

English (Hons); Part-I; Paper-I; Unit-2; Topic-
AESTHETICISM; Lec-ser-40: by- GANESH KUMAR
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AESTHETICISM

"Aestheticism" is an artistic movement of the late 19th century, influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites and inspired by the writings of Sir Walter Pater in his two books - 'Studies in the History of Renaissance' and 'Marius the Epicurean' wherein he laid stress on the value of aesthetic experience. The primary purpose of this movement was to have centred upon the doctrine that art exists for the sake of the beauty alone, and that it need serve no political, didactic or other purpose.

'Aestheticism' was also inspired by the French doctrine of 'L' Art Pour l' Art' which means 'Art for Art's Sake'. Actually, this movement originated in France where its chief pioneers were Baudelaire and Gautier. It was originally a reaction against the utilitarian cult of beauty; and it stressed the autonomy of art. Oscar Wilde was the most important aesthete whose novel 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' (1891) was a product of this movement. Since the movement lacked a programme, it had its influence on a variety of writers of different characters: the naturalistic

novelist George Moore; the Celtic poet W.B. Yeats; a Catholic convert poet Lionel Johnson, and an ardent supporter of art for art's sake Swinburne. In England Ruskin presented a moralistic view of art which was objected vehemently by Whistler. Walter Pater emerged as the chief pursuer of beauty in art though he was misjudged for being a promoter of the licentious Decadent or School of Poetry which he was not because his aesthetic theory was based strictly on the principles of austerity and intellectual and spiritual beauty. His famous essay 'On Style' makes a clear distinction between good art and great art. In his opinion, the Bible, Paradise Lost, Divine Comedy and the Miserables are the examples of great art. In the beginning of the 19th century Keats and Shelley emerged as the great worshippers of beauty, though the term 'aesthetic' is not strictly applied to their poetry; nor is John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold whose approach is to convey moral or sentimental messages. The artists and writers of Aesthetic Style tended to

profess that art should provide refined sensual pleasure, rather than convey moral and sentimental messages. They believed that art did not have any didactic purpose, it only needed to be beautiful. The aesthetic developed a 'cult of beauty' which they considered the basic factor of art. Life should copy art. They considered nature as crude and lacking in design when compared to art. The main characteristics of the style were: suggestion rather than statement, sensuality, great use of symbols and synaesthetic effect - that is, correspondence between words, colours and music.

The aesthetes took out a periodical which they named "The Yellow Book", mainly on the account of the fact that French novels that were considered 'daring' were printed on yellow pages. But the artificialities of this movement were ridiculed in the 'Punch' a literary critical magazine.