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Aestheticism in Britain: A Movement for Uncertainty

Stemming from the French philosophy of *l'art pour l'art,* or "art for art's sake," Aestheticism redesigned the intentions and interpretations of art across Europe. Though widely acclaimed and accepted in modern culture, notable Aesthetic artists such as James McNeill Whistler, were the innovators of their time who produced art beyond its conventional purpose. Whistler and his contemporaries emphasized the creative execution of technique and overall visual appeal above significance of subject matter. With the valuing of beauty over meaning, though, came a perceived abandonment of morality – thus, Aestheticism also become a movement toward the more profane, provocative, and in some cases, pornographic. In the Victorian culture, so strictly bound by its values and desire to maintain them, the unruly hair and pouted lips of a Dante Gabriel Rossetti woman were radical to say the least. What was initially intended to evoke positivity and pleasantness would soon be viewed as rebellious debauchery: visual evidence of society's declining moral state. In keeping with the ebb and flow of British cultural fads, values, and interests, the period of Aestheticism represented a reformative movement against the structured and socially labored ways of its time.

The Victorian Age, which preceded and coincided with British Aestheticism, is often defined by its rigid emphasis on morality, utilitarianism, and industrialization. In *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms,* Ross Murfin goes as far as describing Victorians as "prudish, hypocritical, stuffy, [and] narrow-minded" (Murfin 496). Professor Robert M.

Kirschen, concurring with Murfin's notion, argues that such generalizations of the Victorian Age stem from the growing, more culturally pertinent middle class. He writes: "Many members of this middle-class aspired to join the ranks of the nobles, and felt that acting 'properly,' according to the conventions and values of the time, was an important step in that direction" (Kirschen). The prominence of these conceptions of morality, in addition to the ongoing Industrial Revolution and imperialistic drive, contributed to an era of discipline and productivity. Each Victorians' action had a purpose, be it to boost one's social status, appease God through Protestant work ethic, or instill national pride. Artistically, Victorian pieces carried out this same emphasis on earnestness. Modern artist Starr Abbott describes Victorian art as "characterized by a strong adherence to realism and truthfulness to nature, infused with a spiritual or moral message." In literature, the artistically concrete was used to express Victorian sentiments of doubt, along with the impacts of the emergence of science as a challenge to the stability of faith. Victorian writers themselves, namely Lord Tennyson, longed for a renewed purpose. Tennyson's confusion and sadness over his increasingly anachronistic place in the world heralded Victorian art's urgencies, which used morality and realism to regain a sense of certainty.

Initiated in many ways by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the alternative to the stuffiness of Victorian art would soon become Aestheticism, which sought to defy much of the time's demand for rigid purpose. Initially defined by the Greeks as "applied to things perceived by the senses," Aestheticism abandoned the artistic commitment to moral messages and instead focused on creating pieces that were visually appealing; works that conveyed profound emotions through visual technique and quality rather than the realism of their subjects (Denney 38). Simon Poe describes the objective of Aestheticism as a breaking of Victorian habit. He writes of Aesthetes,

…there were people in Victorian Britain (stuffy, cluttered and repressed as we have been taught to see it) who believed that transcendence could be achieved by the reverent enjoyment of a tea-pot, and who tried to live according to that belief (Poe).

Whistler, James Abbott McNeill. *Arrangement in Grey and Black No.1*. 1871. Musée D'Orsay, Paris. *Mr. Whistler's Art*. Web. 17 Dec. 2013.

This idea is demonstrated in many of Whistler's paintings. "Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 1," more commonly known as "Whistler's Mother," shows through its title alone a shift of focus from the subject of the painting to the painting's colors. Within the painting itself, the woman is expressionless and almost secondary to her surroundings. Similarly, the girl in Whistler's "Symphony in White, No.1: The White Girl" is quite pale and wears a muted white that essentially blends in with her background. She exists only in the negative space created by the surrounding colors, and, like the title "Arrangement in Grey and Black," "Symphony in White" refers specifically to the painting's aesthetics rather than its subject. Such concepts were a stark digression from traditional Victorian paintings, which often highlighted topics such as courtship and marriage, social class, and historical events.

Whistler, James Abbott McNeill. *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl*. 1862. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

These digressions did little to ingratiate Aestheticism with the prevailing Victorian artists of the time. In his book on late-Victorian Britain, author Philip Cohen opens his discussion of the Aesthetic movement by writing: "The purest Aesthetic poems are not really 'about' anything. Form, sound, image, and mood dominate to the extent that little or no room remains for ideas" (Cohen 214). Aestheticism's perceived lack of subject or purpose sparked outrage amongst classic Victorians. Because no apparent moral message was being conveyed, Aesthetic art and writing was viewed as immoral and, in some cases, wicked and lazy. Simon Poe notes that the opposition to Aestheticism held that art and beauty were intended to be vessels for morality. He writes, "The Puritan conviction that unless an experience of beauty involved a moral transaction it could not be more than 'a mere amusement' coloured perceptions of Aestheticism well into the twentieth century" (Poe). Pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti faced particular scrutiny, not only for his works' absence of ethical meaning, but also their presentation of very sensual, unkempt women. Poe refers to a specific criticism of Rossetti's work by Scottish poet Robert Buchanan to show the adversary of Aestheticism:

> [Buchanan] felt that it was 'remarkable for gross sensuality of a revolting kind peculiar to foreign prints' and suggested that Rossetti was 'advocating as a principle the mere gratification of the eye and, if any passion at all, the animal passion to be the aim of art (Poe).

Buchanan's doubt of "passion" in Rossetti's art, combined with his belief that the only passion it could possess was crudely animalistic, aptly demonstrates the Victorian perception of Aestheticism. The style was often devalued as idle or errant simply because it did not conform to the period's believed intention of art. In the case of Decadent writer Algernon Swinburne, whose writing was often seen as excessively florid and "explored previously forbidden topics [of] illicit

kinds of love, blasphemy, and indulgent sensuality," traditional Victorians voiced their opposition through terminating publication of his work *Poems and Ballads* (Denney 38).

Swinburne, as well as other Aesthetic writers, blatantly and vehemently objected to the Victorians' persistent demand for purpose. After all, such revisions to their work undermined the very ideals they advocated. It was the opinion of many Aesthetes that art was and should be morally neutral, and that the insistence of such requirements was tiresome and produced only restrictive art. Following the cessation of publication of his *Poems and Ballads*, Swinburne published a written reaction, *Notes on Poems and Reviews*, which, according to author Colleen Denney, only increased Swinburne's popularity:

> Important for the later artistic adherents, its concluding paragraphs contained the first sustained plea in English literature for the freedom of art from any limitations imposed by moral considerations. If art were to be free of moral restraints, as Swinburne demanded in his pamphlet, then life, which imitated it, would also be free of those constraints (Denney 38).

A self-proclaimed Aesthete himself, Oscar Wilde additionally defended the amoral nature of art in the 'Preface' to his book *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Added after the initial publication, the 'Preface' directly addresses much of the controversy over art's intent. "The artist is the creator of beautiful things," Wilde begins, noting the emphasis on beauty, characteristic of Aestheticism (Wilde 17). He continues, "Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault," (17) a declaration which scorns Victorian analyzers and critics of Aesthetic art. Finally, Wilde matter-of-factly acknowledges that "there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all" (17). The Victorian distaste for the Aesthetic lack of ethical agenda was a well-known complaint in the late

nineteenth century, one that crept its way into popular literature and shaped the definition of art and the artist.

Victorian complaints of Aestheticism were not limited to their vacant messages. Despite the minimization of subject content in Aesthetic artwork, the portrayal of women by Aesthetes was relatively consistent. In listing the characteristics of Aestheticism, Denney writes:

> The central components of [Aesthetic] verse were a subdued, somber, melancholy tone, a preoccupation with subjects far removed from everyday life, and the glorification of the pale, aloof, and languorous female type. (Denney 38)

Most evidently seen in the works of Rossetti, artistic portrayals of Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic women were fleshy and bold. Rossetti's women sported bright, fiery red hair that fell loose on bare shoulders. William Gaunt, in his book *The Aesthetic Adventure*, describes them as "sad eyed, brooding with passionate melancholy, with full drooping lips and a long columnar neck" (Gaunt 62), and further addresses a cultural desire by women to imitate such appearances. Rossetti's women defied the Victorian image and standards of a 'proper' woman; a condition which further perpetuated the belief of Aestheticism being inherently immoral. Simon Poe again recounts Robert Buchanan's objections: "…his Puritan tendency [was] to regard Aesthetic representations of women as pornographic and to perceive the Aesthetes' pleasure in their beauty as nothing more than lust" (Poe). But, the anti-Victorian depiction of women was not seen only in physicality. Diana Maltz describes a complete shift in the roles of women as a result of the Aesthetic movement:

> Through their assemblage of ornaments, aesthetes also undermined physical domestic separate spheres for men and women. Complexly, women in aesthetic circles experienced both empowerment and struggle as writers of guides, models,

> embroiderers, painters, and homemakers, packaging artist-husbands' personae through the aesthetic presentation of the family and home (Maltz 402).

Rejecting many of the characteristic "Angel of the House" qualities of the Victorian woman, Aesthetes were progressive in their content and lifestyles, a clear contrast to the traditional, somewhat archaic ways of the Victorians.

Cohen notes that one of the paramount themes of Aestheticism was a sort of escapism. In the case of such artists and writers, the restrictions they sought to escape were primarily founded in Victorian culture. Like several ages and eras before it, Aesthetes separated themselves from the time's accepted norms and helped swing the pendulum of culture in a new direction. They sought to restore emotion, feeling, and beauty to the labored and lectured ways of the Victorians; an artistic labor met with great resistance. The champions of the Aesthetic movement would face adversity through much of their endeavors, but would ultimately, pave the way for numerous artistic movements to come.

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