

# Shakespeare in the Aesthetic Eyes of Oscar Wilde

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As two literary giants in English literary history, Oscar Wilde is so fascinated in Shakespeare as we can see not only their literary relationship, but also Shakespearean elements pervades in Oscar Wilde's critical works. Shakespearean plays, characters, and even sentences were used either as a kind of tool or as a target for Wilde's aesthetic ideology concerning the relationship on art and criticism, art and life, as well as art and morality. By sorting out the Shakespearean elements in Wilde's aesthetic ideology and analyzing its causes, we may further acquire the close relationship between Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde's aesthetic thought.

*Keywords:* Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, aesthetic ideology

Oscar Wilde was not only a poet, a dramatist, but also a characteristic literary critic. Interestingly, It is easy to find that Shakespeare's characters, imagery and sentences pervades in Wilde's works. Some critics may have realized the literary similarity and connection between them. However, as a literary critic, the aesthetic ideology of Wilde is complex, paradoxical, and ambiguous, still and all, he refereed to Shakespeare's plays, characters, sentences in most of his critical essays.

With the slogan "art for art's sake", the aesthetic ideology revolves around the topic of art, life, and criticism. As the "folk" hero or the "cult" hero of the Aesthetic movement (Abrams, 2012, p. 4) in Europe, Wilde to the greatest extent demonstrated the aesthetic artistic thought in his ideology and his life. Characteristically, Shakespearean elements played a vital role in this progress. Most of critics gave little attention to the role of Shakespearean elements in it. In this paper, we will try to classify Shakespeare's role in illustrating Oscar Wilde's aesthetic ideology of art and criticism, art and life, art and morality.

## Art and Criticism

In the process of human beings, art and criticism did not come into human world simultaneously, and the critics traditionally expressed their point of view based on the historical and cultural context of the artists and their works. As a result, from the beginning to the Victorian age, criticism was not rated as high as art in literary world, as Wilde depicted through Ernest's words in *The Critic as Artist*, "In the best days of art, there were no art-critics" (Wilde, 1969, p. 346). That is to say, art is more approved than critic by man of letters in literary history. However, as a paradoxical genius in the Victorian world, in this essay full of paradoxical ideology, Oscar Wilde by using the dialogue of two fictional characters dexterously illustrated his own view of the relationship on art and criticism. Even more deeply admired as a renowned writer, his aesthetic ideology on critic exerted a

profound influence on literary circle. That's why Oscar Wilde was often regarded as a forerunner of modern criticism.

To better interpret his argument, Oscar Wilde published two essays entitled *The Critic as Artist*. In this critical essays, Shakespeare's works, characters and sentences were continuously employed as a kind of tool to back up his viewpoint. Through the fictional character of Gilbert, Oscar Wilde put forward the critical point of view that "criticism is itself an art, criticism is both creative and independent from art" (Wilde, 1969, p. 364). To step further, Oscar Wilde would like to call criticism of a creation within a creation. In illustrating this doctrine, Gilbert cited a number of ancient great artist who created their well-know classical literary works by making use of myth, legend and ancient tales, critics also dealt with materials of not his own, but the works of the artists. Here, the characteristic of Shakespeare's writing was analogized with the nature of critic to expound Wilde's ideology that critic is itself an art and is the same as art which is a creative job.

What's more, in Wilde's eyes, criticism is superior to art, as Gilbert stated in the essay that "criticism demands infinitely more cultivation than creation does" (Wilde, 1969, p. 358), and "it is much more difficult to do a thing than to talk about it" (Wilde, 1969, p. 359). In later part of his essay, in supporting of this statement, we can find that Shakespearean examples were employed by him.

And he who desires to 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; he must be familiar with the history of the struggle for supremacy between the old classical forms and the new spirit of romance, between the school of Sidney, and Daniel, and Johnson, and the school of Marlowe and Marlowe's great son, he must know the materials that were at Shakespeare's disposal, and the method in which he used them, and the conditions of theatric presentation in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, their limitations and their opportunities for freedom, and the literary criticism of Shakespeare's day, its aim and modes and canons; ... in a word, he must be able to bind Elizabethan London to the Athens of Pericles, and to learn Shakespeare's true position in the history European drama and the drama of the world (Wilde, 1969, p. 373).

Here Oscar Wilde desired to illustrate his argument that criticism demands infinitely more cultivation and competence than creation does by taking example of getting a full understanding of Shakespeare. In another case, in illustrating his standpoint of the autonomy of literary criticism, Wilde expounded through his fictional characters that personality is the absolute core of criticism, and just as art springs from personality, so it is from personality comes right the interpretative criticism. For example, in acting Shakespeare's greatest drama *Hamlet*, different actors will show his own character. Here, Wilde cited the case of the play *Hamlet* and the major character in interpreting his own point of view.

In addition to these two direct critical essays on interpreting the aesthetic ideology of Oscar Wilde, he made every efforts to put his ideology into his writing practice, which in turn demonstrated his argument on the relationship of art and criticism. By investigating all the works of Oscar Wilde, *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* is a typical example to support this point, which is closely related to Shakespeare, specifically his sonnet sequence.

The dedicator of Shakespeare's sonnets has always been one of the focus of debate among Shakespearean critics. However, the majority of critics tried from the background of Elizabethan world and the text of the sonnet sequence to study the identity of the dedicator. A number of critics delivered several critical essays to expound their standpoints on the identity such as literary sponsor, friend, homosexual partner, etc. Most of them developed their ideas just by giving critical study. As for Oscar Wilde, even though as a critic in Victorian age, he expressed

his critical point of view on this topic by publishing a novelette. This form of novelette all the better elaborated Wilde's crucial ideology thought that criticism is itself an art.

In this critical novella, Oscar Wilde cast away the traditional means of researching into his argument by investigating the particular backgrounds and textual context, and created a piece of writing work in which he disagreed with most of existing viewpoint of the identity of the dedicator such as Earl of Pembroke or Earl of Southampton (Wilde, 1969, p. 157), but created a fictional character named "Willie Hughes", a wonderful boy-actor of great beauty in Shakespeare's company (Wilde, 1969, p. 161). By creating this piece of novella, Oscar Wilde dexterously demonstrated his critical argument on the relationship of art and criticism by taking use of Shakespeare's sonnets as a kind of raw material.

Based on the above statement, as a characteristic critic, Oscar Wilde thought out of the box to stress the independence of critic activity, and even elevate criticism to a higher level than art creation. In illustrating his rebellious critic ideology, he not only employed a large number of Shakespearean elements to elaborate his point of view, but also made a good example to put his aesthetic ideology into practice by writing a novella to express his critical viewpoint on Shakespeare's sonnets.

### **Art and Life**

As is known to us that art and life have been inextricably related since its birth. Their relationship with each other is also one of complicated issue in the development history of literary world. Aristotle's *Poetics* was traditionally regarded as the origination and criterion of literary criticism in Western literary world. In this epoch-marking theoretical work, Aristotle touched on the topic of life and art as he put forward his ideology of imitation, and included the concept of life in his object of imitation (Fergusson, 1961, p. 62), which laid a solid foundation for later theory of literary writing and criticism, including the Victorian age.

Marked as an unconventional flamboyant figure in Victorian England, Oscar Wilde vigorously upheld and carried forward the core principle of the Aestheticism School who advocated the slogan of "art for art's sake" and declared the autonomy characteristic of art. In contrary to Aristotle's critic ideology, Oscar Wilde and his fellows asserted the supremacy of art to life, and even cried out the proposition that life imitates art. In his critical essay *The Decay of Lying*, his aesthetic ideology of the relationship between art and life was illustrated through the conversation of Vivian and Cyril. In this essay, Wilde made full use of his knowledge on classical writers and philosophers to demonstrate his rebellious ideology on the correlations between art and life. Shakespeare's plays and his characters none the less were put to use by him.

In the conclusion part of this essay, It is clearly presented that the doctrines of Oscar Wilde's new aestheticism contains three principles. The first is that art never expresses anything but itself. The second is that all bad arts comes from return to life and nature, and elevating them into ideals. The third is that life imitates art far more than art imitates life.

In elaborating the first principle, Oscar Wilde criticized the writing style of Balzac and George Meredith who tried to do everything in their novel except to do a novelist's own duty. Here, he provided one of the character "Touchstone" in Shakespeare's play *As You Like It* for his criticizing tool. From here we can see that Oscar Wilde is so familiar with Shakespeare's drama and has an intimate knowledge of his character's trait.

For his second principle that bad art comes from return to life itself, Oscar Wilde employed Shakespeare as his criticizing target because he regarded Shakespeare's later plays as imperfect. In his eyes, due to life calling for his own voice and thus shattering the perfection of the form, the language in some passage in Shakespeare's later plays is uncouth, vulgar, exaggerated, fantastic, obscene even, Shakespeare is not by any means a flawless artist (Wilde, 1969, p. 302).

To better illustrate the third principle, which step further for his aesthetic ideology, Oscar Wilde presented abundant examples of artists such as Balzac, Thackeray and the cases caused by the influence of their stories in their works. Shakespeare's character of Hamlet was considered as the invention of the pessimism for the model of people's melancholy in the world. As a matter of fact, Oscar Wilde from time to time put his aesthetic ideology into practice by modeling his lifestyle on classical artists, among which Shakespeare is one of his option. One of the best evidence comes from Wilde's homosexual relationship with Alfred Douglas, which Wilde acknowledged that love that dare not speak out its name could be found in Shakespeare's sonnets (Ellmann, 1988, p. 463).

In defense of his trial on homosexual love, he cited Shakespeare's sonnets for himself, which to some extent demonstrate his life imitating Shakespeare's sonnets:

CARSON: The affection and love of the artist of Dorian Gray might lead an ordinary individual to believe that it might have a certain tendency?

WILDE: I have no knowledge of the views of ordinary individuals.

CARSON: Have you ever adored a young man madly?

WILDE: No, not madly. I prefer love—that is a higher form.

CARSON: Never mind about that. Let us keep down to the level we are at now.

WILDE: I have never given adoration to anybody except myself.

CARSON: I suppose you think that a very smart thing?

WILDE: Not at all.

CARSON: Then you have never had that feeling?

WILDE: No. The whole idea was borrowed from Shakespeare, I regret to say—yes, from Shakespeare's sonnets. (Ellmann, 1988, p. 449)

Thus, From the testimony on his trial, we can find that Shakespeare's art was imitated by Oscar Wilde in his own life, which demonstrated his aesthetic ideology by his own practice. As a matter of fact, Shakespeare's art not only provided the model for Oscar Wilde himself, but affected the whole Victorian society to some extent. One of the apparent fact was the Shakespearean cult during the Victorian age among people. In the Victorian era, the position of Shakespeare's works and its influence among the Victorian common people's life was even amounted as high as the Bible in western society, just as what Charles LaPort, a professor of Washington University, exposed in his book that Shakespeare served throughout the nineteenth century as an index of value and a shibboleth of cultural literacy akin to the Bible itself (LaPort, 2021, p. 10), and he further pointed out that Shakespeare thus provides the preeminent English example of how art can maintain a life of its own, of how it can speak truths of which its artist appears unconscious, an idea beautifully theorized by Oscar Wilde's alter ego Gilbert in *The Critic as Artist* (1891) (LaPort, 2021, p. 17). Therefore, Shakespeare's works was not only imitated by Oscar Wilde's personal life, but also the phenomenon of the idolatry of Shakespeare and his art in the Victorian age could also be interpreted as a kind of the doctrine of life imitates art, which is one of Oscar Wilde's dogma of aesthetic ideology.

Nature, to some extent, can be regarded as one part of life and thus included in Wilde's aesthetic ideology and then he further explained that nature, no less than life, is also an imitation of art. Actually, Nature was one of an important issue expounded in Wilde's critical essays, and his ideology of the natural phenomenon of fog in London was a classical example which was usually cited by critics to illustrate Wilde's ideology of "nature imitates art, and art is superior to nature". In his demonstration of this ideology, Oscar Wilde never forgot to take Shakespeare's example for his tool and testimony. In his essay *The Decay of Lying*, Wilde tactfully sneered at the ideology of "art reflects nature" displayed in Shakespeare's greatest tragedy *Hamlet*, which ideology was usually considered to be Shakespeare's artistic thought by some critics. However, Wilde interpreted this principle to be hackneyed and stereotyped passage by Vivian's words, and the purpose of Hamlet's unfortunate aphorism about art was to convince the bystanders of his absolute insanity in all art-matters (Wilde, 1969, p. 306).

Above all, just as a dandy who is always tend to astound people's attention in the Victorian society, he put forward his ideology upside down to traditional doctrines. In his ideology, life imitates art more than art imitates life, and art is superior to life and nature. To our concern and interests, in illustrating his anti-traditional viewpoint, Shakespearean elements were either used as a tool or as a target for his purpose.

### **Art and Morality**

Traditionally speaking, art and morality is concordance with each other from the beginning. To teach and to delight is one of the doctrines of art originating from the ancient Greek age, which is more dominating in the Victorian age as government and upper-class bourgeois desired to take use of literary for his political purpose.

However, with the emergence of the aestheticism group who developed a view of pure aesthetic experience consists of a "disinterested" contemplation of an object that please for its own sake, without reference to reality or to the external ends of utility or morality (Abrams, 2012, p. 4), the traditional doctrine was challenged, and the advocates for formal perfection and indifference of moral values in arts prevails among these artists.

Oscar Wilde as the epitome of this group, has a great concern in relation with art and morality in his aesthetic system. The topic of art and morality ran through almost all of his works. His basic declaration was put forward straightforwardly and repeatedly in his essay *The Critic as the Artist* that "All art is immoral", as the beautiful sterile the emotions that art excites in us are hateful in its eyes. Here the emotions wept away one's tears over the death of Cordelia and the daughter of Brabantio were a case in point for his argument in his illustration. We can see clearly that Shakespearean characters Cordelia and Desdemona were cited to display his viewpoint.

In one of his lectures titled "The English Renaissance", Wilde gave in publicity of his aesthetic viewpoint that any elements of morals or implied reference to a standard of good or evil in art is often a sign of a certain incompleteness of vision, often a note of discord in the harmony of an imaginative creation (Wilde, 1921, p. 267), that is to say, an imperfect work. Next he took Shakespeare's example once again, and explained that Shakespeare, as well as Dante and Sophocles are supreme masters of spiritual and intellectual vision as they are not limited by moral standard.

Another case in relation to morality is obvious in his essay *The Soul of Man under Socialism*. In supporting his argument that artist can express everything including immoral, unhealthy, exotic and so on, and should never be regraded as morbid by public, Wilde put up the example of Shakespeare's *King Lear* to explain that "to call an artist morbid because he deals with morbidity as his subject matter is as silly as if one called Shakespeare mad

because he wrote *King Lear*". Here, Wilde intended to interpret that the immorality of content or theme is not directly relevant with the greatness of the art or the artist.

His only autobiographical-like novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which is usually regarded as his experimental work for his aesthetic ideology. The conflict of art and morality aroused a great number of attention by critics and reviewers since its publication. It is firstly labeled as a novel of "immorality" by some critics. To defense it, Wilde added a preface to this novel in his revised version, which was often regarded as a kind of his critical ideology. The topic of morality to art is put forward directly in the preface. In his point of view, art expresses itself without concerning morality: "There is no such thing as a moral or an unmoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all", "The moral life of man forms part of subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium" (Wilde, 1969, p. 235 ). Interestingly enough, in this short preface full of interpretation of morality to arts, Wilde also included two sentences involving Shakespearean elements for illustration, that is, Caliban's face from *The Tempest*.

In addition to the frank statement of tenets of the aesthetic morality in the preface, the theme and contents presented in this novel also illustrated Oscar Wilde's aesthetic viewpoints on the conflicts of art and morality. What to make us concern, by reading closely on this experimental novel, Shakespearean elements suffused it throughout.

On the first layer, Shakespeare's plays and characters played an important role in the context of this novel. For instance, one of famous Shakespearean drama *Romeo and Juliet* was acted in this novel, and one of the role in the novel Sibyl Vane played many roles of Shakespeare's characters such as Juliet, Portia, Cordelia, etc. Throughout this novel, we are deeply impressed that Shakespeare's plays and characters spread here and there. On the other hand, the sources of the story in creating this novel were detected by several researchers that may come from Shakespeare's sonnets<sup>1</sup>, and the theme of male friendship and the image of a young lovely boy showed somewhat direct parallels between this novel and Shakespeare's sonnets. From this text connection, we may aware Shakespeare's importance in Wilde's writings, aesthetic ideology, and even his personal life.

Besides, in one letter writing to the editor of *The Scots Observer* on 9 July, 1970, Wilde gave a feedback to the criticism of his novel by pointing out that an artist has no ethical sympathies at all, and virtue and wickedness are to him simply what the colors on his palette are to the painter. For further interpretation, he put forward Shakespearean characters Iago and Imogen to say that Iago may be morally horrible and Imogen may be stainlessly pure, Shakespeare, as Keats said, had as much delight in creating the one as he had in creating the other (Holland, 2000, p. 439).

What stuck most among readers of this novel is the relationship of the theme of art, life and morality which entailed in the characters and the picture. Many critics have tried to explore Wilde's deep ideology of this topic as it is regarded a kind of autobiographical novel and Oscar Wilde himself once acknowledged in a private letter in 1894 that "It contains much of me in it, Basil Howard is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me:

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<sup>1</sup> The sources of this novel have been detected in great detail, including images, plots, characters, and particular passages, which includes Faust, Charles Maturin and Balzac, Poe and Henry James, Disraeli and Bulwer-Lytton, Hawthorne and Stevenson, Water Pater and J.A.Symonds, J.K.Huysmans and E.Heron-Allen. Horst Breuer. "Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray and Shakespeare's Sonnets." *English Language Notes*, vol. 44, no. 2, December, 2004, pp. 59-68. Another researcher published an article also discussing the the relationship of this novel and Shakespeare's sonnets. Kumiko Suda. "The Picture of Dorian Gray and Oscar Wilde as Critic of Shakespeare's Sonnets." *Doshisha Literature*, no.59-60, March, 2017, pp. 33-51.

Dorian what I would to be—in other ages perhaps (Holland, 2000, p. 585)”. Here we do not focus on the conflicts of his viewpoint on relationship of art and morality, but we can find that Shakespearean elements played an important role in his demonstration of his ideology in this novel.

### **The Reasons and Grounds**

Oscar Wilde’s great interest in Shakespeare could be attributed to personal as well as social reasons and grounds. First of all, the Victorian age carries on the literary tradition of the Romantic age which laid emphasis on the creativity and genius of the poet and elevated Shakespeare to a divined position as Shakespeare’s art does not stereo-typically conform to classical dogma but bears some romantic characteristic pursuit of creative ability, which happens to play up to the Victorian bourgeois’s spirit to get more free rights for their own profits. With the rise of scientific technology and transformation the position of social religious belief, the Victorians is eager to find a direction in social belief. Under such social atmosphere, Shakespearean worship was becoming more widespread that flowed to arts, religion, education and even ordinary social life. Shakespeare the figure was worshiped as a hero poet, a prophet, by Thomas Carlyle in his lectures, and even an English king, whom no time or chance, parliament or combination of parliaments can dethrone (Carlyle, 2013, p. 102). On the other hand, Shakespeare’s works was even celebrated a sacred text: a sort of secular English bible (LaPort, 2021, p. ix). That is to say, Shakespeare’s importance ranked as high as the Bible in Western society. One more remarkable feature of the nineteenth century literacy is that Shakespeare’s oeuvre also comes to enjoy the circulation and religious cachet that it does right alongside the Bible. The Victorian critics reflectively look to him for what Adrian Poole calls a “figure of supreme authority and the dream of triumphant near-divinity (LaPort, 2021, p. 5). Thus, the Victorian age could be regarded as the summit of Shakespearean worship in literary world, and Shakespeare’s poems, plays, and performance are well popular and easy to obtain for common people. In this Shakespearean idolatry age, Oscar Wilde’s art, ideology and even personal life could not be detached from this atmosphere. In effect, Wilde also showed a great admiration for Shakespeare and his arts which can be testified in his private letters from time to time to his friends or editors. For example, in one of his letters to the revered Matthew Russel SJ. on 15 or 16 June, 1877, Wilde was frank to acknowledge that “it is a noble privilege to count oneself of the same race as Keats or Shakespeare (Holland, 2000, p. 53)”. In another letter to his friend Frank Harris in 1898, Oscar Wilde straightforwardly communicated his enthusiasm in Shakespeare’s works and reviews, and pointed out clearly that it is a great era in Shakespearean criticism, and conveyed his ideology that “the first that one has looked in Shakespeare’s plays not for philosophy, but something far better and far more mysterious than philosophy. It is one of his aesthetic doctrines once writing in his *Intentions* that the more objective a work of art is in form, the more subjective it really in its matter (Holland, 2000, p. 1094)”. Thus we can see Oscar Wilde is well accordant with the trend of Shakespearean cult in the Victorian age.

On the other hand, Oscar Wilde’s personal interests in classical culture and literature as well as his profound knowledge in ancient writers and works could well explain his readiness in taking advantage of Shakespeare’s works, characters and sentences in his own thoughts and writings, and we may even aware that Shakespeare’s works might exerted a great influence in his writing and thoughts. In his school time, Oscar Wilde was good at classical knowledge and usually got scholarship in his examination. In one of his letters to his friend Reginald Harding, he showed a great confidence and proud of his exam on classic knowledge including Shakespeare. “I

was rather afraid of being put on in Catullus, but got a delightful exam from a delightful man—not on the books at all but on Aeschylus versus Shakespeare (Holland, 2000, p. 19)”. From some of his private letters and several biographical texts we are easy to find Oscar Wilde’s interest in Shakespeare and his plays, characters, and knowledge.

On account of above reasons and grounds in two aspects, Shakespearean elements were easy and ready to be taken advantage by Wilde in his own works and from time to time were taken advantage of supporting of his aesthetic ideology.

### Conclusion

Even though Oscar Wilde was not generally rated high as a Shakespeare critic in the four hundred years of Shakespearean criticism (Ghosal, 2015, p. 10), and he even did not have a high opinion on Shakespeare, as he stated in his essay straightforwardly that “Shakespeare is not by any means a flawless artist” (Wilde, 1969, p. 302), yet he was so steeped in Shakespeare that we are easy to find Shakespearean elements here and there in Oscar Wilde’s writings. In demonstrating his aesthetic ideology, Shakespeare’s plays, characters, sentences, and even the settings run through the process. By sorting out and analyzing it, we may not only further acquire the relationship between Oscar Wilde and Shakespeare, but also realize the importance of Shakespeare and his arts that played in Oscar Wilde’s aesthetic ideology.

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