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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.

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Illustration

Word Count: 2558

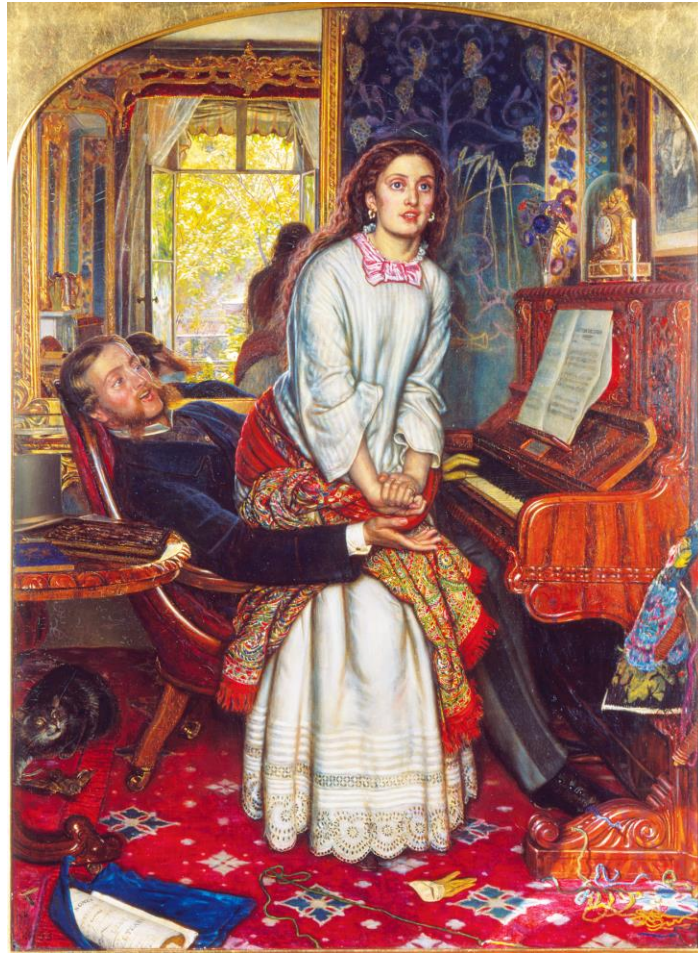
Gwenllian Beynon

Introduction

The Pre Raphaelite-Brotherhood was established in London, 1848. The movement contained a collection of skillful artists that rejected the period's ideal of painting; of which was formed by the Royal Academy and exemplified in the work of Renaissance painter, Raphael (TATE, 2020a). TATE lists the founding artists: William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Rossetti, for example, had a great influence on art during the 1860's with the symbolism contribution to his work (TATE, 2020a). Taking this overview into consideration, many critics of the time and even to this day believe that this movement was controversial and harmful to society (Roe, 2014). An exhaustive exploration and analysis must be taken to detect the meaning of the movement and whether their intentions were simply to provoke outrage or encourage more diverse painting styles. In order to discover the truth, a thorough inspection of several art historians and critics' theories and assumptions will be carried out. This includes Charles Dickens and Pereiro's statements among various other educated sources. The accumulated response and final verdict will reveal if the Pre-Raphaelite movement was solely in interest of distressing Victorian audiences into infamy or if they held genuine intentions to convey their desired direction of art.

An admired and influential figure proclaims hatred towards the movement, which likely affected thousands of perspectives towards this form of art. Charles Dickens viewed these paintings as amoral and “described the figure of the Virgin Mary in John Everett Millais’s (1849-50) *Christ in the House of His Parents* as a degenerate type, one who was ‘horrible in her ugliness’” (TATE, 2020b). This was particularly revolting to critics of the time as the Holy family was only illustrated as idyllic figures: unempathetic and godly. Nygren (2019, pg.125) states Raphael was “a philosophical and rhetorical concept capable of unveiling the essence of things”. Thus, highlighting Jesus as a perfect being, with no physical blemishes, such as those identified in the brotherhood’s paintings. TATE (2020b) insists that the movement favoured painting with an “unprecedented realism, detailing peculiarities of physiognomy and character”, this was “so people read them in terms of the model rather than in terms of the person that particular model was impersonating”. Nature and realism were elated and prioritised above any other religious feature. This, at the time, was considered “blasphemous”, as TATE details. This was primarily due to how society treasured Christianity at the time. Victorian culture had an established Anglican Church that was slowly dissolving under the pressure of the science (Helmstadter and Phillips (1988). Helmstadter and Phillips continue to present the “crumbling of the old order, the impact of science and finally the new social consciousness”. This reinstates the fractured sense of morality and how disconnected society was due to their warped and unagreeable religious viewpoint. This may have also caused the range of perspectives of the Brotherhood and their movement; those that valued Christ still were horrified of the altered and realistic interpretation of him, while those that sided more with science believed this was an inspiring illustration of Christ. Thus, explaining how the public caused the controversy surrounding the brotherhood and not the artists themselves.

As the Pre-Raphaelites used bright colours, some may believe this was to provoke more outrage and conjure controversy (TATE, 2020b). The source continues to suggest this frequent colour selection was purely to “demand people’s attention”. This desperation for fascination may have led to such a drastic alteration from perfection to realism. Ensuring conscious outrage from the public.



'The Awakening Conscience', William Holman Hunt, 1853

The image above provides an example of the controversy discussed. Hunt signifies a specific unsettling subject matter in this painting, one that would be discomforting to the average viewer to this day. Prostitution is subtly hinted at here; TATE (2020b) implies that the Brotherhood's paintings are so "densely encoded with signs and symbols that you have to work hard at deciphering them". The female character's clothing and the lack of a wedding ring proposes the character is a mistress of the male figure. There are several significant and ambiguous elements in this painting; for example, the disheveled glove on the floor mimics her inevitable status as a "discarded mistress" but may also reflect the lack of respect and chivalry men display towards women (TATE, 2020b). Taking this into consideration, the movement enlightens and challenges the period's audience of such matters: treatment of women,

prostitution, and the lack of social balance in terms of wealth and rights. They “explored modern social problems” (TATE, 2020a).



'The Hireling Shepherd', William Holman Hunt, 1851

An additional painting that displays conventionally distasteful topic matters is Hunt's 'The Hireling Shepherd', 1851. Grieve (2014, pp. 406), brings forwards multiple significant concepts surrounding the themes of this piece. The art historian describes the image as “light-heartedly erotic”, indicating how sensitive and taboo the paintings were within the brotherhood. The intimacy portrayed by the couple is symbolic of many frowned upon topics; this form of symbolism is similar to that found in Rossetti's late 1850's-1860's work, thus depicting how

symbolism was an influential and fundamental aspect of this movement (TATE, 2020a). Potentially indicating how the movement's art was intended to be examined and respected rather than immediately frowned upon. Some other important symbolic references identified in this painting involve the colour palette and choice of animals. The purity surrounding the imagery of the lamb in conjunction with the prominent use of the bold, vivid red presents a juxtaposition in relation to the girl's sexuality and virginity. Grieve shapes Hunt's common characters as "extremely religious women that forego worldly pleasures to devote their lives to Christ", potentially signifying temptation within this character. Temptation that has never been explored within paintings beforehand; thus, inflicting a sense of disgust from a viewer of the Victorian era. Pereiro (2009, pp. 2), an art historian states, "the existence of a crisis of faith in the Great Victorian Brittany" is clear, despite many being "raised and educated in an environment of intense evangelical religiosity". This period demonstrates a time of great social divide in terms of religion and science as Pereiro exemplifies. He continues to highlight such "new advances in the life sciences and the introduction in Britain of biblical criticism" of which was "taking place in Germany: the Darwin's Origin of Species saw the light in November 1859". Therefore, this movement did not create these alternative interpretations to the Bible solely to ensure distress, but more so to compliment the everchanging social acceptance and growing intelligence of science and the rejection of idyllic perceptions of potential fictional characters.

Additionally, the characters are represented as a working-class pair, often neglected by art during this period; overlooked and replaced with Biblical images, that of idyllic scenes the audience could only admire and never relate to (Grieve, 2014, pp. 406). This may reflect the "religious turmoil of Hunt's time", as Grieve insists. The social divide and unrest of this period, as discussed in the previous paragraphs, may have also neglected the working class. "Anglican clergy were overwhelmingly educated at the English universities, so they enjoyed a high social status that was supported by a substantial income" (Smith, 2009, pp. 913). Just as the brotherhood were, attending the prestigious Royal Academy (TATE 2020a). Sir John Everett Millais and Hunt were born into very wealthy families themselves, therefore they possess no selfish advantage in illustrating working class and their daily deeds (Art of Design, 2020). It is possible that they aimed to bring more realism into their work, "inspired by the theories of

John Ruskin, who urged artists to 'go to nature', they believed in an art of serious subjects treated with maximum realism"(TATE, 2020a). Expressing their common desire to produce inclusive and diverse paintings.

Grieve (2014, pp. 406) states that Hunt was inspired by Titian and "pastoral tradition". That of which is very present in this image. Grieve comments on the common recurrence of the pastoral pipe in Hunt's work. He notices the similarities between that of Hunt's symbolism and Titian, Hunt mirrored his shepherdess' dress to be that of a colour "close to that of Titian's shepherdess... in a man's smock embroidered with a pattern that draws attention to her bust". Other similarities involve the characters' carelessness and negligence towards their herd; the sheep "are suffering so that they indulge their lustful curiosity in each other, like Titian's couple". The National Gallery (2020) present Titian's work as "profane", in his later years "he pushed his art to the edge of abstraction; this style has been defined as 'magic impressionism'". This may link to how the brotherhood interpreted religion and Biblical stories differently to previous masters and artists. Thus, highlighting Hunt's admiration for Titian. Of which may be interpreted as a known cause of outrage: purposeful knowledge of previous successful artistic shifts may have encouraged the brotherhood to push for a greater impact.

However, it can be argued that the previous popular teachings of Raphael were not that of destructive and damaging nature, with no reason to differentiate from it. “He produced work of such quality that his status as one of the greatest European artists has never been in doubt” (The Royal Academy, 2020). The Royal Academy continues by stating, “his career coincided with the High Renaissance (1550–1520), in which he was perhaps the outstanding figure”. Although, this source may be slightly biased considering they taught Raphael’s work to the founding members (TATE, 2020a). On the contrary, Cooper notices the shift in recognition and respect for Renaissance painters post Pre-Raphaelite Movement (1981, p. 406). The art historian insists on the fact that those in the 1840’s that were unable to travel and access private exhibitions of Raphael and other Renaissance artists were only able to derive their knowledge and understanding of the artform from “descriptions in art-literature and crude reproductions”. This validates the possibility that the public and critics may have appreciated the movement more without the heavy comparison like that in the Academy. Consequently, impacting viewpoints of the brotherhood to this day. He declares, “since attitudes towards the earlier masters varied” there were complications that furthered “discussions about the connections between the Pre-Raphaelites and their namesakes”.

It is also important to consider the fact that the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood did not invent this form of working, they took inspiration from the centuries preceding the High Renaissance (The Art Story, 2020). Art styles and movements are ever-changing, although slowly, people grow with a popular movement and morph their perception of beauty and art around it (Kemp, 2015). It is possible that those in the Victorian era may have already grown past this medieval approach to painting. Kemp portrays the concept that art transforms us and will continue to alter society as art itself transforms, “Over the ages, painters and sculptors have invited us to do radically new things”. This may justify how those from the Victorian period were appalled by a movement that set them back in time. Hunt (2017, pp. 454) delves into the debate between realism and idealism within politics and other social matters. He reveals the existing “argument between preachers of virtue and promoters of strength” claiming it “sprang from the competing ways in which they made sense of a complex world”. This is an ongoing feud that, like art movements, is ever-changing. Realism may be deemed more worthy than idealism one

century for it all to change in the next. Therefore, it is not quite fair to place one above the other in terms of values. In this regard, it is insinuated that the brotherhood did not intentionally claim this way of working to insult the public; in relation to statistics, many would have sided with realism, as Hunt explains. As Dobson, Renaissance professor (2015), alleges: “the Pre-Raphaelites identified in Shakespeare an ideal they could harness to their attempt to revitalize British art with noble ideas and fidelity to nature”. The language here suggests certain positive connotations towards high moral principles considering Cambridge Dictionary’s (2020) definition of ‘noble’. This particular sense of morality and beneficial conscience may link to the chosen theme of realism over idealism; Dobson (2015) connects Shakespeare to certain paintings and artists and generates significant topics. “Hunt chose episodes dramatizing moral conflict in *Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus* (1851)”, emphasising segments from Shakespeare’s play may contradict the brotherhood’s desire to maintain and uphold a mighty sense of realism but it does benefit from highlighting their importance in ethics. Dissimilarly, “Millais’s luminous *Ferdinand Lured by Ariel* (1849) enlivened popular fairy painting with an innovative realism which also characterizes his *Ophelia* (1852)”, the advanced interpretation of a scene that was not presented in the play perfectly exaggerates the movement’s desire to convey realism. The artist illustrates what is only described in the play, creating a new impression of realism to this piece of literature. Subsequently, the Pre-Raphaelites appear innocent in terms of their perceived bad notions for producing art, forming a new image to a well-loved play is most likely to fascinate and excite the public rather than disgust them purely due to the style in which it is painted. However, when the painting was first exhibited it received a “mixed reception, with many critics praising his technique, yet questioning the subject matter” (Scott, 2019). Many are frightened by the thievery of beauty and life in this understanding of the character, insinuating the painting is “perverse”, as the source says. Although, once again, this is all due to personal acceptance of all forms of realism. As Shafer-Landau (2003) states in his book surrounding moral realism, “nowadays many people express their moral views with a great deal more hesitation than was usual in the past”. Thus, presenting how Victorian viewers of these paintings may have treasured a more subtle and less harrowing portrayal of this character, indicating how little they appreciated realism. This is

reinforced by the fact that people in Shakespeare's time did not adore his tragedies as much as his other works (Estill, 2015). To compliment this comment, Shafer-Landau (2003) labels the Pre-Raphaelite audience as "arrogant Victorians", perceiving moral modesty as an incoherent cause for them as personal fallibility was much less acceptable. Overall, it is most likely that the Pre-Raphaelites obtained pure intentions with their art but failed to convey this accurately due to misunderstanding and common Victorian attitudes.

CONCLUSION

Although, there are several obvious viewpoints to be had, many of which are disclosed above, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood are a very controversial matter (TATE, 2020b). Some believe their desire to present nature and life in a realistic and explicit manner was villainous and dishonourable to The Royal Academy (TATE, 2020b) and to God, considering their recurring conventional delineation of Jesus (Pereiro, 2009, pp. 2). Nevertheless, many Victorian members of the public and critics view their work as revolutionary, just as many looking back on their work do today (Organ, 2015, pp. 181). There are many reasons towards this perspective, the most significant of which have been discussed above. For example, favouring a healthier and more realistic viewpoint of nature and life (Shafer-Landau, 2003); and their paintings were inclusive and diverse, detailing tasks and events of the working-class previously neglected by art in former years (Grieve, 2014, pp. 406). Overall, it is clear that the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood had progressive intentions towards expanding art through this movement, separating themselves from the previous Raphael teachings (TATE, 2020a). However, many saw this as destructive, society has learnt to treasure their aims and appreciate their impact on history (Shafer-Landau, 2003).

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