

Criticism  
or  
creativity

(which is higher)

## The Critic As An Artist

Oscar Wilde

→ Art for Art's Sake  
Curiosity of Art.

### The Critical Faculty Is Essential to the Creative Process

The play opens with a discussion between Ernest and Gilbert about memoir. Ernest dislikes all memoirs whereas Gilbert has a nuanced idea about what is interesting to a reader and why. The discussion continues with Ernest making claims about his beliefs about literature and art and Gilbert insisting that Ernest is wrong and pontificating about his own views. Gilbert convinces Ernest the ancient Greeks were a nation of critics. Ernest expresses that he feels bad for the Greeks because in his estimation, "The creative faculty is higher than the critical." Gilbert then convinces Ernest that he's wrong about the creative faculty being higher than the critical faculty. Gilbert maintains that without the "critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all." Ernest explains that what he actually means is that the work of great artists comes from the unconscious mind rather than the conscious mind. Gilbert disagrees. He argues, "All fine imaginative work is self-conscious and deliberate." He claims that poets don't burst into song unconsciously. They sing because they choose to. It's people's romantic sense of history that leads them to believe that poets exist in a magical space. Gilbert contends that people imagine the art of previous centuries existing in settings such as "muses brushing the dew from anemones in the morning" and in the evening the Olympian god of sun, light, music, and poetry "Apollo to sing to the shepherds in the vale." These are figments of people's imaginations and ideas that people want to be true. Gilbert argues that the poetry that seems so natural is a direct result of conscious effort.

God Gifted  
Naturally

Is art  
consciously  
or  
unconsciously  
made?

Ernest concedes that art in fact comes from deliberate work of artists rather than their unconscious. However, he thinks that Gilbert must agree that the great poems of the antiquities are indicative of the collective imagination rather than the work of the individual. Gilbert goes on to explain how he believes every work of art is the work of an individual. An individual took those stories and shaped them into song even if they had material like old ballads and stories to work with.

### Talking About a Thing Is Harder Than Doing a Thing

Ernest can't believe that Gilbert said, "It was more difficult to talk about a thing than to do it." Gilbert explains, "When a man acts he is a puppet. When he describes he is a poet." He describes in detail scenes from Greek mythology. He tells stories of legends and myths that have lasted centuries. Gilbert claims it's easy enough in the moment for the adulterous queen "to throw over [the king's] head the purple net, and call to her smooth-faced lover to stab through the meshes at the heart that should have broken at Aulis." Gilbert explains that actions are momentary things and then they die. He maintains that people who wrote about these heroic deeds are the ones who made them real. Gilbert continues to explain that poets made these stories immortal and it's the singers that turn these people into heroes.

Art is  
more  
wonderful  
when  
spoken  
rather  
than  
acting.

Criticism Is an Art

"Critical ages can be creative.  
creative ages can't exist  
if there is no criticism"



Ernest tries to articulate his ideas about the relationship between life and art as well as between art and criticism. Gilbert counters that criticism is an art in and of itself. According to him criticism is the highest art form because it is creative and independent. He explains that other artists need materials but all the critic needs is to view a piece of art. It doesn't matter whether the art is good because what the critic creates through critique is independent of whatever is being critiqued.

critic is highest form of art.

Ernest asks if it's possible that criticism is a creative art. Gilbert asks in return why it should be so. The critic works with materials "and puts them in a form that is both new and delightful." Gilbert asks if more can be said of poetry. Gilbert considers criticism to be a "creation within a creation." The great writers starting from Homer (9th or 8th century BCE) and Aeschylus (c. 525–455 BCE) and on to William Shakespeare (1564–1616) and John Keats (1795–1821) didn't take their subject matter from real life. They looked for it in ancient stories, myths, and legends. The critic does the same. They deal with materials that already have imaginative form and color.

Critics is a creation within a creator

Gilbert explains that criticism reveals the soul of the critic. He suggests that this is more interesting and delightful than history or philosophy because its subject is real. It deals with the critic's thoughts about life. Events are accidental things that happen but with the critic the reader is able to see the critic's moods and passions. Furthermore, critics have a refined artistic sense so they look in the mirror to relay their own thoughts and impressions.

Criticism reveals the soul of the critic

### The Qualities of a True Critic

Ernest states that he thinks a critic must be fair-minded, rational, and sincere. Gilbert dismisses each of those ideas. Gilbert reveals his idea of the "primary requisite for the critic." The critic must have "a temperament exquisitely susceptible to beauty, and to the various impressions that beauty gives us." He says that people have a "beauty-sense" that is separate from thought and separate from but of equal value to the soul. This beauty-sense leads some people to create art and more sophisticated people to contemplation. Gilbert continues to explain that this beauty-sense needs an exquisite environment to survive. Otherwise, it won't thrive. He claims that people with an artist's temperament will naturally reject anything vulgar and become drawn to grace, charm, and loveliness. Ultimately, these people will develop a self-conscious and critical spirit.

Acc. to Gilbert

### Analysis

#### The Critical Faculty Is Essential to the Creative Process

Ernest mentions that artists should be held in higher esteem than critics. Gilbert responds and explains that the critical faculty works in concert with the creative faculty to create art. He states "without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all." He goes on to



explain that poets don't sing because they have to. They sing because they choose to. Oscar Wilde refers to poets of the ancient world who passed on history, myth, and culture through their songs. It would be easy to assume that previous generations of artists were endowed with such magical artistic gifts that the work flowed out of them effortlessly. Nevertheless, Gilbert insists that this assumption that artists didn't have to employ their critical and creative faculties and hard work to create art that has lasted for centuries is a mistake.

The idea of choices is key to Gilbert's argument. A person must use their critical faculty to make choices. The poet's choices go beyond whether to sing or not to sing. The poet makes critical choices about whose story to memorialize and whose story to ignore. The critical faculty comes into play in creating original pieces of art as well. Ideas for new creations can come from the critical eye that sees where something is missing or where something needs improvement. This same critical faculty can come into play in terms of finishing the work. Observing the creation with a critical eye can drive artists to work on a book or a sculpture until they are satisfied that it's as near perfect as it can be. The artist looks at their work critically to see where it needs improvement and they can do this over and over again. Gilbert proclaims, "All fine imaginative work is self-conscious and deliberate," meaning the work has been carefully considered and deliberately executed.

### Talking about a Thing Is Harder Than Doing a Thing

Gilbert claims, "It is very much more difficult to talk about a thing than to do it," and critics have the most difficult task of all the artists. He dismisses the idea that actions are the most important part of history when he says, "Anybody can make history. Only a great man can write it." Gilbert asserts that poets and bards are the ones who memorialize an event or an action which then becomes a significant historical and cultural touchstone. A particular action or event would be lost to history without the role of the bard.

Gilbert explains that being a critic requires introspection and contemplation and adds, "to do nothing at all is the most difficult thing in the world, the most difficult, and the most intellectual." However, people have different temperaments. Wilde acknowledges this fact elsewhere in the play when Gilbert explains that artists are born with a particular temperament and a beauty-sense. It's difficult to prove one thing is harder than another. If people have different temperaments and different levels of talent and abilities then the experience of working as a critic is going to differ from one person to another. Whether one kind of art is more difficult to create than another must be an individual experience rather than a universal one. However, Wilde suggests that the recording of history through art like monuments, statues, stories, and literature is more impactful than the actual events of history.

### Criticism Is an Art

Art is something that is created with skill, imagination, and the intent that it will be appreciated for its beauty. Wilde introduces the idea that criticism is an art by showing the reader that a critic uses the same process to create a critique that other artists use to create their art. Artists have tools or materials that they work with to create something beautiful. Writers have stories, myths, and songs to base their work on. Visual artists have paints and



sculptors have stones and chisels to work with. These tools give the artist a framework upon which to create their vision and see their ideas come to fruition.

Artists' materials help them in another way beyond the basic function of tools. Tools and materials give artists a place to begin and end. There are boundaries beyond which a particular medium cannot go. A painter knows to start with paints, a brush, and a canvas. They know where their work has to end because there are only so many surfaces in the world an artist can paint on. For critics there are no real physical tools to work with aside from the pen. The critics' tools are the subject of their critiques and their minds, so critics are left alone to decide where the work begins and ends. Anything critics find in the mind or soul is fair game. Gilbert contends that this lack of tools makes criticism a more arduous process than other art forms and yields a purer outcome. He argues, "Contemplation ... is the opinion of the highest culture. It is the proper occupation of man. ... To do nothing at all is the most difficult thing in the world, the most difficult and the most intellectual." Contemplation is considered the most worthwhile of occupations in high cultural circles.

Wilde allows Gilbert to idealize the craft of criticism. Not only does Gilbert consider criticism an art but he considers it to be the highest of art forms. He contends that this highest form of art is also the purest form of autobiography because the subject is real and the critique reveals the artist's soul by allowing the reader to see inside the critic's innermost thoughts. Gilbert claims that, "The best thing we can say about art is that it's less vulgar than life." However, critique deals with thoughts about life and not mere events of pure happenstance.

Gilbert asserts that criticism is the most difficult form of art to create but his argument falls apart upon Gilbert's insistence that critique is the highest and purest form of art. Opinion is subjective. It's a matter of opinion whether anything is the best, or the greatest, or the purest. Gilbert explains later in the play that it is the viewer who imbues the art with its meaning rather than the artist's intention. If the experience of a piece of art differs from one individual to the next, then the value of the art is subjective. There cannot be a piece of art or genre of art that can objectively be considered the highest or the purest over every other piece of art.

### The Qualities of a True Critic

Ernest imagines that a critic should be fair-minded, rational, and sincere. Gilbert dispenses with each of these ideas fairly quickly. He explains that people can be unbiased only about things they don't care about. Art doesn't appeal to the sense of reason and sincerity is overrated.

Gilbert explains, "Temperament is the primary requisite for the critic—a temperament exquisitely susceptible to beauty, and to the various impressions that beauty gives us." People who have an artist's temperament also have what Gilbert calls a beauty-sense. This means they have the ability to appreciate beauty and to fall in love with beauty. This beauty-sense is separate from and more important than reason and separate from but of

equal value to the soul. He maintains that artists need to be nurtured in an environment of exquisite beauty so that they will learn to recognize and appreciate it.

If temperament is the main ingredient for a good critic, the reader must look to the rest of the play to learn which other traits go into creating a proper critic. It is implied early in the play that the artist has a creative sense. This isn't something that Ernest questions so it's not addressed at length. Ernest proposes that art is purely creative and intuitive and Gilbert insists that there is no art without the critical faculty. Throughout *The Critic as Artist*, Wilde gives the reader the recipe for what goes into creating a good critic and artist. There are four factors that a person needs to become a good critic including the artist's temperament, the exquisite environment, the creative faculty, and the critical faculty.





## "Ernest"

- Creativity is higher.
- Art is unconsciously made.
- Art is harder to act upon than to speak about.
- Criticism is not art.
- Criticism is a creative art.
- Critic must be fair-minded, rational and sincere.

## "Gilbert"

- criticism is higher.
- Art is self-consciously made.
- Art is harder to speak than to act upon.
- Criticism is the highest form of art.
- Criticism is a "creation within a creation".
- Critic must have the "beauty-sense".

criticism (Uncomy)

- \* Presentation → (Secrets of Self)
- \* Friday → Quiz (Painter of Modern Life)
- \* Past Papers.