

The Critic as Artist—*The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* and Oscar Wilde as a Shakespeare Critic

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Oscar Wilde is not only a literary artist but also a literary critic in the Victorian age. As a critic, he carried through his aesthetic ideology of the critic as artist that he treated the critic activity as art creation. *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* is one of Wilde's critic work exclusively on Shakespeare's sonnets. It is a piece of critic work as well as a piece of creative art in the form of novella, which well demonstrated Wilde's critical ideology of the critic as artist. This present paper will try to analyze Wilde's Shakespearean critic from his ideology on critic and art by taking the case of *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*

Keywords: *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*, Critic, Artist, Oscar Wilde, Shakespeare Critic

Introduction

Oscar Wilde was first and foremost regarded as a dramatist, a poet, a fairy and fiction writer. Scholars and informed writers are generally agreed that Wilde's criticism merits only as a patchwork affair or as a polished form of public entertainment (San Juan, 1967, p. 74). The role of Oscar Wilde as a critic did not attract as much public attention perhaps partly due to external reason that the critic was not regarded as high as art itself from ancient Greek literary history up to the Victorian age, as he stated in one of his essay that in the best of days of art, there were no art-critics (Wilde, 1969, p. 346). However, even though not renowned as a critic, Oscar Wilde wrote several critical essays in his life time among which *The Critic as Artist* in two volumes were included. As a matter of fact, nearly as early as his literary writing, Oscar Wilde's activities as a critic began, almost inadvertently in 1884 when his brother Willie, then as a drama critic for the London journal *Vanity Fair*, had taken a mid-summer holiday, leaving Oscar Wilde to fill the unsigned column whenever necessary, and a few months later, Oscar Wilde was writing articles on his own, for *the Pall Mall Gazette*, then for *the Dramatic Review*, *Nineteenth Century*, and other publications (Weintraub, 1968, p. xi).

Not only started his critic activity as early as his literary writing, Oscar Wilde as a conformist rebel, also posed a characteristic posture in circle of criticism. His anti-traditional view on criticism left an important mark on the history of criticism. The importance of his role in criticism was gradually realized and acknowledged in later ages. As a critic, Oscar Wilde in effect put his aesthetic ideology on criticism into practice as he acted the role of criticism as an artist. Among the objects of his criticism, Shakespeare was one of his best target in his critic practice.

Victorian Shakespearean Cult and Oscar Wilde's Shakespearean Complex

In the long history of English literature, Shakespeare does not stand in the centre of the canon all the time. As a matter of fact, the fortunes of Shakespeare's works underwent ups and downs since its own time. Not until the last quarter of the 18th century, with the turning up of the Romantic age, all aspects of Shakespeare's reception saw an enormous consolidation. Under the promotion of the Romantic poets and critics, the image and the reputation of Shakespeare was improved to an idolatry figure. In Brian Vickers's words, "His prestige is now so great that he is seen not only as England's greatest writer but as the world's greatest writer, an altogether exceptional human being" (Vickers, 2003, p. 1). With the rise of Shakespeare's reputation and image, the Shakespearean idolatry was beginning to take into shape.

When it comes to the Victorian age, with the advancement of industrialization and colonization, the national power of the British Empire increased and strengthened to a great extent. Science and technology was beginning to play the leading role in the society. However, the disadvantages of industrialization and the economic problems resulted from the high developed capitalism are becoming more and more apparent in late Victorian age. The traditional belief of social value on science and arts needs to be reassessed and it requires a new direction for the social belief in this age.

Carrying on the Romantic tradition, the phenomenon of Shakespearean worship was deepening and extending to a further degree, Shakespeare was becoming a national hero in the Victorian society. In effect, Shakespeare was progressively acting as a role model in every social fields and his arts and personal image permeated into several aspects of the Victorian society including religion, arts and common life, etc.

In religion, the position of Shakespeare's image was elevated to stand along side with the Bible. His works was often celebrated as a sacred text: a sort of secular English bible for the Victorians. Ministers wrote sermons based upon Shakespearean text and delivered them from pulpits in Christian churches (LaPorte, 2021, p. i). Shakespeare's text and image infiltrated into the Victorian religious culture that Shakespeare was becoming an indispensable part of religious life in the Victorian age. The church is ready to enroll Shakespeare for his propaganda of religious thoughts, particularly with the development of science and technology, especially the publication of Darwin's *The Origins of Specimen*, the religious belief of God was shaken, the collapse of religious belief compelled common people to seek to adopt Shakespeare's text as a replacement for the Bible, which they perceive to be inadequate at best. Shakespeare was becoming one of an important symbol in religious culture.

In everyday life, with the development of technology of publishing and editing, the circulation of Shakespeare's works was getting more and more convenient for ordinary people and the image of Shakespeare began to get well popular among people of all walks in society, On the other hand, with the repealing of the Licensing Act of 1737 and the passing of the Theatre Regulation Act, Shakespeare's works were thus released for more widespread performance and the hunger for Shakespeare on stage was pervasive across the boundaries of rank (Sillars, 2013, p. 51). With the widespread of Shakespeare's performance and reading material, the image of Shakespeare and the influence of his works were deeply rooted into the heart of the Victorians, Shakespearean elements were gradually intruding various fields of people's common life including daily talk, dressing, entertainments, etc. As Adrian Poole once points out, the Victorians had Shakespeare in their bones and bloods,

so they liked to believe. He was certainly all around them, on stage and on posters, in paintings and print and cartoons, in the air they breathed, and on the china they ate off (Poole, 2004, p. 1). Under such circumstances, Shakespeare was gradually evaluated to be a national symbol and some relating industry with Shakespeare was taking into shape in the Victorian society.

In literary circle, on one hand, Shakespeare was a great monster that exerted ubiquitous influence on the hereafter writers in the Victorian age such as Dickens, Eliot, Woolf, Browning and so on. Shakespeare's works was one of important sources they would like to make allusions in their own writing. On the other hand, except literary creation, as a great era in Shakespearean criticism pointed out by Wilde, a group of scholars devoted themselves to the study of Shakespeare and it was getting more and more specialized and professionalized. The first Shakespeare Society (1840-1853) was set up by John Payne Collier, and next the New Shakspere Society¹ (1873-1894) was founded by F. J. Furnivall in 1873. The members of these professional Shakespeare Society devoted a significant portion to the study of the knowledge of Shakespeare and promoted the popularization of Shakespeare's reputation. In this age, Shakespeare was not only a favourable object for literary criticism and a great number of literary critics published several Shakespearean critical essays, such as Edward Dowden, Algernon Swinburne, Walter Pater, etc., Shakespeare critic in this age amounted to another climax along with literary art.

Oscar Wilde as a Victorian literary figure could not be able to shed from the pervasive atmosphere of Shakespearean influence which is full of this era. Actually, if we read comprehensively and intensively about the works of Oscar Wilde, it is easy to find Shakespearean elements suffused here and there. Oscar Wilde was so keen on taking Shakespeare either as a target or a tool for its ideology thought and literary writing, not only because Shakespeare was an iconic figure in the Victorian society, his Shakespearean complex from his school time also enabled him to ready to utilize Shakespearean knowledge for his own writing and thought. From his school time, Oscar Wilde showed a great interest in classical knowledge and more than once got scholarships on his examination on this subject. Shakespeare was among the classical writers that Oscar Wilde was interested that he was confident in the knowledge of Shakespeare as in one of his private letters to his friend Reginald Harding in 1876 that he is confident and proud of his exam on Shakespeare and wrote that "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, modern poetry and drama and every conceivable subject" (Hart-Davis, 1962, p. 14). His confidence on the knowledge of Shakespeare might demonstrate that he read a lot about Shakespeare's works and to some extent account for the reason that Shakespeare was one of the classic writers whom he fascinated in his life. When he became a public figure for his own achievements, though acted as an arrogant and overbearing for his talent in his age, Oscar Wilde's admiration for Shakespeare could be found in several of his private letters where he looked upon "Shakespeare as the most purely human of all the great artists" (Hart-Davis, 1962, p. 477), and frankly acknowledged that "it is a noble privilege to count oneself of the same race as Keats or Shakespeare" (Hart-Davis, 1962, p. 440). From his early school experience and his private letters, we are not difficult to infer that Shakespeare's image as well as his works was an ever-existing icon in Wilde's art and life.

¹ Furnivall deliberately used an archaic spelling of Shakespeare's name in order to distinguish his Society from the early Shakespeare Society by John Pyne Collier.

As a Victorian literary figure, Oscar Wilde created 9 dramas, 4 short stories, 2 volumes of fairy tales, 2 novelettes and a quantity of poems in his life. *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* is one of his novella, which also could be considered to be an interpretation and review of Shakespeare's sonnets. Even though not usually acted as a professional literary critic, Oscar Wilde could be ranked among the Shakespeare critics in the four hundred years history of Shakespearean criticism for this novella together with some other critical essays by him.

***The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* and the Characteristics of Wilde's Shakespearean Critic**

The Portrait of Mr. W. H. was first published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in July, 1889, and Wilde revised and expanded the story to more than twice its first version before his trial, but the second version did not appear in print until 1921 after his death. The story revolves around three main fictional characters, the narrator, Cyril Graham, and George Erskine. According to Erskine, Graham had a strange theory about a certain work of art, and he believed in his theory and even committed a forgery in order to prove it. The theory is that the dedicator of the sonnet sequence by Shakespeare is a hypothetical boy actor in his own company named Willie Hughes. Erskine describes how Cyril has a fake Elizabethan portrait of Willie Hughes painted by an impoverished modern artist, a strategy which in turn convinces Erskine that the theory is perfectly unsound. Thereupon, Cyril shoots himself. At this point, the narrator becomes convinced of the truth of this theory and via a close textual analysis of the sonnets themselves and set about proving it. In turn, the narrator's researches convince Erskine of the theory's truth, but at this point the narrator himself lose faith in it. Two years passes, and the latter receives a letter from Erskine, and in it he announces that he, too, will kill himself for the sake of the theory and for Cyril Graham's sake. The narrator hastens to where Erskine is and only to find that Erskine is already dead (Powell, 2013, p. 379). This story is completely about the identity of the person to whom Shakespeare enigmatically dedicated his sonnet sequence, and which has been debated for centuries about the person's true name. Oscar Wilde in this story put forward his personalized interpretation and review about it through Erskine's performance. In his work, he recounted the already existing suggestions that the identity of Mr.W.H. could be Lord Pembroke, Lord Southampton, William Hathaway, William Hall, Henry Willobie, and Shakespeare, or W. H. referring to William Himself (Kessler, 2018, p. 361), but put forward his own speculative suggestion of Mr. W. H. as a boy actor named Willie Hughes. The story ended without the final conclusion on the debate of the question. However, reading intensively about this novel, it is obviously to detect that *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* is one of Wilde's experimental works about his aesthetic ideology on art and critic. This novel, regarded as a Shakespeare critic somehow, showed some differences with other Shakespeare critical work as it bore some aesthetic characteristic of Oscar Wilde.

First of all, like all other aesthetes in the 19th century, Oscar Wilde paid much attention to form in life as well as in his art which may has its root in the 18th century of German classical aesthetic tradition. As a leading exponent in the Aesthetic Movement in the 19th century in Britain, Oscar Wilde lived a flamboyant lifestyle in daily life which the dress, the decoration, the colors are highly cared about. In his endeavor to aestheticize his everyday life, Oscar Wilde showed a great interest in different kinds of decorative arts from dress to furniture, from artifacts to interior design, from flowers to decorations. In Wilde's aesthetic ideology, form is the first principle and he is ready to put into practice in his writing. His famous critical essays *The Decay of Lying* and *The Critic as Artist* are full of expressions of centrality of form in art, and *The Truth of the Mask* primarily focuses on

the costume and stage presentation of Shakespeare's drama, which concentrated on the external form of Shakespeare's art. In the essay *The Critic as Artist*, Oscar Wilde through his fictional personae expressed directly that "form is everything, it is the secret of life", and "to return to the sphere of art, it is form that creates not merely the critical temperament, but also the aesthetic instinct, that unerring instinct that reveals to one all things under the conditions of beauty" (Wilde, 2008, p. 1052). As a great genius writer of the Victorian age, he experienced different genres of writing and achieved success in different forms. In terms of critic work, according to Wilde, a critic will realize himself in many different forms, and by a thousand different ways, and will ever be curious of new sensations and fresh points of view. Thus, as a critic, Wilde did not confine himself to one stereotype. Unlike traditional Shakespearean critic article, *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* is created in the form of a fiction which happens between three hypothetical main characters. Contrary to the popular belief that criticism usually intended to testify some arguments on one subject by providing some facts and historical backgrounds, the viewpoint on the identification of the young man in Shakespeare's sonnets was not put forward directly by the critic Wilde himself but through the personae of this novella. As a writer who wrote in different genres, his novella *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*, actually a piece of Shakespearean critic works, bears apparent characteristic of aestheticism in relation to the form of this critical work. According to Herbert Sussman, the virtue of Wilde's critical writings is that he sets forth his new views and specific literary judgement in a form that implicitly suggests the tentative nature of his suggestions and the impressionistic basis of his judgement (Sussman, 1973, p. 114). Thus, *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* is one of critical work that Oscar Wilde dexterously implicated his critical views and judgement on the argument of the identity of Mr. W. H. in Shakespeare's sonnets. In communicating his new viewpoints, Wilde created a fictional writing which implicated his own suggestion in it. At the same time, the emphasis on form often concurs with the neglect of the content of the art for the aesthetes. For Wilde, the subject matter of arts is just like colors or lines for a painter or sculptor which only function as a tool, and it never expresses anything itself. As a piece of Shakespearean critic work, the subject matter of *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* is never most important to the work itself as the conclusion of the criticism is vague and open-ended. Though Cyril and Erskine believed in and tried best to prove for the Willie Hughes theory, and never lost faith in it despite of their death, the final result of argumentation on the identification of Mr. W. H. in Shakespeare's sonnets didn't come to an agreed conclusion as the narrator acknowledged himself in last sentence of this work: There is really a great deal to be said for the Willie Hughes theory of Shakespeare's sonnets (Wilde, 2008, p. 1201). Therefore, as a critic work, it is different from traditional critic work that tried to prove an argument by giving the critic's unbiased opinion, but *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* never tried to give a final conclusion on Wilde's opinion on the long debated question concerning with the identification of Mr. W. H. in Shakespeare's sonnets. For Wilde, the contents and subjects of art are less important in his aesthetic ideology of art and critic, and form is what he most cares about in his writing and critic.

Above from, *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* is a characteristic piece of Shakespearean critic work appeared in the form of a piece of novella. That the form is unique and the content is vague and open-ended is one of unique characteristics comparing with other traditional Shakespearean critical work.

Secondly, as a rebellious literary figure, Oscar Wilde elevated criticism to a higher position than art itself. As is known to us, in literary history, criticism generally comes after art itself as art is usually the objects that critics would choose. In the didactic theories of the 19th century, art, even though it took a creative leadership,

had to be somehow true to the way things basically are. In Arnold's formula "art is a criticism of life", the criticism would obviously have to be somehow faithful to, or limited by its object. But for the aesthetes who advocate for the doctrine of "art for art's sake", they wanted very much to say something nearly the opposite (Wimsatt, 1957, p. 491). Oscar Wilde, as the epitome of the Aesthetic Movement in England, ranks among the aesthetes who would like to advocate a different kind of criticism with earlier Victorian critics did. In Wilde's aesthetic ideology, especially demonstrated in his critical essay *The Critic as Artist*, he destabilized the relation between the critic and the thing it criticized, and obliterated their boundaries which traditional ideology defined it. For him, critic is never only a kind of inferior activity that just like beggars to live on the object it chose, but the critic occupies the same position with the work of arts that he criticizes. What's more, in his viewpoint, criticism is itself an art which demands infinitely more cultivation than art creation does, and criticism is a kind of creation within a creation as one needs to understand the history, the background, and social relationships of the artist. In the critical essay *The Critic as Artist*, Oscar Wilde interpreted by words of his fictional personae Gilbert that the process of criticism is analogy with creative arts as just like greatest artist Shakespeare and Keats sought for their subject matter in myth, legend and ancient tale, so the critics dealt with the materials that others have and to which imaginative form and colour have been already added (Wilde, 2008, p. 1027). According to Wilde, it is a shallow endeavor for a critic to discover the true intentions of the artist, and the highest criticism is that which reveals in the work of art what the artist had not put there. Such criticism treats the work of art simply as a starting point for a new creation. In practice, *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* is such kind of work that Wilde put forward his critical viewpoint on the argument of the identity of the young man in Shakespeare's sonnets by creating a novella. As an outstanding piece of creative critic work, Oscar Wilde employed Shakespeare's works of sonnets as his subject for new works of art, besides, he exerted the novel writing techniques such as characters, plot, suspense, final ending and took use of Shakespeare's sonnets as his sources of writing material. In developing the plot of the story, Oscar Wilde provided many background materials behind the sonnets for supporting his argument. For example, before putting forward his own theory, Oscar Wilde first had better know the knowledge of extant Shakespearean criticism, and in refuting the traditional viewpoint that the sonnet sequence of Shakespeare was addressed to Lord Pembroke, Cyril had got to know the information that Lord Pembroke came to London in 1598 and Shakespeare's sonnet sequence has been finished before 1598 according to Francis Meres. And from Sonnet CIV, we can infer that Shakespeare's friendship with Mr. W. H. might have been in existence for three years. Accordingly, Mr. W. H. should not be Lord Pembroke because of the discrepancy of the time. From Cyril's progress of criticism, we could be well aware that as a Shakespearean critic, one has not only to know better the sonnets itself, but also desires to be familiar with the backgrounds of the object. In Oscar Wilde's point of view, critic is superior to art itself as it desires much more cultivation such as textual information, historical backgrounds, etc. To a great extent, this novella is one of typical experimental work which carried out Wilde's aesthetic ideology on the tenet of art and criticism.

Thirdly, another point of view in Wilde's critical aesthetic ideology is about the insincerity of critic. Traditional point of view on criticism is the fidelity of criticism to the object, and critics sincerely express their unbiased opinions by providing detailed historical facts, textual evidence, and background materials. With the development of science and technology, scientific research method extends to a more range including Shakespeare studies. One of the most outstanding representation is the New Shakspere Society, whose members

study Shakespeare by using strict scientific research methods which is similar to scientific study. However, Oscar Wilde always acted as a rebel to the era, cried out a heterodox voice that the true critic is unfair, insincere, and not rational (Wilde, 2008, p. 1058). According to Oscar Wilde, for critic, a little sincerity is a dangerous thing, and a great deal of it is absolutely fatal. For him, a true critic should only sincere to his devotion to the principle of beauty, and never suffer himself to be limited to any settled custom of thought, or stereotyped mode of looking at things (Wilde, 2008, p. 1048). In his another critical essay related to lying, *The Decay of Lying*, Wilde laments and deplores about the decline of lying in arts as in his view point that lying, as the way of telling the beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of art. For him, lying is one of the most important components and techniques of art creation. Thus, as the critic who believes that criticism is art itself, Wilde also exerted the function of lying in his critical practice. In the novella *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*, we can perceive the ideology of art as lying deep into the texture of the story. The story explores the Cyril Graham's theory of the boy actor "Willie Hughes" for Shakespeare's young man in his sonnet sequence. In the progress of undeceiving the theory of the boy actor Willie Hughes as W. H. in Shakespeare's sonnets, Wilde expressed his disdain of logical, rational procedures of criticism. In point of fact, forgery and lying was Wilde's important technique in developing his critical theory. First of all, the portrait is a forgery, which is actually painted for Cyril Graham by a poor young artist named Edward Merton, as Erskine discovers by accident, Wilde thus embodies in the story the central paradox of "The Decay of Lying" (Poteet, 1970, p. 462). In order to prove his Willie Hughes theory on the sonnets for Erskine's belief, Cyril had to tell a lie to his friends by providing a forgery portrait to his friend. Even though the truth was turned out by accident, yet the technique of lying as a method of critic was betrayal to traditional critic ideology which is usually faithful to or somehow limited by its object. As a critic, Wilde advocates critical ideology of critic as artist, thus in developing his critic process, he carried out his principle of art of lying to provide forgery testimony for his critic work. In effect, this is an appropriated example of his critical principle of lying is the essence of art, and the critic as artist for him, would also practice the ideology of lying in his work. In addition to the forgery portrait, in order to make the narrator of this story have faith in the Willie Hughes theory, Erskine wrote a letter to his friend, that is, the narrator of the story, that he was going to commit suicide for supporting Cyril's Willie Hughes theory even though he had tried in every way to verify the Willie Hughes theory, but he would like to sacrifice his life for this theory. However, when the narrator drove the place where Erskine ended his life, he was told by the doctor by accident that Erskine was died of consumption instead of suicide. The final truth of the story is that Erskine told a lie to his friend when he could not find the true testimony for the theory of Willie Hughes. It is interesting to find that Oscar Wilde took full advantage of lying as his important technique in progressing his critic ideology on the theory of Mr. W. H. in Shakespeare's Sonnets. As a piece of Shakespearean critic work, *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* is one of an excellent experimental example of aesthetic principle of lying which is one of unique characteristics to traditional Shakespearean critic work.

In addition, as a rebellious critic, another characteristic of Wilde's ideology of criticism which is distinct to traditional viewpoints is the subjectivity, individuality of criticism. In his aesthetic ideology, the critic as artist conducted their work to express himself, to communicate his own thoughts by words. For Oscar Wilde, the highest criticism is the purest form of personal impression. In his critical essay *The Critic as Artist*, Wilde demonstrated his ideology on criticism by his personae Gilbert that the highest criticism deals with art not as expressive but as impressive purely, and criticism's most perfect form, which is in its essence purely subjective,

seeks to reveal its own secret and not the secret of another (Wilde, 2008, p. 1028). As a matter of fact, Oscar Wilde never forget to put this ideology in his own critic practice. *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*, even though written in the form of a piece of novella, also counted as a piece of Shakespearean critic work because it most dealt with the long term argument on the identification of the young boy W. H. in Shakespeare's sonnets. However, Wilde's critical viewpoint on the identity of the young man might best illustrate his defense of homosexual love of himself with Douglas. If we go deep into the conceived intention of this works, we might detect that Oscar Wilde's critical point of view on Shakespeare could be interpreted as the demonstration of his own ideology on critic that "the highest criticism really is the record of one's own soul" (Wilde, 2008, p. 1027). After reading this story, it is apparent to find that his argument for his own inner male love desire was subtly conceived in it. In effect, Wilde put forward the theory of Mr. W. H. as a boy actor and in the progress of his critic, Wilde dexterously explain the appropriateness of boy love tradition, which is regarded as the defense for his own homosexual love with Douglas as Wilde acknowledged himself when he referred to the article on Shakespeare's young man sonnets on his trial:

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.

CARSON: I believe you have written an article to show that Shakespeare's sonnets were suggestive of unnatural vice.

WILDE: On the contrary I have written an article to show that they are not. I object to such a perversion being put on Shakespeare. (Ellmann, 1988, pp. 553-554)

Here, the article Oscar Wilde referred to for his defense is apparently his novella *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* Thus, from his testimony, we can infer that Oscar Wilde's critical viewpoint on the identity of the young man in Shakespeare's sonnets was just argumentation for his own secrete behaviour. *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*, as a piece of Shakespearean critic work, best illustrated his ideology that the highest criticism is not expressive but impressive, and criticism's most perfect form seeks to reveal his own secrete and not the secrete of another. On this point, *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* was written to manifest Wilde's own desire for the justification of his boy love with Douglas. This piece of Shakespearean critic work well demonstrated Oscar Wilde's ideology of subjectivity of criticism.

As the greatest advocate for art for art's sake, Oscar Wilde carried out his aesthetic ideology in his art and his private life. Critic activity stands along with art itself in his ideology thus bears with the same doctrines of aestheticism. Shakespeare was one of Renaissance writers in whom he showed a great interest and his Shakespearean critic deserved some rebellious characteristics which is distinctive in the long history of Shakespearean criticism.

Conclusion

As an important public figure in the Victorian society, Oscar Wilde is first and foremost renowned as a literary writer for his dramas, fairy tales. However, he once wrote to his friend Keningale Cook in 1877 that he

intended to take up the critic's life (Hart-Davis, 1962, p. 39), and as we mentioned before that he began his critic career as early as his literary writing. Nevertheless, his role on the history of criticism never received enough attention that he deserved. In regard to Shakespearean criticism, Oscar Wilde is not rated very high as neither F. E. Halliday in his *Shakespeare and His Critics* nor August Rali in his monumental *History of Shakespearean Criticism* mentioned his name as a Shakespeare critic (Ghosal, 2015, p. 10). However, Shakespeare is one of the most important figure whom Wilde would like to cite and comment and he wrote at least two essays exclusively on Shakespeare *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* and *The Truth of the Mask*, besides, we can see Shakespearean elements pervades in Wilde's own writing.

The Portrait of Mr. W. H. is a piece of critic work as well as a piece of novella, which well illustrated his ideology of the critic as artist, and Wilde both acted an artist as well as a critic in this unique work. Thus, in Arthur Ransom's words, Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* is more than a refutable theory, a charming piece of speculation. It is an illustration of the critic as artist, a foretaste of Wilde's critical essays *Intentions* (Ransom, 1923, p. 110). *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*, both a novella and a piece of Shakespeare critic work, is the best experimental work of Oscar Wilde's critic ideology on "the critic as artist".

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