

## Art for Art's Sake: A Literary Luxury or a Contemporaneous Need?

Dr. Mohamad Haj Mohamad<sup>1</sup> & Dr. Nadia Hamendi<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

---

The dichotomy of art for art's sake and art for society's sake became a pressing concern in the Victorian period due to the pressure from government to use art as a means for championing its causes and aspirations, leaving artists feeling the need to redefine the identity and objectives of art. Believing in art as serving the creation only of beauty for its own sake led to the emergence and rise of art for art's sake, a movement that felt that art stripped of its true aesthetic values would suffer as a result. Art for art's sake is an assertion of the value of art away from any moral or didactic objectives, a process that adds a mask of luxury to literature. This paper traces the movement of art for art's sake, looking at its main figures from across Europe. It poses the question of whether art is supposed to moralize and teach or devote itself to the creation and championing of the cause of beauty and idealism. Believing that art had declined in an era of utility and rationalism, rebellion against Victorian middle class moral standards was unavoidable. That is why they claimed that art deserved to be judged on its own terms alone. However, the need to save art had mainly only succeeded in confining it to an ivory tower making it mainly accessible to the elite, a literary luxury fit for museums and ceremonies. That is why the influence of the movement had no real chance of surviving in the post modern and contemporary periods where art had to deal with the ever rising complexities of life and its fast and quick rhythm. Beauty is an essential factor in man's life; however, creating beauty for beauty's sake would serve museums more than real life and art.

---

**Keywords:** art for art's sake, fin de siècle, aestheticism, Oscar Wilde, Baudelaire, E. A. Poe.

### 1. Introduction

**Tracing the history of art for art's sake** goes back to nineteenth century France where the movement “was coined in the early 19th century by the French philosopher Victor Cousin. The phrase expresses the belief held by many writers and artists, especially those associated with Aestheticism, that art needs no justification, that it needs serve no political, didactic, or other end.”<https://www.britannica.com/topic/art-for-arts-sake> (March 2, 2018).

Art in nineteenth century Europe, especially France and England, felt the brunt of serving non-literary objectives. Championing imperial policies and being in close contact with people's daily lives left art vulnerable to the waves of social stains that stripped art of its true aesthetic values. As a result art that stripped art of its true aesthetic values of art had to suffer as a result of its engagement with people's daily affairs. That is why art had become “rather tired of ugliness and things which are not well made and art that isn't well drawn.”

[www.artanddesign/2010/sep/14/victoria-albert-aesthetic-movement-exhibition](http://www.artanddesign/2010/sep/14/victoria-albert-aesthetic-movement-exhibition) (March 2, 2018).

The aesthetes, or beauty hunters, responded to the idea of art being deprived of beauty by searching for alternatives to save it from being drawn further into the garbage of life and politics. That is why they were “passionate and serious-minded, reacting against Victorian values which said that all art had to have a purpose and also against a kind of pervading ugliness.”[www.artanddesign/2010/sep/14/victoria-albert-aesthetic-movement-exhibition](http://www.artanddesign/2010/sep/14/victoria-albert-aesthetic-movement-exhibition) (March 2, 2018).

---

<sup>1</sup> English Department, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Middle East University, Queen Alia Airport St., Amman, Jordan. E-mail: [mohamad.haj53@gmail.com](mailto:mohamad.haj53@gmail.com),

<sup>2</sup> English Department, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Middle East University, Queen Alia Airport St., Amman, Jordan. E-mail: [nad\\_tm973@yahoo.com](mailto:nad_tm973@yahoo.com)

Artists felt the need to redefine the identity and objectives of art by questioning its values at that time. Should art serve only itself as a top aesthetic literary value detached from any engagement in championing people's and government's causes and aspirations? In such a case, could art lock itself up in an ivory tower divorced from the dust of daily human life? This question topped the considerations of men of letters in the closing days of the Victorian Age, the values of which clashed with the literary and aesthetic ones.

This paper conducts an analysis of the genuine objectives and value of art and questions whether it is supposed to moralize and teach or stay away from endless daily conflicts and devote itself to the creation and championing of the cause of beauty and idealism. The pursuit of artistic idealism, so to speak, was an enough objective for artists to disassociate themselves from any other obligations, be they religious, political or philosophical. In short, beauty is art's main objective and being. That is why, rebellion against Victorian moralities and values was a matter of time and inevitable. By ostracising itself from Victorian moralities, art evolved, consciously, to an aesthetic tendency and domain, a move known as the British Aesthetic Movement, which committed itself to the pursuit of beauty, an orientation that found its substantiation in the doctrine of art for art's sake. Believing "that art had declined in an era of utility and rationalism, they claimed that art deserved to be judged on its own terms alone." <https://www.theartstory.org/definition-art-for-art.htm> (March 10, 2018).

## 2. Elements of the Theory of Art for Art's Sake and its Development:

Giving a definitive date for the emergence of the Art for Art's Sake movement could be a jump into space; however this orientation in art, like other movements, must have been an idea that had previously haunted artists' philosophy of writing, especially at a time when literature was becoming more and more conditioned by institutionalized power. Art for art's sake in its yet –to –be crystallized status can be traced back to the men of letters' seeming break from their societies.

The birth of the Aesthetic Movement in art was not a sort of luxury nor was it isolationism in an ivory tower. Reconsidering art's nature and function was an over due process. Rethinking the aesthetics and the role of art appeared in English in two works published simultaneously in 1868: Pater's review of William Morris's poetry in *The Westminster Review* and in William Blake's by Swinburne. A modified form of Pater's review appeared in his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), one of the most influential texts of the Aesthetic Movement.

Walter Pater (1838- 1891), an exponent of that new aesthetic and even proclaimed the prophet of art for art's sake felt inclined to the rites rather than the doctrine of Christianity and hence he proposed the doctrine of pleasure as the only end for existence. The idea of art for art's sake found its best and most carefully considered expression in his writings, who in his first volume *The Renaissance* (1873), presents an aesthetic theory which "rests upon the contrast between the richness and fleetingness of immediate experience and the bare abstract concepts to which analytical thought seeks to distil it." <https://www.jstor.org/stable/426721> (March 17, 2018).

Literarily speaking, art for art's sake can be traced back to French symbolism from which it descended. The French symbolists opted for a voluntary isolation because they believed that the poet must choose between either commercial prostitution of his art or go for aesthetic purity.

Theophile Gautier (1811- 1872) coined the term art for art's sake in his preface to *Mademoiselle De Maupin* (1835). In *Mademoiselle de Maupin* he states his belief that the beauty of things was in direct disproportion to their utility. The preface marks an attack against the ignorance and middle class moral standards of such journalists, neo-classical artists and critics.

Gautier's literary practice helped shape poetic tendencies in the 19th century and his effect was more pronounced than Baudelaire (1821-1876) who developed the formal qualities of poetry into a demonic religion of art. He regarded a poet with a moral intention as a cheap and degraded artist and the strict Victorian moralities as obstacles before true art and true beauty. Gautier believed in the orientation that art should have an ideological mission only. It is no wonder, then, to see him calling for art for art's sake, which he considers as the ultimate expression of truth and beauty. Art for art's sake can also be detected in the writings of another Frenchman, Remy De Gourmont (1858-1915), a pioneering French symbolist whose principles of criticism were based completely on aesthetics. His approach to literature later influenced the 20th-century poets Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. This view is also explicable in the German writing on aesthetics by Hegel (1770 – 1831) who sees "art and the beauty of art as another way that the Idea manifests itself in the world."

<https://theologiansinc.wordpress.com/2014/11/23/the-aesthetics-of-kant-and-hegel> (March 15, 2018).

Kant, in 1780, argued that aesthetic judgements were made by the imagination, not by the understanding. He talked about the disinterestedness of art, which means appreciating beauty for its own sake not for any other utility, "A pure poet has no other end than to produce a work of art," (<https://arthistory.unstuffed.com/kant-art-for-arts-sake/>), the highest degree of excellence.

This is not to suggest that only Europe pioneered the push to saving the beauty of art into a movement. The embryonic start of the movement can be traced back to E. A. Poe (1808 – 1848), the American short story writer, critic and poet who advocated the yet to be crystallized view of art for art's sake. For him writing a poem is "simply for poem's sake" a very persuasive reason to continue to say that under the sun there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified, more supremely noble, than this very poem, this poem per se, this poem which is a poem and nothing more, this poem written solely for the poem's sake. <https://books.google.jo/books?isbn=048682624h> p. 190 (March 13, 2018)

Poe's view ranks him among the early if not the earliest forerunner to the movement of Art for Art's Sake where he envisaged art as free from utilitarianism that would only deepen man's involvement in the mud of life. Thus safeguarding art against social stains and obligations and would help to create and keep art's beauty intact and untarnished. So the beauty of art should have one sole purpose, to copy the beat and the beautiful rhythm of life and present it to man who is supposed to have it enhanced by protecting it from becoming a utilitarian art.

By pushing for such autonomy, art would be heading either for an Ivory tower so to speak or for an entirely different world of art. In other words art would be creating a lofty identity independent from the real experiences that everyday life provides. Art therefore is seen as independent both from science and from the useful and the moral.

However, the theory of art for art's sake was not always met with open arms. Detached from the decadence of life, art looked starved of its social mission that sustains its identity. Because artists came to believe that beauty and its creation were the only objectives of art and the search for beauty as the only thing that mattered in life, hence defining art's identity as being for the sole purpose of reclaiming it from the decadence of life. This backlash fed a tendency among artists to seek aesthetic shelter in art as a possible alternative to religion. The seeds of art as a substitute to religion were detected in France and especially in the ideas of Baudelaire (1821-181867) whose controversial themes included not only death, depression, and metamorphosis, but also sex, lesbianism, as well as urban corruption, lost innocence and alcoholism, all of which garnered him both loyal followers and dissenters.

As it has already been mentioned in this paper, Baudelaire was the first to develop poetry into a kind of satanic religion that avoided any moral intention. His stance could be attributed to different reasons on top of which was his undiluted love for art. His dedication to art interprets his belief that literature must come before everything else even before pleasure and mother.

That is why art had become his only solace to combat and counterbalance his feelings of illusion and bitterness and is seen as the maker of goodness and the power that wards off evil. Art, more or less, looked like religion, the only power that can produce goodness. His orientation was not a lone cry. Stephan Mallarme and Jean Arthur Rimbaud were disciples of Baudelaire, both of whom lost faith in religion shortly after the death of Baudelaire. <https://blog.bookstellyouwhy.com/charles-baudelaire-and-french-poetry> (March 26, 2018). Mallarme (1842-1698) attempted to divorce art from its acclaimed purpose of making poetry an abstract image such as music, which is composed and performed to transform the audience to a mystic milieu away from the troubles of life; an experience set to bring about an aesthetic feeling and, more possibly, a spiritual one.

However, while Mallarme retreated into the sanctuary of art where his imagination was set to create the world, the step that amounted to a revolt against morality, society and even religion and despite feeling defeated and a flight from reality which coloured his life, his impact nevertheless, made poetry a mystic releaser and revelation i. e. a source of spiritual power. Looking into the social and religious development in the Victorian age there can be detected another need for the theory of Art for Art's Sake. Due to the church's abuses and misconduct, people started to lose faith in religious institutions. The unhappy marriage between art and religion, so to speak, came under scrutiny and stress.

Art, in this case, exerted a great appeal to the mind, more so than religion, the traditional source for spiritual tranquillity. No wonder then to find the dwindling number of church goers, who to combat spiritual emptiness, sought an alternative for the fading power of religion, the orientation that encouraged the spirit of individualism.

Breaking away from traditional and social ties procures a dormant spirit of individualism and helps flush it into the open. Consequently, intellectuals became “more and more anti-clerical.” The new spirit of discontent and revolt was reflected in the emergence of the Aesthetic school, thought to be a substitute for religion. New aesthetic values made a strong appeal away from the doctrine of Christianity and hence Art for Art’s sake advocates, like Baudelaire proposed, the doctrine of pleasure as the one end of existence

### 3 – The Victorian Age and The Emergence of Art for Art’s sake

Historians divided the Victorian Age into three parts, each triggering a move into the next. The early period: 1832-1848, named the time of troubles was a tumultuous one both socially and economically. The industrial revolution was gathering pace with rising inequality between classes as a result of the accumulation of fortune and money in the hands of the few. Certain classifications came into being as a result of the exploitation of resources and man power, the process that rendered the working class as the unprivileged proletariat. Work conditions left workers defenseless before any emergency. They were easily fired with no compensation. The Reform Bill of 1832 marked the closure of the old aristocratic order and the dawning of a new one of social equality which facilitated the emergence of the middle class as a main player on the social, economic and even literary scopes. However, suffering continued with social illness proliferating and crime rising. Worsening social conditions stimulated and fermented unrest on one hand and on the other opened up the way for the next period which came to address injustice by pushing industry to new frontiers to help equate modernizing industry with reforming work and workers’ conditions. The Mid Victorian period, it is believed, managed to solve some problems like improving work conditions, yet such attempts were only cosmetics and in reality failed to address deepening revolution and industry affiliated crises at a time of science – religion disputes where philosophy was gaining ground. Darwin in England and Nietzsche in Germany pushed philosophy to the frontier to reshape minds and thoughts. Victorian values were the immediate victims of the growing sense of optimism in man as master of the universe. Literature monitored those socio-economic and religious developments with careful consideration not to get smeared by what seemed insolvable problems. The Aesthetic movement came into being as a reaction to the possible unnecessary involvement of art in social problems and political ambitions as was the case with the poet laureate. Lord Tennyson, (1809 – 1892) resuscitated time old legends, like Odysseus, to put them to the service of social education and moral enlightenment, a too demanding task that art needs to accomplish, according to other artists.

In the late Victorian age, Oscar Wilde (1854 – 1900), embraced this cult of Art for Art’s Sake. In his novel *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, he gave the concept a great boost. He strongly believes that art has no other purpose but to offer beauty. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, beauty reigns for it is a means to revitalize the wearied spirit.

Both he and Walter Pater spearheaded the move to shield art against any possible staining. Art for Art’s Sake dawned as a movement arguing for the independence of literature from brewing social ills. Saving art was closer to a rescue operation than to a move to a luxury status

<https://www.ff.umb.sk/cms/saveDataFilePublic.php?uid=jjavorcikova&path>(April 2, 2018).

The new literary term, art for art’s sake, which Pater advocated, affected a group of Victorian poets who were called the decadents or fin-de-siècle poets. “The group comprised Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Arthur Simons, Oscar Wilde, W.B. Yeats and others. Art, they said is a necessity of civilized life but it has nothing to do with morals.” <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/ncl.2006.60.4.48>(April 21, 2018).

Their dream-like poetry “is characterised by exaggerated romanticism shocking Hedonism and melancholic world weariness. It is a poetry of prose not of genuine emotions. In their flamboyant style they imitated Swinburne.” <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/ncl.2006.60.4.481> (April 21, 2018).

For them art was the only thing that mattered in life. Art for Art’s sake raised the question of art’s autonomy and independence. To sustain this tendency two options were available.

The first is heading for an ivory tower while the other favours the Kantian idea of art as hedonism i.e. another world. In other words art creates a second independent nature from the material provided by real nature. Art, therefore is "Independent both of science and of the useful and the moral." (Child: 1940, iii). Getting to this independent art demands reforming art itself by ridding it of its allegiance to non-artistic orientations and responsibilities.

The aesthetic movement, of which Oscar Wilde was a major proponent, sought to free art from this responsibility. Strict and rigid Victorian moralities had gradually become counter-productive. Freeing art from the didactic and moral approaches had become a need to help it regain its philosophy of literary independence in order to promote the artistic pursuit as its main and sole justification for being. Hence, art and Victorianism were no longer valid allies. Social, religious and political values championed by art were the immediate victims claimed by a growing sense of the need to break away from art as serving the empire. Literature monitored those social, economic and religious developments and there appeared the aesthetic movement which argued for the independence of literature that was to be kept free from the brewing troubles of life that could stain its image. Art for Art's Sake, thus, was the legitimate product of the age as a need more than a luxury. The need was to cleanse and heal art from the endless encounter with human follies, greed and ambition as found and backed up by some artists.

The Victorian culture that banked on religion to support its imperial policies came under fire when artists like Thomas Hardy (1840 – 1928) who in the eighties of the Nineteenth century and in his poem "Channel Firing" criticized the alliance between clerics, politicians and warmongers.

That night your great guns, unawares,  
Shook all our coffins as we lay

[www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46544/channel-firing](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46544/channel-firing) (March 21, 2018)

His criticism even mocks the divine  
Ha, ha. It will be warmer when  
I blow the trumpet

[www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46544/channel-firing](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46544/channel-firing)(March 21, 2018)

James McNeill Whistler (1834- 1903) advocated the freedom of art from any obligation apart from expressing itself. Art should be independent of all claptrap and should stand alone, appealing only to the eye or ear, without complicating it with emotions that do not belong to it, such as devotion, pity, patriotism.

By calling for literary independence artists would certainly mean their own independence as well. Freedom for art definitely means their freedom, which they have long cherished for making them an objective observer viewing experience for its beautiful clustering of emotions. (Child: 1940, iii)

We have taken it into our heads that to write a poem simply for the poem's sake ... and to acknowledge such to have been our design, would be to confess ourselves radically wanting in the true poetic dignity and force:—but the simple fact is that would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified, more supremely noble, than this very poem, this poem per se, this poem which is a poem and nothing more, this poem written solely for the poem's sake. (Child: 1940, 49)

#### **4 – Art for Art's Sake: Luxury or Need in Modern and Contemporary Times.**

Can art be and remain a luxury, the untouchable beauty? If yes, would art then be able to thrive and develop or would it move to a gradual self-termination for losing touch with reality? Coining art as the creation of beauty for beauty drastically narrows art's ability to synthesize into the fabric of social life and possibly some artists may consider it as impractical and almost but unattainable.

By focusing on beauty to function as the facade and at the same time core for art, authors would likely shut themselves off from any possibility to see art and people differently. Ostracizing art from daily life definitely leads it to living in an ivory tower and eventually expanding the margin between author and people to a very wide one.

Marcel Duchamp a French- American painter (1887 – 1968) dismissed the movement as a falsehood, because it "serves to conceal and protect a particular set of values" and Duchamp adds became obsolete for "art for art's sake that had turned inward, and away from everyday concerns." <https://www.theartstory.org/definition-art-for-art.htm> (May 19, 2018). Thus barring art from its primary mission of social concern had left it short of its true identity on the one hand and unable to identify with any referential sphere of life on the other. Given the fact that art for art's sake opts for solitary confinement away from any other considerations but beauty, memory of the movement would also be confined to a single scope, that is beauty. Diversity which is the main value of modernism would also be at variance with art for art's sake which views itself as superior to others.

The clash of artistic identities, as such, would seem inevitable. At a time of globalization art for art's sake would have little, if any, chance to continue as an independent movement simply because the technological edge has reduced the world to a small village. It would be totally impractical for art for art's sake and contemporary art to co-exist, for the latter has no single objective or point of view. Its view instead is unclear, perhaps reflective of the world today, which is contradictory, confusing, and open-ended.

Modern, post-modern and contemporary art needed to address critical issues like war, the quick rhythm of life and the fast developing technology, all of which are challenges to which art cannot turn a blind eye. Nathalie Heinich, (1955 - ) the French sociologist found that while "modern art" challenges the conventions of representation, "contemporary art" challenges the very notion of an artwork, which is why a movement like art for art's sake has no chance of survival except in the museum of art.

In contemporary life, art cannot detach itself from serving purposes other than art. Creating beauty can serve to beautify politics, science fiction, man's travel in time and be an integral part of the macrocosm. The beautiful poem or work of art, with a world of its own, needs people's approaches to help give meaning to the work. Art, as part of social life, has a responsibility and so do artists. Beauty's effect can have better access to readers and social milieu and development. In a complex world, like ours today, where most if not all elements of life are intertwined there is a narrow chance of survival for art that has been confined to an ivory tower shut off from normal life and everyday concerns.

## 6. Conclusion

The literary scene of the nineteenth century was ripe for that shift in art's identity, nature and objectives. Delivering art from committed realism helped to strip art of its social base in favour of forming an aesthetical shell to shield it against any possible involvement in people's daily affairs. Creating this sort of abstract art was not an artistic luxury at that time. Given the fact that art was wheeled into all aspects of daily life, art, as a result had to deal with and even sustain endless ills, corruption and garbage. Artists, therefore, mounted a rescue operation by trying to keep art for art only. So art had to be rescued from the didactic and moral functions and help restore its brilliance and glory. However, the need to save art had mainly only succeeded in confining it to an ivory tower making it mainly accessible to the elite, a literary luxury fit for museums and ceremonies. That is why the influence of the movement had no real chance of addressing the ever developing demands of art especially in the post modern and contemporary periods where art had to deal with the ever rising complexities of life and its fast and quick rhythm. Contemporary art is diverse, plural and open to all possibilities while art for art's sake looks isolated from the real world and locked up in a closed formalist sphere. The insularity of art that abstracted itself has, apart from giving art beauty, distanced it from any attachment to any subject that is not concerned with the creation of beauty. Creating a beautiful image is not the best way, to make it understood by "as many people as possible. But it was not a matter of simply manipulating images; it was the 'true' art behind the image that was deemed important."

<http://arthistoryresources.net/modernism/artsake.htm> (May 23, 2018).

Consequently, beauty is an essential factor in man's life; however, creating beauty for beauty's sake would serve museums more than real life and art.

## Bibliography

- Child, Ruth C. *The Aesthetic of Walter Pater*. New York: The Macmillan, 1940.
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/art-for-arts-sake>
- [www.artanddesign.com/2010/sep/14/victoria-albert-aesthetic-movement-exhibition](http://www.artanddesign.com/2010/sep/14/victoria-albert-aesthetic-movement-exhibition)
- <https://www.theartstory.org/definition-art-for-art.htm>
- <https://theologiansinc.wordpress.com/2014/11/23/the-aesthetics-of-kant-and-hegel>
- <https://arthistoryunstuffed.com/kant-art-for-arts-sake/>
- <https://books.google.jo/books?isbn=048682624h>
- <https://blog.bookstellyouwhy.com/charles-baudelaire-and-french-poetry>
- <https://www.ff.umb.sk/cms/saveDataFilePublic.php?uid=jjavorcikova&path>
- [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46544/channel-firing](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46544/channel-firing)
- [www./arthistoryresources.net/modernism/artsake.htm](http://arthistoryresources.net/modernism/artsake.htm)
- <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/ncl.2006.60.4.48>
- <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/ncl.2006.60.4.481>
- <https://www.jstor.org/stable/426721>