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## THE AESTHETIC MOVEMENT: OSCAR WILDE AND THE ART FOR ART'S SAKE PHILOSOPHY

**Qodirova Muborakxon Abdusamadjon qizi**

Student, Chirchiq State Pedagogical University

[muborakxonqodirova873@gmail.com](mailto:muborakxonqodirova873@gmail.com)

Scientific adviser: **Isroilova Tursuntosh Ro'zi qizi**

A teacher, Chirchik State Pedagogical University

[isroilova.tursuntosh@gmail.com](mailto:isroilova.tursuntosh@gmail.com)

**ABSTRACT.** This article discusses the Aesthetic Movement of the late nineteenth century, focusing on Oscar Wilde as its central representative. The study analyzes how Wilde's works express the "Art for Art's Sake" philosophy, which sought to liberate art from moral, political, and utilitarian functions. Through close reading of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the paper argues that Wilde viewed beauty and artistic experience as the highest forms of truth. The analysis also reveals how his aesthetic ideals challenged Victorian moralism and laid the foundation for modernist and postmodernist artistic freedom.

**Key Words:** Aesthetic Movement, Oscar Wilde, Art for Art's Sake, Victorian Morality, Beauty, Art and Ethics

### INTRODUCTION

The Aesthetic Movement emerged in England during the latter half of the nineteenth century as a reaction against the moral rigidity and materialism of the Victorian age. It emphasized the autonomy of art and the supremacy of beauty over moral or social concerns. The slogan "Art for Art's Sake" summarized this belief that art should exist purely for its aesthetic value. Among its leading figures, Oscar Wilde stands out as the most brilliant and controversial representative. Through his novels, plays, and essays, Wilde argued that the purpose of art is not to instruct but to delight that beauty itself is the ultimate truth. His works challenged the moral expectations of Victorian society and celebrated individuality, imagination, and aesthetic pleasure.

### LITERATURE ANALYSIS AND METHODOLOGY

Scholars such as Ellmann (1988) and Guy (2015) identify Oscar Wilde as the culmination of the Aesthetic Movement, which had roots in the works of Walter Pater and John Ruskin. Pater's famous conclusion in *The Renaissance* (1873) "to burn always with this hard, gem-like flame" became the intellectual foundation of Wilde's philosophy. Wilde's essays, particularly *The Critic as Artist* and *The Decay of Lying*, extend Pater's ideas, insisting that art is an imaginative creation independent of moral or social truth. According to Richard Ellmann in *Oscar Wilde* (1988), Wilde's life and works embody "the







tension between art and morality,” making him both a defender of beauty and a critic of Victorian hypocrisy. Similarly, Josephine Guy in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* (2015) argues that Wilde’s art “consciously transforms ethics into aesthetics,” redefining virtue in terms of style and creativity. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Wilde dramatizes the conflict between aesthetic pleasure and moral corruption. The novel illustrates how the pursuit of beauty, detached from morality, leads to self-destruction, thereby exposing both the power and danger of aestheticism.

Wilde’s comedies, particularly *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), further express his belief in the artifice of life and art. Beneath the surface humor, the play ridicules social conventions and exposes the emptiness of moral pretension. Critics note that Wilde’s use of paradox and wit functions as both social critique and aesthetic performance, blending art and life into a unified artistic gesture. This study adopts a qualitative and comparative literary approach, combining close textual analysis, historical contextualization, and critical interpretation. Key texts by Oscar Wilde, including *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and selected essays, are analyzed for themes of beauty, artifice, and morality. Literary devices such as irony, paradox, and symbolism are examined to show how Wilde conveys his aesthetic ideals. The Aesthetic Movement is studied in the context of late Victorian England an era characterized by moral conservatism and rapid industrial progress. The research draws on works by Walter Pater and John Ruskin to trace the philosophical origins of Wilde’s aesthetics. The analysis incorporates perspectives from modern critics such as Ellmann (1988), Guy (2015), and Beckson (1998) to evaluate Wilde’s place within the broader aesthetic and cultural debates of his time. Through these methods, the study seeks to explain how Wilde’s philosophy of beauty not only redefined Victorian art but also anticipated modernist ideas about artistic autonomy.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis reveal that Wilde’s version of aestheticism was both revolutionary and paradoxical. His advocacy of beauty for its own sake challenged the dominant Victorian belief that art should serve moral or social purposes. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde portrays art as a mirror of the soul rather than a moral guide. The protagonist’s downfall demonstrates the danger of aesthetic excess, yet the novel also celebrates art’s ability to transcend moral boundaries. In his essays, Wilde argues that “all art is quite useless,” a statement that encapsulates his conviction that art’s value lies in its independence. As critics like Beckson (1998) note, Wilde’s aestheticism was a “dramatization of the artist’s freedom” in an age of conformity. His plays similarly use wit and irony to expose the superficial morality of upper-class society, affirming that life itself can be lived as art. The





discussion also highlights the broader cultural impact of Wilde's aesthetic philosophy. By separating art from moral duty, Wilde paved the way for twentieth-century modernism and the avant-garde. His influence can be traced in writers such as James Joyce and T. S. Eliot, who continued to explore the autonomy of art and the fragmentation of modern identity. Wilde thus emerges as both the culmination of Victorian aestheticism and a precursor to modern artistic experimentation.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Oscar Wilde's contribution to the Aesthetic Movement established a new vision of art and beauty that defied Victorian moral norms. Through his fiction, drama, and criticism, he transformed the idea of "Art for Art's Sake" into a philosophy of life, asserting that beauty, imagination, and creativity are higher truths than morality or utility. Wilde's works continue to challenge readers to reconsider the purpose of art and the role of the artist in society. His legacy lies in the enduring belief that art need not justify itself that beauty alone is a form of truth.

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