Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Movement

Queen Victoria ascended the throne in 1837, less than a month after her 18th birthday. During a 64-year reign (the longest in English history, although Elizabeth II is gaining on her), she presided over an era of unparalleled progress, power and propriety that came to bear her name. Dazzling innovations in technology, transportation and science transformed the way Englishmen lived and worked. With the prosperity and exuberance of the age came a tremendous flowering of English literature. Victorian writers remain widely-read and beloved today, none more so than the great novelists like Charles Dickens and the Brontë sisters. The Victorian novel embodies a cherished moral vision: that perseverance and virtue are rewarded in the end, and that the ill-intentioned will fail.

By the end of the 19th century, however, the Victorian ideal was losing some of its luster. Too often, it had been powered by hypocrisy and greed. A younger generation of artists repudiated the role of moralizer and apologist for the status quo. Beauty, they said, was the sole virtue of art and life. They came to be known as the Aesthetic Movement.

“Art for Art’s Sake”

The rallying cry of the Aesthetic Movement was “Art for art’s sake.” The value of a poem or painting is purely sensual. “Is it beautiful?” is the only question worth asking about a work of art – or anything else. The Aesthetic style was luxuriant, artificial, sensual, subversive, provocative, hinting of decadence and erotic pleasure. Oscar Wilde’s love of paradox, which sounds so light and witty to modern ears, literally turned Victorian society on its head. Life imitates art, he said, not the other way around. We think he’s teasing; the Victorians knew he was attacking.

Icons of the British Aesthetic Movement

Walter Pater (1839-1894) was an Oxford professor who gave the Aesthetes their credo. In *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), he wrote that faith and ethical systems are no bulwark against the relentless flow of time and the tragic brevity of life. "While all melts under our feet, we may well catch at any exquisite pas..."

Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909) brought intense lyricism, evocative imagery and explicit sexuality to his *Poems and Ballads* (1866). His extreme style and erratic personal conduct handed his critics easy tools for mockery, but his poetry and prose gave rich and powerful voice to the Aesthetic Movement throughout a long career.

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) is the name most inextricably linked to the Aesthetic Movement, as much for the lurid details of his life as for his considerable literary contributions. When he left Oxford, he declared “I’ll be a poet, a writer, a dramatist. Somehow or other I’ll be famous, and if not famous, I’ll be notorious.” He fulfilled those ambitions. His enduring legacy resides mainly in his plays (*The Importance of Being Earnest* is an acknowledged comic masterpiece) and his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Of his poetry, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is most enduring. Wilde produced two delightful volumes of fairy tales, some significant critical essays, most notably in *Intentions* (1891), and a long soul-searching letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, *De Profundis*, written in 1897 from Reading Gaol.

*The Yellow Book* was a lavishly-illustrated and beautifully-produced literary magazine that embraced the values of the Aesthetic Movement and featured many of its writers. Launched in 1894, its first editor was Aubrey Beardsley, who gave the magazine its distinctive graphic style and its decadent yellow cover. Essays, poems, and fiction by Max Beerbohm, Arnold

An Abrupt Demise

The trial of Oscar Wilde brought the Aesthetic Movement in England to a screeching halt. As much as the Aesthetes loved shocking and indeed, deliberately provoking, the moral middle classes, few were willing to risk disgrace and literary extinction. Most felt it wiser to distance themselves from the dangerous Aesthetic label. The Victorians had considered the movement “unhealthy” – and it literally became so.

Selected Works by Oscar Wilde

Plays
Lady Windermere's Fan (1892)
A Woman of No Importance (1893)
Salome (1894)
An Ideal Husband (1895)
The Importance of Being Earnest (1895)

Poetry
Ravenna (1878)
Poems (1881)
The Ballad of Reading Gaol (1898)

Prose
The Happy Prince and Other Tales (1888)
The Canterville Ghost (included in Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories, 1891)
Intentions (essays and dialogues on aesthetics, 1891)
The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891)
De Profundis (epistle, written in prison 1897, first published 1905, complete version published 1962)

Oscar Wilde, the complete Aesthete