

# John Ruskin as a Critic

**INTRODUCTION:** One of the greatest art critics of the Victorian era, John Ruskin (1819-1900) had a major impact on art evaluation of the 19th century. James Najarian rightly hails him as “the most highly theoretical of Victorian critics.” His personal views on painting, sculpture and architecture had a huge influence on a host of poets and critics who lived after him. He was also a committed social reformer (he gave away all his inheritance) and believed in the dignity of labor and the importance of craftsmanship. He had complete faith in God and believed that nature and beauty are the gifts of God.

Ruskin's most critical comments are found in his following major works:

1. *Modern Painters* (published in 5 volumes, 1843-60)
2. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849)
3. *The Stones of Venice* (published in 3 volumes, 1851-3)

In all of his books and articles, he stressed the connections between nature, art and society. He was a naturalist, an artist and a social reformer. He lived a very unhappy life but he has been remembered as a great commentator on art and aesthetics.

## **RUSKIN'S VIEWS ON ART & MORALITY:**

For Ruskin art and morality cannot be separated. Both art and morality go hand in hand. According to him, good art is always 'didactic'. We might not be aware of the food digestion in our

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stomach, but it actually happens. In the same manner, we learn some moral lessons unknowingly. For example, mark the following lines from Pope's 'Ode on Solitude':

"Happy the man, whose wish and care  
A few paternal acres bound,  
Content to breathe his native air,  
In his own ground.

The above poem teaches us the importance of nature and solace in life. But we learn this unconsciously.

**PLATO VS RUSKIN:** Both Plato and Ruskin were moralists. In Plato's times, it was a general belief that the function of art was to 'instruct' as well as 'delight'. But Plato opposed the poets saying that 'morality' and 'delight' cannot go together. Plato condemned art because it was immoral whereas Ruskin welcomed art because it was highly moral. For Ruskin, the main duty of an artist is to create nobility. Art expresses the truth and morals delightfully.

**RUSKIN'S VIEWS ON IMAGINATION:** Ruskin defines poetry and literature as "the suggestion by the imagination of noble grounds for noble emotions." Here "noble grounds" can be understood as the themes selected by the poets and the "noble emotions" means the emotions of love, admiration and joy on the one hand and "hatred, scorn and grief" on the other hand. When these two opposite emotions are combined in poetry, they give "poetic feeling". To present these emotions, the artist needs a tool called imagination. According to Ruskin, there are



following three functions of imagination.

1. **Associative Imagination:** It combines various images and thereby creates something new.
2. **Contemplative Imagination:** It justifies the combination of various images.
3. **Penetrative Imagination:** It analyzes and finds out the truth. Ruskin writes, "it penetrates, analyzes and reaches truths by no other faculty discoverable."

#### **RUSKIN AS AN ART CRITIC:**

As an art critic, John Ruskin popularized the idea of "truth to nature" which encouraged painters to closely observe the landscape and in doing so capture the natural world as truthfully as possible. He criticized the poets and artists who romanticized nature in their works. His idea that nature must be represented in art in its raw form influenced the Pre-Raphaelite poets, a group of young artists who rejected contemporary notions of artistic beauty.

His emphasis on realistic presentation of nature in art gave birth to a new movement called – Naturalism. Ruskin was concerned more with truth than natural beauty.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

In short, Ruskin linked art and morality and advocated for moralism in art. He showed the importance of nature and truth in literature. He advised the poets to present nature in its raw form. However, some critics opposed his theory of didacticism. The debate whether art should preach morals and aim at social

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reform is never ending. Ruskin's views are in contrast to John Dryden's declaration, "Delight is the chief, if not the only end of poesy." But Ruskin can be seen as championing the idea of "Art is for life's sake."

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