

"God Almighty has given us green, and you may depend upon it, it's a fine colour."

John Everett Millais

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- **Essay Question 1:** From the MESSAGE, MEDIUM, CONTEXT research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.
- **Word Count:** 2,643

This essay is going to address the themes found in Pre-Raphaelite artwork and its connections to illustration through the ideals and aims established by Millais, Hunt and Rossetti when the Pre Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) formed. It will focus primarily on the influence from Victorian art critic, John Ruskin, and the use of narrative and symbolism found in specific pieces of artwork. Also speaking about the effects of the industrial revolution on their lives and how they used colour and composition to make their artwork different from other fine art of the time.

As well as the three founders of the PRB. Artists such as William Dyce; who was an inspiration to the PRB, and later on came to be influenced by them himself, and William Morris, who was associated with the PRB, will also be mentioned. (Pointon, 1979)

In the month of September, 1848, three young artists met at 83 Gower Street to form the PRB. The names of these artists were John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. (Lochnan and Jacobi, 2008)

John Everett Millais, who was born in 1829 and only 19 at the time, had already achieved extraordinary things. He was a childhood prodigy, by the age of 11 studying at the Royal Academy of Arts (the RA), the youngest student that had ever enrolled there. (Milner, 1988) He met Hunt as a student in 1844, and they became close friends; sharing each other's love of past artists, their want for collaboration and desire to reform British art.

William Holman Hunt although born in 1827, making him 2 years older than Millais, did not become a student at the RA until 1845, on his third attempt. He was born into a family that did not carry an interest for art and literature, so it was through hard work and struggle that he was finally permitted to try painting as a profession. (Lochnan and Jacobi, 2008) It was early in the summer of 1848 that Hunt was approached by Dante Gabriel Rossetti who had seen his piece, *The Eve of Saint Agnes*, while walking through the galleries in Trafalgar

Square. Rossetti had liked it immensely, and wished to congratulate the artist responsible.

So from there, they became firm friends.

Rossetti, born in 1828, began studying at the RA in 1845, at age 17. He was particular with his preferences in art and literature, longing for a personal mentor and a source of inspiration. He chose Ford Madox Brown to be that source, and sent him such an extravagant letter that Brown thought it to be a joke. After he found it not to be, he took Rossetti as his pupil, and when the PRB formed, he was supportive but did not join. In later years though, Brown's work was distinctly pre-Raphaelite in style.

Rossetti and Millais were introduced to each other by Hunt in the late summer of 1848. The three would meet in the evenings at 83 Gower Street, which was the Millais family home, and a few days later they formed the PRB. (Hilton, 1970)

Preceding the arrival of the PRB, there was John Ruskin; artist and art critic, pundit on aesthetics, and a social revolutionary born in 1819, in the midst of the industrial revolution.

From a young age he developed a keen interest for the natural world, prompted by his family's frequent trips to different parts of England and Europe, his eyes were opened to the myriad of creations' natural wonders. He took delight in every aspect of the living world, and desired for others to also appreciate the free loveliness around them. He believed in the power of art to transform lives. (Hilton, 1970)

As an enthusiast for organic beauty, Ruskin observed the detrimental effects of the industrial revolution on the environment and the well-being of men's souls and was displeased. He wished for a perfect world, highly influenced by the romantics, Ruskin was altruistic and troubled for the working class. (The Ruskin Museum) When the pre

Raphaelites came to be, Ruskin admired their commitment to naturalism, and eventually in 1851, he appointed himself their defender. (Leahy)

This was rather fitting, as the PRB's accentuation on painting only from nature and illustrating scenery with true detail was greatly influenced by Ruskin's beliefs. They shared the view that the task of an artist was to observe nature and express it truthfully.

In the same way as Ruskin, they felt that the industrial revolution did more harm than good, and they felt the need to paint this reality through their art and challenge Victorian traditions.

They wanted to reform the contemporary art scene by painting stories based on literature, with themes ordinary people could relate to such as; love, death, history and religion.

Resisting the rise of the industrial revolution, and turning away from classicism, the art of the Old Masters, and what was learnt by rote.

Author Wilkie Collins; in his novel entitled *A Rogue's Life*, serialised in Charles Dickens' 1856 weekly magazine, *Household Words*, commented on the pre Raphaelites by writing; *"They saw that trees were green in nature, and brown in the Old Masters, and they thought the latter colour not an improvement on the former--and said so. They wanted interesting subjects; variety, resemblance to nature; genuineness of the article, and fresh paint..."*

(Collins, 1879)

This observation from Collins perfectly encapsulates the PRB's original four principles, and their deep-seated passion to be "true to nature."

In addition to the three founders of the PRB, there were four more members; Thomas Woolner, James Collinson, Frederick George Stephens and William Michael Rossetti, the brother of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who took minutes and formally wrote down the PRB's aims and ideals during the formation meeting. There were four aims in total: 1. *To have*

genuine ideas to express; 2. To study nature attentively, so as to know how to express them; 3. To sympathise with what is direct and serious and heartfelt in previous art, to the exclusion of what is conventional and self-parading and learned by rote; 4. And most indispensable of all, to produce thoroughly good pictures and statues. (Lochnan and Jacobi, 2008)

The style of art they produced was heavily inspired by the Nazarene movement, which began in 1809 with a group of young German painters. The Nazarene's themselves were influenced by early renaissance work and the medieval art of fresco painting.

William Dyce, born in 1806 in Scotland, made contact with the Nazarenes in the mid 1820s. It is not known exactly what year he was first introduced to them, but it is thought that Dyce's good friend, Christian Charles Josias von Bunsen, would have been in an excellent position to introduce them in 1825. German artist and member of the Nazarene movement, Johann Friedrich Overbeck, admired Dyce's painting entitled *Madonna and Child*. It was painted in 1828 and is the earliest painting of Dyce's that reveals a change of style from his previous work.

Nazarene artwork was already known in England before 1830, but only in small circles, so Dyce may have been familiar with the style even if not acquainted with the artists themselves yet.

Moving forward to the late 1840s and early 1850s, Dyce's Nazarene style and truth to nature attracted the newly formed PRB. They turned to Dyce as a mentor in years to come. But being a whole generation older than the young Millais, Hunt and Rossetti, his work was never intentionally 'Pre-Raphaelite.' Even though it was, as John Ruskin once said about his painting: *Titian Preparing to Make His First Essay in Colouring*, "*quite up to the high-water mark of Pre-Raphaelitism,*" and displayed "*Pre-Raphaelite characteristics.*"

Dyce himself, “ensured that his art – indeed every detail of his life – was upheld by a devoutly practiced religious faith.” It is probable though, that Dyce would have been drawn to William Holman Hunt due to their shared religious and theological views, and would have been an ideal mentor to them all as they painted with a great deal of religious symbolism in their work.

In 1850, Dyce painted the first version of his piece entitled *The Meeting of Jacob and Rachel*. He went on to paint three more versions, each one avidly received by the public. He commissioned William Holman Hunt to make a copy of this painting, and then a year later Hunt began work on the *Hireling Shepherd*, which shows great influence from Dyce’s *The Meeting of Jacob and Rachel*.

Although Dyce wasn’t part of the PRB, towards the latter years of his career, his work began to take on a more Pre-Raphaelite direction. His piece *Christabel*, painted in 1855, is regarded as the first of a few paintings by Dyce that show the influence of the PRB.

Mentioned earlier was the piece, *Titian Preparing to Make His First Essay in Colouring*, which was painted across 1856-1857. This is thought to be the most intensely Pre-Raphaelite piece that Dyce painted, with it’s vivid colours, attention to detail in nature and composition. (Pointon, 1979)

The group’s name, Pre-Raphaelite, was meant to convey a number of ideas. Adulation for early Christian art, and frustration with the conventional art of the day which was based on old master practice. Adding “Brotherhood” referred to early Christian artists also, and showed their admiration for the Nazarenes. A personal thought is that the word “Brotherhood” indicates their obvious deep friendship and the sense of family within the group. They shared thoughts and feelings, collaborated on ideas and themes within their work and offered each other suggestions. (Lochnan and Jacobi, 2008)

The poem, *Isabella, or the Pot of Basil*, written by John Keats was to be the first illustration carried out with their new ideas, each member providing a design. Millais went on to paint *Isabella* in 1849, with rather an obvious change in style from his previous piece entitled *Cymon and Iphigenia*. Instead of the well blended, soft brush strokes, expressionless sensuality and hierarchy of detail. *Isabella* is overflowing with detail in every part of the painting, each face is expressive, and all the colours are illuminated and striking. In contrast to *Cymon and Iphigenia*, the person observing the artwork can see the narrative unravelling before them. Isabella is seated next to her secret love, Lorenzo. Opposite them are Isabella's two scheming brothers, who plan to kill Lorenzo because they think he is not a fit match for their sister.

The body language, and the looks in people's eyes, you can almost see the picture move. Hunt also completed a painting based on Keats' *Isabella, or the Pot of Basil* in 1866-68, but entitled it: *Isabella and the Pot of Basil*. Hunt's version depicts a later scene from the poem, where Isabella waters a thriving basil plant with her tears. Upon the cloth on which the basil plant sits, one can see the name *Lorenzo* stitched. The piece is burdened with sorrow and melancholy as Isabella mourns over her lost love, but the colours are still bold and full of exceptional detail. (Riding, 2006) (Lochnan and Jacobi, 2008)

While painting, the PRB broke all the known rules of art. They focused on every part of the artwork equally, rejecting the idea that one should paint the character first, and then move onto the background with layered, well blended colour and soft chiaroscuro. They painted onto white ground rather than the traditional dull coloured surfaces that most artists used, and this allowed the colours to be sharp and defined and pure. (Boddy-Evans, 2019) (Tate) Ruskin wrote a five volume book series entitled *Modern Painters*, spanning across 1840 to 1860. (Hilton, 1970) The second volume in this set emphasised symbolism in art and

expression through nature, and was the very piece of writing that inspired the early developments of the PRB. In this volume, Ruskin writes; "*We have too much picture-manufacturing, too much making up of lay figures with a certain quantity of foliage, and a certain quantity of sky and a certain quantity of water, -- a little bit of all that is pretty, a little sun and a little shade, -- a touch of pink, and a touch of blue...*". (Ruskin, 1847)

As has been mentioned already, the pre Raphaelites were adamant on their belief that art should be true to nature, and that the only way to paint was *en plein air*, and with real people as models. The models they used were often their friends, or loved ones. Rossetti's own wife, Elizabeth Siddal, was the protagonist of many famous pre Raphaelite paintings such as Millais' *Ophelia*, and Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix*. Hunt's wife, Fanny Waugh, sat for him as he painted *Isabella and the Pot of Basil*. From a personal standpoint, this would have enabled the painter to form an even deeper connection with their composition; by adding a personal layer of care, love and romance. (Lochnan and Jacobi, 2008) (Marsh, 1989) Another famous face found in pre Raphaelite art is the face of William Morris' wife, Jane Morris. She embodied the pre Raphaelite ideal for beauty and was her husband's muse, as well as Rossetti's.

The brotherhood began to dissolve in the mid to late 1850s. Beginning with the departure of James Collinson in 1850, and then Thomas Woolner in 1852. The functioning of the brotherhood was questioned, and they began to disperse. (Hilton, 1970) (Lochnan and Jacobi, 2008) William Holman Hunt left in 1854 to travel to the Holy Land, an expedition he'd had in mind for some time. John Everett Millais settled in Perth, Scotland in 1856 with his new wife Euphemia Chalmers Gray (or Effie Gray). (Milner, 1988)

Although from 1854 to 1860, the PRB had gradually disbanded. Their principles and thoughts had made a lasting impression on the artistic community. Therefore, creating a

new phase of artwork heavily influenced by the PRB, but not limited to the tight knit group where it was once unique.

Names associated with this second phase of pre Raphaelitism include; John William Waterhouse, creator of *The Lady of Shalott*, Ford Madox Brown, Frederick Sandys, Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris. In 1861, Morris actually went on to form his new design firm; *Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co*, which later became *Morris & Co* in 1875. Captivated by Ruskin's writings on aesthetic, the beliefs of the PRB and their opinions on the industrial revolution, Morris founded the Arts and Crafts movement in 1861. (V&A) Troubled by the effects of the industrial revolution on style and craftsmanship, the members of this movement steered away from the use of machines in their creative process and instead, turned to the medieval methods of craftsmanship. Similar to the pre Raphaelites, they were fascinated by medieval art, nature, and the importance of conserving the environment. As well as William Morris, other pre Raphaelite artists such as; Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones and Ford Madox Brown, also joined the movement. They emphasized the connection between artist and artwork by reviving traditional crafts and techniques. For example; enamelling, embroidery and calligraphy. William Morris himself specialised in textile design, he printed beautifully designed patterns of nature, bursting with style and colour, by hand. (V&A) (Tate)

The pre Raphaelite movement survived until 1890, succeeded by the arts and crafts movement, and later by art nouveau. But its impact on Victorian society has endured to the present day. Famous author, J R R Tolkien, was greatly influenced by the PRB in his concept art for *The Lord of the Rings*. The ideals of Ruskin and the PRB continue to inspire and

amaze, they were shocking and controversial, but created works of art unparalleled by any other work of art from the time. (Finch, 2019)

To quote a letter from Ruskin, written May 30th 1851, *“the pre Raphaelite brotherhood may, as they gain experience, lay in our land the foundations of a school of art nobler than has been seen for 300 years.”*

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