016

All art is quite useless

LITERARY NOTEBOOK

An **aphorism** is a short clever saying that is intended to express a general truth, and an aphoristic style is a compact, condensed style of writing, which Oscar Wilde used extensively in his plays, in his novel and in his critical essays.

WARM UP

1. Focus on the title of the passage: 'All art is quite useless'. Do you agree with the idea that art does not have any specific aim in society? Find an example of a work of art/artist that either supports or contradicts Wilde's statement and give reasons for your choice.

This is one of the best examples of Wilde's aphoristic style. The excerpt you are going to read is taken from the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and contains Wilde's deep reflections on art, the role of the artist in the modern world and the function of the critic.

The artist is the creator of beautiful things. To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim. The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things.

The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography. Those who find ugly[1] meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault. Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope.

They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty.

There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all. [...]

1 ugly: orribili

The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium. No artist desires to prove anything. Even things that are true can be proved. No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style. No artist is ever morbid[2]. The artist can express everything. Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art. Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art. From the point of view of form, the type of all the arts is the art of the musician. From the point of view of feeling, the actor's craft is the type. All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril[3]. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors. Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital. When critics disagree, the artist is in accord with himself. We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely.

All art is quite useless.

2 morbid: morboso
3 at their peril: a loro rischio e pericolo

COMPREHENSION

2. Read the text and complete the following sentences using words from the text. According to Wilde:

1 A real artist creates only ..... things.
2 Critics' writings are just a form of ..... .
3 Books are never ..... .
4 Writers use an ..... medium, but good writers use it in a ..... way.
5 Art can express ..... and has no limits.
6 Art is basically ..... .

ANALYSIS

3. Consider the tone of the passage. How would you define it? Choose the correct option.

a simple
b colloquial
c witty/provoking
d philosophical

4. What kind of sentences does Wilde use in this passage? Choose the correct option.

a Mainly long and complex sentences.
b Compact and condensed sentences.
c Sentences that contain general truths.

INTERPRETATION

5. Find evidence in the text to support the following statements.

1 The artist is like God because he/she has the power to create.
2 The critic gets a personal impression of the work of art and translates it into a new form.
3 People who can appreciate the beauty of art are special and unique.
4 Artists have unlimited power to express everything.
5 Real works of art generate contrasting opinions.

6. Which sentence from exercise 5 states that art is autonomous from morality?

7. Does Wilde agree with the Victorian idea that a work of art should teach something? Why/Why not?

a No, because the essence of art is not its utility or didactic aim.
b Yes, because the essence of art is its utility or didactic aim.

8. What is the essence of art according to Wilde?

9. Wilde believes that art is both 'surface' and 'symbol'.

1 Which of these two terms suggests the idea that art is always about form?
2 Why do you think Wilde writes that 'those who read the symbol do so at their peril'? What can be dangerous about reading a 'symbol'?

10. In the light of what you read about *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, do you think the statement 'There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book' may have an autobiographical meaning for Wilde? Why/Why not?

11. What shouldn't readers and critics confuse, according to Wilde? Choose the correct option.

a The artist and his subject matter.
b The artist and the medium he uses.