

Oscar Wilde's Dolls, Puppets and Marionettes
in *The Harlot's House*

Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu
"Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău
Romania

Abstract

Oscar Wilde's *The Harlot's House* presents the author's own images of love and lust with the help of puppetry imagery; he refers to prostitutes as "mechanical grotesques", "automatons", "skeletons", "puppet[s]", "marionette[s]" and ultimately "the dead". He could hardly find more synonyms for 'manipulated, lifeless dolls'. Women are misogynistically viewed as objects of desire and subjected to the male glance. All these images represent in fact Wilde's attempt to create "art for art's sake" by illustrating decay and depravity through a disrespectful depiction of harlots, dehumanizing them and stealing them the gender identity. The women, described as phantomatic, slim and inert, controlled by a puppeteer, are in fact the representation of the true love's decay and the lust's increasing attraction. The female puppets/dolls try to imitate real feelings but cannot do this because of their wires pulled mechanically.

Keywords: *doll, puppet, puppeteer, mechanized culture, transgression of boundaries*

1. Introduction

Oscar Wilde is widely-known as one of the authors at the end of the 19th century who exposed the bourgeoisie's hypocrisy regarding sexual and moral regulations and who criticised London for becoming more and more the heart of urban depravity in England, instead of centre of finance and banking. In one of his poems, *The Harlot's House*

from 1885 published in *The Dramatic Review*, Wilde presented the sexual and physical corruption of London, the centre of decay and degeneration, and its influence on upper or middle-class men and lower-class women. In this poem, a male narrator is walking through the streets of London accompanied by a woman heading to the poor slums in search for sexual pleasures. Wilde's narrator seems to represent the voice of bourgeoisie regarding the harlot's houses (= brothels, whorehouse) and their denizens. The narrator's voice seems to resonate with the society's disdain for individuals who chose to live outside the societal norms.

There are many historians (Henry Mayhew, William Tuckniss in *London Labour and the London Poor*, 1861, or William Acton in *Prostitution: Its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects*, 1870) who were particularly outspoken about the topic of prostitution in the 19th century. They revealed how, by the mid-19th century, it had become quite difficult for women to find work in decent positions; rather, they are forced to accept poorly paid jobs and work long hours in agricultural environment, or as shop girls, servants, seamstresses, factory workers (Sigworth 1980: 81). Consequently, many women looked for other ways of supplementing their income and prostitution was an easy way to do it.

William Acton, both a doctor and writer, tried in his book to explain prostitution not only from a moral perspective, but also from a 'sanitary' one, binding this sexual activity performed in brothels to all kinds of venereal diseases which, beyond moral depravity, led the society to physical decay. One section of his book is dedicated to a type of brothel mentioned by Wilde in his *The Harlot's House*: the dancing-room¹. These were well-decorated houses which were one of the finest

¹ "The visitor, on passing the doors, finds himself in a spacious room, the fittings of which are of the most costly description, while brilliant gas

Oscar Wilde's Dolls, Puppets and Marionettes...

venues for the prostitutes and their clients. In fact, the sexual intercourse did not even take place there, but elsewhere. These sites were used to arrange the meeting between customers and their objects of desire, while listening to good music and admiring "pretty faces". Acton (1972) insists upon the fact that the majority of visitors, despite their "vicious propensities", did not go there for sex, but for reasons less explicit like chatting and idling.

The term "harlot", by the 19th century, had come to be used as a derogatory appellation for a woman, but as Helen Davies shows in her book *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction* (Davies, 2012: 94) historically the term has also been applied to men. However, even if one ignores the question whether the harlots are male or female, the term refers to "a person who engages in sexual intercourse for money"² and this is what Oscar Wilde is interested in the most: the sexual desire which might turn subjects into objects, making some play the role of the puppet and others – that of the master.

The present paper is divided into three sections which are related to: the definition of puppets/dolls/marionettes and their presence in different cultures and literary works; Wilde's representation of prostitutes as mechanical puppets due to the rising economy and industry of 19th century Britain; and finally, any objects of desire subjected to a voyeuristic gaze³ becomes a prey in someone's

illuminations, reflected by numerous mirrors, impart a fairy-like aspect to the scene. The company is, of course, mixed. Many of the men resorting to such places seek no doubt the opportunity of indulging their vicious propensities; but the majority of the better class go merely to while away an idle hour." (Acton, 1972 [1870]: 19).

² www.thefreedictionary.com/harlot.

³ In feminist books, the male gaze is the act of describing women and their body from a masculine perspective that presents women as objects of desire

eyes and hands. The main objective of this paper is to emphasize the degeneration of bodies by transforming humans into clockwork devices and by endowing abstract entities with human characteristics.

2. Dolls and Puppets in the 19th Century

Even from the title (*The Harlot's House*) and later from the lines of the poem⁴, I was drawn to the connection with Henrik Ibsen's book, *A Doll's House*, published in 1879, a few years earlier than Wilde's poem. Although Wilde's title clearly subverts the values Ibsen tried to emphasize in his work, both 'houses' refer to the women's fate in the 19th century who lacked reasonable opportunities to fulfil their dreams and ideals in a patriarchal society. Both literary works refer to women as dolls and puppets in the hands of men, reinforcing the dichotomy between the female object and the male manipulator. Readers are inclined to superficially consider both Wilde and Ibsen as misogynistic writers since they associate women with artificiality, objectification and susceptibility, but by reading carefully their works we realize that the aforementioned dichotomy is blurred.

Indeed, Ibsen's Nora is treated by her husband in the beginning as a doll-wife, a trophy which displays both his position in society as well as his fortune. The doll is mainly related to children, to games and play time; it is considered too unimportant for adults and it has no word to say in any matter. It is not the first time when women are treated like dolls and puppets. William Thackeray's preface to his novel, *Vanity Fair*, frames the story into a puppet play, in which the

for the pleasure of male spectators. The term was first used by feminist critic Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) who found *male gaze* deeply rooted in the patriarchal understanding.

⁴ Oscar Wilde makes use of various examples of puppetry imagery: "wire-pulled automatons" (line 13), "clockwork puppet" (line 19), "a horrible marionette" (line 22).

Oscar Wilde's Dolls, Puppets and Marionettes...

author takes on multiple roles (narrator, interlocutor, puppeteer, manager of the performance) and in which Thackeray "links the puppet, the doll and the woman in an implicit hierarchy of representational and gendered subordination" (Capuano, 2015: 116). Thackeray calls two of his female characters 'puppet' and 'doll' according to their representative features. On the one hand, Becky, being "more lively on the wire" (Thackeray, 1994: IX) is ascribed the role of the puppet whose strings are handled by the Manager of the Performance and whose strings allow her more freedom than the rest of the characters. On the other hand, Amelia Sedley is the beautiful doll who is static, passive, submissive – a toy in everyone's hands. The doll's role is to be possessed and to be handled and its clothes and beauty depend on the fortune of the owner: the more beautiful the doll's face and clothes are, the richer the possessor is. It is interesting to notice that Ibsen compares his heroine to a doll, not a puppet or a marionette, as if Nora's only role is to wear beautiful clothes and jewels, to be displayed and to remain passive and keep silence in important matters such as the financial issues. Nora is not granted the flexibility of the puppet's strings which would allow her some kind of movement besides the puppeteer's actions.

Another example of puppetry imagery mentioned by Oscar Wilde in his poem is the "clockwork puppet" which reminds the readers of the porcelain puppet placed on a pedestal, which moves only when somebody turns the key into the lock; the wiggling of the key engages the clockwork puppet into dancing on a specific music⁵.

⁵ Originally, the clockwork puppets are rooted in ancient Chinese clockwork mechanism, but they were shortly imported to Korea and Japan; Karakuri Ningyo – as the puppets were called in Japan – have a long history in the Japanese ritual life and were believed to be endowed with a magical quality due to the clockwork which allowed them to move on their own. Many forms of Japanese theatre have been influenced by these puppets and have often

The clockwork puppet draws our attention specifically because it is heavily focused on gesture and movement rather than the use of language.

All these examples of puppetry imagery indicate Oscar Wilde's representation of a possible threat of interfering into the English domestic sphere: since wives and daughters were expected to be manipulated by their husbands, fathers, brothers, it is surprising to notice how the decadent author subverts men's right to control and manipulate the women in their life; prostitution and any sexual activity outside marriage transform anyone into puppets and dolls without gender.

3. Wilde's Dehumanized Harlots - Mechanized Puppets without Gender

Wilde's attitude towards prostitution is puzzling, because as a renowned Aesthete he was supposed to promote "art for art's sake" and to praise the unnatural and the extraordinary. Almost paradoxically, while Oscar Wilde confirms the harlots' marginal position in the London society due to their exaggerated sexuality, at the same time he also depicts them as being objects without gender. All references to them show so much contempt that he aims at dehumanizing the harlots. The poem suggests that the harlots and their customers are nothing more than some machines, presenting them as "mechanical grotesques" (line 7), "wire-pulled automatons" and "skeletons" (lines 13, 14), "clockwork puppets" (line 19), "horrible marionettes" (line 22). This language reduces the inhabitants and the visitors of this depraved house to mere imitations of real life; the

imitated the set of hand gestures and poses which are also seen in anime and Japanese television programs. (Boyle 2008)

Oscar Wilde's Dolls, Puppets and Marionettes...

mechanized puppets are described as empty shells that would imitate the human deeds and emotions.

Wilde's prostitute reminds the readers of the Pre-Raphaelite 'fallen woman' torn between sensuality, sexual frustration and denial of the true sweetness of romantic love. The fallen woman's unnatural red lips, her insensitivity to human emotions, her paleness, her loitering attitude are deliberate attempts to make this woman pathetic and unsympathetic. Oscar Wilde, like all Pre-Raphaelites, Aesthetes and Decadents, includes in his works the male's presence and alludes to his role in the woman's destruction. Unlike the Victorians, who put the blame only on the fallen woman, Wilde shifts the blame and emphasizes through this unflattering description the unnaturalness of the characters involved. In fact, the Pre-Raphaelites, the Aesthetes and the Decadents tried to find a plausible explanation for the woman's 'fall' and positioned the fallen woman in the role of the victim. In this poem, it seems Wilde makes the transition from the 'fallen woman' (the lover with whom the author is loitering down the streets) to prostitutes (the ones described in the harlot's house). This transition is not meant to denigrate women, but it is his way of exploring vice.

Besides dehumanizing his prostitutes, Wilde also describes them as objects whose gender is uncertain. The objectification starts with the narrator's shift in pronouns used to describe the depraved woman. First the harlot ("a clockwork puppet") holds the lover "to her breast", but once the woman transgresses the threshold between the world based on societal norms and the world of subversion, disobedience and sexuality, Wilde makes use of a pronoun without any gender specification ("its") laying stress on the prostitute's and the lover's transgression of any type of boundaries: social, cultural, human – "Sometimes a clockwork puppet pressed/A phantom lover to *her* breast" (lines 19-20); "Sometimes a horrible marionette/ Came out, and smoked *its* cigarette/ Upon the steps like a live thing" (lines 22-

24). Wilde assumes the Victorian attitude which rejects lust and passion, therefore the lovers should be labelled as lacking individuality and social agency: "like a live thing"; "a phantom lover". The first time Wilde refers to men – visitors of the harlot's house – the word "phantom" modifies the word "lover" by implying that the emotions obtained in this location cannot be but fake, unreal, unnatural. To Victorian society (and apparently to the narrator, too), the enjoyment of sexual pleasure is just a shadow of true love, thus Wilde equates the two dancers in their sinful pleasure: "The dead are dancing with the dead, / The dust is whirling with the dust" (lines 26-27); "Like black leaves wheeling in the wind. / Like wire-pulled automatons, / Slim silhouetted skeletons" (lines 12-14).

The dehumanizing representation of lustful lovers oscillates between a ghost-like figure and tangible machines under the form of puppets controlled by wires, or in the form of clockwork puppets controlled by the turning of a key, or as marionettes controlled by the society's fingers from inside themselves. The dream-like apparition of a beautiful puppet is tuned by mechanical devices to emphasize the social purpose. Wilde aims at highlighting the anxieties arising from the industrial milieu; the Victorians lived in a world full of industrial and financial concerns, preoccupied with practicality and pragmatism, in a country marked by huge changes in science and economics. Changes in the British social life were closely connected to the empire's economic development. England began to industrialize its culture and economy and people had to adapt to these alterations. Most of the labour force was replaced by machineries and the poor experienced unemployment and famine. The ghastly combination of machines and poverty produced in Wilde's poem the automated dancing of the quadrille by characters, completely lacking life and exuding death. The prostitute together with the lover are envisioned like two clockwork puppets which start spinning once the key is turned in. They dance to

Oscar Wilde's Dolls, Puppets and Marionettes...

a famous tune "Treues Liebes Herz" by Strauss (= "true loving heart"), without realizing the intensity of these emotions. Their dance ("the stately saraband" – line 17) resembles the monotonous activity of engines in factories and manufactures in Victorian times: automatic, unnatural and maddening. The poem also suggests Wilde's rejection of this mechanized culture, in passages such as "strange mechanical grotesques", "wire-pulled automatons", "horrible marionette". Wilde realizes that Victorians were enjoying the power and control given by the machines, but at the same time the author knew that the dehumanized hand which controlled the puppets, the dolls and the marionettes brought about an aura of doom to the people.

4. The Harlot – a Doll between Lust and Voyeurism

A pioneer of aesthetic and decadent movement, the author advocated for "art for art's sake", for the belief that art should be free of the restrictions imposed by a hypocritically moralistic Victorian society that cruelly rejected any violation of codes or transgression of norms. Yet, Wilde's repugnance of prostitutes and their lifeless representation is seen by the critics as a form of self-criticism for his own depravity and a realization that he himself is a part of the so-called "Great Social Evil"⁶. Due to the venereal diseases which affected important representatives of British society, the Parliament passed all kinds of Contagious Disease Acts in 1864, 1866 and 1869 which allowed prostitution especially in military towns, but finally in 1885 (the year when Wilde's *The Harlot's House* was published) the Parliament passed the Criminal Law Amendment Act which prohibited brothels, pimping/profitting off prostitution and homosexuality⁷. By writing this poem, Oscar Wilde tried to adapt to

⁶ Ridgway <http://www.isis.aust.com>.

⁷ Landow <http://www.victorianweb.org/gender/prostitution>.

the norms of the Victorian society and not to offend these narrow-minded people or to violate their limited perceptions.

If Wilde depicts the prostitutes as “horrible marionettes”, there are other contemporaries such as William Acton who describes the women from the dancing-rooms as “pretty and quietly, though expensively dressed” (Acton 1972: 5). Unlike the decadents’ preference for heroines with a deathly-looking face, Acton praises the prostitutes’ freshness of the flesh, unknowing that much of this ‘freshness’ has to do with cosmetics. Practically, the women from these dancing-rooms were not common harlots from the poor London slums, but classy mistresses who did not entertain soldiers and sailors, but well-to-do men. They behave nicely and possess the necessary skills to play the piano or to sing promiscuous songs (Walkowitz, 1980: 68). Both Wilde and Acton (1972) concur with the idea that these women should be conferred little importance and substance beyond their physical beauty.

Besides attributing to his characters a sexualized personality, Wilde also confers on them the attributes of the voyeurs. While walking through the streets at night, the lovers stop outside a (brothel) dancing-room drawn by the scenes inside. They can hear some fragments of the music and joy and can only guess what is happening inside: “the shadows raced across the blind” (line 9). A song about the true nature of love is being played while skeleton-like creatures dance lustfully. The inability to be part of the scene tantalizes and intrigues them. Through the blinds of the windows, the pair of lovers watches how prostitutes dance with/for their customers. The narrator seems both disgusted and delighted with what he sees through the window of the harlot’s house because of the lustful creatures that dance with “the dead” (= disease, decay)⁸. Though the narrator finds the entire

⁸ Weiss <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/wilde/weiss>.

Oscar Wilde's Dolls, Puppets and Marionettes...

scene appalling, the lover finds it seducing, therefore she boldly enters the brothel: "But she – she heard the violin, / And left my side, and entered in:/Love passed into the house of lust." (lines 28-30). But immediately after she walks in, "the tune went false" (line 31). In a voyeur's eyes, the scene appears seductive through the veil of the blinds (and Oscar Wilde knows how to handle the voyeurs and draw their attention since the writing of his famous play *Salome* whose protagonist lures her admirers with her dances and her veils). But appearances deceive: what seems attractive from outside, inside represents the loss of innocence and ultimately death awaits the sexualised lovers. Adapting to the Victorian ideals, to the advocacy for the idealisation of female purity, Wilde suggests in his poem that lust might seem more seductive than pure love, but once the person lets himself/herself be subjugated by lust, it loses its appeal, therefore "the dancers wearied of the waltz" (line 32). The voyeur's sinful revelry is transformed by the author into a sinister image: women are associated with industrial terms ("automatons", "mechanical grotesques"). The unnaturalness preached by the decadents in their works is presented here through the dehumanization of people and their transformation into factory machines. A human identity is conferred in the poem on to the dawn which manages to slowly infiltrate into the city "like a frightened girl" (line 36); the dawn seems to be the only pure thing left in this filthy, depraved city, thus it embodies a young girl's innocence and fear of sexual intercourse.

Everything that is illustrated in *The Harlot's House* seems illusory, shadowy, mechanical and deathlike. Lust is described as a failed attempt at love, and due to its failure, it brings about emotionless actions and ultimately weariness, boredom and even disease. Wilde's "art for art's sake" arguably presents the society's view on lust and passion – both being presented as empty and lifeless unlike the true love which should be celibate and pure. Love's power

and beauty are enhanced by the rejection of lust which can lead to death and superficiality. Once love steps into the house of lust, being drawn by the lust's music, love 'wearies', 'ceases to wheel and whirl' and ultimately is dispelled. Through his representation of the harlot's house, Wilde points out the society's belief that the pleasures of the body are evil and empty of emotions.

Conclusions

In a world where patriarchal order established the woman's role as virginal daughter, dutiful wife and mother, little space was left to the sexualised woman. However, art and literature allowed an alternative representation of the prostitute and later of the fallen woman. Many times, the woman's lapse into sexual pleasure is blamed on the poor conditions and male desire. Unlike the pre-Raphaelite obsession with restoring the woman's purity and with negating the contemporary anxieties regarding "The Great Social Evil", Oscar Wilde overtly criticizes this dangerous female type: the prostitute. In *The Harlot's House*, through use of puppetry imagery, Wilde dehumanizes the prostitutes and to a lesser degree he even steals their gender identity by making a shift in the pronouns used. The dehumanization of the prostitutes is based on the mechanization of dolls, puppets and marionettes which represent Britain's latest economic and scientific development. On closer inspection, beyond presenting these women's sexuality and depravity, the author also focuses on the male who acts as a voyeur when his desire is enticed. The lifeless depiction of prostitutes invites man to let go their sexual desires and the woman becomes his prey under his ogling eyes. The poem offers a series of synonyms for 'lifeless dolls', easily to be manipulated and controlled, placing the woman once again into the passive stereotype and empowering the male spectator/reader.

Oscar Wilde's Dolls, Puppets and Marionettes...

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Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu

affiliation: Faculty of Letters, "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, Romania

position: PhD professor's assistant

email: balinisteanu.catalina@ub.ro

research interests: gender studies, Victorian literature, decadence, narratology

selected publications:

- (2017): „Sprechende Körper – eine Semiotik der Körper” (Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu), in „Jassy liegt am Meer”. *Expeditionen in die deutschsprachige Literatur zwischen Czernowitz und Lübeck zu Ehren von Andrei Corbea-Hoișie*, Konstanz: Hartung Gorre Verlag, pp. 21-31.
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