PG EG S2 - 03 (DSC)

TWO YEAR MARSTER'S DEGREE COURSE

(CBCS in Accordance with NEP 2020)

SEMESTER - II

LITERARY CRITICISM

ENGLISH

Padmanath Gohainbaruah School of Humanities

KRISHNA KANTA HANDIQUI STATE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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DSC 6 : LITERARY CRITICISM

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COURSE INTRODUCTION

This is **Discipline Specific Core (DSC) Course 6** of the MA English Programme of KKHSOU. In this course, learners will be introduced to the Western critical tradition and its development till the beginning of twentieth century. As a course on the History of English Criticism, it traces the origin of the criticism in a common Greeco-Roman classical heritage, out of which the European intellectual tradition had emerged, and its subsequent development through the Neoclassical, the Victorian, and the Modern periods. We shall discuss criticism in the modern period in terms of what we often tend to call New Criticism. Therefore, this course is intended to provide you with an overall account of one of the most important fields within literary studies. However, when dealing with critical concepts in this course, we are supposed to take care to find out what the critics/theorists were originally referring to. This would help us to gain a better understanding of the contents of this Course.

This course comprises three Blocks, each containing five units. In each of the units, learners will be introduced to one very basic text of a particular critic whose contribution shaped the critical tradition in a particular period. **Block 1** of this course shall deal with Classical Criticism; **Block 2** shall deal with Neo classical and Romantic Criticism and **Block 3** shall deal with Victorian to New Criticism.

BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Block 1 of DSC Course 6 shall give you sufficient ideas regarding Classical Criticism starting with Plato and Aristotle upto the time of Philip Sidney during the Renaissance. This Block contains five units, i.e. Units 1-5, which are as the following:

Unit 1: History of Greek and Roman Criticism shall introduce us to the history of Greek and Roman criticism. Anthologies covering the history criticism and literary theory usually begin with the classical critics, because their influence has continued up to the present. The most influential classical theorists in Western culture are Plato and Aristotle, followed distantly by Horace. Recently, a renewed interest in Rhetoric has brought Gorgias, Quintilian, and others into the picture. Taken together, the classical theorists represent a wide range of opinions about literature and its significance developed over a millennium (from the 5th century BC to the 5th century CE).

Unit 2: Plato: Republic (Book X) deals with Plato and his book *Republic* (Book 10). Plato was the first person to approach philosophical issues systematically, but it was the genius with which he treated those issues that made his critical thought so influential. Nearly all the philosophers of antiquity, who lived

after Plato, offered a response to what he had written. Plato discusses his views on poetry in Book II and III, and more extensively in Book X. You will finally learn that it is in *Republic* that Plato ponders over the moral effects of poetry in the discussion of which we come across the concept of "imitation" (*mimesis*).

Unit 3: Aristotle: *Poetics* introduces us to Aristotle and his *Poetics*—a seminal contribution to the intellectual world. Aristotle inaugurated the systematic and distinctive discipline of literary criticism and theory with *Poetics.* This unit shall help us to discuss the importance of *Poetics, which* is one of the most influential works in the history of criticism and theory, as it shaped discussions of genre, prosody, style, structure, and form in later times. *Poetics* is believed to be a set of incomplete notes, survived only in a few faulty copies. Scholars speculate that we have discovered only half of the original text and that the other half, probably dealing with comedy, has been lost.

Unit 4: Longinus: *On The Sublime* is based on a discussion of the critical essay "On the Sublime" written by Longinus. Since the 18th century, "On the Sublime" has maintained the reputation as one of the most influential classical works in the tradition of European criticism, despite the uncertainty that surrounds its authorship and the date of its composition. We shall learn that in the text of "On the Sublime", Longinus emphasises the felt effects induced by great mental conceptions or figures of speech or well-chosen diction. The Sublime became an important element in the broad Romantic reaction in Europe against Neoclassicism.

Unit 5: Sir Philip Sidney: *An Apology for Poetry* or *The Defence of Poesy* which is also the last unit of this Block, shall introduce you to English criticism during the Renaissance through a discussion of Philip Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry.* Although Sidney is best known as a critic of the Renaissance period, he was also a great poet, a creative writer, a noble and virtuous man. Sidney is also the first to write literary criticism in English. *An Apology* enjoys significance far beyond its occasion for its synthesis of the Renaissance understanding of classical literary theory, which set the terms of literary debate in England for the next two centuries, and for its formidable handling of its genre-the defence of poetry, which Sidney adapted from classical and medieval models.

Block 2 of this Course deals with Neoclassicism which belonged to the period stretching from the early 17th to the middle of the 18th. This period is signified by a return to the ideals preserved in the works of the ancient Greek and Roman authors and thinkers. The heritage of classicism was to be seen in the works of the Renaissance humanists who, in their attempts to revive classical standards, displayed their objection to Renaissance excesses of fantasy and imagination. This aspect of thought can be seen as an 'Aristotelian' tendency in Renaissance humanism that stressed the laws of probability and the ideas of the three Unities. The Renaissance writers liked to explore their creative capacities but the Neo-classical thinkers insisted on literary composition as a rational activity subject to well-considered rules.

Neoclassicism gave its own meaning to 'nature' and 'imitation', terms which remind us of typically classical ideas. Imitation here is tied to nature in which the universe was thought to have been designed in a harmonious arrangement of a hierarchical order.

On the other hand, the beginning of Romanticism can actually be traced in the late 18th century although it gained maturity in the early 19th. It was more than a coincidence that Romanticism emerged when various other movements and events like the French Revolution, and the growth of intense nationalism, were taking place. Rather than taking the classical writers and models as a source, there could be seen a shift in philosophical orientations of many thinkers like Locke, Hume, and Burke. Subsequently, the Neoclassical ideals had been displaced by a new emphasis on individual experience. In some ways, Romanticism shares similarities with Enlightenment thought which had great faith in progress and which emphasised the authoritative nature of experience. Soon there emerged an interest in originality, creative imagination and genius. **This Block** comprises five units, i.e. Units 6-10, which are as the following.

Unit 6:Introduction to Neo-classical Criticism shall introduce you to Neoclassical criticism. The term 'Neoclassicism' refers to a tendency in the field of literature, art and culture in Europe predominant in the period from the early 17th century until the middle of 18th century. Despite variations across different cultures, Neoclassicism was marked by certain common concerns and characteristics. Neoclassicism is the return to the classical models in literature and literary styles, and a revisiting of the values of ancient Greek and Roman authors as models. Neoclassicism was a sharp reaction against the use of extravagant styles, superfluous ornaments, and overtly sophisticated languages by some of the Renaissance writers.

Unit 7: Samuel Johnson: *Preface to Shakespeare* shall help us to discuss Neoclassical criticism of the 18th century as represented by a text called *Preface to Shakespeare* by Samuel Johnson. An integral dimension of Johnson's literary output was his literary criticism, which was to have a huge impact on the English men of letters in the subsequent days to come. In this unit, we shall notice that *Preface to Shakespeare* played a large part in establishing Shakespeare's reputation in the 18th century as well as in subsequent period.

Unit 8: Introduction to Romantic Criticism introduces us to the different aspects of Romantic Criticism. Romanticism can be seen as a revolt against the aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment as well as a reaction to the scientific rationalization of nature. Embodied most strongly in art, music, and literature, it had a tremendous impact on historiography, education, politics and the natural sciences. Romanticism reached beyond the rational and Classicist ideal models, embraced the exotic, the unfamiliar, and the distant. It also viewed the individual imagination as a critical authority.

Unit 9: William Wordsworth: *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* deals with William Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. Though Wordsworth is more popular as a poet than as a critic, he has made a seminal contribution to the development of Romantic literary criticism through his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. As a major Romantic poet, Wordsworth, along with S. T. Coleridge, is regarded as the founder of the Romantic Age in English literature. *Preface* to *Lyrical Ballads*is often regarded as a defence against the vehement criticism posed by a section of the contemporary critics.

Unit 10: S. T. Coleridge: *Biographia Literaria* (Chapters *XIII & XIV*) discusses Coleridge's critical text *Biographia Literaria* with particular reference to Chapters XIII and XIV. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) has been praised as one of the premier English literary intellectuals and poets of the Romantic era. As a critic, however he sought to integrate literary analysis with the insights of other disciplines and tried to provide literary criticism a philosophical foundation. We shall finally learn that Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* is yet another significant text of Romantic Criticism along with the 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*.

Block 3 of this Course comprises a total of 5 units, i.e. Units 11-15 that mostly deal with Victorian and New Criticism.

Unit 11: Introducing Victorian Criticism introduces you to the major premises of Victorian and New Criticism. With the changes in priority of the writers because of the vast socio-economic changes in the intellectual scenario, Victorian criticism has opened up a new direction opening up prospects for the future dominance of criticism in terms of its importance in literary studies. This unit, therefore, intends to acquaint us with the ways criticism took its shape in the Victorian age. Further, the unit shall emphasise on some of the prominent texts that have laid down the way for criticism its due prominence among scholars and critics alike.

Unit 12: Matthew Arnold: "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" discusses Matthew Arnold as a critic and his critical essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time". Arnold is a prominent poet critic of the 19th century. As a critic, he pondered over the role of literary criticism as a vehicle for bringing positive changes in society. He felt that against the Romantic criticism of the previous generation, criticism of his time must be drawn closer to life so that life could be made nobler and better. Defending literature against its enemies and critics, whose emphasis on science, moneymaking, and commercial prosperity had led them to regard poetry as merely a pleasant pastime, Arnold argued that poetry prepared the people of the society to perceive authentic value in the workings of the society and culture around them.

Unit 13: Introduction to New Criticism discusses the important aspects of New criticism which is an influential critical movement in the course of modern literary criticism. The term 'New Criticism'

appears in John Crowe Ransom's book entitled *The New Criticism,* published in 1941. As a critical trend, it implies a form of critical practice that was gradually becoming dominant in Anglo-American literary criticism in-between 1940s and 1960s. In this unit, we shall discuss the history of New Criticism with reference to the major exponents as well as the important concepts in New Criticism.

Unit 14: W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley: "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946) & "The Affective fallacy" (1949) introduces you to two important New Critical texts namely—"The Intentional Fallacy" (1946) and "The Affective Fallacy" (1949), co-authored by William Kurtz Wimsatt Jr. (1907-1975) and Monroe C. Beardsley (1915-1985). These two essays are important position papers in 20th century criticism. The main thrust in these essays is on Wimsatt and Beardsley's formalist view that critical analysis must centre on the text itself and a critic is to examine the linguistic structure and the aesthetic unity of the text as an autonomous object.

Unit 15: F. R. Leavis: "Line of Wit" discusses the essay "Line of Wit" in by F. R. Leavis. Leavis was an English literary critic of early-to-mid-20th century. Leavis is also one of the most influential figures in 20th century English literary criticism, as he introduced a new "seriousness" into the field of English studies. Throughout his entire career as a critic, Leavis took 'evaluation' as the principal concern of criticism, which had the power to shape contemporary sensibility. In this unit, you will get an opportunity to discuss F. R. Leavis and judge for yourself his relative significance in the English critical scenario of the 20th century through a discussion of his essay "Line of Wit."

While going through a unit, you may also notice some text boxes, which have been included to help you know some of the difficult terms and concepts. You will also read about some relevant ideas and concepts in "LET US KNOW" along with the text. We have kept "CHECK YOUR PROGRESS" questions in each unit. These have been designed to self-check your progress of study. The hints for the answers to these questions are given at the end of the unit. We strongly advise that you answer the questions immediately after you finish reading the section in which these questions occur. We have also included a few books in the "FURTHER READING" which will be helpful for your further consultation. The books referred to in the preparation of the units have been added at the end of the block. As you know the world of literature and criticism is too big, we strongly advise you not to take a unit to be an end in itself. Despite our attempts to make a unit self-contained, we advise that you read the original texts of the authors prescribed as well as other additional materials for a thorough understanding of the contents of a particular unit.

UNIT 1: HISTORY OF GREEK AND ROMAN CRITICISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

1.1 Learning Objectives
1.2 Introduction
1.3 History of Greek Criticism
1.4 History of Roman Criticism
1.5 The tradition of Rhetoric
1.6 Let us Sum up
1.7 Further Reading
1.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)
1.9 Possible Questions

1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- *identify* the main lines of thought in classical criticism
- *discuss* the history of Greek criticism with reference to important critics like Plato and Aristotle
- *describe* the development of Roman Criticism with reference to the critics
- *trace* the history of Rhetoric
- *discuss* the important critical ideas in classical criticism in general.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of this course you are studying. In this unit, we shall discuss the history of Greek and Roman criticism. You perhaps know that the word criticism has been derived from the ancient Greek term ‘krites’ meaning ‘judge’. It involves some kind of self-assessment, reflection and judgement. Anthologies covering the history criticism and literary theory usually begin with the classical critics, because their influence has continued up to the present. The most influential classical

theorists in Western culture are Plato and Aristotle, followed distantly by Horace. Recently, a renewed interest in Rhetoric has brought Gorgias, Quintilian, and others into the picture. Taken together, the classical theorists represent a wide range of opinions about literature and its significance developed over a millennium (from the 5th century BC to the 5th century CE). In this unit, we shall try to examine the basic premises of Greek and Roman criticism as well as the history of Rhetoric. It is hoped that by the time you finish reading this unit, you will gain sufficient ideas regarding how classical criticism involved itself with the discussions of issues and aspects such as 'imitation' and 'representations' which are still so significant for the students of English literature.

1.3 HISTORY OF GREEK CRITICISM

In Europe, the art of criticism began in ancient Greece. Although the exact timing cannot be ascertained, it seemed to have attracted unprecedented attention during the 5th century BC. To speak of Athens of that time, following an unprecedented intellectual awakening, many scholars and learned men, freely discussed the different aspects of religion, philosophy, morality, politics, art, and literature—areas with which they were mostly concerned. This was also the period of learned men like Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Socrates, Aristophanes—all who lived through this age.



LET US KNOW

The city of Athens became historically important as it could defend two Persian invasions. Subsequently, Athens organised the "Delian League" of Greek allies with a view to liberating Asia Minor from the rule of the Persians. During the reign of Pericles, Athens flourished economically, socially and culturally. The cultural activities could be best seen in terms of drama practised by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and the emergence of the

schools of Rhetoric. However, Athens received her major challenge from Sparta, who established the Peloponnesian League. This struggle for supremacy between the two city-states led finally to the Peloponnesian War spanning over 21 years, and ending with the utter defeat of Athens in 404 BC.

Aristophanes was the first among them to apply his mind to critical considerations of literature. In his comedy *The Frogs,* he discussed the relative merits of Aeschylus and Euripides, making critical enquiry the criterion to judge the merit of poetry and drama, and to identify the relative importance of morality in art and the choice of language. We may state that the first regular criticism of the Western world begins with Aristophanes. The contrast between Aeschylus and Euripides presupposes Aristophanes' familiarity with some kind of great literatures prior to them. Although during that times, books were rare and expensive; this familiarity was a product not of reading but of hearing usually at different festivals where both comedy and tragedy were produced. Along with plays, epic was yet another genre that could attract a larger number of audiences.

You should note that in Classical Greece; only a minority could study literature, but it is interesting also to note that tragedy and epics could easily reach out to a larger section of people of the society. As Russell and Winterbottom have stated, Aristophanes in his *The Frogs* was able to make Euripides claim that a poet was to be admired "for his expertise and his sound advice, because we improve by our teachings/ mankind's civic sense and their natures too". He made Aeschylus claim, "The poets alone are the teachers of youth". The Aristophanic Aeschylus even asserts that the poets taught more than moral values. Therefore, the view of the poet as the instructor was something that was to raise a whole lot of debate in the subsequent days to come.

It can be assumed that the main context for classical criticism can be traced through the role the poet and poetry would play; and poetry in the Greek sense, meant tragedy, comedy and epic. However, any discussion of the history of criticism usually starts with the classical

critics/theorists rightly because of their influence on the development of criticism in subsequent times. The most important and influential classical critics of Western culture are Plato and Aristotle, followed roughly by Horace. However, the recent interest in Rhetoric has also brought in Gorgias, Quintilian, and others into the canon of classical criticism. The classical Greek thinkers present a wide range of opinions about literature and its development over a millennium from around the 5th century BC– the two most significant and interrelated issues of their time being **Mimesis** and **Didacticism**. You should note that Plato and his pupil Aristotle perhaps provide important views on these two issues.



LET US KNOW

The Socratic Method:

Little is known about the early life of Plato's master Socrates. We learn about him only through the dialogues of Plato himself, Xenophone, and Aristophanes, besides some other sources. Plato is famous for what may be called *The Socratic Method.* Plato's own writings, especially the early works, help us to examine how the Socratic Method worked. In his works, Socrates appears as a character/speaker through a kind of "Socratic conversations", which in fact, structures Plato's own works. However, one should not confuse this with the idea that Plato is giving us the (real) historical Socrates. He was actually recreating Socrates as a fictional or dramatic character, as "the main point of the Dialogues in which Socrates confronts sophists is to bring out the contrast between his genuine philosophising and their counterfeit."

However, you might find it interesting to note that the moral effect of poetry, along with the idea of the poet, was becoming even more important a critical preoccupation of both Plato and Aristotle. Both seem to have agreed that mimesis (imitation or representation) is a key feature of poetry, but they evaluated it quite differently. For example, Plato

influenced by his mentor Socrates, often refused to accept poetry's imitation of reality because it cannot depict truth and teach morality, and that it is irrational and is based on inspiration, not on actual knowledge. Plato, as an idealist philosopher, locates reality in a transcendent world of eternal Forms or Ideas that only **reason** can properly apprehend. For him, this world is distinct from the illusory phenomenal world of our senses, which poetry seeks to represent. Since the material world is an imperfect copy of the original transcendent world of ideas, Plato believed that poetry is but a degraded copy of a copy. He finally concludes that poetic representation threatens social stability by offering false images and role models.

In his *Republic*, Plato has Socrates recommend that poets should be banished from the ideal society, except perhaps those poetry, which praise the gods. Plato takes this severe position as part of his reaction against the views of earlier sophists such as Gorgias and Thrasymachus who were less concerned with truth than with persuasion. They used language not simply to represent reality but to produce reality by shaping the beliefs of an audience. Such a background strongly influenced Plato's ethical position as a critic. According to Plato, epics and tragedy are based on a corrupting mythology, encourages human feelings that are to be tamed, and in any case, gives us a world that itself is somehow inferior to the ultimate realities of the Forms.

However, Plato's views met with reactions. The most famous came from his own disciple Aristotle who reacted firmly to Plato's views on imitation, because he believed that it is not the main duty of poetry to dictate a favourable view of human behaviour, and represent the world correctly, for 'this does not involve the essential nature of poetry'. Unlike Plato and Socrates, Aristotle makes imitation the foundation of his views on poetry, and asserts that the desire to imitate, which is basic in man, provides pleasures to the imitators as well as his audience. Poetic imitation can reveal truth precisely because it does not copy appearances: it is a more creative act. Poetry in this view is an organised whole, whose parts are organically related and subordinated to a single

objective. He illustrates this with reference to tragic drama in which the plot is the key example of the organisation of poetry. For him, plot is not a random sequence of incidents but a unified whole with a beginning, a middle and an end, and structured by logical necessity. Unlike history, which is built on accidental details, poetry rises above the description of particulars to represent universal truths about nature. This new view of imitation springs from Aristotle's belief that human beings have a natural instinct for imitation, which is generally pleasurable and connected with learning.

Later developments in classical criticism develop from this groundbreaking work of the Greek thinkers like Plato and Aristotle. For example, Horace follows Aristotle while asserting that poets can and must imitate nature, and adds that it is also important for young poets to imitate great writers. As he approves of poetic imitation, Horace stresses the importance of morality and decorum. For him, the pleasures of imitation are best yoked with moral teaching. He declares that the primary function of poetry is to combine "pleasure with usefulness". This famous Horatian maxim has exerted considerable influence on all subsequent theorising on the idea of poetry.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What significance does Aristophane's play *The Frogs* carry in the discussion of classical Greek criticism?

Q 2: What, according to you, is the basic difference between Plato and Aristotle with respect to Mimesis?

Q 3: How does the Socratic Method work in Plato?

Q 4: On what grounds, did Plato reject the poets from his ideal society?

Q 5: Why did Aristotle react to his master Plato's views on the idea of imitation?

1.4 HISTORY OF ROMAN CRITICISM

In the previous section, you have read briefly about the Greek tradition of Classical Criticism. You must have realised that literary criticism goes as far as the 8th century BC, which was also the era of the epic poets— Homer, and Hesiod, and of the lyric poets Archilochus, Ibycus, Alcaeus and Sappho. Around the 1st century BC when the age of Plato and Aristotle was over, the centre of literary and cultural activity shifted from Alexandria to Rome, the then capital of the Roman Empire. Various factors contributed to the flowering of literary and critical activity during the era. The Greek classics became a constant source of inspiration and stimulation for the Romans. This revival of Greek classical tradition was inaugurated by Virgil (70 BC-19 BC) and Horace (65 BC-8 BC). That way, the Roman Classical tradition seems to be a continuation of Greek thoughts, ideas, and values.

However, the Romans did manage to preserve something of their own identity. The Roman tradition in literary criticism began with Horace. He was both a critic and a creative writer. His first book of the *Satires* and the *Epodes* were originally not intended for publication, but were read to his friends. Horace himself calls these works *Sermones* or “Talks”. He even disclaims the title of poet, though his “Talks” are in hexameters. His lyric poems are deliberate attempts to add to the beauty of Roman literature and thereby to the glory of the Roman Empire. In addition, it is chiefly to the poems that he owes his fame today.

“Epistle to Pisos” or *Ars Poetica* is the most important critical document written by Horace. It drew heavily on Alexandrian poetic theory and Roman Rhetoric. *Ars Poetica* is not a systematic treatise on poetry, but Horace derived his views in part from his own experience and part from his own reading. It is written in the form of an informal letter. He insists that each poem must have a consistent fundamental idea or plot. He advises care in the choice of a subject. Throughout the letter or treatise, he constantly impresses upon his readers his conviction that good poetry is the result of hard work. Therefore, it is a treatise on the

art of writing poetry, which aims to lay down rules and precepts for the guidance of would-be writers. According to him, the aim of poetry is 'to instruct, or to delight' or both. The concept of 'decorum' runs like an undertone throughout *Ars Poetica*. The satires and the epistles are full of brilliant and witty sayings, of critical and historical remarks; they throw much light upon the social and literary life of the period, and acquaint us with the character of the poet. Thus, his contribution to the history of Roman criticism is inestimable.

After the period of the early Roman Empire, two broad intellectual currents emerged during the first four centuries, viz., the Second Sophistic (27 BC-AD 410) and Neo-Platonism. The Second Sophistic was named after a new generation of Rhetoricians who took for their model the language and style of classical Athens. In this period, the speakers focused on style and delivery and Rhetorical ornamentation rather than everyday life and the actual affairs of the state. The focus was on imitation of earlier models, especially those of 4th century Athens. Hence, the art of Rhetoric lost its public role because of its focus on formalisation of rules for literary composition. Longinus's "On the Sublime" is the most influential Rhetorical text produced during the period called the Second Sophistic. This treatise was originally written in Greek entitled, *Peri Hupsous*. It has exerted a powerful influence on literary criticism and critics of the modern period are fascinated by his treatment of the sublime as a quality of the soul or spirit rather than as a matter of mere technique. As a critical piece of work, it remains unsurpassed for its sheer originality and power. However, Plotinus developed the philosophy of Neo-Platonism. The Neo-Platonists preferred allegorical and symbolic modes of interpretation, opening the way for Christian medieval conceptions of allegory and discourse. Along with Plotinus, the other exponents are Macrobius and Boethius. Like the Rhetoricians of the Second Sophistic, the Neo-Platonists had reverence for the classical texts.

Therefore, the study of the Roman tradition of classical criticism has to be studied keeping the above mentioned issues in mind. You will

do well by reading any good book on classical literary criticism in this regard.



LET US KNOW

There is no mention of "On the Sublime" in any ancient text still extant, and it was largely unknown prior to its rediscovery during the Italian Renaissance. Following Boileau's popular translation of 1674, however, the treatise became a standard object of study for literary critics from Dryden onwards. During the 17th and 18th centuries, Neoclassical critics, primarily in England, frequently cited the text. Its influence is evident in such works as Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, and extends to such critics as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Burke, Joseph Addison, Coleridge, and Alexander Pope. Despite its relative anonymity prior to the 17th and 18th centuries, modern critics have found "On the Sublime" to prefigure their own literary perspectives and to be as relevant and insightful as other standard ancient texts by Aristotle, Horace, and Quintilian.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: Who is Horace? What is his historical significance?

Q 7: Describe the significance of *Ars Poetica*?

Q 8: Why is the Second Sophistic period historically significant?

1.5 THE TRADITION OF RHETORIC

The term Rhetoric is derived from the Greek word, *rhetor* meaning 'speaker'. This term, which initially referred to the method of public speaking, also deals with the methods of persuasion on the part of a speaker. Towards the end of the 5th century BC, Rhetoric originated as an art in Greece. Nearly 50 years before the birth of Aristotle, the

Sophists Corax and Tisias taught legal Rhetoric in Syracuse. Gorgias of Leontini was another great Rhetorician who enthralled audiences in Athens after arriving there in 427.

While discussing the history of Rhetoric, we should first try to know who the Sophists were. They were special teachers generally traveling and teaching a wide range of subjects for payment. The Sophists (sophos, meaning 'wise') were so influential that Rhetoric became the main focus of education in ancient Greece. However, as times elapsed, the Sophists were replaced by **Schools,** such as those of Plato and Isocrates. Many Sophists were specialised in using the tools of philosophy and Rhetoric, though others taught subjects such as Music, Athletics, and Mathematics. Protagoras, Gorgias, Antiphon, Lysias, and Isocrates were among the most influential of the Greek Sophists. You will note that in the satiric comedy *Clouds*, Aristophanes satirises the sophists. Some scholars often view that the Greeks were already the inheritors of a tradition of Rhetoric as visible in the example of Homer's *Odyssey* or in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, where speeches hold the key to power or knowledge is mediated by the power of language and oratory.

In Athens of that period, the Sophists remained quite active. Since they were to teach young men about the art of speaking and the conduct of public debate, they were of high demand for the kind of education and training they imparted. As Rhetoric was an important component of their education, they helped to develop theories of Rhetoric, which, in turn, led to further developments in styles of oratory. Against the view that they dealt only with the art of persuasion, it has now been proven that they covered instruction on a wide range of topics such as social history, art history, grammar, the nature of virtue (*arete*), and so on. In general, the Sophists claimed to teach arête ("excellence" or "virtue") to young statesmen and nobility. However, very few writings have survived of the first Sophists. The early Sophists' practice of charging money for education and providing wisdom only to those who could pay handsomely, invited contempt and condemnations on the part of Socrates and Plato in his *Dialogues*, as well as on the part of Xenophone

in *Memorabilia* and, somewhat controversially, by Aristotle who, being paid to tutor Alexander the Great, could also be accused of being a Sophist.

However, many Sophists did flourish in later periods, especially during the Roman history, and they came to be known as the Second Sophists. It developed in the Roman world with Cato, Cicero, and Quintilian and came to be nearly equivalent with higher education therein. Greek Rhetoric was introduced into Rome in the 2nd century BC. Alexandria, the famous centre of the Hellenistic world, was home to scholars working in various fields like poetic composition, literary criticism, and science. Hellenistic education concerned itself with practical skills of written and oral composition. Hermagoras of Temnos, of the 2nd century BC, wrote an important work on Rhetoric, and he was the major influence behind two early Roman texts on Rhetoric, namely—*Rhetorica ad Herennium*, and Cicero's *De inventione*. The first text, of anonymous authorship, presents a detailed discussion of the five-part system of Roman Rhetoric. Cicero's work, *De invention,* was published at an early age in the 1st century BC and it highlights the political importance of Rhetoric. Here, Cicero stresses the point that a speaker must not only be eloquent but also wise, as Rhetoric promotes a just society based on common welfare. Some of Cicero's other works include *De oratore*, *Brutus*, *Orator*, *De optimo genere oratorum*, *Partitione oratoria* and *Topica*. You will note here that in *De oratore*, Cicero inquires into the connection between Philosophy, Rhetoric and other forms of knowledge.



LET US KNOW

Rhetoric arose in 5th century BC in ancient Greece. It developed in the hands of the Sophists, later Aristotle in the Greek world, and then Cato, Cicero, and Quintilian, in the Roman world. In its classical form, until the time of Cicero, there were five parts or "offices"—invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery.

Cicero identifies six parts of a speech: the introduction and the insinuation, the narrative, the partition, the confirmation, the refutation, and the peroration.

Quintilian was another figure whose influence rivaled that of Cicero's. His *Institutio Orataria* shows in detail the importance of Rhetoric in the Roman educational system, which proposes the education for an ideal orator from an early age. In the preface, Quintilian stresses the close association of moral goodness with true oratory. The important point that Quintilian insists is that the teacher of Rhetoric should be of exemplary morality.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: Who became famous as the Sophists in ancient Greece?

Q 10: Why were the Sophists of very High demand in ancient Athens?



1.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit must have given you some ideas about classical criticism with particular reference to the history of Greco-Roman criticism and Rhetoric. This unit must have helped you to gain a preliminary understanding of the larger issues and aspects of literary criticism. You have learnt how the different classical traditions of criticism evolved, how the important critics contributed to the development of criticism, how the historical situation provided the mainspring for such an evolution, and how one is supposed to understand the concept like Rhetoric. The discussion of the various concepts made in this unit, shall help you to understand the thinkers like Plato, Aristotle and Longinus, as well as the Neo-classical critics of the 18th century in the subsequent units of this course.



1.7 FURTHER READING

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2) Prasad, Birjadish. (1965). *An Introduction to English Criticism*. New Delhi: Macmillan India Ltd.

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1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Aristophanes brought the first regular criticism in the Western world… **…**in his comedy *The Frogs,* he made 'critical enquiry' the criterion to judge the merit of poetry and drama, and to identify the relative importance of morality in art and the choice of language … …this play deals with the relative merits of Aeschylus and Euripides, which also shows Aristophanes' familiarity with the kind of great literatures prior to him.

Ans to Q 2: Plato dismissed the idea of mimesis thinking that it corrupts the poets with false ideas… … However, Aristotle makes mimesis the foundation of his views on poetry… …he asserts that the desire to imitate is basic in human beings… …imitation provides pleasures because it is more creative an act.

Ans to Q 3: Socrates appears as a character/speaker through a kind of "Socratic conversations"… …Plato recreated Socrates as a fictional or dramatic character… …"the main point of the Dialogues in which Socrates confronts sophists is to bring out the contrast between his

genuine philosophising and their counterfeit."

Ans to Q 4: Plato opined that the poets should be banished from the ideal society, except perhaps those poetry which praise the gods… …Plato takes this severe position as he reacted against the views of sophists such as Gorgias and Thrasymachus who were less concerned with truth than with persuasion… … Plato held the view that poets are liars… …For Plato, epics and tragedy are based on a corrupting mythology.

Ans to Q 5: Plato believed that it is not the main duty of poetry to dictate a favourable view of human behaviour and represent the world correctly… …unlike Plato and Socrates, Aristotle makes imitation the foundation of his views on poetry… …Aristotle asserts that the desire to imitate is basic in man, provides pleasures to the imitators as well as his audience.

Ans to Q 6: Horace was a Roman Classicist… …the Roman tradition in literary criticism begins with Horace… …he was both a critic and a creative writer… …"Epistle to Pisos" or *Ars Poetica* is the most important critical document written by Horace… …It drew heavily on Alexandrian poetic theory and Roman Rhetoric.

Ans to Q 7: *Ars Poetica* is not a systematic treatise on poetry… ...however, it is an important treatise on the art of writing poetry, which aims to lay down rules and precepts for the guidance of would-be writers… …the aim of poetry, as held by Horace is both 'to instruct and to delight.'

Ans to Q 8: The period was named after a new generation of Rhetoricians taking for their model, the language and style of classical Athens… …in this period, the speakers focused on style and delivery and Rhetorical ornamentation rather than everyday life and the actual affairs of the state… …the art of Rhetoric lost its public role because of its focus on formalisation of rules for literary composition… …Longinus's "On the Sublime" is the most influential Rhetorical text produced during the period.

Ans to Q 9: The Sophists were the most influential Rhetoricians in

ancient Greece… …many Sophists were specialised in using the tools of philosophy and Rhetoric, though others taught subjects such as Music, Athletics, and Mathematics. Protagoras, Gorgias, Antiphon, Lysias, and Isocrates were among the most influential of the Greek Sophists.

Ans to Q 10: They used to teach young men about the art of speaking and the conduct of public debate… …they were of high demand for the kind of education and training they imparted… …as Rhetoric was an important component of their education, they helped to develop theories of Rhetoric.



1.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: What is meant by the term Criticism? Give an account of the major premises of Greek criticism with particular reference to Plato and Aristotle.

Q 2: In what ways, did the tradition of classical criticism evolve? Discuss.

Q 3: What kind of intellectual and historical conditions provided a boost to the emergence of classical criticism? Discuss.

Q 4: Who are the Sophists and why did they mess up with the critics like Plato and Aristotle?

Q 5: Make a survey of Roman criticism and try to discuss the important concerns of the Roman critics.

Q 6: What is meant by the term Rhetoric? Write an account of the evolution of Rhetoric in ancient times with reference to some of the famous Rhetoricians.

Q 7: Explain the main facets of classical Greek criticism. Why, according to you, did critical enquiry become the main criterion to judge literature during that time?

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UNIT 2: PLATO: REPUBLIC (BOOK X)

UNIT STRUCTURE

2.1 Learning Objectives

2.2 Introduction

2.3 Plato: The Critic

2.4 Important Concepts in Republic (Book X)

2.5 Reception of Plato as a Critic

2.6 Let us Sum up

2.7 Further Reading

2.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

2.9 Possible Questions

2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- assess the importance of Plato in terms of his life and works
- discuss Plato's *Republic* as a foundational text of classical criticism
- explain the different concepts and issues raised in the text
- examine how Plato's text provides fresh insights into the notion of imitation
- evaluate the status of Plato in the context of Western philosophy and criticism.

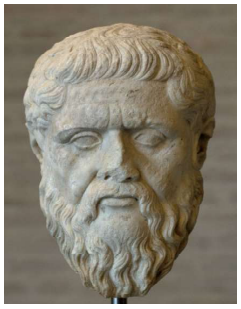
2.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with Plato and his book *Republic* (Book 10). As you know, Plato and Aristotle are at the centre of philosophical thought in the ancient world. Plato was the first person to approach philosophical issues systematically, but it was the genius with which he treated those issues that made his critical thought so influential. Nearly all the philosophers of antiquity, who lived after Plato, offered a response to what he had written. Moreover, Plato's influence was hardly limited to the ancient world. His

thought was studied throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and continues to be crucial to an understanding of philosophical issues even today. Although, the acceptability of his ideas and doctrines has always been the subject of energetic debate, no one can deny Plato's persistent influence on the history of Western philosophy. This unit shall try to address Plato's views on poetry as available in his *Republic* (Book X). Plato discusses his views on poetry in Book II and III, and more extensively in Book X. You will finally learn that it is in *Republic* that Plato ponders over the the moral effects of poetry in the discussion of which we come across the concept of "imitation" (*mimesis*).

2.3 PLATO: THE CRITIC [Adapted from Norton Anthology]

A colossal figure in the history of Western philosophy; Plato looms large in the history of European literary theory. Many literary scholars often argue that Plato marks the beginning of the tradition of literary theory, although his choice of the dialogue form suggests that the issue he raises had already been debated among the historical personages like the pre-Socratic philosophers. Nearly all Dialogues attributed to Plato hint at almost every important issue that interests philosophers, such as – the nature of being; the question of how we come to know things; the proper ordering of human society and the nature of justice, truth; the good, beauty, and love.



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org

Plato was born about four years after the beginning of the twenty-five-year-long Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, and just after the death of the great Athenian statesman Pericles. His parents both came from distinguished Athenian families, and his stepfather, an associate of Pericles, was an active participant in the political and cultural life of 5th century Athens. Plato had two older brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus, who appear as characters in his longest dialogue; *Republic* (375 BC). As a young man, growing up in a city at war and in constant political turmoil, Plato seems to have been destined for a political career.



The older philosopher was a close friend of Plato's family, and Plato's writings attest to Socrates' great influence on him. Indeed, the position of Socrates in European philosophy is unique. Though he apparently never wrote a word, his influence on subsequent thought through his followers, Plato in particular, is incalculable.

However, after the Peloponnesian War ended in 405, with the defeat and humiliation of Athens, the excesses of Athenian political life under the oligarchical rule (404-403) of the so-called Thirty Tyrants and under the restored democracy, left Plato disillusioned with political life. The execution in 399 of his master Socrates, on charges of impiety and corrupting the young, was a turning point in his life.

After Socrates' death, Plato retired from Athenian political life and travelled for a number of years. In 388, he journeyed to Italy and Sicily, where he became the friend of Dionysius I, the ruler of Syracuse, and his brother-In-law Dion. The following year he returned to Athens, where he founded the Academy, an institution devoted to research and instruction in philosophy and the sciences. He taught there for the rest of his life. Plato envisioned the Academy as a school for statesmen where he could train a new kind of philosopher-ruler (or "guardian") according to the principles set forth in his *Republic.* Unlike the older sophist Gorgias or Plato's contemporary rival Isocrates, who both taught the arts of Rhetoric and persuasion, Plato in his Academy, focused primarily on mathematics, logic, and philosophy. However, when Dionysius died in 367, Dion Invited Plato to return to Syracuse to undertake the philosophical education of the new ruler Dlonyslus II. Plato went, perhaps with the hope of putting the theory of *Republic* into practice; but philosophy proved no match for local politics, further arousing Dionysius's suspicion that resulted in Plato's brief Imprisonment.

Today Plato is recognised as a master of the dialogue form and as one of the great prose stylists of the Greek language. His works consist of some 35 dramatic dialogues on philosophical and related themes. The central problematic posed by this form is that it becomes virtually impossible to attribute any statement directly to Plato: as he never speaks in his own person. For the most part, Plato places his arguments in the mouths of characters who may or may not be based on historical persons. The speakers can never be assumed to be voicing Plato's own views or the views of those whose names they bear. In almost all the dialogues, Socrates is the focal character and Plato's

mouthpiece, but Plato's Socrates is not the historical Socrates. These complications, which thwart efforts to fix Plato's thought within a series of propositional statements, have attracted much attention, especially from late-20th century poststructuralist philosophers like Jacques Derrida.

The chronology of Plato's dialogues is highly controversial, but most scholars divide the works roughly into three periods. The earliest works, begun after 399, include the *Apology of Socrates* and *Crito,* in which Plato defends Socrates against the charges that led to his death; *Gorgias,* in which Socrates' opponent is the sophist Gorgias; and *Ion*, which examines poetry as a kind of divine madness. Characteristic of these early Platonic dialogues is Socrates' disarming claim of ignorance and a formal technique of cross-examination called *elenchus* a method of questioning designed to lead a learner through stages of reasoning and to expose the contradictions in an opponent's original statement. This method of "emptying out" the question by Socrates to reveal his opponents' ignorance is especially evident in his discussion of poetry with Ion, a rhapsode (professional reciter of epic poetry).

The middle period, from 380 to 367, includes the *Symposium, Cratylus,* and *Republic,* all begun after the founding of the Academy. They develop the theory of Forms or Ideas anticipated in the early dialogues. The Forms constitute a realm of unchanging being to which the world of individual mutable objects is subordinate. Because the Forms are immutable, they are more real-and truer than the changeable material world. The Form of the Good enjoys a unique status, for it is responsible for the being and intelligibility of the world as a whole.

To the late period (366-360) belong *Timaeus,* which throughout the Middle Ages was Plato's most widely known work; *Critias; Sophist;* and *Phaedrus,* the latter closing with a notorious attack on writing.

In *Ion,* Plato's Socrates engages Ion in a debate about the nature of the rhapsode's knowledge of poetry, about the nature of poetry, and about the status of knowledge itself. Poetry, Socrates maintains, is not an art; it is a form of divine madness: "the poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and

goes out of his mind." This debate between the claims of inspiration and those of art would subsequently have a long history in European literary criticism. Plato's Socrates goes a step further: "You are powerless to speak of Homer," he tells Ion, "on the basis of knowledge or mastery." Socrates uses the image of a magnet as a metaphor for divine inspiration: as a magnet attracts iron and passes that attraction along, so the gods inspire the artist, who inspires the Interpreter, who, In turn, inspires the audience. For Plato's Socrates, the work of poet and critic is not divided between inspiration and rational analysis; rather, it lies on a continuum, and the work of the critic is no more rational than that of the poet, the critic's knowledge no more truthful…"



LET US KNOW

However, it is helpful when reading Plato to remember that his dialogues do not always present a straightforward argument or arrive at a single unambiguous conclusion. The process of elenchus and Socrates' persistent irony often make it difficult to pin him down to anyone position. In *Ion,* is Socrates making fun of the pomposity of the rhapsode, or does he seriously believe that whatever truth emerges from poetry and the interpretation of poetry results only from divine madness?

On the surface, it might seem that *Ion* treats poetry very differently than does the later *Republic,* where Plato's Socrates argues that far from being divinely inspired, poets lie and ought to be banished from the ideal republic or, at the very least, heavily censored and kept in check. However, *Ion* presents a view of knowledge that is consistent with the weightier arguments of *Republic.* However divinely inspired, Socrates argues, poets' and critics' knowledge is of a different order.

To understand Socrates' remarks about knowledge, we need to understand the centrality of poetry to Greek education. In a culture in which the idea of literacy was relatively new, knowledge was frequently encoded and passed on through the devices of music and poetry. The

instruction provided by the Sophists and by Plato's main rival, Isocrates, was almost exclusively Rhetorical and literary. Even in *Republic,* a book concerned with the ideal education of the guardians and citizens, Socrates divides schooling into physical training for the body and music and poetry for the soul. Socrates' criticism of poetry and its representations appears to be directed against a culture that, believed literally "that poets know all crafts, all human affairs." In such a culture/ Socrates' insistence makes more sense: a poet needs to know a horse the way a horseman knows a-horse. In his Academy, however, Plato promoted a learning whose foundation was dialectics, dialogue, and philosophical, reasoning.

The critique of mimesis in both the *Allegory of the Cave* and *Republic (Book X)*, explore the nature of knowledge and its proper objects. The world we perceive through the senses, Socrates argues, is illusory and deceptive; it depends on a prior realm of separately existing Forms, organised beneath the Form of Good. The realm of Forms is accessible not through the senses, as is the world of appearances, but only through rigorous philosophic discussion and thought, based on 'mathematical reasoning'. For Plato's Socrates, measuring, counting, and weighing all bring us closer to the realm of Forms than do poetry's pale representations of nature. All art and poetry, because they represent what is already an inferior representation of the true original (the Forms), can only lead further away from the truth, and further into a world of illusion and deception. Virtually every subsequent defence of poetry (memorable examples include those by Aristotle, Sir Philip Sidney, Aphra Behn, P B Shelley) has had to come to terms with Plato's devastating attack on poetry as inferior and deceptive mimesis.

This way, we can assume that Plato is the progenitor of Western didactic criticism and theory: the idea that literature should serve moral and social functions: *Republic,* where he describes an ideal well-regulated community in which the educational curriculum promotes respect for law, reason, authority, self-discipline; and piety, has been especially influential.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: How was the teaching in Plato's Academy different from the Sophists'?

Q 2: What is the nature of Plato's Dialogues?

Q 3: What does Socrates state about poetry in Plato's *Ion*?

Q 4: Which are the three periods of Plato's dialogues?

Q 5: Mention the significance of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave."

2.4 IMPORTANT CONCEPTS IN *REPUBLIC* (BOOK X)

The following are the important aspects of Plato's *Republic* (Book X).

Platonic Theory of Forms:

Plato's theory of forms occurs in Book VII of the *Republic.* Plato likens the physical world to shadows, a cave (his 'Myth of the Cave'), from which men who are enlightened will ascend to the world of Forms. At this stage, we have to be sensitive to the fact that Plato was influenced by pre-Socratic thinkers like Heraclitus and Parmenides, who insisted on the physical world, knowable through our senses, as the world of "appearances." For Plato, the world of forms is the world of essences, of universality, changeless and eternal, each Form being a wide category capable of including many objects in the physical world. For Plato, the world of Forms, alone constitutes reality because these Forms are eternal and unchanging. These are essences; they are universal and exist in a world of unity. A Form is actually a category under which diverse objects of the physical world can be brought. A Table is a Form under which all objects which are used for supporting or displaying things can be included if they perform this function. In this manner, the theory allows to bring together disparate objects by referring them to a common essence. Thus, the theory enables us to make sense of the immense diversity of our experiences in the world.

Plato's Views on Poetry (Mimesis):

At this point, let us also observe Plato's views on poetry. In one sense, artistic and literary theory begins with Plato's idea of 'mimesis'. In his Dialogues, Plato points to inspiration behind poetry rather than wisdom: poetry as an element of education' the aims of poetic composition, the difference between speech and writing, and the relation of words to things. In *Ion*, Socrates cross-examines a rhapsode (a singer) regarding his art. As the investigation proceeds, it becomes clear that since a rhapsode only interprets what the poet conveys through divine inspiration, the rhapsodes are "interpreters of interpreters". What the rhapsode knows is not through knowledge but through divine inspiration.

In the *Republic*, Plato mentions an "ancient quarrel" between poetry and philosophy. The question of mimesis is closely linked to Plato's concern with justice. Mimesis, for him, is not simply an aesthetic category. It involves wider issues of social organisation, political structure, education. Mimesis is seen to run counter to reason and justice. In the ideal state, where its future guardians will receive their education and training, the ethical training will have to include stories since these will be important to their moral education. It is, while on this question of the kind of stories to be told to the future guardians that Plato turns deeper into the issue. The stories should be such as to induce good behaviour, not the opposite. In Book X of *Republic* containing the 'allegory of the cave', Plato views the world as an imitation, a copy of the world of essences. Following on this argument, artistic images are mere shadows of what they imitate. Artistic images present the appearances of things and not their real truth. Thus, images are inherently corrupting because they deal with appearance. Mimesis gives us 'phantoms', not essential, real things. Since images do not give us rational truth, they are inherently corrupting for the philosopher as well. Since the poet, like the painter or the artist, makes images or appearances of 'phantoms', it follows that the poet's activity which is far from proper knowledge, must be strictly monitored.

So, what was Plato's view of poetry in relation to his ideal

Republic? The argument can be traced through the ways in which Socrates, as the speaker in the *Republic*, reveals the notion of justice to be in keeping with poetic tradition. In other words, the notion of justice is derived from Homer's epic. In Book III of the *Republic*, Plato distinguishes different genres of poetry by their distinctive uses of imitation. In Book X, he reinforces his objection to "imitative" poetry and reiterates his earlier point that the imitator imitates what the craftsman makes. For Plato the imitator is the craftsman of images. Through Book X, Plato turns his attention to the relationship between painting and poetry as well as to the relation between imitation and craftsmanship.

Mimesis or Representation *from Norton Anthology :*

Plato and his student Aristotle both agree that mimesis (imitation or representation) is a key feature of poetry, but they conceive of and evaluate it quite differently. Plato has his spokesperson Socrates disapprove of' poetry's imitation of reality because poetry cannot depict truth and teach morality and that it is irrational-based on inspiration, not knowledge. As an idealist philosopher, Plato locates reality in a transcendent world of eternal Forms or Ideas that only reason can properly apprehend; this world is distinct from the illusory phenomenal world of our senses, which poetry represents. For Plato, "the material world is at best an imperfect copy of the original transcendent world of Ideas, and poetry is but a degraded copy of a copy. He concludes that poetic representation threatens social stability by offering false images and unsuitable role models. In *Republic*, therefore, he has Socrates recommend that it be banished from the ideal society, except perhaps that poetry which praises the gods and avoids representing them in an unseemly fashion.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: How does Plato view the Theory of Forms?

Q 7: What is Plato's views on Poetry in general?

2.5 RECEPTION OF PLATO AS A CRITIC

For centuries after Plato's death, the Academy continued though its members deviated from Platonic teachings in several striking ways. Within a century (276 BC), the school had become a centre for the philosophy of the Skeptics under Archesilaus. Revivals of some versions of Platonism were undertaken both at the Academy itself under Antiochus of Ascalon (87 BC) and elsewhere. For example, "Middle Platonism" developed at the same time in Athens and Alexandria (which included Plutarch). Neoplatonism began with Plotinus in Rome and continued until Justinian closed the pagan schools in 529 CE. In many ways, the Neoplatonism continued to provide a significant source of ideas for later medieval thinkers.

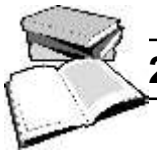
Plato's influence though transformed and reshaped by the Middle Platonists and the Neoplatonists, can be found later in the conceptions of temporal order and eternity in Augustine and Boethius, and in other ideas among the medieval rationalists, especially Anselm. The Platonic conception of knowledge, as derived from and secured by innate and infallible cognitive capacities, makes contact with a truth or reality that is independent of the human senses, continued after the Enlightenment in the philosophies of what have come to be known as the Continental Rationalists, most notably Rene´ Descartes, Benedict (Baruch) de Spinoza, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. It echoes even later in the transcendentalism of Immanuel Kant, the British idealist Francis Herbert Bradley, and, later still, in the American transcendentalists, most notably Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Despite the persistent debate about the nature of Plato's writings, they continue to be read in philosophy, justice, and history courses alike because the works pose philosophical problems and questions that remain intricate enough to challenge those who think critically about serious issues.



2.6 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, you have learnt about many important aspects of Plato's criticism. Although Plato did not set out to write systematic literary theory, unlike his disciple Aristotle who produced a treatise on poetics, his consideration of philosophical issues in several of the dialogues leads him to reflect on poetry which has often set the terms of literary debate in the West. What binds together Plato's various discussions of poetry is a distrust of miss-representation or imitation. According to Plato, art, including poetry, as can be found in *Republic*, is a mimesis of nature, a copy of objects in the physical world. But, those objects in the material world, according to the idealist philosophy that Plato propounds, are themselves only mutable copies of timeless universals, called Forms or Ideas. Poetry is merely a copy of a copy, leading away from the truth rather than toward it. Philosophers and literary, critics ever since, from Plotinus in the third century C.E. to Jacques Derrida in the late 20th century, have wrestled with the terms of Plato's critique of poetry, revising it or attempting to point out inconsistencies in his argument.



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6) Wimsatt, William K., & Brooks, Cleanth. (1957). *Literary Criticism*: *A Short History.* New Delhi: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.



2.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Plato's Academy was an institution devoted to research and instruction in philosophy and the sciences… …He envisioned the Academy as a school for statesmen where he could train a new kind of philosopher-ruler or the "guardian"… …unlike the older sophist Gorgias or Plato's contemporary rival Isocrates teaching the arts of Rhetoric and persuasion, Plato focused primarily on mathematics, logic and philosophy.

Ans to Q 2: Plato places his arguments in the mouths of characters who may or may not be based on historical persons… …the speakers can never be assumed to be voicing Plato's own views or the views of those whose names they bear… … Socrates is the focal character and Plato's mouthpiece in most of the dialogues.

Ans to Q 3: In *Ion* Socrates engages Ion in a debate about the nature of the rhapsode's knowledge of poetry, about the nature of poetry, and about the status of knowledge itself… … poetry is not an art; it is a form of divine madness.

Ans to Q 4: The first period include the *Apology of Socrates* and *Crito* in which Plato defends Socrates against the charges that led to his death; *Gorgias;* and *Ion* which examines poetry as a kind of divine madness… …the middle period includes the *Symposium, Cratylus,* and *Republic* all develop his theory of Forms… …the last include *Timaeus,* which throughout the Middle Ages was Plato's most widely known work; and other works such as *Critias; Sophist;* and *Phaedrus.*

Ans to Q 5: The world we perceive through the senses, Socrates argues, is illusory and deceptive; it depends on a prior realm of separately

existing Forms, organised beneath the Form of Good. The realm of Forms is accessible not through the senses, as is the world of appearances, but only through rigorous philosophic discussion and thought, based on 'mathematical reasoning.

Ans to Q 6: The world of forms is the world of essences, of universality, changeless and eternal, each Form being a wide category capable of including many objects in the physical world. For Plato, the world of Forms, alone constitutes reality because these Forms are eternal and unchanging. These are essences; they are universal and exist in a world of unity.

Ans to Q 7: Plato's view on poetry begins with Plato's idea of 'mimesis'… …In his Dialogues, Plato points to inspiration behind poetry rather than wisdom which means—poetry as an element of education, the aims of poetic composition, the difference between speech and writing, and the relation of words to things etc… …In *Ion*, Socrates cross-examines a rhapsode (a singer) regarding his art… …a rhapsode only interprets what the poet conveys through divine inspiration… …the rhapsodes are "interpreters of interpreters"… …what the rhapsode knows is not through knowledge but through divine inspiration.



2.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: How does the dialogue form help in philosophical inquiry, according to Plato? Discuss.

Q 2: Explain the ways, Plato engages himself with the discussions of poetry as well as poetic inspiration in his famous dialogue *Republic* (Book X)

Q 3: Who was Socrates? In what way can you get to know about Socrates through Plato's Dialogues?

Q 4: How does Plato's Republic helps to understand the Platonic theory of Representation? Discuss with reference to the text

prescribed.

Q 5: Write a note on Plato's contributions in Ancient Greek Criticism? Do you think that Plato succeeded in asking 'philosophical' questions? Give your reasons.

Q 6: What, according to you, are the major concerns of Classical Roman criticism? Elaborate with reference to Longinus's "On the Sublime"?

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Unit 3: ARISTOTLE: *POETICS*

UNIT STRUCTURE

3.1 Learning Objectives

3.2 Introduction

3.3 Aristotle: The Critic

3.4 Aristotle's *Poetics*

3.5 Important Concepts of the Text

3.6 Reception of Aristotle as a Critic

3.7 Let us Sum up

3.8 Further Reading

3.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

3.10 Possible Questions

3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss Aristotle's *Poetics* as a foundational text of classical criticism
- explain the different concepts and issues raised in the text
- examine how Aristotle's text provides fresh insights into the notion of imitation
- evaluate the status of Aristotle in the context of Western philosophy and criticism.

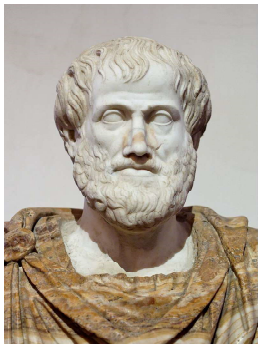
3.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to Aristotle and his *Poetics*—a seminal contribution to the intellectual world. You should note that Aristotle (384-322 BCE) is an important figure in the history of Western Philosophy. He invented the scientific method of analysis, and in a series of treatises, he codified the divisions of knowledge into disciplines and sub-disciplines that still continue in the form of physics, chemistry, zoology, biology, botany, psychology, politics, logic, and epistemology. Unlike his master Plato, who uses the dialogic mode to dramatise paths of thinking in a

conversational form, Aristotle, while presenting his ideas, relies on categorisation and logical differentiation in a straightforward propositional manner. He emphasises the distinctive qualities of a given object of study, whether of plants or of poems, systematically describing their specific features and construction. Plato and other personages often commented on literary works, but Aristotle inaugurated the systematic and distinctive discipline of literary criticism and theory with *Poetics.* This unit shall help you to discuss the importance of *Poetics, which* is one of the most influential works in the history of criticism and theory, as it shaped discussions of genre, prosody, style, structure, and form in later times. *Poetics* is believed to be a set of incomplete notes, survived only in a few faulty copies. Scholars speculate that we have discovered only half of the original text and that the other half, probably dealing with comedy, has been lost.

3.3 ARISTOTLE: THE CRITIC

Historical records tell that Aristotle was born in Stagira in Northern Greece. Greece, at that time was under the rule of Macedonia. Aristotle's father, Nicomachus, was the personal physician friend of Amyntus II, the king of Macedonia. Therefore, scholars naturally speculate that Aristotle's physician father inculcated in him a pragmatic interest in Biology and the natural world. Aristotle's connection with the Macedonian court affected his career. In 367 BC, Aristotle went to study at Plato's Academy in Athens, where he distinguished himself as one of Plato's best disciples, and eventually became a teacher himself. In 347 BC, perhaps after the death of Plato, Aristotle left Athens. He travelled first to Assos in Asia Minor, where he taught in a colony of Platonists for three years, and then to the island of Lesbos, where he did the biological research that grounded his later scientific treatises. In 344 or 343, Amyntas's son, King Philip, invited Aristotle to tutor his heir, Alexander, who was then about 13 years old.



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org

Aristotle perhaps finished tutoring him around 340, and probably lived in Macedonia or Stagira and completed *Rhetoric.* In 335, when Alexander ascended the throne and departed for his campaigns in Asia, Aristotle returned to Athens and began his own school at the Lyceum. There, he taught poetics, Rhetoric, politics, ethics, and metaphysics, and probably also worked on his famous treatises like *Politics, Nicomachean Ethics,* and *Poetics.* After the death of Alexander in 323, when public sentiment against Macedonia was rising, Aristotle left Athens to live in Chalcis on the island of Euboea, where he died in 322.

Aristotle's intellectual achievement is stupendous. He was the first genuine scientist in history. He was the first author whose surviving works contain detailed and extensive observations of natural phenomena, and he was the first philosopher to achieve a comprehensive grasp of the relationship between observation and theory in scientific method. He identified the various scientific disciplines and explored their relationships to each other. He was the first great teacher to organise his lectures into courses. In that sense, the Lyceum was the first academic institute in which a number of scholars and investigators joined in collaborative inquiry and documentation. He was also one of the first persons in history to build up a library, a systematic collection of works to be used by his colleagues and his posterity.

Aristotle believed that the life of the philosopher was not reclusive and scholarly but absorbed with public affairs. Many Aristotelian scholars tend to state that only about a fifth of Aristotle's prodigious 150 speculated works survived and transmitted, usually imperfectly through manuscript copies during the Middle Ages. His treatises are often seen as obscure, because they were available only in libraries for study by other scholars, and not to be copied for reading by general readers. Another important aspect of his works is that they are study guides rather than polished works, which is mainly because of the abrupt transitions, frequent repetitions, and short hand references to other works or writers. Most of them are also particularly difficult to date, since they were probably composed and revised over an extended period.

His Works:

Aristotle's early works were written mainly in the form of dialogues that obviously show marked influences of his teacher Plato. His more mature works, however, depart from Plato's model in a number of significant ways. Stylistically, he replaces the literary approach with systematic expositions of particular subjects, more in the form of technical manuals, than dramatic accounts. He uses analysis as his method, which means examining objects by studying their component parts, and through differentiation and classification. Philosophically, looking at nature and the objects of the real world, Aristotle grounds his research on a more pragmatic basis than Plato. In so doing, he tacitly rejects Plato's fundamental concept of transcendental ideas or Forms that govern and generate reality. In his own terms, Aristotle often works from induction, drawing his general conclusions from the particular objects he observes, whereas Plato usually works from deduction, drawing particular conclusions from his general metaphysical concept of being. Such differences between Plato and Aristotle help both students of philosophy and criticism to have a better grasp of various important aspects of early Greek criticism.

As you will read in this unit, *Poetics* demonstrates Aristotle's analytical method, which parallels that of his examinations of biology or zoology. He turns to the various categories of human artifacts, differentiating those made in language and eventually focusing on poetry and especially on the species-specific traits of epic and tragedy. He assumes a distinction between the wide class of objects that are humanly made and those that are naturally produced—between, say, a table and a tree. In treating poetry as a craft, Aristotle differs from Plato, who discusses poetry in terms of inspiration and the emotive transport of the poet—a line of thought that continues in 19th century Romanticism, exemplified by William Wordsworth's famous definition of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of emotion." He limits the study of poetry to its observable kinds and its formal construction, more or less ignoring questions about its origins. Drawing on a wide range of literary examples,

mainly from Sophocles' celebrated tragedy *Oedipus Rex,* Aristotle in *Poetics* presents six salient parts of tragedy, in order of their importance—plot, character, thought, diction, music, and spectacle.

Aristotle's *Rhetoric* suggests a different avenue for the study of literature. If you remember from your reading of Unit 1, Rhetoric as the study of figures of speech, but Aristotle defined it more broadly as the ability to see the available means of persuasion. Rather than seeing literary works in terms of their distinctive features and internal construction, it opens for consideration their affective and political dimensions as forms of public speech. Because of its focus on types of public speaking, the impact of the *Rhetoric* on literary study has been less direct than that of *Poetics.* However, its emphasis on audience response foreshadows subsequent theoretical approaches concerned with the reader, interpretation, and the political effects of literature. His distinction between poetics and Rhetoric reflects a perennial division in literary theory: the split between theories concerned with the internal properties of literature and those concerned with literature's external effects, especially on readers and society. Although Aristotle alludes to audience response in his discussion of catharsis in *Poetics,* he is most concerned with the material and formal causes of poetry. Such a focus has strongly marked modern Literary Criticism notably that of the New Critics like Wimsatt and Beardsley who explicitly disallow considerations of the audience as "the affective fallacy".

Other surviving works of Aristotle include the *Nicomachean Ethics* in 10 books, the *Eudemian Ethics* in 7 books, and the *Magna Moralia* (or "Great Ethics" in Latin). The *Nicomachean Ethics* is generally regarded as the most important of the three. It consists of a series of short treatises. In the 19th century, the *Eudemian Ethics* was often suspected of being the work of Aristotle's pupil Eudemus of Rhodes, but there is no good reason to doubt its authenticity. The concerns of Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* are explicit in this line: "It is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: "Aristotle's intellectual ideas are stupendous." Do you agree?

Q 2: Mention some of the great works of Aristotle. What ideas can we have of them?

Q 3: What do you get in Aristotle's *Poetics*?

Q 4: Discuss the significance of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*?

3.4 ARISTOTLE'S *POETICS*

Aristotle's main concern in *Poetics* is tragedy, which was considered the most developed form of poetry in his days. In this section, we shall try to have a detailed discussion on *Poetics.* Although many translations of the text of *Poetics* are available, the quotations in this unit, are mainly from Richard Janko's translation.

Poetics is a treatise of about not more than 50 pages, containing 26 small chapters. We can assume that it is a collection of the lectures that Aristotle delivered to his pupils. It is also believed that there is a second part, which is lost. If we have a look at the division of the chapters the first 4 chapters are devoted to poetry, the 5th chapter to comedy, epic and tragedy, the next 14 chapters exclusively to tragedy, the next 3 to poetic diction, the last 4 chapters to epic poetry and its comparison to tragedy. For the convenience of our discussion, let us discuss Poetics in terms of its chronological presentations of the different issues and ideas.

A. Aristotle's Observations on Poetry:

The text of *Poetics* begins with a declaration:

"Our topic is poetry in itself and its kinds, and what potential each has; how plots should be constructed if the composition is to turn out well; also, from how many parts it is [constituted], and of what sort they are; and likewise all other aspects of the same enquiry…Epic and tragic composition, and indeed comedy, dithyrambic composition, and most

sorts of music for wind and stringed instruments are all,[considered] as a whole, representations. They differ from one another in three ways, by using for the representation (i) different media, (ii) different objects, or, (iii) a manner that is different and not the same…Some people use colours and forms for representations, making images of many objects (some by art, and some by practice), and others do so with sound; so too all the arts we mentioned produce a representation using rhythm, speech and melody, but use these either separately or mixed."

After going through such a declaration, it should be clear to you that Aristotle's first consideration is the nature of the poetic art in general and representation or imitation in particular. While mentioning representation, Aristotle refers to three points of difference—its media, its objects and its manner. Like Plato, he too calls the poet an imitator, who like a painter or any other artist, imitates one of the three objects—'things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be, or things as they ought to be'. Like Plato, he too believes in the natural pleasures of imitation. Look at these lines:

"Two causes seem to have generated the art of poetry as a whole, and these are natural ones. (i) Representation is natural to human beings from childhood. They differ from the other animals in this: man tends most towards representation and learns his first lessons through representation. (ii) Everyone delights in representations."

So, it is the pleasure of imitation that enables a child to learn his earliest lessons in speech and behaviour. It is quite natural for a poet or an artist to imitate. However, there is also another natural instinct helping the poet—the instinct for harmony and rhythm manifesting itself in metrical composition. Hence, Aristotle states:

"Those by nature most disposed towards these generated poetry from their improvisations, developing it little by little. Poetry was split up according to their particular characters; the grander people represented fine actions, i.e. those of fine persons, the more ordinary people represented those of inferior ones, at first composing invectives, just as the others composed hymns and praise-poems. We donor know of any

composition of this sort by anyone before Homer, but there were probably many [who composed invectives]."

This is how, as Aristotle describes, comedy, tragedy and epic poetry were born. Comedy became the representation of people who are rather inferior, tragedy of serious people, and epic poetry following tragedy in so far as it is a representation of serious people, which uses speech in verse. Again, with respect to length, tragedy attempts as far as possible to keep within one revolution of the sun or only to exceed this a little, but epic is unbounded in time; although the poets at first composed in the same way in tragedy as in epics.



LET US KNOW

You have noted that Aristotle laid more and more emphasis on tragedy as the best form of poetic art. You have also understood that tragedy is different from comedy and epics in many ways. It also seems that epics and tragedy, being the imitations of the noble actions of good men, are held to be superior to satire and comedy, which are often concerned with the mean actions of low men. However, between tragedy and epic, Aristotle holds tragedy to be more superior a form, because it is compact and often embellished through music and spectacular effects.

Then Aristotle makes a comparative analysis between poetry and history. The difference between the poet and the historian is that the later relates to what has happened and the former to what may happen. Since history deals with the particulars, poetry expresses the universal. Thus, **poetry is more philosophical than history**. Poetry therefore is not the reproductions of facts, but truths embedded in those facts that apply to all places and times. This is perhaps the meaning imitation for Aristotle, as well as a severe objection to Plato's idea of imitation. Taking tragedy as the highest form of poetry, he states that it arouses the emotions of pity and fear—pity at the suffering of the hero who does not deserve that suffering and fear of the worst that may befall him. Thus, the emotional

appeal of poetry is not harmful, as Plato once believed, but health giving and artistically satisfying.

B. Aristotle's Observations on Tragedy:

Aristotle deals broadly with the characteristics of tragedy. He defines tragedy "as a representation of a serious, complete action which has magnitude, in embellished speech, with each of its elements used separately in the various parts of the play; represented by people acting and not by narration; accomplishing by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions." This has so far been one of the best definitions of tragedy. By "embellished speech," he means which has rhythm and melody. Since the actors of a tragedy produce the representation, the ornament of spectacle will necessarily be a part of tragedy. And then, 'song' and 'diction' become the media in which they produce the representation. By "diction", Aristotle means the construction of the [spoken] verses itself; and by "song", he means that of which the meaning is entirely obvious. Since tragedy is a representation of an action, and is enacted by actual people, these people are necessarily of a certain sort according to their character and their reasoning. It is because of these that we say that actions are of a certain sort, and it is according to people's actions that they all succeed or fail. Action thus comprises all human activities, deeds, thoughts and feelings. It should be complete or self-contained with a beginning, middle and ending. If this order is somehow gets dismantled, the action is never complete or whole, and becomes haphazard or loose.

Then Aristotle moves on to discuss the constituent parts of tragedy. As he states: "So tragedy as a whole necessarily has six parts...These are plot (mythos), characters (ethos), diction (lexis), reasoning (dianoia), spectacle (opsis),and song (melos)." The media in which the poets make the representation comprise two parts – diction and song, the manner in which they make the representation, plot, character and reasoning, spectacle and the objects which they represent. Then, he proceeds to describe each constituent part one by one. Plot is described as the soul of tragedy. Plot is primary while characters are

secondary. However, a character in a tragedy should be good, appropriate, life like and consistent. Since tragedy is a representation of an action, for the sake of the action, people who act are necessary. By diction, he means language which has the same potential in the case of both verse and prose speeches. By Reasoning he means what is possible and appropriate in case of the speeches of civic life. It is that element with which people demonstrate that something is or is not, or make some universal statement. Of the remaining constituents— song is the most important of the embellishments, while spectacle is something enthralling, but is very artless and least particular to the art of poetic composition.

After Aristotle provides the definitions, he starts discussing the sort of structure of the incidents, since this is the first and most important part of tragedy. If tragedy is the representation of a complete action, the whole action should have some magnitude. A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an ending. A beginning is that which itself does not follow something else, but after which there naturally is, or comes into being, something else. A middle is that which itself naturally follows something else, and has something else after it. An ending or conclusion, conversely, is that which itself naturally follows something else, either of necessity or for the most part, but has nothing else after it. Well-constructed plots, then, should neither begin from a random point nor conclude at a random point, but should use the elements. Completeness thus implies organic unity or natural sequence of events that is not to be disturbed. This is how he brings in the idea of a plot, which is the representation of the action through the construction of the incidents. The plot should have certain magnitude or a reasonable length, such as the mind may comprehend fully within a stipulated time. In his own words, the plot should be of a length, which can be easily embraced by the memory. Thus, as Lodovico Castelvetro observed, Aristotle brings in the ideas of the three unities – Unity of Action, Unity of Time, and Unity of Place, to discuss the structure of the plot. Aristotle also brings in the idea of simple and complex plot. In a simple plot, there is no puzzling

situation, which often enters into a complex plot in terms of what Aristotle calls Peripeteia and Anagnorisis.

The Three Unities:

Lodovico Castelvetro (1505-1571) was an important figure in the development of Neo-classicism. It was his reading of Aristotle that led to a widespread adoption of a tight version of the Three Unities, as a dramatic standard. Subsequently, his "The Poetics of Aristotle in the Vulgar Language" came to be considered as one of the most famous Italian Renaissance commentaries on Aristotle's *Poetics.* In *Poetics,* while discussing action in a play, Aristotle states that the fable should be the imitation of one action, and of the whole of this and the parts of the transactions should be so arranged, that any one of them being transposed, or taken away the whole would become different and changed. Of time he states that Tragedy endeavours to confine itself to one revolution of the sun, or but slightly to exceed this limit. Of space, he is less explicit, merely saying (when contrasting epic and tragedy), that tragedy should be confined to a narrow compass. In the 16th and 17th century Neo-classical critics of the drama in Italy and France strongly adhered to the unities.

C. Aristotle's Observations on Comedy:

In the text of *Poetics*, we find very little about comedy. However, as Aristotle discusses, the roots of comedy perhaps lie deep in satirical verses, which owes its origin to the earlier phallic songs in honour of the fertility God Dionysus. Comedy represents men as worse than they are. Satire ridicules personalities, while comedy ridicules general vices. While referring to men as worse than the average, he does not actually mean men who are wicked or vicious but men who have some defect or ugliness, which is not painful or destructive. They simply provoke laughter but cause no harm or pain either to themselves or to others. They are simply ludicrous which is a subdivision of the ugly.

D. Aristotle's Observations on the Epics:

The epic is earlier in origin than either tragedy or comedy. In its

nature, it resembles tragedy closely, but differs from it in terms of form. As Aristotle states: “As for the art of exposition and representation in verse, it is clear that, just as in tragedies, the epic poet should also construct plot that is dramatic, that it should be a single whole action that is complete, with a beginning, middle and end, so that it will produce the pleasure particular to it. The constructions of the incidents should not be like histories. Just as the sea battle at Salamis and the battle against the Carthaginians in Sicily happened at the same time, but did not contribute to the same end, so in addition, in sequential periods, one thing sometimes comes about after another, but from these there comes about no single end. This is what the majority of the epic poets do.

Referring to Homer, he states: “For this reason, as we said already, Homer appears marvellous compared to the others, in that he did not undertake to put into his composition even the Trojan War as a whole, although it has a beginning and an end. For the plot would probably have been too big and not easily seen as a whole; or, if it were moderate in magnitude, it would have been too complex in its variety of incidents. As it is, selecting a single part of it, Homer has used many of them as episodes.” Again, epic must have, the same kinds as tragedy, for it must be either (i) simple or (if) complex, (iii) an epic of character or (iv) one of suffering. Its parts, except for song and spectacle, are the same. In fact, it also needs reversals, recognitions and sufferings. Homer is the first epic poet to use all of these. In addition, he has surpassed all others in diction and reasoning. Epic differs from tragedy in terms of the length of its plot-structure, and its verse. Epics imitate life by narration and not by dramatic action and speech. It has no use for song and spectacle, which are integral part of acting. Meaning is communicated through mere reading or recitation. Homer deserves acclaim mainly because he alone among epic poets is so well aware of what he was doing.

Poetics ends with a citation of the relative importance of tragedy over other genres of poetry mainly the epic. As he states “So if tragedy is superior in all these ways, and also in achieving the function of the art

(for tragedy and epic should produce not a random pleasure, but the one we have mentioned), it is obvious that it will be superior to epic as it achieves its end more than epic does. So, regarding tragedy and epic, in themselves, their kinds and their parts, as to how many there are and how they differ, and what are the causes of doing well or not in them, and regarding questions raised and their solutions, let this account suffice."

Russell and Winterbottom write, *Poetics* is a work that does not so much describe the genres of tragedy and epic as analyse them to see what makes them what they are, how they have developed with some admixture of historical information. From *Poetics*, we somehow come to learn about the kinds of plays that Aristotle likes or dislikes. *Poetics* demonstrates Aristotle's analytical method. We find Aristotle turning to the various categories of human artefacts, differentiating those made in language and eventually focusing on poetry, especially on epic and tragedy. He assumes a distinction between the wide class of objects that are humanly made and those that are naturally produced-between, say, a chair and a tree. Aristotle limits his study of poetry to its observable kinds and its formal construction, more or less ignoring questions about its affective origins, which he regards as falling under the auspices of other pursuits, such as psychology or Rhetoric.



LET US KNOW

Plato and Aristotle:

Arguing against Plato, Aristotle defined and defended tragedy as a worthy form. Plato had condemned poetry in his *Republic* on several grounds like—poets don't know what they are doing, but merely reproduce the surface of things, theirs is expressions of emotion, rather than illustration of the dangers of giving way to emotion and exalting the greater privilege of thinking, as philosophers do. In his defence of tragedy in *Poetics,* Aristotle gives poetry the knowledge and moral weight that Plato had denied. Aristotle undertakes to examine the nature and differentiating qualities of imaginative literature with a view to

demonstrating that it is true, serious and useful, unlike Plato who had shown it to be false, trivial and harmful. Aristotle's Catharsis is in fact an answer to Plato's notion that art corrupts by nourishing the passions. Instead, Aristotle implies that art gives them real and useful purgation. For example, by exciting pity and fear in us, tragedy enables us to leave the theatre 'in calm of mind, all passion spent.'



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What are the main issues dealt by Aristotle in his *Poetics*?

Q 6: Mention the three points of difference in Aristotle's ideas of imitation.

Q 7: What is Aristotle's definition of tragedy? How is it related to imitation or representation?

Q 8: What are the constituent parts of a tragedy? State their role in a tragedy.

Q 9: What, according to Castelvetro, are the three unities in *Poetics*?

Q10: How does Aristotle view comedy and epic?

Q11: How do Russell and Winterbottom assess the importance of Aristotle's *Poetics*?

3.5 IMPORTANT CONCEPTS OF THE TEXT

Central to Aristotle's discussions in *Poetics* is representation *(Mimesis),* and he opines that the best plots should have verisimilitude, which means, they must be plausible. He also stresses a logically connected order— an appropriate starting point, elaboration, and a dramatic end or resolution. The best resolution is one that shows a reversal *(Peripeteia)* of position for the main character, as well as the character's recognition *(Anagnorisis)* of his or her fate. Aristotle feels that the characters in tragedy should come from high positions; otherwise, their tragic circumstances would not be remarkable. He also prescribes

that their fates be linked to their own error *(hamartia,* literally "missing the mark," though frequently translated as "flaw"), rather than from some accident or wickedness. He concludes *Poetics* somewhat technically by classifying parts of speech in his discussion of diction, sketching solutions to problems of interpretation, and comparing the genres of tragedy and epic. Though rooted in the literature of his own time and focused especially on a form of drama quite different from ours, *Poetics* has continued to powerfully influence criticism. Let us now briefly discuss the important concepts of *Poetics* in some detail.

Mimesis or "imitation", "representation":

In literary criticism, mimesis or imitation has two applications— (1) to define the nature of literature and the other arts, and (2) to indicate the relation of one literary work to another which served as its model. In *Poetics* however, Aristotle defines poetry as an imitation of human actions. By imitation, he probably means something like 'representation' in its root sense. The poem imitates by taking an instance of human action and re-presenting it in a new medium or material—that of words. By distinguishing differences in the artistic media, in the kind of actions imitated, and in the manner of imitation (for example, dramatic or narrative), Aristotle first distinguishes poetry from other arts, and then makes distinctions between the various poetic kinds, such as drama and epic, tragedy, and comedy. You should note that from the 16th through the 18th century, the term imitation was central in discussing the nature of poetry. Critics differed radically, however, in their concept of the nature of the mimetic relationship and the kinds of things in the external world that works of literature imitate. With the emergence *Expressive Criticism* (the view that poetry is essentially an expression of the poet's feelings or imaginative process) in the early 19th century, imitation seems to have been displaced from its central position in criticism and literary theory.

Catharsis or "purgation", "purification", "clarification":

Aristotle uses the word Catharsis in his definition of tragedy in *Poetics*, but there has been much inconclusive debate on exactly what he meant. The key sentence is: "Tragedy through pity and fear effects

catharsis of such emotions." Therefore, in a sense, tragedy having aroused powerful feelings in the spectator has also a therapeutic effect. After the conflict-ridden climax, there comes a sense of release from tension. Traditionally, Catharsis is rendered as 'purgation' and refers to the psychological effect of tragedy on the audience. Against Plato's condemnation of art for unhealthily stimulating emotions, which should be suppressed, Aristotle argues that audiences are not inflamed or depressed by the spectacle of suffering in tragedy, but in some way released. Our subjective, potentially morbid emotions are extended outward, through pity for the tragic hero, in an enlargement, a leading out, of the soul. Therefore, tragedy moves us towards psychic harmony. A related, but less psychological, interpretation puts Catharsis into the context of Aristotle's argument that the pleasure peculiar to tragedy arises from the fact that our emotion is authorised and released by an intellectually conditioned structure of action. Alternatively, Catharsis may also be seen not as the result but as a process operating through the 'structure of events' which purifies, not the audience, but the events themselves. Therefore, Catharsis is the purification of the hero, which enables us to overcome horror.

Anagnorisis or "recognition", "identification" & Peripeteia or "reversal":

According to Aristotle, Anagnorisis and Peripeteia are the two key moments of tragic plot. Aristotle uses these terms in his *Poetics* to describe the moment of recognition (of truth) that gives way to knowledge. For Aristotle, the best kind of recognition is accompanied by a Peripeteia, a reversal of situation (from happy to miserable, for example). The classic example is Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in which Oedipus discovers that he himself killed Laiusm, his father, and married his mother. While, Peripeteia is the reversal of fortune to misfortune that guides most tragic narratives, including that of Oedipus. Aristotle defines recognition as "A change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune." In Aristotle's favourite example, Oedipus finally knows that he

has killed his father and married his mother, and this recognition brings on the terrible conclusion of *Oedipus Rex*.

Hamartia or "miscalculation", "tragic flaw":

Hamartia primarily means an error of judgment, which may arise from ignorance or some moral shortcoming. Discussing tragedy and the tragic hero in *Poetics*, Aristotle points out that the tragic hero ought to be a man whose misfortune comes to him, not through vice or depravity, but through some error. For example, in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex,* Oedipus impulsively kills his father and marries his mother out of ignorance. To understand Hamartia, we may look at the Aristotelian definition of tragedy as 'the imitation of an action that is serious . . . with incidents arousing pity and fear'. Although in *Poetics* Aristotle attempts a classification of the elements proper to tragedy, but very few Greek tragedies conform to his model. However, his concept of Hamartia, the act of the hero, which initiates the fatal process, suggests a basis for a more developed theory of tragedy. This Hamartia may be anything—a mistake over identity or deliberate crime or sin. This is always horrifying as it leads to the consequences of pain and destruction. Tragedy is a dramatisation of an individual's sense of life and society as constantly under threat from the arbitrary chances of fate and humanity's own innate savagery.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 12: Discuss the main concepts that Aristotle raises in his discussion of tragedy in *Poetics*.

Q 13: How would you like to discuss the idea of Catharsis?

Q 14: What do you mean by Anagnorisis and Peripeteia? How are they connected?

Q 15: How is Hamartia connected with a more mature sense of tragedy?

3.6 RECEPTION OF ARISTOTLE AS A CRITIC

In the century immediately after his death, Aristotle's works seem

to have fallen out of circulation. However, eventually they came to form the backbone of some seven centuries of philosophy in the form of the commentary tradition. From the 6th through the 12th centuries, although the bulk of Aristotle's writings were lost to the West, they received extensive consideration in Byzantine and Arabic Philosophy, where Aristotle was so prominent that he became known simply as "The First Teacher". In this tradition, the notably rigorous and illuminating commentaries of Avicenna and Averroes interpreted and developed Aristotle's views in striking ways. These commentaries in turn proved exceedingly influential in the earliest reception of the Aristotelian corpus into the Latin West in the 12th century. Interest in Aristotle continued throughout the Renaissance in the form of Renaissance Aristotelianism. The dominant figures of this period borrow much from Medieval Aristotelian Scholasticism, which reached a rich and highly influential end in the figure of Suárez, whose life in turn overlaps with Descartes.

However, the study of Aristotle has undergone several periods of relative neglect and interest. Today, philosophers of various schools continue to look to Aristotle for guidance and inspiration in many different areas, ranging from the philosophy of mind to theories of the infinite, though perhaps Aristotle's influence is seen most overtly and avowedly in the resurgence of virtue and ethics that began in the last half of the 20th century. Aristotle's *Rhetoric,* although its influence has not been as sustained or decisive as that of *Poetics,* proposes what the twentieth-century philosopher Martin Heidegger called the first work of hermeneutics; that is, it considers how response too is a factor in interpretation.

Aristotle's seminal distinction between Poetics and Rhetoric has been crucial in contemporary debates over the proper object of literary criticism. Against the tendency fostered by the New Critics, and later by the deconstructive critics who advocated a close linguistic study of literature, we have witnessed a "Rhetorical turn" toward methods favouring attention to the personal, historical, and social effects of literary texts. Some object that such approaches address topics outside the

purview of literary study. That is, they urge, a strict poetic view, arguing that literary criticism should focus on the distinctive attributes of literary works.

You should however remember that the modern speculation on *Poetics* began during the Renaissance, when it was rediscovered from fragmentary manuscripts and was taken as a rulebook for literary composition. The descriptions of formal unity influenced 17th century European writers such as the French dramatist Pierre Corneille. While the 18th century writers sought to revive its precepts as "neoclassicism". In 20th century literary theory, *Poetics* was often considered foundational for formalist methods, which apply objective modes of analysis to linguistic artefacts. Subsequently, it influenced a wide array of critics, ranging from the Russian formalists like Boris Eichenbaum and the American New Critics like William K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe c. Beardsley to the archetypal critics like Northrop Frye and the French Structuralists like Tzvetan Todorov.

Aristotle's systematic categorisation of genus and species and his comparison of tragedy and epic underlie all genre theory. Perhaps, most decisively, in Aristotle's systematic description of plot and its component parts, is grounded contemporary narrative theory. His scientific examination of poetry has been championed by the New Critics– W.K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks as "Aristotle's answer" to Plato, responding both to Plato's view of poetry as a degraded imitation twice removed from the reality of eternal Ideas or Forms, and to his suspicion of poetry as stirring emotions in a way that is dangerous for society.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 16: In what ways, as the New Critics would like to suggest, is Aristotle's *Poetics* an answer to Plato's idea of poetry?



3.7 LET US SUM UP

Poetics, as you must have realised by now, deals mainly with poetry. Among other things, it aims to answer Plato's criticisms of representative art. According to Plato's theory of Forms, material objects are only imitations of original or 'real' Forms. Artistic representations of material objects are therefore only copies of copies, and so removed from reality. Moreover, drama has a specially corrupting effect, because it stimulates unworthy emotions in its audience. In response to such Platonic ideas, Aristotle insists that imitation is natural to humans. Subsequently, in order to answer Plato's complaint that playwrights are only imitators of everyday life, Aristotle draws a contrast between poetry and history. The poet's job is to describe not something that has actually happened but something that might well happen. Thus, poetry is viewed by Aristotle to be more philosophical and more important than history, for poetry speaks of the universal, history only the particular. Another point Aristotle raises regarding drama, is that far from debasing the emotions, as Plato used to think, drama has a beneficial and purgatory effect on the audience. Tragedy, according to Aristotle, must contain episodes that arouse pity and fear to achieve a "purification" of emotions.



3.8 FURTHER READING

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9) Russell, D. A. & M. Winterbottom. (eds). (1989). *Classical Literary Criticism.* New York: Oxford University Press.

10) Vincent B. Leitch. (Ed). (2001). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Norton.

Web Resources :

plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle/http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/34560/Aristotle/254726/Rhetoric-and-poetics



3.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Yes,he is the first genuine scientist in history… …He is the first to observe natural phenomena purposefully… …he is the first philosopher to achieve a comprehensive grasp of the relationship between observation and theory… …he is the first to identity the various scientific disciplines and explored their relationships… …he is the first great teacher to organise his lectures into courses.

Ans to Q 2: It is believed that Aristotle wrote nearly 150 books… …some of his great contributions are – *Poetics*, *Rhetoric*, *Nichomachean Ethics*, *Eudemian Ethics*, *Magna Moralia*… …one important aspect of his works is that they are study guides rather than polished works… …most of them are particularly difficult to date, since they were probably composed and revised over a period of time.

Ans to Q 3: *Poetics* demonstrates Aristotle's analytical method… …here he turns to poetry and especially to the species-specific traits of

epic and tragedy… …in treating poetry as a craft, Aristotle differs from Plato, who discusses poetry in terms of inspiration and the emotive transport of the poet… …here he draws mainly from Sophocles' celebrated tragedy *Oedipus Rex* to present the six salient parts of tragedy—plot, character, thought, diction, music, and spectacle.

Ans to Q 4: Aristotle *Rhetoric* deals with the ability of a work of art to persuade… …rather than seeing literary works in terms of their distinctive features and internal construction, it is concerned with an external effect of literature… …its emphasis on audience response foreshadows twentieth century theoretical approaches concerned with the reader, interpretation, and the political effects of literature.

Ans to Q 5: Aristotle's observation on Poetry which is divided into tragedy, comedy and epic… …the notion of Imitation which is different from that of Plato… …detailed observation on tragedy… …the distinction between poetry and history and so on.

Ans to Q 6: While mentioning mimesis, Aristotle refers to three points of difference—its media, its objects and its manner… …as Aristotle writes: "Some people use colours and forms for representations, making images of many objects (some by art, and some by practice), and others do so with sound; so too all the arts we mentioned produce a representation using rhythm, speech and melody, but use these either separately or mixed."

Ans to Q 7: Aristotle defines tragedy as **"**a representation of a serious, complete action which has magnitude, in embellished speech, with each of its elements used separately in the various parts of the play; represented by people acting and not by narration; accomplishing by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions."… …tragedy is enacted by actual people who are necessarily of certain sort according to their character and their reasoning, while action comprises all human activities, deeds, thoughts and feelings.

Ans to Q 8: The main constituent parts are: plot (mythos), characters

(ethos), diction (lexis), reasoning (dianoia), spectacle (opsis), and song (melos)… …plot is the soul of tragedy… …characters in a tragedy should be good, appropriate, life like and consistent… … diction is the language which should have potential… …reasoning demonstrates people's ability to make some universal statement… …song is used mainly for embellishments… …spectacle is something enthralling, but least particular to the art of poetic composition.

Ans to Q 9: The idea of three unities are related to Aristotle's idea of a plot… …the plot should be of a length which can be easily embraced by the memory… …thus, he brings in the ideas of the three unities – Unity of Action, Unity of Time, and Unity of Place to discuss the structure of the plot.

Ans to Q 10: In the text of *Poetics* very little is available on Comedy… …comedy represents men as worse than they are to arouse laughter… …while epic in its nature resembles tragedy closely, the only difference being its form.

Ans to Q 11: *Poetics* demonstrates Aristotle's analytical method… …we find Aristotle turning to the various categories of human artifacts, differentiating those made in language and eventually focusing on poetry and especially on the specific traits of epic and tragedy… …but he limits his study of poetry to its observable kinds more or less ignoring questions about its affective origins… …finally, we end up knowing about the kinds of play that Aristotle likes or dislikes.

Ans to Q 12 to 15: For the answers, you are advised to go through the section 3.5 carefully.

Ans to Q 16: Instead of directly disagreeing with Plato, Aristotle implicitly validates poetry by examining it as a legitimate branch of study… …countering Plato's notion of poetry as degraded imitation, Aristotle sees poetry as a source of universal knowledge of human behaviour… …he also felt that unlike history, which produces knowledge only of specific situations, poetry describes the actions

of characters who might be any humans… …moreover, he claims that good poetry has a positive emotional effect on its audience, which he calls Catharsis-perhaps the most important and variously interpreted word in *Poetics.*



3.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q1: What do you mean by the idea of imitation or poetic representation in the context of Greek classical criticism? Discuss with reference to Plato and Aristotle.

Q2: How does Aristotle view Poetry in his *Poetics*? Discuss in detail.

Q3: Aristotle differentiates poetry from history. Discuss this point with reference to tragedy as the greatest form of poetry.

Q4: Why does the idea of 'representation of an action' become so important in Aristotle's definition of tragedy?

Q5: What according to you is the significance of what critics call the 'Platonic Dilemma'? Do, you feel that Aristotle's 'Catharsis' is an answer to the charges brought against poetry by Plato?

Q6: In what ways, both Plato and Aristotle seek to provide clues to the 'ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry'? Substantiate your answer with reference to classical Greek criticism represented by Plato and Aristotle.

Q7: Discuss the important concepts related to tragedy that Aristotle develops in his *Poetics.*

Q8: Assess the importance of Aristotle as one of the most important critics of classical Greek tradition.

Q9: How is Aristotle received as a critic since the Renaissance until the 20th century? Provide a detailed answer.

Q10: Comment on the nature of Aristotle's works? How does Aristotle differ from his master Plato in terms of his works?

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UNIT 4: LONGINUS: *ON THE SUBLIME*

UNIT STRUCTURE:

4.1 Learning Objectives

4.2 Introduction

4.3 Longinus: The Critic

4.4 Reading Longinus' *On The Sublime*

4.5 Important Concepts of the Text

4.6 Reception of Longinus as a Critic

4.7 Let us Sum up

4.8 Further Reading

4.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

4.10 Possible Questions

4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- make a survey of the life and works of Longinus
- discuss "On the Sublime" as a foundational text of Roman classical criticism
- appreciate the treatise "On the Sublime" for its originality and power
- explain the different concepts and issues that are raised in the text and evaluate the contributions of Longinus in terms of the concept of the 'Sublime'
- assess the importance of Longinus as a critic in terms of the different aspects of his life and works.

4.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we will be discussing another most important critical essays of classical literary criticism—"On the Sublime" written by Longinus. This essay about which you are going to read in this unit is fragmentary in nature because there are many frequent and extensive gaps in the text. Since the 18th century, "On the Sublime" has maintained

the reputation as one of the most influential classical works in the tradition of European criticism, despite the uncertainty that surrounds its authorship and the date of its composition. It is believed that nearly one third of the original document is missing. It is to be noted that in modern times, the concept of the Sublime owes its resurgence to a translation in 1674 by Nicolas Boileau, the most important figure of French Neo-classicism. You should also note that in the text of "On the Sublime", Longinus emphasises the felt effects induced by great mental conceptions or figures of speech or well-chosen diction. The Sublime became an important element in the broad Romantic reaction in Europe against Neoclassicism, as well as in the newly rising domain of aesthetics in the work of thinkers such as Immanuel Kant. Thus, this unit shall help you to understand the importance of Longinus as a major critic of Roman classicism with the help of an important critical essay of antiquity.

4.3 LONGINUS: THE CRITIC

Longinus, sometimes referred to as Pseudo-Longinus (because his real name is unknown), was a Greek teacher of Rhetoric or a critic who may have lived in the 1st or 3rd century A.D. He is known solely for his treatise "On the Sublime"**.** He appears to be well-educated, one who shows a keen interest in several literatures, including the first chapter of *Genesis*. He finds Greek techniques preferable to Roman, and pointedly quotes Homer and Plato rather than Virgil and Cicero. He turns toward the intensive cultivation of critical skills and refined literary judgment in the pursuit of expressive power and intellectual transport. The improvement of his mind was always uppermost in his thoughts, and his thirst for knowledge led him to those channels by which it is conveyed. He was widely travelled, studied in many cities, and was the friend of the mystic Neo-Platonists, Plotinus and Ammonius. He was a perfect master of style, and could discern every beauty or blemish in every composition.

Although it is believed that to Longinus's credit lies a whole lot of texts, majority of them are philosophical and written on critical subjects. However, it is **Peri Hupsous** or "On the Sublime" on which his fame has

been founded and erected. When “On the Sublime” was first published in its original Greek by an Italian critic, Robortelli in 1554, the volume was attributed to “Dionysius Longinus” which further led ancient scholars to ascribe the work to either Dionysius of Halicarnassus or to Cassius Longinus, the 3rd century critic and Rhetorician. However, the controversy regarding its authorship remains. Most translators and commentators, then, have adhered to the convention of referring to the unknown author of ”On the Sublime” simply as Longinus.

The essay is personal in tone and addressed to Postumius Terentianus, his friend. This friend, as Longinus recalls in the first sentence, once accompanied him in a study of Caecilius’s monograph ‘On Sublimity’, but they found the work greatly lacking in the treatment of its subject matter and in the attitude, it took toward its readers. Longinus points out that “every specialised treatise...should clarify its subject,” and, second, “it should tell us how and by what methods we can attain it”. Longinus adopts a rather amiable, intimate, yet soberly critical attitude here and views his inquiry into the nature of the sublime or greatness in writing as a collaborative enterprise. His work, deliberately and inter-textually dependent upon another work of the same title, appears to originate in a scene of collaborative critical reading. It is written in the epistolary form and the final part, possibly dealing with public speaking, has been lost. Longinus critically praises and blames literary works as examples of good or bad styles of writing. Longinus ultimately promotes an “elevation of style” and an essence of ”simplicity”.

Such a reference is quite distinctive: no other known pagan writer employs the Bible in this manner. While scholars continue to attribute *On Sublimity* to Cassius Longinus, they do so as a matter of convenience. Despite seven lengthy gaps that make up approximately one-third of the original text, the intended organisation of *On Sublimity* is reasonably certain. After the formal preface addressed to Postumius Terentianus (about whom we know nothing) and the enumeration of common faults that arise when authors attempt to achieve sublimity, Longinus provides some general marks of true sublimity. Then, in the 8th chapter, he

proceeds to enumerate the five sources of sublimity: great thoughts, strong emotion, certain figures of thought and speech, noble diction; and dignified word arrangement. The remainder of the treatise, except for the anomalous short final chapter on the decline of literature, concerns itself with detailed analytical discussion of each source in the order in which they are first listed, with illustrative digressions on Homer, Demosthenes, and Plato, among others. While the text on the second source, strong emotion, is no longer extant, the author's understanding of it is clear from, many comments scattered throughout the treatise.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: State briefly about the controversy related to the text of "On the Sublime".

4.4 READING LONGINUS' *ON THE SUBLIME*

The original text of "On the Sublime" starts with an address to one Postumius Terentianus whose identity cannot be traced now. This address helps us to consider the context, which necessitated a detail discussion on the idea of sublime by Longinus. Read the opening lines of the text:

"My dear Postumius Terentianus, You will recall that when we were reading together Caecilius' monograph *On Sublimity,* we felt that it was inadequate to its high subject, and failed to touch the essential points. Nor indeed did it appear to offer the reader much practical help, though this ought to be a writer's principal object. Two things are required of any textbook: first, that it should explain what its subject is; second, and more important, that it should explain how and by what methods we could achieve it. Caecilius tries at immense length to explain to us what sort of thing 'the sublime' is, as though we did not know; but he has somehow passed over as unnecessary the question how wean develop our nature to some degree of greatness. However, we ought perhaps not so much to blame our author for what he has left out as to commend him for his originality and enthusiasm…You have urged me to set down a few notes



Homer: Ancient Greek epic poet.
Aeschylus: Greek tragedian.
Plato: Classical Greek philosopher, mathematician and student of Socrates.
Sappho: Ancient Greek lyric poet.
Demosthenes: prominent Greek statesman and orator of ancient Athens.
Herodotus: Ancient Greek historian.

on sublimity for your own use. Let us then consider whether there is anything in my observations, which may be thought useful to public men. You must help me, my friend, by giving your honest opinion in detail, as both your natural candour and your friendship with *me require*. It was well said that what man has in common with the; gods is "doing good and telling the truth."

Soon you will find that Longinus's "On the Sublime" is a critical document of immense worth and significance, as he cites **Sublimity** to be a kind of eminence or excellence of discourse. It is the source of the distinction of the very greatest poets and prose writers and the means by which they have given eternal life to their own fame. Here he discusses those vices of style, which constitute contemporary oratory, which Longinus calls a 'false sublime'. Then, he points out some defects of style, which tends to spoil the loftiness of language. **The first fault** is "turgidity" when the artist or poet aims too high and, instead of achieving ecstasy, merely lapses into folly, producing effects, which are overblown or bombastic**. The second fault** is "puerility". The use of puerility spoils the sublimity. It is a pedantic type of conceit adding to a pompous and frigid style. **The third fault** is "parenthyrson". To Longinus, this term refers to 'emotion misplaced and pointless where none is needed or unrestrained where restraint is required'. Thus, the false sublime consists merely of a gorgeous exterior where pompous language is used to clothe thoughts, which are essentially trivial or puerile. The poet can avoid these faults by having a clear knowledge and appreciation of what is truly sublime. At this stage, Longinus tells his friend about the marks of true sublimity: "At this stage, the question we must put to ourselves for discussion is how to avoid the faults which are so much tied up with sublimity. The answer, my friend, is: by first of all achieving a genuine understanding and appreciation of true sublimity. This is difficult; literary judgement comes only as the final product of long experience. However, for the purposes of instruction, I think we can say that an understanding of all this can be acquaint." For Longinus, the true sublime uplifts our soul. He also opines that the "truly beautiful and sublime . . . pleases all

people at all times", for it expresses thoughts of universal validity and a language which instinctively uplifts our souls. It produces a lasting effect on the part of the reader.

Longinus then points out to the sources of the sublime, which lie in the capacities of the speaker or writer. He cites five most productive sources of the sublime: **'grandeur of thought', 'strong and inspired passion', 'use of figurative language', 'nobility of expression'** and **'elevated composition'**. Three of these capacities—the 'use of figurative language', 'nobility of expression' and 'elevated composition'—are matters of art that can be acquired by practice; but two others, and more important, capacities, are largely innate: 'loftiness or grandeur of thought' and 'strong and inspired passion'. Longinus's examples of sublime passages in poems range from the epics of Homer through the tragedies of Aeschylus to a love-lyric by Sappho; his examples in prose are taken from the writings of the philosopher Plato, the orator Demosthenes, and the historian Herodotus. Especially notable is his quotation, as a prime instance of sublimity, of the passage in the Book of Genesis written by the "law-giver of the Jews": "And God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light, 'Let there be land', and there was land". Longinus does not treat emotion or passion, but the other four sources receive substantial discussion. He discusses digression on the question of how great but flawed writing can and should be recognised as superior to flawless yet moderate or humble writing.

Longinus adds another factor to his notion of sublimity: the power of combining certain elements appropriately into an organic whole. Closely connected with this is the device of 'amplification' i.e., the accumulation of relevant details of a subject. Sublimity, he suggests, "lies in elevation" and is found "in a single idea", whereas amplification lies in quantity and redundancy. Longinus suggests another way to attain sublimity: the path of imitation. The imitation of great historians and poets of the past can pave the way in achieving sublimity since these great masters of antiquity are the standards of excellence. He sees the process of influence not as passive and static but as an active endeavour



Often cited as a peak moment in "On the Sublime is the digression on Plato and the orator Lysias near the end of the treatise, following the discussion of metaphors. The digression on genius, as it is known, is important because it provides a detailed and eloquent account of sublimity through a series of concise comparisons in which Homer, Plato, and Demosthenes.

of the contemporary writer to vie with the ancient poets. His vision is comprehensive, and everywhere he stresses the emotional and imaginative appeal of great literature. It is the creative imagination, which modifies and transforms, and produces works of beauty. The appropriate use of imagination in rhetoric, says Longinus, 'is to introduce a great deal of vigour and emotion into one's speeches, but when combined with argumentative treatment it not only convinces the audience, it positively masters them'. In such cases, the imaginative conceptions of the speaker far surpass "mere persuasion".

The essay then proceeds to discuss the use of figures. Longinus holds the view that the use of figure allows the speaker "to carry the audience away with him". However, he recommends that a figure is most effective when it is unnoticed. Figures should be used in a natural manner. He cites a number of important figures. One of these is the figure of **rhetorical question and answer**, which involves the audience emotionally. Another figure is 'Asyndeton', which consists in the removal of connecting particles. The effect produced is one of rush and torrent (heavy uncontrolled outpouring) of passion. The union of certain figures imparts strength, beauty and persuasiveness to the language. In order to produce a powerful emotional effect, figures such as 'Anaphora' (repetition of words) and 'Diatyposis' (vivid description) may be combined together. 'Hyperbaton' is a figure, which consists in the inversion of the natural order of words or thoughts. It carries the very effect of violent, mental agitation and thus, gives a touch of reality to speech and produces the natural effect of emotion. 'Polyptoton' consists in the interchange of one case for another, of one number for another, of one tense for another, and of one person for another. It contributes to sublimity and enlivens exposition. 'Periphrasis' contributes much to the sublime and adds much to the beauty of language.

Longinus then examines the importance of diction. The choice of correct and magnificent words is a source of immense power to entice and charm the reader. Metaphors, Hyperboles and Similes contribute a great deal to the sublime. Vulgar idioms should be avoided because low

and undignified vocabulary degrades sublimity. He points out that a genius with some faults is better than a flawless mediocre. The harmonious arrangement of words is a great source of persuasion and pleasure. It is the sense of harmony that gives organic unity to a work of art.

As with many of the preceding sections, Longinus addresses the last section to Terentianus, relating to him the problem of the decline of eloquence in literature of his age. To him, the cause is the moral decline of the people of his age. They attach more importance to the materialistic values of life. But according to Longinus, the facts that great literature springs from great and lofty souls. Thus, the essay “On the Sublime” examines the work of several ancient writers under the lens of the sublime, which Longinus defines as man’s ability, through feeling and words, to reach beyond the realm of the human condition into greater mystery.

“On the Sublime” differs fundamentally from Platonic doctrine, which distrusted the frenzied and irrational flights of poetic inspiration and banned poetry from the ideal republic. Cleverly, Longinus points out that Plato does not practice what he preaches. In citing Plato in an example of sublime writer, Longinus reinterprets the philosopher, highlighting the unconscious ways in which he too is “carried away by a sort of literary madness.” “On the Sublime” also differs from Horace, who in the *Ars Poetica* stresses rhetorical strategies rather than the erratic genius of authors. Horace would have felt comfortable with the last three sources of the sublime, cantered as they are on rhetoric, but probably not with the first two, which depend on the mind and heart of the author. In some respects, Longinus’s treatise is more like Aristotle’s *Poetics,* for they both take note of the formal techniques and psychological effects of literature, Aristotle famously focusing on the emotional “catharsis” that an audience experiences during the performance of a tragedy. An important distinction between them is that Longinus considers the emotional psychology of the author as well as that of the audience. Longinus’ text appears not to have been read during ancient or Mediaeval times perhaps because it was

lost. It re-emerged as an important text first during the Renaissance, with the Italian translation of Niccolo da Falgano in 1560, but especially in Nicolas Boileau's 1674 French rendering. The latter made "On the Sublime" a central text in European criticism throughout the 18th century, and set the stage for many discussions of the sublime, including those by Joseph Addison, Edmund Burke, and, most notably, Immanuel Kant. With Kant's Critique of Judgement (1790), the theory of the sublime reached a level of analytical rigor considerably beyond Longinus, who, by comparison is content merely to enact the sublime and work intuitively. Still, Longinus manages to anticipate many of Kant's major themes, especially his fascination with the uplifting sense of the "supersensible" (the transcendent). He also anticipates Romantic theories of literature, which focus on the creative genius of the author.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 2: In what ways, is Longinus's "On the Sublime" a reaction to Caecilius' monograph *On Sublimity?*

Q 3: What do you mean by Sublimity? Mention the three faults, which tend to spoil Sublimity?

Q 4: Mention the sources of the sublime as available in the text of Longinus. Which ancient writers does Longinus quote as examples of Sublimity?

Q 5: What is the nature of Sublimity, according to Longinus?

Q 6: What direct or indirect connections does Longinus's text have with Plato, Horace and Aristotle?

4.5 IMPORTANT CONCEPTS OF THE TEXT

The following are some of the most important concepts of "On the Sublime".

Sublime:

The concept was introduced into the criticism of literature and art by a Greek treatise **Peri Hupsous** or "On the Sublime" by Longinus. It

is a quality whose effect is to "transport" (ekstasis) the reader out of themselves. The concept of the sublime is generally accepted to refer to a style of writing that elevates itself "above the ordinary". Longinus critically applauds and condemns certain literary works as examples of good or bad styles of writing. He ultimately promotes an "elevation of style" and an essence of "simplicity". The Sublime is a mechanism of recognition (arising from the impact of the work of art) of the greatness of a spirit, of the depth of an idea, of the power of speech. The ability to achieve sublimity is in itself enough to establish the transcendent genius of a writer. The sublime produces a lasting and repeated effect on "a man of sense, well-versed in literature". The sublime pleases all people at all times. Sublimity is a certain distinction and excellence in expression. The "elevated language" of the sublime aims to cast a spell over the audience, not merely persuading but transporting the audience in an enthralling and delightful manner to the conclusion desired by the writer. As defined by Longinus, the sublime is a quality that can occur in any type of discourse, whether poetry or prose. According to him, the sublime consists "in a consummate excellence and distinction of language, and . . . this alone gave to the greatest poets and historians their pre-eminence . . . For the effect of genius is not to persuade the audience but rather to transport them out of themselves." Thus, sublimity means a certain loftiness and excellence in language. It expresses itself in a single phrase, like a flash of lightning.

The Sources of the Sublime:

Longinus cites 'five' genuine sources of the sublime in his essay "On the Sublime". They are as follows:

Grandeur of Thought:

This source actually reflects the classicism of Longinus. Nobody can produce a work of pure sublime unless his thoughts are sublime. Longinus refers to this faculty as "natural genius", affirming that it is a gift of nature rather than something acquired. Lofty and natural expression is possible when there are noble and lofty thoughts. Such elevating thoughts that remain as the "echo of great soul" are possible only when

the author has power of forming great conceptions. Hence, it is impossible for people having mean ideas and habits, to produce anything that is admirable and worthy. It is also because; great thoughts come from the imagination of a great creative genius and from a sound interpretation of the imitation of nature and of the great predecessors. Those who would attain distinction of style must feel the greatness of the masters such as Homer, Plato and Demosthenes, and capture from them some of their greatness.

Capacity for Strong Emotion:

The second source of the sublime is forceful and inspired emotion. The emotion should be strong and natural and it is to be expressed in lofty and elevated language so that it can move the readers with pleasure and persuasion. Longinus asserts that nothing contributes to loftiness of tone in writing than genuine emotion.

Appropriate Use of Figures:

The third source of attaining excellence of style is the use of figures of speech, which he considers very important. Longinus devotes nearly one third of his essay to it. Figures of speech should not be used mechanically. They must be ingrained in genuine emotion. They help in the elevated style. The grandeur of any figure will depend upon its being employed in an effective manner. The figures cited by Longinus are Rhetorical questions, asyndeton, anaphora, polysyndeton, hyperbaton and periphrasis. Other figures include accumulation, variation and climax ranging over changes of case, tense, person, number, and gender.

Nobility of Diction:

The forth source of the sublime is nobility of diction, thought and metaphor. It is fine diction, which gives the style “grandeur, beauty, a classical flavour . . . and endues the facts as it were with a living voice”. Metaphors are used in treating commonplace descriptions. However, majestic diction should be used in important situations. The discussion of diction however is incomplete because it is believed that some parts of the book are unfortunately lost.

Dignity of Composition:

The fifth source of the sublime is the dignity of composition which relates to the arrangement of words in a certain order and various elements of a particular passage into a unified whole. A harmonious composition alone sometimes makes up for the deficiency of the other elements. Words must be harmoniously arranged for both persuasion and pleasure.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: Define the term 'Sublimity'.

Q 8: In what ways, does the use of Figures of speech enhance Sublimity?

Q 9: Which two sources, according to Longinus, are gifts of nature?

4.6 RECEPTION OF LONGINUS AS A CRITIC

As a critic, Longinus displays a rare breadth of outlook and a mind free from prejudice. His estimates are just and have been upheld by posterity. He is a pioneer in the field of literary appreciation. "On the Sublime" is the first and a unique treatise on style. His prescriptions for sublimity are universal. R.A. Scott James calls him the 'first romantic critic' because of his insistence on passion, ecstasy, transport, imagination, intensity and exaltation. He attaches importance to emotion, imagination and beauty of words. He is a romanticist in his theory of Sublimity as he recommends judging a work of art based on its power to carry away, transport and moving to ecstasy by its grandeur and passion. His stress on emotion as a vital element of the sublime, however, does not rest on a simple appeal to the heart over abstract reasoning but is an intrinsic expression of his view of the purpose of humankind. We should be cautious in observing that he was not a thorough romantic critic because he fused romanticism and classicism together. Throughout, he is concerned mainly with ancient Greek models. The classical qualities of Longinus as a critic are quite obvious. He

shows a great reverence for the ancient Greek models, for tradition. He is a classicist in curbing the license of the artist; in his emphasis on order and grandeur of thought and language; he likes inspiration but does not ignore perspiration. He is also a classicist in his balance between genius and unimpassioned hard work. He stands for fitness, correctness, selection and balance. He believes in rules and regulations. He stands for the use of a refined and cultivated poetic style.

"On the Sublime" was largely unknown prior to its rediscovery during the Italian Renaissance. Following Boileau's popular translation of 1674, however, the treatise became a standard object of study for literary critics from Dryden onwards. In the 18th century an important phenomenon was the shift in the location of the sublime from a quality of linguistic discourse that originates in the powers of a writer's mind, to a quality inherent in external objects, and above all in the scenes and occurrences of the natural world. Thus, Edmund Burke's highly influential *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, published in 1757, attributes the source of the sublime to whatever things are 'in any sort terrible'—that is, to whatever is "fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger"—provided that the observer is in a situation of safety from danger, and so is able to experience what would otherwise be a painful terror as a 'delightful horror.' The qualities of objects conducive to sublime horror that Burke stresses are obscurity, immense power, and vastness in dimension or quantity. His examples include vast architectural structures and natural phenomena.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, neoclassical critics, primarily in England, frequently cited the text. The domain of aesthetics was influenced by the sublime in the work of thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, whose *Critique of Judgment* (1790) is an extended analysis of the sublime. Kant made division of the sublime objects specified by Burke into two types: the mathematical sublime and the dynamic sublime. The mathematical sublime includes in its scope the sublime of magnitude, of vastness in size or infinitude in number. Whereas the dynamic sublime

encompasses the objects that tend to bring terror, provided that the terror is rendered pleasurably by the safe situation of the observer. He takes as examples of sublimity the scenes and events in the natural world. According to him, sublimity resides not in the object of nature itself, but only in the mind of the judging subject who contemplates the object. In his view, the ability to experience the sublime exemplifies the limitations of finite humanity on the one hand, but on the other hand its pre-eminence over nature. Longinus also anticipates Arnold's "touchstone" theory of tradition whereby we measure contemporary works against a set of acknowledged critics. Arnold urged modern poets to look to the ancients and their great characters and themes for guidance and inspiration. Classical literature, in his view, possess pathos, moral profundity and noble simplicity, while modern themes, arising from an age of spiritual weakness, are suitable for only comic and lighter kinds of poetry, and don't possess the loftiness to support epic or heroic poetry.

Sublimity became a central concern not only in 18th century criticism, but also in 18th century literature, especially in the works of the so-called pre-Romantic poets — Thomas Gray, William Collins, and in the works of Gothic novelists — Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis. Thomas Gray, and William Collins, the writers of the sublime ode, sought to achieve effects of wildness and obscurity in their descriptive style and abrupt transitions. Their sublime odes also rendered the wildness, vastness and obscurity of the sublime objects they described. Authors of the gothic novels exploited the sublimity of delightful horror both in the natural and architectural settings of their narratives and in the actions and events that they narrated.

Longinus' treatise exerted a persistent influence on literary criticism. He makes use of both the historical and comparative method. He is also a pioneer in the field of analytical criticism. He analysis passages from particular works to estimate the aptness of the words, images, epithets, etc. It helped establish both the expressive theory of poetry and the critical method of impressionism. Longinus illustrates the Rhetorical practice of close textual reading. Such close attention to the

text was the monopoly of modern formalists and new critics. In a broad sense, Longinus' ideas anticipate various consensual theories ranging from those of Edmund Burke to reader-response critics. Despite its relative anonymity prior to the 17th and 18th centuries, modern critics have found "On the Sublime" to prefigure their own literary perspectives and to be as relevant and insightful as other standard ancient texts. From Longinus's author-centred perspective, writers and orators achieve greatness not just by Rhetorical techniques but also by deep feelings, profound thoughts, and natural genius: "Sublimity is the echo of a noble mind." Often the experience of reading a great author or listening to a great speech leads us to a feeling of ecstasy or transport (ekstasis), which is distinct from the more rational effects of persuasion, the goal of Rhetoric. For Longinus, sublimity uplifts the spirit of the reader, filling him or her with unexpected astonishment and pride, arousing noble thoughts, and suggesting more than words can convey.

From a contemporary perspective, Longinus's view of the sublime has limitations. It focuses mainly on the profound feelings and thoughts of geniuses and audiences, without attending to the ways in which they are structured or determined by language. Longinus does discuss figurative language, Rhetoric, and composition, but the ideas and emotions of the genius precede such linguistic "ornamentation". The audience's experience, moreover, is said to transcend words.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 10: State the importance of Longinus' criticism.

Q 11: From your reading of the essay, what ideas do you get of Longinus as a romantic?



4.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have made yourself familiar with Longinus one of the greatest critics of antiquity. The decline of literature in his age made

Longinus talk about Rhetoric. In this connection, he points out Caecilius' monograph "On Sublimity" which, he felt, had failed to touch the essential points. His "On the Sublime" is written in order to make correction of what Caecilius has written. He distinguishes between other compositional skills and the sublime. Through a composition, inventive skill and appropriate use of facts are expressed. However, the sublime reveals the power of the speaker 'at a single stroke'. The sublime appears like a bolt of lightning. The different sections of this unit must have helped you to understand what the essay is all about. By now, you must have also realised the features that might effect sublimity—bad and affected rhythm; the 'chopped up' style (phrases too closely knit); excessive brevity; and undignified vocabulary. Thus, with a single essay, Longinus has been able to leave his mark in the history of literary criticism.



4.8 FURTHER READING

1) Abrams, M. H. (2003). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Singapore: Thomson Asia Pte Ltd.

2) Fowler, Harold N. (1905). *A History of Roman Literature*. New York: D Appleton and Company. (E-book from www.archive.org)

3) Habib, M.A.R. (2005). *A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present*. Malden: Blackwell.

4) Johnston, Wilfred Percy. (Trans). (1907). *Greek Literary Criticism.* Hamilton: Blackwell. (E-book from www.archive.org)

5) Prickard, A. O. (Trans). (1906). *Longinus: On the Sublime.* Oxford: Clarendon Press. (E-book from www.archive.org)

6) Russell, D.A. & Winterbottom, Michael. (eds).(1989).*Classical Literary Criticism.* New York: Oxford University Press.

7) Wimsatt, William K, JR. & Brooks, Cleanth. (1970). *Literary Criticism: A Short History*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Web Resources :

www.wikipedia.org

www.archive.org



4.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: When "On the Sublime" was first published the volume was attributed to Dionysius Longinus ... ... then to Cassius Longinus ... thus, the authorship of the text still remains uncertain.

Ans to Q 2: Longinus considered Caecilius' monograph *On Sublimity,* to be inadequate to its high subject and failed to touch the essential points… …nor did it appear to offer the reader much practical help… …Caecilius unnecessarily tried to think about the question of how we can develop our nature to some degree of greatness.

Ans to Q 3: According to Longinus, Sublimity is the source of the distinction of the very greatest poets and prose writers… …The first defect is "turgidity" when the artist or poet aims too high and, instead of achieving ecstasy, merely lapses into folly… …the second fault is "puerility" meaning a pedantic type of conceit adding to a pompous and frigid style… …the third fault is "parenthyrson" which refers to 'emotion misplaced'.

And to Q 4: Longinus cites five sources of the sublime: 'grandeur of thought', 'strong and inspired passion', 'use of figurative language', 'nobility of expression' and 'elevated composition'… …while discussing sublimity he cites the epics of Homer, the tragedies of Aeschylus, the love-lyrics of Sappho, the writings of Plato, the orator Demosthenes, and the historian Herodotus.

Ans to Q 5: Sublimity lies in the capacities of the speaker or writer . . .it can be acquired by the power of combining certain elements appropriately into an organic whole . . .it is the path of imitation . . .it suggests the appropriate use of imagination in Rhetoric.

Ans to Q 6: Longinus points out that Plato does not practice what he preaches… …Longinus reinterprets Plato, highlighting the unconscious ways he is "carried away by a sort of literary

madness."… …he differs from Horace, who in the *Ars Poetica* stresses Rhetorical strategies rather than the erratic genius of authors… …Longinus' treatise is more like Aristotle's *Poetics,* for they both take note of the formal techniques and psychological effects of literature.

Ans to Q 7: Its a quality whose effect is to transport the reader out of themselves… …style of writing that elevates itself above the ordinary… …mechanism of recognition of the greatness of a spirit, of the depth of an idea, of the power of speech… …a certain distinction and excellence in expression… …it expresses itself in a single phrase, like a flash of lightning.

Ans to Q 8: The use of figures allows the speaker to carry the audience away with him… … figure of Rhetorical question and answer involves the audience emotionally… …use of Asyndeton imparts strength, beauty and persuasiveness to the language… …Anaphora and Diatyposis may be combined together… …Hyperbaton consists in the inversion of the natural order of words or thoughts… …figures give a touch of reality to speech and produces the natural effect of emotion… …Polyptoton and Periphrasis contribute to sublimity and enlivens exposition.

Ans to Q 9: Among the five sources, loftiness or grandeur of thought is the gift of nature… …such elevating thoughts remain as the "echo of great soul" and are possible only when the author has power of forming great conceptions.

Ans to Q 10: Longinus displays a rare breadth of outlook… …his prescriptions for sublimity is universal… …he fuses romanticism and classicism together… …great reverence for the ancient Greek models… …refined and cultivated poetic style…. …makes use of both the historical and comparative methods… …the treatise became a standard object of study for literary critics.

Ans to Q 11: R.A. Scott James calls him the 'first romantic critic'… …his insistence on passion, ecstasy, transport, imagination, intensity and exaltation… …he recommends judging a work of art on the basis

of its power to transport… … moving to ecstasy by its grandeur and passion… …attaches importance to emotion and imagination.



4.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q1: What is the importance of the treatise “On the Sublime” by Longinus in the context of modern literary criticism?

Q2: Do you agree that “On the Sublime” can be called a romantic aesthetic document. Give reasons for your answer by reflecting on the Romantic elements of Longinus as a critic.

Q3: ‘Sublimity is the echo of a great soul’. Substantiate your answer with reference to the sources as well as the defects of sublimity.

Q4: How has the concept of the sublime been exploited by other writers? Illustrate your answer.

Q5: Discuss Longinus as a literary critic. What are the features of his writing as evident in his essay “On the Sublime”?

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Unit 5: SIR PHILIP SIDNEY: *AN APOLOGY FOR POETRY* OR *THE DEFENCE OF POESY*

UNIT STRUCTURE

5.1 Learning Objectives

5.2 Introduction

5.3 English Criticism in the time of the Renaissance

5.4 Sidney: The Critic

5.5 Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry*

5.6 Important Concepts of the Text

5.7 Reception of Sidney as a Critic

5.8 Let us Sum up

5.9 Further Reading

5.10 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

5.11 Possible Questions

5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to read about English criticism during the time of the Renaissance

- discuss Sidney as one of the greatest English critics
- trace the importance *An Apology of Poetry* in terms of the various issues raised by Sidney
- discuss the major concepts dealt with by Sidney in the text
- identify the relevance and influence of Sidney's doctrine in the history of English criticism.

5.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the last unit of this Block. In this unit, you will be introduced to English criticism during the Renaissance through a discussion of Philip Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry.* Although Sidney is best known as a critic of the Renaissance period, he was also a great poet, a creative writer,

a noble and virtuous man. He is also one who embodies the aristocratic ideals of the Renaissance man, by virtue of his being a courtier, soldier, statesman, amateur scholar, and a legendary figure in his time. Author of the first English sonnet sequence, *Astrophel and Stella,* he was also the first to write literary criticism in English. In 1579, a Puritan minister named Stephen Gosson published *The School of Abuse* in which he attacked the theatres, dedicating it, without permission, "to the right noble Gentleman, Master Philip Sidney, Esquire". Sidney was outraged by this act of dedication and countered the following year with his defence *An Apology for Poetry,* sometimes called *A Defence of Poetry* (1580-81). However, *An Apology* enjoys significance far beyond its occasion for its synthesis of the Renaissance understanding of classical literary theory, which set the terms of literary debate in England for the next two centuries, and for its formidable handling of its genre-the defence of poetry, which Sidney adapted from classical and medieval models. You will find that the *Apology* is virtually confined to what we may call the 'philosophy of poetry', that is, the nature of poetry, its main kinds and its peculiar function in relation to the actual life of society. He tries to interpret and evaluate poets like Chaucer and Spenser. Of Chaucer, he appreciates 'Troilus and Criseyde', and in Spenser, he is full of praise for 'Shepherd's Calendar'. According to Sidney, his contemporaries did not care for the three unities – Time, Place and Action prescribed by the classical critics. Secondly, Sidney is also unhappy over the blending of Tragedy and Comedy. When you finish reading this unit, you will see that Sidney through his essay displays his awareness of classical literature as well as the tradition of criticism.

5.3 ENGLISH CRITICISM IN THE TIME OF THE RENAISSANCE

No critical work worth mentioning appeared in England till the middle of the 16th century. It was only after the Renaissance, when the classical Greek and Latin treatises on criticism were made available to English scholars as they began to apply their minds to criticism in

general. The first critics to do so were the three Cambridge friends Sir John Cheke, Roger Ascham, and Thomas Wilson. On the one hand, they were devoted scholars of the Classics, on the other; they were equally devoted to the native English tradition like the poetry of Chaucer. Thus, you should note that in their critical discussion, two things become apparent: On the one hand, they adore the classics as model for guidance, and on the other, they advocate the purity of the native tongue from foreign influences like Latin, French and Italian. One may also argue that the birth of Renaissance criticism begins with the recovery of classical texts, most notably, Giorgio Valla's Latin translation of Aristotle's *Poetics*. The work of Aristotle, especially *Poetics*, was the most important influence upon literary criticism until the late 18th century. Lodovico Castelvetro was one of the most influential Renaissance critics who wrote commentaries on Aristotle's *Poetics* in 1570.

English criticism, during the 16thand 17th centuries, passed through many distinct stages of development, which may be seen as the following:

a. The first stage was characterised by a purely rhetorical study of literature, probably beginning with Leonard Coxe's *Arte or Crafte of Rhetoryke* (1524), a handbook for young students. This was followed by Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorike* (1553), a more extensive and certainly more original text than Coxe's. Warton calls it "the first book or system of criticism in our language." It was at this time that English writers for the first time began to appreciate form and style to be the distinguishing features of literature. This appreciation led to the formation of an English prose style.
b. The second stage of English criticism—a period of classification and especially of metrical studies—commences with Gascoigne's *Notes of Instruction concerning the making of Verse*, published in 1575. Besides this brief pamphlet, this stage also includes Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie*, the first systematic classification of poetic forms and subjects, and of Rhetorical figures; Bullokar's *Brief Grammar*, the first systematic treatise on

English grammar; and Harvey's *Letters* and Webbe's *Discourse of English Poetrie*, the first systematic attempts to introduce classical metres into English poetry. This stage was characterised by the study and classification of the practical questions of language and versification. The study of the verse-forms introduced into England from Italy helped materially to perfect the external side of English poetry. The Italian prosodists thus became the masters of the English students of this era.

c. The third stage is characterised by the period of philosophical and apologetic criticism as exemplified by Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesy*, published posthumously in 1595, though probably written about 1583. Harington's *Apologie of Poetrie,* Daniel's *Defence of Ryme*, and a few others, are also contemporary treatises. These works, as their titles indicate, are all defenses or apologies, and were called forth by the attacks of the Puritans on poetry, especially dramatic poetry, and the attacks of the classicists on English versification and rhyme. Sidney's contemporaries had studied the general theory of poetry, not for the purpose of enunciating rules or dogmas of criticism, but chiefly in order to defend the poetic art, and to understand its fundamental principles.

d. The fourth stage of English criticism, of which Ben Jonson is the main exponent, occupies the first half of the 17thcentury. The period that proceeded, it was in general romantic in its tendencies. The literary criticism of the Renaissance developed classical ideas of unity of form and content into literary neoclassicism, proclaiming literature as central to culture, entrusting the poet and the author with a responsibility to preserve a long literary tradition which grew directly from the recovery of classic texts and notably from Giorgio Valla's translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* into Latin in 1498. By 1549, the text of *Poetics* had been rendered into Italian as well. From this period until the later part of the 18th century, Aristotle was once again the most imposing presence behind literary theory. The most

influential of Renaissance critic was probably Lodovico Castelvetro, whose 1570 commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics* encouraged the writing of tightly structured plays.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Mention the two main characteristics of English criticism duringtheRenaissance.

Q 2: What makes Renaissance criticism an important area for the students of English literature?

5.4 SIDNEY: THE CRITIC

Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) was one of the most eminent poets of the Elizabethan period. His influence can be seen throughout the history of English literary criticism because of *The Defence of Poesie*, which is also frequently referred to by its other title, *An Apology for Poetry*. In *An Apology for Poetry* he both explores the core concepts and answers to earlier criticism of poetry. The text itself deals with three major topics: the dignity or power of poetry, the general critique of poetry, and an examination of the current state of English literature.

His Life:

Sidney's father was Sir Henry Sidney and his mother was Lady Mary Dudley who was the daughter of the Duke of Northumberland. The eldest of three sons and four daughters, he was born in 1554. Philip Sidney entered Shrewsbury School on Oct 17, 1564 where he befriended Fulke Greville, his future biographer. Sidney made the second great friendship of his youth with Edward Dyer, a man of quality. From 1568 to 1571, Sidney went to Christ Church, Oxford, but he left without a degree in the spring of 1571, probably because of an outbreak of Plague. In the following year, he left England for a three-year visit to the continent to complete his education. During that time, he travelled through many countries namely, France, Germany, Italy and Austria.

On May 31, 1575, he returned to England as an 'eminent courtier'.

However, his fervent interest in Protestantism became an obstacle in his diplomatic career. Though for a short period, he was also dismissed from the court as he had a conflict with the Queen. And it was during this period that his connection with the literary life of his time began. It appears to have been initiated by his introduction in July 1578, to Gabriel Harvey who introduced him to Spenser. Spenser dedicated his "Shepherd's Calendar" to Sidney. Their acquaintance soon ripened into intimacy. Subsequently, they were joined by Sidney's old college friends, Fulke Greville and Edward Dyer, and a literary society was formed which they called the 'Areopagus'. During this time, he wrote the long pastoral romance *Arcadia*.

One of the most important works by Sidney was his famous sonnet sequence namely, *Astrophel and Stella* ("Star lover and Star").Composed in 1576,it consisted of 108 sonnets and 11 songs. Most of the sonnets in this collection are influenced by Petrarchan conventions — the abject lover laments the coldness of his beloved woman, even though he is so true of love and her neglect causes him so much anguish. The critical writings of Sidney were published after his death under the two titles—"The Defence of Poesy" and "An Apology for Poetry".

In 1585, he made a covert attempt to join Sir Francis Drake's expedition to Cadiz without Queen Elizabeth's permission. His enthusiasm for the Protestant struggle was given a free rein when he was appointed governor of Flushing in the Netherlands. He conducted a successful raid on Spanish forces near Axel in July 1586. In 1586 Sidney, along with his younger brother Robert Sidney, another poet in this family of poets, joined Sir John Norris in the Battle of Zutphen, and was shot in the thigh and died twenty-six days later, at the age of 31. His death was mourned by the Queen as well as her subjects. It is said that the Londoners who came out to see the funeral progression cried out "Farewell, the worthiest knight that lived."

Sidney's body was returned to London and buried in St. Paul's Cathedral on 16th February 1587. He had become for many English

people the epitome of a courtier—learned and politic, but at the same time, generous, brave, and impulsive. Never more than a marginal figure in the politics of his time, he was memorialised as the flower of English manhood in Edmund Spenser's "Astrophel", one of the greatest English Renaissance elegies.



LET US KNOW

The Battle of Zutphen was a confrontation of the Eighty Years War on 22 September 1586, near Zutphen (Warnsveld), the Netherlands. It was fought between forces of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, aided by the English, against the Spanish, who sought to regain the Northern Netherlands. It ended in a victory for Spain. Important English soldiers included Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, Peregrine Bertie, George Whetstone, Henry Unton, and Robert Sidney, whose brother, Philip Sidney, was mortally wounded during the battle and died in Arnhem at the age of 31.

'**The Eighty Years' War':** The Eighty Years' War, or Dutch War of Independence (1568–1648), began as a revolt of the Seventeen Provinces against Philip II of Spain, the sovereign of the Habsburg Netherlands.

His Works:

The time in which Sidney lived was marked by vigour and thoroughness, chivalry and love of adventure. Sidney's first important literary work was the result of a temporary retirement from the world of politics in which he had meddled somewhat too boldly. "The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia", also known as *Arcadia*, is by far Sidney's most ambitious work. His style here is little affected by the prevailing taste for **Euphuism**. It is not improbable that Lyly's *Euphues* (1579), suggested to Sidney the notion of writing a romance in a somewhat similar style. However, unlike *Euphues*, Arcadia has no direct didactic purpose.

Throughout, it suffers from the over-straining, which is characteristic of most Elizabethan prose. The work enjoyed great popularity for more than a century after its publication.

It is however, the form of the sonnet with which Sidney's name is most closely connected. In *Arcadia*, and later in the *Astrophel and Stella*, he showed that it is peculiarly suited to the genius of English language, though perhaps not in its severer Petrarchan form. The first of the famous English sonnet sequences, *Astrophel and Stella* was probably composed in the early 1580s containing 108 sonnets and 11 songs. In this sonnet sequence, Sidney partially nativised the key features of his Italian Petrarch sonnet form. His experiments with rhyme scheme freed the English sonnet from the strict rhyming requirements of the Italian form. Incidentally, although not a realistic autobiography, Stella is modelled on Penelope Devereux, who was supposed to marry Sidney but was then forced to marry Lord Rich. The autobiographical element is evident and the sonnets express Sidney's own desires, regrets, and conflicts of conscience, which resulted from the social pressures and moral restraints of his time.

The Apologie for Poetrie is a philosophical treatise, which touches on questions of form, of technique and of matter in poetry. It is generally believed that Stephen Gosson's "School of Abuse" that was dedicated to Sidney in 1579, was the driving force to write this treatise. Gosson's book may be taken as representative of Sidney's narrower Puritanical standpoint which condemns all that beautifies and all that gives value to the present life. In perfectly simple and straightforward language, which has enriched the history of English prose, Sidney gives us an account of his thought. In his essay, Sidney has assimilated many classical and as well as Italian maxims on fiction. The essence of his *defence* is that poetry, by combining the vivacity of history with a moral focus of philosophy is more effective.

The Lady of May is one of Sidney's lesser-known works, a masque written and performed for Queen Elizabeth in 1578 or 1579. It is a one-act play and is notable for its allegorical content relating to

Queen Elizabeth I, for whom the first production was performed at the Earl of Leicester's country estate at Wanstead. Queen Elizabeth was asked to mediate the outcome of the masque itself. The plot is about selection and marriage. The May Lady asks the Queen to judge her two suitors, Therion and Espilus. A schoolmaster Rombus moderated the debate. At the end, the Queen favoured Espilus, and the entertainment ends with dancing.

Thus, we can conclude that Sidney showed his powers as one of the great thinkers and prose-writers of England.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Discuss the literary significance of Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*.

Q 4: Discuss the context following which Sidney wrote *An Apology for Poetry*.

5.5 SIDNEY'S *AN APOLOGY FOR POETRY*

The importance of *An Apology For Poetry* is great since it exhibits not only the temper of the generation, which actually produced the first fruits of the greatest Elizabethan poetry but also the enthusiasm of the successive generations. As already stated, it was occasioned by an attack on poetry entitled *The School of Abuse* (1579) by a Puritan minister, Stephen Gosson, who had indicted poetry on four grounds:

(a) That men could employ his time more usefully than in poetry

(b) That poetry is the mother of lies

(c) That poetry is the nurse of abuse

(d) Plato had rightly banished the poets from his ideal Commonwealth

In his *Apology*, Sidney rejects Gosson's Protestant attack on courtly pleasure and defends poetry as a virtuous activity for the aristocracy. He replies to each one of the charges drawing heavily from the ancient classics and the Italian writers of the Renaissance, most

particularly on Homer, Plato, Aristotle, and Plutrarch among the Greeks, Cicero, Virgil, Horace and Ovid among the Romans, and Minturo, Scaliger, and Castelvetro, among the Italians. The issues such as the value and function of poetry, the nature of imitation and the concept of nature are raised in his reply.

Towards the beginning of the text, Sidney observes that poetry has fallen from its status as the highest estimation of learning to be the laughing stock of children. Thus, he advances certain reasons to defend 'poor poetry'. His defence is based on chronology, the authority of ancient tradition, the relation of poetry to nature, the function of poetry as imitation, the status of poetry among the various disciplines of learning and the relationship of poetry to truth and morality. He brings forward an argument which colours the whole treatise, that is, poetry has ever been "the first light-giver to ignorance" in the noblest nations and languages that are known. He points out that the first Greek philosophers Thales, Empedocles, Parmenides and Pythagoras expressed their visions in verse. Even Plato used poetic devices like dialogue and description of setting and circumstance to adorn his philosophy. Sidney points out that the historians such as Herodotus have borrowed the 'fashion' and 'weight' of poetry. A poet was called 'vates' by the Romans, which means "a diviner, for-seer, or prophet". To Sidney, this definition of poet was reasonable as shown by the fact that "Psalms" of David is a 'divine poem', whereby prophecy is expressed in a poetic manner. Therefore, poetry should be highly valued and it does not deserve the ridiculous estimation into which it has lapsed.

Sidney then discusses the Greek definition of poetry. The Greek origin of the English word 'poet' is 'poiein', which means 'to make'. He provides his own view of the connection between poetry and nature when he says that every art has the works of nature for its principal object. He gives the examples of the astronomers who observed the stars as ordered in nature, the geometrician and arithmetician who examine the diverse sorts of quantities as ordered in nature, the natural philosopher who examines physical nature, the moral philosopher who considers the

natural virtues, vices and passions of men; the grammarian, Rhetorician and logician who expound the rules of speech, persuasion and reasoning respectively as based on nature. His point is that unlike each of these disciplines, whichdepend on some aspects of nature, the poet is not restricted by Nature:

"Onely the Poet, disdayning to be tied to any such subiection, lifted up with the vigour of his owne invention, doothgrowe in effect another nature, in making things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anewe,formes such as never were in Nature, as the *Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies*, and such like . . . feely ranging onely within the Zodiack of his owne wit." (Sidney, 8)

Commenting on the creative powers of the poet, Sidney further states:

"Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapistry as divers Poets have done, neither with so plesant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet smelling flowers, nor whatsoever els may make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brasen, the Poets only deliver a golden." (Sidney, 8)

Thus, for Sidney, poetry is higher than nature. However, he also holds poetry as an art of 'imitation', its chief function being to teach and delight. Imitation does not mean mere copying or a reproduction of facts. It means representing or transmuting of the real and actual, and sometimes creating something entirely new. In the section devoted to the divisions or kinds of mimetic poetry and their practitioners, Sidney conceives three types: **Divine poets** like David and Solomon who imitate the "inconceivable excellences of God," **Pagan poets** like Orpheus, Amphion, and Home rare; and poets who imitate "matter philosophical" of which there are four subtypes (moral, natural, astronomical, and historical); and **Right poets**. Sidney is primarily concerned with the Right poets as he states: "these third be they which most properly do imitate to teach and delight; and, to imitate, borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be: but range, only reined with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be, and should be." Hence, the poet is free from the dependence on nature at least in two ways: Firstly, he is

not restricted to any given subject matter, any given sphere of nature. Secondly, his "imitation" does not actually reproduce anything in nature, since his concern is not with actuality but with portrayals of probability and of idealised situations.

Sidney's whole defence lies in his proof that poetry brings about an end. He sets off the Right poet against other masters of "earthly learning" who claim to lead men to "virtuous action", an ancient contest developed at length in Aristotle's *Poetics.* The poet's principal competitors in this regard are two: the moral philosopher and the historian. In the promotion of virtue, both philosophy and history play their parts. Philosophy deals with its theoretical aspects and teaches virtue by precept. History teaches practical virtue by drawing concrete examples from life. However, poetry gives both precepts and practical examples. Both philosophy and history are thus, one-sided. Philosophy, being based on abstractions, is 'hard of utterance and mystery to be conceived.' It cannot be a proper guide for youth. On the other hand, the historian is tied to empirical facts that his example drags no necessary consequence. Sidney cites a third possible contender, the lawyer. However, he rapidly dismisses the claims of the lawyer, since the lawyer merely imposes upon people to follow the outward form of virtue without changing their inward disposition.

According to Sidney, Poetry provides perfect pictures of virtue, which are far more effective than the mere definitions of philosophy. It is poetry which brings to life all the virtues, vices, and passions, and hence the "feigned images" of poetry have "more force in teaching" than the "regular instruction" of philosophy. **Poetry is superior to Philosophy** in the sense that it has the power to move and to give incentive for virtuous action. It presents moral lessons in a very attractive form. Things, which in themselves are horrible as cruel battles, unnatural monsters, are made delightful in poetic imitation. The poet does not begin with obscure definitions which load the memory with doubtfulness, 'but he cometh to you with words sent in delightful proportion, either accompanied with, or prepared for the well enchanting skill of music; and with a tale forsooth

he cometh unto you, with a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner.' Poetry also gives imaginary examples, which are more instructive than the real examples of History. Since the historian is tied to reality, he is not at liberty to present the ideal pattern of people or events, whereas the poet can frame his example to that which is most reasonable. Moreover, what the historian can relate in terms of true events, the poet can make his own imitation, "beautifying it both for further teaching, and more delighting".

Sidney here emphasises the poet's freedom, which allows him to choose his material and to frame it in an ideal pattern. His tone is persistent in attempting to overturn the conventional hierarchy of knowledge. The poet, of course, "standeth for the highest form in the school of learning" because he is the moderator between the philosopher and the historian. Through the art of mimesis, the poet unites in one event the philosopher's precept and the historian's example. Rephrasing his earlier argument on fore-conceit and image, Sidney proclaims that the poet gives "a perfect picture" of something. He then lists exemplary precepts that poets encode in speaking pictures: anger, wisdom, temperance, valour, friendship, remorse, pride, cruelty, and ambition. However, the greatest of these is "the most excellent determination of goodness," as in **Xenophon**'s "feigning" of the prince in Cyrus, in **Virgil**'s fashioning of a virtuous man in Aeneas and in Sir **Thomas More**'s representation of an entire commonwealth in his *Utopia* (1516). The reference to the Catholic Thomas More prompts a brief digression in which Sidney states a general tenet of mimesis he had not made before—if the poetic artefact is flawed, the fault lies with the poet, not with poetry. Having made this point, he cites from the practices of Jesus, who provided his teachings in lively stories.

Sidney now undertakes to defend the various genres of poetry that shows clearly the moral and theological functions he assigns to this art. He considers heroic poetry to be the best and most accomplished kind of poetry since it both "instructeth the mind" and "most inflameth the mind with desire to be worthy". The function of poetry for Sidney is threefold:

to teach people the substance of virtue; to move people to virtuous action; and, underlying these two functions, to impress upon people the transitory and worthless nature of worldly affairs. The poet is historian and moral philosopher, but above all, preacher and theologian. A common complaint against poetry is that it is bound up with 'rhyming and versing'. But verse is not essential for poetry. Verse is used for convenience. It produces verbal harmony and lends itself easily to memorising. It is the only fit speech for music. It adds to words a sensuous and emotional quality. Some more serious objections to poetry (as raised by Gosson in his school of abuse) as Sidney observes are:

(a) There being many other more fruitful knowledge, a man might better spend his time in them than in this;

(b) Poetry is the mother of lies

(c) It is the nurse of abuse, infecting us with many pestilent desires; and,

(d) Plato had banished poets from his ideal republic.

Sidney places his defence like the following:

1. Sidney dismisses the first charge by saying that since poetry "teacheth and moveth to virtue", there can be no "more fruitful knowledge" than this.
2. His answer to the second objection that poets are liars is that of all writers under the sun the poet is the least liar. The Astronomer, the Geometrician, the Historian, and others, all make false statements. However, the poet "nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth", his aim being "to tell not what is or is not, but what should or should not be." Therefore, what he presents is not fact but fiction embodying truth of an ideal kind.
3. The third charge against poetry is that its entire species are infected with love themes and amorous conceits, which have a demoralising effect on readers. To this charge, Sidney replies that poetry does not abuse man's wit, man's wit abuse poetry. Even the word of God, says Sidney, when abused, can breed heresy and blasphemy.

4. Sidney is rather perplexed at the last charge, that is, Plato was right when he rejected poetry. In fact, Plato warned men not against poetry but against its abuse by his contemporary poets who filled the world with wrong opinions about the Gods. So, Plato's objection was directed against the theological concepts. In *Ion*, Plato gives high and rightly divine commendation to poetry. His description of the poet as 'a light winged and sacred thing' in that dialogue reveals his attitude to poetry. In fact, by attributing unto poetry a very inspiring of a divine force, Plato was making a claim for poetry, which he for his part could not endorse. Sidney also cites the authority of many great figures who admired poetry, including Aristotle, Alexander, Plutarch and Caesar.

Sidney ends his text with a lamentation over the impoverished state to which poetry has declined in England. He thinks that it is so because poetry has come to be represented by 'base men with servile wits' or to men who, however studious, are not born poets. Another cause is the want of serious cultivation of the Poetic Art. Three things necessary for producing good poetry Art, Imitation, and Exercise, according to Sidney are lacking in the present generation of poets. After this, he deals with the low repute into which poetry had fallen in England, attributing it partly to a sort of lethargy in the people and partly to the inferiority of the poets. Sidney says that few good poems have been produced in England since Chaucer. Chaucer did marvellously well in 'Troilus and Cressida' or 'The Mirror of Magistrates' which contains some beautiful passages. Earl of Surrey's lyrics also deserve praise. Spenser's 'The Shepherds Calendar' is worth reading. Thus, he reviews the state of poetry in England from Chaucer to his own time. Regarding drama, Sidney argued that tragedy should be tied to the laws of poetry and not of history. A dramatist should have liberty to frame the history to his own tragic convenience. The dramatists should know the difference between reporting and representing. They should straightway plunge into the principal point of action, which they want to represent in their play. There should be no mingling of tragedies and comedies. The proper aim of

comedy is to afford delightful teaching, not mere coarse amusement. Comedy should not only amuse but morally instruct. After discussing comedy and tragedy, he proceeds to lyric poetry, to style and diction. Lastly, he proceeds to prosody, dwelling on the great advantage possessed by the English language. Sidney concludes with an attribution of poetry to veneration and honour, with a semi-humorous blessing on those who love and appreciate it and a semi-humorous denunciation of those who are insensible of its charms and its importance. He concludes by admonishing the reader no more to scorn this sacred art.



LET US KNOW

You should note that Stephen Gosson's attack draws heavily on Plato's objections to poetry. So, Sidney's *Apology* reads like a reply to the *Republic.* Though his classicism is filtered through the Italian humanists of the 14th and 15th century, Sidney relies particularly on Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Ars Poetica.* His remarks on the state of the English language and poetry would define the significant literary issues for later English critics including that of John Dryden and Aphra Behn in the 17th century and Samuel Johnson in the 18th

Therefore, you find that *An Apology for Poetry* is a classic statement of Renaissance literary criticism primarily because of its scope, its typicality, and its grace and clarity. Unlike his English contemporary George Puttenham, Sidney displays little interest in formulating the technical rules of poetry and Rhetoric; he treats the subject of poetry much more broadly. Though structured as a classical oration with the standard seven parts (exordium; proposition, division, examination, refutation, digression, peroration); Sidney's text is more usefully understood as treating three major topics.

The first part defends the dignity of poetry demonstrating its superiority to philosophy and history. Along the way, Sidney discusses the ethics of genres; ranging from pastoral, elegy; and satire to comedy, tragedy, and epic.

The second part deals with the specific objections raised against poetry, in particular the charge that the poet is a liar.

The third part of the essay examines the current state of English literature. Here Sidney offers some critical comments on diction, poetic figures, meter, rhyme, rhythm, and the English vernacular compared to other languages. Of particular interest is Sidney's pointed criticism of the English drama for failing to adhere to the unities of time and place sketched in Aristotle's *Poetics.*

A fundamental aesthetic problem of the late 16th century concerns the object and purpose of representation. Sidney's definition of poetry sets an agenda for the discussion of poetry that brings together many of the learned commonplaces of Renaissance criticism: the nature of imitation, the problem of defining nature, and the injunction that poetry serve moral ends.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What are the four grounds on which Stephen Gosson had indicted poetry?

Q 6: Mention the three different types of poets as discussed by Sidney while expressing his idea of imitation in *An Apology for Poetry*.

Q 7: How does Sidney defend the idea of poetry against the attacks raised by Gosson?

Q 8: "Sidney's text is more usefully understood as treating three major topics". Discuss.

5.6 IMPORTANT CONCEPTS OF THE TEXT

The following are the important concepts dealt by Sidney in his Apology.

Importance of Poetry:

In the discussion of Sidney's *An Apology* M. A. R. Habib states that toward the beginning of the text Sidney observes that poetry has fallen

from its status as “the highest estimation of learning” to “be the laughing stock of children.” He produces a wide range of arguments in defence of “poor poetry” based on chronology, the authority of ancient tradition, the relation of poetry to nature, the function of poetry as imitation, the status of poetry among the various disciplines of learning, and the relationship of poetry to truth and morality. Sidney’s initial argument is that poetry was the first form in which knowledge had been expressed, the “first light giver to ignorance,” as bodied forth by poets such as Musaeus, Homer, and Hesiod, Livius, Ennius, Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch. In addition, the first Greek philosophers Thales, Empedocles, Parmenides, and Pythagoras, Sidney points out, expressed their vision in verse. Even Plato used poetic devices such as dialogue and description of setting and circumstance to adorn his philosophy. Again, historians such as Herodotus too had borrowed the “fashion” and the “weight” of poetry. Sidney concludes here “neither philosopher nor historiographer could at the first have entered into the gates of popular judgments, if they had not taken a great passport of poetry.” His point is that an essential prerequisite of knowledge is pleasure in learning; and itis poetry that has made each of these varieties of knowledge – scientific, moral, philosophical, and political–accessible by expressing them in pleasurable forms. While he acknowledges that poetry is a “divine gift” and dependent on genius, he actually laments the fact that these would-be poets ignore the need to labour at their craft, a craft whose principles must be “art, imitation, and exercise” He concludes by asking the reader not to scorn poetry. Instead, he entreats the readers to believe that “there are many mysteries contained in poetry, which of purpose were written darkly, least by profane wits, it should be abused”. In addition, he curses those who are possessed of “so earth-creeping a mind that it cannot lift itself up, to look to the sky of poetry”. In *An Apology*, poetry is elevated to that sacred status: in its very nature it is opposed to worldliness and “earth creeping” concerns.

Nature of Imitation:

Although the principle of imitation reigned unchallenged in literary

criticism from the Renaissance to the end of the 18th century, not all critics meant the same thing by *imitation,* nor did they necessarily agree on the existing notion of imitation. At the centre of the controversy over imitation was a debate about nature itself—what constituted nature and, what was the status of representations of reality? Like the third-century philosopher Plotinus, Sidney uses the Platonic theory of Forms to refute criticism against poetry. Sidney held that the nature poets imitated the ideal, and not the material. During the Renaissance, the ideal of nature was God's cosmological plan. Sidney perhaps best represents this viewpoint when he argues that the Right poets "imitate to teach and delight, and to imitate, borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or, shall be, but range only reined with learned discretion into the divine consideration of what, may be and should be." This view of imitation is based on a religious belief in providential design; because the universe is the product of divine wisdom. Hence, the purpose of the poet is ultimately to affirm the rule of justice. In the next century, this view of nature runs head on into the scientific revolution, and the debate is recast in Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* and elsewhere.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: What are the major concepts of Sidney in his *Apology*?

Q 10: What kind of argument on poetry does Sidney in his Apology provide?

5.7 RECEPTION OF SIDNEY AS A CRITIC

Sidney's influence was largely found in the works of his successors. Most importantly, he had left an impact in several of the literary genres like the sonnet form, chivalric romance, pastoral poems, tragedy and tragi-comedy. His *Arcadia* had a great impact in many leading playwrights like Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, etc. The real identity of Sidney's "Stella" triggered a fascination among the critics. Also, the part played by his sister in translating the Psalms was also

inquired by the later critics. The "antiquarian movement" of the early 19th century played a massive role in bringing about a renewed interest on Sidney. As an example Thomas Zouch's *Memoir of Sir Philip Sidney* may be cited for it was instrumental in bringing Sidney's life and philosophical, as well as his literary inclinations and interests to a wide exposure.

It seems that Sidney is basically a creative writer compelled to become a critic to reply to Stephen Gosson's vindication of poetry. Being a creative writer Sidney wanted to encourage both poetry and drama to be developed. His posterity often considers him to be an important critic of the Renaissance mainly because he was not only an innovator but also one who helped in the dispersion of cultural tradition. Following his innovative cravings, he introduced many literary forms or techniques in the English literary traditions. In fact, it was Sidney who was credited to be the first writer of England who reflected on the significance of Aristotle's famous book, *Poetics* and threw light on Renaissance criticism of Italy. In fact, "he helped to popularise Hellenistic romance and Italian poetic style, and his treatment of Machiavellian politics and Epicurean philosophy are among the earliest in English literature. Other writers of the age may have been greater, but none could inspire the movement in literature and the arts" during the Elizabethan period. (http://bibs.slu.edu/sidney/history.html)

Sidney's contribution to literary criticism opened up future prospects for writers. Of the many influences Sidney exerted upon the writers of the succeeding age, we must note in particular "A Defence of Poetry" by Percy Bysshe Shelley. Another writer belonging to the Romantic age whose work showed strong influence of Sidney was S. T. Coleridge in his treatise titled "On Poesy or Art". Sidney's perspectives on poetry and poets as well as his use of metaphoric language influenced several critics in the latter age. One of the significant themes or ideas represented in *An Apology* is "portraiture". His main point is that poetry is an "arte of imitation . . . that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth: to speake metaphorically, a speaking picture: with this end to teach and delight" (Sidney, 10). In fact, Sidney also influenced the metaphysical poets like John Donne.



5.8 LET US SUM UP

After reading this unit, you must have realised the important role played by Sir Philip Sidney in the history of English literary criticism. His *An Apology for Poetry* written in a 16th century is concerned mainly about the aesthetic problems regarding the object and purpose of poetic representation. It is in many ways a seminal text of literary criticism. It is not only a defence but also one of the most acclaimed treatises on poetics of its time. While its ideas are not original, it represents the first synthesis in the English language of the various strands and concerns of Renaissance literary criticism, drawing on Aristotle, Horace, and more recent writers such as Boccaccio and Julius Caesar Scaliger. It raised issues – such as the value and function of poetry, the nature of imitation, and the concept of nature – which were to concern literary critics in numerous languages until the late 18th century. Sidney's writing of the *Apology* as a defence of poetry was occasioned by an attack on poetry entitled *The School of Abuse* published in 1579 by a Puritan minister, Stephen Gosson. As you have already read, Sidney rejected Gosson's Protestant attack on courtly pleasure, effectively defending poetry as a virtuous activity.



5.9 FURTHER READING

1) Alexander, Gavin. (2004). *Sidney's 'The Defence of Poesy'andSelected Renaissance Literary Criticism*. Penguin.

2) Habib, M.A.R. (2005). *A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present*. Malden: Blackwell.

3) Morley, Edith J. (1901). *The Works of Sir Philip Sidney.*London: Hugh Rees Ltd. (E-book from www.archive.org)

4) Roy, Lisa. (ed.). (2009).*History and Principles of Literary Criticism*. New Delhi: Anmol Publications Pvt. Limited.

5) Saintsbury, George. (2004).*A History of English Criticism*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.

6) Sidney, Sir Philip. (1891). *An Apologie for Poetrie*. Ed. by Evelyn S. Shuckburgh. New York: Cambridge University Press.

7) Spingarn, J.E. (1924). *A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance*. New York: Columbia University Press. (E-book from www.archive.org) Symonds, J. A. (1887). *Sir Philip Sidney*. New York: Harper and Brothers. (E-book from www.archive.org)

8) Wimsatt, William K, JR. & Brooks, Cleanth. (1970). *Literary Criticism: A Short History*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Web Resource:

http://bibs.slu.edu/sidney/history.html

5.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: On the one hand, the Renaissance critics were devoted scholars of the Classics, on the other, they were equally devoted to the native English tradition like the poetry of Chaucer… …on the other hand, they adored the classics as model for guidance, and on the other, they advocated the purity of the native tongue from foreign influences like Latin, French and Italian.

Ans to Q 2: The main concerns of Renaissance has been the revival of interests in classical Greek and Latin criticism… …it was also the time in which English writers were concerned over the appreciation of form and style as the distinguishing features of literature… …it was also the time for the first systematic classification of poetic forms and subjects… …this period is also marked by an emergence of philosophical and apologetic criticism.

Ans to Q 3: The sonnet cycle *Astrophel and Stella* is the first Elizabethan sonnet sequences… …It includes 108 sonnets and 11 songs… …most of the sonnets are influenced by Petrarchan conventions in

which the abject lover laments the coldness of the lady he peruses… …this sonnet sequence is autobiographical as Stella is modelled on Penelope Devereux, who was supposed to marry Sidney.

Ans to Q 4: The *Apology* is an answer to Stephen Gosson, who dedicated his "School of Abuse" to Sidney in 1579, without taking his consent… …Gosson presented a puritanical standpoint which condemns all the beauties of present life… …Sidney argues that poetry is more effective than either history or philosophy in rousing its readers to virtue.

Ans to Q 5: That men could employ his time more usefully than in poetry… …that poetry is the mother of lies… …that poetry is the nurse of abuse… …Plato had rightly banished the poets from his ideal commonwealth.

Ans to Q 6: Divine poets who imitate the "inconceivable excellences of God"… …Pagan poets who imitate "matter philosophical"… …and Right poets who imitate to teach and delight.

Ans to Q 7: There can be no "more fruitful knowledge" than we derive from poetry… …what a poet presents is not fact but fiction embodying truth of an ideal kind… …poetry does not abuse man's wit, it is man's wit that abuses poetry… …Plato was right when he rejected poetry because he warned men not against poetry but against its abuse by his contemporary poets.

Ans to Q 8: Sidney's demonstration of the superiority of poetry to philosophy and history… …Sidney's reply to the specific charges the poet as a liar…. …Sidney's observation on the current state of English literature.

Ans to Q 9: Sidney proposes that poetry should be seen as "the highest estimation of learning" and defends it for being a rich tradition… …Nature of Imitation: Sidney argues that "right poets" "imitate to teach and delight, and to imitate, borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or, shall be, but range only reined with learned discretion into the divine consideration of what, may be and should be."

Ans to Q 10: That poetry has fallen from its status as "the highest estimation of learning" to "be the laughing stock of children"… …"poor poetry" is based on chronology, the authority of ancient tradition, the relation of poetry to nature, the function of poetry as imitation.. …on the other hand, Sidney viewed that poetry was the first form in which knowledge had been expressed as practised by poets such as Musaeus, Homer, Hesiod, Livius, Ennius, Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch.



5.11 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss briefly the Puritan objections against poetry and Sidney's defence of it. What significance does it hold in the context of the critical discussion of poetry during the Renaissance?

Q 2: How does Sidney interpret poetry in his age? Substantiate your answer with reference to the different stands that he takes in the text of *An Apology for Poetry?*

Q 3: Who is a true poet according to Sidney? Does his view reflect his own upbringing as a poet of the Elizabethan age?

Q 4: In what ways does Sidney stick to the doctrine of poetry as imitation? Discuss with reference to Sidney's preoccupation with classical masters like Plato and Aristotle.

Q 5: How does Sidney refute the main accusations against poetry? Who, according to Sidney, is a true poet?

Q 6: What, according to you, is the importance of Sidney's criticism? How did it influence the future generations of English critics?

Q 7: How does Sidney extol the cause of poetry during his time? Elaborate with examples from the text.

Q 8: Write a note on the reception of Sidney as a critic.

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UNIT 6: INTRODUCTION TO NEO-CLASSICAL CRITICISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

6.1 Learning Objectives

6.2 Introduction

6.3 History of Neoclassical Criticism

6.3.1 Major Exponents in Neoclassical Criticism

6.3.2 Important Concepts

6.4 Let us Sum up

6.5 Further Reading

6.6 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

6.7 Possible Questions

6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- *Understand* the basic concepts of Neoclassical criticism
- *Identify* the major exponents of Neoclassical criticism
- *Situate* and contextualise Neoclassical criticism in the history of English literature.

6.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of Block 2 and in this unit, we shall discuss Neoclassical criticism. The term 'Neoclassicism' refers to a tendency in the field of literature, art and culture in Europe predominant in the period from the early 17th century until the middle of 18th century. Despite variations across different cultures, Neoclassicism was marked by certain common concerns and characteristics. Neoclassicism is the return to the classical models in literature and literary styles, and a revisiting of the values of ancient Greek and Roman authors as models. Neoclassicism was a sharp reaction against the use of extravagant styles, superfluous ornaments, and overtly sophisticated languages by some of the Renaissance writers. The

neoclassic also rejected the extravagance of the Gothic and Baroque styles. This unit offers you a brief introduction to this approach of literary criticism, along with an attempt at locating Neoclassicism in the socio-cultural contexts of the literature of the time. Very brief introductions to the major critics along with their critical ideas have also been provided in this unit. However, it is always advisable to read the major critical texts of each critic in order to understand the characteristics of each critic and the period or school s/he represents.

6.3 HISTORY OF NEOCLASSICAL CRITICISM

Neoclassicism can be understood as a form of reaction against many Renaissance tendencies in art and literature in Europe. While the work of most of the major medieval and Renaissance authors like Dante, Ariosto, More, Spenser, Giraldi, and Milton centred round the representation of the fantastic and mythical beings, the 'marvellous' and unreal elements, poets like Sidney and others, echoed Plato by emphasising that a poet's duty was to create an ideal world. The neoclassicists vehemently rejected this neo-Platonic idealistic tendency in Renaissance poetics by taking recourse to the Aristotelian notions of art and literature. Scholars like Minturno, Scaliger, Castelvetro, showed new interest on Aristotle's *Poetics* and promoted the Aristotelian notions of probability, and the three 'unities'. The transgression from Renaissance to Neoclassicism is marked by the transformation from the maintenance of individualism of outlook and expression to the celebration of the classical values of objectivity, impersonality, rationality, decorum, proportion, and moderation, from the stress upon invention and creativity in literature to the rational and rule-bound nature of literature. Whereas the Renaissance scholars were promoting new and mixed genres, the neoclassicists were more interested in separating poetry from prose, maintaining the purity of each genre.

The root of Neoclassical literary criticism can be traced in France from where it diffused to England and other parts of Europe. The works of the Italian Aristotelian scholars Castelvetro and Scaliger, after being introduced to the French scholars by Jean Chapelain, developed a new

interest in classical studies in France. King Louis XIV, during this time, was an enthusiast for poetry and drama. The socio-political conditions were relatively more peaceful and prosperous than that during period of religious wars in the 16th century. French Academy was established in 1635 with a chief intention, among many others, to standardize language through the development of a dictionary and grammar. The Academy also started to work on rhetoric and poetics. Such an environment resulted in the birth of literary figures like Corneille, Racine, Molière, and La Fontaine, who are representatives of French Neoclassicism.

Neoclassicism dominated the field of English literature from the Restoration in 1660 until the end of the 18th century, or more specifically, till the publication of Lyrical Ballads in 1798, which marks the beginning of the Romantic period. The Neoclassical period in English literature can be divided into three parts: the Restoration Age (1660 – 1700) dominated by Milton, Bunyan, and Dryden; the Augustan Age (17001750) dominated by Pope, Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett; and the Age of Johnson (17501798), dominated by Dr. Samuel Johnson. Neoclassicism, to some extent, is a reaction against the optimistic and enthusiastic Renaissance idea of man as fundamentally good with limitless possibilities for spiritual and intellectual growth. On the other hand, the Neoclassical theorists, viewed man as an imperfect, inherently sinful being with limited potentials. The Renaissance emphasis on imagination, invention, experimentation, and mysticism is replaced by the emphasis on order, reason, restraint, common sense, as well as on religious, political, economic and philosophical conservatism. The neoclassicist's emphasis rested on the selection of proper subject matter; on the employment of the concepts like symmetry, proportion, unity, harmony, and grace; and on the basic function of art in delighting, instructing, educating.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How is neoclassicism connected to Renaissance?

Q 2: How do you divide the neoclassical period in English literature?

Q 3: In what way can the root of Neoclassical literary criticism be traced in France?

6.3.1 Major Exponents of Neoclassical Criticism

French Writers:

We have already found that the root of Neoclassicism in Europe can be traced in French literature. Authors like Corneille, Boileau-Despréauxh have made immense contribution to the development of Neoclassical theories in French literature, which later influenced other literatures including English. So let us begin our discussion with the discussion of these major French authors.

Pierre Corneille (1606–1684):

Pierre Corneille, primarily a playwright, wrote the most influential text of literary criticism, *Trois Discourssur le poème dramatique* (*Three Discourses on Dramatic Poetry*, 1660), as a defence to his own dramatic practice, specifically his most renowned play *Le Cid* (1637). This play, despite being popular among the audiences, faced diverse criticisms from the French literary and political establishment. The allegation was that the play failed to observe the rules of theatre like the classical unities and the Aristotelian precepts of probability and necessity, and the play ignored the educational function of drama. Corneille reacted to these allegations by producing his *Three Discourses*. This book is an important document in the history of Western literary criticism in the sense that here Corneille re-interpreted and modified most of the Aristotelian concepts like 'three unities', plot and its division: 'beginning, middle and end', 'complication and resolution' etc.

Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (1636–1711):

Boileau was basically a poet, satirist, and a critic having tremendous influence on French as well as English and German writers and critics. His major work *L'Art Poétique* (*The Art of Poetry*), (1674), was translated by John Dryden into English. This book drew

heavily on Aristotle and Horace and influenced directly some of the English Neoclassical writers like Pope. Boileau was the spokesperson of classical rationality, "good sense," and proportion. His *Art of Poetry*, like Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, documents some of the major socio-cultural, intellectual and political that the contemporary Europe was undergoing. His book vehemently rejected the feudal system, ignored the Middle Ages, viewed human being as essentially social, and sought to restore the classical principles of reason and nature. Just as Molière's plays affect a balance between religious belief and rationalism, arguing for an enlightened rather than authoritarian religion, so Boileau's text is marked by a central affirmation of the importance of reason, as well as observation. Boileau's text, written as a poem in the tradition of Horace's *Ars Poetica*, offers advice in various genres such as tragedy, comedy, epic, and ode, along with commenting on various aspects of literary history. The principle of reason takes the central stage in this text.

English Writers:

John Dryden (1631–1700):

John Dryden, who was considered as 'the father of English criticism' by Samuel Johnson is the most influential Neoclassical critic in the history of English literature. His critical works touched upon diverse genres including epic, tragedy, comedy, satire, along with topics like relative virtues of ancient and modern writers, the nature of poetry as well as translation. About his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668), Johnson commented that 'modern English prose begins here.' Apart from his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, numerous prefaces, reviews, and prologues composed by him construct the vast edifice of his critical writings that shaped the poetic and critical developments of his successors like Pope and Johnson in the same era as well as Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot in later periods of English literature. Dryden was born just before the outbreak of the English Civil War between King Charles-I, and the Parliament. The

works of Dryden as a poet, dramatist, and translator, mark his shift in religious and political allegiances from the Parliament, led by Cromwell and other Puritan leaders, to Charles-II after his restoration to the throne in 1660. Dryden celebrated the restoration of the king in his poem *Astrea Redux* (*Justice Restored*). After being appointed as the poet laureate in 1668 he composed a good number of important poems "Mac Flecknoe", "Absalom and Achitophel", "Religio Laici" etc. His important plays include *Marriage a la Mode* (1671), *Aureng Zebe* (1675), *All for Love* etc. Besides, he also translated Ovid, Boccaccio and Chaucer.

As a critic, in Dryden an interest in the general issues of criticism can be noticed rather than the close reading of any particular text. In his *An Essay on Dramatic Poesy*, written in the form of a debate on drama, Dryden not only carried out his critical thoughts effectively but also left some room for difference of opinion from other critics. One of the characters in this book, Neander, expresses that, for the development of literary standards, norms can be added to make a work ideal; but the norms are not enough if the work does not contain some degree of perfection. Dryden himself believes that despite disobeying the rules, Shakespeare was undoubtedly superior to any writer. However, in a classic manner, he was very coherent in detailing his formulations of the rules.



LET US KNOW

Dryden's *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* is written in the form of a debate between four speakers, Eugenius, Crites, Lisideius, and Neander, who are conventionally identified with four contemporaries of Dryden. It was the result of a public dispute, as Dryden himself admits later, with Sir Robert Howard (Crites in the *Essay*) over the use of rhyme in drama. Though the essay was targeted to the blind followers of French literature, it later extended its scope to certain larger debates connected to the idea of nature and concerning dramatic composition.

Alexander Pope (1688–1744):

Pope is an important name in 18th century English poetry, especially for his satirical verse, his use of the heroic couplet and the translation of Homer. Being a Catholic in an anti-Catholic state headed by the Protestant King William III of Orange, Pope failed to obtain university education, hold public office, and even reside in London. Diseases and deformities handicapped his personal life. Despite such socio-political and personal obstacles, he authored some of the phenomenal pieces of poetry such as *The Rape of the Lock* (1712; 1714), *The Dunciad* (1728) as well as the philosophical poem *An Essay on Man* (1733–1734). His *An Essay on Criticism* is an important document of Neoclassical criticism in English literature. It is a synthesis of Roman Catholic elements with principles of classical aesthetics. He wrote it in verse, following the tradition of Horace's *Ars Poetica*. The poem is a response to an ongoing debate on the question of whether poetry should be natural, or written according to predetermined artificial rules inherited from the classical past. He discusses the laws to which a critic should adhere while critiquing poetry, and points out that critics serve an important function in aiding poets with their works. *An Essay on Criticism* provides a space for him to develop much of the philosophical ideas he discusses in *An Essay on Man*, which is often called a study and defence of 'nature' and of 'wit'.



LET US KNOW

In his *Essay on Criticism* Pope has delineated the scope and nature of good literary criticism along with redefining classical virtues in terms of an exploration of nature and wit. While much of Pope's essay laments the void into which his contemporary literary criticism has fallen, he does not denounce the practice of criticism in any means. Pope specifies a few guidelines for the critic: the first is to recognize the overall unity of a work, and thereby to avoid falling into partial assessments based

on the author's use of poetic conceits, ornamented language, and meters, as well as those which are biased toward either archaic or modern styles or based on the reputations of given writers. Secondly, a critic needs to possess a moral sensibility, as well as a sense of balance and proportion, as indicated in these lines: "Nor in the Critick let the Man be lost! / Good Nature and Good Sense must ever join" (ll. 523–525). In the interests of good nature and good sense, Pope urges the critic to adopt not only habits of self-criticism and integrity, but also modesty and caution. For him, to be truthful is not enough; "Good Breeding" must accompany truth or else it will lose its effect. For Pope, the qualities of a good critic are primarily attributes of humanity or moral sensibility rather than aesthetic qualities. These virtues have a theological ground, resting on the ability to overcome pride. Pope's specific advice to the critic is grounded on virtues whose application extends far beyond literary criticism, into the realms of morality, theology, and art itself. In other words, Pope sees criticism itself as an art. Hence, most of the guidance he offers is applicable equally to poetry and criticism. His writings suggest that criticism must be a part of the creative process, that poets themselves must possess critical faculties in order to execute their craft in a self-conscious and controlled manner.

Aphra Behn (1640–1689)

Aphra Behn, as one of the first ladies to support herself financially as a writer, as one of the founders of the English novel, was a pioneer in many respects. As a playwright, her views about drama were highly unorthodox and controversial. She expressed her views basically in the prefaces to her plays like *The Dutch Lover* (1673), *The Rover* (1677), *The Lucky Chance* (1687) etc. Being herself a witness to all the obstacles that a woman might face in her times, her views were highly affected by her personal experiences. Her forerunners like Pierre Corneille's emphasis on experience took drama a few steps away from the classical authorities; her appeal to

experience, more specifically to female experience, was far more radical. Moreover, she adds another dimension to drama – the performative aspect of drama. In her "Epistle to the Reader", she defends the value of drama by contrasting it with traditional learning as taught in the universities. Behn's opinion about drama is that it represents the best entertainment that "wise men have"; so it is a valueless affair to discourse formally about its rules. She clarified that her own purpose, in writing her plays was "only to make this as entertaining as I could".



LET US KNOW

For Behn, women are just as capable of acquiring knowledge as men. Again, citing Shakespeare and Jonson as examples, she argues that successful plays do not rest on the learning, which is men's point of advantage over women. Further, she argues that had women been given the same education as men do, women might well reach the heights attained by men. In her preface to *The Lucky Chance*, after its huge success, Behn states that she will defend her comedy against the critics who "load it with all manner of Infamy" just because it has been written by a woman. She further asserts that many works of poetry have indecently mistreated the subject of women; but critics overlook it "because a Man writ them." She appeals the critics to examine her work by "reading, comparing, or thinking" rather than out rightly rejecting it because of the femininity of the writer. Behn here effectively places the virtues of good judgment, critical reading, and thinking beyond the confines of traditional masculine learning and the conventional male literary establishment.

Behn, as a woman writer, does not attempt to subvert male assumptions about women writers; rather, she appropriates for women's use the categories of common sense and reason, extricating them from the tradition of male prejudice. Thus, her

approach cannot directly be viewed as representative of feminism. She does not attempt to see herself as outside the male literary tradition; rather she pleads to be included in it. However, her works need to be read in the context of her having scorned both male learning and classical rules of literary composition.

Samuel Johnson (1709–1784)

Johnson, as a literary critic, had a huge impact on English letters in his time and in future. His "Preface" to an edition of Shakespeare's plays was vital to the establishment of Shakespeare's reputation; his discussion of the lives of English poets contributed to the forming of the English literary canon. As a critic, he was enormously well read, witty, acerbic, provocative and sometimes radical. Johnson's classical commitment to reason, probability, and truth was complemented by his equally classical insistence on the moral function of literature. He argued that the modern writers require not only the learning that is to be gained from books but also "that experience which can never be attained by solitary diligence, but must arise from general converse, and accurate observation of the living world" (*Rambler*, 10). However, he argues that the prime concern of the author should not be verisimilitude but moral instruction. Johnson acknowledges that "the greatest excellency of art" is to "imitate nature; but it is necessary to distinguish those parts of nature, which are most proper for imitation" (*Rambler*, 12–13). Hence the "realism" that Johnson advocates is highly selective, constrained by moral imperatives. Johnson's position appears to be solidly entrenched within the tradition of classical realism: like Aristotle, he desires literature, even the newly emerging genre of the novel, to express truth in general and universal terms.



LET US KNOW

Most of Johnson's views on criticism and literature have been taken up in the "Preface" to his edition of Shakespeare's plays. Three basic concerns inform

this preface: how a poet's reputation is established; the poet's relation to nature; and the relative virtues of nature and experience of life as against a reliance on principles established by criticism and convention. After intervening in the debate on the relative virtues of ancient and modern writers, he affirms that the excellence of the ancient authors is based on a "gradual and comparative" estimate, as tested by "observation and experience". Johnson admits that Shakespeare had no regard for the unities of time and place; but Johnson defends Shakespeare in this matter by questioning the very unities themselves. Like Corneille, he views these unities as having "given more trouble to the poet, than pleasure to the auditor". Johnson sees these unities as arising from "the supposed necessity of making the drama credible.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Discuss Dryden's idea of the nature of poetry.

Q 5: Mention the significance of Pierre Corneille's *Three Discourses on Dramatic Poetry.*

Q 6: Why is Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Criticism" considered an important document of Neoclassical criticism?

Q 7: How did Aphra Behn succeed as a writer in a male dominated intellectual environment?

6.3.2 Important Concepts

Dryden's idea of the nature and function of Poetry:

In general, terms, Dryden accepts the Aristotelian notion of poetry as a process of imitation; but he did make some modifications to this idea by adding some qualifiers to it. In his time, the generally accepted view was that poetry had to be a close imitation of facts past or present. Dryden was not against the prevalent Neoclassical interest in 'verisimilitude', but he was an advocate for more liberties and flexibilities for poetry. In the *The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy* he explains that a poet is free to imitate "things as they are said or

thought to be", apart from, as what he adds, his right to imitate what could be, might be or ought to be. He draws examples of Shakespeare who so deftly exploited elements of the supernatural, popular beliefs and superstitions. Dryden categorised such exercises within the scope of 'imitation' since they are also drawn on "other men's fancies".

Dryden, as a poet and critic, was familiar with all the classical scholars like Plato, Aristotle, Longinus and Horace. While formulating his idea of the function of poetry, he was considerate to all the differences of views of these classical models. Plato emphasised on the responsibility of poetry to instruct the reader, while Aristotle concentrated on delight; Horace advocated both delight and instruction, while Longinus gave importance to the responsibility to transport. However, Dryden was of the opinion that the chief aim of poetry is delight and transport rather than instruction. For him, poetry does not imitate life but presents its own version of life. For him, the poet is neither an instructor nor a plain imitator; he is a creator, who, using life and Nature as his raw material, creates new things that resemble the original. Thus poetry, for Dryden, is much more a work of art than a mere work of imitation.

Pope's Idea of Nature:

The term 'nature' has been associated with diverse meanings through different times across various traditions. In his *An Essay on Man*, Pope's call for a "return to nature" is problematised by this complexity of meaning, and he exploits the multiple significance of the term to produce a comprehensive reinterpretation of it. First, the term 'nature' can refer to the providential order of the world and the universe. It is an order hierarchical in nature where each entity has its proper assigned place. Pope talks about the "Great Chain of Being," where everything in existence starting from God and the angels to the humans and the animals to the plants to the inanimate objects has been allotted a well-defined position in the hierarchical order. Nature also refers to what is normal, central, and universal in

human experience. This definition includes all the spheres of morality and knowledge, the rules of proper moral conduct as well as the archetypal patterns of human reason.

The idea of Wit:

During the late 17th and early 18th centuries, 'wit' was the subject of a broad and heated debate. During and before the time of Pope, the term 'wit' had been used for diversity of meanings. In general, wit could refer to intelligence and intellectual sharpness; it was also used to mean 'wit' to reference to cleverness, as expressed, for example, in the ability to produce a concise and poignant figure of speech or pun. Apart from these connotations, wit designated the capacity to differentiate similarities between different entities and to perceive the hidden relationships underlying the appearances of things. Thus in the debate over the meaning of wit, various parties contested the right to define it and to invest it with moral significance. A number of writers such as Nicolas Malebranche and Joseph Addison, and philosophers such as John Locke, argued that wit was a negative quality, associated with a corrupting imagination, distortion of truth, profanity, and scepticism, a quality opposed to "judgment," which was a faculty of clear and truthful insight. Literature generally had come to be associated with wit and had been under attack from the Puritans also, who saw it as morally defective and corrupting. On the other side, writers such as John Dryden and William Wycherley, as well as moralists such as the third earl of Shaftesbury, defended the use and freedom of wit. Pope developed his idea of wit in the context of this debate, and his redefinition of 'true' wit in *Essay on Criticism* was a means not only of upholding the proper uses of wit but also of defending literature itself. Thus for Pope, wit is a mode of knowing or apprehension – unique characteristic of literature.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: Discuss the neoclassical idea of nature.

Q 9: How is the idea of 'Wit' seen during the Neoclassical period?



6.4 LET US SUM UP

After going through this introductory unit, you must have developed a fair idea about the basic characteristics of Neoclassical criticism. Let us now have a brief overview of what we have learnt. We have learnt that Neoclassicism is the return to the classical models in literature and literary styles, and a revisiting of the values of ancient Greek and Roman authors as models. It was a sharp reaction against the use of extravagant styles, superfluous ornaments, and overtly sophisticated languages by some of the Renaissance writers. The root of Neoclassical literary criticism can be traced in France from where it diffused to England and other parts of Europe. It dominated the field of English literature from the Restoration in 1660 till the end of the 18th century. Dryden, Pope, Johnson are the most influential critics of the era. In their understanding of art and the creative faculty, they have maintained the classical models like Aristotle, Horace as the base of their criticism. They have touched upon diverse topics starting from the nature and function of poetry to the idea of 'Nature' and reality, the idea of wit to the individual engagement with the norms of poetry, etc.



6.5 FURTHER READING

1) Habib, M. A. R. (2011). *Literary Criticism from Plato to the Present: An Introduction,* Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

2) Highet, Gilbert. (1949). *The Classical Tradition.* Oxford University Press.

3) Leitch, Vincent B. (2001). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Norton and Company, Inc.

4) Wimsatt, William K. & Cleanth Brooks. (1970). *Literary Criticism: A Short History*. London: Routledge & Keegan Paul.



6.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Neoclassicism is a return to the classical models… …provides a sharp reaction against the use of extravagant styles, superfluous ornaments, and overtly sophisticated languages by some of the Renaissance writers… … NeoPlatonic idealistic tendency in Renaissance poetics was vehemently rejected by the neo-classicists… …the Renaissance emphasis on imagination, invention, experimentation, and mysticism is replaced by the emphasis on order, reason, restraint, common sense, as well as on religious, political, economic and philosophical conservatism.

Ans to Q 2: Neoclassicism: from the Restoration in 1660 till the end of the 18th century – can be divided into three parts: the Restoration Age (1660 – 1700) dominated by Milton, Bunyan, and Dryden; the Augustan Age (17001750) dominated by Pope, Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett; and the Age of Johnson (17501798), dominated by Dr. Samuel Johnson.

Ans to Q 3: From France Neoclassicism diffused to England and other parts of Europe. The works of the Italian Aristotelian scholars Castelvetro and Scaliger, after being introduced to the French scholars by Jean Chapelain, developed a new interest in classical studies in France… …role played by French Academy in the development of a dictionary and grammar, rhetoric and poetics… …this environment gave birth to French Neoclassicists like Corneille, Racine, Molière, and La Fontaine.

Ans to Q 4: Dryden accepts the Aristotelian notion of poetry as a process

of imitation… …he advocated for more liberties and flexibilities for poetry by stating that a poet is free to imitate "things as they are said or thought to be"… …for him the chief aim of poetry is delight and transport rather than instruction.. …poetry does not imitate life but presents its own version of life… …the poet is neither an instructor nor a plain imitator; he is a creator.

Ans to Q 5: This book is an important document in the history of Western literary criticism in the sense that here Corneille re-interpreted and modified most of the Aristotelian concepts like 'three unities', plot and its division: 'beginning, middle and end', 'complication and resolution' etc.

Ans to Q 6: The poem is a response to an ongoing debate on the question of whether poetry should be natural, or written according to predetermined artificial rules inherited from the classical past……laws a critic should adhere to while critiquing poetry… …this poem provides a space for him to develop much of the philosophical ideas he discusses in *An Essay on Man* where he mentions the ideas of 'nature' and 'wit'.

Ans to Q 7: In her "Epistle to the Reader" she defends the value of drama by contrasting it with traditional learning as taught in the universities. Behn's opinion about drama is that it represents the best entertainment that "wise men have"; so it is a valueless affair to discourse formally about its rules. She clarified that her own purpose, in writing her plays was "only to make this as entertaining as I could".

Ans to Q 8: The term 'nature' refers to the providential order of the world and the universe – a hierarchical order where each entity has its proper assigned place – Nature also refers to what is normal, central, and universal in human experience – it includes all the spheres of morality and knowledge, the rules of proper moral conduct as well as the archetypal patterns of human reason.

Ans to Q 9: Before the time of Pope, the term 'wit' had been used for diversity of meanings… …wit referred to cleverness, intelligence and intellectual sharpness… …writers such as Nicolas Malebranche and

Joseph Addison, and philosophers such as John Locke, argued that wit was a negative quality, associated with a corrupting imagination, distortion of truth, profanity, and scepticism, a quality opposed to "judgment," which was a faculty of clear and truthful insight… …Alexander Pope in *Essay on Criticism* tried to discuss wit as a mode of knowing or apprehension.



6.7 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Trace the development of Neoclassicism in the history of English criticism.

Q 2: Do you think that the Neoclassical critics blindly followed the classical masters? Explain.

Q 3: Can it be argued that Neoclassicism led to the development of Romantic criticism in English literature? How are both of the literary periods interrelated?

Q 4: Discuss how the Neoclassical critics evaluated Shakespeare.

Q 5: How did the Neo-classical critics view the idea of 'Imitation'?

Q 6: What are the major intellectual preoccupations of the writers and critics during the Neo-classical Period? Illustrate with reference to Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare*.

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UNIT 7: SAMUEL JOHNSON: *PREFACE TO SHAKESPEARE*

UNIT STRUCTURE

7.1 Learning Objectives

7.2 Introduction

7.3 Samuel Johnson: The Critic

7.4 Johnson: *Preface to Shakespeare*

7.5 Important Concepts of the Text

7.6 Reception of Johnson as a Critic

7.7 Let us Sum up

7.8 Further Reading

7.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

7.10 Possible Questions

7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you should be able to

- assess the importance of Samuel Johnson with respect to his life and works
- discuss the text of *Preface to Shakespeare* as an important text for Neo-classical criticism
- explain the different concepts and issues that are raised in the text
- gain ideas on how Johnson's text provides fresh insights into the plays of Shakespeare
- evaluate the status of Johnson as a critic of the 18th century.

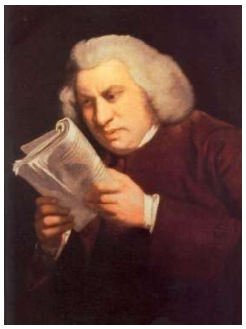
7.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, an attempt has been made to discuss Neoclassical criticism of the 18th century as represented by a text called *Preface to Shakespeare* by Samuel Johnson. Johnson is one of the most influential critics in English literary history of the Neoclassical period. His literary endeavours include a monumental *Dictionary of the English Language,* a

comprehensive edition of Shakespeare, and the *Lives of the English Poets*—a set of insightful, vividly written biographical portraits of 17th and 18th century authors. Johnson's eight-volume edition of Shakespeare was published in October 1765. There, he celebrates Shakespeare's talent in portraying character and revealing truths about the human nature, and defends the playwright against charges of violating the dramatic unities of time and place and improperly mixing the genres of tragedy and comedy. An integral dimension of Johnson's literary output was his literary criticism, which was to have a huge impact on the English men of letters in the subsequent days to come. In this unit, you will notice that *Preface to Shakespeare* played a large part in establishing Shakespeare's reputation in the 18th century as well as in subsequent period.

7.3 SAMUEL JOHNSON: THE CRITIC

Samuel Johnson, the eldest son of Michael Johnson, was born in 1709 at Lichfield, Staffordshire, a town about 100 miles Northwest of London. His father was a bookseller and his education consisted largely of the volumes in his father's bookshop, and by what was "whipped into" him by the master of the grammar school in Lichfield. Leaving this school at the age of 16, he spent the next two years at home presumably learning his father's business. It was during this period that the foundations of his future career as a man of letters were laid by his voracious reading. He attended Pembroke College at the University of Oxford for only a year, leaving in December 1729, because he lacked the funds to continue. During his short stay at Oxford, he proved himself an ardent Latin scholar of vast knowledge. As he recalls later, "I was miserably poor, and I thought to fight my way by my literature and my wit". The fight against poverty continued for most of his life. Johnson was an intense, discerning reader as the economist Adam Smith recalled—"Johnson knew more books than any man alive." While at oxford, he was influenced by the popular devotional tract A *Serious Call*



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org

to *A Devout and Holy Life* (1729), by the schoolmaster and minister William Law. He termed Law's book "the finest piece of hortatory theology in any language", and it is the foundation for the prayers and meditations that he composed later in his life.

In July 1735, Johnson married Elizabeth Jervis Porter, a widow more than 20 years his senior, and a mother of three children. Though she was very fat, dressed fantastically, and affected in manners and addicted to drink, Johnson was deeply associated with her. With the help of a small fortune from her, in 1736 Johnson opened a school in Edial, near Lichfield. Although he got very few pupils from the start, one of his students whose name was David Garrick turned out to be very distinguished and became a poet, an essayist, and an acclaimed actor and manager of Drury Lane Theatre. Johnson left Lichfield for London in search of better fortune. While in London, he worked on a historical tragedy *Irene,* which recounts the story of the love of Sultan Mahomet for the lovely Irene, a Christian slave captured in Constantinople. (The play was not performed until 1749, in a production that Garrick organised). Therefore, in 1737, Johnson and Garrick travelled to London, which had by then become the largest city in Europe with a population between 650,000 and 700,000. Johnson found it captivating and later famously professed: "No, Sir, when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford." Once settled there, he began his association with the *Gentleman's Magazine,* contributing to it not only prose and poetry but also, from 1741 to 1744, a series of speeches and works that represented the debates in the House of Commons.

In between 1739-49, Johnson was engaged with numerous literary projects. One was his biography of Mr. Richard Savage: *An Account of the Life of Mr. Richard Savage, Son of the Earl of Rivers* (1744)—a book on the trials of a failed poet whom Johnson knew and the tribulations of Grub Street, famous for many literary hacks and desperate writers. *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1949) in verse was yet another achievement and the most important and characteristic product his genius. This solemn, disquieting rumination on the futility of worldly hopes and endeavours was

the first composition that Johnson issued under his own name. Johnson was working on and planning larger projects as well. In 1745, he wrote "Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth," along with a proposal for an edition of Shakespeare. In the following year, he outlined his "Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language."

During 1950s, Johnson wrote many periodical essays. The best of this work appeared in *The Rambler,* which was published twice weekly from March 1750 to March 1752. The 20th century critic Walter Jackson Bate has described these pieces as "saturated with thought to an extent unexceeded by any other writer of English prose since Francis Bacon." Johnson also contributed essays to his friend John Hawkesworth's periodical *The Adventurer;* and from 1758 to 1760, he wrote yet another series of essays, titled *The Idler, which* were published in a weekly newspaper, *The Universal Chronicle.* However, Johnson's greatest accomplishment of the decade was *A Dictionary of the English Language,* published in two large folio volumes in April 1755. Nine years in the making, and compiled by Johnson and six assistants, it consists of 40,000 defined words and 114,000 quotations that illustrate the meanings. In January 1759, Johnson wrote his only long fictional work *Rasselas* so that he could pay for his mother's funeral and settle her debts. Three years later, he received from King George III an annual pension of 300 pounds, winning at last some economic security. Then he met the Scotsman James Boswell, a twenty-two-year-old lawyer less interested in law than in literature and politics. Boswell cultivated Johnson's friendship; watched him closely at the literary clubs with Adam Smith, the painter Joshua Reynolds, Edmund Burke, and other luminaries; conversed with them, and gathered facts and anecdotes about him. Boswell made Johnson the subject of what is often called the greatest biography in English, *The Life of Samuel Johnson,* LL.D. (I79I).

In 1777, Johnson was approached by London booksellers to contribute, brief prefaces to a multivolume edition of English poets. Though the original plan was scaled back (instead of including all reputable poets from Chaucer on, the survey began in the 17th with Cowley), Johnson did



Drury Lane Theatre: Theatre Royal Drury Lane is the oldest London Theatre still in use. It stands in the eastern part of the City of Westminster.

much more than required, producing in all about 400,000 words of biographical and interpretive text on the fifty-two poets (all male). Each preface follows a three-part plan, as Johnson recounts the author's biography, the features of his character, and criticism of his writings.

Johnson died on 20th December 1784, and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Johnson was more than a well-known writer and scholar. He was a celebrity for the activities and the state of his health in his later years, were constantly reported in various journals and newspapers. In addition, most interestingly, when there was nothing to report, something was invented. According to Bate, "Johnson loved biography," and he "changed the whole course of biography for the modern world. One by-product was the most famous biographical work—Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. There were however, many other memoirs and biographies on Johnson after his death. Some of them include Thomas Tyers's *A Biographical Sketch of Dr. Samuel Johnson* (1784); John Hawkins's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1787), the first full-length biography of Johnson; and Arthur Murphy's *An Essay on the Life and Genius of Samuel Johnson* (1792) which replaced Hawkins's biography as the introduction to a collection of Johnson's *Works*. Another important source was Fanny Burney, who described Johnson as "the acknowledged Head of Literature in this kingdom" and kept a diary containing details missing from other biographies.



LET US KNOW

There are many societies formed around and dedicated to the study and enjoyment of Samuel Johnson's life and works. On the bicentennial of Johnson's death in 1984, Oxford University held a weeklong conference featuring 50 papers, and the Arts Council of Great Britain held an exhibition of "Johnsonian portraits and other memorabilia". *The London Times* and *Punch* produced parodies of Johnson's style for the occasion. In 1999, the BBC 4 television channel started Samuel Johnson award for non-fiction.

His Works:

You should note that Johnson's career as writer and critic is marked by three major scholarly projects. These are – *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), and his eight-volume edition of Shakespeare (1765), and *Lives of the English Poets* (1783). In 1746, some London booksellers commissioned Johnson to produce a wholly new dictionary of the English Language. Produced on historical principles on illustrations from well-known writers, this dictionary has still retained its historical significance.

As you have realized that, an integral dimension of Johnson's literary output and personality was his literary criticism, which was to have a huge impact on the English men of letters in the subsequent days to come. Another area in which Johnson exerted great influence on his successors was that of biography and comparative estimation of the poets in the English canon. His accounts of the lives and works of numerous English poets were first produced as a series of prefaces to a large edition of the works of the English poets. These prefaces, fifty-two in all, were published separately as *Lives of the English Poets* in 1781. In general, Johnson raises biography to an art: far from being adherent to facts. His most fundamental appeal, throughout these prefaces, is to the notion of "nature," as encompassing reason, truth, and moral propriety. He considers various genres and styles of poetry, the nature of imitation, the problems of translation, the classical rules of art, and the duties of literary criticism.

However, many of Johnson's views on drama are available in his contributions to different issues of the *Rambler.* Johnson stresses that rules should be drawn from reason rather than from mere precedent (*Rambler* 197–199). In No. 156 of *Rambler,* he had also urged, "many rules have been advanced without consulting nature or reason." Among these, he cites some long-held precepts about drama: the rule that only three persons should appear at one time on stage; the limitation of a play to five acts; and the unity of time, whereby a play should be performed in the compass of one day. He applauds the "mixed" genre of tragicomedy, suggesting that this does not violate either reason or the essential function

of drama, which "pretends only to be the mirror of life." Johnson does, however, commend the absolute need to observe the rules of unity of action and unity of character. In judging which rules to follow, he states that it "ought to be the first endeavour of a writer to distinguish nature from custom" (*Rambler*, 194–196). There seems to be an admission here, not that the foundations of classical precepts – adherence to nature, reason, and truth – were wrong, but that some rules have not been truly derived from these foundations.

Johnson on Shakespeare

Shakespeare was a subject of much of critical discussion during Johnson's period and his subsequent reputation in the Neoclassical period rests mainly on the assessments made by Dryden and Johnson. Dryden had made his claims for Shakespeare in his *Essay on Dramatic Poesy* (1668) which was to have important implications for his own ideas of drama. The three 'Unities' represented the dictates of the classical influences on drama. However, Johnson's *Preface* shows how Shakespeare is exonerated from his breaking of the rule of the Unities, and the views contained in it sums up what Johnson's age thought of Shakespeare.

Johnson's connection with Shakespeare and his plays started from the very beginning of his literary career as part of his project to edit the plays of Shakespeare. Because, he firmly believed that none of the previous editors of Shakespeare—Rowe, Pope and Theobald had done any satisfactory job. In 1745, Johnson issued his *Proposal* for bringing out a completely new edition of all the plays of Shakespeare. A specimen of the kind of work that could be expected from Johnson is visible in his *Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth.* However, Johnson had to call off his scheme, as he was busy with the *Dictionary* (1755). Johnson once again turned towards Shakespeare with yet another proposal for a new edition of Shakespeare in 1756. Here, he presents a comprehensive account of the duties and responsibilities of a modern editor of Shakespeare. In October 1765, Johnson's *Shakespeare* finally appeared in 8 volumes. His goal was to produce a huge text that was clear

and intelligible. Keeping this end in view, Johnson modified the punctuation, modernised the spelling and added many new stage directions. Moreover, his experience as a lexicographer had made him an expert in accurate definitions of certain terms. One might of course argue that Johnson was not free from criticism. For example, Johnson did not have access to all the necessary materials to perform a thorough job of collation. So, as an editor of Shakespeare, Johnson does not rank among the greatest editors. However, you should also note that the *Preface* alone would entitle Johnson to be ranked among the foremost critics of Shakespeare.

Through his criticism, Johnson introduces certain fresh insights into Shakespeare's dramatic art. From the outset, he seeks to establish Shakespeare's undisputed supremacy in the world of drama, although he never hesitates to mention the flaws of Shakespeare. Despite Shakespeare's violation of the classical rules, like the unities, Johnson applies to the work of Shakespeare the Longinian principle of 'length of duration and continuance of esteem'. Shakespeare's greatness lies in the universal appeal of his plays owing to their faithful portrayal of the universals of human experience. At the same time, his characters are noted for their intense realism. Johnson also points to Shakespeare's originality and places him next to Homer. His genuine strength lies not in the isolated passages of exceptional beauty but in the orderly development of his plots.

Thus, we may assume that Samuel Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* is a landmark in Shakespearean criticism. In one sense, he laid the foundations of modern Shakespearean scholarship and textual criticism.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Write a short note on Johnson's literary accomplishments with reference to his periodical essays.

Q 2: Who was David Garrick? What were his collaborations with Dr. Johnson?

Q 3: What is the significance of Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*?

Q 4: Describe briefly how Johnson's engagement with the works of Shakespeare?

7.4 JOHNSON: *PREFACE TO SHAKESPEARE*

Johnson begins his *Preface* by referring to the debate on the relative virtues of ancient and modern writers. He affirms that the excellence of the ancient authors is based on a "gradual and comparative" estimate, as tested by "observation and experience." If we judge Shakespeare by these criteria – "length of duration and continuance of esteem"–we are justified, thinks Johnson, in allowing Shakespeare "to assume the dignity of an ancient," since his reputation has survived the customs, opinions, and circumstances of his time. Inquiring into the reasons behind Shakespeare's enduring success and popularity, Johnson makes an important statement: "Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature". By "general nature", Johnson refers to the avoidance of particular manners and customs, and the foundation of one's work on the 'stability of truth' – truth that is permanent and universal. Johnson claims that Shakespeare is "the poet of nature: the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life." His characters are not molded by the accidents of time, place, and local custom; rather, they are "the genuine progeny of common humanity," and they "act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated." In contrast with the "hyperbolical or aggravated characters" of most playwrights, Shakespeare's personages are not heroes but men; he expresses "human sentiments in human language," using common occurrences. Indeed, in virtue of his use of durable speech derived from "the common intercourse of life," Johnson views Shakespeare as "one of the original masters of our language". Though Shakespeare "approximates the remote, and familiarises the wonderful," the events he portrays accord with probability.

In view of these qualities, Shakespeare's drama "is the mirror of life" (64–65).

Johnson then defends Shakespeare against charges brought by critics and writers such as John Dennis, Thomas Rymer, and Voltaire. They argue that Shakespeare's characters insufficiently reflect their period and status. For example, his Romans not sufficiently Roman, and his kings not sufficiently royal. Johnson retorts that Shakespeare "always makes nature predominate over accident; and…he preserves the essential character," extricated from accidental conventions and the "casual distinction of country and condition" (65–66). A more serious form of censure concerns Shakespeare's mixing of comic and tragic scenes, thereby violating the classical distinction between tragedy and comedy. Johnson acknowledges that Shakespeare's plays "are not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind; exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and in numerable modes of combination." The ancient poets selected certain aspects of this variety, which they restricted to tragedy and comedy respectively; whereas Shakespeare "has united the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind but in one composition" (66–67).

It is in his defence of tragicomedy that Johnson appeals to nature as a higher authority than precedent. He allows that Shakespeare's practice is "contrary to the rules of criticism . . . but there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature. The end of writing is to instruct; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing. That the mingled drama may convey all the instruction of tragedy or comedy cannot be denied, and approaches nearer than either to the appearance of life." Moreover, says Johnson, the mixed genre makes for greater variety, and "all pleasure consists in variety" (67). Johnson also points out that when Shakespeare's plays were first "edited" in 1623 by members of his acting company, these editors, though they divided the plays into comedies, histories, and tragedies, did not distinguish clearly between these three types. But

although through all of the three forms, Shakespeare's mode of composition is the same which is an interchange of seriousness and merriment" and he "never fails to attain his purpose". However, Johnson does concede, that Shakespeare had many faults. As he states: "Shakespeare with his excellencies has likewise faults, and faults sufficient to obscure and overwhelm any other merit. I shall show, them in the proportion in which they appear to me, without envious malignity or superstitious veneration. No question can be more innocently discussed than a dead poet's pretensions to renown; and little regard is due to that bigotry which sets candour higher than truth."

The faults of Shakespeare, according to Johnson are as follows:

A. He is "more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose."

B. The plots are often so loosely formed that a very slight consideration may prove them, and so carelessly pursued that he seems not always fully to comprehend his own design.

C. In many of his plays the later part is evidently neglected.

D. He had no regard to distinction of time or place, but gives to one age or nation, without scruple, the customs, institutions, and opinions of another, at the expense not only of likelihood, but also of possibility.

E. In his comic scenes he is seldom very successful. Neither his gentlemen nor his ladies have much delicacy, nor are sufficiently distinguished from his clowns by any appearance of refined manners.

F. In tragedy his performance seems constantly to 'be worse, as his labour is more. The effusions of passion which exigence forces out are for the most part striking and energetic; but whenever he solicits his invention, or strains his faculties, the offspring of his throes is tumour, meanness, tediousness, and obscurity.

G. In narration, he affects a disproportionate pomp of diction, and a wearisome train of circumlocution, and tells the incident imperfectly in many words, which might have been more plainly delivered in few.

H. His declamations or set speeches are commonly cold and weak, for his power was the power of nature; when he endeavoured, like other

tragic writers, to catch opportunities of amplification, and instead of inquiring what the occasion demanded, to show how much his stores of knowledge could supply, he seldom escapes without the pity or resentment of his reader.

I. His neglect of the unities, his violation of those laws, which have been instituted and established by the joint authority of poets and critics. To the unities of time and place, he has shown no regard.

J. His histories, being neither tragedies nor comedies, are not subject to any of their laws. Nothing more is necessary to all the praise which they expect than that the changes of action be so prepared as to be understood, that the incidents be various and affecting, and the characters consistent, natural, and distinct. No other unity is intended, and therefore none is to be sought.

Johnson acknowledges that from Shakespeare's plays, a "system of social duty" may be cultivated. Some other faults of Shakespeare cited by Johnson are:

- the looseness of his plots, whereby he "omits opportunities of instructing or delighting"
- the lack of regard for distinction of time or place, such that persons from one age or place are indiscriminately given attributes pertaining to other eras and locations
- the grossness and licentiousness of his humour
- the coldness and pomp of his narrations and set speeches;
- the failure to follow through with scenes that evoke terror and pity; and a perverse and digressive fascination with quibbles and wordplay.

As stated earlier in this unit, there is one fault from which Johnson exonerates Shakespeare— neglect of the classical unities of drama. Johnson takes this opportunity to elaborate on his own cynicism regarding these ancient rules. To begin with, he exempts Shakespeare's histories from any requirement of unity: since these are neither tragedies nor comedies, they are not subject to the laws governing these genres. All that is required in these histories is that "the changes of action be so

prepared as to be understood, that the incidents be various and affecting, and the characters consistent, natural and distinct. No other unity is intended." Johnson argues that Shakespeare does observe unity of action: his plots are not structured by a complication and denouement "for this is seldom the order of real events, and Shakespeare is the poet of nature." However, he does observe Aristotle's requirement that a plot should have a beginning, middle, and end.

For the unities of time and place, however, Shakespeare had no regard. This is one point on which Johnson defends Shakespeare by questioning these unities themselves. Like Corneille, he views these unities as having "given more trouble to the poet, than pleasure to the auditor." Johnson sees these unities as arising from "the supposed necessity of making the drama credible." In addition, such a requirement is premised on the view that the mind of a spectator or reader "revolts from evident falsehood, and fiction loses its force when it departs from the resemblance of reality." The unity of place is merely an inference from the unity of time, since in a short period, spectators cannot believe that given actors have traversed impossible distances to remote locations. Such are the grounds on which critics have objected to the irregularity of Shakespeare's drama. Spectators, Johnson observes, are always aware that they are subjecting themselves to a fiction in theatre, to a form of temporary self-delusion. In addition, we must acknowledge that, "if delusion be admitted," it has "no certain limitation." If we can believe that the battle being enacted on stage is real, why would we be counting the clock or dismissing the changing of places as unreal? We know, from first to last, that "the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players".

Johnson concludes by holding the views that "nothing is essential to the fable, but unity of action", and the unities of time and place arise from "false assumptions". Hence, these unities are "to be sacrificed to the nobler beauties of variety and instruction," the greatest virtues of a play being "to copy nature and instruct life." Although, Johnson is discussing the principles of drama in the context of new examination, yet his strategy is both to argue logically against the incoherence of the unities of time

and place and to set up Shakespeare as an alternative source of authority against the classical tradition. Johnson broadly agrees with the tradition that Shakespeare lacked formal learning; and the greater part of his excellence being a "product of his own genius." Unlike his predecessors, Shakespeare directly obtained "an exact knowledge of many modes of life" and demonstrates clearly that "he has seen with his own eyes; he gives the image which he receives, not weakened or distorted by the intervention of any other mind." Johnson also shrewdly points out that Shakespeare's reputation owes something to his audience, to its willingness to praise his graces and overlook his defects. In this text, Johnson's appeal to nature and direct experience and observation over classical precedents and rules, as well as his assessment of Shakespeare as inaugurating a new tradition, effectively sets the stage for various broader perspectives of the role of the poet, the poet's relation to tradition and classical authority, and the virtues of individualistic poetic genius.



LET US KNOW

Three basic concerns of Johnson in the *Preface:*

1. How a poet's reputation is established
2. The poet's relation to nature, and
3. The relative virtues of nature and experience of life as against a reliance on principles established by criticism and convention



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What, according to Johnsons, is the meaning of general nature?

Q 6: Mention the faults of Shakespeare as dictated by Samuel Johnson in the *Preface*?

Q 7: State the common charges that were labelled against Shakespeare during Johnson's time?

7.5 IMPORTANT CONCEPTS OF THE TEXT

The following are the important concepts available in Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare.*

Importance of Nature:

Nature has an important role to play in Johnson's criticism. Nature is seen to be allied with reason and experience, and even truth. As we read in the *Preface*: "Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature. Particular manners can be known to few, and therefore few only can judge how nearly they are copied. The irregular combinations of fanciful invention may delight awhile, by that novelty of which the common satiety of life sends us all in quest; but the pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted, and the mind can only repose on the stability of truth. Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of the world; by the peculiarities of studies or professions which can operate but upon small numbers; or by the 'accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions: they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply; and observation will always find. His persons act and speak by the influences of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion. In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of *Shakespeare* it is commonly a species." Thus, in the *Preface*, we have seen that Johnson's ultimate perspective in the evaluation of Shakespeare as a poet of nature against classical authority rests on relations with the truth of valid experience.

Reason and Experience:

Reason and Experience are other important aspects in Johnson's criticism in the *Preface*. You should note that Johnson's inclination towards nature, reason and experience is not without its own merit. It is perhaps important to note that during his time, Johnson makes a unique

contribution by reminding critics of the role of the audience in the reception of a particular play and of the value of practical experience. Johnson's essays in *The Rambler* were pieces of valuable literary criticism that show his contributions towards promoting a general culture of literary decorum. Interestingly, Johnson also had a keen interest in scientific matters, conducting minor chemical experiments of his own. This may remind us of how the classicism of the late 17th and the 18th centuries was also influenced by scientific rationalism. This would have naturally laid open classical authority to questioning from 'reasonableness'. This is the kind of thinking that led Johnson to temper his classicism with an historical sense of what is to be expected of an age. Therefore, Shakespeare's writings must be read and understood in the light of his times. You would have also noted that Johnson's criticism takes into view the concept of 'verisimilitude' or the representation of reality. The discussion of the unities is centred on this problem.

Idea of the Universal:

On the question of Shakespeare's characterisation in drama we have to relate Johnson's idea of the 'universal' or the 'typical'. We may rest with the conclusion that what is 'universal' or 'natural' has a relation with "just representations" of reality, which is often an unclear premise in Johnson's criticism. This is the difficulty that perhaps leaves us often mystified regarding the depiction of characters in drama in Johnson's *Preface*.

7.6 RECEPTION OF JOHNSON AS A CRITIC

Johnson's critical assessments of the English poets have been taken as what Matthew Arnold calls "natural centres" of reference to which criticism can repeatedly return. Though Johnson's criticism rests on the classical foundation of nature, reason, and truth, as well as on moral instruction, what Johnson added was the need for historical contextualisation (exemplified in his work on Shakespeare, in his *Lives*, and in his *Dictionary*) of authors and their works, as well as the obligation to place nature–in its most comprehensive sense–above the authority of

mere precedent or classical authors, an obligation that might empower new or revised visions of the literary tradition. Johnson stresses that "truth . . . is . . . superior to rule" (*Lives*, 94).

It is worth remembering also that by "nature," Johnson does not mean primarily the world of external, physical nature, but rather human nature in its universal and historical embodiment of reason and moral sensibility. In his essay on Milton, he states:

"the knowledge of external nature, and the sciences which that knowledge requires or includes, are not the great or the frequent business of the human mind . . . the first requisite is the religious and moral knowledge of right and wrong; the next is an acquaintance with the history of mankind, and with those examples which may be said to embody truth . . . Prudence and justice are virtues and excellences of all times and of all places; we are perpetually moralists, but we are geometricians only by chance" (*Lives* 23).

In both these respects: the need for historical contextualisation and comparison, and the appeal to nature and truth over convention–he anticipates, and sets the stage for, much Romantic and modern criticism.

In the field of English criticism, Johnson had a lasting influence, although not everyone viewed him favourably. For example, the Romantic poets were completely opposed to Johnson's views on poetry and literature, especially in regards to Milton. Macaulay regarded Johnson as an idiot savant who produced some respectable works. However, contrary to such views, Stendhal's *Racine et Shakespeare* is based in part on Johnson's views of Shakespeare. Johnson influenced Jane Austen's writing style and philosophy. Even Matthew Arnold, in his *Six Chief Lives from Johnson's Lives of the Poets*, considered the *Lives* of Milton, Dryden, Pope, Addison, Swift, and Gray as "points which stand as so many natural centres, and by returning to which we can always find our way again."

More than a century after his death, literary critics such as G. Birkbeck Hill and T. S. Eliot came to regard Johnson as a serious critic. They began to study Johnson's works increasingly focusing on the critical analysis found in his edition of Shakespeare and *Lives of the Poets*. Yvor

Winters claimed: “A great critic is the rarest of all literary geniuses; perhaps the only critic in English who deserves that epithet is Samuel Johnson”. F. R. Leavis on Johnson’s criticism stated: “When we read him we know, beyond question, that we have here a powerful and distinguished mind operating at first hand upon literature. This, we can say with emphatic conviction, really *is* criticism.” Edmund Wilson claimed that *The Lives of the Poets* and the prefaces and commentary on Shakespeare are among the most brilliant documentation in the whole range of English criticism. The critic Harold Bloom placed Johnson’s work firmly within the Western canon, describing him as “unmatched by any critic in any nation before or after him...”



7.7 LET US SUM UP

By this time, you must have gained some relevant ideas about Neo classical criticism through a reading of Johnson’s *Preface*. You must have also realised that Samuel Johnson’s importance as a critic mainly rests on his work on Shakespeare and his dramatic art. This unit has tried to introduce you to the life and works of Johnson so that you gain important insights into the phase of English criticism of the 18th century, and into how through the criticism of Johnson, and his praise for the classical masters, the idea of Neoclassical criticism can be expounded. You have seen that Johnson’s text provides fresh insights into the plays of Shakespeare as he mainly seeks to establish Shakespeare’s undisputed supremacy in the world of drama, although he never hesitates to mention the flaws of Shakespeare. You have learnt that Shakespeare’s greatness lies in the universal appeal of his plays owing to their faithful portrayal of the universals of human experience. At the same time, his characters are noted for their intense realism. Thus, we may assume that Samuel Johnson’s *Preface to Shakespeare* is a landmark in Shakespearean criticism for one single most dominant idea that he laid the foundations of modern Shakespearean scholarship and textual criticism.



7.8 FURTHER READING

1) Abrams, M. H. (2003). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Singapore : Thomson Asia Pvt. Ltd. Habib, M.A.R. (2005). *A History of Literary Criticism:*

2) *From Plato to the Present*. Malden: Blackwell.

Johnson, Samuel. *Preface to Shakespeare*. UK, Dodo Press.

3) Leitch, Vincent B. (2001). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Norton and Company, Inc.

4) Thomas, C. T. (ed.) (1986). *Samuel Johnson Preface to Shakespeare*. Macmillan India limited.

Web Resources:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Johnson



7.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: The best Johnsons' works appeared in *The Rambler* (1750-1752)… …he also contributed essays to his friend John Hawkesworth's periodical *The Adventure* (1758 to 1760)… …he wrote yet another series of essays, titled *The Idler*… …however, his greatest accomplishment was *A Dictionary of the English Language.*

Ans to Q 2: David Garrick was one of the most distinguished students of Johnson in his school at Edial, near Lichfield, in 1736… …later, he became very distinguished as a poet, essayist, and acclaimed actor and manager of Drury Lane Theatre… …in 1737, Johnson and Garrick travelled to London.

Ans to Q 3: This book rendered great service by making biographical and comparative estimation of the poets in the English canon… …his accounts of the lives and works of numerous English poets were first

produced as a series of prefaces to a large edition of the works of the English poets… … these fifty two prefaces were published separately as *Lives of the English Poets* in 1781… …here Johnson raises biography to an art of writing.

Ans to Q 4: Johnson's *Preface* shows how Shakespeare is exonerated from his breaking of the rule of the Unities and the views contained in this preface sum up what Johnson's age thought of Shakespeare… …But Johnson's connection with Shakespeare started with his project to edit the plays of Shakespeare… …In October, 1765, Johnson's *Shakespeare* finally appeared in 8 octave volumes… …however, it is his *Preface to Shakespeare* which is a landmark in Shakespearean criticism of all times.

Ans to Q 5: By "general nature" Johnson refers to the avoidance of particular manners and customs, and the foundation of one's work on the 'stability of truth' – truth that is permanent and universal… …his claim is that Shakespeare is "the poet of nature: the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life."

Ans to Q 6: That he is "more careful to please than to instruct"… … that the plots are often so loosely formed… …that in many of his plays the later part is evidently neglected… …that he had no regard to distinction of time or place…. …that in his comic scenes he is seldom very successful…. …that in tragedy his performance seems constantly to be worse as his labour is more… …that in narration he affects a disproportionate pomp of diction… …that his histories, being neither tragedies nor comedies are not subject to any of their laws and so on.

Ans to Q 7: Critics and writers such as John Dennis, Thomas Rymer, and Voltaire argued that Shakespeare's characters insufficiently reflect their time period and status… …Shakespeare's mixing of comic and tragic scenes, thereby violating the classical distinction between tragedy and comedy.



7.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: In what ways, can we call Samuel Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* a landmark in Shakespearean criticism?

Q 2: Do you agree that Johnson restored the reputation of Shakespeare in the 18th century? Discuss with reference to Johnson's praise for Shakespeare.

Q 3: State the grounds based on which Samuel Johnson tried to establish the significance of Shakespeare.

Q 4: Provide an evaluation of Johnson's central critical principles in *Preface to Shakespeare.*

Q 5: *Preface to Shakespeare* is an important document about drama, human nature, common sense, and literary precepts. Discuss with reference to the text.

Q 6: What are the main aspects of Johnson's criticism? Assess the importance of Johnson's *Preface* in the context of 18th century Neo classical criticism.

Q 7: "Shakespeare is, above all writers, the poet of nature." Examine Johnson's deliberations on the representation of nature in Shakespeare's plays.

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UNIT 8: INTRODUCTION TO ROMANTIC CRITICISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

8.1 Learning Objectives

8.2 Introduction

8.3 History of Romantic Criticism

8.3.1 Major Exponents of Romantic Criticism

8.3.2 Important Concepts

8.4 Let us Sum up

8.5 Further Reading

8.6 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

8.7 Possible Questions

8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- *understand* the basic concepts of Romantic criticism
- *identify* the major exponents of Romantic criticism
- *situate* and contextualise Romantic criticism in the history of English literature.

8.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to the different aspects of Romantic Criticism. Romanticism, as an artistic, literary, and intellectual movement, began in Europe toward the end of the 18th century and flourished in the first half of the 19th century in most places in Europe. Romanticism can be seen as a revolt against the aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment as well as a reaction to the scientific rationalization of nature. Embodied most strongly in art, music, and literature, it had a tremendous impact on historiography, education, politics and the natural sciences. Romanticism legalised intense emotion as an authentic source of aesthetic experience, elevated folk art and ancient custom to noble status, made spontaneity a desirable

characteristic. Romanticism reached beyond the rational and Classicist ideal models, embraced the exotic, the unfamiliar, and the distant. It also viewed the individual imagination as a critical authority. This unit offers you a brief introduction to Romantic criticism. Along with contextualising the critical approach in the socio-cultural context of the literature of the time, attempt has been made to distinguish it from Neoclassical criticism. However, it is always advisable to read the major critical texts of each critic in order to understand the characteristics of each critic and the period or school s/he represents.

8.3 HISTORY OF ROMANTIC CRITICISM

The Romantic period in English literature begins around the end of the 18th century and lasts till the 1830s. More specifically, from the point of view of the literary historian, Romantic period in English (and also in German) literature began in 1798, the year of the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge and of the composition of *Hymns to the Night* by Novalis, and ended in 1832, the year which marked the deaths of both Sir Walter Scott and Goethe. As an international movement of all the arts, Romanticism began at least in the 1770's and continued into the second half of the 19th century. This extended chronological spectrum (1770-1870) also permits recognition as Romantic the poetry of Robert Burns and William Blake in England, the early writings of Goethe and Schiller in Germany, and the great period of influence for Rousseau's writings throughout Europe. The early Romantic period thus coincides with what is often called the 'age of revolutions'—including the American (1776) and the French (1789) revolutions. Though there lays vast difference in the philosophy and treatment of subject matters among the writers of the Romantic era, it is noteworthy that almost everyone were responding to certain socio-political movements taking place in their time. It was a socially tumultuous period and the influx of different revolutionary ideas created chaos and conflict in the socio-cultural lives of people.

The definition of Romanticism has been a topic of debate in the field of literary history throughout the 20th century. The generally accepted view is that it was part of the reaction against the Age of Enlightenment, the classic Western traditions of rationality and the very idea of moral absolutes and agreed values. Most Romantics can be said to be broadly progressive in their views, but a considerable number always had, or developed, a wide range of conservative views, and nationalism was in many countries strongly associated with Romanticism. According to some scholars, Romanticism is essentially continuous with the present; for scholars like Robert Hughes it is the inaugural moment of modernity; and others like Chateaubriand, 'Novalis' and Samuel Taylor Coleridge believe that it is the beginning of a tradition of 'Counter-Enlightenment', – a resistance to Enlightenment rationalism, which is associated most closely with German Romanticism.

Both the fictional and nonfictional writings of the Romantic period were highly influenced by the French Revolution, which inspired writers to address themes like democracy and human rights. The French Revolution, bringing a violent end to feudal powers and monarchy, asserted the right and supremacy of the individual free will. The new philosophy of the rights of all men was expressed in both politics and literature, which led to the 'Liberalism in Literature.' This literature was inspired by the ideals of equality, fraternity and liberty and revolted against the tyranny of set formulas, rules and conventions. They individual spirit has been dignified. This new form of philosophy became one of the main guidelines of a new school of Romantic poets, writers and philosophers. Romantic's search for fresh subject, their belief in nature, their emphasis upon spontaneity and their belief that everyone has a right to express his own idea are the features of individualism, which was the prime demand of French Revolution. In the beginning, the Revolution got huge support from the writers because of the opportunities it seemed to offer for political and social change. In later years, the poets used the spirit of the revolution to help characterize their poetic philosophies. The Industrial Revolution brought about a different

and related reaction in literature that addressed the rights of the laboring classes and improved labor conditions. This revolutionary spirit prompted Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley to posit new theories about the function and form of poetry.



LET US KNOW

The term 'Romantic' first appeared in the mid 17th century English to describe 'the fabulous, the extravagant, the factious, and the unreal.' Towards the middle of the 18th century, "romantic" in English and '*romantique*' in French were commonly used as adjectives of praise for natural phenomena. The term started to be commonly used in literature towards the end of the 18th century in Germany where August Schlegel and Friedrich Schlegel talked about *romantische Poesie* (romantic poetry) in the 1790s. The use of the word spread widely in France, by Madame de Staël, who, in her *De L'Allemagne* (1813) made persistent use of the term. In England Wordsworth wrote in the 1815 edition of his preface to his poems about 'romantic harp'; but the word was still not in use as we see Byron writing in 1820, "I perceive that in Germany, as well as in Italy, there is a great struggle about what they call 'Classical' and 'Romantic', terms which were not subjects of classification in England, at least when I left it four or five years ago". The term 'Romanticism' began to be used in the sense we use today since the 1820s only.

Romanticism, as a school of thought, tries to establish the prevalence of instincts and emotions over rationalism and common sense. The poets and the writers not only sought to emancipate themselves from the fetters of neo-classical rules but also experimented with the old forms, revived some of them, which went into the oblivion because the neo-classical writers considered them vulgar and undignified. In course of such experimentation with forms, revival of form or creations of new forms, following tendencies were noticed:

- More emphasis was given on imagination than intellect. The poets allowed free play of imagination in their poetry. It is a reaction against the neo-classical obsession with intellect.
- Interest was developed in the remote, the exotic and the mysterious. The poets of the romantic period turned to medieval age for inspiration unlike the neoclassicists who turned to Classical writers.
- They gave free reign to their emotion and passion. They abhorred classical restraint and obsession with reason.
- The preoccupation with imagination and emotions made Romantic poetry primarily subjective, which is in contrast with the classical preference for objectivity in poetry.
- The 'poetic diction' of the 18th century was rejected as artificial and unnatural. The Romantics advocated the use of 'rustic', 'common' language as ideal for poetry.
- A chief motto of the Romantics was "Return to nature". It opposed the Neoclassical insistence on the urban experiences. Love of nature for them meant love of mankind, humanism and a world view that encompassed the idea of freedom and equality.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How would you differentiate the themes between Neoclassical and Romantic criticism?

Q 2: How did the French Revolution influence the development of Romantic literature?

Q 3: How has the term 'Romantic' been used in the intellectual history of the early 19th century?

8.3.1 Major Exponents of Romantic Criticism

Romantic Literary criticism in English literature is basically associated with and dominated by the writings of William Wordsworth in his 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) and Samuel

Taylor Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817). Apart from them, poets like John Keats, PB Shelley as well as essayists like Hazlitt, De Quincey also contributed to the development of criticism in the Romantic period. Let us now discuss some of the major exponents of Romantic criticism in English literature.

Wordsworth:

Wordsworth is one of the most important Romantic exponents in English literature in the sense that he is the only romantic poet who made his poetic experiences the locus of his critical discourse. Instead of theorising his idea of poetry, like his friend Coleridge, he was insisted on unraveling the workings of the mind of the poet. That is why; his literary criticism ceases to be criticism in its most literal sense. Rather, his *Preface* to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, an important document of Romantic literature in English can be seen as a poetic 'manifesto,' or 'statement of revolutionary aims.'

The revolutionary idea that Wordsworth brought to English Romantic literature was the rejection of 'the Pseudo Classical' – Neoclassical – theory of poetic diction. As a poet, his aim was to deal with the rustic and humble life: 'to choose incidents and situations from common life' for which the appropriate language would be the language used by the common men in day-to-day simple situations: 'a selection of language, really used by men'. The rustic language in its simplicity, for Wordsworth, is highly emotional and passionate. Charged with the natural emotions of the human heart, it comes from the heart, and thus goes direct to the heart. Therefore, such a language is highly expressive of the essential truths about human life and nature; it is more 'philosophical' than any other language.

Apart from his take on 'poetic diction', Wordsworth's definition of poetry is emblematic of the Romantic notion of poetry. As far as the nature of poetry is concerned, Wordsworth held the opinion that "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of

powerful feelings." Poetry, having its origin in the internal feelings of the poet, is a matter of passion, mood and temperament. It cannot be produced by strictly adhering to the rules laid down by the Classicists. However, it has been clarified by him that good poetry is never an immediate expression of powerful emotions; it is the result of deep and long meditation: 'poetry has its origin in emotions recollected in tranquility.' There are four stages in the composition of poetry. The first stage is of observation or perception of objects, characters, or incidents, which infuses powerful emotions in the mind of the poet. The next stage is about the contemplation or recollection of that emotion in tranquility. At this stage, memory comes into play and brings out what had been lying in the unconscious for days, months or years. The third stage is that of filtering wherein the poet is purged of non-essential elements and thus makes his experience communicable to all men. The fourth stage is where the actual task – the composition – begins.

There have been a series of severe criticism of Wordsworth's critical notions about poetry among his contemporaries. That his conception about the language of poetry was unsound is best exemplified by his own practice: most of his best poetry is written in language far removed from the language of ordinary people. Wordsworth's status in the history of English criticism is not exceedingly high. Coleridge himself exposed the hollowness of Wordsworth's notions in his *Biographia Literaria*.

Coleridge:

Coleridge was a far greater critic than Wordsworth because of the fact that he had depth of study and observation, a deeper understanding of the creative process. Besides, he was a pioneer in many respects. He gave a new conception of the very function of a critic: a critic should appreciate and interpret but not judge a work of art. According to his own conception of the poetic process where he claims that for the existence of truth there must

be a knower and a known, a subject and an object, or the Self and Nature. Out of the interaction and fusion of the two arises a creative work. This work is neither Self nor Nature but a different entity altogether having laws of its own. Coleridge's criticism of Shakespeare is based on this conception of the creative process. He reacted to the Neoclassical critics like Dr. Johnson, who considered Shakespeare to be a great dramatist on the ground that Shakespeare was 'the poet of nature' holding in his art 'a faithful mirror of manners and of life.' For Coleridge, to mirror nature is not the functions of a poet. Poetry is neither Nature nor Self but the outcome of the counteraction of the two, and, therefore, an independent entity with laws, which it is the function of a true critic to explore and explain. Thus, he develops the idea of 'organic unity'. Coleridge is one of the earliest critics to distinguish between fancy and imagination. While he confines fancy to 'fixities and definities', imagination is defined as the chief creative force of an artist.

The critical theories of Coleridge seem to be part of a larger system of aesthetics he might have wanted to develop in future. His criticism was also influenced by the metaphysics of the German Philosophers like Lessing, Schlegel and Kant. However, despite being a remarkable critic, he failed to develop his own 'school' of criticism. Most of his critical writings are concentrated in the only monument of his criticism: *Biographia Literaria.*



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What is Wordsworth's idea on the selection of the object for poetry?

Q 5: How does Coleridge define the term 'Imagination'?

8.3.2 Important Concepts

The Romantic poets and critics developed the theory of poetry as a reaction to the 18th century theories of poetry as

imitative of human life and nature by suggesting that poetic inspiration was located not outside in nature, but inside the poet's mind, in a "spontaneous" emotional response. This new theory of poetry also posited new possible subjects of poetic expression in a revaluation of the outcast, delinquent, rustic, common and the supernatural. In the development of the theory, the thinkers have touched upon many important topics essential to the study of literature. Let us discuss some of these topics.

Imagination:

The Romantics raised imagination to the level of a supreme creative faculty central to the composition of poetry. This contrasted distinctly with the Neoclassical and 18th century arguments for the supremacy of reason. The Romantics tended to define and to present the imagination as our ultimate "shaping" or creative power, the approximate human equivalent of the creative powers of nature or even deity. It is dynamic, an active, rather than passive power, with many functions. Imagination is the primary faculty for creating all art. For Wordsworth imagination is the faculty that helps humans to constitute reality, for, we not only perceive the world around us, but also in part create it. Wordsworth's colleague Coleridge has a major role to play in defining imagination in a more specific manner. He contrasted it with another human faculty 'Fancy'. Rejecting the empiricist assumption that the mind was a tabula rasa on which external experiences and sense impressions were imprinted, stored, recalled, and combined through a process of association, Coleridge divided the 'mind' into two distinct faculties: 'Imagination' and 'Fancy.' While 'Fancy', as a lower faculty in the creative process, deals with '*fixities and definites*', 'Imagination' assumes the central position in the process of poetic creation.

Uniting both reason and feeling, Coleridge considers imagination as the ultimate synthesizing faculty, enabling humans to reconcile differences and opposites in the world of appearance.

The reconciliation of opposites is a central ideal for the Romantics. He divides Imagination into two categories: Primary Imagination and Secondary Imagination. Of these, Secondary Imagination, which is rare to the common humans and common to the artistic minds, is of the highest creative power because it 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate'.



LET US KNOW

The IMAGINATION then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead. (Coleridge *Biographia Literaria*)

Nature:

The idea of 'nature' was redefined in the Romantic period as the term 'Nature' began to mean many things, apart from the conventional, to the Romantics. Nature was often presented as itself a work of art, constructed by a divine imagination. Though particular perspectives with regard to nature were diverse: nature as a healing power, nature as a source of subject and image, nature as a refuge from the artificial constructs of civilization, including artificial language, the prevailing views accorded nature the status of an organically unified whole. It was viewed as 'organic,' rather than, as in the scientific or rationalist view, as a system of 'mechanical' laws. Romanticism displaced the

rationalist view of the universe as a machine with the analogue of an "organic" image, a living tree or mankind itself. At the same time, Romantics gave greater attention both to describing natural phenomena accurately and to capturing "sensuous nuance"—and this is as true of Romantic landscape painting as of Romantic nature poetry. Romantic nature poetry is essentially a poetry of meditation. The writings of Wordsworth show that he considered nature as a friend, a philosopher and a guide.

Emotion and the Self:

The Romantic emphasis on the creative faculty of imagination was aided by greater emphasis on the importance of intuition, instincts, and feelings. The Romantics called for greater attention to the emotions as a necessary supplement to purely logical reason. By defining all good poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", Wordsworth located the ultimate source of poetry in the individual artist, in the tradition stretching back to the ancients. Here the classical method of valuing art primarily for its ability to imitate human life was subverted. In Romantic theory, art was valuable not so much as a mirror of the external world, but as a source of illumination of the world within. The interior journey and the development of the self recurred everywhere as subject material for the Romantic artist.

Symbolism and Myth:

The Romantic conception of art gave utmost importance to symbolism and myth. For the Romantics, symbols were the human aesthetic correlatives of nature's emblematic language. They were valued too because they could simultaneously suggest many things, and were thus thought superior to the one-to-one communications of allegory. Partly, it may have been the desire to express the 'inexpressible'- the infinite - through the available resources of language that led to symbol at one level and myth at another.

Individualism:

The Romantics poets and critics asserted the uniqueness and self-expressivity of the individual. Consequently, they opposed the character typology of Neoclassical drama. In style, the Romantics preferred boldness over the preceding age's desire for restraint, maximum suggestiveness over the Neoclassical ideal of clarity, free experimentation over the 'rules' of composition, genre, and decorum, and they promoted the conception of the artist as 'inspired' creator over that of the artist as 'maker' or technical master. Although interests in religion and in the powers of faith were prominent during the Romantic period, the Romantics generally rejected absolute systems, whether of philosophy or religion, in favor of the idea that each person must create the system by which to live.

The Everyday and the Exotic:

The Romantics showed great interest in the everyday, common social world around them for poetic inspiration. Though certain realistic techniques were used in addressing the subject matters, such as the use of 'local color' through down-to-earth characters, like Wordsworth's rustics, or through everyday language, or through popular literary forms like folk narratives, their presentation of social realism was usually subordinate to imaginative suggestion. Besides, the ideals of simplicity or innocence were treated as the most important elements of their subject. The poets often turned for their symbols to the domestic rather than the exotic sources; there turned to folk legends and older, 'unsophisticated' art forms, such as the ballad, to contemporary country folk that used 'the language of common men'. Thus, their strive for the common, rustic let them reject the Neoclassical 'artificial' poetic diction. Most importantly, they have turned towards the children who were for the first time presented as individuals, and often idealized as sources of greater wisdom than adults.

However, various forms of the exotic in time or place also gained favor, as opposed to everyday subjects, as part of the Romantic fascination with realms of existence that were, by definition, prior to or opposed to the ordered conceptions of 'objective' reason. Often, both the everyday and the exotic appeared together in paradoxical combinations. In the *Lyrical Ballads*, for example, Wordsworth and Coleridge agreed to divide their labors according to two subject areas, the natural and the supernatural: Wordsworth would try to exhibit the novelty in what was all too familiar, while Coleridge would try to show in the supernatural what was psychologically real. However, both aimed at one thing: to get away from the tyranny of convention of classical realism.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: What type of new poetic theory emerged during the Romantic period?

Q 7: What role did 'imagination' play among the Romantics?



8.4 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you must have developed a fair idea about the basic characteristics of Romantic criticism. We have learnt that Romanticism can be seen as a revolt against the aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment as well as a reaction to the scientific rationalization of nature. Both the fictional and nonfictional writings of the Romantic period were highly influenced by the French Revolution. It tries to legalize intense emotion as an authentic source of aesthetic experience, elevate folk art and ancient custom to noble status, make spontaneity a desirable characteristic for poetic creation, and tries to establish the prevalence of instincts and emotions over rationalism and common sense. Apart from the most renowned Wordsworth and

Coleridge, John Keats, PB Shelley, Hazlitt, De Quincey have contributed to the development of Romantic criticism in English literature. Wordsworth's "Preface" is a seminal text in Romantic criticism in the sense that here, the poet-critic has provided some revolutionary definitions of the poetic process, poetic language and the subject matter of poetry. Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* is his only monumental piece where he discusses the nature of poetic art, comments on the appropriate subject matter and language of poetry and, most importantly, differentiates fancy and imagination and identifying imagination as central to the creative faculty of an artist.



8.5 FURTHER READING

1) Abrams, M. H. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. London: OUP.

2) Abrams, M. H. (1973). *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. New York: W.W. Norton.

3) Day, Aidan. (1996). *Romanticism.* London: Routledge.

4) Ferber, Michael. (2010). *Romanticism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

5) Greenblatt, Stephen et al. (eds.) (2006). "The Romantic Period." *Norton Anthology of English Literature (8th Edition)*. Vol. D*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc*

6) Habib, M. A. R. (2011). *Literary Criticism from Plato to the Present: An Introduction,* Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

7) Wimsatt , William K. & Cleanth Brooks. (1970). *Literary Criticism: A Short History*. London: Routledge & Keegan Paul.



8.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Neoclassicism: emphasis on intellect, Romanticism: Emphasis on imagination, interest in the remote, the exotic and the mysterious… …Neoclassicism: well-defined, close, rationality, Romanticism: free reign to emotion and passion… …Neoclassicism: classical restraint and obsession with reason… …Romantic poetry was primarily subjective, Neoclassical poetry objective… …Neoclassical adopted 'poetic diction'; Romantics advocated the use of 'rustic', 'common' language for poetry.

Ans to Q 2: French Revolution inspired writers to address themes like democracy and human rights… …the Revolution, brought an end to feudal powers and monarchy, asserted the right and supremacy of the individual free will… …the new philosophy of the rights of all men was expressed both in politics and literature which led to the 'Liberalism in Literature.' … …Romantic literature was inspired by the ideals of equality, fraternity and liberty, and revolted against the tyranny of set formulas, rules and conventions.

Ans to Q 3: In the mid 17th century, the term was used to describe 'the fabulous, the extravagant, the factious, and the unreal'… …towards the middle of the 18th century, 'romantic' in English and '*romantique*' in French were commonly used as adjectives of praise for natural phenomena… …towards the end of the 18th century, the term was used in Germany by August Schlegel and Friedrich Schlegel to discuss *Romantische Poesie* (romantic poetry).

Ans to Q 4: Subject is the low and rustic life – that condition, free from all outside influences, men speak from their own personal experience–"convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions."–'simple language" is more permanent– a far more philosophical language – expressive of the basic truth

of life.

Ans to Q 5: Coleridge divided the mind into 'Imagination' and 'Fancy'– Fancy deals with '*fixities and definites*'–Imagination is the creative faculty in poets–it is the ultimate synthesizing faculty— reconciliation of opposites–divides imagination into Primary and Secondary – Secondary Imagination is of the highest creative power – it 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate'.

Ans to Q 6: The Romantic poets developed a theory of poetry in reaction to the 18th century theories of poetry that imitated human life and nature… …they suggested that poetic inspiration was located not outside in nature, but inside the poet's mind, in a "spontaneous" emotional response… …this new poetic theory posited new possible subjects of poetic expression in a revaluation of the outcast, delinquent, rustic, common and the supernatural.

Ans to Q 7: The Romantics raised imagination to the level of a supreme creative faculty central to the composition of poetry… …this contrasted distinctly with the Neoclassical and 18th century arguments for the supremacy of reason… …the Romantics writers tried to present imagination as a dynamic, active, the primary faculty for creating all art.



8.7 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Can it be argued that Neoclassicism led to the development of Romantic criticism in English literature? How are both of the literary periods interrelated?

Q 2: Trace the development of Romantic literary criticism in the socio-political and cultural context of Europe.

Q 3: Elaborate the idea of Imagination as a major theme in Romantic literary criticism.

Q 4: How did the Romantic critics tackle the question of the subject matter and language of poetry? Explain.

Q 5: Do you think that there is difference in attitude towards the idea of poetry among the Neoclassical and Romantic critics? Discuss.

Q 6: How do the Romantic critics differ from the Neoclassical critics in their conception of the relation between the individual self and poetry?

Q 7: Discuss in detail the main aspects of Romantic criticism. In what ways can we call Romanticism a reaction to Neo classical ideals?

Q 8: Do you agree that Romanticism is marked by an emphasis on individual experience? Discuss with reference to Wordsworth and Coleridge.

Q 9: Who are the famous German thinkers and philosophers and how are they to be regarded as the harbingers of Romanticism in England?

Q 10: The French Revolution got huge support from the writers because of the opportunities it seemed to offer for political and social change. Discuss.

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UNIT 9: WILLIAM WORDSWORTH: *PREFACE TO LYRICAL BALLADS*

UNIT STRUCTURE

9.1 Learning Objectives

9.2 Introduction

9.3 William Wordsworth: The Critic (His Life and Works)

9.4 Wordsworth: *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*

9.5 Important Concepts of the Text

9.6 Reception of Wordsworth as a Critic

9.7 Let us Sum up

9.8 Further Reading

9.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

9.10 Possible Questions

9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- contextualise *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* in the history of English criticism
- understand the role of Wordsworth in the development of Romanticism in English literature
- distinguish the basic concerns of the Romantic period from the Neoclassical
- explore the themes like poetic diction, poetic creation, imagination as expressed by Wordsworth
- evaluate Wordsworth as a literary critic.

9.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with William Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. Though Wordsworth is more popular as a poet than as a critic, he has made a seminal contribution to the development of Romantic literary criticism through his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. As a major Romantic poet,

Wordsworth, along with S. T. Coleridge, is regarded as the founder of the Romantic Age in English literature. The publication of their joint volume of poetry *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 is a groundbreaking moment in the history of English literature as it challenged many established norms about the object, subject matter and the language of poetry. Wordsworth's *Preface* to *Lyrical Ballads* was a defence against the vehement criticism posed by a section of the contemporary critics. Though Wordsworth was not a critic, both by temperament and training, his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* came to be called the 'manifesto' of English Romantic criticism because of the fact that this essay explained quite clearly most of the basic concerns of Romantic literature in England. Besides, the stance he took against the neo-classical notion of poetic diction is unprecedented among his contemporaries. Apart from this, Wordsworth indulges in the age-old debate of understanding the function of poetry and the poets in human societies. All these considerations make the *Preface* an important document in English literature. This unit shall provide you with some basic information and understanding of the text. Try to relate what you learn with the socio-cultural and political context of the work. You can follow the books mentioned below in this unit as part of your exercise.

9.3 WILLIAM WORDSWORTH: THE CRITIC

In Unit 3 of Block 1 of the previous Course, we have read about the life and works of William Wordsworth in sufficient detail. However, to help you recollect some of the important aspects of Wordsworth's life and works, we shall, in this section, only touch upon the important milestones in Wordsworth's life and works.

Wordsworth was born on 7th April 1770 to John Wordsworth and Ann Cookson in Cockermouth, the Lake District. His early childhood experience with the world of nature conditioned the development of his emotional, intellectual and aesthetic sensibility. His imaginative explorations and revisits of these childhood experiences helped him realise the intimate bond between Man and Nature, which remains one of the most prominent themes of his poetic exercise. Wordsworth's early education and introduction

of poetry was done by his father. He, despite being rarely at home, introduced William to the poetry of Milton, Shakespeare and Spenser, and allowed him to use his own library. William used to spend a good many hours reading in the library.

William made his debut as a poet in *The European Magazine* in 1787 by publishing a sonnet. He got admitted to St John's College, Cambridge, in 1787 and came out after being awarded the B.A. degree in 1791. He developed the habit of travelling to different places famous for their beauty and landscape in his holidays. He went on a walking tour in 1790 across Europe and extensively travelled through the Alps along with visiting the nearby areas of France, Switzerland, and Italy. His stay at France and a trip to Switzerland helped him to come closer to the socio-political changes taking place around that time in Europe.

After returning to England, Wordsworth started living a very unhappy and unsettled life for a couple of years. His first published works *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Works,* which came out in 1793, were poorly received. The violent course of events in France broke his dreams of the transformation of the world into a new world of liberty. The war between England and France made him refigure his political loyalties and beliefs. During this period, he met Godwin, had frequent conversations with him and found himself mesmerized with his ideas. However, Wordsworth could not reconcile his idea of the actuality of life with Godwin's insistence on the ascendance of Reason over feelings.

In 1795, he met Samuel Taylor Coleridge in Somerset and they would soon become close friends. Wordsworth moved to Alfoxton House at Somerset along with his sister Dorothy. Their new home would be just a few miles away from Nether Stowey where Coleridge lived. Both friends together published *Lyrical Ballads* in the autumn of 1798, which would later prove to be an important catalyst in the development of Romanticism in English literature. Wordsworth terms his poems published in this volume as some 'experimental' works of poetry in his "Preface to Lyrical Ballads". The publication of this volume is regarded as a path breaking moment in the history of English literature. This collection included some parts of

his earlier compositions along with a few delightful lyrics like "I heard a thousand blended notes", "It is the first mild day of March", "Expostulation and Reply" and the most celebrated long poem called "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey". However, the collection also included, as the title suggests, a few ballads too. The language in these poems is simple, often non-poetic. Most of the words are taken from everyday usages and colloquial language; even many of his ballads are partly made of conversations. His "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" was attached with the second edition of the book published in 1800. The "Preface" was edited and augmented significantly in the 1802 edition. Considered a central work of Romantic literary theory this "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads"* offers a detailed discussion of what Wordsworth believes as the elements of a new type of poetry, which would be based on the "real language of men" and which would avoid the poetic diction of much 18th century poetry.

Wordsworth was awarded with an honorary Doctor of Civil Law degree from Durham University in 1838 and from Oxford University in 1839. He was awarded a civil list pension amounting to £300 a year by the government. After the death of Robert Southey in 1843, Wordsworth was offered the honour of being the Poet Laureate.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Write a short note on *Lyrical Ballads*.

Q 2: Why is Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* is so significant?

9.4 WORDSWORTH: *"PREFACE TO LYRICAL BALLADS"*

We have already come to know that the "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads"* was attached to the second publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800, and was later substantially modified in the 1802 edition of the volume. It was further edited in the 1815. This "Preface" later came to be regarded as the 'manifesto' of English Romantic criticism because it had commented on some of the vital issues connected to poetry and its relation to man,

nature and the poet himself. Wordsworth, neither by temperament nor by training, had the qualification to be a critic. He was dragged into criticism by the vehement attack he witnessed by the neo-classical critics of the Edinburgh and the Quarterly Reviews on the poems published in his *Lyrical Ballads.* He had to take to writing criticism in sheer self-defence. In all of his publications as parts of the "Preface", Wordsworth concentrated on the subject of poetic diction and his view of poetry.

In the very first paragraph itself, Wordsworth clarifies to the readers of *Lyrical Ballads* that it was published as an 'experiment' to ascertain a sort of 'pleasure' that 'a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart' by using the 'real language of men in a state of vivid sensation'. Wordsworth expresses his satisfaction with the experiment as he observes that a greater number of readers have liked his poems in the volume than he expected. What he thinks about the volume is that it consists of a class of poetry well adapted to 'interest mankind permanently' and important in the quality and multiplicity of its 'moral relations'. In this context, the "Preface" is a defence of the theory upon which the poems in *Lyrical Ballads* were written.

The primary objective of Wordsworth behind the "Preface" was to establish, as he showed through the poems in the volume, incidents and situations drawn from common life as the subject matter of poetry. The other important objective was in terms of the great innovation he had made in *Lyrical Ballads* in the language of poetry. Rejecting poetic diction of the Neo-Classicists, he attempted to use the language 'really used by men'. The "Preface" offers his justifications behind such a revolutionary 'experiment' to examine whether the conversational language used by people from the middle and lower social classes can be employed fruitfully in poetry. Apart from his take on the choice of language, the most important objective of the "Preface" was to offer a definition and his conception of Poetry. He proposed his views on the nature and functions of poetry and the basic qualities required in a true poet. From the point of view of the nature of poetry, Wordsworth holds that "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." Poetry originates from the internal feelings of the

poet; it is a matter of passion, mood and temperament. A poet cannot produce poetry by strictly following the rules and norms laid down by the Classicists. Poetry has to flow out spontaneously from the soul of the poet. Good poetry is never the result of an immediate expression of the powerful emotions felt by the poet; it is the result of deep and long meditation by the poet pondering over such powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion 'recollected in tranquility.'

Another important aspect of the "Preface" is its attempt to define imagination and its role in aesthetic creativity. Wordsworth is one of the forerunners in the development of imagination is a creative agent in literary criticism. The neo-classical literary theory considered the human mind as a passive agent whose function is limited to the recording of sense impressions. Imagination was considered not more than a mode of memory that may bring images from recorded impressions of the memory. Imagination was also thought to be the agent that can link together different impressions and form images of objects or things that do not exist in reality. Rejecting such a limited scope allowed to Imagination, Wordsworth along with the other Romantics like Coleridge placed Imagination at a much higher position. For the Romantics, Imagination has higher creative faculty that allows the human mind to see and understand the world beyond the material compositions.

Another important point of discussion in the "Preface" is the theme and subject matter of poetry. Wordsworth argues that any subject that can 'interest the human mind' is eligible to be treated poetically. Wordsworth extends the scope of poetry, by incorporating themes chosen from lives of the rustic, humble and common people. Because the rustic people live close to nature far away from artificiality and vanity, their language becomes more expressive of the vital truths of life. Thus, for Wordsworth, the incidents and situations from common life, expressed in the language really used by men, can be the worthy subject matter of poetry. Wordsworth further indulges in the debate over the function of poetry in the "Preface" and adheres to the views that poetry is for 'life's sake'. Poetry, as he asserts, "is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge, the impassioned

expression that is in the countenance of all science". Poetry, for Wordsworth, is the moral guide who imparts moral lessons in a delightful manner. In this stance, he does not deviate much from the classicists' view of the function of poetry. Now let us discuss the chief themes and concepts of the essay.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: What does Wordsworth state about the primary objective of the *Lyrical Ballads*?

Q 4: What, according to Wordsworth, should be the subject matter of Poetry?

9.5 IMPORTANT CONCEPTS OF THE TEXT

Wordsworth's attack on Poetic Diction

Throughout the history of English literature, there have been various debates over the suitable language of poetry in different ages. Wordsworth also wrote substantially on what he believes to be the proper language of poetry. Actually, he was compelled to write his "Preface" chiefly because of this debate. His take on poetic diction was an utter rejection of the neo-classical idea of poetic diction.



LET US KNOW

Poetic Diction:

The issue of poetic diction has been a topic of debate in English literature right from the days of Chaucer. It achieved intensity in the time of Spenser when with the inspiration of Renaissance new modes of linguistic expression were being developed and a learned treatment of the vernacular came into vogue. Poetry came to be treated seriously and the important poetry in an important language needed a refined diction. However the vocabularies used by different poets like Spenser, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Thomson, Collins, Gray in successive years problematise

the issue. Spenser preferred the archaic language to the popular diction in his time. Milton cherished a liking for the uncommon in word and phrase.

There can be noticed two types of protests against poetic diction in the history of western literatures; the first one being that of the classicists voicing against pedantry and affectation and advocating the use of polite learned words while the second one being that of the romantics advocating for the native, primitive and the passionately and directly spoken words. Wordsworth remains a pioneer in the second category in English literary history.

In the *Advertisement* of the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, Wordsworth stated that his chief aim behind adopting a simple diction for his poems was 'to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society was adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure'. He feared that his audience would find him 'too low' or 'too familiar'; but he was confident that his style would be a contrast to 'the gaudiness and inane phraseology of the modern writers'. When he, along with his friend Coleridge, was vehemently attacked by a section of the readers adhering to the conservative notions of poetic diction, Wordsworth had to give his tentative experiment the shape of a definite concept. In the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800, he tried to explain his theory in the "Preface". He argues that the principal objective in the poems published in the volume, 'was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men, and at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect.'

Explaining why only 'low and rustic' life was chosen for this purpose, Wordsworth states that in that condition, " … such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple unelaborated

expressions." Thus, remaining free from all outside influences, men speak from their own personal experience in a language, which is "more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by poets, who think that they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression in order to furnish food for fickle tastes and fickle appetites of their own creation."

Thus, Wordsworth raises his doubt over the established norms of diction by attacking different elements like personification, periphrasis, inversion etc. used commonly by the poets of his time. "The reader will find that personifications of abstract ideas rarely occur in these volumes; and are utterly rejected as an ordinary device to elevate the style and raise it above prose. My purpose was to imitate and, as far as is possible, to adopt the very language of men; and assuredly such personifications do not make any natural or regular part of that language…There will also be found in these volumes little of what is usually called poetic diction; as much pains has been taken to avoid it as is ordinarily taken to produce it….to bring my language near to the language of men." Within the scope of poetic diction, besides the common use of personification, Wordsworth includes "phrases and figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as the common inheritance of poets", which can be understood as periphrasis, inversion, antithesis, and other devices and even those expressions, "in themselves proper and beautiful", but so frequently repeated and overused by bad poets that they arouse nothing but disgust in the mind of the reader.

Wordsworth further clarifies that according to his concept of poetic style, the language of poetry cannot be materially different from that of prose: "that not only the language of a large portion of every good poem, even of the most elevated character, must necessarily, except with reference to the metre, in no respect differ from that of good prose; but likewise that some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose, when prose is well written." As an instance,

he offers the example of some lines from one of Gray's sonnets "On the Death of Richard West", which he considers to be the best lines in the poem, and where, in spite of that the poet Gray's insistence on the difference between the language of poetry and prose, are hardly different from what they would be in prose:

A different object do these eyes require;
My only anguish melts no heart but mine;
And in my breast the imperfect joys expire;
…… ….. ….. ….. ….. ….. ….. ….. ….. ….. …..
….. …… …… …… ….. ….. ….. ….. …. ….. …..
I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear,
And weep the more because I weep in vain

Wordsworth thus concludes that, "there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition." However he anticipates possible objection that rhyme and metre would constitutes a distinction between the language of prose and metrical composition, he offers his reply beforehand, "the language of such poetry as is here recommended is, as far as possible, a selection of the language really spoken by men; that this selection, wherever it is made with true taste and feelings, will of itself form a distinction far greater than composition from the vulgarity and meanness of ordinary life; and if metre be superadded thereto, I believe that a dissimilitude (i.e. distinction) will be produced altogether sufficient for the gratification of a rational mind." However, this expression indirectly makes him admit that there is a distinction between the language of poetry and that of prose or 'the very language of men', and that the distinction lies not only in metre but also in the choice of words and phrases, which in the case of poetry must be made 'with true taste and feeling'. Thus, apparently, Wordsworth negates what he himself tries hard to promote in the name of the language of poetry.

There have been raised a lot of critical questions over the success of Wordsworth's attack on the neo-classical idea of poetic diction. With his emphasis on the selection of words 'with true sense and feeling', Wordsworth actually gives way to the possibility of what Johnson called

'flowers of speech' arising in the process: 'for, if selected truly and judiciously, must necessarily be dignified and variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures.' Here, Wordsworth falls prey to his own trap; he succumbs to the same notions he thinks of rejecting. By talking about the vulgarity of common speech refined by taste, and dignity and variety added to it by metaphors and figures, while being used in poetry, Wordsworth fails to raise his protests. He comes back to the same old tradition; as Rene Wellek says, 'Wordsworth actually ends in good neo-classicism.' In fact most of his successful poems like "Tintern Abbey", "The Immortality Ode", "The Solitary Reaper", and many others are not written 'in a selection of language really used by men' but in a language well refined in intellectual artistry.

Wordsworth's Definition of Poetry

The discussion on the nature of the suitable language of poetry leads Wordsworth to critically address the very idea of poetry itself. He defines good poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'. In his discussion on the idea of poetry, it becomes evident that his assertions are not very clear. We shall discuss this point elaborately here. His initial definition of poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' implies that there can be no difference between poetry and the full hearted song of a bird (for example, the song of Shelley's Skylark). However, this initial definition is rendered incomplete and problematic with some other ideas connected to the language of poetry: the 'selection of language really used by men' and the addition of metre and rhyme to it. Wordsworth does not try to resolve this confusion but modifies the statement thus: "I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappear and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does its actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on." It has to be noted here that the expressions - 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' and 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' –

seem to mean ideas distinctly opposite to each other: the first one happening suddenly without individual effort while the other recalled to memory deliberately.

However, despite this apparent difference, Wordsworth makes no difference between the two and attempts to explain the one with the help of the other. Actually, as it appears from the elucidation of the first statement by the second, he tries to mean the same thing by both statements. His meaning in the two statements seems to be that poetry is the 'final product' of the 'unforced' overflow of powerful feelings. As Wordsworth does not try to clarify the problem, the readers have no other means than reconciling the opposing statements by force to produce such meaning. However, the second statement seems to be a well thought-out one and it explains his stand on the idea of poetry more clearly. In fact, most of his own great works were composed in the state of 'recollected in tranquillity'. A classic example is his "Solitary Reaper", where a moving sight of the solitary reaper was seen during a walk, it got stored in the memory, and in moments of calm contemplation, the sight is recalled and woven in words to compose the poem. In this process of poetic creation, the emotion originally aroused by the sight was re-created in contemplation as nearly as possible till it overpowered the mind completely. Thus, in Wordsworth's theory, poetry originates in powerful emotion recollected in tranquillity; and thus it is the product of the original free flow of that emotion. Had there been aroused no emotion in the beginning, no recollection would have been possible in the state of tranquillity and hence there would be no composition of poetry. Here, the first stage in the process of poetic creation is 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,' followed by the next in the form of 'recollection in tranquillity', resulting in the expression in poetry.

Wordsworth and Imagination:

For Wordsworth, imagination is the most important gift that a poet can have. Wordsworth held the opinion that nature can add in poetry a sense of mystery and uncommonness in the ordinary objects of nature and human life. A colouring of imagination upon the common things of life and nature can make them appear to be uncommon; imagination can

make the natural appear like the supernatural. In the poet's imagination, the ordinary objects are so heightened and glorified that they seem completely transmuted and transfigured. The ordinary things of life and nature thus assume new appearance and acquire a new charm under the imaginative treatment of the poet.

The Function of Poetry and the Poet:

Wordsworth believes that the function of poetry and poets in a serious one. The function of poetry is not limited to the mere self-expression of the poet as suggested by 'spontaneous overflow' in the definition of poetry. Poetry stands or falls by its effect on the reader. The poet 'is a man speaking to men'; if he fails to address men, his song reduces to a mere voice in the wilderness. The poet's over-all objective is, without any doubt, to impart pleasure; but the pleasure in poetry is conditioned by the situation where the moral gain far outweighs the aesthetic. The aesthetic effect arises from the poet's style and manner of saying things and from his use of metre or rhythm, which, with their pleasurable recurrence, make even pathetic situations and sentiments painless. The moral learning, on the other hand, consists partly in the refinement of feelings through true poetic effects, and partly in the exercise of the knowledge of 'Man, Nature, and Human Life', and partly in its emphasis on whatever makes life richer and fuller: 'Truth, Grandeur, Beauty, Love, and Hope'. A poet is gifted with the greater power to feel and to express feelings than other common men. Hence, he has a direct access to the reader's heart; and as his feelings are saner, purer, and more permanent than can be aroused by the same objects in other men. The reader is induced by poetry to feel the poet's way in the same situation and even in others. The reader, thus, emerges saner and purer than before.

For Wordsworth, poetry is the pursuit of truth; it is the pursuit of man's knowledge of himself and the world around him. Here Wordsworth tries to distinguish between poetry and other human intellectual exercises like science, mathematics etc. Science and other disciplines are also engaged in the same pursuit of truth; but while the truths science discovers benefits humans only materially, the truths discovered in poetry 'cleave to

us as a necessary part of our existence'. It is because, the truth observed in poetry is concerned with man's relation to man, on the one hand, and his relation to the external world of nature, on the other, both illustrated in 'incidents and situation from common life'. While the pursuit of a specific discipline like Botany, Chemistry, Mathematics or other science pleases the practitioner of the particular discipline, there is nothing in their truths that can equally please the common man. The pleasure derived from those disciplines is confined to those only who know the disciplines. Such truths, being purely the product of the 'meddling intellect', are never 'felt in the blood, and felt along the heart', as the truths of poetry do. Thus, Wordsworth arrives at his one of the most quoted expressions: 'Poetry (therefore) is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science'.

Poetry, for Wordsworth, is a force with intense affinity towards what is good and superior. He observes that the chief objective of him behind writing poetry was "to console the afflicted; to add sunshine to daylight by making the happy happier, to each the young and the gracious of every age to see, to think, and feel, and therefore to become more actively and securely virtuous." Thus, he develops the general conclusion that every great poet keeps in his or her mind the basic intention to impart something good to the reader: 'I wish either to be considered as a teacher or as nothing.' In this context, we can compare Wordsworth with Plato keeping in view the common ground they shared in terms of the educative nature of poetry. However, considering Wordsworth's recurrent insistence on pleasure as being a necessary condition of poetic teaching, he may be viewed as a follower of Horace much more than Plato. But, again, he seems to echo the Plato in an observation made about his own poetry and the educative value of them: "they will cooperate with the benign tendencies in human nature and society, and will, in their degree, be efficacious in making men wiser, better, and happier." The benign tendencies that he refers to in the "Preface" are defined as 'relationship and love'; and it is the great function of poetry to promote these benign feelings. However, they are to be induced in the people through a diffusion of

feelings rather than through a mere appeal to the intellect. This is the point where Wordsworth differs from the neo-classicists in his articulation of the concept of teaching through poetry.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What is Wordsworth's take on the selection of the object for poetry?

Q 6: What is the poetic diction for Wordsworth?

Q 7: In what way does Wordsworth's language of poetry differ from the language of prose?

Q 8: How does Wordsworth define poetic art?

Q 9: How does Wordsworth distinguish the role of "Imagination" in the creative process?

Q10: What, according to Wordsworth, is the function of poetry?

9.6 RECEPTION OF WORDSWORTH AS A CRITIC

Wordsworth was never trained to be a literary critic; neither did he want to be one. He was dragged into literary criticism by the vehement rejection of his *Lyrical Ballads* he witnessed from a selected section of the literary society. His defence in the form of the "Preface", which was edited and modified more than once, would later function as an important document to clarify certain basic traits of English Romanticism. In that way, despite being accidentally forced to the field of literary criticism, Wordsworth offers the 'manifesto' of English Romanticism in the form of the "Preface". His attack on the neo-classical Poetic Diction is a path-breaking as well as eye-opening exercise for his contemporary poets and critics. However, it has to be admitted that his emphasis on the 'rustic', 'real language of men' has been severely questioned by his fellow poet Coleridge. He himself did not practice what he preached in terms of the language of poetry, as is evident from most of his famous poems. Thus, serious questions can be raised on the authenticity and integrity of the critic in Wordsworth.

Despite his limitations as a critic, his influence and contribution to English literary criticism cannot be utterly negated. He is one of the pioneers to attribute creative faculty to imagination, thereby debunking the mere passivity attributed on it by the neo-classics. Apart from that, he indulged in some of the more serious and age-old debates over the function and object of poetry. In his "Preface", Wordsworth opposed the neo-classical practice of judging a work of art by the application of tests based on ancient models. These tests are limited because they can, at the most, judge the external qualities of the work – its structure, diction, metre, and the like. A work might be flawless in all these and yet fail 'to please always and please all'. A critic interested in all these external elements may easily be pleased with the perfection of these niceties. However, such niceties cannot be enough to judge the merit of a poet or a piece of poetry. Wordsworth concludes that the success or greatness of poetry lay neither in a particular diction nor in a particular mode expression. It lay rather in the healthy pleasure it afford to the reader. This healthy pleasure may arise as much from the use of common language as from the customary language of poetry, and as much from the writer's individual mode of writing as from that laid down by new-classicism. In this connection, what Wordsworth says about the style of his *Lyrical Ballads* can be applied equally to the general poetic practice: "I am well aware that others who pursue different track may interest him likewise; I do not interfere with their claim, I only wish to prefer a difference claim of my own." This expression summarises actually all that he wanted to express in the "Preface": it is through the application of the common principle of 'live and let live' in the sphere of letters that the individual space for self-expression in Romanticism is defined and practiced.



9.7 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you must have developed a fair idea about the basic thematic concerns of the essay *Preface* to *Lyrical Ballads.*

In the *Preface* Wordsworth subverts certain conventional norms of poetry established by his neo-classical predecessors. First, Wordsworth finds in the life of the common people the most important and meaningful objects of poetry. Secondly, in the treatment of such 'common', 'rustic' themes, he advocated for the employment of the language 'really used by man'. This selection of the most suitable language for poetry goes directly against the poetic diction of the neo-classicists. His choice of language is a revolt against 'the gaudiness and inane phraseology' of the 18th century poets. Wordsworth further observes that there can be no difference between the language of prose and metrical composition. In Wordsworth's theory, poetry is composed from the powerful emotions stored in the mind, recollected later in the state of tranquillity, and woven in the fabric of words. For Wordsworth, poetry is the pursuit of truth; it is the pursuit of man's knowledge of himself and the world around him. "Poetry (therefore) is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science." It is a force with intense affinity towards what is good and superior.



9.8 FURTHER READING

1) Abrams, M. H. (1953). *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. London: OUP.
2) Abrams, M. H. (ed.) (1972). *Wordsworth: A Collection of Critical Essays*.
3) Cuddon, J. A. (1977). *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. London: Penguin Books.
4) Gill, Simon. (ed.) (2003). *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
5) Heffernan, James A. W. (1969). *Wordsworth's Theory of Poetry: The Transforming Imagination.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
6) Hill, John Spencer. (1977). *The Romantic Imagination, A Selection of Critical Essays*. London: The Macmillan Press Limited.

7) Jones, Alun R., Tydeman, William. (eds.) (1984). *Wordsworth: Lyrical Ballads*, London: Macmillan Publication.

8) Moorman, Mary. (1965). *William Wordsworth: A Biography.* 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

9) Perkins, David. (1964). *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Sincerity*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

9.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: In 1795, Wordsworth met Samuel Taylor Coleridge in Somerset… …both friends together published *Lyrical Ballads* in the autumn of 1798… …Wordsworth termed his poems published in the volume as some 'experimental' works of poetry… …the publication was a path-breaking moment in the history of English literature… …this collection included lyrics like "I heard a thousand blended notes", "It is the first mild day of March", "Expostulation and Reply" and the most celebrated long poem called "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey."

Ans to Q 2: Attached to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads,* the "Preface" considered a central work of Romantic literary theory… …this "Preface" later came to be regarded as the 'manifesto' of English Romantic criticism… …this "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads"* offers a detailed discussion of what Wordsworth believes as the elements of a new type of poetry, which would be based on the "real language of men," and which would avoid the poetic diction of much 18th century poetry.

Ans to Q 3: The primary objective was to establish incidents and situations drawn from common life as the subject matter of poetry… … the other objective was to write poetry rejecting poetic diction of the Neo-Classicists with the use the language 'really used by men'.

Ans to Q 4: Wordsworth extends the scope of poetry, by incorporating

themes chosen from lives of the rustic, humble and common people… …rustic people live close to nature far away from artificiality and vanity… …their language becomes more expressive of the vital truths of life… …the incidents and situations from common life, expressed in the language really used by men, can be the worthy subject matter of poetry.

Ans to Q 5: The low and rustic life – that condition, free from all outside influences, men speak from their own personal experience – "convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions." – 'simple language" is more permanent – a far more philosophical language – expressive of the basic truth of life.

Ans to Q 6: His theory of poetic diction was to imitate, and as far as possible to adopt" the very language of men" – to bring "language near to the language of men".

Ans to Q 7: The language of poetry cannot differ materially from that of prose – it is only the addition of metre that the pleasure is superadded to a rational mind.

Ans to Q 8: Good poetry is 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' – it takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquility – the emotion is contemplated, the tranquility gradually disappears and an emotion kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation is gradually produced – In this mood begins the actual successful composition.

Ans to Q 9: A colouring of imagination upon the common things of life and nature make them appear to be uncommon… …to make the natural appear like the supernatural… …the ordinary objects are heightened and glorified by the poet's imagination… …they seem completely transmuted and transfigured… …the whole of Wordsworth's poetry is an integrated vision of nature and man revealed through his imagination.

Ans to Q 10: The poet is a 'man speaking to men'… …poetry should give pleasure to the common men… …the moral consists partly in the

refinement of feelings which true poetry effects, partly is the knowledge of "Man, Nature and Human life" and on things that makes life fuller and richer… …poetry is "the breath and fines spirit of all knowledge, it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science."



9.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss how William Wordsworth revolts against the neo-classical theory of poetic diction.

Q 2: Write a note on Wordsworth's contribution to the development of the importance of imagination in Romantic literary Criticism.

Q 3: Write an essay on Wordsworth's concept of poetic art.

Q 4: How, according to Wordsworth, are the subject matter and the language of poetry interrelated? Discuss.

Q 5: Discuss, after Wordsworth, the functions of poetry in human society.

Q 6: How does Wordsworth understand and define the qualifications of a poet? Explain.

Q 7: Evaluate the critical value of Wordsworth's "Preface" in the context of English Romanticism.

Q 8: Do you consider Wordsworth as a good critic? Justify your position with proper arguments.

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Unit 10: S. T. COLERIDGE: *BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA* (CHAPTER *XIII & XIV*)

UNIT STRUCTURE

10.1 Learning Objectives

10.2 Introduction

10.3 S.T. Coleridge: The Critic

10.4 Reading Chapters XIII & XI**V**

10.5 Important Concepts of the Text

10.6 Reception of Coleridge as a Critic

10.7 Let us Sum up

10.8 Further Reading

10.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

10.10 Possible Questions

10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss Coleridge's importance as a major critic of the Romantic period
- explain the major concerns of *Biographia Literaria,* and justify their significance in the context of Romantic criticism
- identify the major issues raised in the text prescribed and assess their implications
- gain a clear idea of how Coleridge presented his ideas
- read *Biographia Literaria* as an important contribution to English Romantic Criticism

10.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the last unit of the Block 2 on Neoclassical and Romantic Criticism. In this unit, we shall discuss Coleridge's critical text *Biographia Literaria* with particular reference to Chapters XIII and XIV. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) has been praised as one of the premier English

literary intellectuals and poets of the Romantic era. As a critic, however he sought to integrate literary analysis with the insights of other disciplines and tried to provide literary criticism a philosophical foundation. While formulating his ideas he drew from many 18th century and contemporary authors, particularly the German idealist and Romantic philosophers and critics like Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Von Schiller, A. W. Schlegel, and Friedrich von Schelling. The *Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* or better known as *Biographia Literaria* is a significant text of Romantic Criticism. Published in 1817, this work is long and loosely structured, and although there are many autobiographical elements, it is not a straightforward autobiography. Instead, it is a meditative deliberation on his ideas on imagination. This unit helps you to discuss his *Biographia Literaria* in general and Chapters XIII & XIV in particular. By the time you finish reading the unit, you will discover that at the centre of Coleridge's project is his inquiry into and defence of the 'Imagination'.

10.3 S. T. COLERIDGE: THE CRITIC

S. T. Coleridge was born at the vicarage of Ottery St. Mary, in Devonshire, England, on October 21, 1772. His father was a clergyman of the Church of England, good-hearted but absent-minded and impractical. Coleridge was an imaginative boy, and since his childhood, he read a lot about fairy tales and acted out the scenes in them, living much by himself in the world, which he created out of his Imagination. When he was nine years old his father died, and the next year Coleridge entered the great public school of Christ's Hospital, where he became intimate with Charles Lamb. Then, he went up to Cambridge, met Wordsworth, but failed to lead a comfortable college life. While still a student, he made an excursion to Oxford, and met Robert Southey. It was a restless time of the French Revolution, and these young students and enthusiasts were eager to try some new order of life. With the help of a few other friends he developed a scheme which they named **Pantisocracy** (or the equal rule of all), and proposed to form a

community on the banks of the Susquehanna in Pennsylvania, where two or three hours' labour a day, on the part of each, would suffice for the community, and then the remaining time could be given to the pursuit of philosophy, poetry and all the arts. Southey was married, and Coleridge was thrown much with Mrs. Southey's sister, Sara Fricker, as a result of which he had to marry her hastily. Among his friends at this time in Bristol, where the Frickers lived, was the bookseller Joseph Cottle, who had great faith in Coleridge's literary potentials. He undertook the publication of a volume of poems, and lent him money to run his family.

Coleridge at the time of his marriage was only twenty-three years old. For a number of years, Coleridge and his wife, and the children born to them, led a shifting life. Now, Coleridge would make a stay in Germany, now they would be all together with the Wordsworths (William and his sister Dorothy) and Southeys in the Lake Country. However, by 1813, the union of an irresponsible, dreamy husband with a wife of limited intellectual sympathy ended. For three years, Coleridge led a dreary life, lecturing, arguing with friends, and struggling against the habit of opium, which had finally taken his life. In 1816, he put himself under the care of Dr. Gillman, living at Highgate, on the outskirts of London. There he spent the last sixteen years of his life, cared for by a kind physician, making occasional journeys into other parts of England, receiving many visitors and continuing to write. His most notable poems were written towards the end of the 18th century. Coleridge died on 25th July 1834.

We remember Coleridge mostly for his poems like "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", "Kubla Khan", "Frost at Midnight", among others, as well as the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) to which he was contributor together with Wordsworth. For his deliberations on matters of education, religion and politics, we can read his *Lectures on Politics and Religion* (1795), his *Lay Sermons* (1816), and *On the Constitution of the Church and State* (1829). It is however, *Biographia Literaria*, which contains his best contributions to literary criticism. In it, he shows what other critics have adjudged as a worthy attempt to build the philosophical foundations of

English criticism. It was Coleridge's sympathy for the radical leader, William Frend, while at Cambridge, that marked his radicalism. He had expressed support for the French Revolution and turned to Unitarian beliefs, guided by which he gave many radical speeches in various places. After the French invasion of Switzerland in 1798, Coleridge changed his political beliefs. Coleridge's sojourn in Germany in 1798, together with the Wordsworths, is another important phase in his career as this made possible his study of the German Romantic thinkers.

Coleridge was much influenced by the German critics, especially A.W. Schlegel and in his distinctions between mechanical and organic art. To Coleridge, organicism was a useful concept applicable in the field of literary criticism. You can understand how this idea is made to work if you consider the instance of Friedrich Schlegel who wrote in 1795-6, that all Greek art can be viewed as "a single growth whose seed is grounded in human nature itself, and which possesses a 'collective force' as its dynamic and guiding principle". Schlegel continued, "And in its historical course, each 'advance unfolds out of the preceding one as if of its own accord, and contains the complete germ of the following stage." Similar to what the German theorists held, Coleridge too presumed that the process of literary invention involved the same forces – the natural, the unplanned and the unconscious, which make things, grow.

Finally, you will find that Coleridge's main contribution was in the form of literary, philosophical, religious and theological writings. It was 'Imagination', which gave him the power to penetrate deep into the things. This is what makes his readers delve into the great mass of his poetry, his essays and letters, even though they seem to be formless and unfinished. In the formative stages of his poetic career, Wordsworth collaborated with him. Both contributed to *Lyrical Ballads*, but Wordsworth alone was responsible for the important "Preface", which was to influence the whole of the Romantic Movement and much of English poetry in later periods. Wordsworth's poetry is concerned with the ordinary, everyday world and with the impact of memory on the present; but Coleridge's poetry frequently communicates a sense of the

mysterious, supernatural and extraordinary world. Wordsworth stated that he wanted to explore every day subjects and give them a Romantic or supernatural colouring. By contrast, Coleridge wanted to give the supernatural a feeling of everyday reality.

Most of the early works of Coleridge are marked by a sense of radicalism and political reform. For example, one of his early works "Sonnets on Eminent Characters" written in 1794 is clearly partisan defining enemies and friends to the political cause. Another poem "France: An Ode" published in 1798, tends to distinguish the 'spirit of divinest Liberty' which, according to Coleridge, was to be found in the midst of nature. The context of such poems can also be traced in Coleridge's political commitment and his denunciation of monarchy and aristocracy at its worst. Around 1795, he met William Wordsworth and both worked together with a revolutionary enthusiasm for bringing change in society and literature. Their close association bore fruits in the form of conversation poems like "The Lime-tree bower my Prison", "Frost at Midnight", "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan" which were written in between 1797-1798. Poems like "The Lime-tree bower my Prison" and "Frost at Midnight" suggest a Wordsworthian sense of transcendental reality of natural phenomena: the first one being an address to his school friend Charles Lamb, interlinks human affection, a sense of joy and unity in the midst of natural world. The second, on the other hand, is a school day memory of displacement and loneliness. The contrast between town and country, rural companionship and urban isolation are also the important themes in the poem. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is one of his most memorable contributions to "Lyrical Ballads". The poem takes the form of a voyage discovery, but it also beautifully describes the psychodrama concerning the guilt of the Mariner who murdered an albatross. "Kubla Khan" is derived from Coleridge's wide reading of mythology, history and comparative religion. Another important poem "Christabel", intended originally for the publication in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* but refused by Wordsworth for its strangeness, is in many ways a complement to "The Rime of the Ancient

Mariner". It too echoes the style of old ballads and links Christabel's experience of life and death to that of the Mariner.

In 1802, Coleridge composed "Dejection: An Ode", often considered his last important poem. It opens with an epigraph and is marked by an acknowledgement of the failure to respond to natural phenomena and of the decay of an imaginative joy. However, during the early 1800, Coleridge became increasingly aware of his poetic inspiration, and became interested in the processes and implications of 'critical theory'. Despite a visible decline in his Pantisocratic ventures and his revolutionary vows, he continued to delve deeper into the central principle of his philosophy: the ultimate unity and invisibility in the process of creation. The result was his thought provoking *Biographia Literaria* (1817) where he proclaimed his '**esemplastic**' or unifying power of Imagination. This book is a meditation on poetry, poets and above all the nature of the poetic imagination. However, his later writings are preoccupied with religious issues, with the problem of belief and joy of believing, with a moral concern with the inward impulses, and with a criticism of the Scriptures. His subsequent publication of *The Constitution of the Church and State* (1829) brings to a climax his concern with dynamic unity, and constitutes a part of the national debate on reform.

Coleridge as critic is often remembered for his engagement with the ideas of fancy and imagination. Rene Descartes' distinction between mind and body, self and world appealed to Coleridge a lot. As he writes: "To the best of my knowledge Descartes was the first philosopher, who introduced the absolute and essential heterogeneity of the soul as intelligence, and the body as matter". He also appreciated Kant's attempt to resolve the gap between self and nature by connecting mental faculties and the world of phenomena. However, we should see Coleridge's importance as a critic in terms of the various tenets of German speculative philosophy that he brought into English Romanticism. According to M.A.R. Habib, those "tenets, aimed in part against the mechanistic, fragmentary, and secular spirit of much Enlightenment thought, include the primacy of subjectivity and self-

consciousness, the elevation of nature beyond mere lifeless mechanism to a spiritual status, and the perception of a fundamental unity between the human self and the world of nature."



LET US KNOW

Coleridge has also been rebuked and mocked for the ambitious projects he proposed, launched, but left undone: an eight-to ten volume history of literature, an epic poem on the origin of evil, and so on. He had extraordinary literary gifts but was an undisciplined author who failed to make full use of his exceptional talent. Coleridge wrote in his copy of his book *The Statesman's Manual* (I816) that while he had produced a number of significant works, he stood in the world's eyes as "the wild eccentric Genius that has published nothing but fragments & splendid Tirades." With the possible exception of the *Biographia Literaria* (1817) and a handful of poems, none of his works holds together as an effective whole.

You will note that in *Biographia Literaria,* which is a hastily assembled work, Coleridge mixes different modes and genres like autobiography, philosophy, literary theory, and analytical literary criticism, as well as a memoir of Wordsworth, a study of his poems, and a critique of his theory of poetic diction.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Why is Coleridge important in the context of Romantic criticism?

Q 2: In what ways, was Coleridge different from Wordsworth as Romantic poets?

10.4 READING CHAPTERS XIII AND XIV

In *Biographia Literaria,* Coleridge built on his famous theory of the imagination, his exposition of organic unity, and his treatment of poetry

as the reconciliation of opposites. Let us have a brief discussion on chapters XIII and XIV of *Biographia Literaria* in the following sub-sections.

Chapter XIII :

This chapter is famous for Coleridge's distinction between **Fancy** and **Imagination**, which he also makes the basis of his theory of literary creation. Coleridge conceived fancy in a lower rank than imagination as it **"has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites."** It is "indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical faculty of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory the Faculty must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association." What you should pay attention to is the ways Coleridge uses the terms of the associative theory of invention, the "fixities and definites" being the basic elements derived from the senses. However, these are to be differentiated from the units of memory because they are reordered in a new sequence of time and space. This new sequence is based on the laws of association and governed by judgment. However, for Coleridge this has another element—the secondary imagination. This necessitates our consideration of Coleridge's ideas of Imagination. As he states: **"The IMAGINATION then, I consider either as primary, or secondary."** However, before defining imagination, Coleridge actually works through the ideas of Immanuel Kant, mainly his ideas of 'Transcendental Idealism', and those of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz. Hence, the early part of this chapter looks a bit obscure.

Coleridge then moves on to discuss in detail primary and secondary imagination. According to Coleridge, "The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM." M. A. R. Habib draws a parallel between Kant's reproductive imagination and Coleridge's 'primary' imagination. It is a faculty in our normal perception, which integrates the various sense data

into images that then become conceptually available to our understanding. In this process, the imagination plays an intermediary role that unites the sensory data with the concepts of understanding. However, even here, in this role of the primary faculty, imagination echoes the larger cosmic process –our perception re-enacts at the finite level the divine act of creation. Human perception thus recreates actively what is to be found in the world of nature. These elements of the world of nature, which are copied, are reproduced as images that can be further processed by our understanding. This is how we obtain an intelligible perspective on the world. However, this understanding is limited and fragmentary and the primary imagination does not contain originality; it is limited to the experience of the senses and is determined by the laws of associating data.

Then, Coleridge defines the **secondary imagination** like this: "The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead." So the important point about the secondary imagination is that it is poetic, it is creative, it synthesises the data received from the senses into new, complex unities. It assimilates the habitual order and pattern in which we are accustomed to receive the sensory data into new combinations that follow their own logic rather than the customary logic of the laws of association. The secondary imagination belongs to the poet and operates under the control of the will of the poet. This is unlike, we note, the primary imagination, which functions involuntarily in everyone. However, the secondary imagination is connected to the primary imagination on which it depends for its primary data. The secondary imagination exerts its creative operations on the impressions entering through the primary imagination. It sees the world at a higher level of truth because it sees through appearances into

a deeper reality, into the actual perceptions that it receives via the primary imagination. It perceives deeper connections of objects and events, their finite significances in terms of the comprehensive scheme of the infinite.



LET US KNOW

In the 17th century, 'imagination' and 'fancy' were suggestive of a make-believe world. The medieval period and then the Renaissance had handed down a close equivalence between "imaginatio" and "phantasia". However, "phantasia" used to signal a lighter meaning of less sober retention in memory. M H Abrams states that almost all critics till the 18th century conducted systematic investigations into aesthetics in the context of theories of the operations of the human mind. You must note that during the 17th century, the development of modern psychology coincides with the developments in natural philosophy in connection with mechanics. Such developments throw important lights on the course of literary criticism during that period. The concept of imagination was seen as the close connection between sense-impressions and ideas and visual images were taken to be the units of poetic invention. However, some also thought that poetic invention also worked through joining and separating sequences of images. When these images moved across the mind's eye, in the order as they originally arose with the sense-experience, 'memory' is made. When this sequence was changed, it gave a new order of the images of objects which was said to be the work of 'fancy' or 'imagination'. The term Imagination gradually began to replace the term "association" which was perhaps considered to be the way of getting valuable insights into the nature of the world. However, Coleridge's theory of mind was like that of contemporary German philosophers, who rendered revolutionary changes in the habitual way of thinking, in all areas of intellectual enterprise.

The important point that you must note is that Coleridge's conception of the imagination can be discussed in historical terms. Because, Coleridge's definition "was the first important channel for the flow of organicism into the hitherto clear, if perhaps not very deep, stream of English aesthetics." According to Abrams, 'Organicism' is defined as "the philosophy whose major categories are derived metaphorically from the attributes of living and growing things." Coleridge took Memory as "mechanical", and 'fancy' as "passive". However, the imagination, on the other hand, could 'recreate' its elements. Thus, imagination became a 'synthetic', a 'permeative', a 'blending' and 'assimilative' power in the hands of Coleridge. You should also take note of the fact that Coleridge's adoration of the imagination is not a simple reaction to the Enlightenment's over-emphasis on reason. He did, in fact, place the faculty of reason at the highest point of the scale. His secondary imagination touches both the primary imagination, which unifies sense data to be brought under the concepts of understanding, and reason, which unites those concepts into a composite unity. It was from the German philosophers that Coleridge learnt how to distinguish between levels of imagination as well as to overturn the traditional hierarchy of fancy as higher power than imagination. However, Coleridge came to place fancy at a lower plane of creativity. He called fancy an "aggregative and associative power", and the imagination, a "shaping and modifying power", or the "esemplastic" power.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Why, according to you, is chapter XIII of *Biographia Literaria* important?

Q 4: What does M H Abrams have to say about Coleridge's idea of imagination?

Q 5: In what ways, does Coleridge that Secondary imagination is more productive than the Primary?

Chapter XIV :

In this chapter, Coleridge discusses *Lyrical Ballads*, and the objects originally proposed by Wordsworth and himself, the ensuing controversy, and Coleridge's philosophic definitions of poetry. He begins the essay with a reference to his idea of poetry which he understands as the power of exciting the sympathy as well as the power of giving the interest of novelty. As he writes:

"During the first year that Mr. Wordsworth and I were neighbours, our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry: the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination. The sudden charm, which accidents of light and shade, which moonlight or sunset diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both. These are the poetry of nature. The thought suggested itself (to which of us I do not recollect) that a series of poems might be composed of two sorts. In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. In addition, real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency. For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life; the characters and incidents were to be such, as will be found in every village and its vicinity, where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them, or to notice them, when they present themselves."

Coleridge then proceeds to explain what he and Wordsworth had intended to accomplish in the *Lyrical Ballads.* Coleridge writes:

"In this idea originated the plan of the 'Lyrical Ballads'; in which it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient

to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth on the other hand was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand."

When you read Coleridge's poems like 'Ancient Mariner,' 'Dark Ladie,' and 'Christabel,' you will soon understand that these poems illustrate the faith of Coleridge as a poet. However, Coleridge holds Wordsworth's endeavours to be more important than his as we find in this line: "But Mr. Wordsworth's industry had proved so much more successful, and the number of his poems so much greater, that my compositions, instead of forming a balance, appeared rather an interpolation of heterogeneous matter." While acknowledging Wordsworth's supremacy he also reminds us about the significance of *Lyrical Ballads* as a most important critical document of the Romantic Movement and the controversy it created.

After deliberating on Wordsworth, Coleridge comes to his own idea of a poem. "A poem contains the same elements as a prose composition; the difference therefore must consist in a different combination of them, in consequence of a different object proposed." Then he claims that his own conclusions on the nature of poetry, in the strictest use of the word, have been in part anticipated in the preceding disquisition on the fancy and imagination. As he writes:

"What is poetry? is so nearly the same question with 'what is a poet?' that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself, which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet's own mind. The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to

their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends and (as it were) *fuses* each into each by that synthetic and magical power to which I would exclusively appropriate the name of imagination. This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, control (*laxis effertur habenis* [meaning = 'carried on with slackened reins']), reveals itself in the balance or reconcilement of opposite or discordant qualities; of sameness with difference; of the general with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement – and, while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry."

FINALLY, COLERIDGE OPINES "GOOD SENSE IS THE BODY OF POETIC GENIUS, FANCY ITS DRAPERY, MOTION ITS LIFE, AND IMAGINATION THE SOUL THAT IS EVERYWHERE, and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole."

You should note that one major aspect of *Biographia Literaria* is Coleridge's disagreements with Wordsworth. You may also read the text as an extended criticism of Wordsworth's theory of poetry. Chapter XVII of the text is an examination of the various tenets of Wordsworth's poetry. In contrast to Wordsworth's idea that metre in poetry is "superadded", Coleridge argued that metre is the prerequisite of poetry. As he writes: "A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its *immediate* object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species (having *this* object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the *whole*, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component *part*." It follows from this observation that if a poem is defined by a 'purpose', it does not arise from the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling". It is thus a deliberate art. "It is the *art* of communicating whatever we wish to

communicate, so as both to express and produce excitement, but for the purpose of immediate pleasure; and each part is fitted to afford as much pleasure, as is compatible with the largest sum in the whole." Each part of the poem is thus a means to achieving the objective of pleasure. Meter, therefore, is a special matter of choice and an imposed manner of arranging words; it is not a super addition. If the poem is regarded as an organic or harmonised whole, then it follows that "*all* parts of an organized whole must be assimilated to the more *important* and *essential* parts". Poetry needed to be defined after having considered the poem as a product of metrical composition. The problem involved the knowledge that there were great writers who wrote poetically but without metre and whose purpose is truth rather than pleasure. Therefore, 'poetry' cannot be limited to the 'poem'. That is why perhaps he added: "What is poetry? is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? That the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself…". Coleridge's description of the poet and the poem thus become very striking and significant in Romantic criticism.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: Name some of the poems that exemplify Coleridge's love for the supernatural.

Q 7: Provide Coleridge's definition of a poem?

10.5 IMPORTANT CONCEPTS OF THE TEXT

The following are the important concepts that you may note in the two chapters of *Biographia Literaria* that we are discussing in this unit.

Subjectivity:

A major element of Romantic thought is its turn towards subjectivity, which is to be contrasted with the classical insistence on the objective. Following the ideas of Fichte, and Schelling, as much as of Hegel, Romantic critics addressed the relations between self and nature,

and the subject and the object because they saw these different worlds as 'mutually constructive processes'. They understood human perception as being active rather than being passively receptive to impressions form the outside world. Thus, it became possible to valorise uniqueness, originality, experience, in place of convention and tradition. Imagination for the Romantics is a crucial human faculty with the capacity to unify, and it harmonises such polarities as sensation and reason. We should not suppose, simplistically, that the Romantics displaced Enlightenment 'reason' with imagination, (associated with emotion, instinct, spontaneity, and subjectivity).

Fancy and Imagination:

Coleridge in chapter XIII of his *Biographia Literaria* opines that Fancy and Imagination are two distinct mental processes, which produce two different types of poetry. He associates Fancy with light verse, but he believes all serious and passionate poetry comes from the imagination. He values imagination so highly, as he considers it the faculty, which can unite separate elements. He claims that secondary imagination "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate." The idea that has really been stressed here is to find an order in the midst of disorder.

Most of the writers, prior to the 18th century firmly believed that the only source of order is God. But an 18th century writer like Pope sought order in society as well as in religion. However, a Romantic writer like Wordsworth or Coleridge sought and found the source of order in the mind of the poet with the imagination serving to create order and unity in experience. Thus, the distinction between Fancy and Imagination is a key element in Coleridge's theory of poetry, as well as in his general theory of the mental processes. In earlier discussions, Fancy and Imagination had been used synonymously to denote a faculty of the mind, which is distinguished from reason, judgment and memory, in that it receives images that have been perceived by the senses and reorders them into new combinations. Coleridge attributes this reordering function of the sensory images to the lower faculty he calls Fancy: "Fancy... has no other counters to play with, but fixities and définîtes. The Fancy is

indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space." To Coleridge, fancy is a mechanical process which receives the elementary images—the "fixities and definites" which come ready-made from the senses—and, without altering the parts, reassembles them into a different spatio-temporal order from that in which they were originally perceived. The Imagination, however, which produces a much higher kind of poetry, "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create". So, Coleridge's Imagination enables the poet to "create" rather than merely reassemble, by dissolving the fixities and definites-the mental pictures, or images, received from the senses—and unifying them into a new whole. While Fancy is merely mechanical, Imagination is vital; that is, it is an organic faculty which operates not like a sorting machine, but like a living and growing plant. As Coleridge says elsewhere, Imagination "generates and produces a form of its own," while its rules are "the very powers of growth and production." In addition, in Chapter XIV of the *Biographia,* Coleridge adds his famous statement that the "synthetic" power which is the "imagination…reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image..." The faculty of Imagination, in other words, assimilates and synthesises the most disparate elements into an organic whole— that is, a newly generated unity, constituted by an interdependence of parts whose identity cannot survive their removal from the whole.

Poetry as Expression:

Romantic critics and writers very often referred to poetry as a form of expression. Such a thought was expressed in Germany by thinkers like A.W. Schlegel who observed that 'expression' gave the meaning that "the inner is pressed out as though by a force alien to us". John Stuart Mill remarked that poetry equals "the expression or uttering forth of feeling". In 1818, Coleridge wrote in "Poesy or Art", that the fine arts, "like poetry, are to express intellectual purposes, thoughts, conceptions, sentiments, that have their origin in the human mind". For Hazlitt, poetry *expressed* "the music of the mind." According to Shelley, "poetry, in a

general sense, may be defined to be "the expression of the imagination".

With the emergence in the early 19th century of an **Expressive criticism**— the view that poetry is essentially an expression of the poet's feelings or imaginative process, imitation tended to be displaced from its central position in literary theory. Coleridge said: "Images, however beautiful, though faithfully copied from nature, and as accurately represented in words, do not of themselves characterise the poet. They become proofs of original genius only as they are modified by a predominant passion; or by associated thoughts or images awakened by that passion or lastly, when a human and intellectual life is transferred to them from the poet's own spirit". Coleridge stands out as the Romantic poet most concerned to explore just how the poetic mind modifies the objects perceived through the senses without being untruthful to nature.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: What connections can one make between Romanticism and the 19th century Expressive theory of criticism?

Q 9: Discuss how the ideas of Fancy and Imagination are connected to poetry?

Q 10: Discuss the differences between fancy and imagination.

10.6 RECEPTION OF COLERIDGE AS A CRITIC

Coleridge is to be seen as one of the major poet critics in the English critical tradition. He seems to differ from all previous English critics with his psychological approach to literary problems. As T. S. Eliot writes in his "The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism" that unlike his predecessors, Coleridge tried to bring attention to the profoundity of the philosophic problems which the study of poetry may address. Coleridge was not interested in the poem as such, but in what it displayed of human nature. The study of poetry thus led him to probe the imaginative processes that gave it birth. What you need to examine here is to find out how his theory of imagination can be seen in the context of a

particular type of poetry, which we call the Romantic.

One important aspect of Coleridge as a critic is his distinction between “fancy” and “imagination”. Coleridge speaks first of the “primary” ‘imagination: the “living power” of God, in the eternal act of creation, it is also the power of creation in each person, and the “secondary” imagination which echoes the primary; in conjunction with the will and understanding, it dissolves in order to re-create, making whole and cannonising as a “synthetic and magical power.” Fancy, in contrast, merely associates “fixities and definites”. Although sometimes it may look intriguing, the significance of Coleridge’s ideas lies in its departure from 18th century Neoclassical theory. Samuel Johnson in his *Dictionary* (1765) offers “Fancy” as one of the definitions of “imagination”. However, Coleridge’s distinction between the two has important implications for his conception of the poet and the poem. Neoclassical critics such as Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson could exempt only a great genius like Shakespeare from literary decorum, insisting that others rely on deliberate craft; but for Coleridge the creative work of every poet springs from an imaginative power at once available for analysis yet mysterious in its sources. He sees a poem as *organic,* true to itself, acquiring its shape like a plant from a seed and thereby growing according to its own internal law of development.

You have been told that Coleridge’s significance as a critic lies mostly on his theory of primary and secondary imagination that honours the creative capacity of poets while remaining steadfast to the primacy of God. Coleridge further states that each re-creative act that a poet performs is an act of worship. As modern scholars have pointed out, Coleridge was the most devout of all the major Romantic writers as his Christian faith is central to most of his work. He sees “a similar union of the universal and the individual” in religion and in the fine arts. Coleridge makes a similar distinction in his commentaries on allegory and symbol. Allegory, he indicates, is mechanical and formulaic, part of the larger problem of our degenerate age of triumphant “mechanic” philosophy; but symbol is organically unified, fusing the particular and the general, the

temporal and the eternal. This distinction is crucial for Coleridge, yet, as Paul De Man states in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" (1969), his arguments do not sustain it: the more that Coleridge explores the distinction, the more he complicates and blurs its terms. Indeed, some of his best-known poetry "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Kubla Khan," "Christabel" have invited allegorical interpretation too.

Coleridge's emphasis on the power of the imagination is at odds with much contemporary theory and historical and cultural criticism, which is suspicious of claims that appear to give certain individuals the power to create new worlds out of nothing but imagination. The New Historicist Stephen Greenblatt speaks, for example, not of the imaginative power and prowess of Coleridge but of "social energy"; and it is true that Coleridge pays too little attention to the powerful social networks of signification in which an author's work takes shape.

Over this whole unit, you would have seen how Coleridge works differently from his contemporary William Wordsworth. You would have also understood that no critical theory can be comprehensive unless it examines minutely the different aspects of its objects. Therefore, Coleridge not merely describes his idea of the imagination but works it into the larger philosophy of social relations, and man-nature relations. Once you understand this larger philosophy, you can, not only connect, but also make a deeper assessment of the nature of the critical thought that underlies all of Romantic theorising. Coleridge's theoretical work appears as part of the best contributions of Romantic thought. In order to grasp this fact, we have to examine *Biographia Literaria* taking the various nuances of Romantic Criticism in mind.



10.7 LET US SUM UP

As you finish reading this unit, you must have understood why Coleridge is often praised as one of the premier English poet-critics of the Romantic era. His importance lies in his attempt at integrating literary

analysis with the insights of other disciplines like philosophy. While formulating his ideas, he drew heavily from the German philosophers and critics like Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Von Schiller, A. W. Schlegel, and Friedrich von Schelling. *Biographia Literaria* is a significant text of Romantic criticism. It being a meditative deliberation on his ideas on imagination. In *Biographia Literaria,* Coleridge mixes different modes and genres like autobiography, philosophy, literary theory, and analytical literary criticism. You have learnt that Chapter XIII of *Biographia Literaria* deals with Fancy and Imagination to be two distinct mental processes, which produce two different types of poetry. Chapter XIV, on the other hand, has helped you to discuss Coleridge's idea of the "synthetic" power. Through a discussion of Wordsworth's poetic endeavour, Coleridge states that the faculty of imagination assimilates and synthesises the most disparate elements into an organic whole—that is, a newly generated unity, constituted by an interdependence of parts whose identity cannot survive their removal from the whole. Such ideas hold tremendous significance if seen against the context of late 18th and early 19th century criticism.



10.8 FURTHER READING

1) Bowra, C. M. (1961). *The Romantic Imagination.* Oxford University Press.

2) Duncan, Wu. (ed.) (1996). *Romanticism*: *An Anthology*. Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell.

3) Jackson, H. J. (ed.) (2009). *Samuel Taylor Coleridge - The Major Works*. Oxford World's Classics.

4) M. H. Abrams. (2002). *Natural Supernaturalism*: *Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature.* W.W. Norton & Company Ltd.

5) M.A.R. Habib. (2006). *A History of Literary Criticism*: *From Plato to the Present*, Blackwell Publishing.

6) M.H. Abrams. (2006). *The Mirror and the Lamp*: *Romantic Theory*

and the Critical Tradition. Oxford University Press.

7) Prasad, Birjadish. (1965). *An Introduction to English Criticism.* Macmillan India Limited.

8) René, Wellek. (1955). *A History of Modern Criticism*: *1750 – 1950*, Vol.2: *The Romantic Age*; London: Jonathan Cape.

10.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: For his poems like "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" , "Kubla Khan", "Frost at Midnight"… …for his thoughts on matters relating to education, religion and politics in *Lectures on Politics and Religion* (1795), *Lay Sermons* (1816), *On the Constitution of the Church and State* (1829) etc.... ….for *Biographia Literaria* which is one of best contributions to Romantic criticism.

Ans to Q 2: Wordsworth's poetry is concerned with the ordinary, everyday world; Coleridge's poetry frequently communicates a sense of the mysterious, supernatural and extraordinary world… …Wordsworth wanted to explore everyday subjects and give them a Romantic or supernatural colouring; Coleridge wanted to give the supernatural a feeling of everyday reality.

Ans to Q 3: For his distinction between Fancy and Imagination… …Coleridge places fancy in a lower rank than imagination defining it having "no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites"… ...he defines imagination "either as primary, or secondary."

Ans to Q 4: M. H. Abrams discusses the importance of Coleridge's imagination in historical terms… … Imagination became a 'synthetic', a 'permeative', a 'blending' and 'assimilative' power in the hands of Coleridge…. …his theory of imagination is not a simple reaction to the Enlightenment's over-emphasis on reason…. …he called Fancy an "aggregative and associative power", and imagination, a "shaping and modifying power", or the "esemplastic" power.

Ans to Q 5: Primary Imagination is "the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."… …the Secondary Imagination is an "echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create"… …Thus, the latter is more productive.

Ans to Q 6: Find it in the section itself.

Ans to Q 7: "A poem contains the same elements as a prose composition; the difference therefore must consist in a different combination of them, in consequence of a different object proposed."

Ans to Q 8: Romantic thinkers and writers very often referred to poetry as expression… … The German thinker A.W. Schlegel observed that in 'expression' "the inner is pressed out as though by a force alien to us"…. …with the emergence in the early 19th century of an *expressive criticism*—the view that poetry is essentially an expression of the poet's feelings or imaginative process, imitation tended to be displaced from its central position in literary theory.

Ans to Q 9: Coleridge in chapter XIII argues that Fancy and Imagination are two distinct mental processes which produce two different types of poetry. He associates Fancy with light verse, but he believes all serious and passionate poetry comes from the Imagination.

Ans to Q 10: As two separate mental processes Fancy and Imagination produce two different types of poetry… …He associates fancy with light verse, and imagination with serious and passionate poetry… …fancy deals with 'fixities and definites' while secondary imagination "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate."… … fancy is a mechanical process while imagination is a vital process as it produces a much higher kind of poetry.



10.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Find out the major differences between Wordsworth and Coleridge in matters relating to Romantic poetry and criticism.

Q 2: Attempt an explanation of Coleridge's main ideas in Chapter XIII and XIV of *Biographia Literaria*. To what extent does Coleridge draw upon the work of his predecessors to explain his concept of the imagination?

Q 3: What kind of distinction does Coleridge maintain between 'fancy' and 'imagination' in Chapter VIII of *Biographia Literaria*?

Q 4: Secondary Imagination is creative because it synthesises the data received from the senses into new, complex unities. Discuss.

Q 5: Coleridge considers fancy as a lower creative faculty as contrasted with imagination, which is a re-creative faculty. Discuss with examples from Coleridge's poems, which you have read.

Q 6: The distinction between fancy and imagination is a key element in Coleridge's theory of poetry and the mental processes. Elaborate.

Q 7: Why is Chapter XIV of *Biographia Literaria* is important? What ideas do we gain regarding the poetic techniques of both Wordsworth and Coleridge from this chapter? Discuss.

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UNIT 11: INTRODUCING VICTORIAN CRITICISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.1 Learning Objectives

11.2 Introduction

11.3 History of Victorian Criticism

11.4 Major Exponents of Victorian Criticism

11.5 Important Concepts in Victorian Criticism

11.6 Let us Sum up

11.7 Further Reading

11.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

11.9 Possible Questions

11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- describe and contextualise Victorian criticism
- write on the emerging trends of criticism in the Victorian age
- identify the major critics contributing towards Victorian criticism
- discuss the significance of criticism in the overall development of Victorian literature
- analyse the main concepts in Victorian criticism

11.2 INTRODUCTION

You may remember reading Wordsworth or Coleridge as a critic belonging to the preceding age, significantly called “romantic critics” and their contributions. However, quite interestingly, with the changes in priority of the writers because of the vast socio-economic changes in the intellectual scenario, Victorian criticism has opened up a new direction opening up prospects for the future dominance of criticism in terms of its importance in literary studies. This unit, therefore, intends to acquaint you with the ways

criticism took its shape in the Victorian age. Further, the unit shall emphasise on some of the prominent texts that have laid down the way for criticism its due prominence among scholars and critics alike.

You must be familiar to the Victorian way of life and the changes that had been brought about by industrialisation and the rapid growth of science. Age-old beliefs were challenged by the scientific ways of thinking most importantly it was the battle of faith versus doubt. A sceptical attitude overshadowed the Victorian period because of this, and it got reflected in literature. Religion that is “an extremely effective form of ideological control” (Eagleton, 20) was questioned and doubted, thereby forecasting a shift in the social structure. With the passing of the Reform Act of 1832, the status of the middle or working class was ultimately elevated as they became very powerful. Following this, the concept of “Popular Education” arose in England. To cater to the needs of the emerging and rapidly growing powerful working class, many new educational institutions including universities were set up as well as government “grants” were passed with respect to the “cost of education” (Newbolt Committee Report, 1921). Hence, education became accessible to a greater public thereby increasing the number of prospective readers and writers.

Naturally, people in general lost the flavour of the early age that laid emphasis on individuality and flexibility. Contradictorily, it can be seen that many writers became didactic and many others turned towards tackling the social condition and problems in their works. All these events shaped Victorian criticism mainly reflected in the form of literary writings such as reviews, essays, introduction to edited books, etc. Let us now in this unit, look forward to gain a better understanding of Victorian criticism by laying our focus on its development and the important figures associated to it. The following sections shall deal with a brief overview of the development of Victorian criticism.

11.3 HISTORY OF VICTORIAN CRITICISM

After getting a background of the Victorian crisis of doubt and faith and the emerging dominance of the middle class, here we shall concentrate

upon the factors that initiated criticism. Notably, it was during the Victorian period that 'criticism' as an individual area of study began to emerge. Primarily, the publication of *The Edinburgh Review* provided scope for the critics to voice out their concerns. Reviewers with strong individual opinions were encouraged through this magazine. The role of this magazine in the initiation of literary criticism in the nineteenth century was significant as works of literature such as poetry, drama and novels were widely reviewed. Gradually, the reputation of a literary work came to be measured by way of reviews. Along with *The Edinburgh Review*, there were other magazines, which promoted the early springs of criticism like *The Quarterly Review*, *Macmillan's Magazine*, *Cornhill Magazine*, etc.

The Victorians like Matthew Arnold and a few others were greatly influenced by the French critics like Taine and Sainte-Beuve whose main insistence was on finding "a scientific system to assess the worth of a writer" (Prasad, 198). To assess a writer's worth, it was important for them to know about the writer's biographical details. Getting a personal touch would help the readers to measure the worth of a writer in a better way.

Victorian criticism has also paved the way for New Criticism. The influence of Victorian criticism was ardently felt in the way the literary texts, including the novels, were approached.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What changes did the Reform Act of 1832 bring about in the Victorian society with regard to educational opportunities?

Q 2: Give a list of the various reviews that initiated Victorian criticism.

Q 3: Which two French critics had a tremendous bearing upon the Victorian critics?

11.4 MAJOR EXPONENTS OF VICTORIAN CRITICISM

Matthew Arnold:

Matthew Arnold– the poet critic is one of the major figures associated with Victorian criticism. Born in 1822, Matthew Arnold is remembered not

only as a poet but also an influential critic who also showed his concern for various issues such as culture, religion, education, etc. His "Preface" to the *Poems* of 1853 is a notable piece of literary criticism. In the Preface, Arnold's ideas such as his insistence upon 'grand style', his inclination towards the Classical form and his emphasis on art or poetry as a 'criticism of life' are reflected to a great extent. First of all, it must be mentioned that Matthew Arnold was an ardent advocate of Classical poets and considered them suitable for imitation by the Victorian poets. To be precise, the "Preface" was written as a reaction towards the extravagant poetry of the **Spasmodic** poets. Arnold believed that art or poetry as such should depict "joy". Hence, he rebelled against the Spasmodics for their inferior thematic concerns and poor treatment of their verses. Arnold was against their excessive use of metaphors through which they exaggerated their concerns in poetry. Another important work of literary criticism by Arnold is the essay titled "The Study of Poetry" which introduced his famous "Touchstone method". In this essay, he pointed out the higher values of poetry for it enables "to interpret life for us, to console us, and to sustain us" (Arnold, "The Study of Poetry"). Arnold, however, noted that only the poetry, which is 'a criticism of life', could be considered great. In order to find out the worth of poetry, Arnold suggested that poets like Milton, Shakespeare, Dante and Homer must be considered as examples because the essence of high poetry is present in their works. By high poetry, Arnold implied the inclusion of excellent subject matter and style. Talking about 'high seriousness' that is attached to these great classic poets, Arnold emphasised on the "Touchstone Method". He suggested that lines or passages from these poets must be used as 'touchstone' to find out the worth of poetry. Therefore, this essay primarily reflects Arnold's praise and high expectations from poetry. The Victorian crisis of religion that was triggered by scientific developments created an uncertainty in the lives of the people and for Arnold, poetry with its serious preoccupation with life was only capable of bringing stability through its high ideals and moral values. He was well known as a critic also for works like *On Translating Homer*, *The Study of Celtic Literature*, etc.

Apart from these, another significant contribution of Arnold is the

essay titled “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” that appeared in his book *Essays in Criticism* in 1865. Here Arnold emphasised on the role of a critic and the function of criticism which is “a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and true ideas.” (Arnold, “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time”). As such, the first focus of Arnold is on knowledge of the critic that has to be developed with a sense of disinterestedness by trying to see the things as it really is. The critic has to acquire extensive knowledge in order to share his opinions and views and propagate the best that he has acquired. Thirdly, the critic’s role is to promote creative genius by propagating the best ideals prevailing in the society. Arnold laid emphasis on creative faculty because to him it was higher than critical faculty. At the same time, he asserted that only a critic could best appreciate a creative work of literature.



LET US KNOW

The term ‘spasmodic’ coined by William Edmonstoune Aytoun is a term used to refer to poets namely, Philip James Bailey, Sydney Dobell and Alexander Smith. Their poetry was mainly notable for their use of bombastic words. These poets tried to express their scepticism regarding the age in view of their emphasis on poetry as an expression of one’s inner state. Basically, their works reflected the inner turmoil of the protagonists who were mostly poets themselves. Pertaining to their pompous use of words, depiction of the protagonists as lonely and depressed souls, excessive use of imagery and metaphors, these poets lost the favour of their readers, mainly with Aytoun’s parody titled *Firmilian* in 1854.

Walter Pater:

Walter Pater (1839-1894) was a famous literary critic, essayist and art critic. He also wrote fiction. Pater was primarily an advocate of “art for art’s sake”. The works from which Pater’s ideas regarding criticism can be derived are *Appreciations*, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, *Marius*

the Epicurean, *Plato and Platonism,* etc. In the Preface of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Pater clearly stated that the aim of criticism is "To see the object as in itself it really is" (viii) and "in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly" (viii).

Pater, however, did not favour didacticism; for him art must only seek to provide a purely aesthetic experience. He opposed Ruskin who emphasised on the reflection of life through art. We shall read in details about Ruskin in the following paragraph. Talking about style, Pater noted that 'Diction, Design and Personality' are the necessary qualities of a writer for offering a pleasurable experience to his readers.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Who were the Spasmodics? Why did Arnold's disapprove of them?

Q 5: In which essay did Arnold talk about Touchstone Method?

Q 6: Who, according to Arnold, were classic poets?

Q 7: What are the threefold functions of a critic according to Matthew Arnold?

Q 8: Mention some of the major works of literary criticism by Walter Pater.

John Ruskin:

John Ruskin (1819-1900) was one of the popular art critics of the Victorian times. Paintings in the Victorian period were one of the most important focuses with regard to the representation of reality. This was more vivid with the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood consisting of painters namely, W. H. Hunt, J. E. Millais and D. G. Rossetti also a poet who were highly influenced by John Ruskin's approach to art. The early Victorian paintings showed the influence of the idealised and sophisticated masterpieces of the Italian painter, Raphael. It was against this practice that Ruskin revolted since he believed that artists must not idealise, rather the role of an artist is "truth to nature" (Ruskin, *Modern Painters*). Ruskin emphasised on the

accuracy of details on the part of an artist while painting 'nature'. Like literature, Victorian art was also an important area of study. John Ruskin's criticism on art is another manifestation of the significance of pictorial aspect to the understanding of literature and criticism during the Victorian period. Few other works by John Ruskin are *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53). All these three books of Ruskin had more than one volume. In the book titled *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*, it has been rightly pointed out that "Nineteenth century aesthetic theory frequently makes the eye the predominant organ of truth" (xix-xx). Arts, literature or criticism–whatever might be the medium for a writer, depiction of reality became important. Therefore, it is relevant for us to have a brief overview on Victorian art too in order to examine the overall reputation of criticism during the time.

Algernon Charles Swinburne:

Swinburne (1837-1909) was another major figure in Victorian criticism who also wrote plays, novels and poems. He was closely associated with the Pre-Raphaelites and aestheticism. His *Poems and Ballads* was a very popular work owing to its controversial reception during the Victorian period. This volume dealing with homosexual themes brought him closer to the philosophy of aestheticism by challenging the prevailing cultural mores and importance of morality in the Victorian society. However, his critical output rested mainly on his defence of the above volume, which is titled *Notes on Poems and Reviews* in 1866.*Under the Microscope* is another significant critical work of Swinburne.

Henry James:

Henry James was a notable American born writer who later on acquired British citizenship. His literary output spread across various genres including novels, plays, biographical and autobiographical writings, etc. In fact, James also contributed towards Victorian criticism by his numerous reviews and works like "The Art of Fiction", "The future of the Novel", etc. Apart from these, his critical works included *French Poets and Novelists*(I878), *Hawthorne* (I879), *Partial Portraits* (1888), *Essays in London and Elsewhere* (I893), *Notes on Novelists* (1914), *Literary Essays and*

Reviews (1957), etc. Rene Welleck noted, “James alone in his time and place in the English-speaking world holds fast to the insights of organistic aesthetics and thus constitutes a bridge from the early nineteenth century to modern criticism.” (p. 321). It must be noted that Henry James strived for ‘a revival of criticism’ mainly of the novel form. A fair idea about Henry James as a critic can be summed up in the words of Wellek:

James has an extraordinarily clear grasp of the nature of art, its relations to reality and the other activities of man; he has very definite, though often implicit, requirements for successful art and he has the power to apply his standards to the authors he examines. His theoretical position seems clear-cut and coherent. He is neither a “realist,’ the label pinned on him in most histories of literature, nor a “formalist,” a devotee of art for art’s sake for which he is often dismissed. (p. 299)



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: What, according to John Ruskin, is the role of an artist?

Q 10: Name any two major works of criticism by Algernon Charles Swinburne.

Q 11: What is your idea regarding Henry James as a literary critic? Explain.

11.5 IMPORTANT CONCEPTS IN VICTORIAN CRITICISM

Art for art’s sake:

‘Art for art’s sake’ was first coined by the French critic Benjamin Constant. However, it was the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant who laid the basis or principles of Aestheticism. According to Kant, art stands for its own sake or its own beauty and not to mean anything else. Prior to the Victorian period, the romantic poet and critic –S.T. Coleridge supported this philosophy. However, in the Victorian times, this idea got echoed in the writings of Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Charles Algernon Swinburne and D. G. Rossetti who were highly influenced by Kant. By following this doctrine

of aestheticism, these critics sought a refuge from the crude depiction of reality prevailing in their society and hence they considered art as a pleasurable activity without succumbing to any morals. You must note here that among the Victorian critics who disregarded this doctrine, the chief among them were John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle. They held a completely different view. Contrary to the followers of aestheticism, they believed that art must have a didactic purpose.

The Touchstone Method:

With reference to Victorian criticism, the Touchstone Method is an important concept. The main figure behind this was the poet and critic, Matthew Arnold. In the essay titled "The Study of Poetry", Arnold pointed out that in order to judge the value of a work it must be compared with the works of the classic poets as Milton, Shakespeare, Dante and Homer. Arnold believed that the works of these classic poets were poetry of higher order. According to the Touchstone method of Arnold, a line or one passage of any of the classic poets must be used for assessing the worth of other poetic works. By this concept, Arnold led the path to 'scientific objectivity' in criticism. He also highlighted comparison as an important aspect of criticism. Some of the passages to be considered as touchstone that

Arnold suggested were from Shakespeare's *Henry IV*—

Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
Seal up the ship-boy's eyes, and rock his brains
In cradle of the rude imperious surge . . .

from John Milton's Paradise Lost:

Darken'd so, yet shone
Above them all the archangel; but his face
Deep scars of thunder had intrench'd, and care
Sat on his faded cheek . . .

from Dante's "Inferno":

[I wailed not, so of stone grew I within; / they wailed.]

and from Homer's Iliad:

[Ah, unhappy pair, why gave we you to King Peleus, to a mortal? but ye are without old age, and immortal. Was it that with men born to

misery ye might have sorrow?]

The touchstone method for Arnold was helpful to overcome the false standards of judging a work. Pointing out personal estimate– judging poetry from a personal point of view; and historic estimate taking the circumstances of the poet into consideration, as insufficient for judging a poetic work, Arnold favoured the touchstone method.



ACTIVITY 11.1

Make a list of the relevant essays, lectures, preface to volumes, etc. or any other source of Victorian criticism by eminent Victorian critics while you are reading the unit. This will enable you to remember not only the important texts but also give you a clarified understanding of Victorian criticism as a whole.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 12: Which German philosopher is said to have initiated the principles of Aestheticism?

Q 13: Describe in brief the Touchstone method.

Q 14: Describe some of the important concepts in Victorian criticism.



11.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have been familiarised with Victorian criticism and the background in which it has emerged. Swinging in between doubt and faith, the Victorian age is marked for providing inspiration for novel literary undertakings including criticism. To be specific, in this unit you have known that criticism became an important literary practice from the Victorian period onwards. Hence, critically viewed, the Victorian critics can be said to have laid down the basis for twentieth century critics. Since criticism was gradually taking its shape in the various works of the Victorian critics, it must be noted that Victorian criticism is mainly important as it served as the

transitional phase for the establishment of criticism as an individual and reputed branch of knowledge and literary practice. As you have now finished reading the unit, you have acquired a fair idea on the socio-economic situation of the age that found its vent through criticism also along with the literature of the period. You have also read about many critics in this unit, some of them are Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater, John Ruskin, Henry James, etc. Apart from this, the unit acquainted you with the various contributions of these critics whose works challenged the prevailing approach towards literature. You are now familiar with the concepts that dominated Victorian criticism like art for art's sake, touchstone method, etc. By and large, the unit has provided you with a broad idea on Victorian criticism. You are, however, advised to read the essays and consult the books mentioned in the unit for acquiring a better perception of Victorian criticism.



11.7 FURTHER READING

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Web1 Resources:

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http://www.bartleby.com



11.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: With the passing of the Reform Act of 1832, the status of the middle or working class… …became very powerful. and the concept of "Popular Education" arose in England. To cater to the needs of the emerging and rapidly growing powerful working class, many new educational institutions including universities were set up… …education became accessible to a greater public thereby increasing the number of prospective readers and writers.

Ans to Q 2: *Edinburgh Review*, *The Quarterly Review*, *Macmillan's Magazine*, *Cornhill Magazine*, etc.

Ans to Q 3: Taine and Sainte-Beauve.

Ans to Q 4: Philip James Bailey, Sydney Dobell and Alexander Smith were the Spasmodic poets . . . use of bombastic words . . . tried to express their scepticism regarding the age in view of their emphasis on poetry as an expression of one's inner state. Arnold believed that art or poetry as such should depict "joy" . . . he rebelled against the Spasmodics for their inferior thematic concerns and poor treatment of their verses . . . against their excessive use of metaphors through which they exaggerated their concerns in poetry.

Ans to Q 5: "The Study of Poetry".

Ans to Q 6: Milton, Shakespeare, Dante and Homer.

Ans to Q 7: The critic has to be developed . . . a sense of disinterestedness . . . see the things as it really is . . . acquire extensive knowledge in order to share his opinions and views and propagate the best that he has acquired . . . to promote creative genius by propagating the best ideals prevailing in the society.

Ans to Q 8: *Appreciations*, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, *Marius the Epicurean*, *Plato and Platonism,* etc.

Ans to Q 9: Artists must not idealise . . . the role of an artist is "truth to nature" . . . Ruskin emphasised on the accuracy of details on the part of an artist while painting 'nature'.

Ans to Q 10: *Notes on Poems and Reviews* and *Under the Microscope.*

Ans to Q 11: James contributed towards Victorian criticism . . . "The Art of Fiction", "The future of the Novel", *French Poets and Novelists*(I878), *Hawthorne* (I879), *Partial Portraits* (1888), *Essays in London and Elsewhere* (I893), *Notes on Novelists* (1914), *Literary Essays and Reviews* (1957), etc. Rene Wellek noted . . . "James alone in his time and place in the English-speaking world holds fast to the insights of organistic aesthetics and thus constitutes a bridge from the early nineteenth century to modern criticism" . . . Henry James strived for 'a revival of criticism' mainly of the novel form.

Ans to Q 12: Immanuel Kant.

Ans to Q 13: To judge the value of a work it must be compared with the works of the classic poets as Milton, Shakespeare, Dante and Homer . . . the Touchstone method of Arnold, a line or one passage of any of the classic poets must be used for assessing the worth of other poetic works . . . led the path to 'scientific objectivity' in criticism.

Ans to Q 14: Refer to Section 11.5



11.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: What are the important characteristics of Victorian Criticism? Discuss briefly.

Q 2: Analyse the influence of Matthew Arnold as a critic with special reference to his major contributions in the field of criticism.

Q 3: Consider the factors that contributed towards the development of criticism in the Victorian age.

Q 4: Give an idea of Victorian criticism with reference to the major critics. How did their works influence the conception of Victorian literature in general?

Q 5: Discuss the major concepts that were predominant in Victorian criticism and highlight its importance in relation to the scope of criticism in the succeeding age.

Q 6: Briefly describe the following with reference to Victorian criticism: “Art for art’s sake”.

Q 7: Highlight the significance of art criticism in the Victorian age. Illustrate your answer by giving examples.

Q 8: Critically comment on the concept of aestheticism in the Victorian context.

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UNIT 12: MATTHEW ARNOLD: "THE FUNCTION OF CRITICISM AT THE PRESENT TIME"

UNIT STRUCTURE

12.1 Learning Objectives

12.2 Introduction

12.3 Arnold: The Critic

12.4 Reading the Text

12.5 Important Concepts

12.6 Arnold as a Victorian Critic

12.7 Let us Sum up

12.8 Further Reading

12.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

12.10 Possible Questions

12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- read about the life and works of Matthew Arnold as a critic
- understand the context of Arnold's "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time"
- explain the role of criticism which Arnold had tried to address in the essay
- discuss the importance of Matthew Arnold as a 19th century English critic.

12.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, you will be introduced to Matthew Arnold and his essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time". Arnold is a prominent poet critic of the 19th century. As a critic, he pondered over the role of literary criticism as a vehicle for bringing positive changes in society. He felt that against the Romantic criticism of the previous generation, criticism of his

time must be drawn closer to life so that life could be made nobler and better. Arnold believed that literary criticism, to be worthwhile, must serve the ends of life and promote a better understanding of cultural values so that social regeneration can be brought about. Defending literature against its enemies and critics, whose emphasis on science, moneymaking, and commercial prosperity had led them to regard poetry as merely a pleasant pastime, he argued that poetry prepared the people of the society to perceive authentic value in the workings of the society and culture around them. You will learn that Arnold's essay "The Function of Criticism" seeks to redefine the central responsibilities of criticism. It is precisely the task of criticism to "establish an order of ideas" and "to make the best ideas prevail." These are some of the very relevant ideas that you are expected to understand and comprehend by the time you finish reading the unit.

12.3 ARNOLD: THE CRITIC

Matthew Arnold was born at Laleham in Middlesex in 1822. He was the son of Thomas Arnold, a noted Victorian man of letters, a religious leader, a historian, and the influential headmaster of Rugby from 1828 to 1841. Arnold received education from *Winchester*, *Rugby* and *Balliol College* and finally from *Oxford.* There he won the *Newdigate* Prize for poetry. In 1845, he became a fellow of *Oriel College*. However, soon he left the university and became the private secretary of Lord Lansdowne. In 1840, he travelled abroad and met Marguerite, a Swiss girl who features in most of his early lyrics. In 1851, he became an inspector of school. This post of honour gave him financial security. He married Frances Lucy Wightman in 1851. In 1858, Arnold became a professor of poetry at *Oxford*. Along with being famous for his poetry, prose and criticism, Arnold is also acclaimed for his advocacy of culture.

Educated at Rugby and Oxford University, Matthew Arnold seems to have concentrated more on his social life than on his studies. Soon he got dissatisfied with the kind of poetry that he had been writing. Still they eloquently express the self-doubt, intellectual unease, and emotional uncertainty typical of the contemporary intellectuals. After joining Oxford

as a Professor of Poetry in 1858, he started writing literary criticism. He sought to deal with the problems of his age through a series of literary, political, religious and educational writings. As an Inspector of the schools, Arnold expressed his views about the British and Continental pedagogical systems through a series of reports on differing educational problems. Most of his writings are marked by a strong sense of discipline. You should remember that Arnold's educational writings are related to what we may popularly call "the Rise of English". Arnold often suggested the establishment of an English Academy on the model of the French to regulate literary taste where education would be imparted in terms of the writings of the English writers. Arnold as the model used the great literary heritage of the English writers for 'Culture'. It was also the model with the help of which he could address the issue of 'Englishness'.

In 185I, when Arnold was appointed the inspector of schools, he continued his discussion with teachers and administrators for educational reforms. Subsequently, he also travelled extensively in England and abroad in between 1859 and 1865. The experiences gathered led to the publication of three books on European (particularly French) systems of education. Arnold viewed the schools as the crucial site for "civilising the next generation of the lower classes, who, as things are going, will have most of the political power of the country in their hands." In his duties as an inspector, he took pain at the deprivations that workers and their families suffered, and subsequently he dedicated his life to the task of social and cultural progress, identifying himself as a "Liberal of the future". Arnold was named Professor of Poetry at Oxford University in 1857, a position he held until 1867.

Arnold takes criticism as involving flexibility, openness to new experiences, and curiosity. He insisted on the "free play" of mind—a phrase that Jacques Derrida would define more radically and subversively in the 20th century. Arnold takes criticism to be a rigorous duty as he explains that it "tends to *establish* an order of ideas", and seeks to "make the best ideas prevail." Arnold firmly believed that some ideas are right and others wrong. A good literary critic was inevitably for Arnold, a person of culture

embarked on a steady, steadfast inquiry into self and society. Arnold excelled as a critic and polemicist, and he frequently took delight in the public controversies that his books and articles invited and in the charges raided against him. However, Arnold was also a poet, an educator, and an advocate for civility and moderation who followed the footsteps of his eminent father Thomas Arnold.

He died in 1888.

His Works:

Along with being a critic Arnold also gained popularity as a poet. You will note that Arnold's literary career had started with *The Strayed Reveller and other Poems* (1849) and ended with the publication of *New Poems* in 1867. Between these years, he published *Empedocles on Etna, and other Poems* (1852), *Poems* (1853), *Poems II Series* (1855) and *Merope*, a tragedy in verse (1858). In these volumes, he tried various poetic works like lyrics (*Dover Beach*), Poetic Drama (*Empedocles on Etna*), Narrative poem (*Sohrab and Rustum*), Elegy (*The Scholar Gipsy*) *etc*. Although Arnold derives much from classical literature, his poetry is also marked by the sense of alienation, stoicism, despair and spiritual emptiness.

However, Arnold made his debut as a critic in the *Preface to the Poems of 1853,* in which he follows Dryden's method of throwing light on his own performance and of making critical observations suitable to the occasion. His lectures as the Professor of poetry at Oxford were published in book form in two volumes–*On Translating Homer* and *The Study of Celtic Literature.* His works on Homer is famous for his unconvincing advocacy of English hexameters and his creation of a kind of literature in the "grand style". He also wrote for various literary journals. Of the miscellaneous writings he published, a selection called *Essays in Criticism* in two series (1865 and 1888). The essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" from the 1865 volume develops his views of criticism as a disinterested and flexible mode of thought.

His *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) is one of his significant critical texts in which he deliberates on the notion of "culture" in detail. Here he defines

"culture" and affirms the need for "culture" in a modern industrial society devoted to mechanism and profit. He calls culture "*a study of perfection"*. According to Arnold, culture has an intellectual and an ethical end to meet. The aims of culture are identical with those of religion. Arnold calls "culture" to be "the greatest and most important of the efforts by which the human race has manifested its impulse to perfect itself" while he conceives religion as the "voice of the deepest human experience". So, what they have in common is the cultivation of inwardness: religion preaches that "The Kingdom of God is within you," and culture "places human perfection in an *internal* condition, in the growth and predominance of our humanity proper, as distinguished from our animality" But culture advances beyond religion, because through a "disinterested study of human nature," it fosters a "harmonious expansion of *all* the powers which make the beauty and worth of human nature." Because culture represents for Arnold an inward condition of the mind, and not outward circumstances, he considers its function to be crucial in our modern civilization which is "mechanical and external" as well as strongly individualistic, specialized, and inflexible.



LET US KNOW

Arnold sees "faith in machinery," as the "besetting danger" of modern civilization. The function of culture is to purge our minds of the effects of such material and narrow preoccupations, and to stem "the common tide of men's thoughts in a wealthy and industrial community". Without this purging, Arnold warns, the future as well as the present "would inevitably belong to the Philistines," those who are devoted to the pursuit of wealth. The task of both criticism and culture, then, is to place the pragmatic bourgeois vision of life in a broader historical and international context. You should try to understand why Matthew Arnold was so vehemently against the Philistines.

His *Essays in Criticism* remains a significant influence on critics till this day. In one of his most famous essays entitled "The Study of Poetry"

(1880), Arnold wrote: "Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry". He considered "high truth" and "high seriousness" to be the most important criteria to judge the value of a poem. By this standard, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* did not merit Arnold's approval. He also sought for literary criticism to remain disinterested, and said that the appreciation should be of "the object as in itself it really is." In Arnold's essay "The Study of Poetry", we find an even greater insistence on the notion of 'seriousness'. This essay, which is also one of the most influential texts of literary humanism, insists on the social and cultural functions of literature, its ability to civilize and to cultivate morality, as well as its provision against the mechanistic excesses of modern civilization. According to Arnold, the status of religion has been increasingly threatened by science, by the ideology of the "fact." Philosophy, too has been rendered powerless since it is hopelessly engaged with unresolved questions and problems. It is, he claims, to poetry that we must turn, not merely for spiritual and emotional support and consolation, but to interpret life for us. Therefore, he defines poetry as a criticism of life. Poetry's high function is actually to replace religion and philosophy. Implicit in his essay is also the notions of the classic and tradition, which will be further developed by writers such as T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis. Arnold suggests that, in the first place, we need to be sure that our estimate of poetry is "real" rather than historical or personal.

The emergence of the "Spasmodics", (a term coined by Charles Kingsley) the group of poets which included P. J. Bailey, Sydney Dobell, and Alexander Smith resulted in the production of a kind of poetry which held poetry to be the expression of "the state of one's own mind in striking language. Leading to utter dissatisfaction on the part of Arnold this newly emergent type of poetry gave birth to an extravagance of thought and emotion on the one hand, and to an excess of ornamentations on the other. In other words, it could be said that they simply expressed the 'doubts, disputes, distractions (and) fears' of their age in a bombastic language. It was in the context of combating this Spasmodic tendency to which Arnold

himself had fallen a victim, that he had felt the necessity of writing his "Preface to the Poems of 1853". Although widely read, the poem *Empedocles on Aetna* (1852) was omitted from his next edition of poems in 1853. In addition, in the Preface Arnold informs his readers why he had done that. According to Arnold, the hero Empedocles in the poem, who ends his life by jumping into the volcano Aetna, "*does nothing but suffer; and suffering that finds no vent in action is not a fit subject for poetry: for all art is dedicated to joy*" and to Arnold, the joy that poetry imparts is dependent on its subject. The Spasmodics believed that the classical subjects had little validity in the modern age and they need to be replaced by modern subjects and concerns. However, Arnold thought otherwise. He believed that "*the business of the poets is not to praise their age, but to afford to the men who live in it the highest pleasure they are capable of feeling.*" Perhaps, that is why, he expresses his indebtedness to the classical writers including Shakespeare.

Thus, you will find that Arnold's main concerns in most of his important critical works are marked by his views on poetry, criticism and culture.



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While acknowledging that the "critical faculty is lower than the inventive," and that the exercise of the "creative power…is the highest function of man," Arnold suggested that the conditions for a high creative genius can be realized in an atmosphere of appropriate criticism. The work of the literary genius, according to Arnold, is not like the philosopher whose job is to discover new ideas. A literary work needs to be inspired by "a certain intellectual and spiritual atmosphere, by a certain order of ideas." The aim of the literary work, according to Arnold, is to present these ideas "in the most effective and attractive combinations," in beautiful form.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How is Matthew Arnold connected to the 'Rise of English'?

Q 2: Which are the major critical texts of Arnold?

Q 3: How does Arnold define the term culture in his *Culture and Anarchy*?

Q 4: Discuss what Arnold means by the term 'philistine'.

12.4 READING THE TEXT

In this section, we shall try to discuss the main aspects of Arnold's essay. This essay mainly deals with his ideas of Creative and Critical faculty, his notion of disinterestedness, his idea of criticism and the role of the critic.

Arnold starts the essay with a discussion of the Creative faculty vs Critical faculty. However, he begins with a reference to his own translation of Homer in which he tried to put a proposition about criticism. As he states:

"Many objections have been made to a proposition which, in some remarks of mine on translating Homer, I ventured to put forth; a proposition about criticism, and its importance at the present day. I said: 'Of the literature of France and Germany, as of the intellect of Europe in general, the main effort, for now many years, has been a critical effort; the endeavour, in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is.' I added, that owing to the operation in English literature of certain causes, 'almost the last thing for which one would come to English literature is just that very thing which now Europe most desires,–criticism'; and that the power and value of English literature was thereby impaired. More than one rejoinder declared that the importance I here assigned to criticism was excessive, and asserted the inherent superiority of the creative effort of the human spirit over its critical effort."

The beginning of Arnold's essay sets the tone of the essay as being one of advocating the idea of criticism and the role of the critic more than

anything else. He then refers to one of Wordsworth's comments and accuses him of holding the critical power very low. Arnold states:

"Without wasting time over the exaggeration which Wordsworth's judgment on criticism clearly contains, or over an attempt to trace the causes, not difficult, I think, to be traced, which may have led Wordsworth to this exaggeration, a critic may with advantage seize an occasion for trying his own conscience, and for asking himself of what real service at any given moment the practice of criticism either is or may be made to his own mind and spirit, and to the minds and spirits of others."

Arnold seems to argue that the critical power may be of lower rank than the creative. However, it is also undeniable, that men may exercise their creative activity in other ways than in producing great works of literature or art. Another argument that Arnold holds is that "the exercise of the creative power in the production of great works of literature or art,...is not at all epochs and under all conditions possible; and that therefore labour may be vainly spent in attempting it, which might with more fruit be used in preparing for it, in rendering it possible." To speak of literature, Arnold believed that **the grand work of the creative literary genius is a work of synthesis and exposition, not of analysis and discovery**. That is why, the great creative epochs in literature are so rare, and there is so much that is unsatisfactory in the productions of many men of real genius. Then, Arnold argues for the need for the critical power, in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is. Thus, this essay tends to refer to the intellectual conditions in which the creative power can profitably sustain itself. It should establish an order of ideas, so that the best ideas prevail.

Arnold calls the poetic endeavours of the Romantic poets premature, and this prematurity is the result of not having sufficient materials to work with. In other words, the English poets of the first part of the 19th century, with plenty of energy and creative force, did not know enough. This makes Byron so empty of matter, Shelley so incoherent, Wordsworth so wanting in completeness and variety. However, it was not the case with Greek Pinder and Sophocles or English Shakespeare. He

states that Pindar and Sophocles had not read many books; or Shakespeare was not an avid reader. But, they lived in a current of ideas in the highest degree that animated and nourished the creative power. Their society was, in the fullest measure, permeated by fresh thoughts. Arnold cites this state of things to be the true basis for the creative power's exercise. He thus confirms that the creative power of poetry requires ideas and materials to provide it with inspiration for achieving success.

Then gradually, Arnold brings in his famous idea of **disinterestedness**. Arnold states that in order to produce fruit for the future, English literature ought to adopt disinterestedness. However, how is criticism to show disinterestedness? Arnold's view is that by keeping aloof from what is called "the practical view of things," a critic may maintain disinterestedness. Then, Arnold deals in greater detail about the business of criticism. According to him, the purpose of criticism is simply to know **"the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas."** However, it has to do it with inflexible honesty, with due ability. Otherwise, "criticism besides being really false to its own nature merely continues in the old rut which it has hitherto followed in England, and will certainly miss the chance now given to it." Arnold then questions the present status of criticism in England. Look at the lines quoted from the text:

"Our organs of criticism are organs of men and parties having practical ends to serve, and with them those practical ends are the first thing and the play of mind the second; so much play of mind as is compatible with the prosecution of those practical ends is all that is wanted…But we have the ***Edinburgh Review***, existing as an organ of the old Whigs, and for as much play of the mind as may suit its being that; we have the ***Quarterly Review***, existing as an organ of the Tories, and for as much play of mind as may suit its being that; we have the ***British Quarterly Review***, existing as an organ of the political Dissenters, and for as much play of mind as may suit its being that; we have the ***Times*****,** existing as an organ of the common, satisfied, well-to-do Englishman, and for as much play of mind as may suit its being that. And so on through

all the various fractions, political and religious, of our society; every fraction has, as such, its organ of criticism, but the notion of combining all fractions in the common pleasure of a free **disinterested** play of mind meets with no favour. Directly this play of mind wants to have more scope, and to forget the pressure of practical considerations a little, it is checked, it is made to feel the chain…The ***Dublin Review*** subordinates play of mind to the practical business of English and Irish Catholicism, and lives. It must needs be that men should act in sects and parties, that each of these sects and parties should have its organ, and should make this organ serve the interests of its action; but it would be well, too, **that there should be a criticism, not the minister of these interests, not their enemy, but absolutely and entirely independent of them**. No other criticism will ever attain any real authority or make any real way towards its end,–the creating a current of true and fresh ideas."

In this quotation, Arnold is perhaps trying to mean how intellectual pursuits of the writers cannot be free from the politics of the country. However, Arnold is also hinting at the actual role of criticism. According to him, criticism has so little kept in the pure intellectual sphere, has so little detached itself from practice, has been so directly polemical and controversial, that it has so ill accomplished. It has failed to keep man from a self-satisfaction, which is retarding and vulgarizing, to lead him towards perfection, by making his mind dwell upon what is excellent in itself, and the absolute beauty and fitness of things. A polemical practical criticism makes men blind even to the ideal imperfection of their practice, makes them willingly assert its ideal perfection, in order the better to secure it against attack: and clearly this is narrowing and baneful for them.



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Thus, you will find that according to Arnold the business of criticism is to know the best that is known and thought in the world. Moreover, it should spread knowledge to create a flow of new and fresh ideas. Its business is to practise the function with strict honesty and sense of duty.

He opposes the flexible honest in criticism. Arnold sees that practical considerations hinder faithful criticism and suffocates it. Criticism should be free of these considerations. It should firstly be a free play of mind. The free play of mind is much more important than any practical ends.

After deliberating on the role of criticism, Arnold goes on to discuss the role of the critic. By remaining 'detached' the critic should show the society the right path, to help them chose what is just. Then he urges his readers to start a social movement, start a new party unlike the Whigs and Tories to pursue truth and new thought. They should call it ***the liberal party***, it should let them stick to each other, and back each other up, it should let them have no nonsense about independent criticism, and intellectual delicacy. They should not be troubled by foreign thoughts; they should invent the whole thing for themselves. As he says: "If one of us speaks well, applaud him; if one of us speaks ill, applaud him too; we are all in the same movement, we are all liberals, we are all in pursuit of truth." In this way, the pursuit of truth in the hands of Arnold becomes really a social, practical, pleasurable affair.

Arnold then tries to discuss what he takes criticism to be as we find the following in the text:

"I am bound by my own definition of **criticism; *a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world.*** How much of current English literature comes into this "best that is known and thought in the world"? Not very much I fear; certainly less, at this moment, than of the current literature of France or Germany. Well, then, am I to alter my definition of criticism, in order to meet the requirements of a number of practising English critics, who, after all, are free in their choice of a business? That would be making criticism lend itself just to one of those alien practical considerations, which, I have said, are so fatal to it. One may say, indeed, to those who have to deal with the mass–so much better disregarded–of current English literature, that they may at all events endeavour, in dealing with this, to try it, so far as they can, by the standard of the best that is known and thought in the

world; one may say, that to get anywhere near this standard, every critic should try and possess one great literature, at least, besides his own; and the more unlike his own, the better. But, after all, the criticism I am really concerned with,–the criticism which alone can much help us for the future, the criticism which, throughout Europe, is at the present day meant, when so much stress is laid on the importance of criticism and the critical spirit,–is a criticism which regards Europe as being, for intellectual and spiritual purposes, one great confederation, bound to a joint action and working to a common result; and whose members have, for their proper outfit, a knowledge of Greek, Roman, and Eastern antiquity, and of one another. Special, local, and temporary advantages being put out of account, that modern nation will in the intellectual and spiritual sphere make most progress, which most thoroughly carries out this program. And what is that but saying that we too, all of us, as individuals, the more thoroughly we carry it out, shall make the more progress?"

Arnold concludes the essay by stating that **"creative activity is the great happiness and the great proof of being alive, and it is not denied to criticism to have it; but then criticism must be sincere, simple, flexible, ardent, ever widening its knowledge**. Then it may have, in no contemptible measure, a joyful sense of creative activity; a sense which a man of insight and conscience will prefer to what he might derive from a poor, starved, fragmentary, inadequate creation. In addition, at some epochs no other creation is possible. Still, in full measure, the sense of creative activity belongs only to genuine creation; in literature, we must never forget that.

Therefore, according to Matthew Arnold, criticism has social function to play—that is to protect man from a self-satisfaction that holds him back. It lends him to perfection by introducing his mind to excellent ideas, beauty and fitness. Non-objective practical criticism makes man blind to shortcomings and faults in their practice. This will lead to narrow-mindedness. Hence, Arnold specifies certain activity for criticism which should refrain itself from the sphere of practical life.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Mention the grounds on which Arnold criticise the Romantic poets.

Q 6: What, according to Arnold, is the true business of criticism?

Q 7: How does Matthew Arnold visualise the role of criticism?

12.5 IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

The important concepts of the text are as follows:

Creative Faculty vs Critical Faculty:

According to Arnold, the creative power of poetry requires ideas and material for inspiration and success. Because, these ideas nourish the creative power. The critical faculties create cultural environment rich with ideas. He goes on to equate the experience of writing criticism with the experience of writing creative work to undermine typical opinion against criticism. He defends criticism against the opinion that it serves no purpose and that those who criticize cannot write something creative themselves. To illustrate this he compares Goethe with Byron. Arnold opines that both of them had a great productive power, but Goethe was nourished by great critical effort that provided the required material for his work. Lord Byron possessed the same gift but was less productive because he found no rich cultural background and material to work with. Byron lacked critical efforts. Thus, he sees that the poet should understand the world about which he writes. Understanding the world needs critical effort and analysis. Arnold argues that real criticism is essentially the exercise of curiosity, which is the disinterested endeavour to know. It is an instinct that urges man to seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge. The creative activity must be preceded by criticism because it paves the way for creative activity.

Disinterestedness:

Arnold considers disinterestedness indispensable in English criticism. It also means independence of judgment. How can criticism show disinterestedness? Arnold opines that criticism should follow the law

of its own nature, which is freedom. Criticism should be a free activity, which is not subject to any external influence. It should refuse to submit to political or practical consideration. Thus, according to Arnold, Criticism should serve nothing but itself. Arnold brings in his famous idea of **disinterestedness** by stating that in order to avail it of the field opening to it, and to produce fruit for the future, English criticism ought to adopt disinterestedness. However, how is criticism to show disinterestedness? Arnold states three ways to maintain disinterestedness.

a. By keeping aloof from what is called "the practical view of things",

b. By resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches,

c. By steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas, which plenty of people will be sure to attach to them, which perhaps ought often to be attached to them, which in this country at any rate are certain to be attached to them quite sufficiently, but which criticism has really nothing to do with.

The idea of Literary Criticism:

Arnold defines literary criticism as "**the idea of a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and true ideas."** However, Arnold feels that much of the best that is known and thought in the world cannot be of English origin and growth alone. By the nature of things, they must be foreign. The English critic of literature, therefore, must dwell on foreign thought. Again, judging is often spoken of as the critic's own business. However, the judgment, which almost insensibly forms itself in a fair and clear mind, along with fresh knowledge, is the valuable one. Thus knowledge, or fresh knowledge, must be the critic's great concern. In addition, it is by communicating fresh knowledge, and letting his own judgment pass along with it that the critic will generally do most good to his readers. Sometimes for the sake of establishing an author's place in literature and his relation to a central standard, criticism may also have to deal with a subject matter so familiar that fresh

knowledge is out of the question, and then it must be all judgment; an enunciation and detailed application of principles. In that case, the great safeguard is never to let oneself become abstract, and always to retain an intimate and lively consciousness of the truth of what one is saying. The moment this fails us, we must be sure that something is wrong.

The Role of the Critic:

According to Arnold, a critic should be detached. He states: "The mass of mankind will never have any ardent zeal for seeing things as they are; very inadequate ideas will always satisfy them. The rush and roar of practical life will always have an effect upon the most collected spectator. However, it is only by remaining collected, and refusing to lend himself to the point of view of the so-called practical man, that the critic can render great service to the practical man, and it is only by the greatest sincerity in pursuing his own course, that he can escape misunderstandings, which perpetually threaten him. Then again he states that the "practical man is not apt for fine distinctions, and yet in these distinctions truth and the highest culture greatly find their account. However, it is not easy to lead a practical man. Then he calls the British Constitution itself, 'a magnificent organ of progress and virtue' is also a 'colossal machine' for the manufacture of philistines. Therefore, a critic will still remain exposed to frequent misunderstandings, and nowhere so much as in this country.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: What do you mean by disinterestedness? State the ways through which disinterestedness can be understood.

Q 9: Mention the major aspects in the essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Times".

Q 10: State what Arnold has to say about the role of a critic in the essay.

12.6 ARNOLD AS A VICTORIAN CRITIC

Lionel Trilling opined that Matthew Arnold is "virtually the founding

father of modern criticism in the English-speaking world." Citing "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1865), Trilling quoted Arnold's famous injunction that the critic should strive to "see the object as in itself it really is" and his celebrated definition of criticism as the "disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world." These statements, according to Trilling, gave later scholars and teachers their inspiration and interpretive mission. Arnold provided literary criticism with an important social function and paved the way for its "institutionalisation" in the academy. He regarded the pursuit of literature as urgent activities in the world, insisting "that poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life, to the question: How to live." Serious criticism, he believed, was responsible for generating and maintaining the proper context of ideas and high standards that the production of literature required. Furthermore, criticism for Arnold meant an engagement with history, education, politics, religion, philosophy and other subjects and concerns.

Rene Wellek views Arnold as a historical critic working with a historical scheme in his mind. Wellek is right when he states that Arnold "almost single handedly pulled English criticism out of the doldrums into which it had fallen after the great Romantic Age." While critics like Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde and their followers used Arnolds Hellenism, his plea for "disinterestedness", "antipathy" for "Philistinism" as the sanction to withdraw from the practical world to a world of aesthetic sensibility.

T.S. Eliot's biased view of Arnold and the views of I.A. Richards, F.R. Leavis and Lionel Trilling add to the critical receptions surrounding Arnold. The relationship with Arnold resulted in Leavis's great emphasis on the moral force of literature, and I.A. Richards also responded to Arnold's doctrines of psychological criticism. Lionel Trilling carried on Arnold's moral social concerns to the modern context. Arnold's desire to represent an ideal of cultural and literary humanism coupled with the 'institutionalisation' of literacy criticism in the academy make him "virtually the founding father of modern criticism in the English speaking world".

(According to Lionel Trilling).

Arnold continues today to represent an ideal of literary and cultural humanism that many critics honour. However, this same ideal is one that radical critics and contemporary literary theorists have sought to complicate or undermine. As the scholar Joseph Carroll has noted, his key term "disinterestedness" is "now the most violently disputed word in the Arnoldian lexicon," and many theorists from the today have launched their proposals by taking issue with Arnold's and his followers' account of the critic's role and procedures. For example, Stanley Fish's Reader Response criticism denies the possibility of "disinterested" objective perception, and the Marxist critic Terry Eagleton emphasises Arnold's alignment with state power and the privileged classes in his stress on "timeless truths."

However, it is not so difficult to identify Arnold's limitations. Because, he is mainly interested in the personality and moral tone of the author, not, in the resources of language or the unfolding meanings of literary works themselves; he does not devote much attention to specific texts. Lines that he does quote typically function for him as "touchstones" which are the "specimens of poetry of the high, the very highest quality" that "save us from fallacious estimates of value" and that seem to beg the very question of "greatness" that they are meant to answer. Arnold assumed that his readers would know these authors and texts and their contexts, and that the "touchstones" would be recognized by all as profound and memorable.



12.7 LET US SUM UP

By this time, you must have realised that central to Arnold's literary criticism is the problem of living adequately in late industrial society. Arnold is deeply humanist, and he writes in the tradition of humanism that can be stated to have started with figures such as F. R. Leavis. Arnold's central terms and phrases – "sweetness and light," "perfection," "inwardness," "the best that has been thought and said" – all derive ultimately from his

analysis of the malaise of modern culture. He sees the human being in industrial society as mechanised, as wholly given to "external" pursuits, as stunted in his spiritual and moral sensibility. Arnold was somewhat obsessed with the narrow moralism and mercantilism of the bourgeoisie, whom he termed philistines. His essay "The Function of Criticism" is concerned to counteract the philistinism of the world as defined by the English bourgeoisie, enshrined in the restrictive obsession of this class with practicality, utility, and reason: in a phrase, with the imperatives of the immediate present.



12.8 FURTHER READING

1) Arnold, Matthew. "Function of Criticism at the Present Times" in Das & Mohanty. (eds.) (1985). *Literary Criticism: A Reading.* Oxford University Press.

2) Habib, M.A.R. (2005). *A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present*. Malden: Blackwell.

3) Vincent B. Leitch. (ed.) (2001). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Norton and Company, Inc.

4) Wellek, Rene. (1983). *A History of Modern Criticism 1750-1950: Volume 1, The Later Eighteenth Century.* Cambridge University Press.



12.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: As an Inspector of the schools, Arnold expressed his views about the English pedagogical systems… …his educational writings are marked by a strong sense of discipline and affected the "Rise of English"… …the great literary heritage of the English writers was used as the model for 'Culture' while Arnold addressed the issue of

'Englishness'.

Ans to Q 2: *Preface to the Poems of 1853… … On Translating Homer… … The Study of Celtic Literature… …Essays in Criticism* in two series (1865 and 1888).. …*Culture and Anarchy* (1869).

Ans to Q 3: In *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) Arnold views culture as "*a study of perfection"*. … …it has an intellectual and an ethical end to meet… …Arnold calls "culture" as "the greatest and most important of the efforts by which the human race has manifested its impulse to perfect itself"… …it advances beyond religion, because through a "disinterested study of human nature," it fosters a "harmonious expansion of *all* the powers which make the beauty and worth of human nature."

Ans to Q 4: Philistines are people devoted to the pursuit of wealth… …the function of culture is to purge the minds of the effects of such material and narrow preoccupations… …. the task of both criticism and culture, then, is to place the pragmatic vision of life in a broader historical and cultural context.

Ans to Q 5: Arnold calls the poetic endeavours of the Romantics poets premature without sufficient materials to work with… …Byron so empty of matter, Shelley so incoherent, Wordsworth so wanting in completeness and variety… …but it was not the case with Greek Pinder and Sophocles or English Shakespeare… …Arnold cites the state of things to be the true basis for the creative power's exercise.

Ans to Q 6: The business of criticism is to know the best that is known and thought in the world… …it should spread knowledge to create a flow of new and fresh ideas… …its business is to practise the function with honesty and sense of duty… …by remaining 'detached' the critic should show the society what is right and just… …thus, the pursuit of truth becomes the main business of criticism.

Ans to Q 7: True criticism must maintain its independence of the practical spirit and its aims… …it must not hurry on to the goal because of its practical importance… …it must be patient, and flexible, and know how to attach itself to things and how to withdraw from them… …it

must be apt to discern the spiritual shortcomings or illusions of powers that in the practical sphere may be beneficent.

Ans to Q 8: Disinterestedness, is indispensable a rule of English criticism because it helps create objectivity… …It also means independence of judgment… …three ways to maintain disinterestedness… …a. By keeping aloof from what is called "the practical view of things… …b. By resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches… …c. By steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas.

Ans to Q 9: Creative Faculty vs Critical Faculty… …Disinterestedness… …The idea of Literary Criticism… …The Role of the Critic.

Ans to Q 10: The critic has to remain collected and refuse to lend himself to the point of view of the so called practical man… …the critic should pursue his own course with greatest sincerity… … but he should remain exposed to frequent misunderstandings.



12.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Criticism is 'a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world'. Discuss with reference to Matthew Arnold's "Function of Criticism in Present Times".

Q 2: Discuss the concept of disinterestedness. Why does the idea of disinterestedness remain so prominent in Arnold's criticism?

Q 3: How does Arnold react to the changing Victorian ethos of art and morality? Elaborate.

Q 4: From the reading of Arnold's text, provide a detailed discussion of creative faculty vs critical faculty as the most dominant mode in Arnoldian criticism.

Q 5: **"**Creative activity is the great happiness and the great proof of being alive, and it is not denied to criticism to have it; but then criticism must be sincere, simple, flexible, ardent, ever widening its

knowledge". Discuss with reference to Arnold's interpretation of the creative activity and criticism.

Q 6: Which are the four main issues taken up by Matthew Arnold in his essay? Illustrate with reference from the original text. (Hints: Arnold's ideas of Creative and Critical faculty, his notion of disinterestedness, the idea of criticism and the role of the critic)

Q 7: Provide a detailed analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of Matthew Arnold as a critic. Do you think that he had succeeded in his effort to instruct his contemporaries regarding how to become a critic?

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UNIT 13: INTRODUCTION TO NEW CRITICISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

13.1 Learning Objectives

13.2 Introduction

13.3 History of New Criticism

13.4 New Criticism Vs Russian Formalism

13.5 Key Figures of New Criticism

13.6 Important Concepts in New Criticism

13.7 Let us Sum up

13.8 Further Reading

13.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

13.10 Possible Questions

13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- familiarise yourself with the historical background and philosophical heritage of New Criticism
- discuss how the movement is continuous with or departs from critical tendencies and theorisation prevalent in earlier times
- find out the important critics and literary scholars associated with New Criticism
- explain the ideas and concepts central to New Criticism.

13.2 INTRODUCTION

New criticism was an influential critical movement in the course of modern literary criticism. If it is in some ways aligned with Structuralism and Russian Formalism, more recent trends such as Marxism, Post-structuralism, Feminist or Neo-historicism developed as reaction against the New-Critical ethos. The term 'New Criticism' appears in John Crowe Ransom's book entitled *The New Criticism,* published in 1941. As a critical trend, it implies a form of critical practice that was gradually

becoming dominant in Anglo-American literary criticism in-between 1940s and 1960s. You should note that *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), *Practical Criticism* (1929), and *Understanding Poetry* (1938) are the three important works that served as the foundational text of the new critical movement. Many of the critical essays of the poet T.S. Eliot also paved the way for the development of New Criticism. New Criticism is a reaction against some of the important critical insights and tendencies of the Romantics. In this unit, we shall discuss the history of New Criticism with reference to the major exponents as well as the important concepts in New Criticism.

13.3 HISTORY OF NEW CRITICISM

Perhaps you remember that the dominant tendency of the Romantics like Wordsworth and Coleridge was to see the value and significance of literary work as the result of authorial intention or the 'expression' of the intention of the authors. Thus, it was believed that the root of literary truth could be traced in the sincerity of emotions and feelings experienced by the author. New Criticism dispensed with the idea of an author while assessing a work of art. Secondly, it is a reaction against the historical and philological approaches to literature. For example, John Crowe Ransom, the Carnegie Professor of Poetry at Kenyon College, regularly organised academic discussions pleading for a 'pure' criticism that could overthrow historical, philological, and biographical scholarship then in vogue in the universities. Subsequently, he opted for exclusive focus on literary techniques rather than on biography, morality, psychology, and sought to replace 'extrinsic' criticism with the 'intrinsic'. Thirdly, with the advent of the New Critical trends, criticism became a self-contained academic discipline. From the 1920s, there started a sudden vogue in academic institutions of critical interpretation, which included analysis, and introduction of evaluative judgment of literary works.

The key thinkers and critics associated with this school had their own individual agendas and propositions. Despite having differences and

disagreements among themselves, they all seemed to agree on the question of the text as the main object of literary criticism. The basic assumption was that reading a text in terms of authorial intention, effect on the reader, or its historical context could not do justice to the text, which is a texture of variously patterned linguistic elements. The text is an autonomous, self-contained entity, and is itself the proper object of criticism. A text must be studied in its own terms and extra-textual yardsticks should not be brought to bear upon it. Hence, the New Critics called for 'Close Reading' of texts.

Is New Criticism just a method of reading or does it also embody a distinctive ideology are some other related issues to be discussed. In subsequent critical trends, with the advent of a variety of 'political reading' of literary works, the New Critics are accused of a certain snobbery because of their exclusive focus on a clearly demarcated text, alienated from its various contexts. You should however understand that such a separation of the text from history as well as the circumstances of its production could also imply a 'closure' of reading rather than opening up of the text to diverse possibilities of meaning. Critics like Terry Eagleton, Frank Lentriccia critiqued New Criticism for this kind of conservatism. In America, the 'little magazine' *The Fugitive* formed a group of critics that included Allan Tate, John Crowe Ransom and Austin Warren. Although the group disappeared by 1937, Ransom, Tate, Warren and Brooks turned to literary criticism and the conservative political background inspired them to uphold a formalist poetics.



LET US KNOW

Although the New Critics reacted against some of the important critical insights and tendencies of the Romantics like the 'authorial intention' or the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' of the author, there also seems to be some affinities between Romantic criticism and New Criticism. For example, in chapter XIV of *Biographia Literaria,* Coleridge offers a theory of poetry and its relation to the poet. Poetry, to Coleridge, is

not just an outward expression of a poet's inner feelings because imagination plays a creative and transformative role. Imagination, Coleridge states: "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to recreate". Besides, imagination fuses the opposites…". This accounts for the organic unity of poetry, the interrelationships of poetic elements and their inseparability from the whole seems to be an important antecedent to the New Critical concept of literary work as a self-contained whole. Of course, the pervasive insistence of the Romantics on the link between the poet and the poem, the cause and the effect, the literary phenomenon and its subjective origin did not find any importance among the New Critics. The New Critical ethos goes against the dominant Romantic concept of the origin of any literary phenomenon. Again, Keats's idea of the relation between a poet and his/her poem greatly departs from the expresser's notion of art, and is more attuned towards the New Critical ethos. Wimsatt and Beardsley in *The Intentional Fallacy* declare that the biographical account of the poet is irrelevant to the reading of the poem. Keats too was dismissive of Romantic subjectivism. In a letter to Sir Richard Woodhouse, he stated: "The poetical character… is not itself, it has no self, it is everything and nothing, it has no character…a poet is the most un-poetical of anything in existence; because he has no identity- he is continually in for and filling some other body**".** The implication is important, as knowledge about the poet does not help in the reading of the poem. Therefore, an understanding of this type of a background should surely help you to comprehend the ideas of New Criticism in detail.

The next point to be discussed is the connection between New Criticism and Empiricism. Because, discussing a literary text as the object of literary study is not the only purpose of New criticism. It also dwells extensively on the 'nature' of 'textual experience'. 'Experience' thus becomes a key word because critics see literature and more specifically poetry as an embodied experience, which cannot be reduced

to a set of principles or propositional truth. Philosophically the term 'experience' refers to empiricism, and you should note that the philosophical origin of New Criticism is Empiricism. According to the New Critics, any reference to context, either historical or biographical, or understanding of how a text affects a reader does not help us in this regard. The only way to acquire the experience of the text itself is through 'close-reading' of the text. Reading itself is an experience, which is the authentic source of truth and knowledge. Empiricism is based on the assumption that all knowledge is derived from experience. The mind, according to the Empiricists, is capable of organising experience and that there is no 'innate' idea, as ideas are impressed upon the human mind by experience itself. There are two ways in which knowledge-formation is possible- (i) perception and (ii) reflection of the mind. You should not, however confuse poetic experience with scientific and practical knowledge. New Critics were assertive of the distinctive character of literary knowledge, which greatly differed from scientific knowledge.

New Criticism had many things in common with Formalism. Both unanimously fixed the text to be object of investigation, both employed a mode of 'intrinsic' criticism, brushing aside the 'extrinsic' elements from the scene, and both shared a pervasive concern for 'form'. Therefore, a discussion of the convergence between the two becomes yet another necessity. New Criticism and Russian Formalism is that both regard literature as a self-contained verbal entity. They both insist on the autonomy of the literary text. One important offshoot of such an assumption is that they promote a mode of intrinsic criticism, and, they reject extra-literary criteria to judge literary texts. Both schools dwell on the specific nature of literary language. Whereas New Critics hold literary language in opposition to the language of science and of practical discourse, Formalists like Roman Jacobson defines 'literariness' by insisting on the poetic function of language. However, as M H Abrams points out, Formalists rely more on overarching organisational principles such as fabula, syuzhet, metaphor, metonymy or on specific modes of literary representation, which they tend to call defamiliarisation. On the

other hand, "the principles of the New Criticism are basically verbal. That is, literature is conceived to be a special kind of language…and the explicative procedure is to analyse the meanings and interactions of words, figures of speech, and symbols. However, whether or not one dwells on the 'origin' of meaning or exploration of meaning through interrelationship of verbal entities that constitute the text, one must invariably seal off experiences of the external world, and read the text itself carefully. Hence, both groups adopt a habit of 'close reading'".



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Who, for the first time, had used the term New Criticism? Name some of the foundational New Critical texts?

Q 2: In what ways would you like to state that New Criticism is 'new'?

Q 3: What is so common to all the New Critics?

13.4 NEW CRITICISM VS RUSSIAN FORMALISM:

An important point of convergence between New Criticism and Russian Formalism is that both regard literature as a self-contained verbal entity. They insist on the autonomy of the literary text. One important offshoot of such an assumption is that they promote a mode of intrinsic criticism and reject extra-literary criteria to judge literary texts. Let us, in this context, quote from Hans Bertens: "Although Eliot is obviously very much interested in poetic technique and in the form of specific poems, an interest that would be worked out by a group of American poets and critics, the so-called New Critics – he is ultimately more interested in a poem's meaning. Poetry should convey complex meanings in which attitudes that might easily be seen as contradictory are fused and which allow us to see things that we otherwise would not see. Our job, then, is to interpret poems after which we can pass judgment on them; that is, establish how well they succeed in creating and conveying the complexity of meaning that we expect from them…the

idea that we read poems, and literature in general, because they contain meaning, is obvious. This search for the meaning of poems, novels, plays and other works of literature has from the 1920s well into the 1970s absolutely dominated English and American literary studies and still constituted one of their important activities." To the Formalists, however, literary investigation should not be directed at the meaning *per se* but to the discovery of form, that makes meaning possible.

Both schools dwell on the specific nature of literary language. Whereas New Critics hold literary language in opposition to the language of science and of practical discourse, Formalists like Roman Jakobson define 'literariness' by insisting on the poetic function of language. However, Formalists rely more on overarching organizational principles such as fabula, syuzhet, metaphor, and metonymy or on specific modes of literary representation–defamiliarisation. On the other hand, "the principles of the New Criticism are basically verbal. That is, literature is conceived to be a special kind of language…and the explicative procedure is to analyse the meanings and interactions of words, figures of speech, and symbols".*(A Glossary of literary Terms)*

However, whether or not one dwells on the 'origin' of meaning or exploration of meaning through interrelationship of verbal entities that constitute the text, one must invariably seal off experiences of the external world, and read the text itself carefully. Hence, both groups adopt a habit of 'close reading'.

We must also note that the Formalists, unlike the New Critics, confer a greater amount of scientificity to the study of literature. This can be better understood when we read M. H. Abrams. He says: "Unlike the European Formalists…the New Critics did not apply the science of linguistics to poetry' and their emphasis was not on a work as constituted by linguistic devices for achieving specifically literary effects, but on the complex interplay within a work of ironic, paradoxical, and metaphoric meanings around a humanly important theme."

The basic theoretical premises of this school have been variously contested in subsequent periods. New Criticism's implicit assumption

about the high cultural values embedded in English literary culture was debunked with 'Culture studies' emerging as a new discipline along with the advent of post-modernism, where moral and ethical barriers are sought to be resolved, hierarchies of aesthetic works are destabilised, in order to pave the way for an open study of multifarious cultural phenomenon. For example, New Historicism, which opts for the historical and social elements as important source of literary speculation, is in sharp reaction to the insular and textual reading upheld by New Criticism. New Historicism insists on a dynamic text, context and dialogue in the production of meaning and value of literature. In fact, the theoretical movements such as Structuralism, Post-structuralism, Deconstruction. Post colonialism, Feminism, Cultural Studies and New Historicism that started from the 1960s onwards began as a reaction against the basic principles and ideas of New Criticism.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Mention the similarities between New Criticism and Russian Formalism.

13.5 KEY FIGURES OF NEW CRITICISM

The key figurers of New Criticism are John Crowe Ransom, I.A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, William Empson, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley among others. To be more precise, New Criticism denotes a practice of reading evolved by I.A. Richards. In fact, it was 'practical criticism' initiated by Richards that was carried forward by the New Critics, and its impact can be seen in their exclusive textual orientation. Following is a list of the most important New Critics.

John Crowe Ransom: (1888-1974)

Ransom was a pioneering figure of New Criticism in America. To Ransom, the function of criticism is the elucidation of literary works. Most notable among his critical works are *The New Criticism* and *The World as Body* both of which contain important aspects of New Criticism. In an essay titled "Criticism, Inc.", he states certain basic principles of this

school, and expresses his aim to make literary criticism "more scientific or precise and systematic". He underlines the importance of a critical shift from historicism to aesthetic appreciation. Historical and biographical information is not irrelevant either, but they must help to define the 'aesthetic' of literature. Ransom mentions some normative principles characteristic of New Criticism. For him, criticism should exclude— Personal impressions, Synopsis and paraphrase, Historical studies, Linguistic studies (involving allusion, word-meaning etc.), Moral content. Ransom further asserts that poetry is ontologically different and hence irreducible to prose meaning.

Ransom had a remarkable influence on contemporary American critics through the literary journal *Kenyon Review* (He was the editor of *Kenyon Review* for 20 years.) His view of the distinctive nature of poetic experience can also be understood through the distinction he made between 'Texture' and 'Structure' of a poem. 'Structure' is the argument of the poem seen as a whole. While 'Texture' is constituted by elements that have local value and affect the overall shape of the poem. The 'Texture' does not easily give rise to the 'Structure', but rather impedes it. It complicates whatever argument the poet is going to establish. As a result, "in the end we have our logic but only after a lively reminder of the aspects of reality with which logic cannot cope." The term 'Texture' is actually derived from the plastic arts, which denotes the surface quality of a work, as opposed to its shape and structure. As applied in modern literary criticism, it thus designates the concrete qualities of a poem as opposed to its idea.

I. A. Richards: (1893-1979)

I.A. Richards was an extraordinary English literary critic and rhetorician. He is known mostly for his experimental 'practical' criticism. Once, he distributed in the classroom some papers containing poems (where the names of the poets were withheld) and asked students to critically evaluate them. Such an undertaking might seem commonplace to you, but it was indeed a formidable task then because it inspired a direct, 'unmediated' encounter between the literary text and the critical

reader. It was principally because of I.A. Richards that scientific objectivity became the hallmark of New Criticism. You will like to know that C. K. Ogden was his main collaborator throughout his intellectual pursuits. Richards, Ogden and James Wood co-authored *Foundations of Aesthetics*, where they mapped the principles of aesthetic reception. Another outstanding work by Richards and Ogden was *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language and of the Science of Symbolism.* The earlier phase of his critical works focused on meaning, comprehension and communication.

Principles of Literary Criticism by Richards is a reaction against a time when there was nothing but "an echo of critical theories". The book is an expression of the enthusiasm he felt for science and the scientific mode of enquiry. *Practical Criticism,* another work by Richards, had a pedagogic necessity as it promoted a particular method of teaching literature in many Anglo-American universities, and inspired the practice of 'close-reading' in subsequent critical developments. Richards, who is today considered to be the founder of New Criticism, contributed a good number of terms to the field of literary criticism such as 'stock responses', 'pseudo-statements', 'bogus entities', distinction between 'tenor' and 'vehicle', terms like 'referential', 'referent', 'ambiguity', etc. The term 'ambiguity' was a negative marker, and was used in a pejorative sense in earlier criticism. It was Richards who put it to use in a non-pejorative way, asserting that ambiguity is a basic trait of language itself. William Empson, who was a student of Richards, expounded the term in his *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.

Cleanth Brooks: (1906-1994)

Cleanth Brook was an influential American literary critic and professor. He is best known for his contributions to New Criticism in the mid-20th century and for revolutionising the teaching of poetry in American higher education. His most important works are *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947) and *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939). Such works express the centrality of ambiguity and paradox as a way of understanding poetry. With his

writings, Brooks helped to formulate formalist criticism, emphasising "the interior life of a poem" and codifying the principles of close reading. Brooks was also the preeminent critic of Southern literature, writing classic texts on William Faulkner, and co-founder of the influential journal *The Southern Review* with Robert Penn Warren.

Allen Tate: (1899-1979)

Allen Tate belongs to the Southern group of American critics. He distinguishes between scientific and literary discourses, which may also explain the distinction between New Criticism and Russian Formalism. If both schools share the view that a literary work is the proper object of study, the Russian Formalists' scientific study of literature goes against the New Critics' insistence on the irreducible and ontologically different experience of literature. In one sense, Tate's criticism is eclectic, and he reconciles Richards, Cleanth Brooks and R.P. Warren. For example, he draws on Richards's ideas of reconciliation, Brooks' concept of irony, and Warren's view that a poetic proposition has nothing to do with intellectual and rational scrutiny.

William Empson: (1906-1984)

Empson, the English literary critic, is perhaps the first analytical critic to consistently apply the principles of I.A. Richards on the nature and function of language. He emphasised a linguistic analysis of literary texts. He maintained that a particular word does not have a single meaning but a cluster of meanings. His *Seven Types of Ambiguity* shows careful analysis of small units of a text (word, line, sentence, etc.). Empson insisted on alternative readings and stated that ambiguity is characteristic of poetic and literary language. He meticulously probes texts like *Othello* and *Paradise Lost,* and explores multiple meanings of certain key words found in the text. I.A. Richards' principles regarding the nature and function of criticism, was first applied to poetry by Empson. In the *English Critical Tradition,* he is regarded as one of the sharpest and the most sensitive of modern critics.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Mention the names of some of the important New Critics and their specific critical works.

Q 6: Explain the meaning of the terms 'texture' and 'structure'.



Eliot's "objective correlative" predates "Affective Fallacy". According to it, emotions are externalised into a poem not as emotions but in the form of some events and situation, specific to the emotion, because judging a poem from emotion results in impressionism.

13.6 IMPORTANT CONCEPTS IN NEW CRITICISM

Autonomy of the Text

The New Critics were oriented towards "close-reading" or 'practical reading' on the lines laid down by I. A. Richards. They believed that a text, being constituted by a unique system of language, is itself a source of its meaning and value, and is thus distinguished from other texts or other uses of language. A poem is an embodied experience inextricably bound up with language, and hence its meaning cannot be conveyed by prose paraphrases. In the Romantic period, it is the poet who is the locus of meaning and significance, as one can remember from Wordsworth's famous dictum that poetry is the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'. However, following New Criticism, poetry is said to have its own territory, its own unique mode of existence. New Critics see the poem as a self-contained, self-sustaining entity. The poem, and not its relation to the external world, should be the focus and object of criticism, as the new Critics sought to establish.

Intentional Fallacy and Affective Fallacy

"The Intentional Fallacy" by W K Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley is a foundational text of New Criticism, which states that 'intention' should not be brought to bear upon the analysis of the literary text. Wimsatt and Beardsley argue that knowledge of an author's original intention is neither integral to, nor essential in the critical analysis of, a work. One can interpret a text without any reference to 'authorial intention'. Their claim here is two-fold: First, authorial intentions are not available in the text; second, the notion of authorial intention dismantles

the integrity of a literary work.

On the other hand, the term "Affective Fallacy" used by Wimsatt and Beardsley (*The Verbal Icon*, 1954), connotes 'a confusion between the poem and its result (what it is and what it does)'. Judgment of a literary text should not rest upon the effect it has on the readers. 'Affective fallacy' is thus a confusion between a poem and its "affect" on readers. A text, however emotive its context might be, must nevertheless be judged as a text, or a self-sufficient entity. It must be seen as a system of language. Therefore, evaluating a work of art in terms of its results in the mind of the readers is supposed to be a critical error. In the subsequent unit, you will read about these concepts in detail.

Irony and Paradox:

In general terms irony refers to a subtly humorous perception of inconsistency in which an apparently straightforward statement or event is undermined by its context so as to give it a very different significance. Irony also indicates a 'verbal situation' where the expressed meaning differs from its implied meaning. Some New Critics used this term to provide a general criterion of affixing literary value to a work of art. I.A. Richards, for example, contends that in any aesthetic experience, the rivalry of conflicting impulses is avoided as they are given autonomy. He also distinguishes between 'exclusion' and 'inclusion' in poetry, defining irony as a 'touchstone' for the poetry of exclusion. As he states: "Irony consists in bringing in of the opposite, the complementary impulses; that is why poetry which is exposed to it is not of the highest order, and why irony itself is so constantly a characteristic of poetry". (*Literary Criticism: A Short History*).

Cleanth Brooks further elaborates Richards' idea in his essay "Irony as a Principle of Structure". He opines that poetic statements can aspire for musicality only through particular and concrete details. In poetry, general meaning is qualified by the particular "the concrete particular with which the poet loads himself seems to deny the universal to which he aspires." (*The English Critical Tradition,* 472). Brooks would even like to suggest that the 'language of poetry is the language of

paradox'. This idea has been persuasively elaborated in his book *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947), which is devoted to close reading of poems by John Donne, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, Eliot and a few others. Brooks tried to argue that the poems are meant to be "the concrete examples on which generalizations are to be based." Thus, the poetic language may be seen as "The Language of Paradox." Because, it is a language in which connotations play an equally important part along with denotations.

Ambiguity

Ambiguity usually refers to openness to different interpretations, or an instance in which some use of language may be understood in diverse ways. Sometimes known as 'plurisignation' or 'multiple meaning', ambiguity became a central concept in the interpretation of poetry in William Empson's book *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), which is a fundamental text of New Criticism. The basic argument is that because of its unique organization of language, poetry can cover an indecision, which finds an echo in the mind of the reader. Such indecision stems from the reconciliation of contradictory impulses. Although Empson offers a classification of ambiguity into seven types, his actual contributions can be traced not in his classification, but in the way he offers a close and acute analysis of the linguistic elements of language. In view of the multiple meanings, Empson states that a reader must know the forces that work in the mind of the author, or how those forces appear to its first readers. So, knowledge of the history of language, the author's conscious or unconscious intentions as well as the reactions of the first readers—are all keys to an understanding of ambiguity.

Metaphorical Meaning:

I.A. Richards has it that meaning originates from a specific context within a text. However, contrary to this, metaphor exemplifies how the contexts merge. Metaphorical meaning is therefore not a version of literal meaning or "simply a prettified version of an already stated meaning" (*Literary Criticism: A Short History,* 644), but that which



Denotation and Connotation:

Denotation is the most literal meaning of a word, regardless of what one feels about it or the various ideas and suggestions it connotes. For example, the word apartheid denotes a certain form of political, social, and racial regime. However, it *connotes* much more than that. Connotation refers to the suggestions and implications evoked by a word or a phrase.

occupies a new, distinctive ground, adding to the richness of poetry. Richards introduced the terms 'tenor' and 'vehicle', 'tenor' indicating the subject and 'vehicle', the metaphorical term linked to the 'tenor'. However, metaphor does not mean either 'tenor' or 'vehicle', but a third entity that stems from their link. Resisting traditional notions of the 'displacement of words', Richards sees metaphor as a transaction of two contexts, and its value is thus, never ornamental.



13.7 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, we have learnt that New Criticism institutionalised the study of literature and established it as a self-sufficient academic discipline. You have learnt that New Criticism is a movement in American literary criticism from around 1930s to 1960s that concentrated on the verbal complexities and ambiguities of short poems considered as self-sufficient objects without attention to their origins or effects. John Crowe Ransom (*The New Criticism* 1941), I. A. Richards, William Empson are the most important New Critics. Ransom called for a more 'objective' criticism so that one could focus on the intrinsic qualities of a work rather than on its biographical or historical context; and Ransom's students Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren had already provided a very influential model of such an approach in their college textbook *Understanding Poetry* (1938). This intellectual background made New Criticism the academic orthodoxy for the next twenty years. The names of the other New Critics include Allen Tate, R. P. Blackmur, W. K. Wimsatt Jr, and Kenneth Burke. You have learnt that I. A. Richards' *Practical Criticism* (1929), William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), Cleanth Brooks's *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947), and Wimsatt's *The Verbal Icon* (1954) are the outstanding works of New Criticism. New Criticism also promoted a particular reading practice—the habit of "close reading."



13.8 FURTHER READING

1) Abrams, M. H. (2003). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Singapore: Thomson Asia Pte Ltd.
2) Brooks, Cleanth & William K. Wimsatt Jr. (1957). *Literary Criticism: A Short History*. New Delhi: Oxford & IBH Publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd.
3) Cuddon, J. A. (1999). *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
4) Leavis, F R. (1936). *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry.* Chatto and Windus.
5) Leitch, Vincent B. (Gen. ed.) (2001). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Norton and Company, Inc.
6) Macey, David. (2000). *Dictionary of Critical Theory.* London: Penguin Books.
7) Makaryk, Irena R. (ed.) (1993). *Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms.* Canada: University of Toronto Press.
8) Ramaswami S. & V.S. Sethuraman. (eds.) (1978). *The Critical Tradition: An Anthology of English Literary Criticism Vol-2.* New Delhi: Macmillan India Limited.



13.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: John Crowe Ransom in his book *The New Criticism* which (1941) used the term for the first time… …*Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), *Practical Criticism* (1929), and *Understanding Poetry* (1938) are the three other important books that served as the foundational texts of the New Critical movement.

Ans to Q 2: Because it is a reaction against some of the important

critical insights and tendencies of the Romantics (mainly their advocacy of authorial intention or 'expression' of their intention)… …because it is a reaction against the historical and philological approaches to literature…. …with New criticism, criticism became a self-contained academic discipline.

Ans to Q 3: They all agreed to accept the text as the object of literary criticism… …they held that the text is an autonomous, self-contained entity and is itself the proper object of criticism… …they all agreed with 'Close Reading'.

Ans to Q 4: Both fixed the text to be object of investigation… … both employed a mode of 'intrinsic' criticism, brushing aside the 'extrinsic' elements from the scene… …both shared a pervasive concern for 'form'… …both schools dwelled on the specific nature of literary language… …both adopted a habit of 'close reading'.

Ans to Q 5: John Crowe Ransom (*The New Criticism* and *The World as Body*)… …I.A. Richards (*Principles of Literary Criticism and Practical Criticism… …*Cleanth Brooks (*The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* and *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*)… William Empson (*English Critical Tradition & Seven Types of Ambiguity)… …* W. K. Wimsatt & Monroe C. Beardsley (*The Verbal Icon*) and so on.

Ans to Q 6: According to John Crowe Ransom, the distinctive nature of poetic experience can be understood through the distinction he makes between 'texture' and 'structure' of a poem… …the structure is the argument of the poem seen as a whole… …'texture' is constituted by elements that have local value and affect the overall shape of the poem.



13.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q1: Outline the main concerns of the New Critical advocacy of textual "close reading".

Q2: Highlight the extent of the similarities between New Criticism and the Formalists. In what sense are both schools proponents of the 'poem'? In what way do they differ?

Q3: How did New Criticism evolve as a dominant critical mode in the beginning of the 20th century? Discuss.

Q4: What are the important concepts under New Criticism? Discuss their role in the intellectual contexts of New Criticism.

Q5: "New Criticism institutionalised the study of literature and established it as a self-sufficient academic discipline." Justify your views.

Q6: Make a list of the important New Critics and describe their contributions with particular reference to their works.

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UNIT 14: W. K. WIMSATT AND M. C. BEARDSLEY: "THE INTENTIONAL FALLACY" (1946) & "THE AFFECTIVE FALLACY" (1949)

UNIT STRUCTURE

14.1 Learning Objectives

14.2 Introduction

14.3 W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley: The New Critics

14.4 Reading the Texts

14.5 Important Concepts

14.6 Wimsatt and Beardsley as New Critics

14.7 Let us Sum up

14.8 Further Reading

14.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

14.10 Possible Questions

14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the importance of new critical formulations of critics like Wimsatt and Beardsley
- explain the contextual significance of the two texts "The Intentional Fallacy" & "The Affective Fallacy"
- explain the different aspects of "The Intentional Fallacy" & "The Affective Fallacy" as two seminal texts in New Criticism
- discuss the importance of Wimsatt and Beardsley among the New Critics whose critical views changed the course of modern criticism in the 20th century.

14.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to two important New Critical texts namely—"The Intentional Fallacy" (1946) and "The Affective Fallacy" (1949), co-authored by William Kurtz Wimsatt Jr. (1907-1975) and Monroe C. Beardsley

(1915-1985). These two essays are important position papers in 20th century criticism. Neither of them presents an argument that is wholly original, but each codifies a crucial tenet of the Anglo American New Critical orthodoxy. In "The Intentional Fallacy" Wimsatt and Beardsley argue that we cannot use the author's intention to judge a literary work, because the work is a public utterance, not a private one that depends for its meaning on the intent or design of its author. In the later piece, "The Affective Fallacy", Wimsatt and Beardsley emphasise that the meaning of a literary work is not equivalent to its effects, especially its emotional impact, on the reader. This unit introduces you to the New Critical school of thought, but the main thrust will be on Wimsatt and Beardsley's formalist view that critical analysis must centre on the text itself and a critic is to examine the linguistic structure and the aesthetic unity of the text as an autonomous object.



A ***fallacy*** is the use of invalid or otherwise faulty reasoning.

14.3 W. K. WIMSATT AND M. C. BEARDSLEY: THE NEW CRITICS

W. K. Wimsatt (1907-1975) was an American literary critic and theorist. Born in Washington D C, he later attended Georgetown University, and then Yale University from which he received his Ph.D. In 1939, he became a member of Yale's English department, and soon won wide acclaim for his work in eighteenth-century studies. His books in that field include *The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson* (I941) and *Philosophic Wards: A Study of Style and Meaning in the "Rambler" and "Dictionary" of Samuel Johnson* (1948). However, he is best known for his literary theory and criticism, notably *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (1954), *Hateful Contraries: Studies in Literature and Criticism* (I965), *Day of the Leopards: Essays in Defense of the Poem* (1976), and with Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (1957). Written as a series of independent essays between 1941 and 1952, *Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* was finally published as a cohesive work in 1954. Probably his most influential work, *Verbal Icon* contains two of Wimsatt's most important essays, "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy" co-authored with Monroe Beardsley.

Paul de Man in *Blindness and Insight* offers a significant critique of Wimsatt's texts, taken as an example of the understanding of the notion of 'autonomy' in New Criticism. While his *Hateful Contraries: Studies in Literature and Criticism* (1965) is concerned with the influence of what he calls "Amateur Criticism". This book was written as a way to "distinguish what [he] consider[s] an inevitable and proper literary interest in the contraries" Through studies of works by T. S. Eliot as well as discussions of topics such as "The Augustan Mode in English Poetry" and "The Criticism of Comedy", Wimsatt attempted to add to the efforts to justify and improve literary criticism. *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (1957) was written along with Cleanth Brooks. It was intended as "a history of ideas about verbal art and about its elucidation and criticism." Both attempted to contribute to the "intelligibility in the history of literary argument" which, they state, is a necessary part of any historical literary studies.

In this context, let us also have a brief look at M. C. Beardsley (1915-1985). Beardsley was an American philosopher of art. A native of Connecticut, he received his *BA* and PhD from Yale University, and held a position in the Philosophy department there before entering Mount Holyoke College in 1944. He later taught at Swarthmore College and at Temple University, focusing on literary criticism and aesthetics. His work in aesthetics is best known for its championing of the instrumentalist theory of art and the concept of aesthetic experience. Beardsley was elected president of the American Society for Aesthetics in 1956. He also wrote an introductory text on aesthetics and edited a well-regarded survey anthology of philosophy. Among literary critics, Beardsley is known for two essays written with W.K. Wimsatt, "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy", both key texts of New Criticism. His other works include—*Practical Logic* (1950), *Aesthetics* (1958), and *Aesthetics: A Short History* (1966). He was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1976.

14.4 READING THE TEXTS

The following shall help you to understand the texts better.

"The Intentional Fallacy" (1946)

Wimsatt and Beardsley begin the essay with a discussion of the author's "intention" upon the critic's judgment, which, they claim, had been challenged in a number of recent discussions, notably in the debate entitled *The Personal Heresy,* between Professors Lewis and Tillyard, as well as in periodical essays like the "Symposiums" of 1940 in the *Southern* and *Kenyan Reviews.* They refer to their own discussion of "Intention" for a *Dictionary* of literary criticism in which they raised the issue but were unable to pursue its implications at any length. They argued that the **"design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art,** and it seemed to them that this is a principle which goes deep into some differences in the history of critical attitudes. It is a principle entailing many specific truths about inspiration, authenticity, biography, literary history and scholarship, and about some trends of contemporary poetry, especially its allusiveness. There is hardly a problem of literary criticism in which the critic's approach will not be qualified by his view of "intention". Then, they proceed to explain what they think of Intention. They write that the term corresponds to **what is intended** in a formula, which more or less explicitly has had wide acceptance. In order to judge the poet's performance, one must know what he intended. Therefore, intention is the design or plan in the author's mind. It is connected with the author's attitude toward his work, the way he felt, what made him write.

Then they provide a series of certain important propositions, which hold tremendous significance in the discussions of New Criticism. Some of them are as the following.

1. A poem does not come into existence by accident. Although Professor Stoll would like to remark that, it comes out of a head, not out of a hat, yet to insist on the designing intellect, as a *cause* of a poem is not to grant the design or intention as a standard.
2. One must ask how a critic expects to get an answer to the question about 'intention'. How is he to find out what the poet tried to do? If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And, if the poet did not succeed then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem—for

evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem.

3. Judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. It is only because an artefact works when we can infer the intention of an artificer. "A poem should not mean but be." A poem can *be* only through its *meaning* since its medium is words-yet it *is,* simply *is,* in the sense that we have no excuse for inquiring what part is intended or meant. Poetry is a feat of style by which a complex of meaning is handled all at once. Poetry differs from practical messages, which are successful, if and only if we correctly infer the intention. They are more abstract than poetry.
4. The meaning of a poem may certainly be a personal one, in the sense that a poem expresses a personality or state of soul rather than a physical object like an apple. However, even a short lyric poem is dramatic, the response of a speaker to a situation. We ought to impute the thoughts and attitudes of the poem immediately to the dramatic *speaker,* and the author is implied only by a 'biographical act of inference.

They again refer to Professor Stoll who had asked if the critic is not a judge who does not explore his own consciousness but determines the author's meaning or intention. Therefore, the poem is not the critic's own property. Contradicting such a remark made by Stoll, they argue that the poem is neither of the critic's own nor of the author's. It is detached from the author at birth. For example, the poem belongs to the public. It is embodied in language under the peculiar possession of the public. Then they mention I. A. Richards and Rene Wellek and what they had to say about a poet. I. A. Richards called the poem *"a* class of experiences which do not differ in any character more than a certain amount…from a standard experience". Professor Wellek on the other hand, objected to Richards and preferred to call the poem "a system of norms," "extracted from every individual experience." However, in doing that, he was never wishing to make the poet (outside the poem) an authority.

What Wimsatt and Beardsley are opposing here is what they tend to call a Romantic intentional fallacy: the Romantic idea, expressed in ancient

times by Longinus and more recently, by figures such as the great German writer Goethe and the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce, that a poem echoes the soul of its author, that it embodies his intentions or psychological circumstances. The most influential recent statement of intentionalism, according to the authors of this essay, is I. A. Richards' fourfold characterisation of meaning as "sense," "feeling," "tone," and "intention." The passwords of the intentional school are Romantic words such as "spontaneity," "sincerity," "authenticity," and "originality." These need to be replaced, say the authors, with terms of analysis such as "integrity," "relevance," "unity," and "function". Like Ransom, Wimsatt and Beardsley are concerned to exclude from criticism certain related studies such as author psychology, biography, and history. They in fact make a distinction between "internal" and "external" evidence for the meaning of a poem. Internal evidence is public, is internal to the poem itself, and is discovered through the poem's semantics, syntax, and the knowledge of how these operate within the larger context of language and culture. External evidence is private or idiosyncratic: it is evidence gleaned from outside the poem, and may include diaries, journals, letters, and reported conversations. Wimsatt and Beardsley acknowledge that there may be a third kind of evidence, which is "intermediate": evidence about an author's character, or semi-private meanings attached to words and concepts by the author and his circle.

The arguments of this essay are subject to many of the same criticisms that have been levelled against the writers' positions in "The Intentional Fallacy". Perhaps, the most fundamental objection is the impossibility and artificiality of treating literature as a self-contained object which is not somehow realised in its performance, in interaction with readers who legitimately bring to the texts their own cultural backgrounds, interests, and assumptions. Moreover, the insistence that the text is an isolated object in itself effectively represents a philosophical regression to a world conceived as composed of separate and independent objects; despite its persistence on many levels of ideology and politics. It is a view that has been discredited by many thinkers, from Hegel and Marx, through Bergson, Sartre, and Derrida.



LET US KNOW

"The Intentional Fallacy" is a powerful polemic, but somewhat confusing as critics have pointed out. How convincing, for example, is the distinction that an author draws between the inside and the outside of a text? They insist that a poem is a public utterance and hence cannot depend for its success on personal or private knowledge about the author, whether deliberately revealed or unearthed by literary historians and biographers. However, one could reply that what an author says and the information that a scholar brings forward are public as well. As is common with many key New Critical precepts, the concept of "the intentional fallacy" is pedagogical. A teacher and class can concentrate on the text at hand without feeling that the students' interpretive work needs the support of information about the author and the· historical period when the text was composed.

"Affective Fallacy" (1949)

As used by Wimsatt and Beardsley (*The Verbal Icon*, 1954), this term connotes 'a confusion between the poem and its result (what it is and what it does)'. Judgment of a literary text should not rest upon the effect it has on the readers. 'Affective fallacy' is thus a confusion between a poem and its "effect" on readers. A text, however emotive its context might be, must nevertheless be judged as a text, or a self-sufficient entity. It must be seen as a system of language. Therefore, evaluating a work of art in terms of its results in the mind of the readers is supposed to be a critical error. Eliot's "objective correlative" predates this principle. According to it, emotions are externalised into a poem not as emotions but in the form of some events and situation, specific to the emotion, because judging a poem from emotion results in impressionism.

Affective Fallacy is an answer to the idea of Impressionistic criticism, which is based on the idea that the reader's response to a poem is the ultimate indication of its value. It is the antithesis of affective criticism, which is the practice of evaluating the effect that a literary work has on its reader

or audience. Therefore, Wimsatt used the term to refer to all forms of criticism that understood a text's effect upon the reader to be the primary route to analysing the importance and success of that text. For Wimsatt, the fallacy led to a number of potential errors, most of them related to emotional relativism. According to Wimsatt, a view of literature based on its putative emotional effects will always be vulnerable to mystification and subjectivity, and he points out that the belletristic tradition exemplified by critics such as Arthur Quiller Couch and George Saintsbury as an instance of a type of criticism that relies on subjective impressions and is thus unrepeatable and unreliable. For Wimsatt such impressionistic approaches pose both practical and theoretical problems. In practical terms, it makes reliable comparisons of different critics difficult, if not irrelevant.

Affective Fallacy was controversial and although influential, it was never accepted wholly by a great number of critics. For example, the New Historicist critics repudiated the New Critical rejection of historical context. Similarly, reader-response criticism denied that a text could have a quantifiable significance outside its being read and experienced by particular readers at particular moments. These critics rejected the idea of text as icon, focusing instead on the ramifications of the interaction between text and reader.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What do you understand by the expression "Intentional Fallacy"? What is the main objection against "Intentional Fallacy"?

Q 2: Do you agree that "Affective Fallacy" is significant as a critical essay?

14.5 IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

The following are the important concepts available in the texts we are discussing in these units.

Intentionality:

"The Intentional Fallacy" by W. K. Wimsatt Jr. & Monroe C. Beardsley

is a foundational text of New Criticism, which states that 'intention' should not be brought to bear upon the analysis of the literary text. The authors state, "intention, as we shall use the term, corresponds to what he intended in a formula which more or less explicitly has had wide acceptance…In order to judge the poem's performance, we must know what he intended. Intention is designed or planned in the author's mind. Intention has obvious affinities for the author's attitude toward his work, the way he felt, what made him write."

Wimsatt and Beardsley argue that knowledge of an author's original intention is neither integral to, nor essential in the critical analysis of a work. One can interpret a text without any reference to 'authorial intention'. Their claim here is two-fold:

- Authorial intentions are not available in the text.
- Notion of authorial intention dismantles the integrity of a literary work.

However, 'intention' cannot be so easily dispensed with. Have the authors completely denied the very notion of "authorial intention"? We must know that they distinguished between the intention realised in the text and that, which is supposed to exist prior to the existence of the text. When intention is realized, it is useless to consult the author because "Critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle". Again, 'intention' cannot be the standard for critical evaluation of a text. Meaning can be deciphered only through a 'close' analysis of the text, attending to its linguistic as well as rhetorical components. Of course, not all meanings can be said to be free from authorial intention. In conversation, for instance, what the speaker intends prior to his utterance is crucial to meaning of the utterance. Literary meaning resists such dependence on the psychology of the author. "The Intentional Fallacy" also contends that a text can have meanings unacknowledged by the author. Hence, the author cannot be a guide to interpretation of a text because interpretation must be justified textually. There is both external and internal evidence for a work's meaning. Internal evidence can be found in "the semantics and syntax of a poem, through our habitual knowledge of the language, through grammars, diction, and all the literature which is the source of dictionaries, in general through all that

makes a language and culture". External evidence is private, and not part of the work and it comes from journals, letters, conversation etc. However, Wimsatt and Beardsley could not sharply demarcate these two kinds of evidence, because the author's expressed meaning and intention can get incorporated into the text through its linguistic texture.

Intentional Fallacy:

It signifies what is claimed to be the error in interpreting and evaluating a literary work by reference to evidence outside the text itself. Wimsatt and Beardsley asserted that an author's intended aims and meanings in writing a literary work—whether these are asserted by the author or merely inferred from our knowledge of the author's life and opinions—are irrelevant to the literary critic, because the meaning, structure, and value of a text are inherent within the finished, freestanding, and public work of literature itself. Reference to the author's supposed purposes, or else to the author's personal situation and state of mind in writing a text, is held to be a harmful mistake, because it diverts our attention to such "external" matters as the author's biography, or psychological condition, or creative process, which we substitute for the proper critical concern with the "internal" constitution and inherent value of the literary product. This claim, which was central in the *New Criticism,* has been strenuously debated, and was reformulated by both of its original proponents.

Affective Fallacy:

W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley defined Affective Fallacy as the error of evaluating a poem by its effects—especially its emotional effects—upon the reader. As a result of this fallacy "the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear," so that criticism "ends in impressionism and relativism." The two critics wrote in direct reaction to the view of I. A. Richards, in his influential *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1923), that the value of a poem can be measured by the psychological responses it incites in its readers. Beardsley has since modified the earlier claim by the admission that "it does not appear that critical evaluation can be done at all except in relation to certain types of effect that aesthetic objects have upon their perceivers." So modified, the doctrine becomes a claim for

objective criticism, in which the critic, instead of describing the effects of a work, focuses on the features, devices, and form of the work by which such effects are achieved. An extreme reaction against the doctrine of the affective fallacy was manifested during the 1970s in the development of Reader-Response criticism.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: How is the term 'intention' used in New Criticism?

Q 4: What is meant by the term 'intentional fallacy'?

Q 5: Briefly explain the main idea behind what is called 'Affective Fallacy.'

14.6 WIMSATT AND BEARDSLEY AS NEW CRITICS

It has been stated already that in their critique of intention, Wimsatt and Beardsley aimed at the Romantic idea of poetry as the expression of a writer's soul or personality. Influenced by T. S. Eliot, as well as by New Critics such as—John Crowe Ransom, Brooks, and others. Wimsatt and Beardsley sought to define poetry as an impersonal art by stating 'what matters is the text itself'. They also challenge literary historians who mistakenly believe that when evaluating a poem, one must know its biographical and historical origins. For Wimsatt and Beardsley, one must attend only to the organization of the words on the page and the coherence that the words do or do not possess. They affirm that, "the poem itself is what the poet is trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem."

During the late 1960s and 1970s, a new movement in criticism, backed by Reader-Response theory, drew on the insights about the reading process that Richards and others had advanced or implied in formulating their text-cantered approaches. One of its most important members, Stanley Fish in his essay "Literature in the Reader" (I970), explicitly invoked Wimsatt and Beardsley's arguments. For Fish, criticism should be concerned with

the "analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time." Other critics and theorists during this same period challenged and complicated Wimsatt and Beardsley's rejection of the author. For example, Michel Foucault and Stephen Greenblatt are too opposed to the Romantic conception of the author as were Wimsatt and Beardsley. However, they re-imagined and reconfigured the author to be a focal point for literary investigation and analysis. Thus, in "What Is an Author?" (1969), Foucault considers not the author as such but rather the historical "author-function," a "mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society." For Wimsatt and Beardsley, and for those they influenced, this position takes us too far from the specific text, the self-contained poem. Studying literature in a disciplined way means directly examining literary artefacts, not authors or readers or social contexts.

There are many possible objections to Wimsatt and Beardsley's argument. To begin with, it presupposes that we can treat the poem as an isolated artefact, torn from all of its contexts, including the circumstances of its reading or reception. Clearly, the distinction between internal and external evidence cannot be absolute and will vary according to the reader's knowledge and literary education. Moreover, many interpretative disputes arise not from questions of content but rather from questions of form and tone. For example, Horace's famous "Ode to Pyrrha" could be translated in a tone of polite urbanity or one of crude sarcasm. Broad considerations of the intention behind the poem may legitimately help us clarify such issues. Many poems, such as satires or mock-heroic poems, presuppose a reader's prior acquaintance with certain literary traditions and conventions: it is important to acknowledge, for example, that Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* is intended to employ epic conventions for the purpose of satire. Recourse to intention can yield necessary insight into the relations between form and content, as well as relations between an artist and his audience. Moreover, given that the same statement made by different speakers in differing contexts could have vastly divergent meanings, it seems implausible to attribute autonomy to any statement or group of words, whether embodied

in poetic language or not.

Wimsatt and Beardsley's later essay "The Affective Fallacy" is motivated by the same presupposition, namely, that literature or poetry is an autonomous object, independent not only of author psychology, biography, and history but also of the reader or audience that consumes it. The word "affection" is used by philosophers to refer to emotion, mental state, or disposition. Hence, the "affective fallacy" occurs, according to Wimsatt and Beardsley, when we attempt to explicate or interpret a poem through recourse to the emotions or mental state produced in the reader or hearer.

As these authors put it, just as the intentional fallacy "is a confusion between the poem and its origins," so the affective fallacy "is a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*)." Again, part of their problem with using the reader's response as a criterion of interpretation is that it makes criticism a subjective rather than objective activity, a discourse about the subject (the reader) rather than the object (the text). An affective reading of a poem "begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism. The outcome of the Fallacy, the Intentional or the Affective, is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: Why did Wimsatt and Beardsley challenge the literary historians?

Q 7: How did a Neo-historicist like Stanley Fish react to the ideas of Wimsatt and Beardsley?

Q 8: What are some of the objections to the arguments provided by Wimsatt and Beardsley?



14.7 LET US SUM UP

By this time, you must have understood that "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy" are very important documents in the theory and practice of New Criticism, the dominant mode of American academic criticism during the first half of the 20th century. The most notable contributions of both critics are found in essays titled "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy" which are prescribed for you. These were controversial papers, which elaborated a basic tenet of New Criticism: the issue of authorial intention and effect on the reader. 'Intention' and 'Affect' must be avoided in criticism because they are not implicated in the text itself. If a poem expresses certain thoughts and attitudes, they can be ascribed to the 'dramatic speaker' or 'persona' of the poem and not to the biographical author. Therefore, in critical discourse, terms such as sincerity, authenticity, originality need to be replaced by terms like integrity, relevance, unity, function because it is the literary work, which is the sole object of critical scrutiny.



14.8 FURTHER READING

1) Abrams, M. H. (2003). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Singapore: Thomson Asia Pte Ltd.

2) Brooks, Cleanth & William K. Wimsatt Jr. (1957). *Literary Criticism: A Short History*. New Delhi: Oxford & IBH Publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd.

3) Cuddon, J. A. (1999). *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.

4) Leavis, F. R. (1936). *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry.* Chatto and Windus.

5) Leitch, Vincent B. (2001). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

6) Macey, David. (2000). *Dictionary of Critical Theory.* London: Penguin

Books.

7) Makaryk, Irena R. (1993). *Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms.* University of Toronto Press.

8) Ramaswami S. & V.S. Sethuraman. (1978). *The Critical Tradition: An Anthology of English Literary Criticism Vol-2.* New Delhi: Macmillan India Limited.



14.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Wimsatt and Beardsley argued that the "design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art hence the fallacy… …as a principle it rejected ideas of both classical "imitation" as well as romantic expression… … the most fundamental objection is the impossibility and artificiality of treating literature as a self-contained object.

Ans to Q 2: Yes… … Affective Fallacy is an answer to the idea of impressionistic criticism, which argues that the reader's response to a poem is the ultimate indication of its value…. …But this is a fallacy because it is based on the practice of evaluating the effect that a literary work has on its reader or audience.

Ans to Q 3: "intention, as we shall use the term, corresponds to what he intended in a formula which more or less explicitly has had wide acceptance…In order to judge the poem's performance, we must know what he intended. Intention is designed or planned in the author's mind. Intention has obvious affinities for the author's attitude toward his work, the way he felt, what made him write."

Ans to Q 4: Intentional Fallacy signifies an error in interpreting and evaluating a literary work by reference to evidence outside the text itself… …that an author's intended aims and meanings in writing a literary work are irrelevant to the literary critic… …because the meaning, structure, and value of a text are inherent within the finished, freestanding, and public work of literature itself.

Ans to Q 5: Affective Fallacy is the error of evaluating a poem by its effects—especially its emotional effects—upon the reader, as a result of which "the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear."

Ans to Q 6: They challenged literary historians as they mistakenly believed that when evaluating a poem, one must know its biographical and historical origins. For them, one must attend only to the organization of the words on the page and the coherence that the words do or do not possess… …they sought to define poetry as an impersonal art by stating 'what matters is the text itself'.

Ans to Q 7: Stanley Fish in his essay "Literature in the Reader" (I970), explicitly invoked Wimsatt and Beardsley's arguments… …for him, criticism should be concerned with the "analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time."

Ans to Q 8: One of the objections is against the presupposition that we can treat the poem as an isolated artefact, torn from all of its contexts, including the circumstances of its reading or reception… …but the distinction between internal and external evidence cannot be absolute and will vary according to the reader's knowledge and literary education… … Another objection is that many interpretative disputes arise not from questions of content but rather from questions of form and tone.



14.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Outline the main concerns of the New Critics, with special reference to textual "close reading".

Q 2: How would you name the 'authorial intention' behind any poem you have read? Would this 'intention' help you to understand the poem later?

Q 3: Is New Criticism just a method of reading or does it also embody a

distinctive ideology? Discuss with reference to the context of criticism in the early 20th century.

Q 4: What are the major propositions provided by Wimsatt and Brooks in their essay "Intentional Fallacy" and "Affective Fallacy"?

Q 5: Discuss how the critical essays like "Intentional Fallacy" or "Affective Fallacy" hint at many of the significant turns that were taking place in the critical field during the early part of the 20th century?

Q 6: How has the issue of 'intentionality' been viewed by the critics? Discuss.

Q 7: Provide a critical reception of the two essays "Intentional Fallacy" and "Affective Fallacy" by Wimsatt and Beardsley.

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UNIT 15: F. R. LEAVIS: “LINE OF WIT”

UNIT STRUCTURE

15.1 Learning Objectives

15.2 Introduction

15.3 F. R. Leavis: The Critic

15.4 Reading the Text “Line of Wit”

15.5 Leavis as a New Critic

15.6 Let us Sum up

15.7 Further Reading

15.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

15.9 Possible Questions

15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- read Leavis as one of the leading English literary critics of the 20th century
- gain a clear idea of his views on literature especially poetry and fiction
- locate the significant issues in Leavisite criticism
- grasp the significance of the essay “Line of Wit” as a seminal text of English criticism.

15.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the last unit of the course. In this unit, we shall discuss the essay “Line of Wit” in by F. R. Leavis. Leavis was an English literary critic of early-to-mid-20th century. He taught for much of his career at Downing College, Cambridge and later at the University of York. The students of literature often read Leavis as one of the most influential figures in 20th century English literary criticism, as he introduced a new “seriousness” into the field of English studies. Throughout his entire career as a critic, Leavis took ‘evaluation’ as the principal concern of criticism, which had the power

to shape contemporary sensibility. He further insisted that the preoccupation with form on the part of the great English novelists was a matter of responsibility towards a rich moral interest, and that works of art with a limited formal concern would always be of lesser quality. In that respect, it is believed, Leavis differed substantially from his contemporaries, the New Critics, with which we often tend to identify him. In this unit, you will get an opportunity to discuss F. R. Leavis and judge for yourself his relative significance in the English critical scenario of the 20th century through a discussion of his essay "Line of Wit."

15.3 F. R. LEAVIS: THE CRITIC

Frank Raymond Leavis was born in Cambridge, England, on July 14th 1895. His father Harry Leavis sold pianos and other musical instruments near Cambridge. Leavis was educated at a local private school whose headmaster Dr. W. H. D. Rouse was a classicist and was highly praised for his 'direct method', a practice done by teachers to carry on classroom conversations with their pupils in Latin and classical Greek. He was just 19 years old when the war between Britain and Germany broke out in 1914 during World War I. He took part in the war as a stretcher-bearer, working with the Friends' Ambulance unit. However, the experience of the war had a lasting effect on Leavis as he later suffered from insomnia and intermittent nightmares. It took time for Leavis to recover from the experience of the War.

He had then won a scholarship from the Perse School, and in 1919, he began to study history. In his second year, he changed to English and became a pupil at the newly founded English School at Cambridge. But, despite a first-class Honours in History, Leavis was never considered a strong candidate for a research fellowship. In 1924, Leavis presented a thesis on 'The Relationship of Journalism to Literature on the Rise and Development of the Press in England'. This work became the stepping-stone for his future development as a thinker and critic. In 1927, Leavis was appointed a probationary lecturer for the university, and his substantial publications left clear marks of influence from the demands of his own

teaching. In 1929, he married one of his students, Queenie Roth. Their union resulted in a productive very collaboration. When Leavis published *New Bearings in English Poetry*, his wife published *Fiction and the Reading Public*, and both became instrumental in publication of the quarterly journal *Scrutiny.* In 1930, F. R. Leavis was appointed director of studies in English at Downing College where he taught for the next thirty years.

Being students of literature, you must try to know about the journal *Scrutiny.* F. R. Leavis founded scrutiny, a Quarterly Review and a literature journal, in 1932. The first issue of May 1932 was limited to only 100 copies. Gradually, the circulation grew leading to 750 copies in the later part of 1930s and 1000 copies in the later part of 1940s. During 1950s only 1500 copies, were made but most of them were held by colleges and academic libraries for circulation. Leavis remained its principal editor of the journal until the final issue in 1953. During that time, he used it as a vehicle for the new Cambridge criticism, upholding rigorous intellectual standards and attacking the dilettante elitism, which he believed, characterised the Bloomsbury Group. *Scrutiny* provided a forum for identifying important contemporary works and for reviewing the traditional canon. This criticism was informed by a teacher's concern to present the essentials to students.

New Bearings in English Poetry was his first major breakthrough in the field of criticism. He was also associated with the American New Critics, who emphasised 'close reading' and detailed textual analysis of poetry over an interest in the mind and personality of the poet, sources, the history of ideas and political and social implications. Although there are similarities between Leavis' approach to criticism and that of the New Critics, Leavis differs from them in not considering the theory of the work of art as a self-contained and self-sufficient aesthetic, and as a formal artifact isolated from the society, culture and tradition from which it emerged. *New Bearings*, devoted principally to Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot and Pound, was an attempt to identify certain new achievements brought by these poets into the field of modern poetry.

In 1933, Leavis published a collection called *For Continuity*, based on some of his *Scrutiny* essays. His other book *Culture and the Environment*



Cavalier Poets

It refers to the group of English poets during the reign of Charles I (1625-49). This group includes Richard Lovelace, Sir John Suckling, Robert Herrick, Thomas Carew and Edmuns Waller. These poets virtually abandoned the sonnet form which had been the most chosen and favoured contemporary medium for love poems. Their lyrical poems are usually light, witty, elegant, and for most part, concerned with love.

stressed the importance of the presence of informed and highly trained intellectual elite whose existence within university English departments could preserve the cultural continuity of English life and literature. In *Education and the University* (1943), Leavis argued that "there is a prior cultural achievement of language; language is not a detachable instrument of thought and communication. It is the historical embodiment of its community's assumptions and aspirations at levels which are so subliminal much of the time that language is their only index."

In around 1948, Leavis focused mostly on fiction, and made his general statement on fiction in *The Great Tradition* by stressing an English tradition through Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad. Leavis purposely excluded major authors such as Sterne and Hardy, but eventually changed his position on Dickens, and later published *Dickens the Novelist* in 1970. In 1950, in the introduction to *Mill on Bentham and Coleridge*, Leavis set out the historical importance of utilitarian thought. In 1952, was published another collection of essays from *Scrutiny* under the title *The Common Pursuit*. This is one of Leavis' best-known and most influential works. A decade later, Leavis became controversial when he delivered his Richmond lecture, "Two cultures? The significance of C. P. Snow" at Downing College vigorously attacking Snow's suggestion that practitioners of the scientific and humanistic disciplines should have some significant understanding of each other, and that a lack of knowledge of 20th century physics was comparable to an ignorance of Shakespeare. Leavis' attacks on Snow were widely decried in the British press by public figures such as Lord Boothby and Lionel Trilling. Leavis introduced the idea of the 'third realm' as a name for the method of existence of literature.

In 1962, his readership and fellowship at Downing were terminated; however, he took up Visiting Professorships at the University of Bristol, the University of Wales and the University of York. His final volumes of criticism include *Nor Shall My Sword* (1972), *The Living Principle* (1975) and *Thought, Words and Creativity* (1976).



LET US KNOW

In his *Living Principle,* F. R. Leavis said that collaboration is essential as any work of art can exist only in what he calls the "third realm"—the realm of that which is neither public in the ordinary sense or merely private. This collaborative nature of criticism is continually underlined in Leavis' own practice. Examples can be cited of his collaboration with his wife, Queenie Dorothy Leavis, in *Lectures in America* and *Dickens the Novelist.* Another example of collaboration was with his students at Downing who introduced his methods and principles in schools and universities where they subsequently taught. Moreover, the subsequent emergence of the journal "Scrutiny" provided as well as accommodated wide range of critical comments on diverse topics. (Irena R. Makaryk, p. 401).

Leavis' preferred method of analysis–displayed to best advantage in his studies of poetry—is a 'close reading' of short passages and he was happiest when working in a classroom with an open text before him. Like the theorists of practical criticism, he held that literary analysis should contain nothing that cannot be produced from, or related back to, the text itself. In a discussion of philosophy and criticism, he argued that the critic must guard against extrapolating from the text under analysis, and refrain from all premature or irrelevant generalizations. His refusal to theorise or philosophise about what he is doing is based on the conviction that the authority of the mature and experienced critic or reader is based on an immediate sense of values instilled by training in the labour of reading.

Leavis' importance in the development of literary criticism in England in the mid 20th-century lay in his unceasing insistence on the priority of practice over theory and the centrality of evaluation within the critical process. Ramaswami S. & V. S. Sethuraman have stated: "Leavis' *Revaluations* is an attempt at rewriting the history of English poetry in the light of Eliot's observation that 'Donne, Crashaw, Vaughan, Herbert and Lord Herbert, Marvell, King, and Cowley at best are in the direct current

of English poetry, and that their faults should be reprimanded by this standard rather than coddled by antiquarian affection' ('The Metaphysical Poets'). Like its counterpart, Leavis' *The Great Tradition*, which attempts to rewrite the history of fiction, *Revaluation* reflects, as much in its inclusions as in its omissions, the critical preferences and prejudices of F.R. Leavis. Leavis is nothing if not normative in his approach and he is not ashamed of his literary judgments which are always based on a deep commitment to life." (Ramaswami S. & V.S. Sethuraman, p. 693). In *Revaluations,* he argued that the critic should 'say nothing that cannot be related immediately to judgments about producible texts.' On the other hand, he also argued that mature literary discussion could manifest itself only within an informed human community.

Although it is difficult to classify Leavis' criticism, an attempt can be made to group it into four chronological stages. The first is that of his early publications and essays which include *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932) and *Revaluation* (1936). Here he was concerned primarily with reexamining poetry from the 17th to the 20th centuries, and this was accomplished under the strong influence of T.S. Eliot. In addition, during this early period Leavis sketched out his views about university education. Then he turned to fiction and the novel, producing *The Great Tradition* (1948) and *D.H. Lawrence, Novelist* (1955). Following this period, Leavis pursued an increasingly complex treatment of myriad literary, educational and social issues.

In two of his last publications were embodied the critical sentiments of his final years including *The Living Principle: 'English' as a Discipline of Thought* (1975), and *Thought, Words and Creativity: Art and Thought in Lawrence* (1976). One noticeable point in him is that unlike in his early phase of carrier, his criticism in later part became progressively philosophical in nature.

F.R. Leavis died at the age of eighty-two on the 14th April 1978 having been made a Companion of Honour in the New Year. His wife Q.D. Leavis died in 1981.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How will you understand Leavis' 'third realm'? Is this a legitimate critical concept?

Q 2: Explain the significance of the journal 'Scrutiny'.

Q 3: What were Leavis' suggestions for the critics?

15.4 READING THE TEXT "LINE OF WIT"

In the preface to his seminal book on English Poetry, *Revaluations* (1936) F.R. Leavis defines the task and duty of the critic to be the perceiver of himself so that he/she can make the finest and sharpest discriminations possible and state his/her findings as responsibly, clearly and forcibly as he/she can. In 1932, Q. D. Leavis criticises Charlotte Brontë for her indulgence in undisciplined emotion that makes her a 'schoolgirl of genius' and very unfavourably compares her genius with the 'well-regulated minds' of Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth, while F. R. Leavis (1936) complains that Milton's habit of writing Latin verse forces him to exhibit in *Samson Agonistes* a loss of 'all feelings for his native English'.

Seen in the context of such discussions, we can comprehend the significance of this essay "Line of Wit", which is also the opening chapter in his book *Revaluations* (1936), is an attempt to define the main line of the English poetic tradition. This essay is also a celebration of T. S. Eliot's work on the Metaphysical poets, as Leavis says: "Mr. Eliot's achievement is a matter for academic evaluation, his poetry is accepted, and his early observations on the Metaphysicals and on Marvell provide currency for university lectures and undergraduate exercise."

Moreover, the appearance of the *Oxford Book of Seventeenth-Century Verse* also offered scope for surveying and reconsidering the poetry of the great Metaphysicals like Donne whose 'extraordinary force of originality' made him 'so potent an influence in the seventeenth century'. Leavis then states that a poem like "The Good Morrow" with its most appealing beginning: *"I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I/Did, till we lov'd?"* enables Donne to show his originality by deviating from the old

'musical' tradition of poetry and by using "in complete dissociation from music a stanza-form that proclaims the union of poetry and music". This dissociation is positive; and the utterance, movement and intonation are those of the controlling and 'talking' voice. Moreover, Donne's verse which had turned acutely dramatic presents a technique, a spirit in which the sinew and living nerve of English are used—"suggests an appropriate development of impressions that his ear might have recorded in the theatre". This also refers to Donne's characteristics like presentation of situations, the liveliness of enactments, which are aptly justified by the inclusion of his poem "Satyre (iii)" in the *Oxford Book.*

Leavis discusses how the characteristics of Donne's poetry such as presentations of situations, liveliness of enactment could be called dramatic. For example, one of Donne's poems in the *Oxford Book* namely "Satyre (iii)" reminds the readers of dramatic blank verses. The elements of play with sense movements across rimes, the control in tone and stresses found in this poem, provide affinities with Shakespeare. Yet Donne was writing something very original and quite different from blank verse. According to Leavis, "Enough illustration (out of an embarrassment of choice) has been given to bring home how dramatic Donne's use of his medium can be, how subtly; in a consummately managed verse he can exploit the strength of spoken English." Leavis was perhaps trying to hint at the 'colloquial' elements in Donne's verse which made his poetry so memorable.

Referring to the influence of Donne on the Cavalier poets like Thomas Carew, Leavis states that Carew: "exemplifies Donne's part in a mode or tradition (or whatever other term may fitly describe that which makes the Court poets a community)…To say this is not to stress any remarkable originality in his talent; his strength is representative, and he has individual force enough to be representative with unusual vitality." This can be best seen in his poem "Know, Celia" where he represents a court culture—an element of the tradition of chivalry, which meaningfully showed the contemporary life and manners. Leavis then makes a reference to Prof. Grierson's *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*

where he is seen to have shown Carew's indebtedness to Donne.

However, Carew's achievements also lead us back to influences other than that of Donne's. For example, Ben Jonson, whose 'classical' endeavours remind us that there are 'ways of being classical'. But, the idiomatic quality of the Caroline poetry, its relation to the spoken language makes another significant point about Jonson's influence on his successors. Jonson's effort was to cultivate an English mode that could express a sense of contemporaneity with the classical masters like Horace and Juvenal. This mode, as seen through a large number of his poems, can be described as 'consciously urbane, mature and civilized.' The assertive force of Jonson's genius, his native robustness, his interest in man and manners and his views on literature and poetic art, could clearly be seen in his poems included in the *Oxford Book.* Leavis argues: "Ben Jonson's powerful genius to initiate the tradition, the common heritage, into which a line of later poets could enter and by which a very great Augustan poet was to profit long after civilization and literary fashions had been transformed." One may use the term 'wit' to emphasise the remoteness of Johnson's art from the 19th century notion of the 'lyrical'.



LET US KNOW

Wit

In the Middle Ages, then term wit used to mean 'sense' or 'the five senses': thus 'common sense'. During the Renaissance, however, it came to mean 'intelligence' or 'wisdom'; thus intellectual capacity. During the neo-classical age, Dryden, Cowley and Pope held wit as primarily a matter of propriety. As Pope started in his famous *Essay on Criticism*: "True wit is Nature to advantage dressed." William Hazlitt later distinguished between wit and imagination: wit being artificial and imagination being valid for him. During the 19th century when the term imagination was used to designate the ability to invent, wit was associated with levity. Matthew Arnold dismissed Chaucer and Pope from his list

of great poets because of their wittiness, and 'lack of high seriousness'. Eliot, however, hailed metaphysical poets like Donne and Marvell for their peculiar ability to combine wit with seriousness.

The "Line of Wit" begins with Ben Jonson and Donne, through Carew and Marvell to Pope. Leavis argues that Pope has certain qualities that relate him to Marvell: "The affinity with the mode of Marvell's *Dialogue* should be fairly obvious. The weight behind that concluding passage of the *Dunciad* is greater than Marvell could supply and the urbanity has a different inflection, but the relation between wit and solemnity is essentially that of the *Dialogue*." But, according to Leavis, such a line should also include Cowley who seems to be another significant figure and more representative than Marvell. Because, in a poem like "Of Wit", Cowley "discusses and expounds wit in a manner and spirit quite out of resonance with the Metaphysical mode—quite alien and uncongenial to it; with a reasonableness that has little to do with the 'tough reasonableness' underlying Marvell's lyric grace…It is a spirit of good sense, of common sense; appealing to criteria that the coming age will refine into 'Reason, Truth and Nature'."

Then, he goes on to analyse the relative significance of the neo-classical poets like Dryden and Pope. Leavis states that Dryden's genius and his strength of native English led Hopkins in the 20th century to praise him as 'the most masculine of our poets, in his style and his rhythms lay the strongest stress of our own literature…'But when compared to Pope, Dryden becomes inferior. Pope's greater strictness of versification means greater autonomy manifesting greater fineness and profundity of organization suggesting a much greater intensity of art. However, such a comparison is erroneous. Because, Dryden's effects are all for the public ear and his pamphleteering verse as well as the blank verse in a poem like "All for Love" could be appreciated on a first hearing. Therefore, Dryden's verses were effective for satiric purposes and could be read in the appropriate spirit. This is what is perhaps missing in Pope. So, the greatness of Dryden can be compared to that of Ben Jonson. The community to which Jonson belonged as a poet was predominantly ideal but the

community to which Dryden belonged was one in which he actually lived and moved. His complete involvement with the Augustan life could make one call him a great representative poet rather than a great poet. However, Leavis says that he may be a greater poet than Marvell, but he did not write any poetry as indubitably great as Marvell's best. Instead, Pope was a complete Augustan and explored through his poetry the strength of his own civilization and achieved a kind of strength so closely related to Marvell's.

In this context, Leavis' reference to Eliot's idea of 'dissociation of sensibility' becomes significant as he puts the phrase into currency, and ascribes the kind of dissociation largely to the influence of Dryden and Pope. This directly brings us back to the discussion of the changes that took place over English cilvilisation in the 17th century leading to the appearance of modern English prose during the early part of the Restoration. Other influential factors leading to the 'changes' included—economic and socio-political history, the emergence of the Royal Society and various intellectual and cultural developments. But, the decay of the Courtly culture due to 'disruptions', 'exile' and 'travels', can be best identified in the lyrical tradition of the Restoration. As for the tradition of wit and grace in lyric is concerned, it died into modes, into conventions of sentiments and expressions of a new age. However, the impression of the period was incomparably rich with the contributions of Donne, Ben Jonson, Herbert, Milton, Marvell and Dryden. Each poet was practising an art having important social functions.

The essay "Line of Wit" finally comes to an end with references to Carew, Cowley and Herrick. Leavis once again says that 'the line of wit', then, runs from Ben Jonson (and Donne) through Carew and Marvell to Pope'. Carew's "The Inscription on the Tombe of the Lady Mary Wentworth" neatly justifies this line. His wit is in the pure Augustan mode. On the other hand, the wit in Cowley's "Of Wit" exhibits a curious instability. While Herrick's poem "The Funeral Rites of the Rose" when compared to Marvell's "And Sleeps so too" can be discussed by the underlying urbane wit.

From your reading of this unit on Leavis' essay "Line of Wit" you must have understood that 'Moral Seriousness', according to Leavis, is the hallmark of criticism. Besides, like Matthew Arnold, he viewed 'Reading' as a defence against the mass-culture born out of heavy industrialisation. As David Macey observes—although such criticism is quite open about its attachment to a high culture, it also made the study of popular culture an institutionalized practice which had a direct impact on the early developments in cultural studies. As one of the most influential figures in 20th century English literary criticism, Leavis introduced a kind of 'seriousness' into English studies, and the modern university subject on criticism has been shaped very much by Leavis' examples.

Leavis held the view that an 'organic' or 'common culture' had been lost because of industrialization. Therefore, his preservation of tradition goes hand in hand with his celebration of the life-force that once sustained the sturdy communities of 16th century, and which survives in the capacity of experience, the reverent openness towards life and the moral seriousness that typify the great novelists. However, you will note that Leavis' idea of tradition depends on his views of literature. He further opined that the educated public must maintain a kind of cultural continuity. Because, a living culture draws upon the best from the past, adapting it to new situations and needs, and the educated public can uphold standards that have been established in the past.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: How does Leavis define the task and duty of a critic in the Preface to his *Revaluations*?

Q 5: How has the term 'Wit' been viewed throughout the ages?

Q 6: On what grounds, Leavis compared Dryden with Pope in his essay "Line of Wit"?

Q 7: What does Leavis have to state about 'moral seriousness'?

15.5 LEAVIS AS A NEW CRITIC

The influence of the Leavises on the development of English as an academic discipline has been so strong that anyone studying English literature in Britain during their time could be called an unwitting Leavisite. David Macey writes "Together with the 'Practical Criticism' of I. A. Richards and William Empson's practice of 'Close Reading', the Leavises' recommendation of attention to the 'text', played an immensely important role in turning English into a serious and disciplined mode of study rather than a 'gentlemanly' conversation about books. The network of connections cantered on the journal *Scrutiny* extended their influence through schools and colleges and shaped the literary education of more than one generation of students, whilst the insistence from the 1930s to the 1970s on the distinctive discipline of university English is the major single factor that has made English literature the hegemonic discipline within the English education system. In major studies like *Of Both Poetry* (1936) and *General Studies of Prose* (1948, 1952), as well as of individual novelists such as *Lawrence* (1955) and *Dickens* (1970), the Leavises helped to shape the modern canon of English Literature." (Macey, 225).

F. R. Leavis possessed a very clear idea of literary criticism and he was well-known for his decisive and often provocative judgements. Leavis insisted that evaluation was the principal concern of criticism, and that it must ensure that English literature should be a living reality operating as an informing spirit in society, and that criticism should involve the shaping of contemporary sensibility. The attention paid by other critics to Leavis was never free from controversies. Although his ideas superficially resembled those of the New Critics of the United States, he was never an anti-historicist. Leavis firmly believed that literature and life are closely connected and that a work of art cannot be separated from the culture that produced it.

It can be argued that Leavis' achievements as a critic of poetry have always been so impressive. But, Leavis is widely accepted to have been a better critic of fiction and the novel than of poetry. Much of this is due

to the fact that a large portion of what he had to say about poetry had already been said by his contemporaries. For example, in *New Bearings in English Poetry,* Leavis attacked the Victorian poetical ideal, suggesting that 19th century poetry rejected the 'poetical' and instead showed a separation of thought and feeling and a divorce from the real world. The influence of T. S. Eliot is easily identifiable in his criticism of Victorian poetry, as he acknowledged in *The Common Pursuit* that, 'It was Mr. Eliot who made us fully conscious of the weakness of that tradition'. In his later publication *Revaluations*, the dependence on Eliot was still very much present, but Leavis also demonstrated an individual critical sense operating in such a way as to place him among the distinguished modern critics.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: In what ways, does David Macey see Leavis as a New Critic?



15.6 LET US SUM UP

You have, from this unit, learnt that Leavis' criticism falls into two phases. In the first place, influenced by T.S. Eliot, he devoted his attention to English verse. In *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932), he attacked Victorian poetry and proclaimed the importance of the work of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, emphasizing wit and the play of intellect rather than late-Romantic sensuousness. In *Revaluations: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (1936), on the other hand, he extended his survey of English poetry back to the 17th century. In *Revaluations*, Leavis was able to provide a fuller analysis of the poets like Eliot and others. Leavis opens the first chapter "Line of Wit" of Revaluations by remarking that Eliot's achievement is a matter of academic evaluation, his poetry is accepted and his early observations on the metaphysical and on Marvell provide currency for University lectures. Although Leavis follows

Eliot in describing the line of wit, he also has some disagreements about the lack of the quality of wit in Colwley and in Milton's *Comus* as can be found from the essay "Line of Wit".



15.7 FURTHER READING

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2) Cuddon, J. A. (1999). *The penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
3) Leavis, F R. (1936). *Revaluation Tradition and Development in English Poetry.* Chatto and Windus.
4) Macey, David. (2000). *Dictionary of Critical Theory.* London: Penguin Books.
5) Makaryk, Irena R. (ed.) (1993). *Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms.* Canada: University of Toronto Press.
6) Ramaswami S. & V. S. Sethuraman. (eds.) (1978). *The Critical Tradition: An Anthology of English Literary Criticism Vol-2.* New Delhi: Macmillan India Limited.
7) Vincent B. Leitch (Gen. ed.) (2001). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Norton and Company, Inc.

Web Resources:

http://www.artandpopularculture.com/F._R._Leavis
http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/334127/F-R-Leavis
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scrutiny_(journal)
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/F._R._Leavis



15.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Leavis took collaboration as very essential as any work of art can exist only in what he calls the "third realm"—the realm of that which is neither public in the ordinary sense or merely private… …This collaborative nature of criticism is continually underlined in Leavis' own practice such as his collaboration with wife Queenie Dorothy Leavis, in *Lectures in America* and *Dickens the Novelist*… …Another example is the journal "Scrutiny".

Ans to Q 2: Leavis remained the principal editor of the journal "Scrutiny" until the final issue in 1953… …he used the journal as a vehicle for the new Cambridge criticism, upholding rigorous intellectual standards and attacking the dilettante elitism which he believed, characterised the Bloomsbury Group… … "scrutiny" provided a forum for identifying important contemporary works and for reviewing the traditional canon.

Ans to Q 3: Leavis argued that the critic must guard against extrapolating from the text under analysis, and refrain from all premature or irrelevant generalizations… …his conviction was that the authority of the mature and experienced critic or reader is based on an immediate sense of values instilled by training in the labour of reading.

Ans to Q 4: A critic should be the perceiver of himself so that he/she can make the finest and sharpest discriminations possible and state his/her findings as responsibly, clearly and forcibly as he/she can.

Ans to Q 5: In the Middle Ages, the term wit meant 'sense' or 'the five senses'… …during the Renaissance, it came to mean 'intelligence' or 'wisdom'… …in the neo-classical age, Dryden, Cowley and Pope held wit as primarily a matter of propriety… …in his famous *Essay on Criticism* Pope stated: "True wit is Nature to advantage dressed."… …in the 19th century wit was associated with levity… …When Matthew

Arnold dismissed Chaucer and Pope from his list of great poets because of their wittiness and lack of 'high seriousness', T. S. Eliot, hailed the metaphysical poets for their ability to combine wit with seriousness.

Ans to Q 6: Leavis states that Dryden's genius and his strength of native English led Hopkins in the 20th century to praise him as 'the most masculine of our poets, in his style and his rhythms lay the strongest stress of our own literature…'… …But when compared to Pope, Dryden becomes inferior. Pope's greater strictness of versification means greater autonomy manifesting greater fineness and profundity of organization suggesting a much greater intensity of art. However, such a comparison is erroneous.

Ans to Q 7: Leavis viewed 'Moral Seriousness', as the hallmark of criticism… …Like Matthew Arnold, he too viewed 'Reading' as a defence against the onslaught of Industrialism born mass culture… …Leavis introduced a kind of 'seriousness' into English studies in the early part of the 20th century, and the modern university subject of criticism has been shaped very much by Leavis' examples.

Ans to Q 8: David Macey states that like other New Critics such as I. A. Richards and William Empson, both F. R. Leavis and Q. D. Leavis focussed on the 'text'… …this method played an immensely important role in turning English into a serious and disciplined mode of study… …the journal *Scrutiny* extended influence through schools and colleges and shaped the literary education of more than one generation of students.



15.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Provide an appraisal of F. R. Leavis' achievement as a literary critic. What is the nature of Leavis' critical method?

Q 2: Do you think that F. R. Leavis' critical practice was influenced by T. S. Eliot's discussion of the Metaphysical poets? Discuss with reference to the essay "Line of Wit."

Q 3: Discuss Leavis' stand on the English poetic traditions in connection with the poets he mentions in the essay "Line of Wit".

Q 4: Discuss how Leavis accords Donne a special poetic significance in the text "Line of Wit."

Q 5: Explain how or why Leavis sees the 'line of wit' running through specific poets whom he mentions.

Q 6: What are the important premises of Leavis' New Criticism? Assess the significance of Leavis as a New Critic.

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