

Oscar Wilde- Critic as Artist.

Lq no. 01

Is the critic a creator? Discuss the role of critic as highlighted by Oscar Wilde in his essay Critic as Artist.

Oscar Wilde was an Irish **poet and dramatist**. He is best remembered for his epigrams and plays like *"The Importance of Being Earnest" (1895)* which is a play regarded as his most important work, and his novel *"The Picture of Dorian Gray" (1890)*. He was a spokesman for the late 19th century Aesthetic movement in England, which advocated art for art's sake theories.

"**The Critic as Artist**" is an essay by Oscar Wilde, containing the most extensive statements of his aesthetic philosophy. It is a dialogue between two people who are involved in extending and refining the role of a critic. Part one of the dialogue discusses the role of critic as a creator, while part two of the dialogue explains its role as an interpreter.

In his work **"Critic as Artist"**, Oscar Wilde has redefined the role of a critic put forward by **Matthew Arnold** in his essay **"The Function of Criticism at the Present Time"**. Matthew Arnold holds that it is the function of criticism **"to see the object as in itself it really is"**, a notion with which Wilde assertively **disagrees**, along with many other points he disputes in his essay. Instead he believes critic is a creator. Indeed, the very title of his work suggests as much: **the critic does not stand in relation to the artist, but rather becomes an artist himself as he experiences and interprets the art of others.**

Oscar Wilde has repeatedly elevated the role of the critic to that of an artist. Critic is in no means inferior to the artist when it comes to creating something new. In fact, he is unable to incorporate all his knowledge and experience in his work. According to Oscar Wilde, **"The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticizes as the artist does to the visible world of form and**

color, or the unseen world of passion and of thought. He does not even require for the perfection of his art the finest materials.”

Oscar Wilde holds the critic in high regards as an artist in his own right, who simply uses the works of artists as they in turn have used the material world: as a point from which to jump in the creation of something wholly new. So, a critic is just like an artist. He too uses the material in his own way to create. The only difference is that the critic works on something that has already been created by other people.

There is no reason to disregard the work of critic as a creator just because he has created by means of criticizing other's works. Oscar Wilde has asserted in his essay, **“If a man's work is easy to understand, an explanation is unnecessary... And if his work is incomprehensible, an explanation is wicked.”** Hence more often than not, the presence of a critic becomes not only a requirement but is justified. As Oscar Wilde states about a critic's method of creating, **“It works with materials, and puts them into a form that is at once new and delightful. What more can one say of poetry? Indeed, I would call criticism a creation within a creation.”**

Oscar Wilde accounts that **“The highest Criticism, then, is more creative than creation, and the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not.”** Hence the role of the critic is to view the work of art as a suggestion for a new work of his own, and to put it into a form according to his own wishes and his own particular perspective.

Moreover, this new work does not necessarily have any resemblance to the original. It is a new work that belongs solely to the critic. Hence the role of the critic is to be a creator. In fact, the critic reproduces the work he reviews in a much different way, one that incorporates a different form and is unique in its own charm and beauty, so much so that it becomes a new work entirely, and does not necessarily hold any resemblance to the original work that was reviewed by it. As Oscar Wilde reiterates, **“The critic reproduces the work that he criticizes in a mode that is never imitative, and part of whose charm may really consist in**

the rejection of resemblance, and shows us in this way not merely the meaning but also the mystery of Beauty.”

Hence the critic views the work from a different perspective. He finds in it, elements that might have been initially disregarded and were unnoticed. He finds instances of rare beauty and charm that might not have been observable initially by the reader without the assistance of the critic. In this way the credit goes to both the critic for creating his own work and to the author, for being the originator. Oscar Wilde is seen to correctly praise criticism as **“the purest form of personal impression” because “it has least reference to any standard external to itself”**.

Lq no. 02

Art for art's sake

During his lifetime, Irish playwright, novelist, and poet **Oscar Wilde** – known for his clever wit and outrageous behavior – delved deep into a discussion of the **nature of art** in his plays, essays, and speeches. Oscar Wilde was strongly associated with the phrase **“art for art's sake”** though it doesn't actually appear in his writing. It stems from his role in the **Aesthetics Movement**, in which he advocated that art needed no justification or purpose. As he notoriously claimed in the preface to his dark novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, **“All art is quite useless.”** Wilde believed that art need not express anything but itself. He put the value on artistry above anything else and regarded life as a kind of art form, to be lived beautifully.

The philosophical foundations of **Aestheticism** were formulated in the eighteenth century by **Immanuel Kant**, who spoke for the autonomy of art. Art was to exist for its own sake, for its own essence or beauty. The artist was not to be concerned about morality or utility or even the pleasure that a work might bring to its audience. Aestheticism was supported in Germany by J. W. von Goethe and in England by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle. **Benjamin Constant** first used the phrase **“l'art pour l'art”** (French, meaning **“art for art”** or **“art for art's sake”**) in 1804.

Art exists only for the sake to be beautiful, and to be admired. **Wilde** consulted the *Venus de Milo* as he related to the phrase and the movement. The phrase itself was coined by **Theophile Gautier**. The movement was spearheaded by **Walter Pater, Father of the Aestheticism movement**. Oscar Wilde did not invent Aestheticism, but he was a dramatic leader in promoting the movement near the end of the nineteenth century. *Art was not meant to instruct and should not concern itself with social, moral, or political guidance.*

Like **Baudelaire**, Wilde advocated freedom from moral restraint and the limitations of society. This point of view contradicted Victorian convention in which the arts were supposed to be spiritually uplifting and instructive. Wilde went a step further and stated that the artist's life was even more important than any work that he produced; his life was to be his most important body of work.

The most important of **Wilde's critical works**, published in May 1891, is a volume titled *Intentions*. It consists of four essays: "The Decay of Lying," "Pen, Pencil and Poison," "The Critic as Artist," and "The Truth of Masks." These and the contemporary essay "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" affirm Wilde's support of Aestheticism and supply the philosophical context for his novel, "The Picture of Dorian Gray".

The longest of the essays in *Intentions*, "*The Critic as Artist*", first appeared in two parts with the significant title, "The True Function and Value in Criticism; With Some Remarks on the Importance of Doing Nothing: A Dialogue." It is considered to be a response to **Matthew Arnold's essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time"**. Arnold's position is that the creative faculty is higher than the critical.

The central thesis of Wilde's essay is that the critic must reach beyond the creative work that he considers. The **setting** of the dialogue is a library in a house in London's Piccadilly area overlooking Green Park, and the principal characters are Gilbert and Ernest. Through Gilbert, Wilde presented his theories and philosophies.

The best criticism must cast off ordinary guidelines, especially those of Realism, and accept the aesthetics of Impressionism — **what a reader feels** when reading a work of literature rather than what a reader thinks, or reasons while

reading. The critic must transcend literal events and consider the "**imaginative passions of the mind.**" The critic should not seek to explain a work of art but should seek to deepen its mystery.

In his essay **The Decay of Lying**, Wilde wrote, *"No great artist ever sees things as they really are. If he did, he would cease to be an artist."* For Wilde, **art** is about **illusion** and **imagination**. He believed that the artist's ability to transcend reality and to create the sublime is what makes him great. The proper aim of art is to lie or tell of beautiful, untrue things.

Oscar Wilde argued for **imagination** and **openness** in order to really appreciate **art**. He said, *"An educated person's ideas of Art are drawn naturally from what Art has been, whereas the new work of art is beautiful by being what Art has never been... A temperament capable of receiving, through an imaginative medium, and under imaginative conditions, new and beautiful impressions, is the only temperament that can appreciate a work of art."*

In 1891 Wilde also published *"The Picture of Dorian Gray"*, a novel which is considered to be Wilde's most important work as in it he expresses his ideas on art which should develop, as he sees it, only under the guiding principle of **"art for art's sake"** or aesthetic isolation. Wilde believed that only **"Art as the cult of Beauty"** could prevent the murder of the soul. He wrote only to please himself and was not concerned with communicating his theories.

"All art is quite useless". This short statement of Oscar Wilde in his Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* expresses one of the central aspects of the idea of Art for Art's Sake: **art shall have no other aim than being art and it should be protected from subordination to any moral, didactic, social or political purpose. Art should be an end in itself and have no specific use in terms of the utilitarian philosophers.** This concept is not one to emerge in the 19th century for the first time, but the movement referred to by the term **"Art for Art's Sake"** is.

Sq no. 01

Aesthetic theory of Oscar Wilde

The Aesthetic Movement developed in the last decades of the 19th century was originated in France with **Théophile Gautier**, it reflected the sense of frustration and uncertainty of the artist, his reaction against the materialism and the restrictive moral code of the bourgeoisie. Gautier said,

“Nothing is really beautiful unless it is useless. Everything useful is ugly for it expresses a need, and the needs of men are ignoble and disgusting, like his poor, weak nature. The most useful place in the house is the lavatory”.

The French artists ‘escaped’ into aesthetic isolation, into what Gautier defined ‘**Art for Art’s Sake**’ (Arte per amore dell’Arte). **Oscar Wilde** was a great propagator and representative of this movement. He became a disciple of **Walter Pater**, the theorist of aestheticism in England, accepting the theory of “Art for Art’s Sake”.

Wilde totally adopted “**the aesthetic ideal**”. His aestheticism was based on the cult of beauty and pleasure, a new ‘**hedonism**’ which was to replace the Puritanism of Victorian society. Wilde’s attitude was also very **rebellious** and provocative and he transposed in his lifestyle what he believed in and wrote in his works. Wilde believed that only “**Art as the cult of Beauty**” could prevent the murder of the soul. He wrote only to please himself and was not concerned with communicating his theories.

Oscar Wilde famously wrote “**all art is quite useless**” in the preface to his novel ***The Picture of Dorian Gray***. He explained that art only attempts to create a mood and not instruct or inform any type of action or doing. According to him, the **authentic artists** concern themselves with style and form, with the adroit handling of the artistic medium and the shaping of beautiful works. He was of the view that,

“Morality is not a matter of an artist’s or writer’s message; instead it rests in how well he or she has executed an aesthetic task”.

In the “***The Critic as Artist***”, a Wilde not only celebrates criticism in its own right but also asserts its superiority over the creative work itself. He is **anti-Romantic** and **anti-Historical**. He believes,

“...the highest criticism, being the purest form of personal impression, is, in its way, more creative than creation”.

Thus, Oscar Wilde is known as the father of the Aesthetic Movement as he was vocally interested only in the literary study of beauty and aesthetics. He was the first major writer to challenge classic literary structure and cause controversy for doing so.

Sq no.03

Is all art immortal.

Oscar Wilde was **Irish playwright, novelist and poet**. He is known for his **clever wit** and **outrageous behavior** which delved deep into the discussion of the **nature of art** in **essays, plays and speeches**. In his essay **‘The Critic as an Artist**’, the point he was trying to make is that art, on its own, has no value and one gives it value because of what it does to us. Art is a **reflection** of the **artist**, that is why the artist creates the art but one likes looking at it because what one sees in it is something that reflects ourselves on some way. He was saying that different forms of art are not necessarily **‘moral’** or **‘immoral’**, which ties into his statement that art is useful because one gives it use. If one looks at something and finds ugliness, and art is reflection of yourself, it means one is corrupt in some way, whereas someone who can look at something and find good in it, even if it’s ugly, it means that person has good in them since art is a mirror of the spectator.

Oscar Wilde did not invent **Aestheticism** but he was a dramatic leader in promoting the movement near the end of **nineteenth** century. Wilde was specially influenced by the by **Algernon Charles Swinburne** and **Walter Pater** for their **‘art for art’s sake’** notion. For him, art was not meant to **instruct** and should not concern itself with **social, moral or political guidance**. Wilde went a step further and stated that the artist’s life was even more important than any work that he produced; his life was to be his most important body of work. He notoriously claimed in the preface to his dark novel **‘The Picture of Dorian Gray’** that **‘All art is quiet useless’**. Wilde believed that art need not express anything else but itself. He put the value on artistry above anything else and regarded life as a kind of art form, to be lived beautifully.

Oscar Wilde warned artists not be interested in seeking approval or create art for demand. If the work is not good for the artist himself, it's not good for anyone else. He said, **"A true artist takes no notice whatsoever of the public. The public to him are non-existent."** In fact, Wilde argued it should be the audience who adapt rather than the artist: **"The artist should never try to be popular. Rather the public should be more artistic"**.

Oscar Wilde commented on the political conditions needed for art to thrive; rules or authority. He said, **"People sometimes inquire what form of government is most suitable for an artist to live under. To this question there is only one answer. The form of government that is most suitable to the artist is no government at all. Authority over him and his art is ridiculous."**

He disagreed with the idea that art need to be virtuous or that an artist needs to have a moral stance. **"No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style"**. He believed the success of an artist was due to him not relying on his craft as source of earnings. He said, **' The best work in literature is always done by those who do not depend on it for their daily bread and the highest form of literature, Poetry brings no wealth to the singer"**.

Oscar Wilde assessed that, **"No great artist ever sees things as they really are. If he did, he would cease to be an artist"**. For Wilde, art is about illusion and imagination. He believed that the artist's ability to transcend reality and to create the sublime is what makes him great. The popular aim of art is to lie or tell of beautiful, untrue things.

For him art was about returning to nature for inspiration. Originality was key to art. **"In a very ugly and sensible age, the arts barrow, not from each other'**. He proposed that individualism offers the most fertile ground for the creation of art and cultivates the highest potential, stating: **"Art is the most intense mode of individualism that the world has known"**. He said, **" All art is immortal. For emotion for the sake of emotion is the aim of art, and emotion for the sake of actions is the aim of life"**.

Sq no. 04

Critic as an interpreter:

"Critic as an artist" by **Oscar Wilde** is an essay which discusses importance of a critic, his superiority over art and his role as an interpreter of an artistic work. **Oscar Wilde** put emphasis over the importance of critic by saying that a **critic occupies same position** to a work of art that he criticizes **as an artist** who recreates a world of form, color or passion in that art work. He gives the critic a higher position when he says that *"criticism is itself an art"*. He further remarks a critic as an interpreter who **adds mystery in a work of art**.

According to Wilde, a critic becomes an interpreter only when he explains and analyzes a work by adding mystery in it. A critic can produce mystery in art not only by **analyzing art as art itself** but also according to the **perspective of artist** in order to create various perspectives. A critic can also deepen mystery in art by **intensifying his own personality**. According to Wilde;

"It is only by intensifying his own personality that the critic can interpret the personality and work of others, and the more strongly this personality enters into the interpretation the more real interpretation becomes, the more satisfying, the more convincing, and the more true."

A critic acts as an interpreter when he analyzes the work by its **context, by covering multiple aspects of past and present** and by telling where the whole work stands in literary canon. Wilde rejects the people of specific viewpoint who do not consider history important for understanding of work of art. According to him, such people holds the narrow viewpoint believing that, ***"why should we read what is written about Shakespeare and Milton. We can read the plays and poems. That is enough."***

Oscar Wilde rejects this notion and put emphasis on context for a good interpretation. His disapprobation is reflected in following lines;

"And he who desires to understand Shakespeare truly must understand the relations in which Shakespeare stood to the Renaissance and the Reformation, to the age of Elizabeth and the age of James."

Moreover the critic must understand English language in its progress, its development at various ages and its influence over any work of art in order to

achieve convincing interpretation. He must know the level of supremacy of literature of Greek era to that of other ages.

Wilde further argues that while interpreting a work of art, a critic should not make it complicated to an extent that it becomes a source of anxiety for people. Rather, this art should become a source of adoration and inspiration for people. Wilde assures that a critic will be an interpreter when he ***will not treat Art as a riddling Sphinx but as a goddess whose mystery it must be his province to intensify.*** Wilde believes that for a true and convincing interpretation, a critic must intensify his own individualism.

Moreover, a critic is an interpreter who should not be the spokesman of writer. He should be independent and self-conscious in his interpretation and understanding of an artistic work.

Furthermore, Wilde discusses actors or performers as critics who interpret art. A performer performs an artistic work through a method interpreted by him and becomes the critic of that performance. A singer acts as a critic of music. Similarly an actor is a critic of drama because he shows the work of artist under new conditions akin only to himself. Wilde says, ***“There are as many Hamlet as there as melancholies.”*** This is because melancholy of Hamlet, is differently interpreted by different actors, Wilde calls this ***“interpretive criticism”***.

Sq no. 05

What are the functions of critical spirit?

Oscar Wild is known for his keen **epigrammatic** wit and drizzling skills in conversation but he was more than a brilliant and witty personality. In "**The critic as an artist**", a brisk pointed dialogue on the nature of, and relationship between the art and criticism, Wilde expands on his ideologies. Strong critical sensibility off Oscar Wild is reflected through the dialogue.

"Critical Spirit is what the author is getting at is the individual thought process that creates meaning". What we know of the world might be broken into three categories, **fact**, **experience** and **story**.

Fact is the measured detail of life. How old it is, how big it is, how it reacts chemically, that kind of thing. Experience is the raw sensation of the moment: emotions, smells, sounds, tastes, sights, awareness, feelings. It is how we know we are alive. And then there is Story, and this is how we are all poets. We take in data, we see events transpire, we feel emotions and

sensations, and then put that together into a narrative that makes sense to us.

In the dialogue, Gilbert's paeon to form immediately begs the question of form in the Wild's piece. Taking Wild on the terms of his own game, the dialogue impresses the absence of an authorial didactic voice, perhaps then allowing the ideas to kind of float more freely and independently.

It is suggested that the dialogue models how one acquires and maintains a critical spirit. The dialogue is skewed clearly in favour of Gilbert's ideas, Ernest's quick understanding and his capacity to quickly summarize what Gilbert has said and ability to ask productive questions make him an apt model.

The work is largely supervised by ego as thought processes select and omit and weigh the data according to our preferences and values.

"The imagination imitates, it is the Critical Spirit that create". We imagine and imitate what we like we suppress what we don't; we spin what comes out. These stories become part of the body of data that we use to create further meaning as well.

For everything there's a reason, a time to imitate, a time to create and a time to refrain from creating ego activities.

