

# Oscar Wilde and the French Decadents

SEPTEMBER 29, 2012 · 11:39 PM

## Image and Sound Interpretation: Wilde, "The Harlot's House" (Exercise #2)

(Written by the instructor.)

A creative, synaesthetic mind map of Wilde's poem! This exercise is open for online students/visitors as well as Stanford students.

We'll be discussing Wilde's poetry in class this week, and "The Harlot's House" is among the poems on which we will spend a little more time. For our second group close reading exercise, I'd like us to try something that we can really only do, in this particular fashion, in our online space. It is an exercise that calls for a creative visceral and sensual, rather than rational and verbal, interpretation.

**Due:** Sunday, October 8, 2012

**Task:** Let's work on a group interpretation of Wilde's "The Harlot's House" that uses visual images (or video if you like) and sounds to express certain aspects of the poem that you intuit or have already learned about (such as the poem's gothic elements, its particular form, or representation of femininity, for example). **Think about either a particular part of Wilde's poem** that lingers in your mind (a word, a phrase, a passage from the poem) **or the poem as a whole, and find**

- **either an image** (a photo of a nightly street, a reproduction of a painting or statue, a nature photo altered with instagram, etc.)
- **or a video file** (something you record yourself or that you find via youtube, etc.)
- **or a sound file** (such as a particular piece of music, the sound of footsteps, a sound from nature, a voice reading another text, etc. etc.).

**that, to you, represents something important about Wilde's poem.** Simply add your image/video/sound file (one or more) and your screen name or initials. If you like, you may write a sentence or two explaining why you picked this image/video/sound file in response to Wilde's poem. That's it!

**Stanford students:** Work from within the Dashboard post, as always. Scroll down to below the second set of stars (\*\*\*) below. This is the space for your contribution. You can add an image, a video, or a sound file easily from there by first uploading it via the first button after "Upload/Insert," or by linking to another file with the "Insert/edit/link" button [Alt+Shift+A]. Click on this [brief tutorial](#), which will show you how to do this. You can link to another image on the web, to a youtube video (or you can shoot your own video and upload it to youtube), or to a sound file. Let me know if you have any technical trouble; you can always send the link or the file to [me](#) or [you](#).



**Online visitors:** You can link to images or video on the web by inserting the website address in the [HTML](#) section below. We will respond to all your posts! Please join us.

\* \* \*

Oscar Wilde, The Harlot's House--[Click here](#) to find the poem

\*\*\*



"Olympia" by Manet

1863

Oil on canvas, 130.5 x 190 cm

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

"Like wire-pulled automatons,  
Slim silhouetted skeletons  
Went sidling through the slow quadrille,"

This disturbing painting of a nineteenth-century courtesan (Olympia was a common nickname for prostitute in the 19th century; for more information, see T.J. Clark's "Olympia's Choice" in *The Painting of Modern Life*) could very well illustrate the verse: "Slim silhouetted skeletons." Wilde's poem is, in my opinion, a depiction of a brothel wherein dehumanized men and women meet. In the painting, Olympia's enigmatic gaze along with her yellowy and cadaverous skin color is accusing the viewer, making the latter feel both guilty and uncomfortable. As it is the case for Wilde's poem, a feeling of malaise, ennui, and fear emanates from this painting: what happens to the *Self* when it is reified and becomes a mere object of consummation (a mechanical grotesque, an automaton, a clockwork puppet, a horrible marionette)? Well, it's a little like a when "the tune goes false:" something is wrong and then, we all can feel this disturbing eeriness... -R.C.

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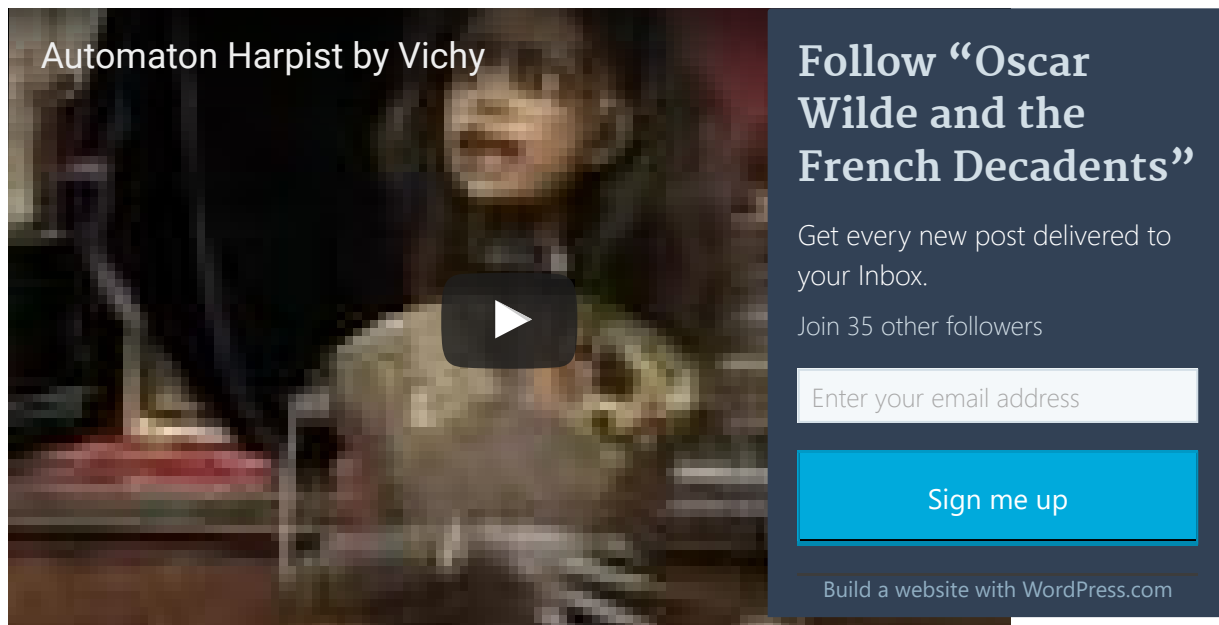
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The above piece is Zbigniew Preisner—Les Marionettes. Very simple, stately, melancholy piece of piano music. I imagine grinning inhuman puppets dancing round and round to this.



Above: A picture I found on the web, of a deserted London city street at night. What's missing here is a smoker under a street lamp, half in shadow.





Above: A 19th-century French female automaton (used to play a harp). She's beautiful and eerie at the same time. Winding her up feels like a violation somehow. -petradt



The "Dance of Death," ("Toytentantz" in Yiddish) from the 1937 production of An-sky's 1914 play, *The Dybbuk*.

The eerie dance of automatons in Wilde's "The Harlot's House" is also a dance phantoms and skeletons, where "the dead are dancing with the dead." Wilde's poem echoes the tradition of the Danse Macabre, which served as an especially important motif in both Jewish and Polish avant-garde theater (i.e. Wyspiański's *The Wedding*, 1901). – Voland

LH's links: 1). <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFBfMvoqEWA>;

(a link to a Youtube music clip entitled Rex Irae, by the Swiss band Celtic Frost. The beginning of the song is keenly suggestive of the mad, whirling atmosphere of the revellers—at least to me);

2). the following are paintings by Otto Dix, an expressionist painter whose work captured the original way that verges on (an sometimes spills over into) the grotesque.





Prostitutes



Grosstadt



Portrait of Anita Berber

From WildeFranc

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SONYA TAYEH's choreography captures the physicality and pull of some dark force — the forces that I imagine in Oscar Wilde's Harlot's House as a contemporary dance. Sex, compulsion, manipulation, voyeurism, whore/pimp — lines from the poem: mechanical grotesques, fantastic arabesques, ghostly dancers spin, automatons, a phantom lover to her breast, sometimes a horrible marionette, etc. WildeFranc



Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, ca. 1938  
Mia Slavenska and Igor Youkevitch  
in Michel Fokine's "Carnaval"

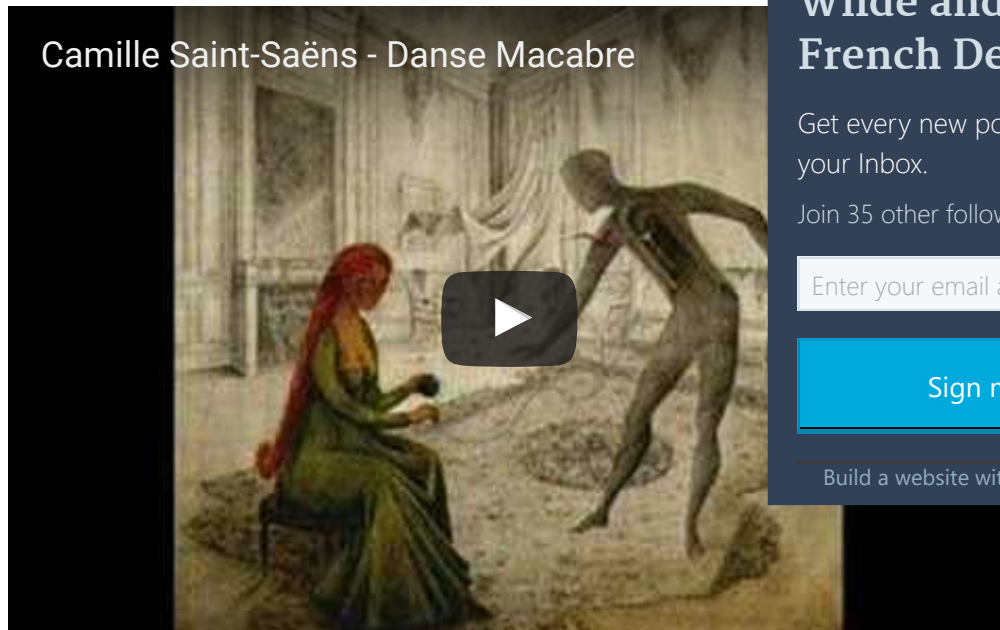
This image from a Russian ballet reminded me a lot of "The Harlot's House," particularly in the lines: "Sometimes a clockwork puppet pressed/ A phantom lover to her breast,/ Sometimes they seemed to try to sing." Not only does ballet seem to correlate perfectly to Wilde's artistic style and French influence, but these dancers specifically are well suited to the dark and eerie tone of the poem. The garish costumes and makeup, the unnatural positioning, the contrast between the ballerina's expression and her

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seemingly modest pose (thus implying a sexual element) all correlate well with "The

The poem immediately brought to mind Camille Saint-Saëns beautifully haunting Da



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Saint-Saëns composed the piece in 1874, based on a poem by Henri Cazalis about death coming and playing a dance for his skeletons. I think the song elegantly captures both the lure and liveliness of the dance in the Harlot's House and its danger. -LN

Although a childish image, I was instantly reminded of Tim Burton's Nightmare Before Christmas.



The poem emphasizes an almost forbidden ball, to which only other-worldly creatures are invited. Although sexuality is eminent in the poem, and the setting is a whore house, the visual description of these creatures was more poignant to me. In this particular song in the movie, the creatures of Halloween Town are inviting their viewers to enter a world of song, dance, gluttony, and fear. Their physiognomy is off-putting, their body parts are sown together or falling off, and they sing mechanically. The harlot's house is terrifying just like Halloween Town, but even something as pure as "Love" cannot resist to enter. MCR

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Movie Trailer - 1983 - Something Wicked This Way Comes

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This poem quickly reminded me of Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, which was adapted to a film in 1983. The premise of *Something Wicked This Way Comes* is significantly darker than "The Harlot's House," as this trailer for the film aptly depicts. However, several of the themes highly dramatized in *Something Wicked This Way Comes* may be seen in "The Harlot's House," though less extremely. *Something Wicked This Way Comes* discusses the deepest, most hidden desires we have, and the dangers associated with sacrificing other elements to find them. Similarly, "The Harlot's House" reflects the grim, grotesque search for fulfillment of hidden desires, most especially physical ones. *Something Wicked This Way Comes* and the poem both emphasize how fading the temporary fulfillment of these desires is. -M.P.



This link will direct you to the music video for the song "Bird of Flames," a collaboration between the singer Chrysta Bell and the famous writer/director/artist David Lynch. The song is from Bell's 2011 album *This Train*. (As a fair warning, I should say the video might be somewhat perturbing to those of you who are particularly sensitive to dark or bizarre imagery; those of you familiar with David Lynch's work won't be surprised by it.) The video offers several suggestive contemporary parallels to the scene described in Wilde's poem, perhaps even



emphasizing what might have struck some as the dystopian note sounded by the 1888 video. As the video invited us to suggest, the woman accompanying the male speaker of Wilde's poem is returning to her house to which she is returning, perhaps we may think of what goes on in the video, namely, to be a captive and to perform. In the video, a sorcerer of sorts seems to be the one within which she is enveloped. She does, indeed, come to life, performing an alluring dance number for the seedy, shady denizens of the mysterious locale. One spectator, in particular, is the focus of the course of the song. We might imagine that he feels more tenderness toward her than even that he, like the speaker of Wilde's poem, might wish for her, one day, not to return altogether. Maybe he would help her. The video's style emphasizes the smoky, exotic atmosphere found within it. In particular, the color green is used to give both people and place a sense of being into a flower, a poetic trope not without its sexual reverberations as well as its associations with the (the most obvious of many possible symbolic associations). The editing of the video, with its movements spastic and animalistic (that is, less human-like) seem to me more than suggestive of Wilde's lines about "strange mechanical grotesques," "ghostly dancers," "wire-pulled skeletons" and "clockwork puppets." The singer herself is made to look particularly disturbing, to render problematic the spectator's infatuation with her, if he indeed sees in her, or women in general, something "doll-like." I'd be happy to know whether or not the video resonated with anyone else. It seems to me many of the issues raised in class – voyeurism, exploitation, obsession, thanatic eroticism, and exoticism, are visible here. DJM

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This clip is from Fritz Lang's 1927 masterpiece *Metropolis*. In this scene, the automaton Maria (an exact mechanical replica of the film's heroine) seduces a crowd of aristocratic men. She appears before them scantily clad in Eastern garb and performs a number of erratic, erotic dance moves. She at once evokes images of Salomé and the Whore of Babylon. This pits the sensual, evil Maria against the Madonna-like good Maria, establishing a virgin/whore dichotomy. The inherent identity crisis—which is the real Maria?—is reminiscent of the ambiguity of character of the lover in "The Harlot's House": is she Love personified, or the harlot herself? The scene transitions to a depiction of Death and the Seven Deadly Sins, similar to the concept of the Danse Macabre others have mentioned. This is included to suggest the imminence of death and the ephemerality of the moment. Alcibiades.

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Because I could not Stop for Death by Emily D

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This video is a reading of Emily Dickinson's poem, "Because I could Not Stop For Death". This poem reminded me of "The Harlot House" first because of the coupling between its rhythm and its content. The rhythm of the poem, which seems to be a slow yet steadfast movement—almost even dragging movement, reflects the inexorable movement of the carriage of Death taking the speaker towards her last day. However, the themes of the poem were also reminiscent of a number of themes in "The Harlot House." Indeed, we find the same idea of a coupling between sex and death. The speaker personifies Death as a young, charming Prince who is taking her away on a carriage. However, this ride is ominous as it is leading her to her downfall. What is more, the speaker's dress is reminiscent of "The Harlot House" both because it is scant clothing and because of the frailty it is portrayed with, which links the speaker to the dark leaves of Wilde's poem, which could be dark because they are burnt, and therefore about to crumble. Finally, the notions of time are blurred, as the Speaker shares that "tis centuries yet seems shorter than the day". This is reminiscent of the many contradictory indications in "The Harlot House", like the contrasts between inside and outside, the organic and the artificial, the passive and the active, and the fast versus the slow, many of which are similarly found in Dickinson's poem. – CAN



Moulin Rouge - El Tango de Roxanne

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After reading the poem, my mind went to Baz Luhrmann's 2001 film *Moulin Rouge!*, particularly the scene, "El Tango

de Roxanne." The way the tango is danced in this scene juxtaposes passion with violence to the fore of the dance. The music, sung mostly by the unexpectedly rough voice of a man, in creating a sense of fear and anxiety in the midst of what seems like a beautifully choreographed "problematizing" of a normally graceful and social activity – dancing – is exactly what the quadrilles of his poem. The theme of prostitution is also prominent here, both in the setting of the dance, and in the fact that the main character is losing his love to the lust of a man. Luhrmann even creates an inside/outside dichotomy in the moment where the main character watches his love enter the "house of lust." The end of the video invokes pacing of the tempo of the song, the increasingly discordant instrument, and the rapid scene cuts and emotional movement until, suddenly, it goes silent. This abrupt transition from a moment of one that occurs after the speaker's love enters the house: one moment, there is shrill music, next, only the quiet, frightened dawn.

-A.A.



This image depicts ballerina Carlotta Grisi in the role of *Giselle*, a ballet dating from the mid-nineteenth century. Wilde's diction displays an understanding and admiration of dance. In addition, his use of ballet-specific language and tetrameter evoked ballerinas of the mid-nineteenth century, who often moonlighted as prostitutes when not performing. The title of the poem and explicit reference to "dancing" in the first line immediately created this association. In the ballet *Giselle*, the eponymous protagonist cannot be with the duke she loves and succumbs in a "mad scene." Many interpret the ballet through a historical and cultural lens. Ballerinas who doubled as prostitutes in the time period are one of many reasons for the spread of syphilis during the time period. Wilde's diction such as "whirling," "raced," and "grotesque" may have its roots in the madness associated with the disease. Dance also appears in the structure of Wilde's poem. Many basic routines fit into a count of eight. The tetrameter and rhyming couplets aid the sensation of eight in the poem. When not counted in eight, routines are often in threes, such as a waltz. The three lines per stanza and rhymes in the last line of stanzas helps to regulate the three-point rhythm. – KJO

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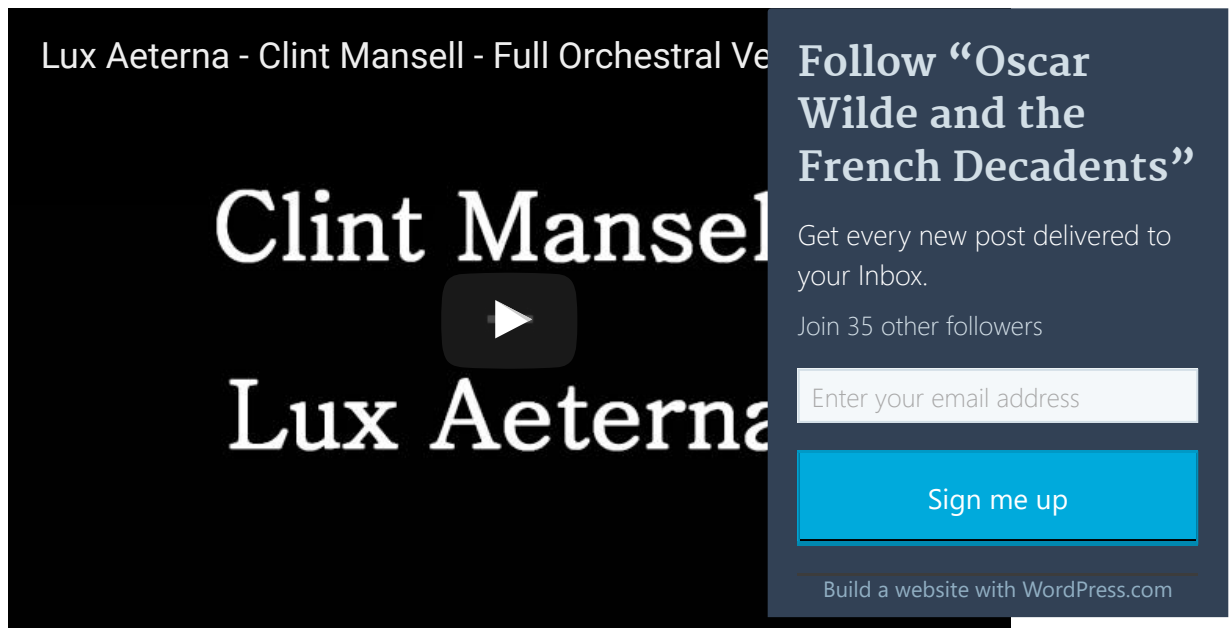
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Lux Aeterna - Clint Mansell - Full Orchestral Version

# Clint Mansell

# Lux Aeterna

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This is a composition by Clint Mansell titled "Lux Aeterna". Though the name actually means "The Eternal Light", I personally find it to a bit misleading— this piece is actually quite eerie and morbid. "The Harlot's House" seemed to be a good companion to "Lux Aeterna" because, like the musical piece, the poem effectively conjures up images of darkness, sadness, and mechanics. The unique sense of rhythm present in the poem through both its actual structure and description of dancing can also be heard in Lux Aeterna through the gradual increase in tempo and crescendo. -MG

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EotNviTsa> 

This is a clip from a Fellini film wherein the protagonist encounters a dancing automaton in a manner very similar to the way in which the 'lover' in "The Harlot's House" is slowly enveloped into the almost static activity of the house. The darkness and morbidity of these scene mirrors the stylistic aura of Wilde's poem and the almost hyper-real nature of the Fellini scene is very similar to the amalgamation of the ghostly and the real which occurs in Wilde's poem due to the ethereal nature of the poem. There exists a certain dark, seductive beauty in the clip, which is surely the same effect Wilde conjures in the Harlot's House. - DF



The above is footage of the tamest dust devils I could find on youtube. The line "the dust devil" immediately recalled, to my mind, a dust devil, in which dust whirls in motion similar to a tornado. Yet Wilde's line

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seems much calmer than more intense dust devils (I have inserted a picture of a large  
this). – ER

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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xeNnSm4uzGA>

But she—she heard the violin,  
And left my side, and entered in:  
Love passed into the house of lust.

Then suddenly the tune went false,  
The dancers wearied of the waltz,  
The shadows ceased to wheel and whirl.

The "point of no return" seems so similar to the moment when love passed into the house of lust where upon entering the Harlot's House, their relationship cannot return to what it once was.

-HJ

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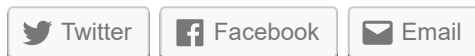
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## 5 responses to "Image and Sound Interpretation: Wilde, "The Harlot's House" (Exercise #2)"

### Jamil Mustafa

October 1, 2012 at 7:56 am



Terrific posts so far! Since Wilde was apparently inspired to write the poem by a Pa murdered after his encounter with her, the link below seemed appropriate.

[Reply](#)**wildedecadents**

October 1, 2012 at 10:26 am

Hi Jamil, Thanks for your comment! There was no link in your comment, howe  
that? We'd be very curious 😊

[Reply](#)**AGT**

October 1, 2012 at 9:58 pm

I'm an interested Stanford community member who unfortunately had some other  
intrigued in Wilde's poem by the interplay of soft femininity and the grotesque or  
savage yet sensual dance that is reminiscent of both lust and death. The tension of these senses urged me to submit  
a picture of Sharon Needles, the self-described "drag queen of shock," who here distorts an otherwise potentially  
attractive or seductive female impersonation with zombie paraphernalia. Despite her corpselike appearance, there  
is something alluring in her visage and her movement, which is both stylized and grotesque. I could only find a still,  
but here she is walking the runway in the "Apocalyptic Couture" (itself a contradictory yet captivating dichotomy)  
challenge in season 4 of RuPaul's Drag Race.

[Reply](#)**wildedecadents**

October 7, 2012 at 10:53 am

Hi AGT, Thanks so much for your comment and participation! Love the RuPaul reference! The erotic and  
aesthetic allure of the death-like puppet(automaton, marionette ...) is indeed a major feature in Wilde's poem.  
Great idea.

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