

Impression du Matin¹

- The Thames nocturne of blue and gold²
 Changed to a harmony in grey;
 A barge with ochre-colored hay
 Dropped from the wharf:³ and chill and cold
- 5 The yellow fog came creeping down
 The bridges, till the houses' walls
 Seemed changed to shadows, and St. Paul's
 Loomed like a bubble o'er the town.⁴
- Then suddenly arose the clang
 10 Of waking life; the streets were stirred
 With country wagons; and a bird
 Flew to the glistening roofs and sang.
- But one pale woman all alone,
 The daylight kissing her wan hair,
 15 Loitered beneath the gas lamps' flare,
 With lips of flame and heart of stone.

1881

The Harlot's House

- We caught the tread of dancing feet,
 We loitered down the moonlit street,
 And stopped beneath the Harlot's house.
- Inside, above the din and fray,
 5 We heard the loud musicians play
 The "Treues Liebes Herz" of Strauss.¹
- Like strange mechanical grotesques,
 Making fantastic arabesques,
 The shadows raced across the blind.
- 10 We watched the ghostly dancers spin
 To sound of horn and violin,
 Like black leaves wheeling in the wind.

1. Impression of the morning (French).

2. Cf. the "Nocturnes" (paintings of nighttime scenes) by James McNeill Whistler in the 1870s. *Nocturne in Blue and Gold: Old Battersea Bridge* was one of this series; it was painted by 1875 but given its present title in 1892. In the next line Wilde may be referring to an earlier painting by Whistler, *Harmony in Gray and Green: Miss Cic-**ely Alexander* (1872-74).

3. I.e., left the wharf and went down river with the ebb tide.

4. I.e., the large dome of St. Paul's Cathedral in London.

1. *Heart of True Love*, a waltz by the Austrian composer and "Waltz King" Johann Strauss (1825-1899).

Like wire-pulled automatons,
Slim silhouetted skeletons
15 Went sidling through the slow quadrille,²

Then took each other by the hand,
And danced a stately saraband;³
Their laughter echoed thin and shrill.

Sometimes a clockwork puppet pressed
20 A phantom lover to her breast,
Sometimes they seemed to try to sing,

Sometimes a horrible marionette
Came out, and smoked its cigarette
Upon the steps like a live thing.⁴

25 Then turning to my love I said,
"The dead are dancing with the dead,
The dust is whirling with the dust."

But she, she heard the violin,
And left my side, and entered in;
30 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,

35 And down the long and silent street,
The dawn, with silver-sandaled feet,
Crept like a frightened girl.

1885, 1908

*From The Critic as Artist*¹

[CRITICISM ITSELF AN ART]

ERNEST Gilbert, you sound too harsh a note. Let us go back to the more gracious fields of literature. What was it you said? That it was more difficult to talk about a thing than to do it?

GILBERT [*After a pause.*] Yes: I believe I ventured upon that simple truth. Surely you see now that I am right? When man acts he is a puppet.

2. An intricate dance involving four couples facing each other in a square.

3. A slow and stately dance, originating in Spain.

4. In an illustration for the poem by Althea Gyles (approved by Wilde), the marionette is pictured as a man in evening dress.

1. In "the library of a house in Piccadilly," Gilbert and Ernest, two sophisticated young men, are talking about the use and function of criticism.

Earlier in the dialogue Ernest had complained that criticism is officious and useless: "Why should the artist be troubled by the shrill clamour of criticism? Why should those who cannot create take upon themselves to estimate the value of creative work?" Gilbert, in his reply, argues that criticism is creative in its own right. He digresses to compare the life of action unfavorably with the life of art: actions are dangerous and their results