

INTRODUCTION TO LITERARY CRITICISM

BY

MAITREYEE DUTTA

DEPT OF ENGLISH



Plato

Theory of Mimesis: Plato says that all art is mimetic by nature; art is an imitation of life. He believed that 'idea' is the ultimate reality. Art imitates idea and so it is imitation of reality. He gives an example of a carpenter and a chair. The idea of 'chair' first came in the mind of carpenter. He gave physical shape to his idea out of wood and created a chair. The painter imitated the chair of the carpenter in his picture of chair. Thus, painter's chair is twice removed from reality. Hence, he believed that art is twice removed from reality.

He gives first importance to philosophy as philosophy deals with the ideas whereas poetry deals with illusion – things which are twice removed from reality. So to Plato, philosophy is superior to poetry.

Plato rejected poetry as it is mimetic in nature on the moral and philosophical grounds.

Aristotle, his student, answered back to his accusations on poetry.

Plato says that art being the imitation of the actual is removed from the Truth

Plato fails to explain that art also gives something more which is absent in the actual. The artist does not simply reflect the real in the manner of a mirror. Art cannot be slavish imitation of reality. Literature is not the exact reproduction of life in all its totality. It is the representation of selected events and characters necessary in a coherent action for the realization of the artist's purpose. He even exalts, idealizes and imaginatively recreates a world which has its own meaning and beauty. These elements, present in art, are absent in the raw and rough real. While a poet creates something less than reality he at the same times creates something more as well. He puts an idea of the reality which he perceives in an object. This 'more', this intuition and perception, is the aim of the artist. Artistic creation cannot be fairly criticized on the ground that it is not the creation in concrete terms of things and beings. Thus considered, it does not take us away from the Truth but leads us to the essential reality of life.

Plato again says that art is bad because it does not inspire virtue, does not teach morality.

But is teaching the function of art? Is it the aim of the artist? The function of art is to provide aesthetic delight, communicate experience, express emotions and represent life. It should never be confused with the function of ethics which is simply to teach morality. If an artist succeeds in pleasing us in the aesthetic sense, he is a good artist. If he fails in doing so, he is a bad artist. There is no other criterion to judge his worth. R.A.Scott -James observes: "Morality teaches. Art does not attempt to teach. It merely asserts it is thus or thus that life is perceived to be. That is my bit of reality, says the artist. Take it or leave it – draw any lessons you like from it – that is my account of things as they are – if it has any value to you as evidence of teaching, use it, but that is not my business: I have given you my rendering, my account, my vision, my dream, my illusion – call it what you will. If there is any lesson in it, it is yours to draw, not mine to preach." Similarly, Plato's charges on needless lamentations and ecstasies at the imaginary events of sorrow and happiness encourage the weaker part of the soul and numb the faculty of reason. These charges are defended by Aristotle in his Theory of Catharsis.

Plato judges poetry now from the educational, philosophical, ethical viewpoint but not from its own unique standpoint

He does not define its aims. He forgets that everything should be judged in terms of its own aims and objectives, its own criteria of merit and demerit. We cannot fairly maintain that music is bad because it does not paint, or that painting is bad because it does not sing. Similarly, we cannot say that poetry is bad because it does not teach philosophy or ethics. If poetry, philosophy and ethics had identical function, how could they be different subjects? To denounce poetry because it is not philosophy or ideal is clearly absurd.

Tragedy

“Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in the language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation-catharsis of these and similar emotions.” (Poetics, P.10)

All art is representation (imitation) of life, but none can represent life in its totality. Therefore, an artist has to be selective in representation. He must aim at representing or imitating an aspect of life or a fragment of life.

Action comprises all human activities including deeds, thoughts and feelings. Therefore, we find soliloquies, choruses etc. in tragedy.

The writer of 'tragedy' seeks to imitate the serious side of life just as a writer of 'comedy' seeks to imitate only the shallow and superficial side.

The tragic section presented on the stage in a drama should be complete or self contained with a proper beginning, proper middle and proper end.

A beginning is that before which the audience or the reader does not need to be told anything to understand the story. If something more is required to understand the story than the beginning gives, it is unsatisfactory.

From it follows the middle. In their turn the events from the middle lead to the end. Thus the story becomes a compact & self sufficient one. It must not leave the impression that even after the end the action is still to be continued, or that before the action starts certain things remain to be known.

The play must have, then, a definite magnitude, a proper size or a reasonable length such as the mind may comprehend fully. That is to say that it must have only necessary duration, it should neither be too long to tire our patience nor be too short to make effective representation impossible.

The language employed here should be duly embellished and beautified with various artistic ornaments (rhythm, harmony, song) and figures of speech. The language of our daily affairs is not useful here because tragedy has to present a heightened picture of life's serious side, and that is possible only if elevated language of poetry is used. According to need, the writer makes use of songs, poetry, poetic dialogue; simple conversation etc. in various parts of the play.

Its manner of imitation should be action, not narration as in epic, for it is meant to be a dramatic representation on the stage and not a mere story-telling.

Then, for the function/aim of tragedy is to shake up in the soul the impulses of pity and fear, to achieve what he calls Catharsis. The emotions of pity and fear find a full and free outlet in tragedy. Their excess is purged and we are lifted out of our selves and emerges nobler than before.

Different parts of tragedy

Aristotle asserts that any tragedy can be divided into six constituent parts – Plot, Character, Thought, Diction, Song and Spectacle.

The Plot:- is the most important part of a tragedy. It means ‘the arrangement of the incidents’. Normally the plot is divided into five acts, and each Act is further divided into several scenes. The dramatist’s main skill lies in dividing the plot into Acts and Scenes in such a way that they may produce the maximum scenic effect in a natural development.

Characters:- Characters are men and women who act to serve to advance the action of the story. The hero and the heroine are two important figures among the characters.

Thought:- Thought means what the characters think or feel during their career in the development of the plot. The thought is expressed through their speeches and dialogues.

Diction:- Diction is the medium of language or expression through which the characters reveal their thoughts and feelings. The diction should be ‘embellished with each kind of artistic element’.

Song: The song is one of these embellishments.

Spectacle:- The decoration of the stage is the major part of the spectacle. The Spectacle is theatrical effect presented on the stage. But spectacle also includes scenes of physical torture, loud lamentations, dances, colourful garments of the main characters, and the beggarly or jocular appearance of the subordinate characters or of the fool on the stage.

Tragic Hero

The ideal tragic hero, according to Aristotle, should be, in the first place, a man of eminence. The actions of an eminent man would be 'serious, complete and of a certain magnitude', as required by Aristotle.

Further, the hero should not only be eminent but also basically a good man, though not absolutely virtuous. The sufferings, fall and death of an absolutely virtuous man would generate feelings of disgust rather than those of 'terror and compassion' which a tragic play must produce.

The hero should neither be a villain nor a wicked person for his fall, otherwise his death would please and satisfy our moral sense without generation the feelings of pity, compassion and fear. Therefore, the ideal tragic hero should be basically a good man with a minor flaw or tragic trait in his character.

The entire tragedy should issue from this minor flaw or error of judgment. The fall and sufferings and death of such a hero would certainly generate feelings of pity and fear. So, Aristotle says: "For our pity is excited by misfortunes undeservedly suffered, and our terror by some resemblance between the sufferer and ourselves."

Finally, Aristotle says: "There remains for our choice a person neither eminently virtuous nor just, nor yet involved in misfortune by deliberate vice or villainy, but by some error or human frailty; and this person should also be someone of high-fame and flourishing prosperity." Such a man would make an ideal tragic hero.

The characteristics of Tragic Hero: According to Aristotle, in a good tragedy, character supports plot. The personal motivation / actions of the characters are intricately involved with the action to such an extent that it leads to arouse pity and fear in the audience. The protagonist / tragic hero of the play should have all the characteristics of a good character.

Aristotle disqualifies two types of characters – purely virtuous and thoroughly bad. There remains but one kind of character, who can best satisfy this requirement – ‘A man who is not eminently good and just yet whose misfortune is not brought by vice or depravity but by some error of frailty’.

Thus the ideal Tragic Hero must be an intermediate kind of a person- neither too virtuous nor too wicked. His misfortune excites pity because it is out of all proportion to his error of judgement, and his over all goodness excites fear for his doom.

Thus, he is a man with the following attributes: He should be a man of mixed character, neither blameless nor absolutely depraved. His misfortune should follow from some error or flaw of character; short of moral taint. He must fall from height of prosperity and glory.

The protagonist should be renowned and prosperous, so that his change of fortune can be from good to bad. The fall of such a man of eminence affects entire state/nation.

This change occurs not as the result of vice, but of some great error or frailty in a character. Such a plot is most likely to generate pity and fear in the audience.

The ideal tragic hero should be an intermediate kind of a person, a man not preeminently virtuous and just yet whose misfortune is brought upon him not by vice or depravity but by some error of judgement.

Important Key terms

Hamartia ('fatal flaw' or 'tragic flaw') may consist of a moral flaw, or it may simply be a technical error/ error of judgement, or, ignorance, or even, at times, an arrogance (called hubris in Greek). It is owing to this flaw that the protagonist comes into conflict with Fate and ultimately meets his/her doom through the workings of Fate (called Dike in Greek) called Nemesis.

Peripeteia, (Greek: "reversal") the turning point in a drama after which the plot moves steadily to its denouement. It is discussed by Aristotle in the Poetics as the shift of the tragic protagonist's fortune from good to bad, which is essential to the plot of a tragedy.

Anagnorisis is a change from ignorance to knowledge. This discovery will bring love and happiness to characters who learn of good fortune, and hatred and misery to those who discover unhappy truths. The best kind of anagnorisis accompanies peripeteia. That is, a reversal of fortune effects a discovery or vice versa. For instance, Oedipus' discovery of who his mother is effects a reversal of fortune from proud king to horrible disgrace. Aristotle suggests that anagnorisis is possible by a number of other means as well, but it is most intimately connected to the plot when it accompanies peripeteia. The two together will help to arouse pity and fear and will also help to draw the play to its conclusion.

Hubris in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*: Hubris is 'doing and saying things at which the victim incurs shame, not in order that one may achieve anything other than what is done, but simply to get pleasure from it.

Horace

He was a Latin lyric poet and satirist under Emperor Augustus.

He also wrote elegant hexameter verses (Satires and Epistles) and caustic iambic poetry (Epodes).

Author of *Ars Poetica*

His letters in verse, particularly his *Ars Poetica*: Epistle to the Pisos, outline his beliefs about the art and craft of poetry.

His main contribution to the traditions of literary theory we are exploring lie in his articulation of the purpose of poetry, or literature in general: it is dulce et utile, sweet and useful.

Horace insists that literature serves the didactic purpose which had been Plato's main concern, and that it provides pleasure; the two goals are not incompatible, as Plato had feared. Poetry is a useful teaching tool, Horace argues, precisely because it is pleasurable.

(Combines both Plato(teach) and Aristotle (pleasure)).

The pleasure of poetry makes it popular and accessible, and its lessons thus can be widely learned. Like Plato, Horace sees nature as the primary source for poetry, but he argues that poets should imitate other authors as well as imitating nature.

Horace thus establishes the importance of a poet knowing a literary tradition, and respecting inherited forms and conventions, as well as creating new works.

Longinus

Rhetorician and philosophical critic

Author of one of the seminal works of literary criticism – *On the Sublime*

Longinus is very different from classical writers like Aristotle and Plato. Longinus doesn't ask whether literature is good for society, nor does he worry too much about how genres are different from each other, or how a proper plot should be constructed. He is much more interested in the question of why we read in the first place. What do we get out of it?

Longinus defines sublime as a kind of loftiness and excellence in language raising the style of the ordinary language. Sublimity springs from a great and lofty soul, thereby becoming "one echo of a great soul". It should not only be distinct and excellent in composition but also move the readers along with the effects of pleasure and persuasion

In this sense, sublime is lofty and excellent poetic creation with power to please, persuade and move the readers through the upliftment of their souls. Sublimity is thus the aesthetic upliftment of the soul through the reconciliation of the poetic inspiration and rhetorical mastery of the writers. Longinus believes that sublimity is achieved by a deft handling of Nature and Art, which is inborn genius and learned skills. The five sources he mentions for the sublime are either related to author or poem

To go into sublimity in more depth, Longinus provides five sources that can lead to this goal: great thoughts, noble diction, dignified word arrangement strong emotions and particular figures of speech or thoughts. The sublime also has a number of specific effects, for which Longinus calls upon readers to search: the loss of rationality, deep emotion combined with pleasure, and alienation. That alienation should lead to identifying the creative process in order to be considered sublime. Longinus simplifies these effects by stating that a strong writer will not focus on his own emotions, or trying to convey emotions, but rather to cause the reader to feel those emotions.

In addition, Longinus admires genius in writing. He mentions specific writers in addition to Homer, including Sappho, Plato, and Aristophanes. Longinus talks about these writers' ability to create the sublime by causing readers to feel pleasure. Other writers on his list are Apollonius of Rhodes and Theocritus for their sophisticated poetry; however, Longinus says they fail to measure up to classic writers like Homer because they lack the bravery. Bravery is necessary to take risks, and taking risks is necessary to reach the sublime.

Longinus defines sublimity (Greek *hypsos*) in literature as “the echo of greatness of spirit,” that is, the moral and imaginative power of the writer that pervades a work. Thus, for the first time greatness in literature is ascribed to qualities innate in the writer rather than in the art.

Longinus’ essay on elevated or great writing (“*Peri Hypsous*”) argues that sublimity has a powerful psychological effect on the reader. We are captivated and transported to a different realm. We experience a kind of transcendence or ecstasy (the Greek word *ekstasis* literally means to stand outside of oneself).

Longinus mentions that the sublime makes us feel exalted. It gives us “joy and pride, as though we had ourselves originated the ideas which we read” (7.2). The sublime is also different from rhetoric in that it does not persuade us of a particular view, but rather lifts us up so that we feel ennobled (1.4). In addition, a sublime passage is extremely memorable (7.3).

These are all effects rather than causes. However, in section 8, Longinus provides some more specific criteria:

- a) Sublime passages stimulate grand thoughts.
- b) Exalted language uses passionate and emotional language.
- c) Great writers are adept at using figures (poetic devices and the like).
- d) Sublime writing involves appropriate and noble diction.
- e) Such passages are also majestic in their structure (grammar and composition).

Another way to describe the sublime is through what it is not. In sections 3-5, Longinus suggests that when people try to be sublime, but fail, they produce a kind of foolish bombast. It's like a high-school band trying to sound like a symphony orchestra. The result is bathos (from the Greek word for depth), where a passage aims for grandeur yet ends in anti-climax.

He also mentions two other vices: puerility (or childishness), which ends in frigidity; and false sentiment. Puerility occurs when the writing is stiff and laboured, written by a boring, scholarly type who wants to add every last poetic device he can think of. Such writing is showy without being truly emotional. It leaves us cold (frigidity). The opposite extreme is a false sentimentality that is overly emotional and melodramatic.

Stephen Gosson (April 1554 – 13 February 1624)

He was an English satirist, was baptized at St George's, Canterbury, on the 17th of April 1554.

He entered Corpus Christi College, Oxford, 1572,1572, and on leaving the university in 1576 he went to London.

He is best known for his work *The School of Abuse* where Gosson offers what is in essence an attack on imaginative literature.

He levelled 4 main charges against poetry.

Gosson's charges

1. A man could employ his time more usefully than in poetry
2. It is the 'mother of lies'
3. It is immoral and 'the nurse of abuse'
4. Plato had rightly banished poets from his ideal commonwealth.

These charges were answered by Philip Sidney in his work that he wrote to defend poetry.

Sir Philip Sidney

In the year of 1554, Philip Sidney was born to the parents of Sir Henry Sidney and Mary Dudley.

Growing up he was the oldest child in his family and lived in Kent, England. Sidney was educated at the Shrewsbury School and Christ Church in Oxford.

In later years he was elected to the parliament as a member for Shrewsbury

While he was part of the military, he saw little action, however, was injured which eventually led to his death in 1588 on October 17th.

The Defense of Poesy is well known, it is also referred to as “An Apology for Poetry”.

Sidney wrote this in 1579, however died before it was published in 1595. Many are believed to have influenced this work especially including Stephen Gosson and his work, *School of Abuse*.

This work by Sidney is an early example of English criticism as it goes beyond just looking at poetry. Sidney instead said “poesy” which included all of fictionalized arts, examples being prose and drama.

The idea that poetry is all lies comes from puritans and even Plato, but *Defense of Poesy* takes the judicial side of the argument and explains why this isn't the case.

Sidney's argument attempts to raise poetry into the higher arts and disprove the criticism against it.

Background of Sidney and Gosson

In 1579 Stephen Gosson published a short book, *The School of Abuse*, virtually attacking poets and actors and questioning the morality of fictitious works.

These comments while not addressed specifically to Sir Philip Sidney, motivated him to write his own opinions on the subject.

In 1580 Sidney wrote *The Defense of Poesy* also known as *An Apology for Poetry*.

It was not published until 1595. This piece of writing had a huge impact on English Literature and served as one of the first arguments in favor of fiction-making.

It spoke to not only the historical relevance of poetry but the practical applications and cultural importance.

His reasoning has stood the test of time and is still referred to today when poetry is discussed. Sidney divided his writing into multiple sections to adequately defend poetry's importance in society.

In his opening paragraph he questions why poetry has fallen from the highest estimation of learning to what he calls "the laughingstock of children".

Historical Importance of Poetry

One of Sidney's first points is that the majority of our scientists have been Roman and before them Greek, and both of these civilizations placed a great value in the art of poetry. The Romans called poets vates and defined them as a diviner, foreseer, or a prophet. The Greeks named them poet which comes from the word poiein meaning to make. They believed writing poetry to be a divine gift based in God's ability to create. Sidney writes, "There is no art delivered to mankind that hath not the works of nature for his principal object, without which they could not consist, and on which they so depend, as they become actors and players, as it were, of what nature will have set forth." He claims that poetry could not exist without nature as inspiration and because nature is a direct result of God's creativity, poetry has a certain sense of divinity that cannot be ignored.

Definition and Classification of Poetry

Sidney references Aristotle, and the term he used, mimesis which means a representation, counterfeit, or metaphorically, a speaking picture. He writes that although it is possible to view poetry as a simply an unoriginal imitation, on the other hand poets are not limited by the rules of reality. This brings to the forefront the idea that the skill of an artist is based on the idea and not the art itself. For example when a painter uses a model, the end results value is not necessarily a reflection of how closely the piece resembles the original subject. Due to the lack of limitation, poetry has the ability to surpass the beauty of nature. Art is a teaching tool that is also used to delight and entertain. Poetry is divided into many subcategories such as: heroic, lyric, tragic, comic, satiric, iambic, elegiac, and pastoral. He goes on to discuss the importance of verse, however, he is quick to clarify that while verse can be an attribute it is not a necessity. There have been many great poets in history that were not versifiers. For example: Heliodorus in *Theagenes* and *Chariclea* which were both written in prose.

Poetry Versus Philosophy and History

One of the most controversial arguments made by Sidney in *The Defense of Poesy*, was made in this section. Sidney discusses the notion of learning which he defines as a purifying of wit, enrichment of memory, and enlarging of conceit.

Some believe the greatest path to happiness is through learning and the gain of knowledge. Those who believed the most important discoveries could be made through the stars gave themselves to the study of Astronomy while others found enlightenment through mathematics, philosophy, and music. Sidney explains this concept writing, "But all, one and other, having this scope: to know, and by knowledge to lift up the mind from the dungeon of the body to the enjoying his own divine essence."

However, he also cautions against immersing oneself too deeply in any individual study using an astronomer whose eyes are constantly trained on the stars falling in a ditch as an example. He advises all those studying any sciences to devote themselves to their passion but also to aim to serve a higher purpose with their discoveries. Just like the saddler aims to make the best saddle but to a further end to improve the horsemanship of a soldier and in turn perfect the art of soldiery.

After these points Sidney continues on to attempt to prove that poets encompass the best traits of Philosophers and Historians. He condemns historians for relying only on the hearsay of others and being trapped in the past instead of looking towards the future. On the other side he complains that philosophers are so busy looking towards the future and pondering the what-ifs that they do not pay attention to the present.

His claim is that poets have the ability to remember and paint the past while philosophizing about the future. However, they also have the ability to comprehend the world around them and offer explanations to those experiencing it and assist in making sense of what is happening in the present. Sidney does recognize the importance of both History and Philosophy but maintains that poetry represents an artistic perspective of both.

Sidney's Defence

Philip Sidney defends poetry in his essay "An Apology for Poetry" from the accusations made by Stephen Gosson in his "School of Abuse" dedicated to him. There, Gosson makes some objections against poetry. Sidney replies to the objections made by Gosson very emphatically, defending poetry in his essay. Sidney does this in a very logical and scholarly way.

The major objections against poetry are: (a) "that there being many other more fruitful knowledges, a man might better spend his time in them then in this"; (b) that it is the mother of lies; (c) that it is the nurse of abuse; infecting us with many pestilent desires; and (d) that Plato had rightly banished poets from his ideal republic.

A man could employ his time more usefully than in poetry

Defending poetry against the first charge, he says that man can't employ his time more usefully than in poetry. He says that "no learning is so good as that teacheth and moveth to virtue, and that none can both teach virtue, and thereto as much as poetry".

Poetry is the mother of all lies

His answer to the second objection that poets are liars is that of all writers under the sun the poet is the least liar. The poet creates something by emotion or imagination against which no charge of lying can be brought. The astronomer, the geometrician, the historian and others, all make false statements. But poet “nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth”, his end being “to tell not what is or what is not, but what should or should not be”. The question of truth or falsehood would arise only when a person insists on telling a fact. The poet does not present fact but fiction embodying truth of an ideal kind.

Poetry is the nurse of abuse

The third objection against poetry that it is the nurse of abuse, “infecting us with many pestilent desires or wits” may be partly justified, but for this a particular poet may be blamed but not poetry. To this charge, Sidney replies that poetry does not abuse man’s wit but it is man’s wit that abuses poetry. All arts and sciences misused had evil effects, but that did not mean that they were less valuable when rightly employed. Abuse of poetry, according to Sidney, is not the problem of poetry but of the poet.

Plato had rightly banished poets from his ideal commonwealth.

The fourth objection that Plato had rightly banished the poets from his ideal republic is also not tenable because Plato sought to banish the amoral poets of his time, and not poetry itself. Plato himself believed that poetry is divinely inspired. In “Ion”, Plato gives high and rightly divine commendation to poetry. His description of the poet as “a light-winged and sacred thing” reveals his attitude to poetry. Sidney concludes, “So as Plato banishing the abuse, not the ‘Thing’, not banishing it, but giving due honour unto it, shall be our patron and not adversary”.

Summary of Defence Arguments

Sidney addresses the accusations that poets are liars or falsifiers by claiming someone cannot lie if they never attempt to tell the truth in the first place. Poetry is not written to record historical details with specific accuracy but rather to speak to the virtue of the person writing and the general feelings of the time.

Sidney writes, “To the second, therefore, that they should be the principal liars, I will answer paradoxically, but truly, I think truly, that of all writers under the sun the poet is the least liar, and, though he would, as a poet can scarcely be a liar.”

One of the main reasons poetry and fictitious literary works were being condemned was because of the ideology that prophesiers were attempting to be greater than God. England at the time was being overrun with Protestantism, and Sidney used this rational point to help his audience see that was not the purpose of poetry.

Once again he mentions Historians and Astronomers. His point being that these studies fall into the category of liars because they seek to affirm knowledge of mankind where a poet makes no attempt to do so.

Sidney's Conclusion

To conclude his arguments, Sidney summarizes his main points and perspectives. Poetry was never intended to rival the value of other forms of writing and definitely makes no effort to falsify or replace God. While the poet speaks to general truths such as love, family, mortality and nature, they do not try to prove that they are right or affirm their truths. Poetry is a type of literary expression that has lasted the tests of time and will remain a vital art form. Sidney used his defense to claim that poetry has more of a place in society than other sciences and writing styles. This essay has stood the test of time because while he makes valid arguments in a methodical and well-organized way, he also infuses the piece with humor that makes it an easy read. Poetry is an important part of the world and should not be dismissed because of the feelings of society at any given time.

Samuel Johnson (8 September 1709– 13 December 1784)

He was an English writer who made lasting contributions to English literature as a poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer.

He created an English Dictionary that was used prolifically.

Johnson's edition of *Shakespeare* was finally published on 10 October 1765 as *The Plays of William Shakespeare, in Eight Volumes; To which are added Notes by Sam. Johnson* in a printing of one thousand copies.

Johnson's major work is *The Lives of the English Poets*, which were critical as well as biographical studies, appeared as prefaces to selections of each poet's work. The work was finished in March 1781 and the whole collection was published in six volumes. As Johnson justified in the advertisement for the work, "my purpose was only to have allotted to every Poet an Advertisement, like those which we find in the French Miscellanies, containing a few dates and a general character."

Preface to Shakespeare

Samuel Johnson's preface to *The Plays of Shakespeare* has long been considered a classic document of English literary criticism.

In it Johnson sets forth his editorial principles and provides an appreciative analysis of the "excellences" and "defects" of the work of the good Elizabethan dramatist.

Many of his points became fundamental tenets of recent criticism.

Perhaps no other document exhibits the character of eighteenth-century literary criticism better than what's commonly referred to as Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare.

Written after Johnson had spent nine years laboring to supply an edition of Shakespeare's plays, the Preface to Shakespeare is characterized by sweeping generalizations about the dramatist's work and by stunning pronouncements about its merits, judgments that elevated Shakespeare to the highest spot among European writers of any century.

At times, Johnson displays the tendency of his contemporaries to fault Shakespeare for his propensity for wordplay and for ignoring the stress for just deserts in his plays; readers of subsequent generations have found these criticisms to reflect the inadequacies of the critic quite they are doing those of the dramatist.

What sets Johnson's work aside from that of his contemporaries, however, is that the immense learning that lies beneath numerous of his judgments; he consistently displays his familiarity with the texts, and his generalizations are rooted in specific passages from the dramas.

Further, Johnson is that the first among the good Shakespeare critics to worry the playwright's sound understanding of attribute.

Johnson's specialize in character analysis initiated a critical trend that might be dominant in Shakespeare's criticism (in fact, all of dramatic criticism) for quite a century and would cause the good work of critics like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lamb, and A. C. Bradley.

The significance of the Preface to Shakespeare, however, goes beyond its contributions to Shakespeare scholarship.

First, it's the foremost significant application of a critical principle that Johnson espoused consistently which has become a staple of the practice since a comparison. His systematic plan to measure Shakespeare against others, both classical and contemporary, became the model.

Second, the Preface to Shakespeare exemplifies Johnson's belief that good criticism is often produced only after a good scholarship has been practiced. The critic who wishes to gauge an author's originality or an author's contributions to the tradition must first practice sound literary reading and research to know what has been borrowed and what has been invented.

Characteristically, Johnson makes his Shakespeare criticism the inspiration for general statements about people, nature, and literature.

He's a real classicist in his concern with the universal instead of with the particular; the very best praise he can bestow upon Shakespeare is to mention that his plays are "just representations of general nature."

The dramatist has relied upon his knowledge of attributes, instead of on bizarre effects, for his success. "The pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted, and therefore the mind can only rest on the steadiness of truth," Johnson concludes.

It's for this reason that Shakespeare has outlived his century and reached the purpose at which his works are often judged solely on their own merits, without the interference of private interests and prejudices that make criticism of one's contemporaries difficult.

Johnson feels that the readers of his time can often understand the universality of Shakespeare's vision better than the audiences of Elizabethan England could, for the intervening centuries have freed the plays of their topicality.

Important Points:

Shakespeare's characters are a just representation of human nature as they deal with passions and principles which are common to humanity. They are also true to the age, sex, profession to which they belong and hence the speech of one cannot be put in the mouth of another. His characters are not exaggerated. Even when the agency is supernatural, the dialogue is level with life.

Shakespeare's plays are a storehouse of practical wisdom and from them can be formulated a philosophy of life. Moreover, his plays represent the different passions and not love alone. In this, his plays mirror life.

Shakespeare's use of tragic comedy: Shakespeare has been much criticized for mixing tragedy and comedy, but Johnson defends him in this. Johnson says that in mixing tragedy and comedy, Shakespeare has been true to nature, because even in real life there is a mingling of good and evil, joy and sorrow, tears and smiles etc. this may be against the classical rules, but there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature. Moreover, tragic-comedy being nearer to life combines within itself the pleasure and instruction of both tragedy and comedy. Shakespeare's use of tragicomedy does not weaken the effect of a tragedy because it does not interrupt the progress of passions. In fact, Shakespeare knew that pleasure consisted in variety. Continued melancholy or grief is often not pleasing. Shakespeare had the power to move, whether to tears or laughter.

Shakespeare's comic genius: Johnson says that comedy came natural to Shakespeare. He seems to produce his comic scenes without much labour, and these scenes are durable and hence their popularity has not suffered with the passing of time. The language of his comic scenes is the language of real life which is neither gross nor over refined, and hence it has not grown obsolete. Shakespeare writes tragedies with great appearance of toil and study, but there is always something wanting in his tragic scenes. His tragedy seems to be skill, his comedy instinct.

Unities

In the discussion of drama in “Poetics” Aristotle mentions the three unities as the three formal requirements of a play. These are the unities of time, place and action. The unity of time demands that the action should take place within a day. The unity of place demands that the action should take place within one building or city. The unity of action implies that there be a single plot of limited extent.

The unities of time, place and action were considered essential by Renaissance critics. Many dramatists such as Shakespeare paid little attention to the unities of time and place. In his “Preface to Shakespeare” Johnson shows that only unity of action has the critical justification.

In drama neo-classicism is marked by devotion to the “rules” derived from ancient practice and Aristotelian precept. Johnson questions the absolute validity of these rules.

As regards the unity of action, Aristotle says that the plot being an imitation of an action must imitate one action. Then he says that the drama is a whole. The structural union of its parts is such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed. Johnson accepts only the unity of action, among the three unities because the unity of action ensures an effect of compactness and intensity. It helps getting to the centre of things in a play.

Conventions are techniques that are accepted by common agreement. The unities are dramatic conventions. They are necessary but excessive dependence on them makes a play conventional. Johnson shows that Shakespeare, being a great playwright avoids conventionally by avoiding the unities of time and place.

The classicism of the later 17th and 18th centuries was supported by rationalism. This rationalism in the end undercut the authoritarian element in classicism. Johnson in questioning the use of three unities proves himself an exponent of rationalism. He places stresses on being reasonable. Here Johnson might be considered as a reasonable classicist. In his literary criticism he makes constant reference to firm literary conventional to a general knowledge of life literature. There is always an appeal open from criticism to nature. Some of his ideas may be rigid.

Johnson demands that during the enactment of a play a spectator remains “in a state of elevation above the reach of reason or of truth.” So, Johnson can firmly proclaim that the mind of a spectator wanders in ecstasy while a theatre is being enacted in front of him. But, the spectators always remain in their senses and never forget that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players who are upon the stage to recite a certain number of lines with just gesture and elegant modulation. These lines relate to some actions which may happen in places very remote from each other. And there is no absurdity of allowing that space to represent first Athens, and then Sicily; as all spectators know it to be a modern theatre in actuality. Johnson thus expunges the Aristotelian concept of Unity of Place in dramatic poetry.

Then to comment upon the Unity of Time, Johnson claims that by supposition a place is introduced. Time is all of modes of existence, most obedient to the imaginations. In Johnson’s view the audience does not find it in the least offensive or absurd if the action of the play is located in the first hour at Alexandria and the next at Rome. A lapse of year may easily be conceived of as a passage of hours. Similarly the audience can accept the change of locations on the stage. On imagination the audience can easily contract the time of real actions and also allow the shifts of settings on the stage.

Thus the unities of time and place are not necessary for creating theatrical illusion. Shakespeare didn’t want the counsels and admonitions of scholars and critics and never bothered the unities of time and place.

Johnson believes that ‘nothing is essential to the fable but unity of action.’ Shakespeare is a supreme by gifted artist. His gifts are intuition and imagination. These help him in maintaining the unity of action. And the unity of action ensure in Shakespeare the arrangements of events by which the initial situation is modified and developed until the final situation is brought out. The consistency is always maintained. This consistency and continuity of action make his plays plausible and creates successful moment of theatrical illusion.

Defence of unities

Shakespeare's histories are neither tragedy nor comedy and hence he is not required to follow classical rules of unities. The only unity he needs to maintain in his histories is the consistency and naturalness in his characters and this he does so faithfully. In his other works, he has well maintained the unity of action. His plots have the variety and complexity of nature, but have a beginning, middle and an end, and one event is logically connected with another, and the plot makes gradual advancement towards the denouement.

Shakespeare shows no regard for the unities of Time and place, and according to Johnson, these have troubled the poet more than it has pleased his audience. The observance of these unities is considered necessary to provide credibility to the drama. But, any fiction can never be real, and the audience knows this. If a spectator can imagine the stage to be Alexandria and the actors to be Antony and Cleopatra, he can surely imagine much more. Drama is a delusion, and delusion has no limits. Therefore, there is no absurdity in showing different actions in different places.

As regards the unity of Time, Shakespeare says that a drama imitates successive actions, and just as they may be represented at successive places, so also they may be represented at different period, separated by several days. The only condition is that the events must be connected with each other.

Johnson further says that drama moves us not because we think it is real, but because it makes us feel that the evils represented may happen to ourselves. Imitations produce pleasure or pain, not because they are mistaken for reality, but because they bring realities to mind. Therefore, unity of Action alone is sufficient, and the other two unities arise from false assumptions. Hence it is good that Shakespeare violates them.

Faults and Merits

Faults of Shakespeare: Shakespeare writes without moral purpose and is more careful to please than to instruct. There is no poetic justice in his plays. This fault cannot be excused by the barbarity of his age for justice is a virtue independent of time and place.

Next, his plots are loosely formed, and only a little attention would have improved them. He neglects opportunities of instruction that his plots offer, in fact, he very often neglects the later parts of his plays and so his catastrophes often seem forced and improbable.

There are many faults of chronology and many anachronisms in his play.

His jokes are often gross and licentious. In his narration, there is much pomp of diction and circumlocution. Narration in his dramas is often tedious. His set speeches are cold and weak. They are often verbose and too large for thought. Trivial ideas are clothed in sonorous epithets. He is too fond of puns and quibbles which engulf him in mire. For a pun, he sacrifices reason, propriety and truth. He often fails at moments of great excellence. Some contemptible conceit spoils the effect of his pathetic and tragic scenes.

Merits of Shakespeare: He perfected the blank verse, imparted to it diversity and flexibility and brought it nearer to the language of prose.

William Wordsworth (7 April 1770 – 23 April 1850)

He was an English Romantic poet who, with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, helped to launch the Romantic Age in English literature with their joint publication *Lyrical Ballads* (1798).

Wordsworth's magnum opus is generally considered to be *The Prelude*, a semi-autobiographical poem of his early years that he revised and expanded a number of times. It was posthumously titled and published by his wife in the year of his death, before which it was generally known as "the poem to Coleridge".

Wordsworth was Poet Laureate from 1843 until his death from pleurisy on 23 April 1850.

Wordsworth and the Preface

A second edition appeared in 1800, under Wordsworth's name alone, with one additional poem by Coleridge- Love. It was this edition in which Wordsworth incorporated the famous Preface. A third edition appeared in 1802 and it was followed by a fourth and final edition in 1805.

This Preface is considered a central work of Romantic literary theory and is one of the masterpieces in English criticism.

However, Wordsworth was primarily a poet and not a critic. In the Advertisement to Lyrical Ballads he informed the readers that the Lyrical Ballads was an experiment.

In the Preface he explained in detail what his theories about new poetry were and what was to be looked for in his own poems.

The Preface, when analyzed, resolve into certain declarations about the objectives of poetry, others concerning the methods by which these objectives are to be attained, and certain effects dependent on these axioms.

Throughout the Preface, he is concerned with - to state the facts of poetic creation than to attempt to explain them.

The overall intention of Wordsworth is two-fold, that is, to relate poetry as closely as possible to common life, by removing it in the first place from the realm of fantasy, and in the second by changing it from the polite or over-sophisticated amusement to a serious art.

He speaks about the main subject of poetry. He says that poetry should choose incidents and situations from common life and it must be related in „a selection of language really used by men.“

With the help of imagination, ordinary things should be presented in an extraordinary way. Ultimately these methods should reflect the primary laws of nature. Wordsworth has an exalted conception of poetry.

According to him “poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science”.

He not only defines poetry; but also explains the process involved in the production of poetry. His theory of poetry is comprehensive in the sense that it tells us the qualification of the poet, the function of poetry and recommends the language of poetry.

In Wordsworth’s opinion poetry should have a purpose. It must achieve something positive. What he defines as its purpose is not something ethical but rather psychological. The purpose is „to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement...”

Accordingly, deep emotion is the fundamental condition of poetry. It is the feeling that matters. Wordsworth discards Aristotelian doctrine that the plot or the situation is the first and most important thing. For Wordsworth the first thing is feeling.

It is objected that Wordsworth emphasizes feeling and ignores thoughts, but it is not true. It is true that he attaches great significance to feeling, yet he maintains that valuable poems can only be produced by a man who has thought long deeply. And he adds that the feeling developed in a poem gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling.

Hence the purpose of poetry is to proceed from the simple ideas inherent in the incidents and situations of common life to the exhibition of affection. In short, the purpose is to develop feeling out of the ideas surviving from the sensations of daily life. T

Definition of Poetry

Definition:

...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 reactions the tranquillity disappears, and an emotion kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exit in the mind. In this mood successful composition begins and in a mood similar to this it is carried on.

These famous lines of Wordsworth describe the process, which leads to the production of poetry. First, there is the emotion set up by an experience. Then there is an interval of time, during which the non-essential elements in the experience are purged off. In the second stage, memory plays the important role. It controls what is to be retained and shapes into beautiful forms what it retains. This idea of an interval between experience or observation and composition is an important part of Wordsworth's theory of poetry. The third stage is recollection, when the experience thus purged is recalled. At the fourth stage, the emotion is gradually set up in the mind again. The last stage is composition.

Thus these stages are Sensation, Recollection, Contemplation and Recreation.

William Wordsworth says that he has selected incidents and situations of common life. He describes them by selection of incidents and situations of common life. He describes them by selection of language really used by men. In the past this ordinary life of the ordinary people has never been a subject of poetry. For the first time he democratizes poetry and gives a universal appeal to it. People living in the modern cities are very much artificial and far away from the simplicity of nature.

Therefore, they don't express the reality of human life. They suffer from social vanity. Artificiality predominates in them. But the villagers are very simple and free from social vanity. Wordsworth says that in Lyrical Ballads, humble and rustic life has been chosen as the theme of poetry because the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity in the humble state of life.

Wordsworth comments that humble and rustic life holds simplicity, serenity and tranquility. The rustic people express their feelings and emotion through simple, unelaborated and unsophisticated way. Their language is more passionate, more vivid and more emphatic. The language of the rustics, according to William Wordsworth is more philosophical and permanent than the language used by the city dwellers and the earlier poets.

Poetry should express common human feelings and there should be no restriction in the expression of the experiences of the senses and sensibilities. Wordsworth defines poetry as the spontaneous overflow of the powerful feelings. It is the poet's business to embody in their poetry the general passions of men.

Wordsworth avoids the use of personifications of abstract ideas and serious diction in his poems so far as possible for making poetry intelligible to all types of readers. The language of his poetry is near to that of prose. The incidents of life, the natural objects around us and the common feelings of men as well as our sorrows and happiness, failure and success should get a ready appeal in poetry without false description.

Wordsworth says, "Poetry sheds no tears, such as angels weep, but natural and human tears."

Another important idea of Wordsworth about poetry is that the function of poetry is to give pleasure to readers by presenting the incidents and situations of their lives in a fascinating and unusual way with a color of imagination. Therefore Wordsworth agrees with Aristotle, "Poetry is the most philosophical of all writings. The subject of poetry is general and operative truth which is its own testimony."

According to J. C. Smith, an eminent critic, "The nature of poetry will appear more clearly when we have considered its end or purpose, or the function of the poet in a civil society."

Wordsworth establishes a relation between man and nature in his poetry. Therefore he opines that poetry is the image of man and nature. It is an acknowledgement of the beauty of the universe. Poetry, to Wordsworth, is a powerful media of supplying knowledge and pleasure to mankind. He considers that man and nature are essentially adapted to each other.

Therefore, man has emotional, philosophical, moral and spiritual connection to nature. The poet's business is to describe human life in its very form and to establish a relationship between man and universe. So, Wordsworth says that poetry is the first and last of all knowledge- it is as immortal as the heart of man.

On the Poet

Wordsworth's aim was to show the poet as a man appealing to the normal interests of mankind, not as a peculiar being appealing to a specialized taste. Wordsworth considers poet a seer. He is „a man speaking to men“, and is different from others in the degree of certain qualities. He is endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, more lively knowledge of human nature, more fertile imagination than common people.

The poet“ he says, „thinks and feels in the spirit of human passions. How then can his language differ from that of all other men who feel vividly and see clearly?“ The poet is to be the guide and leader of his fellow men in their search for a mode of experience that would transform the world without falsifying it.

It is imagination that enables man to enter into and give life and significance to the world. A poet must unite the two qualities of thought and feeling. He would seem to say that the poet first resolves to use the language of real life because it is more powerful than any other.

Wordsworth defines a poet as a man of more comprehensive soul. A poet is different from other men, because he/she has a more lively sensibility. And his emotions and passions are more enthusiastic, tenderer and more powerful. He has a greater knowledge of human nature.

The poet is a 'man speaking to men'. But the poet is not only a social instrument but an individual, pleased with his own passions and volitions. The poet has a greater degree of imaginative power than other men, a power of looking from heaven to earth and earth to heaven.

The insight of the poet is higher than other people. That is why, a poet can create new ideas and present them to us with images and symbols.

The poet's curiosity and interest in life is intense. Therefore, the poet depicts human life in different ways. His responsibility is great because, what other people can't think or see, he is to present the incredible and invisible images to the readers.

Other people also feel and think that but they don't have the diversity of their sense perception as the poet has, that is why, the poet's soul is very powerful and creative. The poet must have the knowledge of human life and human society because his main study is man society. The poet seeks the truth about life and nature.

His main purpose is to give pleasure by painting out the different branches of knowledge of this vast universe.

The poet creates characters and the characters are the spokesmen of his ideas. Wordsworth's idea about the poet is romantic and democratic. He says that the poet shouldn't live in a lofty height. Rather he must be one of the common human beings.

He should feel what others feel and accordingly he should describe the common feelings and passions. Like the scientist or any other creative man the poet rejoices over his own invention because the purpose of all inventions and discoveries is to give pleasure.

The poet also describes the real incidents that we are facing daily. Moreover, by the power of his creative imagination, the poet creates significant images to sharpen our senses and sensibilities, and to enhance our knowledge about life.

Main Ideas in Brief

The subject matter of poetry is whatever that interests the human mind.

The Lyrical Ballads are written as experiments, to try out the use of the language of conversation of real people in poetry.

They are new and unusual, and will not suit the taste of most readers.

Nevertheless the readers are asked to try them with an open mind, and not to put off at first sight without giving them fair trial.

John Keats

John Keats (31 October 1795 – 23 February 1821) was an English poet prominent in the second generation of Romantic poets, with Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, although his poems were in publication for only four years before he died of tuberculosis at the age of 25.

They were indifferently received by critics in his lifetime, but his fame grew rapidly after his death.

By the end of the century he had been placed in the canon of English literature and become the inspiration for the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, with a strong influence on many writers.

Typically of the Romantics, he accentuated extreme emotion through emphasis on natural imagery.

Today his poems and letters remain among the most popular and analysed in English literature. Especially acclaimed are "Ode to a Nightingale", "Ode on a Grecian Urn", "Sleep and Poetry" and the sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer".

Keats lost most of his family members to an infectious disease, tuberculosis, that would take his own life. In the same way the COVID-19 pandemic turned the worlds of many people upside down, the poet had developed a deep sense of life's uncertainties.

Negative Capability

Negative capability is a phrase first used by Romantic poet John Keats in 1817 to explain the capacity of the greatest writers (particularly Shakespeare) to pursue a vision of artistic beauty even when it leads them into intellectual confusion and uncertainty, as opposed to a preference for philosophical certainty over artistic beauty.

It is used to characterize the capacity of the greatest writers (particularly Shakespeare) to pursue a vision of artistic beauty even when it leads them into intellectual confusion and uncertainty, as opposed to a preference for philosophical certainty over artistic beauty.

The term has been used by poets and philosophers to describe the ability of the individual to perceive, think, and operate beyond an presupposition of a predetermined capacity of the human being so as to perceive and recognize truths beyond the reach of consecutive reasoning.

Keats used the phrase only briefly in a private letter, and it became known only after his correspondence was collected and published. In a letter to his brothers, George and Thomas, on 22 December 1817, Keats described a conversation he had been engaged in a few days previously:

I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, upon various subjects; several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason— Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge. This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.

When John Keats died 200 years ago, on Feb. 23, 1821, he was just 25 years old. Despite his short life, he's still considered one of the finest poets in the English language. Yet in addition to masterpieces such as "Ode to a Nightingale" and "To Autumn," Keats' legacy includes a remarkable concept: what he called "negative capability." The idea – which centers on suspending judgment about something in order to learn more about it – remains as vital today as when he first wrote about it.

Keats coined the term negative capability in a letter he wrote to his brothers George and Tom in 1817. Inspired by Shakespeare's work, he describes it as "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."

Negative here is not pejorative. Instead, it implies the ability to resist explaining away what we do not understand.

Rather than coming to an immediate conclusion about an event, idea or person, Keats advises resting in doubt and continuing to pay attention and probe in order to understand it more completely. In this, he anticipates the work of Nobel laureate economist Daniel Kahneman, who cautions against the naïve view that "What you see is all there is."

It is also a good idea to take the time to look at matters from multiple perspectives. Shakespeare's comedies are full of mistaken identities and misconceptions, including mixed-up genders. Keats reminds us that we are most likely to gain new insights if we can stop assuming that we know everything we need to know about people by neatly shoehorning them into preconceived boxes.

Negative capability also testifies to the importance of humility, which Keats described as a "capability of submission." As Socrates indicates in Plato's "Apology," the people least likely to learn anything new are the ones who think they already know it all. By contrast, those who are willing to question their own assumptions and adopt new perspectives are in the best position to arrive at new insights.

And so our age is often described as polarized: women versus men, Blacks versus whites, liberals versus conservatives, religion versus science – and it's easy to automatically lapse into the facile assumption that all human beings can be divided into two camps. The underlying view seems to be that if only it can be determined which side of an issue a person lines up on, there's no need to look any further.

Against this tendency, Keats suggests that human beings are always more complex than any demographic category or party affiliation. He anticipates another Nobel laureate, writer and philosopher Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who wrote that instead of good guys and bad guys, the world is made up of wonderfully complex and sometimes even self-contradictory people, each capable of both good and bad.

Uncertainty can be uncomfortable. It is often quite tempting to stop pondering complex questions and jump to conclusions. But Keats counsels otherwise. By resisting the temptation to dismiss and despise others, it's possible to open the door to discovering traits in people that are worthy of sympathy or admiration.

Why 'Negative'?

In the same way that chameleons are 'negative' for colour, so Keatsian poets are negative for self and identity: they change their identity with each subject they inhabit.

The negative capability is not the exclusive preserve of poets, but can describe the pre-creative mood of any artist, scientist, or religious person. So negative capability is important as a wellspring of our humanity and an explanation of how periods of indolence give rise to periods of creativity

This concept of Negative Capability is precisely a rejection of set philosophies and preconceived systems of nature. He demanded that the poet be receptive rather than searching for fact or reason, and to not seek absolute knowledge of every truth, mystery, or doubt. It is not known why Keats settled on the phrase 'negative capability', but some scholars have hypothesized that Keats was influenced in his studies of medicine and chemistry, and that it refers to the negative pole of an electric current which is passive and receptive. In the same way that the negative pole receives the current from the positive pole, the poet receives impulses from a world that is full of mystery and doubt, which cannot be explained but which the poet can translate into art.

Criticism of Negative Capability

Stanley Fish has expressed strong reservations about the attempt to apply the concept of negative capability to social contexts. He criticized Unger's early work as being unable to chart a route for the idea to pass into reality, which leaves history closed and the individual holding onto the concept while kicking against air. Fish finds the capability Unger invokes in his early works unimaginable and unmanufacturable that can only be expressed outright in blatant speech, or obliquely in concept.

More generally, Fish finds the idea of radical culture as an oppositional ideal in which context is continuously refined or rejected impracticable at best, and impossible at worst. Unger has addressed these criticisms by developing a full theory of historical process in which negative capability is employed.

In *The Life in the Sonnets*, David Fuller makes use of negative capability in addressing the qualities and potential of writing literary criticism. A critic's experience and feelings altogether form a strong framework to expand one's ability in critical thinking, while negative capability replaces the notion of correctness in analyzing literary texts

Matthew Arnold (24 December 1822 – 15 April 1888)

Matthew Arnold was an English poet and cultural critic who worked as an inspector of schools.

Matthew Arnold has been characterized as a sage writer, a type of writer who chastises and instructs the reader on contemporary social issues. Matthew Arnold is one of the foremost critics of 19th century and is often regarded as the father of modern English criticism.

He was also an inspector of schools for thirty-five years, and supported the concept of state-regulated secondary education.

Arnold was elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1857, and he was the first in this position to deliver his lectures in English rather than in Latin

Arnold's work as a literary critic began with the 1853 "Preface to the Poems". Although Arnold's poetry received only mixed reviews and attention during his lifetime, his forays into literary criticism were more successful. Arnold is famous for introducing a methodology of literary criticism somewhere between the historicist approach common to many critics at the time and the personal essay; he often moved quickly and easily from literary subjects to political and social issues.

He was led on from literary criticism to a more general critique of the spirit of his age.

'The Study of Poetry'

Perhaps Arnold's most famous piece of literary criticism is his essay "The Study of Poetry." In this work, Arnold is fundamentally concerned with poetry's "high destiny;" he believes that "mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us" as science and philosophy will eventually prove flimsy and unstable.

Arnold's essay thus concerns itself with articulating a "high standard" and "strict judgment" in order to avoid the fallacy of valuing certain poems (and poets) too highly, and lays out a method for discerning only the best and therefore "classic" poets (as distinct from the description of writers of the ancient world). Arnold's classic poets include Milton, Shakespeare, Dante, and Homer; and the passages he presents from each are intended to show how their poetry is timeless and moving.

For Arnold, feeling and sincerity are paramount, as is the seriousness of subject: "The superior character of truth and seriousness, in the matter and substance of the best poetry, is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its style and manner." An example of an indispensable poet who falls short of Arnold's "classic" designation is Geoffrey Chaucer, who, Arnold states, ultimately lacks the "high seriousness" of classic poets.

At the root of Arnold's argument is his desire to illuminate and preserve the poets he believes to be the touchstones of literature, and to ask questions about the moral value of poetry that does not champion truth, beauty, valor, and clarity. Arnold's belief that poetry should both uplift and console drives the essay's logic and its conclusions.

The essay was originally published as the introduction to T. H. Ward's anthology, *The English Poets* (1880). It appeared later in *Essays in Criticism, Second Series*.

Touchstone Method

In *The Study of Poetry*, Arnold delineated his idea of excellent poetry and formulates a practical method for identifying the true poetry.

This method is named by him as the touchstone method. Arnold's touchstone method is a comparative method of criticism.

According to this method, the specimens of the very highest quality of poetry are compared to the specimen of the work of poetry under study and conclusions are drawn in favor or against the work.

This method requires to keep in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetical works. Even single line or selected quotations will serve the purpose.

If the other work moves us in the same way these lines and expressions do, then it is really a great work, otherwise not.

In the process of finding truly excellent poetry, Arnold wants us to avoid certain fallacies: the fallacy of historical estimate and the fallacy of personal estimate.

Both in Arnold's view a reflection of inadequate and improper response to literature.

According to him, both the historical significance of a literary work as well as its significance to the critic in personal terms tend to obliterate the real esteem of that work as in itself really is.

Historical judgements are fallacious because one may regard ancient poets with excessive veneration and personal judgements are fallacious because we are biased towards a contemporary poet.

Real estimate can be attained by learning to feel and enjoy the best work of the real classics and thus to appreciate wide difference between it and all lesser work. If one wants to know whether any poetic work is of a high quality, he should compare it with the specimens of poetry of the highest quality.

According to him, the most useful method of discovering the worth of poetry is "to have in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry".

The real classics can serve as the touchstone by which the merit of contemporary poetic work can be tested. This is the central idea of Arnold's touchstone method.

High Seriousness

"The Study of Poetry" is a milestone in the history of English literary criticism. In this critical essay, Matthew Arnold gives to poetry a very high position. He is confident of the high of poetry.

According to him, poetry attains the place of religion. It is able to make room in the heart of man. It is an application of ideas to human life. The best kind of poetry is a criticism of life. It is an interpretation of life. It has the power to console, sustain and form us. At the same time, it delights us too.

Thus Arnold sets high standards for poetry. He proclaims that truth and high seriousness are two essential qualities of excellent poetry. He tries to represent them as a proper standard for evaluation of poetry.

Poetic truth and poetic beauty mean matter and manner respectively. They are later on called high seriousness. In "The Study of Poetry", Arnold expresses his idea of truth and high seriousness as a proper standard for evaluation of poetry.

For judging poetry, the significance of his twin requirements of truth and high seriousness is really undeniable. He opines that the best poetry is characterized by truth and high seriousness.

Arnold says that the substance and matter of the best poetry acquire their special character through an eminent degree truth and seriousness. Thus he has imposed the importance of truth and seriousness in poetry to a great extent. He says in this respect----- ".....the substance and matter of the best poetry acquire their special character from possessing in an eminent degree truth and seriousness."

Considering the substances and matter of poetry, Arnold is directed by Aristotle's observation. Aristotle regards that the superiority of poetry over history consists in its higher truth and higher seriousness.

The greatest poetry has this truth and seriousness to the utmost. The best poetry is also characterized by a superiority of diction and style. Matter and manner are closely connected with it. The superiority of truth and seriousness is inseparable from the superiority of diction and style.

Thus if a poet wants to be regarded as a classic, he should fulfil these conditions. According to Arnold, the best poetry is born of sincerity of feelings and emotion.

It is characterized by high seriousness, truth of representation and excellence of diction. By high seriousness, the critic means the grand style which is in poetry where a serious subject is treated in a simple and intense manner.

Arnold has a very high opinion of Chaucer. It is Chaucer who establishes romantic poetry in England. Chaucer is the father of the splendid English poetry. His poetry has largeness, freedom and kindness. Arnold thus showers high praise on Chaucer. But surprisingly he also remarks that Chaucer is not a classic. He argues that this immortal poet lacks high seriousness. Chaucer does not have high seriousness which Homer, Shakespeare, Milton and many others had.

Dryden and Pope have written in verse. They may be masters of the art of versification. Their application of ideas to life may be powerful. But it is not poetical. Arnold claims that their criticism of life has no high seriousness. He very boldly says that they are not classics of English poetry. They are classic of English prose.

Arnold exposes the application to ideas of life in the poetry of Robert Burns. Truth of matter and style is found in his poetry. But according to Arnold, Burns is not a classic. Like Chaucer, Burns lacks seriousness in his poetry. Arnold admits that like Chaucer, the view of life of Burns is large, free and shrewd. But we do not find the accent of high seriousness in Burns.

However, Arnold is a true disciple of Aristotle who considers truth and high seriousness as two essential qualities of excellent poetry. The superior character of truth and seriousness in the matter and substance of the best poetry is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its style and manner. If the substance and subject-matter of poetry contain the quality high seriousness, grand style will automatically follow. At last, we may say that Arnold's twin requirements of truth and high seriousness may be taken as the proper standards for judging poetry.

Grand Style

Highest poetry and highest poetic pleasure result from the whole and not from separate parts, from the harmony of matter and manner and not from manner alone. No unworthy subject can be made delightful by an excellent treatment. Arnold says that with the Greeks the action was the first consideration, with us, attention is fixed mainly on the value of individual thoughts and images. They regarded the whole, we regard the parts. Greeks were also the highest model of expression, the masters of the grand style. That was because they kept the expression simple and subordinated to the action, and because their expression drew its force directly from the action.

The Ancients as safe models: According to Arnold, the ancients are the perfect guides or models to be followed by the poets. Shakespeare is not a safe guide, for although he has excellence of subject, he is unable to say a thing plainly even when the action demands direct expression. From the ancients, the poet will learn how superior is the effect of one moral impression left by a great action treated as a whole to the effect produced by the most striking single thought.

The Grand style: Arnold says that the ancients were the masters of the 'grand style'. The grand style arises in poetry when 'a noble nature, poetically gifted treats with simplicity or severity, a serious subject'. So, for the grand style, there must be 1) nobility of soul 2) subject or action chosen must be serious enough 3) the treatment should be severe or simple. Homer, Dante and Milton were masters of it, but most English poets lacked it. Modern poets like Keats do not have the shaping power, they have short passages of excellence but not the beauty of the whole. In Arnold's view, only poetry modeled on the Ancients can serve as an antidote to philistinism. Arnold's theory of poetry is to be understood as a counterblast to romantic individualism, subjectivity, and contempt of authority.

Function/definition of poetry:

Arnold is confident that poetry has a great future. It is in poetry that our race will find an ever surer stay. Poetry acc to Arnold, is capable of higher uses, interpreting life for us, consoling us, and sustaining us, that is, poetry will replace religion and philosophy.

Arnold further declares that 'poetry is a criticism of life under conditions fixed for such a criticism by laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty, the spirit of our age will find...as time goes on, and other helps fail, its consolation and stay.'

Poetry as a criticism of life: Arnold explains criticism of life as the application of noble and profound ideas to life, and 'laws of poetic truth and beauty' as 'truth and seriousness of matter' and 'felicity and perfection of diction and manner' Arnold believes that poetry does not represent life as it is, rather the poet adds something to it from his own noble nature and this contributes to his criticism of life. Poetry makes men moral, better and nobler, not by direct teaching but by appealing to the soul, to the whole of man.

Subjects of Poetry

Only those should be taken as subjects of poetry which can impart the highest pleasure.

Arnold points out that it is not necessary for modern poets to choose modern subjects as in the modern age there is too much of philistinism and vulgarization of values.

The poets should choose ancient subjects, those which were chosen by Homer and the other Greek Masters. In short, poets should choose actions that please always and please all.

Actions that are of this nature 'most powerfully appeal to those elementary feelings which are independent of time' and hence are the fittest subjects for poetry.

It is immaterial whether such subjects are ancient or modern so long as they fulfill this principle.

But an age wanting in moral grandeur, says Arnold with reference to his age, can hardly supply such subjects, and so the poets must turn to ancient themes.

<https://www.lsj.org/literature/essays/arnold>