

## Aestheticism and Decadentism

In the last decades of the 19th century there was in English culture a reaction against the principles of the **Victorian Age**. This reaction went away from all practical issues taking refuge in a literary and artistic movement, the **Aesthetic movement**, that challenged traditional ideas advocating a view of life in the spirit of art and the principle of **art for art's sake** in which great value was attached to form rather than subject matter. **Oscar Wilde** represents this movement both in his life and in his works and his novel the **Picture of Dorian Gray** is an exploration of the idea that art has nothing to do with morality.

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**Aestheticism** was a literary movement which was not limited to England, but developed throughout Europe by the middle of the 19th century. It originated in **France** with **Théophile Gautier** and numbered among its members mainly writers and painters. Brought about by the sense of frustration and uncertainty that marked the closing years of the century it expanded as a reaction against the **utilitarian outlook** and the **moral restrictions** of the bourgeois society.

Adopting **Gautier's slogan**, '**Art for Art's sake**' the aesthetic writers broke with the conventions of the time and gave free rein to **imagination and fantasy**, taking their theories and attitudes to extremes. They applied their 'canons' not only to their work but to their **lives** as well and lived an extravagant life, devoted to the cult of **art and beauty** and always rich in creative energy.

In **painting**, the Aesthetic theories led to **impressionism** (**Renoir, Manet, Monet**). In **literature**, after a first period, Aestheticism slowly degenerated into what, between 1880 and 1890, was better known as **Decadentism** and after 1890, in France, was replaced by the term '**Symbolism**'.

**Decadentism** was marked by a sort of extremism in which the main traits of Aestheticism underwent a process of refinement which developed until finally toppled into the absurd, the distasteful and the futile. Disregarding the simple genuine values of life and disdaining mediocrity, the Decadents cut themselves off from the masses. Writers, especially the French ones, were charmed by **imaginary and artificial worlds** where illusion replaced reality and they often delved into vice and corruption.

Among the most noted exponents of **European Decadentism**, besides the French poets Mallarmé, Verlaine, Laforgue, Corbière (better known as Symbolists) three were particularly outstanding:

- **Joris Karl Huysmans** (1848-1907) who wrote **À Rebours** (1884);
- **Gabriele D'Annunzio** (1863-1938) especially for his novel **Il Piacere** (1889);
- **Oscar Wilde** (1854-1900) mainly because of **Dorian Gray**, the protagonist of his only novel, **The Picture of Dorian Gray** (1891).

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