

## WALTER PATER AS AN AESTHETIC CRITIC

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### WALTER PATER'S VIEWS ON STYLE AND "ART FOR ART'S SAKE"

Explained by Dr. Vipul V. Kapoor (PhD), Associate Professor

**INTRODUCTION:** Saintsbury avers that if Matthew Arnold is the greatest critic of the middle phase of Victorian era, Walter Pater is equally a great critic of its later part. In fact, Pater is the antithesis of Arnold. Arnold, being a moralist believed in the theory of "Art for life's sake." whereas Pater was a pure aesthetician who believed in the theory of "Art for art's sake." Arnold advocated for objectivity and disinterestedness in criticism whereas Pater emphasized on the 'Romantic Impressionism'. He is mainly known for his strong belief and faith in Aesthetic movement and believed in the power of beauty and enjoyment of beauty for its own sake.

**WALTER PATER'S CRITICAL WORKS:** Pater's all critical comments are found in his following works.

1. Studies in the History of Renaissance (1873)
2. Marius, the Epicurean (1885)

### 3. Appreciations (1889)

His famous essay 'On Style' appears in his 'Appreciations'. It is here that we see Walter Pater's views on Aestheticism and style.

#### **PATER AS A LEADER OF AESTHETIC MOVEMENT:**

Walter Pater is associated with the aesthetic movement of English literature. He believed in the principle of 'Art for art's sake.' He separated art from morality. He says:

**"Life is short; they live constantly under the shadow of death. So, they hurry to enjoy. Pleasure lies in one's sensations and experiences derived from the beautiful."**

The esthetic movement actually originated in France during the 1830s. Gautier and Baudelaire are considered as the fathers of this movement in France. In England, this movement was further developed by Oscar Wilde and Swinburne. Walter Pater too followed this movement during the Victorian age. According to Pater, beauty is more important in poetic creation. This beauty comes from the form and manner or style. That is the reason why he lays more emphasis on style in poetry. Whistler opined:

**"Walter Pater is the most learned and sober follower of the cult of beauty. By some he is regarded as the leader**

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of the aesthetic movement in England.”

**FUNCTIONS OF AESTHETIC CRITIC:** In his  
'Studies in the History of Renaissance' Pater writes:

“To define beauty, not in the abstract but in the concrete terms ... is the aim of the true student of aesthetics.”

He believed that if one wants to criticize, analyze or interpret a work of art, one should try to find out the real beauty of the work of art. Here he explains the functions of an aesthetic critic.

“And the function of the aesthetic critic is to distinguish, to analyze and separate from its adjuncts (supplementary elements) ... the special impression of beauty or pleasure.”

Pater avers that there are three functions of an aesthetic critic.

1. To experience and feel the beauty or pleasure of a work of art.
2. To separate it from other supplementary, less important elements in that work of art.
3. To record his own enjoyment of the work of art and to pass it on for the enjoyment of others.

Pater has applied this theory practically in his readings of



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Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lamb and other Renaissance poets. A. C. Benson rightly said, "He moves like a bee from flower to flower gathering drops of sweet honey." In this way, Pater himself has analyzed all great poets and enjoyed the beauty and pleasure which he has recorded in his critical works.

**PATER'S ESSAY 'ON STYLE':** In his popular essay 'On Style' Walter Pater has discussed the importance of diction, form and style in poetry.

- **Prose Vs Poetry:** He begins the essay by pointing out that there is no essential difference between prose and poetry. Both are different branches of imaginative literature. Both express the writer's 'sense or feeling of enjoyment'. In both prose and poetry, the artist must be true to his vision of life. A work of art is beautiful only when the artist expresses his vision of life truthfully. For this, the style is the only element which enables him to record and express his vision exactly and truthfully.
- **Style – Choice of Words:** The artist should select the words carefully and observe the difference between the words which are noble and the ones which are ignoble. (Dante & Longinus) He says the writer should reject "many a neology (newly coined



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words), many a license (carefree use of words), many a gypsy phrase (words used by the caravans or travelers).” He advises the poets to use monosyllabic words to bring rhythm and melody.

- **Importance of Learning:** Pater believed that “Hard is beautiful.” (Longinus) The literary artist must be learned in various arts, sciences and philosophies. He must be a well read scholar. Knowledge and reading polishes and enriches his language.
- **Emphasis on Economy:** A prose writer is a scholar writing for scholar. So he should avoid use of surplusage. Too much use of ornaments of language makes the style monotonous and boring. He writes, **“All art doth but consist in the removal of surplusage.”**
- **Mind in Style:** Now Pater discusses the construction of sentences which he calls as the mind in style. The sentences should follow each other logically and naturally. It requires an architectural design in which one sentence is joined to, or fits in, the other, like bricks in a building.
- **Soul in Style:** Logical unity among the sentences is the mind in style. But the tone, color and atmosphere created by the style is its soul.



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According to Pater, every great artist has his own style which imparts a difference color and feeling to his works. It is through his own style that the readers recognize and know him. That's why Pater says, "Style is the man."

- **Good Art Vs Great Art:** All good art may not always be great art. Here, Pater talks about two elements – manner (style) and matter (content). He says that good manner makes the work of art 'good' and good matter makes it 'great'. He considers 'The Divine Comedy' (Dante), 'Paradise Lost' (John Milton) and 'Les Miserables' (Victor Hugo) as the examples of great art.

**CONCLUSION:** The principles expounded by Walter Pater are sound and valuable. He laid stress on the element of beauty in the work of art. He believed in the dictum "A thing of beauty is a joy forever." (John Keats). He was an aesthetician who confirmed that "Art is for art's sake." Moreover, Pater gave much importance to style in literary creations. Matter and manner make the work greater.

Pater is indeed an outstanding aesthetic – impressionistic critic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. W. J. Long is right in ranking him as "one of our best critics." According



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to Compton Rickett, to read Pater's criticism is, "both a joy and a discipline."

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