PGEG S2 04

KRISHNA KANTA HANDIQUI STATE OPEN UNIVERSITY

SEMESTER 2

ENGLISH

BLOCK 2: NEOCLASSICAL AND ROMANTIC CRITICISM

KRISHNA KANTA HANDIQUI STATE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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Reprint : April, 2022

ISBN: 978-81-934669-4-0

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Printed and published by Registrar on behalf of the Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University.

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SEMESTER 2
MA IN ENGLISH
COURSE 1: LITERARY CRITICISM: CLASSICAL TO MODERN
BLOCK 2: NEOCLASSICAL AND ROMANTIC CRITICISM

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BLOCK 2: INTRODUCTION

Neoclassicism 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, which are as the following.

Unit 6 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 shall help you 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, 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.

Unit 8 introduces you 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 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 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. You will finally learn that Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* is yet another significant text of Romantic Criticism along with The 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*.

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 READINGS" 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 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.

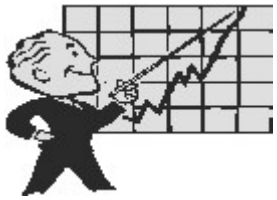
6.3 HISTORY OF NEOCLASSICAL CRITICISM

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.

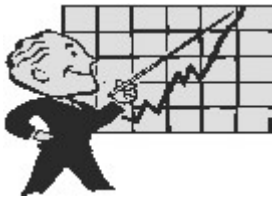
Samuel Johnson (1709–1784)

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

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

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

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

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

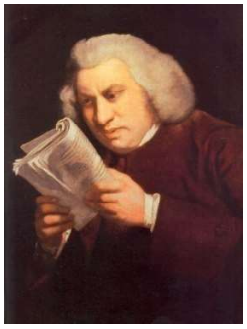
7.2 INTRODUCTION

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



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org

than any man alive." While at oxford, he was influenced by the popular devotional tract A *Serious Call* 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



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.

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 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

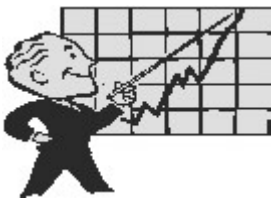
the greater part of his excellence being a "product of his own genius." Unlike his predecessors, Shakespeare directly obtained "an exact knowledge of many modes of life" and demonstrates clearly that "he has seen with his own eyes; he gives the image which he receives, not weakened or distorted by the 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

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

From Plato to the Present. Malden: Blackwell.

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

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

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.

* * *

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.

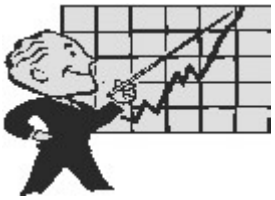
There have been a series of severe criticism of Wordsworth's critical notions about poetry among his contemporaries. That his conception about the language of poetry was unsound is best exemplified by his own practice: most of his best poetry is written in language far removed from the language of ordinary 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:

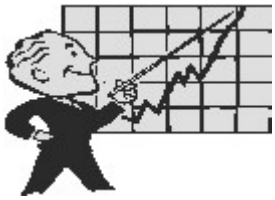
The Romantics poets and critics asserted the uniqueness and self-expressivity of the individual. Consequently, they opposed the character typology of Neoclassical drama. In style, the Romantics preferred boldness over the preceding age's desire for restraint, maximum suggestiveness over the Neoclassical 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

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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*

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

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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.

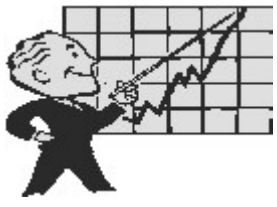
William made his debut as a poet in *The European Magazine* in 1787 by publishing a sonnet. He got admitted to St John's College, Cambridge, in 1787 and came out after being awarded the B.A. degree in 1791. He developed the habit of travelling to different places famous for their beauty and landscape 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.

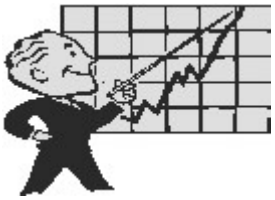
The primary objective of Wordsworth behind the “Preface” was to establish, as he showed through the poems in the volume, incidents and situations drawn from common life as the subject matter of poetry. The other important objective was in terms of the great innovation he had made in *Lyrical Ballads* 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

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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

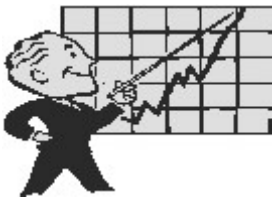
to a spiritual status, and the perception of a fundamental unity between the human self and the world of nature."



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

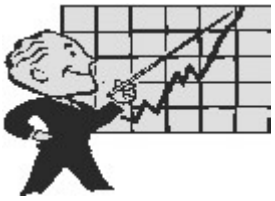
other counters to play with, but fixities and définîtes. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space." To Coleridge, fancy is a mechanical process which receives the elementary images—the "fixities and definites" which come ready-made from the senses—and, 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.



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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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