

'fin de siècle'

Term 'fin de siècle' is relating to the late 19th-century literary and artistic climate of sophistication, escapism, extreme aestheticism, world-weariness, and fashionable despair. When used in reference to literature, the term essentially describes the movement inaugurated by the Decadent poets of France and the movement called Aestheticism in England during this period.

Decadent, any of several poets or other writers of the end of the 19th century, including the French Symbolist poets in particular and their contemporaries in England, the later generation of the Aesthetic movement. Both groups aspired to set literature and art free from the materialistic preoccupations of industrialized society, and, in both, the freedom of some members' morals helped to enlarge the connotation of the term, which is almost equivalent to fin de siècle.

In France it was Paul Verlaine who gladly accepted the descriptive epithet *décadent*, which had been used in a collection of parodies, *Les Déliaquescences d'Adoré Floupette* (1885; "The Corruption of Adoré Floupette"), by Gabriel Vicaire and Henri Beauclair. From 1886 to 1889 appeared a review, *Le Décadent*, founded by Anatole Baju, with Verlaine among its contributors. The Decadents claimed Charles Baudelaire (d. 1867) as their inspiration and counted Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Tristan Corbière among themselves. Another significant figure was the novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans, who developed interest in the esoteric and whose *À rebours* (1884; *Against the Grain*) was called by Arthur Symons "the breviary of the Decadence."

In England the Decadents were 1890s figures such as Arthur Symons ("the blond angel"), Oscar Wilde, Ernest Dowson, and Lionel Johnson, who were members of the Rhymers' Club or contributors to *The Yellow Book*. Aestheticism, late 19th-century European arts movement which centred on the doctrine that art exists for the sake of its beauty alone, and that it need serve no political, didactic, or other purpose.

The movement began in reaction to prevailing utilitarian social philosophies and to what was perceived as the ugliness and philistinism of the industrial age. Its philosophical foundations were laid in the 18th century by Immanuel Kant, who postulated the autonomy of aesthetic standards, setting them apart from considerations of morality, utility, or pleasure. This idea was amplified by J.W. von Goethe, J.L. Tieck, and others in Germany and by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle in England. It was popularized in France by Madame de Staël, Théophile Gautier, and the philosopher Victor Cousin, who coined the phrase *l'art pour l'art* ("art for art's sake") in 1818.

In Victorian England's flourishing art world, two viewpoints clashed in the courts and in public opinion. And it was all because of this painting.

In England, the artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, from 1848, had sown the seeds of Aestheticism, and the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, and Algernon Charles Swinburne exemplified it in expressing a yearning for ideal beauty through conscious medievalism. The attitudes of the movement were also represented in the writings of Oscar Wilde

and Walter Pater and the illustrations of Aubrey Beardsley in the periodical *The Yellow Book*. The painter James McNeill Whistler raised the movement's ideal of the cultivation of refined sensibility to perhaps its highest point.

Contemporary critics of Aestheticism included William Morris and John Ruskin and, in Russia, Leo Tolstoy, who questioned the value of art divorced from morality. Yet the movement focused attention on the formal aesthetics of art and contributed to the art criticism of Roger Fry and Bernard Berenson. Aestheticism shared certain affinities with the French Symbolist movement, fostered the Arts and Crafts Movement, and sponsored Art Nouveau.