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17 January 2013

Denisoff, Dennis. "Decadence and Aestheticism," *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin De Siecle*. Ed. Gail Marshall. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 31-52. Print.

In "Decadence and Aestheticism," Denni Denisoff discusses the histories, philosophies, and aims of the decadent and aesthetic movements that developed during the second half of the nineteenth century. In doing so, Mr. Denisoff outlines the subtle "dissidence" that distinguished the two movements while also arguing that *The Yellow Book*, a late 19<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde journal was a solid representation of the philosophies of both movements. While delving into each movement, Denisoff addresses previous or simultaneously occurring artistic movements and their impact and/or contribution to the aesthetic and decadence movements.

Denisoff begins his article by outlining the basic tenets of decadence and aestheticism. In short, the aims of each movement were to challenge the Victorian era's views upon morality and progress by emphasizing the almost hedonistic pleasure one could obtain through beauty. Denisoff explains *decadent* was first utilized as a critique of works that "over-emphasized artificiality." As *decadent* means to "fall away," the decadent artist "refuses to allow society [i.e. that which is falling away] to pretend that it can know one objective reality of that progress to any sustainable ideal is even manageable" (33). According to Denisoff, decadence celebrated the "artificiality" of not only art but of life as well. Decadence argued that as art is a "refinement" of life, a "refined" or consciously artificial art is even more beautiful. Aestheticism, then, becomes a forebear to the decadent movement and highlights Gautier's "l'art pour l'art" as its catchphrase. The aesthetic movement sought to eliminate all morality and "usefulness" of art;

quoting Gautier, Denisoff states “only that which is utterly useless can be ultimately beautiful because an object’s utility detracts from its function as a source of pleasure” (34).

Like the aesthetics, a number of other movements of the late nineteenth century, such as the Pre-Raphaelites and the Symbolists, began to focus on pleasure and amorality in art. While Denisoff warns that all too often, critics mistake Symbolist works with decadent art, he claims the demarcation is decadence’s ability to “maintain a more overtly socio-political character” (34). The Pre-Raphaelites are distinct in that they believed “nature was an artist’s key guide,” while the decadent and aesthetic movements argued it was artificiality of life, not nature, as the raw material of art.

At the center of both the decadent and aesthetic movements were the “artefact” Oscar Wilde and the avant-garde journal, *The Yellow Book*. Both man and journal were elaborately personified, mythical even. *The Yellow Book* acted as the epitome of the movements as its mere yellow cover argued that everyday objects needed to add beauty and pleasure to an individual’s life. The charismatic Wilde followed suit in living aesthetically as a superficial dandy.

This superficiality is what Denisoff argues is the main tenet of both the aesthetic and decadent movements. Within the superficiality of art (and life) decadence and aestheticism supported a blatant “disregard for cohesion and sense of dissipation” while arguing for the “fleeting moments” of pleasure and recognition. The two movements melodramatically cried “look at us” in order to effectively “destabilize the binary logic that privileged the productivist values of industrial capitalism.” In short, the movements sought to decay the foundation of the bourgeoisie by overdosing the world with their own medicine.