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A Comparative Analysis of Ruskin's and Wilde's Writings on Art

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Kandidat: Irena Curić

Mentor: dr.sc. Tatjana Jukić Gregurić, red. prof.

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Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
1.1. Historical Context.....	3
1.2. Young Ruskin and the Gothic Revival.....	4
2. Ruskin's Greatest Works.....	6
2.1. Modern Painters.....	6
2.2. The Seven Lamps of Architecture.....	10
2.3. The Stones of Venice.....	14
2.4. Ruskin's Later Works.....	18
3. Walter Pater and the Amorality of Art.....	19
4. Oscar Wilde.....	22
4.1. Wilde's Decadence.....	22
4.2. Wilde's Essays.....	25
5. Conclusion – John Ruskin and Oscar Wilde: Two Pillars of the 19th Century Aesthetic Thought.....	31
6. Works Cited.....	35

1. Introduction

This paper gives a comparative analysis of writings on art by two of the most prominent 19th century thinkers and art critics – John Ruskin and Oscar Wilde. The first part presents John Ruskin's most important works and gives a detailed analysis of his views on art and aesthetic philosophy. The paper continues with a brief mention of Walter Pater, his significance and a considerable influence he had on Oscar Wilde as his mentor and professor. It thereafter moves on to analyse Wilde's works, focusing mostly on his essays, which arguably give the reader the best insight into Wilde's views on art and aesthetics. At the same time these essays provide an opportunity to compare his work with that of John Ruskin and to indicate certain differences, but also numerous similarities existing between the two authors. The paper concludes with the explanation of the significance of both Ruskin and Wilde in the context of their influence on the future development of art scene.

1.1. Historical Context

The century when John Ruskin appeared on the intellectual scene of Great Britain was an extremely eventful period in British history. In order to fully understand the significance of his writings, it is important to analyse the historical context of his life and work. He was not only an aesthetic thinker, but also an intellectual, whose works always dealt with society as a whole. His views on beauty reflected his views on the age and the values of his generation.

He was born in 1819 when England was just beginning to absorb the consequences of the first industrial revolution. Big technical advancements were accompanied by new philosophical ideas evoked by the age of Enlightenment and the revolutions in America and France. There was an omnipresent change of political climate.

However, thanks to the still existing power of the monarchy, old ideas were still blossoming in England. Queen Victoria, who ruled the Empire for most of the century, was born the same year as Ruskin and was crowned in 1837. The whole era was named after her, reflecting the influence of the Crown.

1.2. Young Ruskin and The Gothic Revival

When Victoria came to the throne, the art scene in Britain was dominated by the style called the Gothic Revival. Believed by Kenneth Clark to be “the one purely English movement,” it is nowadays considered to be more of a negative than of a positive phenomenon (7-8). It was a manifestation of the early romantic sentiment which cared very little for the exact imitation of the Gothic roots, but was in turn their loose interpretation, the way they were seen by the late 18th and early 19th century poets and artists. As Clark explains, “in the history of taste true understanding of an unfamiliar style is very often preceded by a period of ill-formed and uncritical enthusiasm” (56). Like all historical styles, the Gothic Revival needed time to develop in order to reach its maturity, which it arguably attained in theoretical works rather than in practice.

When young Ruskin started writing about art, his first comments on the contemporary art scene were just as negative. However, there are indications that he in fact had much in common with other contemporary thinkers.

The biggest name in the theory of the Gothic Revival was the famous architect Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, the man who gave the Movement “the seriousness it needed” (Murray, 229). Most famous for rebuilding the Houses of Parliament after the fire, he considered Gothic style to be the true English style which represented the Christian values of its people. Murray explains how this was

partly offset by the connexion between the Gothic style and patriotism which was often made by the partisans, for the historical and archaeological researches of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were held to prove that Gothic was really the national English style. (230)

It was in 1837 that Pugin read an interesting article on architecture, published in the *Architectural Magazine* and in the *Builder*. The article was signed by Kata Phusin, which turned out to be Ruskin's early pen name (Clark, 192). This article already shows some of Ruskin's fundamental principles and views on architecture which he will later develop in his influential essay *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. His tone suggests high criticism of contemporary trends, explaining that "it cannot be expected that we should have any Michael Angelo Buonarottis," due to lack of care in choice of decoration, material or attention to details in architecture (Ruskin, "The Poetry of Architecture" 8). He continues to criticize the inconsistency of contemporary builders to follow stylistic rules and gives examples that according to him characterize bad architecture: "pinnacles without height, windows without light, columns with nothing to sustain, and buttresses with nothing to support" (8). He feels that the neglect of architectural elements' functional side shows utter neglect for "all unity of feeling". This line shows Ruskin's belief that all these rules for architecture exist in order to evoke certain sentiments in people. Although he supports his arguments with rational thoughts about functional elements, he never ignores the feeling provoked by an architectural work. Clark mentions that Ruskin became the part of the Gothic Revival for the simple reason that he "found it [the Gothic style] beautiful" (212). Besides, he studied the Gothic period too closely to stay within the limits of the national movement. There were too many disagreements with Gothic revivalists, such as over the question of religion, over the basic meaning of architecture for society, or what is considered to be good taste. For Clark, "Ruskin is not the man who made the Gothic Revival; he is the man who destroyed it," which he explains by stating that "Ruskin

was opposed to the religious side and damaged the patriotic by his introduction of Italian Gothic”.

2. Ruskin's greatest works

2.1. Modern Painters

The first work that gained Ruskin wider recognition was his Volume I of the *Modern Painters*, published in 1843. Its full name was “Modern Painters: their superiority in the Art of Landscape Painting to all Ancient Masters proved by Examples of True, the Beautiful, and the Intellectual, from the Works of Modern Artists, especially from those of J. M. W. Turner, Esq., R. A.” (i).

In all of his works Ruskin was interested in describing art through certain principles, that way declaring art to be in close connection to morality. He originally explained this idea in detail in the first volume of the *Modern Painters*, where the whole first half deals with his philosophical ideas of what he considers to be beauty and good taste. By meticulously analysing concept by concept, he finds an ultimate definition of what constitutes good art:

But I say that the art is greatest, which conveys to the mind of the spectator, by any means whatsoever, the greatest number of the greatest ideas, and I call an idea great in proportion as it is received by a higher faculty of the mind, and as it more fully occupies, and in occupying, exercises and exalts, the faculty by which it is received.

(17)

Ruskin believes that different types of artwork have different functions. Some are just meant to be beautiful, some are meant to teach, some to make us think or to remind us of God's presence. However, he states that the best art is the one which can sum up the biggest number

of these functions at once. Therefore, beauty for Ruskin has various degrees and levels. He says: “Any material object which can give us pleasure in the simple contemplation of its outward qualities without any direct and definite exertion of the intellect, I call in some way, or in some degree, beautiful” (18). It is up to a person to evaluate what they see and, in order to do that, they have a sense of judgment and taste. Judgement is “a general term, expressing definite action of the intellect, and applicable to every kind of subject which can be submitted by it,” while “perfect taste is the faculty of receiving the greatest possible pleasure from those material sources which are attractive to our moral nature in its purity and perfection” (19). Consequently, while people have judgement to intellectually evaluate whatever they come across, it is taste, the moral judgment, which helps us decide what is beautiful. Here Ruskin mentions another important term – sublimity. The mysticism of the sublime is the feeling which not only connects us to the art world and helps us understand it but also reminds us of our mortality.

Sublimity is, therefore, only another word for the effect of greatness upon the feelings. Greatness of matter, space, power, virtue, or beauty, are thus all sublime; and there is perhaps no desirable quality of a work of art, which in its perfection is not, in some way or degree, sublime. (21)

After explaining the basic ideas of what constitutes good art and taste, Ruskin continues to describe them in greater detail by using examples of different contemporary artists. In this part he analyses various subjects used by painters and draws conclusions on what should be painted and how. Most of this is written in a very scholarly, almost scientific manner, where it is very obvious that Ruskin prefers naturalist and realist approach and cares deeply about paying close attention to nature. It feels as though a painter should be a scientist, as much as an artist, in order to appeal to Ruskin. Ruskin’s obsession with precision in depictions of nature was recognized in Denis E. Cosgrove’s essay, where he says that “Ruskin directed much of his

criticism of landscape painters at their inaccurate representation of forms” (Cosgrove, 12). There is one painter, however, who agrees with Ruskin more than others and whom he mentions on multiple occasions – that painter being William Turner. When introducing the rules for painting the skies, he says that “one alone has taken notice of the neglected upper sky” (Ruskin, *Modern Painters* 44) and when talking about rock drawing he states: “Turner is as much of a geologist as he is a painter” (58). In Ruskin’s opinion, “Turner is the only painter who had ever represented the surface of calm or the force of agitated water” (71) and finally concludes that: “J. M. W. Turner is the only man who has ever given an entire transcript of the whole system of nature, and is, in this point of view, the only perfect landscape painter whom the world has ever seen” (92).

The first volume of *Modern Painters* presents an ideological foundation for all Ruskin’s further work on painting and art in general. In the second volume he expands on these ideas by completely denying the sensual side of art, calling the impressions of beauty “neither sensual nor intellectual, but moral” (93). His focus on nature as the source of all artistic ideas is closely connected to this moralistic standpoint as he very well explains in the following paragraph:

Every leaf and stalk is seen to have a function, to be constantly exercising that function, and as it seems *solely* for the good and enjoyment of the plant ... Those forms which appear to be necessary to its health, the symmetry of its leaflets, the smoothness of its stalks, the vivid green of its shoots, are looked upon by us as signs of the plant's own happiness and perfection; they are useless to us, except as they give us pleasure in our sympathizing with that of the plant, and if we see a leaf withered or shrunk or worm-eaten, we say it is ugly, and feel it to be most painful, not because it hurts *us*, but because it seems to hurt the plant, and conveys to us an idea of pain and disease and failure of life in *it*. (113)

Any artistic decision inspired by nature makes the art truly beautiful. Ruskin's love of realism derives from the fact that he studies art in the way he studies natural life, as he believes that true beauty lies only in its imitation. Use of curvature and effects of gradation are some of the examples which are mentioned. He expands on the subject of truth and beauty in the third volume, where he criticises the idealization in art, because he finds it to be caused by people's inability to accept things as they are. He adds new examples of artists with good views on nature, such as Walter Scott, Dante and Homer, this time concentrating on the written word and its relationship with the poetical truth while explaining that "... painting and speaking are methods of expression. Poetry is the employment of either for the noblest purposes" (146).

In the fourth volume he again deals with some general artistic principles, while in the fifth volume he concludes the whole work describing real contemporary examples. Apart from his adoration of Turner, whom he now compares with Giorgione, he also mentions another group of his contemporaries – the Pre-Raphaelites.

The Pre-Raphaelites were the English answer to the emerging primitivist sentiment born a few years earlier in Germany. These revivalist German painters called themselves Nazarenes "and their followers sought to subordinate the technical and pictorial means of art to didactic, moral and religious ends" (Cooper, 407). However, the Pre-Raphaelites were met with nothing but criticism in their formative years. Cooper tells how they "were attacked as imitators of the defects of the early masters" and that the public saw them as "a band of revolutionaries, defiant of the most sacred name in art and conspiring the overthrow of all the advances made since Raphael" (413). For Ruskin, they were the modern saviours who "began to lead our wandering artists into the eternal paths of all great Art" (300). At the time when the Pre-Raphaelites were struggling with bad reviews, as Elizabeth Prettejohn describes, Ruskin's "support was likely to cause attention, and he took up the Pre-Raphaelite cause with zeal" (58). He

effectively demolished the predominant kind of objection to the P.R.B., the accusation that it was retrogressive or backward-looking. It shifted the debate into a wholly new area, one that had not previously figured in the press controversies: the question of truth-to-nature. (58)

Prettejohn explains Ruskin's crucial role in the theoretical shift from the traditional view of landscape painting as something that "was not considered to need the intellectual justification of a theory, since it seemed devoted primarily to pleasing the eye," to what she calls "theoretical rigor as well as moral and social import on a par with that traditionally attributed to figure painting alone" (174-175).

2.2. The Seven Lamps of Architecture

When Augustus Pugin was asked to defend his choice of style, he defended it "on the grounds that it was 'not a style, but a principle,'" the statement which "involved the claim that Gothic was 'true' because it was the result of an honest use of materials in which structure was exposed and function thereby demonstrated" (qtd. in Watkin, 468). He also believed that "the late Gothic society outshined the contemporary industrial world in its humaneness and faith" (Kostof, 589).

Like his predecessor, Ruskin also analysed all artistic manifestations through moral principles and natural laws, and his clearest manifesto of these ideas was his work *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, an essay written as a handbook for architects, builders and art lovers interested in architecture, first published in 1849.

In the introduction he very confidently warns the reader about the importance of his work, believing it was necessary to write a manual for "the first of the arts" with the list of "not only safeguards against every form of error, but sources of every measure of success" (Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps* 6).

Ruskin sees architecture as an art with distinct purpose, which is “that chief of all purposes, the pleasing of God” (8). When building and creating architecture, one always has to have in mind that they are leaving something bigger than their own existence as a legacy for future generations. “The Lamp of Sacrifice”, first of the lamps, explains the need for “self-denial” (18) and “the desire to honour or please some one else by the costliness of the sacrifice” (19).

The second lamp is “The Lamp of Truth”. Much like in painting, Ruskin insists on truth in architectural work. He feels that the English admit “more of pretence, concealment, and deceit, than any other of this or of past time” (61). As main architectural deceits, he sees the deceit in the mode of structure, falsely represented material and the use of cast or machine-made ornaments, stating that “building will generally be the noblest, which to an intelligent eye discovers the great secrets of its structure” (63). For that reason, he believes that Gothic building is the most honest because it almost completely reveals its structure to the viewer. Deceit starts in the late Gothic period, when structural elements are used for decoration and not for need. Pugin saw the same problem in English late Gothic, calling it “a great departure from the severe and consistent principles”. He mentions Henry the Seventh’s Chapel at Westminster which, although “justly considered one of the most wonderful examples of ingenious construction and elaborate fan groining in the world” in Pugin’s opinion “exhibits the commencement of the bad taste” and its stone pendants on the ceiling are “certainly extravagances” (7).

Ruskin is not against decoration; in the first chapter he explains that the use of decoration is what separates plain building from architecture. However, ornament should only be used where the viewer can see it and according to two principles: “the abstract beauty of its forms” and “the sense of human labour and care spent upon it” (95).

When explaining “The Lamp of Power”, Ruskin reads symbolical power in the choice of shapes used in architecture. He analyses different meanings in the use of square and circle or in the use of elongation. Man has a choice to use any of these elements, depending on the focus of his work, but his abilities to compose and invent are “the highest elements of Power in architecture” (180). He continues to talk of these abilities in the next chapter, where he describes the laws of beauty in architecture. While equal elements should be in symmetry, the unequal elements are the ones that are challenging to compose. There should be at least three of those to create certain proportions. Man’s need to compose different shapes is and should be combined with his constant need to imitate nature. Through that duality, Ruskin describes progress in art. All art starts with “the abstraction of imitated form,” but as one improves his craft, he imitates the nature better and completes the form with less abstraction (238). Nevertheless, imitation can become dangerous when it reaches its full completion and at this point the “decline” of art usually begins. What he seeks is a kind of balance between the finished and the unfinished. In the chapter about “The Lamp of Life” he even enlists a couple of examples of what he finds to be “a wonderful proof of the fearlessness of a living architecture”. He respects certain mistakes in the measurements of the buildings because they remind him of the small imperfections in natural forms:

Do not let it be supposed that I imagine the Byzantine workmen to have had these various principles in their minds as they built. I believe they built altogether from feeling, and that it was because they did so, that there is this marvellous life, changefulness, and subtlety running through their every arrangement; and that we reason upon the lovely building as we should upon some fair growth of the trees of the earth, that know not their own beauty. (302)

This brings us to another important issue Ruskin cares deeply about and that is the morality of the working process. He does not see the mistakes in building as a great sin because

he has great empathy for the authors of that architecture. “I believe the right question to ask, respecting all ornament, is simply this: Was it done with enjoyment,” says Ruskin, thus concluding the chapter about “The Lamp of Life” (316).

Ruskin’s discourse on architecture as a living entity continues with the chapter on “The Lamp of Memory”. There is no better way to conquer “the forgetfulness of men” (324) than with art of architecture. Architecture is the constant reminder of the history of mankind, because it is a piece of history that is a part of our everyday lives. And for these reasons, mankind has a duty towards architecture: “the first, to render the architecture of the day historical; and, the second, to preserve, as the most precious of inheritances, that of past ages” (325). The preservation of architectural sights is one of the key elements of Ruskin’s legacy. This idea goes hand in hand with that of sublime. Ruskin sees something eternally beautiful in the element of decay. The idea of “sublimity” and “the subordinate or parasitical position of that sublimity” are the key elements of picturesqueness (344). That is why, according to Ruskin, it is of uttermost importance to preserve the ruins. Because of their decaying looks, they possess more picturesque quality. Ruskin explains that through their closer connection to nature they appeal to the viewer more:

it [the picturesque] consists in the mere sublimity of the rents, or fractures, or stains, or vegetation, which assimilate the architecture with the work of Nature, and bestow upon it those circumstances of colour and form which are universally beloved by the eye of man. So far as this is done, to the extinction of the true characters of the architecture, it is picturesque, and the artist who looks to the stem of the ivy instead of the shaft of the pillar, is carrying out in more daring freedom the debased sculptor's choice of the hair instead of the countenance. (351)

Precisely for these qualities that buildings acquire after a certain period of time, Ruskin is strongly opposed to restoration, a practice which gained particular popularity in the middle of the 19th century. It was introduced by Eugène Viollet-Le-Duc, French architect responsible for the restoration of some of the most famous French monuments e.g. Notre-Dame Cathedral, Saint Chapelle and medieval city of Carcassonne. He explains his idea of restoration in *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XI au XVI siècle* as a process of re-establishing a building in a complete state which may never have actually existed at any given moment (“qui peut n'avoir jamais existé à un moment donné” 14). On the other hand, what Ruskin proposes is to take care of the old buildings so that there is no need to restore them. Restoration is deceitful and the need for it equals the need for destruction, in which case he finds it more honest to destroy the building than to create a lie. He believes people have no right to touch buildings, because they do not belong to them, but are a part of history, monuments of memory. Through honouring them, we are honouring the people who erected them, thus preserving them for future generations.

This idea of architecture being bigger than people using it is additionally described in the last chapter entitled “The Lamp of Obedience”, where Ruskin deals with political significance of architecture. The most important idea behind the whole work is precisely the thought that architecture is a kind of art created by the people for the people. His moralistic view suggests that its function in everyday life makes it relevant and worthy of certain sacrifices. He treats architecture as a living thing which demands proper use and he, John Ruskin, has created an instruction manual for this purpose.

2.3. The Stones of Venice

The Stones of Venice was the key piece in Ruskin's writings on art which positioned him as the leader of the different kind of Gothic Revival. As much as he admired Gothic art,

this work deals entirely with Italian examples and therefore breaks the myth of Gothic Revival being an exclusively English style.

For Ruskin, Venice represents the centre of the world where three currents of different cultural influences intersect – those of Romans, Lombards and Arabs. It once was the greatest city on Earth. However, its downfall started in 1418 with “the death of Carlo Zeno” (Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, 1: 87). The date coincides with the appearance of the new style (Renaissance) which Ruskin sees as the “loss of truth and vitality in existing architecture all over the world” (112). He continues to name certain artists who, in his opinion, led this degradation, but these names, such as Giulio Romano or Palladio, are today considered to belong to another stylistic movement – Mannerism, which appeared in the 16th century.

Ruskin constantly evaluates certain movements and artists because he thinks that there is a law which divides good art from bad. That law is universal and has nothing to do with style, period or origin, “it must be easily applicable to all possible architectural inventions of human mind” (126).

In the beginning of the work, he deals more with history and general principles, but after an in-depth analysis of Venetian history, he proceeds to describe the most important city monuments. He starts with St. Mark’s, which causes quite opposing feelings in Ruskin. There are parts of St. Mark’s that arrest the eye and affect feelings (162), but these parts are all from the Byzantine period. Some parts are of a later date and Ruskin does not want to deal with those because they may cause him distress. He does admire the practice of “inserting older fragments in modern buildings” though, for he finds “they owed to that practice a great part of the splendour of their city” (182). He feels that colour is “one of the essential signs of life in a school of art” and one more reason Renaissance killed art is “that they despised colour” (198).

Here he steps away from his idea in *The Seven Lamps* where he claims that the “true colours of architecture are those of natural stone” (Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps* 93).

In his description of The Ducal Palace he explains his views on restoration through the story about the fire which damaged the palace in the 16th century. Discussing the future of the damaged building, there were two possible outcomes. Ruskin was happy that the Great Council voted in favour of repairing and preserving the old building rather than pulling it down and executing new designs as proposed by some other architects, “especially Palladio” (*The Stones of Venice*, 1: 264). He feels the same about the restoration of paintings calling the process of painting over a “total destruction” (329).

His negative views on the Renaissance period are fully described in the third volume of *The Stones of Venice*. If Gothic art was the pinnacle of art history, then the early Renaissance presented the first step in its corruption. The Central or Roman Renaissance is the “perfectly formed style” (Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, 2:9), although he later calls it “the true antagonist of the Gothic school” (41), while Grottesque Renaissance is “the corruption of the Renaissance itself” (9). His biggest issue with the Renaissance is its “requirement of universal perfection” (10) which caused art to lose any connection with people. “The lower workman secured method and finish, and lost, in exchange for them, his soul.” (14) The architecture of the 16th century lost the previous level of quality because it treated the workmen as inferior. Cosgrove explains this well when he says: “The superiority claimed by Ruskin for medieval art over Classical and Renaissance art resulted precisely from this argument. Gothic art and architecture followed those pure lines and forms because the free builder of the Age of Faith humbly recognized his duty to follow nature and God” (16). Ruskin goes as far as to compare Renaissance architecture to the worst characteristics of aristocracy in the idea that the ordinary man cannot relate to it. In its need to reach that scientific and aesthetic perfection, the Renaissance completely lost sense that art and science are two different concepts, “distinguished by the nature of their

actions; the one as knowing, the other as changing, producing, or creating” (44). Ruskin claims that knowledge corrupts the simple man, who can no longer produce art with innocence and originality, its effect being to “deaden the force of the imagination and the original energy of the whole man” (52). However, it is not knowledge as such that he takes issue with, but the pride that people feel for possessing it. Ruskin does not see knowledge as a privilege, but as a heritage. It is something that someone else has acquired and we are simply receiving it and passing it on to the next generation.

Ruskin’s descriptions of Venice end on a rather sad note. He is truly disappointed with events that followed “the death of the Doge Tomaso Mocenigo in 1423” and does not hold back when criticizing the Grottesque Renaissance (the period we today consider Mannerism, but also partly Baroque) and any monument in Venice produced thereafter (140).

He is far more excited about the painting. His favourite Venetian painter Tintoret fascinates Ruskin so much that in many entries in *The Venetian* index (last part of the book – detailed descriptions of all Venetian sights worth visiting) he provides more descriptions of the paintings in the building’s interior than of the buildings themselves. He calls Tintoret “the greatest man whom that nation [Venice] produced” (260) and more complex than other great artists such as Bellini or Giorgione. However, he does not have a problem in comparing him with his favourite contemporary artists like Turner, because “exactly like Turner, we find him recording every effect which Nature herself displays” (257).

The small part of the descriptions dedicated to the paintings and buildings that Ruskin admires cannot distract us from the fact that his views on art in the context of Venice are quite pessimistic. Throughout the whole work he sees Venice as a dead, ruined city, whose once glorious past was shattered by centuries of neglect and bad political decisions, described particularly well in the passage:

It is as needless, as it is painful, to trace the steps of her final ruin. That ancient curse was upon her, the curse of the cities of the plain “Pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness.” By the inner burning of her own passions, as fatal as the fiery reign of Gomorrah, she was consumed from her place among the nations; and her ashes are choking the channels of the dead, salt sea. (141)

David Watkin sees Ruskin's descriptions of Venice as the proof of “grandeur and poetry of his prose” and adds that “it may not be too much of an exaggeration to say that he is the most captivating writer on architecture of all time” (666).

2.4. Ruskin's Later Works

In his later days, Ruskin dedicated himself more to writing about society and political issues of the day. As Chancey B. Tinker described, he turned from “reforming art to reforming society” (xii). After becoming a well-known scholar, he toured accross the country and gave many lectures whose transcripts have been preserved. The most important published testimony of his lectures is *Two Paths: Lectures on Art, and its application to decoration and manufacture delivered in 1858-9*. In these lectures Ruskin very clearly positions himself towards the Gothic Revival and the historicist neo-styles by saying they

might be supposed by the public more or less to embody the principles of those styles, but which embody not one of them, nor any shadow or fragment of them; but merely serve to caricature the noble buildings of past ages, and to bring their form into dishonour by leaving out their soul. (*Two Paths* 1)

He prefers original schools and names three historical art schools which he finds to deliver truth in art: Athenian, Florentine and Venetian. The Athenians best carry out the “truth of form,” the Florentines “the truth of mental expression,” while the Venetians are the best in showing “the truth of colour and light” (6). When talking about Gothic art he repeats its most

important characteristics and these are that “it is an art for the people: it is not an art for churches or sanctuaries; it is an art for houses and homes: it is not an art for England only, but an art for the world: above all, it is not an art of form and tradition only, but an art of vital practice and perpetual renewal” (9). He basically delivers a conclusion to his whole previous work by recapitulating all of his main theses, but this time his ideas were received with a widespread acclaim and attention that had not been possible before. The political and intellectual climate in England had considerably changed and thinkers like Thomas Carlyle helped Ruskin seem less controversial and ground-breaking. According to Tinker, “Carlyle described *The Stones of Venice* as a sermon in stones” (qtd. in Tinker xii).

However, there is a subject which is a bit more developed in his later works and lectures – the topic of manufacturing and the destruction of the hierarchy between the fine arts and the applied arts. Although these ideas are not necessarily new to Ruskin and represent a logical continuity of his previous works, he now had a special motive to talk about this subject. In 1870s he became more and more concerned with worker’s rights and he founded the Guild of St. George. It was inspired by the medieval guilds and its aim was to produce beautiful things in small numbers while creating a community of satisfied workers. The Guild still exists today as an evident proof that Ruskin’s ideas are still present and as relevant as ever.

3. Walter Pater and the amorality of art

It is evident from his work that Ruskin was “a very apostle of in consequence” (*Modern Painters* iii). As much as he finds morals to be the main tool for recognizing beauty, he never fully ignores the sentimental side of art. He never fails to mention the effect art has on the senses. Nevertheless, in spite of claiming that art should be created for the people, he is highly critical of the public and their inability to recognize what is good. Therefore, when he talks

about the quality in art being recognized over the years, he explains that “it is not because the average intellect and feeling of the majority of the public are competent in any way to distinguish what is really excellent, but because all erroneous opinion is inconsistent, and all ungrounded opinion transitory” (9). The problem with Ruskin’s highly moralising opinions is that he gets easily caught in hypocrisy and jumps to different conclusions at different points of his literary work.

By the 1870s, Ruskin was a famous scholar and his ideas were finally gaining wide and long awaited appreciation, when a new wave of aesthetic thought appeared and started a serious opposition to his moralistic school of art criticism. This new school, led by an equally famous scholar Walter Pater, addressed the issue of morality in a different way by proclaiming that art and morals are in no way connected. Pater’s influential work *The Renaissance, The Studies in Art and Poetry* claimed that Gothic art was in no way superior to the later movements. Young Pater frequently listened to Ruskin’s lectures and found it unfair that the Renaissance period was unnecessarily demonised.

Pater thought that the Renaissance was simply a continuity of Gothic ideas, combining Christian and Pagan influences in the best possible way. He wrote that the appearance of the Renaissance spirit can be traced to the late 12th and early 13th century France where the notions of romantic love and chivalry represented a new, more liberal outlook on life, which Pater feels is the true significance of the Renaissance period. Pater claimed that the French medieval poet “Abelard, the great clerk and the great lover, connects the expression of this liberty of heart with the free play of human intelligence around all subjects presented to it, with the liberty of the intellect, as that age understood it” (Pater, 35).

Unlike Ruskin, whose works dealt with rules and principles, Pater’s Renaissance was a manifesto of freethinking, a hymn to the liberation of the mind and of the senses. This is due to

a pagan element, described in detail by Heine as the reconciliation between Greek Gods and Christian God, which grew stronger in the Renaissance after centuries of hiding among people, for the triumph of Christianity in the 3rd century led the ancient Gods to exile (Pater, 55). Pater is strongly opposed to the strict censorship of any artistic movement or intellectual belief. He finds that

the essence of humanism is that belief of which he seems never to have doubted, that nothing which has ever interested living men and women can wholly lose its vitality—no language they have spoken, nor oracle beside which they have hushed their voices, no dream which has once been entertained by actual human minds, nothing about which they have ever been passionate, or expended time and zeal. (68)

Pater sees the highest point of that humanism in the mysticism of the early Renaissance, specifically in the Florentine art and the philosophical works of people like Pico della Mirandola or Marsilio Ficino who were active during the reign of Lorenzo de Medici. Their interest in Platonism, in the ideas of micro- and macrocosm, but also in “Jewish rituals” and the studies of the “later Greek mythologists” (63) created an incredibly fertile ground for the development of the arts. According to Pater, the best artist of that period is Sandro Botticelli about whom he wonders: “What is the peculiar sensation, what is the peculiar quality of pleasure, which his work has the property of exciting in us“ (69), enlisting that way the qualities he himself finds crucial in an artwork.

His vision of art as the fulfilment of the senses especially comes forward in the definition provided within the essay on Giorgione, where he states that “art constantly aspires towards the conditions of music” (129) in a sense that its content should become one with its form and that, in an ideal case, its purpose should become completely unrecognizable. In that essay he fully develops the idea of ‘l’art pour l’art’, conceived by the French symbolist poet Theophile

Gautier. He breaks away from Ruskin's moralism by saying that art is "always striving to be independent of the mere intelligence" (132) and later he also states that "painting must before all things be decorative, a thing for the eye" (133). In other words, art should be produced for its own sake, as a product of mere aesthetic beauty without any other purpose or need and according to no particular set of rules and regulations.

As a professor at Oxford, Pater grew a considerable following. His influence was particularly reflected in the works of Oscar Wilde, who would later become the most prominent messenger of the Decadent movement.

4. Oscar Wilde

4.1. Wilde's Decadence

Pater's aesthetic thought, influenced immensely by the French poets of the symbolist movement, took a radical turn in Wilde's prose writing.

Oscar Wilde took the aesthetic movement of Pater's Renaissance and turned it into a way of life. Naomi Wood claims that "Wilde called Pater's *Renaissance: The Studies in the History of Art and Poetry* his 'golden book' and declared that he never travelled anywhere without it; he described it as 'the very flower of decadence; the last trumpet should have sounded the moment it was written'" (qtd. in Wood 3). When John Ruskin mentioned the phenomenon of decay in his dramatic descriptions of the Fall of Venice, he considered it a negative occurrence. He found the events to be happening due to decaying values and loss of morals among the people, describing the so-called "phases of transition" to be "from pride to infidelity, from infidelity to the unscrupulous *pursuit of pleasure*" (Ruskin, *Stones of Venice*, 2: 122). That 'pursuit of pleasure', considered by Ruskin to be the worst possible condition,

was for Wilde the very reason to keep living. His ‘notorious’ behaviour eventually led to a trial for ‘gross indecency’ under “the Labouchere Amendment, a law used primarily to prosecute males for committing homosexual acts” (Cohen, 92). This controversial trial caused many critics to turn from analysing his works to analysing his life.

When analysing his most famous work, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, many instantly turn to study the element of corruption, due to the fact that Dorian received an infamous yellow book by Lord Henry. That book was allegedly “an edition of Huysmans’s bible of French Decadence, *À Rebours*” which “anticipated” his “incipient decline into decadence and degeneracy” (Ledger, 2). Naomi Wood dedicated an entire essay to study the connection between pederasty and the philosophy of the Aesthetic Movement. She quotes Lord Henry’s words as though Lord Henry is the true messenger of Wilde: “Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. (...) A new hedonism – that is what our century wants” (qtd. in Wood 8). However, an important element of that work is often forgotten. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* does not end well for Dorian. As he enjoys life and commits sinful acts, his portrait pays the price and deteriorates with each deed, eventually leading to Dorian’s own destruction. Wilde obviously does not consider Dorian’s doings to be positive, hence he decides to brutally punish him in the end. By putting a young boy into the centre of his story, he indeed follows a tradition brought on by the Hellenistic influences. He was quoted during his trial to have said that a love between a boy and an older man is “the very basis” of Plato’s philosophy, it is

such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. (...) It is intellectual and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder has the intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope, and glamour of life before him (qtd. in Wood 10).

This quote shows that Wilde is by all means concerned with both morals and an artistic tradition that has existed for centuries. He does see life as a form of art, but he does not see it as existing beyond moral. The fact that his views on morals were different from those existing in the late Victorian age probably delighted him, but also brought him great pain and suffering. He gained notoriety because of the fact that he was a homosexual. As a consequence, he spent a big part of his life in prison or as a refugee in France, where he lived in poverty and exile.

Therefore, according to John Allen Quintus, it is not lord Henry that Wilde identifies with, but Basil Hallward, the artist that painted the portrait, the one who envisaged Dorian as an object of pure beauty. Quintus thinks that the cause for ignoring the moral implications of Wilde's writing may lie in the preface of *Dorian Gray*. In it Wilde himself writes that "No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 17). Quintus explains this by calling the preface "an afterthought", "a defence of the author as well as the bill of rights for the artist"(5). He goes on to state that

Wilde could hardly have been expected to apologize for his novel, or to state in a preface to it that he really meant to write a highly moral tale which dramatizes the results of egotism, punishes the wicked, satirizes the superficialities of English society, and falls comfortably and traditionally within the purview of allegorical romance. (Quintus, 5)

It would probably be more accurate to say that Wilde valued his freedom of expression above all. Moral as a category can be quite misleading, because we need to take into account that even Wilde's French sources, which are considered immoral by many critics, put high value on morality (Quintus, 4-5). Nevertheless, it is a different kind of morality, the one that challenges bourgeois values and despises the art which tries to tell people how to live their life.

It avoids the didactic aspect of art and turns instead to the aesthetic pleasure, which can just as easily be good and moral.

4.2. Wilde's Essays

While analysing Ruskin's works, some inconsistencies in his opinions were found. His consideration of the sensible side of art always fought with his purely moralistic outlook on life and society. In this respect, Wilde is no different. Throughout his whole life, he was torn between two opposing sides, the first influenced by Pater and French decadent writers, and the other, influenced by John Ruskin. Ruskin's influence might not be evident in Wilde's prose works, but it is certainly strong in Wilde's essays and theoretical works.

Wilde's essays, considered by his grandson Merlin Holland to be his greatest writing achievement, imitate Ruskin's style in many ways. *The House Beautiful* deals with a set of rules believed to be the premise of a nicely decorated interior space. Among many rules, Wilde warns people that "All ornaments should be carved" and they should not have "cast-iron ornaments, nor any of those ugly things made by machinery" ("Essays" 915), evoking literally the same ideas proposed by Ruskin in *The Seven Lamps*. He also mentions the "beauty of the natural lines" calling anything that "blots out" that beauty "ugly" (923).

Ruskin's influences are further developed in the essay entitled *The Decorative Arts* where Wilde explores the subject of conditions of work. Like Ruskin before him, he emphasizes the importance of the environment in which the labour is done, stating that by looking at the "eras of the highest decorative art ... you will find it a time when the workman had beautiful surroundings" (929). The basic idea in the essay is that art is the essential part of life, just like work and they should go together hand in hand, because there is no work without art and no art without work. He also brings forward the question of morals, adding that true art is "the most practical school of morals in the world" and "the best educator" because "it never lies, never

misleads, and never corrupts, for all good art, all high art is founded on honesty, sincerity, and truth” (936).

The truth in art is a particularly frequent subject in Wilde’s essays. Although he seems to be in favour of it, he interprets it quite differently from Ruskin. In *De Profundis* he states that “Truth in art is the unity of a thing with itself: the outward rendered expressive of the inward: the soul made incarnate: the body instinct with spirit” (1024), and that “Art only begins where imitation ends” (1039). According to Wilde, truth is completely subjective and depends on the individual vision of an artist. He was particularly sensitive about realism and other trends in contemporary art, which tried too hard to depict the world as it is rendered in reality. In his essay *The Decay of Lying*, dedicated almost entirely to that subject, he complains that “There is such a thing as robbing a story of its reality by trying to make it too true” (1074). Vivian, the character that speaks on his behalf, presents a manifesto entitled *The Decay of Lying: A Protest*, in which he declares his vision of what art should be. Just like in reality, where “what is interesting about people in good society...is the mask that each one of them wears, not the reality that lies behind the mask” (1075), in art there is a necessity for lying. He describes three stages of art’s development, which resonate with Ruskin’s almost similar passage in *The Seven Lamps*. Ruskin declares that “all art is abstract in its beginnings” (*The Seven Lamps* 238) and Wilde’s character Vivian tells us that the first stage of art “begins with abstract decoration”. The second stage is when “Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it and refashions it in fresh forms”, and the third is when “Life gets the upper hand, and drives Art into the wilderness” (“Essays” 1078).

Wilde finds it important for art to have an independent spirit and therefore should not be striving to represent the reality of things. He calls realism “a complete failure” and advocates for art to be its own teacher. “The proper school to learn art in is not Life but Art” (1080). He also claims that art does not resonate with its time, but that particular age resonates with its art,

because “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life” (1082). Since art has the previously mentioned autonomy, it can exist regardless of its age. In this context, he mentions Pater’s ‘l’art pour l’art’ philosophy: “Art never expresses anything but itself. This is the principle of my new aesthetics; and it is this, more than that vital connection between form and substance, on which Mr. Pater dwells, that makes basic the type of all arts” (1087).

Life as an imitation of Art though is not Pater’s idea, it is entirely Wilde’s. In *Pen, Pencil and Poison* he praises Thomas Griffiths Wainewright for recognizing that “Art’s first appeal is neither to the intellect nor to the emotions, but purely to the artistic temperament” (1096). With that thought he distances himself from both Ruskin (“intellect”) and Pater (“emotions”). This new type of criticism explains aesthetic judgment to be “unconsciously guided and made perfect by frequent contact with the best work” (1096). It is very similar to Kant’s aesthetics which declares that “a judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment and so is not a logical judgment but an aesthetic one, by which we mean a judgment whose determining basis *cannot be other than subjective*” (Kant 44).

As much as Wilde deals with the way the aesthetic judgment is obtained, he finds the existence of any type of criticism much more important. He created a considerable body of work dedicated solely to the purpose of glorifying the act of criticism and proclaiming it an art form in itself. In addition, these essays also serve to justify Wilde’s own need to write both critical works and fiction. The greatest essay in that category is *The Critic As Artist* written partly as a dialogue between two men, similar to *The Decay of Lying*. According to Merlin Holland, with this essay Wilde tries to “tweak Matthew Arnold’s nose over a famous lecture given in 1864 on ‘The Function of Criticism’ in which he stated that ‘the aim of criticism is to see the object as in itself it really is’. Wilde’s view is that the critic should see the object as it really is not” (“Essays” 910).

He starts by recounting the beginnings of critical thinking which date back to Ancient Greece. By analysing the importance of Plato and Aristotle, he concludes: “It is the Greeks who have given us the whole system of art-criticism” (1117). Criticism has, in Wilde’s opinion, created new movements and inspired new creative strives, because “The tendency of creation is to repeat itself. It is to the critical that we owe each new school that springs up, each new mould that art finds ready to its hand” (1119). Critical thinking serves as a form of corrective element when art becomes too self-absorbed. The critic is to the artist in the same relation as the artist is to life. The art that the artist creates inspires the critic to create a new work, but that work then becomes independent and is an entirely new creation. Wilde even suggests that a critic sees in art something that an artist himself does not: “Who cares whether Mr. Ruskin’s views on Turner are sound or not?” This question actually deals with an alleged comment made by Turner that Ruskin saw in his work more than he himself had actually imagined. But on the same page Wilde also mentions his other influential mentor: “Who, again, cares whether Mr. Pater has put into the portrait of Mona Lisa something that Leonardo never dreamed of?” (1126).

Wilde’s whole philosophy here deals with the thought that art creates different sentiments in different people and that each person can assign new, personal meanings to the same thing. This is in Wilde’s opinion “criticism of the highest kind” (1127), which “deals with art not as expressive but an impressive purely” (1126). It is also the proof that art is a living thing which changes with different perceptions and interpretations, just the way life changes because of art. It now becomes much clearer what Wilde meant with that thought from *The Decay of Lying*. He explained that art “is not symbolic of any age. It is the ages that are her symbols” (1087), because every age has its own taste and its own interpretation of an artwork. This tells us much more about that age than about the artwork itself, or as Wilde puts it: “Beauty

reveals everything, because it expresses nothing. When it shows us itself, it shows us the whole fiery-coloured world” (1127).

In one of his greatest essays, *De Profundis*, Wilde briefly mentions the misery of his life for not being properly understood when it comes to his treatment of “Art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction” (1017). Apart from that phrase, Wilde in his essay constantly moves from Pater to Ruskin, and back to Pater. The whole essay is dedicated to his love, Lord Alfred Douglas, whom Wilde accuses of his own ruin and misery. “I blame myself for allowing an unintellectual friendship, a friendship whose primary aim was not the creation and contemplation of beautiful things, to entirely dominate my life” (981), says Wilde and thus perfectly voices Ruskin in his blame of an unintellectual deed, yet just a few pages later he cites Pater by saying that to form habits is a “failure” (985). Alfred and the rest of England had no understanding for his artistic genius, so he found refuge in France where his art was more appreciated. At the end of his life, he turns to religion and speaks of it a lot in *De Profundis*. We find Wilde identifying himself with Christ, whom Wilde sees as a prototypical figure of an artist. He tells us that “there was nothing that either Plato or Christ had said that could not be transferred immediately into the sphere of Art, and there find its complete fulfilment” (1027). It is Christ’s personality that makes him an artistic figure. According to Wilde, it is the character that makes the true artist, “that imaginative sympathy” Christ possessed which is “the sole secret of creation” (1026). The religious subjects he dealt with appeared as a consequence of his interest in religious mysticism, which Vyvyan Holland claims was present throughout his whole adult life (12).

Apart from religion, Wilde also deals with various political issues. One of those is the position of women in society. In *The House Beautiful* he introduces the subject by stating that applied arts always flourish in the environments where women have bigger power and better position in society (913). In *Woman’s Dress*, an article published in *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1884,

he criticizes the society for forcing women to wear corsets and heels. In that period, several years prior to the emergence of the so called 'New Woman', Wilde's position must have been quite revolutionary, especially since just 20 years prior to that Ruskin had still proposed an idea of separate spheres in which women and men should operate, woman's sphere being home. In his series of lectures entitled *Sesame and Lilies* delivered in 1864 Ruskin was praised for his arguments, which Cheylyne Eccles finds to be a proof of how "well-established gender paradigms were so embedded within the Victorian consciousness" (1).

However, Wilde's most politically engaged essay is *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*. Yvonne Ivory calls it a "programmatically theory of individualism" (10). In a bad political climate, artists are despised and their art is called either "grossly unintelligible" or "grossly immoral" (Wilde, "Essays" 1186). Still, because "Art is Individualism, and Individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force," it is understandable that people are reacting that way. People, in Wilde's opinion, have no real sense for the appreciation of art, so they stick to the classics which they cannot change, as a standard, while at the same time criticizing the living artists for their innovation and progress they themselves cannot deal with. For Wilde, there is a sense of accomplishment in being unappreciated by those with "vulgar mind" and "suburban intellect" (1187).

The fact that art is not respected the way it should be is the result of the history of bad rulers and governments. Art is a phenomenon that should be outside the sphere of politics, because "The form of government that is most suitable to the artists is no government at all" (1192). For Wilde, any commissioned artwork cannot be considered as a work of art, because art is "the unique result of a unique temperament" (1184) of the artist and "the moment that an artist takes notice of what other people want, and tries to supply the demand, he ceases to be an artist". In other words, art is supposed to be free. This freedom of expression and the idea that art is a result of artists' strong individual spirit form the very basis of Wilde's aesthetic writing

and they constitute an important legacy for an almost cult following that his work has gained among later generations.

5. Conclusion – John Ruskin and Oscar Wilde: Two Pillars of the 19th Century Aesthetic Thought

It has already been said in the introduction that John Ruskin was born the same year as Queen Victoria. Oscar Wilde, on the other hand, died a few months before the end of her reign. While John Ruskin marked the middle of the 19th century, when the Queen was still young, Oscar Wilde symbolically rounded up the whole Victorian period and prepared the art world for what was to come thereafter.

The comparison of Ruskin and Wilde makes us aware of the great changes that occurred throughout the 19th century. It was a century of revolutions, new scientific breakthroughs, new social classes rising to prominence and new nations being born. With a rise of the middle class, the whole new audience could now enjoy the artworks which were displayed in the new types of institutions – museums. On the one hand, museums were the monuments of the country's colonial past, while on the other they were a symbol of democratization of the art world and the society in general. For Ruskin, these changes meant that people could enjoy art in their everyday life and he looked for ways it could improve their lives by bringing them together. Wilde saw it as a chance for the art's liberation. The individual spirit of the new age meant that an artist could develop his character in a more independent manner and create art that would serve no other purpose than to be beautiful. While Ruskin saw life as a means of education, Wilde's greatest teacher was art itself. If Ruskin believed that moral principles and intellectual approach could improve art, Wilde strongly believed that art had an even greater power to improve people's lives. Ruskin believed that there was a proper way of looking at art which could be described through rules and principles, while Wilde recognized art's power to create different

sentiments in different people. For Ruskin, good art was the one with a clear purpose, while Wilde saw art as a pure form aspiring “towards the condition of music” (Pater, 129) as Pater explained it. “The same spirit of exclusive attention to form which made Euripides often, like Swinburne, prefer music to meaning and melody to morality,” as Wilde wrote in *The Rise of Historical Criticism*, “was felt in the sphere of history” (Wilde, “Essays” 1224). In the battle between form versus content, in terms of their importance for a work of art, Wilde genuinely felt that content was in every way inferior to form.

While the focus of the paper is mostly on their differences, the two thinkers also had much in common. John Ruskin cared for the sentiment art incited in a viewer much more than he was willing to admit. In *The Stones of Venice*, he allowed himself freedom to give some of the most subjective descriptions of art found in his work. When he mentions that St. Mark's “arrests the eye, or affects the feelings” (Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, 1: 162), he is most certainly aware of the effect that the building creates in a viewer. He calls that effect “the power over the human heart” (177), clearly pointing towards an emotional reaction. Even in the *Modern Painters*, where he mostly deals with beauty as a moral category, he does not fail to mention that anything around us can inspire art and “may convey emotions of glory and sublimity continual and exalted” (Ruskin, *Modern Painters* 101).

When explaining how our surroundings can inspire art, he mostly refers to the effect of nature, while Wilde thought that the best inspiration for art was more art. However, there is a point in Ruskin's lectures where he says that “Beautiful art can only be produced by people who have beautiful things about them, and leisure to look at them” (*Two Paths* 24), that way agreeing with Wilde's later ideas that art is new art's best teacher. Both of them also agree on disliking machine-made ornaments, artificial decoration and the connection between good art and a satisfied worker. Their political engagement is one of the most important aspects of their artistic activity.

The immense legacy of both thinkers is difficult to measure. When John Ruskin wrote against the industrially produced decoration and established the Guild of Saint George, he created a new movement among the artists and thinkers in England, called the Arts and Crafts Movement. When young members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood heard Ruskin's ideas, they first incorporated them into their art and later spread them on to the sphere of the applied arts as well, slowly destroying the prejudice against it being the lowbrow art. John Ruskin believed that art should serve the people and these ideas made a huge impact on the society. Watkin explains the importance of the chapter "On the Nature of Gothic" from *The Stones of Venice* "in which the claim that the beauty of medieval art was a result of the pleasure the workman had taken in creating it was used by William Morris (1834-96) to justify the ideals of the Arts and Crafts Movement and of the emergent theories of socialism" (666). Apart from Ruskin himself, William Morris and his fellow colleagues from the Arts and Crafts Movement were first to put these ideas into practice by means of a well-known manufacturing company Morris & Co. Moreover, Morris later founded a book publishing firm called Kelmscott Press, which issued a small number of beautifully decorated books for people to enjoy. These companies spontaneously inspired the opening of a number of new firms and, along with the new movements like *Jugendstil* in Germany or Vienna Secession in Austria-Hungary, followed by Art Deco, they eventually led to a revolution in the applied arts' design in the 20th century. Thanks to the initiative of these great men, we can nowadays enjoy beautifully designed furniture and other objects of everyday use.

On the other hand, Oscar Wilde brought about a new way of thinking. His Paterian aesthetics gave new freedom to the artists who no longer cared for the public opinion and started experimenting with new forms and new techniques, changing the way we look at the world. Through the new avant-garde art movements the artists gained a new position within the society. Artists no longer needed to be bound by service to political propaganda or private

commissions, but were finally free to create whatever the product of their imagination and inspiration was. “The true artist is a man who believes in himself, because he is absolutely himself” (Wilde, “Essays” 1186). According to Wilde, the special character of an artist is just as important as his talent and the two are, in his opinion, connected. According to him, an artist is a person not necessarily creating art, but living a life led by his imagination and strong character. It is someone who personifies art simply by living it. Both John Ruskin and Oscar Wilde were such people, true and influential artists of the written word, who lived according to their ideas and spread them among their contemporary audience changing society for the better.

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Abstract

The paper starts by describing the historical context in which John Ruskin appeared on the British art scene. It was the period strongly influenced by the new political ideas and by the industrial revolution, but it was also the peak of British colonial power and the start of queen Victoria's reign. At the time, art in Britain was dominated by the movement called *The Gothic Revival*. Ruskin initially disagreed with its ideas, but later became one of its most prominent figures. Next chapter focuses on Ruskin's most famous works and analyses the ideas and philosophy behind them. Although controversial for his age, by the 1870s Ruskin became one of the most revered art critics, praised in intellectual circles all over the United Kingdom. It was during that decade that he faced an emerging opposition through Walter Pater - an aesthetic thinker and professor at Oxford, who developed a new doctrine influenced by the French idea of 'l'art pour l'art'. With his famous work *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, Pater stirred great interest and influenced the new generation of thinkers, Oscar Wilde being the most famous among them. The paper proceeds to describe Wilde's written work, focusing on his essays on art and his constant need to reconcile the opposing views of his two mentors, Pater and Ruskin. The conclusion draws comparison between Ruskin and Wilde, discovering the greatest similarities and differences between the two thinkers. It also emphasizes their great importance and the massive influence they had on the development of the critical thinking and art of the 20th century.

Key words: art, architecture, aesthetics, criticism, beauty