



**TEZPUR
UNIVERSITY**



MASTER OF ARTS

ENGLISH

**CENTRE FOR OPEN AND
DISTANCE LEARNING**

MEG 203: LITERARY CRITICISM & THEORY I

BLOCK II

CENTRE FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

TEZPUR UNIVERSITY (A CENTRAL UNIVERSITY)

TEZPUR, ASSAM -784028

INDIA

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MEG 203: Literary Criticism & Theory I



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MEG 203: LITERARY CRITICISM & THEORY I

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BLOCK II

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PREFACE TO SHAKESPEARE
(SELECTIONS)

UNIT 8: JOHNSON AND NEO-CLASSICISM

UNIT 9: SHAKESPEARE AND THE UNITIES

UNIT 10 : JOHN DRYDEN: *AN ESSAY ON DRAMATIC
POESIE* (SELECTIONS)

MODULE IV: S.T.COLERIDGE AND
WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

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(SELECTIONS)

MODULE V: MATTHEW ARNOLD AND F.
R. LEAVIS

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INTRODUCTION

In Block-I you have been introduced to some of the foundational classical critical theories of Plato, Aristotle, Longinus and an Elizabethan English critic Sir Philip Sidney. By now you have been able to form a reasonably sound idea on the basic concepts of literary criticism and the personalities behind them. Block-II will introduce you to a new set of critical concepts developed in the subsequent centuries in the history of literary criticism.

Block-II consists of three Modules—**Module-III (Unit-8, 9, and 10), Module- IV (Unit-11 and 12) and Module- V (Unit-13 and 14).**

Module-III, Unit-8 discusses one of the most respected neoclassic critics **Dr. Samuel Johnson and Neoclassicism** and some of his iconic literary works. This unit will also introduce you to his age by giving a comprehensive picture of the age he lived and the literary trends prevalent in the Neoclassic Age.

Unit-9 discusses the views of Dr. Samuel Johnson on William Shakespeare as an Elizabethan dramatist as articulated in his *Preface to Shakespeare*. He presents his evaluation of Shakespeare from a neoclassic point of view in this iconic essay.

Unit-10 will acquaint you with another neoclassic critic John Dryden and his much discussed literary work *An Essay of Dramatic Poesie*. In this unit attempt has been made to introduce you to the critical ideas as enumerated by Dryden in *An Essay of Dramatic Poesie* and assess him as a neoclassical critic.

Module-IV consists of two units (**Unit-11 and 12**) dealing with two of the preeminent Romantic poet and critics-- Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth.

Unit-11 discusses selections from Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. This unit will give you an idea about the concepts like

primary and secondary imagination and fancy, the fundamental ideas associated with Romantic poetry. The unit also discusses the key concepts relating to the art and craft of poetry as outlined by Coleridge in the selections from *Biographia Literaria*.

Unit-12 deals with the iconic Romantic figure and eminent critic William Wordsworth and his **Preface to *Lyrical Ballads***. This unit will acquaint you with Wordsworth's philosophy of Poetry and the Poetry making process. This unit will also make you familiar with Wordsworth and his concepts of English Romantic criticism.

Module-V consists of two units (**Unit-13 and 14**).**Unit-13** discusses the renowned Victorian poet and critic Mathew Arnold and his *The Study of Poetry*. This unit will introduce you to Victorian critical trends and concepts. You will not only be introduced to Mathew Arnold, the critic but also to the cultural and social background of the Victorian Age that shaped his critical ideas.

Module-V Unit-14 deals with the modern critic F. R. Leavis' canonical text "*Literary Criticism and Philosophy*". This unit will acquaint you with the social and cultural background of the Modern Age and its influence in moulding the critical concepts of Leavis. This unit also makes an analysis of the views of Leavis on tradition and text as outlined in the text "Literary Criticism and Philosophy".

This Self Learning Material on MEG 203 presents a comprehensive study of literary criticism beginning from the classicists like Plato and Aristotle to a modernist like F.R.Leavis. Hope you will be immensely benefitted by this study material in grasping the complexities of literary criticism.

MODULE III: SAMUEL JOHNSON: *PREFACE TO SHAKESPEARE*
(*SELECTIONS*)

UNIT 8: JOHNSON AND NEOCLASSICISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

8.0 Introduction

8.1 Learning Objectives

8.2 Samuel Johnson's life and Works

8.3 Neo-Classical Period

8.3.1 Characteristics of Neoclassicism

8.4 Summing up

8.5 Assessment Questions

8.6 References and Recommended Readings

8.0 INTRODUCTION

Dr. Samuel Johnson was one of the significant figures of neoclassic period who had dominated the latter half of eighteenth century to such an extent that the period (1744-1784) is known as the Age of Johnson in the history of English literature. Neo-classicism is a reaction in the direction of order and restraint that came after the Renaissance which was a period of exploration and expansiveness. This reaction developed in France in the mid-seventeenth century and in England thirty years later and it dominated European literature until the last part of the eighteenth century.

In fact Neo-Classic criticism has two phases. At the beginning of this era stands John Dryden (1631-1700) and at the end of it there is Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784). In its first phase, i.e., during the Restoration age (1660- 1700) which is presided over by John Dryden, Neo-Classicism was liberal and moderate. But in the second phase, i.e. during first six or seven decades of the eighteenth century it becomes more and more

restrained and slavish. Alexander Pope, Joseph Addison and Dr. Johnson are the leading critics of this second phase.

8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this unit you will find a discussion on Samuel Johnson and the concept of neoclassicism. At the end of this unit you will be able to

- familiarize yourself with the life and works of Samuel Johnson.
- acquaint yourself with the socio-political background of the Neo-Classical Age
- evaluate Johnson as a Neo-Classical critic
- understand the concept of Neoclassicism.
- identify the drawbacks in Neo-Classical criticism.

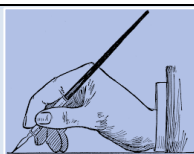
8.2 DR SAMUEL JOHNSON'S LIFE AND WORKS

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), the oft-quoted biographer, poet and lexicographer was the literary dictator of his era. He remains the central figure of what is still called the Age of Johnson — the period between 1750 and 1798 when a wave of Neo-classicism was slowly giving way to the emerging trends of Romantic Movement. Dr. Johnson was born in Lichfield, Staffordshire, in 1709, but his mother was unable to nurse him. He was given a substitute nurse from whom he contracted a serious illness, scrofula, a lymph infection. As a result, he was partially blind and deaf, and his face was scarred. Besides this, later he contracted smallpox and that left terrible scars on his body as well. However, his physical barrier could not stop him from achieving success in his life. It was his strong will power and determination that contributed to his success.

Samuel Johnson began writing poetry at an early age of 15, but throughout his lifetime, he wrote a great variety of works. For

instance, he wrote plays, such as *Irene* and short biographies and articles. But, at that time Johnson's writing could not bring money that the Johnson's family needed to survive. Most of his early works, including the *Parliamentary Debates* (1744) and the powerful poem *London* (1738) were written under fictitious names. This was unfortunate, because Johnson was not establishing a reputation for himself. He then tried to become a lawyer without a law degree and wasn't accepted. Finally, he decided to write a dictionary.

Actually, the time between 1748 and 1760 is a crucial period from which Johnson emerged as the supreme moralist of modern times, as one who have become a part of the conscience of mankind. During this period Johnson published the powerful poem *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, (1749) the periodical papers *The Rambler* (and later *The Adventurer* and *The Idler*), the philosophical tale *Rasselas* (1759) and his masterpiece *The Dictionary*. These twelve years were the high point of Johnson's writing career. The second peak arrived in 1777 when Johnson agreed with booksellers to write prefaces to works of English poets that led to publication of *The Lives of Poets* (1779-1781).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Discuss major writings of Dr. Samuel Johnson.

The Vanity of Human Wishes

This remarkable satirical poem published in 1748 ended Johnson's days as an unknown scribbler. It was published, like all Johnson's work, anonymously. The poem epitomizes Johnson's life philosophy, his belief in the inability of mankind to create a new world. Yet, this realistic poem was not tarnished with cynicism. It recognized the burden of life's struggles and the value of its pleasures. It deals with the sorrows of old age. Soon this poem gave Johnson his public voice that was regularly heard in *The Rambler*

The Rambler

The Rambler contained more than two hundred periodical essays that Johnson began to write in 1750. It was published twice a week—every Tuesday and Saturday—consistently for two years. The essays were published by Edward Cave, who paid him a weekly salary of four guineas, and were again intended as a serious moral effort.

The Rambler is often thought a sober, moral work, with only flashes of humour. There are a fair number of light and amusing essays, though. Johnson was quite willing to laugh at himself. There are amusing commentaries on the use of philosophical words, disappointments of marriage, faulty education, prostitution, disappointed fortune hunters, etc.

The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia

This novel he wrote in 1759, and declared that he had never reread it, was much admired by eighteenth-century readers. It was translated into more languages than any other of his works. In fact, the title was *The Prince of Abissinia, A Tale*. The name 'Rasselas' never appeared in the title of any editions published during Johnson's life. Johnson took the storyline inspiration from Voltaire's *Candide* (1759).

It is a simple story with little plot and rather episodic in form. A prince named Rasselas is confined in a kind of earthly paradise in the highlands of Ethiopia. In spite, or because, of having everything he desires, he is bored. He wishes to see more of the world. Eventually, he, his sister Nekayah, her maid Pekuah, and a philosopher Imlac are able to escape through a tunnel. They make their way to the great city of Cairo, where they set about observing real life. What they are most eager to find is the true source of human happiness. They gradually examine everything which is supposed to bring satisfaction but nothing proves to be the perfect solution. In the end, they decide to return back to their home in the Happy Valley in Abyssinia.

It was not a book in which Johnson himself took much pride. He said that he put it together, hurriedly and casually, to earn the thirty pounds he then needed to pay the expenses of his mother's funeral

The Dictionary of English Language

The need for an English dictionary had been obvious for a long time. There had been many proposals and plans, and by 1736 there was available a huge *Dictionarium Britannicus* by Nathan Bailey, but he and others left much to be desired. Therefore, Johnson was approached by a group of publishers and in 1746 he agreed to prepare a full dictionary of the English language which took many years to complete. He finished amassing his list of the English word stock in 1750. He did not publish the completed work until 1755 when Oxford University granted him a degree. One of his constant problems was money—how to keep himself alive and also pay regular wages to his helpers. The contract for the dictionary was worth £1,575. But at that time there was no copyright law so Johnson never received any additional money after completing the dictionary which continued to sell extremely well. The book, which went into four editions during Johnson's

lifetime, was to remain the standard work, an unrivalled repository of the English language for the next century until the first unbound editions of *The Oxford English Dictionary* in 1884.

The Edition of Shakespeare

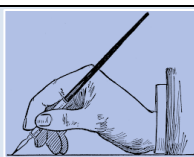
The pension Johnson had received in 1762 had freed him from the necessity of writing for a living, but it had not released him from his obligation to complete the Shakespeare edition, for which he had taken money from subscribers. The edition finally appeared in eight volumes in 1765. Johnson edited and annotated the text and wrote a preface, which is his greatest work of literary criticism. In his “Preface” Johnson addressed several critical issues. For one, he vigorously defends Shakespeare against charges of failing to adhere to the neoclassical doctrine of the dramatic unities of time, place, and action. Johnson alertly observes that time and place are subservient to the mind: since the audience does not confound stage action with reality, it has no trouble with a shift in scene from Rome to Alexandria. Some critics had made similar points before, but Johnson’s defense was decisive. He also questions the need for purity of dramatic genre.

The Lives of the Poets

In 1777, Johnson was commissioned to write brief lives as prefaces to a new collection of works of popular poets. He produced instead more than 50 biographies of English writers in vogue during the second half of the 18th century. While many of these authors are seldom read today, quite a few important figures are included. John Milton, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Thomas Gray, and Abraham Cowley head the list of poets. Johnson also includes men who wrote poetry but who are acclaimed today for works in other genres. They are- essayist Joseph Addison, satirist Jonathan Swift, and dramatists William Congreve and John Gay. The lives are ordered chronologically by date of death, not birth, and range in length from a few pages to an entire

volume. Johnson's personal dislike of some of the poets whose lives he wrote, such as John Milton and Thomas Gray, has been used as a basis for arguing that he was prejudiced against their poetry, but too much has been made of this. His opinions of a poet and his work diverge at times as, for example, in the case of Collins. Johnson liked the man but disapproved of his poetic manner: He was justly proud of *The Life of Cowley*, especially of its lengthy discussion of the 17th-century Metaphysical poets, of whom Cowley may be considered the last representative. *The Life of Pope* is at once the longest and the best. Johnson divided his biographies into three distinct parts: a narrative of the poet's life, a presentation of his character (summarized traits), and a critical assessment of his main poems

Dr. Samuel Johnson's works have been a never-ending source of information, advice, opinions and views. For generation after generation they have provided intimate personal reflections and philosophical ideas to debate. Today, according to *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Johnson is the second most-quoted Englishman. Johnson's life inspired many biographies. Among them the most famous was by his great friend, the Scottish lawyer James Boswell, which was published as *The Life of Samuel Johnson* in 1791.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. In which year Johnson's *Dictionary of English language* was published?

2. *The Rambler* was published twice a week-- mention those two days of the week.

3. How many poets' biographies are included in Johnson's *Lives of Poets*?

4. In which year Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* was published?

LET US STOP AND THINK



James Boswell (1740-1795) was the 9th Laird (a Scottish land owner) of Auchinleck. He was the Scottish biographer of his friend Samuel Johnson

which is considered to be one of the greatest biographies ever written in English language. Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* was published in 1791 and soon after its publication it became a very popular biography. One of the reasons of the biography's popularity was that Boswell had touched upon the very minute personal details of Johnson. He had taken utmost care not to make the biography a dry and detached account of another person's life but had attempted to portray Dr. Johnson as a complete man giving details of his personal as well as professional life. Reading the following excerpt you can form an opinion of Boswell's portrayal of Johnson.

...that strange figure which is as familiar to us as the figures of those among whom we have been brought up, the gigantic body, the huge massy face, seamed with the scars of disease, the brown coat, the black worsted stockings, the grey wig with the scorched foretop, the dirty hands, the nails bitten and pared to the quick. We see the eyes and mouth moving with convulsive twitches; we see the heavy form rolling; we hear it puffing; and then comes the "Why sir!" and "What then, sir?" and the "No, sir!" and the "You don't see your way through the question, sir!"

(*Life of Samuel Johnson*)

8.3 NEOCLASSICAL PERIOD

Neoclassic Period in England is generally agreed to have spanned from after the Restoration till the last decade of the eighteenth century. The neo-classicism that was born with the Restoration Age remained as the ruling force in English literature for the next century. The Restoration literary scene was characterised by a revival of the classics. At the Restoration the break with Elizabethan age was almost absolute. The Restoration writers looked to the Latin poets and dramatists for inspiration. They evolved certain rules based on their study of classics and followed them as clearly as they could. The authors of this neo-classic period exhibit a strong traditionalism, which was joined, to a distrust of radical innovation and was evidenced above all in their great respect for classical writers, who were thought to have achieved excellence and established the enduring models, in all the major literary genres. So the authors are known as Neo-classicist.

It is interesting to note that this period of over one hundred years from 1660 to 1789 is variously known as Augustan Age, the Classical age or pseudo- classical age or the age of Neo-Classicism. The Augustan Age refers to the golden age of Latin poetry during the reign of the mighty emperor Augustus of Rome. The history of Roman literature of that period is bright with rich poetry and shines brightly with such immortal names as Ovid, Virgil, Horace and many such other eminent literary persons. Of course, the English literature of the Restoration and the early decades of the 18th century is found mainly inspired by those Roman authors. This is particularly discernible in the English poetry of the eighteenth century. As a result, this literary age is found so styled in the presumption of its close resemblance to the grand Latin literature of the time of Augustus. The poets of the age appear to have fancied themselves as a second Virgil, a second Horace, a second Ovid and to have as much assured positions in

the society as those Latin masters. That is the reason for which this age is known as Augustan age. On the other hand, though the writers supposed that their poetry had the same qualities as the poetry of ancient Greece and Rome as they were strictly adhering to the rules laid down by the ancient classicists, in reality the poetry of the period did not have the qualities of classical poetry.

In fact, the poets do not really follow the rules of the ancients. In the classical poetry a harmonious balance was maintained between poetic expression and poetic substance. But in the poetry of this age too much attention was given to expression at the cost of substance. Hence the age is not really classical and is rightly called pseudo- classical and Neo-classical.

8.3.1 Characteristics of Neoclassicism

Neo –classicism or Pseudo- Classicism is the result of a number of factors working together. Reaction against the fantastic excess of the metaphysical, the influence of the French writers and critics, the study of the ancients and great admiration for them- all contributed to the growth of Neo-classicism. The chief characteristics of this school are best represented by its poetry. They can be summarized as follows:

Formal Perfection

Neo-classical literature is characterized by formal perfection. The poets care more for the perfection of their language than for their subject-matter. They revise and re-revise what they write and try to say what they have to say in the fewest possible as well as the best possible words. Coarse, vulgar and low words are avoided and loftiness and grandeur are imparted to the language of the poetry. It gives birth to an artificial poetic diction and shows that the language of poetry is cut off from the language of everyday use.

Rational Outlook

Neoclassicism marks a new movement from the romanticism of the Renaissance to the social and rational outlook

of classicism. The age seems to reject extravagant fancies and accept solid intellectualism. Thought, wit and other intellectual qualities seem to be the more domineering forces in place of imagination and impulsiveness so much noticeable in Renaissance literature.

Poetry of the City

The poetry of this age is exclusively the poetry of the city. It deals with the life of the court and courtly circles; that is, with the life of the fashionable upper classes of the city of London. It is as artificial and trivial as the artificial and frivolous life it deals with. It has no love for humble humanity and for lower creatures.

Lack of beauty of Nature

The poetry of this age has nothing to do with the beauty of nature. The poets rarely take us out of the suffocating atmosphere of the city into the refreshing atmosphere of the countryside. Dryden has no love at all for external scenic nature, and in the hands of Pope even nature becomes unnatural and artificial.

Imitation of the Latin Masters

The literature of this age is found to follow, rather imitate the great Latin masters. The literary model or pattern, set up in the new age, belonged to the tradition of the critical and satirical writings of the Augustan age of Rome. The poets of this period try to write according to certain rules supposed to have been laid down by those ancients. They look down upon the great English poets with indifference, even contempt. They insist that rules laid down by the ancient writers and interpreted by the French critics of the day should be followed correctly and strictly. It results in the repression of emotion and imagination and in correctness and elegance of expression. Instead of spontaneity, we get an artificial poetry correct in diction and versification. Indeed, correctness is regarded as the supreme virtue of a poet.

Philosophical Comment

In Neoclassical literature there is much reflection and philosophical comment on man and his life. But their moralising is much superficial, lacking in the depth and originality. The poets moralise on life, but they rarely have anything new or significant to say.

Heroic Couplet

With a few exceptions, the poetry of the age is written in only one metre, the Heroic couplet that is two iambic pentameter lines rhyming together. The pseudo –classical couplet is a closed couplet in which the sense ends with each couplet. Edmund Waller brought into use this heroic couplet. Dryden used it for all purposes, and gave it an additional vigour, a powerful elegance, a noble rhythm and beauty. Pope perfected it and used it with great material skill.

Satire

The mark of Neoclassicism is evident in the predominance of satirical literature. The satirical and didactic tone of Horace and the satirical writings of Juvenal are found imitated and represented, as faithfully as possible, with the interpretation of wit and fun to the maximum extent. The main poetical authors of the age-Dryden and Pope are great satirists-who have established the satire as a potent literary genre.

Though neoclassical literature fails to live up to the great tradition of English literary men, particularly the English poets of the golden past of the Elizabethan age, still it remains outstanding in several specific qualities. First, it has a lively and real social account that is both entertaining and thought provoking. Second, antithesis and rapidity mark its metrical pattern. The former aids to its satiric strength and the latter, its narrative power. Finally, as mentioned already, there is the complete correctness in neo-classical poetry.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Why does neo –classical age is also known as Augustan age?

2. What is Pseudo classicism?

3. Mention the characteristics of neoclassicism.

8.4 SUMMING UP

To sum up this unit we can say that *Neoclassicism* is the movement in the history of English literature, which laid immense emphasis on revival of the classical spirit during the period between 1660 and 1789 in the age of Dryden and Johnson. It is a prototype of classicism. Writers of this period immensely endeavoured to follow the footprints of the writers of the period of Augustus, emperor of Rome, which produced unparalleled writers as Horace, Virgil and Ovid. That is the reason; the age of neoclassicism is also called Augustan Age. Rationalism, didacticism, realism, objectivity, satiric and argumentative tone characterize the literature of this period.

Dr. Samuel Johnson is one of the major figures of the late Neo-classical period. Johnson is usually less dogmatic and more eclectic than Pope and Dryden in his assertion of the neoclassical values. Moreover, sometimes Johnson's claims are contradictory: for instance, he wants at once realism and poetic justice on stage. He is not a consistent theorist, but rather a practical critic of penetrating insights, honesty and common sense. In Johnson we witness both the dead weight of a tradition and the signs that a new conception of literature is emerging. Johnson had a strongly classical mind, and a great desire for order and coherence. Among his different writing *The Dictionary of the English Language* is a unique one. In fact, it was the first ambitious attempt at an English lexicon. Amidst his works of criticism *The Lives of Poets* and the *Preface to Shakespeare* are the principal contributions. However, in *The Lives of the Poets* Johnson gives less space to criticism and more to biography. The *Preface to Shakespeare* is remarkable for its honesty in recognizing Shakespeare's faults and defending him against the charge of ignoring classical unities.



8.5 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Give a brief account of Johnson's life and his contribution in the field of English literature.
2. What is Neoclassicism? What are the basic features of neoclassical literature?



8.6 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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UNIT 9: SHAKESPEARE AND THE UNITIES (SELECTIONS FROM PREFACE TO SHAKESPEARE)

UNIT STRUCTURE

9.0 Introduction to *Preface to Shakespeare*

9.1 Learning Objectives

9.2 Merits of Shakespeare's plays.

9.3 Demerits of Shakespeare's plays

9.4 Dr. Johnson's defence of Tragicomedy

9.5 Johnson's defence of Shakespeare's Neglect of the 'Three Unities'.

9.6 Johnson as a Critic of Shakespeare

9.7 Summing Up

9.8 Assessment Questions

9.9 References and Recommended Readings

9.0 INTRODUCTION: PREFACE TO SHAKESPEARE

Dr. Samuel Johnson's *Preface to the Plays of William Shakespeare* (1765) has been regarded as a classic document of English literary criticism. In it Johnson puts forward his editorial principles and gives an appreciative analysis of the excellence and defects of the work of the great Elizabethan dramatist. In an age of classicism he dismisses the classical concepts of the unities of Time and Place. He tests Shakespeare by fact and experience, by test of time, nature and universality. He defends the genre of tragicomedy by terming them as just representations of life neither comedies nor tragedies. He finds Shakespeare great because he holds a mirror to life and manners. Many of his points have become fundamental creed of modern criticism. Some give greater insight into Johnson's prejudices than into Shakespeare's genius. The ringing prose of the

Preface adds weight to the views of its author. Perhaps no other document displays the character of eighteenth century literary criticism better than Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare*. He had spent nine laborious years before completing his *Preface*. The significance of the *Preface to Shakespeare*, however, goes beyond its contributions to Shakespeare's scholarship. First, it is the most significant practical application of a critical principle that Johnson adopted. His systematic attempt to measure Shakespeare against others, both classical and contemporary, became the model. Second, the *Preface to Shakespeare* exemplifies Johnson's belief that good criticism can be produced only after good scholarship has been practiced. The critic who wishes to judge an author's originality or an author's contributions to the tradition must first practice literary reading and research in order to understand what has been borrowed and what has been invented.

The structure of the *Preface* can be divided into seven parts:

- (a) Shakespeare as a poet of nature
- (b) Defence of mixing comedy and tragedy by Shakespeare
- (c) The Shakespearean style
- (d) Short-comings of Shakespeare
- (e) Defence of the violation of the unities of time and place by Shakespeare
- (f) History and Shakespeare
- (g) Johnson's opinion of his own editorial methods as well as of others.

9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this unit you will find a discussion on Samuel Johnson's seminal essay *Preface to Shakespeare*. After going through this unit you will be able to:

- Read critically the essay which shaped Neo-classical criticism in England

- Understand the basic concepts that Johnson put forward in his essay.
- Evaluate Shakespeare as perceived by Johnson.

LET US STOP AND THINK



Johnson in fact had a plan to edit and publish a complete volume of dramatic works of William Shakespeare. He first conceived this idea in 1745 when he published a pamphlet titled *Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth*. After this he tried to publish an edited volume of Shakespearean plays but could not do so because of copyright issues. However, in 1756 he made a second attempt to publish an edition of dramatic works of Shakespeare and published *Proposals for Printing by Subscription the Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare, Corrected and Illustrated by Samuel Johnson*. After nine years of the proposal the set of eight volumes of edited works of Shakespeare appeared in 1765. Johnson wrote a 72 page Preface to this collection of Shakespearean plays which is considered as an outstanding work of neoclassical criticism.

9.2 MERITS OF SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

Dr. Johnson brings forth the excellences or qualities of Shakespeare's plays in his *Preface to Shakespeare* which are discussed here:

A poet of nature

According to Johnson the key to Shakespeare's greatness lies in the fact that he is the best poet of nature. Shakespeare holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and life. His characters are also the products of common humanity. They are depicted in such a way that the characters are representative of nature in general of all people of all over the countries. In other

words, they have a universal appeal. They speak and act according to those general passions and principles which are experienced by all mankind. It is said that a character depicted by Shakespeare is not an individual but a species: “In the writing of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species”

Realism

Johnson admires Shakespeare’s plays because of its realistic qualities. Though many of Shakespeare’s plots are improbable, the truth of human nature depicted by him can never be questioned. Characters like Hamlet, Macbeth, Cordelia, Desdemona, Rosalind, Portia, Shylock, Falstaff and many others are unforgettable because of their universal appeal. In fact, Shakespeare’s plays would give way to a true and sincere representation of real sentiments of life. Johnson opines that Shakespeare does not depict fabulous persons in his plays. Thus, there is no exaggeration in his character portrayal. The speakers in the plays are men who act and speak as the reader thinks that he would himself have spoken or acted on particular occasion.

A master of Language

In the works of other dramatists we find characters who do not belong to the real world and so they converse in an unfamiliar language. But in Shakespeare, it is the incident that produces the dialogues. It is delivered with ease and simplicity, so that one does not attribute it to fiction. Instead, it seems that the dialogues have been drawn from common conversation through careful selection.

Originality and universality of characters

Shakespeare was most original in his portrayal of characters. Johnson says that no writer before, with the exception of Chaucer, had portrayed human character in such a realistic manner. Shakespeare gathered his knowledge of human nature and human character from his own personal observation. He was able to acquire an exact knowledge of many modes of life and many

kinds of temperament. This knowledge enabled him to portray multiplicity of characters and also helped him in revealing distinctions between man and man. In this respect, he had none to imitate, though he himself was imitated by all succeeding writers. Again, it is because of the universality of his characterization that Shakespeare's plays are full of domestic wisdom. The famous speeches of Brutus and Antony in *Julius Caesar*, Hamlet's soliloquy "to be or not to be", the "Quality of Mercy" speech of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, and the scene of Othello's murder of Desdemona and many such heart touching dramatic portrayals really leave an indelible mark in the hearts of the readers.

No undue prominence to the passion of love

According to Johnson, Shakespeare does not give undue prominence to the passion of love in his plays. Dramatists in general give an excessive importance to the theme of love. But Shakespeare knew that love is only one of many passions of mankind. It is interesting to note that Shakespeare wrote many plays in which love interest hardly has any place. Some of the examples of such plays are – *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus* etc.

Defence of the mingling of the Comic and Tragic

Shakespeare's plays depict real human nature, which represents good and evil, joy and sorrow- mingled in various degrees and endless combinations. Not a single Greek or Roman author attempted to write both tragedy and comedy either in separate plays or in the same composition. Shakespeare is a dramatist who possesses the power to fill us with sorrow and also to evoke laughter. And he is a dramatist who shows this two-fold capacity not in separate plays but together in play after play. Almost all his plays are divided between serious and comic characters, with the result that they sometimes produce seriousness

and sometimes laughter. Elucidating this aspect of Shakespearean plays Johnson writes:

Shakespeare's plays are neither tragedies nor comedies but just representations exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow.

Use of puns

Johnson criticizes that Shakespeare has made use of quibbles or puns in his plays. But he also admits that Shakespeare's puns are not only amusing but also full of moral percept. So, this also includes in his merit.

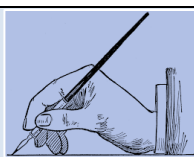
Unity of Action

Johnson points out that in Shakespeare's plays one can easily mark out the Unity of Action, though he has not followed Unity of Time and Place. Shakespeare has maintained that unity what Aristotle requires "a beginning, middle and an end"

Shakespeare's natural genius for comedy

Shakespeare wrote his plays in accordance with his natural temperament. He did not know the rules of dramatic writing. His comedy gives us pleasure by the thoughts and the language. His tragedy gives pleasure by incidents and action. His tragedy seems to be the result of his skill; his comedy is the product of his instinct. Shakespeare seems to have obtained his comic dialogue from the common intercourse of life, and not from the language of polite society or from that of the learned people who tend to depart from the established forms of speech.

Thus, Johnson has shown the excellences of Shakespeare's plays which encourage the readers to appreciate them.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Mention after Johnson the merits of Shakespeare as a dramatist.

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9.3 DEMERITS IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

The many excellences of Shakespeare must not blind us to the fact that his works have numerous faults also. Johnson has pointed out Shakespeare's faults as follows:

Sacrifice of virtue to convenience

According to Johnson, Shakespeare's first defect is that "he sacrifices virtue to convenience." Shakespeare tries more to please his audience than to instruct them. He does so to such an extent that he seems "to write without any moral purpose". The precepts and axioms of his plays were written casually by him. He makes no just distribution of good or evil. He carries his characters indifferently through right or wrong, and at the end dismisses them without further attention, leaving their examples to operate by chance. This fault is serious because it is always a writer's duty to make the world morally better.

Loose Plots

The second fault of Shakespeare as pointed out by Johnson is his loose plots. Shakespeare's plots are often loosely developed. Just a little more attention would have been enough to improve them. He neglects opportunities of giving instruction or pleasure which the development of the plot provides to him. In many of his plays, the latter part does not receive much of his attention. This charge is certainly true. For example, in *Julius Caesar*, there is a clear decline of dramatic interest in its second half. At the same time, it must be pointed out that in certain plays Shakespeare

shows a perfect sense of construction. Moulton, for instance, has brought out at length the very skilful interweaving of the main plot and the sub-plots in *The Merchant of Venice*.

No distinction of Time and Place

The next charge of Johnson is that Shakespeare shows no regard to distinction of time or place. He attributes to a certain nation or a certain period of history the customs, practices and opinions of another. Thus, we find Hector quoting Aristotle in *Troilus and Cressida*. Another example of such violation of chronology is the love of Theseus and Hippolyta combined with the Gothic mythology of fairies in *A Mid Summer Night's Dream*. However, Johnson admits that Shakespeare was not the only violator of chronology in his time. Sir Philip Sidney is guilty of the same fault in his *Arcadia*.

The Coarseness of Conversation

Johnson opines that Shakespeare's comic scenes are seldom very successful when representing witty exchanges between characters. In such scenes the jests are generally indecent. The gentleman and ladies in such scenes show little sophistication and are hardly to be distinguished from the clowns. The coarseness of conversation in Shakespeare's plays cannot be approved. But it is not possible for us to accept this charge. Shakespeare had a great genius for writing witty dialogue. The witty exchanges in *As You Like It* between Rosalind and Orlando are an absolute delight, without the least touch of indecency or coarseness. Indeed, it is surprising that Shakespeare, whose plays are a rich treasury of wit and humour, should be attacked by Johnson for lack of refinement. It should be remembered that indecency is one of the sources of comedy. The only condition is that this element should be served in a small measure and only occasionally, and it should not become a habit. Besides, it is not clear to us whether there was a touch of

vulgarity in the real conversation of ladies and gentlemen of Shakespeare's time.

Unfavourable View of Tragedies

Johnson does not take a favourable view of Shakespeare's tragic plays. He says, "In tragedy his performance seems constantly to be worse as his labour is more." Whenever Shakespeare "strains his faculties" in tragic plays, the result is "tumour, meanness, tediousness and obscurity." This is one of the most disgraceful remarks from Johnson's pen.

Pomp of Diction

Johnson accuses Shakespeare of employing "a disproportionate pomp of diction and a wearisome train of circumlocution" in narration. Narration in drama should be swift and brief; but Shakespeare tries to lend it decorum and magnificence which are unwanted. Trivial sentiments and crude ideas seem to be recommended by Shakespeare with the use of "sonorous epithets and swelling figures".

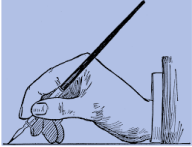
Effect of Pathos

According to Johnson, in producing the effect of pathos, Shakespeare employs some idle conceit or distasteful ambiguity. The feelings of pity and terror in the heart of the readers are suddenly checked by the dramatist's becoming cold in his treatment of the situation.

Over-fondness for Quibbles

Finally, Dr. Johnson censures Shakespeare for his over fondness for quibbles. Shakespeare sacrificed reason, modesty, and truth in order to employ quibble. Johnson says, "A quibble was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world and was content to lose it." There is no doubt that a lot of unnecessary and tedious punning is used in Shakespeare's plays. But to compare it to fatal Cleopatra that would destroy Shakespeare's dramatic power is an

exaggeration. In his way, Dr. Samuel Johnson has traced many demerits of Shakespeare's plays in *Preface to Shakespeare*.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS
1. Mention after Johnson the demerits of Shakespeare as a dramatist.

9.4 DR. JOHNSON'S DEFENCE OF TRAGICOMEDY

Replying to the accusation that Shakespeare has combined the comic and the tragic scenes, Johnson points out that Shakespeare's plays are neither tragedies nor comedies, but composition of a distinct kind. Shakespeare's plays exhibit the real state of earthly life which depicts good and evil, joy and sorrow-mingled in various degrees and endless combinations. In Shakespeare's depiction of the world we see that the loss of one man is the gain of another, the hatred of one man is the fun of another and where many mischief and benefits are done without any design. Out of these medleys of happenings ancient poets choose either crimes of men for a tragic treatment or the absurdities of men for a comic treatment. Thus arose the two kinds of dramatic writing Tragedy and Comedy. But no other writer before Shakespeare had attempted to write both. Shakespeare has united powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind but in one composition. In other words, Shakespeare was

comfortable in writing both tragedy and comedy and so he could combine tragic and comic elements in one and the same play.

This was a practice opposite to the rules of criticism. But Johnson uses variety of arguments to establish that the blame of Shakespeare's practice of mingling of tragic and the comic is unfair. Johnson says that this mingling is not only valid, but also fulfils the proper function of drama much better than pure tragedy or comedy. Johnson's view can be discussed in the following points:

Refutation of the opponents' view by Johnson

Johnson analyses the views of those critics who attacked Shakespeare for the practice of mingling tragedy with comedy. Then he refutes them one by one. The Neo-Classicists regarded Shakespeare's plays as faulty as they mix tragedy and comedy. Johnson accepts that Shakespeare's plays are neither tragedy nor comedy in the pure sense of the terms; instead his plays are composition of a distinct kind. The critics also argue that tragic and the comic scenes, coming in one after another destroy the effect of each other. Johnson examines this argument and establishes that this argument is invalid and unjustifiable.

Classification of Shakespeare's plays

The editors of the First Folio are mainly responsible for the classification of Shakespeare's plays. The plays having happy ends were considered as comedies and those having tragic endings were regarded as tragedies. No notice is given to the leading mood or atmosphere of the plays. Johnson comments that with the help of this basis a play can be termed as tragedy or comedy only by changing their ending. Then the only measure of tragedy was the tragic conclusion. Majesty, elevation of thought and theme were not regarded as the standard for considering a play as tragic. According to Johnson, however only ending is not a proper test for the classification of plays. In the ancient times, no play had the mingling of the tragic and the comic. But in the case of

Shakespeare, the power exciting laughter and that of exciting sorrow are not only combined in one mind but are exhibited in the same composition.

Difference between Rules and Reality

This practice of Shakespeare of mingling tragedy and comedy was contrary to the rules of criticism. But Johnson says, there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature. Rules of criticism are neither final nor obligatory. So, the rule that such combination is faulty is unquestionable.


Closer to Reality of Life

In defending Shakespeare's tragicomedy Johnson argues that such mingling is closer to life than pure tragedy or comedy. The object of literature is to give instruction by pleasing. A tragicomedy is capable of conveying all the instruction that tragedy and comedy aims at because such a play is truer to the reality of life than either pure tragedy or pure comedy. It is not true that the change of scenes interrupt in the progression of passion. The mingling of tragic and comic scenes does not diminish or weaken the vicissitudes of passion that the dramatist aims at. There are many people who welcome comic relief after a scene producing the feeling of sadness. Moreover, in real life we have combination of good and evil and of sorrow and joy. In this respect, Shakespeare's plays are truer to life.

The Pleasure of Variety

It is already mentioned that pleasure is one of the chief functions of drama. Therefore, tragicomedy is full of pleasure as it has both tragic and comic elements. So, there is variety of pleasures in such plays. Dr. Johnson does not agree to the view that the alteration of tragic and comic scenes breaks off the building of tragic and comic mood. Johnson points out that human life also shows it to be false. His final argument upon the whole is that variety is more pleasing than uniformity.

To conclude we can say that Johnson is entirely successful in defending Shakespeare's mingling of tragedy and comedy. The critics who refuse to accept the fusion of comic and the tragic are those who forget that "all pleasure consists in variety."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS
1. How does Johnson defend the genre of tragicomedy of Shakespeare?

9.5 JOHNSON'S DEFENCE OF SHAKESPEARE'S NEGLECT OF THE THREE UNITIES

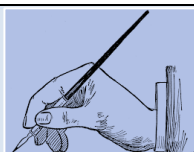
Johnson's view on the three unities is one of the main focuses in his *Preface to Shakespeare*. Among the unities Johnson found only the unity of action justified by reason. There would be utter chaos if event did not naturally lead to event to the desired end. But he found the grounds for the unities of time and place to be wholly illusory.

He states the case for them thus: "The necessity of observing the unities of time and place arises from the supposed necessity of making the drama credible. The critics hold it impossible, that an action of months and years can be possibly believed to pass in three hours..." Johnson says that no audience ever accepts the performance on a stage to be absolutely true. If the audience cannot believe that the first act having been presented at Alexandria, the second is being presented at Rome, how could they

believe that the first act took place at Alexandria when they themselves have been sitting in a theatre in London? Similarly, no audience can in reality believe that, in point of time, they are observing events that took place in the days of Antony and Cleopatra. But, if it is possible for the audience to believe in the first act they were at Alexandria, then they can also believe that in the next act they are in Rome. And likewise they can also believe the changes in respect of time. If in the first act preparation for the war against Mithridates is supposed to have been made in Rome, the result of the war may be represented in a later act as happening in Pontus. It is without any absurdity. A lapse of months or years can easily be imagined by the audience as having occurred between one act and another.

The spectators take the dramatic performance as a picture of reality. When they see the actors on the stage in a miserable state, they imagine themselves miserable for the moment. That much credulity is always there. Otherwise the spectators know that they are witnessing only a fiction. Events presented on the stage create pain or pleasure in the audience, not because the audience believes them to be true, but because they bring realities to mind. In other words, the dramatic action renews in our mind the memories of the reality around us.

According to Johnson the Unities of time and place are not essential. If one writes a play following these unities, the play may become a literary interest, but it would be a piece of superfluous and affected art. Whether Shakespeare was aware of the Unities and deliberately rejected the rules we do not know. But such violations of rules are a natural result of the wide-ranging genius of Shakespeare.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Among the three classical unities Shakespeare maintained only one. What was that?

2. What was Johnson's view regarding the unity of time and place?

9.6 JOHNSON AS A CRITIC OF SHAKESPEARE

Johnson succeeds in depicting a convincing picture of a general praise or tribute of Shakespeare. Not only that, he succeeds also in lifting his tribute a few degrees above the level of already accepted tradition. In the *Preface* Johnson shows himself as “an outright dissenter against the neoclassic rules and proprieties” that had for a long time retained the full appreciation of Shakespeare.

Though the eighteenth century critics were indebted to Shakespeare's greatness first as a poet and then as a dramatist there was a trend of showing Shakespeare as a coarse, incorrect genius. But Johnson realises that Shakespeare is unquestionably the greatest poet and dramatist England has ever produced. Although he is not blind to Shakespeare's faults, he is not diffident about Shakespeare's genius like his contemporaries.

Johnson and his Audience

It is wrong to say that Johnson failed to appreciate the true genius of Shakespeare as he does not go into the ecstasies over him as the Romantic critics do. Johnson was writing for an audience

whose background of expectation and whose background of knowledge and prejudice were different from ours. There are certain other factors involved, but this is the chief one. Some other factors are – till that time Shakespeare was not a universally recognized classic. At that time he was only a popular writer, not establishing his greatness. Secondly, it was quite habitual to discuss Shakespeare in the light of certain critical principles which lost much of their glow later on. Thirdly, the primary function of criticism is to bring out the true nature of writer's work and achievement. But at that time a critic was believed to be a judge who was obliged to make statements on the writer rather than bring out his qualities and characteristics.

Historical and Critical Approach

It seems that Johnson's loyalty to neo-classicism was different. He brought forth an independent approach. It was Dryden who first made a systematic application of the historical and comparative approaches to literature. Johnson not only maintains this but elaborates it further. In the *Preface* we get a clear statement of this: "Every man's performance to be rightly estimated must be compared with the state of the age in which he lived and with his own particular opportunities."

Shakespeare's Obscurities

As a critic Johnson was confidentially concerned with the development of language as he himself was the creator of the famous *Dictionary*. So, he was in a position to comment on the obscurities of Shakespeare. Besides, he could also point out which of the obscurities of Shakespeare were really inexplicable and which could be explained on the ground of Elizabethan language and idioms. Johnson points out some of the sources of Shakespeare's obscurities. One of them is that Shakespeare's writing does not conform to grammatical syntax and practice. Another source of obscurity is the careless work of Shakespeare's editors who allowed errors to crawl into the plays. However,

Johnson does not blind himself to the parts that Shakespeare himself played in some of the obscurities or textual difficulties. Shakespeare often wrote in a hurried and breathless style, where another idea begun before the clearest expression of the first. However, Johnson goes to an extreme when he condemns Shakespeare of having in some of his tragedies like *King Lear*, corrupted language by every mode of depravation.

Johnson as an editor of Shakespeare

The last section of the *Prefaces* shows Dr. Johnson as an editor. Johnson puts an end to the unlikely desires of the editors and critics to alter the revised text. Johnson says that if we want to correct the text, we must know which is an error and where the error is. But what appears to be an error to us may be an obscurity. Johnson also pointed out various reasons for the obscurity of Shakespeare's text. The great concern with which he took up the task of emendation is a perfect and valuable to be followed. Johnson may not have always struck on the correct emendation, but he was guided by a sound principle.

Johnson gives a rank and significance to the task of the editor. It is no longer the "dull duty of an editor" as Pope called it. He presented the duties and responsibilities of an editor and the qualification required for the task. He stressed the value and significance of assembling the texts, the dangers of rashly arriving at emendations and the necessity of notes. The editorial work is depicted as thrilling as that of the creative artist. It can be said that the work of Shakespearean editor has become a vital and reputable one after Dr. Johnson.

Johnson says that he has used three kinds of notes in Shakespeare's plays. They are-(i) illustrative by which difficulties are explained; (ii) judicial, by which faults and beauties are pointed out; (iii) emendatory, by which corrupt lines or passages are corrected. According to Johnson, he has borrowed some of these notes from others because he accepts them as correct.

It is noticed that Johnson had the loftiest conception of a Shakespearean editor. About his own work he says : “ I can say with great sincerity , of all my predecessors, what I hope will hereafter be said of me, that not one has left Shakespeare without improvement, nor is there one to whom I have not been indebted for assistance and information..” This shows the open-mindedness of Johnson.

It is already mentioned that Johnson has borrowed notes that illustrate and explain a difficult passage. These notes are judicial in pointing out the faults and virtues, and which are emendatory. If the explanations put forward by others are found to be correct, he retained them as such. The passages which required an explanation is vastly interpreted. These explanations may appear too much or too little. Johnson says that it is difficult to point out accurately how much an editor should provide. It depends on the various experiences and judgement of the editor. Still, he admits that there are many passages in the *Preface* which he has left unexplained. It is either because the passages are too difficult or the reader must labour hard to understand them.

Johnson accepts his inability to be systematic in the judicial part of the notes. So, in this part he has tried only to encourage the readers to discover something new of the beauties of the play. Again this is an anti-neo-classical trend. Offering the readers the right to appreciation and judgement of the literary work makes Johnson against the neo-classical trend.

Emendatory criticism is the most difficult one as it involves collation and conjecture. In order to collate an editor must have as many copies as possible. But, Johnson unhappily confesses that he could not get all the copies though he made an industrious use of the available material. Conjecture is the second part of the emendatory criticism. Here, he has been very careful. He could not trust it when he realized that he was making more use of it.

Therefore, he was extra careful in altering the readings of the early editions.

Johnson admits that he took a few liberties in altering some of the punctuations. However, he asks his readers not to believe blindly on the notes. He concludes the *Preface* with the wonderful utterance: “Every work of this kind is by its nature deficient, and I should feel little solicitude about the sentence, were it to be pronounced only by the skilful and the learned.”

9.7 SUMMING UP

To sum up it can be said that Dr. Samuel Johnson’s *Preface* and notes on Shakespeare made remarkable contribution to the corpus of English criticism. He has interpreted the qualities and defects of Shakespeare in a traditional manner. But he is different from his predecessors in the sense that he has put forth his individual reaction. It is because of this his evaluation of Shakespeare becomes more interesting and intricate.



9.8 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. What are the merits and demerits of Shakespearean plays according to Dr. Samuel Johnson as enunciated in his *Preface to Shakespeare*?
2. Critically examine Johnson’s defence of Shakespeare’s mingling of the comic and the tragic?
3. What is Johnson’s view on the issue of adhering to the classical doctrines of unities by Shakespeare?
4. “Shakespeare’s plots are loosely formed”- comment.
5. Comment on Johnson’s charge that Shakespeare “sacrifices virtue to convenience”.
6. Evaluate Johnson as an editor of Shakespeare.
7. What is Johnson’s view regarding classification of Shakespeare’s plays?



9.9 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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UNIT 10: JOHN DRYDEN: AN ESSAY OF DRAMATIC POESIE (SELECTIONS)

UNIT STRUCTURE

10.0 Introduction

10.1 Learning Objectives

10.2 Reading *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*:

10.2.1 Setting and Plot Summary.

10.2.2 Arguments of the four Speakers

10.3 Definition of Drama

10.4 Dryden as a Liberal Classicist.

10.5 Style of Dryden's *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*

10.6 Summing Up

10.7 Assessment Questions

10.8 References and Recommended Readings

10.0 INTRODUCTION

John Dryden is a significant figure of Neo-Classic criticism. Neo-Classic criticism has two phases. The first phase is the beginning of this era having John Dryden as the predominant literary personality and the second phase is the period of Dr. Samuel Johnson. In the first phase, that is, the Restoration Age (1660- 1700) was presided over by John Dryden. During this phase Neo-Classicism was liberal and moderate.

It is with John Dryden that criticism in the modern sense of the word begins. Dr. Samuel Johnson is right in conferring on John Dryden the title of “the father of English Criticism.” He said, “Dryden may be properly considered as the father of English Criticism, as the writer who first taught us to determine upon principles the merit of composition”. Before Dryden, English criticism was just a blind imitation of the ancients. It was he who liberated it from classicism. Not that there was no criticism in

England before Dryden. There had been critics like Philip Sidney and Ben Jonson. But they were critics only by chance. Their critical works are merely occasional utterances on the art of writing criticism. Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* arose out of the need to defend poetry against Puritan attack and Ben Jonson's critical utterances are in nature of jottings or on just a few things that interested him. It is in Dryden's criticism that literary analysis which is the dominant concern of the modern critic, emerges for the first time. His criticism of *The Silent Woman* paves the way for critical analysis of a literary work in English. Besides, it is with Dryden that modern approach to criticism is born. He is the first important historical critic of England and he is also the first critic who brings in the comparative methods of criticism.

However, the only formal work of criticism that he has left behind him is his *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, a work which is the unofficial manifesto of his critical creed. Dryden's criticism includes *prefaces*, *epilogues* and *letters of dedication* which he prefixed to his poetic and dramatic works all through his long literary career covering a period of forty years (1664-1700). The best of these prefaces are: *Essay on Satire*, *Essay on Heroic Tragedy*, *Essay on Fables* etc. *Essay on Satire* is the Preface to his translation of Juvenal's Satires. In this essay he defines the aim of satire as the correction of manners and expresses his preference for Horace as against Juvenal. *Essay on Heroic Tragedy*, prefixed to his heroic play *The Conquest of Granada*, is also an important critical document. *Essay on Fables* is prefixed to his translation from Ovid, Homer, Boccaccio and Chaucer. But his manifold critical gifts are fully brought out only by his *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*.

10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The present unit deals with the study of John Dryden's *An Essay of Dramatic Poesie*. It discusses various issues and ideas

Dryden brings into discussion in his essay. After reading this unit you should be in a position to:

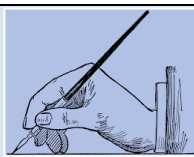
- Read critically the essay which shaped Neo-classical criticism in England
- Understand the basic ideas or thesis that Dryden worked in his essay.
- Evaluate Dryden as a classicist

10.2 READING 'AN ESSAY OF DRAMATIC POESY'

10.2.1 *Setting and Summary*

Dryden's aim in writing his *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668) was "to vindicate the honour of our English writers, from the censure of those who unjustly prefer the French before them". In other words this essay is an effort to develop the principles which should direct us in reviewing a play; it is also an attempt to find out the rules that can help a dramatist in writing a good play. The *Essay* is in the form of a dialogue. There are four speakers or interlocutors and the setting is dramatic. As the conversation progresses, the opposition between classicism and modernity and that between Elizabethan generation tends to entangle and vague the lines of the argument. **Crites**, who stands for Dryden's brother-in-law Sir Robert Howard, is the first speaker who develops his view point. He explains the extreme classical view, that the Greeks and Romans fully discovered and illustrated those reasonable and constant rules to which the modern drama must conform. The second person to speak at length is **Eugenius** who is considered to be Dryden's friend Charles Sackville, Lord Buckhurst. He takes the negative position that the ancient poets failed badly in their illustration of the rules prescribed by their critics. The suggestion is that the moderns have actually best exemplified the rules. Then, thirdly comes **Lisideius**, who is Sir Charles Sedley, a younger wit of the day. He puts forward the

argument that perfect realization of rules is not to be found in the contemporary English drama, but in the French. Thus Dryden gives expression to three leading kinds of classicism through these characters. But the main argument of the essay occurs with the entrance of **Neander** who is Dryden himself. He upholds the superiority of the English drama over the French and of rhyme over blank verse. The four speakers hardly agree to anything, and having reached their destination part with mutual courtesy. The readers are left to draw their own conclusions.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. The essay is written in the form of dialogue concerned to four gentlemen, choose the correct one:

- a. Claudius, Macbeth, Elizabeth, Iago
- b. Collum, Hugo, Grant, Claudius
- c. Eugenius, Crites, Lisideius, Neander
- d. None of the above

2. Identify the spokesman of Dryden

- a. Lisideius
- b. Crites
- c. Eugenius
- d. Neander

10.2.2 Arguments of the four speakers

Crites' Argument in Favour of the Ancients

Crites speaks for the Ancients and claims their superiority on the following grounds:

- Crites starts with the remark that the ancients both invented and perfected the art of drama. They held literature **in** high esteem and the poets were highly honoured. So there was a healthy competition among them to excel each other. Poets

were suitably rewarded. Today, the poets have no such encouragement, and they are not suitably rewarded. They are rather content to mock at one another's efforts. Emulation which is the urge of wit and therefore a necessary factor in artistic development has vanished from the modern age. The result is a decline of the drama.

- Crites adds that the ancients were faithful imitators of nature, which is distorted and disfigured in the drama of the day.
- He further defends that all the rules of drama were discovered by the ancients. The English have added nothing of their own to Aristotle's *Poetics* or Horace's *Art of Poetry*.
- Besides, the ancients observed the three unities well. (a) The Unity of Time means that the action should not take more than 24 hours, the natural compass of a day, and it should be equally divided between the Acts. This rule was faithfully observed by the Ancients. The English do not follow Unity of Time and therefore, they ill-represent nature. (b) The Unity of Place means that the same scene should be continued throughout, for the stage being one place it cannot be represented as many. No doubt there may be some variation of place by the use of painted scenery, but even then it should not shift to places far distant from one another. The French observe this unity, but not the English. (c) The Unity of Action means that there should be one great and complete action. However, there may be a number of actions subservient to the main action, as in the plays of Ben Jonson. Such under-plots must all be conducive to the main design and be subordinated to it. There is gross violation of these unities in the English drama which makes it unnatural and improbable. Therefore,

according to Crites, the superiority of the Ancients is unquestionable.

Eugenius' Arguments on Superiority of the Moderns over The Ancients

Eugenius takes up the defence of the moderns by claiming that no doubt the moderns have profited by the rules of the ancients, but they have also excelled the ancients in many points. The modern plays are superior to the Ancients, because the moderns have the advantage of the experience and rules of the ancients, as well as they have life and nature before them which they imitate. The moderns thus have added many new features which the Ancients lacked.

- For example, among the Ancients the plays were divided by Entrances and not by Acts. The division of it into Acts was not known to them; it was first given only by Horace. So, the Ancient Greeks cannot be said to have perfected the art of poesy, rather their structure of the plays was faulty.
- Their plots were traditional, they were already known to the people, and so lacked in novelty and pleasure. So the main aim of poesy, i.e., to cause delight was gone. They used stale plots and characters in their comedies. There were certain types which were used in one comedy after another.
- Though the ancients devised Unities of Time, Place and Action, they were not perfectly observed by them. (a) The Unity of Place was neither the rule of Aristotle, nor that of Horace. It has been made into a rule by the French. (b) The Unity of Time, they often neglected, and often when they observed it, it led them into absurdities, as in Euripides and Terence.
- Their plots being narrow, and their persons few, their Acts are shorter than even the well-wrought scenes in the

Modern English plays. There is too much of specifying at the cost of action and hence monotony and boredom.

- There is no poetic justice in their plays: they often show malice, and an unhappy piety. So their plays neither delight nor instruct.
- Among the Ancients, Comedies and Tragedies were written by separate dramatists and not by the same person as at present. Hence they should have achieved perfection in the chosen branch, but they failed to do so. Hence there is no justification for their shortcomings.
- Often they are guilty of faulty diction and metaphors.
- Their tragedies are totally lacking in love-scenes. They raise horror by their scenes of lust, cruelty and bloodshed. Love alone can temper the horror of such scenes. Besides this, love is the most frequent of all the passions and so it should not be left out. Because of the absence of the moderating influence of love, their tragedies arouse only, “horror and not compassion”
- So, the Moderns are superior to ancients because of novelty in plot, better division of the play into acts, more action than speech, better poetic justice, mingling of tragedy and comedy, better treatment of love scenes.

Lisideius’ view in favour of the Superiority of the French Drama over English:

Lisideius is definite in his arguments and his speech is mainly a discussion on the brilliance of French drama and indirectly a criticism on the English. Lisideius considers the French drama superior to the English because of the following grounds:

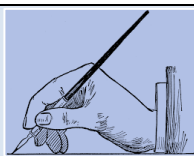
- The French observe the unities to perfection: (a) The Unity of Time, they observe so well that the action in none of their plays exceeds thirty hours. Indeed, they interpret “single

revolution of the sun” to mean 12 hours and not 24; and try to reduce all plays to this compass. (b) They fully observe unity of Place, the entire action being limited to the spot where it begins. It is rarely that they go outside the city or town. (c) They do not burden their plots with under plots, which divert the attention of the audience and readers, as the English do. (d) The French have nothing as absurd as the English tragicomedy, in which we get here a course of mirth, there another of sadness and passion, and a third of honour and duel. They afford variety, but in a more reasonable manner. The end of tragedy is to beget admiration and compassion or concernment, and this end is defeated by the mingling of mirth.

- The plots of the French tragedies are based upon some known history, but they mix facts with fiction so well that they are able to arouse concernment even though the plot is a known one. In this respect they have excelled the ancients. They are never guilty of the absurdities of Shakespeare who cramps the business of thirty years into two to three hours. Thus, there is no just representation of nature, but a drawing of her in miniature. This instead of making a play delightful makes it ridiculous. The English are not true to nature.
- There is no multiplicity of action and incident in their plays, and so there is enough time to represent one passion well and fully, instead of being hurried from one to another as in the English plays. No doubt in their plays one character is exalted above the rest, but due attention is also paid to other characters, and every one of them is given a suitable role to play.
- The French manage their narratives of relations much more dexterously than the English. The narration of events is forerunner to the play, but necessary for its understanding. But it is avoided with great skill by the suitable management

of the plot itself. There are relations of events that have happened off the stage, and through such relations they avoid the tumult and violence of the English stage. Everything too cruel, loathsome, absurd or unnatural is thus kept out. In this way, they avoid the ridicule of showing death on the stage. All passions may find a just and lively representation on the stage, but not all actions, and dying is one of them. Narration is also necessary to reduce the plot to a more reasonable compass of time.

- The French have many other excellences not common to the English. They handle details with much care. They never end a play by making the villain undergo a sudden, psychologically improbable conversion; nor do they bring a character on to the stage without a clear reason for his being there. Thus the whole play looks natural.
- Finally, Lisideius prefers the rhymed verse of the French dramatists to the blank verse of the English tragedies.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Mention important points of Lisideius' view in favour of French drama

Neander's Argument in Defence of English Plays

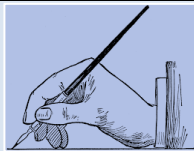
Neander or Dryden speaks last of all. He demonstrates the superiority of the English over the French and of the Moderns over the Ancients. To begin with, he openly acknowledges the regularity of French plays, their observance of the laws of comedy and decorum with more exactness than the English. It is also true that English plays have many irregularities but, “neither our faults nor their virtues are considerable enough to place them above us”. They lack the rich variety of humour in the English plays. Neander then proceeds to defend the English practice of mingling tragic and comic elements against the French practice of their rigid separation. He argues that tragicomedy is not inartistic, instead we can enjoy both happiness and sadness together; the one serves to relieve the other. He, therefore, affirms that the English have invented, increased and perfected a more pleasant way of writing for the stage than was ever known to the ancients or moderns of any nation, which is Tragicomedy.

- He then takes up the question of plot. He cannot admire the harshness of French plays in excluding under plots and minor episodes. English plays are superior to French in this respect, as they have under-plots or by-concernments besides the main design. An under plot –he argues, enriches the play, without violating the essential unity of action if it is harmonised with the main plot. English plays in having these under plots, add a pleasant variety and afford a greater pleasure to the audience.
- Their pre-occupation with a single theme does not give them any advantage in the expression of passion. Their verses are cold and the long speeches in their plays are tiresome. During the performance of a French play “We are concerned for our troubles, instead of being concerned for their imaginary heroes.”

- Long speeches may suit the genius of the French, they do not suit the English who are a more morose people and come to the stage for refreshment.
- Short speeches and replies are more likely to move the passions and wit and repartee are the chief graces of comedy. In the chase of wit the English have reached perfection, and are superior to the French.
- The more the characters in a play the greater will be the variety. Only this variety should be so managed that there is no confusion, and this skill has been attained by the great English dramatists, like Ben Jonson.
- As regards the preference to violent scenes and battles, the English are fierce by nature and prefer action on the stage. As regards incredibility, if the audience can imagine an actor to be a king, they can also imagine three soldiers to be an army. If the English are blamed for showing too much of the action, the French can be blamed for showing too little of it. Therefore a middle path should be followed, but what is beautiful must be acted on the stage.
- Next, he points out that the French dramatists' too strict an observance of the rules was itself fatal to many artistic effects. "By their servile observation of the unities of time and place and integrity of scenes, they have brought on themselves that death of plot, and narrowness of imagination, which may be observed in all their plays. How many beautiful accidents might naturally happen in two or three days, which cannot arrive with any probability in the compass of 24 hours?" In fact, their too much observance to the unities has displaced many artistic beauties from their stage. The French dramatist Corneille himself admitted that the unities have a cramping effect. Violation of unities by the English dramatists had added to greater variety of plots.

- As for rhyme the English used it as well as blank verse, before it was adopted by the French. Neander boldly affirms, to prove the superiority of English plays over the French that many English plays are as regular as French drama and they have more variety of plot and character.

Thus, Dryden through Neander asserts that English dramatists have far surpassed all the ancients and the modern writers of other countries. In the irregular plays of Shakespeare and Fletcher there is greater spirit than in any of the French. That is why he praises Ben Jonson and calls them Homer and Virgil of England respectively.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Mention important points of Neander's views on English drama

10.3 DEFINITION OF DRAMA

Throughout the *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* Dryden treats drama as a form of imaginative literature and hence his remarks on drama apply to poetry as well. The definition of play is expressive of his view of poetry. Drama is defined as *just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and*

instruction of mankind. All the four speakers agree to this definition. According to this definition drama is an image of human nature and that the image is just as well as lively. By using the word just Dryden seems to imply that literature imitates human actions. For Dryden, **poetic imitation** is different from an exact, servile copy of reality, as the imitation is not only just but also lively. While David Daiches takes “lively” to mean interesting, R.A Scott- James takes “lively” to mean beautiful and delightful. Besides, Dryden says that the **function of poetry** is to provide delight and instruction. Instruction is secondary, and delight is the first, the primary function of poetry. In this way in emphasising delight of poetry, Dryden is far in advance of his age in which instruction was regarded as the chief aim of poetry. Thus Dryden’s concept of poetic representation is not mere imitation because it is the work of a poet, or maker whose aim is to produce something more beautiful than life.

LET US STOP AND THINK



Poetic imitation: In poetry there is not only the reproduction of reality. The poet has his own ‘imagination’ and it is by the power of imagination that the poet selects, orders, re-arranges his material. Thus, the poet gives a more heightened and beautiful version of reality. It is not slavish imitation but imaginative creation.

10.4 DRYDEN AS A LIBERAL CLASSICIST

Dryden comes out significantly as a champion of liberal classicism in an age so steeped in grammar of classicism derived from Boileau and other French critics. Dryden had enough courage to defend the claims of genius to write according to his own convictions without regard for the prescriptions and rules which had been laid down for good writing. He refused to pay servile respect even to Aristotle. He writes, “It is not enough that

Aristotle has said so, for Aristotle drew his models of tragedy from Sophocles and Euripides; and if he had seen ours, might have changed his mind". Dryden's attitude to the ancients was not that of idolization.

Dryden's violation of the Three Unities

Dryden's liberalism is best seen in his justification of the violation of the **three unities** of Time, Place and Action on the part of English dramatists. As regards the unities he says that the English violation of unities lends greater prosperity and variety to English plays. The unities have a narrowing and cramping effect on French plays and they are often resulted in absurdities from which the English plays are free. Secondly, Dryden points out that the English disregard of unities enables them to present a more "just" and "lively" picture of human nature. The French plays may be more regular but they are not so "lively". In other words, their presentation is not as pleasant and delightful as that of English. Fourthly, he puts forward that Shakespeare's plays are more true to nature, and more delightful than any French plays though he has not observed unities. Dryden also adds that the English when they do observe the rules, as Ben Jonson has done in *The Silent Woman*, shows greater skill and art than those of French. Though *The Silent Woman* is a regular play it is free from absurdities which are prominent in French plays. So, it can be said that it depends entirely upon the genius or skill of the writer. Besides, Dryden notices no harm in introducing a sub-plot in a play. According to him the sub-plots impart variety, richness and bounty to the play. In this way, the writer can present a more "just" and "lively" picture. Finally, to the view that maintenance of unities is justified on the ground that their violation results in improbability, that it places too great a strain on the imagination of the spectators, he replies that it is all a question of "dramatic illusion". To put simply, for Dryden the rules of Aristotle are not

absolute' there is always an appeal open from rules to nature. If the ends of drama are better fulfilled by a violation of unities, then there is no harm in violating them. Shakespeare has produced more just and lively plays though he has entirely disregarded the unities.

Justification of Tragicomedy

The same liberalism is also seen in Dryden's defence of English **Tragicomedy**. He defends tragicomedy on many grounds, some of them are –the contraries when placed near set off each other; continued gravity depresses the spirit, so a scene of laughter thrown in between refreshes; comic scene does not destroy serious effects which tragedy aims at; just as eye can pass from unpleasant objects to pleasant one, so also the soul can move from the tragic to the comic, and much more swiftly; the English have perfected a new way of writing not known to the ancients. If they had tragic-comedies, perhaps Aristotle would have revised his rules; and finally, it is all a question of progress of a change of tastes. The ancients cannot be a model for all times and countries. To conclude, Dryden is a liberal classicist, who does not consider rules as an end in themselves, but merely as a means of good writing.

10.5 STYLE OF AN ESSAY OF DRAMATIC POESY

It is already mentioned that Dryden's *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* is a dialogue among four persons who discuss whether ancients were superior to moderns. The main purpose of the essay is to support the use of rhyme in drama and to establish the superiority of the English stage over the French. This essay by Dryden is perhaps the best example of Dryden's prose style. It is written in a lucid and clear style. Apart from the fact that it is one of the most critical works in English literature, it is a thoroughly readable essay and it interests even the general reader. The nice

way of putting things attracts the attention of even the casual reader. This type of prose we admire today and Dryden deserves full credit for having brought it to England. The advance that he makes can be immediately realised by contrasting it with the style of such a book as Milton's *Areopagatica*.

10.6 SUMMING UP

Dryden admits that classical rules were not just mechanical laws, but laws discovered in Nature. But they could be eternally valid only when the other ages and nations continued to be like those of Aristotle in all other respects-language, temper, taste. Since these varied from age to age, country to country they must be adjusted accordingly. Dryden valued the teaching of Aristotle too highly. In *The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy* he advocates a close study of the ancient models, not to imitate them blindly as a thorough –going neo-classicist would do, but to bring back their magic- to treat them “as a torch... to enlighten our passage.” For Dryden it is the spirit of the classics that matters more than their rules.

Dryden's criticism is partly a restatement of the percept of Aristotle, partly an appeal for French neo-classicism, partly a deviation from both under the influence of Longinus and Saint-Evremond. From Aristotle he learnt to value rules, French neo-classicism taught him to prefer the epic to tragedy, to insist on a moral in it, and many other things. It is the influence of Longinus and Saint- Evermond that often makes him impatient of rules which may have been good at one time but are now no more. His criticism against the unities of time and place is of this nature. So are his appreciations of Shakespeare, and Beaumont and Fletcher. He is therefore a liberal classicist who would adjust the rules of the ancients.



10.7ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

- 1 Give your own estimate of the achievements of Dryden as a critic. What are his major contributions to the field of literary criticism?
- 2 Write a critical note on the salient features of Dryden's *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*.
- 3 Summarize in your own words Dryden's opinions on the dramatic unities as expressed in his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*.
- 4 Critically examine Dryden's definition of drama. What light does it throw on his views on the nature and function of poetry and poetic imitation?
- 5 What arguments does Neander advance in defence of English plays?



10.7REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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Enright, D.J. and Ernst De Chickera, *English Critical Texts*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013, Print.

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MODULE IV: S. T. COLERIDGE AND WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

UNIT 11- 'BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA' (SELECTIONS)

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.0 Introduction

11.1 Learning Objectives

11.2 Life and Works

11.2.1 English Romantic Period

11.2.2 Coleridge and Wordsworth

11.3 Reading *Biographia Literaria*

11.3.1 Coleridge on Poetry

11.3.2 Fancy and Imagination

11.3.3 Coleridge on Wordsworth's claims in "The Preface"

11.4 Summing Up

11.5 Assessment Questions

11.6 References and Recommended Readings

11.0 INTRODUCTION

Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth are synonymous with the English Romantic period and the Romantic school of literary criticism. This unit focuses on Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his contribution to literary criticism with reference to his seminal text *Biographia Literaria*. According to William J. Long, *Biographia Literaria* contains "more sound sense and illuminating ideas on the general subject of poetry than any other book in our language" (*History of English Literature* 393). However scholars have also noted its uneven structure which fuses literary criticism with autobiography, philosophy, religion and poetry. James Engell notes that "the shape of *Biographia Literaria* and its contents live up to Coleridge's description: 'an immethodical miscellany' of 'life and opinions', with shades of Tristram Shandy, Hamlet and a 'literary Quixote' tilting against the indifferent machinery of

the modern critical press” (*Biographia Literaria* 62). Discussing its continued appeal in modern times, Engell says that the text comprises topics that cover a range of disciplines that are now bracketed under ‘Arts and Humanities’. Moreover by placing literary engagement in the “arena of the nature of the personal self”, and “the transcendent in a world where materialism and mechanism threaten alienation and loss” (65), it is not simply a ‘Romantic’ book but an expression of modernity. Despite his knowledge of the past and attention to intellectual and literary heritage, Coleridge’s thoughts look forward, anticipating New Criticism, the structuralists’ concerns about language and the post-structuralists’ “indecisiveness about the logocentric” (ibid). *Biographia Literaria* thus is a classic text within English Romantic Literary Criticism whose appeal has transcended to current times.

11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By now you have formed an idea on the Neo-classical school of literary criticism, particularly exemplified by Dryden in the earlier unit. In this unit you will be introduced to one of the significant figures among the English Romantics, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. After reading this unit you will be well conversant with:

- The life and works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge
- The select portions from the prescribed text *Biographia Literaria*
- The key concepts relating to the art and craft of poetry as outlined by Coleridge
- Coleridge’s contribution to the Romantic school of literary criticism

11.2 LIFE AND WORKS

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) was born in Ottery St. Mary, Devonshire to Rev. John Coleridge, the Vicar of the parish church and master of the local grammar school. He was the youngest of thirteen children and extraordinarily intelligent. He did his early schooling in his father's school and at the age of ten he was sent to the Charity School of Christ's Hospital, London. At the age of nineteen he joined Cambridge University as a charity student (his father had passed away when he was nine leaving the family destitute). He left the University in 1794 without finishing his degree. He moved around from jobs to jobs never satisfied and happy. In his early life he had suffered from neuralgia which led him to using opiates to ease his pain. This made him addicted to drugs and hampered his life and health. Amidst this, his association with William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy in the Quantock hills offers a ray of light. Their association led to the publication of *The Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. He died in 1834 and was buried in Highgate Church. (Long 387-90)

The works of Coleridge can be divided into three classes- the poetic, the critical and the philosophical writings. His early poetry shows a hint of Blake, for instance in poems like "A Day Dream", "The Devil's Thoughts", "The Suicide's Argument" and "The Wanderings of Cain". His later poems like "Kubla Khan", "Christabel" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" are considered his masterpieces. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is Coleridge's main contribution to the *Lyrical Ballads*. Some of his other poems are "Ode to France", "Youth and Age", "Dejection", "Love Poems", "Fears in Solitude", "Religious Musings", "Work Without Hope", "Hymn Before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni" etc. Some of his prose works are *Biographia Literaria*, or *Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (1817), his collected *Lectures on Shakespeare*

(1849), and *Aids to Reflection* (1825). W.J. Long notes that “In his philosophical work Coleridge introduced the idealistic philosophy of Germany into England. He set himself in line with Berkeley, and squarely against Bentham, Malthus, Mill, and all the materialistic tendencies which were and still are the bane of English philosophy. The *Aids to Reflection* is Coleridge’s most profound work...” (393).

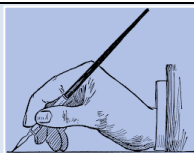
11.2.1 English Romantic Period

To understand the prescribed text, we need to first have an idea of the time and context in which Coleridge and his contemporaries lived and produced their literary creations. The Romantic period in England is usually said to begin in 1798, the year *Lyrical Ballads* was published and ended in 1832, when Sir Walter Scott and Goethe died (Cuddon, 771). Romanticism emerged in an era of profound socio-political and economic changes in Europe, dominated by two events between 1760 and 1860- the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. The resultant dissolution of feudalism and transformation of society into a bourgeois society was accompanied by change in its values and ideology. Stemming from Enlightenment thought, the focus shifted to an ideology which was secular and gave importance to reason and individual experience. M.A.R. Habib notes “Much Romanticism took its initial impetus as a response to the new world created by these vast structural transformations in the realms of politics, economy, philosophy, and aesthetics” (*A History of Literary Criticism* 350). As a broad intellectual and artistic movement, it arose by the end of the eighteenth century and gained prominence by the nineteenth century. To quote Habib again, “The ideals of Romanticism included an intense focus on human subjectivity and its expression, an exaltation of nature, which was seen as a vast repository of symbols, of childhood and spontaneity, of

primitive forms of society, of human passion and emotion, of the poet, of the sublime, and of imagination as a more comprehensive and inclusive faculty than reason” (408). Expressing these ideals in their poetry, the most well known of the English Romantic poets- William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, John Keats, Percy B. Shelley were reacting to these changing times. In that period, ‘Many of the age’s foremost writers thought that something new was happening in the world’s affairs... William Blake’s affirmation in 1793 that “a new heaven is begun” was matched a generation later by Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “The world’s great age begins anew.” “These, these will give the world another heart,/And other pulses,” wrote John Keats, referring to Leigh Hunt and William Wordsworth. Fresh ideals came to the fore; in particular, the ideal of freedom, long cherished in England, was being extended to every range of human endeavour.’ (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* n.p.).

As a departure from the main ideals of eighteenth century poetics, English Romantics saw the poet as an individual distinguished from his fellows “by the intensity of his perceptions, taking as his basic subject matter the workings of his own mind” (ibid). The primacy given to feelings in Romantic thought is well articulated in Wordsworth’s famous line from the “Preface” where he called poetry “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling” (Enright and Chickera 165). In Romantic writing we also see a shift from the earlier Neo-Classical emphasis on imitating the ancient Classical writers, to that on the imagination as a supreme poetic quality. As we know, the French poet and critic Boileau (1636-1711) who was the most illustrious exponent of neoclassicism believed that excellence in literature could only be attained by following the ancients. He set out the main principles of neoclassicism- reason, nature, decorum, moderation and unity- in

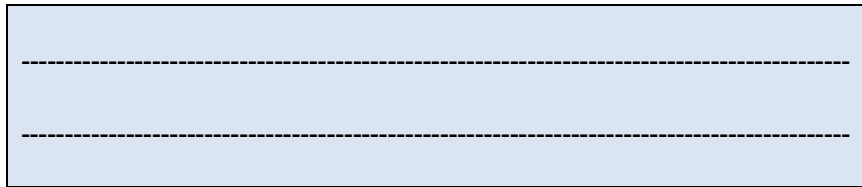
L'Artpoétique (1674). The English poets and dramatists were influenced by these ideas with *L'Artpoétique* directly influencing Pope's *Essay on Criticism* (1711). The literary men of the Neo-classical era therefore imitated the old literary forms of epic, eclogue, epigram, elegy, ode, satire, tragedy and comedy rather than experimenting with new forms. (Day *Literary Criticism: A New History* 169-70). However, as we shall see poet-critics like Coleridge gave primacy to imagination, and considered it almost like a divine creative force that elevated the poet to a godlike being. Thus, the Romantic poets 'placed great emphasis on the workings of the unconscious mind, on dreams and reveries, on the supernatural, and on the childlike or primitive view of the world, this last being regarded as valuable because its clarity and intensity had not been overlaid by the restrictions of civilized "reason."' (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* n.p.). With the understanding of the primacy of imagination in Romantic thought, we can now approach Coleridge and his philosophical musings on fancy and imagination in *Biographia Literaria*.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is the most conspicuous difference between the Neo-classical and Romantic poetry?

2. Why did the Romantics give more importance to imagination?



11.2.2 Coleridge and Wordsworth

A study of Coleridge is incomplete without reference to Wordsworth as they were not only friends and collaborators, but also their philosophies interact with each other in numerous ways. Harold Bloom in his “Introduction” to *The Romantic Poets* notes:

Coleridge had the dark fortune of being eclipsed by his best friend, William Wordsworth. What we think of as modern poetry is Wordsworthianism, the evanescence of any poetic subject except for the poet’s own subjectivity. Two years younger than Wordsworth, Coleridge actually invented what was to be the Wordsworthian mode in such early poems as “*The Eolian Harp*” (1795) and “*Frost at Midnight*” (1798), the immediate precursors of Wordsworth’s “*Tintern Abbey*” (written later in 1798). (Bloom, 4)

“*Tintern Abbey*” as we know is one of Wordsworth’s contribution in *Lyrical Ballads* and also one of the most well known poems from the volume. In this sense, *Lyrical Ballads* is a significant text not only because it is often considered as one of the indicators of the English Romantic Age but also as it led to the publication of two seminal texts on literary criticism- William Wordsworth’s “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” and *Biographia Literaria* by S.T. Coleridge where these two eminent poet-critics outlined their respective philosophies regarding Poetry and the Poet. Wordsworth in a sense got a head start in this endeavour as he first published his “Preface” in 1800, merely two years after the publication of their joint poetry

collection. In turn, *Biographia Literaria* was first published in 1817 where Coleridge expresses his own opinions regarding the genesis of *Lyrical Ballads*, and the philosophy behind it and at the same time gives his own view of the poetry making process. He clearly states that in *Biographia Literaria* he will answer Wordsworth's assertions made in the Preface and "declare once and for all, in what points I [Coleridge] coincide with his [Wordsworth's] opinions, and in what points I altogether differ" (Enright and Chickera 192-193).

LET US STOP AND THINK



Coleridge could read at three years of age and had read the Bible and the Arabian Nights before he was five years old!

In 1794 Coleridge left Cambridge without taking his degree and met the young Robert Southey with whom he dreamt of the Pantisocracy for the regeneration of human society. The Pantisocracy, on the banks of the Susquehanna, was to be an ideal community, a Utopia where the citizens combined farming and literature. It however never materialised. (Long 388)

"Kubla Khan" is a fragment of a poem that came to Coleridge when he was sleeping. Upon awakening he started writing it down but after writing fifty-four lines he was interrupted and he could never finish the poem.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What were the intentions of Coleridge in writing *Biographia Literaria*?

2. What did the Romantics place emphasis on?

11.3 READING 'BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA'

In Chapter XIV of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge gives us information on how the idea of *Lyrical Ballads* was conceived during conversations with William Wordsworth. Coleridge says that during their stay in Quantock Valley, when they were both neighbours, their conversations used to turn frequently to 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 powers of imagination” (Enright and Chickera 190). This led them to propose the creation of a series of poems of two different types. One would be dealing with the supernatural while the other would take its subjects from ordinary life. Thus, originated the idea of the *Lyrical Ballads* where it was agreed that Coleridge would focus on “persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic” while Wordsworth was to take as his subject everyday ordinary things- things that people do not notice or appreciate anymore due to “lethargy of custom” - and present it in a novel way (191).

Coleridge then refers to the publication of the “Preface” where Wordsworth had declared his objectives and his opinions regarding *Lyrical Ballads* and of Poetry in general. Coleridge says that because his name is frequently used in conjunction with Wordsworth’s, readers assume his views concur too. But he wants to clarify this position and says that he does not agree with many of Wordsworth’s views as given in the “Preface”, and on the contrary objects to them. Therefore, he wants to declare in *Biographia Literaria*, his own opinions regarding Poetry, the points where his opinions coincide with Wordsworth and where it differs (192-193).

11.3.1 Coleridge on Poetry

Coleridge in Chapter XIV defines a poem as “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*.” (Enright and Chickera 194). For him, Poetry as an art form which is constructed of many constituent parts, for instance rhythm, meter, musicality, word choice etc. is capable of providing us with pleasure while fully engaging with our senses. This idea of an integrated whole made of many constituent parts producing pleasure or “eudaimonia” is according to James Engell almost Aristotelian. He further claims that in the text Coleridge succeeds greatly as a ‘Romantic’ critic because he modifies and transforms classical criticism and thought (“*Biographia Literaria*” 68-69). Moreover the distinction between poetry and science that Coleridge makes, echoes Wordsworth’s discussion of the Man of Science and the Poet in the 1800 “Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*”(Engell 69).

Coleridge follows in the same chapter by claiming that “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.’ The poet diffuses a ‘spirit of unity’ by the power of imagination and balances or reconciles ‘opposite or discordant qualities’, which include “sameness” and “difference”, the “general” and the “concrete”, the “idea” with the “image” and so on . This spirit he says, while it harmonizes the natural and the artificial, subordinates art to nature and “our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry” (196).

11.3.2 Fancy and Imagination

Coleridge in Chapter XII, XIII and XIV of *Biographia Literaria* discusses fancy and imagination and its role in the poetry making process. The following excerpt is from Ch-XIII. 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, coexisting 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 recreate: 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.

FANCY, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The fancy 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 phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word Choice. But equally

with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association. (Project Gutenberg *Biographia Literaria* Ch-XIII)

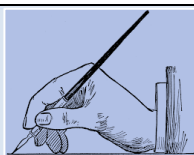
David Daiches in *A Critical History of English Literature Vol IV* notes that for Coleridge, the primary imagination is the “great ordering principle, an agency which enables us both to discriminate and to order, to separate and to synthesize, and thus makes perception possible”. The secondary imagination then is “the conscious human use of this power”. Utilising our primary imagination to perceive the world is then not a conscious activity but an exercise of our basic faculty of being aware of ourselves and the external world. Compared to primary imagination, the secondary imagination is “more conscious and less elemental”, however it does not differ in kind from the primary as it “projects and creates new harmonies of meaning”. Utilising the secondary imagination then becomes similar to a poetic activity. A poem then is a product of a man utilising the secondary imagination and so achieving “the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities” as stated by Coleridge (Daiches 900-901).

For Coleridge, the notion of organic unity within which opposites are reconciled is a part of poetry; every feature of a poem must grow out of its whole nature and be an integral part of it. “He was offering his idea of imagination as the root of genius in the arts, the great completing power mediating between and reconciling opposites to create unity” (Mahoney “Tragedy and the Imagination in Coleridge’s Later Poems” 147) This is important to understand Coleridge’s distinction between imagination and fancy. Imagination is more fitted to achieve this true unity of expression, the idea of a poem as an organic whole. Fancy constructs surface decoration out of new combinations of memories and perceptions, while the imagination ‘generates and produces a form of its own.’ The

formation of a poem as a organic whole under the “shaping and modifying power”(Biographia Literaria Ch XII) of imagination is contrasted with “the aggregative and associative power” (ibid) of the fancy (Daiches 901-902).

Douglas Hedley in *Living Forms of the Imagination* notes the distinction between imagination and fancy. He observes that the “Imagination is based upon the freedom or spontaneity of the mind’s control over its images or contents. Primary imagination is simply the Kantian idea of ‘apperception’. Fancy is rather the passive mechanism of association of images.” Hedley notes that for Coleridge “fancy is ‘an aggregative and associative power’” which “accumulates items and constructs an artificial whole” whereas “imagination is the ‘shaping and modifying power’” which forges “an entire new fabric”. They are then two different ways of dealing with “the mind’s materials”. (49-50)

In conclusion, we have seen that Coleridge links imagination to the unconscious, it is more primordial and inscrutable while fancy represents the “capacity of the mind to represent and combine remembered images” (Hedley 52). As Coleridge says in the concluding lines of Ch-XIV, “Good Sense is the body of poetic genius, Fancy is Drapery, Motion its Life, and Imagination the soul that is everywhere, and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole.”(197)



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is Coleridge’s concept of primary and secondary imagination.

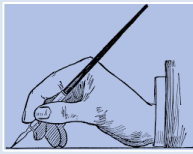
2. What is Coleridge's idea of fancy?

11.3.3 Coleridge on Wordsworth's claims in "The Preface"

In Chapter XVII of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge expounds in great detail the points where he disagrees with Wordsworth and gives his own opinions and justifications for the same. He identifies the passages from the "Preface" with which he disagrees for the benefit of the reader. He says that the positions that he disagrees with are contained in the following sentences- "a selection of the REAL language of men;" "the language of these men" (i.e. men in low and rustic life) has been adopted.; "I propose to myself to imitate, and as far as is possible, to adopt the very language of men.;" "Between the language of prose and that of metrical composition, there neither is, nor can be any essential difference." (208). He objects to the use of the word "real" as "every man's language varies, according to the extent of his knowledge, the activity of his faculties, and the depth or quickness of his feelings." (208-209). He says that every man's language possesses firstly, its individual differences; second the common linguistic properties of the particular class they belong to; and third the words and

phrases that are universally used (209). Therefore there cannot be a universally real language to be found among the rustic people. He says that this language so highly praised by Wordsworth varies from village to village depending on the “character of the clergyman, existence or non-existence of schools”, and even on how politically aware the residents are. (209) Moreover, he says that the homeliest of Wordsworth’s composition differs greatly from the language of a common peasant which negates Wordsworth’s claims about using the language from rustic life for his poems. He points out that in some of Wordsworth’s most well received poems like “The Brothers”, “Michael”, “Ruth”, “The Mad Mother” etc. he presents characters, who have not been taken from “low or rustic life”, and the thoughts and feelings attributed to them are not connected to their occupations or abode but are universal and can be produced in both rural and urban areas (199-200). He also disagrees with Wordsworth’s assertion that the best part of language forms from the objects with which the rustic hourly communicates. He says that if this is so, then the knowledge of the rustic and his communication with objects limited to his surroundings will provide a very scanty vocabulary. Secondly, the language that the rustic is familiar with is limited and cannot form the best part of the language. He claims that the best part of the human language comes from mental reflection and use of imagination, which has no place in the consciousness of an uneducated man. He says that in civilized society, by imitation and passive remembrance, of what they hear from their clergy men and other superiors, the most uneducated can improve his language. Moreover, the common man today has a far greater vocabulary and linguistic competence today than three or four centuries ago, when the language used exclusively in universities and schools were transferred to the pulpit i.e. to the

priest giving the sermons in Church and thus passing on the knowledge to the common man (208-209).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What according to Coleridge is the immediate object of Poetry?

2. Is fancy and imagination the same for Coleridge?

3. According to Coleridge, between fancy and imagination, which is the “shaping and modifying power”?

4. Is there a “real” language of man according to Coleridge?

11.4 SUMMING UP

S.T. Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* is one of the integral texts within English Romantic literary criticism. His discussion on Imagination and Fancy has been one of the most debated areas of his philosophy, influencing later generation poets and writers, and inviting scholarly engagement from literary critics. Chaotic at times but with a narrative unity, it blends philosophy, literary criticism, religion and autobiography and remains a seminal text of literary criticism till now. Within Romantic thought, primacy is given to the imagination, as a departure from the mimetic actions of the preceding Neo-classical poets. For him, imagination as a unifying force which blends in discordant elements to produce something new then becomes the unique god like ability of the poet. For Coleridge, *Biographia* was an attempt to put forward his thoughts on Poetry and the poetry making process, and distinguish his philosophy from that of William Wordsworth.



11.5 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Discuss Coleridge's views regarding Fancy and Imagination in *Biographia Literaria*.
2. What were Coleridge's objections to views expressed by Wordsworth in the "Preface"? Do you agree with them and why?
3. Write a critical note on Coleridge's contribution to literary criticism with special reference to *Biographia Literaria*.
4. Critically comment on Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* as a "Romantic" work of literary criticism.
5. Discuss the key ways in which Coleridge's concept of fancy, imagination and the poetry making process as enumerated in

Biographia Literaria is a departure from the preceding Neo-classical ideals.

6. Summarise Coleridge's views on poetry.

7. How did the Romantics differ from the Neo-classical poets?



11.6 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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UNIT 12: PREFACE TO LYRICAL BALLADS (SELECTIONS)

12.0 Introduction

12.1 Learning Objectives

12.2 William Wordsworth: Life and Works

12.3 Reading 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*'

12.3.1 Why write the Preface?

12.3.2 Subject and Aim of the Poems in *Lyrical Ballads*

12.3.3 Style and Language of the Poems

12.3.4 What is a Poet?

12.3.5 Verse form

12.3.6 The Poem and the Reader

12.4 Summing Up

12.5 Assessment Questions

12.6 References and Recommended Readings

12.0 INTRODUCTION

The publication of *Lyrical Ballads* is often considered as one of the indicators of the English Romantic period (Abrams *A Glossary of Literary Terms* 215). It was first published in 1798 with poems from both Wordsworth and Coleridge. Coleridge contributed four poems to the volume while Wordsworth contributed nineteen. Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" are two well-known poems which were part of this volume. Cuddon notes that in the preceding literary Neo-classical age, most writers were traditionalists, and imitated the Classical authors. (*Dictionay of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 541).

The view of the Neoclassical writers that Literature is an art, "in which excellence could be attained only by prolonged study" (Cuddon 541) changes with the publication of *Lyrical*

Ballads when Wordsworth declares in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (Enright and Chickera 165), which signals the coming of Romantic thought to England. The term “Romantic” is used to cover the most distinctive writers in England in the last years of the 18th century and the first decades of the 19th century. It is a term used for convenience as these writers did not consider themselves as Romantics. There was no “Romantic movement” as such. It was only after August Wilhelm von Schlegel’s Vienna lectures of 1808–09, that there was “a clear distinction established between the “organic,” “plastic” qualities of Romantic art and the “mechanical” character of Classicism” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* n.p.).

After the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth was urged by his friends and well-wishers to “prefix a systematic defence of the theory upon which the Poems were written” (Enright and Chickera 162). “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” was first published in 1800 and prefixed to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, and then again in 1802, another text was published with additional material and the “Appendix”. This unit uses the 1850 standard version (with minor revisions) as published in *English Critical Texts*, edited by D.J. Enright and E.D. Chickera. The “Preface” is his attempt to introduce the reader to the concepts and ideologies that form the basis of the poems included in the *Lyrical Ballads*. It focuses on his philosophy regarding the poet and his art. James A. Butler opines that “Wordsworth’s unshakeable faith in his own greatness and originality created the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* to instruct his readers how to read those poems” (“Poetry 1798–1807”, 48).

12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In the earlier unit you have learned about Samuel Taylor Coleridge, one of the contemporaries and collaborators of William Wordsworth, together with whom he published the *Lyrical Ballads*. You now have formed an idea of English Romantic thought and the significance of *Lyrical Ballads* as a harbinger of English Romanticism. Discussing Coleridge and *Biographia Literaria* in the previous unit, you must have seen how Wordsworth, his life, his works and his philosophy is intertwined with both Coleridge and English Romanticism. This unit will focus on William Wordsworth and his philosophy with reference to “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*”. After reading this unit you will be able to:

- Acquaint with the life and works of William Wordsworth
- Read critically select portions from Wordsworth’s ‘Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*’
- Understand Wordsworth’s philosophy of Poetry and the Poetry making process
- Be aware of the position of Wordsworth as well as Coleridge within English Romantic criticism

12.2 WILLIAM WORDSWORTH: LIFE AND WORKS

William Wordsworth was born in 1770 at Cockermouth, Cumberland, one of five children to John Wordsworth and Ann Cookson. His mother died when he was eight years old and his father followed six years later. He was sent to a school in Hawkshead in the Lake region where he spent his time amidst nature and her beauty. His time spent here as a child is recorded in his work *The Prelude* where he talks of his days spent there, learning more from the hills and flowers and stars rather than

from his school books. From 1787 to 1797 was a period of uncertainty and stress as well as excitement as Wordsworth begins his university life at Cambridge, he travels abroad and takes part in revolutionary experience. During his time in Cambridge, he befriended many political enthusiasts attracted by the hopes and ambitions of the French Revolution. He made two trips to France, in 1790 and 1791 as part of the Oxford Republicans. On his second trip he joined the Girondists or the moderate Republicans and would have gone to the guillotine with the leaders of the party if his relatives had not brought him back to England. However his enthusiasm regarding the Revolution started to disappear as he beheld its excesses including the execution of King Louis XVI of France, and the rise of Napoleon. This soon led to disgust and opposition of the entire Revolution. From 1797 to 1799 is an important part in his life as he retired to the Quantock Hills, Somerset with his sister Dorothy and S.T. Coleridge. Their association produced the *Lyrical Ballads* which has been said to have heralded Romanticism into English literature. The last half of his life was spent in his beloved lake district where he lived successively at Grasmere and Rydal Mount. Soon his poetry was recognized and he was hailed by critics as one of the greatest poets of England. On the death of the poet Robert Southey in 1843, he was made the Poet Laureate, a position that he held until his death. He passed away quietly in 1850 at the age of eighty and was buried in the churchyard at Grasmere.

LET US STOP AND THINK



William Wordsworth and his friends Coleridge and Robert Southey came to be known as the "Lake Poets".

William Wordsworth's sister Dorothy Wordsworth, herself an unpublished writer, diarist and poet, was a significant presence in his life and provided literary insights to his work

Some of his well-known works are *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) which included poems like "Lines Composed A Few Miles above Tintern Abbey", "Simon Lee", "The Thorn", "The Idiot Boy"; *The Excursion* (1814), *Laodamia* (1815, 1845), *The Prelude* (1850). The 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* included even more exquisite poems like "Michael", "The Ruined Cottage", "Lucy Gray". In his *Poems* published in 1807, we find such poems like "Resolution and Independence", "Ode: Intimations of Immortality", "The Solitary Reaper", "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802". *The Prelude* was a long autobiographical account of his own development which was completed in 1805 but Wordsworth kept working on it his entire life. It was first published posthumously in 1850. It was originally intended to be a part of another volume called *The Recluse* which was never completed. Only *The Excursion*, which was supposed to be a part of the entire grand scheme of *The Recluse* was written (Daiches 881-882). When the *Lyrical Ballads* was published, it received criticism with "childish", "vulgar", "plebeian" were some of the terms used for Wordsworth's poems, while Coleridge was attacked for his "babyish simplicity" and his "uncouth, pedantic and obscure diction" (Day 222). Day notes: "What particularly caught the attention of a number of critics was Wordsworth's statement of purpose: 'to choose incidents from common life and to relate or describe them, throughout as far as possible, in a selection of language really used by men' (Hoffman and Hynes 1966:15). This appalled the editor of the *Edinburgh*, one Francis Jeffrey (1773-1850), who declared that poetry, like religion, had its fixed standards 'fixed long ago by certain inspired writers whose authority is no longer lawful to call in question' (222).

12.3 READING 'PREFACE TO LYRICAL BALLADS'

12.3.1 *Why write the Preface?*

Wordsworth claims to write the Preface in order to introduce the Poems written by him and Coleridge to the general public as their Poems are markedly different from the poems generally popular among the reading public. He says that the public who have been accustomed to the “gaudiness and inane phraseology of modern writers”(Enright and Chickera 163) will feel strange and awkward when they read their Poems and will question whether it is poetry at all. Therefore he feels that he must explain the purpose of his Poems, its subject, language, aims and how both he and Coleridge have gone about executing it which results in its difference from the works of other writers.

12.3.2 *Subject and Aim of the Poems in Lyrical Ballads*

Wordsworth says that the principal object in the Poems was to choose “incidents and situations from common life”(164) and describe them in the language used by the common man and at the same time colour it using their imagination so that the ordinary is presented to the mind in an “unusual aspect”(164). The common and the familiar are thus transformed into something extraordinary. He advocates the use of real language spoken by the common man and not artificial poetic diction. The subjects chosen for the Poems were generally scenes from “Humble and rustic life” (164) because in that situation the primary rules of human nature could be better understood. They are less under restraint and free from the hypocrisies of the modern world. He praises the language used by rural folk as more in tune with the inner human self and in sync with the beauty and simplicity of nature. It is easily

comprehended and more durable, and as these rural folk daily communes with nature, their language is as simple and pure, and less under the influence of social vanity. Wordsworth says they “convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions” (164). Thus this kind of language is superior and more precise than the artificial poetic diction used by the Poets of the day.

Moreover he says that with the increasing monotony and uniformity of modern life, the people start craving sensational incidents which is satisfied by the literature of the day while great literature is ignored. He claims that the human mind can be excited without the “application of gross and violent stimulants” and thus endeavours to develop this capability especially in light of the current situation of “savage torpor”(166).

12.3.3 On the Style and Language of the Poems

Wordsworth comments on the style of the Poems as being different from that seen in other poems of the day. He says that he avoids using personification of abstract ideas as a poetic device to elevate the style of the Poems and raise it above prose. Instead he tried to imitate as far as possible the language of men as these personifications do not form a part of natural speech. He also claims that there is very little of poetic diction in his Poems so as to bring the language of his Poems closer to the language of men. He deliberately avoids such phrases and figures of speech which though beautiful has become clichéd, dull and overused at the hands of bad poets. (167-168)

“Writing in 1834, Henry Taylor noted that Wordsworth's attacks on eighteenth-century diction had succeeded in making poetry, in some particulars, more plain spoken. But Taylor also remarked that in effect a new poetic diction had covertly replaced the old”. (Abrams “The Correspondent Breeze: A

Romantic Metaphor” 37). Even though Wordsworth claims to use the language of the common man in his poetry in the “Preface”, there has been debate regarding how much he actually practices those poetic principles in his poetry (Choudhury *English Social and Cultural History* 193). Coleridge responds to these claims in *Biographia Literaria* as we have seen in the previous unit

12.3.4 *What is a Poet?*

In the Preface, Wordsworth expounds his idea on what a poet is, his craft and the world around him. He says a poet is a man speaking to men but one endowed with more sensibility, tenderness, greater knowledge of human nature with a more comprehensive soul. A poet is one who rejoices in the spirit of life in him and in the universe around him and feels impelled to create such joy and passion where he does not find them. He is able to recreate passions and emotions without the need for immediate external excitement (171).

In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth calls the poet “the rock of defence for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love.” Why is human nature in need of defence? Why now? And why this character, the poet, in this particular cause? Wordsworth’s argument is really circular, as Rousseau’s idea of sympathy also was, but its power is none the less sustaining for that. We look to the poet for a defence of human nature because it is from the poet that we learn the adequacies of the imagination and the inadequacies of things as they are. The person, who can make us start to see this, so that we continue to see it for ourselves, is the person whom we call the poet. (Bromwich “Note on the Romantic Self” 169)

Wordsworth says that the Poet is the “rock of defence for human nature” (175), one who upholds and preserves human values. In spite of difference in countries, languages, manners, law and customs, he claims that a poet binds together by “passion and knowledge” the whole of humanity (175).

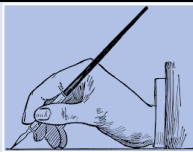
12.3.5 Verse form

Wordsworth in the Preface gives his reasons for using the verse form for his creations. He says that the goal of Poetry is to “produce excitement in co-existence with an overbalance of pleasure” (178) and he contends that it has been acknowledged by all nations that metrical language has charm and imparts pleasure (177). Even Poems that have been written upon humble subjects and in a more simple style, have been giving pleasure to readers from generation to generation (178). Moreover, he claims that topics and situations associated with great pain, is more endurable in verse than in prose. He justifies this claim by citing the Reader’s own experiences where the Reader feels reluctant to re-read the distressful parts of *Clarissa Harlowe* (Samuel Richardson 1748), or *The Gamester* (James Shirley 1637). While at the same time, no such reaction is observed when reading Shakespeare, due to the pleasure derived from the metrical arrangement (178-179). He concludes this discussion by claiming that out of the two, prose and verse, both well executed, the verse will be read a hundred times where the prose will be read once (181).

12.3.6 The Poem and the Reader

Wordsworth here gives primacy to individual feelings and subjectivity. He requests the reader to judge the Poems himself and not be influenced by the judgement of others (183). This is one of the features of Romantic criticism. He talks of introducing a new kind of poetry to the Reader, poetry with a purpose, one where poetry provides “other enjoyments, of a

purser, more lasting, and more exquisite nature. He says that it has been his aim to produce a species of poetry which is “genuine poetry” (184), able to interest mankind permanently and also be important in the “multiplicity and quality of its moral relations.”(184). He ends by leaving it to the reader to determine whether he has succeeded in his objective and form his own judgements regarding the Poems in *The Lyrical Ballads*.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What kind of language did Wordsworth want to use for his Poetry?

2. What is the principal object of his Poems?

3. According to Wordsworth, is a poet endowed with greater sensibility?

12.4 SUMMING UP

“Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” served as a manifesto for William Wordsworth to explain and introduce the poems that he and Coleridge co-authored in *Lyrical Ballads* to the reading public. His concept of good poetry as a spontaneous emotional reaction from within the poet differed from the established writers of his time who were craftsmen who followed the rules of the ancient Classical writers. He claimed to reject the prevailing poetic diction of the time and wanted to use the “real” language of the common man. In the previous section, we have discussed how Coleridge responds to Wordsworth’s claims in the “Preface” in his *Biographia Literaria*. Similar to Coleridge, Wordsworth also grants the poet an elevated status, as somebody who is capable of greater sensibility and ability to perceive the world and emote through his poems. His goal in writing his poems was take events and incidents from common life and present them anew to the reader using a language which rejected the mimetic character of the Neo-classical writers.



12.5 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Discuss Wordsworth’s views regarding Poetry and the Poet with reference to “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*”.
2. How does Wordsworth’s idea of language, form and subject of poetry as seen in his “Preface” differ from the preceding Neo-classical literary practices?
3. What was Wordsworth’s objective in writing the “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*”? What are the key points that he discussed in the text?
4. Critically comment on Wordsworth’s “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” as a “Romantic” work of literary criticism.

5. How do Wordsworth and Coleridge approach Poetry? Critically comment with instances from the “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” and *Biographia Literaria*.
6. What is Wordsworth’s view on style and language in poetry?
7. Summarise Wordsworth’s view on the poet.



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MODULE V: MATTHEW ARNOLD AND F. R. LEAVIS

UNIT 13: “THE STUDY OF POETRY” (SELECTIONS)

UNIT STRUCTURE

- 13.0 Introduction
- 13.1 Learning Objectives
- 13.2 Matthew Arnold: Life and Works
- 13.3 Reading “The Study of Poetry”
- 13.4 Key Concepts
 - 13.4.1 Touchstone method
 - 13.4.2 Criticism of Life
- 13.5 Summing Up
- 13.6 Assessment Questions
- 13.7 References and Recommended Readings

3.0 INTRODUCTION

Mathew Arnold excels as a Victorian poet and literary critic. In his view, the purpose of literary criticism was “to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas”. He propagates an objective approach to criticism and believes that poetry interprets life. It consoles and sustains human beings. Therefore it is necessary to differentiate between good and bad poetry.

13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This unit has been designed to make you familiar with the Victorian critic and poet Matthew Arnold. This unit analyses his critical essay “The Study of Poetry”. As you work through this unit, you will be able to:

- familiarize yourself with the social and cultural background that shaped the literary criticism of Matthew Arnold
- comprehend critically the prescribed text by Arnold

- understand the critical concepts outlined by Arnold
- place Arnold in the lineage of literary critics

13.2 MATTHEW ARNOLD: LIFE AND WORKS

Poet-critic Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) trumpeted the Victorian world of criticism that repudiated the romantic trend of judging literature. He took to the Greek, German, and French models and values to cement his literary taste as well as socio-cultural set up of the nation. As he was aggrieved at the ‘intellectual failings’ of the age, his prime objective was to perform the role of a ‘detector general’ so that much-needed change could be realized in the society. With his academic as well as socio-cultural critical writings, he wanted to do something for the betterment of the social set up of the country. Deeply influenced by Greek models such as Homer and Aristotle, German poet and philosopher Goethe, and the French Sainte Beuve, he enriched the critical bent with an élan that was unprecedented. Given his distinctive style adaptable to the art of criticism, his objective approach to literary works, compromising between head and heart, and his in-depth learning, especially in the classics, Arnold spearheaded the critical domain in literature and the larger socio-cultural context too. He did not merely curve his name as a reputed literary critic, but also appeared as a leading proponent of socio-cultural criticism. Moreover, his classicism was an unquestionably added trait to the critical stance.

In addition to his being a poet of grandeur and excellence, Arnold has been credited with a number of critical works in which his seminal ideas are well articulated. Of his critical works, mention may be made of, at first, *Preface to the Poems* (1853) written at the early age of thirty one. With the appointment as Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1857, he made effective use of the opportunity to formulate a genuine base of criticism. During this

tenure, he delivered a good number of influential lectures included in *On Translating Homer* (1861), *Last Words on Translating Homer*, and *The Study of Celtic Literature* (1867). These works are easily marked with striking judgments and well-made remarks. Advocacy of English hexameters, grand style and need for disinterestedness in criticism seemed to have occupied a distinctive position to his critical approach. He also contributed most of the essays that were published later as *Essays in Criticism* (1865, 1888). The work, without any doubt, has been of perennial influence on critics following Arnold. In one's quest for criticism, procedures and principles as articulated in the essays could be of great help. Then he directed his attention to practical questions that included works like *Friendship's Garland* (1871), and the most significant *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). In his pursuit of cultural criticism, *Culture and Anarchy* is a faithful addition since the work shows how observant and immaculate Arnold was in analyzing culture in the society. Here he observes the society as a perfect amalgam of different classes of people. For him, the society consists of aristocracy, middle class, and working class. He called these three distinctive groups as Barbarians, Philistines and Populace. Both the Barbarians and Populace could not uphold culture because of their outwardness, and lack of sympathy and action respectively. Of course, the Philistines, albeit their being materialistic, puritanical, too Hebraic and too little Hellenist, do have the capability to inculcate moral and intellectual perfection in culture. Besides, his deep speculations on religion found a deserving treatment in *St. Paul and Protestantism* (1870), *Literature and Dogma* (1873), *God and the Bible* (1875), and *Last Essays on Church and Religion* (1877). And the last, but not least, he penned down *Discourses in America* (1885). In his religious views, Arnold adopted a stand that was quite unusual to the contemporary world. His were the views that stood in opposition to convention and general acceptance. Instead of following the path

of religion as a way to realizing the idea of God, thus in its metaphysical signpost, he was more concerned with those virtues and values that could be elicited from religion. This approach referred to his practical concern, and to life as led in a given society. With him, religion is a part of the society, and hence it is to be made use of whether we could elicit benefit from it. Of course, he conditioned this type of approach to religion by coming under the influence of his father Dr. Thomas Arnold, and Baruch Spinoza.

13.3 READING “THE STUDY OF POETRY”

Matthew Arnold’s essay on “The Study of Poetry” was first published as the General Introduction to T. H. Ward’s edited work, *The English Poets*, 1880. Consequently the essay appeared in his *Essays in Criticism*, Second Series, 1888. As the title suggests, the essay makes an in-depth study on poetry, and pays warm accolades to this distinctive genre. Although this position was not altogether new to the English critical scene because of early two versions namely Sir Philip Sidney’s “An Apology for Poetry”, and P.B. Shelley’s “A Defence of Poetry” already initiating this direction, Matthew Arnold’s was a novel approach as far as the critical quarters of the Victorians were concerned. With his characteristic deep veneration for poetry, Arnold rightly assures that we need not worry about its future prospects and reception. As time passes on, more stability and surer position would come under way within its fold. In his eye, poetry assumes a kind of dignity that would never come into an impasse. “The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay”, he remarks. Given its high destinies and far-reaching impact on human civilization, Arnold draws out a fundamental truth of poetry, i.e. its faithful rendering of the much desired interpretation of life. Poetry is bound to “interpret life for us, to console us, (and) to sustain us.”

Thus poetry is not merely all about exploration of an exotic location as conceived by the wings of imagination, and as postulated by the romantic practitioners. Poetry, in the eye of Arnold, is related to the evocation of those areas that are close to life as led in the society. Hence it is not the principle of ‘art for art’s sake’, rather ‘art for life’s sake’ that matters for the critical bent of Arnold. This special facet to poetry makes it surpass science, religion and philosophy since these branches of study, though connected to life in different formats, are partially true to the representation of life and its aspects. For instance, the distinctive branch of philosophy is so obsessed with “reasoning about causation and finite and infinite being” that the genuine concern for human life appears vague and abstract as well, and philosophical speculation bears an unnecessary proportion for the people concerned. Hence it cannot compete with what poetry offers to mankind. Like philosophy, science too cannot stand in close proximity to the grandeur of poetry. Science is always meant for the selected few, and this discipline hardly has the scope for ‘common man’ to participate. For Arnold, science appears ‘incomplete’ without poetry. This formulation by Arnold reminds us of the warm tributes as paid by William Wordsworth to poetry in comparison to science in his ‘Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*’ first published in 1800. Although both Arnold and Wordsworth do not share a common critical base, most prominently in terms of their adherence to classical and romantic exploration of literary taste, they seem to have come close in showing high regards to poetry as a distinctive genre. Following this, both of them place poetry far superior to other art forms. As such, like Wordsworth, Arnold makes a candid revelation that poetry attains a kind of dignity and positions no other art form does the same. In respect of science too, they opine that this branch of study is much inferior to poetry. Wordsworth maintains, “The Man of science seeks truth as a remote and unknown benefactor; he cherishes and loves it in his

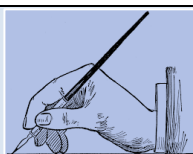
solitude: the Poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion. Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge..." Hence, it is the singing mode a poet adopts that is accessible to all and sundry. It refers to a poet's position at the larger spectrum of the society that a man of science misses outright. Knowledge as provided by science is confined to a selected few, and thus it engages a limited circle or scope in comparison to poetry.

Having showered firm belief in the rich prospects of poetry, Arnold talks about high standards a critic or a reader should make use of in judging poetry. The offer for high standards, as Arnold mentions in the essay, is quite consonant with his high regards for poetry. Both poetry and its sound judgment is a must to evolve what is the best in poetry and its future prospects. One needs to be selective in one's approach to poetry. To do so, Arnold observes that poetry is to be identified along the adjectives of good and bad, excellent and inferior. He says, "... in poetry the distinction between excellent and inferior, sound and unsound or only half-sound, true and untrue or only half-true is of paramount importance... because of the high destinies of poetry." Arnold decries any pretension that there is no essential difference between 'excellent and inferior' poetry. In his eye good or excellent poetry always entails "a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty." The 'best' poetry inherits the power of forming, sustaining, and delighting us, as nothing else can do in true sense. Poetry, according to him, has a greater role to play in life. Keeping this formulation in mind, a critic should proceed to take out the best part in poetry. Thus Arnold adopts a prescriptive method for critics in pursuit of their literary taste. His engagement to Touchstone method, which we shall be discussing later, also substantiates this prescriptive norm. Considering poetry whether it involves 'a

criticism of life' relates to Arnold's anti-romantic proposition he follows pursuing literary criticism. This formulation stands in sharp contrast to imaginative rendering of a given subject or theme. Moreover, entanglement to the laws of 'poetic truth and poetic beauty' conditioning the base for a 'criticism of life' itself is a marker to Arnold's valuation of aestheticism in judging a literary work. With him, a literary work always possesses a strong bond of life and its aesthetic accomplishment. But he finds a disheartening practice of literary critics who consider a work of art, especially poetry, on 'historic' and 'personal' grounds. Since both the historic and personal estimates of poetry are fallacious in nature, they stand as hindrance to the real estimate of this distinctive genre. If these methods are used, a literary critic would miss the best part as could be elicited from a poem. In historic estimate, poetic judgments tend to be exaggerating and overrating, "... we may easily bring ourselves to make it (a poet's work) of more importance as poetry than in itself it really is, we may come to use a language of quite exaggerated praise in criticizing it; in short, to overrate it." Like the historical estimate, the personal estimate is equally defective since "our personal affinities, likings, and circumstances have great power to sway our estimate of this or that poet's work, and to make us attach more importance to it as poetry than in itself it really possesses..."

Both historic and personal estimates of poetry cannot reap the 'best' part as available in poetry. While talking about the 'best' part in poetry, Arnold refers to the 'classic' character a poet adopts in the execution of a given poem. For him it is the classic (not romantic) position that formulates the 'best' of a work of art. In the essay, he observes, "...if he (poet) is a real classic, if his work belongs to the class of the very best, then the great thing for us is to feel and enjoy his work as deeply as ever we can, and to appreciate the wide difference between it and all work which has not the same high character." Arnold's emphasis upon excellence or high

apparatus in a given poem seems to be a pointer to his deep veneration for classicism and to some extent elitist nature as well. This might be his anti-Wordsworthian stance that pays the least attention to Wordsworth's views on poetry and poetic diction. That poetry should linger upon '*humble and rustic life*' who are close to nature, and the language really used by them does not seem to be acceptable to Arnold's critical formulation. Given the 'best' in a poem, it is imperative that a literary critic be aware of the real estimate of it. Without the real estimate, a poem, under no circumstances, could have a lasting impression on the reading circle. But Arnold notices a disappointing picture as prevailed in the judgment of poetry since the majority of literary critics either adopts historic or personal or both methods in their pursuits. These fallacious methods are so active that the real estimate remains an untouched phenomenon. Realising the defective nature of these methods, Arnold comments, "The historic estimate is likely in especial to affect our judgment and our language when we are dealing with ancient poets; the personal estimate when we are dealing with poets our contemporaries, or at any rate modern." Hence he makes a straightforward revelation that both historic and personal estimates of poetry are not the right steps literary critics could take recourse to.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Why does Arnold say that historical and personal methods of evaluating poetry are fallacious?



13.4 KEY CONCEPTS


13.4.1 *Touchstone Method*

To undo the unhealthy effects of both historic and personal estimates of poetry, Arnold offers his ‘Touchstone’ method as the best way critics could take recourse to in pursuit of literary judgment. The prime objective of this distinctive method is to facilitate an impartial and disinterested judgment which could provide what Arnold terms the ‘best’ part in a poem. He gives utmost importance to this method by saying, “Indeed there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one’s mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry.” The lines and expressions of the great masters, if properly manipulated, would help us detect “the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality” in those poetic creations that are placed alongside them. As such it is the comparative mode of judgment that formulates the prime idea in Touchstone method. Comparison between the lines and expressions of the great masters, and those of the poets at hand constitutes the major base in Touchstone method. Next Arnold moves to those great masters and some of their most unforgettable lines that could be of great help in accomplishing the real estimate of poetry. He mentions literary giants like Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton on the ground of their high poetic quality for which, albeit individual differences, they belong to the class of the ‘truly excellent’. In the essay, Arnold quotes a number of lines from their creations and finds a genuine ‘high quality’ both in matter and manner or substance and style of expression. Their

“superior character of truth and seriousness... is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement” that characterizes most of their works. A great master is equally concerned with both subject matter and the form of its expression. Preference for one thing at the cost of another does not seem to be a sound approach that could inculcate excellence to the writer. Aristotle also talks high about the status of poetry because of its accumulation of “a higher truth and a higher seriousness” that is quite absent from most of the other art forms. Commenting on the ‘higher truth’ and ‘higher seriousness’ Aristotle perhaps wants to establish the superior character of poetry, which Plato ignores completely given the distinctive form’s engagement in cheap emotional rendering of the subject matter. Aristotle’s observations on poetry are the counterblast to the unhealthy attitude adopted by his master Plato. In Arnold’s view, style or manner of a given poem is determined by the kind of truth and seriousness the matter or substance of the poem engages. Absence of truth and seriousness from one part affects the other. The intrinsic and inseparable relation between content and form as established by Arnold is an essential criterion to the attainment of an organic whole in a work. Hence Arnold’s Touchstone method is designed to take out the high poetic quality that draws upon truth and seriousness to a great extent.

Though it makes an interesting study, Arnold’s Touchstone method met with serious repercussions in critical circles. Despite its wide-ranging impact on critical discourse ever since its birth, the method is not free of criticism altogether. His inclusion of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton to draw lines and expressions as genuine touchstone seems to be a subjective position he adopts since it does not mean that they are ‘the’ only masters of unparalleled grandeur and beauty in the whole of world literature. It is his personal like for those writers, great as they are, and will always be, that postulates this critical method. Hence an eminent critic succeeding Arnold, like T.S. Eliot has not paid high

accolades to Arnold saying that he lacks the power of reasoning and acts as a propagandist and a clever advertiser rather than a great critic. Besides, Arnold's emphasis upon 'high seriousness' and dignity of 'styles' seems to be echoing classical masters like Aristotle and Longinus respectively. From this point, a type of plagiarism marks out his position of a critic. Thus it is observed that Arnold's critical stance has been looked upon from various perspectives, especially with regard to his Touchstone method. However, we must admit that, despite all such criticism, his Touchstone method is an attempt at undermining the exploration of individual authors in judgment of literary works as prevalent at the preceding decades. The dominant trend of looking at literary works in respect of the life history of the concerned author has been a continuing debate, and Touchstone method decries this development because it campaigns for lines and expressions by the classical masters, not their personal history. This context marks out the significance of this critical method.

	<p style="text-align: center;">CHECK YOUR PROGRESS</p> <p>1. What is Arnold's Touchstone method?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
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13.4.2 Criticism of Life

Poetry for Arnold was never ‘art for art’s sake’. It was a serious preoccupation. He defines poetry “as a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty”. In it “the spirit of our race will find, as time goes and as other helps fail, its consolation and stay”. The “criticism of life” is the “noble and profound application of ideas to life and “laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty” as “truth and seriousness of substance and matter” and “felicity and perfection of diction and manner”. The duty of the poet is not to present life as it is but to add to it something of his own to indicate what he thinks of it. Thus, poetry is the poet’s criticism of life, his contribution to its enrichment. It is different from science and morality in that while the latter appeal either to reason and good reason, it appeals to all the faculties of the soul and so to the whole man. This is achieved by following the laws of poetic truth and beauty.

13.5 SUMMING UP

The striking fact about Matthew Arnold’s essay on “The Study of Poetry” is the high destinies as paid to the genre of poetry. In his eye, true greatness in poetry is made accessible with its accomplishment of the interpretation and criticism of life involving various aspects. Poetry is not merely an exploration of ‘feelings and emotions’ as maintained by the Romantic school, rather it is much more about life as shown with the lens of a critical eye. Arnold’s emphasis upon the critical mode of judging poetry itself is directed against author-text perception that remains a dominant tendency for his preceding practitioners. Given the far-reaching impact of poetry on the larger spectrum of the society, and other notable disciplines, Arnold posits poetry on a much higher level to philosophy, science and religion. Although these

disciplines have been widely prevalent in the society, they could hardly come close in terms of 'faithful rendering' of life and make it easy access to people. Since poetry is intrinsically related to life, thus Arnold's socio-cultural concern as a literary critic coming into being, proper estimate of this distinctive genre is a must in critical discourse. To this Arnold offers his Touchstone method, which, if used properly, could undo the fallacious Historic and Personal method as widely used by literary critics. Of course, the Touchstone method is not altogether free of fallacy since the famous lines by masters like Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton, to be used as touchstone, might not appear artistically sound for others. The choice made by Arnold is purely personal that might not reap the desired result as expected. Hence his position as a critic might come under the banner of a propagandist as well. Another important aspect to the essay is Arnold's demarcation between excellent and inferior poetry, and tells us to look at poetry with an observant eye. He does not consider everything as a good piece of poetry until and unless they appear as 'faithful rendering' of life. Poetry, in his view, entails 'high seriousness' both in subject matter and its treatment. He does not consider a poetic piece as a good work if it does not come into terms with this said criterion. Here he echoes the great classical masters like Aristotle and Longinus, and his inherent fascination for classicism carries an engagement. This engagement is so potent in his critical pursuits that he follows it all through his reading of the English poets including Chaucer, Dryden and Pope, Gray, and Burns. Although he pays tributes to all these poets, he does not value them, except Gray, in the same fashion, as he has done to the classical authors. Gray's greatness, (if any in the eye of others) is a result, as Arnold observes, of his interest in and close reading of the classical masters. His reading of the classical texts forms a base upon which his poetry assumes a proportion that most of the writers could not come into terms with. However, the rest of the

writers and their creations seem to be lacking in certain qualities that make a writer great and noteworthy. Here too Arnold proves his bent of classicism, and judges everything from that particular point.



13.4 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. How does Matthew Arnold establish the rich prospects of poetry? Give a reasoned answer.
2. What are the two methods being widely used in the estimation of poetry? Do you think they are helpful in proper judgment?
3. Write a note on Matthew Arnold's Touchstone method. Can this method undo the shortcomings of historic and personal estimation of poetry?
4. What are the major aspects Matthew Arnold touches upon in his reading of the selected English poets? How would you assess his critical position from this context?
5. Prepare a critical assessment of Mathew Arnold as a Victorian literary critic.



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UNIT 14: “LITERARY CRITICISM AND PHILOSOPHY”

UNIT STRUCTURE

14.0 Introduction

14.1 Learning Objectives

14.2 F. R. Leavis: Life and Works

14.3 Reading the essay “*Literary Criticism and Philosophy*”

14.4 Function as a Literary Critic

14.4.1 Observations on the Romantic Poets

14.5 Summing Up

14.6 Assessment Questions

14.7. References and Recommended Readings

14.0 INTRODUCTION

F.R. Leavis operates as the critics’ critic in most of his works. He argues that the primary function of a literary critic is to interpret the meaning, aesthetics and production history of a work. In “Literary Criticism and Philosophy”, which is our main area of concern, he argues against the possibility of systematic rules for evaluating the value of poetry. Leavis settles with imagination and extensive reading to qualify as a good interpreter. He further goes on to distinguish between literary criticism and philosophy. He considers reading and re-reading of a text, by the critics, in order to judge the aesthetics behind a good work.

14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

With a view to familiarizing the learners with the larger context of literary criticism as perceived in the Victorian era and in the first part of the twentieth century, this unit has been designed giving due attention to F.R. Leavis, an influential British literary

critic of twentieth century. As you work through this unit, you will be able to:

- familiarize yourself with the social and cultural background that shaped the literary criticism of F R Leavis
- analyse critically the prescribed text “*Literary Criticism and Philosophy*” by Leavis
- understand the critical concepts outlined by Leavis in this text
- comprehend F. R. Leavis’ views on tradition and text with reference to Dr. Wellek’s
- understand Leavis’ notions of a good critic.

14.2 F. R. LEAVIS: LIFE AND WORKS

In a long career, extending from the late 1920s to the mid 1970s, Frank Raymond Leavis (1895-1978) revolutionized the perception of English literary studies and formed a solid base in furthering its horizon. With his shrewd and observant eye, he took up major genres of literature including poetry and fictional narrative to engage his novel ideas. Instead of drawing upon the poetic creations made during the Romantic Revival or the dominant contemporary poetic scene, Leavis drew his focus on the 17th century metaphysical poets spearheaded by John Donne and his close associates. Of course his first major work, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932) was dedicated to G.M. Hopkins, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound. Here he attacked the 19th century poetic practice, especially that of the Victorians who gave undue importance to the ‘poetical’ quality in a given poem. Moreover, he accused the Victorians of failing miserably in respect of inculcating proper amalgamation of thought and feeling. This engagement relates to the influence exerted by T.S. Eliot on Leavis in the contemporary critical scene. T.S. Eliot’s ideas on the Dissociation of Sensibility, as conditioned in his essay on ‘The Metaphysical Poets’, seem to be echoing in Leavis’ approach to the Victorians.

What he did in his *New Bearings in English Poetry* was to unearth what was essentially new and as postulated by poets in the modern age. In the same year, i.e. 1932, he published another work by the name of *Annus Mirabilis* in collaboration with wife, Queenie Roth. The way Leavis manipulated his subject of interest points out his close affiliation with the American School of New Critics that came into prominence with the publication of John Crowe Ransom's *The New Criticism* in 1941. In his being oblivious to the background, sources, and biography to a given text coupled with his renewed interest in analyzing 'literary texts themselves', Leavis seemed to have come close to the New Critics. The emphasis that he gives on the practice of reading to unearth the hidden aspects of the text is a pointer towards New Criticism. However, he differed from the hard core New Critics in respect of his emphasis on great literary works as embodiments of genuine moral and cultural values. He never considered a work of art as a self-supporting or self-contained unit that has an end to itself.

One of F.R. Leavis' seminal contributions to the domain of criticism was the foundation of *Scrutiny* - a quarterly literary periodical. Since its inception in 1932, the *Scrutiny* had the credit of having 76 issues with people like L.C. Knights, F.R. Leavis himself, H. A. Mason, Q. D. Leavis, William Empson, Herbert Read, I.A. Richards and George Santayana being its worthy contributors. F. R. Leavis was its principal editor, and he continued that position until 1953. What characterized the *Scrutiny* was the bold and courageous stand exhibiting rigorous intellectual standards, and it did not mind attacking any discrepancy such as the dilettante elitism as trumpeted by the Bloomsbury Group. The *Scrutiny* was a useful addition to fomenting a unique taste as made accessible through the writings of the Leavis group. In 1933, Leavis published *For Continuity*, a selection of *Scrutiny* essays. Soon his *Culture and the Environment* drew large scale attention since the work articulated Leavis' strong emphasis on the need of

highly trained elite to continue the cultural race of English life and literature. This engagement of Leavis reminds us of Thomas Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero Worship* (1841) that also stressed the need of a selected few who could uphold the real values in the society. These observations by both Carlyle and Leavis bore an anti-democratic colouring since the choice of a few selected ones to uphold the socio-cultural fabric does not come into terms with the ideals of democracy. Leavis pocketed instant fame and recognition with *Revaluation* (1936) and *Education and the University* (1943). The year 1948 was a significant one since Leavis turned his attention to studying fiction writings and published *The Great Tradition*. After years of his engagement in poetry and scores of cultural issues, he took interest in fiction writings, and that too with no less vigour and grandeur. In his pursuit of fiction studies, he took to the writings of Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad. In his eye, the so called 'great tradition' was formed by these writers endowed with exceptional calibre. Exclusion of literary giants like Charles Dickens or Thomas Hardy from his 'great tradition' was an eye-brow raising issue for the reading circle because of the wide-ranging influence exerted by these writers in the Victorian society. Reasons for the exclusion were best known to Leavis himself. He argued that the greatness of a novelist rests primarily on moral engagement, thus taking a step quite strange for the New Critics, and the close connection between form or style of composition and the major area of concern for the subject matter. However, the most significant aspect of the work was its vested interest in upholding the taste of fiction in the backdrop of large scale violence and destruction as conditioned in the aftermath of the World War II. This noble intention was lauded by people like George Orwell and others. Soon Leavis broadened the horizon of his 'great tradition' of novelists and included D. H. Lawrence and Charles Dickens into the ambit of his critical position. This move brought to an end the continuing speculation in

critical discourse in regard to the exclusion of Charles Dickens from what is called the 'great tradition' of the English novelists. The phase added works like *D.H. Lawrence, Novelist* (1955), and *Dickens the Novelist* (1970). In these works he engaged an in-depth study and put forward his distinctive views regarding their place as novelists in the contemporary scene. As evidence to the maturing position of his critical faculty, Leavis adopted a complex perspective in judging literature, especially fiction, in context of the larger socio-cultural set up. It was in *The Common Pursuit* (1952) that Leavis moved outside the genres of poetry and fiction writing, and made a novel attempt at subject matter that were many and varied. Leavis was a kind of personality who could not tolerate anything that went against the self-acclaimed critical position based on wide reading and observant eye. Following this, he attacked C.P. Snow who suggested that practitioners both of science and humanities should have understanding of each other. Pursuance of one discipline at the absence of the other would lead one to less effective postulation. This is what offended Leavis, and he made mockery at Snow's observation in *Two Cultures? The Significance of C. P. Snow*. He fearlessly declared that Snow's observations were vague and baseless. He liked to keep different branches intact given their respective area of interest, and its accomplishment. He maintained this distinctive position in his essay on *Literary Criticism and Philosophy* too when he finds Dr. Rene Wellek's (1903-1995), a Czech-American comparative literary critic, critical observation quite fallacious because of his vested interest in philosophy. He points out that Dr Wellek fails miserably to realise the separate entities of both the disciplines. In his illustrious career, Leavis continued writing till the last phase of his life and a good number of critical works came under way that included *Nor Shall My Sword* (1972), *The Living Principle* (1975), and *Thought, Words and Creativity* (1976). Although the works produced during the last phase of his career have been termed by a section of critics

as a bit ‘philosophical’, they hardly have abstraction or any theoretical formulation.

14.3 READING THE ESSAY “LITERARY CRITICISM AND PHILOSOPHY”

This part intends to familiarize you with the concepts of literary criticism and philosophy as articulated in F.R. Leavis’ essay on *Literary Criticism and Philosophy*. Although the essay is a reply to Dr.Wellek’s criticism of Leavis’ book *Revaluation*, it shows much of Leavis’ critical position who finds literary criticism and philosophy as distinctive genres that are not likely to go simultaneously. Just like his previous disgust at C. P. Snow’s suggestion to make science and humanities as a common area of study, Dr.Wellek’s approach to literary criticism from the viewpoint of philosophy is also a major issue of dissent for Leavis. In case attempt is made to combine the both, as Dr.Wellek opts for, the genuine purpose of both these disciplines seems to be thwarted. Hence it is imperative that both literary criticism and philosophy be studied separately with a view to doing justice to their respective claims and appeals as well. However, this noble postulation, as made perceptible by Leavis, is ignored by Dr.Wellek, who does not find justification in having separate entities of these two distinctive genres. Indeed it is his deep fascination for, and interest in philosophy that makes him see each and everything with the lens of a philosopher. For this, he expects, in his pursuit of literary works, that critics need to look into the rich philosophical bearing that is present in a given text. In addition, he maintains that a critic’s approach to a work ought to be specified so that the method being followed could be made accessible to the viewers. Until and unless, as Dr.Wellek maintains, a definite method or pattern is followed by a literary critic, the readers would be in complete puzzle, and they could hardly come into terms with the observations. Taking this position into account, Dr.Wellek finds Leavis’ work *Revaluation*

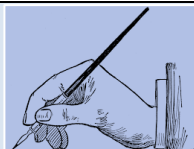
wanting since the assumptions as made by Leavis do not seem to have been defended in proper manner. In his dealings with the English poetry, Leavis' assumptions regarding different poets and their poetic creations have not been made explicit, and defended quite systematically. This objection rages Leavis who does not hesitate confessing, "I knew I was making assumptions and I was not less aware than I am now of what they involve." Making assumptions is a necessary measure for a critic, and Leavis does the same. But Dr. Wellek's proposition to defend them systematically and abstractly subsumes the role of a philosopher, not that of a critic. These respective measures of Leavis and Dr. Wellek constitute the major spurt in their literary observations. This is what Leavis points out too when he suggests that their bifurcation is 'because Dr. Wellek is a philosopher, and my reply to him in the first place is that I myself am not a philosopher, and that I doubt whether in any case I could elaborate a theory that he would find satisfactory.'

As both Dr. Wellek and Leavis are from different background, their observations are bound to be oppositional since they could, especially Dr. Wellek, hardly come out of their usual affiliation. That literary criticism and philosophy are not the same is what Leavis realizes at the earliest when he finds Dr. Wellek taking recourse to literature with high voltage philosophic bearing. This position by Dr. Wellek does not stand close to that of a literary critic, and as pursued by Leavis who makes straightforward observation that literary criticism and philosophy are quite different to each other. He says, "Literary criticism and philosophy seem to me to be quite distinct and different kinds of discipline at least, I think they ought to be... (in my innocence I hope that philosophic writing commonly represents a serious discipline, I am quite sure that literary-critical writing commonly doesn't." Hence it is seriousness; perhaps largely because of its concern for abstract things and issues, that constitutes a major part in philosophic

writing. On the other hand, poetry or any literary work and its critical evaluation is conditioned by a concrete process since “words in poetry invite us, not to ‘think about’ and judge but to ‘feel into’ or ‘become’ to realize a complex experience that is given by the words.” Mostly it is an act of ‘feeling’ and ‘becoming’ on the part of a literary critic that characterizes his or her position. Once it is followed, the ‘complex experience’ as embedded in a given poem could find its way into the viewing mechanism of a critic. The act of ‘feeling’ and ‘becoming’ itself relates to the bond between a literary critic and a work of art. Leavis also maintains that it is the process of reading, a careful reading indeed, a literary critic takes recourse to, which facilitates the act of ‘feeling’ and ‘becoming’. The importance of reading is so much that a literary critic hardly realises the inclusion of a definite method or pattern while judging a work. He observes, “by the critic of poetry I understand the complete reader: the ideal critic is the ideal reader. The reading demanded by poetry is of a different kind from that demanded by philosophy.” This emphasis upon reading and consideration of ‘words on the page’ in a given poem relates to Leavis’ close proximity to the concepts of the critical school, New Criticism that became influential, in American literary criticism, with the publication of John Crowe Ransom’s *The New Criticism* in 1941. Although the critical school continued until late in the 1960s, it exerted deep influence on most of the succeeding developments in this particular domain. Given this affiliation of Leavis, which he accomplishes in critical pursuit, Dr. Wellek finds his procedure rather faulty because of the absence of a definite ‘norm’ or ideal while estimating poetry. As Leavis considers the process of reading as of paramount importance, thus standing close to the New Critics, he does not consider any ‘norm’ or ideal as a requisite to the estimation of poetry, “the critic the reader of poetry is indeed concerned with evaluation, but to figure him as measuring with a norm which he brings up to the object and applies from the outside

is to misrepresent the process.” The responsiveness and the valuing of different organizations in a poem or any literary work warrant a kind of reading that is of a different nature, and is quite distinct from Dr.Wellek’s proposition.

Although Leavis does not like to situate both literary criticism and philosophy in close connection, he opines that the necessity of philosophic training in the life of a literary critic could not be ruled out altogether. Sound philosophic training bears possibility of making a literary critic far surer and more penetrating. If a literary critic takes philosophic training for his or her purpose, then critical formulation would be more sound and reasonable. However, unnecessary philosophic brooding might hamper the real thrust of a literary critic, “it would be reasonable to fear blunting of edge, blurring of focus and muddled misdirection of attention: consequences of queering one discipline with the habits of another.” Here Leavis makes a candid revelation that unnecessary mixing up of both literary criticism and philosophy carries great deal of risk that stands as an obstacle to what is sought after. Taking all this into account, it is imperative that literary criticism be pursued following its own course, and it is safe not to mix it up with the concerns of philosophy.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is the major area of disagreement between Dr. Rene Wellek and F.R. Leavis so far as literary criticism is concerned?

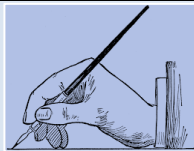
14.4 FUNCTION OF A LITERARY CRITIC

While defending his position against the charges brought about by Dr. Wellek, Leavis draws out a sound picture of a literary critic, and his or her function in estimating a piece of work. What strikes the most about this formulation is Leavis' practical as well as theoretical position as articulated throughout the essay. To Leavis, the first and foremost requisite of a literary critic is that s/he should be a conscious reader. He rightly says, "By the critic of poetry I understand the complete reader: the ideal critic is the ideal reader." Thus the practice of reading plays a vital role for a literary critic, who with the help of reading comes into the possession of the text with all its concerns. This focus on reading tactics, as followed by Leavis, makes him come close to the school of New Critics and many other succeeding practitioners in the field of literary criticism. A literary critic's concern for 'completeness of response' to a given text, and not to make unnecessary generalization could be realized through conscious and effective reading. Leavis says, "The business of the literary critic is to attain a peculiar completeness of response and to observe a peculiarly strict relevance in developing his response into commentary; he must be on his guard against abstracting improperly from what is in front of him and against any pre-mature or irrelevant generalizing of it or from it." So, literary criticism is very much practical, and this special trait as employed by Leavis is found to be missing in Dr. Wellek's philosophic approach to literary texts. As Leavis emphasizes reading, a pragmatic activity, he does not consider Dr. Wellek's observation on the necessity of theorizing the approach adopted by a literary critic as a justified one. It is the idea of complete possession of a text that motivates the approach of a literary critic, "His (critic) first concern is to enter into possession

of the given poem in its concrete fullness and his constant concern is never to lose his completeness of possession, but rather to increase it.” Increasing the sense of complete possession is likely to help the critics elicit some of the vital areas and issues as present in the text.

Another important task of a literary critic is to accomplish organization in a given piece of work. Without this, making value judgment, which is one of the foremost concerns for the literary critic, might not come into reality. A critic should maintain consistency and coherence in making judgments. Leavis’ focus on value judgment stands in contrast to making unnecessary generalizations that Dr.Wellek demands from a literary critic. Leavis defends, ‘If, as I did, I avoided such generalities, it was not out of timidity; it was because they seemed too clumsy to be of any use. I thought I had provided something better. My whole effort was to work in terms of concrete judgments.’ The statement establishes the notion that a literary critic does not work in abstraction, rather he takes to the pragmatic concerns in given literary work. The entire process is carried forward taking into close account of the theme and subject matter, and it is through close reading that the underlying implication comes under way. Since the task of a literary critic is accomplished through conscious and meaningful reading, Leavis finds Dr.Wellek’s observation, i.e. a literary critic should work through certain norm or criteria, quite irrelevant and wanting. To this, Leavis says, “Has any reader of my book been less aware of the essential criteria that emerge than he would have been if I had laid down such general propositions as: ‘poetry must be in serious relation to actuality, it must have a firm grasp of the actual, of the object, it must be in relation to life, it must not be cut off from direct vulgar living, it should be normally human...?’” If this prescription is made, which Dr.Wellek finds necessary, then the role of a literary critic would be end-oriented, and, besides this, delimitation of the given text would find its way

into its reception by the reading public. But a text is not limited in its implication; rather it entails layers of meaning, and each reading adds something new that might not have been attained so far. Leavis' repudiation of definite norm or criteria in reading substantiates this ever-changing nature of a text, which has been of utmost concern for most of the succeeding schools of criticism.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. List Leavis' view on the function of a literary critic.

14.4.1 *Observations on the Romantic Poets*

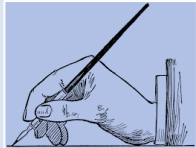
Both Leavis and Dr.Wellek, as the essay shows, maintain their respective viewpoints regarding the approach and process made by a literary critic. What comes out as a focal point of discontent is Dr.Wellek's purely philosophical overbearing and Leavis' genuine critical concern in respect of a literary text. This applies to their approach to the Romantic poets as well. As Leavis does not maintain a sound attitude towards the Romantic poets, Dr.Wellek finds him lacking in philosophy, and it is for this Leavis appears unfair to the poets of the said period. For Dr.Wellek, Leavis fails to realize 'the romantic view of the world' as conditioned in the works of Blake, Wordsworth, and Shelley. To this, Leavis says, "The romantic view of the world, a view common to Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley and others yes, I have heard of it;

but what interest can it have for the literary critic?" So the romantic view of the world that Dr.Wellek is interested in could hardly come into the purview of Leavis who is more concerned with the working of poetic craft, on the function of a given page. Besides, Leavis finds all the romantic poets, although they have arrived at the common scene, radically different from one another. To assimilate them under a common platform and a common interest might come out as a futile process that only philosophy could engage in. While taking upon William Blake, especially his Introduction to *Songs of Experience*, Dr.Wellek is largely fascinated for the deep philosophical underpinning as revealed. This stand as carried out by Dr.Wellek seems rather faulty in the eye of Leavis who does not consider philosophy as the starting point in the real estimate of poetry. He accuses Dr.Wellek of making a mismatch while the acclaimed philosopher judges Blake's poetry and his symbolical philosophy in the same fashion. Leavis declares, "I myself, a literary critic, am interested in Blake because it is possible to say with reference to some of his work that his symbolical philosophy is one thing, his poetry another." What Leavis wants is that the estimate of Blake's poetry is to be made independently of his 'symbolical philosophy'. Leavis observes that the symbols used in Blake's poetry, for which he claims much accolade, do bear an independent quality which Dr.Wellek fails to come into terms with. In addition to this, Leavis credits Blake with inculcating a well-deserved precision in his poetic rendering in *Songs of Experience*, which Dr.Wellek fails to appreciate in his estimate of his poetry. In opposition to most of the poets who are subject to 'certain looseness, a laxity of expression', Blake gives due consideration for technical excellence and poetic craft.

After William Blake, the next important romantic poet who comes under discussion is William Wordsworth whose works have been evaluated by Dr.Wellek and Leavis from their respective viewpoints. As usual, both of them do not seem to have arrived at a

common consensus since Leavis' observations on his poetry being devoid of the much required coherence and unity are not accepted by Dr.Wellek. In this regard, Dr.Wellek says, "So contrary to your own conclusion, I would maintain the coherence, unity, and subtlety of Wordsworth's thought." This statement by Dr.Wellek shows that his philosophical underpinning leads him engage in the faculty of thought as postulated by Wordsworth's poetry, which Leavis considers as an unnecessary brooding on the part of a literary critic. Being a literary critic, Leavis establishes the notion that his prime concern, and should be, is with Wordsworth's poetry, not simply with his thought. He does not, unlike Dr.Wellek, think it proper to take note of Wordsworth's philosophizing nature as a necessary step for the judgment of his poetry. Leavis makes it candid that his philosophizing bears little to his poetic formulation, which Dr.Wellek fails to realise in his approach to the poet. Instead of searching for a philosophic base, as Leavis maintains, in his poetry, it is imperative that the expression of his intense moral seriousness and a mode of contemplation be taken out of his poetic composition alone. Leavis says, "Even if Wordsworth had a philosophy, it is as a poet that he matters, and if we remember that even where he offers 'thought' the strength of what he gives is the poet's..." Although Wordsworth might have an established philosophy, a literary critic, like Leavis would hardly find it a point to start with. His sole concern is with poetry and its excellence, not the poet's philosophy. As with Wordsworth, Dr.Wellek also finds Shelley's poetry interesting given the 'astonishingly unified and perfectly coherent' philosophy being conditioned. The unifying and coherent nature of Shelley's philosophy is all that matters a lot for Dr.Wellek. However, Leavis takes to Shelley's poetry which is, in his view, repetitive, vaporous and monotonously self-regarding, and often emotionally cheap and boring. Moreover, Leavis takes out a number of vices in his poetry, and to point out those vices, he observes, would turn a literary critic into a moralist. But a true

literary critic is not simply concerned with pointing out virtue or vice; rather he or she is deeply engaged in scores of issues that matter in a given text. Leavis finds Dr.Wellek's estimation of Shelley's poetry quite unacceptable because he unnecessarily poses a counter-attack to Leavis himself and his observations. Dr.Wellek's approach seems to be lacking in seriousness and dignity, and he hardly engages himself as literary critic.

	<p>CHECK YOUR PROGRESS</p> <p>1. Compare and contrast Leavis and Wellek's assessment of Romantic poets</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
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14.5 SUMMING UP

F.R. Leavis' essay on "Literary Criticism and Philosophy" is all about a confrontation between Leavis and Dr.Wellek regarding their literary pursuits. Being a hard-core philosopher, Dr.Wellek adopts a philosophic stance, which he finds missing from Leavis in his critical works, especially *Revaluation*. He does not consider it satisfying when Leavis makes assumptions about the English poets and their creations without posing sound defence as he moves on. Moreover, not following a model or theory by Leavis in his critical process is also an area of dissent to Dr.Wellek. To such accusation, Leavis makes a candid revelation that both literary criticism and philosophy are two distinctive genres, and they

should not be tied together. Each of these disciplines has a unique way of looking at things, and it is better not to make a mis-match of them. But this is what Dr.Wellek has done when he judges a critical work by Leavis with philosophic underpinning. He fails to realise that they are not the same, which could be made use of for a single purpose. What is interesting about Leavis' response to Dr.Wellek's accusation is that he formulates the nature and function of a literary critic as he proceeds in the essay. By a literary critic, Leavis means a 'complete reader', and it is the practice of reading that gives the least attention to the necessity of an 'abstract' theory, which Dr.Wellek's formulation warrants. Leavis' emphasis upon the practice of 'close reading' makes his position at ease with the New Critics who consider 'words on the page' as the end in themselves. Moral and socio-cultural implications are of secondary importance for them. However, Leavis, unlike the New Critics, does not undervalue social role of a literary text. For Leavis, both artistic excellence and social role of a literary text are of immense concern in his judgment of a given work. It is the idea of complete possession of a text, through conscious reading, that matters a lot for a literary critic. Thus literary criticism is a practical process, and this is one of the contrasting developments to philosophy. Both Dr.Wellek and Leavis also come into confrontation in their approach to the English romantic poets. As Dr.Wellek, with his characteristic affiliation to philosophy, is interested in the exploration of thought, Leavis finds this as a major drawback since a literary critic, according to him, should impinge upon poetic craft, and nothing else.



14.6 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. What are the major objections Dr.Wellek brings to Leavis' critical formulation? How does Leavis defend his position?

2. “Literary Criticism and Philosophy are separate disciplines”—Discuss in the light of the essay on *Literary Criticism and Philosophy*.
3. Elucidate the nature and function of a literary critic as postulated by F.R. Leavis.
4. Do you think F. R. Leavis’ arguments incline more towards discussions on moral depths in literature?



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