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## The Artist and His Oeuvre in G. K. Chesterton's Biography: G. F. Watts

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### Abstract

The article offers a close analysis G. K. Chesterton's largely overlooked biographical essay *G. F. Watts* (1904). The authors study the genre specifics of the biography of an artist, as well as the problems of biographical theory. In *G. F. Watts*, which the authors define as the literary portrait of the artist, Chesterton traces his subject's personality through his art. He views Watts' creativity through his Victorianism. Analyzing the artist's oeuvre Chesterton also reveals his own artistic methods, which he would later use in his novels. Being the critic's early work, the book allows a closer view of the shaping of his philosophical ideas and artistic principles, which would take form in his later writings. The authors come to the conclusion that, for all its undeniable merits, the biography in a whole is rather subjective, and hence, its value lies in Chesterton's general insights on fine art.

**Keywords:** G. K. Chesterton, Biography, G. F. Watts, Art criticism, Victorian art.

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## Introduction

G. K. Chesterton is well-known in literary criticism. However, his works on art history and biographies of artists are less widely known. Educated in art, a graduate of the famous Slade School, he is the author of two monumental works on art criticism, books about G. F. Watts (1904) and W. Blake (1910). Both works were written to order for *The Popular Library of Art* series and are accordingly popular essays on the artists' life and works. These texts have never attracted much critical attention. References to them are but rare (Gardner, 2004; Pearce, 1997, Wills, 1961, D'Haussy, 1982). G. K. Chesterton in his *Autobiography* (1986) doesn't mention these biographies either, which may signify that he didn't make much of them. On the other hand, his works on art history offer many clues to the understanding of his own work, his philosophical conception and artistic views. While contemplating the artists' oeuvre, Chesterton incidentally reveals his own art principles.

## Materials and Methods

The role of biography in English literature of the twentieth century cannot be underestimated and Chesterton's contribution to the development of the form is obvious. Thus, it is important to study his early biographical works and trace the features which later would become the main milestones of his later writings.

One of the most significant problems we come upon studying biography as a genre is its hybrid nature. The interaction of fact and fiction producing a specific unity has been the object of research for the majority of scholars (Edel, 1978; Holmes, 1995; Lee, 2005 and 2009; Benton, 2009 and 2015, Novak, 2014). As biographies are primarily meant to represent some person, we have to trace the ways of creating/representing the protagonist. In H. Lee's opinion, "whether we think of biography as more like history or more like fiction, what we want from it is a vivid sense of the person" (2005). R. Holmes stresses the psychological aspect of the writer's approach in creating the effect: "If I had to define biography in a style phrase, I would call it an art of human understanding and celebration of human nature" (1995). The study of possible techniques of creating an image of a real person without destroying historical truth and, at the same time, attractive and entertaining for a reader in different documentary forms is also important (Karasik, 2016).

## Discussion

G. Watts' paintings struck the young man of letters' imagination as early as 1895. Chesterton's special, private attitude towards the artist was due to the fact that the famous portrait of Cardinal Manning which, in Chesterton's opinion, indirectly influenced his own conversion to Catholicism was painted by Watts. His admiration increased with Chesterton's controversy with impressionism, the tendency he absolutely renounced due to its uncertain and subjective methods of expression. Watts, a true Victorian, possessed qualities that Chesterton always highly appreciated in art: openly and energetically expressed idea (that may be rendered as tendentiousness), the emotional impulse, and the inner strength expressed through the use of clean lines and bright colors.

The book about G. Watts cannot be called a "life" in a full sense. Chesterton doesn't go beyond certain facts of the artist's life, revealing, in particular, a characteristic instance when he twice refused the title granted by Queen Victoria and only agreed to accept it on behalf of all the painters. This is probably owing to the fact that the monograph was written in the painter's lifetime. Watts was known to be a reserved man, and highly secretive about his private life. Chesterton might have chosen not to resort to journalistic speculations. However, scholars unanimously reckon this essay among Chesterton's biographical writings. Lacking facts, Chesterton traces Watts' character through his creations. The critic will find this method

productive and sound and will further use it in all his critical and biographical works declaring it one of the principles of creating an image of an artist (*Ch. Dickens*). It should be mentioned that G. Watts acquainted himself with the book not long before his death and much approved of it.

Comparing Watts to other painters of the second half of the nineteenth century the author highlights his unique artistic manner. To Chesterton, he is free from either classicist tendencies of Leighton's, or transparent medievalism and brightness of Pre-Raphaelites, or the "damp fog" of Impressionists. On the other hand, here Chesterton is being highly subjective, as in all his critical essays. Thus, he doesn't take into account the development of the artist's creativity: in the 1860s Watts was strongly influenced by D. G. Rossetti – the portrait of Watts' first wife Ellen Terry can easily be mistaken for a work by a Pre-Raphaelite painter.

According to G. K. Chesterton, G. Watts was a typical Victorian. He possessed such qualities as stoicism, freedom from obscure Celtic mysticism, and optimism regarding human nature. As a man of his epoch he never divided art from ethics. Defining Victorian ideology as idealism based on the principles of realistic common sense, Chesterton distinguishes the following traits of Victorianism:

"He has the one great certainty which marks off all the great Victorians from those who have come after them: he may not be certain that he is successful, or certain that he can be great, or certain that he is good, or certain that he is capable: but he is certain that he is right" (Chesterton, 1904).

Many of these principles will be examined in more detail in Chesterton's monumental work *Victorian Age of Literature*.

Chesterton attributes Watts' main artistic methods to the Victorian outlook. Victorian stoicism accounts for the wonderful conciseness of his canvases (for example, the allegory of *Hope*), the limited number of detail and the emphasis on a single color. Describing his allegory paintings (*Hope, Mammon, The Minotaur, Love and Death*) Chesterton calls them "portraits of ideas", thus highlighting the concise and specific nature of the symbolic images. Avoiding the use of conventional symbols that demand specific knowledge, the artist appeals to the audience's deeper memory, to the emotionally psychological perception of events.

The spectator who studies his allegorical paintings one after another will be vaguely impressed with something uniquely absent, something which is usual and familiar in such pictures conspicuous by its withdrawal; a blank or difference which makes them things sundered altogether from the millions of allegorical pictures that throng the great and small galleries of painting. At length the nature of this missing thing may suddenly strike him: in the whole range of Watts' symbolic art there is scarcely a single example of the ordinary and arbitrary current symbol, the ecclesiastical symbol, the heraldic symbol, the national symbol. A primeval vagueness and archaism hangs over the canvases and cartoons, like frescoes from some prehistoric temple. There is nothing there but the eternal things, clay and fire and the sea, and motherhood and the dead (Chesterton, 1904).

The typical Victorian optimism generates a certain degree of idealization in Watts' portraits and a specific arrangement of ideas in them. From Chesterton's point of view, "Watts doesn't copy men at all: he makes them over again" (Chesterton, 1904). Thus, picturing Cardinal Manning, he exaggerates his austerity and piety, and vice versa, his universally acknowledged extraordinary physical beauty is understated. "He has no eyes but for ideas" (Chesterton, 1904). In Chesterton's opinion, Watts follows the views of T. Carlyle, who, in the person of the hero, praised the entire humanity in its best manifestations. The painter also highlights the best and the noblest traits in each of his sitters, imparting a look of deep fervor and dedication to some humanist idea on each countenance. He discerns the divine nature of every human

being and finds the means of projecting it in his portraits. Chesterton traces Watts' idealization, or the reflection of a higher idea in the mundane, to the ancient art, drawing parallels between his works and the plasticity of Classical Greek sculpture. These assumptions can be testified by the artist's biography. The effect produced on him by Homer's *Iliad* is well-known, as well as the fact that he began his career of an artist with studying sculpture. From these, the critic also traces the artistic means employed by Watts.

First of all, there are clean lines, figures, elaborately outlined and thoughtfully arranged. For Watts the arrangement of figures becomes one of the main means of artistic expression, be it a classical portrait composition, or a romantic curvedness of pose in his allegories. As one of the artist's greatest achievements Chesterton notes a frequently recurring image of a person drawn from the back. Indeed, such mode of arrangement is quite common for Watts: *Eve Repentant*, "*For he had great possessions*". It is difficult to disagree with Chesterton on the point that those are especially expressive and true in conveying human feelings, their suggestiveness appealing to the audience's moral sense.

"The back is the most awful and mysterious thing in the universe: it is impossible to speak about it. It is the part of man that he knows nothing of; like an outlining province forgotten by an emperor" (Chesterton, 1904). "Two thousand years before, in the dark scriptures of a nomad people, it had been said, that their prophet saw the immense Creator of all things, but only saw Him from behind. I do not know whether even Watts would dare to paint that. But it reads like one of these pictures: like the most terrific of all the pictures, which he has kept veiled" (Chesterton, 1904).

G. Wills suggests that Chesterton endeavors to put this mode of depiction into practice in his novel *The Man Who Was Thursday* when describing the horrible figure of Sunday (Wills, 1961). However, it still remains unclear, why the author doesn't mention one of the latest works by Watts *The Creator of All Things* which earned him the reputation of a forerunner of abstractionism.

Another important means of expression in Watts' painting is richness of color that Chesterton also traces to the legacy of ancient art as opposed to Christian art. It must be noted that the antithesis in this case isn't evaluative – Chesterton holds both traditions equally high. He thought that color as well as line is an important artistic means. Later on, he would dedicate to the problem of color and the secrets of color formation a philosophical tale *Colored Lands*, and an essay *On the Brown Color* where he would maintain that the beauty of the world is in the radiant combination of pure spectral colors. Those able to see this beauty possess the knowledge of the ultimate truth. The color symbolism plays an important role in Chesterton's novels. In his essay on G. Watts he formulates one of the aspects of his color theory. He points out that Christian painting strives for transparency of color, while heathen art (where he classes the ancient Greek art, the Renaissance and Watts himself) shows preference for solid colors. He finds the explanation in the following: "And I think abroad distinction between the finest pagan and the finest Christian point of view may be found in such an approximate phrase as this, that paganism deals always with a light shining on things through them, Christianity with a light shining through them ... And that is why, again, Christianity, which has been attacked so strangely as dull and austere, invented the thing which is more intoxicating than all the wines of the world, stained glass windows" (Chesterton, 1904). This approach will be exploited in more depth in his novel *The Return of Don Quixote*.

Notwithstanding the subtlety of Chesterton's observations on Watts' art, his reflections on fine art at large are the most insightful. G. Wills specially marks his statement that art is a unique language. "Because all signs fail to exhaust the reality we deal with, art's visual 'language' fills in important gaps and opens important realms where verbal language fails" (Wills, 1961).

The genre of the work may be identified as a literary portrait of the artist. Studying the paintings of G. Watts, Chesterton comes to the conclusion that he was a typical Victorian, didactic in the right way,

trying to teach the high ideals of Christian morals through bright colors and allegories, possessing the ability of combining solemnity and high spirits, enjoying real life.

## Conclusion

Undoubtedly, *G. F. Watts* is Chesterton's early and undeveloped work, written at the time when his philosophical, religious and aesthetic views were taking their shape. Therefore, it is the more interesting to explore it for the ideas that blossom in his mature work. Most of his biographies will be based on the same principle of deriving the personality of his characters from the peculiarities of their creativity (*R. Browning, W. Blake, Ch. Dickens, W. Chaucer, and R. L. Stevenson*).

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