



#### 4. Art for Art's Sake/Art as Social Reform

##### Art for Art's Sake

"Art for Art's sake" is synonymous with the Aesthetic movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Formed in the Victorian era, it is readily associated with Oscar Wilde. The English decadent writers used the slogan by philosopher Victor Cousin "Art for Art's Sake" in their claim that there was no connection between morality and art. The aesthetes were drawn to an understanding of art as independent from social rules, from concepts of good and evil, or indeed any concerns other than the pursuit of beauty.

*"One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art."*

*from Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young*

In this theory, art's purpose was to not only create beautiful things, but to strive for Life to copy everything that was beautiful. It was believed that through beauty, one could achieve completeness. The main characteristics of the movement were suggestion rather than statement, sensuality, the use of symbols, and synaesthetic effects (correspondence between words, colours and music).

*"I find it harder every day to live up to my blue china."*

*Oscar Wilde*

In an era when the homosexual was "invented" by medical sexology as a separate species from the heterosexual, Wilde's aestheticism offered the retort that sexuality, like taste, was simply a heightened sensitivity to the beautiful. Unfortunately, in Wilde's desire to free art, as well as himself, from the constraints of the "ideal" living, as defined by bourgeois society, he was charged and convicted of indecent acts, and convicted to two years hard labour. During the trial, his only defence lay in an aesthetic justification: "Without sin the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colourless."

In the first trial, Wilde is questioned about the morality of his book, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and is asked whether he believes an immoral book can be a good one. He argues that a book is good "if it [is] well written so as to produce a sense of beauty, which is the highest sense of which a human being can be capable. If it [is] badly written, it would produce a sense of disgust." Wilde held these beliefs to be true for all creative individuals, and thus he made beauty his only defence (Kaufman 1).

##### Art As Social Reform

While Wilde's theories and plays seem to espouse "art for art's sake," they can also be considered as a kind of social reform. George Bernard Shaw states clearly that Wilde was "a critic of morals and manners" (Adams 45). Certainly Wilde criticizes the upper classes, especially in his portrayal of Lady Bracknell's hypocrisy: her mind is easily changed when money is in her favour.

Wilde also indicates how crucial art is to our understanding of the world around us. Although Wilde doesn't suggest that art should be "moral," he does suggest that art profoundly affects

the way we live and see things. In this excerpt from *The Decay of Lying*, Wilde describes how art "creates" life:

Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? To whom, if not to them and their master, do we owe the lovely silver mists that brood over our river, and turn to faint forms of fading grace curved bridge and swaying barge? The extraordinary change that has taken place in the climate of London during the last ten years is entirely due to a particular school of Art.

In this way, Wilde points out how the way we look at the world and perceive it is shaped by art. This idea of art can be itself considered a type of social reform.