The Art of Aubrey Beardsley:
A Fin de Siecle Critique of Victorian Society

by Erin Smith

In the late Victorian period, many English, among other Europeans, were beginning to question the benefits of the rapid change and industrialization which characterized most of the nineteenth century. As a result, the Victorian value system and social order, which fit in so well with industrial capitalism, came under attack. In England by the late 1880's, although much of the mainstream art and literature still upheld Victorian values and social order, an avant-garde movement of artists and writers began to criticize and satirize Victorian society. Aubrey Beardsley was an illustrator who took part in this movement, and became known in the larger context of Art Nouveau. In criticizing Victorian society, Beardsley focused on the sexual sphere. He was fully aware that challenges to Victorian values came not only from the avant-garde, but from the Women's Movement, which by the 1880's, had made some gains in the areas of education and economic rights. Through his bizarre and symbolic style, Beardsley's drawings blur gender lines and mock male superiority. They also play on Victorian anxieties about sexual expression and men's fear of female superiority. The phrase Fin de Siecle came from the title of a French play, and became a popular expression which symbolized the mood in England from the 1870's to the turn of the century. During this time, Britain was a power in decline. Economically, the industrial middle class was feeling strain from the "great depression" of the 1880's and increasing foreign competition in trade. Victorian notions of authority were also being threatened by extended franchise, and the Irish demand for home rule. <1> These factors helped to create a mood of pessimism which influenced cultural life.

In the cultural sphere, many intellectuals feared that Victorian society had become static. Matthew Arnold, expressed this fear in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), arguing that the point of culture is "not having a resting, but a growing and a becoming." <2> In the 1880's, many avant-garde artists and writers challenged the mainstream Victorian art scene which they considered static and outmoded. This reaction became manifest in the so-called "Decadent" art movement which exhibited an extreme expression of Fin de Siecle pessimism. <3>

During the period of the "Decadence" (1880-1900), artists and writers reacted against high Victorian values. <4> The Decadents preferred pessimism to optimism, the decayed to the living, the abnormal to the normal, and the artificial to the natural. As avantgarde artists, they were constantly engaged in a search for the new. In society, they looked to the "New Woman" and the "new hedonism," and culturally, there was "new drama" and Art Nouveau. <5> They were influenced by the aestheticism of the 1870's whose slogan was "art for art's sake," where art was appreciated solely for its intrinsic pleasure. <6> This contrasts with the Victorian utilitarian concept of art, where art does not exist merely for pleasure's sake, but must serve some higher purpose. Victorians also attached a moral dimension in judging artistic merit, and felt that only a good person can create good art. In reaction to this idea, the Decadents attempted to live their lives according to their concept of art. As a result, many of the leading artists of this movement

lived decadent lifestyles, and were suspected of drug use and homosexuality. <7> The reaction of the "Decadence" paralleled social changes that were occurring under the impetus of the women's movement. While the Decadents criticized Victorian values, the women's movement threatened to break down the entire Victorian social structure.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, widespread social changes began to alter the status of women in Victorian society. The first of these changes gave women broader legal protection. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 extended the grounds for divorce, and was revised in 1878, to make divorce more affordable for women, and give them more custody rights. The Married Women's Property Acts of 1870, 1874, and 1882 gave women the right to own and control property before and during marriage. Also, the school system was reformed so that women could have an education equal to that of men.

These legal changes were accompanied by alterations in women's social and economic standing. Job reform gave women better training, benefits, standards, and working conditions. Teaching and nursing became women's professions, and women also worked as secretaries, clerks, civil servants, lawyers, editors, journalists, and physicians. <8> Women who worked helped to break down the Victorian stereotype of women as a weak domestic creature who must submit to her husband's or her father's will. By the 1890's women began to take control over their own lives. Linda Zatlin describes the New Women of the 1890's:

They married later and bore fewer children. They began to dress without constricting stays. They ate in restaurants without male companions, without fearing attacks on their reputations. They began to travel alone on bicycles, on the underground, on the railroad, for in doing so they were no longer assumed to be prostitutes. <9>

There was much resistance to these changes, as many Victorians preferred to hold on to their traditional notions of a woman's role. The debate over women's place in society became especially turbulent in the 1890's, when many men began to see the New Woman as a personal and a social threat. Victorian society had formed patriarchal institutions which were based on the premise that women were inferior and thus dependent on men. This notion of women also served to define men as the opposite of women. In other words, men were strong, rational, aggressive, and superior. Thus, because male superiority was contingent upon female inferiority in this system, it is easy to see how threatening to men the women's movement could seem. Not only did men fear losing their superior status, but they were also anxious that the social changes for women could lead to female superiority. A Beardsley biographer Ian Fletcher writes, "The particular anxieties about the age may have been conscious and articulate, but the diffused, subconscious, and inarticulate anxieties could only express themselves through symbols." <10> In this case, Beardsley created a highly symbolic and interiorized world through which his art was a perfect vehicle for the illustration of these anxieties.

Throughout Beardsley's short career, his art can be seen as an insightful criticism of the hypocrisies of Victorian society. Because of this, his drawings were criticized by mainstream artists, guardians of Victorian decency, and even his own colleagues. Most of

these criticisms however, did not deal with the thematic content of Beardsley's illustrations. Rather, they criticized his bizarre and grotesque style. In order to better understand this style we must examine Beardsley in the larger context of Art Nouveau.

Though Art Nouveau was an international movement, Fin de Siecle England played an important role in its development through the Arts and Crafts Movement and the "Decadence." The Arts and Crafts Movement was founded by William Morris, who set up guild shops to produce handmade crafts of beauty and utility. In this movement, art was given a moral dimension, where the artist creates in order to better himself and his fellow humans. <11> The moralists of the Arts and Crafts Movement merged with the immoralists of the "Decadence" in a shared desire for artistic unity and new forms of artistic expression. The Arts and Crafts Movement was a reaction against the cheap imitations of craftsmanship that resulted from the mass production of goods, while the Decadents were tired of the imitation of nature and past artistic styles prevalent in mainstream Victorian art. Art Nouveau was also influenced by the Symbolist Movement, which rejected realism in art. <12> The ultimate formulation of Art Nouveau came with the symbolism of the line, where "line became melodious, agitated, undulating flowing, flaming." <13> This aspect of Art Nouveau can be seen in the linear and symbolic qualities of Beardsley's drawings. Other aspects of Art Nouveau which can be seen in Beardsley's art include twodimensionality, decorative patterns, and exotic influences.

Beardsley's first opportunity to make an impression on the art world came through his work with Oscar Wilde. Wilde was a writer, and one of the most influential members of the "Decadence." Beardsley became associated with him when he agreed to do the illustrations for the English version of Wilde's play, Salome. The plot, which revolved around sex, vice, and corruption, is similar to Beardsley's illustrations in that both deal with a highly symbolic and self-created reality. Ian Fletcher claims that the Salome drawings are some of Beardsley's finest work. He points out that of all of Beardsley's drawings, they have had the most influence on subsequent artists and on the popular image of Beardsley. <14> Nevertheless, these drawings were roundly criticized by Beardsley's contemporaries. Even Wilde was not pleased with the drawings. He said, "I admire, I do not like Aubrey's illustrations." <15> Mainstream artists and art critics ignored Beardsley's explicit sexual themes, and denounced his aesthetics. The Times described the drawings as "unintelligible for the most part and, so long as they are unintelligible, repulsive." <16> From this point on, Beardsley was associated with Oscar Wilde in the public mind. As a result, he was not only criticized individually, but was also charged with Wilde's offenses. <17>

After his Salome illustrations had made him well known as one of the Decadents, Beardsley became the art editor of two Fin de Siecle literary magazines, first the Yellow Book, and then The Savoy. These periodicals offered him many opportunities for artistic expression and opened up new avenues for his social criticism. Beardsley worked on the first five issues of the Yellow Book, but was fired when his name became involved with the Wilde scandal. <18>

In April of 1895, after withdrawing from a libel suit against the Marquess of Queensbury, Oscar Wilde was arrested on a charge of committing indecent acts, and the newspapers declared he was carrying a Yellow Book under his arm. Those who considered themselves guardians of Victorian decency, went to the Yellow Book Publishers and demanded to see Beardsley's drawings. They found them upsetting, and pressured the publishers to relieve Beardsley as art editor. <19> Beardsley was fired, but was then engaged as art editor for the Savoy.

Though he was dying of tuberculosis, Beardsley continued to feverishly turn out illustrations for the Savoy and other projects. Often violent hemorrhages would set him back, but as soon as he could hold a pen in his hand, he would continue his drawings. This creative energy stayed with him until he died in 1898, at the age of twenty-five. <20>

A close analysis of Beardsley's drawings reveal more than a witty and fantastic style. Because he was so intensely concerned about social issues, and particularly, the inequities and hypocrisies of Victorian society, his drawings not only critique Victorian vices, but support the breakdown of the patriarchal system. Many of Beardsley's illustrations reveal a world where the "New Woman" is empowered with knowledge, free to expand her gender boundaries, and fully capable of experiencing a sexuality based on equality.

One of Beardsley's underlying themes in his drawings is the depiction of vice in a male context. For Beardsley, vice was the male struggle for power. His drawings depict men who lust for wealth, men who attempt to corrupt other men intellectually, and men who use sexuality as a weapon in the struggle for dominance. <21> In defending this aspect of his art, Beardsley said, "People hate to see their darting vices depicted [but] vice is terrible and it should be depicted." <22>

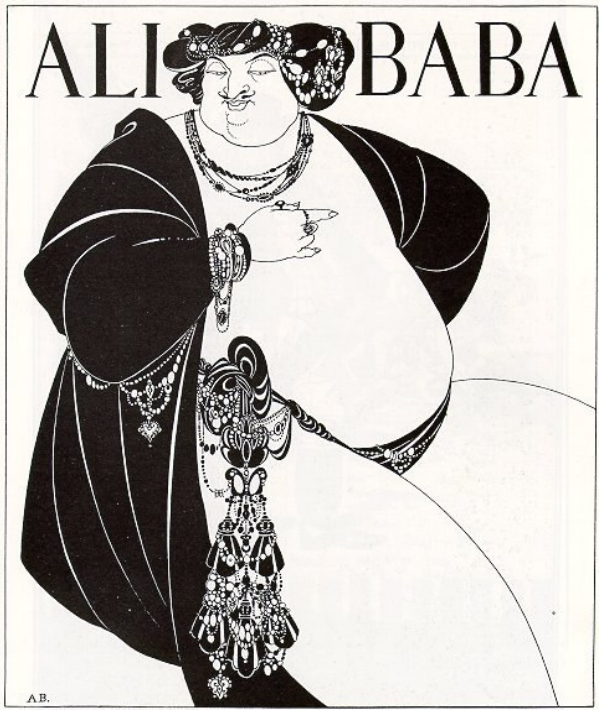

Illustration 1

Beardsley's criticism of materialism is evident in his drawing of the robber chief intended for The Forty Thieves (illus. 1). The body of the chief is bejewelled and monstrous, extending beyond the parameters of the page. In her analysis, Zatlin refers to him as a "vast and impotent eunuch," whose sexual urges have been replaced with a desire for wealth. As a decadent materialist, "his excresent flesh and opulent jewels attest to a grotesque fascination with the physical." <23> Clearly then, Beardsley was questioning the ultimate good of vast accumulations of wealth.

For Beardsley, corruption through wealth was not confined to the eighteenth century aristocracy, but could also be found in the nineteenth century industrial middle classes. Though middle class Victorians may have espoused values of hard work and thrift, their resulting wealth didn't necessarily make them "good" people. In studying Beardsley's art as social criticism, it becomes evident how he suggests that the wealthy Victorians were just as susceptible to corruption as their eighteenth century counterparts.

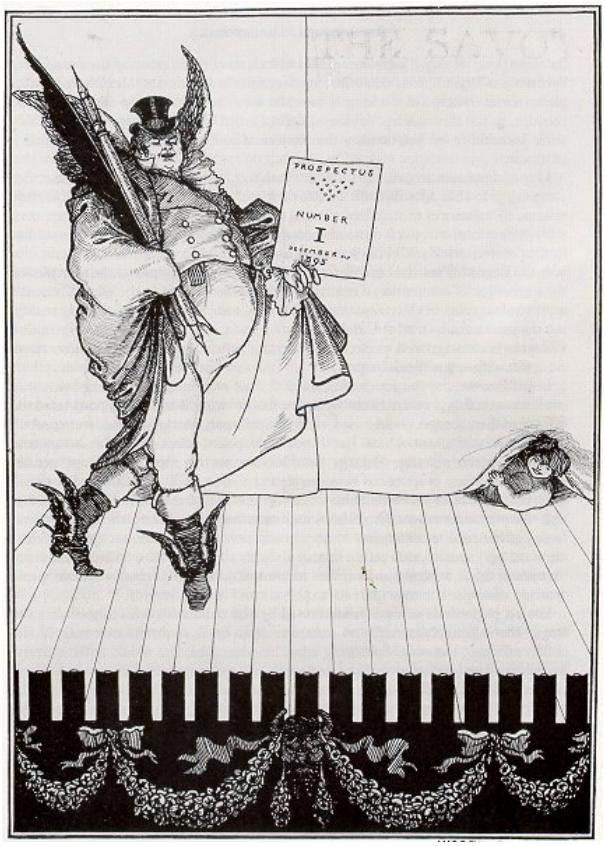

Illustration 2

Beardsley, as a member of the avant garde, also criticized the Victorian art world with its pressure to conform to the Victorian artistic ideal. Here, he outwardly criticizes the Victorian art world in his satirization of mainstream artists. This is most evident in an illustration which was a prospective cover for The Savoy magazine (illus. 2). In the drawing, Beardsley used the image of John Bull to represent the established artist. A foppish and grotesquely overweight version of John Bull stands on a stage to announce some new movement in the art world. <24> He is "pompously self confident" and "disdaining to look at the audience." <25> However, under the curtain, a small boy is peeping out at the audience. This represents the new artist who will be showcased in The Savoy. According to Zatlin: "This young artist has no material power yet, as indicated by his nakedness, but he sees both the audience at which John Bull disdains to look at, and the art still concealed behind the curtain." <26> His knowledge of both worlds thus constitutes a latent power.

The Savoy cover shows how out of touch Beardsley felt the Victorians were with the creative arts. As a result, he challenged Victorian notions of conformity in the art world by criticizing those who held authority in mainstream Victorian art. According to Beardsley, the new artist was more aware of the world around him, and hence would soon replace the existing art authorities with a more modem" approach.

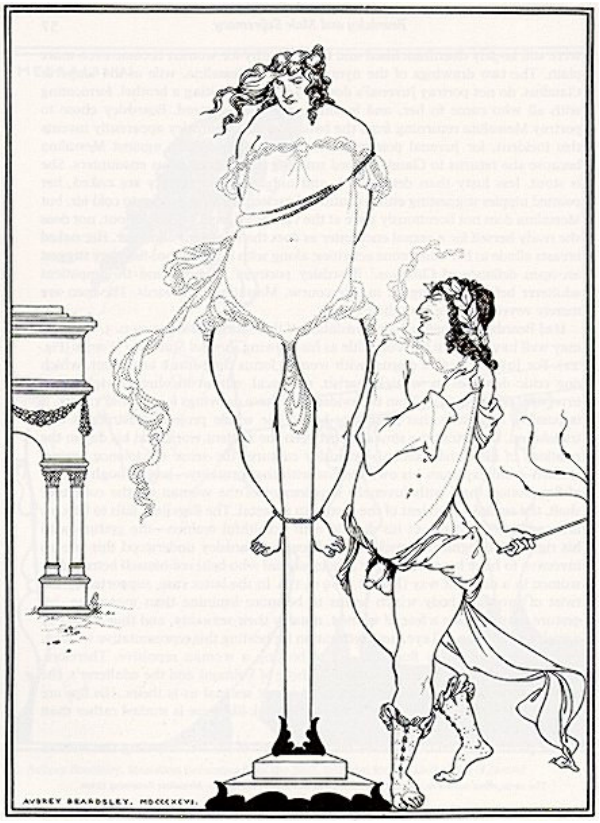
Illustration 3

The vice, however, which Beardsley considered far more heinous than materialism and forced artistic conformity was the male use of sexuality as a weapon in the struggle for dominance. A great majority of his illustrations depict this vice, none of which conceal the ugliness of its consequences. This can be seen in Juvenal Scourging Woman, a drawing intended for The Sixth Satire of Juvenal (illus. 3). Whereas some Victorian artists such as Lord Leighton would portray male sexual domination as sensual, Beardsley creates a brutal scene without a hint of sensuality. <27> The woman, who is neither young nor beautiful, is impaled on a shaft, which is suggestive of rape, but also of a pedestal on which a woman might be displayed as a statue. This position also echoes the Victorian ideal of putting women on a pedestal, but in the drawing she is tied there against her will. Zatlin writes: "Whether a statue exemplifies an act of torture or compels one's adoration, it is an abstraction rather than an individual human being." <28> This drawing expresses the dangers which are inherent in the objectivization of women. That is, when men view women as abstractions, they deny women their autonomy and individuality, and thus make them targets for brutality.

Through his criticisms of Victorian vices, Beardsley offers an alternative vision to the hypocrisy and patriarchy of Victorian society. In many of his fantastic and grotesque designs, he creates a world where gender lines blur, and women are depicted as aggressive, powerful, and sexual. This accounts for the erotic themes in much of Beardsley's art. Like the other Decadents, Beardsley was tired of Victorian social pretensions which censored sex in art and literature, and treated women as sexual objects.

Rather, he portrays women who he feels are symbolic of the "New Woman" in Victorian society.

Some of the best examples of the Beardsley woman can be seen in his Salome drawings. These drawings portray a warped vision of equality between the sexes, where the female subject expresses traditionally male vices of materialism, lust, and a desire to dominate. In three drawings, The Eyes of Herod, The Stomach Dance, and The Climax, Salome's actions are clearly "unfeminine" (illus. 4-6). In The Eyes of Herod and The Stomach Dance, Salome bargains with Herod, offering her body for John the Baptist's head. In a patriarchal society, her body is her only means of bargaining, but the method in which she gets what she wants clearly defies the social conventions which confine her. <29> Zatlin writes: "Through Salome's hard-eyed appraising glare, these pictures demonstrate for Victorians what was a distortion caused by her desire for vengeance, and her acceptance of a masculine role to achieve it." <30> Though Salome uses her sexuality, she is not aroused. She is assuming a masculine role in a power struggle with patriarchy.

Illustration 4

Illustration 5

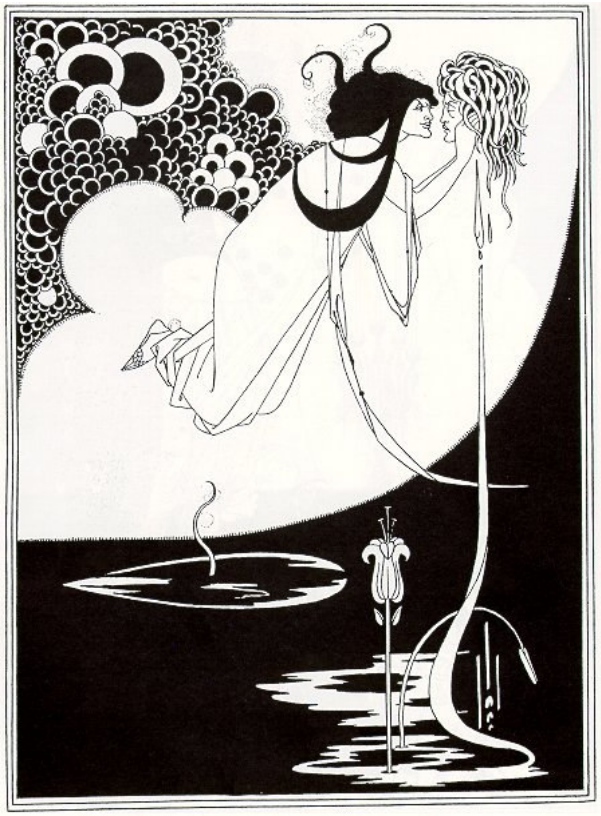

Illustration 6

The Salome drawings played upon the latent fears and anxieties of Victorians concerning the New Women. For example, Salome is portrayed in perverse extremes. Many of her gestures are masculine and unattractive, her sexuality is calculated, and her motives are evil in their nature. This is how many Victorian men felt women would emerge once they had achieved all of the objectives of the women's movement. Because male dominance and superiority was being challenged by this movement, men subconsciously feared their social order would be replaced with an equally repressive system of female superiority. As a result, these fears can express themselves in visions of monster-women such as Salome.

Beardsley also depicts women who do not willingly conform to their role as mothers. This challenges the Victorian idealization of motherhood, where all women are expected to naturally conform to their roles as mothers, and enjoy bearing and raising children. However, Beardsley was aware that many Victorian women feared pregnancy because of the high number of maternal deaths in childbirth. In responding to this anxiety, he created a series of drawings of women with fetuses (illus. 7). <31> In all of the pictures, the fetuses resemble diminutive monsters, and the women seem to express limited delight in their motherhood.

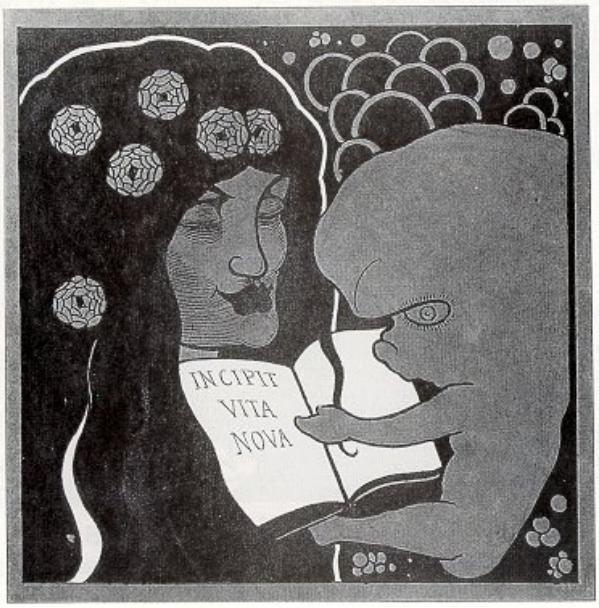

Illustration 7

In what were his most shocking illustrations, Beardsley portrays women who are clearly unashamed about their bodies and sexual needs. Some of his drawings show women with their backs facing the front who appear to be masturbating (illus. 8). In the drawing, Two Athenian Women in Distress, both women masturbate openly (illus. 9). This drawing, however, was suppressed by the 1857 Censorship law because of its obvious suggestiveness. <32>

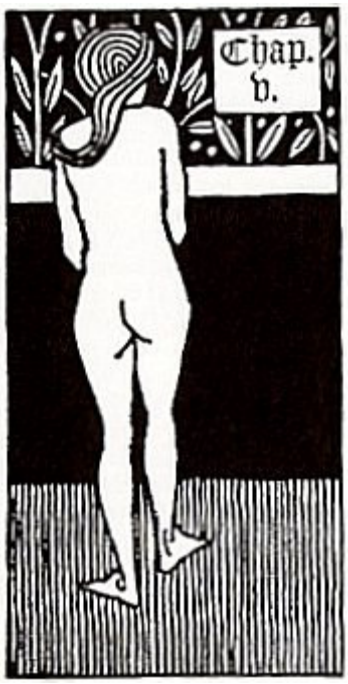

Illustration 8

Illustration 9

Beardsley even goes further to suggest lesbianism in Victorian society. In a drawing entitled Black Coffee, two women sit in the booth of a cafe. (Illus. 10) Their faces reveal no emotion, yet one woman glances sideways, as if to see if anyone is looking, while she reaches into her companion's lap in what appears to be a sexual gesture. <33> This acknowledgement of female homosexuality contrasts with the early Victorian period, which accepted women in close relationships because women were not believed to have sexual desires of any kind.

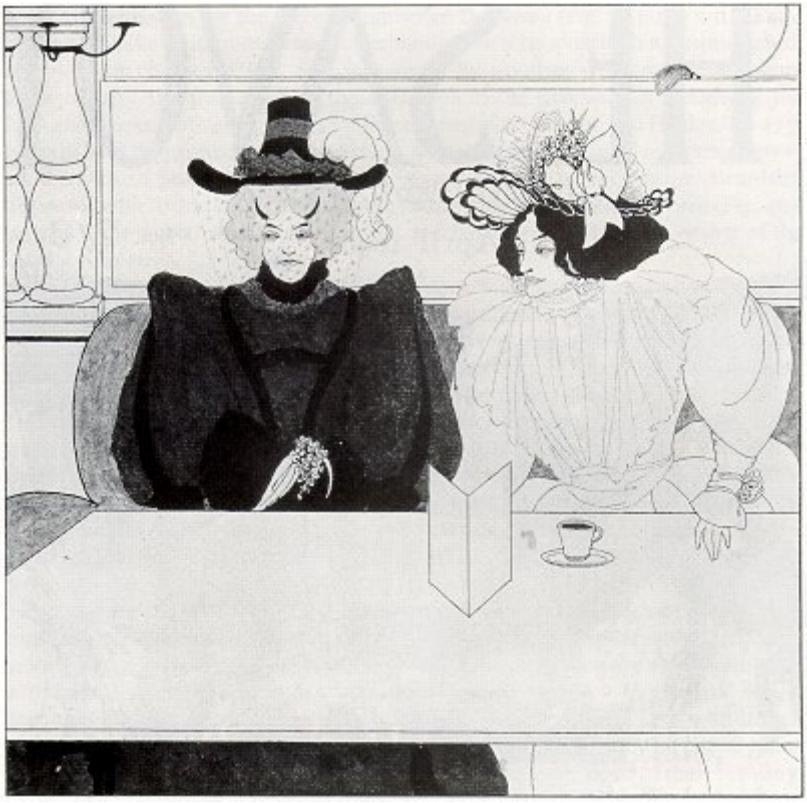

Illustration 10

Beardsley expressed a sexuality in his drawings which mocked. the prudishness of the Victorian age, and advocated full freedom to explore sexuality. He shocked Victorians with his grotesque and highly unnatural style, and drawings of nude bodies which were not idealized. Nonetheless, his drawings do not explicitly depict fornication or denigrate women. For these reasons, Beardsley's art can arguably be placed in the sphere of erotica rather than pornography.

Aubrey Beardsley's drawings also serve as an important Fin de Siecle criticism of Victorian society. Though he was an important leader during the "Decadence" and an innovator in Art Nouveau, his art stands out as one of the most shocking and fantastic critiques of Victorian society. Through the medium of his highly symbolic and esoteric drawings, Beardsley revealed the hypocrisy of the Victorian patriarchal social structure. Victorian society tagged his art as controversial because Beardsley became involved with social issues, and supported sexual freedom. However, this was not the strongest reason for his controversy. For repressed Victorians though, Beardsley's most dangerous weapon was his perceptiveness: in his drawings, they could see visual representations of their most latent desires and anxieties.

Notes

1 Donald Read, *England 1868-1914* (New York: Longman, 1979) p. 211.

2 Read, p. 271.

3 Read, p. 275.

4 Ian Fletcher, *Aubrey Beardsley* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987) p. 66.

5 Peter Selz, *Art Nouveau: Art and Design at the Turn of the Century* (New York: The Museum of Modem Art, 1975) p. 8.

6 Read, p. 272.

7 Fletcher, p. 66.

8 Linda Gertner Zatlin, *Aubrey Beardsley and Victorian Sexual Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) p. 12.

9 Ibid.

10 Fletcher, p. 57.

11 Selz, p. 7.

12 Selz, p. 9.

13 Selz, p. 10.

14 Fletcher, p. 57.

15 Ibid.

16 Miriam J. Benkovitz, *Aubrey Beardsley: An Account of His Life* (New York: Putnam, 1981) p. 84.

17 Benkovitz, p. 84.

18 Benkovitz, p. 87.

19 Benkovitz, pp. 80-121.

20 Benkovitz, p. 122.

21 Zatlin, p. 35.

22 Benkovitz, p. 66.

23 Zatlin, p. 37.

24 Zatlin, p. 42.

25 Ibid.

26 Zatlin, p. 43.

27 Zatlin, p. 59.

28 Ibid.

29 Zatlin, p. 94.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Zatlin, p. 111.

33 Zatlin, p. 114.

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