned from a trip to Athens” (232).

Her place of birth seems to have played a role in colouring her character and made her more English. Consequently she fears the ghost and terribly anticipates the danger that the ghost may bring home. For her the ghost exhibits vulgarity, “it is you who are rude, and horrid and vulgar ....” (224). Virginia out of her pity for the ghost decides to comfort him. She warns him that this is not the place for him to survive. Being a person who has lived her life both in England and the ‘Modern Country’ she persuades him to escape from England:

You know nothing about it, and the best thing you can do is to emigrate and improve your mind. My father will be only too happy to give you a free passage, and though there is a heavy duty on spirits of every kind, there will be no difficulty about the Custom House, as the officers are all Democrats. Once in New York, you are sure to be a great success. I know lots of people there who would give a hundred thousand dollars to have a grandfather, and much more than that to have a family ghost. (224)

She paints in words before him a world where he would be accepted, but he is reluctant to leave. She then promises to help him get a peaceful sleep in the Garden of Death, the only option that the ghost has in front of him if he truly wishes to be in England.
Since the ghost is reluctant to leave England the Modern country with its remarkable possibilities remains a Utopia for him. In England, he knows, he can attain normalcy only through death. ‘The death of the ghost’ symbolically signifies the suppression of homosexuality or conversion to heterosexuality, thus attaining normalcy. Victorian apprehensions about homosexuality will fade away with the death of the ghost.

The ghost was supposedly leading a life full of vices: “It is quite true that his life had been very evil, but upon the other hand, he was most conscientious in all things connected with the supernatural” (219). The ghost was content with his own ways but for the people of England he was evil. The ghost exposes his vulnerability during his encounter with Virginia. When he reveals to her his desire to sleep, “I am so lonely and so unhappy, and I really don’t know what to do. I want to go to sleep and I cannot” (225) he displays his inner conflict. Under the magic spell of Virginia he decides to sleep but finds it impossible. He believes that Virginia can help him get sleep. She can lead him to the Garden of Death,

   Yes, Death. Death must be so beautiful. To lie in the soft brown earth, the grasses waving above one’s head, and listen to silence. To have no yesterday, and no tomorrow. To forget time, to forgive life, to be at peace. You can help me. You can open for me the portals of Death’s house, for Love is always with you, and Love is stronger than Death. (225)

Virginia’s significance functions at two different levels. First of all she is presented as a person who is different from the other members of Otis family because of her ‘Englishness’. The principles of English morality force her to shun the ghost.
She represents Victorian morality that undermines homosexuality as a crime. Hence she is determined to help the ghost attain normalcy through death, (conversion to ‘normal’ sexual orientation).

Secondly, Virginia’s company with the ghost as a woman adds a different colour. The ghost can die (attain normalcy) only if a lady weeps for him. The presence of a person of opposite sex underscores the act of negating homosexuality. The company of a woman (conversion to heterosexuality) is said to be essential for the death of the ghost (suppression of homosexuality). The old prophesy on the library window evidently supports the suggestion:

When a golden girl can win

Prayer from out the lips of sin,

When the barren almond bears,

And a little child gives away its tears,

Then shall all the house be still

And peace come to Canterville. (226)

It means Virginia should weep with the ghost for his sins and should pray for his soul. Then the Angel of Death will have mercy on the ghost. Virginia agrees to do so, so that the Ghost will be rewarded with death: “He rose from his seat with a faint cry of joy, and taking her hand bent over it with old-fashioned grace and kissed it. His fingers were as cold as ice, and his lips burned like fire, but Virginia did not falter, as he led her across the dusky room” (226).
Moreover, Virginia hesitates to reveal what has happened to her on the day she went with the Ghost. After her marriage with Cecil when he asks her about it she expresses her unwillingness to share the secret even with him.

... Suddenly he threw his cigarette away, took hold of her hand, and said to her, ‘Virginia, a wife should have no secret from her husband...You have never told me what happened to you when you were locked up with the ghost.’ ‘I have never told anyone, Cecil,’ said Virginia gravely.

‘I know that, but you might tell me.’

‘Please don’t ask me, Cecil, I cannot tell you. Poor Sir Simon! I owe him a great deal. Yes, don’t laugh, Cecil, I really do. He made me see what Life is, and what Death signifies, and why Love is stronger than both’. (234)

After the death of the Ghost, the victorious Virginia proudly announces to her family that she has saved the ghost from all his sins: “I have been with the Ghost. He is dead, and you must come and see him. He had been very wicked, but he was really sorry for all that he had done...” (230). She acts like a saviour who has saved the ghost from all his wicked deeds. Even the Canterville family is indebted to her for the great service she has done to the Ghost and to the Victorian society. Lord Canterville expresses his gratitude by letting Virginia keep the jewels that the Ghost has given to her. He says, “My dear sir, your charming little daughter rendered my unlucky ancestor, Sir Simon, a very important service, and I and my family are much indebted to her for her marvellous courage and pluck” (232).
Virginia’s endeavour can be read as an attempt to bring solution to a social issue by driving the ‘evil’ away. The ghost represents a social threat that questions the very existence of ‘moral values’. Virginia’s decision to solve the so called social issue envisages the strengthening of moral uprightness. The death of the Ghost thus symbolically suggests the repression of homosexuality which was considered a social threat during Oscar Wilde’s time, and the fatal outcome of a predominantly homophobic society. Logically speaking a ghost is an apparition of an already dead person, and subjecting it to death again is absurd. Probably Wilde’s fear of the society is reflected in the unconscious act of exorcising the ghost by this ironical expulsion. In addition, when the ghost states that “Love is stronger than Death” towards the end of the story there is a clear indication that the re-emergence of the ghost is possible. For Wilde, ‘love’ is the aesthetics of his sexuality or rather the sensuality of his aesthetics and it is in the aesthetic enterprise of his writing that the ghost is likely to reappear and take different forms.

In the Canterville story male-male bonding works in the relationship between the Otis twins. Fear of ghost, as it is observed, metaphorically suggests homophobia and the ghost symbolises homosexuality. The symbolic ghost is closely associated with the Otis twins. Unlike Virginia who is afraid of the ghost, the twins enjoy playing with him though they often hurt his feelings. He is a play thing for the twins. The ghost instead of succeeding in scaring the twins is “agitated by their vulgarity” (214). The twins seem to identify themselves with the ghost, thus assuming the symbolic meaning attributed to the ghost. When they meet the ghost the twins dress themselves up to look like “two little white robed figures” (211). The attire of ‘ghostly figures’ emphasises close semblance between the twins and the ghost thus exposing the twins’ role in the symbolic realm of representation. The ghost is so
frightened by their pranks that he wastes no time to escape. “There was evidently no time to be lost, so, hastily adopting the Fourth Dimension of space as a means of escape, he vanished through the wainscoting, and the house became quite quiet” (211).

Later when the ghost decides to frighten the twins they spoil his plan by displaying a “horrible spectre, motionless as a carven image, and monstrous as a madman’s dream!”(217). The ghost being a ‘strange phenomenon’ in his native place is shocked to realise that there could be monsters like him anywhere else. The ghost gets this insight from the ‘funny games’ of the twins. “Never having seen a ghost before, he naturally was terribly frightened, and, after a second hasty glance at the awful phantom, he fled back to his room, tripping up in his long winding sheet as he sped down the corridor...” (217). Canterville Ghost is a unique phenomenon in the society because no kind of this exists anywhere in England. That is why he has never seen another ghost before. This suggests the Victorian social situation which denies the existence of homosexuals.

The ghost that poses a moral threat to the society is frightened by the twins who are further more frightening. Thus the twins as well possess a symbolic signification and connotes to homosexuality. The portrayal of the twins as ‘Republicans’ stresses the homosexual undertones in the story. They are introduced as the “true republicans of the family” (208). A Republican is someone who is an advocate of republicanism which stresses unalienable individual rights as central values. The room occupied by the twins is called “Blue bed chamber”. While preparing to frighten the twins, the ghost observes that “their beds were quite close to each other” (216). Moreover, the description of the twins’ childish mischief underscores the homosexual undertones in the story: “For some time he was disturbed
by wild shrieks of laughter from the twins, who, with the light hearted gaiety of schoolboys, were evidently amusing themselves before they retired to rest, but at a quarter past eleven all was still, and, as midnight sounded, he sallied forth” (216).

Oscar Wilde seems to have tried to liberate the libidinal desires of the Unconscious through this story as well. The Ghost penned his suppressed self through its symbolic manifestation. No wonder Wilde’s Ghost epitomises the pathetic existence of homosexuals that resulted from Victorian homophobia. Several attempts have already been made to reread popular gothic texts to show how they become an artefact embedding the cultural nuances of the period of its production and consumption. For instance, Bram Stocker’s Dracula’s transformation from a nineteenth century sensation fiction to a socially and culturally significant text reflecting Victorian anxieties has widely been acknowledged:

Christopher Bentley’s analysis (1972) of Dracula focusing on the sexual undercurrents in the sucking and transfusing of blood...and Carol Fry’s observations on vampirism and female sexuality added much to the subsequent reading of the novel...Judith Weissman’s reading of the novel as a depiction of male fear of female sexuality represents one of the major feminist perspectives about the text (Latheef 1)

Like Dracula, which is also a Victorian product, “The Canterville Ghost” expresses the social apprehensions regarding sexuality and morality. Ghost thus becomes a culturally significant symbol which stands for homosexuality. The story depicts Victorian homophobia which in a way destined Wilde to a miserable death.
Salome is a symbolic rendering of the biblical story of Salome, step daughter of the tetrarch Herod Antipus. She asks for the head of Jokanaan (John the Baptist) as a reward from Herod for performing the dance of the seven veils. Unlike the biblical story, Wilde focuses more on the lustful desires of Salome than Herodias’ vengeance on Jokanaan. To give shape to the sexual energy of Salome, Wilde has made use of the Veil dance. Salome is portrayed as a femme fatale, a woman of immense power whose purity is perverted by her sexual desires. She is presented as a lustful woman who uses her sexuality to corrupt and destroy men.

When the play begins the Tetrarch and his family are seen on the terrace of Tetrarch’s palace. A young Syrian admiringly looks at Salome, Tetrarch’s daughter, and praises her beauty. In the backdrop, the voices of Jews howling about their religion can be heard. Suddenly the voice of Jokannan prophesying the arrival of Messiah is also heard. Jokannan is a prophet whom the Tetrarch has forbidden from being seen. Through the soldiers it is explained that the Tetrarch had ordered to kill his brother, and married his brother’s wife. Salome finds it difficult to tolerate the way Tetrarch looks at her. She insists on meeting the prophet and he emerges. Salome is so fascinated by the physical charms of Jokannan that she asks Jokannan to let her kiss him. He curses her and orders her to seek the Lord. Meanwhile, Herod asks Salome to dance for him, but she refuses. Soon she agrees to dance and asks for Jokannan’s head as a reward. Salome hungers for Jokannan’s body, and nothing will quench her. She dances wildly and Herod orders to behead the prophet. The voice of Salome announces that she kissed the dead prophet’s head. Terrified by the horror, Tetrarch orders the soldiers to kill her. The play ends when the soldiers rush forward and crush her beneath their shields.
Wilde’s creation of Salome owes largely to his interest in French literature and art forms. This explains the politics of representing Salome as a femme fatale, because for the French she was an incarnation of dissolute desires,

To the French, Salome was not a woman at all but a brute, insensible force: Huysmans refers to her as ‘the symbolic incarnation of undying Lust...the monstrous, beast, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible’ and Mallarme describes her as being inscrutable: ‘the veil always remains.’ Huysmans’ hero Des Esseintes characterises her as a ‘weird and superhuman figure he had dreamed of...in her quivering breasts,....heaving belly,...tossing thighs...she was now revealed as the symbol incarnate of old world vice. (Rachel 46)

Anne Varty calls Salome “the most notorious femme fatale of the fin de siècle”. She says that, “for the culture of 1890s the figure of the beautiful but vengeful and patriarchally destructive girl who ushered out the old and heralded the new held a particularly resonant power” (x). Salome, who poses a threat to the patriarchal society, takes a symbolic signification and identifies with homosexuality. Like a femme fatale, homosexuality was also considered as a social threat. In the context of the French characterisations of Salome, she can be taken as a symbol of homosexuality because of the social threat that she posed. It is also to be noted that ‘she’ is deemed not a woman but a monster with no specific gender attached in these descriptions by the French writers.

Moreover, Skaggs, in her essay “Modernity’s Revision of the Dancing Daughter: The Salome Narrative of Wilde and Strauss” discusses the possible homosexual subtext of the play. She points to one instance in the play when Salome...
promises Narraboth a flower, a signal of homosexuality in Wilde’s time. She argues that “Salome’s sexuality is presented as typically masculine, which makes the relationship between her and the young Syrian border on the homoerotic” (125).

An interesting contribution of Wilde to Salome is his persistent use of parallels between Salome and the moon. Christopher Nassar observes that “moon is meant to suggest the Pagan goddess, Cybele, who like Salome was obsessed with preserving her virginity and thus took pleasure in destroying male sexuality” (12). When Salome sees the moon, she observes: “The moon is cold and chaste. I am sure she is a virgin. She has a virgin’s beauty. Yes, she is a virgin. She has never defiled herself. She has never abandoned herself to men, like other goddesses” (Salome 138). Salome’s association with the moon insinuates her power to destroy male sexuality, and subtly suggests homosexuality.

Moreover, Aubrey Beardsley through his illustrations for the play emphasises that the “disturbing sexuality expressed by the drama, teases with physical display and concealment, and confuses the gender of Salome and Jokanaan by depicting them as mirror images of one another, their faces identical”(Varty, xii). This again hints at the homosexual undertones in the play.

When Salome with all her lustful desires stands for homosexuality her relationship with three different men constitute three different same-sex pairs.

The first pair is Salome and the young Syrian. The young Syrian is overwhelmed by her beauty that he showers words of praises on her. Whereas, the Page of Herodius sees her as “a woman rising from a tomb” (Salome 135) and warns the young Syrian several times about the horror that awaits him if he enters into a relationship with Salome: “Why do you look at her? You must not look at her...
something terrible may happen” (137). But the young Syrian is so fascinated by her beauty that he ignores the words of his friend. The page of Herodius functions as society’s mouthpiece who constantly reminds the young Syrian about the tragic fate of those who try to breach the social rules. Although Salome is indifferent towards the young Syrian’s affection for her, she flirts with him to get him obey her commands:

Salome: You will do this thing for me, will you not, Narraboth?

...and tomorrow when I pass in my litter beneath the gateway of the idol-sellers, I will let fall for you a little flower, a little green flower.

...I will look at you through the muslin veils; I will look at you, Narraboth, it may be I will smile at you. Look at me Narraboth, look at me. Ah! You know that you will do what I ask of you. (140)

The young Syrian’s attraction towards Salome symbolically suggests his desire to indulge in homosexual relationship, irrespective of the social laws. He disregards the social warning that comes from the mouth of his friend, the Page of Herodius; and the negligence culminates in his own death: “He kills himself and falls between Salome and Jokanaan” (143). His death again, points finger at the social condemnation of homosexuality.

The second pair is Salome and the king. Despite being a stepfather to her, Herod is sexually attracted to Salome, and she is quite aware of that. She says: “Why does Tetrarch look at me all the while with his mole’s eyes under his shaking eyelids? It is strange that the husband of my mother looks at me like that. I know not what it means. In truth, yes, I know it” (138). Moreover, Herod’s impotency in his relationship with his wife implies his failure in a heterosexual relationship:
Herodius: I am sterile? You (Herod) say that, you that are ever looking at my daughter, you that would have her dance for your pleasure? It is absurd to say that. I have borne a child. You have gotten no child, no, not even from one of your slaves. It is you who are sterile, not I. (152)

Herod tries to feed his sexual urges by watching Salome perform the veil dance. Hence, Herod pleads with Salome to dance, whereas Herodius discourages it:

Herod: Salome, Salome, dance for me. I pray thee dance for me. I am sad tonight... Therefore dance for me. Dance for me, Salome, I beseech you. If you dance for me you may ask of me what you will, and I will give it you, even unto the half of my kingdom...

Herodius: Do not dance my daughter. (153)

Salome dances the dance of seven veils and he is extremely pleased, which symbolically suggests his sexual gratification. He exclaims: “Ah! Wonderful! Wonderful! You see that she has danced for me, your daughter. Come near, Salome, come near, that I may give you reward. Ah! I pay the dancers well. I will pay thee royally. I will give thee whatsoever desireth...” (155). But when Salome asks for Jokanaan’s head he is reminded of the inevitable doom and decides to stay away from Salome:

Herod: ... It is true I have looked at you all evening. Your beauty troubled me. Your beauty has grievously troubled me, and I have looked at you too much. But I will look at you no more. Neither at things nor at people should one look. Only in mirrors should one look,
for mirrors do but show us masks. Oh! oh! bring wine! I thirst...

Salome, Salome, let us be friends. (156)

It is then he sees the threatening monstrous aspect of Salome which society has attributed to her over a long period of time: “She is monstrous, thy daughter, she is all together monstrous. In truth what she has done is a great crime. I am sure that it was a crime against an unknown God” (160). He then orders to kill her. Unlike the young Syrian, Herod suppresses his alternative sexual desire by destroying Salome. Herod represents a typical Victorian hypocrite who is forced to conceal his so called deviant sexual orientation in order to retain his power and reputation. So the path of pleasure does not lead him to disaster. Salome’s death and Herod’s survival as the king suggest the need to suppress the homosexual drives to lead a “normal” life. Ellman in his essay, “Overtures to Salome” observes that Wilde has insisted upon Salome’s death at the end of the play in order to show how the transition from sensuality to moral revulsion happens in Herod who stands for Wilde himself:

The execution of Salome was not in the Bible, but Wilde insisted upon it. So at the play’s end the emphasis shifts suddenly to Herod, who is seen to have yielded to Salome’s sensuality, and then to the moral revulsion of Iokanaan from that sensuality, and to have survived them both. In Herod Wilde was suggesting that tertium quid which he felt to be his own nature, susceptible to contrary impulses but not abandoned for long to either. (90)

Ellman substantiates his argument by pointing out that Aubrey Beardsley who has made illustrations for Wilde’s Salome has “divined the autobiographical element in Herod, and in one of his illustrations gave the tetrarch the author’s face” (90).
Salome and Jokanaan constitute the third pair. Jokanaan dictates social laws and he stands for moral values. He curses Herodius for marrying her late husband’s brother: “Thy mother (Herodius) hath filled the earth with the wine of her iniquities, and the cry of her sins hath come up to the ears of God” (142). Salome is determined to seduce Jokanaan. She says: “Jokanaan, I am amorous of thy body! Thy body is white like the lilies...let me touch thy body... thy body is horrible. It is of thy hair I am enamoured... there is nothing in the world so red as thy mouth... let me kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan. I will kiss thy mouth” (142-3). But Jokanaan does not fall for her temptation. He is well aware of his moral responsibilities and condemns her sexuality: “I do not wish to look at thee. I will not look at thee, thou art accursed, Salome, thou art accursed” (144). Jokanaan’s repulsion towards Salome reflects society’s attitude towards homosexuality. Herod’s decision to behead Jokanaan prophesies the social acceptance of homosexuality in the distant future.

Different social attitudes and human temperaments towards homosexuality can be analysed using these three different pairs in the play. The first pair, Salome and The young Syrian, reflects the inevitable doom of homosexuals in the Victorian period. Denial of one’s existence as a homosexual culminates in the destruction of his own identity which is symbolically presented through the death of the Young Syrian. He falls in love with Salome. Salome’s symbolic signification of homosexuality gives a different shade of colour to the young Syrian’s love. His alternative sexual orientation destroys his self. The second pair, Salome and the Tetrarch, pictures the Victorian hypocrisy towards homosexuality. Herod is sexually attracted to Salome and expresses his desires. But when he thinks about the social consequences of his alternative sexual orientation he dismisses his desires and orders to kill Salome. Salome’s death symbolically suggests the suppression of his sexual desires. In order
to succumb to the social demands and to retain his power as a king he shuns Salome and turns to his wife. The third pair, Salome and Jokannan, underscores homophobia which is a defining feature of Victorian England. Jokannan symbolically stands for religious and moral codes, and his expression of disgust towards Salome’s sexuality suggests homophobia. When society enforces moral codes, its inhabitants maintain a similar attitude towards homosexuality as demonstrated by the prophet.

Similar ideas can be explored in Wilde’s other works too. In An Ideal Husband and The Picture of Dorian Gray the symbolic signification of homosexuality operates on abstract ideas as well. If homosexuality is associated with a fraudulent scheme in An Ideal Husband, it is associated with Dorian’s narcissistic attraction towards the portrait in The Picture of Dorian Gray.

The play An Ideal Husband begins with a dinner party hosted by Sir Robert Chiltern, a prestigious member of the House of Commons, and his wife, Lady Chiltern. During the function, Mrs. Cheveley, tries to blackmail Sir Robert into supporting a fraudulent scheme to build a canal in Argentina. In his youth Sir Robert was convinced by Baron Arnheim to sell a cabinet secret related to Suez Canal project. Mrs. Cheveley has with her a letter to prove that Sir Robert has made his fortune with that illicit money. Sir Robert initially submits to her demands fearing the ruin of both his career and marriage. But, Lady Chiltern wants her husband to remain unimpeachable in all his decisions; and asks him not to succumb to the demands of Mrs. Cheveley. Lord Goring, a friend of Sir Robert urges him to fight Mrs. Cheveley and to admit his guilt to his wife. But he does not agree to do that. Later when Lady Chiltern learns about it from Mrs. Cheveley she denounces her husband and refuses to forgive him. Later, when Sir Robert goes to Goring’s house seeking further counsel
from him, he discovers Mrs. Cheveley in the drawing room and, convinced of an affair between these two former lovers, furiously storms out of the house. Mrs. Cheveley proposes Goring, who rejects it. He instead traps her with a diamond brooch which she has apparently stolen from his cousin, Mary Berkshire, years ago. The final act resolves most of the plot’s complications with a decidedly happy ending. Lord Goring proposes to Mabel, who readily accepts him. Sir Robert denounces the Argentine canal scheme before the House and is reconciled with his wife, Lady Chiltern.

Wilde stresses the need to forgive the sins of past, and the foolishness of tarnishing lives of great value to society because of people’s hypocritical reactions to those sins. Through his observations, Wilde seems to be referring to his own situation, and his own fears regarding his secret affair. He maintains anti-upper class sentiments in his overall portrayal of the upper class in England which displays an attitude of hypocrisy and strict observance of silly rules.

The play offers a symbolic representation of same-sex pair in the relationship between the protagonist of the play Sir Robert Chiltern and Baron Arnheim. A treachery that Sir Robert has committed with the aid of Baron Arnheim makes him think of his past with guilt. He conceals his crime and wears a mask before the society. Sir Robert has cheated the government by playing a fraudulent game with Baron Arnheim. If the fraudulent scheme can be taken as a symbolic representation of homosexuality, then Sir Robert has cheated the society by breaking its rules. The symbolic reading of Sir Robert’s crime gives a different interpretation to his relationship with Baron Arnheim.
Sir Robert admits to have had a fascination for Baron Arnheim: “He was very remarkable in many ways... he knew men and cities well, like the old Greek” (*An Ideal Husband* 287). It is interesting to note that the Baron’s knowledge was limited to men. Moreover, Mrs. Cheveley’s observation that the Baron died without “having a Penelope waiting at home for him” (287) emphasises the fact that Baron remained unmarried throughout his life, which opens up the homosexual possibilities. Mrs. Cheveley tries to blackmail Sir Robert by pointing out his relationship with the Baron:

Mrs Cheveley: My dear Sir Robert, what then? You are ruined, that is all! Remember to what a point your Puritanism in England has brought you. In the old days nobody pretended to be a bit better than his neighbours... Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, everyone has to pose a paragon of purity, incorruptibility and all the other seven deadly virtues- and what is the result? You all go over like ninepins – one after the other... And yours is a very nasty scandal. You couldn’t survive it. (296)

Her description of the crime committed by Sir Robert echoes the middle class apprehensions regarding homosexuality. It throws light upon the modern mania for morality. Wilde himself was a prey to a ‘nasty scandal’. Sir Robert has kept the ‘sin’ as a secret from the society as well as his wife. Consequently, when she threatens to reveal his sinful past to the society, he consents to her demands. Homosexual undertones can be traced in Sir Robert’s description of Baron Arnheim and the crime he has committed with him:

Sir Robert Chiltern: ... with that wonderfully fascinating quiet voice of his he expounded to us the most terrible of all philosophies, the
philosophy of power...I think he saw the effect he had produced on me, for some days afterwards he wrote and asked me to come and see him...I remember so well how, with a strange smile on his pale, curved lips, he led me through his picture gallery... (307)

Sir Robert’s wife, Lady Chiltern, is presented as a lady of character who would never fluctuate over morality matters. Her insistence on judging people based on their past frightens her husband so much that he prefers to keep the secret from her. She says, “One’s past is what one is. It is the only way by which people should be judged” (301). She considers her husband as an embodiment of moral virtues: “Robert, that is all very well for other men, for men who treat life simply as a sordid speculation; but not for you, Robert, not for you. You are different. All your life you have stood apart from others. You have never let the world soil you. To the world, as to myself, you have been an ideal still” (302).

She is aware of the shameful things that men often do. But, she does not think of her husband as capable of doing anything dishonest. Sir Robert fears that she may leave him the moment she learns about his secret. He expresses his anxiety to Lord Goring who advises him to confess his past to his wife: “Do you think she would marry me if she had known that the origin of my fortune is as it is, the basis of my career such as it is, and that I had done a thing that I suppose most men would call shameful and dishonourable?” (306). He considers his dishonourable act as a mistake committed by a twenty two year old boy, which is pardonable and should not affect his present life:

Sir Robert Chiltern (pacing up and down the room): Arthur, do you think that what I did nearly eighteen years ago should be brought up
against me now? Do you think it fair that a man’s whole career should be ruined for a fault done in his boyhood almost? ...Is it fair that the folly, the sin of one’s youth, if men choose to call it a sin, should wreck a life like mine, should place me in the pillory, should shatter all that I have worked for, all that I have built up? Is it fair, Arthur? (306)

Lord Goring tries to convince Lady Chiltern about the triviality of Sir Robert’s crime, but she finds it difficult to imagine her husband as having yielded to such a dirty temptation.

It is also important to note that Sir Robert’s relationship with Lord Goring gives suggestions about his same-sex orientation. Lord Goring is presented as a very good friend of Sir Robert Chiltern. Even Lady Chiltern seems to have accepted their friendship which causes no ‘harm’ to the society. She tells Lord Goring “You are Robert’s greatest friend... No one except myself, knows Robert better than you do. He has no secrets from me, and I don’t think he has any from you” (313). Lord Goring is a bachelor who hesitates to get tied up by the chains of marriage. His father, Lord Caversham who represents patriarchy, advises him to get married:

Every man of position is married nowadays. Bachelors are not fashionable any more. They are a damaged lot. Too much is known about them. You must get a wife, sir. Look where your friend Robert Chiltern has got to by probity, hard work and a sensible marriage with a good woman. Why don’t you imitate him, sir? Why don’t you take him for your model? (330)

Lord Caversham’s patriarchal insistence projects social apprehensions regarding homosexual lives of bachelors. He even advises Lord Goring to follow the
model set by Robert Chiltern, who has settled down into a married life after putting an end to his ‘youthful fantasies’. Lord Goring tries to justify Robert’s crime before Lady Chiltern, who is taken aback by their intimate friendship:

Lord Goring: What you know about him is not his real character. It was an act of folly done in his youth, dishonourable I admit, shameful, I admit, unworthy of him, I admit, and therefore...not his true character.

Mrs Cheveley: How you men stand up for each other! (340)

Moreover, Sir Robert Chiltern’s impotency in his relationship with Lady Chiltern is hinted at when he confesses that they have no children to look forward: “We are childless and I have no one else to love, no one else to love me” (335).

Towards the end of the story Lady Chiltern is pushed to such a situation that she either has to present herself as a fallen woman or forgive and reunite with her husband. She does not want to get defamed before her husband’s eyes, so she prefers the latter. Sir Robert Chiltern is thus pardoned and united to his wife. Lord Goring also yields to society’s demands and decides to marry Mabel Chiltern.

Instead of a concrete image, here the symbolic projection of homosexuality is made through an abstract idea. The way Wilde has carefully crafted his art offers scope for more than one connotation. The treacherous deed of Sir Robert Chiltern symbolically stands for homosexuality. This treachery, in fact connects him to Baron Arnheim. Robert and Arnheim thus constitute a same-sex pair. In order to reinforce the homoerotic aspects of Robert, his friendship with Lord Goring is also given a different shade of colour.
The Picture of Dorian Gray on the other hand is Wilde’s philosophical novel which speaks about the handsome young man, Dorian Gray and his full length portrait by Basil Hallward. Dorian is a young gentleman with perfect physical charms. Basil’s painting equally reflects Dorian’s beauty. Dorian, seeing the marvellous portrait of his own self, expresses his desire to sell his soul, to remain young; and the picture will age and fade. This wish is granted. Dorian leads a life pursuing pleasures while remaining young and beautiful; and his portrait ages and withers.

Dorian’s narcissistic attraction towards the portrait yet again symbolises a gay relationship. “This (Narcissism) is a term originally used to describe a sexual perversion in which the subject is in love with himself rather than with another person. It was later extended to include any form of self-love” (Storr 57). Dorian’s narcissistic attraction towards the painting implies an attempt to escape the fear of the opposite sex by embracing the same-sex instead. As Dollimore puts it, “The homosexual is significantly implicated in both sexual and cultural difference, and for two main reasons. First because he or she has been regarded as one who fears the difference of the ‘other’ or opposite sex, and in flight from it, narcissistically embraces the same sex instead” (249). The painting reminds him of the innumerable possibilities of life. It stands as a symbol for forbidden desires he wants to indulge in. He is very much attracted towards the beautiful painting:

Dorian made no answer, but passed listlessly in front of his picture, and turned towards it. When he saw it he drew back, and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognised himself for the first time. He stood there motionless and in wonder, dimly conscious that Hallward was speaking to him, but not catching the meaning of his words. The sense
of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before... *(The Picture of Dorian Gray 33)*

He is so attracted towards the painting that he almost feels jealous of its beauty which would never perish. Lord Henry Wotton’s strange panegyric on youth and his warning of the brevity of youth stirred Dorian as he gazed at the shadow of his own loveliness. The mortality of the painting augments his love for it: “I am jealous of everything whose beauty does not die. I am jealous of the portrait you have painted of me. Why should it keep what I must lose?” (35). When Basil sees that Dorian is much disturbed by the painting, he at once decides to destroy it with a knife. But Dorian rushes over to Basil, tears the knife out of his hand, and flings it to the corner of the studio. He screams: “No, Basil, No. It would be Murder” (36). He admits that he does not just appreciate it but is in love with it. His liking for the painting becomes adoration for a self which he loves to pursue. He loves it so much that he wishes to keep it in his possession: “If you let anyone have it but me, Basil, I shall never forgive you!” (36).

Once Dorian is in real possession of the painting he indulges in sinful life secretly. His association with the painting opens before him the door to a ‘sinful’ life of pleasures. He denounces his lady love, Sibyl Vane and searches for new friendships. As the days pass he feels more and more jealous of the picture for remaining younger than him, but still admires its beauty: “though I am a little jealous of the picture for being a whole month younger than I am, I must admit that I delight in it” (67).
The painting reflects Dorian’s conscience and displays evil when Dorian sins. Dorian witnesses the visible changes happening to the painting as he does morally unacceptable things:

Yet it was watching him, with its beautiful marred face and its cruel smile. Its bright hair gleamed in the early sunlight. Its blue eyes met his own. A sense of infinite pity, not for himself, but for the painted image of himself, came over him. It had altered already, and would alter more... for every sin that he committed, a stain would fleck and wreck its fairness...the picture, changed or unchanged would be to him the visible emblem of conscience... (107)

He becomes aware of the infinite pleasures of life which social codes forbid. But being the owner of a painting that would shoulder his sins, he decides to search for the hidden wonders of life. His association with the painting leads him to commit more forbidden acts and explore the contours of his desire. He decides to indulge in wilder sins, as the portrait would bear the burden.

...Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins – he was to have all these things. The portrait was to bear the burden of his shame: that was all.

A feeling of pain crept over him as he thought of the desecration that was in store for the fair face on the canvas. Once, in boyish mockery of Narcissus, he had kissed, or feigned to kiss, those painted lips that now smiled so cruelly at him. Morning after morning he had sat before the portrait wondering at its beauty, almost enamoured of it, as it seemed to him at times. (123)
The reference to secret pleasures, wild joy and wilder sins connotes to socially restricted pleasures including homosexual life. He decides to have all these things when he owns the painting. The “boyish mockery of narcissus” has a very serious attribution in the light of homosexual reading. Dorian’s innocent act of kissing those painted lips suggests his same-sex interest. Gradually, but drastically, Dorian changes from the silly young boy to a sinner of great scale. He develops new passions, new thoughts, new ideas, and new ways of living. For 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, and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead” (164). Basil’s description of scandals heard in relation with Dorian gives a vivid picture of the sinful life that Dorian leads:

Why is your friendship so fatal to young men? There was that wretched boy in the Guards who committed suicide. You were his great friend. There was Sir Henry Ashton, who had to leave England, with a tarnished name. You and he were inseparable. What about Adrian Singleton, and his dreadful end? I met his father yesterday in St. James Street. He seemed broken with shame and sorrow. (173)

Basil’s description explicitly hints at homosexual possibilities. He observes that Dorian’s friendship is fatal for young men. Men who were his deep friends and inseparable from him often end up in shame. His relationship with them tarnishes their image and reputation. He maintains with them a relationship which is prohibited by the Victorian moral codes. Hence they meet with their fatal end. This clearly proves that Dorian’s sinful life after possessing the painting centred mainly round the circle of young men. Basil examines the painting and finds it completely corrupted by Dorian’s sins. “It was from within, apparently, that the foulness and horror had come.
Through some strange quickening of inner life the leprosies of sin were slowly eating the thing away” (181). Dorian’s passion for sin starts dominating his nature. Wilde makes an interesting observation in the novel about the instinctual desires of men that kill the conscience. Wilde attributes Dorian’s sins to the libidinal drives over which man has no control.

There are moments, psychologists tell us, when the passion for sin, or for what the world calls sin, so dominates a nature, that every fibre of the body, as every cell of the brain, seems to be instinct with fearful impulses. Men and women at such moments lose the freedom of their will. They move to their terrible end as automatons move. Choice is taken from them, and conscience is either killed, or, if it lives at all, lives but to give rebellion its fascination and disobedience its charm. For all sins, as theologians weary not of reminding us, are sins of disobedience. (218)

Finally Dorian gets exhausted with his sinful life and decides to put an end to it. He declares to Harry, “I am going to be good” (249). But all his attempts go futile and he finds no escape from the life in which he is entrapped. He feels a wild longing for the uncorrupted purity of his boyhood. His sinful life has tarnished his self, corrupted his mind and given horror to his fancies. He regrets for having prayed that the portrait should bear the burden of his days:

Then he loathed his own beauty, and flinging the mirror on the floor, crushed it into silver splinters beneath his heel. It was his beauty that had ruined him, his beauty and the youth that he had prayed for. But for those two things, his life might have been free from stain. His
beauty had been to him but a mask, his youth but a mockery. What was youth at best? A green, an unripe time, of shallow moods and sickly thoughts. Why had he worn its livery? Youth had spoiled him. (252)

He realises that he cannot retrieve those innocent days of his life. Having listened to the calls of his libidinal desires, he finds himself away from the social life. He challenged the norms of society, and is denied a normal life in return. The painting has ruined his life, and he regrets for having loved it so much. His attempt to destroy the painting culminates in his own death. His death is a symbolic suggestion of the suppression of homosexuality which marks the moral constraints of Victorian period. The painting which symbolically projects the homoerotic aspects of Dorian corrupts him and brings forth his fatal end. As it is already observed since hostility towards homosexuality hinders the writer’s explicit expression of homoerotic elements in his work, he devises different methods to give expression to his repressed desires.

Unlike his prose works, Wilde has approached his poems in a slightly different and more complex way through which his repressed homosexual feelings find expression by means of contrast. A study of select poems by Wilde will expose how such repressed feelings get manifest through different aspects of physical beauty.

The portrayal of women in his poems is very much relevant in the sense that they expose Wilde’s attitude towards women and heterosexual relationships. Women in his poems mostly stand for symbols of chastity and represent unconsumed love. Though he brings images of virgins and praises their physical charm in abundance, he avoids their physical proximity.

Pearson makes a valid observation regarding Wilde’s relationship with women:
Part of his attractiveness to women was due to the fact that, while delighting in their society, they were not physically necessary to him.

The real ‘Don Juan’, he told Vincent O’ Sullivan, ‘is not the vulgar person who goes about making love to all the women he meets, and what novelists call “seducing” them. The real Don Juan is the man who says to women, “Go away! I don’t want you. You interfere with my life. I can do without you”. Swift was the real Don Juan. Two women died for him’. (260)

“La Circassienne” is Wilde’s poem which celebrates the beauty of a woman. The speaker admires and praises the beauty of that young lady. He loves her “tremulous topaz eyes”. He adores her body, her ivory hips, her gilded breasts, sun-scorched neck, eyelids of chalcedony etc. But more than everything he loves her chastity: “And most of all, my love, I love, / Your beautiful fierce chastity” (75).

His poem “Requiescat” is about the demise of a woman who “was young and fair” but has “fallen to dust” (18). She was “lily like”, “white as snow”, with “bright golden hair” (18), but is now insensible to the music of the world. This poem was written in memory of his sister Isola who died shortly before her tenth birthday (Varty 8). It is a small poem in which the poet grieves over the death of his beloved. The line “She hardly knew she was a woman” (“Requiescat” 18) rules out the possible exploration of pleasures in the life of a woman. The fact that she lived the life of a woman without experiencing the pleasures which she could have had as a woman underscores her virgin existence. Hence, she lived and died as a virgin.

In the poem “The New Helen” the poet brings a different image of Helen. He says “Yet care I not what ruin time may bring/ If in thy temple thou wilt let me kneel”
(28). He loves and adores her since she is different from all other women. He says that she is not “born as common women are” (28). But he concludes the poem by stressing the fact that she is “pure and inviolate!” (29). His love takes the form of spiritual love by presenting her as pure and untainted.

Like the speaker of Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” in the poem “Panthea” the speaker tries to arouse the feelings of his hesitant lover. He says, “I am too young to live without desire/ Too young art thou to waste this summer night” (83). He reminds her that they have lips to kiss with and hearts to love. But here again there is no consummation in their love though he tries to make their love immortal as the notes of a great symphony.

Attributing divinity to women makes it easier to describe them as virgin and chaste. In some of his poems Wilde brings the images of divine and godly women who are virgins. For instance in “San Miniato” he speaks about “The Virginal white Queen of Grace- Mary!” (19). He asks her to listen to him before the sun shows to the world his “sin and shame” (19). Similarly in the poem “Rome Unvisited” he addresses the blessed lady as “Mother without blot or stain” (21).

Wilde even portrays them as passionless and incapable of lustful emotions. In “Madonna Mia” he paints in words the image of a beautiful woman. He describes her in detail: lily girl, brown braided soft hair, blue eyes, pale cheeks, red lips and white throat with purple veins. She is presented as pure and one who is not stained with lustful emotions: “Pale cheeks whereon no love hath left its stain/ Red under lip drawn in for fear of love” (26). Wilde imagines this beauty as devoid of passion and lustful feelings. In a way this act of negating desire in women is a manifestation of Wilde’s own failure in falling for their feelings or desires. The lines “Yet, though my
lips shall praise her without cease, / Even to kiss her feet I am not bold” (26) depicts the poet’s attitude towards heterosexual relationship. He can shower words of praises on her but fears her physical proximity. “Madonna Mia” was first published as “Wasted Days”, which began with the following lines: “A fair slim boy not made for this world’s pain,/ With hair gold thick clustering round his ears,/ And longing eyes half-veiled by foolish tears/ Like bluest water seen through mists of rain” (The Complete Works of Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde: Stories, Plays, Poems, Essays 732). When it appeared as “Madonna Mia” ‘A fair slim boy’ became ‘A lily girl’; and the second line was rewritten as “With brown, soft hair close braided by her ears” (“Madonna Mia” 26). Wilde changed the persona’s gender. The change in the description of the colour and texture of hair in the second line is in accordance with the change in the sex of the person.

In “Impression du Matin” the poet speaks about one pale woman with “lips of flame and heart of stone” (41). Lips of flame suggest her beautiful physical features, but the heart of stone implies her inability to arouse lustful emotions or rather her sensual frigidity. “Silentium Amoris” shows the poet’s inability to express his love to his lady love. He is charmed by her beauty, but fails to express it: “So doth thy Beauty make my lips to fail, / And all my sweetest singing out of tune” (92). He is muted by excess of love and wild passion: “So my too strong passion work me wrong, / And for excess of Love my Love is dumb” (92). This poem is yet another example for the poet’s failure in consummating his love with a woman. He feels that it would be better for her to leave him and go to someone else who may love her: “Else it were better we should part, and go, / Thou to some lips of sweeter melody, / And I to nurse the barren memory / Of unkissed kisses, and songs never sung” (93). It is obvious in
these poems that for Wilde love is complete only when it culminates in sexual gratification.

There are also poems which exhibit Wilde’s hostility towards women and his distrust in a heterosexual relationship. He presents them as unfaithful, treacherous and even wicked. These are poems that depict women as self-indulgent unlike the angelic and immaculate representations in the poems mentioned above. Paradoxically, if it is the divinity that he attributes to the earlier immaculate representations of women that distances the poetic persona from them; it is the lustful or treacherous nature of women in the poems that follow, that repel them from the poetic persona.

“Serenade” is a poem about a faithless woman who has no feeling for her lover. He calls her his lady love but says she will not come because she does not care about a lover’s vows (45). He goes on to generalise his view on women as incapable of being true to love: “True love is but a woman’s toy, / They never know the lover’s pain, / And I who loved as loves a boy / Must love in vain, must love in vain” (45).

“The Dole of the King’s Daughter” is basically a poem about sin and punishment. The king’s daughter lived a life of sins: “Seven sins on the king’s daughter, / Deep in her soul to lie” (75). It is said that there is one man who truly loves her and he “hath duggen a grave by the darksome yew” (75). Perhaps he killed the king’s daughter and dug the grave to bury her, because the poem concludes with the lines: “The sins on her soul are seven, / The sin upon his is one” (75). The poem is yet another example for Wilde’s verses that depict treacherous and sinful woman.

As the title suggests “Her Voice” is the voice of a lady who tells her lover that they were lovers once but, “those times are over and done” (93). She says it was all a beautiful dream and they have lived their “lives in a land of dreams!” (93). Bold and
determined, she advises to “kiss once again, and part” (94). She is yet another representative of deceitful women who mercilessly cheat on their love. She confidently asserts that “I have my beauty – you your Art/ …One world was not enough for two/ Like me and you” (94) and leaves him.

“The Harlot House” is also a poem about an unfaithful woman. The poetic persona goes to the harlot’s house with his love in the night. Together they watched the dancers spin to the loud music. He watched them with disgust and thought “the dead are dancing with the dead” (115). But soon she left his side and joined the dancers: “Love passed into the house of lust.” Here again the poet portrays the image of a dissolute woman who leaves her love to seek more pleasures. The descriptions in the poem give the readers an impression that she has no love, but lust.

These poems are particularly not instances of same-sex pairing. But the poet’s distancing from women or the intrinsic misogyny exhibited in many of the poems only point to the sexual discordance experienced by him in relation to women. It is the inappropriate pairing that subtly hints at the poet’s alternate sexual orientation.

Wilde’s story, “The Nightingale and the Rose” also epitomises his view of women as treacherous and flirtatious. The story is about a nightingale who sacrifices her life in order to procure a red rose for the young man who needs that rose to propose to a girl he loves. However, the bird’s sacrifice proves to be in vain when the girl rejects the man and his rose. He throws the rose away and it is crushed by the wheel of a wagon. The story portrays the girl as faithless and untrue to her love. She promises to dance with him at the ball if he gives her a rose. But when the Chamberlain’s son offers her jewels she decides to dance with the Chamberlain’s son, who has much better prospects than the poor Student. The story, like many of Wilde’s
poems showcases his distrust in women and disgust in heterosexual relationships. Similarly, “The Birthday of the Infanta” pictures a heartless girl who fails to see the Dwarf’s love and shows no sympathy at his death. The story is set in Spain at an unspecified point in time. It is the twelfth birthday of the Infanta, the only daughter of the King of Spain. In order to entertain her, an ugly young dwarf dancer is brought to the court. The Dwarf is completely unaware of his hideous looks and does not realize that the others are scornful of his appearance. When the Dwarf sees his own reflection for the first time in his life, he falls to the ground sobbing, and becomes still. The courtier notices that the Dwarf has died. He tells the princess that the Dwarf will never dance again because his heart is broken. To which the Infanta replies, “For the future, let those who come to play with me have no hearts” (“The Birthday of the Infanta” 114).

However, same-sex pairing can be observed in some of his poems where the speaker associates himself with a male character in the poem. In certain poems the description of his love creates an ambiguous position regarding the lover’s gender. His words of praise seem equally applicable to a boy love as well. In “Ave Maria Gratia Plena” the angel and the speaker form the same sex pair. The speaker is eagerly waiting for “His coming” (20). He has some wonderful images of this angelic figure in his mind. He tries to imagine ‘Him’ as the great “God who in a rain of gold/ Broke open bars and fell on Danae” (20) and as the god who slew Semele when she wished to see “God’s clear body” (20). Both these references connote to the Greek god, Zeus. According to the myth, Danae is the daughter of King Acrisius. When Acrisius learned that he would be killed by the son of his daughter he locked her away in a chamber. But Zeus got into the chamber in the guise of a golden shower and impregnated her. Semele is mother to Dionysus by Zeus. Zeus fell in love with her
and repeatedly visits her. Zeus’ wife Hera becomes jealous of her and plants seeds of
doubt in Semele’s mind. Semele then demands that Zeus reveal himself in all his
glory as a proof of his divinity. He does it. But being a mortal, looking at the God in
his true form she perishes, consumed in flame. The speaker of the poem expects to see
such a heroic paramour like Zeus in his angelic figure: “And now with wondering
eyes and heart I stand/ Before this supreme mystery of Love” (20). And what he sees
is “An angel with a lily in his hand” (20). Attributing the lustful images of Zeus to the
angel gives a different shade of colour to the speaker’s relationship with the angel.
Moreover, he deliberately makes his angel a man not a woman.

The image of ‘narcissi’ in the poem “Sonnet Written in Holy Week at Genoa”
can be taken as a symbolic representation of homosexuality. Narcissi is a type of
flower which exhibits similarity in its name with the mythical character Narcissus
who fell in love with himself. Narcissism is often considered as the epitome of
homosexual attraction. Falling in love with one’s own image is treated as the crudest
form of feeling sexual attraction towards someone of the same-sex. In the poem the
poet was wandering through Scoglietto’s far retreat. “Life seemed very sweet” (21) as
he stood enjoying the beauty of nature with the pale narcissi lying at his feet. It is then
that the young boy priest announced the death of Jesus. And the speaker confesses
that “those clear Hellenic hours” he had spent with his love has “drowned all memory
of Thy bitter pain, / The Cross, the Crown, the Soldier and the Spear” (21). Here he
presents a contrast between Hellenic pleasures and Christian values. His love has
made him forget Christian values for a while.

Similarly, in his long poem “The Ballad of Reading Goal” also there is a
symbolic depiction of Narcissism. As the subject of his poem Wilde has chosen an
outcast – a prisoner. The prisoner of the poem has “killed the thing he loved/ so he
had to die” (“The Ballad of Reading Goal” 232). On the one hand the poem is about the prisoner who has killed his love and on the other hand it is the monologue of the poet himself who could not speak for himself. “No doubt this mixture of faceless outcast and one-time individualistic accurately reflects Wilde’s status at Reading Goal, most of all in his own eyes” (Shewan 198-199). The peaks about how he watched the prisoner “with curious eyes and sick surmise” (“The Ballad of Reading Goal” 236). In De Profundis Wilde has cut a sorry figure of himself who laments his plight as a prisoner. He makes philosophical ruminations over his pathetic prison life. But in the “The Ballad of Reading Goal” he speaks about a prisoner who does not scorn at his state. The prisoner is all that Wilde wishes to be. The poet’s admiration for the prisoner demonstrates his narcissistic attraction towards his self which is the utmost culmination of homosexuality.

In “Easter Day” the poet’s undue admiration for the Pope offers a different reading to the poem. He describes the Pope thus:

Like some great God, the Holy Lord of Rome

Priest – like, he wore a robe more white than foam,

And, king – like, swathed himself in royal red,

Three crowns of gold rose high upon his head:

In splendour and in light the Pope passed home. (24)

The vision of Pope reminds him of someone who long back has wandered by a lonely sea. He is very much touched by the spectral sight of Pope. Pope is thus a symbolic representation of a feeling that he has been longing for long.
In “Vita Nuova” the image of ‘White Limbs’ symbolically suggests the poet’s repressed desires. It stands for the persona for whom the poet waits. The speaker of the poem is not happy with his life: “My life is full of Pain”, he says (25). He waits for some miracle to happen so that the miserable experiences of his life may change. He longs for the arrival of someone “who can garner fruit or golden grain/ From these waste fields which travail ceaselessly!” (25). His quest for this mysterious presence is shown using the image of casting net into the sea. He throws away the net and finally sees, “From the black waters of my tortured past/ The argent splendours of white limbs ascend” (25). The white limbs represent his hope and happiness. He describes the ascent of the limb as “a sudden glory” (25) which has brought happiness to his life. The white limbs thus form a pair with the speaker of the poem.

“The New Helen” speaks about the return of Helen or about the Helen of his time. This Helen, he says is “not born as common women are!” (28). The poet also speaks about a God “whose feet/ In nets of gold the tired planets move” (28). The poet combines the image of Helen with the God to give a new form to the New Helen. He speaks about the God thus: “Who in thy body holds his joyous seat”. Helen’s body is the God’s abode. Helen’s association with the God attributes maleness in her, which gives her the image of a hermaphrodite. This sexual feature underscores the homosexual connotation in her relationship with the speaker of the poem. The description of Helen’s influence on other men reminds us of Dorian’s evil influence on other young men.

No! Thou art Helen, and none other one!

It was for thee that young Sarpedon died,

And Memnon’s manhood was untimely spent;
It was for thee gold-crested Hector tried

With Thetis’ child that evil race to run,

In the last year of thy beleaguerment; (27)

After having set the new image of Helen the poet now expresses his love for this New Helen.

O Helen! ...

For in the gladsome sunlight of thy smile

Of heaven or hell I have no thought or fear. (28)

Moreover, he has taken the image of Helen from the Greek mythology to contrast it with the barren, loveless and passionless England.

Lily of love, pure and inviolate!

Tower of Ivory! Red rose of fire!

Thou hast come down our darkness to illume

For we, close-caught in the wide nets of Fate, ...

Till we beheld thy re-arisen shrine,

And the white glory of thy loneliness. (29)

She thus stands for desires which were forbidden in Victorian England. They are fated to live in the world of gloom and the New Helen sets a model before them with all the glory of her, or more precisely his loveliness.
In “In the Forest” the image of faun can be taken as a symbol for homosexual attraction. The poem is about the poet tracking the faun. The faun has gone into the forest and the poet is chasing its shadow and song. The shadow represents the soul and song stands for passion. The poet tries to chase his body through the soul. His eagerness to catch the faun expresses his attempt to pursue his passion and desires.

In “Taedium Vitae” poet yet again expresses his disgust with women. He says he does not want to mesh his soul within a woman’s hair (95). He does not wish to stab his “youth with desperate knives” (95). He thinks a woman’s love is of least importance in his life. And that it is “better to stand aloof/ Far from these slanderous fools who mock my life” (95). Instead he prefers to go back to the “hoarse cave of strife” where his “white soul first kissed the mouth of sin” (95). Kissing the mouth of sin can be taken as a symbolic representation of homosexual relationship. Thus the speaker of the poem and the symbolic mouth of sin form the pair in the poem.

Owing to the social attitude towards homosexuality Wilde had restrictions regarding blatant treatment of homoerotic themes in his works. Though he had made bold attempts to portray same-sex pairs in many of his works, he had nevertheless faced its consequences. “Wilde had no talent for a direct confrontation with the abyss. His literary genius preferred to go bunburrying” (Bayley 11). Hence the symbolic manifestation of same-sex pairing in Wilde’s works is a kind of liberation of his libidinal tendencies. Here the images speak more. His creative oeuvre exhibits ample symbols and images to speak about the unacceptable sexual desires of his time when he could not talk about same-sex pairing in explicit terms. It is explained in psychoanalysis that “the sexual wishes which appear overtly are those which are acceptable...while those which appear in symbolic form are unacceptable” (Storr 47).