

AESTHETICISM AND THE CULT OF BEAUTY

Aestheticism was an art movement that developed in Europe in the late 19th century. It claimed that art exists for the sake of beauty and does not have to serve any moral, political or didactic purpose. It was a reaction to the utilitarian philosophy of the Industrial Revolution and to Victorian respectability and morals. In England, the artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement paved the way to Aestheticism with the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones and Charles Algernon Swinburne. In Europe 'Decadence' (the term which has origins in common with Aestheticism) was used at first to describe mid-19th-century writers, such as Théophile Gautier, Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé and J. K. Huysmans, whose *A Rebours* (Against Nature) is mentioned in Wilde's novel. It is the book Henry Wotton gives Dorian to convert him to Aestheticism.



▲ Edward Robert Hughes, *Night* (c.1880-85).

CHECKPOINT

1. Answer the questions.

- 1 What works brought success to Oscar Wilde?
- 2 Which work was considered scandalous?
- 3 Why was Wilde's lifestyle considered scandalous in his time?
- 4 What consequences did this have for Wilde?
- 5 What philosophy of art emerged in Wilde's novel?
- 6 What is the moral lesson of the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*?

LITERARY NOTEBOOK

An **aphorism** is a short clever saying that is intended to express a general truth, and an aphoristic style is a compact, condensed style of writing, which Oscar Wilde used extensively in his plays, in his novel and in his critical essays.

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All art is quite useless

WARM UP

1. Focus on the title of the passage: 'All art is quite useless'. Do you agree with the idea that art does not have any specific aim in society? Find an example of a work of art/artist that either supports or contradicts Wilde's statement and give reasons for your choice.

This is one of the best examples of Wilde's aphoristic style. The excerpt you are going to read is taken from the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and contains Wilde's deep reflections on art, the role of the artist in the modern world and the function of the critic.

- 5① The artist is the creator of beautiful things. To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim.
- 5② The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things.

The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography. Those who find

- 5 ugly¹ meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault. Those
- 5③ who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope.

They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty.

There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all. [...]

1 ugly: orribili